

Kate Nash  
*A "Politics of Ideas" and Women's Citizenship*

*Introduction*

The question this article will address is that of the role of ideas in the development of the social and political institutions of women's citizenship, historically and in future feminist strategies. There has been little direct consideration of this question on the part of feminist theorists, with the notable exception of Anne Phillips who introduced it in her recent work, *The Politics of Presence*. In this book she makes an interesting distinction between a conventional "politics of ideas", in which political representation is taken to involve the representation of party policies and voter preferences and beliefs, and a "politics of presence" in which democratic procedures are held to require the physical presence of members of social groups. For Phillips, the latter is required because while political equality entails the inclusion of voices previously excluded from the political process, it also requires an informed judgement of the probable outcome of that process, and she believes that the presence of members of historically disadvantaged groups could result in more egalitarian policies (Phillips 1995). Phillips is evidently using the term "politics of ideas" in a very particular way here and in this article I will open up the discussion of the relation between ideas and social and political practices to compare her theory with another view of how politics is conducted at the level of ideas, the theory of hegemony of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In order to do so we will look at the proposals that have been made by feminists concerning the relation between the ideas of liberalism and the institutions of women's citizenship in order to show that the theory of hegemony is best able to deal with the issues raised by this relation. Finally it will be argued that the politics of ideas proposed by Laclau and Mouffe is at least as important to feminist strategies to end the secondary status of women's citizenship as Phillips' "politics of presence".

*The feminist critique of liberal citizenship*

Since this paper is concerned with the empirical question of the extent to which ideas have affected, or could affect, social and political institutions, rather than normative questions concerning how citizenship should be expanded to include women, we will take the historical theory of citizenship of T.H Marshall as our starting point. Marshall's basic argument is well-known and will not be outlined in detail here. According to his view, liberal rights have been extended since the beginning of capitalism. Civil rights to individual freedom - to speech, the ownership of property, justice before the law and so on - were established in the eighteenth century, more or less. Political rights to participation in the exercise of political power were gained with the establishment of the modern parliamentary system in the nineteenth century. And finally, there was the institutionalisation of social rights to economic welfare and to participation in the social and cultural life of the nation with the establishment of the welfare state in the twentieth century (Marshall 1992). Although there is considerable controversy over Marshall's theory, particularly regarding its evolutionary logic and the question of its status as a model of the development of rights in liberal-democracies other than in Britain (Barbalet 1988, p. 30), it nevertheless provides distinctions between the different forms of rights which have been useful to feminist critics of women's citizenship in Western liberal-democracies.

Theoretically, the most important point of the feminist critique of liberal citizenship is that rights have to a large extent been developed from a male perspective so that they are inappropriate to women: on the one hand, women and men are treated alike when they should be treated differently; and on the other, women are sometimes treated differently from men, as inferior citizens. The first case is exemplified by civil and political rights. Here feminists have mainly focused on formal anti-discrimination rights which fail to take women's particular embodiment and circumstances into account; the right to equal pay, for example, which fails to recognise the occupational segregation of the sexes (Frazer and Lacey, 1993 pp. 78-88). The second case principally involves gender-differentiated welfare rights. As a group, women receive more welfare benefits than men, but there is a difference in the type of benefits men and women are entitled to. There is a two-tiered welfare system in Britain and elsewhere: one tier consists of benefits to which citizens are entitled by virtue of insurance contributions paid on the basis of waged work; men are predominantly entitled to this type of benefits. The other consists of benefits which are not directly paid for by insurance contributions and these are predominantly received by women.

They include benefits to which citizens are entitled by virtue of being the dependants of insurees, means-tested benefits for those in poverty and, in rare cases, benefits which are paid to those who have the main responsibility for the care of children or others who can not care for themselves in the home (Pateman 1989; Walby 1994). The type of welfare benefits which have greatest legitimacy and financial value are those received through work-related insurance; the other type is somewhat stigmatised, since they may be seen as unearned, and involves lower sums of money. Women's social citizenship is, therefore, not just different from men's, but secondary.

Feminists, like Marshall, tend to see citizenship in Western liberal-democracies as an extension of liberal rights. But for feminists, the fact that citizenship is liberal is closely related to the disadvantages it presents for women. Firstly, liberalism is concerned with gender-neutral individuals as the rights-bearing members of society. For the classical liberalism on which formal rights tend to be based, only universal principles which treat all individuals identically are acceptable. This makes it difficult for liberal legislation to take differences between men and women into account, while in some cases, like the famous judgement in which it was ruled that a woman dismissed because she was pregnant was not discriminated against because the same treatment would have been accorded to a similarly situated man (Frazer and Lacey 1993, p. 81-2), it turns out the gender-neutral individual is actually a man. In actual fact, then, women are not always liberal individuals. In the case of social rights the matter is somewhat different; in this modified version of liberalism, which comes close to social-democracy, it is acceptable to treat different categories of citizens differently in order to ensure that minimal economic and social needs are met equally for all citizens (Beveridge 1966, p. 45). But, as we have seen, it is the (male) individual who is contracted to insure himself with the state through paid employment who is the privileged citizen; the (female) dependant of this male breadwinner is not directly insured with the state and is not a full citizen. Secondly, and closely linked to the first point, liberalism divides up society into public and private spheres, where the private sphere tends to be conflated with the home. For liberals the private sphere is outside the jurisdiction of the state, and when this is combined with the view that family relations are natural and therefore somehow outside society altogether, it becomes very difficult for liberals to consider granting rights to women in the home (Kymlicka 1990, pp. 250-262). It is for this reason that it has proved so difficult to gain civil rights for women in the home, and no doubt why, although the welfare state does minimally recognise the work women do in the home, it is nevertheless seen as inferior to men's economic contribu-

tion in the public sphere in terms of the quality and quantity of welfare benefits awarded on the basis of this "feminine" contribution.

*Liberalism as an ideology and women's citizenship*

Feminist criticisms of liberalism seem to suggest quite a close link between the ideas of liberalism as a political ideology and the development of women's secondary status as citizens. That is, they suggest the link between ideas and social and political institutions with which we are concerned here. However, the question of the precise nature of this relation has not been directly addressed by feminists. The following accounts are taken from feminist analyses of liberal political philosophy; I am assuming that they can be applied to the more specific question of women's citizenship in a liberal society. On the basis of the problems these theories give rise to, it will be suggested that the theory of hegemony provides the best approach to understanding the relation between liberal ideology and the institutions of women's citizenship, even though it is not without problems of its own.

The first account we will look at is derived from Marxism and sees liberalism as capitalist ideology. In an article on seventeenth century liberalism, Teresa Brennan and Carole Pateman argue that the main tenets of liberalism - individualism and the distinction between public and private spheres - were established in early modernity with the rise of capitalism and the subsequent shift of production out of the home, and with the liberal political system which developed alongside it (Brennan and Pateman 1979). Brennan and Pateman deny that political theory can simply be seen as reflecting socio-economic changes; they suggest rather that liberalism is a necessary condition of capitalism:

"Individuals can not be seen as freely entering contracts and making exchanges with each other in the market, and as able freely to pursue their interests, unless they have come to be conceived as free and equal to each other. Furthermore, unless they are seen in this fashion, they have no need voluntarily to agree to, or consent to, government or the exercise of authority." (Brennan and Pateman 1979, p. 184)

Brennan and Pateman explicitly reject economic reductionism in refusing to see ideology as determined by the economy; but in suggesting that liberalism is a necessary condition of capitalism as an economic system the problem nevertheless returns. And the economic reductionism which haunts Marxist theories of ideology, however nuanced, is problematic both from a

general theoretical point of view and from the more particular point of view of the question of women's citizenship with which we are concerned.

Firstly, if liberalism as an ideology is a necessary condition of the capitalist economy, then it is also part of that economy; it exists not simply as ideas but as the practices of capitalism in the form of contracts, the rules regulating exchanges and so on. In fact, although it is a feature of the Marxist theory of ideology that has been particularly drawn out by neo-Marxists, Marx himself made this point concerning the legal forms of capitalism, in particular the wage-form in which labour is "freely" exchanged as a commodity. But for Marx, although real in their effects, these forms are at the same time merely a surface appearance concealing the essence of capitalism, the class struggle which takes place over the means of production. It is for this reason that in capitalism, according to Marx, man lives alienation in the material conditions of his life; it is an illusory understanding of the social nature of production, but it is an illusion with real social effects (Marx and Engels 1977). This view of ideology raises difficult epistemological questions which we will consider briefly below, but it also presents particular difficulties for feminist accounts. As work by Marxist feminists has shown, an explanation of how women and men have been differently positioned in relation to the division between the private domestic sphere and the public sphere of the economy and state can not rely on the, at best, gender-neutral Marxist theory of capitalist development since, however nuanced such a theory might be, by definition it can not explain sexual division (Barrett 1980; Nicholson 1986). A theory of how ideas are related to the political and social institutions of women's citizenship can not rely on a general theory of the relation between liberalism and capitalism such as the one put forward by Brennan and Pateman because such a theory can not explain why, if liberalism provided the ideological conditions of capitalism, women have not been full liberal citizens on the same terms as men. In order to do so, Brennan and Pateman would have to show how ideas are related to practices in ways which produced and reproduce *gendered* capitalist institutions and although it seems that they tacitly assume such a relation in the case of the public/private distinction, it can not be theorised from the Marxist perspective they propose.

In her later work Pateman proposes a second view of the relation between political ideology and practice. The public/private distinction of liberal political theory is best seen, she argues, as ideological in the critical, epistemological sense which is also derived from Marxism: it obscures and mystifies real underlying social and economic relations. However, Pateman is now using the term to describe the mystificatory ideas of patriarchy rather

than those of capitalism in order to capture the specificity of women's subordinate position as citizens. Firstly, she argues, having defined the home as private, and therefore non-political, liberalism then forgets about it and treats the public sphere as if it existed entirely independently; it forgets the interdependence of the two in a way that obscures, for example, the economic dependence of women on male breadwinners. And secondly, the way in which political ideology forgets about the home allows it to consider that all citizens are in fact the free and equal autonomous individuals of the public sphere; it allows it to forget women's subordination in the home (Pateman 1989, p.120-3).

There are a number of problems with this view of ideology. Probably the most important in terms of feminist strategy is that it pre-supposes that theorists have access to the "truth" which other social actors do not possess; this seems to be an incipiently authoritarian stance given the inherently contentious nature of most social issues. Furthermore, it would seem that if political theorists can take issue with ideologies, there is no reason to assume that others accept them uncritically and that they are effective as mystifications of reality. At the root of these political problems are difficult questions concerning the validity of drawing a sharp distinction between ideology and scientific knowledge. The Marxist tradition has long been grappling with such problems and it is impossible to do the debates justice here. However, there seems to be widespread agreement that they are irresolvable within the terms of the Marxist paradigm itself and, as Michele Barrett argues, such unresolved problems combined with other developments in social theory have contributed to a paradigm shift to a post-Marxist model which sees ideas and practices as more closely tied together in a theory of discourse (Barrett 1991, p. 46-7). We will explore this theory in more detail below. In relation to Pateman's view of ideology, however, it is worth pointing out that the "forgetting" of women has never been complete, it has only ever been partial and temporary. While she is certainly correct to argue that political theorists have "forgotten" women in the private sphere, the same is not true of social and political movements that have attempted to institute, maintain or subvert the opposition between public and private.

The third view of the relation between political ideology and social and political practices holds that it is psychological. Political ideas are produced by men, and, because men are socially positioned differently from women, they are also psychologically different; political ideology is always generated, then, from a male perspective (DiStefano 1991; Benhabib 1987; Frazer et al. 1992). This claim is not often made explicitly by feminist critics of liberalism; it is more frequently implied. Broadly speaking it is based on the psychoana-

lytic theory of Nancy Chodorow which links psychology to capitalism: because men are brought up by attentive mothers and absent fathers, in order to become masculine they learn to distance themselves from personal relationships and so perform well in the impersonal, competitive public sphere of capitalism; women, on the other hand, retain their close connection with their mothers, which makes them ideally suited to caring for the family in the private domestic sphere (Chodorow 1978). As a result of this cultivation of distance in their upbringing, men are oriented towards thinking morally in terms of hierarchical universal principles which treat all individuals and situations alike (Gilligan 1982). As we have seen, this is the logic of the universal principles of liberal justice which fail to take gender differences into account where they are actually relevant to achieving equality between the sexes (Frazer et al. 1992; Benhabib 1987; Phillips 1992). On this theory, men are also given to rigid, dualistic thinking and especially to the denigration of whatever is associated with the feminine because of their need to maintain strict boundaries between the autonomous masculine self and the dangerous feminine (m)other. This aspect of male psychology can be seen as responsible for the liberal dichotomy between public and private (DiStefano 1991; Benhabib 1987; Pateman 1986).

The main problem with this theory is that liberalism has not been as rigidly universalistic and dualistic as this view proposes. Firstly, liberalism has never totally excluded the feminine from the public sphere of liberal rights. Women actually occupy a rather ambivalent place in liberal political ideology and practice: women are frequently included in the universal principles of liberal justice, sometimes in a way which goes quite far towards challenging their subordinate position in society precisely because it does give them rights as public citizens, while simultaneously they are situated, by the very same theorists, as inferior creatures, subordinate to men and without rights in the private domestic sphere. Liberal theorists have had a much more fluid and ambivalent conception of women than would seem possible on the psychological theory of political ideology. And secondly, liberalism itself has been much less monolithic, and much more varied than this approach suggests (Nash forthcoming). It is important to look at how women have been positioned in historically specific versions of liberalism and, from the point of view of the question of feminist strategies in relation to women's citizenship, at how liberalism has actually been modified by the feminist use of its ideas. It is more useful to look at liberalism as a tool with which to change social and political institutions, rather than supposing that there is a pre-given masculine (or feminine) psychology which will manifest itself in every social product, including political ideology.

*Laclau's and Mouffe's politics of ideas*

The theories of the relation between liberal ideology and social and political institutions we have examined so far may be said to be foundational insofar as they are all realist theories of determinant structures, of society or of the mind (even if that mind is seen, at least to some extent, as historically specific). Such theories are over-deterministic, giving rise to accounts of particular social forms as necessary in relation to underlying structures. What they neglect is social agency, the understanding of which gives rise to accounts of the social which emphasise the contextually specific and continually revisable qualities of social structures. It is this emphasis on agency which makes Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of hegemony a better account of the relation between political ideology and social and political institutions than those theories we have so far considered.

Laclau's and Mouffe's theory enables us to situate liberalism as a political ideology which, although retaining a core of key terms without which it would no longer be situated in the liberal tradition, has been used in different ways by different social and political movements in attempts to institute, maintain and disrupt social and political relations. Hegemonic articulations are always contingent: they are not the necessary outcome of a class or gender structure which is hidden to social participants but which the theorist can uncover, nor are they the product of a pre-given psychological will. The success of a hegemonic project lies in the linking together of ideological elements which were previously linked in other ways, or were floating free, spread across a variety of different contexts without being related one to the other. A hegemonic project attempts to articulate these floating elements in ways which will gain support from those who were previously hostile to the project. Furthermore, hegemony is constitutive: it institutes social identities and relations in a way that does not depend on any *a priori* social rationality, nor on any objectively given social structure. On Laclau's and Mouffe's theory, ideas and social and political institutions are inseparable because all social practices are meaningful. According to their version of discourse theory, material objects and actions have no social being unless they have a significance for us which is necessarily linguistic, in the widest sense; for discourse theory, material social practices are inextricably bound up with ideas as they are articulated in relations of signification. This is not to say that all ideas have social significance, though none can be ruled out as insignificant *a priori*; but for a hegemonic project to be successful, the articulations it makes must be embodied in institutions which weld together a historical bloc, a hegemonic formation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 134-6).



On this model, then, it can only be as a result of social action that a hegemonic project is successful. This is not to say that ideas are instituted precisely as social actors intend, nor that the use of ideas has no unintended consequences, but only that, since a hegemonic project involves re-working ideas in new, and in principle unpredictable ways, it would be impossible without the active intervention of social actors. However, although this is clearly a consequence of their theory, Laclau and Mouffe have not themselves elaborated an adequate account of social agency. As a result of their commitment to anti-humanism they have developed a view of the subject based on Lacanian theory, a subject of lack and identification (Žižek 1990). But there are serious questions concerning whether this subject can do the work Laclau and Mouffe require of it. Laclau is clear that if there is no *a priori* determination of a hegemonic formation, and if, as he argues, the social field is increasingly prone to dislocations which make evident the contingency and historicity of existing social structures, then the question is increasingly that of *who* makes the hegemonic articulations which create new forms of the social (Laclau, 1990 p. 59). But the theory of the subject he puts forward to explain how social transformations take place seems to be that of a subject entirely without agency. For Laclau, the subject is thrown up by the undecidability of a hegemonic structure and, since on his theory all identity is social, it is nothing but a subject of lack which can only construct an identity through identification with a partially constituted subject position in an already existing, dislocated social structure (p. 60). The subject is not, for Laclau, a reflexive social agent; it has no capacities for strategically planning and purposively re-working the terms of a hegemonic formation in order to realise an aim it has set itself. Laclau's and Mouffe's model of the subject, while usefully pointing out the unconscious and irrational aspects of social identity, seems inadequate to theorising the more instrumental and reasoning aspects of social action: we might say that it over-emphasises reaction at the expense of action. This is not to say that the alternative is to take agency as politically and epistemologically pre-given. As Judith Butler points out, to think of agency in this way would be to foreclose investigation into its construction and regulation. The point is rather that "subject" and "agency" may not always be identical such that the conditions of possibility of reflexivity and purposiveness need to be theorised as well as those of lack and identification (Butler 1992).

This paper is not concerned with a general theory of the conditions of possibility of agency. The point here is that, even if Laclau and Mouffe do not theorise agency adequately, their theory of hegemony is nevertheless preferable to the other theories of the relation between ideology and institutions we have looked at because it requires us to consider the action of

social agents in bringing about particular, meaningful social and political practices. In terms of the question with which we are concerned here, it therefore sensitises us to the action of feminists who can affect, and have affected, the institutions of women's citizenship. Once we look at feminism and women's citizenship from the perspective of the theory of hegemony we can see how the somewhat peculiar position women occupy as citizens in liberal political ideology and practices is to some extent a result of the efforts of feminists, as well as of those working from a conventional liberal perspective. From the very beginning of liberalism in the seventeenth century, feminists saw the potential in liberalism for women's equality, while at the same time warning against the way in which it subordinated women to men in the non-political domestic sphere. And nineteenth century and early twentieth century feminism used the existing terms of liberal political ideology in a counter-hegemonic project that influenced the development of women's citizenship as we know it today. First-wave feminism extended women's civil and political rights to be equal to men in terms of rights to own property, the right to vote and so on, but in terms of social rights, for which they campaigned vigorously before and after political rights for women were won, they pushed for a recognition of women as different, as primarily concerned with caring in the home. The terms in which women were situated as citizens who were primarily wives and mothers in the British post-war welfare state, for example, were to some extent the result of the influence of "new feminists" like Eleanor Rathbone. This is not to say that such feminists were entirely successful in their campaigns, but contesting and re-articulating the terms of hegemonic liberalism, along with the new liberalism of the times, meant that they were to some extent able to shape women's citizenship according to their maternalist ideals (Nash forthcoming; Koren and Michel 1993; Bacchi 1990, ch. 3).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Lewis takes issue with this understanding of feminist agency, arguing that in Britain while women were involved in voluntary action and local politics, there is no evidence that they influenced the welfare state at the national level (Lewis 1994). However, she fails to recognise Rathbone's successful attempt to persuade Beveridge to award family allowances to women (though it is true that it was not, as feminists hoped, introduced to reward women's unpaid care), and also the endorsement of the new welfare state on the part of "new feminists" like Vera Brittan (Dale and Foster 1986, p. 3). Nor does she consider the more informal influence of women who were close to the political establishment, nor of those women actively involved in influencing policy through political parties. It was "equal rights" feminists of an older liberal persuasion who were critical of the way in which the welfare state positioned women as wives and mothers; "new feminists" - concerned especially with the conditions of working class women and - and women in the labour movement seem largely to have approved of the way in which welfare liberalism addressed women in the specificity of their position as women.

*A feminist "politics of ideas"?*

Laclau's and Mouffe's theory is a theory of a politics of ideas in that it is concerned with the use of ideological elements in hegemonic projects which aim to institute new social and political institutions. It is clearly different from the "politics of ideas" put forward by Anne Phillips. Firstly, because for Phillips politics is restricted to representative democracy in the public sphere; she explicitly argues for a definition of politics as involving deliberations in the public arena in which common concerns are negotiated across differences, seeing the second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political" as having heralded a retreat from politics as such (Phillips 1991 p. 115-9). In the case of the "politics of ideas", for Phillips, it is party policies and voter preferences which are represented. For the theory of hegemony, on the other hand, politics involves the contestation of meanings across the social field and the democratisation of everyday life which are more commonly associated with the feminist movement since the late 1960s. Secondly, Laclau's and Mouffe's view of agency is quite different from that of Phillips. As we have seen, Laclau's and Mouffe's theory of the politics of ideas implies that agency is required in order to hegemonise social and political meanings, although they do not specify how agents are formed. Phillips, on the other hand, is explicitly concerned with agency, counterposing the "politics of ideas" in her sense with the "politics of presence" on the grounds that the physical presence of women in the political process could provide the conditions in which women will be genuinely empowered as political agents.

Phillips is explicitly concerned to outline a theory of gender-differentiated political rights on the grounds that they may provide the solution to women's secondary status as citizens. It has come to be accepted by many feminists that in order for women to achieve equality with men, women should have specific citizenship rights *as women* (Pateman 1992; Young 1990). It is probably not very controversial now to argue for a minimally different set of social rights for women where it is a matter of biological differences between the sexes, with regard to pregnancy and breast-feeding, for example. And the argument for a gender-differentiated citizenship has also been extended, somewhat more controversially, to civil rights in the case of women's right to self-defence on the grounds of provocation where they have been subjected to severe, long-term violence by their male partners. Phillips, alongside other feminists, including Iris Marion Young, is arguing that gender-differentiated political rights are necessary because political rights for women *as women* would ensure that reasonable numbers of women were

engaged in the political process and this would be likely to result in more egalitarian civil and social rights for women because it would then be more difficult for policy-makers to marginalise issues which are of significance to women (Phillips 1995; Young 1990). This raises extremely complex issues concerning representation which will not be addressed here (Phillips 1991; Phillips 1995). But it also raises interesting questions concerning the role of ideas in the political process and the agency of women as a social group.

Phillips' tentative hope - that if women participate in policy-making it will make a difference to the outcome - is based on the view that women, though not all women, may share a perspective which is distinctive from that of men on particular issues. In agreement with feminist arguments against essentialism, Phillips is reluctant to give too much weight to the commonality of women's experience or shared interests. But she does argue that women are more concerned about certain issues than men are, or can be - on matters of female reproduction, for example - whatever their actual stance on those issues may be. And she also holds that men's and women's interests can be in conflict - rights to employment for women undermine men's pre-eminence in the labour-market, for example - even though this is not a conflict between the interests of *all* women and those of *all* men (p. 67-9). Phillips' strongest argument for the necessity of a "politics of presence" is not that women will be more strenuous advocates on women's issues than men, though she does make this point, but rather that when policy is being made in new areas when women's concerns have not yet been formulated, and so are not even on the agenda for discussion, it is only if there are women actually present in the policy-making process that those concerns stand any chance of being voiced at all (p. 43-5). It is for this reason, she argues, that the "politics of ideas", the conventional view of representative democracy in which what is of concern is what constituents think and believe, is inadequate. If women's concerns have not yet been formulated, they can not be represented in this way. Although she is clear that there is no guarantee that women's presence in policy-making will result in more egalitarian policies, and although she is against assuming that women share a group identity, Phillips' conclusions are based, then, on the possibility that most women do have a distinct perspective and that most men do not see certain things in the same way (p. 158).

As we have seen, Phillips convincingly counterposes her "politics of presence" to the conventional "politics of ideas". However, from the point of view of the "politics of ideas" of the theory of hegemony, Phillips' account needs to be supplemented with an understanding of how perspectives are

socially constructed; in particular, of how "a woman's perspective" could become meaningful to women *as* women in the policy-making process.

Phillips makes the interesting point that in the case of class interests, representation has not seemed to require a "politics of presence" because class interests have been seen as "objective", as definable and definitive beyond the experience of a particular group and therefore as representable by advocates who do not themselves directly share those interests (p. 174-5). In the case of women, however, according to Phillips, interests are not seen as so clear cut and this is why she prefers the term "perspective"; in the case of women it is more a matter of issues yet to be defined on the basis of experiences and perceptions of oppression (p. 176). One of the interesting things about the way Phillips makes this distinction is that she actually sees the distinction itself as a matter of a difference in perspectives: class interests have been *seen* as objective where women's interests are not. This is interesting because, in bracketing the "truth" or otherwise of this perception, Phillips comes very close to adopting the discourse theory view that *everything* is a matter of perspective.

The idea of perspective is linked, for discourse theorists, to the importance of language, because it is in language that experience is organised and given meaning, that anything can be perceived or "known". For discourse theorists, then, while individual women participating in the policy-making process might have certain inchoate experiences and perceptions which have no current political validity, to articulate these as "a woman's perspective" must involve constructing it as such in language. How women's interests are understood, whether or not all women are taken to have a distinct set of interests, whether some women are held to have a very different set of interests from another group of women and so on, depends largely on the persuasiveness of the arguments made for one view or another. Phillips acknowledges as much when she notes that the position Norwegian women MPs take on issues of child-care is determined by party rather than gender: the right favours policies to raise the value of work women do in the home, while the left advocates enhancing public child-care provision to increase women's participation in the labour market (Phillips 1995 p. 76). While women may come to see themselves as having certain interests in common, how those interests are interpreted will depend on how they are constructed in relation to already existing discursive possibilities.

Furthermore, the view that experience is always constructed in language is also linked to the Derridean idea that because of the way in which language works, there is no possibility of any kind of "presence". Derrida's theory of language has been worked through in relation to feminist theory

and the issue of women's presence by Judith Butler. Butler's theory of performativity as the re-iteration of the identity of women which both regulates and constrains its production, and at the same time destabilizes it, is in part derived from Derrida's deconstruction of Austen's *How To Do Things With Words*. In *Ltd Inc*, he shows how performatives depend on "iterability": the performative capacity of the "serious speech act", "I name this ship...", for example, depends not just on the context and intention of the speaker, but also on the repetition (which is at the same time, necessarily, the alteration), of the words used in disparate "non-serious speech acts". What this means is that words are never fully present, they can not be captured in the intentions of the speaker, and their meaning can never be made singular and self-evident (Butler 1993; Derrida 1988). If we take Derrida's theory seriously, the construction of women as the possessors of a set of interests which could then be represented in the political process is impossible in that such a construction would always depend on other constructions, repeated in other contexts, for other purposes, which could not, by definition, be identical. There would always, necessarily, be a plurality of women's identities and sets of interests precisely because women can never be fully present in one place.

If "women" never "is", in that it is never a fully constituted, single identity, this again indicates that the outcome of Phillips' "politics of presence" is dependent on the "politics of ideas" elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe. Although the re-iterated identity of women can never be finally fixed, feminist politics involves the contestation and re-definition of what it means to be a woman and what it might mean in the future. While this requires the disruption of hegemonic definitions, the aspect of feminist politics advocated by Judith Butler, it may on occasion also require the attempt to establish a new hegemony which makes it possible for women to participate in social and political life on a more equal basis with men. A more egalitarian social formation may require the attempt to constitute a feminist identity for women, by fixing a particular version of what it is to be a woman in legislation concerning the right to self-defence against domestic violence, for example, in the institutionalisation of citizenship rights, and perhaps in the case of affirmative action in the economy and state (Nash 1994). To this end, Phillips' "politics of presence" may be one aspect of feminist hegemonic projects which contest the social and cultural meanings of women's lives in the face of traditional and authoritarian conceptions of family life and women's role, and which promote more inclusive definitions of women in order to establish more egalitarian citizenship rights. Insofar as it contributes to such a project, however, it will not be the presence of women in the politi-

cal process which is effective, but rather the contestation and transformation of women's position that is achieved in arguing for women's equality, both within the formal political process and outside it.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have argued that feminism should be seen as a "politics of ideas". Ideas should not be seen simply as the epiphenomena of socio-economic or psychic structures; they have an efficacy in their own right insofar as they are constitutive of social and political practices. In order to achieve this efficacy they require the elaboration and commitment of social actors who institute them in social practices. Once we see ideas in this light, it is evident that the formal political process is not the only forum from which political change may be realized; indeed the efficacy of ideas in "official" politics may very well depend on the politics of ideas conducted in civil society, the bureaucratic institutions of the state, and even the confines of the "private" domestic sphere, at least as much as in the arenas of representative democracy. It follows then that political agency can not be considered in terms of the experience of a particular group of physically present, embodied persons in these arenas, as Phillips' argument concerning women as the agents of feminist political transformation suggests. It is rather that since social change depends on the contestation and transformation of ideas embedded in social practices carried out by less formally empowered agents, we need to consider how such agency is constructed in other social sites and the conditions which make it effective in some cases but not others. It is not that increasing the presence of women in the formal political process will have no effect; its effect or otherwise is an empirical matter, not one on which an *a priori* judgement can be made. On the argument presented here, however, insofar as it is successful, the "politics of presence" will not be effective because it enables the representation of women's unformulated experience in the formal political process. It will only be successful if increasing the numbers of women in the political institutions of representative democracy is interpreted as indicating the will and the opportunity to realize a more egalitarian form of citizenship, and such interpretations are a matter of a "politics of ideas".

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