

BOOK REVIEW

## *Turbulent Times, Transformational Possibilities? Gender and Politics Today and Tomorrow*

Fiona MacDonald and Alexandra Dobrowolsky (eds). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020 (ISBN: 978-1-4875-8832-8)

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Given the year 2020, a volume on gender dynamics in turbulent times is very timely. Turbulence is the state or quality of being beset by violent commotion, agitation or disturbance, and that 2020 was a turbulent year goes without saying. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, changing weather patterns, and a much more acute forest-fire season, in Canada the year was marked by growing protests by Indigenous people asserting ancestral rights to lands and resources, Climate Action Friday marches, and widespread protests, even in the face of stay-at-home orders, against police violence against BIPOC (Black Indigenous and People of Color) people, all topped off in the United States in January 2021 with a far-right insurrection against the United States Capitol and democracy. It was a year of tempestuous disruption, and there was a clear sense that if pollsters were to ask Canadians (or Americans) if their country was headed in the right direction, the answer would be a resounding “no.”

The editors and authors in this volume argue that the distress felt throughout 2020 is part of a more generalized disorder that has been building for the past five to six years in Canada. Using snapshots from 2014, when high-profile radio-show host Jian Ghomeshi was fired after allegations of sexual assault, the rise of Black Lives Matter in 2015, the 2016 Report on Sexual Assault in the Canadian Armed Forces, the 2017 Women's March on Washington, and the various “feminist” policy pronouncements of the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau after 2015, the authors frame the period of disruptive turbulence in terms not solely of discord and disaster, but also of possibilities and opportunities. The old adage regarding crisis as a turning point for better or worse comes to mind, and the editors frame this volume as illustrating “both the turbulent times we live in and some possible transformational opportunities” (3).

Thus, this volume presents a collection of chapters that address the “remarkable shifts in politics in international, national, provincial, municipal and even street levels that are fundamentally connected to issues of gender” (11-12) in Canada and globally from a Canadian perspective. Its purpose, then, is to document these changes, to “illustrate gendered political dynamics at multiple scales: macro, meso, and micro, encompassing global and local trends” (12), but also to make sense of these turbulent times and identify transformational opportunities. By focusing on the Canadian perspective, the volume showcases up-to-date work undertaken by Canadian gender politics scholars across a range of career positions from new to well-established. An important

feature of this currency is the effort to highlight the significance of intersectionality in “giving a name to the realities many of us encounter and seek to challenge” (10). It does so by having each chapter examine gender “in light of other collective identities and their intersections” (12). This includes a commitment to a broader engagement with both gender and feminist politics with respect to masculinity, indigeneity, and transgender politics. Further, the volume avoids limiting itself to a solely institutional perspective, taking the position that “politics encompasses the institutional and non-institutional as mutually constitutive” (12). For these reasons, the volume is divided into two parts. The first is concerned with institutions and their transformation, or lack thereof. This is, as the editors characterize it, the more conventional dimension of political science and gender politics as a discipline. Part 2 examines the affective and cultural elements of gender politics, specifically the politics of the women’s movement and other movements that represent intersectional nodes of possible coalition-formation, or not, given that there is a chapter on the rise of alt-right toxic masculinity.

Part 1 of the volume, from a political science perspective, is the safer, focusing on the conventional parts of the discipline: Canadian politics, comparative politics, law and public policy, international political economy, international relations and political thought, and ultimately on the institutions in which gender politics is defined and undertaken. Methodologically, the section is thought-provoking and showcases the work being done by feminist political scientists in Canada to illustrate the context of feminist governance. Of note are Gina Starblanket’s presentation of an Indigenous-feminist lens and Jeanette Ashe’s chapter on gender sensitivity. Starblanket, in chapter 5, analyzes the relationship between gender and culture as it emerges within the construction of Indigenous political identities, an analysis that deconstructs how gender is constructed in the colonial context. By connecting the body to land, culture, and self-determination, she problematizes binary notions as Western constructs and unpacks the complex intersectionality of gender and colonial systems of oppression. This lens is also represented to a degree in Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez’s chapter on Canadian resource extraction in Oaxaca, Mexico. In chapter 3, based on the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Sarah Childs (IPU 2011; Childs 2016), Ashe develops thirty-two measures for quantifying gender sensitivity across parliaments and parliamentary regimes, ultimately finding that the Liberal Trudeau regime is slightly more gender-sensitive than the previous Conservative Harper regime. A not particularly surprising conclusion, but tempered by the smallness of the difference and the limited nature of the increased gender sensitivity, which is owed mostly to the gender-balanced cabinet, “which both ignores the lack of substantive gender-sensitive changes elsewhere and does not bind future governments” (91).

In fact, my quibble with this section is the lack of change and newness reflected in the majority of the chapters, which in itself is a telling finding. Although novelty is featured in chapters on hashtag/social media feminism (chapter 8) and on children (so often conceptualized out of existence in gender theory because of their association with women’s reproduction) as a distinct group (chapter 9), the overarching theme of the first part is how little has changed. “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” The Trudeau brand might present a new gender-sensitivity, but the end results are still high mountains to climb in Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) policy approaches (chapters 2 and 3), in legal rulings (chapter 4), in military and defense (chapter 6), and in international resource extraction (chapter 7). This is most obvious in chapters 1 and 2: to quote Stephanie Paterson and Francesca Scala in chapter 2, it’s just a brand,

and “the role of economic and political systems in producing and sustaining unequal social relations remains invisible and claims for transformative change are silenced” (61). The 2015 election of Justin Trudeau with his feminist brand actually shows little sign of having disrupted the integrity and hold of neoliberalism, and as Dobrowolsky points out in chapter 1, this is not a new political economic context, but one that dates back to the 1980s; it is less about “turbulent times” and more about “history.”

Part 2 is intended to examine the affective and cultural elements of gender politics, specifically the activities of various social movements to illustrate more fully the relationship between ideas and activities—the praxis—driving current resistance and challenges to the status quo. By focusing on the “non-institutional,” or more correctly non-mainstream political, aspects of social movement issues and organizing, the volume highlights the praxis that comes from intersectional theorizing.

As someone whose background is in social movement studies, I appreciate this focus. In this half of the book, a number of movements or social currents are each accorded their own chapter. Subjects include the feminist movement in Quebec, Black Lives Matter, and LGBTQ2S, environmental, transgender, disability, body type, and alt-right masculinity issues, representing case studies of the emerging intersectional praxis that characterizes generalized challenges and the struggle for equity, equality, and social justice. A strength of this volume is that it highlights pathways to a greater movement for inclusive and equitable treatment and recognition. That it includes chapters on the politics and praxis of movements that have become closely associated with the upheavals of 2020—Indigenous peoples, Black Lives Matter activists, environmentalists, transfeminists, and the alt-right—is particularly timely. How well it explores those pathways, however, is up for question. We are shown how intersectional theorizing and thinking animate the acts and practices of these movements, but the focus is still on their particular issues and identities. The volume does a good job of highlighting both the characteristics of the movements—their situatedness, specificities, and the terms of the issues they struggle over—and the practices, skills, and discourses that are deployed in their confrontation with authority and the status quo. However, more could be done to expand those particularisms across social boundaries to develop a wider discourse of resistance and challenge, particularly in the turbulent times we are living in. Given that one of the intents of this volume is to “identify transformational opportunities now and into the future” (12) for the movement, the volume (with the exception of a few chapters such as chapter 14 by Chamindra Kumari Weerawardhana exploring transfeminist-of-color solidarity with Indigenous environmentalism) could be more explicit in showing how the various intersections can be brought together to form workable and robust coalitions to create a generalized struggle against the neoliberal patriarchal status-quo—a movement of movements, so to speak.

Praise should be given for the work’s recognition of the emergence and establishment of strong counter-movements during these turbulent times. However, the one chapter on the emergence of toxic masculine populism under Donald Trump is not enough to fully capture the rise of challenges from right-wing movements and movement groups. A chapter on the solidification of “quasi-feminist” women’s power groups expressed in the current discourse of anti-abortion movement groups such as “Feminists for Life” and in women’s groups like “Women for Trump,” who were clearly present (and are now facing charges) for the January 6, 2021 riot on Capitol Hill, and represented in political figures like Canadian federal MP Michelle Rempel Garner, would have been worthwhile.

As a representation of current scholarship on gender and politics, the volume delivers. The current status and novelty of today's environment is covered in assessments of the change or lack thereof emanating from the new feminist Liberal Party government of Justin Trudeau, the rise of hashtag/social media-infused feminism, and the growing contributions to the discipline from Indigenous and transgender feminisms and feminists. The coverage of Indigenous feminism and Indigenous politics is a real strength of this volume. Four of the chapters explicitly address indigeneity: Gina Starblanket's chapter 5 and Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez's chapter 7 in the first half, and Sarah Wiebe's chapter 13 and Chamindra Kumari Weerawardhana's chapter 14 in the second half. I would seriously consider using this text as a supplement to a more general women in Canadian politics text in an undergraduate class on Canadian women's politics. It will also be a useful reference to have on issues in Canadian gender and politics. Whether the volume will challenge the disciplinary silos within political science and bring intersectionality more fully into the study of political questions, as the authors hopefully intend, is up in the air, but for those who teach gender and politics in political science from an understanding that gender represents more than the binary of woman and man and includes nonbinary categories such as transgender, as well as the intersectional experiences of gendered persons in terms of race, sexuality, size, indigeneity, and disability, this is a valuable addition to one's bookshelf.

## References

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