

Gender and Political Science: Lessons from the French Case

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In this paper, I present some of the arguments put forward with my colleague, Laure Bereni, in the introduction of the dictionary we edited, *Dictionnaire Genre et science politique: Concepts, objets, problèmes*, concerning the links between gender and political science (Achin and Bereni, 2013).

With this book, we aimed to offer a practical and accessible guide for the studies on gender and politics and to further the integration of gender studies in the discipline of political science. We sought to demonstrate how a gender approach challenges and breathes new life into the main issues of political science and to summarize in 40 entries related developments in terms of knowledge, findings, innovative research, and new tools. The book also provides an extensive bibliography, comprising mostly books and articles written in French or English. The 40 entries reflect different areas of political science in France: political sociology, public policies, political theory, and international relations. They map some canonical concepts and objects of the discipline (democracy, political parties, institutions, representation...) but also some topics and concepts drawn up by gender specialists or re-addressed from a gender perspective (feminism, care, intersectionality, body, globalization, and so on). The articles were written by French-speaking specialists on these issues, mostly from the field of political science, but also from history, philosophy, and sociology. We asked for contributions from a diverse range of authors who have developed various approaches but share a critical concept of gender. In the different articles, gender is considered as a category for critical analysis and as a power relationship constructed, relational, and embedded in other social power relationships.

I will first review the main factors that may explain the strong and long resistance of political science to gender studies in France. I will then highlight the structural conditions that have allowed a relative recognition of this approach in the last 15 years. Finally, I will set out what the gender perspective has done to political science (and vice versa) and all that remains to be done.

The resistance of political science to gender studies

Three main factors can be identified. First, the time it took for political science to become recognized as an independent field of study (in comparison with others, like history, sociology or law) and the fact that political science was for a long time considered as a science “at the service of the state”. This prescriptive and strongly institutionalized view is aimed

at forming the political, administrative and diplomatic elites of the state. Furthermore, this state's elite was masculine.

Second, in the 1980s, a "critical turn" occurred in French political science that represented a missed opportunity for the gender perspective. Indeed, the development of a critical political sociology allowed the elaboration of studies focused on the production and reproduction of relationships of social domination (and not domination based on gender, race or nationality). The "social class" perspective has thus masked the specific working of male domination of the political field. Gender hierarchies were still excluded from the field and relegated to the private (personal, affective) sphere or to economical determinism.

Third, the late feminization of teaching-research personnel in political science must be noted. In 2011, in political science departments of French universities 40% of assistant professors and 23% of full professors were women, but these rates have been achieved only in recent years.

Thus in France, political science has been built as an eminently masculine discipline, male-dominated and based on an androcentric vision of political phenomena. Moreover, unlike what happened in sociology or in history where feminist activists could extend issues arising from the social movement into the academic arena, there was no direct link between the feminist movements of the 1970s and academic research in political science.

The conditions of a relative acclimatization

Several triggers exist for the relative establishment of a gender approach in political science. The role of electoral sociology and of the analyses of women's political behavior in the 1950s must be underlined. Those studies provided a first denaturalization of the female citizen's behavior, which was however linked to exogenous explanations (socialization and family structure).

Later in the 1980s and 1990s, the pioneering work of Mariette Sineau and Janine Mossuz-Lavau (1988) analyzed women's relationship to politics by emphasizing the role of social and economic inequalities between men and women.

Significantly, the development of a reflection on the nexus between "women and power" found place outside the discipline. The role of the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989 was decisive. It allowed the development of new questions about the place of women in the founding moments of the country's democratic modernity, fostering research conducted mostly in history and philosophy (for example Fauré 1985, Fraisse 1989, Rosanvallon 1992). Moreover, debates around the demand for gender parity in the late 1990s, which were accompanied by the mobilization of academics (Gaspard 1992, Riot-Sarcey 1995, Scott 1998) led to a questioning of the links between gender and politics.

Another important factor was research carried out in countries where the institutionalization of gender studies occurred earlier (in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain), which began to structure an international space for dialog (in English) on gender and politics. French-speaking researchers from Quebec, Switzerland, and Belgium, more directly connected to this discursive space, played the role of "mediators", or "translators" between the two linguistic and cultural areas.

Gender research has been conducted in different sectors relevant to political science: in political theory (Elshtain, Pateman), post-structuralist feminism (Landes, Butler and

Scott, Benhabib), but also in empirical political science (Carroll, Sapiro, Norris, etc.), feminist sociology of organizations (Kanter, Acker, etc.) and institutions (Freeman, Lovenduski, Ferguson, etc.), and finally in international relations (Enloe, Tickner, etc.)

In France, the passing of the parity law in 2000 placed the issue of women and politics at the heart of the functioning of political institutions. Studies concerning the effects of a change in electoral laws on political competition, politicians, and public policy were widely conducted, and produced a favorable environment for the establishment of gender studies in political science.

Some events can be highlighted to illustrate this gradual institutionalization. In 2002, a symposium on “Gender and Power” was organized at Sciences Po Paris with the support of the French Association of Political Science. In 2004, a standing group on “gender and politics” was founded within the same association.

Moreover, in the 2000s, many theses were defended in political science adopting a gender perspective (first in political sociology and public policy analysis, then in political theory and cultural areas, and international relations). This new generation of scholars is finally obtaining long-term research-based positions in French universities and in the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*.

What a gender approach has done to political science (and all that remains to be done)

Two classic but fundamental contributions can be highlighted. On the one hand, many studies have contributed to demonstrating the political production of gender, and the gendered production of politics. They have highlighted how gender “fits” into the political system (its history, institutions and mechanisms that structured the field). It was brilliantly proved that by giving different political rights to men and women, modern politics in France has served to differentiate men and women and has mostly contributed to giving a political significance to the difference between the sexes. Thus, the gender perspective has contributed to characterizing political institutions and organizations as not neutral and as deeply gendered; while a gendered grammar impregnates their organization and, at the same time, produces gender. Gender is thus a political language that is central to political competition and structures all public actions. On the other, research on gender and politics has helped to rethink and question the boundaries of politics. It has questioned the gap between the public sphere and the private one, by showing the political dimension of what is called ‘private’ and the role of gender in giving credence to the hierarchical separation of the two areas and in the ‘naturalization’ of this boundary. This research has succeeded in making the political dimension of political behavior visible outside the conventional political field (for example the role of women mobilizations in religious, social or philanthropic organizations). Finally, the gender perspective has contributed to a different definition of the meaning and borders of political activities.

Despite these major contributions, the legitimacy of such an approach is still to be defended and guaranteed. Today the standing working group on gender and politics in the French Association of Political Science no longer exists. However, in every scientific congress, sessions are regularly dedicated to gender, sexuality, and intersectionality issues.

In this “normalization” process, the role of international associations must be underlined. The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Standing Group on

Gender and Politics forms a broad-based network on issues relating to the study of gender and sexuality in politics and world politics, and contributes actively to encouraging workshops, panels and research groups with an emphasis on gender.

While the main political science journals (in French) have devoted some themed issues to gender and politics (including a regular and specialized “book review” in the *Revue Française de Science Politique*), there is no journal in French political science specially dedicated to gender. French journals on issues relating to gender are transdisciplinary or mostly inscribed in history and sociology (*Nouvelles questions féministes*; *Les Cahiers du genre*; *Travail genre et société*; *Clio*; *Genre sexualités et société*).

Two developments must be noted concerning specialized university courses on gender and politics. Some courses about gender have been created in political science curricula (in universities and at Science Po); while in transdisciplinary master courses on gender there are courses dedicated to the links between gender and politics (Université Paris 8, EHESS, Paris 5, Lyon and Bordeaux).

All these developments concerning gender issues have produced a dynamic area of research that remains, nonetheless, diverse and confrontational. The main controversies concern the various definitions of “gender” (a term of critical analysis versus a “mainstream category”), and the different ways to think the relationship between gender and other social power relations (class, “race”, sexuality, age).

In conclusion, we should not minimize recurring obstacles on the road to the institutionalization of a gender approach in political science. This perspective remains poorly integrated in non-specialist research and is always suspected of “activism” and “subjectivity”. Recognizing the consubstantial links between gender and politics continues to be a challenge. Nothing is guaranteed, but a positive outlook is to be found on the part of students’ appreciation and interest (courses relating to gender are much in demand), and of consolidating international research networks.

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