

Feminist Re-imagination of Social Theories

Leena Pujari¹ and Nandini Sengupta²

Abstract

Disciplinary canons are gendered and there have been significant erasures and exclusions. Over the past several decades an impressive and original body of feminist criticism of social and political theory has emerged, that has forcefully challenged the masculinist assumptions of classical canons. A critique of the partial, androcentric nature of disciplines is the starting point for all feminist interventions. We begin by interrogating this canon, from political philosophy and economics to sociology, we argue how a series of dualisms and binaries have characterized the development of knowledge. Women and those from marginal locations lie on the periphery of this 'knowledge-making process'. We then ask what a feminist re-imagination of disciplines would entail. Is it all about adding the women's perspective to the existing masculinist discourses or is it about disrupting and dismantling those hegemonic discourses and a reconceptualization of the same from a feminist perspective with the necessary shifts in epistemologies and ontologies? We argue for a fundamental re-ordering of canonical precepts and discourses through a feminist lens.

Keywords: Feminism; Innovation; Pedagogy; Pandemic; Policy

Interrogating Disciplinary Canons

Feminist scholars have time and again drawn attention to the misogyny and exclusions inherent within disciplinary canons. (Okin, 1979; Pateman, 1986; Millet, Witz and Marshall, 2004 et al.). Constructed by men largely white, privileged, able-bodied, and cisgender from a certain location, especially in Europe and America, social theory has been a patrilineal discourse. Knowledge production has privileged both the male subject and the male knower. Susan Moller Okin (1979, p. 5) says 'great tradition of western political philosophy, consists of writings by men, for men, and about men'. Perhaps, it is an understatement to suggest that there have been

¹ Head, Department of Sociology, K C College, Mumbai
Email: leena.pujari@kccollege.edu.in

² Associate Professor, Department of Economics, K C College, Mumbai.
Email: nandini.sengupta@kccollege.edu.in

silences, absences, and omissions. The erasures are systematic and by design. Janet Woolf (as cited in Witz and Marshall, 2004) talks about how masculinity has operated as a core/ foundational principle of the social. For instance, to the epistemological question ‘Who can be legitimate knowers?’ the answer has historically been, ‘not women’.

We have to dig deeper and see the epistemological foundations, methodological assumptions, and ontological positions that underpin the masculinist discourses and mount a critique of the same. A critique of the partial, androcentric nature of disciplines is the starting point for all feminist interventions. We begin by interrogating this canon. Most of us have been schooled in this canon and we have experienced varying degrees of discomfort. However, the classics can no longer be read as we read them.

Hence, a critical unpacking of the gendered inclusions and erasures must precede a feminist re-imagination, something that **Carole Pateman** (1986) refers to as the feminist subversion of social and political theories. A rich body of feminist work has challenged the most fundamental presuppositions and categories of what has been variously termed as ‘male-stream theory’ (Mary O Brien, 1981 as cited in Pateman, 1986) or ‘androcentric domain assumptions’ (March 1982 as cited in Witz and Marshall, 2004). When we start looking at the theories from the classical to modern and even beyond one is struck by a series of cartesian dualisms and binaries that have characterized the development of social and political theory.

Modern/traditional, public/private, mind/body - female reproductive body vs the male masculine rational mind, universal/particular, individual/social, masculine/feminine, nature/culture, subject/object, detached/embodied permeate our theories and knowledge.

Let us begin with the classics, philosophy first because social also encompasses the political, philosophical, and economic. Susan Moller Okin (1979, p. 22) tells us how Rousseau, for example, tells his reader at the beginning of the ‘Discourse on the Origins and Foundation of Inequality among Men’ that “*It is of man that I am to speak.*” For him, women’s presence in the private sphere is necessary because they have to raise children. Rousseau’s participatory democracy requires the existence of citizens who can devote considerable time to meetings and civic matters. ‘If all the adults of both sexes were to be as much preoccupied with civic activity as citizenship in a direct democracy requires, who would maintain the private sphere of life which Rousseau perceives as crucially important?’ (p. 286).

Plato argues that the pursuit of philosophy was a rational goal that required withdrawal from everyday mundane activities. He said that for women to play an equal role with men in the public space would require the demolition of the private sphere, that is, the sphere of the family. This was the same philosopher who also argued that the female sex was created from the souls of the most wicked and irrational men. How can the claim that women are ‘by nature’ twice as bad as men are reconciled with the revolutionary idea that they should be included among the exalted philosophic rulers of the ideal state?

Aristotle, for example, discusses at length what is the highest good for a human being. He then proceeds to characterize all women as not only conventionally deprived of but constitutionally unfit for this highest good. He held that women have

a natural function: their purpose is reproduction and childrearing so that men can be left free to pursue politics. While Mill wrote a major work of feminist theory, 'The Subjection of Women (1869), nonetheless he could not imagine that married women would not assume their traditional responsibility for the unpaid labor of the family (Okin, 1979).

In each of these cases, the assumption that the family is a natural sphere where women perform most of the work is paramount. In building their theories philosophers often ask 'What are men like?' 'What is man's potential?' whereas for women the question invariably is 'What are women for?' There is, then, an undeniable connection between assigned 'female nature' and social structure (Okin, p 24).

'Human nature', we realize, as described and discovered by philosophers such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, and many others, is intended to refer only to male human nature. Consequently, all the rights and needs that they have considered for humanness to entail have not been perceived as applicable to the female half of the human race.

Even the enlightenment thinkers provided elaborate frameworks that furthered the exclusion of women from the intellectual and public domain. The dualisms of mind over body, masculine over the feminine, and science over nature received a further fillip with the work of Enlightenment thinkers and reinforced the 'private' as the domain of women. Kant identified women with inclination and men with reason. Science played an important part in giving a male content to the question of 'what it is to be a good knower. The methods and ideology of modern science on which social sciences have modeled themselves have reinforced the idea of masculine and scientific hegemony over nature and women.

The sociological canon is full of misogyny. Auguste Comte, one of the early founders and a positivist believed that a woman is inferior and should be naturally subservient to men as this was good for social stability. Interestingly he also opined that since a woman is the epitome of humanity, her mission was to humanize modern men. Women, as wives and mothers, provide the essential basis for the rejuvenation of a society plagued with alienated, morally and sexually unstable men. He makes a comparison to the animal kingdom and says just as among animals, among humans too, men are superior to women intellectually, physically, and practically.

According to Emile Durkheim, the evolutionary scale is characterized by increasing differentiation between men and women. While men move closer to civilization, women lag behind. Men and women are both body and soul, corporeal and embodied, and have the social (read society) embedded in them. While men are able to overcome this tussle between senses and morals which is essentially social, women are unable to overcome or resist the pull of the senses. Hence women lag behind in the civilizational discourse. Durkheim assumes and builds his theory on, the veracity of accounts of absolute sexual difference drawn from such 'sciences' as craniometry, as well as biological accounts of 'drives' and 'instincts' (Witz and Marshall, 2004).

Karl Marx has been an inspirational and profound thinker and feminists draw substantially from his work though he did not develop a theory of gender. However, his writings have drawn attention to how capitalism appropriates the labor of

women. For instance, In *The German Ideology*, he speaks about how the father appropriates the labor of women and children. In the *Communist Manifesto*, he talks about how the bourgeois family treats women like private property. Despite these references to women's exploited labor, at no point in *Capital* does Marx recognize that the reproduction of labor-power entails women's unpaid domestic work or how surplus labor is extracted from the unwaged as well. While he analyses the capitalist exploitation of women's labor, his focus is purely on women as factory workers (Federici, 2018).

Considered the founder of Economics, Adam Smith concentrates heavily on political economy and the market of self-interest in his book 'The Wealth of Nations' published in 1776. Although women in Scotland and Europe during Smith's time did work for pay, the chapters on the division of labor do not mention the sexual division of labor. The chapters on wages and inequalities of wages and profits in different occupations have no reference to women's wages. According to Smith tangible goods are produced by 'productive labor' and intangible goods or services are produced by 'unproductive labor'. Going by this general approach he classified defense, government bureaucracy, justice, and domestic service as unproductive employments as they do not create a product for sale however useful they may be.

However, later in his "Lectures on Jurisprudence' (published after his death) he brings out the differences between men and women across four stages of economic development: the age of hunters, pasture, agriculture, and commerce. The central underlying idea explaining the history of the status of women, their property rights, and the distribution of rights within the family across the stage of economic development is that the biological differences between men and women have remained constant but the social significance of these differences has been a variable. The mode of subsistence has been an important determinant of the status of women. He suggested that with the development of commerce and industry the importance of physical differences will lessen, and women's social and economic position will improve (Clark 1993).

These ideas were barely noticed in the writings of subsequent classical economists and in fact, were challenged by later scholars. John Millar (1960) for instance, declared that if women get economic freedom due to economic development, then they will demand sexual freedom which will destroy the family and undermine paternity. Thus, throughout the classical era, women's economic roles were neglected whether inside or outside the household. If at all discussed (as done by Smith) it was often half concealed (Dimand et al. 2004).

Neoclassical economists like Ricardo advocated that everyone will be better off through comparative advantage and efficiency gains from specializations. These claims were challenged by feminist economists like Irene van Staveren, Diane Elson, Caren Grown, and Nilüfer Çagatay (1988) who argued that Ricardian theory cannot be generalized across genders. Gender inequality may both assist and hinder the development of international competitiveness and the distribution of gains from trade, within and across countries. At the same time, trade policies and flows have contradictory impacts on gender equality. Gender inequality can be reduced by an appropriate mix of and sequence of trade and economic policies.

Address of gender issues even in post-Keynesian economics is rather limited. Post-Keynesians argued that wage earners have a higher propensity to consume than capitalists. Hence a redistribution from capital to labor can increase aggregate demand (Dutt, 1991). However feminist economists argue that at the level of labor households, men have been found to be less inclined towards consumption of necessary household goods and more favorable in consuming luxury goods in comparison to women (Dwyer and Bruce, 1988). Therefore, extending the post-Keynesian concept of propensity to consume with gender distributional effects (transfer of more income in women's hands) would increase aggregate demand through increased consumer expenditures. Thus, traditional economic theories and canons have largely excluded the gender lens in their analysis of economic issues. In all of the above, one can discern, rigidly drawn boundaries between the public and private, with most of the theorizing happening around capitalism, industrialization, secularization, urbanization, reason, rights, contract, individualism, freedom, equality, and citizenship - the usual hallmarks of modernity. Women's very subjectivity was construed as being of a fundamentally different order than men's and it certainly wasn't that of the 'modern' subject.

Thus, classical social theory constructed a disembodied, abstract, rational subject as the ideal subject of modernity. This is the familiar dualism of universal/particular - with the public world of universalized 'humanity' (read men) counterposed to the private world of particularity (read women).

For much of our history, the body has been conceptualized as simply one biological object among others which our rational faculties set us apart from, as well as an instrument to be directed, and a possible source of disruption to be controlled.

The opposition between mind and body has also been correlated with an opposition between male and female, with the female regarded as enmeshed in her bodily existence in a way that makes the attainment of rationality questionable. Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural and therefore pushed to the private sphere that remains outside the domain of rights and justice.

The public-private divide was forcefully challenged by second-wave feminists who by focusing political attention on the private sphere have questioned the effects of keeping the body and things sexual hidden from view. Does liberty, feminists ask, require that we sacrifice emotions to reason or domestic matters to public affairs? (Landes, 1998)

In a structuralist world, we were overwhelmed by positivist, functionalist knowledge. A post-structuralist world has forcefully challenged claims of universality and homogeneity but the epistemological and theoretical frameworks haven't changed. These erasures and exclusions continue in contemporary social theory in a rather novel manner. Lisa Adkins' (2016) argues that post-structural society reconceptualizes the notion of agency - a freeing of agents from structure, releasing them to become mobile and reflexive subjects - and that these are conditions to which women are granted far less access. While in classical social theory, women were excluded from sociality, here woman is overdetermined by the social, indeed cannot escape the social.

So, the ontology of the social and political is masculine and there is no acknowledgment of how the public sphere gains its meaning and significance primarily in opposition to, the private world of particularity, natural subjection, inequality, emotion, love, partiality, and women and femininity. If they did so, they would have to question their conception of theoretical inquiry. Mary O'Brien (1981) has explored some of the reasons why our theoretical heritage lacks 'a philosophy of birth', and has drawn attention to the manner in which the conventional understanding of the 'political' is built upon the rejection of physical birth in favor of the masculine creation of (giving birth to) social and political order.

The ramifications of such androcentric knowledge production have been humongous. This masculinist discourse continues to be reproduced not just in our classrooms but also in our courtrooms, workplaces, state policies so on and so forth. For instance, discourses and debates around marital rape, Section 377, Sabrimala, and many more speak of a hegemonic, masculinist discourse that is being centered and mainstreamed to the exclusion of other discourses. Our understanding of democracy is quite flawed. Ideas of justice, liberty, and solidarity are understood only with respect to public places.

The ideas of liberty and non-discrimination seem alien to the home, which is the site of horrendous domestic abuse, and justice for survivors is a long haul. These binaries also reverberate in academia. Subjects that center the 'private' as a mode of inquiry and engagement are described as 'soft subjects' not worthy of a scientific study. For instance, when we center the private and personal domain as we have done in sociology there is always the danger of being sidestepped or considered 'soft'. We continue to rely on the methods and frameworks of traditional patriarchal theories. Feminist research methods are often seen as 'not scientific and objective enough' or rather lacking the 'rigor' that is so typical of quantitative research methods.

Within the professional life and career structures of social science, those who choose to work on the domestic aspects of social existence are marginalized in relation to those who work on the public aspects. Since there is a marked tendency for the former to be women and for the latter to be men, the masculinist bias of social science finds expression in forms of gender segmentation of the social scientific professional labor markets. This, in turn, has implications for who is found to be most relevant to current theoretical definitions of the agenda for social science and perpetuates the dualistic and gender-coded ordering of that gender. When the public aspect of social existence has a privileged status, its relationship of mutual dependence to the domestic aspect is obscured. This has the effect of making the public domain falsely appear as self-sustaining, and of encouraging thereby an equation of social life with public life. In this context, it is not just that the 'economy' looms larger in theoretical terms than 'love' but that 'love' disappears altogether from the theoretical view. Accordingly, 'the economy' is placed in the center of the theoretical space that social science constructs, while 'love' is consigned to the margins.

Engendering the social vs a Feminist Re-imagination

Engendering social theories connotes the idea of inclusion within the framework of masculinist discourses but does not enable a shift or an interrogation of epistemologies, methodologies, or the nature of knowledge production. Thus, a feminist re-imagination cannot be about a politics of equality or about incorporating women or 'adding them' to the existing corpus of knowledge because then, they would be pale reflections of men, something like surrogate men or duplicate men that Smith (1987) talks about because the very foundation of these disciplines and their theoretical frameworks have been imagined in opposition to women. Their position as the subjects or producers of knowledge was never raised. Hence the political, ontological, and epistemological commitments underlying patriarchal discourses, as well as their theoretical contents required re-evaluation from feminist perspectives.

A feminist re-imagination on the other hand enables that epistemic shift and a reconceptualization of the discipline from the standpoint of those on the margins. Feminists, like Carole Pateman (1986) and Kate Millet (1970) for instance advocate a **politics of autonomy** rather than equality. What we need is a fundamental restructuring, re-fashioning, and reconceptualization of the public and private, modes of knowing and inquiry. It is about bridging the distance between personal and political, between self and discipline. The whole social, political, scientific, and metaphysical underpinning of patriarchal theoretical systems needs to be shaken up. A feminist re-imagination can be diverse and multiple just as there are many feminisms and not one.

Situated and embodied knowledge

What would a feminist re-imagination look like? Here we bring in **Dorothy Smith's** (1987) work on standpoint feminist epistemology. Smith, a feminist sociologist argues that the roots of women's oppression lie not so much in her cultural and political exclusion as in the structures of knowledge that map the world. This intellectual and social world that we inhabit, where we do research, teach and build theories, is centered around the experiences of men, 'the inner circle' as she says, where men produce knowledge about men and for men, from which women have been consciously excluded. This inner circle is part of the 'relations of the ruling' (p.3) an idea she takes from Marxist theory to describe a set of practices invested with power to determine the contours of knowledge and define the academic agenda and these invariably happen to be defined by men³.

There is a certain dissonance here. It appears as though we stand outside this entire corpus of knowledge. It seems very distant and alien and does not speak to or have a conversation with our concrete, material lives. This knowledge is supposed to be objective, rational, universal, impersonal anchored in the structures of /occupies

³ As she says 'when I write of "ruling" in this context I am identifying a complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power

the world of administration, business, bureaucracy, and industry but delinked from particularized entities of family, home, relationships, etc.

This process of knowing or constructing knowledge does not recognize our embodied and embedded selves removing the local, personal, and everyday from the process of theory building and erasing what we are embedded in, the ties of kinship, family, and household. It seems to take on the view of 'ruling' an idea Smith takes from Marxist theory, to describe a set of practices invested with power to determine the contours of knowledge and define the academic agenda and these are invariably inhabited by men.

She became acutely conscious of this bifurcated consciousness, between the world of work and home. There is a constant shuttling between a consciousness organized within the relations of ruling, which tells us that we have to maintain a rigid demarcation between public and private and a consciousness implicated in the local particularities of home and family. The intellectual world spread out before us appears as genderless, far removed from our particular locations and identities. A collaborative research endeavor between Population First and Gender Issues Cell, K C College on gender sensitivity and inclusivity within media brought out these antinomies very clearly.

Some of our respondents spoke about the complete segregation between the world of work and home. Masculine values of rationality, objectivity, and neutrality defined the sphere of work with absolutely no sense of empathy or compassion for and in relation to the private/domestic domain and the telling impact of this bifurcation on their careers and professional growth (Pujari and Sinha, 2019).

Dorothy asks whether we can have different modes of thinking/knowing, and theorizing. A feminist mode of inquiry perhaps, that can then begin with women's experiences from women's standpoint. She asks whether the real everyday world, with its messiness, disorganization, and so-called personalized ways of knowing can be the subject of inquiry instead of the abstract, context-independent, value-neutral, and objective, a universal world that exists outside us. Can we locate the knower in the everyday world of experience? If we do, then women become both the subjects as well as the objects of knowledge. Such a re-fashioning and re-imagination is necessary if the feminist theory is to avoid the intellectual perils of abstraction, idealization, or irrelevance.

In taking women's experiences and lives as a starting point for the development of theory, feminism attempts to develop alternatives to the rigid, hierarchical, and exclusive concept of reason. Feminist theory brought to the fore new forms of writing, and methods of analysis. No one method, the form of writing, speaking position, or mode of argument can act as a representative, model, or ideal for feminist theory. Concepts like experience, the body, history, etc are acknowledged as necessary for reason to function.

Dorothy Smith's work has been critiqued by scholars like Collins (1992) who argues that Smith privileges texts over local oral traditions or writings that are not amenable to a logical, formal discourse but appear as stories and narratives. She further asks whether it's prudent to first join the inner circle, as Smith suggests, and then mount a critique within the dominant framework.

She was further accused of privileging a particular kind of experience, the experiences of women to the exclusion of other marginal experiences. In a rejoinder to Collins (1992), Smith clarified that she was actually privileging the experiences of those on the margins and they could be anyone, from an Afro-American and gay to a lesbian.

A feminist re-imagination enables shifts in paradigms and epistemologies. It is in many ways emancipatory and reflective, open to scrutiny, and has addressed the initial slippages and exclusions along caste, class, race, ableism, and ethnicity. Feminist re-imagination seeks a new discursive space, a space that will encourage a proliferation of voices, a plurality of perspectives and interests, new methods of knowing, and uses an intersectional lens.

References

- Adkins, L. 2004. Gender and the post-structural social. In Anne Witz and Barbara Marshall (Eds.) *Engendering the Social: Feminist encounters with sociological theory*. New York: OUP
- Clark, Henry C. (1993). Women and Humanity in Scottish Enlightenment Social Thought: The Case of Adam Smith. *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques*. 19:3, p 335-61. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298975>. Accessed on 27 July 2022
- Collins, P. 1992. Transforming the inner circle: Dorothy Smith's challenge to sociological theory. *Sociological Theory*, 10(1) p73-80. Available at URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/202018> Accessed on 15 September 2016
- Dimand R W., Evelyn L.F and Chris N .2004. Retrospectives Gender in Classical Economics, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 18(1), p 229-240. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3216883>. Accessed on 26 July 2022
- Disch, L; Hawkesworth, M. 2016. *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford: OUP
- Dutt, K 1991. Stagnation, Income Distribution, and the Agrarian Constraint: A Note, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 15, p 343-351. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23598226>. Accessed on 1 August 2022
- Dwyer, D, Judith B. 1988. *Women and Income in the Third World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Elson, D; Grown, C; Staveren, I. 2007. Introduction: Why feminist economics of trade? In Irene van Staveren, Diane Elson, Caren Grown, and Nilüfer Çagatay (Eds) *The Feminist Economics of Trade*. London: Routledge.
- Federici, S. 2018. Marx and Feminism. *Triple C* 16(2), 468-474. <http://www.triple-c.at>. Accessed on 22nd May 2022.
- Landes, J. 1998. Introduction In *Feminism, the Public and the Private*. (ed) USA: OUP
- Millar, John. 1960. *On the Distinction of Ranks in Society*. As reprinted in W.C. Lehmann, John Millar of Glasgow, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press
- Okin, S. 1979. *Women in Western Political Thought*. Princeton University Press
- Pateman, C. 1986. *Theoretical Submissiveness of Feminism*. In Carole Pateman's (Ed). *Feminist challenges: Social and Political Theory*. North Eastern University Press.
- Pujari, L., & Sinha, S. R. (2019). *Insights from Within: Gendered Dimensions of Media*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 54 (19).
- Smith, D. 1987. *The Everyday World as Problematic: A feminist Sociology*. North Eastern University Press
- Smith, D. 1992. *Sociology from Women's Experience: A Reaffirmation*

Social Thought: The Case of Adam Smith." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 19(3) 2003, p. 335-61., <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41298975> . Accessed on 29 July 2022

Sociological Theory, 10(1) p. 88-98. Available at URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/202020>. Accessed on 21 March 2016

Witz, A and Marshall, B. 2004. Introduction: Feminist Encounters with Sociological Theory. In Anne Witz and Barbara Marshall (Eds) *Engendering the Social: Feminist encounters with sociological theory*. New York: OUP