

Feminist theory: how to do justice to a multifaceted and contentious field of inquiry

Severs, Eline

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

The scholarly but also political relevance of this volume cannot be overstated. As Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (2017, page 3) indicate, approaches to feminist theorising were traditionally analysed within the framework of the larger Western philosophical traditions to which they had affinities (such as, liberalism, socialism, film theory, psycho-analytics, etc.). The resulting *hyphenation model* (consider, for instance, liberal feminism, socialist feminist, radical feminism) helpfully showcases the continuities and shared assumptions underlying certain approaches to feminist theory and traditions in Western thought. This model, however, equally obscures what feminist theories have in common.

This explains, in part, why feminist theory – although institutionalised academically in the 1970s – is often still conceived as derivative of so-called mainstream schools of thought and why feminist theory, despite growing acclaim of its contributions to various fields of science, is often still seen as offering but ancillary or secondary understandings to the core phenomena studied within these fields. The hyphenation model, furthermore, risks introducing too sharp a division between, on the one hand, feminist contributions embedded in mainstream schools of thought and, on the other, radical feminism as a freestanding critique on conventional modes of knowledge production (Disch and Hawkesworth 2017). As a result, this traditional classificatory model risks producing unhelpful debates on what constitutes the ‘core’ of feminist theory; potentially aggravating exclusionary tendencies and power inequalities within feminism itself.

The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory carefully avoids these pitfalls. Rather than offering a chronological or disciplinary ordering of feminist theorising, the volume alphabetically presents essays on the central theoretical concepts and analytical frameworks feminist theorists have developed to challenge established knowledge. Some readers – particularly novices to feminist theory – may prefer a book architecture that focuses on thematically clustered and delineated discussions in contemporary feminist theory (e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Hesse-Biber 2012). The handbook’s alphabetical architecture, however, allows for attributing equal weight and relevance to all entries. By so doing, the *Handbook* actively solicits readers’ judgment calls about the coherence, relevance and consistency of feminist concepts and analytical frameworks. ‘*Alphabetical ordering is attractive,*’ Disch and Hawkesworth (2017, page 11) rightly note, ‘*not just for what it avoids but also for what it makes possible*’. Rather than dictate a specific, supposedly most appropriate, perspective on feminist theory, the *Handbook* invites readers to engage with and evaluate the body of feminist theory on their own terms. This approach demonstrates great coherence with the feminist insight that knowledge production is closely entwined with knowers’ epistemological locations (cf. Alcoff 2007) and treats readers, irrespective of their personal backgrounds or their level of familiarity with feminist theory, as equals.

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

In a manner resembling the *Oxford Handbook on Gender and Politics* (Waylen et al. 2013), the *Handbook on Feminist Theory* underscores the inter-disciplinary and transformative character of feminist research. Challenging mistaken conceptions of feminist theory, the essays are not limited to questions related to women, sexuality, and gender. Far to the contrary, they speak out against and showcase the limitations of a legacy of assumptions cutting across

various fields of science, such as the assumption that gender roles directly follow from the existence of two biological sexes, the belief that the public and private sphere can and should be analytically separated, the tendency to delink agency from social issues of identity and subjectivity, and the assumption that power primarily operates through repression and overt conflict.

While illuminating dimensions of human life and power that often go unnoticed in so-called mainstream discourses of science (Disch and Hawkesworth 2017, page 11), the *Handbook* is not inconsiderate of their contributions. Rather than situating feminist theory in a unidirectional relation to mainstream discourses (as a ‘challenger’ discourse), the essays in this volume clarify the ways in which, for instance, innovations within critical theory (consider, Foucault’s relational conception of power) and feminist theory have fed from each other. In so doing, the contributors to this handbook actively challenge the mistaken notion that feminist theory operates in isolation of other strands of theorising and offers but an ‘outsider’ – i.e. easily dismissible – perspective. Testifying of the maturity of feminism as a field of theorising, the essays in this handbook also do not shy away from addressing ongoing debates within feminist theory, such as contestations surrounding the theorisation of gender and sexuality, or debate over the possibility of invoking women’s shared experiences as an epistemological foundation for feminist theory. Conceived as essays – not overview articles in the classical sense –, the contributions to this handbook do not simply summarise central perspectives within contemporary feminist theorising but, by taking a stance in contemporary debates, help the reader come to terms with these very perspectives.

As a result, the various essays of this Handbook can most fruitfully be read in conjunction to each other. The argument, for instance, that it does not ‘*make sense to think of agency outside a social context, as a purely abstract set of capacities and potentials*’ (McNay 2017, page 3) features most prominently in the essay on agency yet is further substantiated in essays on the microphysics of power, identities, and subjectivity. Similarly, and in close connection to essays on subjectivity and identity, the essays on *Politics* (Zerilli 2017), *Experience* (Grant 2017) and *Representation* (Disch 2017) powerfully illuminate the limitations of a liberal model of politics rooted in sameness and advance an alternative model of politics best described as a practice of constitution and freedom. The fact that multiple voices, drawing upon a diverse range of sources and presenting different stances, reflect on conjoined issues in feminist theorising is

one of the key assets of this handbook: it aptly characterises the multifaceted and contentious field of inquiry that is feminist theorising.

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

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