

# Gender and Political Interests: Taking Institutions Seriously

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## Abstract

One of the most taken-for-granted and yet widely disputed concepts in the analysis of political action is that of 'interests'. This paper argues, first, that in the traditional opposition between liberal and structural theories of politics, and the normative assessment of 'interests' each contains, there continues to be a characteristic tendency to treat 'interests' as though they are 'pre-given' phenomenon. The feminist political analysis which draws on these traditions remains prey to this tendency. Second, although more recent post-structuralist approaches to the study of gender, politics and policy analysis taken up by a number of feminist scholars are sensitive to the 'constructedness' of 'interests', accounts such as these require further development if we are to see 'interests' as more than simply discursive phenomenon. Third, I argue for an account of policy and political analysis in which the subject of gendered 'interests' is understood in terms of it being a particular 'problem of government' or 'governmentality'. This approach to the study of 'interests' seeks to examine both the institutional and the discursive processes through which the policies, institutions and practices of government problematise gendered 'interests'.

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, feminist social theorists have approached the concept of 'political interests' in a variety of ways. Some, working within the framework of liberal theory have scrutinized the notion of 'interests' as part of a broader project which has been concerned to 'rethink the liberal state' (for eg: Nash 1998; Young 1999; Phillips 1995; Mouffe 1993). These theorists and activists have been concerned particularly, to challenge the ways in which the state operates to produce and reproduce gender inequalities. With a strong belief in the power of the state to protect women and better their circumstances, these liberal feminists have seen the state as a dynamic political arena through which 'women's political interests' can be advanced. Others, building on Marxist and neo-Marxist conceptions of the state have

scrutinized the notion of 'political interests' as part of a broader concern to question the public/private distinction, condemning as male-dominated the state and mainstream politics (for eg: Brownmiller 1984; Firestone 1970; Moller Okin 1979). Through the work of these radical and other feminists, a critique of the ways in which women's 'interests' are given to the underlying structure of capitalist social relations and patriarchy was developed. However, despite the very different conceptions of the nature of political 'interests' found in the liberal and structural accounts, there is nonetheless a tendency in both to 'naturalize' 'interests'. While this may seem like a familiar enough critique, it remains true that a naturalistic conception of 'interests' underlies much everyday speech and strategic political discussion. The claim for instance, that this policy or that program is in the 'interests' of this or that group exemplifies the point.

More recently, yet other feminist theorists, drawing on certain aspects of Foucault's work, have rejected the classically organized basis of this controversy about 'women's political interests' (Nicholson 1990; Pringle & Watson 1992; Randall 1998). According to these 'poststructuralist' theorists, neither liberal nor structural conceptions of 'interest' provide an adequate explanation of the complex and differentiated practices and discourses which 'construct' the state and understandings of 'women's political interests'. In drawing attention then to the 'constructedness' of 'interests' research which draws on this framework avoids the recurrent tendency to produce naturalized and normative accounts of gender and political 'interests' analyzing them instead as social or discursive constructs. However, it is my argument that this approach then generates a new problem, that of treating all political concerns and gender differences *merely* as social constructs. If political 'interests' and gender differences are understood simply or even primarily as discursive phenomena, a barrier is set up against the analysis of their concrete institutional forms.

My proposed response to this problem is that we revise our approach to gendered 'interests' by producing a clearer, more empirically-grounded account of the gendered dimensions of 'interests', one which takes seriously *both* their institutional and discursive dimensions. Like the poststructuralist account of 'interests', this approach is also linked to a Foucauldian analysis of political power. However, poststructuralist accounts are limited by their reluctance to draw on Foucault's later work on government or 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991), not to mention the considerable secondary literature on 'studies of governmentality' which has emerged in recent years (for eg: Rose & Miller 1992; Dean 1999; Dean & Hindess 1998). It is these parts of Foucault's work which make it possible to see that while 'interests' are indeed discursively constituted, the processes through which this takes place can be understood more clearly as an intrinsic part of a broader problem of government or 'governmentality'. Conceptualizing 'interests' in this way opens up the institutional as well as the discursive dimensions of political power, along with the linkages between them.

## From liberalism to structuralism: the ‘real’ interests of women

Liberalism, with its emphasis on the individual and the individual’s capacity for reason, its enthusiasm for equality between citizens and its strong commitment to the rights of individuals to participate in society’s public affairs has generated a body of ‘interest’ theory which stresses the individually-known, subjective and ‘natural’ content of ‘interests’. Liberal feminists have drawn selectively from this, emphasizing the ways in which the theory and practice of liberalism has produced specific conceptions of women’s ‘interests’. In particular, they have been critical of that central tenet of liberal thought the public/private distinction for the ways in which this has operated to privilege ‘men’s interests’ over women’s. For liberal feminists, ‘women’s interests’ have thus been tied at once to their subordination in the private sphere, and as a result of this, their lack of participation in the public sphere.

Despite its problematic nature, the public sphere has nonetheless been central to liberal feminists’ arguments about political struggles over ‘women’s interests’, with contemporary liberal feminists by and large seeing the state as essential to the advancement of ‘women’s interests’. Theorists such as Anne Phillips and Iris Marion Young for example, have renewed calls for a distinct public sphere in which participants leave behind personal identifications in order to arrive at some consensus on the ‘public interest’ (Phillips 1995; Young 1994). In more practical terms, liberal feminists in the Australian context have engaged with the state working within its institutions across a number of policy fronts to ensure that ‘women’s interests’ were accommodated and represented.

Marxists in contrast, have placed emphasis on the ways in which the capitalist state creates and reproduces class relations. Political ‘interests’ whether those of men or women, were from this perspective seen as ‘class interests’. This conception of ‘interests’ as objective, class relations had of course, always challenged liberal notions of ‘interests’ as subjective. Marxist feminists extended this critique by arguing that not only were ‘interests’ an outcome of social power structure in the form of class relations but that patriarchy also structured ‘interests’. Class domination was fundamental to capitalism, while gender inequality was functional to it (Wilson 1977; Benston 1972).

If Marxist feminists saw capitalism as the primary basis of women’s subordination, radical feminists saw patriarchy itself as the primary structural power category. For radical feminists gender inequalities were rooted in interpersonal relations, and the public sphere, far from being an arena through which women could advance their ‘interests’ was seen as an ideological construct produced by men to legitimize the exclusion of women from public affairs.

While both radical and Marxist feminists were united against liberal feminism in their antipathy towards the state, they nonetheless both shared a conviction with liberal feminists that they knew (or at least understood) what

‘women’s interests’ in fact were. Both the liberal and the structural conceptions of ‘interests’ – ‘interests’ are ‘given’ to individuals in liberal political thought or, ‘interests’ are ‘given’ to structural categories such as class or sex according to structural frameworks – have, then, been controversial for the extent to which they naturalized ‘interests’ and at the same time concealed the normative assessments contained therein of those ‘real’ ‘interests’. They prompted other feminists to scrutinise the categories ‘men’ and ‘women’, and the relationship between gender, politics and the state to produce an account of ‘interests’ that avoided the more naturalistic and normative characteristics of those classically derived theories of ‘interests’.

As feminist scholars began to engage with the question of the difference between biological sex (male/female) and social gender (masculine/feminine), ‘gender’ came to be used in much the way that the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller (1968: 9) had defined the term to refer to socially constructed behaviours (Oakley 1972), structures (Connell 1987), and systems (Rubin 1984) produced on the basis of, but not determined by, biological difference. This research made clear the multiple, socially constituted as opposed to biologically-given nature of the categories ‘men’ and ‘women’ and thus challenged the naturalistic and unified bases of conceptions of ‘women’s interests’/ ‘men’s interests’.

Up until this point, few feminist analyses had gone beyond seeing state structures as given, as either essentially potentially good (Dahlerup 1987; Fox-Piven 1972) or bad (Wilson 1977; McIntosh 1978) for women as a group. The incipient functionalism reflected in the notion that the state could act on behalf of particular groups in any simple way was rejected by theorists in the late 1980s. ‘The state’ itself began to be theorized not as a unitary structure, but a differentiated set of institutions and agencies (Franzway, Connell and Court: 1987). The state then was understood not simply as reflecting gender inequalities but, through its practices as playing an active role in constituting them; gender practices become institutionalized in historically and geographically specific forms. Such an approach has most recently been developed into a conception of the state’s ‘gender-selectivities’ (Jessop 2001).

This idea of the state as a collection of differentiated institutions which are actively produced and reproduced through social practices has been developed further in a parallel research project often referred to as neo-institutionalism (eg, Brinton & Nee 1998; Raeburn 1999). Here research which examines cross-national differences, processes of change and the ways in which political struggles are mediated through the institutional contexts in which they take place also highlights the productive, mutually constitutive relationship between structural and institutional factors and ‘political interests’. The notion of social *practices* is replaced by the somewhat different idea of *agency*, which is similarly suggestive of the significance of social action, but social action understood more particularly to mean the agency, initiative and activities of individuals and groups of individuals. Feminist scholars working within this tradition have developed a body of research which has become known as feminist comparative policy (Mazur 2002).

However, this way of describing the relationship between women, politics and the state as one of mutual engagement has been criticized for the extent to which it tends to imply two poles of intersection and political interaction – where politics, the state and policies effect women and where women impact on politics, the state and policy processes – when in reality these zones of interaction and intersection are more numerous and diffuse (Randall 1998: 183). What also remains unaddressed is the way in which the term ‘gender’ ends up operating along very similar lines to the notion of sex differences as the ‘natural’ basis of distinction between men and women (Carver 1998).

## Poststructuralism, gendered ‘interests’, and the state

This means that even in its practice-oriented and neo-institutionalist forms, the feminist conception of ‘interests’ had only gone some of the way towards avoiding the problems that I have identified as being inherent in the classically-derived notions of ‘interest’ – their naturalism and normative content – as a range of scholars who draw on poststructuralist perspectives have argued. Nor, does this more recent research really deal with the problem of what are empirically much more diverse phenomena than the analytical categories ‘men’, ‘women’, ‘the state’ and ‘political interests’ posit. According to poststructuralist theorists, these problems can only be overcome by recognizing that ‘interests’ are *discursively constituted*.

Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson (1992), for example, argue that although there was by then widespread acceptance of the notion that ‘women’s interests’ were multiple, actively produced by women themselves just as much as men, through a state that was a complex and differentiated set of institutions and practices, feminists still continued to rely on those older naturalistic, unitary models of the state and ‘women’s interests’. According to Watson and Pringle, feminist theorists were still attached to a ‘sovereign’ conception of power and the state. Only by seeing power, ‘the state’ and ‘political interests’ in Foucauldian terms, as discursive phenomena, could this error be overcome.

Watson and Pringle thus reconceptualized the way in which women had engaged with the Australian state throughout the 1970s and 1980s. They argued that research up until that time on the question of the relationship between ‘women’s interests’ and the state had failed to explain the ‘particular flavour of Australian feminism’ – most especially its relation to the bureaucracy (1992: 60). They identified two problematic areas. First, analysis of ‘the positioning of ‘femocrats’ (feminist bureaucrats) as mediators of the ‘interests’ of all Australian women had been organized around the question of how representative femocrats were of Australian women generally. From Watson and Pringle’s perspective this was hardly the point because the question assumed that somehow it would be possible to find out what in fact different groups and individual women’s ‘real’ ‘interests’ were – to see if these matched the ‘real’ ‘interests’ of femocrats. As they argued, this was neither empirically nor theoretically possible. ‘Interests’ were neither objective nor subjective – nor were they ‘needs’ (Jonasodittir 1988) or any other category

of concern which assumed they had some ‘reality’. Rather, the more appropriate way to approach the study of ‘women’s interests’ was to examine ‘the discursive practices within which interests are constructed’ (Watson & Pringle 1992: 60). This would make clear the ways in which ‘women’s interests’ were themselves artifacts of ‘language, frameworks of meaning’ and ‘discourses’, ‘produced by conscious and unwitting practices by the actors themselves in the processes of engagement’ (Watson & Pringle 1992: 69).

Second, the relationship between feminist bureaucrats and the ALP government throughout the period had been theorized in terms of ‘the state’ which was ‘structurally given’. As Watson and Pringle argued, this was a conception of the state as sovereign, of political power and state policies reflecting dominant ‘interests’ – in this case those of the (male-dominated) labour movement – whereas feminists were ‘actually articulating ‘interests’ that were by no means pre-given, and which had to be constructed in the context of the machinery of government’ (1992: 60). The state then, far from being structurally ‘given’ they argued, should be understood as an historical product the outcome of which should be seen in terms of ‘the current collection of practices and discourses which construct ‘the state’ (1992: 62).

By examining the language used, and meanings constructed around debates concerning ‘women’s interests’ Watson and Pringle were able to argue that those ideas that informed and structured those debates operated to produce a range of competing, contested conceptions of ‘women’s interests’. Watson and Pringle’s conception of ‘political interests’, ‘the state’ and power as discursive phenomena – constituted through multiple and contested ‘frameworks of meaning’ – thus made clear the ways in which ‘interests’ are discursively constituted, revealing their normative and ‘natural’ content as discursive constructs as opposed to ‘real’ phenomena (Watson and Pringle 1992: 57).

## ‘Interests’: Discursive Strategies, Political Reasoning and Governmentality

Poststructuralist scholars like Watson and Pringle draw explicitly on the definition of the term ‘discourse’ as developed by Foucault to designate what he saw to be the conjunction of knowledge/power (Foucault 1976). However, although Foucault saw discourses as ‘practices’ which were inextricably connected to the institutional forms of the state, in Watson and Pringle’s work this relationship is more asserted than examined. The methodologically innovative aspect of Foucault’s work lies in his approach to the study of how specific discourses are constituted over time, and how these discursive practices are linked to specific institutions and apparatuses of the state, a method often referred to as ‘genealogy’ or ‘history of the present’. Watson and Pringle’s argument about the discursive construction of interests is partial to the extent that it makes ‘interests’ appear to be wholly discursive phenomena. A genealogical approach which investigates *how* certain discourses which construct specific notions of ‘interest’ emerged and *how* these are given institutional effect would reveal *both* the discursive *and* institutional dimensions of ‘interests’. This in turn requires a conceptualization of the discursive construction of ‘interests’ as part of what

discursive construction of ‘interests’ as part of what Foucault identified as a broader ‘problem of government’ or ‘governmentality’.

There are three elements of Foucault’s approach to government which are of conceptual significance here. First, modern government is a *problematizing* activity in the sense that it is characteristically preoccupied with the reflexive question of ‘how to govern?’ (Foucault 1991: 97) The problematizing nature of modern government or ‘governmentality’ thus requires that those who govern think not only about the *nature* of government – which involves fundamental questions such as who governs and to what ends – but also about the *practice* of government – which is preoccupied with questions of *method*.

Second, Foucault suggests that such problematics of government can usefully be defined in terms of their political rationalities, defined as ‘the changing discursive fields within which the exercise of power is conceptualized’ (Rose and Miller 1992: 175). Political rationalities operate to link what Foucault refers to as the problem of government in two senses: on the one hand, what Foucault calls ‘government in the political domain’ or ‘the actual definition of the state’. On the other hand, ‘the conduct of conduct’, which refers to any activity which aims to shape, guide or effect the conduct of individuals and populations (Dean and Hindess 1998: 11). This distinction between these two senses of government makes clear the linkages between everyday practices or conduct on the one hand, and on the other, the complex of institutions, organizations, agencies and apparatuses that comprise ‘the state’.

Third, political rationalities are not simply abstract conceptual schemata. They are inextricably connected to a vast array of governmental technologies – techniques, programmes, strategies and apparatuses. It is through these governmental technologies that ‘authorities seek to embody and give effect to governmental ambition’ (Rose and Miller 1992: 175). This technical aspect of government thus asks: by what means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies is authority constituted and rule accomplished? (Dean 1999: 31). Technologies of government are thus an essential condition of governing, and it is through specific technologies such as education, health care, welfare, law, and so on, that ‘political interests’ are discursively and institutionally constituted.

Foucault’s work on governmentality can inform our approach to the study of ‘political interests’ by prompting us to examine the ways in which the construction of ‘interests’ is part of the broader complex of problematizing activities that is modern government. That is, by locating the many constructions of ‘interests’ – ‘women’s interests’, ‘men’s interests’, and so on – within the wider problematics of government or governmentality, charting the discursive fields or political rationalities which inform the different constructions of ‘interests’ over time and through space it becomes possible to see *how* certain discourses emerged when they did to inform specific notions of for example, ‘women’s interests’, and *how* these were given institutional effect. In this way, the linkages between past conceptions of for example, ‘women’s interests’ and the practices associated with these and the present are made clear. Such a ‘history of the present’ indicates the ways in which the past operates to both constrain and facilitate representations of ‘interests’ in the

present, as well as the *normative* content of claims about this or that policy or programme being in this or that group's 'interests'.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the broad contours of theories of 'interests' - characterizing these using the terms liberal, structural and poststructural - to see how the relationship between gender and 'political interests' is understood by the feminist theorists and activists working within differing traditions. In doing this, I have argued that although each theoretical framework and the feminist efforts found in each reveals important aspects of the ways in which the relationship between gender and 'political interests' might be understood, they are all to some extent partial and problematic explanations.

Liberal theorists' conceptions of 'interests' are framed in terms of individual, autonomous agents, while that of structural theories in terms of a particular structures of social power. Both frameworks, however, posit 'interests' in naturalistic terms, as 'pre-given' entities - 'given' that is, to either individuals or 'given' to structural categories. They also, as a result contain normative assessments about the nature of those 'interests'. Feminist theorizing informed by each of these traditions appears to have reproduced these problematic and partial tendencies. More recent feminist theorizing sought to avoid the tendency to naturalize or essentialize the categories 'women' and 'men' by critically and explicitly investigating the categories 'women', 'men', sex and gender. In doing so, however, they have been criticized for using the category 'gender' in much the same unifying way. Postructuralist approaches to the concept of 'interests' emphasise that to believe that 'interests' are 'real', and that it is possible to say what is or is not in the 'interests' of any individual or group, is empirically and theoretically impossible. From the perspective of poststructural theory, 'interests' need to be understood as discursive phenomena.

While the postructuralist conception of 'interests' avoids the problematic tendencies of those other theoretical positions that I have discussed, it, too, is problematic - although for a different reason. By analytically privileging the discursive - to reveal the 'constructedness' of all 'interests' - poststructural thought leaves the institutional dimensions of 'interests' unaccounted for. To understand how 'interests' are constituted both discursively and institutionally, I have argued for a revised approach to the study of 'interests', one which conceptualizes this process as part of a broader 'problem of government' or 'governmentality'. Such an approach will help us obtain a clearer understanding of the nature of 'political interests' and particularly 'of the ways in which their invocation plays a role in political life' (Hindess 1993: 113). We might therefore, as William Connolly suggests, 'help to sharpen the issues implicated in disputes about interests, being clear about the range of judgements woven into these disputes' (1988: 75). We might in other words, be both more critical of claims about 'political interests' and reflexive about ways of thinking and acting differently in relation to them - 'even if this can never resolve the enduring disputes about them' (Connolly 1988: 75).



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