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THE ERASURE OF WOMEN FROM THE HISTORY OF WESTERN POLITICAL THEORY VIA SYLLABI CONSTRUCTION AND LIBRARY CLASSIFICATION (Paper)

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Abstract:

In this analysis of undergraduate political theory syllabi and their library classification, I evaluate the absence of women through P.H. Collins' (2000) 'matrix of domination' and S. Ahmed's (2014; 2019) 'citational relationality'. From this perspective, absence seems to be the result of erasing women's contributions to political discourse through instruction and knowledge organization over time. This perspective reveals how we sometimes classify texts based on patriarchal presumptions rather than current use, leading us to consider how relationships between canonization, disciplinarity, and knowledge organization affect our recognition of past authors.

1. Introduction

Bibliometric and qualitative analyses demonstrate gender imbalances across disciplines worldwide (Aksnes, Piro, & Rørstad's, 2019; Elsevier's 2020; Larivière et al., 2013; Robinson, Richards & Hanson, 2020; Scharrón-Del Río, 2020). These studies demonstrate the absence of minoritized people in contemporary academia and encourage us to consider how today's absence is a product of historical exclusion. In political science and philosophy, feminist theorists have been reflecting on the exclusion of women from the field for decades (Brown, 2002; Garcia, 2020; Haraway, 1988; Nussbaum, 2018; Weiss, 2009; Zerilli, 2009). While these studies provide valuable data on women's disciplinary exclusion, they do not speak to historical erasure. It is possible that exclusion is a product of erasure. To address this possibility, I ask: what social and cultural environments tolerate or encourage contemporary absence and historical exclusion? What formal processes cause erasure in political theory, and why?

I analyze undergraduate political theory syllabi taught at a medium-sized Ontario university from 2010 to 2020 and their texts' corresponding library classification, suggesting how instruction and knowledge organization support a disciplinary history that erases women's contributions. Although women have been writing political theory since antiquity, the development of the discipline over the last 200 years overlook these contributions, creating a history that is White, male, heteronormative, and middle class. By applying critical feminist tools like P.H. Collins' (2000) matrix of domination and S. Ahmed's (2014; 2019) theory of citational relationality, I question this development, which delegitimises authors who do not appear to conform to the disciplinary norm.

2. Theoretical Framework

Situating contemporary absence and historical exclusion within a matrix of domination driven by citational relationality shows how pedagogical and classification practices erase women's scholarship. The matrix of domination is a conceptual map developed by P. H. Collins (2000) to describe how the domination of Black women in American society operates on structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal levels. It has been applied to instances of

intersectional oppression in political science and political economy (Flores et al., 2018; Lindemann & Boyer, 2019; Peretz, 2021) and data and information science (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020; Vera et al., 2019; Watson, 2022) to demonstrate that exclusion and absence are symptoms of processes, policies, laws, and interpersonal interactions that oppress minoritized populations.

One of these processes seems to be what Sarah Ahmed (2014) calls citational relationality. Citational relationality refers to referencing the same canonical texts and institutional practices because it is 'what is done' despite the harm it causes minoritized groups. The idea that reference denotes power is common in information (Dion, Summer, & Mitchell, 2018; Mitchel, Lange, & Brus, 2013) and political science (Diament, Howat, & Lacombe, 2018; Zerilli, 2009). Syllabi construction and library classification often reference the same texts and practices. This repetition, over time and across different domains of power, has erased women political theorists from the history of their discipline.

3. Methods & Results

I collected data from all 'introduction to political theory' syllabi taught at the university under study between 2010 and 2020 and constructed a dataset including each text assigned, their Library of Congress Classification (LCC) used by the university's library, their corresponding Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH), and their authors' genders. As the library did not have access to 18% (59/321) of assigned readings, I used the Library of Congress online catalogue for 10% (31), Library of Congress in-publication data for 8% (25) and LCC from a partnering university library for 0.3% (1) of texts. As in Diament, Howat and Lacombe (2019), recording each text assigned as a unique entry allows us to see which theorists and texts were assigned most often. To describe the results, I calculated the percentage of texts authored by women (1%, or 3/311) and the ratio of assigned texts authored by women to men (1:9).

48% (150/311) of texts authored by men and 0% of texts authored by women were classified as political theory. To evaluate whether their classification corresponds with their use, I adapted Olson's 1998 method for determining the extent of patriarchal bias in the Dewey Decimal System. Investigating what sits immediately above or below subjects, Olson (1998) reveals inconsistencies between Dewey Decimal classification and contemporary feminist, sociology, and postmodernist research. Similarly, conceptual analysis of the LCSH hierarchies used by the university's library for woman authors under study are inconsistent with their instructional and scholarly use. One woman's text was classified as Language and Literature > French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese Literature; two were classified as Social Sciences > The family. Marriage. Women. These classifications erase their political relevance because literature, 'women's content', and feminist philosophy are not yet accepted as legitimate source material in canonical Western political theory (see Brown, 2002; Le Dœuff, 2007).

4. Interpretation of Results

All four domains of Collin's matrix of domination facilitate women's erasure from the history of Western political theory. The structural domain—explicit laws and policies—govern both pedagogical and classification decisions. For example, the library must work with LCSH and LCC. While the flexibility of LCC allows it to accommodate interdisciplinary disciplines like political theory (see Adler, 2012; Denda, 2005; Mullin, 2018), practices like descriptive cataloging and bibliometric utilities increase the likelihood that classifications are reused

(Dobreski, 2021). Additionally, the resource-intensive nature of content-based classification or social tagging limit the library's ability to invest in re-classification programs (Woolwine, 2011).

The disciplinary domain oppresses through bureaucracy and hierarchy when untenured faculty hesitate to change due to job insecurity. The hegemonic domain, which oppresses through culture, media, and ideas, is particularly powerful in political theory because the discipline trades on the cultivation, debate, and evaluation of philosophies, metaphors, analogies, and ideologies. This is evident in the 'essential' texts that repeat patriarchal myths about women, making their erasure an ongoing literary project (see Aristotle, c. 350BCE/1997; Cavello, 2007; Chandler, 2016; Clark, 2005; Falco, 2004; Locke, 1689/1980; Greentree, 2017; 2018; Machiavelli, 1531/2008; Rousseau, 1762/1979; Zerilli, 1991).

The interpersonal domain, or daily interactions and relationships, becomes visible when minoritized students are asked to read materials written, not for their empowerment, but their control (see Mills, 2022; Pateman, 2018). Faculty, cataloguers, and instructors may perceive it in gatekeeping and narrow professional battles fought over intellectual jurisdiction (Brown 2002). Maintaining canons dominated by men and using classification schemes that hide women's authorship reflects and perpetuates erasure within this matrix of power relations.

Finally, conceptual analysis of LCSH and scholarly work on the three texts authored by women in this sample reveals inconsistency between their classification and contemporary use. The scholarly and instructional use of these texts is to explore Medieval (see Neilson, 2017; Siciliano, Valle, & Salomão, 2021; Verini, 2016; Wheat, 1999) and Enlightenment (see Fraser, 2020; Gouverneur, 2019; Pötzsch, 2022; Sireci, 2018; Volkova, 2014) political theory, yet they are classified as 'Portuguese Literature' and 'The Family, Marriage, and Women.' Considering the preceding and following texts on their respective syllabi and corresponding LCSH hierarchy reveals that while contemporary scholarship does not limit these texts to literature or the material conditions of women's lives, LCSH hierarchy emphasizes the subordination of these texts to topics valued more under patriarchy, including 'Death', 'Men', 'The Family', and 'Marriage'. Library classification can re-enforce a matrix of domination that erases women from the history of political theory by masking these texts' contributions.

5. Discussion of Significance: Moving Forward

This analysis contributes to scholarship on canonization and critical librarianship by opening avenues into the historical conditions of women's erasure in Western political theory through instruction and knowledge organization. I invoke Zerilli's (2009) criticism of canon and observation that how to interpret the history political theory is an ongoing debate amongst women theorists. This calls us to complicate the concept of womanhood. Without investigating how and why some women are erased and others included, we perpetuate this same erasure.

Therefore, I consider intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). This concept questions, for example, the motivation to include these three women in political theory instruction over the study period. These women, in many ways, reflect the positionalities of their oppressors: they are White, European, educated and married. This reflection generates a more thorough critique of women's inclusion in terms of who remains excluded—working class, queer, and racialized women—and asks how the inclusion of these three women serves a

historical project that develops a White, heteronormative, and middle class discipline. From this perspective, Western political theory instruction and knowledge organization become entry points into critique of recent disciplinary history. Detangling the relationships between the development of canon and professionalism in Western political theory (Brown, 2002), idea of ‘the author’ (Barthes, 1968; Foucault, 1969), and development of Library of Congress classification tools will help us counteract the myths working against women over the course of Western political theory history.

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