

# Beyond Good News and Bad News: Narrating Gender in Political Science

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Thinking and writing about gender in political science conjures up two affective states. On the one hand, there is the joy coming from the tangible vibrancy that is often generated when feminist political scholars meet. The seminar on ‘Gender and Politics: Research, Practice and Education: Moving Beyond the Obvious’, organised in June 2016 at the University of Padova, is a case in point. On the other hand, other situations and encounters leave one in a rather gloomy mood. In what follows, I will try to show that these two apparently competing moods are illustrative for the narrative about state of gender in the discipline of politics and that we need to unpack this when we want to ‘move beyond the obvious’, the slogan that the Padova organisers used for their event.

As a Dutch national, mostly trained in the UK academic context but working until recently in Austria, I am an outsider to the Italian national academic context. As co-chair of Atgender, the European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation, and in other capacities, I am engaged in intellectual and social conversations with Italian scholars in and outside of Italy. I have learned from these conversations that gender theories and approaches are less institutionally embedded in Italian academia compared to some other countries and that this has led some Italian feminist scholars to look across borders to learn lessons from feminist allies abroad. This neither implies that feminist political science scholars in other countries are not struggling nor that Italian feminist political science simply needs to ‘catch up’. The rich academic and activist work of Italian feminist scholars, the ambivalences about the institutionalisation of feminist perspectives, and the struggles of feminist political science scholars in the hegemonic academic centres belie that judgement. In the next section, I will offer a quick survey of recently published literature in the US and the UK on the state of gender in the discipline of politics to map these struggles.

## Narrating Gender in Politics: Some Good and Some Bad News

An obvious entry point is the 2015 Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics edited by Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and S. Laurel Weldon. In the rich introduction to the handbook, Celis, Kantola, Waylen and Weldon recognise that the discipline of politics now encompasses a wider research remit and broader understanding of politics than traditionally was the case. However, they also soberly remark that ‘despite the vibrancy of the gender and politics scholarship shown in this handbook and a long history of gender activism, gender is still ignored in much academic political science’ (2015: 2-3).

They stress that the positive developments that can be witnessed, for instance in the increasing number of female political science scholars, are only tiny steps on a much longer road to a 'gender equitable' discipline (2015: 6). This pessimistic tone, amidst some positive observations, is echoed by Elizabeth Evans and Fran Amery (2016) who mapped the UK landscape of politics and gender Higher Education. In their tellingly article called 'Gender and Politics in the UK: banished to the sidelines' they observe that the teaching of gender is still seen as marginal to the discipline of politics, or worse perhaps, as a 'luxury' (2016: 1; cf. Bonjour, Mügge and Roggeband 2016 for a similar observation for the Dutch teaching landscape). The results of their survey of undergraduate courses of politics in the UK show that less than one-third of 91 institutions offer a module on gender and politics and that none of these are compulsory. Combined with the fact that no UK university offers a gender or women's studies undergraduate degree (Evans and Amery 2016), this challenges the idea that UK would be 'ahead' compared to other academic contexts. While the authors add some positive notes on the work done by feminist scholars in organising themselves, liaising with other associations and pressuring institutions for change and suggest that the multiple global crises have encouraged students' interest in non-mainstream critical perspectives, their general outlook is rather bleak.

While some concerns might be shared across different disciplines, Smith and Lee (2015) find political science particular reluctant to gendering the discipline: 'What we have discovered is a sharp discrepancy between how issues of gender, sexuality and the body are treated in political science compared with the social sciences and humanities more broadly ... the absence, in particular, of serious consideration of queer theory is notable and appears to place political science in something of an intellectual silo' (Smith and Lee 2015: 50; 59). To understand the specific gender blindness and underrepresentation in the discipline of politics, Celis, Kantola, Waylen and Weldon (2015) suggest that these echo the gendered nature of politics in the world 'out there'. Evans and Amery (2016) add to this picture by drawing a link between the political and economic context of Conservatism and austerity and the precariousness of staff teaching gender and politics modules.

The importance of looking at the relation between the world of politics and the discipline of politics is also underlined in recent work of Karen Beckwith (2014) who suggests drawing on effective political strategies to change the discipline. For efforts towards gendered change in the discipline and world of politics to be successful, it is crucial to work collectively and to find allies, as well as to have key figures in positions of authority who can push political agendas. In a related vein, Carol Mershon and Denise Walsh, editors of a 2016 Dialogue Section on 'Diversity in the Discipline: why it matters and how to get it', collected contributions from feminist political science scholars who turn the analytical lenses they usually employ to study politics in the world, such as attitude survey data and intersectional approaches, to research the discipline of politics. Their suggestions for developing different strategic interventions are presented alongside an equally condemning diagnosis of the 'stubborn reality' of 'slow progress both in diversifying political science faculty at all ranks and in redressing bias in the discipline', where despite many efforts 'political science remains largely the domain of white men' (Mershon and Walsh 2016: 1).

No doubt many of us can add our own stories and anecdotes about gendering the discipline of politics that resonate with and illustrate some of the research findings presented above. The School of Politics and IR at a UK university that enabled my own development

as a feminist political scholar, was at the time an institution with no female professor. Recently, I had to explain once more to one of the many male professors, a mentor and friend who I value very much, why I considered it problematic that the single activity organised to enhance informal contact between PhD students and staff was a weekly game of football. So what do we do with these stories as well as the more substantial findings from the research presented above?

## Moving Beyond the Obvious

What many of the accounts about gender in the discipline of politics share can be summed up in the idiom ‘I have some good news and some bad news’. The good news is a story of progress and of achievement. It is a narrative which rightfully acknowledges the hard work of feminist scholars who have made a difference to the discipline, for example by building networks of support, designing courses that expose the gendered dynamics of politics, and pushing for appointments of female scholars. The bad news part takes stock of the current state of the discipline, in particular the disappointing gender bias, often hidden as gender blindness. The good and bad news components combine in a narrative that describes that we came some way, but we are not there yet. Since the bad news unfortunately tends to overshadow the good news, feminist scholars in political science heavily invest in understanding the gendered and sexist mechanisms in the discipline in order to make effective proposals for change. That means that the stories about the road we have travelled (the good news) and the observations that we are not there yet (the bad news) are generally concluded with recommendations on ‘how we can get there’.

There are good reasons for the narrative of gender in political science to take the tripartite form of ‘recognising progress/seeing that we are not quite there yet/proposing how to get there eventually’. Pragmatically, we hope it has the function of encouraging further action. Affectively, we need something uplifting to end a gloomy story. It is also a recognisable academic genre as well as a common genre for social movement analysis. It is a tempting format that my presentation at the University of Padova, which formed the basis for this article, also adhered to. I alluded to some positive news, then referred to evidence to demonstrate how much work still needs to be done and finally felt compelled to offer some directions for change.

Without challenging the content of these subtle, well-researched and well-told accounts, I propose to have a closer look at the recurrent structure of this narrative. Celis, Kantola, Waylen and Weldon explicitly address the force of standard narratives in their introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (2015: 4):

Our starting point is to recognize the big changes that have taken place both in politics as practice and political science as a discipline over the last century. We do not adhere to a standard metanarrative [...] of a uniformly patriarchal world that began to be transformed when feminism (depicted as originating in the West in the 1960s) spread to the rest of the world.

Clare Hemmings’ (2011) work on feminist narratives, which has forcefully demonstrated that stories matter, presents an even a more complex challenge. Writing about feminist historiography, she asked: ‘How does this story about the 1970s come to be told and accepted?’ And (...) ‘Why do I want to tell this story, and in telling it, what kind of subject do I become?’ (2005: 119). Applying these questions to our reflections on the stories

about gendering and queering political science, we can ask ourselves what our investment is in the narrative where we recount our successes before lamenting the current state of gender in politics. Or, why do we feel that we have to tell the story in this way? What are the pressures making us sandwich our critique by first recognising progress and ending with positive and proactive proposals? Or, what emotional labour are we performing here? How much space is there to revel in resignation, or make our anger a productive force, refusing to provide a set of recommendations to the mainstream of political science?

I also propose to stand still by the temporal and spatial elements implied in the three components of our story: 'this is how far we have come'/'we are still not there yet'/'this is how we could get further'. Where, or rather what is the 'there' where we want to go? The narrative focus on the lack of progress and the pressure to provide recommendations might inhibit us from further developing our vision of what our aims are in the first place. It might also smooth over important differences among feminist and queer political scholars that are worth discussing. The 2015 European Conference on Gender and Politics in Sweden, prompted Jonathan Dean to write a thought-provoking blog post reflecting some of the critical discussions that had taken place at the side-lines of the conference. Under the title 'Feminising Politics, Politicising Gender', he distinguished between scholars predominantly concerned with (formal) political representation of women, in the tradition of plenary speaker Joni Lovenduski, and scholars whose broader interpretation of politics as always already gendered, leads them to extent this remit. This intervention complicates the narrative of gain, disappointment and projections into the future and raises important questions about the directions of our efforts.

Finally, with reference to a recent experience, I want to pick up on the contrast between mainstream political science on the one hand, and feminist and queer political research on the other. About a year after Joni Lovenduski's keynote at the ECPG was described by Jonathan Dean and other conference participants as representing a traditional approach to gendering political science, a similar intervention by Lovenduski at the 2016 15th Dutch and Flemish Political Science Association conference marked her as the first female (let alone feminist) keynote speaker in the history of the Association. Moreover, in this context she stood out as a radical, progressive speaker. This anecdote helps to unpack a further layer to the common narrative to recognise that the progress documented in many commentaries, has mostly been about building a gender and politics subfield within the discipline of politics with its own conferences, networks and journals. Much of the sense of discontent arises from the limited imprint on political science as a general discipline. While we might have hoped for a more straightforward connection between the achievements of the subfield and influencing the mainstream of political science, much of the evidence suggests that this is not the case.

With every evaluation of the state of gender and politics we write (and often repeat) a particular story, and that story has certain effects. Therefore, we need to take a critical look at the evolving master narrative and consider our investments in it. Moreover, when we can liberate ourselves from providing the compulsory positive vision and roadmap for change to cushion our critique, this might open new avenues for thought and action. In this vein, this contribution has refused to end with a set of recommendations on how to integrate gender in political science, instead offering some suggestions on how to 'move beyond the obvious'.

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