

The queerness of political science: challenging and destabilizing the discipline's boundaries

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Key perspectives and contributions – including those from queer scholars – are, in effect, written out of the discipline of political science, argues [Nicola Smith](#). Far from being the highly multifaceted and inclusive field that it purports itself to be, political science is presenting itself in ways that marginalise the very work that is being treated as central in other social science disciplines.



Last week I turned on Radio 4 and listened to a discussion on the [Today](#) programme about child poverty, with [nearly one third of children reported to be living in poverty in the UK](#). Interviewed on the programme was [Samantha Callan](#), associate director at the Centre for Social Justice and former adviser on family policy to David Cameron. I was not surprised to hear one of Callan's chief explanations for child poverty: that it is a result of 'family breakdown'. This narrative is one that I have heard time and time before, for [appeals to 'the family'](#) are a defining feature of David Cameron's political discourse.

It is through the language of the family that Cameron articulates both his vision for Britain's economic and social recovery and, conversely, his assessment of the causes of Britain's economic and social decline. It is the 'hard-working family' that represents 'the future' for Britain and the 'troubled family' that threatens such a future – as Cameron [puts it](#): "if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start".

Yet – just as I am struck by how consistently such narratives are being articulated by Cameron and his representatives – I am also struck by how powerful, how successful, they have been. They are discourses that are used in a whole variety of contexts, including in everyday contexts, so much so that they have become naturalized and normalized over time.

I am struck by how part of their power lies not in their visibility but in their invisibility – in their repetition, so often and so widespread, that they begin to erase themselves from view. And this brings me to the queerness of political science. For the other thing to strike me about Cameron's discourses surrounding the family is precisely how little attention they have received in the vast, diverse and ever-growing political science scholarship on economic and social crisis.

There is in fact a rich and long-standing literature from [feminist](#) and [queer](#) scholars that highlights how the supposedly 'private' and domestic realm of the family is not separable from, but rather is deeply implicated in, the reproduction of political and economic power relations. This scholarship interrogates how the family is not only deeply political but is also a central site upon which the structures and hierarchies of global capitalism are produced.

For feminist and queer scholars, then, we cannot bracket off the 'personal' sphere from questions of political, economic and social justice but rather need to (re)position this sphere as central to the study of politics. Yet, as feminist and queer scholars also note, matters surrounding intimacy and the family are systematically erased as 'political' matters and this is not least evident in the field of political science.

The above discussion is meant primarily as an illustration of a broader issue that, as [Donna Lee](#) and I argue in a recent article, bedevils political science. In our piece, entitled '[What's queer about political science?](#)', we contend that the construction of boundaries between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the discipline is part of the way in which political science constructs itself as a discipline. We suggest that this not only results in silences and exclusions surrounding gender, sexuality, intimacy, the family, and the body but that these silences and exclusions do important

work for, as [Roxanne Doty](#) writes, ‘the margins ... are themselves constitutive of the centre’.

We focus in the article on queer scholarship but could (and should) also have pointed to the systematic marginalisation of other traditions including postcolonial, critical race, trans, crip and other theories that are all centrally concerned with the critique of embodied power relations. We note that key contemporary textbooks present political science as a fairly heterodox field – including e.g. Marxism, postmodernism, some feminisms – and so a picture is painted to our students of inclusivity. Yet we also suggest that this disguises a continued preoccupation in political science with the state and that, although care is taken to equate politics with power rather than with government, the state is nevertheless positioned as the central (if not the only) site of politics/power.

This means, in turn, that other key perspectives and contributions – including those from queer scholars – are, in effect, written out of the discipline. We suggest that this is neither intentional nor the ‘fault’ of individual authors but that it is nevertheless problematic, for queer and other scholars working both within and outside of political science are busy making hugely important contributions to the study of politics and power and yet this work is often going unrecognised in the field.

Ironically, our research into citation practice in the social sciences, arts and humanities finds that it is precisely work in queer theory that is particularly highly cited outside of political science. We find, for instance, that Judith Butler’s book [Gender Trouble](#) gains more citations than [The Communist Manifesto](#) and that ‘Butler’ is more cited as a standalone search term than is ‘Marx’. This implies that something queer – by which we mean strange – is going on in contemporary political science (or, more accurately, in how political science is being defined as a disciplinary terrain). Far from being the highly multifaceted and inclusive field that it purports itself to be, political science is presenting itself (to its students, at least) in ways that marginalise the very work that is being treated as central in other social science disciplines.

How can this be addressed? Queer theory itself can help. As we write:

“[W]hat queer theory does is to encourage reflection on what it means for something to be ‘political’. What gets to be constituted as ‘political’ and what doesn’t? What gets to become an object of ‘politics’ in academic enquiry and, indeed, public deliberation more broadly? What gets to be studied, discussed, contested, written about, cited, lectured on, and what doesn’t? In short: what’s in and what’s out? More than this, queer theory also insists that what gets to be counted as ‘political’ is itself political-it is a product of the exercise of power, with real material effects. In this sense, queer theory seeks to politicise ‘the political’ itself.”

Yet we would also caution against what [Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash](#) term ‘queer fundamentalism,’ for queer theory opens up questions but resists closure in terms of concrete ‘answers,’ and so is best understood not as a theory that ‘is’ but rather as a theorizing that ‘does’ (a [doing](#), or indeed an ‘[undoing](#)’). But we also want to be clear that there are other traditions aside from queer theory that are centrally concerned with questions of knowledge and power, and political science needs to do justice to these theories and approaches as well. For example, we would now see it as problematic that we mention postcolonial theory only in passing in our own piece – an omission that both reflects and reproduces the neglect of this crucially important work in the discipline more broadly.

Nevertheless, we very much hope that our article will help to open up (rather than to close off) space to critique, challenge and destabilize the disciplinary boundaries of political science. We would love to see a political science emerge where queer, postcolonial, trans, crip and other perspectives are taught as standard to our students; where unequal power relations along axes of gender, sexuality, race, class, dis/ability and territory are not removed from discussions of ‘politics’ and ‘power’; where the ‘private’ and intimate realms of gender, sexuality, the family, and the body are treated as always-already political; and where there is greater reflection on how processes of knowledge production are in themselves reproduction of unequal power relations. Even if we don’t go queer in political science,

to do queer to political science would be a good place to start.

About the Author

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