Review Symposium Article

Roundtable 3 – State-society relations and republican ideology

The study of gender politics in France

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The study of state-society relations and republican ideology really gets to the heart of French exceptionalism because it addresses the notion of the state: the French state as a *dirigiste* state and the way in which state-ideology and policies and political elites in general have promoted this notion of republican universalism. It also gets to the heart of French exceptionalism in terms of the analytical use of exceptionalism. Of course, on the one hand, there is a version of French universalism that came out of the French Revolution: how it promoted the state – a strong state – how individual identities were not important, how interest groups were bad and how everyone needed to look at France as a *cas à part*. However, when this hypothesis is put to the test, we find that the state is not so different: maybe it is not so *étatiste*, maybe it is not so *dirigiste* and maybe other countries have universalist aspirations.

I wanted to address this issue in terms of my own research area. I wanted to look at the problem of universalism as an important variable, as a driving force in gender politics. When considering gender politics in France (and the same is also true up to a certain point with ethnic politics), when issues relating to women's participation, women's movements and the sex distribution of power or gender roles are considered, republican universalism is a major explanatory factor in understanding the low level of women's representation, the poor performance in feminist policies outcomes. I have written about symbolic reforms in France (Mazur, 1995). This is a concept that has been developed by both non-French and French people who work on gender; I call it gender-biased universalism, which is that, on the one hand, there is a rhetoric about equality (there cannot be individual groups and gender differences) but, on the other hand, the state is extremely gendered. There is a social policy that is based on the notion that women are going to work part-time or stay at home and that men are going to be the breadwinners. In fact, this very gendered

rhetoric that is hidden in universalism can be seen in many different policy areas. In studies of French public policy and women's representation (Baudino, 2005; Lépinard, 2007; Bérén, 2009), it is clear that this is an obstacle to achieving gender equality or more performing policies. However, when this gender-biased universalism is placed in a comparative perspective – that is when France is included in a cross-national study – it is a different story. It is an important variable, but actually France is not so different. I am going to talk very briefly about some of the cross-national works that I have been involved with. I am then going to take a brief moment to talk about the state of the field.

I co-direct a project on women's policies agencies in 17 countries, the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS), which looks at the presence of state feminism, meaning whether women's movements are partnering with government offices for women to promote more women-friendly policy outcomes that are both representing women substantively and descriptively (libarts.wsu.edu/polisci/rngs and McBride and Mazur, forthcoming). In this study, measures of women's movements, and women's movements change were developed; we looked at how women policy agency activities affected debates on gender issues (actually in five different policy areas in the 17 countries) and we did a lot of thinking about cross-national measurement.

The first thing that we found was that when we went to measure the women's movement, we went totally against this notion that France women's movements are anti-state and do not play the game, which is a common notion of women's movements. It actually goes back to periodization; we are looking at the long run, starting in 1970 and going through to 2001. We find that the French feminist movement has had great mobilization periods (in the 1960s and 1970s) and we see a rising institutionalization. This is not as different as people have identified. We also see the same thing in terms of policy outcomes. In the literature, French feminist policy is said to be merely symbolic and that women's agencies are only 'window-dressing'. Again we find that this is not always the case.

It is true that France has more symbolic reform than some countries, but it is more complex. Actually, what the work on gender policy in a comparative perspective has shown is that rather than country patterns there are differences across sectors. For instance, in our studies, we see that, for the work on family issues, there is a certain pattern across many different countries, whereas in sexual violence areas there is a quite different pattern across countries. In a special issue of *Comparative European Politics* that looks at feminist policies across a variety of countries (Mazur and Pollack, 2009) we demonstrate this tendency towards sectoral differentiation as opposed to nation-state variations. In a special issue on gender politics in *Revue Française de Science Politique*

(Boussaguet and et Jacquot, 2009) we use policy case studies and again find this sectoral variation – in certain sectors there has been feminist policy success but in other sectors there has not). Overall, this work challenges the notion of ‘families of nations’ with Southern European countries exhibiting a certain kind of pattern and Anglo-American countries with another kind of pattern. We find that sectoral dynamics are far more significant than these regional historical pattern variables. So what does this do to universalism? When talking about the universalism of the French state, it is important not to overgeneralize. The important contribution of this work is that the universalism of the French state is more complicated than it seems and that French republican universalism should not be discussed in such a monolithic manner.

What is going on in terms of gender research today? Gender-biased universalism is still extremely important. There are many more people working systematically on this issue in France than before. Previously, Mariette Sineau and Jeannine Mossuz-Lavau were the only people working on this in France and they were focusing on elections and participation. Now, there are at least eight French people working on gender issues. Four out of six dissertations in political science last year in France were on gender. There are people such as Anne Revillard working on state feminism, Laure Bereni looking at the women’s movement not just at the national level but also at the sub-national level. Eléonore Lépinard came out with a book on *parité* and Claudie Baudino on the feminization of names. There is Sophie Jacquot, who is working on gender mainstreaming (and the EU is extremely important in this gender policy area). There are people outside France who are bringing France into a comparative perspective. Kimberly Morgan has done a lot of work on reproductive policy. Katherine Oppello and Rainbow Murray have been doing a lot of things on parties and elections. And these are by no means all of the people working on gender and politics in France.

Overall, there is a great deal of development of the study of gender politics in a systematic fashion, but there is much more to do there. Of course, there are the usual issues of being plugged into international projects. For example, France is rarely included in gender and EU projects. In a paper for the special issue of *Comparative European Politics*, I looked at nine international studies on gender policy and there is a French academic on only one. So, there is a new generation, but at the same time France needs to be represented more in these studies. That said, there is a real sea change. The new scholars speak English; they are in international networks; and they are using international literature. This is particularly important in France because for so long republican universalism was used as a way to not study gender. We see this new generation of people who are much more transversal, and Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Mariette Sineau thankfully no longer have to see every single person working on gender and politics in France!

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