The decline of class-based politics has seen a revival in the idea of citizenship as a basis for democratic politics. But Carole Pateman is sceptical. She argues that advocates of citizenship and new democratic theories fail to take account of the gender-based assumptions of the political traditions they hope to recover.

In discussions of electoral politics the point is sometimes made that the achievement of formal rights, such as the suffrage, is not the same as the ability of all citizens to enjoy those rights on an equal basis; or, to make the same point in another way, formal rights do not necessarily mean that citizenship is of equal worth to all citizens. Another important point that is frequently overlooked is that all individuals are not necessarily incorporated into the political order in the same fashion. The meaning of citizenship can be very different for different groups and categories of the population. Yet theorists of democracy, who currently place a good deal of faith in citizenship as a political value or idea, still fail to confront some major problems about the status of women, and blacks and other minorities, and so gloss over the implications of that status for ‘democracy’ itself.

Theorists who advocate radical, participatory forms of democracy should be particularly concerned with limitations upon democracy and the problems posed by the structure of the relations between the sexes. There has been a revival of interest in participatory democratic theory since the mid-1980s and, in particular, a focus on a revived conception of citizenship as a new organising principle for democratic politics. These theorists have available to them the feminist scholarship developed over the past twenty years. But, like most other political theorists, they either do not read feminist political theory or fail to engage with feminist arguments. New arguments about participatory democracy still tend to ignore the question of women and democracy and never look at the contemporary women’s
movement, even though it advocates a radical form of democracy and provides a multitude of examples of attempts to put participatory democracy into practice.

Similarly, no attention is given to the problems debated by feminist political theorists, such as men's power over women, the political significance of sexual difference, the relation between the public and private spheres, the bodily integrity of women and pervasive sexual violence, or the position of women in the workplace. Only a handful of democratic theorists have begun to discuss the question of the relation between domestic life and the public world of politics, or, for instance, to consider reproductive rights in addition to the more familiar list of democratic rights. And it is feminist scholars, rather than those identified as 'democratic theorists', who have begun to write books about women, feminism and democracy.

Part of the reason why women and feminist arguments have so minor a place in democratic theory is undoubtedly that democratic theory, like conventional electoral politics in the West, is still largely the preserve of men or, more exactly, white men. Much more important, however, than male domination of the profession, is the acceptance of a view of the political which systematically excludes crucial features of socio-political life from scrutiny. Feminist critics of political theory have posed a fundamental challenge to the canon; they are arguing that a new democratic theory is needed because the discipline rests on a patriarchal conception of its subject matter, a conception which inhibits the creation of a new democratic theory.

The claim that the central category of political science and democratic theory, the political itself, is patriarchal, is complex, but involves the following two arguments: first, that the manner in which the political has been constructed excludes women; second, that the way in which women have actually been included in political life is different from, and subordinate to, the incorporation of men as subjects and citizens.

Political theorists have not extended the scope of their critical inquiries to ask why certain social and political relations are seen as falling outside, or as not relevant to, their scholarly investigations. They have not examined how the modern notion of the political was developed by the classic contract theorists in the 17th and 18th centuries but, instead, have accepted their construction as obvious and self-evident—and then have interpreted the relevant texts in the light of that same view of the political.

Democratic theorists have failed to take seriously (or often even to mention) the discussions in these texts of the political significance of sexual difference. Nor have they examined how conceptions of the political meaning of manhood and womanhood were integral to the modern separation of a public sphere from domestic and intimate relations or private life. Therefore, they ignore—by tacitly taking for granted—the separation of the private sphere, identified with women, from the public sphere, identified with men. This patriarchal division between private and intimate relations and the public world of economy and state is the concern of feminist scholars. Democratic theorists, in contrast, focus on another division, a class
division, within the public arena, between private enterprise (the economy) and the state (the public realm). Democratic theorists assume that the public sphere, in the sense that feminists use the term, is their proper subject matter. They also assume that they can study the public world in abstraction from the private sphere, which is irrelevant to their inquiries. They therefore display no curiosity about the patriarchal division between public and private, which is a major structural feature that distinguishes modern liberal societies from other societal forms.

The classic theorists present the sexes as differentiated ‘by nature’, so that the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subordination. All men are seen as self-sufficient, independent, equal and self-governing; there is no natural jurisdiction of one man over another. The government of men must therefore be created through voluntary agreement or consent, and all men have the capacity to take part in political life. In contrast, women lack these attributes and must be governed by men. The place for which women are fitted is private, not political, life; they must be excluded from citizenship. A certain view of manhood and a certain view of the political were thus developed together, and the political was made in the masculine image.

When democratic theorists discuss these texts as a foundation of modern democracy, they typically pass over this central aspect of the classic theorists’ argument. They do not, therefore, have anything to say about the significance of the construction of sexual difference that assumes that men are the political sex, or anything to say about women’s inclusion into the political order. Women had a very long fight to become citizens, but their exclusion from citizenship did not mean that they were left outside of the scope of political power and public policy. Arguments about democratic citizenship are usually conducted as if what is said about men can be generalised to women too—or, more accurately, the terms of the argument are not presented as being about men, but assumed to be about an ostensibly sexually neuter ‘individual’. A brief consideration of one aspect of the incorporation of men as citizens will illustrate this important point.

Citizenship in the English-speaking democracies since the late 19th century has been citizenship in a developing welfare state. Political theorists have had a good deal to say about the welfare state recently as rightwing governments have attacked the welfare budget and institutions, but the manner in which they have framed their discussions presupposes that the welfare state provides an answer to a certain problem. The problem is the poverty of (a greater or lesser proportion of) male workers generated by the capitalist market economy.

If a worker is unemployed or, through sickness, old age or some misfortune, cannot sell his labour power on the market, his resulting poverty means that he lacks the resources to enjoy the rights he has as a citizen. His poverty sets him apart from his fellow citizens, and he may eventually pose a threat to public order. The welfare state provides a solution to this problem. As a worker, a man can make a contribution (pay for ‘social insurance’) that then entitles him to benefits if he cannot sell his labour power. The benefits maintain his standard of living, and also maintain his standing as a citizen. The welfare state and its entitlements thus makes democratic citizenship of equal worth to all citizens.

Paid employment has been a major mechanism through which men have been incorporated into citizenship, although this argument about the welfare state is usually presented as if it applied indifferently to men and women alike. The questions that democratic theorists do not ask are whether the argument is in fact generalisable to women, or whether there has been another status for women that corresponds to that of ‘worker’ for men.

Or, to make the point slightly differently, theorists of the democratic welfare state do not ask about the citizenship of the worker’s wife. The worker’s wife might be in paid employment herself, but even if she is, these theorists have failed to recognise that, as a worker, she has had a quite different relationship to citizenship in the welfare state from that of her husband. From its initial stages, the structure of the Anglophone welfare state was patriarchal and the very different treatment of men and women has only recently begun to be dismantled. This fundamental feature of citizenship in the welfare state has been very well documented by feminist theorists and historians for some time but their work is not considered by democratic theorists.

The argument about citizenship and the welfare state focuses on the worker and citizen and hence on the public world of employment and politics. No attention is paid to private, domestic life, which is implicitly accepted as a natural basis for the public world and so as falling outside the purview of political theory. Domestic life is also implicitly accepted as the realm most suitable for women. The ‘worker’ maintains the home through his wages, he returns there from his day’s labours and is looked after by his wife. The economic dependence and, hence, subordination, of wives is so taken-for-granted in democratic theory that the fact that this is a creation of the 19th century—and not a ‘natural’ arrangement—is completely overlooked.

The structure of the welfare state provides a clear illustration of the differential incorporation of women and men into citizenship, and of the lesser worth of women’s citizenship despite their formal equality as votes. This is not, however, the only matter that is overlooked in discussions of democracy. Democratic theorists have yet to ask whether women make a contribution to the welfare state that has any significance for their citizenship or for democracy. A contribution has been demanded of women but, paradoxically, not a public contribution, like that of men; women have been required to supply private welfare. As part of the task held to be suited to them because of their sex, women—almost invariably married women—have cared for children, the sick, the aged and the infirm in their homes, and the current crisis of the welfare state would have been much worse if the state had been responsible for providing these services.
Arguments about the welfare state and democracy, like debate about injustice, concentrate on distributive issues. The large inequalities of income and wealth in the English-speaking democracies, and the lack, for example, of a national system of health insurance in the USA so that many individuals have very limited or no access to medical treatment, together with the differential allocation of welfare benefits between the sexes, means that questions about distribution are extremely important. There are, however, two problems with the conventional arguments. First, the issue of distribution within the domestic sphere and how it is connected to the workplace is rarely considered. How the (male) worker distributes his wage to his dependents—or if he distributes it to them at all—is assumed to be yet another matter of not great interest to students of democracy. The fact that half the citizen body relies—or, now that most wives today are in the labor force but earning less than their husbands, relies partially—on the benevolence of another citizen for the resources necessary for the enjoyment of their citizenship, is typically passed over in silence. Women's standard of living is not regarded as a relevant issue in its own right for democracy.

The second problem is with the 'distributive paradigm' which now covers much more than the allocation of material goods. In recent arguments, the distribution of such 'goods' as self-respect, rights, opportunities or power have been discussed as if they are no different from cars or income or wealth. The result is that rights, for instance, are treated as a bundle of things that individuals possess in greater or lesser amounts, so that their distribution can be compared. The question is not asked of what it could mean to talk of 'distributing' a right. Rights are not material things which can be owned but relationships that help define the conditions for individual and collective action. More generally, the distributive focus of so much political theory means that the problem of subordination, hence also the problem of freedom, is rarely discussed. In democratic theory, attention is directed to fairness, or in the case of radical theorists, exploitation, rather than subjection and lack of freedom.

When democratic theorists examine the distribution of welfare benefits they typically ignore both the allocation to men compared to women and the social structures that determined the patriarchal character of the distribution. That is, they ignore the patriarchal power and subordination of women that is consolidated in the welfare state. The neglect is encouraged when power is brought under the distributive paradigm. The consequence is that it is hard to realise that someone had to invent it. Exactly: it has been 'self-evident' since the late 19th century that tasks assigned to women because of their sex are not 'work'. Only the activities of men in the public market are included within the UNSNA 'production boundary'; women are 'dependents', not 'producers'. Households in general are seen as nonproductive, except for production for the market by agricultural households. More recently, a value has been imputed to some non-monetary household activities—such as carrying water, weeding, the collection of firewood, subsistence crop production and housework are excluded. These are precisely the tasks that are typically consigned to women. UN manuals explicitly exclude unpaid domestic work from 'work'. As Waring emphasises, since domestic work is never defined it becomes a 'residual category' that includes, beside the tasks that are thought of as 'housework' in the West, 'all food processing, kitchen gardening, animal tending, food and water collection, fishing, hunting, gathering and manufacturing for home use'.

There are, it is claimed, practical difficulties of data collection and conceptual problems that prevent women's work being counted but, as Waring notes, ways are found to include men's non-monetary work and the informal economy when required. The major obstacle to the inclusion of women's productive 'contribution' in the UNSNA is the same as the obstacle to including women's 'contribution' to the welfare state in the West. To do so would lead to scrutiny of some awkward matters; men's power, patriarchal institutional structures, the division between public and private and the political significance of sexual difference would become visible. The construction of categories like 'productive', 'housework', 'market' or 'private' would cease to be 'self-evident'. Questions would be raised about the kind of 'development' and 'structural adjustment' in the Third World that can lengthen women's hours of work while shortening men's, that can give jobs and land to men, and push women into poverty and into economic and sexual subordination to men. In short, the normal science of politics would have to be reconstituted.

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