

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IMPERATIVES

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Abstract: The paper deals with the concepts of public and private spheres as defined from Plato and Aristotle to more recent sources. The two issues are considered as being distinct from each other. The link between them is mediated by education.

Keywords: education, family, private, public, state

Introduction

The paper deals with the binary of public/private, two concepts that have undergone significant changes in the course of history. The private area refers to all those activities that are carried on within the household, whereas the public area implies activities concerned with the space outside the house, i.e. society.

According to Professor Reghina Dascăl, the distinction between the public and the private spheres has been a central feature of liberal political discourse since its beginning. Aristotle regarded the public sphere as an arena for free discursive interaction, where free and equal citizens engage in striving together toward the common good. The liberal theorists defined the zone of privacy as a way of delimiting the power of the state, taking individual freedom as their departure point. There was a question for many theorists about where the line of demarcation between the state power and the private realm should be. The private includes everything that is not political; it is not a locus of constructed power relationships, and largely

irrelevant to politics. The private is not the domain where rights reign but is governed by norms of duty, love, and custom. (Dascăl, 2001 145-49).

According to the very origin myths of liberalism, men came out of the state of nature to procure rights for themselves in society; they do not establish the state to protect or empower individuals inside families. Thus, the liberal subject is a man who moves freely between family and civil society, bearing prerogatives in the former and rights in the latter. This person is male rather than generic, because his enjoyment of civic rights is buttressed rather than limited by his relations in the private sphere, while the opposite is the case for women within the standard sexual division of labour, women's access to civic society and its liberties being limited by household labour and responsibilities. Liberalism's discursive construction of the private sphere as neither a realm of work nor of power but of nature, of comfort and regeneration is inherently bound to a socially male position within it; it parallels the privileging of class entailed in bourgeois characterization of civil society as a place of universal freedom and equality (Dascăl 149).

Education

As a link between the two spheres I intend to take up the issue of education. Before the invention of reading and writing, people lived in an environment in which they struggled to survive in the face of natural forces and wild animals. To survive, preliterate people developed skills that grew into cultural and educational patterns. Peoples had to transmit their culture from adults to children. The earliest educational processes involved sharing information about gathering food and providing shelter, making weapons and other tools, learning language, acquiring values. Since they lived before the invention of writing, preliterate peoples used oral tradition to pass on their culture from one generation to the next.

When Europeans began to invade the American continent in the 1500s, the most devastating assault on Indian life came from the unseen viruses they brought with them. As cultural and economic contact grew, the differences between women and men began to change. These various changes were shaped by the sexual division of labour in indigenous cultures. (Evans1-18).

Perhaps the most striking evidence of change among women was the emergence of the college-educated and self-supporting new woman. After the Civil War, the first generation of such women was formed in the intense world of women's colleges. By 1870 there were 11,000 women students enrolled in higher education. I would like to single out Mary Jane McLeod, an outstanding example of a woman who by assigning great importance to becoming educated also

contributed to education of other women. She was born on July 10, 1875, the fifteenth of seventeen children of Samuel and Patsy McLeod. Some of their children were born into slavery and sold to nearby landowners, but they reassembled after President Lincoln's Proclamation. Although Mary Jane was born free, she was no stranger to the evils of slavery. In the hard-working family every one had to do her or his part. Mary learned to cook, sew and chop cotton. She sang as she worked in the fields and in the Methodist Episcopal church where the family worshipped. They all worked on the farm, praying together every night and morning.

Most of all Mary prayed to be able to go to school. More than anything else, she desired to read. She did so well at her studies that after finishing elementary school she was awarded a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in North Carolina. In 1887 she left her family to ride alone on a train, frightened but proud, to her new school. After graduation from Scotia, she continued her education at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, the only African-American in a school of a thousand students, and her world expanded again. She had a dream, that of establishing a school of her own, where African-American girls could be educated. Mary believed that by means of education, these girls' low social status could be raised. On October 3, 1904, the *Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls* opened its doors. Her school grew faster than she could have imagined. In addition, she started a library and a tiny hospital, which eventually became a school for nurses. In 1928, while Mary was involved in transforming her school into a junior college, she received an invitation from President Calvin Coolidge to attend a child welfare conference. She became the country's expert on the education of African-Americans. (Wright 31-41).

She died on May 18, 1955, leaving as her legacy to all her people: "I leave you love I leave you hope I leave you a thirst for education I leave you faith I leave you racial dignity I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people" (Wright 42).

Ancient Greece is considered to be one of the places where Western formal education originated. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, epic poems attributed to Homer and written sometime in the eighth century BC, created a cultural tradition that gave the Greeks a sense of group identity.

Ancient Greece was divided into small city states (Athens, Sparta, etc). Athens laid the stress on a humane and democratic society and education. Only the sons of free citizens could attend school. The Athenians believed a free man should have a liberal education in order to be

able to perform his civic duties and for his own personal development. Women's education depended on the customs of each particular Greek city-state. As in Athens women had no legal or economic rights, most women did not attend school. However, there were girls who were educated at home by tutors.

In the fifth century BC, the Sophists began to teach in Athens. They claimed that they could teach any subject or skill to whoever wanted to learn. They specialized in teaching grammar, logic and rhetoric, subjects that eventually formed the core of the liberal arts curriculum.

The Greek philosopher Socrates wanted to discover and teach universal principles of truth, beauty and goodness. He considered that true knowledge existed within everyone and needed to be brought to consciousness. Plato believed in the unchanging world of perfect ideas or universal concepts. He said that since true knowledge is the same in every place at every time, education, like truth, should be unchanging. He described his educational ideal in the *Republic*, a fundamental work of Western philosophy.

Public versus Private

Public has meaning in relation to what is not public, the private sphere. The Greeks made a distinction between two lines of inquiry: the first was concerned with the study of goodness in the collective life of a community, while the second dealt with the goodness of an individual. They also differentiated between the *polis* (the city-state) and the *oikos* (the household). In the *Republic*, Plato considers that private interests have divided citizens and undermined their interest in the well-being of the *polis* as a whole. Plato's ideal republic opts for equality between the sexes in the guardian class. This is to be achieved by eliminating the internal divisions within a state which pull leaders away from the collective good towards their own private interests.

For Plato to eliminate these divisions, the private sphere had to be abolished. So Plato has to find a place in the public sphere for women who had previously filled the roles of wife or slave in the private area. He focuses attention on the guardian class and claims that men and women should be trained equally for the role of ruler. He also brings in the concept of education for the guardian class.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle believed strongly in the need for both a public and a private sphere. His description of political society begins with the description of what he calls *first societies*, namely families. The purpose of the private realm is to meet biological needs. The public area, on the other hand, exists for the sake of a good life. Aristotle considers that a man should rule over his wife; the man is fitter to rule because he possesses moral goodness and reason in a perfect form. He asserts that men have authority over their wives, but it is the rule of the statesman over his fellow citizens rather than of the monarch over his subjects. This limitation of men's authority is rooted in the recognition that wives have some authority over the children in any marriage and that they have a capacity for rationality (Arneil 28-31).

For Plato, the private sphere must be eliminated (in the guardian class) if the interest of the whole community is not to be divided by the interests of private families. The radical implications of eliminating the family for wives of the guardians is understood by Plato, and hence the need for his elaborate schemes of reproduction and equality between the sexes in training and education. Some have argued, however, that by creating a sphere in which only the public may exist, Plato actually leaves no choice but for these wives to become *masculine* in political life, by the very way he defines the virtues of the guardian class. Equality, therefore, may be at the expense of retaining a difference between the genders and in particular those qualities traditionally associated with femininity. Plato ignores the majority of men and women who fall outside of this category of *guardian* in his analysis, seeing them as providers of the biological needs of the guardian class. Aristotle, on the other hand, has anchored the origin of his political societies on the more primitive household societies. The key difference is that the *polis* is both public and part of the cultural rather than natural world. The family, in particular the wives and slaves, on the other hand, meets the needs of mere life. Rule within the family naturally falls to the man for reasons of morality and his capacity for rational thought, yet his authority over wives is different from his authority over female slaves: Aristotle claims that the former has some capacity for reason, while the latter has none (Arneil32).

According to Sara M. Evans, the rhetoric surrounding the American Revolution was rooted in classical Greek assumptions and presumed a sharp dichotomy between public and private. As Hannah Arendt has stated, the public was the realm of politics, where citizens who commanded independent resources and private households, gathered to debate the future of the community. This political sphere was the locus of freedom, an arena for action through which individuals made themselves visible by using impressive discourse and seeking public recognition of their achievements. It was also important to have a strong sense of virtue, to assume responsibility for community affairs. By contrast, the private area was concerned with producing food and bearing children. On account of the fact that women devoted themselves to

the necessities of life, male heads of households had the freedom to engage in politics. Jean Bethke Elstain has asserted: "The flip side of a coin that features the public spirited visage of the male citizen and dutiful father, is the profile of the loving, virtuous, chaste, selfless wife.... Without someone to tend the hearth, the legislative halls would grow silent and empty, or became noisily corrupt" (qtd. in Evans, 1997 2).

American women reshaped the boundaries of the private sphere in ways that have not up until now been explored. They changed the meaning of public life itself. The realities of seventeenth century life, however, ascribed to the family many activities and responsibilities such as education, health and welfare that we now associate with public life and institutions. Even though women were excluded from most formal public roles, they had access to private sources of social control over public action. The most outstanding example is represented by Iroquois women who, unlike their colonial counterparts, could act as a group to nominate council elders and vote on the appointment of chiefs.

As a consequence of the Revolution, a new political meaning was given to domestic life; this raised the role of women to a problematic status in the new political order, a status that has persisted to the present. Women created a different form of public life. In different ways and to different degrees, every group of women (middle class, immigrant, black, and working class) used voluntary associations to express their interests and to organise themselves for public activity. This made possible the public expression of private perspectives.

Among the peoples of North America, whose tribes lived in the woods, along the rivers and on the edges of the plains, women were essential to group survival. Their work as gatherers and processors of food and as nurturers of small children was not only visible to the whole community but also shaped ritual life and processes of community decision making. In most Indian societies, women's activities were different from those of men. They gathered seeds, roots, fruits and other wild plants. They were also responsible for cooking, preserving foods and making household utensils and furnishings. Male activities centred on hunting and warfare. After the hunts, Indian women had an important role in processing the hides of deer or buffalo into clothing, blankets, floor coverings or trade goods. Indian societies differed in their definitions of which tasks were appropriate for women and men and their degree of flexibility. In some groups people would be ridiculed for engaging in tasks inappropriate for their gender, while other groups were more tolerant. Sometimes man and women performed complementary tasks. Among the

Iroquois, men cleared the fields and women planted them. Societies with a clear sexual division of labour encouraged gender solidarity.

In Iroquois society women farmed in a highly organised way. Their work is described by a white woman as follows:

In the summer season, we planted, tended and harvested our corn, and generally had all of our children with us; but had no master to oversee or drive us, so that we could work as leisurely as we pleased we pursued our farming business according to the general custom of Indian women, which is as follows: in order to expedite their business and at the same time enjoy each other's company they all worked together in one field, or at whatever job they may have on hand. In the spring they choose an old active squaw to be their driver and overseer, when at labor for the ensuing year. She accepts the honor and they consider themselves bound to obey her. When the time for planting arrives and the soil is prepared, the squaws are assembled in the morning and conducted into the field where each plants one row. They then go into the next field and plant once across and so on till they have gone through the tribe (Evans 9).

In many tribes there were public forums, such as a council of elders, where decisions could be made for the community as a whole. In spite of most scholars' belief that women had no significant political roles, there were many female chiefs and traders. Iroquois women represented the apex of female political power. The land was theirs; the women worked it and controlled the distribution of all food. This gave them essential control over the economic organisation of their tribe. They could withhold the food at any point – in the household, the council of elders, at religious celebrations etc. The Iroquois institutionalised female power in the right of matrons or older women to nominate council elders.

Conclusion

The public and private spheres coexist in people's lives all over the world. One of the links, as I have tried to show, is education. Everybody must have access to education, irrespective of gender, nationality, social status or age. Women, as well as men, have always and at all times made their contribution visible in the two areas under discussion. All the citizens of a state should enjoy full access to both of them. They exist as different areas, but this does not mean that they belong to only one segment of humanity. One's existence has to benefit equally from the achievements of both spheres.

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