Can a Woman be a Citizen?

by Mitchell Cowen Verter

for WMST 6002

Feminist Theory

Professor Janice Newton

Aristotle begins the \_Politics\_ by explaining that the state (\*polis\*) arises out of man's nature as a political animal. In contrast, the man without the state is denounced as "brotherless, lawless, homeless" (1253a) (\*aphrêtôr athemistos anestios\*) one. This first adjective \*aphrêtôr\* derives from the Greek word for "brother", indicating Aristotle's belief that the political community is constituted by a fraternity of male brothers. The masculinity of the political sphere is clearly emphasized when Aristotle distinguishes it from the realm of the home (\*oikos\*), the place where a man rules over his wife. "Of household management we have seen that there are three parts- one is the rule of a master over slaves, which has been discussed already, another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father, we saw, rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule." (1259a)

Under the patriarchal polis, the fraternity of men come together as citizens. Aristotle explains citizenship, saying, "he who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizens (\*politên\*) of that state (\*poleôs\*); and, speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life." (1275a) The historical overthrow of monarchism and feudalism during the eighteenth century was driven by the reassertion of citizenship as a right for all men. However, this right was initially applied only to men: the French revolution proclaimed the slogan "liberty, equality, fraternity", not sorority.

Liberal feminism has classically sought to extend the rights of citizenship to all people. They have pointed out that it is contradictory to restrict universal values such as "liberty" and "equality" to only half of the human race. Against this hypocritical exclusion, they have asserted that women should be given the same rights as men to be citizens and to take part in the deliberative and judicial administration of the state. Women have an equal capability to rationalize and to decide, so they should be given the freedom to express their political choices. Under liberalism, this choice is made through voting for a democratically elected representative. Historically, this drive towards liberal citizenship has been expressed through the suffrage movement, and by groups such as the League of Woman Voters and the National Organization of Women.

From the beginning of this political effort, radicals have questioned whether equal citizenship was an appropriate goal for women's liberation. They questioned whether citizenship wrongly supports the most oppressive structure of all, the political state. A contemporary of the suffragists, anarchist feminist Emma Goldman argued, "Woman's demand for equal suffrage is based largely on the contention that woman must have the equal right in all affairs of society. No one could, possibly, refute that, if suffrage were a right. Alas, for the ignorance of the human mind, which can see a right in an imposition. Or is it not the most brutal imposition for one set of people to make laws that another set is coerced by force to obey?" (Emma Goldman \_Anarchism and Other Essays\_ [New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1911], 202) According to Goldman, it is not enough to gain participation in the state if the form of the state is itself corrupt. The right to a vote only allows a woman to elect between members of a financial and political elite. Therefore, the assertion of political citizenship would only allow a woman to be part of a system that is fundamentally unequal, which is founded upon the exploitation of the impoverished masses by the propertied minority.

Radical feminists agree that liberal reforms are not sufficient to change the fundamental structure of society. The primary problem for women is not merely the lack of voting rights or any other right, but rather the very organization of patriarchy. Kate Millet explains, "Groups who rule by birthright are fast disappearing, yet there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another -- the scheme that prevails in the area of sex." (Sexual Politics [New York: Avon Books, 1971], 44) Although modern democracies have ostensibly eradicated the feudal domination between families, they still preserve the inequality within the family. As Millet points out, patriarchy's primary institution is the family: it functions both as the model of and the connection with society-at-large. (55.) Husbands still effectively maintain ownership over their wives and children. Boys and girls are socialized into roles that preserve the authority of men over women. Defined according to her biological nature and taught to accept passivity, a woman is still subjected to the force, discipline, lust, and violence of a man's arbitrary will.

Catherine MacKinnon doubts whether the modern state can bring justice to women. Although she does not address either citizenship or voting per se, she critiques the simple liberal conception of individuals composing a body politic. Women, she claims, do not experience life merely as individual subjects but as members of a collective social being. A woman's personal existence is impacted by the political oppression of all women within a patriarchal state. In the most immediate and visceral manner, an individual woman experiences the structural male domination of women collectively as the constant threat of rape. According to MacKinnon, "the split between public and private ... [makes] very little sense" (A Feminist Theory of State [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989], 95.) Instead, she calls for consciousness raising groups to enable women to collectively discover the conditions of their oppression and the terms of their liberation.

In a sense, MacKinnon does not necessarily oppose the Aristotelian conception of \*politên\* as those who "take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state" as such, only the masculine development of this ideal. The ontological difference between men and women's ways of being correlates with the epistemological difference between their ways of knowing. Masculine law and the masculine state pretend to act from an objective standpoint. They ignore the reality of gender differences under the masquerade of treating all individuals equally. This allegedly neuter, genderless perspective is not actually neutral, but actually operates for the benefit of males. This masculine viewpoint validates the objectification of women's bodies in debates over abortion. Conversely, it restricts the state from infringing upon male civil "rights", effectively giving license to rape and pornography and preventing constitutional relief from women. MacKinnon explains "In male supremacist societies, the male standpoint dominates civil society in the form of the objective standard ... The state incorporates these facts of social power in and as law. Two things happen: law becomes legitimate and social dominance becomes invisible." (237)

Against this patriarchal state domination, MacKinnon asserts that females must take part in the deliberative and juridical administration of the state. As mentioned above, women's consciousness groups effectively function as realms where women can discuss the conditions of their collective subjection. Because they exist within these conditions of oppression, women have the unique standpoint to analyze and remedy it. Because they have this unique deliberative authority, they also have a special obligation to judge. Against the masculine state whose "law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women" (161-2), MacKinnon asserts the importance of a feminist jurisprudence. Presumably, this feminist jurisprudence will authoritatively redress the power imbalance between the genders and put an end to the physical and social violence against women. MacKinnon seems to indicate that it may require a certain degree of coercion to bring about these changes. The way that sacrificing individual rights to collective decision making and judicial authority sounds, one begins to hear the echo of William Burroughs's warning, "God damned matriarchy. All matriarchies anti-homo-sexual, conformist and prosaic. Find yourself in a matriarchy walk don't run to the nearest frontier." (Naked Lunch. New York: Grove Press, 1959).

The ways that feminist, anti-colonial, and other such struggles have ruptured the myth of the liberal universal order have proliferated into the intense fragmentation of the postmodern epoch. As one would expect in an era with such tenuous certainties, the notion of citizenship has been repeatedly requestioned and rethought. Postmodernism has disrupted the integrity of identifiable categories such as "citizen" and "subject" as well as distinct categories such as "man" and "woman." Not only have the objective standards disappeared, the subjective standpoints are no longer stable. The loss of all authoritative and transcendental guidelines has highlighted the arbitrariness and contingency of all judgments between conflicting claims to truths and rights.

Many postmodernists regard politics as having utmost importance in this era of intense fragmentation. The classical notion of citizen as a member of a "discursive and juridical community" becomes especially important when one's community is always shifting. Once individuals are broken free from an exclusive identification with only one set of people or a singular and universal goal, they become committed to a multiplicity of alliances with different communities and interests. They become responsible to a diversity of political exigencies and are pushed beyond any simplistic, singular solution.

Wendy Brown asserts "The constitutive elements of politics suggested by \*politeia\* do not dissappear in postmodernity but are starkly featured within it ." ("Feminist Hesitations, Postmodern Exposures [Differences 3:1 (1991)], 70).Now that all the terms that supposedly anchored political discourse such as "truth" and "equality" have themselves been unmoored, one finds oneself constantly adrift among an infinitude of discussions and judgments. One always negotiates at the cross section of numerous different social networks. According to Brown, this requires people to develop ways to conduct open and fair discussions. She argues that the disruption of metaphysical foundations may leave us open to technological domination unless we "seize this opening to develop democratic processes for formulating collective postepistemological and postontological judgments. Such judgments require learning how to have \*public\* conversations with each other, arguing from a vision about the common ('what I want for us') rather than from identity ('who I am') and from explicitly postulated norms and potential common values rather than from false essentialism or unreconstructed private interest." (80)

Chantal Mouffe similarly argues that understanding a new mode of citizenship is essential for confronting the challenges of the postmodern era. She similarly notes that, now that we can no longer count on any unitary subjectivity or essential identity, we find ourselves committed to a wide variety of struggles and responsible for a multiplicity of relationships. Mouffe defends her ideas of radical democracy against Carole Pateman's feminist critique of citizenship. Although she credits Pateman for deconstructing the patriarchal nature of this idea, Mouffe critiques Pateman for still maintaining a rigid distinction between men and women.

It is unclear what Mouffe intends to do once the distinction between men and women is deconstructed. Despite her assertion that each person is involved in a multiplicity of important relationships, Mouffe makes the somewhat bizarre argument that we should construct "a new conception of citizenship where sexual difference is effectively non pertinent." ("Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics" In Diana Meyers (ed.) \_Feminist Social Thought: A Reader\_ [London: Routledge, 1997], 539.) Mouffe later explicates this argument by stating that "Feminism ... should not be understood as a struggle for realizing the equality of a definable empirical group with a common essence and identity, women, but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category 'woman' is constructed in subordination." (543) Mouffe's point is well taken: women are oppressed in various ways, and clinging to one definition may prevent one from effectively opposing the myriad forms of oppression. However, this would require one to create new ways of strategically employing the category "woman", not to discard it as being "non pertinent."

I would argue that Mouffe's description of postmodern politics is actually quite similar to that of classical liberalism. She makes vague and almost mystical references about the impossible pathos of the "vanishing point" of the common good (541). However, it is unclear whether this view is truly different from the pragmatic orientation of liberalism. Against its critics, I would argue that liberalism does not -- or at least not all liberals do -- construct universal, ontological objective truths and view the subjective actor as independent, autonomous, and equal. Liberal democracy has generally been considered a dynamic process, not a static absolute. For example, in the Federalist Papers, the basis of the US Constitution, James Madison describes democracy as a constant struggle and negotiation between different interest groups. My skepticism regarding Mouffe seems to be evinced by the fact that Amarpal K. Dhaliwal's critique of her is indistinguishable from a critique of mainstream liberalism: namely, that the notion of the "free citizen" has always depended on certain practices of racism, colonialism, and exclusion

Like postmodernism, ecofeminism emphasizes the myriad connections that already locate a person even before she becomes a separate individual. This complex networking similarly demonstrates the relevance of Aristotle's conception of \*politên\* as members of a discursive and juridical community. However, one can not conceive of human citizens in isolation: the political community takes place within the context of a natural environment. Therefore, one must attend to its communication as well. In their book \_Ecofeminism\_ (London: Zed Books, 1993), Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies explain that most indigenous communities have felt a deep sense of connection to the earth they live upon. They quote a village elder explaining, "The sun, the moon, the air, the trees are signs of my continuity. Social life will continue as long as these continue to live. I was born as part of the \*bhum\* [sacred soil]. I will die when this \*bhum\* dies." (p. 102-103).

According to Mies and Shiva, capitalist industry has desacrilized the earth, tearing people from their deep roots in nature. International trade agreements and outright theft are depriving people from sustaining themselves on the lands that have sustained their families for generations. The real sense of organic belonging that people used to experience in their communities has been supplanted by their integration within a political state. In most cases, the state does not reflect the interests of the actual citizens who live within it, but rather those of the transnational corporations who exploit its natural resources. Through its police tactics and authoritarian laws, colonialism replaces the people's harmonious belonging in nature with coercive relationships to the state and international capital. In certain cases, nationalist movements have arisen to oppose the impact of multinational exploitation. However, these masculine movements have perverted the environmental connection to the earth into an ideology based on race and identity.

Given the way that politics has corrupted women and men's natural relationships to nature, Mies questions the notion of citizenship. "Why was the entire effort of the old women's movement focused on finally giving woman the status of a citizen, of a subject?" (223) Like Dhaliwal, Mies argues that this right to self-determination has always been defined in opposition to an "other" such as the primitive, the woman, the body, and nature. Against this liberal ideal, Mies and Shiva assert the importance of a reestablishing the traditional living relation with the earth. Although this does not require citizenship in a state, it does again echo the classical ideas of Aristotle. Not only do \*politên\* need to "take part in the deliberative or judicial administration" of their political community, they must constitute "a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life." That is, they must act in a way that sustains life. Mies and Shiva describe various ways that groups both in the global north and the global north have freed themselves from the domination of international capital and the national state in order to assert their connections with their local bioregions. Shiva quotes a son expressing this deep sense of communal participation, "Money I can get anywhere but my mother's dignity and respect comes from the village community, and we can never sacrifice that." (249) Mies provides examples about how consumers and anarchists have begun creating their own alternatives to the toxic options given by multinational corporations. Against the destruction of international capitalism, Mies and Shiva suggest a revitalization of the traditional ideal of living in a sustainable, subsistent, and self-sufficient manner.

Aristotle's definition of citizenship is broad enough to encompass any social-political community. In any group, there must be a way for people to discuss and judge their own administration and to sustain their own way of life. As many feminists point out, however, our modern political state is not necessarily the way to instantiate such a a community. As Emma Goldman argued, a state centralizes control in the hands of the elites who have maintained power. Participation through democratic vote only fosters the illusion of real participation. Furthermore, the Enlightenment ideal of "fraternity" seems to structure political participation in a way that is fundamentally problematic. Taken as a whole, feminist approaches may suggest a notion of "sisterhood" that can challenge and complement this "fraternity." However, as much as I have looked -- even in books with titles like \_Sisterhood is Powerful\_ -- I haven't actually come across a good definition of what such sisterhood would entail. Perhaps one would have to begin with Carol Gilligan's notion of a feminine ethic based on relationships and caring rather than objective rules and judgments. Applied politically, this would indeed begin to resemble the postmodernist notion on an infinite multiplicity of relationships as well as the ecofeminist focus on the human interrelation with its environment.