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Perspectives Against Interests: Sketch of a Feminist Political Theory of "Women"

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Do women share interests? Seeking interests that women share is theoretically problematic and politically undesirable for feminists. Efforts to redefine interests as subjective, contingent and/or context sensitive are unsatisfying for those who want to link women's representation to the fact of their oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. Fortunately, we need not posit shared interests to make strong claims about the importance of women's representation. Nor do we need such a concept to explain why women work together across significant institutional barriers and social differences. Overlapping, entwined sets of global and local social structures define "women" as a social collectivity. Women in diverse organizational, social, and national contexts organize to alter this complex configuration, forging relations of solidarity and shared identities in the process. But this is not reducible to shared interests. Moreover, focusing on things that women have in common de-emphasizes issues that mainly confront marginalized groups of women and/or that are group or context specific but critical to achieving gender justice. Fortunately, feminist theorists have identified bases for political representation and mobilization that offer more useful accounts of social

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group politics (e.g., Mansbridge 1995; Mohanty 2003; Young 1997, 2000;). The idea of social perspective is one such concept.

Problems with the Idea of Women's Interests

Feminist theorists no longer emphasize women's shared identities or interests for several reasons. To begin with, ignoring differing sexualities among women implicitly privileges heterosexist, binary notions of gender, erasing alternative sexual experiences (Butler 1990; Epstein and Straub 1995). The claim to universality also obscures the experiences of women of color (Collins 1990; hooks 2000), and reproduces a colonial stance towards Third World women (Mohanty 2003; Narayan 1997). The problem is not that women never share any interests. Rather, the search for, and emphasis on, universal concerns privileges heterosexual, middle-class, and otherwise advantaged groups of women. The problem is both political and analytical: As Burns puts it, "We will get the story wrong if we focus on the things all women or all men share" (2007, 104). Indeed, most feminist theorists shy away from claims of common interests and identities, focusing instead on gender as an analytic category, process, or social structure.

Defining interests (unitary or diverse) as wholly objectively given is also problematic. Often, such interests seem to diverge from women's expressed interests. Democratic theorists have generally been uncomfortable with suggesting that people are ignorant of what is best for them (Vickers 2006).[1] On the other hand, merely accepting expressed preferences as interests raises problems of its own: Women's expressed interests vary across groups and over time (O'Brien 2004). The information people receive may be systematically distorted or manipulated, and they may be socialized to accept ideas that go against their interests. This may be mitigated when oppressed groups self-organize (Lukes 2005; Morris and Braine 2001; Vickers 2006). But even self-organized groups of women express varying preferences over time and across groups, and some women's groups oppose feminist policies.

Women's preferences, mobilization in social movements, and political solidarity are importantly influenced by ideas and identities, not just interests (Mansbridge 1995; McBride and Mazur 2010). Feminists seek to oppose oppression in its many and varied forms, not just to advance women's interests (hooks 1990; Mohanty 2003). Feminists want "justice

1. See also Diamond and Hartsock (1981) and Sapiro (1981) on objective and subjective interests.

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for women and everyone" rather than "more goodies for me." The concept of "women" must capture the important role of ideational, normative phenomena *and* link it to the social structures that organize power in its diverse forms. We need an account of the social category "women" that can account for both the impressive political solidarity of women and the deep conflicts of interest among women. The concept of women's interests cannot do these things.

So Why Are We Still Talking about Women's Interests?

Even for those who recognize the problematic nature of the idea of women's interests, the concern persists that if women do not share interests, then we cannot speak of representing women, evaluate their representation, or treat "women" as a significant political grouping. As Vickers (2006) puts it: "Where women do not articulate a common voice . . . democracies cannot be deepened by the feminist project" (p. 9), and "Being able to assert what are 'women's' best interests in a particular context enables contestation when men are making laws and allocations or formulating policies based on *their* images of what is good for 'the universal woman' (p. 17). But we do not need to claim that women share interests to show that particular policies or practices disadvantage or favor particular groups.

Some scholars have tried to reconstitute the idea of women's common interests as a sort of contextual, politically pragmatic claim, based on empirical analysis: We could speak of women's common (but not universal) interests where such interests could be demonstrated (Vickers 2006). In order to avoid attributing interests to women based on expert opinion, we should look to women's own expression of these interests in contexts where they self-organize. This approach leaves many troubling questions unanswered, however: What do we make of women who fail to identify with each other at one point in time, who nevertheless forge strong bonds of solidarity and agree on a political agenda at a later time, as happened in the global women's movement? Does this common interest suddenly emerge? Nor does this approach solve the political problem: Women need to speak with a common voice, not only where we have common interests, but *especially* in those instances when we have conflicting interests, when the interests of marginalized groups of women are most likely to be overlooked.

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Women's Perspective as a Basis for Political Solidarity and Analysis of Representation

Analytically, a better way of linking women's social position to women's movements, and to evaluate women's substantive political representation, is to focus on women's perspective (Young 1997, 2000). While women have divergent experiences, identities, and interests, they are designated as a social collective, or *series*, by social institutions, by social practice, by what Sartre calls practico-inert structures. Constituting this sort of social collective, or series, does not require shared experience; it means that some external object, practice, or process links the members of the collectivity. This link may constitute a trivial aspect of their consciousness or subjectivity, but it is a social fact. Bus riders, for example, are objectively linked by virtue of waiting for the same bus, and this makes them a sort of social collective, a series (Young 1997). This does not mean that the riders have the same experiences or interests, but they are part of the operation of a larger system, which designates and defines a category to which they belong. Their subjectively reported experience helps us to understand the actual operation of the bus route.

In order to understand broader processes of social organization, we need to map the connections across groups, as well as understand the many different ways that members of a series subjectively experience belonging to the group. Greater diversity in the individual and group subjectivities that are mapped provides more information about how a social structure operates. Any particular organized group of women will always be partial in relation to the series. But every woman has some information about the operation of social structures in her personal experience. This element of personal experience may not be salient; it may be in the background. When women organize as women, however, their membership in the broader series is foregrounded, made visible. Deliberation among women is a particularly powerful tool for generating knowledge of social structure. Such groups of women have more information about the broader series than do individuals, and more diverse groups offer more insight.

Where members of such a series freely organize to seek to change the reality they face, then, they generate social knowledge. The issues they discuss reflect the social landscape they see. This set of issues comprises the *perspective* of the series (Young 2000). Substantive representation of women is accomplished when these issues are accorded weight in

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democratic deliberations or policymaking processes. Perspective is a plural concept: A group perspective is comprised of the perspectives of subgroups. We can tell which groups of women are substantively represented by examining whether their priorities are given weight and attention.

This account, then, sees women as a special kind of social collective called a series. Each series is associated with a social perspective. This idea of perspective allows us to recognize, for example, that we are all connected as women by the way gendered norms about responsibility for children combine with international economic processes that create significant inequalities, and even relations of exploitation, among women. This connection can ground a shared commitment to address these inequalities, but it does not suggest a common interest. Indeed, developing a shared program to address such issues requires women to overcome serious conflicts of interest. Neither the connection nor the conflicts are determinative of political action; but organizing and developing better ideas can produce a solidarity that builds on this connection (Mohanty 2003).

The idea of women as a series with a social perspective explains why there is the potential for global organizing without positing common interests among women. Although there is the potential to create political solidarity among women by virtue of their membership in the series, there is not necessarily a shared interest or identity. This explains why in the initial phases of women's global organizing, women activists were unable to come together around a common agenda, as they were divided by region, religion, sexuality, race, and other political categories (Weldon 2006). In spite of these divisions, women were able to generate solidarity by identifying a set of priorities they shared. It is important to recognize that this was not a process through which common *interests* were revealed. It was a process of building solidarity by recognizing diversity among women and developing new ideas (e.g., a broadened concept of violence against women) that better captured the experiences of the world's women. And the women in these movements who pushed for reproductive freedom, for equality in family law, or to end violence against women did so not necessarily because it was in their own interest but, rather, because it reflected their shared commitment to gender justice.

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