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The Mediated Communication of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Politics: from equality of representation to the re-emergence of the masculine

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Introduction

This Special Issue arrives at a time of contradiction and challenge in the study of gender and politics. Progressive politics has begun to internalise the drive for equality of representation, with political institutions such as the Nordic states and devolved parliaments of Wales and Scotland increasing the proportions of women elected to office (Mackay and McAllister 2012). Yet, throughout political life, women still confront variations of the dilemma between the exercise of power and conventions of femininity commonly referred to as the "double bind" (Hall Jamieson 1995; Campus 2013). In what Parry-Giles (2018: 315) has recently articulated as the "power paradox", women are encouraged to pursue political office, but are routinely demeaned and treated with suspicion when they meet with success. Added to this is the rise of a new populism, laced with that toxic masculinity identified by some of our contributors below, where gendered abuse has become a tactical resource in a grotesque lexicon of "authentic" expression.

The domestic dilemma: distracted women and new men

One of the characteristics of this double bind has been the evocation of the domestic hinterland as simultaneous source of experience and evidence of neglect. In June 2018, New Zealand Premier Jacinda Ardern gave birth to her daughter Neve, after becoming the first elected world leader to take maternity leave. Two weeks later, from her sofa at home with the infant Neve in her arms, Arden announced the introduction of sweeping reforms for families in New Zealand. While not New Zealand's first female premier, Arden spent the first year of her term in office cultivating a softer, more compassionate brand of politics.

Initially, this was framed through her 'new mother' status, but in March 2019 also produced what was broadly seen as an appropriate and sympathetic response to the massacre of 50 mosque-worshippers in Christchurch.

However, in the "no win" context of the double bind (Hall Jamieson 1995), the combination of compassionate politics and maternal duty and experience embodied by Arden meets with hostility. In the online comments attached to the generally positive report of Neve's birth in the UK *Daily Mail*, for example, several present motherhood and political leadership as incompatible. Citing the demands of parenthood, one comment ran "Let a man do the job or any woman who will devote her energy to the task". Implicit here are gendered assumptions about the ideal political leader, presenting the male politician as focused and tough, set against their sympathetic and caring – but less hardy – female counterpart (Lovenduski 2005). In this way, women are accorded with stereotypically-gendered characteristics that are at odds with the inherently male qualities assumed to accord with robust political leadership.

Adern's premiership occurred at a time when there were other female leaders in positions of political power. This was markedly the case in Europe where Angela Merkel became German Chancellor in 2005, Nicola Sturgeon became Scottish First Minister in 2014, and Theresa May UK Prime Minister in 2016. In the United States too, Hilary Clinton narrowly lost the 2016 Presidential election, while carrying the popular vote. All of these women, however, have been subject to extensive reporting on their gendered performances, with particular attention paid to their clothing, hair and demeanour (Higgins and McKay 2016; Aaldering and Van Der Pas 2018). Like the comments directed at new mother Ardern, these successful and competent women have been framed as unsuited to the job by virtue of their gender. As such, even as we mark 100 years since the first women achieved the vote in the UK (some 15 years after this was achieved in New Zealand), women can still be seen as intruders in the political firmament.

This increased appreciation of the role of women in politics also offers a lens through which to survey how the representation of male politicians has also changed in the last 30 years. Tony Blair's election to be British prime minister in 1997 saw a new generation of young

male politicians using their fatherhood status for political gain. Whilst being "one of the people" is not new (see Langer 2011; Street 2004), in Blair this is represented as the hands-on dad. This is typified by his appearance in *Parent* magazine in 1996, illustrated with a casual shot at his home desk, surrounded by photos of his young family and featuring the strapline: 'Being a dad is harder than being a politician'. Even before election to office a year later, Blair presented the progressive embodiment of New Labour and the new man (Smith 2008). Throughout his time in office, Blair referenced his children and family life, and a central policy of the first New Labour government was the introduction of paternity leave in 1998. Like Jacinda Ardern 20 years later, Blair was seen to be engaging with hands-on parenting while promoting relevant policies in the wider community. So accustomed had the public become to seeing male political leaders in a domestic role that both Blair successors Labour PM Gordon Brown and subsequent Conservative PM David Cameron incorporated their young families into their mediated personas (see Smith 2008). In the US, President Barack Obama, extended this "new man" appeal, even inviting candid "domestic" images to be taken on his campaign trail (Smith 2008; Smith 2015).

The return of the masculine, and this time it's angry

We began by acknowledging what developments there have been, and have extended this into a reframing of how male politicians can be represented. However, this centralist liberalism in Western politics masked an underlying dissatisfaction that gender equality had gone "too far", and that the balance of patriarchal power had shifted in light of "political correctness". The far right's view of political correctness had long been the subject of debate. Dunant's *The War of Words* (1994) offered essays on how liberalism was coming under attack. This backlash against liberalism existed largely at the level of superficial debates about political correctness, and as Hall (1994, 173) comments, reports of "political correctness gone mad" proved difficult to counter because "there was just enough truth in the stories in a few instances to sustain media amplification". Since the 1980s, political correctness has been part of a political struggle against political dominance by liberal ideals, and has become part of the armoury of the right wing of politics. This is apparent in the offensive treatment of female politicians in the media, coupled with the rise of social media where access to public figures is less mediated through diligent secretaries and aides. As

with the below-the-line comments relating to Ardern mentioned previously, online threats made against women overwhelmingly focus on their gender rather than their actions (Smith 2018), with threats of rape and other forms of physical violence appearing alongside comments from those desiring a return to traditional gender norms where women exclusively inhabited the domestic domain.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, there has been a resurgence of dissatisfaction with liberal centrism from both left and right, with the post-crisis austerity policies of various governments hitting those on the lowest incomes hardest. The backlash to this is partly to blame for the rise in populism across western democracies, particularly in those countries that were hardest hit by the financial crisis (see Higgins 2019). The fear of poverty through unemployment or low wages and lower standards of living produced fertile ground on which to develop fear and antipathy towards the "other" (Wodak 2015). These "others" most visibly were seen to be immigrants, arriving in increasing numbers from the Middle East as a result of the civil wars that flared up at the same time as the West was grappling with austerity. The rhetoric of "bogus asylum seekers" that had arisen in the early part of the century slipped too easily into a portrayal of desperate people as being a burden on already over-stretched resources.

Even as this revitalised form of racism gained political favour, it was clearly set against the softer, more compassionate liberal views that had dominated over the recent decades: muscular macho populism over a style of political engagement that had come to discredited as weak and feminised. This fight against political correctness required strong male figures, who emerged armed with military metaphors and macho posturing. In this setting, discursive resources are available to present female politicians as even less suitable for public office. Even a long-standing leader like Angela Merkel found it hard to compete with the populist anti-immigration rhetoric, particularly after she actively welcomed Germany's borders to Syrian refugees in 2014-15. Indeed, subsequent instances of racial unrest in Germany were used by opponents to attack Merkel's empathy as remote and feeble.

However, participatory media enables some degree of response. Globally, social media has been used by activists to raise awareness of gender inequality issues, and most famously

through the #MeToo campaign, to draw attention to sexual assaults that had otherwise gone unnoticed (Boyle 2019). The #MeToo campaign actually started in 2006 when Tarana Burke used this phrase to demand intersectional support and recognition for young women of colour who had experienced sexual abuse, as well as it being a statement of solidarity. In 2015, Italian model Ambra Gutierrez wrote a blog posting that accused film mogul Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault. Weinstein was questioned by New York police, and the media's response was largely to dismiss Gutierrez as an unreliable witness who was essentially an opportunist. However, two years later in October 2017 actor Alyssa Milano wrote about her own experience of sexual assault in the film industry and used the hashtag #MeToo on social media to claim a connection with other women who had also started to publically talk about their own experiences. Milano's first tweet was made around noon on 15 October 2017, and within 24 hours it had been used 500,000 times on Twitter (France 2017) and referred to in 12 million Facebook posts. High profile Hollywood stars such as Jennifer Lawrence, Uma Thurman and Gwyneth Paltrow all joined in, and soon the hashtag became associated with just one man: Harvey Weinstein (Boyle 2019). However, it was not just celebrities who spoke out: the unheard stories of sexual predators in politics also came to light. For example, in the UK, in October and November 2017, initially led by junior researchers who shared their stories of sexual assaults by various male politicians. Female journalist Jane Merrick and Kate Maltby made allegations of assaults by the then UK Defence Secretary, David Fallon, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Damian Green. Both men resigned from Theresa May's government, and Merrick and Maltby both reported that they had felt emboldened to speak out because of the #MeToo campaign.

It is not just in British politics that the #MeToo campaign has shed light on abuses of power, although some examples demonstrate the resilience of aggressive masculinity. As Smith and Higgins (2020) show, claims of sexual exploitation and assaults have dogged Donald Trump both before and during his presidency. However, in Trump's case, when caught on tape boasting of such behaviour, he dismissed it as "locker-room talk", and refused to engage in any further debate. However, in the US legislature, one immediate effect of the #MeToo campaign has been the introduction of the "Me Too Act" which aims to make it easier for complainants to report sexually inappropriate behaviour such as that claimed by Trump. Many of the articles in this special issue explore the rise of a form of populism

associated with hypermasculinity and the rejection of progressive equality issues. Yet, the #MeToo campaign does offer some hope for change, as what passed for social norms of behaviour is defied. These challenges and opportunities are matters that many of the articles in this special edition explore.

Articles in this issue

The articles in the Special Issue therefore situate their interventions within this dynamic of forward-thinking against regressive political action. They range in national context, from the United States, to Greece, the UK and Scotland. The papers are also united in seeing the relationship between political language and gender as drawing upon norms and conventions that are in state of flux, invoking political, historical and domestic discourses that can be used tactically, and drawing upon gendered categories and associations that may be subject to conceptual challenge as well as environmental change.

In terms of the progressive shifts towards a more feminised politics, Smith uses the example of former UK Prime Minister David Cameron to analyse the development of the "new man", showing it to be a tactical appropriation of feminised political traits, as part of the representation of a broader political strategy. In their article "A stairhead rammy", McKay looks at the media treatment of women political leaders in televised debates in Scotland, and emphasises the residual, underlying expectation of feminine decorousness, showing how the breach of these standards in the heat of political discussion are easily cast as a descent into uncontrolled, feminised squabbling.

Both of the articles focussing on the social media performance of US President Donald Trump see Trump as expressing a retrograde political outlook, but take slightly different perspectives on the gendered character of Trump's discourse. In "Trumping Twitter", Scotto di Carlo analyses the portrayal of women on Trump's personal Twitter feed, and his promotion of a "male-centric" attitude towards political legitimacy. Trump is thereby complicit in the normalisation of the continued objectification of women in public discourse. In partial contrast, McDonnell compares the Twitter performances of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and finds that Clinton's tweets combined masculine-style statements and

directives, mitigated by the inclusion of cooperative items, whereas Trump partly confounds expectations of a masculine style based upon directives in favour of emotional forms based on the frequent use of exclamations. Trump's performance of spontaneity produces a new, frenzied type of masculinity.

These regressive political discourses pervade Europe as well as the United States. In "Political masculinities and Brexit", Higgins argues that particular forms of masculine performance dominated discussions over the management of the UK's exit from the European Union (Brexit). Prominent in the political discourses in support of a "strong Brexit" were hypermasculine associations between political strategy and the language of war, especially a populist reimagining of World War II. Keil also emphasises the articulation between masculinity and political populism, with a discussion of political discourse in Germany. In ways that find parallels with work on populism across the collection, Keil uncovers a dangerous association between the demonstration of "manliness" and a politics of aggressive xenophobia.

Yet, Cameron and Shaw's "Constructing women's different voices" questions the orthodox gender division in speech styles, while at the same time drawing our attention to the homogeneity of women as a gendered group, in contrast to the individualised power accorded to men.

In different ways, therefore, a number of the articles call into question the sustainability of our established expectations of gendered language, including both media actors and politicians in the scope of their analysis. Clayman, Heritage and Hill look at the enactment of gender amongst media professionals themselves, finding the adversarial mode of questioning internalised by women journalists, in a manner that foregrounds the agency of individual media participants in the production of political language. It is also the tactical use of adversarial language, but this time by the political right, that Patrona confronts in their study of the results of the mediation and recontextualisation of extreme and "scandalous" political talk by Greek media. In "You are not normal, you are against nature", Patrona finds that the coverage of controversial interventions on same-sex fostering serves

to heighten the visibility or and give credence what would otherwise be sanctionable and illiberal political viewpoints.

It will already be apparent that the place of gender in the study of the language of politics is contestable, and in a constant state of development. However, it should also be apparent that research into the relationship between language and gender has much to reveal in terms of the aspirations, attitudes and dangers that characterise contemporary political culture. It is the activities across this complex field, and the development of our understanding of language to the gender relations therein, that this Special Issue dedicates itself.

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