

July 2015

Book Review: The Symbolic Representation of Gender: A Discursive Approach

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Recommended Citation

Makhunga, Lindiwe D. (2015). Book Review: The Symbolic Representation of Gender: A Discursive Approach. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(3), 338-341.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss3/25>

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***The Symbolic Representation of Gender: A Discursive Approach*; Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier; Ashgate; Surrey and Burlington, VT; vii + 225 pp; e-book. ISBN 978-1-4094-3237-1.**

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Political representation is widely acknowledged as being the process by which one thing stands for or denotes another, situating it as synonymous and metonymic with the entity it is designated to represent. The conception of representation, as a normative political entity, is inextricably laden with conceptual contestations about legitimacy and while its basic definition is largely uncontested, what it entails, who can perform this function and when it is legitimate has been a central preoccupation for political studies for the past four centuries. In their study of the mutually reinforcing relationship between representative symbolism, gender and political power, *The Symbolic Representation of Gender: A Discursive Approach*, Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2014) interrogate the meaning and function of the symbolic representation of gender and its relationship for the reproduction of political authority and power. The book argues that the symbolic representation of gender within political systems is central and instrumental to three political processes: constructing identity and subjectivities, establishing legitimacy and lastly asserting political control.

Hanna Pitkin (1967), whose contribution to the debate on political representation is considered seminal, proposes a theoretical framework that distinguishes between four kinds of political representation, namely formalistic representation, symbolic representation, descriptive representation, and substantive representation. Formalistic representation refers to the political arrangements and processes that govern the election of a representative to office. Descriptive representation refers to the formal composition of parliament and is concerned with the presence of individuals who are *ascriptive* of a particular social, economic or political group, share similar characteristics and stand for that group within a representative body. Substantive representation refers to representation where the actions of representatives have tangible consequences and can potentially lead to favourable policy and legislative outcomes for the represented.

Hanna Pitkin (1967) explains symbolic representation as constituting the meaning and significance of representation for the represented. According to this argument which is inherent in Pitkin's (1967) concept of 'symbolic representation', the inclusion of certain representatives symbolically broaden and promote the notion of that representative's competence and ability to participate and affect decision making in a wider society. The presence of that representative therefore has symbolic significance for those represented. For example, Pitkin rationalises that having women in powerful political positions also promotes respect for women in representative's societies and increases the legitimacy of women's mandate to represent their wider population. The majority of feminist political studies on political representation mainly address the last two forms of representation frequently distinguishing between *descriptive* representation and *substantive* representation. As the authors themselves recognize, gendered

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symbolic representation is a heavily under-researched theme and when discussed, is engaged with as consequence the increased descriptive representation of a group.

As their acknowledgements show, Lombardo and Meier are in direct conversation with Hanna Pitkin, aiming to extend Pitkin's definition of symbolic representation to encompass the ways in which political power is utilized in society to pursue political outcomes that rely on certain symbolic gender roles. This book therefore extends the concept of symbolic representation, pushing its definition beyond that envisaged by Pitkin by 'taking a discursive turn in the analysis of women's representation'. The symbolic representation that Lombardo and Meier (2014: 22) address in this book is more concerned with 'the representative' (symbol) than the represented and aims to address the gap left by 'Pitkin [who] herself neither was concerned about the constructed nature of symbols, nor did she pay attention to the possibility that symbols can be constructed with the help of discourse or language'.

Gender regimes and discursive frameworks establish the discursive practices of the state. For example, the reification of women's traditional roles in the public domain by women locates women as symbolic of the nation whose political interests it is advancing while prescribing gender relations in their broader society. Women are discursively constructed through language and discourse which transforms into dominant political discourses that are institutionally and structurally reproduced with the discursive reproduction of gender ideology in the political arena. Masculinism largely reproduced by political power became the mechanisms through which patriarchal political ideology and subjectivities are manifested in and its institutional politics through discourse.

The authors rely on a critical frame analysis that provides the reader with more than a contextual glimpse into how various political development shape the discursive construction of gender roles, norms, values and socially inscribed gendered hierarchies. Not only does a critical frame analysis allow the reader to understand the different gendered repertoires utilized by political agents to convey meaning and pursue claims on the state but also enables an understanding of successful gendered claims on the state, as partly constituted by discursive opportunities. Most importantly, critical frame analysis provides an insight into the gendered ideologies propagated by the state through legislation, policy and the discourse of political power in the public domain.

While firmly located in a Western European context, the most interesting and valuable part of the book, its theoretical chapter, encompasses a rich and informed discussion about the fraught and difficult relationship between nationalism, gender and feminism that highlights contestations that are equally applicable to Third World contexts. Located within an established theoretical engagement with nationalism that situates it as a fundamentally gendered process and ideology (Jayawardena, 1986; Moghadam, 1994; Mohanty et al., 1991; Yuval-Davis, 1997), Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2014) address the gendered relations that symbolically situate women in their collective roles as 'bearers of the nation' and the location of women in legitimating narratives of power. This is important in understanding not only the role that nationalisms and their attendant discourses play in the formation of ruling political party narratives and the legitimation of a government ideology, but also *particularly* important in understanding the ideological location of women and gender in the exercise of state power in various political arenas and the parameters within which women operate.

Although the study of women in the formal political arena is presently recognised as a 'flourishing international sub-field of scholarly enquiry' (Mackay, 2004: 99), traditionally and historically, women's marginalization and under-representation in the political decision-making

structures of *almost all societies* has been a central preoccupation for both feminism, political science and more specifically, representation for over two centuries. This book is an original, timeous and important contribution to this highly contested field specifically because it deals with symbolic representation as part of a more holistic framework of the representation of gender in relation to Pitkin's framework of representation. Understanding the logic of the state through its discursive reproduction of masculine and feminine roles through representational symbolism assists in understanding the meaning of women's presence in inherently masculine political institutions and what the exercise of power entails for gender relations in wider society.

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