Politics & Gender, 8 (2012), 205–245.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Feminist Perspectives on Freedom

Introduction

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X12000165

This collection of essays grew out of a 2011 APSA roundtable on the theme "Feminist Perspectives on Freedom." The objective was to bring together a group of political theorists to talk about freedom in a way that would be informed by, and engaged with, recent work in feminist theory, which has so greatly advanced the study of freedom. The participants were theorists whose past work had engaged feminist debates, methods, or perspectives, and who had written on matters relating to freedom. The panel generated a rich discussion and a good deal of excitement in the room. Yet our papers hardly mentioned women or gender directly. We were all surprised by this, and at a dinner following the session, we tried to make sense of it. What did it mean for five feminists to discuss feminist perspectives on freedom without putting women or gender at the center of the discussion? Was it even right to characterize our papers and perspectives as feminist? What *is* feminism anyway? Or what has feminism become?

No real consensus on this question emerged among us, other than a general agreement that it would be a mistake to define the category of "feminist" too narrowly, or in a way that might foreclose emerging perspectives and concerns, limiting its power of critical inquiry by tightening its boundaries. Yet several considerations raised at the table (and in subsequent exchanges) were particularly resonant. One is the familiar notion that feminist work analyzes how gendered structures within the family and society help or hurt women in terms of power and equality. Feminist theory in this sense makes women's experience and gender-based inequalities the direct objects of its analysis. We all saw this way of doing feminist theory as tremendously important. Yet we felt that it did not exhaust the category, at least not anymore.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/12 $30.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One of us pointed out that feminist theory often contributes to the rethinking of core concepts, such as freedom and justice, through the lens of women's experiences, interests, and perspectives, and in light of the dynamics of gender inequality. The ethics and politics of care, which has shifted mainstream thinking about both freedom and justice, is a good example. Yet while feminist rethinking of core concepts is inspired by the ways that traditional perspectives have failed women, the constructive work of reconceptualizing such concepts often goes beyond a focus on their particular significance for women, or for gender and sexuality.

Thus, we distinguished two different ways for work to be feminist. It could treat women and gender inequality as the *direct objects* of its analysis; or it could include the experiences, interests, and perspectives of women and the dynamics of gender inequality in the constitution of its analytical framework as *constitutive* of its methodological approach and its normative aspirations. We did not rule out other ways for work to be feminist. Indeed, we thought it important not to specify too restrictively what the form or outcome of feminist theory might be. Yet sketching this theoretical terrain, however provisionally, helped us to make sense of how our own papers — and work by other feminist theorists we admire — fit into the field.

The essays collected here are feminist mainly in the constitutive sense. Libby Anker's, for example, demonstrates how feminist theoretical arguments, which constitute the core of her analytical framework, can intervene in post-9/11 political problems whose effects are not limited to women or gendered experiences. Likewise, Nancy Hirschmann's piece shows that disability is a feminist issue regardless of the way that it affects gender equality because it hinges on questions that feminism, and only feminism, made possible — regarding the body as a social category, a social construction, and a social meaning that operates in language. The essays by Cristina Beltrán, Jennifer Nedelsky, and Sharon Krause similarly operate within a constitutively feminist framework, building on insights about the relational character of law and human agency, as well as the intersectional nature of human identities, insights that entered into political theory through the study of gender inequality and the revaluation of women's experience but that have broad application.

These essays, which address various contemporary problematics of freedom, show that feminism today is as much about *how* we study

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political life as about *what* we study. This changing focus marks something of a shift in the development of feminist political theory. It is true that feminism has always been "a method for political theory," in Nancy Hirschmann's words, and hence has always been concerned with the "how" and not merely the "what" of political inquiry. Yet the immense body of literature that has arisen since the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1970s has now become integral to political theory as a whole. It has introduced knowledge and methods that have reconstituted the defining concepts and questions of the field. Consequently, feminism today pervades political theory itself in a constitutive way. This is not to say that all political theory is feminist (not by a long shot). The point is that the tools of feminist analysis are now available in rich array to theorists studying anything and everything in the field. Our essays make use of these tools. And while none of us would wish to see the direct-object approach to feminist theory eclipsed, we welcome the developments that have made it possible to practice feminist theory in the diverse ways that these essays embody.

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Feminist Theory and the Failures of Post-9/11 Freedom

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X12000177

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, *freedom* was the dominant term used to describe the United States in national political discourse. It was articulated as sovereign power, unencumbered agency, and military triumph. "Freedom" eventually animated global violence, becoming a justification for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as for substantial increases in state surveillance. A significant body of feminist scholarship has interrogated the discourse of post-9/11 freedom, examining how the call to "free the women of Afghanistan and Iraq" legitimated the push for war (Bhattacharrya 2008; Marso 2007; Mohanty 2008). For these scholars, "freedom" transformed feminist concerns into tools of militarism and imperialism, while worsening living conditions of women

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press