


ARTICLE

Feminism as Epic Theory

Kate M. Phelan 

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

E-mail: kate.phelan2@rmit.edu.au

(Received 11 June 2020; revised 17 December 2020; accepted 17 February 2021; first published online 14 May 2021)

Abstract

Sheldon Wolin identifies a particular tradition within political theory that he calls ‘epic theory’. Epic theory, he explains, is political theory’s equivalent of the Kuhnian scientific revolution. This article takes up the analogy between epic theory and scientific revolution to show that feminism is an epic theory in the truest sense of the term, a sense not fully grasped by Wolin. It is so for two reasons. First, it is a theory of the whole. Second, it is less a discovery than an invention of the world. The author seeks to account for the existence of feminism in the face of its impossibility, and to demonstrate the magnitude of the achievement that feminism represents.

Keywords: epic theory; scientific revolution; feminist theory; Catharine MacKinnon

Sheldon Wolin argues that a particular tradition within political theory – which he calls ‘epic theory’ – resembles the Kuhnian scientific revolution. In the preface of her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Catharine MacKinnon suggests, almost in passing, that feminism is properly understood as belonging to this tradition. Understood in this way, she explains, feminism emerges as not yet what it means to be: ‘Seen in these terms, feminism offered a rich description of the variables and locales of sexism and several possible explanations for it ... But except for a few major beginnings ... feminism had no account of male power as an ordered yet deranged whole. Feminism began to seem an epic indictment in search of a theory, an epic theory in need of writing’ (MacKinnon 1989, xi). And so she set out to develop this theory.

But what exactly does it mean to say that feminism is properly understood as belonging to the tradition of epic theory? MacKinnon says only that feminism, like epic theory, describes in order to change a systematically deranged world (MacKinnon 1989, x). In this article, I seek to show that feminism is an epic theory in the truest sense of the term, a sense other than that intended by MacKinnon and a sense not fully grasped by Wolin. I do so in order to demonstrate the magnitude of the achievement that feminism is. Along the way, I reveal a further feature of epic theory, offer a solution to a puzzle that MacKinnon bequeaths feminism, and question the feminist preoccupation with method.

Epic Theory

In 1969, in an article entitled ‘Political Theory as Vocation’, Wolin put forward the concept of epic theory. In this article, he argues that the primacy of method in the study of politics threatens to leave us unable to theorize in a particular sense of the term, that of comprehending the world anew. He calls such theorizing ‘epic’. Wolin begins his explanation of what epic theory is by likening it to Thomas Kuhn’s idea of revolutionary science. Kuhn argues that the procession of science is characterized by ‘normal’ and ‘extraordinary’ or ‘revolutionary’ phases. During normal phases,

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press.

scientists actualize the promise of the paradigm within which they work, solving the puzzles that it presents (Kuhn 2012[1962], 24). In extraordinary phases, they begin to diverge from the paradigm as they attempt to make sense of anomalies. This phase ends with the emergence of a new paradigm, or a paradigm shift. Epic theories, Wolin says, share this magnitude. They do not explain the as-yet-unexplained behaviour of phenomena within an already theorized world, filling in an already existing theory. They explain the world anew. In this way, they are concerned not with a part of a whole but with the whole itself, where that whole is the political world: '[b]y an act of thought, the [epic] theorist seeks to reassemble the whole political world' (Wolin 1969, 1,078). As an example, Marx does not provide an account of class hierarchy or the economic development of society as mere parts of an already understood whole. Rather, he offers a new explanation of the whole social world, and in so doing provides an account of class hierarchy or the economic development of society.

If epic theories share with scientific revolutions a particular structure of formal features, they also share what Wolin terms a structure of intentions. By 'structure of intentions' he means the theorist's controlling purposes, 'the considerations which determine how the formal features of concept, fact, logic, and interconnection are to be deployed so as to heighten the effect of the whole' (Wolin 1969, 1,078). Wolin suggests that while structures of intention vary across epic theories, they share a persistent feature: all such theories are driven by deep public concern. He illustrates this by citing Machiavelli ('I love my country more than my soul'), Thomas More ('If you cannot pluck up wrongheaded opinions by the root, if you cannot cure according to your heart's desire vices of long standing, yet you must not on that account desert the commonwealth') and Hobbes ('one whose just grief for the present calamities of his country' has driven him to theorize), along with Plato, Augustine, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Tocqueville and Marx, among others (Wolin 1969, 1,079). This sharply contrasts the vocation of the epic theorist with that of the methodist: while the latter begins inquiry as the requirements of scientific procedure demand (namely, by assuming an objective perspective, by removing herself from the world she wishes to understand), the former is moved to inquire by an unabashed sense of connection to and care for that world, and so sees her inquiry as accountable to that world. Adapting Richard Rorty, the methodist may be said to take objectivity as the standard by which to conduct inquiry, while the epic theorist may be said to take solidarity (Rorty 1991).

Since epic theories are driven by public concern, they differ from scientific revolutions. The latter are precipitated by persistent anomalies, which are taken to signal a problem in the theory, not in nature. They are thus responsive to crises in the theory. By contrast, epic theories are responsive to crises in the world. These crises, however, must be of a particular sort: they must be truly theoretical. Theoretical problems, in contrast to technical ones, are those that demand for their resolution theory rather than practical judgment. While crises are the result of three types of errors or mistakes – those in arrangements, those in decisions and those in beliefs – truly theoretical crises are the result of such errors or mistakes where they are systematic. They occur, in other words, 'when arrangements or decisions appear not as random consequences of a system which otherwise works tolerably well ... but as the necessary result of a more extensive set of evils which can confidently be expected to continue producing similar results' (Wolin 1969, 1,080). Marx sought to show that the logic of capitalism entailed the exploitation of the working class, the reduction of it to a state of mere subsistence, and the perpetual subordination of it to the capitalist class – in short, that it made such wrongs 'inevitable rather than contingencies' (Wolin 1969, 1,080). This makes sense of the first feature of epic theories – their magnitude. If theoretical crises occur because arrangements, decisions or beliefs are systematically mistaken, then epic theorists – whose theorizing is driven by, and is an attempt to resolve, such crises – must locate the error in the very laws of society. Having explained the concept of epic theory, I now turn to showing that feminist theory, as established by MacKinnon, is such a theory.

MacKinnon

Feminism, MacKinnon suggests, is properly understood as belonging to the tradition of epic theory, since it is based on the belief that men's oppression of women is systematic. In search of a theory of this oppression, feminists looked to Marxism, which provided the epic account of class hierarchy that feminists sought of gender hierarchy. At first, they attempted to incorporate an account of gender hierarchy within the Marxist account of class hierarchy (for example, Benston 1969; Dalla Costa and James 1975; Gimenez 1975). But as Marxism provides an account of the whole, this attempt succeeded in explaining gender hierarchy only as a part of an already theorized whole. If gender hierarchy is a part of an already theorized whole, then the workings of this whole can be understood independently of gender hierarchy, in which case this hierarchy is an indirect consequence of the system, perhaps not random but derivative and thus contingent rather than inevitable.

Recognizing this, feminists then attempted to develop an account of gender hierarchy that is consistent with (but not subsumed by) an account of class hierarchy, claiming that capitalism is one sphere of the social world and patriarchy another (for example, Delphy 1980; Eisenstein 1979; Hartmann 1979). But according to Marxism, work is not merely one sphere of social life; it organizes the entire social world. This attempt failed in the same way as the previous one: it reduced gender hierarchy to a part of an already theorized whole.

In 1982, MacKinnon confronted what feminists' attempts to synthesize Marxism and feminism were beginning to make clear:¹ that if women's oppression was not the aberrant but the normal functioning of a system, then a theory of that oppression could not be unified with Marxism. It would have to be a theory parallel to Marxism, an alternative theory of the whole. She then attempted to develop such a theory, beginning with the proposition that '[s]exuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away' (MacKinnon 1989, 3). This perhaps suggests that sexuality is analogous to work only in that it is expropriated from women, as work is from the working class. In fact, as I argue elsewhere, it is analogous to work in that it organizes the social world as gender hierarchy, as work organizes it as class hierarchy (Phelan 2017, 5–6). This becomes clearer as MacKinnon goes on:

Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed to survive humanly. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are ... Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument: the moulding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes – women and men – which division underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society (MacKinnon 1989, 3).

Since MacKinnon's account of how sexuality organizes the social world as gender hierarchy is highly condensed, presuming for its intelligibility a familiarity with the Marxist account of how work organizes the social world as class hierarchy, I shall begin by outlining the Marxist account.

According to the Marxist account, a person is first and foremost a material being, meaning a flesh-and-blood being (Marx and Engels 1970, 48). What she needs in order to exist, then, are material things such as food and water. But she does not simply find these things in the world; she must work to produce them. This compels those who do not own the means of production to enter into relations with those who do, and it is herein that class hierarchy begins to form: as the former are dependent on the latter and thus lack the power to reject the latter's terms, the latter can set the terms so that they benefit. And so set the terms they do, not exactly for the

¹For a discussion of the failure of feminists' attempts to synthesize Marxism and feminism, see Young (1980).

simplicistic reason that they are self-interested but for the more complicated reason that the system of capitalism is such that if they do not profit, they will go under, thereby ceasing to be a member of the capitalist class and all that that entails (Marx 1976, 739). Work is thus both the process by which people first enter into relations with one another and by which they are organized into classes. It is, in other words, what organizes the social world and organizes it as class hierarchy. This helps to make clear why Marxism is an epic theory, because it is (however successful) a theory not of one aspect but of the whole social world, where that world is systematically deranged. We are now better placed to understand MacKinnon's analogy and the theory implicit within it.

On the feminist account, MacKinnon suggests, a person comes into existence when they come into social existence. This means that what they exist as is simply what they *socially* exist as, which is to say, what they are socially defined as – boy or girl, man or woman.² MacKinnon argues that 'man' is *one who eroticizes dominance* and 'woman' *one who eroticizes subordination* (MacKinnon 1989, 143). In short, a person is first and foremost a man or woman, a being who eroticizes dominance or a being who eroticizes subordination. What they need in order to exist, then, is the object of their sexual desire. As work is the process by which a person produces the material things that they need to live, sexuality is the process by which a person gets the object of their sexual desire. Sexuality is thus both the process by which people first enter into relations with one another and by which they are organized into genders. It is, in other words, what organizes the social world and organizes it as gender hierarchy.³ MacKinnon succeeds in transforming feminist insights into an epic theory.

You might wonder to what this characterization of MacKinnon's theory amounts. First, it attributes to it a significance, hence a worthiness of our attention, that it has not yet been thought to have. This might seem a strange claim, for MacKinnon is recognized as an influential theorist. But her theory of sexuality is not taught alongside (or as though it were in some way comparable to) the theories of those whom Wolin cites as kindred epic theorists: Machiavelli, More, Hobbes, Plato, Augustine, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Toqueville and Marx. I do not mean to suggest that these theories cannot be grouped in ways that would render MacKinnon's relevantly different and thus preclude it from inclusion. I mean only to suggest that MacKinnon's theory shares with these theories some of the properties for which they are appreciated yet for which hers is not. What is at stake here is not merely proper appreciation of MacKinnon's theory; it is also what that theory, understood as I am suggesting we understand it, stands to offer us: 'a new way of looking at the world' (Wolin 1969, 1,078).

Secondly, my characterization helps to make clear that MacKinnon's theory is of the sort that women's condition demands. There seems to be a consensus within feminist scholarship that this theory as a whole is properly consigned to the past, that it is, as I have been told, 'water under the bridge'.⁴ This consensus rests on a view of this theory as belonging to a tradition of theory – sometimes called grand narrative – that, in its attempt to describe a whole, is 'universalizing' and as such, suspect (for example, Haraway 1990; Kapur 2002; Romany 1991).

A grand narrative is one that invokes a philosophy of history, one according to which it is not merely one more narrative but *the truth* (Lyotard 1984). In claiming the status of truth it implies the existence of a universal standpoint, from which it is true and other apparent truths are merely narratives. Postmodernism – denying the existence, or at least the attainability, of such a standpoint – is incredulous of grand narratives.

²As Judith Butler says, '[I]nsofar as social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of gender norms' (Butler 1985, 508).

³For a fuller reconstruction of MacKinnon's account in parallel with the Marxist account, see Phelan (2017).

⁴To be sure, aspects of MacKinnon's work continue to inspire and inform feminist thinking. These include the idea that sexuality is constitutive of gender, that 'man' and 'woman' name positions in a hierarchy, that the powerful create reality, that women's experience is a source of knowledge and that pornography silences women. These ideas are, however, decoupled from the project of creating a feminist theory that is parallel to the Marxist one. Post modernity, this project is assumed to be untenable.

MacKinnon's theory is not universalizing in this sense, for she does not claim to be speaking from a universal standpoint. On the contrary, she grounds her theory in women's experiences, come to light through the process of consciousness raising.⁵ Tellingly, she says, 'My approach would claim our perspective; we are not attempting to be objective about it, we're attempting to represent the point of view of women' (MacKinnon 1987, 86). Her theory is, or so her critics claim, universalizing in the alternative sense that as, like Marxism, a 'total' theory, it treats what is culturally and historically contingent as universal. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson express such a view when they say:

[T]heorists like Ann Ferguson, Nancy Folbre, Nancy Hartsock, and Catharine MacKinnon have built theories around notions of 'sex-affective production', 'reproduction' and 'sexuality', respectively. Each claims to have identified a basic kind of human practice found in all societies that has cross-cultural explanatory power ... As a matter of fact, it is doubtful whether these categories have any determinate cross-cultural content. Thus, for a theorist to use categories to construct a universalistic social theory is to risk projecting the socially dominant conjunctions and dispersions of her own society onto others, thereby distorting important features of both (Fraser and Nicholson 1989, 97).

The view that theories of the whole are universalizing in this sense is premised on the assumption that the social world is irreducibly heterogeneous such that any attempt to describe it as a whole necessarily falsely universalizes. Within feminist theory, this assumption has come to have the status of a moral truth. But it is not a moral truth; it is an empirical claim, the truth of which is to be established case by case through empirical inquiry.⁶ Because this assumption has become sacrosanct, feminists can – and do – reject MacKinnon's theory prior to engaging it. They refuse to entertain the picture of commonality in women's condition across place and time that MacKinnon offers by simply denying, in the face of such a picture, the possibility of its truth.

Moreover, this criticism treats MacKinnon's theory as an empirical theory, which it is not, at least in the social scientific sense of the term.⁷ As epic theory describes the world in order to change it, its description succeeds not insofar as it corresponds to the world but insofar as it transforms it. It thus awaits its truth. In this way, it is less description than prophecy. Iris Murdoch says of Marxism that it seeks 'not to ... painstakingly ... establish a disconnected variety of alleged facts about the past, not to attempt an impossible bits-and-pieces illusory truthfulness, but to stir the imagination to a unified grasp of what is "really significant", what is "relevant"' (Murdoch 1992, 202). We may say the same of feminism: it seeks to stir the imagination to a unified grasp of what is really significant, where what is really significant is what, when it transforms the world, will prove to be so.

This continues the parallel between feminism and Marxism. Wolin acknowledges that Marx's predictions have failed to materialize yet expresses a desire to say that his theory is no less true for this. He argues that Marx theorizes in the hope of inspiring the revolutionary action that, 'realising in fact what the theoretical mind could envision only as idea', will prove his theory true (Wolin 2016a, 175). Here arises a tension: what if Marx as theorist discovers that capitalism will thwart such action? What if commitment to truth in one sense – to accurate description

⁵Wendy Brown suggests that MacKinnon's theory is universalizing because by epistemologically privileging women's accounts of life, it implies that women are the sort of being that can recognize their situation as unjust (Brown 1995, 41). It thus implies that women are, in a universal moral truth, human beings. Brown is right. However, as I will show in the second half of the article, an understanding of feminism as epic theory reveals feminist consciousness as the product of feminism, in which case MacKinnon's epistemological privileging of women's accounts of life is rhetorical.

⁶Fraser and Nicholson provide no empirical evidence for their claim that 'it is doubtful whether these categories have any determinate cross-cultural content'.

⁷Wolin says that the privileging of method in the study of politics leaves us unable to theorize epically. Perhaps it also leaves us unable to evaluate theory in terms other than the empirical.

of the nature of capitalism – precludes commitment to truth in another – to the action by which we shall overcome capitalism and establish as fact its unjust nature? As Wolin recognizes, Marx saw that what he predicted as inevitable was not so, that no crisis need be final. But to admit this is to undercut the action by which we shall overcome capitalism. It is thus to *ensure* one truth over another. So, he chose to predict that capitalism would undo itself. This prediction may have failed, but this failure is the cost of a commitment to the action that will yield an alternative truth.

This aside, the concept of epic theory allows us a new understanding of theories of the whole, one according to which such theories are to be seen not as suspect but as what the social wrong to which they respond demands. If, as Wolin explains, an account of systematic derangement is necessarily an account of the whole, then feminist theory must be of the whole. Feminists are right to criticize accounts of women's oppression that treat what is culturally specific as universal, because such an account succeeds only in explaining the oppression of a culturally specific group of women rather than women as such. They are wrong to reject out of hand theories of the whole. To do so is to turn our back on the sort of theorizing that women's condition demands.

Susan Bernick (1992) argues that MacKinnon's theory occupies in feminism the place of Parmenides' work in ancient Greek philosophy. As Parmenides bequeaths to the Greeks a puzzle that made further speculations into metaphysics literally impossible,⁸ so MacKinnon bequeaths to feminists a puzzle (described in the next section) that makes further feminist theorizing impossible (Bernick 1992, 12). If this is so, then 'until post-MacKinnon feminists take her work as seriously as post-Parmenidean Greeks took his, feminist theory cannot progress further' (Bernick 1992, 12). Sadly, though not surprisingly, feminists have paid Bernick little attention. Consequently, some 18 years later, feminist theory remains in the state of malaise that Bernick lamented. My hope is that characterizing MacKinnon's theory as epic theory may help us to re-engage with it.

A Puzzle

In fact, it may do more than help us to re-engage with it; it may offer a solution to the puzzle that MacKinnon bequeaths to feminists. Feminists observe that as men are thought to be rational and women emotional, and as rationality is thought to be that which enables one to look upon the world objectively, seeing it as it is to be seen, and emotionality that which prevents one from doing so, men are granted the status of knower and women are not. This status brings with it the power to say, and to have one's saying accepted, how the world is, or, adapting Beauvoir, the power to represent the world (Beauvoir 2010[1949], 166). MacKinnon sustains this insight to its logical conclusion, arguing that the power to represent the world is the power to create it: '[c]ombining, like any form of power, legitimation with force, male power extends beneath the representation of reality to its construction: it makes women (as it were) and so verifies (makes true) who women "are" in its view' (MacKinnon 1989, 122). In short, while previous feminists saw men as having the power to define 'woman', MacKinnon – recognizing that who we are defined as shapes who we conceive of ourselves as, hence who we inhabit the world as, hence who we become – saw them as having the power to create women.⁹

If men create women, then women *are* who men define 'woman' as, in which case men's treatment of women, their confinement of women to a life of 'child care, home care, and husband care', is consistent with women's natures (MacKinnon 1989, 109). As such, it is just. If men's

⁸The meaning of Parmenides' puzzle is thoroughly contested. I cannot hope, in what little space I have here, to do more than capture the spirit of it. Roughly, it is this. Things 'exist' as objects of thought; and things appear to change. But if things exist as objects of thought, then anything that does not exist cannot be thought, and so cannot exist. If what does not exist cannot exist, then a thing can be neither generated nor destroyed, for generation is from what does not exist and destruction is into what does not exist. How, then, is change possible? See Bernick (1992, 3–6). See also Furley (1967).

⁹For further explanation of how men create women, see Haslanger (2002).

treatment of women is just, then, logically, it is unknowable as oppressive. This is the puzzle that MacKinnon bequeaths to feminism: if men have the power that feminists say they do, then their oppression of women is unknowable and feminism is therefore impossible. MacKinnon grasps this puzzle: ‘The problem of how the object can know herself as such is the same as how the alienated can know its own alienation. This, in turn, poses the problem of feminism’s account of women’s consciousness. How can woman, as created, “thingified in the head” (Rowbotham 1971, 17, quoted in MacKinnon 1989, 124), complicit in the body, see her condition as such?’ (MacKinnon 1989, 124).

Of course, we could take the fact that feminism does exist as evidence that men’s oppression of women is knowable. But if the claim that men’s oppression of women is unknowable is entailed by the claim that men create women, which in turn is entailed by the claim that men have epistemic authority and women do not, then we cannot reject the claim that men’s oppression of women is unknowable without undermining the claim that men have epistemic authority and women do not. And if we undermine this claim, then what remains of our account of male power? MacKinnon paralyzes feminism: we cannot account for the existence, hence the validity, of feminist consciousness, yet nor can we reject the premise that implies the impossibility of it. Until we turn our attention to this problem, feminist theory cannot progress.

A Solution

Understanding feminism as an epic theory, a theory akin to a scientific revolution, provides an unexpected solution to this problem. Kuhn argues that the shift from one paradigm to another blurs the distinction between discovery and invention (Kuhn 2012[1962], 53). A paradigm is a ‘universally recognised scientific achievement[] that for a time provide[s] model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners’ (Kuhn 2012[1962], xlii). Such achievements rest on and, because they are taken to be exemplary, prescribe metaphysical and methodological commitments, thereby determining what scientists see, what questions they ask, how they go about answering those questions, and what they make of what they see. A paradigm thus makes the world accessible to scientific inquiry. In this way, it is ‘prerequisite to perception itself’ (Kuhn 2012[1962], 113). If a paradigm makes the world accessible to scientific inquiry, then we can measure its accuracy with reference only to the world that it makes accessible, which is to say we lack a standard against which to measure the accuracy of one paradigm relative to another. Paradigms are incommensurable. We therefore cannot say that a new paradigm improves on the old, by more accurately capturing the world, and so we cannot say that what the new paradigm illuminates had existed all along, waiting to be uncovered. In this sense, a paradigm does not so much discover an already existing world as invent a new one. This is why Kuhn speaks of scientists as, post-revolution, working in a new world (Kuhn 2012[1962], 111–134).

If feminism is an epic theory, and epic theory akin to scientific revolution, then we cannot say that the world as feminism discloses it – a world in which men as men oppress women as women – is the world as it was prior to feminism. The emergence of feminism, like all paradigm shifts, constitutes less a discovery of the world than the invention of a new one. Women’s experience of acquiring feminist consciousness suggests as much: they speak of ‘a feeling of a world dissolving’ (Frye 1983, 172).¹⁰ If this is so, then feminism is not born of consciousness of men’s oppression of women, for that oppression cannot be said to have existed in order that it might be felt or known prior to feminism. Rather, feminism is what, bringing into being the world in which men oppress women, in which that oppression is therefore knowable, makes

¹⁰In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Mrs Pontellier’s awakening, her coming to feminist consciousness, is described as the beginning of a new world: ‘In short, Mrs Pontellier was beginning to realise her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognise her relations as an individual to the world within and about her ... But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!’ (Chopin 1899, 33–34).

feminist consciousness possible. Or, perhaps more accurately, feminism and feminist consciousness emerge simultaneously, the former allowing the latter, which then validates the former, which in turn revalidates the latter, and on it goes.¹¹

How exactly does this solve the puzzle? The emergence of feminism, I have suggested, constitutes a paradigm shift. Recall that a paradigm prescribes metaphysical and methodological commitments. In the patriarchal paradigm, the paradigm that preceded feminism, one such commitment is the concept of ‘woman’: *feminine being*. If this concept creates women, then it immunizes itself against falsification: women who exhibit full personhood must be aberrations, women who cannot have vaginal orgasms must be dysfunctional, women who are discontent must be ill. No empirical evidence that undermines this concept and compels the revision of it can be produced. This does not mean that such a revision cannot occur, but that its occurrence is not the extension of this paradigm but the creation of a new one, one in which empirical evidence that reinforces it can be produced. Feminism, as the revision of the concept of ‘woman’ from *feminine being* to *full person*, is therefore a new paradigm.¹²

As paradigms are incommensurable, we cannot say that feminism, in revising the concept of ‘woman’, discovers woman. Under the patriarchal paradigm, women were not full persons and their treatment by men neither was nor was knowable as oppressive, and under the feminist paradigm, women are full persons and their treatment by men both is and is knowable as oppressive. Men’s oppression of women is knowable, then, not because men failed to create women, allowing feminism to discover their full personhood, but because feminism redescribed women as full persons,¹³ creating them anew. This account of the possibility of feminist consciousness is compatible with the claim that men succeeded in creating women and so with the claim that men had epistemic authority and women did not. It thus allows us to explain the existence of feminist consciousness without denying the fullness of male power.

We may object that this denies what is a matter of historical record: that women felt oppressed, even if only inchoately, prior to feminism. What, if not this feeling, drove them to speak to other women, begin consciousness-raising groups, analyse their condition and ultimately assemble, from the stories they shared, a theory – feminism? This shows that feminism articulates the world in which women lived. It does not invent a new world. But if we consider a little more carefully what it is to examine the past, it becomes less certain that the historical record provides us with access to women’s experiences in a pre-feminist world.

First, feminism determines ‘the past’ (White 1973). Only if we inhabit a present in which feminism exists, a present in which we believe that women are oppressed, can we conceive the past as containing evidence that women felt oppressed in order that we might inquire into it in search of such evidence. The past is thus, as Michael Oakeshott says, ‘a consequence of understanding the present in a particular manner’ (Oakeshott 1991, 161). So, feminist inquiry into the past is inquiry into one particular past, the past as feminism renders it.

Secondly, feminism determines what counts as evidence that women felt oppressed. In theorizing how women are oppressed, it implies what it is for women to feel that they are oppressed, hence what counts as evidence of their feeling so. In both of these ways, feminism prescribes the terrain across which we look, what we look for, and what sense we make of what we see. Because it identifies the site of women’s oppression as the ‘sphere that has been socially lived as the personal – private, emotional, interiorised, particular, individuated, intimate’, we focus our attention on that sphere, examining women’s experiences within it (MacKinnon 1989, 120). We find expressions of discontentment: ‘All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the

¹¹Consistent with this, Susan Brison says that she came to experience injustice only on acquiring the conceptual resources that feminism provides: ‘When I was harassed in college and in grad school, I didn’t have ... the words I needed to *experience* what happened as unjust’ (Brison 2017, 5).

¹²I further discuss how feminism came into being on p. 11.

¹³I take the term ‘redescribe’ from Rorty. See Rorty (1989, 3–22, esp. 9).

kids and Bob and my home. There's no problem you can even put a name to. But I'm desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker ... But who am I?' (Friedan 1965, 19); 'I ask myself why I'm so dissatisfied. I've got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money' (Friedan 1965, 19); 'I envy her terribly ... She knows what she wants to do. I don't know. I never have. When I'm pregnant and the babies are little, I'm somebody, finally, a mother. But then, they get older. I can't just keep on having babies' (Friedan 1965, 208); 'My greatest displeasure is feeling myself to be simply a substitute for his hand, a dish of mashed potatoes, or any warm place he can stick it into and come' (Hite 1976, 384); 'I've tried everything but I've never had one. I feel that having an orgasm would leave me more satisfied and satiated. Now I never feel contented when we are finished. I feel very frustrated and insecure without them. It causes me more unhappiness than anything else in my life' (Hite 1976, 166). We hear in these expressions that women felt stifled and demeaned by their role. We hear, that is, that they felt oppressed.

But if we look closely at these expressions, we see that women lament not their role but their inability to fulfil it or the transitoriness of it. They do the former when they describe feeling frustrated at not having vaginal orgasms¹⁴ and the latter when they describe feeling purposeless once their children no longer need them. This implies that women find their role fulfilling. Such expressions of discontentment are thus not evidence that women feel oppressed. On the contrary, they are evidence that women have been socialized to find a situation that we wish to call oppressive fulfilling, or, as MacKinnon says, 'of the completeness of the incursion into who one becomes through growing up female in a male-dominated society' (MacKinnon 1989, 103). I do not mean to suggest that all expressions of discontentment are of this sort; it seems clear to me that displeasure at being 'a substitute for his hand' is displeasure with the role of a woman. I mean only to show how our feminist vantage point shapes our view, allowing what is not self-evidently so to appear proof that women felt oppressed.

We might object that this discontentment is proto-consciousness: perhaps it grows into the realization that a woman's role is unfulfillable or provides only a temporary sense of self, which grows into a resentment of the role itself, which grows into an awareness of oppression. But to say that it is proto-consciousness is to imply that it naturally becomes the awareness that one is oppressed, and it does not for two reasons. First, if women persistently fail to do all of what a woman is expected to, it is not clear why this fact is, in the absence of a theory that they are oppressed, evidence that a woman's role is unfulfillable rather than evidence that they as individual women are incapable of fulfilling it, in which case it is unclear why it is to be interpreted as such. Secondly, even if women come to realize that their role is unfulfillable or that it provides only a temporary sense of self, they may conclude only that it ought to be adapted or certain expectations altered, rather than that it is in its essence problematic: we ought not expect that women have vaginal orgasms, or we ought to encourage women to work so that they have a sense of purpose once their children are grown. It therefore seems to me that women's discontentment becomes feminist consciousness only because feminism in a sense exploits it, situating it within a theory in which women are oppressed, a theory in light of which the fact that a woman's role is unfulfillable or provides only a temporary sense of self is yet one more manifestation of their oppression.

In addition, because we believe that women are oppressed, we regard expressions of discontentment as utterances revealing the truth of how women feel. Consequently, when women do not say that they are unhappy, we nevertheless hear unhappiness in their voices or see it in their eyes. Or, when they claim to feel fulfilled, we hear this claim as desperate or hollow, an

¹⁴An explanation of why a woman must have vaginal orgasms in order to fulfil her role as a woman is beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, it is this: as 'man' is *one who eroticizes dominance* and 'woman' *one who eroticizes subordination*, men and women are realized as their gender in the act in which they satiate their sexual desire – sexual intercourse. See MacKinnon (1989, 111).

attempt to suppress their discontentment or the mechanical speech of the brainwashed. Similarly, when they attribute their unhappiness to unusually trying or otherwise exceptional circumstances (such as a bad day), we hear this attribution as a post hoc attempt to rationalize and thereby dismiss an unhappiness that in truth they feel, very deep down, much of the time. To be clear, I am not suggesting that feminism misinterprets the facts at hand. Rather, I am suggesting that it is only in light of feminism that these facts assume the meaning with which they become evidence that women felt oppressed. The historical record is in this sense a product of feminism. As such, it cannot be said to show what was the case prior to feminism. In Kuhnian language, the paradigm that is feminism gives particular meaning to particular facts, and places them in particular relation to one another, thereby forming an account of the past. We then mistake this account for one that is truly independent of the paradigm and treat it as proof that feminist consciousness preceded the very paradigm on which the evidence of such consciousness depends.

Thirdly, women often recount their experiences only once they have begun to come to consciousness. This makes sense: the act of recounting one's experiences presupposes that one regards those experiences as having a meaning in virtue of which they are worthy of being recounted, and it is feminism that gives their experiences such meaning. But once one has begun to come to consciousness, to remember is to look back on one's life through feminist eyes. In redescribing what the world is like, feminism rearranges the visual field. Insofar as what existed in the previous description cannot exist in the feminist one, its presence within the visual field implies that it has become other than it was. So, to look back on one's life through feminist eyes is not to see old things new ways but to see new things. Women's accounts of their experiences therefore do not describe experiences that preceded feminist consciousness.

Naomi Scheman's discussion of women's anger bears on this question (Scheman 1980). She describes the following scenario. On joining a consciousness-raising group, Alice is satisfied with her life. However, as she participates, she becomes more aware of having felt depressed, pressured or harried, of having snapped at her children, of having cried without quite knowing why. She comes to see these feelings, which she had hitherto thought unjustifiable and sought to overcome, as justified responses to her oppression. She comes, in other words, to see herself not as inexplicably or unreasonably emotional but as angry – and rightfully so (Scheman 1980, 176–177). If we are inclined to say that Alice *discovers* that she has been angry, what can this mean? Scheman wants us to resist the temptation to think of Alice's anger as having been submerged, not only because we cannot produce evidence of this but more importantly because when we take ourselves to be angry, our anger changes:

We begin to see things differently, as it were, *through* the anger; it colours our world, both inner and outer. We find, because we are looking for them, more reason for our anger and more feelings we can take as anger, which we may before have labelled differently or not have noticed. Our feelings, judgements, and behaviour become organised around the fact of our anger (Scheman 1980, 179).

On taking ourselves to be angry, what it is to be angry changes. If this is so, then the anger that we come to feel as we participate in consciousness raising cannot be said to be a previously submerged anger that has now surfaced. In this way, Scheman casts doubt on the notion that women felt oppressed prior to feminism.

This would seem to show that we cannot speak of women who did not take themselves to be angry as having in fact been so. Scheman, however, thinks there is a sense in which we can. If particular vague and unfocussed feelings become anger in the 'natural future' – meaning the future in which a woman sees her situation as it truly is – then this anger is the matured form of those vague and unfocussed feelings, or those vague and unfocussed feelings are the embryonic form of anger (Scheman 1980, 184). As Scheman explains, this does not allow us to speak of all women as having been angry. If it is only recently that women have become

able to see their situation as one of oppression, then prior to this they inhabited a world in which their vague and unfocussed feelings could not mature into anger; those feelings therefore cannot be described as embryonic anger. This, I suggest, means that it is only if women inhabit a world in which feminism exists that they can be said to have embryonic anger, and, on coming to consciousness, to have 'discovered' that they have been angry. If this is so, then feminism is the precondition not only for the discovery of having been angry, but for the embryonic anger that one can be said to have discovered. It may therefore be more accurate to say that feminism creates what it then allows us to discover. Scheman's discussion thus supports my claim that feminism less discovers than invents the world.

Moreover, if paradigms are incommensurable, then we cannot say that in coming to see that they are oppressed women are seeing their situation as it truly is. Or rather, we can say only that they are seeing their situation as, according to the feminist paradigm, it truly is. If it is only on the feminist paradigm that a future in which women see that they are oppressed is natural, and their anger the matured form of their vague and unfocussed feelings, then here too feminism is a precondition for embryonic anger.

Still unwilling to let go our conviction that women felt oppressed prior to feminism, we might ask how it was that feminism came into being, and how, having done so, it drew women to it. What gave rise to it, and what did it touch in women if not a latent sense of oppression? These are just the questions of how a new paradigm emerges and how it gathers adherents. As existing facts cannot yield a new paradigm, one must take an imaginative leap in order to conceive of one. As Kuhn says, one must depart from the rules of normal science; one must begin to inquire as though the nature of the world may be other than those rules would have it (Kuhn 2012[1962], 83). If paradigms provide the reference point for truth, if we can judge them only from within, then how does one come to choose the new paradigm, the paradigm implicit in the theory at which one has, by taking an imaginative leap, arrived, over the existing one? The answer can only be: from within (Kuhn 2012[1962], 78). If we survey the world from the perspective afforded by the theory, and if we feel as we do that the world has been illuminated, we will simultaneously move away from the existing paradigm and toward the new one. This is how women became feminists. It was not that we sensed the edge of our oppression and so were moved to uncover it, but that we dared to imagine that life might be more than it is, an imagining in light of which life took new shape: the shape of oppression. And it seemed then that it was a dim sense of this shape that inevitably gave rise to feminism. But in truth it was feminism that gave rise to this shape,¹⁵ that rearranged the present and with that the past, allowing us to see ourselves as having always sensed our oppression.

Finally, I suspect that even if we grant that the historical record is a product of feminism, we will continue to worry about the notion that feminism is the invention of a new world, for we will see it as illegitimizing feminism by implying that it was not true that men oppressed women, that feminism created this truth, an implication that sounds alarmingly like the antifeminist claim that men's oppression of women is a feminist fabrication. I am not sure how to respond to this other than to say that feminist theory is no less a 'discovery', its picture of the world no less truthful than such scientific theories as Copernican astronomy, Lavoisier's oxygen theory of combustion or Einstein's special theory of relativity. Moreover, the fact that feminist theory has succeeded, the fact that women came to believe it, implies that the world was amenable to such an interpretation. To say that feminism invents a world is thus less a comment on the reality of that world and more

¹⁵My friend, Catherine Orian Weiss, recounted the following to me: she once gave a talk in which she observed that women often speak of sex with their husbands as a 'chore' and suggested that if we take these women seriously, then what they are saying is that, night in, night out, for much of their lives, they have unwanted sex, which in other contexts we call rape. As she said this, she watched as a woman's face dropped. She watched, she said to me, as this woman reimagined her entire sex life, seeing what she had never really questioned as Cathy was now describing it. I think it would be false to say that this woman was fully grasping what she had all along partially felt. I think she was, under feminism, seeing her life through entirely new eyes.

a comment on the magnitude of the achievement that feminism is, in the sense not just of how it came into being but also of what that coming into being meant: the making knowable of a hitherto unknowable world.

Method

This brings me back to the concern motivating Wolin's article: the primacy of method in the study of politics. If one must abandon the rules of normal science in order to develop the sort of scientific theories that constitute paradigm shifts, then adherence to method obstructs the creation of such theories. What allows one to solve puzzles within the paradigm is what prevents one from moving beyond it. The primacy of method in the study of politics thus thwarts the creation of the sort of theory that opens up new vistas. Rather recently, feminist philosophers have become preoccupied with articulating a feminist method or epistemology (for example, Alcoff and Potter 1993; Collins 2000; Harding and Hintikka 1983). This preoccupation is born of a desire to legitimate feminism, to show that its claims constitute knowledge properly labeled as such.

Central to the various articulations of feminist method is the claim that those who must navigate a world in which they are oppressed therefore have epistemological access to a reality that those who oppress, who can successfully navigate the world unaware of their doing so, do not (for example, Harding 2004). To employ a feminist method is thus to critically embrace rather than distance oneself from those whose condition one seeks to know – to treat their involvement in that condition as a source of (rather than an obstacle to) knowledge. But if those who are oppressed have epistemological access such that we must turn to them, how do we know to whom to turn in the first place? It seems to me that the claim that women have epistemological access to their oppression presupposes the belief that they are oppressed, in which case it is not feminist method that produces feminist theory but the theory that produces the method. Moreover, there are as many women who do not believe they are oppressed as there are those who do. How do we know which group of women has knowledge? How do we decide whose accounts are veridical and whose are reflective of false consciousness, unless, that is, we already believe that women are oppressed? These are tired questions. I raise them not to undercut feminist method or the claims made in its name, but to suggest that it was not by adhering to such a method that feminists developed feminist theory. In fact, as with all paradigm shifts, it was by abandoning method, in the sense of disregarding the rules governing inquiry, not by adopting one that they did. Marilyn Frye's description of feminist inquiry bears a striking resemblance to Kuhn's description of inquiry during scientific revolution. She says:

The resources for the inquiry are, in the main, drawn from the very scheme whose limits we are already looking beyond in order to conceive the project. This undertaking therefore engages me in a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness – dancing about a region of communicative gaps and negative semantic spaces, kept aloft only by the rhythm and momentum of my own motion, trying to plumb the abysses which are generally agreed not to exist (Frye 1983, 154).

As scientists must begin to depart from the paradigm, thus flirting with meaninglessness, so must feminists. Now, this does not mean that feminist methods such as standpoint theory have no place or no use; it means only that such methods could not have discovered women's oppression. Feminists therefore need not (and ought not) seek to articulate a method by which that oppression was discovered; to do so would be to diminish the revolutionary nature of feminism (and to write the development of political life as others have written the development of science: as increasing approximation to truth).

Interestingly, my suggestion that a feature of epic theory is that it invents a new world alters the sense in which it issues from a crisis in the world. The claim that epic theory issues from a crisis

suggests that it is a response to a crisis that precedes it. But if feminism is less the discovery of women's oppression than the invention of a world in which that oppression, hitherto unknowable, becomes knowable, then feminism is responsible for the crisis to which it then responds. This blurs the distinction between political theory and praxis, revealing the former as what ripens the world for its changing. If theory is what ripens the world for its changing, then praxis, applying the theory to change the world, is theory's consummation. As Wolin says, 'The theorist's wholeness awaited that deed which would unite idea and act, *theoria* and *praxis*' (Wolin 2016b, 120). If this calls into question one sense in which epic theory issues from a crisis in the world, it affirms it in another: the sense that it is ultimately concerned not with the problematic state of theory, but with the problematic state of the political world.

Feminism: An Heroic Deed

Wolin explains that he names this kind of political theory 'epic' because its authors share with the heroes of the epic tradition 'the hope of doing a great and memorable deed': as Achilles, the hero of the Homeric epic, is a 'doer of great deeds and a speaker of great words', so the author of an epic theory aims to do a great deed 'through the medium of thought' (Wolin 2016b, 120). Feminism is, or so I hope to have shown, a great and memorable deed of a hitherto unrecognized order: unable to discover but refusing to submit, feminism forsakes the comfort of method in pursuit of what it has dared to imagine, 'that this – life as we have known it – is not all, not enough, not ours, not just' (MacKinnon 1989, 115). Now as ever, this great and memorable deed demands of us another: the action by which it will be realized.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Holly Lawford-Smith, Caroline Norma and Sun Liu for valuable discussion; audience members at the 4th Australian Political Theory and Philosophy Conference for helpful questions and suggestions; and three anonymous reviewers and editor Paul Bou-Habib for careful and constructive reviews.

References

- Alcoff L and Potter E (eds) (1993) *Feminist Epistemologies*. New York: Routledge.
- Benston M (1969) The political economy of women's liberation. *Monthly Review* 21(4), 13–27.
- Bernick SE (1992) The logic of the development of feminism; or, is MacKinnon to feminism as Parmenides is to Greek philosophy? *Hypatia* 7(1), 1–15.
- Brisson SJ (2017) "We must find words or burn": speaking out against disciplinary silencing. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3(2), Article 3.
- Brown W (1995) *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Butler J (1985) Variations on sex and gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault. *PRAXIS International* 5(4), 505–516.
- Chopin K (1899) *The Awakening*. Chicago: Herbert S. Stone and Company.
- Collins PH (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd Edn., New York: Routledge.
- Dalla Costa M and James S (1975) *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. London: Falling Wall Press.
- de Beauvoir S (2010[1949]) *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Books.
- Delphy C (1980) The main enemy. *Feminist Issues* 1(1), 23–40.
- Eisenstein ZR (1979) Developing a theory of capitalist patriarchy and socialist feminism. In Eisenstein ZR (ed), *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 5–40.
- Fraser N and Linda N (1989) Social criticism without philosophy: an encounter between feminism and postmodernism. *Social Text* 21, 983–104.
- Friedan B (1965) *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Penguin Books.
- Frye M (1983) *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. New York: Crossing Press.
- Furley DJ (1967) Parmenides of Elea. In Edwards P (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 47–51.
- Gimenez ME (1975) Marxism and feminism. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 1(1), 61–80.
- Haraway D (1990) A Manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. In Nicholson LJ (ed), *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, pp. 190–233.
- Harding S (ed) (2004) *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. New York: Routledge.

- Harding S and Hintikka MB** (eds) (1983) *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Hartmann HI** (1979) The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union. *Capital & Class* 3(1), 1–33.
- Haslanger S** (2002) On being objective and being objectified. In Antony LM and Witt CE (eds), *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, 2nd Edn. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, pp. 209–254.
- Hite S** (1976) *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Kapur R** (2002) The tragedy of victimisation rhetoric: resurrecting the 'native' subject in international/post-colonial feminist legal politics. *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 15, 1–37.
- Kuhn TS** (2012[1962]) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th Edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lyotard JF** (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- MacKinnon CA** (1987) *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacKinnon CA** (1989) *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marx K** (1976) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Marx K and Engels F** (1970) *The German Ideology: Part One*. New York: International Bestsellers.
- Murdoch I** (1992) *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin Books.
- Oakeshott M** (1991) *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Phelan KM** (2017) Is feminism yet a theory of the kind that Marxism is? *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3(1), Article 2.
- Romany C** (1991) Ain't I a feminist? *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, 23–33.
- Rorty R** (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty R** (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rowbotham S** (1971) Women's Liberation and the New Politics. Spokesman Pamphlet, no. 17. Bristol: Falling Wall Press.
- Scheman N** (1980) Anger and the politics of naming. In McConnell-Ginet S, Borker R and Furman N (eds), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger, pp. 174–187.
- White H** (1973) *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wolin SS** (1969) Political theory as a vocation. *The American Political Science Review* 63(4), 1062–1082.
- Wolin SS** (2016a) On reading Marx politically. In Xenos N (ed), *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 173–194.
- Wolin SS** (2016b) Hobbes and the epic tradition of political theory. In Xenos N (ed), *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 117–148.
- Young IM** (1980) Socialist feminism and the limits of dual systems theory. *Socialist Review* 50/51, 169–188.