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Contributions of Women Political Scientists to a More Just World

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Contributions of Women Political Scientists to a More Just World

Introduction

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This roundtable was originally presented as a panel at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the APSA in Philadelphia that was sponsored by the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession. It was the sense of members of that Committee that far too much of the time and energy of many political scientists-- especially within the hallowed halls of convention centers-- has focused on methodological debates and conflicts, while far too little attention has been directed to issues of social change and/or to contemporary issues of public policy. Nevertheless, it was also our sense that the focus on method to the exclusion--or, at least, the devaluation--of substance has been less true for feminist scholars and others who have been on the margins of the discipline or of the society than it has been for members of the profession at large. Indeed, many of the women and minority scholars, in particular, who entered the field of political science in the past 20-30 years did so precisely because they wanted to make a difference in the world, and to learn how to use the tools of the profession to improve the situation of the less empowered members of society, whether in the U.S. or abroad. Hence, the decision to sponsor this roundtable, to highlight some of those women and their contributions, and to reflect on what we have achieved, and what significant questions and tasks remain to be addressed.

The scholars whose contributions are included in this roundtable offer a variety of different framings of the question, and of perspectives on the issues. Indeed, some of the conversation at the panel at which these ideas were first presented was quite spirited,

even contentious. Without attempting to summarize their arguments, what I would like to do is to name some of the major themes that were addressed, in hopes of sharpening for readers some of the significant issues at stake. In this respect, I would argue that we find four major themes, or sets of questions, interwoven in the remarks of our participants, despite the fact that they come from different subfields of the discipline, and work in rather different methodological frameworks. These are:

1. A claim that many women (and, more specifically, feminist) political scientists have had a particular role in challenging the epistemological boundaries, and/or transforming the analytical frameworks, of the discipline of political science.
2. A concern about the relationship between activism and the academy. The conversation clearly brought to the surface strong feelings about what responsibilities attend what many perceive as the privilege of working in the academy. What, for example, are our responsibilities as members of the academy to members of the communities in which we live? To members of the communities (based on ethnicity, race, or class, for example) with which we identify? Do we have (or do we feel) a responsibility to engage in research and teaching that somehow contributes to struggles for justice in the world?
3. While our responses may have differed, virtually everyone also raised questions about an assumed responsibility as professors to promote active, engaged, citizenship among our students.
4. Finally, even if only indirectly, the roundtable also elicited discussion about the relationship between challenging academic frameworks and transforming

analytical categories, on the one hand, and struggles for social justice, on the other.

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1. It is certainly not the case that every female or queer political scientist or political scientist of color has made the challenging of epistemological boundaries or the development of new analytical frameworks a centerpiece of her research agenda. Nor is it the case that no male, white, heterosexual political scientists have done so. Indeed, the same Annual Meeting at which this roundtable began included a variety of panels celebrating the Caucus for a New Political Science, including one entitled “100 Years of Dissent in Political Science,” as well as a number of panels, roundtables, and meetings discussing the Perestroika insurgency and its impact on the discipline. Nevertheless, feminist political scientists, and those from historically marginalized communities, have tended to be somewhat more likely than average to “push the epistemological envelope.” In some respects, this is hardly surprising. One need not argue, for example, that every woman will necessarily develop an oppositional “feminist standpoint,” any more than one can argue that every worker will develop a Marxian class-consciousness, to recognize that those whose experiences had long been ignored by mainstream analytical frameworks might find themselves, at the moment when they attempt to use those frameworks, to paraphrase Freud, adopting a “hostile attitude”¹ toward the governing paradigms of the discipline.

Indeed, from the very beginning of the Second Wave interest in recovering the varied experiences of women, and incorporating them into the frameworks of political science, feminist scholars found themselves, of necessity, questioning the terms in which

“politics,” “political behavior,” and “political participation”-- let alone “political man”-- had been constructed.² And the development of feminist perspectives in comparative politics, international relations, American politics, and political theory has only deepened and broadened that critical focus, so that, now, virtually none of the analytical frameworks to which I was introduced in graduate school some thirty years ago have escaped profound critical scrutiny.

At the same time, there are, of course, many women political scientists (as there are political scientists of color, political scientists from working-class backgrounds, or who identify as queer) whose work is neither explicitly critical of disciplinary boundaries nor contributes-- explicitly or implicitly-- to struggles for social justice. It is both common and also problematic-- both within the academy and outside it-- to assume that those formerly excluded will necessarily be rebels once they have an opportunity to join the mainstream. Nevertheless, it is the case that all of those who are contributors to this roundtable-- while knowledgeable about, and adept in using, dominant analytical paradigms-- have tended to engage in work that, to one degree or another, engages and challenges those frameworks.

2. One of the most striking elements of the discussion was the degree to which all the participants felt a responsibility as feminist political scientists to be engaged in social activism, in whatever way that was defined. While readers will note considerable differences among the contributors with respect to what sorts of activities are thought to constitute activism (and these range from the “simple” fact of teaching, as women, to serving as “public intellectuals” to engaging in community-led campaigns of one sort or

another), all our participants clearly express some sense of obligation to the world beyond the academy.

Interestingly, that sense of obligation to engage in activism is what generated some of the most heated discussion at the initial roundtable. Is doing feminist work within the academy-- challenging the paradigms, training new generations of undergraduate and graduate students with new understandings of what constitutes both the study and the practice of politics-- “enough” to fulfill our felt commitments? Do we need, as Susan Carroll suggested, to “give ourselves a break,” and recognize the contributions we make through our work? Do we have some additional responsibility to be, and to train, public intellectuals? To speak out in support of, and indeed, to join, social movements engaged with critical public policy issues?

The clearest disagreement among participants on the panel was over the question of whether academic work, in itself-- even that focused around questions of social justice-- necessarily contributes to social change. While Cathy Rudder suggested that all of us find important connections between our scholarship and a commitment to social justice, Iris Young argued that those of us whose professional lives are located in the academy need to be activists as citizens, regardless of the focus of their research and teaching. Even so, there is an important role for the academy in activism, and vice versa. Activists can be important resources for academics, who have much to learn from the ways people engage with the world and try to change it. And those of us in the academy, with access to research facilities and other resources, can offer a variety of tests and supports for the claims of activists. In short, there is much translation work to be done. In addition, we must recognize that not all of us are similarly situated with respect to the various

communities in our lives. Melissa Harris-Lacewell, for example, notes that black women in the academy may have a more intimate relationship with activist communities, one potentially sharpened by class differences and by the assumption of the need to “give back” to one’s community. And she urges us to pay attention to the “extra-scholarly burdens” that black women scholars bear in the academy, and to the ways that, “even as they...craft a more just world through their scholarship and professional duties, they find themselves paying the cost of that justice” through their association with marginalized/vulnerable communities, and their attention to issues and questions frequently devalued by mainstream institutions and professional gatekeepers.

3. Virtually all our participants took as a starting point a commitment to promote active, engaged, citizenship among our students. To be sure, one might well argue that this perspective is hardly unique to women political scientists: I would assume that it is widely-held among political scientists, in general. Nevertheless, there are some distinctive elements in these reflections. Most generally, perhaps, especially since women have been so long excluded from (or at least marginalized within) the major structures of political participation in many communities and societies, issues of power and privilege, of inclusion and exclusion, have been central to the writings of feminist critics from Wollstonecraft to Carole Pateman. And, as Spike Peterson argues, critiques of power and privilege (and an acknowledgment of the power that comes with privilege) are central to feminist theorizing, as well as to feminist activism. Feminist scholars, then, are perhaps even more likely than political scientists overall to promote in their students the values of civic activism and responsibility—a position deriving from their particular location as what we might term “marginal insiders.”

In addition, of course, there is the question of “citizenship” within the profession and our particular institutions. As Melissa Harris-Lacewell notes, the pressures on black women professionals, in particular, can be extreme: because they constitute “such a tiny fraction of the discipline, particularly in elite institutions, each black woman carries a disproportionate share of extra-scholarly work as compared to her white male colleagues.” Even more than is the case for many white women, as well as men of color, members of the group are often called on for committee service, and to serve as “role models” for students—tasks which they may well welcome but which, nevertheless, are often undertaken only at a considerable cost within the structure of academic institutions. Such scholars, then, promote “good citizenship” in their teaching and in the way they engage with the academy more generally; in both ways, they have a significant impact on students, and on the pursuit of justice in the academy and in the world.

4. Finally, there is a question that the panel did not address directly, but which arises from consideration of the themes discussed: what, if anything, is the relationship between challenging disciplinary paradigms and struggles for social justice? Clearly, one can challenge disciplinary paradigms on a whole range of issues, and for a variety of reasons, none of them necessarily connected with larger claims of social justice. And, presumably, one can be committed to, and work towards, larger societal goals of social justice without attempting to transform the major categories of the discipline. And, yet, there does seem to be a connection, at least for those on the panel, and for many who have been engaged in feminist scholarship over the past three decades. As Harris-Lacewell notes, because many black women political scientists come to the academy from traditions of activism and political engagement, they “often challenge the

epistemological frameworks of political science by scrutinizing established norms of scientificism and scholarly distance.” Indeed, to the extent that feminist studies in the academy more generally grew out of the larger women’s movement, a commitment to social change animated the lives and work of many women political scientists who have joined the profession in the last 30 years.

A challenge to conventional categories has been a hallmark of feminist research from its inception—not least, of course, because feminist research focused on the ways conventional categories and methodologies ignored or excluded the experiences of women, people of color, the poor, and others who did not “fit” the traditional descriptions of citizenship and political belonging. And, further, as Spike Peterson notes, “those with privilege/power have ‘more’ responsibility for making ‘progressive’ social changed because many enjoy ‘unearned’ (assigned not acquired) privilege that is ‘unjust’ and all with privilege have a disproportionate share of ‘benefits,” including *more power to reproduce or transform structural hierarchies*.” Feminist scholars within the academy, as well as feminist activists outside it, then, have a responsibility to challenge the ways dominant paradigms devalue the lives and work of vulnerable groups. She urges us to merge empirical/structural studies with cultural/linguistic/discursive struggles to challenge the cultural dimension of these devaluations. Without such a change in how we understand what constitutes knowledge, and what sorts of experiences and activities are valuable, there will be no significant change in the condition of marginalized groups—either within the terms of our academic disciplines or in the larger society.

¹ I refer to Freud’s comment about women coming “into opposition to civilization,” and adopting a “hostile attitude” toward it, in Civilization and Its Discontents, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1961), pp. 50-51.

² See, for example, Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz, "Politics as Unnatural Practice: Political Science Looks at Female Participation," Politics and Society I (Winter 1974): 225-266; Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Moral Woman and Immoral Man: Reflections on the Public-Private Split..." Politics and Society IV, 2? ; Kristen Amundsen, The Silenced Majority; and Susan Moller Okin, Women and Western Political Thought.