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The Power of Gender Perspectives: Feminist Influence on Policy Paradigms, Social Science, and Social Politics

Abstract

Feminist scholarship changed the study of welfare states; influential policy experts have taken off from the feminist critique, incorporating it as they crafted their own social investment strategy, (mis-)translating (and transforming) feminist arguments into an economic rationale. Social science mattered as well: it helped to create a new policy paradigm that is influential across a number of political spaces. Public policy analysis thus needs to pay attention to intellectual processes, emphasizing the role of knowledge in politics; in policy-making, there is puzzling, not only powering. But nobody masters her ideas, or her political actions: actors can deploy “frames,” or discourses, but cannot control what happens to them politically.

Introduction

Gender perspectives have had a growing influence on policy paradigms, both within social-science debates around the role of ideas and culture in policies, and on new social policy paradigms themselves. These are the themes we take up in this special issue of *Social Politics*.

More and more scholars recognize that current changes within welfare systems are of a paradigmatic nature, and therefore should include the analysis of ideas, discourse, ideologies and culture in explanations of change and stability. An emerging body of scholarship seeks to document and understand the process through which actors change their ideas, the process through which ideas, discourses and ideologies may influence welfare reforms, and the ways in which culturally given categories and ways of thinking inform policy outcomes [see the essays by Padamsee (2009) and Beland (2009) in this volume].

When looking at the content of the current new social policy paradigms—the ideas which have become dominant in the social policy field—we see new concern about women’s employment, emphasis on the “care crisis,” the promotion of investment in children as well as the reconciliation between work and family life (see the essays by Jenson (2009) and by Knijn and Smit (2009) in this volume). One can assert that the new thinking about welfare states and the new architecture for welfare systems of the twenty-first century are largely based on ideas of social policies that have become thinkable thanks to a gendered analysis, promoted by the feminist welfare scholars (for examples of such “new thinking,” see the “Babies and Bosses” series produced by the OECD or any number of recent publications of the European Commission on child care services and “work life balance”; Orloff 2009 reviews the gender literature on welfare states).

Studying feminist ideas and scholarship on gender is thus crucial to understanding contemporary welfare systems’ transformation, for both changing gender relations and changing policy ideas and cultural assumptions—influenced by feminisms, in and out of the academy—have been implicated in the alteration of policies. Gender is central to the transformations of the contemporary welfare state, in a host of ways. Familial and work arrangements that had underpinned systems of social provision and regulation for many decades have been destabilized by changing gender relations, reflected in increased levels of mothers’ employment; women’s greater autonomy vis-à-vis partnering, reproduction and sexuality; declining fertility; and the terminal decline of housewifery and “male breadwinner”

households. Associated political and cultural changes—women’s equality movements and the increased presence of women in the formal political sphere, rising support for notions of gender equality, women’s political importance as voters, taxpayers, and bearers of the next generation of workers and taxpayers—have shaped contemporary social politics. Women’s increased entry into politics to press an equality agenda has been central to the transformation of policy paradigms, especially when the so-called “femocrats” and elected women take up these themes.

Changing gender relations are also implicated indirectly in welfare state transformations, via the influence of feminist social analysts (academic and otherwise), who have been in the vanguard of understanding these changes, on the work of “mainstream” social scientists, formerly uninterested in gender issues. The academic and policy mainstream has taken up and transformed—some might even say perverted—gendered insights about the linkages between family and employment (“private” and “public” spheres), the significance of care work for the welfare of all people and for the character of gender relations, and the importance of non-familial services for mothers’ employment. Social scientists and policy experts—and, to the extent that they are influential, also political elites—now work from the premise that welfare states must be reformed to accommodate or even facilitate gendered changes, perhaps through “a new gender contract,” to produce the higher levels of mother’ employment and fertility they see as critical to the future of welfare states or population well-being.

We see the evidence of the influence of gender studies in recent shifts away from neo-liberalism and toward paradigms calling for greater state involvement in enhancing child outcomes and maternal employment, called “social investment paradigms” by Jane Jenson (2009, this issue) and others, and in associated policy changes across many countries in both the developed and developing world, albeit in different fashions. This certainly implies that one must “take ideas seriously” as an analytic matter. *Social Politics* authors have been investigating the significance of gendered transformations for changing social policies and politics—and vice versa—for some time, contributing to what has developed into an impressive body of scholarship on the mutually constitutive relationship between gender and politics (including but not limited to welfare states) (for reviews of the literature of systems of social provision and regulation, see, e.g., Orloff 2005, 2009). The causal influence of explicit policy paradigms, ideologies, or discourses and implicit cultural assumptions about gender have been continually highlighted within this scholarship, for gender is understood to include “ideational” elements.¹

The culturally constructed and ideologically justified gendered division of labor and masculine authority and privilege, gendered political and affective orientations and identities—both as defended and as challenged, and sometimes transformed—are critical factors in explaining policy developments and gendered outcomes.

Simultaneously, but in another arena of the academy, scholars have been arguing about the necessity of bringing ideas, culture, discourse more centrally into explanatory narratives about institutional change, including in social policy and politics—and too often, without referencing relevant feminist work. There have been explicit feminist contributions to this debate (Adams 1999; Adams and Padamsee 2001; Fraser 2000; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Haney 2002; Jenson 1989; Orloff 1999). But feminist social scientists working on these issues have usually not been understood by the mainstream to be engaging same questions—yet, arguably, gender analysis has been among the most innovative in taking up questions of how “ideational” elements influence systems of social provision and social politics, as scholars of gender within sociology and political science have served as conduits of influence for the linguistic and cultural turns (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005). The papers by Padamsee (2009) and Beland (2009) in this special issue take up these themes and underline the importance of feminist scholarship and gender perspectives in contributing to approaches that emphasize the role of ideas, culture, and policy paradigms in shaping policy outcomes.

We aim in this special issue to bring together the conversation around the causal influence of culture and paradigms in changing policies/institutions and the discussion of specifically gendered aspects of cultural/ideational change—in the emergence of new policy paradigms, most centrally—with reference to contemporary social policies. Our starting point was our mutual interest in doing something on ideas, or “culture” and “policy paradigms” (the former term more dominant in sociology, the latter in political science). To get started, we invited papers on ideas and changing welfare states, not limited to those incorporating a gender perspective, for sessions organized at the annual conferences of RC19 (the comparative welfare state research committee of the International Sociological Association) and ESPAnet (the European Network for Social Policy Analysis). However, not by chance, many of the papers we received focused on gendered policy changes—reconciliation, parental leaves, care policies, activation—and the specific role of *ideas* about gender and policy, notably social investment paradigms. Needless to say, we were intrigued, and saw the potential for the special issue of *Social Politics* to focus on the origins and emergence of new and newly “gender aware” policy paradigms. We found a

novel history of recent welfare system changes. The argument, broadly speaking, is that neo-liberalisms—important though not determinative in shifting policy toward mothers’ commodification—are now on the decline; that there is competition among proponents of different ideas about how to adapt to new postindustrial global realities; and that new global social policy paradigms, with both implicitly and explicitly gendered aspects, including new concerns to support mothers’ employment, are emerging. We claim that this has been possible partly because of feminist intellectual work as well as changes in gender relations, both of which inform the new paradigms. These new frameworks have had notable influence on social policies; as shown by the papers in this volume, the transformation of welfare systems cannot simply be characterized as neo-liberalization.

Neo-liberals sometimes pushed women’s commodification, albeit unevenly, as some countries’ political elites were constrained by competing demands to accommodate mothers’ full-time caregiving (O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999, chap. 4). In this issue, Stryker and Wald (2009) discuss one instance of this in the celebrated US “welfare reform” (i.e., elimination of entitlement to social assistance) in the mid-1990s, which represented a drive toward poor single mothers’ commodification, and how this necessitated ideational shifts not only vis-à-vis mothers’ labor, but also with respect to other ideas linked to welfare provision, specifically, “compassion.” But interests in women’s “activation” have now extended far beyond neoliberals to those interested in the “third way” or varieties of “social investment,” for whom the nexus of fertility, caregiving and care services, and labor supply and immigration leads them to “considerations of gender.” Our (collective) narrative then also challenges the notion, still current in some parts of the academy, that “neo-liberalism” continues to be the hegemonic policy paradigm—the papers by Jenson (2009) and by Knijn and Smit (2009) make this point most forcefully, describing the new policy paradigms which have eclipsed neo-liberalism even as they incorporate some significant aspects of it. And note that this is an uneven process within and across states and international organizations—some elites embrace new social investment perspectives more decisively than others. But even in the United States, the key force promoting neo-liberal policies from the Reagan through the Bush administrations, social investment ideas are receiving attention within the newly-elected Obama administration. And the ideas of social investment also find important spokespeople within the US academy; James Heckman (2006), a principal proponent of social investment arguments both within the United States and

internationally, is based at the University of Chicago Economics Department—a delicious irony that would be more enjoyable if only the place had not been the source of so much immiseration via structural adjustment brought in on the advice of other “Chicago boys.”

It seems that influential policy experts have taken off from the feminist critique developed by scholars of gender and welfare states, incorporating it in their own social investment strategy, (mis-)translating feminist arguments into an economic rationale. Feminist scholarship has thus been crucially influential in changing the way welfare state were studied and understood, and this new perspective, when finally endorsed by the mainstream research, has helped to allow the building of this new “post neo-liberal” social policy paradigm, sometimes called “social investment”. However, as Jane Jenson (2009) shows in her article, while some aspects of the feminist contribution were endorsed by mainstream scholars and converted into a new social policy paradigm, some other basic claims by feminist have been “lost in translation” (such as the relational dimensions of care, the preoccupation for gender equality in the here-and-now, emancipatory perspectives, and the critique of rational actor theories of subjects and agency). This demonstrates that new approaches and concepts in the social sciences can be influential, but that those forging these new perspectives do not necessarily master how their ideas are taken up.

Two main ideational filters have distorted feminist contributions when translated into the new social policy paradigms. These are the reduction of the gender perspective to economic rationalist reasoning, as Jenson (2009) argues, and the adaptation of the approach to various national ideological and institutional contexts, leading to the emergence of three worlds of work-welfare reconciliation approaches, both at the ideational and at the policy levels (see Knijn and Smit 2009, in this issue).

Feminist scholarship changed the study of welfare states—however, nobody masters her analytic insights, ideas, or her political actions: actors can deploy “frames,” or discourses, but cannot control what happens to them politically. Social science also mattered: it helped to create a new policy paradigm that is influential across a number of political spaces. We thus agree with public policy analyses, reviewed by Padamsee and Béland, that pay attention to intellectual processes, emphasizing the role of knowledge in politics; in policy-making, there is puzzling, not only powering. But one should never forget that power relations—including but not limited to gender relations—are still central, even in the way ideas are incorporated and translated.

NOTES

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1. This was well-articulated among gender studies scholars by the mid-1980s, for example, by Joan Scott (1986) in her germinal "Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," which offers a multi-layered concept of gender as comprising normative, cultural, institutional, and subjective elements.

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