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Beyond Dichotomy: Conversations Between International Relations and Feminist Theory

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Ann Tickner's article in this journal, "You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists," seeks to generate a missing debate: between feminist students of international relations and what she denotes (1997:613) as "methodologically conventional IR scholars," who seek knowledge through scientific, or positivist, methodologies. Professor Tickner points out that the states at the heart of international relations theory are deeply gendered hierarchies, and that such hierarchies also structure transnational relations. Conventional definitions of "security" miss the real personal insecurity suffered by people, especially women, who are excluded from power, autonomy, and even from respect, as a result of gendered patterns of social relations. Tickner suggests a research agenda for understanding the connections that she asserts between these unequal social relations, on the one hand, and distributional outcomes and external security-seeking behavior, on the other. These are important contributions, and I hope that Tickner's thoughtful argument will provoke deep reflection and wide discussion.

The absence of sustained responses by established IR theorists frustrates Professor Tickner, for good reason. She suggests that one of the reasons for IR theorists' silence is ignorance of the contributions that feminist thinking has made. Another reason, however, may be that the politicization of debate on issues related to feminist scholarship has meant that IR scholars fear that if they engage seriously in this debate, they will not provoke a serious discussion but will instead become targets for *ad hominem* attacks on their motives. My own experience unfortunately provides some support for such fears. On the whole, feminist scholars met my own 1989 efforts to point up connections between institutionalist theory and feminist analysis with silence; the most prominent discussion (to my knowledge) accused me of attempts at manipulation and cooptation, but failed to deal with the substantive issues that I had raised (Weber, 1994). Weber's rhetoric about "good girls and bad girls" was amusing, but it did not constitute a serious attempt to discuss real issues.

Since the issues are important ones, and Tickner's article is a major statement, I have accepted the editors' invitation to engage once again in this conversation. My first response is to welcome work that has introduced concepts of gender into international relations. Clearly, gender permeates social life, and is likely therefore to have profound, and largely unnoticed, effects on the actions of states and on transnational relations. Tickner's book, *Gender in International Relations* (1992), is probably the most important work about gender and international relations to date, and certainly the pioneering feminist statement on the issue. Ann Tickner is a bridge-builder between scholars with broadly common purposes but very different preoccupations. Her work helps in an insightful way to cross barriers to synergistic syntheses of orientations in the study of world politics. At what is called, ironically in light of feminist theory, the "domestic" level, societies construct gendered roles,

whose impact on international and transnational behavior is virtually unknown to us, because we haven't studied it. Tickner is right to tell us that we need to do so. At the end of this essay, I will return to the research program that Tickner suggests and outline some possible directions that I think scholarly work, informed both by IR theory and by feminism, could take.

Three Misleading Dichotomies

Taking scholarly work seriously, however, involves not only trying to read it sympathetically, but also offering criticism of arguments that do not seem convincing. My starting point is to accept an insight of much feminist writing: conceptual dichotomies create misleading stereotypes. Professor Tickner mentions four: rational/irrational, fact/value, universal/particular, and public/private. As feminists point out, gender—the social construction of sexual differences—operates largely through the use of such stereotypes.

What I will argue here is that Professor Tickner herself relies too much on three key dichotomies, which seem to me to have misleading implications, and to hinder constructive debate. The first of these dichotomies contrasts “critical theory” with “problem-solving” theory. “Problem-solving [theory] takes the world as it finds it and implicitly accepts the prevailing order as its framework” (1997:619). The second dichotomy pits “hermeneutic, historically-based, humanistic and philosophical traditions” against positivist epistemologies modeled on the natural sciences. Finally, Tickner contrasts a view that emphasizes the social construction of reality with an atomistic, asocial conception of behavior governed by the laws of nature (1997:616, 618–9). International relations theory is portrayed as problem-solving, positivist, and asocial; feminist theory as critical, post-positivist, and sociological.

These dichotomies have some rhetorical force; arguably, recent international relations theory has been insufficiently critical, too committed to covering law epistemology, and too mechanistic and asocial, in its reliance on states as actors and on economic logic to analyze their behavior. But few major IR theorists fit the stereotype of being at the problem-solving, positivist, and asocial ends of all three dichotomies. As Tickner herself points out, Hans J. Morgenthau had a deeply normative purpose: to prevent the recurrence of war generated by ideologies such as fascism and communism. Since Morgenthau was a refugee from Nazism, he hardly accepted the prevailing world order of the late 1930s and early 1940s as the framework for his analysis! Kenneth N. Waltz, the leader in neorealist theory, has famously relied on “socialization” as a major (although insufficiently specified) process in world politics, which makes him a poor candidate for a proponent of “asocial” theories. And Stephen Walt—one of Tickner’s targets—has been highly critical of game-theoretic methodology.

The problem with Tickner’s dichotomies, however, goes much deeper. The dichotomies should be replaced by continua, with the dichotomous characterizations at the poles. Each analyst of world politics has to locate herself or himself somewhere along the dimensions between critical and problem-solving theory, nomothetic and narrative epistemology, and a social or structural conception of international relations. In my view, none of the ends of these continua are the optimal places to rest one’s perspective.

Criticism of the world, by itself, becomes a jeremiad, often resting implicitly on a utopian view of human potential. Without analysis, furthermore, it constitutes merely the opinion of one or a number of people. On the other hand, implicit or complacent acceptance of the world as it is would rob the study of international relations of much of its meaning. How could one identify “problems” without criticism at some level? The issue is not problem-solving vs. critical theory—a convenient device for discarding work that one does not wish to accept—but how

deeply the criticism should go. For example, most students of war study it because they hope to expose its evils or to control it in some way: few do so to glorify war as such. But the depth of their critique varies. Does the author reject certain acts of warfare, all warfare, all coercion, or the system of states itself? The deeper the criticism, the more wide-ranging the questions. Narrowly problem-solving work, as in much policy analysis, often ignores the most important causal factors in a situation because they are not manipulable in the short run. However, the more critical and wide-ranging an author's perspective, the more difficult it is to do comparative empirical analysis. An opponent of some types of war can compare the causes of different wars, as a way to help to eliminate those that are regarded as pernicious; but the opponent of the system of states has to imagine the counterfactual situation of a system without states.

The second dichotomy—positivist vs. post-positivist—is also misleading. There is a wide range of adherence, in international relations, to more or less nomothetic theoretical claims, and to aspirations of greater or less adherence to canons associated with natural science. Scientific success is not the attainment of objective truth, but the attainment of wider agreement on descriptive facts and causal relationships, based on transparent and replicable methods. Even those who seek scientific generalization recognize the importance of descriptive work, and of investigating issues that are not amenable to statistical analysis, due to their complexity, contingency, and lack of homogeneity between the units to be compared (King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994). No serious students of international relations expect to discover meaningful universal laws that operate deterministically, since they recognize that no generalization is meaningful without specification of its scope conditions.

The point is that a sophisticated view of science overcomes the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy, and forces the investigator to make interrelated choices about purposes, subject matter, and methods. One can recognize that knowledge is socially constructed without giving up on efforts to widen intersubjective agreement about important issues, and to specify more fully the conditions under which some important outcomes are more or less likely to occur. For instance, our current knowledge of the conditions under which various strategies in international crises lead to war or settlement (Gelpi, 1997; Huth, 1996) is surely an advance over aphorisms such as “to achieve peace, prepare for war,” or “deterrence does (or does not) work.” But it would be foolish to believe that one could understand the Cuban Missile Crisis simply on the basis of generalizations, however valid, about crisis management. Narratives, and an understanding of personal psychology, play an essential role in understanding unique events. Finally, the social-asocial dichotomy is misleading because social behavior consists of individual choices constrained by social, economic, and political structures, and by institutions. Choices are made on the basis of normative, descriptive, and causal beliefs, all of which are deeply socially constructed. It is a platitude that our beliefs are culturally conditioned and transmitted. Hence all human action is in a profound sense social. Yet as Marx said, people make their own history, but not “as they please.” Choices are made within structures of demography, material scarcity, and power—and within institutions that affect the incentives and opportunities available to actors, as well as constraining them.

It seems ill-advised to locate oneself on the extreme end of any of these three continua: it is not sensible to choose between critical and problem-solving theory; commitment to nomothetic, objective science and attention to particularity; emphasis on social construction of reality and on constraints—material, political, and institutional. Aspects of all of these foci of attention can enrich the study of international relations. On each continuum, trade-offs exist: movements along the continuum achieve gains on one dimension, but incur losses on another. Where to locate oneself depends, among other things, on the condition of world politics at

the moment, the state of our knowledge of the issues, and the nature of the problem to be investigated.

Research Directions

Recent constructivist work in international relations (Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996) has demonstrated how theoretical imagination and empirical exploration can be enhanced, and made more persuasive to the community of international relations scholars, by a commitment to a relatively conventional epistemology. As Katzenstein, Jepperson, and Wendt suggest, “[I]he literature is prone to conflate substantive and theoretical differences with methodological ones, as if a theoretical departure necessarily depends on some methodological uniqueness. It need not” (Katzenstein, Jepperson, and Wendt, 1996:68). Constructivist work in international relations has articulated new concepts, identified puzzles unexplained by previous theory, and begun to articulate interesting hypotheses about behavior. Since this work is exploratory, the concepts are not always clearly specified and the evidence is often fragmentary rather than comprehensive; but the procedures being followed are consistent with a broad conception of the scientific method. Other scholars, not previously committed to these views, are paying more attention to work of scholars such as Finnemore and Katzenstein than to arguments that conflate similar theoretical innovations with dismissal of the desirability of systematic, disciplined efforts to evaluate propositions with evidence.

Careful scientific work does not have to aggregate homogeneous units, much less use quantitative data. When events are unique—whether the subject is dinosaur extinction, a murder, or a particular path-dependent sequence of political actions—the investigator may have to act more like a detective than like a statistician. But the basic method of social science remains the same: make a conjecture about causality; formulate that conjecture as an hypothesis, consistent with established theory (and perhaps deduced from it, at least in part); specify the observable implications of the hypothesis; test for whether those implications obtain in the real world; and overall, ensure that one’s procedures are publicly known and replicable. Relevant evidence has to be brought to bear on hypotheses generated by theory for the theory to be meaningful.

Feminists give us wise advice to dispense with sexist dichotomies. I think that conversations among students of international relations—nonfeminist, feminist, neofeminist, quasi-feminist, and post-feminist—will be advanced if we extend this advice to common but misleading dichotomies about theory and method in our own discipline. We need more cogent contingent generalizations about international relations—scientific because based on publicly known methods and checked by a community of scholars, working both critically and cooperatively. These generalizations will not stand forever—no science does—but if successful they could command wider intersubjective agreement, forming the basis for more discriminating and subtle analysis. The questions asked, and the methods, will reflect our preoccupations and critical dissatisfactions, as members of particular societies at a particular time: hence the findings will indeed be socially constructed. Furthermore, insofar as these generalizations are worthwhile, they will not claim excessive comprehensiveness: events that follow pathways created by individual action are unlikely to be meaningfully explained by covering laws. Most of all, we should all be sufficiently humble to recognize that the points on which we have chosen to place our emphasis—the trade-offs we accept—are not privileged.

Ann Tickner refers to criticisms of feminist thinkers by international relations scholars for allegedly not having a research program, and suggests a response: a research program that links gendered hierarchies—domestically and transnationally—with classic external behavior, such as actions affecting war and peace. It seems

to me that such a research program could be enormously fruitful. We now have much reason to believe that democracies behave differently, in international relations, than autocracies. Do countries with highly inegalitarian gendered hierarchies behave differently from those with less inequality at home? Like democracies, are they less inclined to fight each other? Feminists can be interpreted, in neopositivist terms, as proposing a new explanatory variable for the study of international relations: the degree to which socially constructed gendered hierarchies are important. Analysis of the effects of gendered hierarchies could proceed by issue area, by historical time period, by country, or through a combination of the three.

Since we know that intentionality and consequences are not tightly linked in international relations, we should not assume that the consequences in international relations of more egalitarian practices within some societies will necessarily be benign. Supposing that increased gender equality leads to less aggression, we might well expect that countries with relatively less hierarchical internal structures would not fight each other. But their relationships with states with more inegalitarian gender relationships would need to be investigated. Perhaps states with less gender hierarchy could resolve conflict more easily; but it is also possible that they would be more easily bullied, or would become more moralistic, leading eventually to more serious crises and perhaps warfare. To continue with the democracy analogy, democracies are quite warlike toward nondemocracies, although they are disinclined to fight other democracies. It would be worthwhile to explore such questions, with an open mind about what the answers will be.

Comparable questions could be posed about transnational relations. To what extent do gendered inequalities within societies extend to transnational relations—as, for instance, in tolerating or even encouraging the operation of brothels near military bases, or in the hiring practices of Japanese-based multinational enterprises operating in the United States? Once again, however, questions will not be enough: feminist IR scholars will need to supply answers that will convince others—including those not ideologically predisposed to being convinced. Specifying their propositions, and providing systematically gathered evidence to test these propositions, will be essential: scientific method, in the broadest sense, is the best path toward convincing current nonbelievers of the validity of the message that feminists are seeking to deliver. We will only “understand” each other if IR scholars are open to the important questions that feminist theories raise, and if feminists are willing to formulate their hypotheses in ways that are testable—and falsifiable—with evidence.

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