Okin, Susan Moller (1946-2004)
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Abstract
Susan Moller Okin, an egalitarian feminist liberal, reconstructed the history of political thought to correct for the absence, exclusion or distortion of women, gendered culture and reproduction. She developed the social contract tradition to secure family and gender central place, highlighted the plight of minority women in multicultural societies, and contributed to women-centred development policies.

Background
Susan Okin was born in New Zealand, and earned a masters’ degree in philosophy at Oxford in 1970, before obtaining her doctorate at Harvard University in 1975. She taught at the University of Auckland, at Vassar, Brandeis and Harvard before she was appointed Professor at Stanford University from 1990.

Criticism of traditional political thought
Her first book concerned Women in Western Political Thought (1979), arguing that philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau erred when claiming to write about the individual, since their actual subject were the male heads of families. They would typically ask ‘what is the nature and capacities of man?’ – and ‘what is the purpose of women?’ Conflicts in society at large sapped attention from conflicts among family members. Okin held the philosophers’ divisions between the private and the public to be theoretically untenable and with indefensible implications. John Stuart Mill was an exception, concerned about the plight of women and about how children are socialised to gender roles instead of to equality. This remained one of her central themes: the constraints of justice on socialization in the family.

Reconstructing recent political theory
In Justice, Gender and the Family (1989) Okin criticized current political philosophy for ignoring women, e.g. in flawed distinctions between public and private life. Typical of her charitable yet critical reading of others, she would not reject these theories but instead correct their lacunae or mistaken premises, normative or empirical. Corrected
and reworked, the arguments would yield more defensible – and surprisingly feminist - conclusions. Such ‘internal’ criticism often proved more persuasive, giving her own contributions even stronger credibility and impact in the field. For instance, she argued that liberal theories had ignored the burdens and obligations wrought from human reproduction and individuals’ need for care as children and infirm. For instance, in effect, these theories assumed that workers have no responsibilities for providing such care. Instead of dismissing such theories, she urged their revision. To ensure the requisite personal and political autonomy also for caregivers, a just state must maintain such policies as parental leave and day care opportunities.

Reconstructing Rawls

Okin’s engagement with John Rawls’ 1971 *Theory of Justice* illustrates her argumentative strategy. That theory overlooks problems of the family and gender roles, she argued. One reason is that it only concerns ‘the basic structure of society’ understood as certain social institutions, considered as a whole. She sought to show that this approach fails to capture those injustices that happen in ‘private,’ traditionally insulated from the public power of the state. She claimed that this oversight led Rawls to hold that justice was not at stake with regards to division of labour within the family or in a labour market divided by gender. Okin instead urged to reconstruct Rawls’ theory, starting with his premise that citizens must be socialized to this theory. Okin traced at least three implications with regard to gender roles. First, regarding the family as a central site of socialization of children, Okin held that it must mirror the equal dignity and opportunities of citizens in society. She therefore warned against gendered division of domestic burdens, however freely chosen, lest children come to believe that these roles are normatively required. She secondly criticized gender roles that diminish women’s political autonomy by reducing women’s fair value of political rights, contrary to Rawls’ ‘Principle of Equal Liberties.’ She thirdly criticized Rawls’ ‘Principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity’ as insufficient. It is not enough that “those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system.” (Rawls 1993a).

Drawing on Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, she charged that even the willingness to use talents and ability and aspiration levels are partly effects of the family and other parts of the basic social structure. Socialisation in the private sphere thus affects women’s well-being and life opportunities in the public sphere. Of particular concern were mechanisms that prevent young women even from “perceiving the oppressiveness of oppressive practices” (Okin 2001, 208, 211). These
mechanisms must be regarded as part and parcel of what Rawls termed “the basic structure of society.” The way they allocate “ambitions and hopes” is thus part of the domain of justice (Rawls 1993b).

Both Okin’s critique and her acceptance of Rawls have been criticized, not least by other feminist authors (Kymlicka 1991, Russell 1995, Baehr 1996, Satz and Reich 2009). Such criticisms notwithstanding, she may be right in holding that Rawls did not distinguish convincingly between the private and the public sphere, and that such theories failed to resolve dilemmas concerning equal worth between men and women. Rawls’ response was not even to his own satisfaction. One of Okin’s very last completed papers (2004) criticized Rawls’s response.

Egalitarian feminist liberalism
Susan Okin’s political theory might be best described and assessed as an egalitarian feminist liberalism (Baehr 2007, Abbey 2011). She insisted that the liberal tradition, reinterpreted in its best light, would give sufficient grounds to defend principles and policies typically supported by feminist theorists. Okin’s position is illustrated by her arguments that the state should encourage a society without gender roles, including the equal division among men and women of paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive labor. To allow drastic differences in roles and responsibilities between mothers and fathers, even when ‘freely’ chosen, would hinder the appropriate socialization. Children must experience the equal sharing domestic burdens, to avoid their believing that ‘typical’ gender roles are not only normal, but normatively right – repeating the mistakes of the philosophers of old. Her solution, that the state should restrict parents’ choice in favor of more equality, has been criticized inter alia as being insufficiently liberal, insofar as the recommended use of state power can not easily be based on “public reason”, and is at odds with other reasonable conceptions of the family.

Okin dismissed alleged conflicts between reason and passion as an oversimplification of the moral. Similarly, she argued that there is no fundamental conflict between theories of just institutions and the ‘ethics of care’ (1989). To the contrary, many theories of justice assume that we have responsibility and concern for one another as equal citizens of our common social world. Her research interests brought such theoretical contribution to bear on public policies. Two of her more policy oriented research topics applied her liberal feminist perspective to women’s circumstances in different parts of the world.
Minority Women and Multiculturalism

One of her contributions addressing public policies concerned the question *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (1999). Okin challenged the ‘multicultural’ society that permits hijab and other traditions that may hinder women’s equal participation in society. When adjudicating between the claims of minority group rights and ideals of gender equality, she argued that respect for minorities cannot require the state to respect everything that happens behind closed doors and internally in these societies. That would repeat the mistakes far too long made by Western political theory. Since many of the cultural specifics of minorities are especially burdensome for women, we need a reflective demarcation – especially in Western societies, where it appears especially indefensible to let minority women have less protection against discrimination than other women, justified from respect for minorities. She held that self governance of such groups should not be respected when the internal culture socialises boys and girls toward roles they cannot easily select away. Which minorities should be respected, and who in these minority groups should have the last word? In the absence of good answers to these questions, group rights are not part of the solution but may instead be part of the problem. It is in the end the needs and interests of individuals that ground group rights, so Okin was critical of minority rights that allow group leaders to discriminate some members. Thus questions about the rights of a minority should not be answered only by the self appointed group leaders, who tend to be older men. Minority women must participate and delineate the ground and limits of minority rights. Here, as elsewhere, Okin held that women must be full and equal participants in deliberations, negotiations and decisions about how power should be used, when their interests are at stake. Her claims, particularly about multiculturalism, sparked much debate also among feminist scholars (Satz and Reich 2009; Abbey 2011).

Gender, development and human rights

The topic Okin was working on at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at the time of her death, was economic global gender injustice and women’s human rights. Visiting the slums of India had made a deep impression where she saw how assistance from the outside can actually help. Okin argued strongly that we bear responsibility for poverty in other countries, not least due to the tight institutional ties among states. She was especially concerned with how policies of the World Bank and the IMF wrought unintended damages on women and children, directly contrary to the objectives of the UN. Rapid economic changes based on free market ideas can create new economic opportunities for the strong, but also creates radical
uncertainties for the weak and unfortunate. Real improvements require that we pay more direct attention to the factors that create poverty and what can empower the poor. She was particularly concerned to heed the voices of afflicted women themselves, with controversial implications for measures of poverty and well-being (2003, Nussbaum 2004).

References and Suggested Readings


