

Politics Beyond Boundaries: A Feminist Perspective

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1 Introduction and Argument

There is no true site of politics. Politics is everywhere. This is so because no realm of life is immune to relations of conflict and power. There is always the possibility that social relations could be ordered differently, which means that there is inevitable dispute as to the most appropriate, or just, way of organizing these relations otherwise.

This broad answer to the question 'what is politics?' issues a challenge to many conventional ways of defining politics, which frequently entail the marking of its boundaries. Politics, it is frequently claimed, concerns government and the institutions of the state. Politics is what takes place within these institutions: other spheres of life are non-political. The association of politics with the institutions of government creates a very particular boundary between the public, as the apparatus of government, and the private, as civil society. This understanding of politics derives from a liberal conviction that there both is and *should* be a private sphere beyond the reach of politics, which is pre- or non-political. This conviction can be traced back to a natural-rights tradition in which the role of the state is to protect the existence of pre-political rights.

Yet natural-rights theories have been subject to increasing scepticism as it becomes ever more evident that – stripped of their theological basis – these 'natural' rights are contingent and contested. When rights themselves come to be seen as political rather than pre-political, the possibility of a non-political sphere of life is curtailed. It then becomes clear that the accepted boundaries of politics are but a product of past political struggles.

This is significant because the narrow association of politics with the institutions of state and government excludes the 'private' sphere of domesticity and sexuality from political sight. Given that women have conventionally been defined in terms of their relation to the domestic, this particular conception of the political has effectively marginalized women as political actors. By contrast, a broader conception of politics, as those processes concerned with the struggle over the control and distribution of power across a whole range of sites, opens up space for considering issues of gender as central to the study of politics. It is for this reason that feminists have largely adopted this broader view, making visible the extent to which relations of power are far more pervasive than the kind of power normally associated with institutions and government.

Moreover, having eroded the boundaries of the political, feminists have then gone on to demand the reconfiguration of these broadly conceived sets of power relations. The relations of power in the personal domain should be understood as political, but traditionally formal domains of politics also require rethinking from a feminist perspective. In this way feminism makes several key contributions to debates about the nature of the political: in eroding the boundaries of the political; in focusing attention on how the old institutional 'arenas' of the political themselves need reform; and in exploring the linkage between the institutions of government and wider social practices, such that they can be reconfigured more profoundly.

In this chapter I will, first, indicate the nature of the narrow institutional conception of politics, and then show why and in what ways feminists have worked to erode the boundaries of this conception of politics, developing a more extensive power-based conception of politics. I will go on to indicate how this project relates to the various feminist critiques of the public / private dichotomy, especially, and consider the impact of this project in terms of feminist engagements in politics. These engagements have encompassed both social movement activism, which focuses on politicizing and transforming relations frequently presumed personal, and hence 'non-political', and also an entry into political parties and the state, often resulting in the transformation of political practices such that they facilitate greater and more equal participation by women.

2 Moving Beyond Institutionalism

The origins of the discipline of politics are commonly located with Aristotle's *The Politics*, in which he evaluates differing constitutions

in search of the best method of government. Since this time there has been deep-rooted disagreement as to what constitutes the political. There are those who define politics in terms of governmental institutions and others who define it in terms of relations of power. Within the latter camp there are some who focus on a very narrowly defined range of power relations and others who adopt a very broad range. Feminist theorists have, by and large, promoted the second conception of politics as relations of power, and worked to extend the accepted understanding of the range of relations which might then be deemed political.

For those who have understood politics as the institutions of government the political is equated with the juridical – issues of rights, justice and responsibility. This contrasts with those who have understood politics as being about power relations, and who tend to equate the political with issues of policy and pragmatism. The institutional perspective has been a dominant one within the academic study of politics in contemporary liberal states. During the 1970s the institutional conception of politics was even deemed to be the true definition, finally releasing Political Science 'from its synthetic past', thereby enabling theoretical consensus (Easton, 1968: 87). The power-based conception of politics that focused on policy and pragmatism was in large part a reaction to the dominance of this institutional approach, but frequently shared its focus on individuals rather than groups, structures or systems (Connolly, 1991: 74).

Feminist political theorists and activists have been at the forefront of a move to adopt a broader definition of politics as the study of power, extending and transforming the early power-based conceptions of politics in their refusal to delimit political power and political decisions from all other types of power and decisions. Many contemporary theorists of politics, not only feminists, exhibit scepticism not only about particular presumed boundaries to the political, but also at the possibility of producing any objective criteria of delineation at all. As Leftwich comments: 'There is, in fact, nothing *more political* than the constant attempts to exclude certain types of issues from politics' (Held and Leftwich, 1984: 144). Far from being neutral clarifications of empirical fact, these delimitations are 'strategies of depoliticization' whereby issues are kept off the political agenda. The achievement of such a delimitation, and the building of particular boundaries around ('official') conceptions of what constitutes the political, is itself a manifestation of power.

If one accepts this challenge, it then becomes necessary to consider whether there can be any convincing boundary to the political at all. Focusing attention on politics as *power*, in all its manifestations,

reduces the significance of the precise boundaries of the institutional form of politics (Leftwich, 1984: 10). Indeed it runs the risk of generating a definition of politics that is so wide as to lose its specificity and usefulness. Politics, Held and Leftwich tell us:

is a phenomenon found in and between all groups, institutions (formal and informal) and societies, cutting across public and private life. It is involved in all the relations, institutions and structures that are implicated in the activities of production and reproduction in the life of societies. It is expressed in all the activities of co-operation, negotiation and struggle over the use, production and distribution of resources which this entails. (Held and Leftwich, 1984: 144)

Though this broad conception of the political has its weaknesses, it is nonetheless the one that has – more than any other – created the disciplinary space for considering issues of gender as central to the study of politics. The narrow institutional conceptions of politics adopted within most dominant renderings of the discipline perhaps account for the fact that the study of politics has been one of the last to take up the challenge of feminist scholarship, and more recently men's studies, and modify the canon. The more extensive power-based conception of the political both emerges from, and makes possible, the feminist challenge to the orthodoxy of politics.

The dominance of the narrow institutional conception of politics foreclosed other areas of power as legitimate areas of political study. This served to de-politicize and thereby naturalize numerous social relations that systematically perpetuated men's power over women. For example, until the end of the 1970s the plight of the women suffering from domestic violence in the UK had been ignored by society and there were very few options available to women seeking alternatives to living with violent men (Hague and Wilson, 2000). Protection under civil or family law was almost impossible to get, domestic violence was not accepted as a reason for homelessness and the police dismissed 'domestics' as a trivial and time-wasting use of their resources. However, in the context of the growth of the second-wave feminist movement, there were by 1977 nearly 200 refugees in the UK for women escaping domestic violence. Women's Aid, the feminist organization that established these refuges, saw domestic violence as a reflection of unequal power relations both in the society and in personal relationships and as a symptom of the more general male violence and domination over women. In other words, for Women's Aid, domestic violence was a serious *political* problem. The emergence of organizations like Women's Aid served to challenge existing

boundaries of political discourse. It also established women as political actors who were engaged in the process of changing laws and state practices, but also engaged in empowering other women to determine their own futures.

3 Feminism and Politics

There is an oddly paradoxical relation between politics and feminism. On the one hand, the traditional institutional manifestations of politics located in government have been notoriously resistant to the incorporation of women, their interests or perspectives. Politics has been more exclusively limited to men and more self-consciously masculine than any other social practice (Brown, 1988: 4). On the other hand, feminism has always been explicitly political. Feminism, as Anne Phillips tells us, 'is politics' (Phillips, 1998: 1). Its project, to realize fundamental transformations in gender relations, is overtly political in the sense that it seeks to make more equal the power relations between men and women.

The apparent tension between the claim that 'feminism is politics' and that politics has been exclusively limited to men lies in the different notions of politics employed here. Women have largely been excluded from the political, where politics is defined as the institutional forum of government. But when it is defined primarily as a process of negotiation or struggle over the distribution of power it becomes evident that, far from being excluded from politics, women have both shaped and been shaped by its operation. Feminist theorists would appear to be claiming both that the political is explicitly masculine and excludes women, and also that women are engaged in political struggle to alter existing power relations between the sexes. The paradoxical nature of these two statements subjects the political itself to scrutiny. It also raises questions about the nature of feminist objectives in relation to the political: is the ambition to include women in a political from which they are currently excluded, or to reconfigure a political by which they are currently oppressed, or perhaps both?

Thus, if there is a distinctively feminist answer to the question 'what is politics?' it is, in light of the argument above, an answer that takes two parts. The first part entails an endorsement of the ubiquity of politics, from which there follows a determination to reveal the artificial and unsustainable nature of existing attempts to maintain strong boundaries around a political realm. The second part entails a commitment to exploring and advocating ways in which

social relations might be ordered differently, such that they embody a norm of gender justice.

Feminists have tended to accept the broad conception of politics, taking this as a reality from which they go on to address the normative question of how to change the diverse spheres of social relations in pursuit of gender justice. One should not, however, expect to find any great consensus in relation to the second part of the answer to 'what is politics?', for here there is significant normative dispute – as befits politics. Even within the early second-wave women's movement, serious division emerged between socialist and radical feminists, with socialist feminists emphasizing the importance of childcare, family allowance, women organizing in paid work, and women's control over their own fertility and sexuality, and radical feminists emphasizing violence against women as the central issue (Segal, 1987: 46). Such divisions have only increased and become more complex with the increased awareness of 'intersectionality' and the diversity of women's experiences and commitments. So one should resist the temptation to assume that feminists share a common political agenda. If feminists have a distinctive shared contribution to make to the debate about the nature of politics, it is perhaps in assuming a critical function, casting doubt on the presumed immutability of existing social relations, thereby rendering them political.

But why is it that feminists have tended to adopt the broad definition of politics, eschewing attempts to define either the essence or the boundaries of the political? It is, at heart, because a central element of the feminist challenge to mainstream politics consists in exposing the extent to which dominant conceptions of politics have been constituted in ways that simultaneously and systematically exclude women and femininity, on the one hand, and privilege men and masculinity, on the other hand. The central task in any feminist consideration of politics must therefore be to explore why and how politics has come to be associated with men and masculinity; how and why it has excluded women and femininity; and how this state of affairs might be changed. This means that a central element of any feminist engagement with the nature of politics will entail first and foremost an exploration and critique of existing assumptions regarding the boundaries of the political. Only once these presumed boundaries have been unsettled, and their androcentric nature understood, can we begin to develop conceptions of politics that are less gendered.

The long-standing feminist determination to unsettle dominant discourses regarding the boundaries of politics has frequently entailed a critique of the presumed correlation between politics and the public

sphere. In particular, it has entailed various critiques of the public / private dichotomy and its association with a political / non-political dichotomy.

In other words, feminists start by making visible the extent to which women have been systematically excluded from the political where politics is about the institutions of government. They then offer an expanded conception of politics, which politicizes previously presumed spheres of life, including spheres that have been conventionally understood to be paradigmatically female such as the domestic. Feminist contributions to debates about politics are not therefore limited to demands for inclusion within a political realm as currently conceived; they also entail varied attempts to reconfigure politics as practices (of power) more generally.

4 Eroding the Boundaries of the Political: The Feminist Critiques

Modern political theorists, whatever their personal commitments, have been able to admit the relevance or significance of feminist questions and criticisms only with great difficulty. This is not because of individual bias, but because 'such matters are systematically excluded from their theorizing by the modern patriarchal construction of the object of their studies, "political" theory itself (Pateman, 1989: 3). The central mechanism by which this exclusion is realized is the assumption that the political is public and that the private realm of domestic, familial and sexual relations falls outside the proper concern of the study of the political.

The distinctions that are commonly drawn between the public and private have been used, and continue to be used, to sustain women's oppression. Catharine MacKinnon goes so far as to suggest that the very idea of a private realm is 'a means of subordinating women's collective needs to the imperatives of male supremacy' (1989: 188). Whilst not all feminists would endorse MacKinnon's stance, most have embraced some form of critique of the public / private dichotomy. Significantly, the key demands of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s spanned issues conventionally located within both public and private domains: equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, and free 24-hour nurseries (Segal, 1987: 57). In asserting these demands as political objectives the women's movement issued a profound challenge to the established assumption that politics pertains to the public sphere alone.

Feminist theorists reinforced this challenge by critiquing the theoretical underpinnings of the public / private dichotomy. These critiques fall into three broad categories.

The critique of individualism

The first critique focuses on assumptions of what it means to be an individual, claiming that the liberal institutionalist conception of politics rests on a discourse of individual autonomy, which is prescriptive rather than descriptive; structuring, rather than simply reflecting, social relations. The liberal theory of the self is a theory of a rational individual engaged in abstract as opposed to contextual moral reasoning (see Squires, 1999: 140–63). The insistence on the value of the mind over the body, and the adoption of a rather narrow conception of rationality, entails a rejection of what is commonly associated with the feminine (see Lloyd, 1984). This, feminists have argued, is not a neutral description of human nature; rather it is part of a discourse that constructs individuals in this image. Recognition of this fact leads to two further insights.

The first is that very particular social structures and institutions are needed to shape individuals into this mould and this insight leads to a concern with the processes of reproduction, nurturance and socialization – those material processes that construct people as autonomous individuals (Lister, 2003). These are processes that have conventionally been located within the family and so hidden by the liberal construction of the public / private distinction as a state / civil society distinction. The second insight is that this conception of subjectivity may not apply equally to everyone and leads to an exploration of the extent to which women have been understood as subordinate, dependent and emotional, and so excluded from the category of ‘individuals’ within liberal political theorizing (Prokhovnik, 1999). The discourse that privileges autonomous reasoning as distinctly human has generally assumed women to be incapable of such rationality, and so not properly deserving of the rights granted to individuals by the liberal state.

These two issues are linked in women’s status as primary carers. Neither the process of caring and nurturing nor the status of carers and nurturers have been of concern in liberal political theory. The concern of feminist theorists is that, as a result of this omission, not only have women been denied the rights and privileges granted to the ‘rational individuals’ of liberal societies, but also that a crucial aspect of life, associated with the caring performed by women, has been glossed over. This insight has implications not only for the role of

caring as a practice, but also for its role as a perspective. The significance of caring, as both practice and perspective, has generated a large feminist literature on the ‘ethic of care’ (Tronto, 1993; Mackay, 2001).

The limitations of social contract theory

This critique of the public / private distinction is complemented by a second, which focuses on contract. Here the object of concern is not the rational liberal individual, but liberalism’s origins in social contract theory. The tradition of social contract theory (manifest in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) conceives of political institutions and arrangements as the outcome of an agreement between individuals who believe that they will be better off under these arrangements than they would be in state of nature (see Heywood, 2003: 39–41). The critique of this tradition places the subjectivity-based critique in historical context. The focus here is the particular social and political forces that created the situation in which women were confined to a private, domestic, care-taking role whilst men were presumed to be able to move freely between the private (domestic) and the public (civil society and state) spheres. Carole Pateman influentially claims that the social contract that generates liberal politics and establishes the political freedom of individuals simultaneously entails the sexual subordination of women in marriage (Pateman, 1988). The social contract that is required to create both civil society and the state requires a sexual contract to accommodate the patriarchy that pre-dates liberalism. The liberal social contract therefore represents the reorganization, but not the abolition, of patriarchy. Patriarchy was relocated into the private domain and reformulated as complementary to civil society. In this way gender is given a highly specific and structuring role within liberal theory at the same time as liberal theory presents itself as gender-neutral.

Liberalism, the state and the family

A third critique of the public / private dichotomy, articulated most clearly by Susan Moller Okin, focuses on the historical practice of liberal political regimes. The charge here is that, notwithstanding the abstract commitment to the importance of a prohibition on state intervention in the private sphere, liberal states have in practice regulated and controlled the family (Okin, 1989). Not only has this practice been contrary to the fundamental principle of liberalism, it

has been adopted in pursuit of a profoundly illiberal end: the perpetuation of patriarchy. Whilst the state adopted this directly non-neutral relation to personal and domestic life, it also upheld practices within the market-place, which presumed that those engaged in waged work could rely on the support and care of someone at home. To add to the insult, from the perspective of women, the principle of non-intervention in the private sphere has been used by the state to justify inaction regarding cases of child-abuse, marital rape and domestic violence. As Zillah Eisenstein has pointed out:

The state is said to be public (by definition) and therefore divorced from the private realm, which is the area of women's lives. The state can appear, through its own ideology, to be unrelated to the family as the private sphere, when in actuality this sphere is both defined and regulated *in relation* to the state realm. (1993: 26)

As invoked by liberal states, the institutional definition of politics has worked to reinforce patriarchal power relations within the family, whilst formally denying their responsibility to intervene in familial disputes on the grounds that it is essential to limit state intervention in civil society and personal relations. This tension, arising from the very formulation of liberalism itself, is the inevitable conclusion of the ambivalent role of the family in relation to the private sphere.

All three critiques have effectively highlighted the tension running through contemporary conceptions of the public / private distinction, a tension that grows out of the simultaneous appeal to the classic notion of the private as a sphere of repetitive, domestic drudgery, and the liberal notion of the private as a sphere of unconstrained individual liberty. The critical contribution of the feminist engagement with this dichotomy has been to focus on the extent to which women have been made to carry the burden of this tension. While men were encouraged to view the domestic as a sphere of personal privacy (a particular combination of the two liberal distinctions – state / civil society and social / personal), women have frequently experienced it as a sphere of constraint and oppression (a manifestation of a classical, or patriarchal, distinction). The two sexes were apparently living different manifestations of the dichotomy simultaneously. Yet, importantly, both were subsumed with a liberal conception of politics that played with the ambiguity to its own benefit. Liberalism, Diana Coole notes:

tends to hold a schizoid attitude toward the private realm as civil society and domestic sphere, modern and traditional, masculine and

feminine, individualist and familial, contractual and natural... Although its inconsistencies are theoretically unsatisfying, in the economy of gender power, they permit an entirely functional flexibility. (2000: 343)

Taken together these three feminist critiques of the public / private distinction draw attention to the way in which the liberal notion still incorporates an earlier classic notion of the public / private distinction as a division between the political sphere and a pre-political natural sphere of the home. They differ in that the second feminist critique (advocated by Pateman) views this incorporation as defining of liberalism itself, whilst the third feminist critique (advocated by Okin) views the incorporation as inconsistent with liberalism. They agree, though, in the assessment that, to the extent that women are part of this home world, they constitute the unacknowledged preconditions of the male public world of autonomous individuals. As a result most mainstream political theorists have ignored the domestic sphere. This has worked to marginalize women in relation to the political precisely because they have conventionally been assigned to this domestic sphere. Moreover, the classification of the family as private has frequently worked to hide abuse and domination within familial relations, thereby shielding them and placing them beyond 'political' scrutiny or legal intervention.

It is for these reasons that feminists have largely rejected the narrow institutional conception of politics whose boundaries act to exclude a 'private sphere', and have embraced a broad conception of politics as power. The de-naturalization of the 'private' and deconstruction of the public / private boundary has, in other words, had serious consequences for perceptions of 'politics', where politics was defined negatively in relation to a boundary demarcating the political from a 'private' non-political sphere.

5 In and Against the State

This feminist determination to extend the boundaries of the political to encompass spheres of life previously presumed to be apolitical has lent some credence to the idea that feminists were primarily or exclusively concerned with personal politics – that is, with politics outside the conventional institutions of government. For one consequence of the refusal to accept an institutionalist conception of politics was the association of feminism with informal social movement politics located outside the state. Indeed the feminist suspicion of narrow

conceptions of the political was frequently echoed by a hostility to the state. For example, Women's Aid, which campaigns against violence against women, was established as an organization run for women and by women. Its distrust of the state as a patriarchal institution led to the creation of autonomous refuges run by women on non-hierarchical principles.

Perhaps because of this focus on social politics outside the formal institutions of state and government, feminists appeared to under-theorize the nature and role of the state. MacKinnon's claim that feminism has no theory of the state (1989: 157) was a product of this determination to expound a different, broader conception of politics.

But feminist attempts to reconfigure politics have extended more widely than this. The old 'political' institutions of government have increasingly been subject to feminist critique along with other social practices and relations. So, for instance, Women's Aid campaigned throughout the 1970s and 1980s for domestic violence legislation as well as running its refuges, thereby engaging in state transformation as well as civil society activism. Recognition of this fact has meant that, whilst early critiques of the public / private dichotomy led to a focus on establishing the political nature of the 'personal', more recent feminist work has turned its attention to transforming the nature of 'public politics' and re-theorizing the state.

One important issue for second-wave feminists was how, in the context of patriarchal political institutions, to organize for political change. Amongst many UK feminists the answer was to focus energy on feminist social movements beyond the state. Yet, in the context of women's increased levels of political representation and the development of gender machinery within state bureaucracies, feminists have adopted a keener interest in the relationship between institutional politics and broader social movement activism.

At the same time recent articulations of the institutional approach to politics show a marked convergence with broad power-based conceptions of politics. New institutionalists, or neo-institutionalism, now understand 'institutions' as rule-governed practices, both formal and informal. This means that the institutions under consideration in political study encompass not only parliament and parties, but also the rules that govern non-public institutions (including the family, the church, the factory and NGOs). This renders new institutionalism more amenable to feminist perceptions of politics, allowing for a focus on ways in which a whole range of institutions – which together make up the wider political culture – might be reconfigured.

The broad definition of politics demanded by feminists in previous decades allows us to explore the complex linkages between these institutions, from parliament to childcare arrangements, thereby effecting greater change. For example, whilst feminists struggled in the 1970s to establish domestic violence as a legitimate political concern and eschewed contact with a state they deemed patriarchal, more recent feminist campaigners have played a significant role in shaping the 1997 and 2001 Labour Governments' policies in relation to domestic violence (Women's Unit, 1999). Government machinery for women, in the form of the Women and Equality Unit, has domestic violence as one of its key policy concerns, clearly endorsing the feminist claim that domestic violence is a central political issue. This indicates that feminists have not only succeeded in eroding the boundaries of the political such that it is now commonly perceived to include issues such as domestic violence, but also that they are gaining access to the old arenas of politics and shaping government policy on such issues.

Whilst early socialist and radical feminists tended to conceptualize the state as a monolithic entity that institutionalizes the interests of dominant groups, more recent feminist writing, influenced by post-structuralism, offers a much more heterogeneous image of state relations, showing that gendered relations of power are institutionalized by different state arenas in different ways. The state is understood as a process, comprising many sites of struggle, which means that political analysis should focus on the ways in which specific discursive practices construct specific interests (Pringle and Watson, 1992; Waylen 1998).

This feminist insight, as with those that pre-dated it, is grounded in experience and motivated by a commitment to normative change. It is a political discourse that is both framed by practical experiences and constitutive of future feminist practices. The feminist embrace of neo-institutionalism represents an interesting development in relation to the question 'what is politics?'. The institutions under consideration are informal, dynamic and disaggregated rather than formal, static and holistic (Lowndes, 2002: 97). This destabilizes the association of politics with the institutions of government, thereby eroding the critical purchase of the public / private distinction in political analyses. It allows the political to encompass all social relations, including those conventionally labelled 'non-political' because of their domestic location. Politics is, potentially, everywhere. But it does not entail the claim that everything is therefore political. Political analysis is concerned with those aspects of social relations that pertain to the distribution, exercise and consequences of power (Hay, 2002: 3).

There is no essentially political sphere, only heterogeneous political processes.

This insight is not, of course, specifically feminist. It is now held quite widely (see Shapiro, 1999, and Hay, 2002 for good examples). But I would suggest that feminist critiques of the public / private dichotomy, and feminist challenges to the orthodox institutionalist conception of politics as government, have facilitated its development. The theoretical claims of neo-institutionalism and the rhetoric of governance owe a (largely unacknowledged) debt to earlier feminist claims that 'the personal is political', and all that followed from this claim.

6 Conclusion

I have suggested that feminist contributions to the debate about the nature of politics comprise two elements. The first is an endorsement of a broad power-based conception of politics rather than a narrow institution-based conception. The second is the demand for the reform of all the institutions governing relations of power, including the old formalistic and public institutions of politics, but extending beyond these to the traditionally 'non-public' and private domain.

Feminists played a hugely important role in popularizing the broad power-based conception of politics, such that it is now increasingly accepted by many mainstream political scholars, and even underpins the newest disciplinary developments. The second element, however, entails a commitment to exploring and advocating ways in which social relations might be ordered differently, such that they embody gender justice, and this has been notably less influential. For one can agree that politics permeates every facet of human interaction and still disagree quite profoundly about the normative implications of this. Nonetheless, if we proceed from the assumption that politics is concerned with power relations and we accept the empirical claim that gender relations significantly determine the distribution of power, it follows that mainstream political studies ought to be more concerned to analyse the operation of gender relations than it has been to date.

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