Reflections from a Visitor

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I work in neither political science nor the United States. I was trained in both, and I visit often, but I am now employed on the faculty of a critical law school in the United Kingdom. My work is in gender, development, and political economy. It could fit into politics, but it fits better elsewhere at present. As a result, my reflections on the themes of gender scholarship and knowledge transformation are somewhat removed from the discipline. Hence, in this piece, I offer some thoughts from outside political science on the subject of border crossings and theory/practice in feminist academic work.

GENDER SCHOLARSHIP AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

I was trained in interdisciplines (development studies and gender studies) before I came to politics, and I would like to think that James Scott (2010) is right when he warns that U.S. politics scholars risk extinction unless at least half of their reading is outside the discipline. Yet I wonder what it means to designate my own work (and that of the scholars I cite) as interdisciplinary, and whether it concedes too much. My research is in feminist political economy. We have our own canons of essential literature, dedicated journals, and conference dress codes (funky scarves always useful). So maybe I am in an under-the-radar discipline. Or maybe the interdisciplinary space of feminist political economy is an academic naughty step for those who have made the disciplines cross: It is packed with sociologists, economists, lawyers, and political scientists who have been told that their research is marginal, or irrelevant, to their respective mainstreams.

Stubbornly, then, I and others insist that the core questions driving this field are central to politics. These questions include how to understand the relationship between states and markets, how social reproduction is secured in different arrangements of political economy, and what that implies for struggles around inequality. I am particularly interested in the relationship between political economy and the gendered rescaling of political authority. For example, feminists have had very productive conversations about gender and multilevel governance (in some cases, decades before multilevel governance was coined as a term in political

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science journals), in part because we are well-practiced in denaturalizing levels of governance and seeing interrelations between power in state, suprastate, and nonstate spheres. Moreover, as many observers have noted, multilevel governance can be a cloak for neoliberal cuts in social programs. Responsibilities for what were once state services are increasingly dumped to underresourced entities at the provincial, municipal, local, or community level, sometimes as a result of conditionality demands by supranational institutions. The responsibilities being downloaded are often cast off on women as volunteers, and the services being chosen for rescaling are often those associated with care work. The valorization of the local, and its political-economic effects, is thus a central theme of feminist scholarship.

My own work has argued that it is especially important to extend critical scrutiny to the transnational political-economic production of gender-sharing partnership within the family, given its central role in new multilevel governance frameworks (Bedford 2009; 2010). For example, in the World Bank, the family has been positioned as a crucial informal institution necessary for good development, and family is listed first in the Bank's online inventory of sources of social capital. Most recently, the Bank's new World Development Report (the first on gender) centered households — which are read as nuclear units — as the key linchpin institutions connecting success in gender policies to progress in market growth.

The frame of family restoration in the aftermath of crisis, and of equal harmonious partnership between more-caring men and harder-working women, is evident across a range of other transnational institutions. For example, the 2009 meetings of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women focused on the key theme of "the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS" (see Bedford 2010). The Bank is technocratic, economistic, and focused on growth. The Commission on the Status of Women is none of these things. Yet happy couples resonate well in them both. Indeed, it is a common sense within gender and development policy that poor women get empowered through the labor market, that poor men need to be more involved and responsible, and that partnership is the way forward.

While there is new potential created here to take gender and development work seriously, the limits of this approach to gender equality policy are well known. In the project-based examples I explored in Ecuador and Argentina, the frame of sharing harmonious partnership

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made it harder for feminists to argue for state provision of care services as a policy priority, since this could not compete with the solution of allegedly more shared (but privatized) caring labor within loving couples. Moreover, the frame held poor men responsible for women's poverty. It posited family cohesion as the ultimate poverty-eradication strategy. It led to the racialized targeting of black and indigenous men long cast as unloving and irresponsible by dominant white and mestizo society. It bolstered conservative religious actors whose approach to gender empowerment is contested by many feminists. And it results in a legal and policy framework that can seriously limit our ability to talk about sexual autonomy outside of a male-female, coupled model.

In this research exploring the role of multilateral actors in the governance of interpersonal intimate attachments, I was interested in trying to link forms of governance and regulation taking place at seemingly disparate levels of analysis. I have also been inspired by those arguing that reflexivity about gender policy — and dominant understandings of gender politics — is a crucial component of feminist work. As Bacchi and others note, we need critical reflection on hegemonic feminist approaches to ascertain how they may create borders or silence voices (in Lombardo, Meir, and Verloo 2009, 9). I remain convinced that these driving concerns belong in political science (and elsewhere), even though many who work on them do so from outside spaces designated as "interdisciplinary."

KEEPING THE DOOR TO THE SEMINAR ROOM OPEN: THEORY/PRACTICE IN THE NEW FEE ERA

As to the much-discussed theory/practice boundary, I have learned much from the work done on this issue inside and outside of political science.[1] While I hope that my research — either in process or in print — does not harm the causes important to me, I came into academia convinced that short-haired women with guitars inspired more feminist activism than did academics writing articles. I do not mean that to offend: I know that people have sacrificed careers to stay true to feminist research commitments and that education can change people's worlds. But I am not sure that this impact is best discussed in terms of what most of us *publish*. There, the songwriters have it almost every time.

1. For example, Black 1995; Corntassel 2003; Rich 1977.

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Rather, two other discussions stand out for me as important in relation to feminist theory/practice links in the present environment. First, we might recenter teaching in our debates about transforming knowledge. I recognize that some activists are angered by the notion that teaching counts as activism, but my experience has been different: Being taught by feminists changed my world, and it continues to do so. Moreover, while I have benefited professionally from the privilege that research receives over teaching, most of the moments in my career where I feel that I may have done something useful occurred when I was teaching, or keeping students in university who were otherwise close to quitting. Feminist pedagogy matters at least as much as feminist research. For that reason, we might redevote our attention not just to planning classes that provide supportive environments for traditionally disenfranchised students and assigning readings that remind them that they are not alone, but to affirming the university as a place where teaching and research are both valued and regarded as interconnected. Thus, the growing disparities in pay and conditions between full-time faculty and adjunct instructors should surely be central to debates about academic feminist praxis.

Finally, resistance to the corporatization of the university within broader political/economic austerity agendas is a central concern of feminist theory/practice now in the UK for political scientists, lawyers, and a wide assortment of others. In 2010, the UK government tripled tuition fees, as part of austerity measures resulting from banking bailouts. They also removed the allowance designed to encourage low-income students to remain in post-16 (high school) education. The first move has resulted in a substantial drop in applications from returning students (many of whom are mothers), and the second has hit students of color, especially young black women, hard (National Union of Students 2010, 2).

Such measures have provoked considerable protest. The University of Kent, where I work, was occupied by students for several months, and feminist staff provided central support. Among the teach-ins, marches, petitions, and so on that happened during that time, for me, the most moving initiative was a photo blog where people uploaded images of themselves holding a hand-written placard that read, "I wouldn't be here," in reference to the fact that they had benefited from free education and would not have been able to attend university if this policy had been in place. Of course, higher education is more often a result of privilege than an explanation for it, and those of us who have it are no more deserving of dignified lives than those who have been

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excluded. But if feminist pedagogy is to have any meaningful place in the academy, then we have to keep the doors wide open for people who cannot afford to pay high tuition fees (whether those fees are demanded upfront or are incurred as debt). No one needs a U.S. doctorate in political science to learn that lesson: It is common sense to most working-class kids. But if we have such a doctorate, and if we benefited from the institutional spaces created by feminists in universities who wanted to encourage intersectional gender scholarship, then we are surely obligated to use any ensuing privilege to resist the regressive political/economic restructuring of the educational environment. I consider this a key legacy of the Rutgers Women in Politics program, and I am happy to report that it crosses borders — national and disciplinary — just fine.

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