
In this unique collection of essays Martha Ackelsberg reflects on the relationship between power and community in the context of democratic theory, with an emphasis on the United States as a case study. Drawing upon feminist theory, Ackelsberg calls upon the reader to rethink basic political concepts including citizenship, participation, and independence. While the author has arranged the book in three distinct sections addressing politics and community in Part I, political dichotomies in Part II, and the goal(s) of citizenship in Part III, she acknowledges from the outset that certain themes run throughout the book, especially critiques of dichotomous thinking with regard to public/private and dependence/independence. The book largely focuses on the ways power is experienced in and through community, with special attention paid to the relationship between activist women and their local communities.

The first section addresses the significance of “community” in democratic theory, in contrast with the more traditional use of “power” as a central organising concept in the academic literature on urban politics and community activism up until the mid-1980s. Ackelsberg insists on incorporating the activities of women in (re)considering political theory. Does including women change the framework? This is the underlying question for Ackelsberg throughout the book, and her answer is definitively yes. It is worth mentioning that Chapter 1 was originally published in 1984, at a time when mainstream political science did not yet reflect the paradigm shift that resulted from feminist scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Ackelsberg is particularly attune to the limits of both American pluralist ideology as well as many of the Marxist and Neo-Marxist critiques of pluralism, which she discusses in Chapter 2. Here she argues that democratic theory, specifically in the “pluralist” form that dominates political discourse in the contemporary U.S., rests on a number of flawed assumptions. Notably, the premise that individuals are primarily motivated by self-interest is a major tenet of liberal theories of democracy, of which the author is sceptical. Ackelsberg points out that these theories assume all individuals are treated equally in a free and open political arena. Thus, she concurs with
the many critics of U.S. democracy who have argued that the pluralist model is flawed on its own terms based on the history of racial, gender, and class inequality in the U.S.

Using such critiques as a jumping off point, she adds another layer of complexity in her own analysis by examining how women’s experiences of resistance further problematise the pluralist model. Ackelsberg takes issue with two key aspects of democratic theory with regard to the structuring of political consciousness in the U.S.: (1) the public/private split, and (2) the relationship between individuals and community(ies). She argues that since both aspects tend to be dichotomised in the democratic theory literature, not only are the experiences of many women misrepresented, but it becomes “difficult for us even to imagine what a truly democratic, participatory polity might look like” (p. 28). Lest the reader dismiss Ackelsberg’s analysis as overemphasizing gender (or the experiences of marginalised groups in general), she is quick to point out that her critiques may apply to either sex. Indeed, men as well as women engage in efforts to improve their communities, their families, and their governments.

The second section (written mostly in the mid-1990s) utilises a case-study approach to speak to the problems inherent in theories that rely on overly simplistic dichotomies, particularly the public/private. While Ackelsberg correctly traces this ideological split all the way back to Aristotle, she underplays the significance of two key resurgences of the public/private dichotomy in the U.S. that have come to be known in the feminist literature as the “separate spheres model.” This model, which the historian Barbara Welter famously coined the “cult of true womanhood” came about in the late nineteenth century in response to industrialisation, and resurfaced in the mid-twentieth century after World War II, a cultural phenomenon Betty Friedan referred to as “the problem without a name” in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

In her most current essay (written in 2008), Chapter 12, the author asks what meaning “democracy” has for anyone in the contemporary Euro-American context when those excluded from decision-making at both local and national levels are not just the usual suspects (e.g. the poor, women, people of color) but also white middle-class citizens. This is one of the major contributions of the book. Ackelsberg astutely observes that, “precisely at the moment when women and members of minority cultural groups are organising to assert their needs and rights, it often seems as