Översikter och meddelanden

Gender and Politics – Comments on an evaluation

An evaluation of Swedish research in political science, organized by The Swedish Research Council, has been completed (report nr 1, 2001). The evaluators are, naturally, from outside Sweden, which gives a special weight to the report. Its praise, criticisms and suggestions will play a role in future research in political science in Sweden. The same cannot be said about its (rather short) chapter on gender and politics within political science. It is altogether too superficial for that. In the following I will try to substantiate this assertion.

But first a couple of general comments. One is about productivity. The evaluators seem neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the quantity of gender research in political science. In this they are excused since they have little to compare with. In my former position as research secretary responsible for a gender program at the research councils, accepting between one and two thousands applications in gender research during exactly the period they are reviewing, the 1990ies up to 2001, I have been able to follow the development in gender research generally. In comparison to other areas, the social sciences, history, literature, economy, ethnology, etc, the gender program received very few applications from political science departments. This is most remarkable and begs an explanation. After all feminism is about power and so is political science The evaluators point out that the concept gender and politics has passed the "infant stage" and should be much more part of mainstream research in political science. I would argue that gender and politics in terms of political science is much more in an "infant stage" than other fields of gender research. During the 1990ies platforms for gender research were constituted in many fields but not in political science.

This quantitative peculiarity does not at all, I hasten to add, reflect on the gender researchers within the field of political science who have striven heroically with and for the gender aspect.

Secondly, the evaluators mention the difficulty to separate gender research within political science departments from policy studies in the centres of Gender studies or Women studies. They see their task as confined to the political science departments and, indeed, it is the researchers and the work within these departments they mention and deal with. This would be OK, if they did not widen their task without telling us.

It is true that the evaluators claim not to take sides in the internal tension regarding organisation, but it is clear that they see specialized gender and politics programs/women's studies programs as risk projects in terms of quality and prefer mainstreaming gender research into the political science departments. They criticize the gender programs for lack of clarity, lack of definitions, feminist theory with pretensions to new paradigms. To give examples of what they mean, they write

> some projects in this area seem not to have clearly specified research questions, and indeed, some of the questions being asked /such as "can men and women ever be equal"/ would appear to be more appropriate for a speculative conclusion to a study than a question addressed from the outset. In some of the studies, some of the propositions (for example the existence of "patriarchy") seem to have the status of unquestioned assumptions, rather than questions calling for systematic empirical analysis. This is somewhat of a paradox, in particular, for work in the deconstructivist vein that sets out to "problematize" concepts....(s 133)

This is where the question of superficiality comes in. Has it not occurred to them that their ironical remark about deconstructivism can be turned around in the same academic vernacular and used against them? It is somewhat of a paradox that they who so much stress the necessity of systematic empirical analytic work, can, to such a degree, disregard the fact that we walk knee-deep in empirical studies and statistics that together demonstrate that there exists a male hegemonial norm, a patriarchy if you wish, a hierarchy of values where that which is considered male has higher status than that which is considered female in society, in work life, in wages and salaries, in culture. This norm is consciously and unconsciously upheld by both men and women, but to a lesser degree by women. It is paradoxical that they cannot draw the normal conclusion of so much empirical evidence. (Of course, there is the possibility that these expert evaluators are not familiar with the wide scope of empirical research that this conclusion is drawn upon, but then one must question their expert status).

Now, they can argue that they did not explicitly take sides whether there exists a patriarchy or not. Nor did I when I formulated an invitation in the 1990ies to apply for money in gender research to my research council. In one sentence I intimated the possible existence of male hegemonial power (or patriarchy). When the council's attention was directed toward this formulation, several of its members threatened to resign. Such a question was not to be introduced in serious, objective research.

The evaluators complain about the diffuse area of gender research, no clear borders, no definitions. To that I would add lack of research compared to other fields. The explanation, in my view, can be found in the emotional charge exemplified in the aggressive reaction of the same members of the research council. So far, the deniers of the existence of patriarchy (or its equivalents) dominate the arena of research thoroughly. No wonder that researchers in gender and politics where one cannot avoid the idea of power as one can in other fields of research, are few and theoretically not very clear. The price for them is high.

It is also surprisingly superficial by the evaluators to consider questions about gender equality too speculative to be taken seriously in research ("can men and women ever be equal"). After all there is a whole area in political science, classical political theory, that deals with equality, liberty, power etc. As a matter of fact, assessing main stream political science in general, the evaluators suggest improvements here, since they do not think that Sweden is very outstanding in classical political theory. But apparently they do not consider that classical political theory applies to gender and politics, or is it the "communitarians" they exclude from political theory?

Reflecting on the development in political theory in the 20th century, it is now easy to see that liberal individualism/egalitarian liberalism has totally dominated since WW2 in symbiosis with technological and economic progress and the success story of Western democracy. In the last decades criticism against liberalism has been formulated by the so called "communitarians", (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandler, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer). To summarize their criticism, they question the idea of an autonomous individual, sprung so to speak from nowhere, self-interested, aimed at realizing a private conception of a good life. No such creature exists. A person's conception of a good life is a concoction of experiences, values, conventions, moral principles that they are born into. Not even self-interest can be conceived atomically. People normally feel affinity with family, friends, collegues ethnic groups etc. In reality the individual is formed by a multiplicity of influences to which they are subject.

The liberal government is according to itself neutral to different conceptions of a good life, but the pretensions to neutrality can only be kept as long as the individual is seen as an empty vessel. If you fill it with preferences the liberal individual is no more neutral than other individuals whose ideas of a good life are quite different, e.g religious, ethnical, etc. Liberalism is secular, voluntaristic, atomistic and with leanings towards Promethean romanticism. (Flathman 1992, Taylor, 1989). The point here is not which conception of a good life is best, but that egalitarian liberal societies have managed to present

themselves as neutral to different conceptions of a good life. This false notion of neutrality makes them superior and is a shining shield that is very hard to penetrate.

There are feminist scholars who has dealt with these questions in political science and in philosophy, the problem of the atomistic individual, the lack of community (e.g. Iris Young, J Elshtain, Carole Pateman, Seyla Ben Habib). They are few and they are not a homogenous group. But in pointing to the fact that women are totally excluded in the history of political ideas in the West (as well as everywhere else), and in criticizing the liberal conception of a good life as it is described above, they speak with one voice.

The male communitarians tend to see women as an excluded group among others (immigrants, poor, women...). This is awkward not only because men and women share the same cultures and classes in comparison to other groups, but above all because the special relationship between men and women. If a minority by some peculiar circumstance would disappear from the earth, the majority would go on as usual. This is not the case with men and women.

So, the expert evaluators, should, instead of making light of classical political theory in a gender perspective, criticize the lack of it and suggest improvements as they did in main stream political science. One can ask why they did not do that. One explanation to their attitude can be that they never took gender and politics seriously anyway, another is that they simply did not know very much about gender and politics. Of course the answers are not mutually exclusive. But then the bucket is left with the Swedish Council of Research for not including expertise on gender and politics in the group.

Finally, the evaluators make a plea for more cooperation between mainstream political science and gender and politics. I can only agree. They suggest that *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* can make a contribution here.

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