

## VISIBLE WOMEN



# Visible Women

*Essays on Feminist Legal Theory  
and Political Philosophy*

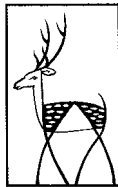
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# Introduction

SUSAN JAMES AND STEPHANIE PALMER

IN JANUARY 2001 the British Equal Opportunities Commission celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary by announcing a new vision for the twenty-first century: “sex equality is no longer just about rights for women.”<sup>1</sup> While the Commission has, in practice, primarily dealt with cases of discrimination against women, it will now address inequalities between women and men, girls and boys, whenever they appear. The Commission’s decision to campaign for equality laws which are “consistent, clear and workable” and to provide effective protection for people “of all races and creeds, at home, at school and in the workplace” is admirable in conception.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, changes of this sort, which are relatively common at the moment, trouble many women and contribute to a widespread sense that feminism is losing momentum as a political movement, both within and outside government. While feminists have always hoped for a time when there would be no special need to fight for improvements in women’s circumstances because institutions would, in the ordinary course of things, devote as much attention and resources to satisfying the needs of women as of men, there is ample evidence that this era has not arrived.<sup>3</sup> A decline of interest in the predicament of women, whether in political life or in the academy, is therefore a cause for concern among people who fear that the advances made so far may be stalled or even reversed at a point where so much remains to be done.

This cultural shift away from feminism is a feature of intellectual as well as political life, and arises in part from developments within legal and political philosophy. During the past twenty years or so, insights into sexual difference which originated within feminism have been incorporated into broader conceptions of difference and its place in politics. As a result, feminism has sometimes come to be represented as an outmoded and unduly partisan position which has been transcended by a more wide-ranging analysis of social diversity. Rather than concentrating on the disadvantages suffered by women in particular, it is held, we should pay attention to the relative powers and condition of all sorts of groups, and work to minimise structural inequalities between them.

<sup>1</sup> EOC Annual Report (2000–1) at 4.

<sup>2</sup> Reported by Maureen Freely in *The Independent*, London 17 January 2001.

<sup>3</sup> To cite a single example, male earnings in Britain are still on average 18 % higher than those of women.

One version of this argument has been articulated by liberal theorists who oppose what they regard as an excessive sensitivity to difference and an insufficiently robust view of citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Another, as Anne Phillips points out in her contribution to this volume, has been presented by multiculturalists and communitarians whose concern is precisely to find ways of respecting and accommodating differences between communities, and who view women as one community among others.<sup>5</sup> For them, sexual difference has to be considered alongside other differences, such as those of race, ethnicity or religion. In addition to these challenges, the relevance and coherence of feminism has been questioned from a second direction by advocates of the view that women as such do not have interests or suffer disadvantages, and that an adequate politics must focus on their diverse needs and experiences.<sup>6</sup> Women are members of all races, ethnic communities or nations, and rather than presenting them as a single constituency, feminism must come to terms with their complex, overlapping identities.

These powerful lines of argument pose both a threat and an opportunity: a threat to the identity of feminism as it has been understood; and at the same time an opportunity to reconsider how the interests of women are to be kept in view. Challenges of this general type are not unusual, if only because feminism has usually been an alliance of diverse and sometimes conflicting campaigns, underpinned by a range of often incompatible theoretical positions, so that contest and disagreement within it are the norm rather than the exception. What is new, however, is the precise nature of the challenges it now faces. Because many of the arguments that tend to diminish its significance have their origins in feminism itself, feminists are likely to recognise their power, and to sympathise with the conceptions of difference that—on one level at least—now threaten them. This development helps to explain why current debates have become exceptionally fine-drawn. The play of sameness and difference around which so much feminist theorising revolves is reflected in the relations between feminist positions, and in those between feminism and other stances, with the result that any unequivocal other is hard to find. Rather than confronting clearly identified opponents, feminists have set out to explore ways of recognising a range of cultural differences while retaining a voice for women.

While trying sensitively to understand difference, feminism has of course created differences of its own between academic disciplines, and between more theoretical and more practical stances. This volume grew out of an interdisciplinary seminar held at the University of Cambridge where lawyers, political theorists and philosophers came together to listen to one another and discuss the problems they found

<sup>4</sup> B Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> There are many variants of this view. See for example I M Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990); W Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995); C Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in A Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> See for example E Spelman, *Inessential Woman. Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London, Women's Press, 1988).

most pressing. Despite the diverse backgrounds of the participants, their concerns turned out to converge, as the articles collected here attest. Nor was there a striking gap between philosophical interpretation of issues such as identity or embodiment and proposals about the way these might figure in the law. The following essays therefore form a whole, within which the argument moves easily back and forth between theoretical problems and issues of social policy, and focuses on a small range of themes that are tenaciously pursued. Some contributors reflect directly on the intellectual strategies currently available to lawyers and political philosophers who wish to oppose injustices to women. Others examine the materials on which such strategies depend, the categories in terms of which women and their situations are constructed or questioned within legal, philosophical and political discourses. The essays are marked by a common ambition to engage critically and constructively with contemporary theory and practice, and to develop intellectual tools which can successfully maintain and increase the visibility of women.

The decline of feminism as a political movement is most explicitly addressed by Anne Phillips, who begins by asking why feminism proceeds in cycles. This is partly because women find it difficult single-mindedly to promote their own interests, she suggests, and partly because it is not easy to sustain a politics on the margins. However, it is also due to the fact that insights originating within feminism have been taken over by other political movements. In the present cycle, the politics of difference threatens to obscure women by representing sexual difference as just one axis of variation alongside others. At the same time, multiculturalists sometimes occlude the distinctiveness of women's situation by treating them as a relatively homogeneous group with a culture in need of protection. This latter approach directs attention away from women's diversity and subordination, and can also make it more difficult to recognise conflicts and inequalities within cultures, including those between men and women. Rather than revealing women's distinctive interests, it tends to render them invisible by assimilating them to those of a culture as a whole.

As Phillips emphasises, her aim is not to reverse the beneficial movement from a politics centred on women to one organised around difference. It is rather to show that this movement "can encourage an over-individualised understanding of political agency that attaches too little weight to structural differences between women and men".<sup>7</sup> To reap the advantages of the politics of difference while retaining the visibility of women, we need to "theorise that complex relationship between individual and group . . . in a way that retains a meaningful politics of sexual equality".<sup>8</sup>

The proposal that the relationship between individual and group needs to be further explored if women are to remain visible is taken up throughout this volume. One set of contributors analyses the way in which this relationship works within the law, focusing on the connection between the individual legal person who is the

<sup>7</sup> A Phillips, "Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Or, Where Have All the Women Gone?", *infra* chap. 1, at p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, *ibid.*, at p. 27.

bearer of rights, and the broader field of practices in which individual and group identity are constructed. Another set examines the ways in which philosophers and social theorists have tried to articulate the interdependencies between individuals and groups with an eye to providing a conception of identity that allows for individual and social change.

In concentrating on these themes, the contributors pursue an issue that has already been widely discussed and remains of great interest. Are our conceptions of individual and collective identity gendered? If so, what are the legal and political implications of this fact? Among philosophers and political theorists who have raised these questions, some have embarked on a critical examination of standard philosophical accounts of personal identity.<sup>9</sup> Others have focused on a central issue within political philosophy, namely, what it is to be a citizen, the kind of person recognised as a full member of the state?<sup>10</sup> In both these areas, research has uncovered assumptions and patterns of argument which marginalise the culturally feminine, and in some cases exclude women from full personhood. In debates about personal identity, for example, the differences between male and female bodies, and their consequences for personal identity, have been largely ignored. In broadly liberal political philosophy, norms of citizenship developed by and for men have been uncritically adopted so that women only become citizens insofar as they are able to conform to male standards.

Significantly, the gendered character of political personhood or citizenship within the liberal tradition has been matched by the case of legal personhood. This issue is addressed by Kristin Savell and Ngaire Naffine, both of whom chart ways in which conceptions of legal personhood serve to exclude and subordinate women. Savell asks how law constructs the bodies of legal persons and, taking the case of pregnant women, shows that although the law formally recognises them as legal subjects it does not always treat them as such. In practice, some pregnant women are not recognised as persons before the law and are thus denied a status otherwise accorded to all sane adults. In English law, Savell explains, the foetus is not a legal person until it is born, and therefore possesses no rights or obligations. By contrast, the mother is a legal person. Her status is regularly undermined, however, when the law intervenes to protect the interests of the foetus and violates her rights, for example by prohibiting late abortion, enforcing caesarean sections on women who refuse them, or imposing restrictions on drug addicts by whose way of life the foetus may be damaged. In grappling with the difficulty of reconciling the mother's legal status with the interests of the foetus the law is torn, Savell argues, between two main strategies, neither of them satisfactory. It can give up the claim that the foetus is not a legal person, thus clearing the way to awarding it rights

<sup>9</sup> See for example S Benhabib, *Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992); M Schectman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1996); S James, "Feminism in Philosophy of Mind. The Question of Personal Identity" in M Fricker and J Hornsby (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> See for example R Voet, *Feminism and Citizenship* (London and Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1998); A Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991).

of its own. Alternatively, it can, and does, find grounds for claiming that pregnant women lack capacities that are taken to be essential to legal personhood, such as the capacity for rational judgement. This method of sustaining its own doctrines excludes and diminishes a class of women, while sweeping a central jurisprudential problem under the carpet.

In elaborating her critique, Savell refers to the essay by Naffine which argues, in somewhat broader terms, that law works with a norm of a “healthy” legal person who is implicitly male. On the face of things, women are as much legal subjects as men, and are thus included in the historical development of the doctrine of legal personality. In fact, however, they remain less than “healthy legal persons”, both in the circumstances discussed by Savell, and also in relation to the law of marriage and of rape. Naffine shows that their exclusion stems from their inability to conform to an accepted conception of a legal person who is unitary, assertive and self-contained. There are several arenas where the law assumes that women do not answer to this description. When pregnant, they are not unified; in marriage they complement men; and the law of rape prescribes their sexual role. These departures from a male norm underlie and explain the persistence of laws which continue to disadvantage women by denying them legal personhood, and at the same time continue to impose a hierarchical, binary understanding of sexual difference.

In the final section of her paper, Naffine asks what approach women should take to legal personality. Should they work for legal reforms aimed at establishing a more inclusive conception of personhood that allows for sexual difference, or is this strategy suspect? Naffine offers a general criticism of the modern legal subject who has been stripped of his social nature to the point where he is incapable of negotiating or renegotiating his identity. The identity of the legal person is constituted by contractual relations which do not allow for change. As a result, legal personhood fails to capture the mutability of individual identity and is unable to recognise maturation, ageing and other kinds of transformation that are crucial to our understanding of ourselves. Without these, it is of doubtful value to women or men, and rather than rushing to make it accessible to women we should view it with cautious scepticism.

Naffine here broaches an issue, at once intellectual and strategic, which is further discussed in other essays. Is it fruitful to appeal to the normative categories of theories that were not developed with the interests of women in mind in our attempts to understand and overcome the disadvantages that women suffer? Or are there reasons for believing that this strategy will backfire, either because such categories are ineradicably tainted by masculine presuppositions or because they are in some other way ill-adapted to the aims of feminism? One area in which this question is hotly debated is that of rights—the rights of the legal person. Although feminists have in the past relied on a liberal conception of rights, and although this strategy has been in some ways extremely successful, there is currently a good deal of doubt as to whether it can achieve the ends for which women now need to strive. These reservations are part of a more general debate about the extent to which liberalism can accommodate the interests of women and, like Naffine’s scepticism about legal

personhood, focus on the juridical concepts at the heart of liberal political philosophy. They therefore pose a major challenge to the legal and political institutions of Western-style democracies, and to one of the theoretical frameworks within which women's disadvantages have been powerfully articulated.

In the opening section of her essay, Stephanie Palmer summarises a number of key objections to rights theory. The abstract universalism that lies at the heart of liberal rights presupposes sameness: the notion that has been at the root of women's historical difficulty in using rights to their advantage. The enormous obstacles that women have encountered in obtaining equality in the workplace and in public policy has led many feminists to reject rights as fundamentally inappropriate to feminist politics and theory.<sup>11</sup> On a more pragmatic note, some feminists have expressed fear that by diverting attention away from more direct political action and into legal disputes, "rights-based strategies will limit aspirations by merely reframing debates within the dominant discourse".<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, she argues that rights have become a fundamental part of our legal philosophy and that women cannot afford to abandon law as a potential medium for change. She identifies an affinity between feminist ideals and human rights which have taken on a greater prominence in the United Kingdom since the enactment of the Human Rights Act 1998. As a consequence there exists an opportunity for feminist engagement with public law and new ground for theorising and strategy making.

Any excavation of the relationship between law and feminism exposes paradoxes and raises more questions than it answers. If feminism is based on a claim to speak not only "for" but "of" women, then who is this universal "woman"? If only partial knowledge is possible, then feminist theory cannot speak on behalf of the essential universal "woman". How then can any political or legal claim be made on behalf of women as a group? Is it possible for feminists to seek access to the law without being silenced by it? Can a more contextual position be adopted when formulating feminist legal claims? While cautiously adopting a rights based strategy, Palmer suggests possible ways in which the adoption of the Human Rights Act may provide a "space" for feminist voices; a chance to unsettle liberal categories. The challenge lies in giving meanings to rights that are consistent with feminist values and that are responsive to the realities of women's lives.

The question of the extent to which women's interests can be furthered by appealing to theories designed for other ends is also raised by Nicola Lacey, who integrates a discussion of legal subjectivity into a wider examination of the nature of law and the possibility of using it for ethical purposes. As Lacey points out, feminists have often taken it for granted that some of the wrongs and injustices suffered by women can be redressed by law, and have thus fought for legal reform or imagined legal utopias. The assumption that law can be assessed in ethical terms is put in doubt, however, by the view that it is intrinsically and inevitably violent. This

<sup>11</sup> See for example, C Smart, *Feminism and the Power of Law* (London, Routledge, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> S Palmer, "Feminism and the Promise of Human Rights: Possibilities and Paradoxes", *infra* chap. 4, at p. 96.

position has recently been defended by Derrida,<sup>13</sup> who argues that the very process of applying general rules to particular cases, thereby fixing subjects and events and imposing unchallengeable judgements on them, is a violent one. Such pervasive violence undercuts the possibility of ethically assessing particular laws or decisions, so that if an ethical sphere exists, it must lie beyond law.

The conflict between a conception of law as ethical, and the Derridean claim that law and ethics are mutually exclusive, prompts Lacey to consider how feminists committed to the value of deconstruction should resolve this clash. Taking the case of the legal subject, she argues that feminist deconstructions of legal categories work at three levels: they reveal how law violently excludes the feminine; they draw attention to the dynamic role of law in constructing sexed subjects; and they point towards the possibility of a form of law less oppressive to women. Writers who focus on the last two levels employ an approach that Lacey labels “contextualisation as strategy”. By drawing attention to social relations that the law excludes, and in this way setting legal concepts and procedures in broader contexts, they aim to show how we can begin to formulate categories that are no longer culturally masculine and are less violently exclusive than the dominant ones. This project can be either reformist or utopian. Some contextualisations aim simply to modify existing categories, and therefore uphold a conception of law as ethical. Others, such as Irigaray’s utopian reinterpretation of rights, envisage a society so different from our own as to be barely imaginable, and conceive the ethical as lying beyond law as we know it. As ways of furthering the interests of women, Lacey argues, both variants encounter practical and intellectual pitfalls which serve as a warning against an unqualified commitment to any philosophical analysis of the relation between ethics and law. Rather than taking an abstract stand on this matter, feminists will do better to adopt a pragmatic approach to theorising, and realising, the interests of women.

As the essays by Savell, Naffine and Lacey reveal, deconstruction of the legal subject often aspires to replace a narrowly individualist conception of the person with one whose identity is constituted by a wider range of relations with other individuals and groups. The central task of articulating such a conception of identity is taken up by Seyla Benhabib and Moira Gatens. According to Benhabib, this is an urgent project. We need to reassess the place of sexual difference in a world where traditional identities are becoming increasingly fragmented. We also need to hang on to a conception of political and moral agency in the face of post-modern views which threaten to dissipate it. (While allowing that the identities of individuals alter, we need to retain a space for the self who subverts, conforms to, or revolutionises social practices.) Finally, we need a sense of identity which will enable women to be full members of the polity, rather than strangers or nomads. Responding to these demands, Benhabib proposes a narrative view of the self. Rather than focusing on a core self-constituted by a set of relatively stable and

<sup>13</sup> J Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” in D Cornell, M Rosenfeld and D Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York, Routledge, 1992).

enduring characteristics, or by a horizon of deep commitments and values, we should think of selfhood in dialogical terms, as “an ability to insert oneself into webs of interlocution”. The identity of an individual or group consists in its ability to go on telling a story about itself that makes sense of its own existence and answers the questions that confront it. What matters, as Benhabib elegantly expresses it, is not the document but the signature, not the content of the story but its narrative function of holding together past, present and future.

In developing her account, Benhabib acknowledges the embodiment and fluidity of the self. Here her interests overlap with those of Moira Gatens who argues in her essay that feminist theory needs to develop a politics able to accommodate difference, “whilst retaining a conception of identity as dynamic and open to transformation through encounters with others”.<sup>14</sup> To meet this challenge, we need to avoid two unsatisfactory positions: on the one hand, a liberal outlook which recognises differences in people’s ideas but fails to acknowledge the relation between who we are and what we think; on the other hand, a politics of difference which views identities as relatively fixed and fails to do justice to the ways in which they change. Gatens suggests that we can overcome the limitations of these approaches by drawing on the philosophy of Spinoza, and at the same time on a feminist understanding of the self as embodied, to arrive at what she calls an ethico-political ontology—an account of how political identities are formed and transformed, and of why, and when, we should value their transformation.

Recent feminist work has provided powerful arguments for the view that our ideas—our desires, beliefs, passions and preferences—are not independent of, and separable from, our bodies, but are formed and limited by different forms of embodiment and associated ways of life. We now face the problem of seeing how this insight bears on ethical and political theory, and here, Gatens suggests, it is helpful to turn to Spinoza, for whom individual identity is always embodied and only emerges from our relations with others. As well as being shaped by our relations with individuals, however, our capacities and ideas are shaped by our relations with institutions and associations, and with the values and ways of life they sustain. Their shared imaginaries provide individuals with a sense of identity and belonging, and confer meaning on their actions. Besides articulating this view, however, Spinoza allows for diverse forms of individuality, or difference, and for the transformation of identity as we move through the world. Gatens goes on to show how this Spinozist conception of identity is applied and developed by George Eliot (who translated Spinoza’s *Ethics* into English) in her novel, *Daniel Deronda*. The great strength of these two writers is that they offer us a way to acknowledge the material presence of the past and the embodied nature of our beliefs, together with an account of our ability to transform them.

In much of her work about the construction of subjectivity and its relation to agency, Gatens makes use of the notion of the imaginary, the category that Susan

<sup>14</sup> M Gatens, “The Politics of ‘Presence’ and ‘Difference’: Working Through Spinoza and Eliot”, *infra*, chap. 7 at p. 174.

James goes on to examine. The imaginary has played an important part in the work of several feminist philosophers who use it, James suggests, in strikingly diverse ways. For some of them it is primarily a psychological phenomenon, a structure of the individual mind, whereas for others it is social and refers to the images and symbols embedded in a discourse or culture. James begins by analysing the differences and overlaps between these two conceptions, and traces the origin of the division between them to the work of an earlier generation of theorists. She then examines the way in which the division is perpetuated in contemporary writing, concentrating on the work of Michèle le Doeuff, Moira Gatens, and Drucilla Cornell. Cornell has recently claimed that each individual has an imaginary domain, and also a right to have it protected. James questions this latter view. The assimilation of the imaginary into a theory of rights is only achieved, she argues, at the expense of the traits that make it most valuable as a means of reflecting critically on the forces that shape our understandings of ourselves as women and men. We therefore should not allow ourselves to lose sight of the sense in which the imaginary is a social phenomenon, but should investigate it further.

This volume raises as many questions as it answers, and can be read as an invitation to further conversation about the tools that feminism has at its disposal and the problems it needs to address. As with any serious political movement, the obstacles by which feminists are confronted often appear substantial and intractable. If these essays contribute to the project of inventing ways to shift them, they will have served their purpose.



## *Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Or, Where Have All the Women Gone?*

ANNE PHILLIPS

*Personally, I am a feminist, and an Old Feminist, because I dislike everything that feminism implies. I desire an end of the whole business, the demands for equality, the suggestions of sex warfare, the very name of feminist. I want to be about the work in which my real interests lie, the study of inter-race relationships, the writing of novels and so forth. But while the inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunity denied to the great majority of women, I shall have to be a feminist and an Old Feminist, with the motto Equality First.<sup>1</sup>*

WINIFRED HOLTBY, novelist, journalist, harsh critic of South Africa's racial policies, and active if reluctant feminist, wrote this in 1926 in the context of a debate then raging between old and new Feminism. The old feminism she defended pursued equality between the sexes in education and politics and employment; the "new feminism" challenging this focused on policies to improve the condition of women as mothers. A similar debate surfaced in the 1980s, when feminists found themselves embroiled in a rather unhelpful opposition between either equality or difference. When women claimed equality with men, did this mean they were accepting male conventions about what constitutes a good life, like the equal right to sacrifice one's children to one's career advancement, or the equal right to brutalise oneself in the army? If they insisted instead on what made their lives different from men's, did this confirm traditional stereotypes about the sexes— notions about women finding their fulfilment in motherhood not employment, or caring more about their nearest and dearest than any abstract justice claims? These are not the questions I focus on here, for my perception of the current state of feminist debate is that it has moved beyond that dichotomy between **either** equality **or** difference. What interests me in Holtby's comment is the reluctance it suggests about having to keep going on about the women.

There is a curious cycle within feminism that starts with exposing the once-invisible woman (attacking the many ways in which her needs, concerns, or interests have been submerged under those of men or mankind), but then gets frustrated with what comes to be experienced as an obsessive preoccupation with sex difference, and wishes it could submerge those women again. In mid-nineteenth

<sup>1</sup> W Holtby, "Feminism Divided" 1926, reprinted in P Berry and A Bishop (eds.), *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London, Virago, 1985) 48.

century Britain, women were literally obliterated as legal persona on entering marriage. They were subsumed under fathers or husbands for the purposes of political representation, prevented from addressing public audiences that included men, and through a combination of legal and customary practices, denied access to education and many fields of employment. Much of the campaigning activity of nineteenth-century feminism was devoted to putting these women back on the map, challenging the practices that had rendered their needs and claims invisible, and asserting their independent rights within employment, politics, and marriage. In later arguments, feminists have focused on the divisions between public and private that continued to obscure women from view even after the achievements of formal equality, and much contemporary analysis deals with the apparently inclusive categories (like humanity or citizenship) whose masculine provenance still keeps women out.

A great deal of feminism is about breaking the silence on women: disentangling the supposed unities of the family that conceal relationships of power and subordination; identifying the new issues that arise when we turn from the abstractions of humanity to put the spotlight on women themselves; drawing attention to conflicts of interest between the sexes; battling on behalf of women's rights or needs. In one particularly strong formulation of this, Carole Pateman has argued that our understanding of citizenship has to be reformulated "to open up space for two figures: one masculine, one feminine".<sup>2</sup> Instead, that is, of subsuming women under the false universalisms of humanity, feminists have sought to reframe views on freedom, equality, or democracy with the knowledge that there are both women and men.

This has always been a key moment in the feminist cycle, and yet the preoccupation with women never seems to last very long. It is as if we lose heart with what we come to see as an over-emphasis on women, begin stretching out towards broader implications, towards pacifism, perhaps eco-feminism, or as in the example discussed here, towards a more generalised politics of difference. This process can be extraordinarily productive, but it also threatens to return feminism to the beginning of the cycle. Women may then drop out of the picture, to become invisible again.

There are a number of reasons for this, and my own guess is that there are three particularly important contributory factors. One is that women have trouble insisting on their own special needs and interests (self-denial being part of the construction of femininity), and that feminists have proved no better at dealing with this than other groups of women. In the history of feminist campaigning, there has always been an attempt to associate women's needs with the broader needs of humanity as a whole, and it is only in rare moments that feminists have felt tough enough—or angry enough—to insist on their own "selfish" concerns. The case for women's suffrage was typically argued in terms of the way women would civilise and moralise politics, and even the most ardent of suffragists found it hard to say she wanted the vote just to make life better for herself. When Britain entered the First World War, the Women's Social and Political Union immediately suspended

<sup>2</sup> C Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988) 224.