

## Book Review: Getting to Grips with Feminist Social and Political Theory

Gooch, Rebecca

Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

www.peerproject.eu

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gooch, R. (2005). Book Review: Getting to Grips with Feminist Social and Political Theory. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(1), 111-114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050680501200110>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter dem "PEER Licence Agreement zur Verfügung" gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zum PEER-Projekt finden Sie hier: <http://www.peerproject.eu> Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

**gesis**  
Leibniz-Institut  
für Sozialwissenschaften

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under the "PEER Licence Agreement". For more Information regarding the PEER-project see: <http://www.peerproject.eu> This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Mitglied der  
  
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

simple map, might help the students to locate women writers in the region(s) from which they came and in which they lived. The map could focus on regional, religious or other factors that would be relevant for student research. For example, in the introduction the authors mention women writers from the US and Britain (whom they point out represent the majority of woman writers), Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Ireland. It would also be helpful if visual material was added for students whose preferred learning style is a visual one. The companion may increase its readership by making a name as a cross-over reference book that accommodates different learning styles.

There are numerous references to websites throughout the book. However, a random check on the websites showed that a small percentage of hyperlinks are already no longer accessible. Given that websites and hyperlinks do tend to change without notice and sometimes without redirections, the authors may want to provide some general tips for navigating from websites in which the links are not, or appear not to be, functional. By navigating back to the root and searching for the woman writer the student may locate her on another page. Such tips should decrease any frustration for those who may not be familiar with searching the Internet. To this end, the authors will do well to give a few tips for navigation. One way to accomplish this is for the panel to revisit the websites, note where redirects or navigation problems are, analyse the types of redirects and problems and write the results into the section 'Web Sites' in the introduction. This improvement should reduce the possibilities for confusion and help to make the next edition to the Companion series even more enjoyable and useful to student researchers.

Jolanda Robinson  
*University of Utrecht*

## GETTING TO GRIPS WITH FEMINIST SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY

Janice McLaughlin  
*Feminist Social and Political Theory*  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 214 pp., ISBN 0-3339-6810-7

The book *Feminist Social and Political Theory* by Janice McLaughlin is an undergraduate student's guide to current feminist debates in social and political theory. As such, it aims to be a practical, easy to follow guide that introduces current feminist debates on equal rights, standpoint theories, the ethics of care, post-modernism, Foucault, queer theory and social studies of technology. It offers clear summaries of central arguments in the field, feminist critiques of the arguments, feminist revisions of the theories and the associated political uses and benefits for the theories.

McLaughlin's discussion of standpoint theories begins with a clear summary of Marxist ideas of historical materialism. According to McLaughlin, Marx and Engels 'argue that human beings develop their sense of consciousness through their relationship with the real world, and the labour involved in producing the material necessities of life' (p. 48). Thus, one's experiences in life and their role in the material market determine their understanding of the universe. 'The problem is that in a capitalist society, the consciousness that is held to be "man's", is that of the ruling class' (p. 48). Where citizens once worked to develop their own craft, but now work in companies ruled by managers that dictate their actions and

restrict their freedom of choice, the outcome is a separation of mental and material labour, a specialization into specific realms of labour, and the sale of goods that profit others instead of the crafts worker. As a long-term result of this, the proletariat may gain an understanding of the oppressive capitalistic structures and this may spawn collective action to revolt against the ruling class.

A feminist critique of Marx's ideas points out that Marx overlooked the fact that women are affected by both capitalism *and patriarchy*. Feminist writers have therefore produced a revision of his ideas in the form of 'standpoint theories', which address such elements as identity and difference. Feminist standpoint theorists Nancy Hartsock and Dorothy Smith argue that knowledge is a product of patriarchal views because life's questions are framed and answered by individuals in power, and this power stems from a system of patriarchy. To counter this, one can formulate knowledge through the analysis of the standpoint of individuals in marginalized groups, in order to generate 'alternative understandings of the world'. These understandings can bring light to the uneven power structures and needs/desires of the less-often heard. This in turn may lead to an emancipation of the subordinated, as an awareness of their concerns could promote the agency needed to spur social change.

Although the intention in standpoint theory is praiseworthy, it has been subject to much feminist critique, which McLaughlin summarizes as:

- 1) Marxist foundations are no longer appropriate for exploring experience and knowledge.
- 2) Standpoint theories are ill equipped to deal with difference.
- 3) Postmodern recognition of multiplicity and deconstruction of experience and knowledge make standpoint arguments appear old fashioned and naïve. (p. 58)

In the chapter on the ethics of care, McLaughlin offers a feminist response to Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg's research and theory on moral judgement and action. In the 1930s, Jean Piaget aimed to understand moral values and reasoning among children through a study which observed their approach to playing games. He argued that girls 'develop through increasing rule recognition, but they never reach the universal quality of rule cooperation obtained by boys' (p. 74). Lawrence Kohlberg conducted a longitudinal study testing the moral judgements of boys and girls until they reached adulthood. He asked them questions that would spur a moral dilemma and then rated their response for rationality and successfully instilled moral principles. He found that women did not reach the higher stages that men did because 'they remained centred on irrational values of pleasing others and immediacy' (p. 74).

Feminist critics argue that Piaget and Kohlberg's work is inadequate to evaluate reason, rationality, moral thinking and judgement. Feminists further charge that 'structuring moral thought around a hierarchy and prioritizing impartiality is deeply flawed' (p. 75). The framework for rating moral judgement came from a model that ruled out the possibility of women reaching the highest stages of complexity. The model was therefore not designed to test the entire population, but rather more effectively to test the reasoning of males.

In the 1970s, Carol Gilligan restructured Kohlberg's model by taking a different approach to the understanding of the development of moral thought. Her model exchanged a focus on the achievement of rational cognitive thinking with 'the ability to care'. This offers a more female perspective to the approach, but has faced subsequent criticisms from feminists who question whether the notion of 'care' offers the best framework to analyse women's lives and values. This touches

on notions of how women are/were trapped into caring roles, with caring viewed as a feminine attribute, moulding many women into 'good mother/woman/carer' roles. Furthermore, black feminists have charged Gilligan with basing her theory on work that largely ignores 'race, class and sexuality' (p. 81).

McLaughlin discusses more recent theories on the ethics of care in the welfare system. One such theory incorporates a politicized ethics of care model that addresses matters of citizenship, interconnection and state responsibility. This envisions individuals as 'interdependent' with a need for both giving and receiving care. This theory incorporates demands to make care a larger matter, relevant to the public sphere rather than the private sphere, thus making a case for the support women need as interdependent caregivers.

The section titled 'Moving on from Foucault' addresses Foucault's work relating to power, knowledge, subjectivity and aesthetics. His work on power and discourse discussed how the modern state has become 'more local and encompassing', and how it has turned 'man' 'into an object of knowledge and that knowledge into a mode of control and regulation' (p. 117). This stemmed from the 1800s, where modes of surveillance arose to monitor individuals' actions in their daily lives. 'New institutions of medicine, law and psychiatry began to classify and monitor the body in order that its functions and failures could be calculated and regulated. At the same time, prisons, hospitals and asylums were built to house those bodies categorized as bad, mad or sick' (p. 117). Architecture even catered to this new idea of surveillance through its open construction of hospitals and prisons, making people aware that they were being watched at all times. This spurred a sense of self-awareness and self-monitoring, which reinforced the ability of those in power to sustain control.

Feminist critiques of Foucault charge that his depiction of power over citizens omits any reference to resistance or to the inequalities marginalized groups face, which impedes them from acting powerfully. Furthermore, Foucault fails to 'specify the role of male sexuality in the overall exploitation and social position of women' (p. 122).

Bartky and Bordo are feminist theorists who have tried to give Foucault's work on discipline and surveillance a gendered perspective through analysing the body. They argue that the 'feminine body is a product of disciplinary power' (p. 125). The media produces images deemed as the ideal female figure, which, like the shape of the Barbie doll, is unattainable. When women struggle to attain it, it is regarded as a sign of 'their frivolous nature' (p. 125). Therefore, women are criticized for focusing too much on their looks, when, in western societies, women's looks are deemed monumentally important. Women however continue excessively to diet, overexercise and develop eating disorders in order to meet this unrealistic expectation. They are thus players in their own subjectification. As Foucault suggests, patriarchy at the societal level produces a mode of self-discipline at the individual level.

This is one example of Foucault's various contributions to feminist thought. As McLaughlin concludes, for feminists, Foucault's work has been a useful bridge into gender theory and understanding of power structures. Yet his work can only be a bridge as in itself it lacks the gender-based lens that defines true feminist theory.

Foucault directs feminism towards what it already does, and that is to dispute the frameworks within which freedom and rights are discussed. His ideas can be used to identify the intricacies of contemporary patriarchal power relations but incorporating these ideas into feminism does have to respond to two difficulties. The first is the slight treatment Foucault himself gave gender and feminism; the

second is his treatment of power, which leaves his work at times overly deterministic, and at others overly optimistic (p. 135)

In conclusion, Janice McLaughlin's review of feminist social and political theory provides a solid base from which students can gain a broad understanding of feminist scholarship. The book is well structured and presented, offering readers a clear and concise background to a wide range of arguments. I highly recommend it for students seeking insight into current feminist theory.

Rebecca Gooch

*London School of Economics and Political Science*

#### THEORIZING IRANIAN WOMEN: FEMINISM, ISLAM AND CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Hammed Shahidian

*Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*

Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002, ix + 304 pp., ISBN 0-313-31476-4

Hammed Shahidian

*Women in Iran: Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement*

Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002, vii + 213 pp., ISBN 0-313-32345-3

These two publications discuss gender relations and women's movements in Iran. *Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic* provides the historical background with a discussion of gender relations in Iran from the 1960s onwards. *Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement* further details women's strategies for resistance in response to the gender policies of the Islamic Republic following the Revolution of 1979. The books are subsequently referred to here as (2002a) and (2002b), respectively.

Shahidian begins his discussion of gender relations in Iran with the Shah's 'White Revolution' (1962 onwards), which included the enfranchisement of women (1963), as well as educational, labour and legal reforms. Women's increased access to education and paid work and their 'token' presence in politics did not include a radical shift in gender roles however, and women remained responsible for household chores, often working a 'double-shift' (2002a: 50). The Family Protection Law of 1967, modified in 1975, restricted polygyny and reformed divorce and custody laws. It also increased the role of civil courts, thereby contributing to the marginalization of the clergy from the legislative system.

Shahidian argues that these measures 'brought family relations more under the control of the state' and that women were thereby subjected to 'new forms of patriarchal control' (2002a: 36; emphasis in original). He draws here on Walby's theory of private vs public patriarchy.

In private patriarchy, women are primarily confined to domestic production and controlled by specific men. Women's seclusion in the private sphere is replaced by their segregation in certain fields and levels of social activity in a public patriarchy. Male control over women is exerted not only through individual men, but, more importantly, through such public channels as the state or the media (2002a: 30).

Furthermore, only women's organizations sanctioned by the government were allowed, preventing the formation of 'genuine, grassroots women's organizations' (2002a: 44). Shahidian argues that the Pahlavi era's women-friendly reforms never