

## Domestic Politics

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*James S. Fishkin: Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family. Yale University Press. 200 pp. \$18.95.*

*Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed.: The Family in Political Thought. University of Massachusetts Press. 354 pp. \$22.50 cloth, \$10.00 paper.*

*Jean Bethke Elshtain: Public Man, Private Woman. Princeton University Press. 378 pp. \$6.95.*

FOR 2,500 years the family has been a theme of tragedy and occasionally of comedy. Plato first made it a concern of political philosophers. In the *Republic*, Socrates was asked to prove that justice is good in itself—that is, that living justly under a just regime is the necessary and sufficient condition of happiness. Socrates and his interlocutors set about designing a polity to which anyone could freely be devoted because it is just, and therefore good. The men agree that children of exceptional or inferior ability must be taken from their parents and appropriately placed in a hierarchy of merit, not birth. With much reluctance, they then deny the ruling class private property and families altogether. Female as well as male guardians are taught to make war, and both are to make love only (and as much) as eugenics dictates. Children are to be reared in common as brothers and sisters; every parent will be a parent of every child in a given generation, and every child the child of every parent. The city as a whole must be one big happy family so that, unlike Antigone, no one will have private ties in whose name to oppose public authority.

These arrangements, we are told, will work only when philosophers rule as kings and queens. They can rule only after having persuaded the inhabitants of some city to go into voluntary exile, leaving behind them their children under the age of ten, to be molded as citizens of the new order. Socrates's scheme seems ridiculously impossible because it requires some men and women to abandon the families they have, and all others to agree not to make new families. Even were it possible, this justice would be, on balance, undesirable. The "irrational," "unjust," and very strong desire that human beings have for families of their own is an indication that the public good and private happiness can be quite distinct from one another.

IN *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* James Fishkin rediscovers some of this Platonic truth, and applies it to contemporary politics. According to him, the central doctrine of modern liberalism is that only equal opportunity can legitimate the

distribution of goods in society. Equal opportunity entails, obviously, the principle of distribution according to meritorious achievement. Fishkin, however, supplements this widely accepted view with his principle of "equal life chances," or "background fairness." By this he means that, since we do not "merit" the race, sex, family background, or ethnic origin with which we begin, none of these factors ought to affect where we end up. Equal opportunity means not just running the race by the same rules and not just beginning at the same starting line, but having the same coach. A procedurally fair competition that someone is likely to win because he is well fed and bred by privileged or ambitious parents is still unfair.

Do we then want to say that our parents have no right to improve our life chances? Unlike Plato, no liberal philosopher has the courage to go so far, even in a speculative vein. "Autonomy of the family" remains dear to us. In neither the practice of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society nor the theory epitomized by John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* have liberals been willing to violate the integrity of the family for the sake of justice. So liberals are inconsistent. From this observation Fishkin concludes that liberal public policy can have no coherent direction, and that intellectual probity bids us to embrace a "limited liberalism."

In addition to being about 190 pages too long, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* is seriously flawed. First, in keeping with a current academic fashion, Fishkin relocates the core of liberalism from politics to economics. Traditional liberalism's first promise was that of an equal right to consent to government; its central concern has not always been equal distribution of goods in society. Second, although Fishkin denies that he has in mind anything more radical than equal opportunity, he virtually subsumes the principle of equality of result under his requirement of background fairness. After all, less need be done to equalize results if unequal beginnings have already been effectively neutralized. It is especially this new requirement that makes the family a problem for liberal justice. Third, while Fishkin is really talking about a problem that calls for moderation in the *application* of liberal principles, he claims to have shown the principles themselves to be rationally indefensible. The concern for the family that tempers our ardor for liberal justice is dismissed as merely an element of "conventional morality." For Fishkin, there is nothing special about this particular value. In fact, the title notwithstanding, this book is not about the family at all.

What makes the book not only trivial but almost comical is its complete silence about the greatest threat posed today to the reigning moral consensus. Not once does Fishkin mention that our attachment to the family is believed by some to have been the obstacle to equal opportunity, not only for economically or culturally deprived minorities, but for fully half the human race. One need not be a feminist to wonder how, in 1983, any American

political scientist could write a book about justice and the family without ever taking up the current complaints of so many women.

JEAN ELSHTAIN, author of *Public Man, Private Woman* and editor of and contributor to *The Family in Political Thought*, is a political theorist by profession, a feminist by conviction, and a mother of four for reasons she ought to explain. Elshtain must be taken seriously. She writes with intelligence, spirit, and, often, refreshing good sense. Her intention in *Public Man, Private Woman* is to attest “as honestly as possible to the truth of the human condition” or, alternatively, to “voice the discontents of society’s silenced, ignored, abused, or invisible members” and “proffer reasons for that suffering in order that the silenced may find a voice, cry out for justice. . . .” Elshtain’s honesty, or sense of justice, requires her to bring to bear on the tradition of political thought the concerns of women heretofore unstated, and to inform feminist thought with the political perspective it has lacked.

Political thought, by Elshtain’s account, has traditionally distinguished the private and the political. She says the private exists because shame is “basic” to human beings, shame of “our body, its functions, passions, and desires.” Politics originates in an awareness of the possibility of intentional human agency. As an intentional activity of human beings, politics is most visible to us when opposed to the natural. Nature’s power, it happens, is most obviously embodied in woman, in her sexuality and natality. To escape the tyranny of nature, political men and their traditional spokesmen have not merely denied women a voice in politics, but have defined politics in opposition to the virtues most characteristic of women: “responsibility toward the helpless, the vulnerable, the weak; gentleness, mercy, and compassion.” Further, they have bestowed greater dignity on politics, the “realm of freedom,” than on the everyday realm of nature, or necessity. And in excluding women from the public realm they have denied them their very humanity, for “human beings [are] creatures who give a spoken account of themselves.”

Elshtain does, as she admits, write from a point of view, but her claim to treat the “fathers” of the political tradition without *ressentiment* is fair. Moreover, she is no easier on her sisters than on the fathers, and much of *Public Man, Private Woman* consists in a critique of the writings of contemporary feminists. Because they have dismissed without study the tradition of political thought for its misogyny—or have studied it only to document its misogyny—feminists have unwittingly assumed many of the erroneous political positions of that tradition, from the power politics of radical feminists to the elitism of liberals to the obliteration of “self-reflective human subjects” by Marxists. Moreover, many have unconsciously absorbed the tradition’s private/public dichotomy to no good end. Even as feminists tend toward overconfidence in women’s ability to transform politics when given their rightful

share in political authority, they reveal their defensiveness about their (feminine) concern for the everyday world. As a consequence they have made the family, now weakened by additional forces, a scapegoat. The intent of Elshtain's writings is as much to defend the family before feminists as it is to improve the politics of men and women.

Our politics, she believes, will be improved in overcoming liberalism. In her essay "Thank Heaven for Little Girls: The Dialectics of Development," Elshtain suggests that discrepancies between what liberalism's official ideology promises and what liberalism actually delivers to women have the unintended benefit of forcing thoughtful women to undertake a critical reconstruction of liberalism. Political speech in general and liberal speech in particular have abstracted from the private, passionate concerns with which women especially have always been preoccupied. What women would say in a reconstructed political context is to be determined in the "ideal speech situation" of "critical theory." In this perfectly democratic situation, no speaker is made to speak or to listen. Even if "on the basis of tests of coherence, internal consistency, and plausibility, the political thinker may have the better case," he or she can do nothing to coerce the agreement of an unwilling speaker.

In the meantime, Elshtain can suggest what the politics of these embodied speakers might look and sound like. The clearest image drawn from our experience is that of the handicapped marching and wheeling to demand their rights and their dignity. Elshtain's reader may be hard-pressed to distinguish her "ethical polity" and "politics of compassion" from the liberal welfare state and its politics of self-interest. They differ here because the handicapped's movement "represents... a powerful participatory ideal and embodies a less exclusionary definition of the moral and political community." The political participation of women (and men) liberated from liberalism consists in demanding that politics serve our private, albeit universal, needs.

Women's going public in this way will not mark the end of the private/public dichotomy, according to Elshtain. A militant democrat is presumably not just a nagging wife. But how the two differ in either form or content is not quite clear. Elshtain repudiates liberalism for its elitism and sexism, but especially for its separation of reason and passion. She fails to appreciate the purpose of the "abstract" formalism of its politics and discourse. Liberalism's empty forms, because empty, give us time to gather our rational forces in resistance to nature's tyranny, be it that of our own bodies' needs, or of the speaker who voices his needs most vociferously, or of those who refuse most intransigently to listen for others'. Without some such separation both men and women are in danger of losing their humanity. Elshtain forgets or tacitly rejects the *raison d'être* she herself gives for politics.

**I**F anything unites the contributors to these three books, it is their disaffection from liberalism, guided by Marx, Freud, Habermas, and Rawls. They assert or imply that liberalism (or, for some, liberal capitalism) either endangers the family as it now exists or precludes its becoming what it ought to be, namely more egalitarian. Unfortunately, none shows precisely how a transformation of liberalism inspired by egalitarianism would benefit the family.

In fact, because their political radicalism is accompanied by philosophical complacency, none of these would-be defenders of the family mounts an adequate defense of it at all. Elshtain argues elegantly that children need the family for their individual development. But why do adults, male and female, need children? Why must erotic desire culminate in marriage and children? Why not in free love? Why not, as a prophetess once taught Socrates, better in homosexuality, politics, and philosophy? What is the explanation that would satisfy the embodied reason of the feminist, or any other kind of reason? While Elshtain contends that politics must be enriched by an account of woman's experience, by "the values and language of 'mothering,'" she omits from her defense of the family precisely the account of the human needs she has felt and fulfilled as a mother.

In sum, the political theorists presently engaged in rethinking the family and politics have not yet said enough to enable us to answer the very difficult questions first raised by Plato.

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## Integration and Local Politics

NEAL DEVINS

*David L. Kirp: Just Schools. University of California Press. 374 pp. \$19.95.*

**T**HE issue of race still troubles many of America's schools. Are students better off in neighborhood schools? Do "magnet" schools—those which specialize in vocational training or advanced studies—attract a representative cross-section of students? Should a school system focus on educational achievement or racial distribution? And how should a system respond to minority-group opposition to busing?

Even more pressing is the question of whether there is a "correct" method of integration, one that extends beyond any single