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Feminist Political Theory

An Introduction

Valerie Bryson

Foreword by Elizabeth Meehan

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To my parents, Heather and Alan Poole

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Foreword

I am delighted to be able to introduce readers to this book, having been 'in on it' from the beginning when the publisher asked me to review the original proposal. Initially, I thought that if Valerie Bryson could bring off what she intended she would make a unique contribution to the literature on feminist theory and politics. Throughout the progress of the manuscript, it was clear that this was exactly what was going to happen. There are many things that are important about this book; here, I shall mention three.

First, her scope is remarkable. The historical and conceptual sweep of the book is comprehensive, beginning with the seventeenth century and continuing to explain the linkages and points of departure among mainstream schools of political philosophy and feminist ideas. All of this illuminates her discussion of disagreements in modern feminist theory. It is very difficult to do this without being simplistic or repetitive. This book is neither.

Second, while the business of understanding and explaining entails categorizing and labelling, Valerie shows how the usual way of classifying feminist approaches tends to 'obscure the sophistication of . . . [their] . . . ideas and activities'. As she explains, 'modern feminism involves a dynamic and exciting body of thought that is highly controversial and that is constantly challenging its own assumptions'. In her outstanding exposition of both concepts and the history of ideas, Valerie has written a book that deserves to be a standard text for undergraduates and which will be a constant source of stimulation to experienced researchers.

Third, the book addresses issues that preoccupy readers outside the academic world. As Valerie says, feminist thinking is an enterprise that seeks to understand society in order to challenge and change it. The goal is 'knowledge that can be used to guide and

inform feminist political practice'. She shows, like Dale Spender in *Women of Ideas*,¹ that many guides from the past have been lost – a loss that is important as early writings are of interest, not only in their own right, but because they are often strikingly modern in the issues they deal with and their forms of analysis. There has had to be too much 'starting from scratch'. In recent decades, the revival of feminism has often provoked two counter-claims. One, heard even in the 1950s, is that feminism is redundant because most goals have been met. The other is that, for one reason or another, feminism is no longer interesting, politically or intellectually. Yet, as I was thinking about what to say in this preface, one of my sisters told me that she could not borrow *Women of Ideas* from Inverness Public Library for the customary four weeks because there was such a queue of readers waiting for it. In the two weeks allotted to her, older relatives in Edinburgh, where she was reading it, were keenly interested in the snippets they were able to share. Without simplifying her complex and difficult themes, Valerie uses a language of beautiful simplicity that will capture the attention of women outside the universities and colleges. I know what to give some of my relations for Christmas!

I think the capacity to span audiences is vitally important to society in all sorts of fields. Too often, the idea that 'ordinary people' cannot understand, or be objective about, matters of principle (to do with business, constitutions, electoral systems, the public interest, and so on) is used as a pretext for restricting participation to elite groups. If Valerie's subject-matter 'is a dynamic and exciting body of thought' that challenges social practice, then her exposition of it is the most universally exciting and challenging that I have read.

Department of Politics
Queen's University of Belfast

ELIZABETH MEEHAN

Note

1. Spender, D. (1983) *Women of Ideas and What Men have Done to Them* (London: Routledge).

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And, of course, thanks to David, Patrick and Lucy Bryson.

VALERIE BRYSON