Introduction to Book Review Section on Gender and Conservatism

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As noted in the introduction to this issue of Politics & Gender, for this Special Issue on Gender and Conservatism, we have coordinated the book review section with the thematics of the volume’s four research articles. This lends the volume an intellectual cohesion that we hope will prove engaging, as it also expands the purview of topics that come into play where the intersections of conservatism and feminism are concerned. The books reviewed here suggest the rich diversity of the scholarly work that is now being generated on this question.

In selecting books to review, like the editors of this special issue, we sought to identify books that explore the “dangerous liaison” between conservatism, feminism, representation, and politics. As Karen Celis and Sarah Childs state in their introduction, we have chosen books that call into question any “general and a-priori rejection of conservatism and feminism as oppositional theories and practices.” Instead, to quote the editors once again, we selected six books that in one way or another “investigate how conservatism and feminism meet in co-constitutive ways: how conservatism might re-define feminist goals, and how feminism might re-model conservative political thought and practice.”

The first book for which we commissioned a review is Melissa Deckman’s Tea Party Women: Mama Grizzlies, Grassroots Leaders, and the Changing Face of the American Right (Wilson 2017). Deckman’s aim is to explore the role of women in creating and leading the Tea
Party movement. Using national-level public opinion data, observation at Tea Party rallies, and interviews with its leaders, Deckman argues that many women find this grassroots movement more inclusive than mainstream Republican political organizations. In part, this testifies to their strategic choice to recast certain key conservative issues such as the deficit and gun control as matters affecting families, and to ground their claim to expertise in these areas in their traditionally-gendered roles as mothers and homemakers. Yet, at the same time, Deckman argues, many Tea Party women reclaim the name of “feminism” by reconfiguring it as a call to freedom and independence from government intrusion.

The second book reviewed is Jeffrey Dudas’s *Raised Right: Fatherhood in Modern American Conservatism* (Carver 2017). Dudas addresses several questions that are essential to understanding the intersection of gender and politics: How has the modern conservative movement thrived in the face of the multiple constituencies it claims to represent? How, for example, does it sustain its apparent harmony among major corporate interests, small-government libertarians, evangelical Christians, and racial purists? To explore these questions, Dudas examines the thought of three iconic figures in the conservative movement: William F. Buckley, Jr., Ronald Reagan, and Clarence Thomas. Common to these three, Dudas identifies what he calls a “paternal rights discourse.” That discourse suggests that strong paternal discipline is essential to raising autonomous citizens. But, in the very act of affirming the need for such discipline, Dudas argues, this discourse generates a paradox about just when and how authoritarian fathers are to transfer their powers to those who have been “raised right.”

Our third book is Sara R. Farris’ *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonalism* (Mascat 2017). Like our other authors, Farris advances what to many may appear to be a counterintuitive argument. Specifically, she examines the demands for women’s rights from an unlikely amalgam of contemporary right-wing nationalist political parties. Focusing on France, Italy, and the Netherlands, Farris coins the term “femonationalism” to label this appropriation of feminist themes by xenophobic and especially anti-Islam campaigns. By characterizing Muslim men as dangerous to western societies and as oppressors of Muslim women, these groups appeal to the ideal of gender equality in order to justify their racist rhetoric and policies. Importantly, Farris also shows how the rhetoric and practices of these campaigns channels Muslim and non-western migrant women into domestic and caregiving
industries, thereby advancing forms of neoliberal economic exploitation while simultaneously claiming to promote the emancipation of these same women.

Fourth, we review a collection of essays edited by Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Petö titled *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Lombardo 2017). Together, this volume’s 24 essays consider the link between extreme right-wing political movements and gender issues within a diverse group of European nation states. In addition to providing important quantitative data regarding the participation of women in right-wing politics, the authors also examine the networks, organizational forms, and specific tactics of women in far-right groups. Of particular interest are the essays’ explorations of the ideological commitments of these women, especially regarding femininity and masculinity, heteronormativity, and sexuality more generally. As with the other books we have chosen for review in this issue, these essays render exceedingly problematic any facile identification of feminism with left-wing politics and, accordingly, any mutually-exclusive opposition between conservatism and a commitment to women’s emancipation.

Our fifth book, which is more historical in orientation, is D.A.J. MacPherson’s *Women and the Orange Order* (McKane 2017). This volume examines the growth and activism of Orange women in England, Scotland, and Canada between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of World War II. MacPherson argues that women were vital participants in the formation of diasporic connections throughout the British world, building on links created by migration and the spread of the British Empire. The participation of women, and especially working-class women who joined the Orange Order, proved key to furnishing support to conservative political movements generally and, more specifically, to legitimating the ideology of the Empire. Weaving together themes of gender, ethnicity, class and imperialism, MacPherson, too, complicates our familiar narratives about the relationship between politics and gender.

Sixth, and finally, we offer a review of Lihi Ben Shitrit’s *Righteous Transgressions: Women’s Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right* (Sucharov 2017). The central question Ben Shitrit seeks to answer is: How do women in conservative religious movements expand spaces for political activism in ways that extend beyond their movements’ strict and stereotypical conceptions of gender identity and roles? *Righteous Transgressions* examines these questions by studying Jewish settlers in the West Bank, the ultra-Orthodox Shas, the Islamic Movement in Israel,
and the Palestinian Hamas. To show how women in these groups prioritize nationalist over proselytizing agendas, the author argues that they construct “frames of exception” that temporarily suspend, rather than challenge, some of the more constricting elements of their movements’ gendered expectations regarding identity and activism. This in turn enables Ben Shitrit to argue that these activists strategically appeal to nationalism in order to re-characterize what might otherwise appear to be forms of gender trouble as, instead, exemplifications of righteousness. The net result is that transgressions of normative expectations are effectively reframed as noble acts on behalf of a greater political good.

Together, these books complicate any simple suggestion that the resurgence of political conservatism and religious fundamentalism in recent decades has aimed entirely at returning women to the private sphere, where they are to cheerfully assume their duties as wives and mothers. In fact, in many cases, women have arguably drawn on feminism’s insistence on liberation from those constraints in moving into the public sphere as active and sometimes violent political subjects. (Dudas’s book adds a fascinating wrinkle to this tale by showing how it is only via subordination to patriarchs within traditional family structures that conservative men learn the disciplined autonomy that justifies their exit from that sphere.) If nothing else, the books reviewed in this issue suggest that the question of whether the conservative and often reactionary causes for which these women fight disqualifies them from marching under the banner of feminism is far from unproblematic.

REFERENCES


