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Situated Citizenship: A Theoretical and Methodological Intervention

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Abstract

In this essay, I ask: Who has the power to theorize? And how do we challenge narrow understandings of what counts as theories, theorists, and theorizing? I draw on alternative intellectual histories—feminist, intersectional, interpretive, and decolonial—that are attentive to expanded definitions of the political within and beyond the Western world and to the internal diversity of often taken-for-granted categories of analysis. Next, I show how these intellectual histories open up the space for *Gendered Citizenship* by briefly outlining the main concepts of the book and their significance for political science. In this section, I also respond to the contributors to this symposium. I am grateful to Dipali Anumol, Lisa Beard, and Denise Walsh for their thoughtful and careful commentaries.

Keywords

interpretivism – gendered violence – intersectionality – gender justice – lived experience

Introduction

Why is *Gendered Citizenship*, a book that centers the lived experience of minority Sikh women in Punjab, India, featured in a journal on comparative political theory? Some readers might wonder where the theory is in this book. Other readers might ask who the *theorists* are. Still others might wonder if

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this counts as political *theorizing*. I, too, have shared these questions about my own scholarship. I have often described my scholarship as theoretically informed empirical research. However, I struggled to call my research empirically grounded normative theory. It has taken me time to *write* and *speak* these words. I often thought to myself "Who am I to *theorize* about anything?" At times, I engaged in a kind self-censorship and silencing by questioning my own expertise, training, and competence in the canon of political theory—a canon that often seemed to center the Western world, whiteness, and men (Gordon, 2014; Collins, 2019; Bierria, 2020). At other times, I internalized external forms of silencing that deemed me too biased to be a legitimate empirical scholar and too particularistic to be engaged in the process of theorizing (Smith, 2012; Ackerly, 2018; Collins, 2019). "As a graduate student, I was often told: 'What I am doing isn't political science; you won't finish the PhD; you won't get an academic job'" (Behl, 2019a, p. 117). Why do I engage in a kind of epistemic self-censorship when it comes to theory and theorizing? Why isn't the space of theory available to all of us to claim? Why are some of us silenced within the process of theorizing? Who has the power to theorize?

In other writings, I recount how my epistemological and methodological choices interact with my embodied positionality to render me illegitimate and to make me more vulnerable to violence as a student, scholar, and teacher (Behl, 2017, 2019b, 2020). In this essay, I highlight the intellectual histories that make my scholarship possible—histories that are attentive to expanded definitions of the political within and beyond the Western world and to the internal diversity of often taken-for-granted categories of analysis. Next, I show how these intellectual histories open up the space for *Gendered Citizenship* by briefly outlining the main concepts of the book and their significance for political science. In this section, I also respond to the contributors to this symposium. I am grateful to Dipali Anumol, Lisa Beard, and Denise Walsh for their thoughtful and careful commentaries.

Who Has the Power to Theorize?

Often theory is understood as an abstract, intellectual pursuit—something done in isolation without empirical data and something done by individual thinkers, often white, male thinkers (Collins, 2019, p. 13; Hawkesworth, 2019, p. 11; Bierria, 2020, p. 301). How do we challenge narrow understandings of what counts as theories, theorists, and theorizing? One way forward is through the subfield of comparative political theory, which expands understandings of "the political" while also being attentive to the Western/non-Western binary (Sakurai & Tampio, 2021, p. 2; Freeden, 2021, p. 3).

Michael Freeden identifies two distinct features of comparative political thought—the first is "an elaboration of the political, so as to comprehend its myriad forms… [and the second is] the plural diversity…of cultures whose significance has been particularly underrated to date in political and philosophical studies" (2021, p. 4). Christine Keating (2007) argues that "One of the strengths…of comparative political theory…is its challenge to institutional structures and modes of theorizing that exclude or marginalize consideration of non-Western political thought." She finds that these exclusions overlook "transformative work being done to recast democracy on more egalitarian and inclusive terms in postcolonial polities" (Keating, 2007, p. 132). Similarly, Jane Gordon (2014) argues that "within the US academy no new development has created more disciplinary space for the project of creolizing political theory than comparative political theorizing." She explains that comparative political theory, which is informed by hermeneutics and postcolonial thought, seeks to expand political theory to include human dilemmas, not simply Western ones (Gordon, 2014, pp. 203–4).

However, there are limitations to comparative political theory. Gordon points out that the "conceptual apparatus of 'comparative political thinking,'…is in some cases misleading and, in others…even a misnomer" (2014, p. 205). For her, "much of the work going on within this rubric is not comparative at all" (Gordon, 2014, pp. 205–6). What comparative political theory often overlooks is the internal diversity of seemingly fixed and distinct categories such as "Chinese" or "Indian" (Gordon, 2014, pp. 7–8).

The intellectual history that I draw from, including feminist, intersectional, interpretive, and decolonial scholars, "find[s] that the meaning of key concepts, the fullness of history, and the understandings of power dynamics have become emaciated because they were not informed by the lived experience of those outside of their discipline's rehearsed categories" (Ackerly, 2018, p. 144). In response, Brooke Ackerly calls for a grounded normative theorizing that "is a dynamic and multidimensional process of theorizing through engagement with struggle" (2018, p. 145). Jane Gordon calls for a creolizing of political theory to reflect "actual human practices and the more adequate instantiations of political legitimacy that might emerge from them" (2014, p. 2).

I, like so many others, who draw from these intellectual histories, center lived experience in my understanding of normative political theory. As Ackerly explains "'experience-based' or 'grounded' normative theory…use[s] a methodological approach to normative theorizing in which the insights of those whose lives are affected by a normative problem…are brought to bear as textual resources for addressing that problem" (2018, p. 13). And yet, these ways of knowing are largely seen as suspect in political science.

My experience of both self-censorship and being actively silenced is not unique. Unfortunately, epistemic violence, oppression, and injustice are the norm for many of us who find ourselves at the margins of academia due to our epistemological and methodological choices and our embodied positionalities. Linda Smith explains: “Having been immersed in the Western academy which claims theory as thoroughly Western…indigenous voices have been overwhelmingly silenced. The act, let alone the art and science, of theorizing our own existence and realities is not something which many indigenous people assume is possible” (2012, p. 72). Similarly, Zenzele Isoke describes, “Against all odds, the black intellectual manages to overcome an ‘officially imposed silence’; that ironically was drilled into her by her own assimilation into the political culture of the ‘professional discourser’” (2018, p. 159). She finds that the language of professional discourser “forces us to pound our ideas into Cartesian formulations of objectivity, and to conceal our deepest intellectual impetus behind other people’s words and other people’s ideas” (Isoke, 2018, p. 163). Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that “many have traditions of theorizing, yet the forms their theorizing takes are varied and may not be recognizable as theory” (2019, p. 146).

What if we understood theorizing as explanation and meaning-making processes? What if we acknowledged that the work of theorizing occurs not only in universities, but also in our families, religious spaces, and communities? What if we were to choose alternative intellectual histories to better understand theory, ones that recognize that theorizing is not just for the elite? What if we were to elevate a kind of thinking that so often gets labeled as “studies” but not “theories,” such as intersectionality studies, decolonial studies, and critical race studies? These alternative intellectual histories open up the space from which to challenge underlying assumptions about who is considered a theorist, what it means to theorize, and where the labor of theorizing occurs (Collins, 2019, p. 10; Bierria, 2020, p. 301).

Leanne Simpson (2014) describes theory as “explanation of a phenomenon…generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people.” For her, theory isn’t simply an intellectual exercise; rather, it is a process (kinetic, spiritual, and emotional process) for meaning making at the level of the individual, family, and community. Most importantly, she argues that theory “isn’t just for academics; it’s for everyone” (Simpson, 2014, p. 7). Similarly, Alisa Bierria (2020) challenges the assumption in philosophy that only “those who receive sustained academic training in philosophy can count as people ‘doing’ legitimate philosophy.” For her, such narrow understandings of philosophy and philosopher do not reflect the “reality of philosophy as a common part of human

experience, and it obscures critical philosophical production happening outside of…academic and other professional contexts" (Bierria, 2020, p. 307). Likewise, Collins argues that "Educated academics are not the only ones who produce critical social theory, but they are the ones who are more likely to claim it and benefit from it" (2019, p. 5).

What these scholars share is a commitment to embracing embodied lived experience as a key dimension of theorizing—be it "Nishnaabeg intelligence" (Simpson, 2014), "grassroots philosophy" (Bierria, 2020) or "intersectionality as critical social theory" (Collins, 2019). And yet, it is precisely this focus on embodied lived experience that is devalued in Western political theory: this way of knowing isn't understood as theorizing (Collins, 2019, p. 12). For some scholars, non-normative approaches to theorizing intersect with their non-normative bodies and identities, which means that deviating from the norms can be painful and dangerous (Bierria, 2020, p. 310). But it can also open up the possibility to not only "'dream alternative realities' but to create them, on the ground in the physical world, in spite of being occupied" (Simpson, 2014, p. 8).

In the next section, I will explain how *Gendered Citizenship* not only draws from the scholarship discussed above, but also contributes to it. I will outline some of the key concepts, arguments, and contributions of the book while engaging with the contributors to this symposium.

Bridging Empirical and Theoretical Approaches

Gendered Citizenship examines the contradictory nature of Indian democracy by weaving together an analysis of the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh with ethnographic data with members of the Sikh community. The book asks, "why do we find pervasive gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence in India when the Indian constitution builds an inclusive democracy committed to gender and caste equality?" (Behl, 2019a, p. 2) To make sense of this question, I dwell in the gap between the abstract *promise* of equal citizenship enshrined in the Indian constitution, and the *empirical realities* of gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence in democratic India. I focus on the Sikh community because, like Indian democracy at large, it too is founded on gender and caste equality that is not fully realized in practice. Again, I dwell in the gaps between the religious *promise* of gender equality and Sikh women's complicated and contradictory *lived experience* of citizenship. This, in turn, enables me to center Sikh women's embodied lived experience in the theorizing

process as I make sense of uneven and unequal experiences of citizenship in democratic India.

To do this work, the book introduces a general theoretical and methodological framework—situated citizenship—to understand the contradictory nature of liberal democracy in any context and then applies this framework to understand uneven experiences of Indian democracy (Behl, 2019a, pp. 3–4). As a theoretical approach, situated citizenship calls for an understanding of citizenship as both legal status *and* embodied social relation (Behl, 2019a, p. 3). By doing so, situated citizenship requires an analysis to citizens' access to civil, political, and social rights while being attentive to mediating forces that limit citizens' standing as members and participants in their communities (Behl, 2019a, p. 4). "As a methodological approach, situated citizenship demands an attentiveness to embodied lived experience, meaning-making processes, and self-reflexivity" (Behl, 2019a, p. 17). It expands existing methods of studying citizenship to include interpretive approaches. Lastly, it requires that as researchers we be situated within local contexts to understand citizenship.

Situated citizenship is significant because it maps the contradictions between law and lived experience in liberal democracies while locating potential sources to challenge these contradictions. First, situated citizenship is open to the observation that the categories and spaces in which citizenship can be practiced are continually being expanded and contested in sometimes unusual places and unexpected ways. Second, it holds the tension between abstract normative theory and lived experience at the center of any analysis. This opens up the possibility of creating new forms of knowledge that can, in turn, force a rethinking of taken-for-granted concepts. Third, it relies on interpretive research design and methodology to open up the possibility of collecting new kinds of empirical data. These new forms of data can potentially make visible overlooked forms of political life (Behl, 2019a, p. 24).

By centering an analysis of embodied lived reality, situated citizenship highlights how citizens understand and experience the promises of formal equality while being attentive to the mechanisms by which these contradictions are incorporated into daily life in multiple domains from the intimacy of the home to civil society, religious community, and the institutions of government. By shedding light on these often-overlooked contradictions, I account for a puzzling experience in liberal democracies worldwide: Why is legal equality insufficient for achieving democratic equality? The book provides both theoretical and empirical answers to this question while developing a novel theoretical and methodological tool, situated citizenship, which others might use to study democratic contradictions in other parts of the world and among other marginalized groups.

Each chapter explores the potential for liberatory politics across different sites, including the state and law, civil society, religious community, and home. This exploration culminates with an examination of Sikh women's participation in devotional organizations, Sukhmani Seva Societies, to show how situated citizenship can expand the very meaning of citizenship. I demonstrate how situated citizenship can moves us beyond (1) traditional approaches to citizenship that center abstract formal equality, (2) narrow definitions of the political focused on state and government, and (3) Western-centric notions of citizenship, which assume that strong religious ties are antithetical to modern citizenship (Behl, 2019a, pp. 24–26).

Situated citizenship, as a theory and methodology, can lead to unexpected findings. By centering the lived experience of Indian women, I demonstrate how the state and formal, legal equality can operate in undemocratic and exclusionary ways (Behl, 2019a, p. 5). I also show how seemingly undemocratic groups like religious communities can be a surprising resource from which to create more egalitarian gender relations (Behl, 2019a, p. 112). Through a situated analysis of citizenship, the book also maps "how similar gendered norms…operate in state-citizen relations, in interpersonal relations, in religious relations, and in kinship relations to limit women's inclusion and participation, to police their behavior and bodies, and to determine their worth and standing" (Behl, 2019a, p. 5).

The scholarly task, for me, is to use empirical data to question and rethink existing categories of analysis in political science (Behl, 2019a, p. 52). For example, in the book, I "take the category of woman, differentiated based on religion, caste, class, nation, and sexuality, as the subject of empirical study" (Behl, 2019a, p. 52). I do not assume that "the category of woman exists a priori, shares a common interest and identity, and can be used as part of our analytic toolkit" (Behl, 2019a, p. 52). Rather I remain open to differences within this category while also explaining how, when, and why some women come together across differences to forge contingent solidarities and coalitions.

Lisa Beard (This Issue) finds that through an "interpretivist" and "feminist and critical theoretical approach" *Gendered Citizenship* brings together "empirical and theoretical approaches in a field in which they have so often been divorced." It is through this bridging of empirical and grounded theory that I trouble the boundaries of some of the most essential concepts in political science.

The ethnographic research that informs the book was carried out over multiple trips to Punjab, India, between 2000 and 2010, during which time I engaged in extended participant observation, sustained immersion, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Behl, 2019a, p. 30). This resulted in cogenerated

data on gender roles, gender norms, and gendered violence. Through an interpretive research design, the book explores a continuum of gendered violence. "At one end of the spectrum is violent sexual assault and rape. At the other end of the continuum are gendered norms and informal rules that determine who has access to food, healthcare, education, inheritance, and property rights" (Behl, 2019a, p. 9). I call attention to the similar logics at play across the entirety of this continuum (Behl, 2019a, p. 115). I do so through a feminist ethic of care that fuses "emotions and thoughts" (Anumol, This Issue).

As Denise Walsh (This Issue) says, I bring "violence that occurs in private life into political science." Many political scientists who study gender-based violence analyze the causes of sexual assault during war and overlook the everyday nature of violence in nominally inclusive democracies (Walsh, This Issue). This, in turn, ignores how women's lives are potentially at fatal risk in both the private and public spheres.

Through a close reading of interview responses and ethnographic data, I uncover forms of democratic action that are often overlooked. I find that some Sikh women overcome contradictory and conflicting gendered norms to build contingent coalitions. These women "envision and enact more egalitarian interpersonal and community relations through their devotional practices, which understand gender equality and minority rights as coexisting and human and divine agency as interdependent" (Behl, 2019a, p. 14). These women gain access to public spaces, build solidarities across differences, and create more egalitarian relations. The Sukhmani Seva societies founded and run by women provide civic and public services, medical services, infrastructure improvements, and social assistance.

I read these devotional acts as citizenship acts because these women are entering civic and associational life, they are exercising their freedom of association and travel, they are placing women in a position of honor at the center of devotional life, and they are opening up the possibility of significant transformation of gender norms and roles (Behl, 2019a, p. 104). These citizenship acts open up the possibility of creating more egalitarian ways of relating in liberal democracies even in the face of gendered discrimination, exclusion, and violence. They also provide insights into the possibility of re-imagining the democratic potential of women's religious agency in liberal democracies by understanding religiosity not as an obstacle to citizenship but rather as a way of enacting it (Behl, 2019a, p. 88).

Denise Walsh (This Issue) suggests that we treat these devotional acts, not as citizenship acts, but as liminal acts because she is not convinced that "these societies are exemplars of democratic political interaction." I am open to the idea that these devotional acts might be a kind of pre-figurative politics

occurring within liminal spaces. I am open to new categories of analysis as they relate to the political life of non-Western, nonsecular women. However, I insist that as scholars we study the devotional practices and organizations of devout women because they have the capacity to transform (and reinforce) informal institutions, rules, and norms, as we see with Sikh women in Punjab. I call on scholars to remain open to the possibility that secular mechanisms designed for inclusion can exclude while forms of devotion assumed to be undemocratic can be inclusionary (Behl, 2019a, p. 116).

Conclusion

I want to return to the question of who has the power to theorize. One way to answer this question is by expanding the very meaning of theorizing to include explanation and meaning making that occurs within and beyond the discipline of political science. By doing so, we can recognize that the analysis of co-generated data, the process of contextual meaning making, and the relational embodied practices within the fieldwork, "deskwork," and "textwork" are a kind of theorizing (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 101). By centering embodied lived experience, such approaches can bridge multiple divides, including empirical and theoretical, emotional and rational, and secular and religious divides. Such approaches may also open up the possibility of theorizing with care in the research process.

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