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Multiple Feminisms

Commentary on Noëlle McAfee's "Two Feminisms"

AMY ALLEN

Department of Philosophy
6035 Thornton Hall
Dartmouth College
Hanover, NH 03755
USA
Amy.R.Allen@dartmouth.edu

In her bold and provocative paper, Noëlle McAfee argues against a version of feminism that understands politics in terms of oppression and struggle, and for another feminism that conceives of politics instead in terms of the sociosymbolic public sphere, a sphere in which individual identities and collective visions of the good life are discursively and semiotically constituted and negotiated. According to McAfee, the former view, which she labels the *agonal conception of politics*, is problematic in several respects. It misunderstands the nature of politics, envisioning politics as an agonal struggle rather than as a deliberative process of collective self-determination. It misconstrues the public sphere in terms of a "unidirectional flow of power" from

oppressor to oppressed, rather than conceptualizing it as a "discursive space in which subjectivity, identity, and meaning are created, dispersed, and interpreted" (140). Finally, it misrepresents subjectivity as a prepolitical entity with pre-given interests rather than understanding the subject as a sociohistorically constituted entity whose interests are "formed in the thick of politics" (143).

I agree wholeheartedly with McAfee's critical claims about the importance of moving beyond an overly simplistic dyadic model of oppressions as a one-way transmission of power. I am also generally quite sympathetic to her vision for feminist politics, particularly to her emphasis on the public sphere as a site for the deconstruction, negotiation, and reconstruction of identity. This is a point that is all too often overlooked by feminists who are interested in the so-called problem of the subject.¹ Since I find myself largely in agreement with the motivating assumptions of the essay, in what follows I will focus mainly on the details of her critical analysis of the situation of contemporary feminism. These reflections will lead me in the end to raise a critical question about McAfee's positive alternative vision for feminism.

My first question about McAfee's diagnosis of feminist politics concerns her equation the broad agonal conception of politics - according to which politics is centrally concerned with struggle - with the much narrower view of politics as the self-interested struggle over resources. Although I agree with McAfee's criticisms of this latter view, it seems to me that she conflates two distinct understandings of politics. After all, it certainly seems possible for someone to hold an agonistic view of politics and yet to understand political struggle as first and foremost a collective struggle over how to define who "we" are and what is in "our" common interest. This is the kind of Arendtian vision of agonal politics that Linda Zerilli lays out in her recent book (2005). Whatever else one may think of this agonistic model, it does

not necessarily entail a commitment to a distributive model of power and resources in the way that McAfee suggests (see p .141). Nor does it commit its advocates to denying that subjectivity is sociohistorically and intersubjectively shaped, despite the connection that McAfee tries to draw between agonistic views of politics and a prepolitical notion of the subject.

There is a second worrisome conflation at the center of McAfee's diagnosis. She also seems to run together the agonal conception of politics as struggle with a conception of power that equates power with oppression and understands oppression dyadically, on the model of the male master and female slave. Again, I agree with McAfee's critical point regarding overly simplistic models of oppression,² but I am unclear as to the connection McAfee tries to draw between this way of understanding power and the agonal conception of politics. First of all, it seems to me that very few feminists actually even hold this dyadic conception of oppression. Second, the agonal conception of politics as struggle is so broad that it is endorsed by many theorists who would clearly reject the dyadic conception of oppression. As I see it, this would include both Chantal Mouffe, whose Gramscian notion of hegemony is antithetical to the dyadic model of oppression that McAfee is criticizing, and Iris Young, whose structural account of oppression is very similar in spirit to McAfee's own, though with more emphasis on economic and institutional structures than on the sociosymbolic. (I'll come back to the issue of the relationship between these two conceptions of the public sphere below). Moreover, the agonal model of politics is not necessarily antithetical to McAfee's sociosymbolic model: one could think of the sociosymbolic public sphere somewhat more agonistically as the site where signs and their interpretations are negotiated and contested.

These conflations generate some conceptual unclarity in McAfee's critical diagnosis. Is her concern really about how feminists have conceptualized power – as dyadic oppression – or with the general notion that politics is basically about struggle? Or is it only certain visions of politics as struggle – let's say those that presuppose a prepolitical view of the self or that view the struggle as one over how to divide up the goodies – that are the object of her critique? But they also lead to a broader concern that McAfee leaves multiple alternative visions of feminism out of her discussion. What would she say, for example, to feminist projects that embrace the vision of politics as struggle and contestation but reject the model of power as dyadic oppression and the prepolitical visions of the self that McAfee rightly criticizes? What about those who theorize oppression in terms of structural dynamics, as McAfee suggests, but understand the relevant structures in sociological and economic rather than symbolic terms? What about alternative feminist conceptions of the public sphere, those that understand this sphere more in institutional than semiotic terms, such as those articulated by Nancy Fraser, Seyla Behabib, and Maria Pia Lara?

But there is still another vision of feminism that McAfee leaves out of her discussion. I'm thinking of Judith Butler's feminist genealogy of power and her use of the Foucaultian notion of subjection. This omission is curious on two counts: first because Butler's work has been so massively influential for feminist theory over the last two decades, and second because her account of subjection arguably addresses the very issues that McAfee complains are not addressed by other feminists. Butler's basically Foucaultian conception of power provides an intriguing and viable alternative to the flat model of oppression McAfee criticizes, and she most definitely views the subject as shaped by sociohistorical, linguistic, and affective relations with others. Like McAfee, Butler understands that sociosymbolic "systems are not something we can sanely reject" for they are formative of our very

subjectivity (McAfee 2005, 142). Butler's work also addresses – though perhaps not entirely satisfactorily – the issue of how this sort of sociosymbolic subordination “can be reworked or reformed via means of replacing bad structures or dichotomies with more liberatory ones” (142).³ Perhaps McAfee would take issue with Butler's vision on the grounds that she does not emphasize enough the ways in which subjects “actively produce, interpret, and reinterpret meaning” (144). This would be to raise the familiar problem of the subject in Butler (and Foucault). This is a legitimate – though not, in my view, insurmountable – concern with Butler's work. Still the complete omission of any mention of Butler's work is odd, especially given that she clearly offers an important and influential feminist alternative to the model of power as a flat transmission from oppressor to oppressed. Her work also raises important questions about the ways in which our subjection to subordinating gender norms places limits on our ability to reconfigure the semiotic structures that have heretofore shaped who we are and how we engage in the public sphere.

Whatever their theoretical differences, Butler and McAfee share a commitment to the priority of the cultural, symbolic or semiotic level of analysis. This leads me to another question about her paper. McAfee contends that: “Attending to sociosymbolic structures and the ways in which these formulate ‘the feminine’ is the fundamental political task for feminists. Only after such work has begun can we fruitfully carry on other tasks, such as legal reforms, economic measures, and all. In a real sense, these other problems or symptoms are superstructural effects of fundamental maladies in the communicative public sphere” (146). This statement quite suggestively turns the old Marxist economic base/cultural superstructure model on its head. But it would be nice to see some argument for it. Failing that, at the very least it would be helpful for McAfee to acknowledge that these statements might be controversial and to provide some

motivating reasons for them. After all, one might view the aim of feminism differently: as the effort to overcome and transform subordination in all of its multiple and interconnected forms, including but not limited to sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class oppression. Or one might take issue with any and all base-superstructure models and argue instead for a multivalent account of politics, according to which cultural recognition and economic distribution are equally basic and important.⁴

The general point behind all of these critical reflections is that multiple feminisms are available to us. The world of feminist political thought is not divided up amongst those who adopt either an outmoded dyadic model of oppression or a narrow conception of politics as a struggle to satisfy one's self interest (where self-interest is understood pre-politically), on the one hand, and those who embrace the primacy of the sociosymbolic for the structuring of subjectivity and the public sphere, on the other. Up to now, I have highlighted only some of the most obvious alternatives.

This leads me, finally, to the big question about McAfee's positive vision for feminism. Supposing we take her basic contrast in the broadest possible terms, as one between the agonal conception of politics as struggle and her alternative sociosymbolic deliberative public sphere account. Why do feminists have to choose between these two visions of politics? Is it not possible to envision the public sphere as a site both of contestation and of deliberation, as a site of the struggle over how we collectively define ourselves as a polity and our common interests but a struggle that aims at agreement? Suppose, alternatively, that we take her two feminisms contrast a bit more narrowly, as a contrast between an understanding of politics that focuses on oppressive power-over, on the one hand, and one that focuses on the collective power-with of the public sphere. Don't feminists need *both* a viable theory of oppression – though I agree we

should reject the flat-footed dyadic model that McAfee criticizes – and an account of how the collective power generated in public spheres can empower us to deconstruct and reconstruct our individual and collective identities and conceptions of the good life? Indeed, I would argue that one of the biggest challenges facing feminists is figuring out how to integrate these two theoretical accounts into an overarching account of power, and of politics more generally. The challenge is to sort out the relationships between oppression (or subordination) and collective power in the public sphere, both in terms of the way in which social equality (or lack of social subordination) is a necessary condition for political democracy (on this point, see Fraser 1990), and also in terms of the ways in which collective power generated in the public sphere provides conceptual, normative, material, and psychological resources for those struggling to resist and overcome social subordination. For this we will draw on aspects of both of the feminisms that McAfee discusses, and a few others besides.

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¹ On this point, see Fraser 1990.

² As I have argued in Allen 1998, 1999 and 2001.

³ On this point see Butler's discussions of resistance in Butler 1990, 1993, and 1997.

⁴ For such a vision, see Fraser 1997. This is arguably also the vision implied by Young 1990, though Fraser articulates her account by means of a critique of Young.