"Theories don't grow on trees": Contextualizing gender knowledge

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Abstract:

Both *Gender and Power* and *Gender* were written in specific historical circumstances. Each book spoke to the political conditions of its construction in both its explicit argument and its implicit agenda. By looking at what is said and left unsaid in each of Connell's general theoretical statements, I show how their shift in perspective illuminates ongoing issues of theory and historical change. Both, however, were intersectional in ways that the current embrace of intersectionality tends to undervalue. The use of class analysis to inform a sociological understanding of gender socialization in the first book and the attention to national variation and transnational organizing for gender equality politics in the second highlight a more historically specific, politically dynamic and strategic understanding of intersections than is captured in models that focus on gender and race as identity categories. I point to some of the current circumstances and debates about feminist politics as examples of why a more dynamic and reflexive model of intersectionality can be useful for a practical theory of gender transformation.

Gender & Power is a book that profoundly influenced my thinking when it appeared in 1987, one I used regularly in teaching until the shorter volume, *Gender*, came out in 2002 (and a second edition in 2005). I found *Gender* a much easier book to teach from and one that captured the main points of the original, but writing this essay has led me to look more closely at the similarities and differences between the two books. I argue here that each spoke to how gender appeared as a social structure of practice in the particular moment of its publication, and varied importantly in emphasis as a result. As Raewyn Connell recently said, although asked by her publisher to write a second edition of *Gender & Power*, it was really not possible to do that; *Gender* had to be a different book, coming as it did in a different historical moment and speaking to different political and intellectual needs.

I draw my title from Connell's own preface to *Gender & Power* (p. xi): "theories don't grow on trees; theorizing is itself a social practice with a politics." I believe these two books speak to the concerns not only of their historical emergence but to those of the present moment, particularly by how they emphasize the more structural and historical aspects of the now popular concept of intersectionality. In this paper, I trace the more dynamic, political and historically specific understanding of intersectionality back to Connell's formulation of gender in relation to class and its later extension to the dynamics of nationalism in the context of globalization.

In re-reading *Gender & Power* in relation to *Gender,* both books emerged more clearly as historical documents reflecting the politics of the times in which they were written. At a general level of argument, both *Gender & Power* (henceforward, G&P) and *Gender* present gender as a relationship of power and object of struggle that changes over

time, but only indirectly indicate how the historically shifting set of gender arrangements in the decade and a half prior to the publication of each shape their emphases. To say that material conditions of history influenced Connell's theoretical claims does not disparage the claims' continued relevance, but rather highlights the shifting terrain of political struggle that feminists face.

Gender theory doesn't "grow on trees": like all feminist practice, theorizing is a practical politics of "choice, doubt, strategy, planning, error and transformation" (G&P, p.61) that has to be done by situated thinkers, not all of whom are ever called theorists or hold academic positions. Theorizing is also to be understood as a form of embodied action that takes place in particular historical moments; feminist theory is work aimed not only at understanding societies but intervening in them, guided by experience and directing strategic choices with a modesty that acknowledges the doubt and error as well as transformative aspirations. Looking back at past theory and rethinking it in present conditions is an essential element of the reflexive responsibility of feminist theoretical practice.

Bringing history more centrally into the work of feminist theorizing, I argue, also locates political struggles in specific sites and circumstances, emphasizing the variety of conditions in which strategic choices must be made to advance gender equality. These sites and struggles themselves constitute the politics that make intersectionality more than a merely academic exercise and offer insight into practices that can advance gender justice. I argue that the concept of intersectionality is weakened when it is treated primarily as operating at the meso or micro levels of group and identity formations. Drawing on Connell's macro orientation to gender politics as historically grounded and

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continually contested, I present intersectionality as a matter of macro political dynamics (waves) that generate conflict (turbulence) of different sorts in different locations depending both on the history of the site (sediments) and the directions from which the "waves" come when political interventions happen (stones are thrown) from different positions.[1] I use my own social location as a student of gender politics in the United States and European Union (EU) today to illustrate this approach to intersectional analysis in the current historical moment in which neo-liberalism often appears as the preeminent challenge.

The plan of this essay is first to review how *Gender* and *Gender & Power* captured important aspects of the gender politics of their specific moments, then suggest how gender theory responds to feminist practices more broadly to frame intersectionality in different ways. In each section, I emphasize what systems of power and discourse were crucial historically in that period of feminist politics. I conclude by emphasizing the methods of feminist theorizing that characterize excellent practice, including a reflexive understanding of politics in which this work is being done.

Locating *Gender and Power* in History

Gender and Power is revolutionary in the sense of being oriented primarily to overthrowing dominant paradigms and figures of theoretical authority. Its approach is to challenge the assumption of binary and ahistorical gender "roles" based on the emergent practices of the feminist movements that had sprung into action in the late 1960s and

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[1] Thanks to Mieke Verloo for providing the core of this imagery.

early 1970s. In its time, G&P offered a brilliant critique and reconceptualization of many classics of the social sciences from Marx to Freud and Lacan, and from these fragments built a new edifice, a critical theory of gender understood in structural and relational terms. To briefly recapitulate its core argument, gender is a social relation organizing action, a historically variable material framework in which collective consciousness and group coordination as well as individual performances and personalities take on their particular meanings at the micro-level. However, it also defines structure and agency as recursively related, since out of the groups and identities formed by such structuring relations come the political activities that contribute to the making or unmaking of material social inequalities at a macro-level.

The connections between the micro level of bodies, personalities and emotional experience and the macro level of cultures, institutions and societies are what Connell calls "practices," emphasizing their active, reflexive and political nature (p.61). This middle (meso) level of practice is the site where structures –macro level material contradictions and transformations – become visible as situated agents grapple with the situations they face, as they perceive them. As socially embedded agents, both individual and collective actors make choices constrained by their separate and joint histories and enabled and informed by their ethical and political judgments (p.95). These choices are *political*: they arise from power relations, give form to power and generate specific conflicts (or turbulences). Seeing gender theorizing as a political practice is to emphasize its choices and consequences as constituting real social facts.

The gender theory Connell advanced in 1987 was drawn from experiences in challenging the powers of that time, including the intellectuals who provided what

Connell judged to be justifications for inequality's resilience rather than a map for transforming it. G&P was intended to be useful to the women's movement that had emerged over the previous decade and a half, and was struggling to understand the specific opportunities and resistances of that period. In addition to the predictable opposition from gender traditionalists, feminists faced two particular challenges from their "friends." One was the "sex roles" ideology of complementarity and pseudo-equality with which most liberal theorists were still working.[2] The other was the Marxist edifice of theory that defined class as the only fundamental structural contradiction, and this class-based struggle the only source from which true social equality could come.[3] Both liberal and socialist theory informed the social sciences of the 1980s, placing gender relations into the role of being at best a "secondary" consideration. For example, US introductory sociology textbooks in the 1980s presented class as a macro-structural issue, race as a matter of group identities and group conflicts, and gender as a micro-level matter of attitudes and values transmitted in an endless cycle of reproduction of conformity (Ferree and Hall, 1996).

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[2] By liberal, I mean the classic liberalism of Locke and Mill, focused on abstract individuals as making choices, participating democratically in constructing societies and advancing both their own self-development and advancing the good of society by means of their self-interest "properly understood." See discussion of liberal feminism in Ferree and Hess, 2000. Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement (3rd edition).

[3] Feminist critiques in this period of socialist claims to epistemological priority are well exemplified in the collectios edited by Lydia Sargent, Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, South End Press, 1981.

There could be no intersectional feminist theory in sociology if gender, class and race were all to be understood as segregated to specific levels of analysis and all nested within a framework where class alone set the conditions for practical politics. Moreover, the theories of social change which social scientists used in practice gave no recognition to gender transformation as an autonomous politics which could have consequences for other relations such as class, race, nation and sexuality. "Radical" feminism in liberal societies (notably the US and UK) advanced an alternative view of "patriarchy" but based on analysis of women and men as inherently and eternally oppositional categories. Thus, the boldest move that G&P made was to translate the women's movement's self-understanding as a transformative social force into a theory of gender that recognized the movement's independent historical agency without making a claim for its autonomy from other oppressions or movements mobilizing with or against them.

To connect gender with other theories of injustice and social action, a theory of socialization was needed to connect macro injustice to transformative politics. To advance an intersectional view of injustice also called for severing the institutional anchors that tied gender to the institution of family, race to community-level institutions like education, and class to impersonal-seeming macro-models of the formal economy (capital formation, market relations, and national development). *G&P* accomplishes both these tasks by building on Connell's research on educational institutions as sites of active stratification, an intersectional analysis in which gender and sexuality operate with and through social class. In this view, schools do not just transmit advantages or reproduce stereotypes, but are institutions designed to provide material and ideological resources for embedding the self in hierarchical social relations.

This empirical work on education and stratification (Connell et al. 1982, Connell 1985) was part of a larger, global theoretical project, most strongly represented by Raymond Williams (1976) in the UK and Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in France, that treated culture as a structuring force, not a mere superstructure to economics. Such class-critical theorists promoted ethnographic and historical methods as the means of capturing the cultural forces creating class relations in schools (e.g. Willis, 1977) and actively producing meaningful and usable class categories (e.g. Thompson, 1968). This context provided both a theoretical and methodological structure for *G&P* to extend to gender relations. I underline this facet of Connell's work because class is part of the intersectionality of theories of gender that is, as I will later argue, much in need of recuperation in the present moment.

The intersectionality of gender and class (not gender and race), that informed *G&P* was prominent in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There was a vibrant discussion going on in the US, Australia, Canada and the UK, and in much of Europe and Latin America about the proper relationship between Marxism and feminism, a line of empirical research and theorizing that engaged capitalist patriarchy (and patriarchal capitalism) in an intersectional way long before the term intersectionality itself was coined. The effort to understand patriarchy as a system of power that shaped how capitalism worked, and vice versa, focused on intersectionality largely at the macro level of analysis where class was theoretically situated. Gender relations were understood in historical material terms, especially among leading British Marxist feminists, such as Sheila Rowbotham (1974), Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Michèle Barrett (1980).

However, gender relations were still likely to be thought of in binary terms; studies focused only on women and their lives as sites where gender could be seen, not unlike the focus on studying Black experience as a way of understanding "race." Empirical research, including my own in the 1970s and early 1980s, focused on studying housework as reproductive labor and reflected a normative standard frame of families as the site of (re)production of gender inequalities; many feminist critics pointed out how women were excluded in studies of shop floors, class consciousness, union mobilization, social movements and party politics, even in who was counted as a worker (e.g. Feldberg and Glenn, 1979; Kessler-Harris 1982; Bose, 1987).

By the mid-1980s, however, the "separate spheres" approach that assigned women to home, family, and reproductive labor and men to formal employment and politics was being undermined by historical and sociological studies that connected home and work as institutions. Women of color such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Mary Romero, Bonnie Thornton Dill and Judith Rollins used paid domestic labor as a theoretical wedge that not only introduced race into the consideration of women's lives and labor, but also broke open the binary gendered boxes of home and work, love and money, family and economy.[4] Variation was not just an illustration of how many different binaries gender could possibly take but could now be recognized as reflecting underlying macro power relations that worked across institutions to connect inequalities. But the reflexive

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[4] Ferree (1990) reviews this then-emergent literature on the work dimensions of home and family relations and home dimensions of paid work relations, and the political challenge to separate spheres ideology this research posed..

theorizing that would specifically make use of the marginality of women of color in the US to construct "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) or the "matrix of domination" (Hill Collins 1990) to bring race into macro-social models emphasizing gender and class was still to be done.

G&P came at about the same time as Joan Scott's similarly brilliant and path-breaking article, "Gender as a useful category of historical analysis" (1986), both addressing the historically specific material relations of power without either reducing them to class-economic relations or inscribing these into gendered binaries that stood outside history. Both Scott and Connell independently challenged the existence of universal symbolic meaning inherent in physical differences, making the discourse of difference itself visible as an object of politics. Both offered ways of thinking about governance, that quintessentially Foucaudian term, as a set of practices of power that regulated social action by penetrating both policy and personalities and aligning them with each other. Both also came at a moment in which dissatisfaction was rising with the eternal sameness of depicting gender (or race or class) as simply a system of oppressors and oppressed. Reintroducing agency to the concern with structure was essential if theories of gender were to be *feminist* theories, that is, theories that contribute to the transformation of society toward being more inclusive, empowering and egalitarian for women.

This is why it is so important that Connell understood conflict not as a coincidental or temporary condition but as a fundamental principle of both social and psychic life. Critical gender theory, like critical theories of class, was understood as a tool for directing struggles toward successfully making change. Gender as a theory of

practice implied that the courses of actions taken today would have transformative effects on structures that might outlive the actors themselves. As with theories of class transformation, *G&P*'s gender theory was directed toward identifying crisis tendencies emerging in contradictions among institutions.

In sum, I suggest that *G&P* was an intersectional argument that drew its agenda from the feminist politics of the 1970s and early 1980s. Borrowing tools from class-critical cultural analysis, Connell built a theoretical structure that embedded a material, historical, gendered self in a macro-structural model of process that privileged conflict and contradiction as sources of transformation. G&P has a backward orientation in its critical theorizing, by using claims feminist movements and empirical gender scholarship offered about the linkage of home and work, love and money to undermine a separate spheres orientation and to reorient gender theory from categories to actions. But not as much attention to racializing social processes was given as would be the case in later feminist thought, including Connell's own.

Gender's Intersectional Moment

Gender is pragmatic, self-contained and future-oriented; its practical politics strive to lay out a path forward for feminist engagements that would reflect the existing hard-won insights of the empirical and theoretical study of gender. Published in 2002, 15 years after G&P, *Gender* entered an intellectual and political world that had experienced substantial transformations: the Cold War had abruptly ended in 1989 and the state socialist claim to have "emancipated" women was exposed as hollow; the Fourth UN Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing highlighted the ubiquity and strength of women's movements in the global South, spurred movement development into "Non-

Governmental Organizations" (NGOs) and encouraged an unprecedented level of discursive recognition to women's rights as human rights; the integration of Europe dramatically accelerated, the European Union emerged as a political actor with global influence, and European feminists demonstrated the effectiveness of networking around a gender equality agenda.

Gender thus engages with a political climate in which the transnational dimensions of gender politics are more prominent. Moreover, the "women's movement" that seemed to be the main carrier of feminist thought in the 1970s and 1980s had left the streets to pursue a more institutional politics of gender transformation, a transformation that feminist activists in Australia had pioneered and for which they provided useful practical theory to feminists elsewhere (as in their coinage of the word "femocrat").[5] South Asian and Latin American feminists such as Chandra Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldua and Uma Narayan challenged the power relations that women accepted as feminist even when they erased the visibility of colonialism and racism. The collapse of state socialism allowed sometimes-productive engagements between feminists from those countries and those from the now-triumphalist capitalist countries (Roth 2008; Miethe and Roth 2013). Feminist theory also began to make use of empirical insights arising from social locations outside of the more politically privileged parts of the world, drawing more explicitly and

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[5] The term was used in practice among feminists in governmental positions, but its meaning then also developed in more academic reflection; see for example Hester Eisenstein, Inside Agitators (1996) and the essays in Sophie Watson (1990).

reflexively on understandings of gender grounded in the experience of African-American women and women of the post-colonial countries of the global South.

The development of intersectionality as a concept is typically traced specifically to the US-centered analysis of African-American feminists from the Combahee River Collective through Patricia Hill Collins to Kimberlé Crenshaw. However, the real explosion of interest in the idea began with Crenshaw's presenting it to the UN Conference on Racial Discrimination and Racism in Durban in 2001. Thus, *Gender* enters into a debate founded on both the American analogy of *race* with gender (in which class appears often in the list but without any extended consideration of how it works similarly or differently) and on the international consideration of *racism* as an aspect of the macro social order. *Gender* engages with both, but stresses the latter, more global understanding of racism, carrying forward not only Connell's own position as an Australian (half-in and half-out of the metropole) but also *G&P's* theoretical reflexivity and emphasis on political action as the purpose of feminist theory.

The global order that *Gender* theorizes is very different from the order that *G&P* addressed where new grassroots women's movement activities had sprouted up everywhere. As feminist political practice became less confined to the work of women with women, its political position was less obviously "outside, throwing rocks" at patriarchal institutions, and more women were "moving in to occupy space" in political parties, international development agencies, NGOs and social movements (Ferree and Martin 1995). A useful theory of gender politics had to account for this transformation, without accepting the media frame that saw this as the "death" of feminism (Ewig and Ferree 2013). The challenge of theorizing pragmatically about gender politics in a world

of increasing economic inequalities gave new life to theories that separated feminism from the macro-power relations of capitalism, on the one hand, presenting gender and sexuality advocacy as pursuing a politics of "recognition" that did not alter "redistribution" (e.g. Fraser 1997). On the other hand, in the newly post-socialist societies, gender theory had to contribute to making sense of the transformations of the present and future, rather than returning to the class-dominant theoretical legacy of the past (Gal and Kligman 2000).

The shift in historical conditions and thinking about these intersections is evident in the differences between the two books. Rather than *G&P*'s effort to tell origin stories and make a case that gender is a "useful concept," *Gender* looks forward to offer a strategic analysis to deploy in a still uncertain and unstable future in which gender knowledge is now a highly contested resource. Indeed, a key tool of the feminist movement had become a politics of knowledge: socially situated collective labor that uses teaching, training, reporting, discussing, critiquing, and theorizing to advance a political agenda of equality. In addition to Connell's willingness to completely give up on the ideology-as-superstructure framing in Marxist theory, the gains feminists made in institutionalizing their discursive politics (however precariously) helps to explain *Gender*'s otherwise surprising positioning of "discourse" as an institutional regime of its own (alongside labor, power and cathexis).[6]

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[6] Cathexis is Connell's term, borrowed from Freudian psychology, for all embodied experience, which encompasses sexuality but also all forms of emotions and interpersonal ties. Defining cathexis as a

But the further challenge that *Gender* faced in the new millennium was to offer an understanding of macro politics that reflected the instability of the categories like race, class and gender, and framed the making and remaking of these categories as "real politics" in which power was central. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) moved feminist theory toward understanding bodies are sites of gender practices, but her framing emphasized their individual "performative" capacities as a dispersed politics of transformation. Connell uses *Gender* to offer ideas about more collective forms of politics by now including discourses among the institutional structures that are objects of collective feminist action. Rather than continuing to place systems of knowledge in the static category of "ideology," *Gender's* strategic concern included defining a range of discursive practices that can engage and change institutionalized meanings at both the macro and micro level, avoiding any clear break between so-called structural and post-structural theory. Discourse is now itself recognized as a structure, but not the only structure, that a politics of social justice must engage in order to be effective.

*Gender (*unlike *G&P)* thus engages with post-colonialism and a global order in which women have been agents as well as victims of oppression. Race is much more explicitly identified as a form of intersectional gender politics, differentiating what gender can mean – not just as a multiplicative interaction that has effects on women and men assigned to different racial groups, but at the macro-level of defining how nations define and treat other nations, "tribes" and ethnicities. By 2002, gender scholarship had

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social structure is a strong assertion that the physical body is not prior to or independent of its social formation, nor open to being remade by a simple act of individual will.

responded to critiques of making white women of the global North the normative standard for feminism "in the abstract" and turned to increasingly sophisticated examinations of the gender politics informing concrete global transformations of political economies (e.g. Gal and Kligman 2000, Rosemblatt 2000). Debates had moved beyond framing gender transformation as a "western import" to engage the more urgent business of bringing feminist theory into critical perspectives on colonialism and nationalism (Narayan 1997, Yuval Davis 1997).

This agenda comes to the book's surface in three main ways. First, *Gender* situates Connell self-consciously as Australian, and presents this as an ambiguous position: belonging physically to the geographic periphery, but accorded special status as a member of the British Commonwealth, being thus simultaneously in and not in the global South. Connell's political choice to write as an advocate for the perspectives of the global South (while having the privileges of being a white intellectual tenured in a major research university embedded in the knowledge networks of the global North) shapes the theorizing of this book as much as having male privilege and challenging masculinity as a heterosexual, married feminist shaped *G&P*.

Second, there is considerably less engagement with works of theory (not just Freud and Marx but Butler and Bourdieu) than with empirical research findings. Not only are there many more studies to be drawn upon in 2002 than in 1987, but the studies Connell selects emphasize work not done in the US or Britain, but all over the globe. This focus is central to the future orientation of *Gender* as an account of ongoing struggle. As Connell later summarizes this position, "feminism in the colonial and postcolonial world signifies far more than ethnographic diversity to be added to Northern gender studies. It

documents a great historical transformation in the social processes through which gender is constituted" (2015, p.56). Because gender is globally made and remade, gender theory and transformative feminist agency has to be approached from a global level.

Finally, intersectionality – a term becoming ever more popular in feminist work – now frames the connection between "race" and "nation" as analogous types of extended kin-like structures (p. 105). The "sphere of reproduction" where Connell situates gender is thus also inherently one that is racialized by colonialism and governed through race as well as gender in defining citizenship and rights at the macro-level.   Ultimately, *Gender* presents globalization explicitly as a macro-politics offering feminists both opportunities and threats.

I see both the practices of feminism (more globally mobilized, more institutionalized, using gender knowledge as a transformational tool in organizations) and the challenges presented by theory (international enthusiasm for Butler's emphasis on subversion of categories, nations as social constructions with material consequences, analysis of globalization from the standpoint of the South) as at least partially explaining what focused Connell's attention on discourse as a macro structure of power, one that like all other structures is contested and changeable. The historical circumstances set in motion by the Beijing World Conference on Women also constituted new structural conditions for theorizing feminist change at a more global scale.

The Beijing Platform for Action signed by most of the world's national governments in 1995 demanded specific positive organizational efforts to incorporate awareness of gender inequality into all policy processes in the UN and its constitutive states. This "gender mainstreaming" mandate was adopted in the EU in 1997, and its

own directives to member states demanded not only that gender discrimination be recognized and combatted, but that positive state action must be undertaken to increase gender equality in outcomes. Incorporating gender equality in its internal treaty objectives and using this as a criterion for assessing potential member states' "readiness" to join its political union, EU directives spoke to issues of gender inequality in work-family relations, setting guidelines for minimum maternity and childcare leaves, equalizing part-time and full-time workers' benefits per hour, and setting goals for accessible state-funded childcare services. In 2002, there was still considerable enthusiasm for what the embrace of gender mainstreaming strategies could offer to deep transformation of politics-as-usual (Beveridge, Nott and Stephen 2000; Rees, 2005) as well as growing critique from femocrats and their allies that this new direction was a strategy for dropping attention to women from political calculations (Kantola and Nousiainen 2009). Nonetheless, UN "gender and development" policies increasingly stressed protecting, supporting and educating "the girl child" and offering economic opportunity to adult women in the form of micro-enterprise loans and training.

Another practical opportunity for feminist politics lay in the proliferation of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) that deployed knowledge resources ("epistemic communities" with shared political values) to effect change (Keck and Sikkink 1998). "Gender experts" were increasingly called on to contribute advice to governments and organize programs of services to women as constituents of the state. The NGO sector had exploded, triggering concerns about the extent to which "NGOized" politics could authentically represent the interests of the marginalized (Alvarez, 1999; Lang 1997). Developing "gender expertise" began to run on a practitioner track separate from the

theories and practices of academia. Gender analysis was not merely something that a women's movement collectively produced; one part was now the intellectual product of formally accredited "gender and women's studies" departments and another part was the discursive legitimation of policy change being produced by and for governments. Especially outside the US, gender theory found global resonance in agency white papers, national and international reports, state-mandated gender training, and transnational advocacy networks.

Reflecting this massive increase of feminist engagement with specific governmental institutions, *Gender* shifts its analytic balance from class to nation, presenting nationalisms and globalizations as theoretically significant for gender politics. Its wider lens is evident in the far more internationally inclusive citations that Connell offers in 2002, including a range of empirical work done on gender relations across many national contexts. These examples are not arrayed as evidence of the relative "progress" of some countries compared to others, but given as illustrations that gender relations are contested and changing everywhere.

In short, by 2002 *Gender* recognized the power relations among nations as another intersectional form of historical material social organization that was gendered and that reproduced gender in various forms. Connell's theorizing of these connections didn't "grow on trees": it emerged from the transformational politics of governance in which feminists were now globally engaged. By displacing the western/northern metropole from the center of *Gender*, Connell presents global contestation over the shape of the future international order as a site of gender contradictions and specifically looks at

the emergent discursive power of gender knowledge to take advantage of these opportunities to do feminist politics.

Gender politics and global restructuring

In looking at the 15 years of change since *Gender* was published, I am struck by the extent to which the macro-level forces captured in the term "globalization" are operating in intersectional ways. Even the second edition of *Gender*, published only three years later, expands upon the account of the turbulence being produced by globalizing economic forces, producing not one wave of transformation but many, very specific sites of contested transformation, often called all-inclusively "neo-liberalism." I find most theories of intersectionality limited in understanding these changes in ways that would offer strategic insights into the practical politics of contesting them and improving upon the many accounts of economic transformation that subordinate or ignore feminist, anti-racist politics. *Gender* begins to offer such a "strong theory" of intersectionality, on which Connell's later work as well as that of others, builds.

My argument is that Connell's practical feminist politics of "choice, doubt, strategy, error and transformation" can make good use of her understandings of class and nation as intersectional formations that intersect with gender at all levels from macro to micro. More categorical views of intersectionality that focus only on "giving voice" to marginalized people or on the multiplicatively distinctive experiences only of the less privileged, leaving privileged statuses invisible and looking away from the macro level of intersectional power relations are not wrong, but they are incomplete (Choo and Ferree 2010). Labor, power, cathexis and discourse are institutionalized in social formations

like classes, nations, races, religions and genders but always intersectionally, Connell argues.

Walby (2009) then takes up the challenge of inventorying the complex relations of feedback between them. Walby's notion of intersecting positive and negative feedback loops is a way of operationalizing the recursivity in Connell's view of action and structure. This approach moves beyond path-dependency models of the political economy, for which most non-feminist theorists pick one intersectional inequality to frame the historical "paths" followed in each case. Tracing feedback suggests moving back and forth between action and reaction, with particular historical relations coming sometimes to the foreground of change, while sometimes establishing the institutional structures that enable and limit it. These institutionalized structures, Connell points out, can at any point become the target of reconfiguring politics with implications felt on all the others in varying ways.

I emphasize here that these formations of inequality are and have always been produced through historically knowable interactions, processes that leave distinctive "shapes" behind in each instance. Thus the US should be understood as a racialized state from its founding documents onward, and the embedding of racialization as a process in every other social relation is inescapable in this national context and politics directed at any element in the overall system will have feedback into structures governing "race." However, this process of racialization should not be casually generalized to other national contexts where the formation of their institutions and identities has not been so consistently and insistently done in and through privileged and disprivileged racial

categorizations.[7] My own research on German feminism, for example, stresses the way

in which class formations and conflicts intersected with gender historically to shape

strategic opportunities for feminist mobilization over the previous century and a half

(Ferree 2013). Most importantly, as Connell's empirical examples frequently illustrate,

both racial politics and class politics in every setting have been and continue to be shaped

by the specific gender relations that run through them.

If histories of struggle build up an emerging substructure of discursive

opportunities, actual agents with particular agendas still need to survey the ground, draw

conclusions and mobilize action to transform not only themselves but the "facts on the

ground" as they see them. As I have argued elsewhere, "Framing is a way of connecting

beliefs about social actors and beliefs about social relations into more or less coherent

packages that define what kinds of actions are possible and effective for particular actors.

The point of frames is that they draw connections, identify relationships, and create

perceptions of social order out of the variety of possible mental representations of reality

swirling around social actors" (Ferree 2009, p. 87). The discursive approach that

Connell brings into prominence in *Gender* offers some ways of thinking about framing as

a political process. While it recognizes the power of institutions to keep political actions

in the paths already familiar to individuals, groups, nations and transnational actors, it

also identifies the transformative power that renaming experiences can have in expanding

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[7] Of course, many other countries have their own, equally powerful but fundamentally different,

histories of racialization and how it intersected over time with gender and class and nation.

options and setting new directions, such as starting to define and count gender

inequalities and compare them cross-nationally (Bose 2014).

One broad framing project for feminist theory can be seen in the concentrated

efforts directed at conceptually sorting out the meanings of "intersectionality" in

classification schemes such as those of McCall (2005), Hancock (2007) and Choo and

Ferree (2010). The number of feminist journals that have devoted special issues or

symposia to the concept is enormous and still growing; intersectionality may be vague

enough to be embraced as a "buzz word" by everyone, as Davis (2008) argued, but where

and how it could actually be useful is remarkably contentious. Some African American

feminist scholars see its use in analyzing intersections that are not specifically concerned

with Black experience as a form of intellectual theft and misappropriation (e.g.

Alexander-Floyd,), while others present it as a "heuristic" that can be deployed for

various ends, including those inimical to social justice (Lindsay, 2012). Some feminists

in Europe see its application to policy debates there as fruitful (e.g. Lombardo, Maier and

Verloo 2009), while others are concerned that it is encouraging the transformation of

gender mainstreaming into a shallow form of state "diversity" politics that is analogous to

the "diversity management" that US corporations export (Prügl, 2014).

The growth of feminist influence in governance projects has also drawn theorists'

attention to the intersectional impacts of women's movement organizing, and concerns

are increasingly expressed about the negative impacts of national or transnational gender

equality projects on men of color in the US (Bernstein 2010, Bumiller 2008) and on

women, men and families in the global South (Halley 2008, Cornwall, Harrison and

Whitehead 2007). Orloff and Schiff (2014) note that this "governance feminism" is one

that is facilitated by neoliberal economic transformations at the global level, but as Elizabeth Prügl argues, "Neoliberalism has become somewhat of a master variable, an explanatory hammer that fits all nails, used to account for a multiplicity of contemporary phenomena. . . . In order to make neoliberalism methodologically useful, it is necessary to transcend the reification of the concept, recall the indeterminate way in which doctrines circulate and are resisted, and [address] the process aspect of any class and governance project" (Prügl 2014, 616). This "process aspect" includes the gender, race and nationalist politics waged within and across specific sites.

A more macro level theory of intersectionality would be a very useful tool to address the diversity of contested political changes that are currently being tossed into the concept neoliberalism in a totalizing and inherently condemnatory way. This is as problematic theoretically as the concept of patriarchy has proved; as Evans notes, "those who advance a neoliberal agenda do not defend neoliberalism qua neoliberalism. . . . Neoliberalism is in this respect rather like patriarchy: few openly speak its name" (Evans 2015, 41). The defenders of patriarchy have been able to cloak their agenda by repudiating their support for any universal and unidimensional gender division into dominant men and subordinate women. Defenders of neoliberalism readily employ a discourse of "empowerment" that challenges universalizing claims of economic oppression and victimization. So if neoliberalism is to be a useful concept, it will need to be understood intersectionally with more attention to the specific nuances of class, nation, gender, race and religious and sexual politics that shape the forms it takes -- and thus also the struggles against it generated in specific institutions (Collins 2015). As with all the

other intersectional forces of inequality, neoliberalism is misunderstood if treated as one division between oppressed and oppressors.

Connell repeatedly suggests strategically identifying politically productive contradictions as specific to the particular gender regimes of historically formed institutions and thus vulnerable to challenge. As G&P already concluded, it is "not possible to accept the arguments, which seem increasingly popular with radical intellectuals, that fragment radical politics into a plurality of struggles in different sites with no systematic connection to each other…[but] the connection between structures of inequality is not a logical connection…[it] is empirical and practical (p.292). As *Gender's* greater global diversity then indicated, institutions that follow quite intersectionally specific trajectories produce gender politics that are distinctive to their situations, both within and across national borders (see Bose and Kim 2009). Although some invoke neo-liberalism as if it has coopted and overwhelmed all feminist aspirations (e.g. Eisenstein 2009), Connell argues instead that how local feminisms relate to neo-liberalism is not to be deduced logically but investigated empirically.

Even such globally visible trends as empowering managerial authorities, preferring private rather than public investments, and framing economic costs and benefits as the most socially important outcomes – a standard definition of neoliberalism -- take on quite remarkably different forms, which in particular cases may be empowering for individuals subordinated on other dimensions (Prügl, 2014). Where and how these shifts generate turbulences (or contradictions) depends on what other forces they intersect and what historical conditions provide a "sea floor" of normalized institutions, practices and identities over which they move, shaping and being shaped by these "sediments."

Effective understanding of neoliberal politics demands specific analysis of the politics of gender, race and class in interaction with each other at a structural level, as Ewig's analysis of Peruvian health policies demonstrates can indeed be done (2010).

Drawing on my own work, I illustrate the diversity this dynamic model of intersectional feminism brings to the analysis of neoliberal institutional transformation by picking some particular sites (institutions of higher education in Germany and the US) where struggles over gender relations are currently highly visible. The university systems of both of these economically powerful and politically influential countries are currently being reconfigured, and feminist critics in both countries strongly identify these transformations with neoliberalism (Tuchman, 2009, Kahlert 2015). But in each national context, the path being taken is so remarkably different that the common label is misleading.

In the US, the restructuring takes the form of intensified competition at the bottom from exploitative for-profit institutions that particularly take advantage of Black women's desires for both economic security and a less-stigmatized identity. These organizations, which McMillan Cottom (2016) calls "lower-ed," reflect the intersections of gender, race and class in the US educational policy as much as do the immense endowments of the exclusive private universities. State disinvestments, tuition increases, reliance on highly competitive research funding and on alumni donations are fiscal characteristics that shape all branches of US higher education from top to bottom of their own hierarchies, making most jobs more precarious and decreasing institutional reliance on professorships just at the historical moment in which women are claiming a larger share of these jobs (Ferree and Zippel, 2016). University administrators use "globalization" to troll for affluent

tuition-paying students from all over the world and brag about the "diversity" this form of internationalization produces.

In Germany, by contrast, the neoliberal intensification of competition has given rise to increased federal and state investments in universities and research allocated in the form of grants, and political efforts to add differentiation in status among its research universities (Zippel, Ferree and Zimmerman, 2016). EU directives on gender equality, specifying that measures must to be taken to increase the share of women in science and technology, have been used quite deliberately and effectively as spurs to prod the German government to fund extra professorships for women and to demand regular audits of success in meeting goals for gender inclusivity (Zippel, Ferree and Zimmerman, 2016). Competitive pressure as well as political mobilization lies behind these gender politics, but also explains the decision to abolish tuition at all German universities (apart from a small handful of private colleges). EU pressure for "mobility," especially among its member states, has also increased pressure for standardization of curricula, English-language instruction across many subject areas, and more regular formal grading of student progress along with time limits on funding degree completion.

In other words, both German and U.S. universities are going through restructurings called neoliberal that are not merely economic in either case. Given that there are transnational gender politics, geopolitical national interests, and racialized beliefs about academic success entwined in specific ways with the neoliberal impulse, one can see the very different trajectories of restructuring and radically different types of opportunities for feminist engagement. The moves that the universities in each country make are more than steps down a single, historically determined path. While the shared

label neoliberal creates an illusion that such change is driven by class relations alone, any closer look reveals a variety of specific struggles going simultaneously in each site, ones that are shaped by gender, in the US also by race and in Germany also by nationality.

Conclusions also don't grow on trees

While I think the current concern with neoliberalism – as it shapes governments and globalization as well as universities – is wholly appropriate, I am arguing that theories of neoliberalism will benefit greatly from Connell's macro-level understanding of intersectionality. This conviction grows from my own engagement in feminist politics, comparative research on gender relations, and personal experiences of universities in different countries. I see the current changes hitting universities – and other knowledge-producing institutions -- as a tangle of feedback among diverse forces, not one disembodied economic transformation.

More generally, like Connell, I am convinced that not neoliberalism alone, but intersecting macro forces today are reorganizing social systems globally. These upheavals are being felt in the specific institutions we inhabit, are linked across space and time with those of all other people, can be framed as being about gender or race or class or sexuality or nation, and are being contested by diverse social justice movements arising around the world. In such movements and desires for societal transformation, both women and men as inevitably gendered actors are now taking part. What gender means to them and what they plan to do with it in the future is the "choice, doubt, strategy, planning, error and transformation" Connell has argued is inherent in historical agency.

In addition to neoliberalism, other struggles that are global – the racialization of Muslims, the pressures of migration on affluent countries, the gendering of technological expertise – also are better understood, I argue, by attending specifically to the sites where multiple forces intersect to generate "turbulences" that actors can use to generate energy for transformation. Neoliberalism alone is not the explanation for social change, nor is a new class politics alone the solution to new or persistent inequalities. Rather than "taking a break from feminism" as Halley (2008) and Fraser (2009) have suggested might be necessary to confront neo-liberal globalization, I suggest that a macro-oriented and dynamic gender theory should inspire a greater range of feminist strategic thinking. Taking intersectionality into account in feminist theorizing about power would suggest that governance feminism as mobilized from the inside of state, NGO and corporate organizations offers just one of a number of options for hydra-headed feminist activism.

By attending to the multiple sites of struggle in a dynamic model of intersectionality, a reflexive feminist theory would follow Connell's lead in rejecting static and universal categories as useful constructs. Practical theorizing as well as careful empirical investigation could identify more of the power relations specific to diverse conflicts, both those where social justice campaigns are already mobilized and those offering opportunities to new movement actors. This would also demand a discourse about feminism that was less deeply ambivalent about power and more willing to act with conviction. Looking at politics from the standpoint of 2015, new forms of feminist collective action seem to be emergent in social media and cultural politics not only in the US but other parts of the world (Ewig and Ferree 2013), including high-risk activism

challenging gender relations in non-democratic sites like China (Wang and Ferree 2015), Russia (Sperling 2014) and the Middle East (Al-Ali, 2012).

In the end, an intersectional feminist theory of politics worthy of the name can find a powerful foundation in Connell's evolving understanding of gender and power at the global scale. The macro intersections neoliberalism, fundamentalism, nationalism, environmentalism and neocolonialism have with patriarchy and feminism already became more visible in *Gender* (and drew even more emphasis in the 2005 second edition). Now that another 15 years have passed from *Gender's* initial publication, there is more global growth in theorizing and in empirical transformations of gender relations to be taken into account. Connell's newest work (2015) particularly stresses the need feminists everywhere have for feminist theory from the global South about imperialism, post-colonialism and collective identities or states, violence and human rights (see also Tripp, Ferree and Ewig 2014). Such historically specific, intersectional accounts of societies and struggles are essential to recuperate and use, Connell suggests, particularly by those of us whose perspective is easily mistaken for being universal – the white, privileged, highly educated theorists of the metropole.

Nonetheless, Connell is hardly alone in advocating a more thoroughly intersectional account of the struggles of our own era, and brilliant empirical accounts of how these are being waged can be found. Gender politics in this macro-intersectional sense have been persuasively studied in Peruvian health care policy reform (Ewig, 2010), the way civil war in El Salvador was fought and settled (Viterna, 2013), the framing of work and workers in the anti-austerity protests in Wisconsin (Collins 2015) and the roots and spread of the global financial crisis of 2010 (Walby 2015). The global resonance that

Connell's own work has found suggests that macro intersectional analyses will continue to emerge in many specific locations, unpacking the contradictions and congruencies among the many interacting forces shaking contemporary institutions, showing also how these turbulent times are perceived and experienced, resisted and changed through the practices of both men and women around the world. This is a global feminist knowledge project not restricted to the academy but one in which all who have a desire for social justice have a stake, whether they realize it yet or not.

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