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Contested Questions, Current Trajectories: Feminism in Political Theory Today

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X10000607

I once mentioned to a prominent feminist scholar that I was using one of her books in my course on feminism and political theory. She looked at me blankly for a moment and then replied, "Feminism *and* political theory? I thought feminism *is* political theory." She was right of course; in some sense, everything that is feminist theory is also political theory. Feminism illuminates gendered relations of power in politics and social life, after all, and it contributes (however indirectly) to the larger project of transforming them. Moreover, since the rise of "second wave" feminism in the 1970s, feminist theorists have significantly reshaped political theory as a discipline, moving crucial questions from the margins of the field to its center, questions about gender equity and justice, the constitution of the political subject, the demands of difference, the intersecting dynamics of domination, the differential effects of globalization, and the conditions of

freedom, among other things. As a result, much of what we think of as “mainstream” political theory is now also feminist theory. This is often true even of work that does not make women or gender its sole subject matter, as the leading voices in the field increasingly are scholars whose work has been shaped by literatures central to feminism and who think about politics in ways that are informed by a critical consciousness of the gendered quality of power relations.

In an important 2003 review of the field, Mary Dietz (2003) charted the transition from second-wave feminism to what has come to be known as its “third wave,” which dates from the late 1980s but developed with special dynamism throughout the 1990s. Above all, this change involved the “world diversification” of feminism to a more global, comparative, and differentiated body of work. Indeed, there was a time in the late 1990s when many feminists wondered whether feminism could survive the radical pluralization of methods, purposes, commitments, and subjects of study then underway within feminist theory. Without a unitary “we” and a singular shared purpose, what would feminism be? The last decade has demonstrated that feminism does not have to be one thing to flourish: The diversification of the field has instead broadened and deepened it, generating increased dynamism and a wealth of new understanding.

My reflections here pick up where Dietz left off, focusing on major work that has appeared in the last 10 years and that reflects the field’s growing breadth and depth. Feminists writing in political theory occupy a tremendously wide range of methodological perspectives, from analytic liberal theory to poststructuralism to discourse ethics to postcolonial theory to Arendtian agonism, to name just a few. Feminism is also diverse in terms of its subjects of analysis (*which* women *where?*), its framing values (emancipation in what sense and to what end?), and the specific topics it addresses. Since 2000, feminists of varying stripes have produced important work on every major topic in political theory, including (but, of course, not limited to) transnational democracy and human rights,¹ justice,² citizenship and political authority,³ the role of affect in politics,⁴ postcolonial and diaspora politics,⁵ freedom,⁶ religion

1. See, for example, Ackerly 2008; Benhabib 2002, 2008; Gould 2004; Nussbaum 2000; Young 2006.

2. See, for example, Chambers 2008; Fraser 2009; Nussbaum 2006.

3. See, for example, Brown 2005; Butler and Spivak 2007; Dean 2009; Dietz 2002; Honig 2009; Phelan 2001; Lister 2007.

4. See, for example, Hall 2005; Koziak 2000; Krause 2008; Nussbaum 2006; Tamopolsky 2010.

5. See, for example, Grewal 2005; Mohanty 2003; Narayan and Harding 2000.

6. See, for example, Hirschmann 2002, 2008; Zerilli 2005.

and multiculturalism,⁷ race and identity politics,⁸ and environmentalism.⁹

Amidst this rich array of topics and approaches, three trends stand out as particularly welcome instances of the broadening and deepening taking place in feminism today. They reflect contested questions and trajectories of thought that cut across the many methodological differences and topic areas that animate feminist political theory.

The first is what has come to be known as “intersectionality,” or sensitivity to the divergent ways that the multiple aspects of our identities affect our political experience. First articulated as a critique of middle-class, white feminism in the United States by poor and working-class women and women of color (Crenshaw 1989),¹⁰ the intersectionalist approach now infuses global feminisms as well as the best U.S. work, and it covers religion, ethnicity, nationality, caste, and sexual orientation, in addition to race, class, and gender. It thus links up in important ways with the analytical lens of “hybridity” that occupies such a central place in postcolonial theory. Intersectionalist approaches also extend beyond the politics of identity to reflect on the intersecting structural dimensions of power operative in (for example) transnational migration patterns, systems of humanitarian aid, environmental degradation, and global health disparities.¹¹ Saba Mahmood’s (2005) study of the women’s mosque movement in contemporary Egypt, for instance, shows how religious, class, and cultural differences under pressures of globalization affect women’s experiences of social mobilization, leadership, and agency. It also disrupts (quite productively) many normative assumptions implicit in secular and radical-democratic strands of feminist theory. Feminisms with roots in South Asia, China, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa continue to extend this trajectory of intersectionality/hybridity, as does new work within the United States that focuses on “the new racism” and the experiences of LGBTQ people.¹² The result is an explosion of knowledge about the lived experience of differently placed and multiply-positioned women, knowledge that can only enrich our normative theorizing and the possibilities for future emancipation.

7. Mahmood 2005; Narayan and Harding 2000; Phillips 2009; Shachar 2001; Song 2007.

8. See, for example, Alcoff 2006; Beltrán 2010; Hancock 2007; Hill-Collins 2005.

9. See, for example, Bennett 2004; Shiva 2005.

10. It is worth noting that Crenshaw’s critique was directed equally at feminists who were white and race activists who were men.

11. See Ackerly 2000; Ackerly and Attanasi 2009; Alexander 2005; Smith 2000.

12. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning people. See, among others, Ackerly and Attanasi 2009; Hawkesworth 2006; Hill-Collins 2005; Pateman and Mills 2007; Pereira 2003; Shaheed 2010; and Love 2007.

A second important trend in feminist political theory is the effort to theorize human agency in nonsovereign terms while recognizing its real potency and exploring the possibilities for freedom that it makes available. Throughout the 1990s, often in response to the influential work of Judith Butler and others, feminists debated whether the deconstruction of the sovereign subject as an autonomous agent, which many feminists had championed, undercut emancipatory political action — and freedom itself. For a time, it seemed as if feminist political theory had reached something of an impasse on this matter (Dietz 2003). New work is now moving beyond that impasse, contesting the old assumption that agency equals autonomy, and making room within agency for forms of subjectivity and action that are nonsovereign but nevertheless potent.¹³ For some theorists, this shift involves thinking of agency and freedom in more collective ways, which emphasize solidarity, relationality, and constitutive intersubjectivity.¹⁴ This trend is valuable in part because it ameliorates the potential for a disabling cynicism and political passivity that threatened to overtake feminist theory once the social construction of identities through discourses of power came to be understood and accepted. In part, too, these new approaches to agency are important because they make it possible to recognize and learn from the agency of the oppressed, and to think in more emancipatory ways about the obligations and the practices of democratic citizenship. One question worth raising here is whether feminist theories of agency, which rightly reject the untenable psychological assumptions and normative commitments associated with the old liberal individualism, can nevertheless accommodate the distinctive individuality of particular women. Individuality is one of the many intersecting (but typically group-based) aspects of identity that feminist theories of agency need to accommodate.

A third trend that is full of promise is the increased travel across the border between normative political theory and the empirical study of women and politics.¹⁵ Brooke Ackerly's recent (2008) book about human rights, which grounds its normative theory of rights in the arguments and experiences of women human rights activists in the developing world, is a good example of this kind of travel and the fruits it yields. Cristina Beltrán's study of *Latinidad* (2010) is another case in

13. See Allen 2007; Beltrán 2010; Butler 2004; Hirschmann 2002; Zerilli 2005.

14. See, for example, Butler 2004; Comell 2007; Mohanty 2003; Nedelsky 2005.

15. I borrow the imagery of border crossings here from Anzaldúa 1987.

point, for it combines traditional sources in political theory, such as Rousseau and Arendt, with survey results and narrative histories of the Chicano and Puerto Rican rights movements in the United States. As normative theory, feminism needs to be able to think beyond the limits of the actual, but it also needs to be informed and guided by the lived experiences and aspirations of real women. The realities of domination, oppression, and exclusion are often easiest to see (or only visible) in the concrete cases in which they are actually experienced. Attending to these concrete cases enhances our ability to understand conditions as they are and to theorize meaningfully about what ought to be. The contemporary border crossings between normative theory and empirical study are, therefore, tremendously valuable contributions, not just to feminism but also to political theory and the study of politics as a whole.

So the future of feminism in political theory is full of promise. These trends and others continue to deepen and broaden our understanding of gendered relations of power from a rich multiplicity of perspectives. We know now that feminism does not have to be just one thing. On the contrary, part of the value that feminism brings to political theory today is its dynamism, the restless intellectual reaching that continually opens new vistas of understanding and new possibilities for political transformation.

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Feminist International Relations

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X10000619

Feminist international relations is situated uneasily within a subfield of political science, on the one hand, and within an interdisciplinary literature on globalization, on the other. Emerging in the 1990s from a critique of the realist and rationalist IR canon, feminist IR research has diversified considerably, including different lines of theoretical and empirical inquiry and drawing on a range of methods. Different