BOOK REVIEWS


At first sight Different Voices will strike the reader as somewhat diffuse and unstructured. Those who are unused to the trials of teaching compulsory courses in gender and feminism to undergraduate audiences may be especially perplexed and/or irritated by the apparent lack of synthetic theoretical structure or the tendency towards statements of the obvious (e.g. "Women who dispute feminism have very different ideas about what is in the best interests of women" or "Feminists have consistently fought for various women's issues since the 1890s"). But the most important fact to bear in mind about this book is its target audience. Elizabeth van Acker seeks, quite explicitly, to speak to an audience looking for a picture of Australian gender politics painted in very broad brushstrokes. The aims of the book are fairly modest ones, namely, to demonstrate the ways in which "gender and politics inform each other in particular ways." Most social scientists will find this goal overly modest but as van Acker points out, "This is not a book for people familiar with this idea - it will appear unduly simplified." Instead, Different Voices "is designed for a different audience: those who have yet to discover this area of scholarship." She also expresses the hope that her prose and the ideas it conveys will be understood by its readership. This is refreshing.

A second and quite worthy aim of Different Voices is to rehabilitate feminism for a disaffected generation labouring under the misapprehension that all the important feminist battles have now been won (there also tends to be a concomitant underlying contempt for an older generation of feminists who struggled fiercely for benefits now taken for granted). In the preface van Acker explains: "I first started thinking about this book when I noticed many undergraduate politics students' strong resistance whenever I mentioned the word 'gender', let alone 'feminism' in class." Her hope is to break this resistance down in order to enable students to better understand what feminism is all about and perhaps even accept the legitimacy of some or any of its claims.

But Different Voices is no panegyric rant on the virtues of feminism; rather, it attempts to fill a gap in the literature. According to its author, on the one hand, most "politics texts" treat feminism cursorily in a single chapter while feminist texts, on the other, treat the subject of politics in similar nugatory style. None, however, "seem to talk about gender and politics throughout."

The author takes little for granted in terms of the reader's prior knowledge. Even fairly recent and well-publicised controversies such as that surrounding the publication of Helen Garner's The First Stone are recounted and analysed for readers, some of whom may have been too young to be tuned in at the time (bear in mind that it is quite common to encounter first year politics students who don't even know who Bob Hawke is), van Acker tells her reader who Women Who Want to be Women are, and what they are reacting against; she pauses to provide an outline of the essentials of the "victim feminism" debate; the distinction and relationship between Australia's Women's Liberation
Movement and the Women's Electoral Lobby; what semiotics is all about and what it has to do with the study of gender and so on. Her language is clear and simple and her treatment of all parties concerned even-handed. And apart from providing a potted history of Australian feminism, she works to historicise whatever issue she happens to be discussing. The details are up to date; there is, for example, a section on the travails of feminism under the current Federal government and a postscript on the One Nation phenomenon. The book covers an enormous amount of ground, from media portrayals of feminism, to the gendered division of labour in the workplace through to feminist theory.

I particularly liked van Acker's willingness to defend feminism while patiently addressing the complaints of its enemies; in this regard Different Voices is indeed normative, more than simply a description of "everything you need to know about gender and feminism in Australia today."

From an editorial point of view I detected some repetition and a few typographical errors. In addition, the index could be more complete; given the wealth of information inside the book it deserves to be more detailed.

From casual corridor conversations with colleagues I understand that the book has already garnered positive feedback from undergraduates, apparently because it assumes little or no prior knowledge but also, I suspect, because it assumes that its audience may be a prejudiced one; accordingly van Acker may well succeed in converting some of the hostile, disaffected and sometimes uncomprehending undergraduate audiences with whom teachers of gender are often confronted at the beginning of each teaching year. In addition, the text will be of practical use to anyone teaching introductory courses in politics; the bibliography alone will be useful to undergraduates.

LISA HILL
Australian National University