

Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics

Blog Admin

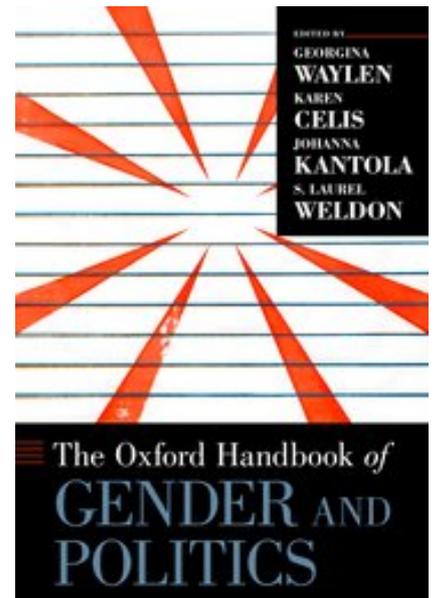
*As a field of scholarship, gender and politics has exploded over the last fifty years and is now global, institutionalized, and ever expanding. **The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics** seeks to bring to political science an accessible and comprehensive overview of the key contributions of gender scholars to the study of politics and shows how these contributions produce a richer understanding of politics and societies. **Emma Miller** finds that an impressively broad range of subjects are covered.*



The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics. Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and Laurel Weldon (eds.) Oxford University Press. April 2013.

Find this book:

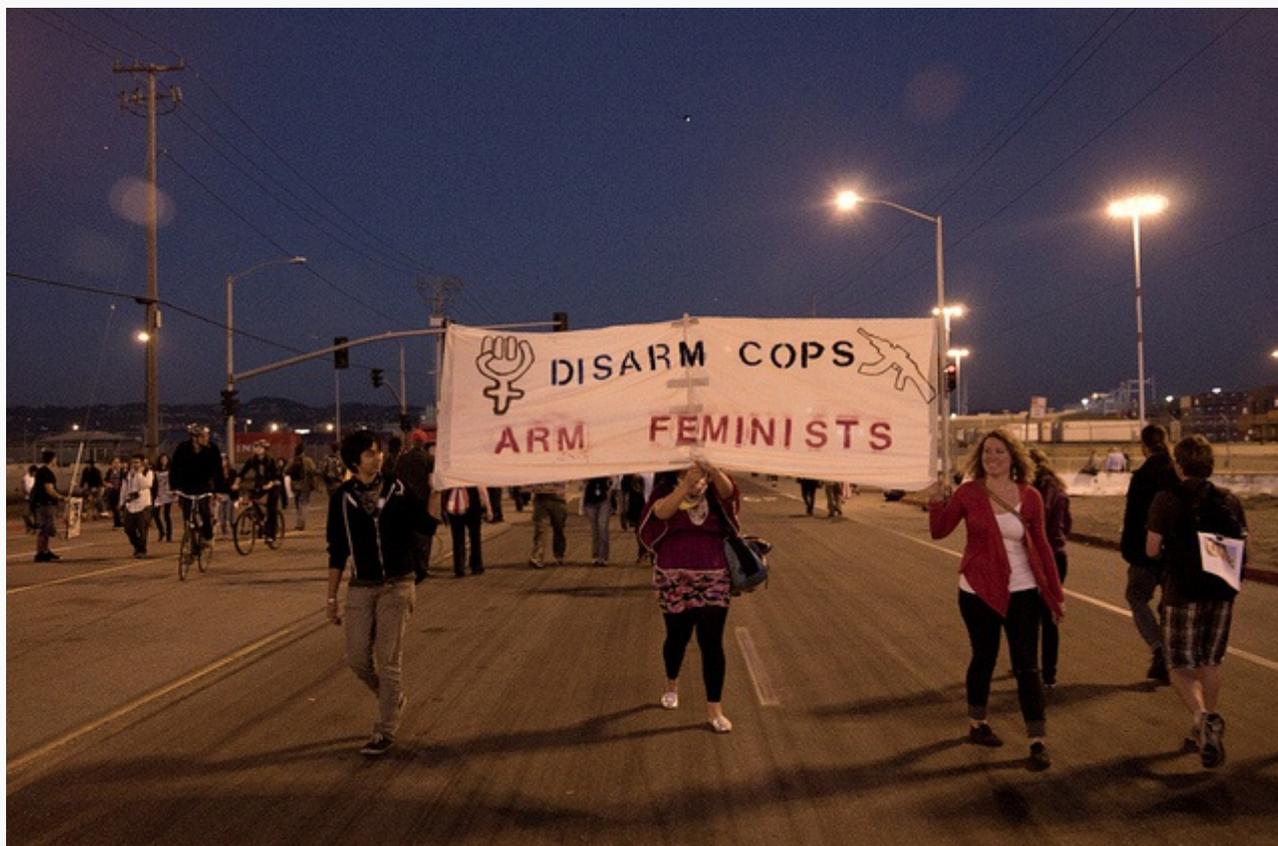
As an Oxford University Press handbook, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that this volume would provide a serious but detached theoretical consideration of the issues for students and academics in a specialist field, particularly as the title indicates the domain of politics, and therefore the holders of power, rather than the seemingly more community orientated term, of sociology, but in both of these concerns, the reader is soon proven wrong. As from the first lines, this volume proves itself determined to consider “[p]olitics as a real-world phenomenon” whose application of gender affects real people in the most fundamental and essential ways, stating that: “People all over the world find that the basic conditions of their lives – their safety, health, education, work, as well as access to markets, public space, and free expression – are fundamentally shaped by their identification as belonging to particular sex or gender groups.” Perhaps of primary importance is the awareness that the gendering of politics and political science is not just a worrying issue in cultures vastly different from our own in the West, but that everyone, everywhere can be detrimentally affected by this issue even when, as is often the case in the developed world, “these social practices of gender... appear natural and unproblematic, even biological and therefore impossible to change, in the social contexts in which they occur.”



This text then, from the first, takes an academically rigorous, socially aware and culturally enlightened approach to a rather ambiguous title, and in so doing, makes a significant contribution to the rapidly developing field, of not just political science as a discipline, but to *every* discipline, and, outside of academia, every person, to whom the issues discussed are relevant and therefore life affecting.

The volume’s organisation is clear and logical, and with so many conflicting and contrasting, highly sensitive issues regarding a world of gendered differences, it would be impossible to satisfy everyone in terms of the groupings of the topics. It is also inevitable with e-book versions of reference texts that readers of such a large volume will simply search for terms that interest them. As such chapters and even parts of chapters will be read out of context, yet with such a large amount of thoroughly researched and therefore reliable information available as is the case in this series of handbooks, it is unlikely this will cause the reader any significant problems, and it is evident that the groupings of chapters are there for guidance only and to make the potentially unwieldy volume of material appear more easily digestible.

For



Banner at Occupy Oakland, November 2011. Credit: [Margaret Killjoy](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

many societies, including our own, still struggling to define feminisms within the contemporary climate, and for individuals trying to locate, or indeed create, their own narrative within a feminist framework, there are three invaluable, comprehensive yet erudite chapters: Rita Kaur Dhamoon's chapter, "Feminisms", Karen Beckwith's "The Comparative Study of Women's Movements" and Christina Ewig and Myra Marx Ferree's "Feminist Organizing: What's Old, What's New? History, Trends and Issues". All three provide a rigorous tour de force of the recognised groups and their relative inter-group tensions, as well as, and particularly in the latter chapter, an insight into how this impacts upon national and local construction, structural maintenance and policy. Whilst these chapters can easily be seen as transferable to interested readers from other disciplines, such as those writing on visual art and literature, and how culture interacts with political issues, Kelsy Kretschmer and David S. Meyer's, section, "Organizing around Gender Identities", provides a discussion of these issues from a viewpoint more specialised to political scientists.

The section of this book entitled *Body Politics* is of particular note, because as the introduction states, “[s]eemingly personal issues associated with the body – such as rape, contraception, hair and clothing styles, pregnancy, or sexual harassment – were not traditionally seen as ‘political’...But bodies are at the core of the political order as markers of status and power [and] [a]dvancement requires assimilation to the norms associated with powerful bodies.” For a section that seems to have the most to prove, in that it must first show it deserves for its concerns to be included in the volume as a whole, this section actually stands out as one of the strongest. As it demonstrates both a key future direction for academia in general as it becomes increasingly interested in the social impact of research, whilst it also, crucially, looks back to the Second Wave feminist cry that “the personal is political”, an awareness that has taken a long time to be fully assimilated into the wider understanding of what politics is and what it can do. The chapter in this section which is perhaps most topical and therefore of the greatest general interest and of acute social concern is R. Amy Elman’s discussion of *Gender and Violence*. The section introduction demonstrates also how this area of study is of particular note, because “[p]olitical action on violence preceded the study of violence in the field of political science, demonstrating the way that the focus on traditional subject matter has occluded our understanding of state action.” Elman’s chapter then covers a relatively new locale to political science but an issue that has always been of political relevance and therefore of political concern. Her paper though, in that it provides a thorough and fascinating insight into the politics of sex and violence, especially domestic violence, will provide insights for numerous other disciplines which consider these issues, even obliquely, as it is important that all research regardless of faculty and affiliation is concerned with the politics of the problems they consider.

Overall then this volume does much more than its title infers, although admittedly, its title is not misleading, but the volume of issues the authors cover, their topicality and magnitude, and their relevance to every faculty or indeed, individual, seeking to evaluate and research social impact whether that be of public policy or popular fiction is so broad and simultaneously thorough that it would be a shame to limit the benefits such a text might offer beyond the political sciences, as well as within the discipline.

Dr Emma Miller teaches English Literature at Durham University. Her research focusses on the narration of domestic abuse in young adult literature. Her monograph on Iris Murdoch’s treatment of this subject will be published by McFarland in 2014. [Read more reviews by Emma.](#)

