

THE POLITICAL INTERESTS OF GENDER

Developing Theory
and Research with
a Feminist Face

Edited by
Kathleen B Jones
Anna G Jónasdóttir

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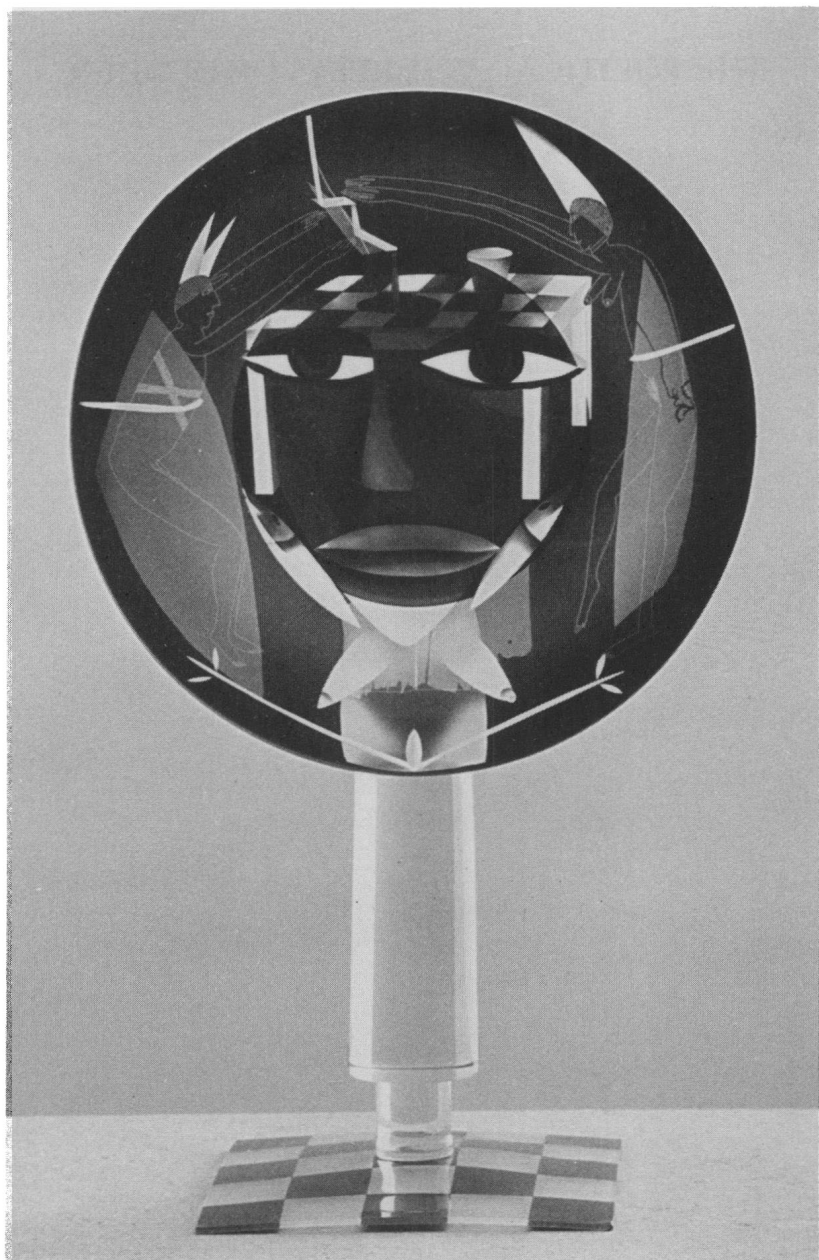
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'FISKMADONNA' by Ann Wolff

Notes on Contributors

Kathy E. Ferguson is Associate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu.

Gun Hedlund teaches women's studies courses and is co-ordinator of the Center for Women's Studies at Örebro University, Sweden.

Helga Maria Hernes is Under Secretary of State at the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Norway.

Anne Hildreth is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, Iowa.

Jane S. Jaquette is Professor of Political Science at Occidental College, Los Angeles.

Anna G. Jónasdóttir is Lecturer in Politics at Örebro University, Sweden.

Kathleen B. Jones is Associate Professor in the Department of Women's Studies at San Diego State University, San Diego.

Arthur H. Miller is Professor of Political Science at the University of Iowa, Iowa.

Birte Siim is Associate Professor at the Institute of Social Development and Planning at Aalborg University, Denmark.

Grace L. Simmons is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, Iowa.

Kathleen A. Staudt is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas, El Paso.

Ursula Vogel is Lecturer in Government at the University of Manchester, Manchester.

Editors' Preface

This book of essays grew out of the 1986 ECPR Workshop of the Standing Group on Women and Politics, 'Theories of Gender and Power', co-organized by Anna Jónasdóttir and Gun Hedlund, which met at the University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden. For five intensive days, feminists from all over the world met to consider basic issues in contemporary feminist theory and research on politics. We all recognized the similarity of our pursuits and the necessity for greater communication among us. In particular, we felt the need to increase the exchange of ideas among theorists in Northern Europe, and those working in and on Western Europe, North America and the Third World. The book is inspired by the desire to promote dialogue about the parameters of a truly international feminist theory and practice that represents the interests of gender in cross-cultural and historical perspective. In so far as this dialogue is institutionalized – we now regularly read each other's work and attend each other's meetings – the book's purpose has been realized. The hope is that this text will be the harbinger of more works that stress the cross-cultural project of developing feminist theory and research.

The majority of the essays were written by participants in the 1986 meetings. Several others, those by Jaquette and Staudt, Ferguson and Miller *et al.*, were included because their work contributed so well to the book's thesis.

We would like to express our thanks especially to David Hill, Managing Director at Sage Publications, and to Michael Laver, Modern Politics Series editor, for their encouragement and assistance with this project. We also would like to thank the ECPR conference organizers for the 1986 meetings in Sweden that brought us all together in the first place.

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Introduction: Gender as an Analytic Category in Political Theory

Kathleen B. Jones and Anna G. Jónasdóttir

The premise of this book is that the conceptual terrain on which contemporary political theory rests is inadequate when political analysis is approached from the perspective of gender. Although there is disagreement among feminists about whether the basic concepts of political theory are value-free, there is widespread agreement that, in the modern period, theoretical works have been notoriously silent about women. (See the differences of opinion represented in the essays in Evans *et al.*, 1986.) Following the implications of this book's premise, the authors contribute to the ongoing task of breaking this silence.

Whereas early classical political writers, like Aristotle, may have regarded women as naturally unsuited to rule, they at least felt compelled to speak about the differences between the sexes. On both the metaphorical and the empirical level, Aristotle and others argued that women's activities and attributes made women incompetent to engage in political activities. This made politics a definitively male enterprise (Saxonhouse, 1985). Later classical writers directly addressed the gender question too. In the initial phase of classical liberal theory, women – now understood as more like than unlike men – were used to complete the analysis of social authority structures, marking the transition from medieval to modern thought. Nevertheless, the apparent levelling tendency in their thinking did not prevent such writers from precluding women's participation in governing, since they argued that women necessarily were subordinate to men (Jónasdóttir, 1983). Until women's studies scholars began to produce their own readings of classical theory, the secondary literature also remained almost totally silent about what the classical philosophers wrote about women, men and the family, as well as about the connection between these topics and their political theories. (See, for instance, Wolin, 1961; Sabine and

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Thorson, 1973; and compare with Okin, 1979; Elshtain, 1981; Saxonhouse, 1985.)

In contrast, since the breakthrough of liberal democracy, modern authors have proceeded from the position of not so benign indifference to the meaning and interests of gender. However, their theories and research have not escaped gender-based limitations. On the contrary, indifference has meant that the nature of political action and the scope of political research have been defined in ways that, in particular, exclude women as women from politics. Men as men do not suffer the same fate, although the extent of their activities also is circumscribed by the shape of political concepts. This is because, to a great extent, modern theorists adopted the conceptual framework they inherited from earlier times. This framework had been built on the premise, never seriously challenged even by liberal thinkers, that political action and masculinity were congruent, whereas political action and femininity were antithetical (Okin, 1979; Edwards, 1983; Hartsock, 1983; Jaggar, 1983; Pateman, 1983; Lloyd, 1984; Saxonhouse, 1985; Hernes, chapter 9). Jones argues in chapter 2 that this heritage has continued to shape the research parameters and methodological principles of contemporary political science, even among some feminist writers. Vogel (chapter 7) focuses on how modern juridical notions of liberty conceal ubiquitous forms of power that men exercise over women, both in the family and in the economy.

How would one engage in the construction of political theory and the design of political communities as if women, and gender-based interests, mattered? This volume comprises a set of responses to this query. The authors share the recognition that the definition of central concepts in political analysis is the result of complex historical and political processes; these work to illuminate and privilege specific dimensions and meanings of human discourse and activity, while at the same time hiding others. Our intention is to challenge the hypothesis that the central concepts of political thought, and its basic techniques, are value-neutral. In contrast to those who argue that it is simply the assumptions of a particular investigator, structured by his or her socialization, that are biased and distort the uses of an otherwise objective technique of analysis, the argument of most of the contributors in this volume is with the very conceptualization of political theorizing itself.

If the way that politics is defined limits the vision of politics of specific theorists, as Wolin argued long ago, it follows that the tools and methods for representing and explicating this vision are not disinterested. One of the tenets of critical theory that this volume accepts and explores is the view expressed by Habermas that human

knowledge, both in the ways that it is produced and the view of the social world that it constructs, is always connected to and driven by some set of human interests of either a technical, interpretive or emancipatory nature. Even formal logic and the principles of reason are not 'mere' tools used in knowledge production. For example, a particular conception of rationality abstracts from a set of social practices engaged in by 'situated' thinkers, whose activities reflect a specific way of apprehending reality. Rational comprehension is understood to be based, literally and figuratively, on a 'grasping' of reality through information collected through sense experience. Among the interests reflected in this grasping is the desire for greater control over the natural and the social world. What counts as rational thought is at least in part related to the extent to which it provides a relatively unambiguous picture of an otherwise chaotic universe. Thought that does not afford this kind of clarity, thought that remains uncertain about the boundaries between self and other, for example, does not appear to qualify as rational in this sense.

In recent years, feminist theorists have been claiming that there is something distinctive about women's interests and the activities that they represent. **Among the interests that have been identified in contemporary and historical research are the concerns that emerge from women's disproportionate association with 'mothering and reproduction; . . . the political economy of the gendered division of labor; . . . the arrangements of the female body; . . . [and] spirituality and contact with the divine'** (Ferguson, chapter 4).

In identifying these interests, feminists have also argued that what distinguishes 'women's interests' is not only the issues that are represented, but also the mode of representation. For instance, wedding concern with the activities of caretaking and nurturance to traditional notions of interest seems to diminish and distort the vocabulary of connectedness that gives expressive force to that concern in favour of the formalistic language of self-interested power-brokerage. Traditional concepts of interest do not seem adequate to define the political and moral values that women strive to achieve in having their interests represented.

Finally, feminists have been evaluating the relevance of the concept of interest itself. Some, like Diamond and Hartsock (1981), have argued that the language of interest, with its utilitarian connotations and connections to the 'rational calculus', can never be redeemed to serve feminist purposes. Others argue that abandoning the concept of interest cedes too much valuable political space and linguistic force to the dominant group. Theorists like Jónasdóttir (see chapter 3) claim that what is needed is a refocusing of the lens

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of interest to emphasize its formal dimensions – the notion that interest represents a group's 'being among' the members of a political community who are recognized as having a 'controlling presence'. This view leaves open to theoretical and empirical analysis the question of whether and how the specific, unique characteristics of different groups influence the political process, and shape the polity in different ways.

Regardless of the level to which the critique of the conceptualization of interest is taken in the above approaches, all of them concur in the indictment that contemporary political theory's silence about women, and its ignorance or distortion of gender, derive from the meta-theoretical postulates upon which the enterprise depends. This perspective takes the opposite view to that expressed by Judith Evans: **'It is not the techniques of political theory that constitute an obstacle to change, but the attitudes of political theorists, dictating which definitions will be adopted, and the manner in which techniques will be applied.'** (Evans *et al.*, 1986: 3). Whereas Evans's analysis suggests that a re-socialization campaign is the properly therapeutic approach to removing the obstacles to the integration of a feminist perspective in political theory, our analysis confronts the problem of gender bias on a more fundamental level.

We take issue with her critique on two basic grounds. First, such a critique is based on a very narrow definition of 'techniques' of research that fails to consider the limitations of the meta-theoretical framework within which the application of research tools occurs. Recognition of fundamental biases in the methodological approach of bourgeois political science has a long history that is unacknowledged in Evans's view. For instance, Marxism – a paradigmatic shift in political analysis that Evans virtually ignores – attacked the methodology of political economy because of its acceptance of the atomistic world-view and ahistorical methodological individualism of liberal democratic analysis. This critique went well beyond the indictment of the particular class origins and socialization of specific theorists to locate class bias at the conceptual level of discourse. Marx's analysis of the commodity, defined merely as a unit of exchange in bourgeois theory, but which was in fact the expression of human labour power, is just one example of criticism of the distorting effects of the dominant epistemological assumptions of traditional theory. Feminists have advanced this critique by considering the ways in which orthodox materialist analysis still treats the operation of gender hierarchies as unproblematic, unless they can be re-defined in class terms.

Second, Evans's view trivializes the major intellectual challenges that feminist scholarship raises by claiming that *all* sexist bias

reflects the early childhood experiences of particular researchers, or 'sociological factors such as the small proportion of political scientists who are women' (Evans *et al.*, 1986: 103). Increasing the number of women in the profession certainly can have a positive effect both on the legitimacy of women's studies as a research area for political science, and on the career development paths of women within the profession as a whole. It is even likely that increasing the number of women in the profession to the level of a 'critical mass' would make a substantial difference in both the contexts of discovery and the modes of justification in studies of politics in general. In the case of practical politics, the research of Gun Hedlund suggests that the existence of a relatively high proportion of women politicians seems to promote different strategies of activity and different views about women's interests that contribute to the development of a 'new relation to the political culture influenced by the fact that [women] no longer are tokens in the political system' (p. 100). But the view that the *mere* integration of more women in the field will be sufficient to realize the full transformative potential of the feminist challenge is naïve.

This criticism does not negate **the fact that the personal attitudes of particular political theorists influence the construction of research designs.** Certainly, identifiable misogynistic biases can distort the conduct of research. But attitudes reflect more than the personal psycho-histories of given theorists. They are themselves cultural products that express a given society's understanding of gender, on both the linguistic and material level. Feminist critics of mainstream political science are interested in the analysis of what others have called the 'prism of sex' (we choose 'sex/gender' for greater accuracy). This prism refracts the vision of politics that any given school of political thought endorses, often in ways that are not made explicit.

The contributors to this volume, then, address the problem of sexism in the discipline of political science by considering an alternative approach to the conceptualization of politics. They contribute to the growing body of work by feminists (Stiehm, 1984; Scott, 1986; Jones, 1987) that has attempted to reconstruct the methodology of political research by reformulating basic categories of political thinking in order to allow gender to infect the ways we conceptualize political reality with the insights of a feminist vision. This means much more than considering women individually as political actors, or merely adding 'women's issues' to the litany of demands citizens make of the state. It means, materially and metaphorically, conceptualizing the political arena in terms of gender. The research of Hedlund and Jaquette suggests the

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importance of using gender-focused models in empirical studies of political behaviour.

An important task that confronts feminist theory is the clear definition of what taking gender as an analytic category entails, and how it structures political thought. In a recent essay in *The American Historical Review*, Joan Scott charges feminist theorists with often having muddled through their work with imprecise or euphemistic definitions of gender. In some cases, gender merely stands for 'women'. The use of the term 'gender' instead of 'women' in the title of works lends greater scholarly legitimacy to the research enterprise by 'dissociat[ing] itself from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism' (Scott, 1986; 1056). In other cases, Scott argues, gender is meant to imply the social relations between the sexes, or is defined as a 'social category imposed on a sexed body'. But in these latter cases, Scott insists, the interpretive utility of the idea of separate spheres, one male and the other female, is rejected, since this usage of gender suggests that the world of women is 'part of the world of men, created in and by it'.

But Scott is only partially accurate in her interpretations of these positions. Moreover, she has failed to explore other possible constructions and usages of gender that are particularly relevant to political theory, which is concerned not only with how gender symbolizes power, but also with how it, quite literally, embodies power. Thus, in contrast to Scott, many of the contributors in this volume consider the potential utility of the concept of 'women's culture', or some variation of the separate spheres formulation, for describing and explaining the operation of sex/gender interests in politics, while, at the same time, endorsing the general hypothesis that gender implies the social relations between and among the sexes. Thus, they attempt to use gender as a basic analytic category of political thinking without rejecting, a priori, the explanatory utility of the idea of separate spheres.

Paraphrasing Scott, the way that the premises and standards of scholarly work in political science will be changed by including and accounting for women's experiences depends upon the extent to which sex/gender can be developed into a category of political analysis. What, specifically, does the development of sex/gender as an analytic category in political theory entail? How does this volume contribute to that enterprise?

The aim of theorizing about sex/gender is to understand this system itself, in all its historical and cultural forms. This is in stark contrast with Scott's project, whose end-point is the definition of gender as a signifier of other relationships of power, or as primarily constitutive of power. Yet, as Scott herself argues, it is imperative

to resist reducing sex/gender to some other social structure, and to preserve gender as an independent analytic category in its own right (1986: 1062).

Equally important is the necessity to distinguish between different expressions of power – economic, political, sexual and linguistic. Without these distinctions we are left with the Foucaultian dilemma: power is so dispersed, ubiquitous and fluid that one has no clear notion either of what its substance is, or of the norms for determining adequate paths of resistance to it (White, 1986).

Feminists have contributed in significant and different ways to the project of theorizing about sex/gender. Early theories of patriarchy focused on sexuality and reproductive roles as factors determining the exploitation of women (Firestone, 1970; Millett, 1970; O'Brien, 1983; Delphy, 1984). Later analyses of work and the economy contributed further to the investigation of the dynamics of the oppression of women (Eisenstein, 1978; Rowbotham, 1978; Young, 1980; Hartmann, 1981). More recently, feminists influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of object relations, and the linguistic/symbolic accounts of the post-structuralist school, have turned to a consideration of the ways that gendered subjects are constructed. They have been concerned also with understanding the influence of gendered signifiers on the articulation of the rules and meaning of social relationships (Dinnerstein, 1976; Chodorow, 1978; Flax, 1983; Keller, 1984; Irigaray, 1985; Moi, 1985; Harding, 1986). Scott, for instance, proposes that we treat gender as a 'constitutive element of social relationships' as well as 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (1986: 1067).

Yet all these attempts to theorize about sex/gender, and to apply these theories to the reconstruction of the framework of social and political thought, have been limited by their lack of historical specificity, or, at the conceptual level, by the failure to distinguish among the various levels of lived experience, for instance, between work and sexuality. The tendency has been either to treat sex/gender as an epiphenomenon, secondary to determining economic relations; to describe it ahistorically; or to empty it of meaning in its own terms.

One of the key questions posed by feminist research is how the same structures of oppression – work, despotic political authority, systems of social stratification – affect women and men both differently and in the same ways. What distinguishes the feminist project is that it asks 'why differently?' The answer must have to do with the fact that the structurally different conditions of women and men are due not only to capital taking advantage of women as child-bearers and cheap labour, etc.; the division of labour and the sexual

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segregation of work activities are due also to the fact that men and women as sex/gendered actors enter into exploitative relationships which possess a relative independence. It is important to emphasize that in every dimension of social experience, as well as in the sphere of the intimate, women and men are present as embodied, sex/gendered beings, that is, as women and men. Naturally, the shape of this presence varies historically and cross-culturally. Feminist theory that stresses the reclamation of the 'power of difference, of womanliness as women define it' (Offen, forthcoming) has the greatest potential for supporting research which considers the ways that the structure and representation of gender vary with different and temporal contexts.

It is a peculiar irony of modern political theory that precisely at the moment of its embracing the ideals of freedom and equality for all, the specific presence of women and men in the political field is denied. Rather, the notion of the political agent as an abstract individual, or as the sexless and genderless member of an organized interest group, is institutionalized as the norm of political behaviour. Marx, of course, offered one of the most extensive critiques of the construction of 'alien politics' in his 'On the Jewish Question' (Thomas, 1985). Recent feminist theory has contributed further to this critique of liberal politics by arguing that the concept of autonomy as personal independence and the abstract conceptualization of individual human rights suppress a 'gendered but egalitarian vision of social organization' that is more consistent with the dominant modes of feminism in modern European history, and increasingly in the ideologies of women's liberation in the non-Western world, as well as with the project of fully incorporating women *as* women within a more diverse and pluralistic world (Offen, forthcoming; Ferguson, chapter 4; Vogel, chapter 7).

Both Siim (chapter 8) and Hernes (chapter 9) use the idea of the mediation of relations between the citizen and the state through the reality of gender differences in order to examine the sometimes contradictory effects of changes in welfare state politics in different political systems. Miller *et al.* (chapter 6) explore how gender consciousness, not merely sex differences, is becoming increasingly significant to the explanation of electoral behaviour in the United States. More research like this is needed on what factors contribute to the development of gender consciousness in terms of a wide variety of forms of political action in different historical and cultural contexts. Hedlund, for instance, explores (in chapter 5) how significant different forms of gender consciousness are to understanding the self-perception of elected officials in Sweden. Jaquette and Staudt (chapter 10) argue that the subordination of women's

own definition of their interests to the exigencies of population policies perpetuates programmes that often have negative results for feminist politics.

The central argument of this volume is that to consider gender as an analytic category in political theory – that is, to perceive gender as at least an analytically distinct set of social relationships – re-defines and enlarges the scope of politics, the practice of citizenship and authority, and the language of political action, as well as recognizes the political dimensions of sexuality. The following chapters are examples of research that contributes to this re-definition and enlargement.

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