

Negotiating Boundaries: Disciplinarity and the Interdisciplinarity¹

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Thanks Denise and Carol for inviting me to this workshop. In my presentation, I want to address the following questions posed by the organizers in relation to the panel on “Forging Inclusive Diversity Coalitions” namely: what kinds of obstacles might the change advocates intent on building such coalitions need to overcome, how might they do so, and what opportunities exist in the discipline and in interdisciplinary associations that they might be able to exploit?

In my short paper, I mostly want to spend some time articulating the obstacles that advocates of inclusive diversity coalitions need to overcome. I will discuss two main ones: 1) Implications of the Rigidity of Subfields within Political Science and 2) Relationship between the Disciplinary and the Interdisciplinary Initiatives.

First, I want to identify the implications of the rigidity of subfields within the discipline of Political Science and a lack of infrastructure that corresponds to the transformations within the discipline as one of the primary obstacles in advancing diverse leadership. Second, I want to question whether the interdisciplinarity within the fields of women and politics (and intersectionality research) and law and social sciences also allows the discipline of political science to remain somewhat untouched by these crucial shifts.

RIGIDITY OF SUBFIELDS AND LACK OF TRANSFORMATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The debate between the proponents of qualitative and quantitative methods in Political Science of course has a long history and was exemplified by the Perestroika moment in 2000.² However, I want to actually bring our attention to another kind of methodological intervention in the last few years that is extremely significant for identifying the challenges of the current moment.

Here I want to discuss Mary Hawkesworth's 2012 book—*Political Worlds of Women*-- as an illustration of the powerful work being done by feminist scholars and the kind of critique that they represent. Her book above all represents a stringent critique of the exclusions in the discipline of traditional Political Science. Just to give one example, she points to the way in which the study of state—a dominant concept-- was conducted within Political Science. She notes that regardless of the approach utilized for the study of the state-- liberal, Marxists, pluralists or new institutionalists--they had one thing in common. The scholars portrayed the state in a way which was devoid of any reference to race, gender or sexuality. As she notes, “Construed as individual attributes or demographic characteristics, race, gender, and sexuality are assumed to be prepolitical and to have no relevance to the nature or operations of the state.”³ This assumption of race, gender or sexuality as individual attributes or demographic characteristics has of course been squarely challenged by feminists, critical race theorists and queer theorists to point to ways in which state (and law) has historically produced some of the identities and the corresponding hierarchies and exclusions. Indeed, the richness of her book is represented by the critique and research that has been done within interdisciplinary

women and gender studies as also by race and gender scholars within political science. And that precisely is the peculiarity of today's dilemma that we face when we speak of discrimination. On one hand, there is a long history of methodological preference within the discipline that is premised on exclusion and marginalization of particular subjects, on the other hand there is a rich tradition, in the last few decades, of path breaking work that has created new paradigms of thinking and research premised on the critiques— as captured in the solid body of work referenced by and built upon by Hawkesworth.

I want to suggest that one of the major obstacles in the contemporary moment is the difficulty in negotiating this new reality. In other words, one of the definitional features of a critical effort represented by the vast growth of scholarship on race and gender is that it questions the boundaries within political science and also between various disciplines that constitute women and gender studies. And yet despite these incredible efforts, institutional discrimination remains a major issue of concern- in part due to the lack of transformational infrastructure but also because perhaps the scholarship stopped short of demanding certain kinds of disciplinary changes. Let me explain what I mean.

Alongside the critiques of traditional political science for excluding women's experiences (and experiences of other marginalized groups), Hawkesworth's book also challenges the divisions of traditional subfields within Political Science by drawing upon scholarship by feminist scholars across these fields. As she puts it, "Rather than respecting the boundaries established by subfields within the discipline of political science, it intentionally crosses boundaries to present more comprehensive account of women's activism, advocacy, and governance. Indeed, it suggests that boundary crossing

is essential to illuminate raced and gendered power dynamics that shape not only individual and group identities but also standard operating procedures in national political institutions and international regimes.”⁴ The need to cross boundaries in order to present a more comprehensive account of women’s activism and governance is a worthy goal and path breaking in itself. However, I suggest that perhaps, it may not be adequate to just cross boundaries but rather in some ways one needs to frontally challenge the very existence of such boundaries in order to challenge discrimination institutionally.

Here I turn to Timothy Kaufman-Osborn’s critique of fetishism of the subfields to further explain my point. The need to challenge the subfields and especially the “totemic” status of the subfields has been critiqued and historicized by Kaufman-Osborn in his essay “Dividing the Domains of Political Science: On the fetishism of Subfields.”⁵ He reminds us that these divisions between the subfields- Political Theory, Comparative Politics, American Politics and International Relations didn’t always exist (similar to divisions between disciplines that began in late 19th-early 20th century). Indeed he echoes Roger Smith’s explanation for the “grand quartet” that it was the post-world war II nationalistic aspirations that made the US nation state as central to the discipline (in terms of American Politics) and the comparative and international experience defined in relation to them. More importantly, Kaufman-Osborn adds another observation to the study of the discipline namely of a post-behavioral stalemate that has allowed the proliferation of many different special fields and an apparent “disunity” within the subject matter of the discipline coexisting with the rigidity of the four subfields. For our purpose what that means is that while there is a growth of race and gender scholarship that points to the blurring, crossing over of boundaries whether directly or indirectly, and

institutional changes that address discrimination and exclusions through the introduction of new journals, new sections, new status of group committees and initiatives, those however are not still not able to fully transform the discipline. While Kaufman- Osborn is not addressing the question of discrimination on the basis of race, gender and sexuality, I wish to suggest that one way to understand the paradox of rich scholarship and initiatives coexisting with discrimination may be that it stops short of transforming the discipline as a whole.

Critiques of these subfields and efforts such as *Political Worlds of Women* by Hawkesworth are extremely powerful in creating new paradigms. But the success of such an initiative is currently not supported by an infrastructure that can sustain this effort. For example, the continuing regimenting of subfields –whether at the level of curriculum, jobs, specializations and categorizations suggests that such an effort that challenges the sub fields remain rare and less transformative than their potential. Kaufman-Osborn reminds us that these divisions cannot just be considered as “administrative convenience” but are “vehicles of power” since almost all elements of professionalization- jobs, teaching, curriculum, and promotion are based on them. One could add that in terms of publications as well rather than finding place within the existing journals, new journals are constantly created to accommodate the new methodological emphasis or substantive and previously marginalized areas of research. The pluralism according to Kaufman-Osborn has actually depoliticized the discipline “by disguising the appearance and dampening the articulation of latent but very real conflicts within the discipline.”⁶ Thus, I suggest that only if the infrastructure of our discipline is willing to modify the rigid divisions within it that some of these significant works on race and gender have the

potential of transforming the hierarchies within the discipline as a whole as opposed to creating powerful but potentially limited spaces within. Rather than exclusion, I think one of our major challenges currently is that while there are opportunities for individuals or collaborations within the discipline that are much more visible, these have not been able to impact patterns of discrimination as a whole. Thus, new sections, new journals, new initiatives sprout alongside the continuation of traditional divisions externally that limit their transformative potential and possibilities of challenging institutional discrimination.

NEGOTIATING THE DISCIPLINARY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY

My second point- again regarding obstacles to coalition building—concerns the negotiating between the disciplinary and Interdisciplinary and here I want to draw upon my teaching experience both of law related courses within Political Science and a course that is cross listed between womens and gender studies and Political Science. In particular, I draw upon my experience of teaching *Law, Politics, and Society* as a Political Science course and *Global Feminisms* as a cross-listed one. I teach in a Liberal Arts college which should make teaching more multidisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary courses more coveted. Yet as the financial crisis/recession has affected higher education and the relevance of liberal arts in particular has been greatly challenged (and the emphasis has become on assessment of utility of a course for the job market), it has strangely led to a retrenchment as far as interdisciplinarity is concerned and a further reification of the traditional sub-fields within the departments. In such a context, the teaching of interdisciplinary cross-listed courses or an attempt to teach law courses with a legal studies perspective (as opposed to a pre-law one) becomes more challenging. This is

because in the absence of shifts within the discipline, most of the scholarship that challenges these boundaries move to more interdisciplinary associations in ways that seldom seem to be push the boundaries within. The interdisciplinary associations in turn proliferate sometimes reflecting their own tensions- law and social sciences reflected in Law and Society Association and *Law and Society Review*; and Law, Culture and the Humanities (association and journal) with Political Scientists going to both and finding spaces to engage with. Again, just as the proliferation of individuals, initiatives and scholarship may not be adequate to transform the discipline, the participation in interdisciplinary associations may create sympathetic allies but one wonders whether it is adequate to again push at the boundaries of the discipline and challenge existing power structures.

The implication of the points that I have been raising can be better illustrated by the following examples in terms of pedagogy. One example is from the *Global Feminisms* class where the course draws upon different disciplines and conceptualized by women and gender studies faculty for the most part but taught always in a cross-listed fashion. The course primarily adopts a post-positivistic interpretive feminist methodology thereby builds on a critique of positivism that is dominant within Political Science. A similar approach animates the *Law, Politics, and Society* course even though there is a much greater affinity between political science and law and society that makes such an attempt ostensibly easier. Yet, in both, as I think more critically (also in assessment terms in rubrics that are created to capture the different elements representing a discipline), I wonder about the overall role these courses are playing within the discipline. In other words, if the students are predominantly trained to think in dominant

terms about the discipline (whether Political Science or Law) as opposed to a critical reflective way about exclusions and transformations within the discipline, then I wonder whether these courses would have a limited impact. I also wonder whether it would devalue the contributions and institutional status of the few faculty who may be engaged in such pedagogy and research considered mostly as exceptions within the discipline. In other words, the impact on pedagogy literally depends on the critical mass of faculty in a particular department, rather than reflecting the decades of critical work within the discipline. Another way to think about this is that while there are decades of work now by Political Science scholars who challenge the dominant ways of studying politics, the introductory courses may still be taught in canonical ways that do not necessarily acknowledge such a shift—an observation that was reiterated by the 2001 report on Status of Women in Political Science.⁷

FORGING ALLIANCES

Thus, in face of such obstacles, forging of alliances becomes extremely difficult and requires a rethinking of strategies. The 2001 Report on the Status of Women in Political Science had raised some significant points regarding the continuing challenges that women and minorities face in the discipline. However, there are two additional points that I wish to reiterate in relation to that report as well. One is that even in the 2001 report, the discussion continued to be at the level of contributions of women and politics scholars and scholarship within subfields and not to the discipline as a whole. Second, while it acknowledged the two strands within this scholarship namely the accommodationist—more conventional methodology and concepts adding women

(positivist) and transformational (more postpositivist), it did not confront the basic question about whether one is able to creatively work through these tensions while addressing discrimination as a whole. Using Kaufman-Osborn's historicizing of the discipline and the subfields, one may even argue that Political Science has been well suited to take advantage of its incoherence and the fluidity within the subfields to precisely make the transformational moves, and as Hawkesworth notes, the race and gender scholars have been at the forefront of challenging the weaknesses within the discipline in the past thereby are well placed to do the same ahead.

In closing, I also want to suggest that if the history of Political Science in the United States has been very closely linked to the nationalistic aspirations in the post-world war 2 period (as some scholars have pointed out), then perhaps, the forging of alliances has to find an international or better still a transnational path. And here perhaps building more transnational links and intentionally connecting with the diversity in the development of the discipline in different parts of the world may actually help come up with institutional strategies for dealing with discrimination here as well.

1 Draft Paper for Workshop on Coalition Building to Advance Diverse Leadership and Address Discrimination in Political Science and Law & Social Sciences.

2 The movement represented a critique of the dominance of quantitative methods within the discipline.

3 Mary Hawkesworth. *Political Worlds of Women: Activism, Advocacy, and Governance in the Twenty-First century*. Westview Press, 2012, p. 157.

4 Hawkesworth, p. 3.

5 Timothy V Kaufman-Osborn. "Dividing the Domain of Political Science: On the Fetishism of Subfields. *Polity* 38, 41-71 (January 2006).

6 Kaufman-Osborn, p. 70.

7 The Status of Women in Political Science: Female Participation in the Professoriate and the Study of Women and Politics in the discipline. Committee on the Status of Women, *PS* June, 2001.