Parish Conkling
Program Coordinator - Philosophy
Professor - Department of Philosophy
Houston Community College

Houston, Texas

Bio:

I have teaching Philosophy since 2010 and studying Philosophy for much of my life. I am interested in questions relating to justice and fairness within a wide scope. I believe, as Hannah Arendt said, that “men, not Man, live on the Earth and inhabit the world”, and that our interactions with each other matter. In addition to my work teaching, I have also created, and run a monthly discussion series at local pubs in the city that brings scholars and the general public together to discuss various philosophical issues. Our goal is to dismantle the current popular opinion that higher education is elitist and that ‘one should never discuss politics and religion in polite society’, and remind people what civil discourse can achieve. It has been gratifying to see the community interest and to hear about some of the conversations our series has inspired.

A Gendered View of Political Violence:

Keywords: Political Violence, Gender, Armed Conflict, Sexual Violence

Gendered accounts of global justice claim that it is necessary to keep in mind traditional gender arrangements when examining political violence. Historically men have been seen as the agents of political violence while women have been positioned as the victims. When global justice is discussed, it is often framed by this binary relationship. My presentation seeks to explore the liminal space women occupy between victim and agent, including the ways in which notions of femininity and the body influence our understanding of how women are affected by and engage with violence. Beginning with Hannah Arendt’s “Problem of Understanding”, I argue that what is needed is a re-framing of women’s roles in violent political action that takes agency into account and examines the ways in which women navigate and engage in armed combat. I will look at work done by Ortbals and Poloni-Staudinger as well as Carol E. Gentry and Mia Bloom, which reposition women as active, willing agents of political violence to examine my claim that we must re-evaluate what we think we know about the ways gender operates in global conflict if we are to get a fuller understanding of the extent of political violence, and create meaningful ways of dealing with it. With this in mind, I will sketch out the traditional view of women’s roles during conflict, including the militarized victimization of the female body. I will then turn to the problem of the ‘mother, monster, whore’ dichotomy as presented by Gentry, that is often used to discuss how women actively participate in armed conflict. I will include an explanation of the current trend in scholarship to carve out an individual sphere for “female terrorist”, “female bomber” and so on, which creates the impression of aberrations, rather than equal actors. I will then address what I see as the main challenge to the type of re-framing I am calling for, which is the need for reliance on testimony rather than empirical studies. I will close with a more robust explanation of what a re-framing of gender roles in armed conflict would look like and why I believe it to be necessary. If I am right, such a re-framing would allow us to bypass gender assumptions and significantly expand our understanding of political violence.