

## *Introduction: Patriarchy as a Problem in Political Theory*

*It is the very essence of the theoretical enterprise that, if and when it seems appropriate, it should feel free to sever itself from the bonds of traditional ways of looking at political life.*

David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis*

*An understanding of the relation between man and woman has not yet really begun to be tapped for insights into conceptions of community, though it is probably the most fruitful source of insight for such conceptions, and for discovering whatever it is that lies deepest at the heart of society. If power is all it can ever be, here may be the place to find out.*

Virginia Held, "Marx, Sex, and the Transformation of Society"

This book examines the broad question of how contemporary inequality between women and men is to be analyzed and explained.<sup>1</sup> Specifically: Why, or how, do men's social and political power positions with respect to women persist even in contemporary Western societies, where women and men are seen as formally/legally equal individuals, where almost all adult women are fully or partly employed, where there is a high proportion of well-educated women, and where welfare state arrangements, which obviously benefit women, are relatively well developed?

Even after decades of benevolent and active policies for gender equality, inequalities between women and men in today's Western

societies persist and, very likely, have increased in some spheres. We are still confronted with a continuous flow of evidence, in art, research, literature, political actions, and so on, that women are being restrained, against—or by—their wills. Even though equality exists in the form of legal rights and formally equal opportunities, there must be some underlying mechanisms that curtail women's actual possibilities of realizing their opportunities.

Since the late 1960s the quest for theories to deal with issues like these has been a prominent feature in the social and political mobilization of women. A new kind of theoretical knowledge was and still is pursued: one that will reveal the causes of male dominance and women's subordination and devaluation.<sup>2</sup> The feminist quest for explanatory knowledge is especially interesting from a scholarly point of view. Since 1970, many attempts have been made to define the "problem [with] no name" (Friedan, 1963:11), or the "sense of oppression" that women were "organizing around" (Rowbotham, 1974:24). New approaches have been designed, with names like "patriarchy," "women's oppression," and "male dominance" as core concepts. From the beginning, titles of articles and books, like "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" (Benston, 1969), "The Politics of Housework" (Mainardi, 1970), *Sexual Politics* (Millett, 1970) and *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Firestone, 1971) indicated that the problem in question could be identified and investigated in all spheres of society, in the home as well as outside it. "The problem" also seemed to be connected with a specific social, transformative—even revolutionary—dynamic. Furthermore, titles like those listed above and to an even greater extent the widely embraced feminist slogan "The personal is political" expressed a new way of understanding that the dimension of sex should be viewed as one of society's fundamental dimensions and must be taken seriously in social and political theory. Many overviews and analyses have been published in the past decade that account for the ongoing development of feminist theory (see, for instance, Connell, 1987; Donovan, 1985; Eisenstein, 1983; Göransson, 1987; Jaggar, 1983; Jónasdóttir, 1984; Walby, 1986, 1990).

In this book I identify those mechanisms that hold together, produce, and reproduce contemporary society when seen primarily as a web of relations between the sexes.<sup>3</sup> Methodologically, I deal with the problem of patriarchy by comparing two influential strands of feminist thought: socialist feminist theory and radical feminist theory. Initially, both used historical materialism, that is, Marxism's meta-theoretical assumptions and principles, to approach social reality. The so-called Marxist method was expected, somehow, to do "service [to] feminist questions" (Hartmann, 1981a:11). Sometimes the Weberian understanding of politics as *Herrschaft* (a relationship of dominance and subordination) was also applied to feminist theorizing.<sup>4</sup> In my view, these two branches of feminist theory moved away from their initial objectives, with detrimental consequences for the development of feminist theory in general. In radical feminism, the dialogue with Marxist theory, begun by Shulamith Firestone (1971) and others, ended rather abruptly.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Weberian framework, introduced by Kate Millett (1970), among others, was also let go of as an object of closer feminist critique and rethinking.<sup>6</sup> In socialist feminism, the Marxist method was taken too much at face value. The conventional Marxist methodological assumptions were not challenged sufficiently, and one reason for this was, simply, that the feminist questions were not posed radically enough. A third branch of feminist theory, envisioned by Juliet Mitchell and others around 1970, was dropped or lost along the way.

I propose an alternative mode of theorizing contemporary patriarchy, characterized by the specific way in which I rearrange the following three discursive elements: What feminist questions should be raised? How should historical materialism, alias the "Marxist method," be used to frame these questions? How should this feminist historical-materialist problematic be related to political theory, including theories of the state?

Actually, I could not find a "room" suitable for the questions I struggled with in any of the different schools of historical materialism that so many feminists have tried to refurbish during the past twenty years.<sup>7</sup> Yet I think that the development of the kind of femi-

nist theorizing necessary to explain patriarchy can benefit from the materialist conception of history and, indeed, the reverse applies as well.<sup>8</sup> The Marxist variant that seems best suited to serve basic feminist purposes is the *realist view*, or the *realist approach*.<sup>9</sup> Most important here is that the realist view, as a set of metatheoretical principles, seems to be able to contain and support a distinct feminist materialist field of knowledge, within which patriarchy as a social and historical system can be specified and theorized.

By pushing the “distinctive theoretical project” of socialist feminism (Jaggar, 1983:118) further in the very direction pointed out by its originators, I restate the basic problem of patriarchy. I restate it as a question of a specific sociosexual power struggle, a struggle over the political conditions of sexual love, rather than over the conditions of women’s work. This move implies that the concept of love can be understood, primarily, as sociosexual relational practices, and not only as emotions that dwell inside individuals.

By focusing on sexuality and love rather than on economy and work, I take seriously the “tentative and imperfect” attempts by early radical feminists, like Kate Millett (1970) and Shulamith Firestone (1971), to problematize the present form of male-dominated heterosexuality and the articulations of sexist power in modern society at large. I say “early radical feminists” because those who have continued to work on and with radical feminist theory since the late 1970s have lost something crucial in their mode of dealing with sexuality. I agree with Hester Eisenstein’s claim that “the women-centered analysis brought radical feminism to a theoretical and practical impasse” (Eisenstein, 1983:xii). But I show also that socialist feminism, with its women-and-work-centered perspective, has for an equally long time been going around in circles. The conclusion of my theoretical exploration, thus, is that sexuality, as a field of social and political power relations, should be identified as the basic theoretical domain of feminism. The ontological views and the methodological principles applied to this domain, however, should be those of a revised, or re-oriented, historical materialism. The kind of “unmodified” feminist “domination approach”—I would say, reified violence ap-

proach—that radical feminists (most prominently Catharine MacKinnon, 1987) now pursue, leads, in my opinion, into a blind alley.<sup>10</sup>

Readers of this volume will readily note that I do not deal equally with socialist feminism and radical feminism. I am occupied with the former much more and differently than with the latter, because my thinking developed along the winding path of attempting to make specifically feminist use of historical materialism, rather than along a direct path of consciously attempting to construct a better radical feminism. This means that I arrived at the field of sexuality through a method of exclusion. Again and again, when reading socialist feminist texts, I came to the firm conviction that the various socialist feminist modes of using Marxism had to be transcended. In other words, I did not simply start where the early radical feminists had ended in their attempts to modify and apply theoretical notions and historical schemes borrowed from Marx, Engels, or Weber. This is also the reason why I have not yet, to any greater extent, related my own way of theorizing to MacKinnon's radical feminism. Her original mode of inquiry, or, in her words, the "point of departure" with which she later broke (see preface in her latest book, 1989), is in certain ways similar to mine. However, a critical examination of how and with what consequences MacKinnon has displaced Marxism (which she claims to have done) as well as a comparison of her methods with mine will have to wait.<sup>11</sup>

To assume that historical materialism could be made to serve feminist questions is not the same as to have a clear idea about how this should be done. Nor has there ever existed a common view—even among socialist feminists themselves—on what variant, or variants, of this multi-branched research tradition that would be most fruitful.<sup>12</sup> And, remarkably little has been written by feminists about Marxism as a particular method.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, a specific chapter on metatheoretical assumptions is also lacking in this volume. In Chapter 2, however, I present a very preliminary overview of what feminist theorists commonly find attractive in Marxism and how they differ in making use of it. I go on to underline an important division in socialist feminist theorizing, between theories of gendered "con-

sciousness" and theories of gender relations. I am concerned with the development of the second type, that is, a theory of "social being" or "social existence."

Within Marxism, this is the type of theory that hitherto has focused solely on society's socioeconomic processes and work, and—within Marxist-oriented feminism—on the position of women in these processes. The result of my investigation is instead that the work paradigm in historical materialism now can and should be transcended (not invalidated). Feminist theory must identify and focus on society's sociosexual processes. This type of theoretical enterprise, I argue, moves beyond the theories of gender socialization that dominate the theoretical repertoire of today's socialist feminism. I believe also that sociosexual relations and "political sexuality" as theoretically significant fields—significant in and of themselves—have become possible to identify because of certain historical changes.<sup>14</sup>

What needs to be done in social and political theory, then, is to construct conceptually a whole new domain more or less from scratch.<sup>15</sup> And this, as stated above, should be done by putting both a reorientated Marxist method and a feminist re-reading of the best of political theory to the service of feminist questions. This stance presupposes that two feminist approaches that usually are seen as opposites somehow can be integrated. On one hand there is socialist feminism, the appropriator of the Marxist method. On the other hand there is radical feminism, the only branch of feminist theory up to now that has theorized about patriarchy in political terms. Socialist feminists consistently reject the radical feminist approach in both its older and its more recent forms. They reject it as being sex- or biology-fixated, as being ahistorical and nonmaterialistic; and with it they reject serious attempts to theorize "sexual politics." Radical feminists today, on their side, go against many core assumptions in socialist feminist analysis, such as the one that nurturant consciousness and ethics of care are connected positively with women's specific experiences and should be seen as advantageous for feminism. But they are particularly opposed to the idea that the development of an independent feminist theory of sexual politics needs any

methodological "qualification" by conventional (read male-designated) "modifiers" (see MacKinnon, 1987:16). As far as I can see, this demand for total theoretical independence, when put into (theoretical) practice, entices people to be either naive or dishonest about influences from or similarities with other frameworks and lines of thought. What is still worse is, and here I agree with Moira Gatens (1987:16), that any theoretical separatism, "if presented as a long-term program, is utopian and runs the serious risks of reproducing, elsewhere, the very relations which it seeks to leave behind." This is not the place to go into detail about what "integration" would mean in an envisioned integrated feminist approach. However, this is what the rest of the book is about.

A few remarks should be made about the empirical testability and applicability of my theories. Much of my theoretical examination belongs on a metatheoretical level, and metatheory (i.e., ontological assumptions and methodological principles) cannot be tested empirically. My specific theory of contemporary patriarchy, however, which, stated briefly, proposes that men are empowered by exploiting women, is empirically testable, although only in principle or indirectly. Its chief task is to inform empirical studies, and to function in "communicative interaction" with more concrete and directly testable theories of the middle-range.

Some parts of my theorizing are more normatively oriented than others. Although I am well aware of the nondiscreet boundaries between empirical and normative issues, I still view my contribution to interest theory, as well as to democratic theory, as being more closely related to normative issues than are other parts of my work. I am not, however, occupied directly with practical-political problems. Even my interest theory is intended to function as an analytical framework, empirically applicable to social and political reality. Its aim is to clarify conditions rather than to deliver political answers.

Before leaving these considerations, one more point should be made about the empirical relevance of my theorizing. In Chapters 2 and 8, I identify certain situations characteristic of the contemporary form of the struggle between the sexes that would be particularly

profitable to investigate. I am referring to situations and processes in various spheres of society, where women and men compete for scarce values—it might be a desirable job or a position of power in politics—and where all things are equal except sex. In these situations the men and women involved are about equally free from barriers like burdensome responsibilities at home, they are equally competent, and they are equally decided about what they want. Yet men—and for no obvious reason other than their malehood—most often come out as “winners.” Exactly what happens in these processes? Conversely, what happens when women actually “win” over men in a zero-sum game? With this I am not implying that all processes of value distribution between women and men are zero-sum games, but some obviously are.<sup>16</sup>

This study has been in process for several years. A slightly different version of this book was edited specifically for my Ph.d. dissertation and published in Sweden in 1991. Before that, all but one of the main chapters (Chapter 5) had been published as articles in journals or as essays in books, in Swedish or in English. These earlier versions differ somewhat from what appears here. Chapter 9, as well as this Introduction, were written especially for the dissertation. Because of the mode in which the whole work has been carried out, a certain amount of overlapping in the different chapters has been unavoidable.

In Chapter 2 I specify the problem of patriarchy and account, briefly, for the whole range of issues dealt with in this book. My theoretical enterprise, like all theories that aim at a general understanding of women's and men's social and historical conditions, is highly abstract. The importance of differentiating abstract theories from more concrete ones, and the rationale for why and how abstractions are useful in the first place, is discussed in Chapter 3. Such considerations also inform the critical analysis of socialist feminist economic reductionism I undertake in Chapter 4.

The bulk of my constructive development toward an alternative theory of contemporary patriarchy is contained in Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5. This includes a general methodological framework as well as



the central concepts for a more specified theory. The question of whether and how the concept of "exploitation" is applicable to the relations between the sexes is covered in Chapter 5. There, and in Chapter 9, I present a theoretical explanation for the persistence of men's power today. I want to underline, however, that I am still working out the final form of this theory.

When dealing, critically, with social relationships in their contemporary institutionalized form, it is necessary to distance oneself, analytically, from the apparently self-evident nature of the present. For this, it is highly rewarding to look back, selectively, into history to observe how the web of institutionalized social relations, including sex, is patterned and understood differently in different periods. The analysis in Chapter 6 tells us how some of the most influential writers ever in modern political theory, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, conceptualized and justified the historical reshaping of gender relations that occurred in the youth of capitalism and the nation-state. In reading these old texts, one is amazed to find how significant sex was in the early development of modern political theory.

Chapter 7 deals with the questions whether, how, and with what limits classical interest theory is applicable to women's concerns and of relevance to feminism. The chapter results in a decisive step toward a feminist political, or normatively oriented, theory of interest that claims to transcend many apparent contradictions and dilemmas in prevailing feminist debates. The question raised in Chapter 8, then, concerns the connection between citizenship, individuality, and sexuality in Western democracies. In short, the aim is to extend my main theoretical standpoints and arguments into the field of democratic theory. Finally, in Chapter 9, I present my critical assessments and my constructive proposals restructured into several theses.