



Book Review Symposium

Symposium on The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory

Publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* signifies that feminist theory is now acknowledged as an established and flourishing field of scholarly accomplishment. Totalling 1,088 pages, this impressive work consists of 50 essays, each written specifically for this purpose, on topics ranging from “Affect” to “Violence.” Because this form does not lend itself to a conventional book review, in organizing this symposium, we invited five authors to address the broader intellectual as well as the political import of this volume’s appearance at this moment in feminism’s history. Their analyses are followed by a response prepared by the *Handbook’s* editors, Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth.

Feminist Theorizing: How to Do Justice to a Multifaceted and Contentious Field of Inquiry

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The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, successfully showcases the multifaceted character of feminist theorizing, all the while elucidating its relevance to contemporary schools of thought. Its impressive volume (more than 1,000 pages), the wide range of topics it covers, and the diversity of feminist perspectives it draws on (such as difference feminism, diversity feminism, and deconstruction feminism)

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underscore the richness, the diversity, and the maturity of feminism as a field of theorizing.

The scholarly but also political relevance of this volume cannot be overstated. As Disch and Hawkesworth indicate in their introductory essay, “Feminist Theory: Transforming the Known World,” approaches to feminist theorizing were traditionally analyzed within the framework of the larger Western philosophical traditions to which they had affinities (such as liberalism, socialism, film theory, psycho-analytics, etc.). The resulting *hyphenation model* (consider, for instance, liberal-feminism, socialist-feminist, radical-feminism) has helpfully showcased the continuities and shared assumptions underlying certain approaches to feminist theory and traditions in Western thought. This model, however, has equally obscured what feminist theories have in common.

This explains, in part, why feminist theory — although institutionalized academically in the 1970s — is often still conceived as derivative of so-called mainstream schools of thought and why feminist theory, despite growing acclaim for its contributions to various fields of science, is often still seen as offering but ancillary or secondary understandings to the core phenomena studied within these fields (3). The hyphenation model, furthermore, risks introducing too sharp a division between, on the one hand, feminist contributions embedded in mainstream schools of thought and, on the other, radical feminism as a freestanding critique of conventional modes of knowledge production. As a result, this traditional classificatory model risks producing unhelpful debates on what constitutes the “core” of feminist theory, potentially aggravating exclusionary tendencies and power inequalities within feminism itself.

The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory carefully avoids these pitfalls. Rather than offering a chronological or disciplinary ordering of feminist theorizing, the volume alphabetically presents essays on the central theoretical concepts and analytical frameworks that feminist theorists have developed to challenge established knowledge. Some readers — particularly novices to feminist theory — may prefer a book architecture that focuses on thematically clustered and delineated discussions in contemporary feminist theory (e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Hesse-Biber 2012). The handbook’s alphabetical architecture, however, allows for attributing equal weight and relevance to all entries. In so doing, the *Handbook* actively solicits readers’ judgment calls about the coherence, relevance, and consistency of feminist concepts and analytical frameworks. “Alphabetical ordering is attractive,” Disch and Hawkesworth rightly note, “not just for what it avoids but also for what it makes possible” (10).

Rather than dictate a specific, supposedly most appropriate, perspective on feminist theory, the *Handbook* invites readers to engage with and evaluate the body of feminist theory on their own terms. This approach demonstrates great coherence with the feminist insight that knowledge production is closely entwined with knowers' epistemological locations (cf. Alcoff 2007) and treats readers, irrespective of their personal backgrounds or their level of familiarity with feminist theory, as equals.

The *Handbook* consists of 50 original essays by noted feminist scholars from a range of academic specializations, such as Africana studies, anthropology, art and literature, biology, communication studies, cultural studies, history, international relations, law, philosophy, political science, and sociology. The majority of contributors are drawn from the global North, and approximately two-thirds of the contributors are based in the United States. Although this lineup of contributors somewhat undermines the *Handbook's* political project (i.e., facilitating critical encounters between readers across epistemological locations), many essays deal with topics, such as biopolitics, postcoloniality, subjectivity, normalization, and intersectionality, that have challenged the essentialist tendencies within feminist theorizing and that have transformed feminism as both a political project and theoretical endeavor.

In a manner resembling *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Waylen et al. 2013), the *Handbook of Feminist Theory* underscores the interdisciplinary and transformative character of feminist research. Challenging mistaken conceptions of feminist theory, the essays are not limited to questions related to women, sexuality, and gender. Far to the contrary, they speak out against and showcase the limitations of a legacy of assumptions cutting across various fields of science, such as the assumption that gender roles directly follow from the existence of two biological sexes, the belief that the public and private sphere can and should be analytically separated, the tendency to delink agency from social issues of identity and subjectivity, and the assumption that power primarily operates through repression and overt conflict. While the inclusion of essays on, for instance, social movements, crime, justice, and globalization would have made for welcome additions, demonstrating the scope and relevance of feminist theorizing even further, this comment may sound gratuitous given the already impressive volume of the *Handbook*.

While illuminating dimensions of human life and power that often go unnoticed in so-called mainstream discourses of science (10), the *Handbook* is not inconsiderate of their contributions. Rather than situating feminist theory in a unidirectional relation to mainstream

discourses (as a “challenger” discourse), the essays in this volume clarify the ways in which, for instance, innovations within critical theory (consider, Foucault’s relational conception of power) and feminist theory have fed on each other. In so doing, the contributors to this *Handbook* actively challenge the mistaken notion that feminist theory operates in isolation from other strands of theorizing and offers but an “outsider” — that is, easily dismissible — perspective. Testifying to the maturity of feminism as a field of theorizing, the essays in this volume also do not shy away from addressing ongoing debates within feminist theory, such as contestations surrounding the theorization of gender and sexuality or debate over the possibility of invoking women’s shared experiences as an epistemological foundation for feminist theory. Conceived as essays — not overview articles in the classical sense — the contributions to this handbook do not simply summarize central perspectives within contemporary feminist theorizing but, by taking a stance in contemporary debates, help the reader come to terms with these very perspectives.

As a result, the various essays in the *Handbook* can most fruitfully be read in conjunction with each other. The argument, for instance, that it does not “make sense to think of agency outside a social context, as a purely abstract set of capacities and potentials” (41) features most prominently in Lois McNay’s essay on “Agency,” yet it is further substantiated in the essays “Microphysics of Power” by Johanna Oksala, “Identities” by Nadine Ehlers, and “Subjectivity and Subjectivation” by Anna Marie Smith. Similarly, and in close connection with essays on subjectivity and identity, the essays on “Politics” by Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Experience” by Judith Grant, and “Representation” by Disch powerfully illuminate the limitations of a liberal model of politics rooted in sameness and advance an alternative model of politics best described as a practice of meaning-making, contestation, and freedom. The fact that multiple voices, drawing upon a diverse range of sources and presenting different stances, reflect on conjoined issues in feminist theorizing is one of the key assets of this handbook: it aptly characterizes the multifaceted and contentious field of inquiry that is feminist theorizing.

The essay-like format of the *Handbook*’s chapters could, however, also be conceived of as a downside. Although the various chapters contain cross-references, the authors do not (explicitly) position their arguments against those of other contributors to the *Handbook*. For instance, in the essay on “Agency,” McNay formulates a convincing critique of post-identity feminists’ “free-floating notions of agency as world building” (15). Post-identity conceptions of agency as unconstrained agonism,

McNay argues, tend to ignore the fact that the conditions for effective agency are unequally distributed across social groups. This critique speaks, among others, to the essay “Politics” in which Zerilli advocates against a conception of politics as rooted in ascribed identities or shared experiences. Clearly, both authors conceive of power, politics, and agency on somewhat different terms, but the breadth of their disagreement remains underspecified. In sum: although the *Handbook*’s essay-like format and alphabetical architecture may foster dialogue between author and reader, it seems to weaken the opportunities for dialogue between contributing authors, potentially to the detriment of readers less familiar with today’s diversity of feminist perspectives.

In spite of these remarks, *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* is an indispensable work of reference for any university library or research institute. Because of its alphabetical ordering, the handbook seems more suitable for researchers than for practitioners or policymakers. The handbook’s architecture, then again, makes it an exceptionally conveniently structured tool for research and teaching purposes: students, researchers and teachers can immediately identify essays of interest and, when reading essays in close connection to each other, can form their own judgments calls on the coherence, relevance, consistency, and implications of feminist theorizing, thus becoming partakers in the feminist project. I have nothing but praise for the editors’ careful and considerate planning of this *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*.

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