Contributions of Gender Theorists to International Relations

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ALISON MAGUIRE, MAY 7 2009

Outline the Main Contributions of Gender Theorists to the Discipline of International Relations

In order to outline the main contributions of gender theorists to the discipline of International Relations it will first be necessary to examine the term 'gender' and to establish the relationship between gender, identity and feminism. Secondly, it would be useful to highlight the normative theoretical framework and ontology present within this discipline's dominant realist and neo liberal discourse, and identify some of the areas in which writers have sought to challenge these hegemonic assumptions and expand beyond traditional fields of enquiry. I will then discuss the ways in which the application of a 'gender lens' has affected this sphere of study, and assess its success as to the mainstreaming of gender as a normative perspective with which to evaluate and theorise politics on a domestic and international scale. Lastly, I will show that despite a discernable growth in the visibility of gender as an issue in I.R theory, there has been no revolution of inclusiveness. Rather, an increasing willingness to challenge the traditional norms, paradigms and pursuits of this discipline.

The term gender is often used interchangeably with that of sex. However, in the distinction between sex as a biological determinant and gender as a social construction (subject to various and differing forms and experiences in any given time or place) is an important acknowledgment of the diversity of personal and social identities that both men and women inhabit. The exploration of the social construction of femininity and masculinity exposes a power relationship in which women as a social category are typically under- represented, and gender difference politicised.[1] Gender identity and difference is a contested, subverted, queried and manipulated construct, the realms of which are used to justify, explain and bolster traditional and normalised approaches to international politics and theories of international relations. In response to this, feminist writers in particular, have sought to examine the unequal gender relations present in the interstate system, and assess the implications of the fact that most of the public world of the state and its international politics has been reserved to men.[2] However, gender theorists have not only challenged the conception of femininity and its role or use in the political arena, but have also identified and addressed the diversity of conceptions about maleness and the privileging of certain types of masculinity in contemporary politics. Thus, to an increasing body of writers, gender is identified as a fundamental consideration in the ontological and normative framework of International Relations theory, a consideration that was, and remains, largely ignored by the discipline.

In these traditional maxims of International Relations theory, exemplified by a focus upon states, the state system and a drawing on "politically powerful men's understandings as a source for comprehending and managing state behaviour"[3], there has been a silencing of women's and non elite men's voices that has led to a privileging of issues such as security, sovereignty and power in the conceptualisation of world politics. Arguably, this has contrived to exclude the relevance of the individual in seeking to understand global political discord and achieve some kind of global political harmony. Cynthia Enloe asserts that: rather than painting the world in broad brushstrokes, an understanding of the processes involved in the ending or prolonging of war requires:

A curiosity that pays attention to differences as well as similarities. And is an enterprise that rewards those who take seriously the experiences of ordinary women and men, who follow the breadcrumbs leading from national and

*international elite decisions back to the daily lives of people who seem to wield little political influence.**[4]***

Thus, Enloe makes a significant demand for a rejection of the traditional I.R. norms of content and methodology – shifting the emphasis from the sweeping analysis and state centrism of classical realist theory – to an interpretation of political experience that values the role of the powerless as political actors.

Critics of this view may point out that neo-liberal theories of co-operation in the anarchical state system already address the realist orthodox view, wherein the lives of the estimated 26 million people displaced by armed conflict in 2007[5] are viewed as an inevitable consequence of the militarism of conflict and peace. However, the liberalist, largely economic perspective conspires to classify gender issues as separate to those of sovereignty, power and state. However, paying attention to women and gender generates a debate that looks to move issues such as human rights, poverty, migration, and healthcare beyond the realms of marginal consideration to a new paradigm in which the epistemological and ontological basis of traditional I.R theory is challenged, and replaced with a normative framework that not only identifies 'where the women are', but also why they and 'feminised' men are subject to an inequality of power relations. Gender theorists can, therefore, be acknowledged as having contested the normative assumptions underpinning the realist – neo liberal debate.

There are examples of 'traditional' IR theorists seemingly accepting and even promoting a gendered account of power, conflict and peace. Often however, articles such as Fukuyama's "Women and the evolution of World Politics" that apparently assert the positive outcomes from a world system where morally superior women are in charge in a utopian world do little to promote feminist concerns, but rather compound existing characterisations of men and women in relation to power. Ann Tickner found that:

*Even though Fukuyama's feminized world is seemingly sympathetic// his message is in fact deeply conservative – offering one more iteration of the well-established argument that a 'realistic' view of international politics demands that 'real' men stay in charge.**[6]***

Associating idealistic notions of peace and morality with femininity, reinforces a stereotype of women as inherently ineffectual, unrealistic and irrational, thereby disenfranchising them from the power processes upheld by, and embodied in, male rationality.

In her essay Tickner emphasises that language used by men and women is important when discussing power.[7] This question of language as a tool of academic debate is interesting in that it serves to highlight the 'maleness' of language and its links to the rationality of power and the legitimising of gendered power differentials on the maintenance of the state system. In a feminist reading of language, the masculinity of language is exposed in the use of binary oppositions or dichotomous pairs: "unsurprisingly, in this pairing, men are associated with positive qualities and women with negative. Man is the norm, woman always the *other.*"[8] The link between sex and gender identity is formed in language and it plays a fundamental role in maintaining the dualism of associating men with rationality and female with irrationality.[9] Employing a male norm as a definition for rationality, such as the use of violence as a rational response to threat, is evidence, Judith Butler argues, that gender is constituted not by 'a founding act but rather by a regulated pattern of repetition'[10] that associates certain characteristics with each sex. Consequently, this language is utilized in the rhetoric of a patriarchal, hierarchical system to rationalise and normalise gender power differentials and the state system.

The importance of language as a reinforcement of norms links back to the theory of gender as a social construct – important in that it is part of societies constant influence, able to immerse children in, and imbibe them with, established norms. As Tickner and Fukuyama's debate emphasised, and as research into language shows – there is a perception of maleness as violent and aggressive, and femaleness as peace loving and conciliatory, that informs much of I.R's theoretical assumptions. Ulf Bjereld's 2001 article *'Children and the Gender Gap in Foreign Policy Issues'**[11]*** sought to ascertain at what age the opinion-related gender gap between men and women on issues surrounding war peace and the use of military violence, that previous studies had established exists, begins to manifest and where its origins lie. After taking into consideration the specific locality of the 251 Children interviewed and various other factors, it was found that "compared to adults, both girls and boys were significantly more pacifist

and moralistic"[12] and that, on most issues, the gender based opinion differences were smaller between children than between adults, but that boys 'undoubtedly changed the most'. In Bjereld's judgment, this lends credibility to a perspective that focuses on gendered differences of opinions on war and violence as originating, not in the realms of sexual difference, but in the unequal power relations between men and women. Reflecting the fact that generally women have fewer political and social resources than do men, and as a result men and women experience war, violence and fear differently.

This then, lends credence to the conception that, rather than peacefulness being an inherently feminine trait and violence and war as being masculine, it is the socially constructed relationships of power that inform women's and men's responses to hostilities, amity and resolution. For example: influential presumptions about male heroes fighting to defend vulnerable women and the 'motherland', feminine norms of conflict resolution that minimizes risk. Arguably these gendered presumptions also compel some scholars (both men and women) to fulfil and extrapolate entrenched gendered models of theorising about peace and war.

Important in any outline of the impact gender theorists have had on IR is a consideration of the 'life blood' of academia: funding, publication and citation. The presence of the dominant orthodox schools of thought as discussed earlier, suggests that in the inevitable scramble for funding, resources and publication, radical viewpoints are squeezed out and maintenance of the status quo and conventional dialogue is achieved in the process of citation, which favours a 'de facto' approach to legitimacy. Academic legitimacy rests on a foundation of sedimentary knowledge that receives constant reinforcement as these citations form a chain of re-iterated norms. However, Soreanu and Hudson, having traced the citation practices following one specific journals publication, see a positive outcome in this for feminist scholars. They reflect that, far from being marginal in the discipline of I.R, feminist writers have successfully synthesised a range of properties from various disciplines, and in doing so are "silently creating the conditions for a substantative reorganisation in the IR field".[13]

From these examples it can be seen that not only has gender and feminist theory challenged realist and liberalist thinking, it has also expanded the realms of what is considered to be relevant to I.R research beyond military, economic and even human rights considerations. Taking gender seriously has led to a necessary critique of the language, roles and rituals involved in academic endeavour itself.

The question of whether these inroads into the normative assumptions played out in the discipline of I.R are reflected in, and affective upon policy, issue awareness and social movements can perhaps be illustrated within the topic of gender mainstreaming. Following the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing an innovative call was made to the U.N and its signatory states to "mainstream gender issues across the policy process, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made on the effects on women and men respectively."[14] Although gender mainstreaming has been adopted and endorsed by European governments and organisations, and by international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, the "the rhetorical acceptance of mainstreaming obscures considerable diversity in both its timing and nature, (and that) the actual implementation of mainstreaming remains highly variable both within and across organizations."[15] Effectively, the commitment to gender mainstreaming exemplified in Beijing has not yet achieved the goal of "a world in which women and men share equally the enjoyment of basic capabilities, economic assets, voice and freedom from fear of violence."[16] In their 2006 ICRW report Mehra and Gupta acknowledge its many successes, but also describe gender mainstreaming as being "in crisis",[17] and identify, on the meta level: a lack of political will, inadequate financial resources and a too little gender expertise as fundamental too this.[18] Therefore, though gender has been accepted as an important consideration in relation to developing a new framework of policy for governments and institutions, the difficulty in transforming cultural, institutional and political maxims and ideologies is evident.

As with the discipline of International Relations, gender remains a partially accepted 'sub-division' within the world of policy and action it informs and reflects upon. The seminal work of writers such as Enloe and Tickner, emphasize that because the "dependence on feminizing women (exposes) that this world system is also dependent on artificial notions of masculinity: this seemingly overwhelming world system may be more fragile and open to radical change than we have been led to imagine", [19]there is a need to continue to promote a gendered analysis of all aspects of International Relations and persist in critiquing embedded conventional approaches. Even in the area of IR that is

most often identified with the privileging of identity issues – human rights, there is a tendency to:

*Articulate a set of universalised 'principled norms' (that) tend to focus on international law and the macro-picture of global governance, thereby neglecting the ways in which both state power and contemporary global governance actually play out in the particular contexts of households and communities.**[20]***

There is also, in the ontology of individualism, an inclination to atomise identity that has the effect of neglecting other concerns such as those of power relations. However, despite some of the changes of emphasis that can impede it, gender theory has undoubtedly contributed to the ability of International Relations as a discipline to generate a more comprehensive understanding of gender, and an acceptance of its importance in politics and world affairs.

I have shown that the development of gender theory has been important in altering the scope of the discipline of International Relations, and has led to re-visioning of its traditional paradigms. It has sought to draw attention to, not only the marginalisation of women, but also the diminishment of certain norms and values characterised as female or feminine. In its effort to illuminate the hegemonic, elite male privileging of normative ontology and epistemology, gender theory has extended its reach to include research into language, rituals, gendered power relations and other areas that fall outside of the traditional framework of IR theory. In doing so, gender theorists have attempted to establish new paradigms and re-interpret and contest the dominant theoretical perspectives. In this they have been successful to some degree, however there is still work to be done before the gendered and partial nature of academic endeavour is fully revealed or overcome.

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[2] J. Ann Tickner. In V. Spike Peterson,ed, *Gendered States*. (London: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1992), x.

[3] J. Ann Tickner, *Gendered States*, xi..

[4] Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After. Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War.* (London: University of California Press. 1993). 6

[5] United Nations Report on Global Trends – Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Detainees. http://wwwunher.org.statistics.485236672.pdf. Pg1. 05/11/08.

[6] J.Ann Tickner, *Why Women Can’t Run the World: International Politics according to Francis Fukuyama. In International Studies Review, Vol1 No.3* (Autumn,1999) Blackwell Publishing. (http://jstor.org/stable), 3. 01/12/08.

[7]J. Ann Tickner, *Why Women Can’t Run the World: International Politics according to Francis Fukuyama,3.*

[8]Alison Adam, *Artificial knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine*. (London: Routledge, 1998),107

[9] Alison Adam, *Artificial Knowing: Gender and the Thinking Machine.*125-127.

[10] As quoted by: Joanne P. Sharp, in, Nancy Duncan, ed, *Gendering Nationhood* .(London: Routledge, 1996), 98.

[11] Ulf Bjereld, *Children & the Gender Issue, In, Gender & Society, Vol 15, No.2.* (April 2001.)http://.sagepub.com.), 313.

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[15]Emilie Hafner-Burton & Mark A. Pollack. *Mainstreaming Gender,* 365.

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Written by: Alison Maguire
Written at: University of Wales, Swansea
Written for: Dr.Helen Brocklehurst
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