

## WPSA Feminist Theory Workshop

### *Origins*

Shane Phelan, then Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of New Mexico and a political theorist pioneering in feminist theory and queer theory, conceived the Feminist Theory Workshop and pitched the idea to colleagues during the 1995 meeting of the WPSA. All who heard the proposal were markedly enthusiastic. Weary of established formats for intellectual exchange—the invited lecture or the conference panel with four papers and one discussant—Shane suggested a radically different format to foster serious and sustained intellectual discourse: a day-long session immediately prior to the WPSA annual meeting (Kaufman-Osborn 2021). In contrast to the hierarchy established by the invited lecture in which a distinguished scholar holds forth, allowing scant time for Q & A, Shane envisioned an egalitarian discussion of a recent book agreed upon by workshop participants and introduced by one or two thoughtful colleagues. The author of the featured work would be invited to offer a brief response before the floor opened for discussion. In contrast to the rigid time allotment of a standard academic panel, the Feminist Theory Workshop afforded participants hours to probe substantive arguments, analyze strengths and weaknesses of the text, and consider implications for the burgeoning field of feminist theory, traditional understandings of political theory, and for transformative politics. To maximize the benefits of these insightful dialogues, participants decided to supplement a book discussion with a second session focusing on works in progress, book chapters, or recently published articles.

Drawing upon communication possibilities enabled by recently established academic email networks, Shane organized the first workshop in 1996, which was held on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley. Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* (Princeton University Press, 1995) was selected as the first text for the discussion. Shane recruited two discussants: pathbreaking feminist political theorist, Nancy Hartsock and newly-minted Ph.D. Renée Heberle. According to Shane (2021), from the beginning an important goal was “to give young scholars a chance to be heard and join the conversation.” An interdisciplinary scholar who had recently defended her dissertation and was employed as a lecturer in Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Renée (2021) recalled the Workshop as “one of the most terrifying and affirming events of my early career.” She was introduced to a roomful of scholars whose work she had “just finished reading and writing about” and her sense of intimidation increased when it turned out that Nancy Hartsock was unable to attend due to illness. Her worries were not apparent to the more than two dozen participants, however, as Renée gave an inspiring analysis and critique of *States of Injury*, raising a host of probing questions that fueled lively debate for the rest of the day. Surpassing the level of intellectual stimulation of even the best graduate seminar—no doubt because the participants were the thinkers who were inventing the field of feminist political theory—the Workshop featured respect, collegiality, laughter, and community-building. Seated in a circle to facilitate face-to-face interaction, each speaker chose the next speaker, ensuring that the conversation was not dominated by a few voices. To share the organizational work, the scholar(s) whose work was featured each year assumed responsibility for consultation and selection of the reading for the following year.

The 1997 email list included 56 addresses: 26 from the Western states that comprise the official catchment area for the WPSA; 18 from universities on the East Coast; 10 from the Midwest; and

2 from the South. By 2021, that list had grown to include 359 scholars from all regions of the USA as well as some international scholars. The scholarship of participants ranged from critical interpretation of canonical works in Western political theory and reclamation of the works of women thinkers such as Arendt, Beauvoir, and Wollstonecraft who had long been excluded from the canon to innovative analyses of the contemporary world including anarchism, constitutional law, democratization, environmentalism, gender and technology, globalization, heteronormativity, international political economy, militarization, public policy, sexual violence, and visual culture. The earliest participants included three Latinas, but the overwhelming preponderance of participants were white. The racial apartheid and colonial legacy so long entrenched in political science haunted the Feminist Theory Workshop just as it did the profession at large.

### *Context and Significance*

It is no exaggeration to say that the Feminist Theory Workshop created a space for feminist scholarship unlike anything that had previously existed in the discipline of political science. The Task Force *Report on Political Science in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2011, 14) noted that “studies conducted since the 1980s have consistently shown a bias against the study of race and inequality within political science as compared to most other social science disciplines.... Flagship journals have, on the whole, rarely addressed issues of race, ethnicity, and gender.... [and] textbooks treat race, ethnicity, and gender...as marginal aspects of the political system, rather than as woven into the fabric of American politics.” Political theory as a subfield did not deviate from this pattern of bias. In a 2008 survey of 1,086 political theorists (4,351 were sent questionnaires, only 1,086 returned them) conducted by Matthew Moore, a small number of respondents indicated that they believed feminist theory and critical race theory should be taught more often in history of political thought classes. Thirty-five scholars suggested that Mary Wollstonecraft should be taught more; 29 noted that Fanon should be taught more; 28 named W.E.B. Du Bois among those who should be taught more; and 11 suggested that Simone de Beauvoir should receive greater attention in political theory classrooms (Moore 2009).

According to the search engine for Sage online journals, there were 79 references to “feminism” in the journal, *Political Theory*, from its founding in 1973 through 2009, compared to 16,174 in all Sage journals during the same period. When the search was restricted to references to “feminist theory,” there were 33 references to feminist theory in *Political Theory*, compared to 22,663 in all Sage journals during those 37 years (Hawkesworth 2010, 688). These 33 references include mention of feminist theory as an area of specialization in author bios, as well as in book reviews and major articles. They also include Jackie Stevens’s tongue-in-cheek review of three recent books, which ended with the provocation: “Feminist theory is dead. Long live feminist theory” (Stevens 1998, 745).

*Political Theory* published 7 major articles by feminist political theorists in the first decade of publication (1973-1982), roughly 2.9%; 14 in its second decade (1983-1992); 25 in the third decade (1993-2002); and 24 between 2003 and 2009: 70 articles in 37 years, just under 8%. The book review section reveals a parallel paucity. From 1973 to 1986, a period in which books in feminist theory were being published by the dozens each year, reviews of books written by feminist political theorists were scarce. When they did appear, it was due to the intellectual labor of

feminist scholars. In 1980, Molly Shanley reviewed Susan Okin's pioneering work, *Women in Western Political Thought*. In 1982, Carol Pateman reviewed Zillah Eisenstein's *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* and Kathy Jones reviewed Jean Elshtain's *Public Man, Private Woman*. In 1983, Molly Shanley and Audrey McKinney reviewed Carol McMillan's *Women, Reason, and Nature*. In 1984, Joan Tronto reviewed Nancy Hartsock's *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. In 1986, Carole Pateman reviewed Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> This gendered pattern of reviews has persisted with very few exceptions over the course of *Political Theory*'s history. It took nearly 20 years for a man to publish a review of a feminist work: in 1991, Isaac Kramnick reviewed Shanley's *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England*. Markedly absent from the works reviewed in *Political Theory* is the thirty-volume series, *Re-Reading the Canon* (Penn State University Press) edited by Nancy Tuana and published between 1994 and 2002, which provides lucid feminist critiques of canonical thinkers from Plato to Derrida and Foucault.

Like the leading journal, political theory panels at professional meetings seldom had more than token representation, occasionally including one feminist theorist or one critical race theorist—rarely both on the same panel unless the panel was organized by a feminist or critical race theorist. For decades, mainstream political theory dismissed (often *unread*) feminist, critical race, and queer analysis on the assumption that it concerned things that fall outside the legitimate interests of traditional political theory. Advancing interlocking notions about the universality of reason, the unvarying operations of the mind, and the fungibility of knowers, mainstream thinkers have rejected concerns about physical, temporal, and geopolitical specificity in knowledge production, treating these phenomena as category mistakes or as problems to be eliminated through heightened analytical precision. Although overtly repudiating the racism, sexism, and homophobia characteristic of earlier eras in the history of political thought, many traditional political theorists cling to the conviction that race, sex, and sexuality are epistemically irrelevant to political theory. Only under the editorships of Jane Bennett (2012-2017) and Lawrie Balfour (2017-2021) has the content of *Political Theory* changed significantly.

In contrast to patterns of marginalization and exclusion, the Feminist Theory Workshop created a space that challenged the putative neutrality of the discipline and the alleged universality of theorists' canonical claims. Populated by avid feminists ranging from grad students to distinguished professors, the Workshop affirmed and legitimated feminist inquiry. Through annual meetings, intensive dialogues, and diverse readings, it enabled participants to redefine and expand the boundaries of mainstream political theory and political science. And as the number of Workshop participants grew and participated regularly in the panels of the WPSA, the Feminist Theory Workshop pushed the Western to become a different kind of professional organization. In the words of Kennan Ferguson (2021), "My own take on the importance of the Feminist Theory Workshop has a serious structural aspect.... [as] the centrality of theory kept growing, I truly believe that the Workshop transformed the WPSA into the theory powerhouse it is today, as well as inspiring groups and approaches such as Environmental Political Theory. In other words, I'd say the Workshop changed the structure and importance of the WPSA, anchoring it as the most important and conceptually richest regional conference." Key Feminist Theory Workshop participants played a central role in launching the WPSA's new journal,

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a selection, but rather a complete list of feminist books reviewed in *Political Theory* in those years.

*Politics, Groups and Identities* in 2013, which publishes “the best scholarship on social groups, exploring the politics of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class and other dimensions of identity and structural disadvantage” across all subfields of the discipline.

### *Contesting Boundaries*

As Kathy Ferguson (2015) has argued, feminist theory is more fruitfully conceived as a multifaceted, multi-sited project than as a bounded field. It is a theoretical endeavor born of struggle—the political struggles for women’s empowerment that have emerged in all regions of the world over the past four centuries. Grounded in the investigation of women’s, men’s, and gender-fluid lives and convinced of the arbitrariness of exclusion based on sexual difference, feminist theory has “flourished as a mode of critical theory that illuminates the limitations of popular assumptions about sex, race, sexuality, and gender and offers insights into the social production of complex hierarchies of difference” and structures of power (Disch and Hawkesworth 2016, 2). Within the Feminist Theory Workshops, participants continued the struggle over the meaning and expanse of political theory and of feminist theory.

In his impressive catalogue of the analytic techniques, methodological approaches, ideological commitments, and intellectual heritages within contemporary political theory, Timothy Kaufman-Osborne (2010, 657) noted that “If political theory is identified by what its practitioners do, it would appear that this category now includes, among others, textual analysis, critical theory, post-colonial theory, comparative political theory, hermeneutics, normative theory, deconstruction, cultural criticism, political ethics, genealogy, psychoanalytic inquiry, the history of political thought, and linguistic analysis. If, alternatively, political theory is identified by the labels its practitioners are prone to pin on one another, we must add to this mix of approaches, among others, radical democrats, Nietzscheans, republicans, Habermassians, liberals, Straussians, greens, neo-Aristotelians, communitarians, Marxists (neo or otherwise), post-structuralists, Rawlsians, pragmatists, pluralists, and perhaps a few anarchists.”

With perhaps the exception of Straussian interpretation, feminist theorists share these diverse analytic practices, challenging the notion that feminist critique is something “other” than “*real* political theory.” Within the Feminist Theory Workshop, discussions explored androcentric, heteronormative, and cisgender bias in key concepts and practices such as freedom, justice, order, sovereignty, autonomy, kinship, rights, shame, democracy, liberalism, nationalism, the state, militarization, war, and peace. They examined analytic strategies and conceptual vocabularies that theorized embodied power and made visible the injustice of male domination and women’s subordination, white domination and the subordination of racialized peoples, heterosexual domination and homosexual subordination, and cisgender domination and subordination of transgender and gender-fluid people. They probed readings that “denaturalized” families, households, plantations, colonies and the hierarchies of power that structure them. They investigated how power operates in the production of sex, sexuality, sexual identification, gender roles, gender stereotypes, gender consciousness, gender identification, gender symbolism, and reifications of sex and gender difference. Readings analyzed the discursive and material production of particular races, the complex political valences of Blackness, the Orient, *Latinidad*, comparative racialization and the construction of “whiteness,” and Occidental biases in the

conceptualization of democracy, rights, individualism, freedom, and humanity in canonical and in feminist texts. (See list of readings below.)

The Feminist Theory Workshop provides a space for learning that goes well beyond approaches accredited in grad school curricula and presses participants to grapple with the politics of difference. Many of the conversations have not been easy. Discussions of race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity have been particularly difficult, leaving participants of color frustrated at blinders that persist even among “well-intentioned” feminist scholars. Commitments to equality and social justice coexist with unconscious biases, illuminating contradictions at the heart of Western theoretical projects—contradictions that cannot be ignored, explained away as an artifact of an older era, or situated in a narrative of progress that suggests that “political theory as a field is ‘expanding,’ remedying its omissions, moving toward universality” (Philipose 2007). Steeped in the tradition of Western philosophical thought, feminist theorists reproduce racialized and gendered hierarchies that “have ideological and material effects in determining the lines between those who are excluded (from humanity) and those who are included and/or representative of humanity” (Philipose 2007, 4). Despite explicit efforts to struggle against diverse modes of domination, legacies of white privilege continue to surface in conceptions of theory and in technologies of the self, embedded in notions of rationality, argumentation, heterosexuality, appropriate lineage, control of emotions and passion and the state-nation. In the Feminist Theory Workshop as in the field of political theory more generally, intensive discussions make clear that “conceptualizations of political theory are thoroughly political... bound up with reproduction of very real configurations of power” (Kaufman-Osborn 2010, 656).

### *A Space of Growth and Friendship*

Despite difficult dialogues over the past 25 years, the Feminist Theory Workshop has provided a space for intellectual growth, professional affirmation, and friendship for many. In the words of Susan Burgess (2021): “The Feminist Theory Workshop is a great example of what makes the Western the best regional conference in political science. Starting the Western meeting with deep and thoughtful engagement in the Feminist Theory Workshop made subsequent discussions in conference panels, meetings, and meals more substantive and productive.... helping me to develop my identity as a writer, professional, activist, and human. Shane Phalen's presence and organization of the Workshop made me more legible as a queer professional to others and even to myself. I really don't think I would have been able to produce the body of scholarship that I have over the past thirty years without the Feminist Theory Workshops. I'm guessing that has probably been the case for many attendees. I've also met lifelong professional and personal friends at the Feminist Theory Workshop. Who knew that such a seemingly small change in the structure of the annual meeting at the Western would have such an enormous effect?”

The Workshops also provide a welcoming space for graduate students, forging networks of scholars who have provided mentoring that has turned into life-long friendships. As Kathy Ferguson (2021) notes: “The workshop is also important in its friendliness to grad students. So many of us brought our students, and we met each other's students..... But I think the loyalty that many of us have to the group, regular appearances each year, speaks volumes. We cared for the group because it fed us intellectually and personally. Think how loud and

happy the voices are before the meeting, at the break. How we made dinner arrangements with friends afterwards. How people smile when, after the discussion starts, we look up and see an old friend slip into the room late.”

Whether the focus is its innovative format, its wide-ranging intellectual engagements, its efforts to push the boundaries of traditional political theory, its creation of a mechanism to foster critical reflection on white privilege and persistent modes of marginalization within the discipline, or as a unique site for professional growth and friendship, the Western Feminist Theory Workshop remains a unique academic experience enabled and sustained by the unparalleled openness of the Western Political Science Association.

## Citations

APSA. 2011. *Task Force Report on Political Science in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association. Available at: [http://www.apsanet.org/files/Task%20Force%20Reports/TF\\_21st%20Century\\_AllPgs\\_webres90.pdf](http://www.apsanet.org/files/Task%20Force%20Reports/TF_21st%20Century_AllPgs_webres90.pdf).

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Kaufman-Osborn, Timothy. 2010. “Political Theory as a Profession and a Subfield? *Political Research Quarterly* 63(3): 655-673.

Kaufman-Osborn. 2021. Email Correspondence. August 23.

Moore, Matthew. 2009. “Political Theory Today: Results of a National Survey.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Canada.

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Philipose, Elizabeth. 2007. "Decolonizing Political Theory" *Radical Pedagogy* 9(1), Winter; available at [http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue9\\_1/philipose.html](http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue9_1/philipose.html).

Stevens, Jacquelyn. 1998. "Review Essay: The Uses and Disadvantages of Feminist (Political) Theory." *Political Theory* 26(5): 725-747.

### **WPSA Feminist Theory Workshop Readings, 1996-2021**

#### Books (discussion year)

Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (1996)

Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (1997)

Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, *Creatures of Prometheus* (1998)

Christine DiStefano and Nancy Hirschmann, *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory* (1999)

Eloise Buker, *Talking Feminist Politics* (2000)

Catherine Holland, *The Body Politic: Foundings, Citizenship, and Difference in the American Political Imagination* (2001)

Jane Bayes, Mary Hawkesworth, Rita Kelly and Birgitte Young, *Gender, Globalization and Democratization* (2002)

Elizabeth Wingrove, *Rousseau's Republican Romance* (2003)

Lori Marso and Pat Moynagh, *Simone de Beauvoir's Political Thinking* (2004)

Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2005)

Noenoe Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (2006)

Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (2007)

Marla Brettschneider, *The Family Flamboyant: Race Politics, Queer Families, Jewish Lives* (2008)

Susan Burgess, *The Founding Fathers, Popular Culture, and Constitutional Law: Who's Your Daddy?* (2009)

Edwina Barvosa, *Wealth of Selves: Multiple Identities, Mestiza Consciousness, and the Subject of Politics* (2010)

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany (2011)

Kathy Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets* (2012)

Kennan Ferguson, *All in the Family: On Community and Incommensurability* (2013)

Mary Caputi, *Feminism and Power: The Need for Critical Theory* (2014)

Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodramatic Politics and the Pursuit of Freedom* (2015)

Anna Sampaio, *Terrorizing Latina/o Immigrants: Race, Gender, and Immigration Politics in the Age of Security* (2016)

Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (2017)

Lori Marso, *Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter* (2018)

Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (2019)

Lida Maxwell, *Insurgent Truth: Chelsea Manning and the Politics of Outsider Truth-telling* (2020)

Natasha Behl, *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India* (2021)

Articles, Book Chapters, Works in Progress\*

- Kathy Ferguson and Phyllis Turnbull, "Militarization in Hawaii" (1996)  
Jane Bennett, Selections from *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (1998)  
Jaqueline Stevens, *Reproducing the State* (1999)  
Karen Zivi, "Conduits of Contagion or Care? Women's Rights and the Politics of Motherhood in the Age of AIDS" (2002)  
Susan Burgess, "Did the Supreme Court Come Out in *Bush v. Gore*? Queer Theory and the Performance of the Politics of Shame" (2003)  
Jill Locke, "Unashamed Citizenship" (2004)  
Ki-young Shin, "Movement Without Activism: Japanese Women and the Family Law Reform Movement Since the 1980s" (2005)  
Ingrid Bartsch, Carolyn DiPalma, and Laura Sells, "Witnessing the Postmodern Jeremiad: (Mis)Understanding Donna Haraway's Method of Inquiry" (2005)  
Cristina Beltrán "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies, and the Challenge of *Mestizaje*" (2006)  
Michael Ferguson, "Resonance and Recognition: Personal Experience in Iris Marion Young" (2007)  
Heath Fogg-Davis "The Dynamic Intersection of Identities" (2007)  
Jyl Josephson "Sexual Citizenship, Sexual Regulation, and Identity Politics" (2009)  
Michael Ferguson, Claire Snyder-Hall, and Nancy Hirschman, Selections from "Choice Feminism Symposium," *Perspectives on Politics* (2010)  
Kathi Weeks, Selections from *The Problem with Work* (2011)  
Joan Tronto, Selections from *Caring Democracy*, and Stacy Clifford Simplican, Selections from *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (2012)  
Liza Taylor, "Rebuilding Feminism's House: Reasserting Political Commitment after Deconstruction" (2013)  
Ange-Marie Hancock, "The Multicultural Feminist Roots of Intersectionality" (2014)  
Cristina Beltrán, "Latina Conservatives: Individual Agency and Stories of the Self" (2015)  
Linda Zerilli, "Ideology and the Ordinary" (2016)  
Sara Angevine, "Aborting Global Women's Rights: The Impact of Antifeminism on American Foreign Policy" (2017)  
Heath Fogg Davis, Selections from *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* (2018)  
Marla Brettschneider, Susan Burgess, and Cricket Keating, Selections from *LGBTQ Politics* (2019)

Compiled by Kennan Ferguson, Michael Ferguson, Kathy Ferguson, Mary Hawkesworth, Renée Heberle, Jill Locke, Lori Marso, Laurie Naranch, Karen Zivi.

\*The readings from the second sessions of the workshops are not complete. Please send any additional names of authors and titles to [mhawkes@womenstudies.rutgers.edu](mailto:mhawkes@womenstudies.rutgers.edu) for inclusion in the list.