Rethinking Obligation

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It was once suggested to me that the title and subtitle of this book should be reversed, and there is considerable merit in that idea. This book provides a feminist analysis of liberal voluntarist theories of political obligation, most commonly referred to as consent theory or social contract theory. It reveals that women’s exclusion from the realm of the political in modern political theories and practices is attributable not merely to the fact that opportunities for consent, the acceptance of benefits, and other modern indexes of political obligation are effectively denied to some people, such as women and minorities. Rather, it is the very definition of obligation as an exclusively voluntarist principle that makes liberal obligation theory problematic for women and other historically disempowered groups.

But this argument marks a deeper theme, namely, whether and how feminist theory can provide new insights and methods in political theory to keep the latter viable and timely. Feminism, as one of many antimodern, or “postmodern,” strategies of the late twentieth century, is an extremely powerful tool for revealing the ways in which the picture of reality represented by state-of-nature theorizing is really a picture of beings of a particular gender, race, and class in a highly specific cultural and economic environment. It provides effective ways of seeing how perspective informs and shapes our conceptions of reality embodied in dominant political theories. I thus take political obligation as a focal point for illustrating the methodological shifts which I believe feminism demands of—and which I am urging on—political theory.

This new methodology requires a reciprocal relationship between
the history of thought and analytical philosophy and between contemporary sources and those of previous eras. Using feminist psychoanalysis to identify the gender bias of early social contract theory, I explore whether contemporary concepts that derived from the Enlightenment, such as obligation, contract, and consent, contain this same bias even though we tend to view them as gender neutral. This gender bias, I argue, is built into the foundation of modern liberalism and hence constitutes a structural component of contemporary visions of political obligation. Feminist analysis is necessary to revealing this bias and constructing new theories that can accommodate the experiences of women and other excluded groups.

It seems somewhat strange to me, though in retrospect it is perhaps not all that surprising, that in the process of developing this argument, I found that the themes of my book echoed those of my personal life. For me, the task of writing, while extremely rewarding, can also be so singular, so isolating, that I have often felt quite alone in it these past several years. I found myself periodically wondering if Hobbes is perhaps correct to say that relationship is artificial, as difficult to sustain as to create. Yet now, as I call to mind all the people who have been connected with my intellectual and emotional life during the production of this project, I am reminded of the degree to which relationship is in fact truly central to our lives.

This book goes back several years, and a number of people offered crucial help in its earlier incarnations. My general indebtedness to Richard Flathman, who was involved in this project from its inception, cannot be overstated. I have incorporated so many of his suggestions that it would be impossible to mention them all. In addition to stimulating my interest in political obligation in the first place, he helped me clarify my arguments, and indeed get to the heart of the problem I sought to grapple with. He also aided me in developing a voice that allowed me to bring together the often conflicting worlds of political theory and feminist theory.

Nancy Hartsock has also provided constant support from the project's beginning. She has read the manuscript in its entirety at one stage or another, always ready to comment on successive drafts. She often brought to bear insights on points I not only did not see but would not likely ever have seen but for her assistance. My intellectual debt to her is evident throughout this work.

Ian Shapiro and Christine Di Stefano each provided careful and insightful readings of the completed manuscript and offered suggestions that greatly improved the clarity and organization of the book. Rogers Smith also commented extensively on an earlier version of the
manuscript, leading me to several improvements. Sandra Harding provided insights at various places along the way, not only reading key chapters at crucial points in the book's development but also providing access to her own ongoing work. Jane Mansbridge and Julie Mostov offered helpful suggestions on democratic theory, as did Laurie Langbauer on postmodernism. The late George A. Kelly also provided early help and guidance, particularly in my work on Rousseau. Less specific but no less important support came in the form of discussions with friends and colleagues, particularly Chuck Beitz, Liz Bussiere, Jean Elshtain, Jim Kurth, Roland Pennock, and Abby Zanger. Students of feminist theory and political theory at Swarthmore College and, more recently, Cornell University also helped me rethink many of the issues considered in these pages.

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Finally, I thank my family, who have always offered unfailing support for me and my work even when they weren't sure they understood either. Most of all, I thank my husband, Chris Stoeckert, not only for sticking by me during the worst—as well as putting up with me at my worst—but for having faith in me when I did not have it in myself. We have been traveling together since this project was very young indeed, and he has seen it and me through many transformations, good and bad, with constancy and good-natured tolerance.

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