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Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Political Geography

Commentary

Religion, politics, and publics in Lynn Staeheli's work

Luiza Bialasiewicz^{a,*}, Caroline Nagel^b^a Department of European Studies, University of Amsterdam, 1000 BP, Amsterdam, the Netherlands^b Department of Geography, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, 29208, USA

In the early 1990s, when Lynn was an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and we were starting our postgraduate studies there, religion was seldom a topic of conversation among political geographers. 'Religion' would appear from time to time in the pages of *Political Geography Quarterly*, but mainly as a variable to be factored into studies of political behavior (for example, voting patterns), or as a distinguishing 'background characteristic' of localities or regions. Sallie Marston's 1989 article in *PGQ*, with its historical account of Irish Catholic identity amidst nativist hostility in 19th century America, stands out as an exception to this general pattern (Marston, 1989). There was, to be sure, some interest in religion in the broader discipline of geography. The Geography of Religion and Belief Systems specialty group within the AAG had been established in 1978, and there were specialized 'geography of religions' courses at some universities. Caroline took one such course as an undergraduate at Berkeley in the late 1980s. Tellingly, the reading list in that course included Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), one of the foundational texts of the academic study of religion. Eliade's analysis centered on *homo religiosus*, or 'religious man', defined by his experience of the sacred in the world and his production of sacred space. This was a 'religion' of temples, ancient pilgrimage routes, holy texts, and cyclical time—a lifeworld that, according to Eliade, remained relevant in 'traditional', non-Western societies, but that had faded from view in 'modern', secular societies.

This understanding of religion as something solely pertaining to 'traditional' peoples and places wasn't of much use to those of us who, in our research on contemporary urban social movements and multicultural politics, found ourselves speaking with individuals and organizations whose political activities were guided by religious beliefs, moralities, and identities. Yet the critical human geography of the 1990s provided us with little help in this sense as well. While strongly focused on questions of social and spatial justice, geographers appeared still very wary of engaging directly with normative questions regarding equality, justice, and rights such as those brought forth by religious individuals and movements (as Andrew Sayer and Michael Storper argued in their

1997 piece 'Ethics Unbound: For a Normative Turn in Social Theory'). Religion was something 'past' and 'elsewhere' - and seemed to make geographers very uncomfortable.

A surge of interdisciplinary interest on religious fundamentalism and extremism in the 1990s placed religion in the academic spotlight, but only to a limited degree did it move religion and religious beliefs from the sidelines of political-geography scholarship. Geographers were quick to criticize the fixation on 'Muslim fundamentalism' in political discourse and to deconstruct Samuel Huntington's (1993) dubious historical claims about Islam's 'bloodied borders'. Yet contesting orientalist geopolitical imaginaries, as many political geographers did in those years (for example, Roberts, Secor, & Sparke, 2003), perversely kept 'the clash of civilizations' at the center of discussions around religion and politics for the next decade, while not greatly expanding political-geographic understandings of religious subjectivities.

Lynn's work, first indirectly and later more directly, was instrumental both in problematizing the preoccupation with religious geopolitics and in drawing attention to the political identities and aims of religious people—or, in Jason Dittmer's words (2007: 737), 'shifting focus from the object of religion to the subjects who contextualize it'. We never heard Lynn describe herself as a 'geographer of religion', and we are certain she would balk at being called an expert on faith, spirituality, or theology. Certainly, there were other critical geographers—including Paul Cloke and the late Claire Dwyer—who were more consistent and explicit in addressing questions of religion in their work. But Lynn developed conceptual tools—especially around ideas of politics, citizenship, community, and 'the public'—that allowed political geographers to engage with faith communities and religiosity in new and non-essentializing ways.

Of crucial importance were Lynn's efforts, as a pioneer of feminist political geography, to dismantle the universal, unmarked subject that had long underpinned liberal political philosophy and that also pervaded the social sciences. She was inspired in this endeavor by the work of Carol Pateman, Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young, and other feminist theorists, who argued that the supposed neutrality and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: l.a.bialasiewicz@uva.nl (L. Bialasiewicz).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102520>

Received 29 September 2021; Accepted 4 October 2021

0962-6298/© 2021 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

egalitarianism of the public sphere masked deep and persistent social inequalities. Early in her career, Lynn began to flesh out a feminist-geographical conceptualization of citizenship, politics, and space, noting, in the first instance, how labor-market discrimination and the double burden of paid and unpaid work restricted women's political voice (Staheli, 1994; Staheli & Cope, 1994). Lynn offered a critical analysis of the content and location of 'the political', arguing that traditional notions of politics and citizenship had ignored women's activism, which was often situated within the 'private' space of the home and which had commonly been oriented around 'private' matters relating to children and domestic economies. Women themselves, she observed, tended to describe their activism and interests as non-political, though they were clearly bringing forward claims and arguments pertaining to the *res publica*. As her work progressed, Lynn sought to untangle the complicated relationships between publics, citizenship, and community. Citizenship, she suggested, rested on notions of community and therefore embodied the tensions between inclusion and exclusion-inherent in community formation. At the heart of politics, in other words, could be found struggles to define the social and spatial boundaries of who we are.

These ideas were crucial in extending our gaze beyond traditional notions of political activism and citizenship, and in enabling us to think about community as a political construct. This insight was especially important at a moment when prominent academic voices were hailing community, civil society, and social capital as the solution to all post-Cold War political ills, whether in the 'democratizing' societies of Eastern and Central Europe, or in the already thoroughly neoliberalized West (e.g. Cohen & Arato, 1992). While Robert Putnam-inspired celebrations of civil society granted religious organizations a role in societal renewal, other accounts continued to view them suspiciously, as naturally susceptible to intolerance—as if liberalism and secularism were somehow immune from orthodoxy, extremism, and violence. Indeed, the term 'bad civil society' (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001), coined by Lynn's colleagues at the University of Colorado, Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein, to refer to illiberal and anti-democratic hate groups, became applied widely to 'fundamentalist' religious groups, intensifying the othering of religious people and associations. Lynn sought neither to praise nor to condemn particular religious communities, but rather, to understand how religious claims and identities became woven into political life, and how people and associations might mobilize religious subjectivities toward a variety of ends, whether democratic or non-democratic.

Lynn's interest in religion as a field of social identity and activism, while appearing in her early work on economic restructuring, became more salient in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, when she launched a comparative study on activism among Arab-origin communities in the U.S. and Britain. Her conversations with Arab-origin activists revealed the contentiousness of religion as a public identity and illuminated the on-going production of ideas like private, public, and political through organizational activities (Staheli & Nagel, 2012; Nagel & Staheli, 2011). Some of her research participants, she found, sought to submerge or to make invisible their religious identities and to foster instead a broader, 'secular', hyphenated Arab identity that would allow them to follow the path of 'integration' laid by other immigrant groups. In advocating a secular identity, many of these individuals drew lessons from the violent sectarianism that plagued their countries of origin, arguing that placing faith safely in the private sphere was the only way to achieve societal cohesion; the secularist norms of liberal citizenship, they suggested, required the privatization of faith. Other respondents, however, did not feel the need to submerge faith. They highlighted instead the common commitments between Islam and Western liberalism around civil rights, political equality, and human rights, and they sought to construct 'Muslim' as a legitimate public identity—one capable of building solidarity across racial-ethnic lines (as well as nation-state boundaries). One strategy for creating a public Muslim identity among U.S.-based respondents was to re-cast Islam as

an Abrahamic faith, expanding the conception of America as a 'Judeo-Christian society', and challenging the idea that religion was best kept separate from political life.

In this and other work, Lynn widened the scope of 'the political' within political geography, disrupting mainstream understandings of politics, and re-locating citizenship and religion to the spaces of the everyday. In so doing, she drew attention to the fluidity and contested nature of the boundaries between religion and politics in 'secular' societies, providing political geographers a conceptual alternative to the aseptic relativism of multiculturalism and the inflammatory ethnocentrism of 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric. As well, she developed a critical vocabulary that helped geographers to engage with religiosity as a mode of community and an axis of social difference. In this, Lynn helped to create intellectual openings for a new generation of scholarship on the political geographies of religion, seen in the work of Matt Baillie Smith, Patricia Ehrkamp, Banu Gökarişel, Peter Hopkins, Lily Kong, Elizabeth Olson, and Anna Secor, among many others.

Lynn's work also provided geographers with a vocabulary and a set of conceptual tools to productively engage with scholars outside of the discipline on 'religious questions'. One of Lynn's last opportunities to collaborate with Lynn was at a conference in Amsterdam in December 2016 dedicated to the politics of religious tolerance. Already ill, Lynn was not able to submit her contribution to the edited volume that emerged from that event (Bialasiewicz and Gentile, 2019), but her paper initiated a key debate with political philosophers of religion at the conference. Drawing on the work she was conducting on NGOs and youth citizenship in Lebanon, Lynn described how 'religion plays complicated, ambiguous, and even contradictory roles in public life and in geopolitics', challenging but also supporting elements of liberal cosmopolitanism. She reminded the political philosophers present that religion can powerfully 'shape relations and modes of interaction that traverse spheres and that link the near and distant in myriad practices'. Here, Lynn was keen to move beyond reductionist accounts of sectarian conflict, religious extremism, and civilisational geopolitics, and to consider instead the working of intimacy-geopolitics—the everyday 'ways of being that attempt to counter division, conflict and insecurity' (Staheli, 2016).

Lynn was not a religious person. She occasionally spoke of her mother's evangelical Christian faith, but she clearly felt like an outsider to that faith tradition. Still, she took seriously people's beliefs, and she was attuned to the many ways that faith shaped and informed her research subjects' political commitments, their understandings of community, and their practices of citizenship. While she may not have been entirely comfortable in a church or mosque, she felt it was important to include the voices of religious people because, for Lynn, the experiences of the transcendent and the divine were not incongruous with politics or citizenship. She was, in this sense, an expert practitioner of feminist geography—a skilled field researcher able to build rapport across social and political differences. But we would venture that Lynn was not simply acting as a professional in her engagements with religious people. Lynn had a genuine and heartfelt desire to connect with people, to learn from their experiences, to consider how their moral values and their conceptions of a fair and just society related to her own. This made her a good scholar, but it also made her a good person. In this, she was a model for all of us, regardless of our backgrounds and beliefs.

Conflict of interest declaration

There is no conflict of interest.

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