

From Private to Public: Is the Public/Private Distinction Gender Discrimination?

Dana Țabrea
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Martha A. Ackelsberg, *Resisting Citizenship. Feminist Essays on Politics, Community and Democracy*, New York and London: Routledge, 2010, 272 pp.

Keywords: public/private, gender, race, citizenship, community, democracy

Martha A. Ackelsberg's book *Resisting Citizenship. Feminist Essays on Politics, Community and Democracy* is a collection of essays from various periods of time that show the author's main interests in applied democratic theory, urban politics, and feminist theory.

I take this review to be the perfect pretext for me to talk about a philosophical issue that I am most fond of, namely the distinction between the public and the private spheres. Since Rorty's sharp distinction between the public and the private realms individualized as the liberal and the ironist in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), we tend to consider the two spheres as separate on the ground that they address different problems and ask distinct questions. A slight hint on a possible link between the two is given only in terms of individuality, in Rorty's saying at the end of his book that the

¹ This work was supported by CNCSIS – UEFISCSU, project number PNII – IDEI 788 / 2010, code 2104.

same person could be both a liberal and an ironist; this probably means that one and the same individual could behave both as a liberal and as an ironist, taking turns and on contextual basis.

However strongly we may think that one and the same person can act in both spheres, depending on what one has to do, we cannot surpass their fundamental separation. But this is exactly what Martha A. Acklesberg is trying to argue against: 'There is no typology or set of procedures that will allow us to draw a line between public and private that will be appropriate for all times and circumstances' (p. 85). In her opinion, there can be no permanent boundary between the public and the private and, as a consequence, the meanings of "private" and "public" change constantly. Her analysis by which she identifies certain cases that erase the public/private separation belongs to contemporary feminist debates that often challenge the traditional distinction between the two spheres. The public/private distinction is a social construction that reveals political issues, and that is gender-based; most often "private" is associated with the domestic and with women, whereas "public" is linked to activities within society and to men. From a feminist point of view, this cannot be accepted as women may also engage in the public world just as men can undertake domestic tasks.

Moreover, the separation between private and public does not make a definitive distinction because we may often find implications of one realm in the other. Most of the time the public legal sphere defines and makes possible different domains of privacy, for instance, a family: everything that happens within a family is private by definition, yet the family exists by virtue of laws that define who and what constitute a family.

Martha A. Acklesberg offers several examples (the anti-slavery movement, the anti-lynching campaigns, welfare mothers' rights movements, the gay and lesbian rights movement, movements against sexual harassment and domestic violence, etc.) in order to show how feminist discussions of the public/private dichotomy generally address the issue of the exercise of power. I will consider each of them.

Concerning black women slavery and their denial of any private life (family or any expression of independent will whatsoever), Martha A. Acklesberg's point, following Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is that by defining the plantation as the master's private domain his power over his slaves becomes limitless.

Next the author follows the argument of Ida B. Wells in order to show how lynching used to be erroneously associated to mob reactions, to the rape of white women by black men, as 'the lynched in the South between 1896 and 1900 were not even accused of rape, but were killed in response to economic competition, self-assertion or insubordination' (p. 77). In fact, certain claims to privacy mask the exercise of power: any relation between a black woman and a white man, even if it had been the case of a rape, lead to no prosecution on the simple pretext that such relations are "private"; to this are added prejudices concerning the black women's promiscuity.

Martha A. Acklesberg also takes into consideration the issues of welfare policies that certainly deny privacy to poor and black people. On the contrary, when it comes to domestic violence, the authorities keep their distance from intervening into one's private domain.

In a similar manner to women in the welfare rights movement, the author observes how gay and lesbian rights defenders argue for their right of privacy: 'consensual sexual activity between adults is a private matter that should be shielded from state scrutiny' (p. 81).

The paradox here is that gay and lesbian advocates fight for a right to privacy in what regards their consensual sexual life, but their struggle has a purpose that envisages the public sphere, the intention to obtain legal recognition of this right. This illustrates how the private domain implies the public one and it offers the perfect occasion to underlie the fact that the two domains are not as separated as we would have thought.

As we could see by the given illustrations, the feminists aim at regaining the respect of the human rights for women and for black people, and at challenging the boundaries between the public and the private spheres as they have been established. The feminist argument discloses race and gender

discrimination behind the distinction between the public and the private: ‘...constructions of race and gender became both inseparable from, and constitutive of, the boundaries of public and private, delimiting what was legitimately an issue available for public/political debate’ (p. 90).

With a certain subtlety, feminist thinking passes from the private sphere to the public one by denouncing the traditional understanding of the notions of “private” and “public”: what generally is considered to be private (sexuality, family, intimate personal relations) is actually implied by public society and its politics. For instance, the cases of the lynching of black men in the South of the US and that of the sexual relations between white and black had a public (meaning political) dimension: lynchings used to be attributed to black men raping white women, relationships between white men and black women discredited black women as prostitutes, white women were reduced to white men’s property and in case of any relationships among white women and black men, their owner of right felt obliged to protect their honour. And the political underlying all these situations names the white men monopolization of political power.

There was also a movement initiated by women known as Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina between 1977 and 1982. During the military dictatorship in Argentina plenty of people disappeared, being illegally detained and killed. Initially reunited as mothers grieving for their abducted children, Madres de Plaza de Mayo eventually became an organization fighting for human rights. It is an exquisite example of how the private sphere turns into a public one.

No doubt, grief is a private matter just as sexual activity is so. But when there is a case for public manifestations, and the scope to attain is political in its essence, there is an obvious transition from the private realm to the public one. If women’s rights are involved, gender problems also arise. I have two questions in mind: if the passage from private to public is justifiable and whether the private/public distinction really reveals gender discrimination. I extracted these two suppositions from feminist thinking and I am wondering how acceptable they may be.

First of all, feminist thinking tends to identify public with political, on the one hand, and private with sexual, on the other. If the boundaries between the two spheres are delineated as such, it is normal to be eager to show that the separation is in fact fluctuant. If we accept that the definitions of the public/private are not as strict, we may try to keep them separate in order to think properly.

If we consider the private/public spheres as a distinction between what happens to human beings as individuals (emotions, ideas, hopes, fears, needs, suffering, missing, etc.) and, separately, as social beings (assuming market, professional, institutional roles, behaving at work, at school, in a university, etc.), we have no problem in identifying certain deeds, actions and conducts as private or, conversely, public, and also no need to find escape passages from one sphere to the other in order to explain the performances of our fellow creatures.

More than it is true that sometimes the spheres converge (at the theatre even the spectator assumes a certain role as he respects the others by his or her outfit and behaviour in public, also by applauding the actors at the end of the play, etc., and at the meantime the play can be a very intimate experience that one lives, by the emotions that he or she feels or by what he or she thinks about what happens on the stage and the actors' performances, etc.) it is also true that the spheres could be easily separated even if it were the case of the same action or conduct.

As for the second question about the gender discrimination underlying the private/public distinction, I reckon it is based on the same presupposition that private means sexual and public means political. It is not wrongly said that the sexual options and activity of the individual relate to the private sphere as his political assumptions and manifestations relate to the public one. But it is simply wrong to skip to reducing the private to the sexual and the public to the political.

When the intention to defend a minority is present within a discourse, its initiator is the first to be blamed because he or she is accused of seeing wicked and masked policies

everywhere. I guess it is the same with feminism. Not only does feminist thinking reduce private to sexual and public to political, but it also reduces private to womanhood (domestic) and public to manhood (social). Therefore, I guess it is normal for it to assume that men intervene within the private sphere with secret intentions of turning it into public, and vice versa, depending on their particular interests with their single purpose to dominate over women.

I do not doubt that sometimes the private/public distinction meets a gender separation, but fighting against the monopoly of men cannot possibly mean fighting over a distinction between two terms.

Address:

Dana Țabrea, PhD

Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Department of Philosophy

Bd. Carol I, 11

700506 Iasi, Romania

E-mail: dtabrea@yahoo.com