Towards a feminist political geography?

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The next challenge for the subdiscipline (of political geography) is to incorporate new politicizations of human geography through... feminist geography (the politics of 'public' and 'private') (1994: p. 450).

(Th)e subdiscipline has still yet to meet the challenge of feminist geography whose concerns for power in place and space from a gender perspective have only appeared intermittently in contemporary political geography. The study of place-space tensions may be one way of integrating feminist geographical concerns into political geography (2000: p. 597).

These quotes are the closing words in the 'political geography' entry in the third and fourth editions of The Dictionary of Human Geography. The 1994 entry basically represents feminist geography as the politics of the 'public–private' divide; while the 2000 entry broadens the scope (and possibly the geographic scale?) of the feminist challenge, framing it in terms of power and space—a central concern of political geography. (Notably, feminist geography is not even mentioned in the 'political geography' entry in the first two editions.) I want to think about a feminist political geography that takes formulations of the politics of 'public' and 'private', power, space, and scale seriously as one way of engaging part of Kevin Cox and Murray Low's charge: "attempt to situate issues about what counts as 'political' subject matter in political geography in a broader field of geographic and social science concern, and in relation to 'current affairs.' Panelists will explore these questions of subdisciplinary approach, identity, and focus in relation to an array of topical areas in political geography which form actual or potential sites for exchange between subdisciplines and with other disciplines."

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"What counts as ‘political’ subject matter"

Several commentators note that political geography experienced a renaissance somewhere around 1980. Early in the revival, Christine Drake and Joan Horton (1983: p. 329) pointedly raised concerns about the "sexist bias in political geography". Several years later, Eleonore Kofman and Linda Peake (1990: p. 313) were compelled to make the same point again, arguing that "the content of political geography simply reflects the overwhelming male dominance of the discipline; gender is absent from the political world and its spatial organization as interpreted by political geographers". And in an even more recent rumination, Lynn Stachel (2001) informs us that there is still a lack of substantial intellectual traffic between feminist and political geographies (although she suggests that both sides maintain this particular boundary). Separated by over a decade, these last two feminist reviews of political geography prescribe a future for political geography that, among other things, considers scales other than the state, region, and globe, and pays closer attention to the significance of the public–private divide.

It still bears constant repetition that feminists have redefined what counts as ‘political’ in geography and ‘current affairs’. Women have actively engaged the state, disrupted public discourses, and through transformative, participatory politics have created new political subjectivities. And women inside and outside the academy have problematized the naturalized, taken-for-granted binary opposition between ‘political–public’ and ‘apolitical–private’ spheres. Many issues that impact upon women’s daily lives (for example: abortion, childcare, and domestic violence) are often designated as part of the ‘private’ sphere and were long deemed inappropriate or invalid for inclusion as ‘political’ subject matter. Under the clarion call that the ‘personal is political’, feminist activists have taken issues previously considered ‘private’, ‘domestic’, and ‘personal’ and placed them squarely on the state’s agenda. Now male violence against women, pay equity, abortion rights, child-care policies, and family law are themes for (frequently heated) public debate and are often part of election campaign promises.

I think of political geography as being concerned with territory and territoriality, exploring how power is exercised in and through spaces, and how spaces (and their boundaries) are defined, defended, and contested. Similarly, it seems fair to claim that most often the scale of analysis for political geographers is the state (arguably the most important), region, globe, and, to some extent, locality. Finer scales get far less attention. For instance, with some limited exceptions, political geography remains relatively untouched by questions of the politics of difference, body politics, and political subjectivities that are energizing many other subdisciplines of human geographies. However, that there continue to be bitter struggles around issues like abortion, pay, and domestic violence is indicative of just how tightly woven power and politics are with the public–private divide and the body, and how borders at finer scales are carefully policed and highly contested.
‘Actual or potential sites for exchange’

In thinking about my mandate, I initially thought that there must be lots of actual, or potential, sites for exchange between feminist geographers and political geographers. However, it seems that this is indeed troubled, even contested, territory, and has been for some time, as is indicated by the feminist readings of political geography I referred to above that span a 20 year period. I wonder whether one device for strengthening and establishing sites for exchange might be the recent provocative discussions about scalar politics and conceptualizations of scale as actively produced, relational, and fluid. Sallie Marston (2000) points out that scholarship about the social construction of scale tends to emphasise the state, labour, and capital, or some combination of them. In other words, the focus is on the politics of the ‘public’ sphere of production. The more ‘private’ processes of social reproduction and consumption get overlooked. She forcefully argues that the construction of the household scale reverberates through other scales from the body through the neighbourhood and city to the nation state. Reflecting on her research about the political subjectivities of urban middle-class women in the late 19th and early 20th century US, Marston argues that household social reproduction was central to both the smooth functioning of capital and to the remaking of the state. She argues, “home was utilized as a scale of social and political identity formation that enabled women to extend their influence beyond the home to other scales” (2000: p. 235).

Recently feminist geographers have also drawn on the public–private divide and the social production of scale to develop feminist readings of geopolitics. For example, Joanne Sharpe (2001: p. 37) calls for a geopolitics of the private–public divide where taking “seriously the mundane acts of national identification suggests that there is a great importance to the politics of the everyday, of the private, in addition to the more obvious politics of the public space of state and international politics”. And Jennifer Hyndman (2001) argues for a feminist geopolitics that critically considers political practices at scales coarser and finer than the state. She illustrates her argument with several case studies, here I will include only one from her discussion about the ways that public–private divides are currently being challenged by international law. The recent decisions by War Crimes Tribunals to prosecute the rape of women as a strategic weapon of war take the body and the public–private divide to the transnational scale. These legal decisions mean that rape as a weapon of war “represents a new category of crime that reorganizes the scale and scope of punishment, and recasts what counts (that which is public) and what does not (that which is considered private). The safety of the body as the finest scale of geopolitical space is politicized” (2001: p. 216). These examples show that sites for exchange could consider scales in addition to the state, and consider the ongoing implications of the space/place tensions associated with the public–private divide, the politics of difference, body politics, and political subjectivities.
Scale and the political geographies of domestic work

I want to take these ideas and reflect on what might be some actual or potential sites for exchange between political geography as I have described it here and some of my work as a feminist geographer. I decided to use this exercise as an opportunity to reconceptualize a research project that I worked on with Bernadette Stiell about foreign domestic workers in Canada (England and Stiell, 1997; Stiell and England, 1997, 1999). At first blush, we were dealing with something very localized, and seemingly quintessentially ‘private’—the care of children in their parents’ home. However, the state (one definition of ‘public’ space as Sharp indicates) is deeply implicated. Since 1981, Canada’s federal policies have strictly stipulated that foreign domestic workers can only enter Canada if they ‘live in’ the homes of their employers for two years. For some women (most often from the ‘Third World’), Canada’s foreign domestic worker and live-in caregiver programmes are their only opportunity to apply for landed immigrant (permanent resident) status as independent migrants. We addressed several questions. We were concerned with how nationalities of domestic workers were racialized and which groups are represented as most suitable for entry into Canada, the difficulties domestic workers face by having a workplace that is someone else’s home, and how different groups of domestic workers get constructed as better suited to certain aspects of paid domestic work (‘English nannies’ teach children manners and do arts and crafts, while ‘Filipina domestic workers’ make good housekeepers). We looked at how the discursive constructions of national identities of domestic workers were mobilized differently in the making of the federal government’s immigration policies, the practices of domestic worker placement agencies, and the ways different groups of domestic workers constructed their own and other domestic workers identities.

Although we focused on the scale of the household, we did argue that the socio-spatial relations we described are linked to wider spatial scales. For example, a large proportion of Canada’s foreign domestic workers are from the ‘Third World’ and so, to some extent, the legacy of colonialism and the subsequent geographies of underdevelopment and poverty help generate the international supply of domestic workers willing to move to Canada. And the demand for domestic workers results from socio-economic changes within Canada—the continuing shortage of affordable, quality childcare, the increase in dual-income and dual-career couples, and the feminization of paid employment, particularly of high-status occupations. These, in turn, are reflections of economic globalization and the shift to the service sector. And while our research primarily involved taking a peek behind the front doors of the households employing foreign domestic workers, we described how the dynamics behind these front doors have ramifications at ‘doors’ at other scales. For instance, attitudes and demands of employers affect the day-to-day operation of domestic worker placement agencies in terms of which domestic workers get sent to the doors of which households (and indeed whether particular nationalities of domestic workers even get through the door of the placement agencies). Employers of domestic workers influence policy directions at Immigration Canada. And, of course, Immigration Canada influences the entry of domestic workers.
To paraphrase Lynn Staeheli, there “is plenty of political geography in (this project), but it is not marked as such.” (2001: p. 183). In terms of the scale of the state, for instance, we could reinterpret our work as looking at how the everyday lives of foreign domestic workers are affected by the governance of immigration and rules about residency at various scales: for example, in ‘private’ homes (the ‘living in’ requirement), and nationally (their immigration status in Canada). We could also think about the production of ‘citizenship’ and political subjectivities operating at scales from the body, community, city, nation, even global as being interpellated and mobilized in the ‘private sphere’ of employers’ homes. At the time we were doing the research, we did not explicitly engage the then newly emerging geographic literature on the body. However, on reflection, we were clearly interested in the discursive and material bodies actually doing domestic work, as well as the many ways by which citizenship is embodied. Our work could also be reframed in terms of globalizing the home. In the last couple of years, feminist scholars have drawn on concepts of transnationalism and commodity chains to place domestic workers within a framework of globalization. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) refers to transnational mothers and Rhacel Parreñas (2001) talks of the globalization of mothering and global care chains to describe women from ‘the south’ leaving their children ‘at home’ in order to move to the US to look after other (more affluent) people’s children. Family members or ‘local’ paid domestic workers care for the domestic workers’ own children in the Philippines or Honduras. Thus, there are several transnational or global links in what can be described as the nanny chain and in the mothering chain. Bernadette and I could have written a political geography of the globalization of domestic work that included an account of nanny chains.

Concluding thoughts

What counts as ‘political’ in political geography? What topical areas in political geography form actual or potential sites for exchange between subdisciplines and with other disciplines? For me, as a feminist geographer I think incredibly fruitful exchanges are already emerging from thoughtful engagements of ideas from critical geopolitics, the literature on the social production of scale, and critical considerations of the politics of the public–private divide. I hope to see more of them in political geography’s future and that the ‘political geography’ entry in the fifth edition of The Dictionary of Human Geography will at least reveal that some of the feminist challenge is being met.

References


