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## **Feminist Political Analysis: Exploring strengths, hegemonies and limitations**

### **Introduction**

Austerity politics, war at the borders of the European Union, the rise of nationalisms, populist parties in Europe, islamophobia, and the refugee crisis, call for discussions about the theories and concepts that academic disciplines provide for making sense of the societal, cultural and political transformations of the time. Such undertakings need to avoid the tendency within increasingly professionalized disciplines to become self-referential, thus narrowing their analytical and imaginative capacities (Brown, 2002).

In this article, we focus on the capacities of feminist political analysis to undertake these tasks. By political analysis – borrowing from Colin Hay (2002) – we mean the *diversity of analytical strategies developed around ‘the political’*. Since the political has to do with the ‘distribution, exercise, and consequences of power’, political analysis focuses on the analysis of ‘power relations’ (Hay, 2002: 3) and the contestations arising around them. Gender and politics has become a vibrant subfield of political science. Feminist approaches to political analysis applied and developed in this subfield, explore, first, how power relations are gendered since they reproduce gender norms and biases that create hierarchies between women and men (Hawkesworth, 1994). Secondly, feminist approaches show how ‘the political’ includes gender issues formerly considered ‘personal’ (Pateman, 1983). This thinking often implies a personal commitment to the political project of gender equality that moves feminist scholars to link theory and practice in their daily work (Celis et al., 2013). The interest in transformative political praxis marks feminist political analysis as both an empirical and normative project. At the same time, feminist analyses have their limitations, which

affect their capacity to analyse the political. These can stem both from taking mainstream political science concepts and theories as a starting point, or from feminist debates themselves.

In this article we explore the hegemonies, silences, and novelties of feminist approaches to political analysis. We discuss the huge diversity of approaches to feminist political analysis under five headings: (i) women, (ii) gender, (iii) deconstruction, (iv) intersectionality, and (v) post-deconstruction. Following Nina Lykke, we see our selection not as representing a ‘canon’ that is the very core of the field of gender and politics but rather as situated nodal points: ‘as temporary crystallizations in ongoing feminist negotiations of located theory making’ (Lykke, 2010: 49). The order in which approaches are presented then is not chronological or hierarchical. Rather, our purpose is to make visible the contributions and limitations of each feminist approach in relation to the others. We argue that some feminist approaches are more dominant than others in the field of gender and politics.<sup>1</sup> Notably, our understanding of this field of ‘gender and politics’ is based on our location in European debates that are also strongly informed by Anglo-American gender and political science writing. Inspired by Breny Mendoza’s (2012) critique concerning the epistemic violence of Anglo-American political science on Latin-American disciplines of gender and politics, we suggest that explorations and self-reflections such as ours are indeed much needed.

In our discussion of each of the feminist approaches to political analysis, we assess its contributions and limitations theoretically. The logic informing the distinctions drawn between the five approaches is primarily based on their epistemological and ontological characteristics. This is first

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<sup>1</sup> The criteria we employ for defining dominance of approaches are not quantitative. We rather draw on our own experience as scholars participating in gender and politics debates, that are well represented in the European Conferences on Politics and Gender (ECPG) that have taken places since 2009, and in other mainstream politics conferences such as the ECPR, APSA, and IPSA; in journals like *Politics & Gender*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy*, among others, and in mainstream politics journals.

and foremost an analytical article rather than an empirical one. However, to illustrate the differences among the approaches, we empirically discuss their analytical potential in relation to the current economic crisis, thereby asking questions about the ways in which the approaches link theory and practice.

What drives our quest here are questions about knowledge and its boundaries. The context we analyse is that of political science, a discipline that still privileges positivist epistemologies, empiricism, and quantitative methods, expresses bias against postmodern and constructivist approaches, and routinely overlooks research on gender and other inequalities (Mügge, Evans and Engeli 2016; Hay 2002). Our argument is that dominant approaches in political science influence the emergence and marginalization of particular feminist approaches to political analysis, but also feminist theorizing in gender and politics when striving for recognition within mainstream political science reproduces its own hegemonies and marginalizations. We ask how is it possible to create new knowledge – at a time like the recent economic crisis that is fundamentally shaping societies and gender politics in Europe – if one sits comfortably within one’s own approach.

## **Women**

A women and politics approach places the focus of analysis on women’s presence, roles, action, interests, needs, rights, or voices. The object of study in this approach is mostly that of ‘women’, but also ‘men’ as a term of comparison. The approach relies on positivist epistemological positions and treats women and men as unitary categories whose interests, needs and beliefs can be objectively identified in research. Illustrative of these approaches is the tendency to take mainstream political science theories, concepts, and institutions as a starting point.

In relation to the economic crisis, scholars have used this approach to map the effects of the crisis on women, analyzing the different waves of the crisis in which men's employment in the private sector was worst hit at first, and how in the second wave, the public sector cuts started to eliminate women's jobs, and the public services and benefits that women relied on (Bettio et al., 2012; Karamessini, 2014). With this approach one can also study the numbers of women and men in economic decision-making and banking. Feminist scholars have argued that this has been a men's crisis in the sense that men have been the dominant actors in the institutions that have inflicted the crisis and attempted to solve it (Walby, 2015). When describing the crisis such approaches often accept mainstream language and definitions.

A women and politics approach tends to make inequality immediately visible by showing who is in power. The approach has the strength of providing factual evidence for policymakers about statistical patterns of inequality, as well as arguments for activists about who is represented in the institutions and whose voice is heard in policymaking. The considerable attention given to women's descriptive political representation has helped to make visible the numerical under-representation of women in political institutions across the world (Phillips, 1995; Mossuz Lavau, 1998). Scholarly debates on women's substantive political representation explore how female representatives 'act for' the represented in a manner responsive to them (Celis et al., 2008; Childs and Krook, 2008). This has opened ways to study the role of women as critical actors, despite their small numbers in political institutions, to promote women's concerns (Celis, 2009), challenging the notion of 'women's interests' that may get represented in politics (Celis et al., 2014). Studying women's action allows scholars to understand political and institutional changes that would otherwise be inexplicable to the political analyst, such as advances in reproductive rights, equal employment, or care policies (McBride and Mazur, 2013).

Feminist debates have criticized, first, a focus on women for being essentialist through assuming that 'women' (and 'men') are treated as relatively unproblematic and unitary categories. This risks hiding different women's experiences of inequality through generalisations relating to more privileged women, as Black and postcolonial feminist researchers have pointed out (Mohanty, 2002; Harris, 1990; Yuval Davis and Anthias, 1989). Essentialism is also evidenced in the continuing desire of gender and politics scholars to research and identify a priori women's interests assumed to be out there and shared by all women (Celis et al., 2014). For example in relation to the recent economic crisis, 'women' have been very differently impacted by austerity politics depending on their class, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their 'interests' might be in contradiction with one another.

Second, while a women perspective makes inequality immediately visible through numerical evidence, it does not necessarily go beyond providing numerical indicators of inequality to challenge less visible unequal structures and norms of male domination and female marginalization that shape political phenomena such as decision-making. In this respect it might contain a 'benchmarking fallacy' that Meier et al. (2005: 35) have identified in policy issues such as women's political representation: 'the easiness with which they can be quantified opens the door for an analysis and solution of problems of gender inequality in terms of numbers, without tackling underlying structural problems'. When gender inequality is only discussed in terms of numbers and sex as a social category becomes too (apparently) easy to trace and target, the risk is of providing simplistic evidence of only one aspect of the reality of inequality, and more complex issues of gender inequality that have to do with less tangible gender norms and structures might be left aside. Feminist theorists have criticised this 'add women and stir' approach for not leading to any substantive change towards greater gender equality as it does not fundamentally challenge deep structures of politics or political science (Harding, 1995). The economic crisis exposes that

including women in the top decision-making bodies (such as the IMF, European Central Bank or the European Commission) might do little to alter the normative and political context of austerity politics that have been detrimental to equality.

In the field of gender and politics the women approach has been rather dominant as a tool for political analysis. An example of this dominance is the extensive number of studies of women's descriptive political representation (see for an overview Childs and Lovenduski, 2013). This predominance might primarily be due to the fact that the approach shows immediately visible data gaps, such as statistical data on women and men in the labour market, gender pay gap, women's representation in politics, which are important to show there is a problem of inequality that people can immediately see. Conscious of the male-dominated context of politics and political science, gender scholars might strategically choose an approach that places the focus on numbers (Meier et al., 2005), which is easier for politicians and colleagues to grasp and accept in contrast to less obvious gender norms and structures. Finally, the influential role of a women approach can also depend on the predominance and legitimacy given to empirical studies in mainstream political science, which affects also gender and politics scholarship, due to the emphasis on empirical evidence in political science Higher Education contexts in which gender and politics scholars are trained.

## **Gender**

A focus on gender as opposed to women calls for an understanding of the wider societal structures that reproduce the continuing patterns of domination and inequality. Gender is a contested concept that has been interpreted in many different ways. Despite their variety, gender approaches to the study of politics include, in our view: (i) the need to understand gender always in relation to wider

societal structures in order to understand domination and inequalities that are by definition structural, (ii) analytically, the need to study gender as a complex socially constructed relation between masculinities and femininities; this broadens the focus from women to women and men, their roles and interdependent relations, and (iii) epistemologically, approaching gender from a critical 'realist' perspective, which means that deep gender structures are socially constructed and at the same time are considered real, and science and language are believed to be capable of describing the reality of these social structures and of providing access to them. Initially inspired by Marxist materialist approaches, gender approaches address social structures, such as family, labour or political institutions, and the gender norms they produce.

Examples of the gender approach to politics include research on gender mainstreaming exploring the extent to which political structures, processes, norms, and practices have been transformed in gender directions (Verloo, 2005; Mazey, 2000; Rees, 1998), or studies on gendered institutions (Krook and Mackay, 2011; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010). In relation to the economic crisis, a gender and politics approach places the focus on the gendered impacts of the crisis, studying the shifts in national gender regimes that the economic crisis generates (Wöhl, 2014; Walby, 2015). The neoliberal policy solutions to the crisis that require cutting down the public sector tend to rely on and reproduce the gender roles that delegate major responsibility for care to women. Feminist political scientists analyze the impact of the crisis on gender policies – including gender mainstreaming in the EU – and gender equality institutions illustrating their downscaling in a number of countries at a time when they would be most needed to counter the gendered effects of the crisis (Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Klatzer and Schlager, 2014; Lombardo, 2017). The very definition of the crisis is then located in the wider societal context of gendered structures. Gender politics is thereby regarded as a central facet of the crisis.

Due to its capacity to incorporate and respond to the criticisms that arose within feminist theories, the concept of gender developed, embodying the richness, complexity and multidimensionality of gender realities. Scott (1986: 1067) provides an analytical account of gender not as a universal causal force, but as context specific and historical. Connell (2002: 57-68) shows that gender relations involve 'multiple structures' and 'dimensions'. Feminist scholars have also conceptualized gender as a regime, consisting of 'the rules and norms about gender relations allocating tasks and rights to the two sexes' (Sainsbury, 1999: 5; Fraser, 1994). The understanding of what are the key relations and structures that define a gender regime has been variously interpreted as being the relation between production and reproduction (Gottfried, 2013), or as involving wider interactions between economy, polity, violence, and civil society (Walby, 2009).

The capacity to incorporate the multidimensional character of gender that emerges in feminist contestations has helped gender become a dominant approach for political analysis, as shows the naming of the discipline after it as 'gender studies' (called before the 1990s 'women's studies'), or the subdiscipline 'gender and politics', which is also reflected in gender and politics committees of national, European, and international political science associations (e.g. IPSA 'gender politics and policy'; ECPR 'gender and politics'). Its influential character among feminist approaches to political analysis exposes it to challenges coming both from outside and from within gender and politics studies. Despite the high level of sophistication and the complex theorizing of the gender structures, mainstream political science continues to see the gender perspective as 'partial', as focusing 'only on women' (e.g. Jones, 1996). More sympathetic feminist criticisms identify the limitation of gender analyses in accounting for the differences in different women's and men's experiences. Another challenge comes from deconstructivist approaches that seek to destabilize gender in order to understand how it works as a powerful discursive structure.



## **Deconstruction of gender**

Deconstructionist approaches, which is where our own work mostly centres, theorize gender as a discourse and a practice that is continuously contested and constructed in political debates. In deconstruction, gender is deemed to have no fixed meaning, but rather to assume different meanings in the conceptual disputes in which policy actors engage (Bacchi, 1999; Kantola, 2006; Verloo, 2007; Ferree, 2012). Epistemologically, this signifies that there is no reality out there but what there is is subject to constant discursive struggles informed by power relations. This approach has contributed to showing that a problem such as gender inequality can be represented in many different ways, with many different solutions, and that a particular diagnosis of the problem of gender inequality is at the same time silencing other alternative representations of the problem (Bacchi, 1999). Deconstruction, therefore, makes it possible to understand how some solutions are favoured over others and how gender can be ignored in political disputes, stretched to include other equality dimensions apart from gender, or bent to other goals that have nothing to do with gender equality (Lombardo, Meier and Verloo, 2009). Discursive constructions of gender also offer particular representations of subjects' roles and positions and close off others. These discursive constructions have effects on people and impact on solutions that are perceived as more legitimate than others.

As an approach to analyse the economic crisis deconstruction of gender means focusing on the ways in which the crisis is discursively constructed, how some diagnosis of the crisis problems and solutions to the crisis are constructed as hegemonic while others are marginalised, and how these constructions are gendered and gendering subjects. For example, there is ample research into the dominance of neoliberal discourses in providing solutions to the crisis, which is a particularly hostile discourse for gender equality (Fraser, 2013; Kantola and Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2015). In

Greek national discourse the macroeconomic level is discursively constructed as the most important, which makes the gendered experiences of the crisis disappear (Vaiaou, 2014) and the feminist, queer and LGBT struggles against homophobia seem unimportant (Athanasiou, 2014: 4). Other examples of discursive politics analyses have also shown how the meaning of gender equality is reproduced in political debates in ways that can take it far from feminist aims, for instance by promoting the goal of economic productivity rather than that of gender equality (Bacchi, 2009). A deconstructionist approach to the crisis then challenges the very definitions of the crisis and asks on whose terms is it defined, what relations of power underpin these definitions and how could they be undone.

A focus on deconstruction of gender then helps to render visible the gendered norms and meanings that are at the core of gender inequalities, but these are less visible than the numerical overrepresentation of men in a parliament is. Discursive politics brings to the surface otherwise submerged norms about gender and gender roles that operate in politics. It shows who the hegemonic and marginalised subjects and groups are in policy discourses, providing insights into subtle mechanisms of gender power that construct some groups as the norm and others as problematic or deviant. Furthermore, such analyses show that discourses have consequences for women and men's lives as they open up and close off opportunities for women and men (Lombardo and Meier, 2014).

Deconstruction of gender has generated heated discussion much of which operates on the level of postmodernism versus modernism; of whether deconstruction of gender undermines women's agency and shared identity or the study of deep economic, social and political structures of domination (Benhabib et al., 1995; Benhabib, 1995: 29; Fraser, 1995: 163-4). Similarly, in a sympathetic critique, Lois McNay points out how deconstructionist approaches may overemphasise

and systematically prioritise the symbolic and the linguistic over the socio-political (McNay, 1999). Scholars working within women or gender approaches, especially from positivist epistemologies, have criticized discursive politics approaches for their lack of dialogue with other approaches (Mazur, 2011) or for disregarding the scientific method (Mazur and Hoard, 2014). Scholars working with deconstruction approaches have noted how questions about Foucauldian governmentality have shifted their analytical focus away from gender, degendering their analyses (Teghtsoonian and Rönnblom, 2015). Others, such as Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012) suggest that it is not enough to study the discursive representations but that one needs to focus on *reactions* to the those representations.

The criticisms listed above about the deconstruction of gender being ‘*only* about discourses and ideas’ that are not immediately visible suggest how it is possible that an approach that has been so influential in gender studies is nevertheless not as influential and accepted in gender and politics debates as the women, gender, or intersectionality approaches are. An overview of the chapters of the 2013 *Oxford Handbook on Gender and Politics* (Waylen et al., 2013) gives an idea of the secondary role given to discursive approaches in the gender and politics debates as compared to the women, gender, and intersectionality perspectives. However, the dominance of approaches is also context related, so that for example deconstruction of gender is much more influential in gender and politics debates in the Nordic countries than in US, UK or Spanish contexts.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality has become a key approach in gender studies over the past decade, and also the gender and politics scholarship is promoting its centrality to political analysis. The object of intersectional analyses are the inequalities, marginalisations and dominations that the interactions of

gender, race, class and other systems of inequality produce. These studies place the core concept of political science, power, at the centre of their analyses and approach it from both positivist and constructivist epistemologies. Whilst the concept of 'intersectionality' may be new to the field, its key ideas were articulated decades ago in Black, lesbian and postcolonial feminist theorizing that exposed the limitations of women-only and gender-only analyses (Collins and Chepp, 2013; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). Crenshaw's coining of the term 'intersectionality' gave new analytical purchase to it. Elaborating the concepts of structural and political intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) studied how the intersection of inequalities of gender, race, and class have consequences for people's opportunities in life, in areas such as employment and gender violence, and how different political and social movements' strategies focusing on one inequality are not neutral to other inequalities.

In the example of the economic crisis, intersectional approaches explore the differentiated impact of austerity policies on migrant minoritized women or men (Bettio et al., 2012), female refugees in countries like Greece (Athanasίου, 2014), younger unemployed women and older women who see their pensions reduced or cut (Bettio et al., 2012; Karamessini and Rubery, 2014). Intersectionality shows how different organisations and movements representing different groups can be pitted against one another in a seeming competition for scarcer resources, or, alternatively it can point to new alliances and solidarity at times of crisis (Bassel and Emejulu, 2014). Populist right-wing parties seeking to protect 'our people' can resort to racist or even fascist discourses that challenge the human rights of racialized others in European countries (Norocel, 2013). Intersectionality studies have also highlighted how in the last two decades, in a European context of increased migration, the intersection between gender, migration, ethnicity, class, and religion has been put at the forefront of European policymaking (Siim, 2014). This 'nexus' reflects processes of racialization of Muslim identities often through the adoption of policies concerning types of gender-

based violence that are considered specific to Muslim migrant women, such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and veiling (Lepinard, 2014: 125). In terms of the definition of the crisis, intersectional approaches pinpoint how the crisis is underpinned not only by a gender system or gendered structures but also by racism, classism and heterosexism.

In terms of the capacity of political analysis to link theory with praxis, intersectional approaches are especially apt for developing policies that are more inclusive of different social groups, especially less privileged ones, and responsive to the needs of increasingly diverse societies. Current studies on political intersectionality have explored the complex interaction of different systems of inequalities (Walby, 2009; McCall, 2005), the influence that inequalities historically constructed as hegemonic in particular contexts have on how politics and social movements deal with other inequalities (Ferree, 2009), and the ways in which institutions and policymaking have applied intersectionality (Verloo, 2013; 2006; Krizsan, Skjeie and Squires, 2012; Walby and Verloo, 2012; Kantola and Nousiainen, 2009; Hancock, 2007).

The main limitation of an intersectional approach is that it is not systematically applied in political analysis, and in policy practice it tends to be applied as multiple discrimination, that is in a reductionist way. Doing intersectional analysis poses methodological challenges to researchers. How to operationalize the complexity of intersectionality for political analysis? McCall (2005) argues that one of the most frequently adopted methodological approaches to study intersectionality is the 'intra-categorical', which tries to grasp the complexity of social inequality within members of one specific social group, such as Afro-American women in Crenshaw's analysis of intersecting gender, race, and class inequalities. Its limitation is that it only sees intersectionality within members of the same social group. It is necessary to ask: How to grasp the effects of intersectional inequalities on specific groups of people and in policymaking, without neglecting the autonomous

effects that each inequality might have (Weldon, 2008)? Or how to account for the predominance that one specific inequality could have in each context due to the history and institutionalization of inequalities in which it is anchored, with its related consequences for the framing of public policies (Ferree, 2009)? In policy practice, the application of intersectionality mainly as multiple discrimination can limit its transformative potential adopting an additive model that treats inequalities as if they all mattered equally in a predetermined relationship to each other, meaning that someone could be discriminated against on the basis of more than one inequality, for instance because she is a woman and because she is Asian (Hancock, 2007; Kantola and Nousiainen, 2009). Institutional use of additive approaches to multiple inequalities has been criticized for leading to what Hancock (2007: 68) calls the ‘oppression Olympics’, in which civil society groups compete for the title of being the most oppressed to get attention and resources from dominant groups, or for (inaccurately) assuming that social categories connected to inequalities are all the same, while they are in fact different (Verloo, 2006).

Intersectionality is nowadays considered as an approach that has ‘an extensive influence, perhaps even dominance’ in gender and politics research (Collins and Chepp, 2013: 67). A cascade of intersectionality articles (e.g. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Walby and Verloo, 2012; Kantola and Nousiainen, 2009), special issues (e.g. *Politics and Gender* 2014; 2007; *Signs* 2013; *Social Politics* 2012; *IFJP* 2009; *Sex Roles* 2008; *EJWS* 2006), book series (e.g. Palgrave, Routledge), or EU-funded research projects (e.g. QUING, FEMCIT, VEIL) show the increasing dominance of intersectional approaches for political analysis. In short, intersectionality has become ‘a must’ in gender and politics scholarship so that researchers perceive that they have to at least mention intersectionality, even if they do not methodologically apply it in their study and may only pay lip service to intersectional analysis. The dominance of intersectionality in gender and politics scholarship can be due to the fact that it goes to the core of longstanding feminist issues of power,

oppression, and privilege that have challenged feminist movements and theory from within. As Collins and Chepp (2013: 70) argue, ‘As a knowledge paradigm of praxis, intersectionality knowledge projects offered feminist scholars and activists alike a theoretical template (but not actual politics) for addressing the unresolved issues from the feminist movement’. However, dominance also depends on the context considered: intersectionality is more accepted and influential in US and UK contexts (see aforementioned special issues and publishers), than for example in Spain (Bustelo, 2009).

### **Post-deconstruction**

The term post-deconstruction is used here to signal a diverse set of debates on feminist new materialism, corporealism, and affect theory that come analytically (not chronologically, Lykke, 2010: 106) ‘after’ reflections on the deconstruction of gender (Ahmed, 2004; Hemmings, 2005; Liljeström and Paasonen, 2010). These approaches are interested in understanding what affects, emotions, and bodily material do in gender and politics. From the new materialist point of view, significant social change cannot be achieved solely by deconstructing subjectivities, discourses, and identities. Rather, challenging deconstructionist approaches, new materialists suggest paying renewed scholarly attention to the analysis of the very real socioeconomic conditions and the interests that these serve (Coole and Frost, 2010: 25). Matter is no longer regarded as simply passive as previously in political thought. Instead, “‘matter becomes” rather than that “matter is”” (Coole and Frost, 2010: 10). In political analysis, this places emphasis on economic and political processes and their materiality and impact on bodies. Affects and emotions shape individual and collective bodies, cement sexed and raced relations of domination, and provide the local investments necessary to counter those relations (e.g. Spivak, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Hemmings, 2005). Affective performances materialize and fix the ‘nature’ of subjects and objects and the

boundaries between them (Ahmed, 2004: 45). Importantly for political analysis, affects are seen to be not about individuals: they are regarded as deeply social and political formations (Hemmings, 2005: 565). Ahmed's (2004a) notion of *affective economies* captures how feelings are distributed not in a disparate way but organized socially. For example, ideas about disgust are learned and repeated over time and have been shown to shape class relations. In affective economies, affects align individuals with communities through the very intensity of their attachments (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 159).

The economic crisis makes the analysis of issues such as the material underpinning of the current political economy, its entrenched relations to neoliberalism, states' biopolitics and emotions and affects such as anger, shame and empathy and their bodily impacts particularly important (Coole and Frost, 2010; Athanasiou, 2014). Emotions and affects, such as anger, shame, guilt, and empathy, circulate in the recent economic crisis –think of the indignation and rage of Spain's *Indignados* movement and how important these emotions are for understanding socio-political developments around the crisis. The analytical perspective on post-deconstruction suggests that these emotions are not individual but social and that these involve power relations. For instance, the neoliberal 'austerity' agenda has been accompanied by a moralising discourse 'that passes on the responsibility to citizens together with a feeling of guilt, making easier for governments to impose public expenditure cuts and to increase social control of the population' (Addabbo, Gálvez and Rodríguez, 2013: 5). Another example is that of Northern women politicians' expressing empathy towards 'the other women' in the South, that can read as an affective expression of power that fixes the Southern countries economic and gender policies as failed (Kantola, 2015; Pedwell, 2014). Feminist analyses using these approaches show that neoliberalism and violence constitute the vulnerabilities of the bodies affected by the crisis and protesting against it (Athanasiou, 2014).



Popular parties of the left and right, whose influence the crisis has increased, play with emotions and affects too with tangible results for many.

By paying attention to the ‘matter’ in feminist political analysis, new materialism relocates the focus of theoretical and empirical analyses in the material and not just the cultural roots and consequences of inequality. The new materialist understanding of theory and praxis is concerned with the materiality of bodies, emotions, and affects, a reality that other approaches had neglected. By theorizing the non-separability of the social and biological, it proposes a monist rather than dualist understanding of human beings through the concept of ‘naturecultures’ (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). It can contribute to linking the personal and the political by promoting research on the role of emotions in political thinking and behavior (Neuman et al., 2007) or by placing analyses of everyday life in relationship with analyses of the ordering of the state and international systems (Edwards, 2010). For instance, Ahmed’s (2004) work contributes to political analysis by placing emphasis on affective meaning-making, the constitution of subjects and objects through performativity and reiteration, and the links between affective patterns sedimented over time and structures of power and privilege (Wetherell, 2010: 17-18).

New materialism and affect approaches have been criticised for ‘reinventing the wheel’ or for discrediting former studies (e.g. post-structuralism) by creating a stereotypical image of their features, to celebrate the new approach. Concerning the latter, Claire Hemmings (2005) has traced the tendencies to create unnecessary contradictions between approaches to, in this case, mark the ‘newness’ of new materialism and post-deconstruction and to distinguish it from previous approaches. With respect to the former, one could argue that the materialist turn is ‘just’ an updated return to former materialist analyses. Related to this is another critique on how the affect literature tends to idealize affect as a subject’s response that is more autonomous and free from social norms

than it actually is, whereas examples such as ‘the delights of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism’ are to be considered ‘affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a dominant social order’ (Hemmings, 2005: 551).

If deconstruction is by no means a dominant approach in feminist political analysis or gender and politics research (see e.g. Celis et al., 2013), even less interest has been expressed in the subfield of gender and politics for post-deconstruction approaches. Yet, this is an approach that has acquired relevance in feminist studies and culture studies. We thus find it intriguing that whilst post-deconstruction issues have generated heated debates in feminist theory, there has not been much interest in applying them in gender and politics research. An indicator of this lack of interest is the absence of new materialist and affect approaches from the chapters of the *Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Waylen et al., 2013; (See however Kantola and Lombardo 2017a).

## **Conclusion**

We wish to make two main conclusions in this article. First, if feminist political analysis is to make sense of political phenomena such as the economic crisis, it is in need of a plurality of approaches, and it needs to avoid succumbing to dominant approaches, and to being co-opted to either disciplinary cultures or political preferences, that create a monoculture in the discipline. Approaches that come closer to the mainstream of political science, such as the women or the gender ones, might achieve greater legitimacy in the mainstream, but also risk becoming vulnerable to practices of exclusion that downplay discursive and post-deconstruction approaches. Second, reflexivity is needed to ensure alertness to processes of marginalisation within the discipline of gender and politics. We have started to explore these issues by discerning five different feminist approaches to

political analysis – women, gender, deconstruction, intersectionality and post-deconstruction – and by discussing their distinctive contributions and limitations.

We have illustrated these approaches with reference to their analytical potential in relation to gender and the recent economic crisis. The crisis itself looks fundamentally different depending on the approach that is used to analyse it. Women approaches show women's underrepresentation in political and economic decision-making and the crisis's impact on women and men. Yet, they might leave the structures of unequal gender power that provoked the crisis unquestioned. The strength of gender approaches, in turn, is to employ structural concepts to question the systemic causes of the crisis that lay in capitalist and patriarchal power. Its shortcomings are the risk of essentialism – unequal structures operating in the crisis are not only gendered but classed or racialised too – and the lack of concern for how the crisis is discursively constructed. This is precisely what deconstruction approaches do by analysing how neoliberal solutions to the crisis are constructed as hegemonic while other solutions are marginalized. Its strength is to destabilize gender essentialisms showing that the crisis can be constructed in multiple gendered ways that have powerful effects on subjects. Its limitations are the priority given to the discursive and symbolic over the socio-political power, and the undermining of women's agency and shared identity, both of which might subtract strength to feminist anti-crisis struggles. The strength of intersectional approaches is to show the interacting systems of domination that are at work in the crisis, producing differentiated impacts of austerity policies on, for example, migrant minoritised women, and to advance more inclusive policies. Its unsystematic and shallow application in political analysis, through a multiple discrimination approach, may limit its transformative potential. Postdeconstruction approaches contribute to the debate by relocating attention to the material underpinning of the neoliberal political economy that caused the crisis, and the emotions and affects that circulate during this event and cement gendered and racialized inequalities. Limitations include the extent to which they are

really 'new' ways of studying gendered power and the criticism that much of the discussion of new materialist approaches seems detached from any consideration of gender and politics.

While we have discussed each approach separately for analytical purposes, the approaches are oftentimes combined in political analysis. A women approach can be combined with approaches such as gender and intersectionality. A gender approach can be combined with all other approaches; this might partly explain its dominance in the discipline. The deconstructing gender approach can be used in political analysis in combination with the gender, the intersectionality and the post-deconstruction approaches. Intersectionality combines with all approaches, and as with gender, this could also explain its dominance. The widespread adoption of intersectionality as an approach is also linked as much to its strong compatibility with the epistemological and ontological commitments of mainstream political science as to its resonance with feminist political goals. And post-deconstruction can be combined with gender, intersectionality and deconstruction.

Even if we have sought to give a balanced representation of the approaches, there are big differences in their dominance as analytical approaches to gender and politics, the reasons for which we have begun to explore. Women and gender approaches remain dominant, and intersectionality has made important inroads so that it is nearly always recognised as important in Anglo-American, North, and West European contexts, if not applied consistently. Whilst the importance of 'ideas' tends now to be recognised in both politics and gender and politics (see e.g. Hay, 2002), when used analytically 'discourse' tends to be applied in a narrow sense where it is not an overarching term but rather something communicative or measurable (Schmidt, 2010; Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014). Deconstruction and post-deconstruction remain more marginal as analytical perspectives in the study of gender and politics.

Marginalisation has a cost for political analysis, because each approach can only make visible one particular angle of political reality. It is therefore in the interest of the gender and politics discipline not to marginalise approaches but to create space for a diversity of approaches and to open up the field. The preceding considerations of aspects of the recent economic crisis have shown that to understand this historical episode we need a plurality of approaches that can account for women's representation in the economic and political areas, gender and intersectional impacts of the crisis, neoliberal discourses, and emotional manifestations.

Despite its contribution to a political analysis capable of linking theory and transformative praxis, and its increasing professionalization, gender and politics is still a marginalised discipline within political science. While it struggles for acceptance within the field of political science, it needs to resist the dangers of co-option into the mainstream that might add to its own internal marginalisation processes. Openness to a plurality of approaches and creating space for the margins can keep the discipline of gender and politics self-reflexive about its own hegemony and marginalisation processes, strengthening its capacities for understanding and transforming the political.

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