Gender and political analysis: exploring hegemonies, silences, and novelties

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INTRODUCTION

At the time of austerity politics adopted in response to the ongoing economic crisis, war at the borders of the European Union, the rise of nationalisms, conservatism, populist right and left-wing parties in Europe, and islamophobia and anti-Semitism, politics as a discipline is in special need to connect theory and praxis. Within increasingly professionalized disciplines such as political science, political debates might risk becoming self-referential and thus narrow their analytical and imaginative capacities (Brown 2002). Connecting theory and praxis is thus needed both to make sense of current political developments, their effects and gendered and racialised significance, and to contribute to making this world a more just and equal place to live. Political analysis in general, and gender and political analysis in particular is understood here as a discipline capable to establish a link between theory and practice. More specifically, by political analysis – borrowing from 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’ (Hay 2002: 3) and the contestations arising around them.

Gender approaches are particularly apt to undertake the task of political analysis connecting theory and praxis. Firstly, they have shown that power relations are gendered as well as racialised, classed, or sexualised, because they reproduce gender norms and biases (Hawkesworth 1994). Secondly, they have argued that ‘the political’ includes gender issues formerly considered ‘personal’ (Pateman 1983). This thinking implies for feminist scholars a personal commitment with the political project of gender equality that moves them to link theory and practice in their daily work as political scientists studying inequalities and striving for social change (Celis et al 2013). The interest in transformative political praxis marks feminist political analysis as both an empirical and a normative project. Feminist political analyses on the one hand study how gender power relations are constituted, reproduced, and counteracted by political actors in a variety of political processes, institutional settings, and policymaking; and on the other assess how these institutions, processes, and policies could be changed to contribute to a more gender equal world. Theory-praxis in these analyses has to do with civic engagement (Blunkett 2012) and imagining creative solutions to important world’s problems (Stoker 2012), but from a gender perspective.

However, gender analyses contain their own limitations too, 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 paper, we are interested in exploring the hegemonies, silences, and novelties of gender and feminist political analyses. We discuss the diversity of approaches to gender and political analysis under five headings: (i) women, (ii) gender, (iii) deconstruction, (iv) intersectionality, and (v) post-deconstruction. Following Nina Lykke’s explanation to her selection of the theories that she discusses in her book Feminist Studies, 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). We have named these approaches as ‘gender’ rather than ‘feminist’ because, while they employ gender as their main analytical concept, not all of them will necessarily be feminist in terms of sharing a ‘goal, a target for social change’, that is aimed at ‘challenging and changing women’s subordination to men’ (Ferree 2006: 6 italics hers). While most gender approaches strive for transformation oriented to the creation of more equal societies, not all of the approaches will equally take up this challenge of social transformation. Finally, our understanding of the 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.1 Inspired by Mendoza’s (2012) critique about the epistemic violence of Anglo-American political science on Latin-American disciplines of gender and politics, to which many women and politics scholars in the West and the North take part, we suggest that explorations and self-reflections such as ours are indeed much needed.

In our discussion of each of the approaches to gender and political analysis, we present the approach as we understand it, assess its contributions and limitations to being the link between theory and practice, mention its popularity in gender and politics debates and the possibilities of combining a particular gender approach to political analysis with other gender approaches. Although this is first and foremost an analytical paper rather than an empirical one, we do discuss the approaches’ analytical potential to analyse the current economic crisis. These brief examples, mainly, but not only, about the crisis, will help to illustrate our arguments. What drives our quest here are questions about knowledge and its boundaries. When discussing the different gender perspectives that one can take to political analysis and focusing on their contributions and limitations, we ask which approaches are favoured in current gender and politics research and why we think this happens. Our argument is that dominant approaches in political science influence the emergence and marginalization of particular gender 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. Hence, we ask how can you create new knowledge – at times like the economic crisis that is fundamentally shaping societies and gender politics in Europe – when you sit comfortably with your own approach.

GENDER APPROACHES TO POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Women

1 These debates 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, and mainstream politics journals.
A women and politics approach places the focus of analysis on women’s presence, roles, action, interests, needs, rights, or voices. Scholars from many different theoretical perspectives write about ‘women’ and ‘men’. What we analyse here is an approach that relies on positivist epistemological positions and treats women and men as unitary categories whose interests, needs and beliefs can be objectively identified in research. Also illustrative of these approaches is the tendency to take mainstream political science theories, concepts, and institutions as a starting point and approach them from the perspective of women.

Studies on women’s descriptive political representation and the type and impact of gender quotas on the number of women in political institutions exemplify this approach (Childs and Lovenduski 2013; Krook 2009; Dahlerup 2006). 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 where men’s employment in the private sector, for example in construction businesses, was worst hit at first, and how in the second wave, the public sector cuts started to erase women’s jobs, and the public services and benefits that women relied on (Bettio et al 2012; Karamessini 2014). With the approach one can also study the numbers of women and men in economic decision-making and banking. Feminist scholars have argued that it has been a men’s crisis in a sense that men have been the dominant actors in the institutions that have inflicted the crisis and attempted to solve it (Walby 2013).

A women and politics approach contributes to political analysis that links theory and praxis because it shows real world politics—who is in power in economy, political, and knowledge institutions, making inequality immediately visible. 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 involved in solving the crisis, in our example, and whose voice is heard in policymaking. A women’s approach offers these opportunities for linking theory and praxis, firstly, because it allows scholars to give visibility to women’s actors who are often silenced in political analysis. The massive amount of studies dedicated to women’s descriptive political representation has contributed to make visible the numerical under-representation of women in political institutions across the world (Phillips 1995; Mossuz Lavau 1998). Cynthia Enloe’s (2014) question ‘where are the women in IR?’ has allowed research to look at international politics from the perspective of actors whose activities and positions are commonly excluded from the discipline, to discover the web of interactions between personal and political strategies. Secondly, a women’s approach allows researchers – as Newman (2012: 4) writes – to ‘map some of the ways in which spaces of power are both mobilized by and negotiated through women’s labour’. Scholarly debates on women’s substantive political representation have explored 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 explore what is 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).
A women’s approach has its limitations for political analysis that depend on how it is understood and applied. First, feminist debates have criticized a focus on women for its danger of essentialism, when ‘women’ (and ‘men’) are treated as relatively unproblematic and unitary categories. This risks hiding different women’s experiences of inequality under specific, contextual experiences that often belong to more privileged women, as Black and postcolonial feminist researchers have pointed out (Mohanty 2002; Harris 1991; 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 (for a critique see Celis et al 2014). For example in relation to the economic crisis, ‘women’ have been very differently impacted by the 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 the visible numbers 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 to provide a simplistic evidence of what is actually 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.

Third, ‘women’, ‘men’ and ‘gender’ are often reduced to variables in studies that draw on women approaches. What is at stake here is well illustrated by feminist critiques of Adam Jones’s (1996) award winning article ‘Does gender make the world go around?’ where he argues that feminists should make the ‘gender variable’ inclusive by incorporating men’s perspectives and inequalities in the analyses (see Carver, Cochram and Squires 1998, Jones 1998, Weber 2001). Jones argues that feminist approaches are narrow and normatively biased as they suppose that men are always the ruling class. According to Jones, feminists have failed to expose that men suffer disproportionately to women in world politics as refugees, victims of murder, suicide and state violence such as torture. Usefully for our purposes here his work illustrates well what it means to treat ‘gender’ – or women or men – as variables. Cynthia Weber (2001) argues that gender as a variable for Jones means that gender can be isolated, incorporated, blended, balanced and broadened. One might also add that as a variable it can be measured and compared unproblematically. Weber suggests that Jones’s approach is one where gender can be approached outside of gender, from a ‘gender-free’
point of view. Weber asks a fundamental question: ‘What if gender is not something to be placed or added but something through which the world is viewed?’ (emphasis in the original).

In the field of gender and politics the women approach has been extremely popular as a tool for political analysis. An example of this popularity is the extensive number of studies on women’s descriptive political representation (see for an overview Childs and Lovenduski 2013). This popularity might primarily be due to the fact that the approach shows immediately visible data, 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 to grasp and accept for politicians and colleagues than unspoken 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 the gender and politics scholarship, due to the emphasis on empirical evidence given 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 realist perspective, which means that gender structures are considered real and science and language are believed to describe the reality of these social structures and provide unmediated access to them.

Examples of gender and politics studies include works on gender mainstreaming exploring the extent to which political structures, processes, norms, and practices have been transformed in gender directions (Verloo 2005; Rai 2008; Mazey 2000; Rees 1998), or studies on the genderedness of institutions (Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010). In our crisis example, a gender and politics approach would place the focus on the gendered impacts of the crisis, studying the shifts in national gender regimes that the economic crisis is resulting in (Wohl 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 of care for 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 needed the most to counter the gendered effects of the crisis (Klatzer and Schlager 2014; Lombardo 2015).
The contribution of a gender and politics approach focusing on deep societal structures goes back to the sex/gender distinction constructed in the 1960s to counter biological determinism. While one’s ‘sex’ was still understood to be biologically determined, one’s ‘gender’ was analyzed as socially constructed (Squires 1999: 55), and resulting from structuralist social relations, such as reproduction, caring, production and sexuality in Marxist, radical and maternalist feminist theorizing. These initial gender approaches contributed to political analysis because they defied biological determinism in the understanding of women, and usefully highlighted the relevance of structures and the socially constructed nature of gender, thus opening up possibilities to challenge unequal relations and roles. In terms of political analysis that wishes to link theory and praxis, gender approaches have an important added value. They attempt to make visible gender norms and structures that are not immediately evident to people socialized in patriarchal contexts. These unspoken gender norms are challenging for researchers to make explicit and study (see for example studies on resistances to gender equality initiatives in institutions), but if scholars manage to show unequal structures and norms, this knowledge can be used to transform unequal practices (see for instance studies on gender training as a means to work with resistances to gender mainstreaming initiatives).

Despite its contributions to political analysis, feminist debates raised three main critiques to a gender approach: the first based on the accusation of essentialism, the second on the limitations inherent in the idea of gender as changeable but sex as an unchangeable biological given, and the third on the constraints of a binary understanding of gender. Concerning the first critique, gender approaches were criticised for assuming the existence of a singular nature of the social structures which, in turn, created homogeneous concepts of gender or the belief in a social category of women that would be oppressed in the same way (Squires 1999: 58). Towards the end of the 1980s, following criticisms especially from Black and lesbian feminisms, such simplistic positions became untenable (Lorde 1984; hooks 1981). A second more theoretical critique of these initial gender positions suggested that they took sex as an unalterable biological given upon which gender identities were constructed. As a result, the accounts of gender became intensely theorized, while the category of sex was neglected (Squires 1999: 55). Furthermore, a third criticism identified that a one-way, causal connection between sex and gender was presumed and men and women were posited as exclusionary categories. One can be only one gender, never the other or both (Flax 1997: 175). The idea of unchangeable biological sex and the conceptualizing of women and men as binary exclusionary categories were thus criticized for limiting the expression and transformation of subjective and collective gender identities (Connell 2002).

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) has provided 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 popular 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 gender 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 might evaluate the different gender approaches on the basis of how they succeed in accounting for intersectionality within the category of gender – to what extent the analysis incorporates the differences in different women and men’s experiences. Here it is perhaps evident that it is still easy to continue to use ‘gender as a synonym for women’ (Carver 1998). 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**

In the approach of deconstruction, which is where our own work mostly centres, gender is theorised 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 that policy actors engage with (Bacchi 1999; Kantola 2006; Verloo 2007; Ferree 2012). This approach has contributed to show 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 silenced 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 analytical approach, deconstruction of gender has meant challenging some of the underpinnings of the previous approaches including anything that may be left of biological determinism or cultural essentialism. According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, *deconstruction* disrupts and displaces hierarchies and binaries. Language constantly tries to build up binary oppositions between terms, of which one has the tendency to establish itself as the signifier that defines the pair, while the other becomes profiled as a mere negation of the first (Lykke 2010: 100). Judith Butler furthermore explains that to deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss but to call
into question and to open up a term to a reusage that previously has not been authorised (Butler 1995: 49). The deconstructivist approach has been immensely influential in gender studies (see e.g. Lykke 2010; Hemmings 2005). It has led to an understanding of gender that has shifted away from gender as a noun – an identity that individuals ‘have’ or ‘are’, towards understanding gender as ‘doing’ (Butler 1990). When gender is done, the analytical perspective of the researcher is directed towards processes that are gendering or racializing (Lykke 2010: 52), as in the case of the regulatory practice of heterosexualism in perpetuating the norm of two sexes and two genders (Butler 1990: 31).

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 problem 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 (Crouch 2011; Fraser 2013; Kantola and Squires 2012, cf. Prugl 2014). 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 as unimportant (Athanasiou 2014: 4). Other examples of discursive politics analyses have also shown how contents of gender equality are 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 (True 2009; Rönnblom 2009; Bacchi 2009). The roles of women and men are also constructed in gendered ways in political discourses. Gender violence, for instance, is not only something that is inflicted by men on women but the very subjectivities of people are reproduced in discourse on violence shaping the boundaries of their actions and how they are understood (Shepherd 2007; Krizsan et al 2007). For example in the UK it has been important to construct women victims of violence as ‘survivors’ whilst in the Finnish context it has been more empowering to go against the discourse of strong Finnish women and create space for being victims (Kantola 2006).

Deconstructing gender has contributed to an analysis of the political able to connect theory and praxis in two fundamental ways. Firstly, a focus on deconstruction of gender helps to grasp the gendered norms and meanings that are at the core of gender inequalities but are less immediately visible than the numerical overrepresentation of men in a parliament is. Discursive politics helps to bring to the surface otherwise submerged norms about gender and gender roles that operate in politics, such as the male breadwinner-female caregiver norm. Discursive analyses help to unmask these gendered norms. They also help to show 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 the problematic or deviant ones. Secondly, discourses have consequences on women and men’s lives. Frame analyses of gender equality policies in Europe have shown that men are hardly ever made responsible for creating and for solving the problem of gender inequality, while women are made responsible for solving the problem, for instance by being the ones supposed to reconcile work and family life (Verloo 2007; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009). This has the consequence of maintaining unequal gender roles unaltered. Discourses have gender effects on people because they open up and close off
opportunities for women and men. Traditional constructions of women as symbols of the private and men of the public sphere risk to associate female ministers with family and health portfolios and male with finance and defence (Lombardo and Meier 2014).

Deconstruction of gender has generated heated discussion much of which operates on the level of postmodernism versus modernism (Benhabib et al. 1995). Benhabib (1995: 29) criticized that the deconstruction of gender undermines women’s agency and shared identity on which struggles against different forms of oppression may be based on. Fraser (1995: 163-4) argues that: ‘Butler’s approach is good for theorising the micro level, the intrasubjective, and the historicity of gender relations. It is not useful, in contrast for the macro level, the intersubjective and the normative’. Thus, Butler’s work is argued to hamper feminist attempts to transform the deep economic, social and political structures of domination. Nussbaum argues that Butler’s position leads to ‘the virtually complete turning from the material side of life, toward a type of verbal symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women’ (quoted in Brookey & Miller 1999: 141). Similarly, a sympathetic critique, Lois McNay points out how Butler overemphasises and systematically prioritises the symbolic and the linguistic over the socio-political (McNay 1993, 1994, 1999). Finally, scholars working within women or gender approaches, especially from feminist empiricism, 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).

The above criticisms about the deconstruction of gender being ‘only about discourses and ideas’ that are not immediately visible might help to understand how is it possible that an approach that has been so influential in gender studies is nevertheless not considered 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 popularity 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. Intersectional analyses study the inequalities, marginalisations and dominations that the interactions of gender, race, class and other systems of inequality produce. Whilst the concept of ‘intersectionality’ may be a novelty, its key ideas have been 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; Combahee River Collective 1995; Collins 2000; Mohanty 2003). Their central idea is that the project to make the world more gender equal demands challenging existing power dynamics between women. Gender equality can never be achieved as long as other inequalities of class, sexuality or ethnicity still exist (Lombardo and Verloo 2009). Crenshaw’s coining of the very 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 on 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 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 (Athanasiou 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. For example, populist right 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). Other than the crisis, studies of intersectionality have highlighted, for example, 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; M ügge and de Jong 2013). 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 of Muslim migrant women, such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and veiling (Lepinard 2014: 125).

Intersectional approaches contribute to political analysis by exposing and challenging privileges of dominant groups and dynamics of oppression and marginalisation of subaltern groups. 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 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 people of the same social group. 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 by 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 Signs; 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 popularity of intersectional approaches for political analysis. The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics’ guidelines explicitly recommended authors to apply an intersectional approach in the drafting of their chapters. In short, intersectionality has become ‘a must’ in gender and politics scholarship so that researchers perceive 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 popularity of intersectionality in gender and politics scholarship can be due to the fact that it goes to the core of feminist longstanding issues of power, oppression, and privilege, that have challenged feminist movement 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, popularity 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

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; Body & Society Special Issue 2010; Liljestrom and Paasonen 2010). Feminist new materialist and affect approaches are interested in understanding what affects, emotions, and bodily material do in gender and politics. The debate on post-deconstruction emerged as a response to the cultural turn in social sciences represented by the above discussion on deconstruction of gender. One of the criticisms directed towards the deconstruction of gender was its overemphasis on the linguistic and the ideational. From the new materialist point of view, significant social change cannot be achieved solely by deconstructing subjectivities, discourses, and identities. Rather there is a need to
understand and alter the very real socioeconomic conditions and the interests that these serve (Coole and Frost 2010: 25). In gender theory, this (de)constructionist ‘allergy to “the real”’ (Frost and Coole 2010: 8), had the consequence that biological sex was left untheorized and too little attention was given to bodily materiality and ‘prediscursive bodily facticities’ (Lykke 2010: 107).

Coole and Frost (2010: 6) employ the label ‘new’ materialism to indicate that unprecedented things are being done ‘with and to matter’ as a result of new technologies relating to nature, life, reproduction and production. They suggest that a wide range of issues such as climate change, global capital and population flows, biotechnological engineering of genetically modified organisms, the saturation of our intimate and physical lives by digital, wireless and virtual technologies, make the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitical and global political economy (Coole and Frost 2010: 8). In the feminist new materialist debates, matter is no longer simply passive as previously in political thought. Instead, “‘matter becomes” rather than that “matter is”’ (Frost and Coole 2010: 10). In political analysis, this places emphasis on economic and political processes and their materiality and impact on bodies. What is also new is accepting social constructionist arguments while insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse and vice-versa: society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed and our material lives are always culturally mediated but they are not only cultural (Frost and Coole 2010: 27).

In relation to affects, very similarly, the key question is not what they are but rather what they do (Ahmed 2004). 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, Hill Collins 2000; Hemmings 2005). Affective performances materialize and fix the ‘nature’ of subjects and objects and the boundaries between them. An emotion like hate, love or fear organizes its object as fearsome, hateful or loveable (Ahmed 2004: 45). Importantly for political analysis, affects are not about individuals: they are deeply social and political formations (Hemmings 2005: 565). In other words, affects are not outside social meaning and they are not autonomous. Ahmed shows how affect often accumulates around a sign or figure (such as the ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘chav’). Such figures become ‘sticky surfaces’ where affects nestle and densely cluster. 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’ biopolities 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 economic crisis –think of the indignation and rage of Spain’s Indignados movement and how important these emotions are to understand socio-political developments around the crisis. The analytical perspective on post-deconstruction suggests that these emotions are not individual
but social and 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 politician’s 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 left and right parties whose popularity the crisis has increased play with emotions and affects too with tangible results for many. As Athena Athanasiou argues: ‘According to the profoundly essentialized and normative constructions of masculinities and femininities lying at the core of Far Right and neo-Nazi politics, women who have abortions, feminists, LGBTQ people, HIV-positive people, and immigrants are all considered social abnormalities, biological deviations, and national enemies and hence are designated as dangerous and disposable bodies’ (Athanasiou 2014: 5).

Despite its limited appearance in gender and politics analyses, the new materialist and affect turns can contribute to a political analysis that links theory and praxis. By placing attention on the ‘matter’ in gender and politics issues, new materialism relocates the focus of theoretical and empirical analyses on the material and not just cultural roots and consequences of inequality. The new materialist understanding of theory and praxis is 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 link 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 gender and politics debates for post-deconstruction approaches. Yet, this is an approach that has acquired relevance in feminist studies and culture studies (Ahmed 2004; Hemmings 2005; Body & Society Special Issue 2010; Liljeström and Paasonen 2010). 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).

CONCLUSIONS

We wish to make two main conclusions in this paper. First, if gender and political analysis is to connect theory and practice to make sense of political phenomena such as the economic crisis, it is in need of a plurality of approaches, and it needs to be aware of not succumbing to dominant approaches, to let itself co-opted to either disciplinary cultures or political preferences, that create a monoculture in the discipline. Second, reflexivity is needed to stay alert about processes of marginalisation within the discipline of gender and politics. We have started to explore these issues by discerning five different approaches to gender and 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 economic crisis.

While we have discussed each approach separately for analytical purposes, we are aware that some of the approaches can be fruitfully 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 popularity. 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 popularity. 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 popularity as analytical approaches to gender and politics, whose reasons 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 2011; Bacchi and Rönnblom 2014). Deconstruction and post-deconstruction remain more marginal as analytical perspectives to gender and politics.
Marginalisation has a cost for political analysis, because each approach can only make visible one particular angle of political reality, but not all, and if some approaches are silenced, we reduce the possibilities of a more complete understanding of reality, as Feminist Standpoint Theory argued at the time when advocating for feminist epistemologies. It is therefore in the interest of the gender and politics discipline not to marginalise approaches but to create space for more marginal approaches and open the field to encounters with different approaches. The example of the economic crisis has shown that to understand the crisis 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. Political reality is complex and variegated, and if gender scholars pretend not only to understand it but also to improve it by creating links between theory and praxis, they will need to employ a plurality of approaches.

In today’s political science dominant approaches influence the type of gender approaches that are more accepted within the mainstream of the discipline. In his mapping of the mainstream of political science, Hay (2002: 7-29) includes rational choice theory, behaviouralism, and new institutionalism. Notwithstanding his openness to analytical pluralism, gender approaches are not given much relevance for doing political analysis, and while constructivist and postmodern approaches are extensively discussed, their inclusion in the mainstream is considered ‘more contentious’ (Hay 2002: 14). Constructivism supposedly ‘still has much to prove – not least its scientific status and its substantive contribution to the understanding of world politics’ (Hay 2002: 14), and postmodernism is even less potentially part of the mainstream because it is a ‘challenge to the very notion of a mainstream’ (Hay 2002: 16). This mapping tells us which approaches are considered ‘canonical’ and which are more controversial or marginal in today’s political science. Neither gender approaches nor political theory as speculative work that provokes thinking and imagination through the ‘production of a new representation’ of the world (Brown 2002: 574) appear in this mapping. Moreover, despite developments in constructivist approaches both in European integration theory (Risse 2004; Christiansen et al 2001) and discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2010), prospects for constructivist – not to say for post-deconstruction approaches - to get more recognized as scientific in the field of political science seem curtailed in this era of neoliberal demand for ‘applicable and marketable’ (Brown 2002: 573) knowledge.

Despite its contribution to a political analysis capable to link 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 cooptation in 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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