Towards a contextual and gender sensitive European political science?

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The methodological split in political science between different schools, for example between 'rationalists' and 'social constructivists', has been challenged by feminist political research. The European criticism of the American model of political research can be read as a methodological critique of ethnocentrism and 'methodological individualism'. Comparatively speaking there is at least a normative vision of a more genuine methodological pluralism in European political science. The articles in this symposium present methodological pluralism as one key principle in feminist political research, which can serve as a basis for a dialogue between feminist research and mainstream political science. They illustrate that there is a conversation in feminist political research between an empirically grounded political research, cross-national analysis sensitive to context, and discourse analysis inspired by post-structuralism.

In this piece I want to highlight the main principles of an interdisciplinary, contextual and gender sensitive political science, and discuss recent trends and tensions in feminist political research based upon ten years of experience with comparative European research projects. Speaking from a Nordic feminist position, one of the major achievements of comparative European research on gender and citizenship has been to... explore the political meaning of gender, equality, work and care in different European welfare regimes.

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research has been followed by a parallel move towards social constructivism. One of the implications of the contested and constructivist nature of key concepts like gender equality is the emphasis on different frames as a basis for interpretations. The methodological challenges to feminist research have been followed by new tensions between different feminist positions.

THE MAIN PRINCIPLES IN A CONTEXTUAL GENDER SENSITIVE POLITICAL SCIENCE

During the 1990s feminist political research took both a ‘comparative’ and a ‘discursive’ turn that questioned preconceived normative perceptions and universal principles. Feminist political research aims to be contextual and situated as well as sensitive to different forms of difference. The three preceding articles illustrate how feminist methodologies and approaches have become increasingly sensitive to context and critical of the earlier Anglo-American and ethnocentric bias. This trend is followed by what I perceive to be creative tensions in feminist political research between comparative research, discursive analysis and normative political theory.

One of the articles in this symposium mentions the ‘discursive turn’ in political science, and the issue as a whole illustrates that in feminist discourse analysis there need not be a methodological gulf between surveys, qualitative case studies, institutional studies and discourse analysis. Arguably there is also a ‘deliberative turn’ in European political science and in feminist research, and a tendency to bridge the methodological gulf between normative political theory and contextual cross-national empirical research making it possible to create a new synthesis based upon a reflective social constructivism.

The articles in this symposium express the growing tendency in political research to go beyond the different sub-disciplines and establish conversations between researchers from different fields, for example between political theorists/gender theorists and comparativists, as well as between neo-institutionalists and social constructivists. They indicate that there is no logical split between different approaches and methodologies but rather productive tensions between different positions. They thus illustrate the potential strength of methodological pluralism, and they contribute to a conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies.

The parallel move in feminist political research towards comparative political research and social constructivism poses new methodological challenges for gender research (Hobson, Lewis and Siim, 2002). The recognition of the contested nature, different meanings and interpretative ‘frames’ of key concepts has been followed by a debate about context, structure and agency (Bacchi, 2000; Bang, Jensen and Pfau-Effinger, 2000). There is no agreement in feminist theory about key concepts like emancipation, feminism and gender equality, and the nature of women’s interests and who has the power to define them is contested. Even if we can agree with Mazur’s operational definition of feminism as ‘the pursuit of women’s autonomy; the advancement of women’s status and conditions; the reduction of gender-based