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‘The Private is Political’. The Problem of the Private/Public Divide in the Light of Feminist Theory of the Second Half of the 20th Century

Abstract: Starting from the slogan ‘The Private is Political’, resounding in the American women’s liberation movement, a feminist critique of the separation of the private (domestic/family) sphere and the public sphere, in its early modern form, is presented. The private sphere, with women assigned to it, is, on the grounds of early modern political theory, outlawed from the rules deemed to apply to the public world, and impregnated from sound analysis and possible reform. The separation of the private and the political masks the interdependence between the two spheres and serves to legitimise gender inequality. Feminist theory problematizes this divide and reveals the complex interplay between private and public. Two themes stand out in the analysis: the subsumption of women under the family based on liberal theories of the social contract, and the idealisation of the domestic sphere, imagined as an emotional and moral refuge, in opposition to the public world, marked by egoism and impersonality. This construction serves an ideological function, reinforcing the separation attributing women to the home and family.

Key words: private, public, political, separation, feminism

The American women’s liberation movement, epitomised by its slogan “The personal is political”, ignited a plethora of discussions, probing analyses, and proactive initiatives challenging the entrenched dichotomy between two spheres: the private/personal and the public. The ensuing feminist theory, drawing on the momentum generated by the critique, delved deeper into this divide.

As employed in the present analysis, “private” pertains to the realm of home and family. Other connotations of the private, such as those associated with the market economy or civil society, are not within the scope of this discussion.¹ The relationships between the private sphere thus un-

¹ For an overview of the different meanings of private and public and an attempt to systematise them, see: Krause (2003); Weintraub, Kummar (ed.) (1997), especially

derstood and the public world has been the topic of feminist analyses in the second half of the 20th century, from at least two perspectives. On the one hand, scholars critically examined the status of women within both the family and society during that era, scrutinising its various aspects and prevailing conditions. On the other hand, there was a surge in studies exploring the legacy of Western thought concerning the role of women, including the origins of the private/public divide observed in the 20th century. These inquiries delved into philosophical and political theories which, according to these researchers, contributed over the centuries to the formation and sanctioning of a private/public divide that proved oppressive to women, with enduring repercussions throughout the 20th century.

Numerous authors assert that the significance of this division extends far beyond particular theories or specific periods, permeating the entire Western political tradition. As Susan Moller Okin notes, “the sharp polarization of ‘public’ and ‘private’ [...] characterizes virtually all Western political thought” (Moller Okin, 1992, p. 314). Correspondingly, Carole Pateman emphasises that “[t]he dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about.” (Pateman, 1989, p. 120) These two judgments demonstrate the broad and enduring significance of the private/public problem within feminist theory.

In the following discussion, I focus on a part of this extensive topic, namely on the feminist critique of certain early modern ideas that contributed to this division as its intellectual sources, rather than its economic or legal contexts. The objective of this article is to delineate three related strands of feminist discourse emerging in the second half of the 20th century, which pertain to the private/public divide. In the first section, I consider the origins and the purport of the slogan ‘The personal is political’ that emerged in the late 1960s. In the second section (“Patriarchal liberalism”), I explore how researchers contend that the evolution of liberal thought, notably concepts of the social contract, fortified the demarcation between the private realm and the public sphere, and provided it with a theoretical framework. The third section (“Haven in a heartless world”) discusses the idealisation of women and the domestic sphere, prefigured in sentimentalism and gaining popularity in Western culture during the

chapter 1, J. Weintraub, *The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction*. I mention these works because the private/public dichotomy in the sense analysed in this article has a significant place in them.

18th and 19th centuries, as a contributory factor to this divide. Both the legacy of the social contract and the idealisation of domesticity are posited by the cited authors as pivotal in shaping early modern assumptions about the private and public domains and their pronounced segregation. Traversing these three strands, I believe, provides a nuanced understanding of the scope and relevance of the feminist critique within this field. However, my exposition does not purport to cover every facet of the 20th century feminist theory with respect to the private/public divide. For instance, extensive discussions on the significance of industrialisation and the growth of capitalism in shaping modern family and household structures are beyond the scope of this analysis.

I owe a further methodological explanation regarding the presentation of the views discussed below. In the works of the cited authors, we can find detailed analyses of the ideas presented by individual philosophers, such as classical representatives of the theory of the social contract or authors of various concepts of justice. However, to present the general features of the feminist critique of the private/public divide, I found it necessary to streamline this detail, albeit significant, and instead direct readers to the relevant works for deeper insights.

As elucidated by their authors, women in social contract theories are basically subsumed under family and do not emerge as autonomous beings. Following the researchers, I use the term 'subsumption' to denote assimilation and subordination of individual entities under a broader category or entity. Thus perceived, women are marginalised from the realm where crucial transformations of political orders occur, marked by the social contract theories, the development of liberalism, and the Enlightenment. The private sphere remains unaffected by these transformations. Even when the domestic sphere features in the theories of the social contract, it is not portrayed as a domain of interaction between free and equal subjects. Instead, it is depicted as an adjunct to men and simultaneously as a field governed by natural laws. Consequently, the domestic sphere inhabited by women is exempt from the rules deemed just in the public sphere, while at the same time serving to complement the political realm of the free and equal in a manner deemed desirable for them.

The distinct treatment of women also becomes glaringly apparent in the second concept mentioned earlier: the idealisation of the home, the development of which is attributed to the modern era. According to this notion, women are supposed to embody numerous qualities, such as altruism and gentleness, which are perceived as soothing to men fatigued

by the challenges of the public sphere. This ideological construct further reinforced the division between spheres, portraying the private realm as diametrically opposed to the public sphere – in the broad sense encompassing all socio-political life beyond the confines of home and family.

Both portrayals relegate women to a private sphere, allegedly strictly separate from the public domain. In the first perspective, women are dissolved in nature, while in the second, they are assimilated into a myth of emotional sacrifice and moral duty. Thus, the private/public dichotomy renders women invisible as distinct individuals and autonomous agents. This division serves to perpetuate structures of gender inequality, effectively ‘cementing’ these disparities (Krause, 2003, pp. 70, 92).

The private is political

The slogan ‘the personal is political’ became popular within the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s, notably through Carol Hanisch’s text *The Personal is Political*, published in 1970. This slogan circulated in two variations: ‘The personal is political’ and ‘The private is political,’ sometimes also appearing as ‘the private/personal is political’. In subsequent feminist theory, particularly considering the division between the two spheres, the version featuring ‘private’ has become more prevalent. This slogan, while attributing political character to the private sphere, simultaneously challenges the dichotomy between the private and the public.

Reflecting on that period in the 21st century, Hanisch clarifies that she did not choose the title of the text; rather, it was selected by the publishers of the anthology in which it appeared, *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, namely Ann Koedt and Shulamith Firestone² (Hanisch, 2006, p. 1). However, the specific attribution of the title is of secondary importance, as this rallying cry emerged from the movement as a whole. Therefore, its authorship must be attributed to the collective entity that was the Women’s Liberation Movement of the time, as well as to all the women who, through private and public discourse, raised issues otherwise relegated to the apolitical sphere of personal affairs.³ The slogan

² *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, ed. by A. Koedt, Sh. Firestone, New York 1970.

³ K. T. Burch writes that, according to activists of the time, “the phrase’s collective authors” were “millions of women in millions of private and public conversations.” (Burch, 2012, p. 139).

encapsulated the vitality of the burgeoning movement, brimming with theoretical insights and practical endeavours, and consequently became emblematic of the new women's movement (*die neue Frauenbewegung*) – to use the term employed by German-speaking scholars to describe the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, especially after 1968.

As Hanisch elucidates in 2006, not only the title but also the thought of her text did not come solely out of her 'individual brain'. It was rather a product of the movement and a specific group within it – the New York Radical Women, specifically the Pro-Woman Line (Hanisch, 2006, p. 2). Penned in 1969, the text originally served as a memo addressed to the women's caucus of the organisation she was affiliated with at the time, the Southern Conference Educational Fund. Its inception was spurred by a memo from another staff member, Dorothy Zellner,⁴ who expressed scepticism about the newly formed consciousness-raising groups for women, labelling them merely as "therapy" and questioning whether the new women's movement was "political". As Hanisch puts it, it was not "an unusual reaction to radical feminist ideas in early 1969". In her 1969 text, she wrote: "One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems" (Hanisch 1970, p. 76).

Commenting on her statement years later, Hanisch reports that 'political' was used in the broad sense of the word, "as having to do with power relationships" (Hanisch, 2006, p. 1). It is noteworthy that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, numerous authors were scrutinising the political (in this broad sense) relationships between the sexes, exploring their theoretical and practical dimensions. For instance, Kate Millett's short text *Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution* found in the same collection *Notes from the Second Year* begins with the following words: "When one group rules another, the relationship between the two is political" (Millett, 1970a, p. 111). Millett searches deeper into the same theme in her book *Sexual Politics* (Millett, 1970b). The book opens with expressive examples of sexual politics, namely sex scenes depicting through the eye of men the pleasure they derive from the subjugation and objectification of women. These are drawn from the works of writers who were valued by the progressives and leftists of the time, as conveying 'sexual freedom'. Let us emphasise that what is meant are scenes depicted in literary works, and so not only the acts of humiliation of women but also

⁴ The original title was *Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie's Thoughts on a Women's Liberation Movement* (Hanisch, 2006, p. 1).

the public 'evidence' of this freedom. Another significant contribution to the analysis and critique of the structures of male dominance comes from Shulamith Firestone in her work *Dialectic of Sex*. According to Firestone, the sexual imbalance of power is based biologically, yet she argues that the maintenance of a discriminatory sex class system on grounds of its origins in nature is unjustifiable. She asserts, "The problem becomes political [...] when one realises that, though man is increasingly capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to want to give this tyranny up" (Firestone, 1970, p. 10). Here the concept of "political" reveals its essential connection to the desire or reluctance to change existing power relationships; in other words, the will to dominate is a crucial aspect of the political.

Returning to Hanisch's text and the slogan, they carry strong polemical overtones aimed at those who opposed discussing 'personal' topics, if only in women's groups. Hanisch explains that these topics included 'all those body issues' like sex, appearance, and abortion, as well as the division of household chores and childcare between men and women. These issues were deemed personal or private matters, reserved for individual women or couples to address within their own relationships. The polemical sense of the slogan becomes evident when we emphasise the predicate, focusing on the *is*, rather than the first or second adjective: contrary to some assertions, private/personal matters *are* political. It is not only appropriate but necessary to discuss 'body issues', household labour division, and the problem of male domination, its origins, forms, etc., according to the principle: *study, struggle, and organise*. The core of the matter was the need "to change power relationships, not just change ourselves or a piece of the culture or to have a good time" (Hanisch, 2014, p. 1). Hanisch emphasised that the content of *The Personal is Political* did not originate solely from her 'individual brain'; similarly, the situations of women facing oppression at home are not 'all in our head' but tangible, objective realities, and it is not women who are to be blamed for them. It is not a disease to be cured: "We need to change the objective conditions, not adjust to them" (Hanisch 2006, pp. 3–4).

Those who oppose raising and discussing issues from the private sphere, such as domestic violence, refuse to acknowledge them as political and to include these matters in the official policy. Such an attitude, however, is only ostensibly apolitical, as it implies acceptance of the political *status quo*. After all, the private sphere is already subject to vari-

ous regulations and political influences, and *the status quo* also includes decisions about which issues the state chooses not to address. Whatever the motivations of this attitude, it rests on the private/public divide, which allegedly prohibits looking into the private and interviewing with it. Despite the ambiguous foundations of the divide, it is believed appropriate to uphold it, together with its harmful and unjust, sometimes monstrous consequences. The slogan “the personal is political” retains its polemical force against those who support the political *status quo*, even if they advocate for reforms in selected areas of public life but fail to challenge power imbalances within the private realm – such as those between sexes (discrimination based on race or ethnic origin can also be considered a private matter). And still, not all social movements, including reformist and countercultural ones, not even self-proclaimed radical or leftist groups, advocate full equality for women. As Carol Hanisch writes: “The radical movements of Civil Rights, Anti-Vietnam War, and Old and New Left groups from which many of us sprang were male-dominated and very nervous about women’s liberation in general, but especially the spectre of the mushrooming independent women’s liberation movement, of which I was a staunch advocate.” (Hanisch, 2006, p. 1).

Patriarchal liberalism

The feminist critique of the private/public divide confronts, among others, the tradition of liberalism. According to Pateman, “feminist criticism is primarily directed at the separation and opposition between the public and private spheres in liberal theory and practice” (Pateman, 1989, p. 120).⁵ Below I present some lines of this criticism as applied to classical social contract theories.

In these theories, the public/private divide is often portrayed as or assumed to be granted and unshakeable, while in the light of feminist analyses it is problematic for several reasons. One primary objection is its inherently political nature, manifesting as a gendered and hierarchical separation that perpetuates inequalities between people. This bias is sometimes explicit, and other times implicitly hidden behind seemingly

⁵ Among overviews that sort out various feminist analyses of the private/public delineation, it is worth to mention: Pateman (1989); Moller Okin (1991); and Gavison (1992).

gender-neutral theoretical constructs that purport universality and equality while excluding women, effectively marginalising them from their universe. Moller Okin (1989, p. 10) aptly described it as ‘false gender neutrality’. The gendered and hierarchical nature of the public/private divide is not the sole basis for the feminist criticism thereof. Scholars also argue that this division is not a mere incidental feature but a fundamental aspect of the theories that employ it. As such, feminist critique targets not mere fragments but the core of these conceptions, revealing their theoretical weaknesses.

More broadly, the political significance of this separation lies in the fact that it is not – neither conceptually nor practically – a politically indifferent distinction. In particular, it is not a product of ‘nature’, contrary to what is overtly or tacitly claimed by theories built thereupon. Based on feminist analyses, this opposition, on the one hand, contributes to the relations of domination and subordination, on the other, it is itself a political creation, a product of both official politics and relationships in the domestic sphere, whose various political aspects were brought to light by feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the slogan “The private is political”. Domestic-family inequalities shape public power relations and are also reflected in other areas of the public sphere, such as the workplace, where women carry the burden of inferiority perpetuated from their domestic roles. Moreover, political interventions frequently exceed or blur the boundaries between the public and private realms, through regulations governing people living in families. In this sense, too, the private is not independent from the public sphere. Yet, on other occasions, this separation can be invoked, both in political theories and in public discourse, in the name of liberalism, as if these interdependencies did not exist.

According to Moller Okin, prevailing notions of justice in the Western tradition, both historical and contemporary, typically assume the private/public divide as given. Although very different in many respects, these conceptions generally refer to men “with wives at home” (Moller Okin, 1989, p. 110), i.e. they do not refer to women and to the relationships between people within the family. On this reading, these accounts do not recognise or seek principles of justice that are inclusive and apply to all people – in private, domestic relationships women and men are to do without them. The private sphere is envisioned to be governed by ‘its own laws’, purportedly dictated by nature. Whether these laws manifest as bonds of servitude or perhaps as positive bonds

of affection, the home is perceived as a *sui generis* reality. The specific character of relationships within this sphere is believed to naturally resolve interpersonal issues. This implies that no such problems exist, as everything is presumed to self-regulate accordingly. However, in the absence of appropriate rules, it is difficult to discern what this truly means. The family is portrayed as an undifferentiated whole, making it seemingly impossible to discern individuals within it. Gavison underscores that, according to this account, isolating individuals within the family could potentially disrupt the established order or assumed emotional harmony, which is believed to stem from “familial instincts and common interests,” ensuring “the welfare of everyone” (Gavison, 1992, p. 23). This specificity of the domestic family, which excludes its members from otherwise applicable norms (like justice), can be perceived in two contrasting ways: as natural and primitive (as discussed below), or as embodying even loftier values than those predominant in the public world (as explored in the subsequent section).

In the context of feminist critique, theories of the social contract offer conceptual justification for political structures wherein men enjoy full participation in the civic community, while women are relegated to the confines of the family and are thereby marginalised from this communal engagement.⁶ All theorists of the social contract, regardless of the diversity in their philosophical frameworks, maintain a common insistence on separation: they delineate the political public realm from the domestic and family sphere (Pateman, 1988, 1989). They treat these two spheres as if they were entirely independent of each other, implying that questioning their relationship is futile. However, as emphasised by feminist researchers engaged in this topic, these spheres are interconnected in numerous ways. The strategy of ‘patriarchal liberalism’ involves, among other things, theorists maintaining silence on the issue of women’s (un)presence in the public civic sphere, as it would be challenging to provide meaningful insights on this matter based on the ideas of social contract (Pateman, 1989). Women are subsumed under the family and naturalised, treated as a fragment thereof, and not as independent individuals, which renders liberal individualism inapplicable to them. The home is governed “of nature” by different relationships compared to the community of citizens, i.e. men. Each of them assumes

⁶ In the literature, one can find detailed analyses of the conceptualizations developed by social contract theorists as regards the issues discussed in the article (Moller Okin, 1989, 1991, Pateman, 1988, 1989).

the role of ruler within the family, and though this authority is limited to his own household, the concept of a community of free and equal individuals grants a broader legitimacy to his private power. A woman, also privately subordinated to a man, could be considered not only a subject within her family but also a representation of the state of subjection envisaged for her by the very idea of this community. However, articulating such a notion explicitly based on liberal conceptions of the social contract would prove rather challenging.

Since women and marital relationships do not fall within the public sphere of citizenship, they receive far less attention in these theories than the participants in the social contract, its principles, and its goals. Typically, the home and private relationships within the family are given scant consideration. When they are addressed, they are often attributed to nature and relegated outside the realm of the political: “a fundamental assumption of modern political theory is that sexual relations are not political” (Pateman, 1988, p. 44).

Social contract theorists do not explicitly outline the basis, criterion, or rationale behind the separation of private and public/political spheres they apply. Instead, they often attempt to justify hierarchical relationships within the family, the supposed superiority and power of men over women, appealing to nature. Admittedly, these justifications are often unconvincing, but they reveal that this area effectively escapes their theorizing. If “nature itself” creates the family sphere, would also, according to this view, the separation between private and public realms, as well as between nature and culture, arise “itself”, naturally, without any activity on the part of men? (Could it be that even the fraternal social contract is a product of nature?) In any case, there is no indication that these presumed orders of nature disturb social contract theorists and that they wish to reform them – whereas the social contract, in which their will is of the utmost importance, otherwise protects the presumed natural arrangement.

It is difficult to consider *in extenso* what nature is supposed to mean here. However, a few words about it should be said in order not to give fodder to dubious smugness and idealisations. “Natural” is the superiority and power of men over women. To be sure, this power was formally recognised and legitimised through various means, such as the legal and economic dependency of wives on their husbands. However, integrating gender relations into the realm of nature tends to obscure the socio-political meanings (conditions and dimensions) of this power. Indeed, when we strip away the political and public dimensions of male domination, within

the realm of the 'natural' private sphere, it predominantly manifests as the control over women's sexuality, aimed at fulfilling the desires of their masters and ensuring the production of offspring. Women are expected to provide pleasure, bear and raise children, as well as manage household affairs. These three kinds of activities, fairly different, collapse within the male private sphere into an undifferentiated natural unity. Women are 'representatives of the sex', to use a term from the time of French Revolution (Wysłobocki, 2022, p. 133), which can be interpreted to mean that they represent sex in general, not just their own. Women are the ones who are sexual and who represent sexuality. Thus, whatever is sexual, is so due to women, because of them, or perhaps through their fault. They represent deficiencies and needs in general and are also responsible for fulfilling them. Sexuality, carnality, sensuality, and biological needs are all ascribed to women, nature, and the private sphere. These "body issues," to borrow Hanisch's formula, signify man's dependence on nature, which offends his autonomy and reason. Traditionally, dating back to earlier times than modernity, these aspects have been viewed as dark, primitive, low, and even dirty. Women are seen as serving to satisfy these primitive needs, with independence, individuality, or reason being deemed unnecessary for this role. In fact, men may even believe that these qualities could hinder women from properly fulfilling their assigned tasks, assuming that reason, freedom, and individuality predestine people to engage in higher forms of activity in the public sphere. It is likely not without significance that, simultaneously with these aspirations toward higher pursuits, men are fond of the primitive and dark sensuality, or more broadly, of this type of separation: free activity, individuality, and reason on one hand, and primitive sensuality on the other, the open public realm and the shadowy private sphere.

According to the researchers cited, familial private relations are either invisible or barely visible in the criticised theories. When they are acknowledged, it is often as a distinct, apolitical sphere. In the rough version of separation outlined above, this distinctiveness implies assigning women to sexual and reproductive roles and their 'natural' subordination to men. It is also considered natural for women to primarily handle the necessary housework (though the extent and nature of this work vary among different social classes). In this perspective, all activities now categorised as reproductive work are deemed inferior to male activities in the public sphere. Consequently, the house with a woman is marked as inferior, primitive, and secondary.

Haven in a heartless world

The early modern era has also ascribed other meanings to the domestic sphere, making it a “haven in a heartless world” (Fraser, 2013, p. 27). The domestic family, with women inside it, is idealised. While these tendencies flourished in Western culture during the 19th century, they were already present in the late 17th century (Znanięcka Lopata, 1993). Privacy became increasingly associated with notions of closeness, intimacy, and personal matters, while women came to be associated with qualities like gentleness, virtue, and compassion. Starting from the 18th century, there was a growing emphasis on childhood and motherhood, both of which were subject to idealisation. Children began to be perceived as special beings requiring care, nurturing, and careful upbringing, as well as protection from labour. Similarly, motherhood came to be idealised as the most significant role for women (Znanięcka Lopata, 1993, p. 177). Femininity is now presented “as a mission rather than a mere handicap” (Booth, 1992, p. 28). Love and personal relationships within families, including those between spouses and between parents and children, gained increasing importance. Previously, when economic and pragmatic considerations held more sway, there was often greater distance between family members. This transformed domestic family was also noticeably more isolated from the outside world (Moller Okin, 1982, p. 73).

Numerous exemplifications of these ideas can be found in cultural history, and the literature often addresses the issue through the lens of the ‘two spheres’ concept.⁷ A prominent aspect emphasised in this portrayal

⁷ I refer particularly to the literature on Great Britain and the United States, but the ideas evoked were widespread in culture and customs of many countries. As regards the literature on the concept of two spheres and the idealisation of the home with women, noteworthy texts include: Kerber (1988), Welter (1966), Booth (1992, chapter 1). I omit the rich classical feminist literature of the 19th and 20th centuries on this issue. For an analysis of the position of women and how they were portrayed in Poland in the nineteenth century, see Syguła (2009), *ibid.* for a review of Polish literature. On the changes in the shape of the family and the home in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Dopierała, 2013, pp. 68–78. It is worth mentioning that this model developed (as Fraser points out) among the bourgeoisie, just building its position in the public sphere, to later become widespread also in the lower and upper social classes. The bourgeoisie was building its position in opposition to these classes: “new gender norms enjoining feminine domesticity and a sharp separation of public and private spheres functioned as key signifiers of bourgeois difference from both higher and lower strata. It is a measure of the eventual success of this bourgeois

of women was altruism, a selfless and boundless commitment to the affairs of the family (and consequently, of society), an attitude eloquently captured by the ambiguous term “selflessness” (Booth, 1992, p. 133). This figure is well epitomised by the female angel who appears in Virginia Woolf: “The phantom was a woman. [...] She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel.” (Woolf, 1942, pp. 236–237)

In this perspective, similarly to social contract theory, the family with women is exempted from the rules that govern, or are at least tolerated in, the public world. However, there appears to be a reversal in the valuation. Women within the domestic sphere are idealised as refuge of morality. They are expected to embody a multitude of virtues, including the ambiguous purity. (Unlike nuns, who embrace sexual abstinence and separation from men, women in the domestic sphere are sexually active and focused on motherhood, yet still expected to uphold chastity.) The private sphere thus perceived, is contrasted with the public world as dark and dirty, characterised by rivalry, impersonality, callousness, and brutality. Such an idealised privacy seems quite different from the one previously considered, pushed into a dark nature. The two depictions not only appear but are in fact different – which is not to say that they are independent of each other.

The researchers highlight that amid the rise of liberal theories advocating equality and individual autonomy, there emerged a renewed drive to justify the exclusion of women from the civic realm. Thus, they were more firmly attached to the home, assigned roles that seemed ostensibly vital, undeniably positive, and of such apparent significance that questioning why they were excluded from a community of free and equal individuals seemed futile. Yet, it was various negative traits of the community that were highlighted, evoking a sense of savagery or barbarism rather

project that these norms later became hegemonic, sometimes imposed on, sometimes embraced by, broader segments of society.” (Fraser, 1990, p. 60)

than the ideals of civilisation and social contract. Indeed, the idealisation of the affection-based, sentimental family served to further solidify women's dependence on the home: "Allegedly united in its affections and interests, this special sphere of life was held to depend for its health on the total dedication of women, suited for these special tasks on account of the very qualities that made them unsuited for the harsh world of commerce, learning, and power. Thus anyone who wished to register objection to the subordinate position of women had now to take considerable care not to be branded as an enemy of that newly hallowed institution – the sentimental family." (Moller Okin, 1982, p. 88).

To what extent did these altered, idealised conceptions reflect actual changes in interpersonal relationships, as women, for example, or perhaps men, developed greater emotionality? Did these ideas transform actual relationships? These questions extend beyond the current analysis. What is undeniable, however, as scholars emphasise, is the idealisation of expectations, the extension of an "ideology about family life" which acted "as a *reinforcement* for the patriarchal relations between men and women that had been temporarily threatened by seventeenth-century individualism" (Moller Okin, 1982, p. 74).

In the sentimental private sphere, delicate feelings such as attachment, devotion, altruism (feelings emitted by women) are supposed to flourish, and relationships based on them are supposed to be quite different from the rules operating in the political world of free and equal citizens, and different also from the rules operating in the economic space of earning and market competition. According to this vision, the family with women is fenced off from the world outside. Such an approach does not, of course, make the dependencies between the family and the rest of the world and inequalities between the sexes cease to exist, but it does offer an idealisation of reality that can be – in a sense – attractive.

On one hand, women are naturalised, while on the other, they are idealised, yet in practice, these two approaches often coexist and exert joint influence. Sex and reproduction, attributed to women, can be reduced to the level of primitive biological functions, deemed unworthy of discussion. Simultaneously, they can be idealised, draped in a veil of mysterious purity and otherworldly significance, or framed within rhetoric extolling social benefit and common good. All the same, women are meant to 'represent sex' (encompassing sexuality of both sexes) and the family. It is worth noting that while sex is tightly attached to

women in this perspective, the private sphere is primarily constructed as private for men. Indeed, characterising the family as a private sphere for women is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, if the family were their only sphere of functioning, the distinction between private and public would not apply to them. Secondly, in line with the idealisation of the family, women were expected to be so fully involved in family and domestic roles that this was to be their full-time and professional (albeit unpaid) work, of general social importance – and can this type of activity be considered private? Finally, such a family model is unlikely to provide privacy for women within family life – a private space free from family-home tasks.

The family is expected to cater to men's sexual and relaxation needs, offering biological and psychological renewal to the heads of the household, while supposedly ennobling and moralising men (if one were to believe in the salutary effect of women on them). Yet, the responsibility for meeting these needs and ensuring their fulfilment is assigned to women. Indeed, the notion of "needs" inherently suggests a lack, and this lack is implicit in the root meaning of the word "privacy." Women are expected to address this lack. Moreover, according to this view, women's "nature" should be appropriately moulded: desirable natural qualities are expected to be culturally shaped and perpetuated accordingly. These qualities are to be the same in all women and constitute their – natural and cultural at the same time – essence: all female people are to be the same. Indeed, the expectation is for each female individual to conform as closely as possible to general societal expectations, minimising personal traits and individual features in the process. Is this perhaps the idea of 'equality for women'? Or 'equality of women for men'?

The idealisation of the family also serves to increase women's involvement in it: by conforming to these ideal expectations, they are supposed to assimilate them. They are expected to know their place and roles, understanding that submissiveness and self-sacrifice for others are virtues to be valued and glorified – qualities which, as Booth accurately notes, have, at least in part, 'been shaped by oppression' (Booth, 1992, p. 36). Since the assimilation of such knowledge may encounter resistance, it can be reinforced through faith and prayer. In a Polish nineteenth-century prayer book, we find in the section of prayers for women the following words: "Make me compliant and pleasant, so that I do not encumber his toil [...]", and the husband, in turn, is to pray with such words: "Give me

[...] to look upon her as a flower for enjoyment and entertain me in this creation from Thy hands destined.”⁸

Conclusion

Both approaches advocate for women to serve men, drawing upon and reinforcing the gendered private/public divide. Ideological representations further entangle this service in a web of pseudo-moral meanings, portraying it as a mission and an indispensable tool for the realisation of social and universal human goals.

Women’s self-sacrifice for society as a whole and for all men may appear preferable to the subordination of wives to husbands justified by appeals to nature; but is it truly an improvement? And are there only these two possibilities? Accusing the theorists of the social contract of a glaring contradiction is justified, regarding the disparity between the idea of social contract and their views on relations within the family. However, attempting to cover up this contradiction and ‘repair’ the private sphere by idealising the family is equally problematic. Hidden beneath the idealised images, the true dynamics of relationships between people are hardly visible. The vision of the home as a sanctuary of moral stability persists as a powerful notion, impeding policy actions aimed at improving the situation of women. Such imageries also obscure the interconnectedness of the private sphere with the public realm, including political dimensions of the private. Positioned within the (male) private sphere, women are not seen as autonomous individuals or moral agents, but rather as bearers of certain functions or ideals, subservient to the needs and expectations of the supposedly enlightened and autonomous male subjects.

The notion of ideology can legitimately be applied to conceptions grounded in the private/public divide, as they construct a distorted view of the world that mystifies reality and serves to sustain and justify existing social relations: “[...] the dichotomy between the private and the public obscures the subjection of women to men within an apparently universal, egalitarian and individualist order”. This illusion is created, among other things, by the fact that “the separation of the private and public is presented in liberal theory as if it applied to all individuals in the same

⁸ *Tarcza Polska. Zbiór modlitw i pieśni nabożnych dla Narodu polskiego*, Warsaw 1861, pp. 27–28, quote following: Sygula 2009, p. 64.

way.” (Pateman, 1989, p. 120). The latter claim is patently untrue, if only in the sense that men populate both spheres. Furthermore, the two spheres do not merely signify separate domains of objects but also conceal within them (and in between them) human relations – another characteristic feature of ideology, as it reifies human relations, creating the illusion of their objectivity. One can then perceive the two spheres as two realms of reality, seemingly independent of human relations, including the power relationships.

In political discourse, the terms “private” and “public” are “frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics, and to valorize others. [...] The rhetoric of domestic privacy seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or familializing them” (Fraser, 1990, p. 73).⁹ The title slogan challenges, among other things, the relationships of domination and subordination that are disguised within this rhetoric.

Indeed, the theoretical contributions of feminism in the second half of the 20th century significantly advanced the discourse on concepts of the private, the public, and the political, along with their intricate interconnections and the delineation between the private and public spheres. The gendered significance of this separation within early modern culture and political thought has profoundly shaped the contemporary situation of women. Through feminist theory, we gain a deeper understanding of not only this aspect but also the broader political implications of the private/public divide. The theory has also significantly contributed to ongoing debates on the various meanings of the political. To believe that now, in the third decade of the 21st century, we are in an entirely different era, free from problems uncovered by twentieth-century thinkers, seems to me unwarranted, as hasty and naively optimistic or as an expression of ideology, a way of thinking that obscures problems rather than addresses them. The feminist analyses discussed here, while valuable in content, remain outside the mainstream political theory, which often presents theories of the social contract as a model for modern understanding and legitimisation of equal social relations. Additionally, I believe that the idealisation of the home and the family continues to pose an obstacle to women’s liberation. Therefore, the issue addressed in this paper is not obsolete.

⁹ On the ideological functions of the division in question, see also Finlayson (2016), Chapter 8: *Everyday rebellions: revolution in the private sphere*.

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„Prywatne jest polityczne”.

Problem rozdziału sfery prywatnej i sfery publicznej w świetle teorii feministycznej II połowy XX wieku

Streszczenie

Wychodząc od hasła „prywatne jest polityczne”, głośnego w amerykańskim ruchu wyzwolenia kobiet, przedstawiono niektóre wątki feministycznej krytyki rozdziału sfery prywatnej (domowo-rodzinnej) i sfery publicznej, w jego nowożytnej postaci. Sfera prywatna, z przypisanymi do niej kobietami, jest według omawianych autorek wyjęta spod reguł uznawanych za obowiązujące w świecie publicznym oraz impregnowana na rzetelną analizę i ewentualne reformy. Separacja prywatnego i politycznego maskuje wzajemne zależności między dwiema sferami i służy legitymizacji nierówności płci. Teoria feministyczna problematyzuje ten rozdział i ukazuje złożone zależności między prywatnym i publicznym. W analizie wyróżniono dwa wątki: subsumpcję kobiet pod rodzinę na gruncie teorii umowy społecznej oraz idealizację sfery domowej, wyobrażonej jako uczuciowa i moralna ostoja, w opozycji do świata publicznego, naznaczonego egoizmem i bezosobowością. Konstrukcja ta pełni funkcję ideologiczną, umacniając rozdział przypisujący kobiety do domu i rodziny.

Słowa kluczowe: prywatne, publiczne, polityczne, feminizm