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Does European Union studies have a gender problem? Experiences from researching Brexit

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On International Women’s Day 2017, EU Vice-President Frans Timmermans and High Representative Federica Mogherini claimed, “the European Union stands by women in Europe and around the globe today, as it did at the time of its foundation.” Indeed, (gender) equality has long been used as a foundational narrative of the EU (MacRae 2010). If we take these claims seriously, then gender-sensitive analysis should have a central place within EU studies. So, why do (gender) equality and the insights of feminist scholarship remain largely marginal to the EU studies canon? And how has the United Kingdom’s decision to exit the EU (Brexit) amplified this marginalization? By drawing on our experiences of researching and writing about the gendered impact of Brexit, we draw attention to significant blind spots at the heart of our discipline. This analysis ultimately highlights disparities in focus that reproduce disciplinary hierarchies.

We are not the first to acknowledge this deficit in EU studies. As early pioneer Catherine Hoskyns noted, theories of European integration demonstrate limited gender awareness, yet have been highly gendered, meaning that ‘despite the policy initiatives’ the ‘overall shape’ of the EU has ‘disadvantaged many women and partially at least deprived them a voice’ (Hoskyns 2004, 228). More than a decade on, the absence of feminist contributions in key disciplinary outlets, and the omission of obvious markers of inequalities including gender and race from core textbooks, continues. This “oversight” helped to marginalize equality and fundamental rights during the accession negotiations over ten years ago (Bretherton 2001). What is obvious is that the omission of gender and intersectionality also occur in debates and high-level discussions about Brexit. What sustains this omission?

We contend that EU studies and the EU itself are co-constitutive—that is, that the way the academe approaches the study of the “beast” shapes the way we understand it and determines which elements take center stage. How we study the EU helps to reify institutional hierarchies and normalizes disciplinary blind spots. The nature of the discipline of EU studies – the manner in which it addresses the economic, legal, political and social processes of ~~focus on European integration~~ ~~XXXX~~ ~~LM2~~ ~~–~~ ~~–~~ creates biases

~~that This leads us to pose a fundamental question about the nature of our discipline: does this bias ultimately reproduce wider social hierarchies by concentrating because it mainly concentrates on a narrow set of interests particularly at critical junctures, such as Brexit. the economic crisis and enlargement? If so, EU studies must thus acknowledge the ways in which it helps alternately to legitimize or critique structures of power, which sustain gender inequalities.~~ [TH3][AM4][HM5]

~~We suggest that feminist engagement with EU studies can do two things. To understand the full impact of the challenges currently facing European integration, we need feminist~~ First, feminist approaches can engage in a dialogue with EU studies about the very nature of the discipline. Failing to take seriously the issues around the nature of EU studies puts the discipline in danger of reproducing structures of power that keep traditionally marginal groups, including women, ethnic minorities and migrants, on the periphery of the EU project. This piece is thus a provocation to mainstream scholars to begin that engagement, at a moment when the stakes are particularly high for those same socioeconomic groups. Second, we note that in the broader discipline of International Relations (IR), feminist IR has exposed and challenged strategic silences in the way dominant approaches explain global politics. We similarly seek to contest the nature, assumptions and norms underpinning how we study the EU to expose the biases embedded within mainstream approaches.

This is not to say that feminist accounts are completely absent from EU studies, at present [MD6]. MazeyStratigaki (19982005) for instance, examines the how the gender mainstreaming strategy has shaped the distribution of political power over policy institutions and technical, human and financial resources influence of feminist activism on the Europeanization of women's rights; while Shaw (2000) made the case for a feminist analysis to better understand the EU's legal order. However, the feminist scholarship that has achieved substantial traction in EU studies has been rather limited, and has not included a systematic engagement with the gendered nature of this particular "beast" as a *whole* (notable exceptions are, Abels and MacRae 2016; Kronsell 2016). Thus, feminist engagement with the fundamental and evolving questions of the EU has been limited. The marginalization of feminist scholarship and perspectives during the Brexit campaign and the early phases of Brexit negotiations underscores persistent gaps in understanding how politics shapes inequalities. [MD7][AM8][HM9] Constitutional changes like Brexit, which will reconfigure everything from trade and migration to education and pensions policy in the UK, will shape intersectional inequalities in all those areas (Guerrina and Masselot 2018).

Our intervention here serves a dual purpose. First, we highlight key gaps like the ones listed above in mainstream approaches to the study of the EU. Second, inspired by

Gillian Youngs' (2004) call for ontological revisionism, we argue that so-called “malestream” approaches not only legitimize gender blindness and masculine influences, but also help to construct a Union that sidelines the interests and perspectives of traditionally marginal groups in pursuit of what some consider “higher” economic and political imperatives.

State of the discipline

The field of EU studies is best understood as a web of interlinked policies, actors and theories. Issues relating to European governance, including how to identify the relevant actors, processes and sites of power, have been at the heart of debates about what the EU *is*. As the process of European integration has gained momentum, mainstream research has reflected the key trends that have emerged on the ground. Much of this work, however, remains blind to the structural nature of gender and consistently overlooks the perspectives and experiences of anyone other than White cisgender men, as though their realities do not constitute relevant subjects for the EU.

This blindness runs counter to the aspirations of the Union itself. The Treaty of Amsterdam (1998) mandated the inclusion of gender perspectives in all EU policymaking through the principle of gender mainstreaming, but in practice this has not been achieved. This failure is unfortunately mirrored in academic and public engagement work on the EU. The dominance of “male researchers and malestream analysis,” which build on established gendered and ontological premises (Abels and Mushaben 2012, 9) has inevitably affected what scholars deem worthy of investigation, the questions they ask, and how they train others to explain what the EU is and does. The resulting silences in the dominant approaches replicate significant biases in the way the EU operates and produce ignorance of the asymmetrical impact of critical junctures (e.g. Brexit) and governance structures (e.g. negotiations) on different socioeconomic groups.

Feminist perspectives challenge the dominant power hierarchies that underpin socioeconomic structures and the persistent binary between “high” and “low” politics. The feminist project seeks to subvert and destabilize ~~the field of EU studies~~, first by challenging the reproduction of dominant gender norms within the academe, and second by highlighting the impact of asymmetrical power structures on different groups in society.^[MD10] [For instance, feminist scholars might question the distribution of resources and strategies around economic growth.](#) This project is **crucial** in the context of studying the EU, its institutions and integration as a force permeating everyday life.

Does it matter?

In the Brexit process —the campaign, the referendum result and now the ongoing negotiations—women’s voices and gender perspectives have been noticeably absent. Initial critiques [MD11] of these absences (see Guerrina, Haastrup and Wright, 2016a; Hozic and True, 2017) have stimulated a reactionary impulse by scholars and political pundits to add women to their lineup of experts, but in very limited ways. The detrimental impact of gendered silences in the co-constituted fields of EU studies and EU policymaking are thus acutely revealed as Brexit plays out.

Feminist analyses of ~~the migration crisis or EU economic governance have not been acknowledged or included. Instead, feminist contributions~~ Brexit have been relegated to the gender silo, a wider tendency made evident when such perspectives are “tapped” to address what an issue might mean for gender equality on the occasion of International Women’s Day, for instance. ~~Understanding Brexit’s impact on equality and justice is important research; however, We~~ argue that such a limited engagement with feminist perspectives on Brexit underscores the limited impact that feminist scholarship has had on wider disciplinary concerns. From here, it is worth acknowledging two interrelated issues: first, the long-standing marginalization of women’s voices in the academy, the media and ultimately the negotiation process (Haastrup, Guerrina, and Wright 2016); second, that this marginalization has invariably served to silence the gendered impact of Brexit, which is now increasingly obvious [MD12]. Women’s invisibility in the campaign and the negotiations raises important questions about expertise and women’s contribution to the production of EU knowledge. This is something that Guerrina, Haastrup and Wright (2016) sought to address by producing a crowd-sourced list of women experts who were able to contribute to public debates.

The absence of women’s perspectives thus illustrates who is considered an expert and what kind of expertise is valued. It also highlights the vertical segregation of the academy and the political sphere, to which a feminist understanding of the EU draws attention and offers a pointed challenge. The current system of knowing reifies the position of elite men as the voice of the political debates emerging from Brexit.

The erasure of feminist engagements with the EU is not simply an exogenous problem. We admit that a significant reason for the continued marginalization of these perspectives is the tendency in feminist EU studies to focus on European gender (equality) policies rather than EU processes. This work on gender equality is important and needed for an initial understanding of the EU’s role as a gender actor. Yet the time is now right for a comprehensive critique of EU politics and policies through gender lenses. For mainstream EU researchers, gender remains misunderstood as simply another variable of analysis rather than an intrinsic axis of power. By understanding gender as an intersectional and structural factor in the distribution of power, we propose

a research agenda that can provide incisive insights into the complex nature of the EU, interactions between so-called “high” and “low” politics, and realities of its citizens.

Our provocation is directed at both mainstream and feminist scholars. We call for mainstream scholars to engage with feminist scholarship as an important contribution to the field in these uncertain times. We contend that feminist approaches, particularly intersectional feminism, create the opening needed to undertake detailed assessments of the ways the discipline helps to construct the very institution it tries to study. Feminist approaches not only provide complex theorizations of power but also analytical perspectives that break down the current distinctions between “high” and “low” politics. This new opening might allow for a broader and deeper understanding of the diversity of what constitutes the EU itself as well as EU studies as a discipline.

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