I. INTRODUCTION

During the last half century, numerous political movements have exemplified ways in which democratic action can in practice counteract the ethical failures of a split between public and private spheres. Of these movements, feminism most acutely highlights the deficiencies of this quintessential liberal divide. Practices of women's liberation and feminist theory have together exemplified ways in which a politicized ethics can provide effective resistance to the complacencies and oppressions fostered by splits between public and private spheres. In feminist theories and practices alike we thus discern some of democracy's most trenchant critiques of liberalism.

Unfortunately, philosophical perspectives on politics issuing from the tradition of philosophical pragmatism have as yet not sufficiently engaged with those feminist perspectives challenging liberalism's separation of public and private spheres. This seems odd, since many pragmatist political theorists argue that pragmatism casts doubt on the dichotomizing logic which supports the separation of public and private. There is thus something of a missed opportunity here. As Charlene Haddock Seigfried has noted in her important work on pragmatism and feminism, the tradition of philosophical pragmatism has "not yet been adequately subjected to feminist criticism or transformed by feminist revisioning." Taking up Seigfried's challenge that feminism could "uniquely reinvigorate pragmatism," my hope here is to renew the pragmatism of Dewey's democratic ethic under the guidance of, among other things, a feminist paradigm (Seigfried, 1996, 26, 17).1 Of particular value to such a pragmatist-feminist critique of liber-
primary political landmarks of this culture has been the split between public and private. If, however, this split is increasingly exhausted, confused, and obfuscated, then we would do well to now pay increasing attention to traditions which have struggled to press beyond the confines established by the public-private opposition. A combination of pragmatism and feminism can be an exemplar of this sort of criticism of the politics of publicity versus privacy.

II. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN FEMINISM

Democratic theory and practice owe a great debt to feminism for having articulated, in both thought and action, the democratic shortcomings in liberalism. Feminists have particularly focused much critical energy on liberalism's split between public and private. One feminist historian has recently emphasized the great depth of feminism's interest in this distinction: "Perhaps no concept has been more influential in the field of women's history than that of the distinction between public and private spheres" (Rupp, 2003, 11). Feminists created themselves as strong political forces only after severely contesting not only the specific terms of the distinction between public and private, but also the very viability of a politics organized around it. Carole Pateman thus noted over two decades ago that "the dichotomy between the public and the private" is ultimately "what the feminist movement is about" (Pateman, 1983, 281).

Feminist contestations of this dichotomy have issued in a family of interrelated critiques. What these critiques all share in common is an understanding of ways in which a split between public and private spheres can be used to reproduce subordination and inequality in both public and private. Expositions of this are so troubling for traditional liberalism because the split between public and private was introduced precisely to overcome such injustices. The traditional liberal view holds that subordination and inequality simply cannot exist in the private sphere and that a properly conducted public sphere will inevitably mitigate injustice.

Feminism undermines both of these founding assumptions of traditional liberalism by arguing that injustice can exist in private practices and public procedures can reinforce these injustices. The most obvious examples of this, quintessential in feminist literature, are the ways in which liberal rights of the public sphere have traditionally been conferred only on men in such a way as to in-

alism would be feminism's ongoing interrogation of the enduring oppositions between public and private, identity and difference, and sociality and individuality. My thought is that pragmatists are very well positioned to generalize feminism's exemplary critiques of sexual, gender, familial, and other moral dichotomies. Pragmatism and feminism could thus work together to problematize these dichotomies across the full spectrum of contemporary liberal politics and ethics.

Thus reconstructing the pragmatist conception of democracy according to a feminist paradigm has positive consequences within both feminist political theory and pragmatist political theory. In the context of feminism, such a reconstruction could deepen the ongoing struggles (both practical and theoretical) of feminism and at the same time extend these struggles in the direction of newer political challenges.

In the context of pragmatism, it could help clarify the status of debates between pragmatist political theorists more inclined to participatory and more radical liberal democratic perspectives on the one hand and those inclined to older and more conservative liberal democratic perspectives on the other. The question of how the classical pragmatism of Dewey should be interpreted is caught up within this debate. While most contemporary pragmatist political theorists interpret Dewey along lines more participatory than traditional (Westbrook, 1991 and West, 1989), in the past few decades an influential and convincing reinterpretation of pragmatism along liberal lines has gained momentum under the leadership of Richard Rorty (1989). Rorty thus offers a provocative defense of liberalism's ongoing interrogation of the enduring liberal split between public and private, identity and difference, and sociality and individuality. My thought is that pragmatists should press their political philosophies in the direction not of Rortyan but of Deweyan liberal democracy.

Worth mentioning, finally, is the way in which a synergistic deployment of pragmatism and feminism would be increasingly effective in the context of our liberal democratic culture. One of the
tensify sexual inequalities in traditionally private sphere domains such as family and work. Since the practices stabilizing these public and private subordinations had been immunized from ethical critique, they have persisted unchallenged, at least until fairly recently.\(^5\)

### III. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN RORTY’S PRAGMATISM

Before turning to a more general consideration of how the feminist critiques of the liberal logic of purification lead us to a more ethical conception of democracy, I want to first consider a specific feminist’s critique of a specific pragmatist’s defense of liberal democracy: namely Nancy Fraser’s critique of Richard Rorty. Feminists have been among Rorty’s most insightful critics, but this is not because Rorty has been unfriendly to feminism. Fraser notes well that Rorty’s “Feminism and Pragmatism” lecture was “the first time, to my knowledge, in this era of postwar professionalized philosophy, that a renowned male philosopher has elected to address the subject of feminism and indeed to make it the subject of a major philosophical address” (Fraser, 1991, 289). Nevertheless, feminists have taken issue with Rorty’s claim for potential synergies amongst feminism, liberalism, and pragmatism. By viewing feminism in liberal terms conducive to the public-private split, Rorty has, many feminist critics argue, defended a feminism hardly worth defending.\(^6\)

Fraser accuses Rorty of attempting to redescribe feminism in liberalism’s terms, that is, in terms of a “dichotomous view of cultural and discursive space” that, Fraser argues, maps Rorty’s early Kuhnian distinction “between normal and abnormal discourse onto a new distinction between public life and private life.” Political and Cultural Innovation is guaranteed because it is isolated as private, while social solidarity is stabilized because it is purified as public. But, Fraser continues, “in the case of feminism, the enterprise of remaking oneself through redescriptions is not opposed to political transformation but is rather part and parcel of it” (260–2). Private, abnormal, self-creative action can be separated from public action only at the cost of the very radicalism which has been essential to so much of feminism. Rorty’s “logic of apartheid,” to borrow Richard Bernstein’s epithet, confines radical feminist dissent to the private sphere of poetic innovation (286; cf. Bernstein, 2003). Fraser’s worry is that Rorty’s approach “homogenizes social space” such that “politics is a matter of everyone pulling together to solve a common set of problems” and that “social engineer-

Fraser finds in feminism something both radical and effective because she denies a point which Rorty affirms: that there are “no deep social cleavages, no pervasive axes of dominance and exploitation” in our current cultures of liberal democracy. Fraser argues for the possibility, which Rorty denies, that “the basic institutional framework of [our] society could be unjust.” Rorty denies this possibility because he thinks that Mill’s liberalism is the last conceptual revolution our politics need withstand. Rorty, in other words, cannot imagine any alternative to our current political regime except those enacted through small-scale reformist improvement. Considering the possibility of such alternatives, he writes that “the most efficient way to expose or demystify an existing practice would seem to be by suggesting an alternative practice... an alternative future and a scenario of political action that might take us from the present to that future.” I very much agree with Rorty on this point. There is little value in political theory decoupled from visions of what new projects we ought to lend our energy to in order to enrich our democratic experiment. Rorty encouragingly goes on to note that “[i]n the closest we leftist intellectuals in the rich democracies come nowadays to having such a party and a program is the feminist movement” (Rorty 1993, 96; cf. 2001, 21; cf. 1991, 73).

While feminism thus seems to offer a potentially radical political program, Rorty wants to deny such a view of feminism in favor of understanding it as perpetuating traditional liberal strategies.

My understanding of what is at stake in feminism differs from Rorty’s liberal interpretation. I think the centermost thrust of feminist politics is a dismantling of the distinction between public and private insofar as this distinction has enabled systematic oppression on the basis of sex and gender (as well as in slightly different contexts sexuality, race, class, etc.). But Rorty surely cannot accept feminism as saying this. For if he did, his call for a liberal culture dividing public from private would seem rather hopeless. Rorty is thus forced by his brand of liberalism to offer varying characterizations of feminism as either a form of private poeticization or a kind of friendly and mild public reformism.\(^8\) He is led to adopt these unappreciative caricatures because he is unwilling to let go of his vision of a liberal utopia where radical dissent and cohesive reform are purified in the separate spheres of private and public. The inevitable result, in the words of one feminist critic, is
that "Rorty's claim that we separate public and private is one that feminists can only greet with disbelief" (Bickford, 1993, 113).

And so Rorty, the freewheeling cultural critic who courageously and deftly moves among almost every intellectual trend relevant to modern liberal culture, evinces a surprising lack of grip when it comes to feminism. Feminism is Rorty's one really big weak spot. But perhaps this is because feminism presents a profound political challenge to the liberal culture that Rorty champions. Feminism, as it happens, is also liberalism's one really big weak spot.

On Rorty's view, one cannot cast doubt on the liberal notion of separate spheres by merely describing certain of our most valuable political practices as requiring the abandonment of this notion. Rorty's view, in other words, is that democratic feminism could be used to cast doubt on public-private liberalism only if it can be shown that feminism is both politically compelling and politically opposed to the separation of public and private spheres. I think feminism can be shown to be both. Feminist democratic practices are compelling for many of the familiar reasons which most of us today endorse. These practices are also an alternative to liberalism precisely because they require that we refuse a distinction between public and private which would determine in advance the shape that a feminist politics would have to take. Thus, while Rorty himself would not endorse my argument that central aspects of feminism throw into doubt certain key notions of liberalism, I nevertheless offer this argument from a perspective that I believe can be fairly described as Rortyan.

IV. FEMINISM AND PRAGMATISM BEYOND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

It is important to acknowledge that there are feminists who agree with Rorty that we should not seek to abandon the distinction between public and private. These feminists argue, in terms which Rorty could endorse, that we should render this distinction as supple as possible. This is indeed a formidable set including theorists as diverse as Seyla Benhabib, Chantal Mouffe, Jean Cohen, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. While I agree that the split between public and private can be rendered more flexible, I do not expect that such flexibility could challenge the essential bipolarity of this distinction. It is in liberalism's continuing obsession with an oppositional understanding of the distinction between public and private that I locate the political paralysis of liberal polities.

So what we must abandon is not only the rigidity of a distinction between public and private as some feminists suggest, but also the narrowness at work in any conception of politics which takes this distinction as central to political life. The distinction between public and private, though certainly still a useful tool in a variety of political contexts, should not be seen as the conceptual center of a viable form of liberal democracy. This, however, is exactly how Mill and Rorty, along with other liberal theorists across the spectrum from Hayek to Rawls, see it.

I thus agree with feminist political theorists like Mary Dietz who argue that versions of feminism that "reinforce an abstract split between public and private realms" perpetuate a vision of the world as "divided naturally and abstractly into dual realms." In holding to this distinction, Dietz says, "feminist political consciousness is perilously close to becoming politically barren" (1985, 51, 56; cf. Dietz, 2002, 7, 114 ff.). Dietz elsewhere explicates this claim: "A feminist commitment to democratic citizenship should not be confused with either the liberal politics of pressure groups and representative government or the idea that after victory or defeat on an issue, the game is over and we can 'go home.' . . . The key idea here is that citizenship must be conceived of as a continuous activity and a good in itself" (1987, 76). Dietz's thought is that by bifurcating our political lives we risk reducing the ongoing struggle of democratic ethics to occasional participation in governmental affairs which we tend to neglect in more private moments. Dietz's arguments are reinforced by feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young's argument that politics and justice concern "all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decision making." Young understands this more encompassing conception of justice and politics not as eradicating the distinction between public and private so much as taming it insofar as she denies that a viable conception of justice could mirror a "social division between public and private spheres, each with different kinds of institutions, activities, and human attributes" (1990, 9, 120).

Another feminist political theorist suspicious of a mild reformist attitude towards the split between public and private is bell hooks. hooks argues for infusing democratic politics with an ethics that holds together the classical tension between self-creation and other-recognition: "Feminism defined in political terms that stress collective as well as individual experience challenges women to enter a new domain" (hooks, 1984, 27). The democratic politics of fem-
inism must therefore break from old domain liberal dichotomies: "we’re never going to end the forms of domination if we’re not willing to challenge the notion of public and private... why shouldn’t we have intimacy in the world outside as well?" (hooks, 1994, 224; cf. 1984, 9, 21). hooks thus directly charges Rorty’s vision of liberal culture with perpetrating unnecessary oppositions between consensus and dissent, oneness and otherness, sociality and individuality (see hooks, 1994, 234). By privatizing intimate qualities of personality and isolating them from public action in advance of any real political action, liberalism abandons any attempt to connect politics to ethics. The result is a dangerous complacency in which politics is inoculated against any newness that a more democratic combination of cohesion and dissent may yet yield.

The problem, I think, is one of context. The suggestions of some feminists that we could endure a more flexible and more functional distinction between public and private are good enough so far as applied to the rather narrow range of problems facing contemporary governmental institutions. However, the persistent failure of traditional liberalism has been that it envisions this distinction as the very essence of politics. This is because liberalism has tended to think of the problems of politics in terms of the problems of state governmentality. Liberalism, in other words, reconstructs politics as a critique, in Kant’s special sense of that word, of the state.10

It is indeed difficult to imagine solving many of our political problems without some recourse to law and government, and so a more supple distinction between public and private is needed to more appropriately determine their proper scope. But it is even harder to imagine the blossoming of a broad ethical democratic practice if state-legal means continue to dominate our political practices and if we continue to view state and law as the best tool we have for meeting any and all political problems. Hence the importance of feminist arguments like those voiced by Dietz, Young, and hooks.

I would like to now turn in conclusion to the pragmatist political philosophy of John Dewey, the thinker who Rorty has described as the main inspiration behind his own self-description as a pragmatist. What I want to show in particular is how the feminist arguments I have been describing strikingly resemble Dewey’s pragmatist argument. The first thing to note is that the centermost concept in Dewey’s political philosophy is that of democracy. But Dewey had a unique conception of democracy which he summarized with his slogan that “democracy is a way of life.”11 Dewey’s view was that “[d]emocracy is much broader than a special political form, a method of conducting government, of making laws and carrying on governmental administration by means of popular suffrage and elected officers. It is... a way of life, social and individual” (Dewey, 1937b, 217). Dewey’s pragmatist politics thus nicely links up with feminist politics insofar as both traditions refuse to disengage politics from ethics by reducing politics to a critique of the state—a critique that leads inevitably to a distinction between the proper public sphere of state intervention and the proper private sphere of state noninterference. Dewey’s pragmatist conception of democracy thus strongly resonates with Dietz’s feminist claim that there is an “intrinsic impurity” in politics that is denied by “the formal rubrics of a modern legal-juridical or constitutional-democratic political philosophy” (Dietz, 2002, 143). Liberalism’s almost exclusive focus on the state, Dietz and Dewey seem to be suggesting, tends to crystallize into a form of political practice that functions without and perhaps in spite of ethical practice.

As an alternative to the quintessential liberal distinction between one highly-unified public sphere and one highly-differentiated private sphere, Dewey envisioned a plurality of publics in unceasing interaction. At times these interactions will assume more harmonious tendencies while at other times they will be more conflictual. But never will they all be situated according to the authority of one central public authority. In his fullest statement of political philosophy, The Public and Its Problems, Dewey retained the idea of a distinction between public and private, but he thought this distinction should be drawn only “experimentally” because “[t]he idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best.”12 This Deweyan view has been developed by feminist pragmatists Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1996) and Judith Green (1999). Green calls this view “deep democracy” and convincingly argues that such a conception, drawing inspiration from both pragmatist and feminist sources, amounts to a democracy that would pervade the entirety of our cultural practices and would therefore explicitly refuse to carve up our conceptions and practices of politics into separable domains of public and private.

Feminists and pragmatists who have only occasional interest in the distinction between public and private tend to approach politics not in terms of a critique of the state, but in terms of deeper intimacies between politics and ethics. But democratic theorists attempting to strengthen the intimacy of ethics and politics have always met with considerable frustration at the liberal dichotomization of public and private. This is because the distinction be-
tween public and private serves to render the impact of ethics on politics superfluous. Feminists have thus often found themselves trapped by the logic of public and private in the way noted by feminist historian Mary Ryan: “Feminists tend to experience the border between private and public as a political bottleneck” (Ryan, 2003, 11). The long-standing impasse severing our democratic politics from our democratic ethics is thus an urgent problem for all theorists and practitioners of democracy, be they feminists or pragmatists or both.13

NOTES

1 The history of feminist-pragmatist intersections is explored by Seigfried (1996) and in collections by Sullivan (2001) and Seigfried (1993).

2 Feminism, of course, does not itself possess a stable identity but nor is it a fragmentary set of critiques. I borrow specifically from feminists who hold together tensions between identity and difference rather than seeking further entrenchment of such oppositions; for a description of feminist theory in these terms see Weir (1996).

3 Although I do not defend the claim here, I further believe that a pragmatist conception of democracy must take William James's political philosophy as seriously as it does John Dewey's. For recent work in this direction see Koopman (2005), Smith (2004), Livingston (2001), Miller (1997), and Cotkin (1990).

4 Other particularly useful discussions of feminism in the context of this split include work by Landes (2003), Dietz (2002) and Weintraub (1997).

5 Exemplary feminist critiques of the public/private split in these terms include those of Pateman (1988), Okin (1989), and Young (1990) though in each case the consequences of the critique are very different.


7 Fraser, 1989, 107; for his denial see Rorty, 1994, 209n15.

8 On feminism as private-poetical see Rorty (1994) and as public-reformist see Rorty (1993).

9 See work by Benhabib (1989), Mouffe (1993), Cohen (1988) and Elshtain (1981). These feminists all probably agree that “it is the gender bias lodged at the border between public and private, not the terms themselves, that is objectionable” (Ryan, 2003, 12).

10 See Berlin (1958, 126), Foucault (1979, 77), Manent (1987, 93) and, especially in the context of my broader themes here, Weintraub (1997, 8).

11 This idea permeates Dewey’s works from the early Dewey (1888) all the way to the late Dewey (1939b); helpful recent explications of this idea in Dewey are given by Green (1999) and Stuhr (1993).

12 Dewey 1927, 126, 65, 143; Seigfried (1996, 92) and especially Westbrook (1991, 305) emphasize the point that Dewey’s concern is not the public but rather a plurality of publics.

13 For their comments on earlier drafts, I would like to thank Barry Allen and Allison Weir. I would also like to express posthumous gratitude to Richard Rorty, for it is from conversations with him that I gained an understanding of his views, particularly concerning the way in which feminists and pragmatists would have to go about developing sensible criticisms of certain strains or aspects of liberalism.

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