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Public Man/Private Woman in Context

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Jean Elshtain, in an essay published in *Signs* in 1982 and entitled "Feminist Discourse and Its Discontents: Language, Power, and Meaning," addressed one of the many issues with which feminist theorists were then grappling: the oppressive power of language as a tool of control over those who had been silenced throughout history, leaving those wanting to resist that control with the task of discovering new modes of communication. Acknowledging that language has the potential to oppress, Elshtain was, however, not ready to abandon the past, to urge her readers to imagine a world where one could escape the languages and discourses that were bequeathed to us over the generations. She wrote:

> There are among us … those who seek solutions to our public and private dilemmas by depriving us of a grammar of moral discourse and forcing all of life under a set of terms denuded of a critical edge. In so doing, they would deprive the human object, female and male, of the capacity to think, to judge, to question … for all these activities are importantly constituted by an everyday, ordinary language infused with moral terms (Elshtain 1982, 605).

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I begin with that *Signs* article because I believe it captures the direction and power of Elshtain's work. Her feminism, in contrast to many, resisted abandoning the past whether with regard to language or classical texts or the families from which we emerged. This did not make her a slave to the past; rather, she refused to practice an amnesia about who we — as members of particular culture and families — are and rather sought to use the tools of the past (language in this case) to address the injustices in the political and social world. Elshtain insisted that we recognize how the past might offer resources to develop the new historical world we may want to create for ourselves and for those who follow. In that *Signs* essay she added:

> The "I" that I am grows out of a past that I can perceive but dimly, a past that can anger, enlighten, illumine, or mystify my thinking about what it means to be a female, a human being, a citizen, and a political theorist in a post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima age (1982, 620).

For Elshtain that past was alive within her whether she was discussing our intellectual and linguistic heritage or the personal histories experienced in the crucibles of our families. That early *Signs* essay illustrates how heartily Jean drank from those resources. For this reason I want to discuss her "contentious feminism" by considering *Public Man/Private Woman* as emerging from *its* historical context. I hope that will help us appreciate Elshtain's agenda there and capture how it accomplished what she admonished us to do in her *Signs* piece: not to dismiss prior discourses as simply oppressive tools, but to see how they provide the linguistic and theoretical frameworks that enable us to understand ourselves as political beings confronting the inequalities and the injustices in the world in which we live.

The first edition of *Public Man/Private Woman* followed the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. To oversimplify dreadfully, that turmoil came in reaction to the quietism of post-World War II America. In response to the horrors of World War II there arose the fear of a politics that had engaged its citizens in hatred, exclusion, appalling deeds. That fear in turn engendered a longing for a quiet political world and a withdrawal from a politics that led to such horrors and devastation. The 1950s spawned as well political scientists and theorists who could be called the "apathy theorists." Influenced by the philosophical dominance of a positivism that questioned the value of evaluative terms, they worried about the legitimacy of any moral claims and suggested that democratic stability depended on a disengagement from politics, on tending our private

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gardens. One can think here of a 1954 *Political Studies* article called "In Defense of Apathy," where the author writes: "[M]any of the ideas connected with the general theme of a Duty to Vote belong properly to the totalitarian camp and are out of place in the vocabulary of liberal democracy." Instead, apathy is described as a "sign of understanding and tolerance of human variety" (quoted in Finley 1973, 4).

Beyond the apathy theorists, Schumpeter offered in 1942 the image of the voter as consumer but not much more. Berelson, Lazarfeld, and McPhee's (1954) analysis of the ignorant voter concluded that "[t]he apathetic segment of America probably has helped to hold the system together and cushioned the shock of disagreement, adjustment, and change" (1954, 322). The early Dahl of *Who Governs?* (1961) highlighted the benefits for the political life of a city of engaging only when our own private shoes pinched. Engagement caused the instability that led to the devastation of war. The 1950s and early 1960s was a time to recover and find pleasures far from the contests of the political world. Claims to moral and political certainties worth fighting for had fostered fascism; better to resist those claims by affirming their impossibility with the supposedly value-neutral study and practice of politics.

The experiences of the 1960s, however, destroyed the fantasies that supported a "defense" of the apathy, and the explosions that followed led to the demands for engagement and self-empowerment in the face of the wrongs that apathy enabled. There was the call for public action and an attack against the retreat into the quiet world of conformity and the suburbs. A sociologist like Richard Sennett could write a book that in its title decried *The Fall of Public Man*" (1977). Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, which had been published in 1958, took on a new urgency and gained an astonishing popularity in the 1970s. Women demanded to be part of this resurrected awareness of the importance of engagement, and attention to one's own garden became a narcissistic retreat from the "real" issues: racism, the exploitation of the poor, the oppression of women, an unjust war. The barricades called forth those committed to social justice, but a concern about the consequences for the private world of this clarion call did not weigh heavily in the battle against oppression. Indeed, the seeds of oppression were just as likely to be found in the structure of the family as in the political and academic institutions that fostered an unpopular war and the racist policies of exclusion.

In *Public Man/Private Woman* Elshtain took a stand against these emerging tendencies in social thought. While never denying the

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importance of confronting the social and political injustices in the world around us, she refused to accept the *priority* of political engagement born in the reaction to political apathy. She refused to be drawn along by powerful rhetoric that demanded bringing women into the public arena. Her book, though, was not by any means a retreat into the quietism of the apathy theorists. Elshtain rather wrote as a critic of *unthinking* dogmas, from a deep understanding of the dangers and the tragedies that totalistic theories and certainties posed. She adhered to Wittgenstein's injunction, cited in her introduction to *Public Man/Private Woman*, to "think 'really honestly'" (1981, xi; also 1990, xii). This commitment informed her book and led her to acknowledge tensions that many others preferred to ignore — and that made her work so controversial. Elshtain was not ready to relinquish the loves and satisfactions that mark a private world in the response to the similarly powerful pull of public commitments.

Against the movement of the times that focused so intensely on the public world and political action, she vociferously — indeed with a certain religious fervor that was to become more powerful later in her life through her appreciation of Augustine — called for "the redemption of private life." *Public Man/Private Woman* warned about the overreaction to the apathy theorists who, in trying to revitalize a public world, abandoned the particular for the sake of the universal. Elshtain resonated to Aristotle's criticism of Socrates' Callipolis:

> Yet which is superior — for each of two thousand (or ten thousand) individuals to say "mine" and address the same thing, or rather the way they say "mine" in cities now? ... It is better to have a cousin of one's own, than a son in the city Socrates founds (Aristotle 1984, 57–58).

Elshtain's call for "the redemption" of the private life was not a call for a retreat. She asked instead that the values and virtues that were part of that world inform our public lives. Too much of value came from the private world to let it lie on the garbage heap of past dreams. Nevertheless, she recognized the attachment of the particular over the universal; she did not dismiss the demands that a public life of necessity made on the individual. Her oeuvre embraces both and all the considerable complications that such an expansive embrace would entail.

As others were racing to abandon the private world and enter fully the public world of power and influence and as that world suddenly, through the efforts of feminists, was beginning to open slightly, Elshtain basically said, wait a minute: Is this what we really want? What are the

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terms of that access and that power we are so eager to have for ourselves? What will we accomplish once we move into the public world of male power? What will happen when we invite the language of power into the family? She raised these questions in the effort to help us focus on the gender dimensions of what was happening, and some of what was happening was not particularly appealing to Elshtain in the assertion of what roles women should pursue. Hannah Arendt's book extolled the agonistic public sphere where men would display who they really were through contest and debate about the issues of public action. Arendt dismissed the private world as a realm of biology and necessity. Elshtain basically responded by saying, Do not diminish the private world so readily and be so eager to engage in the public sphere of oppositions.

Elshtain's defense of the private sphere was not based on a sentiment that wanted women barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen because Nature (with a capital "N") decreed it. In her brilliant attack on Bloom's (1987) *Closing of the American Mind*, which prescribed such a role for women, she described "Nature" as one of those messy terms that could serve as a weapon to put pressure on institutions in order to reconstitute them *or* as part of an arsenal to defend against such pressures. She appropriately asked with regard to Bloom's use of Nature, "How is one to tell what really existed by nature and what emerged historically? Furthermore, what difference does the locating of an institution, practice, or tradition in nature, or as natural, make?" (1990, 111). Rather than rely on the ontologically suspect language of nature in her images of the family, she insisted that we not lose those attachments to particular individuals that allow us the opportunities for the love and caring for those with whom we share our lives. Thus, many of Elshtain's subsequent pieces insist that we bring to our public actions an awareness of the underlying concerns and orientations that inform our private lives.

The powerful motivating slogan from feminism of the 1970s affirmed that "the personal is political," a slogan that translated all relations, even our most intimate relations, into power relations, a view captured perhaps most vividly in the writings of Catharine MacKinnon — though she certainly was not alone — for whom all sex is rape and all families are sites of oppression. Marriage understood in the political language of power and oppression was seen as a realm of disempowerment for women, a prison that sucked all personal freedom and personality away from the women who entered into it. Elshtain was prescient in 1981 in her warnings about the dangers of not "thinking 'really hard'" about the meaning and consequences of taking this popular and over-used battle

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cry. Drawing on an understanding of public and private life that came from her reading of both political theorists and from the feminist authors of the time, she warned in *Public Man/Private Woman* of the dangers implicit in such a slogan. She wondered whether maybe the political ought to become personal — not the personal, political. Maybe the political diminishes us, and the effort to wrest it from male control as well as to bring it into our private lives has meant the loss of the capacity to treasure what really needs treasuring. Those qualities and aspects of our personalities and psyches that provide a depth and richness to our lives cannot be achieved in the abstract world of public affairs where we necessarily generalize rather than particularize. Or, as she wrote in a later piece about this famous phrase: "[I]t replicates a central presupposition of the 'totalizing' (hence totalitarian) regimes that have haunted the twentieth century … I am not arguing that feminists wanted totalitarian politics. I am insisting that *they did not pay sufficient attention to the implications* of what they were claiming and just might unleash" (1999, 26; italics added).

Elshtain's exhortation that we draw on our own experiences in the sentiments that define the private realm has not been without its critics, and, for sure, a certain romanticism permeates the warm portraits and defense of family life that sprinkle Elshtain's books and essays. But as a committed democrat and egalitarian, she bristled against claims by others to know what lives we *ought* to lead — without consideration of how we ourselves experience those lives. To affirm universal oppression where there is particular love, for example, is to take an Olympian stance that Elshtain rejected. We may question whether sometimes Elshtain shielded herself from moments of oppression that marked the lives of many within the conventional structure of the family, but she railed against a feminist declaration of universal oppression. She was eager to trust each individual's experience of herself and was unwilling to condemn the satisfactions found in our private lives as false consciousness.

Just as Elshtain insists that we are not Hobbesian mushrooms emerging from the forest floor, she recognizes that the theories and conceptual frameworks with which we grapple must also be understood within the traditions of western political thought. As we are children of our parents, so are we children of the theories that have emerged across the millennia. In the first half of *Public Man/Private Woman*, she explores those texts that are the cradle from which we grow. She acknowledges that these texts have their share of appalling sexist comments, but she was prepared to look beyond such comments, to learn from these authors rather than simply rail against the offensive statements. She learned from

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them about the interpenetration of the public and private, rather than seeing in their writings an untextured division prioritizing one realm at the expense of the other.

Though St. Augustine plays a relatively minor role in *Public Man/Private Woman*, her later elaboration of his thought in *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (1995) is an eloquent exposition of why this early Christian author, who so seldom makes his way into the mainstream language and thought of political science, political theory, or feminism, offers a deep understanding of the value of the private world without sacrificing our commitment to the improvement of the social world within which we live. From an understanding of Augustine we can learn how the intertwining of public and private commitments enables Elshtain to translate her concerns with the particular to the messy world of public policies with issues like family and parenting, surrogacy, the feminist bugaboo of pornography legislation, all of which come under her critical appraisal through the years.

The variety and range of topics she regularly touched on in her various writings was vast, but in her handling of all of them one can see the Augustinian injunction to see beauty in the diversity of the world and to see our engagement in the public world drawing its strength from the particular attachments that make us human. She worried about a feminism that brought into both the public and private world atomistic liberal creatures creating rights out of our wants, a feminism that did not find its intellectual roots in the richness and insights of the thought and the texts of the past. Augustine begins to be her guide in the book from 1982, but his importance as an inspiration for the appreciation of the vast diversity of the world becomes fully evident with the poignant 1995 volume.

Undoubtedly, the most daring part of *Public Man/Private Woman* comes in the last third of the book when Elshtain leaves the classical canonical texts to address the feminist theorists of the previous decade — the ones who had sharply placed feminism on the political agenda with such force and provocation. Her book was written when it was still "hip" to claim radical credentials and to take stances that made one seem more radical, more damning of the male than your female neighbors dared be. For example, Ti-Grace Atkinson could describe men qua men as "ontologically 'insecure and frustrated'" creatures who engage in "metaphysical cannibalism" whereby they "devour and dominate women" (1995, 206). Or Susan Brownmiller might describe a universal male lust for power that created a rape ideology by which "*all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear" (1995, 206). The shocking and extreme language goes on and on, and retrospectively the claims seem absurd

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and indeed almost laughable. Yet, the extremism did not mean that such language and proclamations were not necessary at the time to raise an awareness of the issues at hand or to describe seriously the real lives that many women experienced in the 1970s. Elshtain was as aware as any of us females living in the 1970s of the discrimination and challenges that marked our lives, but she did not with her clear voice jump on the bandwagon of excoriations, and most especially she did not let her serious feminist sympathies lull her into the casual acceptance of the calls among feminists to jettison the family as the realm of patriarchal oppression. We may question the political wisdom of attacking so harshly those who were giving needed expression to the harsh realities of the lives of many women, but she did so from a determination to think "really clearly" — if not politically.

Elshtain's study of the classics of political theory had made her analyses far richer than the blunt tools the feminists she criticized were wielding. She was unwilling to dismiss the world of the private family, because it was the realm where women may have flourished. She read the views of radical feminism as denigrating women and what they most often cared about most profoundly; such views, as Elshtain saw them, diminished women's potential contributions to the welfare of all. In seeking public monuments for themselves they would fail to appreciate the artistry of the quilt. By prefacing her responses to radical feminist writings with the texts of the western tradition in the earlier sections of the book, Elshtain was able to draw from those texts the capacity to understand the complexity of the relationship between and the interpenetration of the public and private rather than assume an untextured division between those worlds, which prioritized one at the expense of the other.

Though Elshtain is highly critical of the feminist theorists she considers in the last third of *Public Man/Private Woman*, she nevertheless affirms the importance of adding their voices to the discussions of our political lives whether we accept their views or not. Later in her career she would add other voices to the texts that comprise the context from which we need to reflect on the nature of public and private, male and female, and the interactions that constitute our world. The voices of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and especially of Jane Addams appeared in her work. She was opening up discourse, not trying to close it off through the dismissal of those who may not say precisely what we may like to hear. Through this openness to the range of voices in a multitude of texts, Elshtain differed from many of her critics and offered an important lesson in the dangers of stifling rather than encouraging conversation. Elshtain wrote that her

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goal was not to overcome conflict nor to smooth over the rough, but to promote the cacophony that comes from listening to many voices. She worried that premature reconciliation among competing points of view would close off debate. Her readings of texts from the wide range of literatures and canonical political theory as well as literature and poetry, polemical documents, even popular songs have all served as the pool from which she learned and drew her insights. She was an advocate for openness to different voices, the voices of the family, of caring mothers in a way that may have too often been stilled in feminist circles. We all must remain in Elshtain's debt for her determined insistence that we recognize the centrality of the conflict that those varied sources reveal, that we accept the tensions that emerge from our differences, and that we insist that the discussions of those differences be kept open. At the same time, we must recognize how that insistence made her feminism — proudly, I think she would have contended — "contentious."

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