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Feminist Research: Disclosure of Route

This paper was written as the first chapter area for my PhD and was initially delivered as a paper at the PSA Women and Politics group at St Antony's, Oxford. I set out within the paper the kinds of diverse reading and insights gained in terms of methodology and epistemology and how these were useful in starting an interdisciplinary study.

My research cuts across the subject areas of feminism, politics and history, which meant that any search for a methodological route to research would mean consideration of the historiography of political thought, feminism, epistemology and methodology. Since my research is concerned with a female historical figure and her political philosophy it seemed vital to scrutinise prevalent methodological positions connected with both researching between history and ideas while also considering supplements, challenges and reformulation to these. My PhD explores the theory of Mary Wollstonecraft by looking at the multiple influences in her works and considering contemporary critiques of Wollstonecraft within this revival. I have chapter areas on the influence of the radical circle of Dissenting friends of Wollstonecraft, of French thought from Condorcet and Rousseau and William Godwin as they appeared to develop on the works of Wollstonecraft rather than as we now pigeon-hole or perceive them.

The search for methodological tools to actualise research therefore began with consideration of the works of Pocock and Skinner in order to consider some insights and problems of researching between history and

ideas. I then considered feminist insights from Harding, Miller and Lather, before examining the work of Sapiro and Squires.

Due to a dissatisfaction with approaches to researching between history and ideas, J.G.A Pocock and Quentin Skinner criticised the shortcomings of traditional methodological views and sought to expound linguistic contextualist approaches to this discipline (See Pocock, 1972, 6 and Tully, 1988, 26). Pocock had argued that textual analysis had sometimes led to a perceived coherence of an author which the author had not actually achieved. The views of these scholars are sometimes referred to as the 'Cambridge school'.

Pocock suggested that by studying traditions of discourse employed by authors which includes inherited words, concepts, paradigms and the differences in these over time, the historian can discover how far the author worked within the confines of the prevalent paradigm and how far this was challenged by the author (Pocock, 1985, 7-9). For Pocock, the historian's task is to,

...read and recognize the diverse idioms of political discourse as they were available in the culture at the time he is studying: to identify them as they appear in the linguistic texture of any one text, and to know what they would ordinarily have enabled that texts author to propound or 'say' (Pocock, 1985, 9)

The extent to which the author's employment of them was out of the ordinary comes later. Pocock acknowledges his debt to the ideas of Thomas Kuhn who had considered the history of science as the history of discourse and language (Pocock, 1972, 13). Pocock argues that one must, therefore, both read extensively in the literature of the time and also sensitize oneself to the presence of diverse idioms. On this view language is the 'key to both speech act and context' (Pocock, 1985, 9 and 11). This approach is based on the premise that by '...viewing 'language' as a product of history and as possessing history of its own....the exploration of language might yield historical results' (Pocock, 1972, 12).

It must be acknowledged that a problem with this approach occurs when the researcher offers a misguided interpretation of the paradigm the author is employing.

Skinner found prevalent textualist and contextualist procedures in the late 1960s inadequate, since according to him the aim of discovering the meaning of an historical text lies in considering the author's intention in writing the text (see Tully, 1988, 7). For Skinner this can be attained by examining linguistic conventions of that time, thereby discovering the linguistic and ideological context.

From this, we can, according to Skinner, uncover the relationship between political thought and political action (Skinner, 1976 in Tully, 1988, p.23). In order to gain a purchase on these conventions Skinner suggests reading a variety of literature of both major and minor authors of the same period, with similar assumptions, vocabulary and principles. In this way, he argues, a measure can be gained of the author's stance in relation to prevailing conventions by the author's acceptance of, questioning of and debate of these.

Studying linguistics and the illocutionary force of words of the text under examination as well as its contemporary texts, Skinner argues, facilitates a conclusion as to the author's intentions and how far that author was joking, ironic or serious when writing the text rather than simply a study of the literal text (ibid, 69). A problem with this approach is that discovering an author's intention is very difficult, if indeed possible at all. King suggests that Skinner is under the spell of J. L. Austin, since the difficulties found in Skinner's approach can be traced back to Austin (Skinner acknowledges his intellectual debt to Austin in *The History of Ideas*, King, 1985, 23). Further, King highlights the problem of recovering intentions, since they are not always coherent and added to this it would be impossible to grasp an alien convention. Preston King suggests, 'History is never subject to total reconstruction,

since our evidence is always partial and our formulae about the evidence again is selective' (King, 1985, 21). This necessarily requires that we use our judgement and inference as well as the available evidence in order to facilitate research of this nature. In turn, our work will be coloured by our own experience, gender and culture and therefore will be value-laden rather than value-free. This idea of research being informed by the researcher's subjectivity is given importance within the works of Millen and Sapiro later in the paper.

Examining the works of Skinner and Pocock has provided me with some helpful insights into researching between history and ideas and also provided an understanding of the dangers and pitfalls of this kind of research. One example of such danger is exemplified by Gubar (1994), who cites Frances Ferguson as suggesting that Wollstonecraft would have benefited from a microwave or word-processor. Sapiro (1998) also notes that terms such as passion, reason and education are problematic for those viewing them from a contemporary perspective (see pg 122). Using Eighteenth Century words and phrases with a Twenty-first Century definition means that differences and changes of meaning of words will not be noted and therefore meaning will be at best distorted and at worst lost.

While Pocock emphasises the study of paradigms and language as well as context to provide a fuller measure of the thinker in relation to their contemporaries, certain problems remain as far as my subject of research is concerned. Wollstonecraft utilized Enlightenment rhetoric in order to bring about changes to the perception of women with regard to their capacity to reason, which allowed her to argue for equal education and similar moral rules for women as those enjoyed by men. Wollstonecraft had used prevalent male language in order to challenge prevalent male ideas and perceptions of females. I would argue that

language in the Eighteenth Century was and even now remains essentially male as were and are paradigms, since the producers of knowledge were seen to be and are still to some extent are seen to be male. Even given the fact that Wollstonecraft is using the language used by her contemporary male writers, problems with the Cambridge school remain.

Skinner 's suggestion of uncovering authorial intention is as King suggests impossible. The idea of reading major and minor texts with similar assumptions and arguments to Wollstonecraft would also be problematic, given the nature of her writing and how it differed from male political literature of the Eighteenth Century.

Wollstonecraft has been compared with her male contemporaries, Paine, Rousseau and even Burke. However, she also differed from them in quite radical ways. While Wollstonecraft belonged to a circle of radical friends, they were not calling for Enlightenment ideas about rights and citizenship to be extended to women. I think that this will help to indicate how far Wollstonecraft worked within the circle of English radicals as well as illustrating that she was prepared to go to the further, more radical length of including women to this equation. It will therefore be difficult if not impossible to take all of Skinner's and Pocock's methodological recommendations on board given the limitation of similar texts, both major and minor at the time Wollstonecraft was writing. While I hope to look at the influence of Condorcet's work on Wollstonecraft in terms of the aspect of shared assumptions and similar views, this is also problematic since it leaves the possibility of meaning becoming lost in translation from French to English, though I suggest in Chapter 3 that this area warrants serious attention due to the similarities between the texts. Skinner's idea of measuring to some extent authorial acceptance, questioning, or debate of prevailing conventions does nonetheless remain important since this comparison can be used to illustrate Wollstonecraft's radical departure in political theory.

I moved on to consider the works of Millen, Harding, McRobbie and Lather in order to explore their views on doing feminist research. Knowledge is described by Millen as 'partial, profane and fragmented' (Millen, 1997, 13). The search for truth and generalisation into laws from such truths has declined, so that now it can be argued that all theory is revisable, that observation is fallible and open to interpretation and error (For this argument see Lather, 1988, 570). On this view the task of science is to provide multiple theories and observations which can be measured and may include errors, but which can be revised and cross-checked to provide accounts of reality. Millen suggests a '...compromise between a completely subjective, unique account of experience and a partly reproducible, objective and contextualised understanding, which importantly includes critiquing the researcher's subjectivity' (Millen, 1997, 15).

In conclusion Millen acknowledges that an attempt at objectivity is probably more useful than the sense that we have achieved it. This can be achieved by remaining aware of the assumptions we make as researchers, while also criticising theories in order to bring about reformulation of our work and questioning the work of others. Lather suggests that in order for research to continue, self and social understanding could lead to a self-reflexive paradigm challenging established views on what knowledge is (Lather, 1988, 576). Harding suggests that, '...the class, race, culture and gender assumptions, beliefs and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint' (Harding, 1987, 9)

This would allow an explicit explanation of the researcher's position by which the reader may come to her own conclusion as to how representative, valid and justified as well as how value-laden the approach has been and how far the study has been affected by this. Harding (1987) argues that this approach avoids the objectivist stance which in her view strives to maintain the anonymity, authority and

invisibility of the researcher. Instead, we could be opening up the views of the researcher and object of research for public scrutiny (see Harding, 1987, 9). King has explained that, '...evidence for an event is not the event itself. And so there must always abide a discrepancy between the past that we assume, and the evidence - as presently available- which we display in support of it' (King, 1985, 49). Harding's view, therefore, that the position of the researcher should be made explicit so that the reader considers the value - judgements, can be viewed as an important consideration.

Some researchers have already begun to make their research position explicit, for example Virginia Sapiro declares herself as,

...a political scientist; [whose]...approach to theory is unmistakably grounded in the practices and canon of that field. [She is]...also a member of the interdisciplinary field of women's studies, therefore [her]..approach has been shaped by what [she]...has learned...' (Sapiro, 1992, ix).

The idea of prescribing a feminist methodology is unrealistic since this infers one right way, one set of procedures or rules which is the basis for all feminist research. Furthermore, the idea that all feminists will adhere to and accept one methodological position is highly suspect given that feminists have differing ideas about how to attain equality and overturn patriarchal relations as well as questioning concepts such as equality, autonomy and citizenship. McRobbie argues for 'articulation between different forms of feminist practice rather than the intrinsic merits of one over the other' in order to forge a feminist culture' (See McRobbie 1982, 57). She suggests a move away from the way in which many academic conventions of researching such as archive work, writing and constructing arguments, 'go undiscussed or else are mystified as tricks of the trade' (McRobbie, 1982, 49). As a PhD student this mystification is worrying, it is not until confidence is gained by sharing one's work with friends, colleagues and supervisors for feedback that

students are sure their work is on the right track and this is daunting in itself. My own experience within the University of Teesside and as a member of the PSA Women and Politics group has been a very favourable one. Other academics have provided feedback in a very supportive and understanding way since most of them have experienced exactly the same feelings even if the discipline area was different. Giving papers is also very helpful since it requires articulation of your ideas and the feedback can help to explore the assumptions made, arguments and reading which might not have been considered.

Questions of epistemology remain central to my research since Mary Wollstonecraft is an example of a woman producing a works, which challenged the traditional canon of political philosophy of Eighteenth Century England. She '...applied the ideas of the mid - 18th century Enlightenment to the female sex', while also acknowledging influences from other writers (see Ezard, 1993, 3 and for Wollstonecraft's acknowledgement of Locke's influence on education see *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Pickering Masters 1989 edition, 25). This radical departure in political philosophy was met with hostility as women were told by male authorities that they would be corrupted by reading this work. The Reverend Richard Polwhele had considered Wollstonecraft's death in childbirth as richly deserved and he urged others not to read her corrupting works (*Feminism in Eighteenth Century England*, Rogers 1998, 218). This was further illustrated when *A Vindication* was published in reactionary Spain where it was made to resemble an educational treatise which had been written by a man (Kitts, 1994, 353). Even into first wave feminism Wollstonecraft was often considered an unsafe example and it remained the case that men were the knowers and producers of knowledge '...who would go forth to reason and rule in the political realm' (Coote and Pattulo, 1990, 31). This legacy of male knowledge continues within politics and may also be a reason why women within this field tend not to write about the research process and their place within it.

Modules, reading lists and teaching in higher education tends to mirror the canon of 'male knowers' within the politics area so that for modules like Modern Political Thought the works which are included tend to begin with Machiavelli and end with Marx. If one looks at Ancient and Modern conceptions of Justice here the thinkers analysed include Plato and Aristotle through to Rawls and Nozick. Akkerman and Stuurman (1988) have highlighted this situation by recognising that within contemporary texts on political thinkers they still often remain devoid of women's work. Politics undergraduates may therefore be forgiven for believing that throughout history only men have contemplated questions of what the good way is and considered ethics, education and citizenship, unless these students have opted to choose a feminist theory or women's studies module. Such examples go some way to explaining the centrality of epistemological issues for feminists.

It still seems incredible that students are in the 21st Century still being offered a 'past masters' view of who knowers are and were. Feminist research has been uncovering gender inequality, and upturning this tradition of male knowledge for some time as more and more women have declared themselves knowers. Examples within political theory are Jean Bethke Elshtain (1981), Zillah Eisenstein (1981), Susan Moller- Okin (1979) and Carole Pateman (1988). However this does not seem to have altered the mainstream political theory syllabus and does not reflect what Spender would assert as a women's movement which has always existed. Shanley and Pateman (1991) explain that Wollstonecraft and de Beauvoir still do not usually make an appearance in the canon of texts that make up the standard curriculum of 'political theory' and that William Godwin and Jean-Paul Sartre are much more likely to be read. Additionally not enough feminist research has been de-mystified within the discipline of politics.

Millen, Lather and Harding have provided an invaluable insight into opening up research to the reader of the research. Explicit explanation of

the researcher allows for question, criticism, and acceptance of the researcher's position and the effects of this upon the research itself. The suggestion of an attempt at objectivity together with the researcher's subjectivity and contextual understanding from feminist methodologies also avoids the post-modern claim of uniqueness of research which lacks reproducibility.

Feminist insights into methodology have proved extremely useful in approaching my research though they are of an interdisciplinary nature rather than specific to Politics as a discipline. I now want to consider the specific insights from Sapiro and Squires on researching within political theory. Virginia Sapiro's (1992) eloquent description of her research on Wollstonecraft displays the shift in theories of what research is and does. She explains that an artistic technique called *tratteggio* describes her research on Wollstonecraft. This method is used in conserving wall paintings where portions have been destroyed, and is a delicate and complex process of making tiny brush marks to give the impression that the gaps are filled in when looking at the wall from a distance. This, she argues contrasts with the older view that the gaps ought to be filled in to make the original and retouched portions indistinguishable as though a modern interpretation could be as accurate as an original (see Sapiro, 1992). Sapiro maintains that the differentiation should be maintained for closer inspection which is similar to the ideas of Millen, and illustrates the shift in social scientific research in recent years from a prescriptive and orthodox methodology to ways in which feminists can operate within the social sciences. This suggestion is not an attempt to reconstruct theory to uncover authorial intention but to fill in what we do know and also to make clear that this is an interpretation and furthermore provide some indication of who is undertaking the interpretation.

In *Gender in Political Theory*, Squires suggests that politics have separated into the fields of political science and political theory which remain exclusionary regarding issues of gender. She notes the central

importance of Pateman's claims about the current situation of political theorists who '...are able to admit the relevance or significance of feminist questions and criticisms only with great difficulty' (Squires, 2000).

Squires argues that the development of feminist theory has been largely inter-disciplinary and suggests that there remains an uneasiness between feminist theory and political studies and calls for researchers to reclaim a distinctive disciplinary identity for feminist political studies (Squires, 2000, 14-15). Squires' text has been one of the most helpful and insightful works that I have read on the issues of feminism and epistemology within politics, which uncovers some of the problems and complexities of feminism within the area of politics. This text will be very useful for undergraduates in beginning their research project, for new researchers about to embark on their research project and for established staff members within this area. I do, however still feel that this type of text would be enhanced by a publication of specific political feminist theory and science which would link theory with the practical problems of doing research. Such publications providing different explicit methodological routes alongside the differing research projects from within both sections of politics would be invaluable. This in turn would question the patriarchal nature of politics as a discipline and attempt to 'recast' it in a way that Pateman has suggested as vital.

The insights from both Sapiro and even more recently from Squires have been extremely helpful in marking out some of the parameters of the problems of doing feminist theoretical research within politics. Further, they have, by publishing in this area, facilitated further questioning and scrutiny of how research is actually facilitated within politics, which had often gone unquestioned or mystified.

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