

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #54

ANN TICKNER ON FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE, ENGAGING THE MAINSTREAM, AND (STILL) REMAINING CRITICAL IN/OF IR

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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Feminist IR is still often side-lined as a particularistic agenda or limited issue area, appearing as one of the last chapters of introductory volumes to the field, despite the limitless efforts of people such as Cynthia Enloe ([Theory Talk #48](#)) and J. Ann Tickner. She has laboured to point out and provincialize the parochialism that haunts mainstream IR, without, however, herself retreating and disengaging from some of its core concerns. In this *Talk*, Tickner elaborates—amongst others—on the specifics of a feminist approach to the philosophical underpinnings of IR; discusses how feminism relates to the distinction between mainstream and critical theory; and addresses the challenges of navigating such divides.

What is, according to you, the central challenge or principal debate in International Relations? And what is your position regarding this challenge/in this debate?

I think the biggest challenge for IR is that it is relevant and helps us understand important issues in our globalized world. I realize this is not a conventional answer, but too often we academics get caught up in substantive and methodological debates where we end up talking only to each other or to a very small audience. We tend to get too concerned with the issue of scientific respectability rather than thinking about how to try to understand and remedy the massive problems that exist in the world today. Steve Smith's presidential address to the ISA in 2002 (read it [here](#)), shortly after 9/11, reminded us of this. Smith chastised the profession for having nothing to say about such a catastrophic event.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about IR?

I've gone through quite a few transformations in my academic career. My original identity was as an International Political Economy (IPE) scholar; my first academic position was at a small liberal arts college (College of the Holy Cross) where I taught a variety of IPE courses. In graduate school I was interested in what, in the 1970s, we called 'North-South' issues, specifically issues of global justice, which were not the most popular subjects in the field. So I always felt a little out of place in my choice of subject matter. In the 1980s when I started teaching, IR was mostly populated by men. As a woman, one felt somewhat uncomfortable at professional meetings; and there were very few texts by women that I could assign to my students. I also found that many of the female students in my introductory IR classes were somewhat uncomfortable and unmotivated by the emphasis placed on strategic issues and nuclear weapons.

It was at about the time when I first started thinking about these issues, I happened to read [Evelyn Fox Keller](#)'s book *Gender and Science*, a book that offers a gendered critique of the natural sciences (read an 'update' of the argument by Keller [here](#), pdf). It struck me that her feminist critique of science could equally be applied to IR theory. My first feminist publication, a feminist critique of Hans Morgenthau's principles of political realism, expanded on this theme (read full text [here](#), pdf).

Teaching at a small liberal arts college where one was judged by the quality of one's work rather than the type of research one was doing was very helpful—because I could follow my own, rather non-conventional, inclinations. So I think my turn to feminism, after ten years in the field, was a combination of my own consciousness-raising and feeling that there was something about IR that didn't speak to me. Later, I was fortunate to be hired by the University of Southern California, a large research institution, with an interdisciplinary School of International Relations, separate from the political science department. When I arrived in 1995, the School had a reputation for teaching a broad array of IR theoretical approaches. The support of these institutional settings and of a network of feminist scholars and students, some of whom I discovered were thinking along similar lines in the late 1980s, were important for getting me to where I am today.

What would a student need (dispositions, skills) to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

It depends on the level of the student: at the undergraduate level, a broad array of courses in global politics including some economics and history. Language training is very important too, and ideally, an overseas experience. We need to encourage our students to be curious and have an open mind about our world.

At the graduate level, this is a more complicated question. The way you phrased the question 'to understand the world in a global way,' can be very different from training to become an IR scholar, especially in the United States. I would emphasize the importance of a broad theoretical and methodological training, including some exposure to the philosophy of science, and to non-Western IR if possible, or at least at a minimum, to try to get beyond the dominance of American IR, which still exists even in places outside the US.

Why should IR scholars incorporate gender in the study of world politics? What are the epistemological and ontological implications of adopting a feminist perspective in IR?

Feminists would argue that incorporating feminist perspectives into IR would fundamentally transform the discipline. Feminists claim that IR is already gendered, and gendered masculine, in the types of questions it asks and the ways it goes about answering them. The questions we ask in our research are never neutral - they are a choice, depending on the researcher's identity and location. Over history, the knowledge that we have accumulated has generally been knowledge about men's lives. It's usually been men who do the asking and consequently, it is often the case that women's lives and women's knowledge are absent from what is deemed 'reliable' knowledge. This historical legacy has had, and continues to have, an effect on the way we build knowledge. [Sandra Harding](#), a feminist philosopher of science, has suggested that if we were to build knowledge from women's lives as well, we would broaden the base from which we construct knowledge, and would therefore get a richer and more complex picture of reality.

One IR example of how we limit our research questions and concerns is how we calculate national income, or wealth—the kind of data states choose to collect and on which they base their public policy. We have no way of measuring the vast amount of non-remunerated reproductive and caring labour, much of which is done by women. Without this labour we would not have a functioning global capitalist economy. To me this is one example as to why putting on our gender lenses helps us gain a more complete picture of global politics and the workings of the global economy.

Feminists have also argued that the epistemological foundations of Western knowledge are gendered. When we use terms such as rationality, objectivity and public, they are paired with terms such as emotional, subjective and private, terms that are seen as carrying less weight. By privileging the first of these terms when we construct knowledge we are valuing knowledge that we typically associate with masculinity and the public sphere, historically associated with men. Rationality and objectivity are not terms that are overtly gendered, but, when asked, women and men alike associate them with masculinity. They are terms we value when we do our research.

In one of the foundational texts of Feminist IR, ‘You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists’ (1997, full text [here](#), pdf), you highlighted three particular (gendered) misunderstandings that continue to divide Feminists and mainstream IR theorists. To what extent do these misunderstandings continue to inform mainstream perceptions of Feminist approaches to the study of international politics?

I think probably they still do, although it’s always hard to tell, because the mainstream has not engaged much with feminist approaches. I’ve been one who’s always calling for conversations with the mainstream but, apart from the forum responding to the article you mention, there have been very few. In a 2010 article, published in the *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, I looked back to see if I could find responses to my 1997 article to which you refer. I found that most of the responses had come from other feminists. The lack of engagement, which other feminists have experienced also, makes it hard to know about the misunderstandings that still exist but my guess would be that they remain. However I do think there has been progress in accepting feminism’s legitimacy in the field. It is now included in many introductory texts.

The first misunderstanding that I identified is the meaning of gender. I would hope that the introduction of constructivist approaches would help with understanding that gender is social construction - a very important point for feminists. But I think that gender is still largely equated with women. Feminists have tried to stress that gender is also about men and about masculinity, something that seems to be rather hard to accept for those unfamiliar with feminist work. I think it’s also hard for the discipline to accept that both international politics as practice and IR as a discipline are not gender neutral. Feminists claim that IR as a discipline is gendered in its concepts, its subject matter, the questions it asks and the way it goes about answering them. This is a radical assertion for those unfamiliar with feminist approaches and it is not very well understood.

Now to answer the second misunderstanding as to whether feminists are doing IR. I think there has been some progress here, because IR has broadened its subject matter. And there has been quite a bit of attention lately to gender issues in the ‘real world’ - issues such as sexual violence, trafficking, and human rights. Of course these issues relate not only to women but they are issues with which feminists have been concerned. Something I continue to find curious is that the

policy and activist communities are generally ahead of the academy in taking up gender issues. Most international organizations, and some national governments are under mandates for gender mainstreaming. Yet, the academy has been slow to catch up and give students the necessary training and skills to go out in the world and deal with such issues.

The third misunderstanding to which I referred in the 1997 article is the question of epistemology. While, as I indicated, there has been some acceptance of the subject matter, with which feminists are concerned, it is a more fundamental and contentious question as to whether feminists are recognized as ‘doing IR’ in the methodological sense. As the field broadens its concerns, IR may see issues that feminists raise as legitimate, but how we study them still evokes the same responses that I brought up fifteen years ago. Many of the questions that feminists ask are not amenable to being answered using the social scientific methodologies popular in the field, particularly in the US. (I should add that there is a branch of IR feminism that does use quantitative methods and it has gained much wider acceptance by the mainstream.) The feminist assumption that Western knowledge is gendered and based on men’s lives is a challenging claim. And feminists often prefer to start knowledge from the lives of people who are on the margins – those who are subordinated or oppressed, and of course, this is very different from IR which tends toward a top-down look at the international system. One of the big problems that have become more evident to me over time is that feminism is fundamentally sociological – it’s about people and social relations, whereas much of IR is about structures and states operating in an anarchic, rather than a social, environment. I find that historians and sociologists are more comfortable with gender analysis, perhaps for this reason. I’m not sure that these misunderstandings are ever going to be solved or that they need to be solved.

Although Feminist methodology is often conflated with ethnographic approaches, in ‘What Is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions’ (2005, pdf [here](#)), you argued that there is no unique Feminist research methodology. Nonetheless, Feminist IR is well known for using an autoethnographic approach. What does this approach add to the study of gender in IR? What might account for the relative dearth of autoethnography in other IR paradigms?

I think it is important to remember that feminists use many different approaches coming out of very different theoretical traditions, such as Marxism, socialism, constructivism, postpositivism, postcolonialism and empiricism. So there are many different kinds of feminisms. If you look specifically at what has been called ‘second-generation feminist IR,’ the empirical work that followed the so-called ‘first generation’ that challenged and critiqued the concepts and theoretical foundations of the field, much of it, but not all, (discourse analysis is quite prevalent too), uses ethnographic methods which seem well suited to researching some of the issues I described earlier. Questions about violence against women, domestic servants, women in the military, violent women, women in peace movements– these are the sorts of research questions that demand fieldwork and an ethnographic approach. Because as I stated earlier, IR asks rather different kinds of questions, it does not generally adopt ethnographic methods. Feminists who do this type of ethnographic research tell me that their work is often more readily received and understood by those who do comparative politics, because they are more comfortable with field research. And since women are not usually found in the halls of power – as decision-makers. IR feminists are particularly concerned with issues having to do with marginalized and disempowered peoples’ lives. Ethnography is useful for this type of research.

I see autoethnography as a different issue. While the reflexive tradition is not unique to feminists, feminism tends to be reflectivist. As I said earlier, feminists are sensitive to issues about who the creators of knowledge have been and whose knowledge is claimed to be universal. Most feminists

believe that there is no such thing as universal knowledge. Consequently, feminists believe that being explicit about one's positionality as a researcher is very important because none of us can achieve objectivity, often called 'the view from nowhere'. So while striving to get as accurate and as useful knowledge as we can, we should be willing to state our own positionality. One's privilege as a researcher must be acknowledged too; one must always be sensitive to the unequal power relations between a researcher and their research subject – something that anthropology recognized some time ago. Feminists who do fieldwork often try to make their research useful to their subjects or do participatory research so that they can give something back to the community. All these concerns lead to autoethnographic disclosures. They demand a reflexive attitude and a willingness to describe and reassess your research journey as you go along. This autoethnographic style is hard for researchers in the positivist tradition to understand. While we all strive to produce accurate and useful knowledge, positivists' striving for objectivity requires keeping subjectivity out of their research.

Robert W. Cox ([Theory Talk #37](#)) famously distinguished two approaches to the study of international politics: problem-solving theory and critical theory. How does the emancipatory project of the latter inform your perspective of IR and its normative goals? And is this distinction as valid today as it was when Cox first formulated it, over 3 decades ago?

Yes I think it's still an important distinction. It's still cited very often which suggests it's still valid, although postmodern scholars (and certain feminists) have problems with Western liberal notions of emancipation. I see my own work as being largely compatible with Cox's definition of critical theory. Like many feminists, I view my work as explicitly normative; I say explicitly because I believe all knowledge is normative although not all scholars would admit it. What Cox calls problem-solving theory is also normative in the conservative sense of not aiming to changing the world. A normative goal to which feminists are generally committed is understanding the reasons for women's subordination and seeking ways to end it. It's also important to note that the IR discipline was borne with the intention of serving the interests of the state whereas academic feminism was borne out of social movements for women's emancipation. The normative goals of my work are to demonstrate how the theory and practice of IR is gendered and what might be the implications of this, both for how we construct knowledge and how we go about solving global problems.

Much of your work addresses the parochial scope and neopositivist inclination of International Relations (IR) scholarship, especially in the United States. What distinguishes other 'Western' institutional and political contexts (in the UK, Europe, Canada and Oceania) from the American study of IR? How and why is critical/reflectivist IR marginalized in the American context? What is the status of these 'debates' in non-Western institutional contexts?

With respect to the parochial scope of US IR, I refer you to a recent book, edited by Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver, *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*. It contains chapters by authors from around the world, some of whom suggest IR in their country imitates the US and some who see very different IRs. The chapter by Thomas J. Biersteker, ('The Parochialism of Hegemony: Challenges for 'American' International Relations', read it [here](#) in pdf) reports on his examination of the required reading lists for IR Ph.D. candidates in the top ten US academic institutions. His findings suggest that constructivism accounts for only about 10% of readings and anything more radical even less. Over 90% of assigned works are written by US scholars. The

dominance of quantitative and rational choice approaches in the US may have something to do with IR generally being a subfield of political science. Critical approaches often have different epistemological roots. And I stress ‘science’ because while IR is also subsumed in certain politics departments in other countries, the commitment to science, in the neopositivist sense, is something that seems to be peculiarly American. Stanley Hoffman’s famous observation, made over thirty years ago, that Americans see problems as solvable by the scientific method is still largely correct I believe (read article [here](#), pdf). I find it striking that so many formerly US based and/or educated critical scholars have left the US and are now based elsewhere – in Canada, Australasia, or Europe.

Biersteker sees the hegemony of American IR extending well beyond the US. But there is generally less commitment to quantification elsewhere. This may be due to IR’s historical legacy emerging out of different knowledge traditions or being housed in separate departments. In France, IR emerged from sociological and legal traditions and, in the UK, history and political theory, including the Marxist tradition, have been influential in IR. And European IR scholars do not move as freely between the academy and the policy world as in the US. All these factors might encourage more openness to critical approaches. I am afraid I don’t know enough about non-Western traditions to make an informed comment. But we must recognize the enormous power differentials that exist with respect to engaging IR’s debates. Language barriers are one problem; having access to research funds is an enormous privilege. Scholars in many parts of the world do not have the resources or the time to engage in esoteric academic debates, nor do they have the resources to attend professional meetings or access certain materials. The production of knowledge is a very unequal process, dominated by those with power and resources; hence the hegemonic position of the US that Biersteker and others still see.

As methodological pluralism now retains the status of a norm in the field, John M. Hobson recently argued that the question facing IR scholars no longer revolves around the debate between positivist and postpositivist approaches. Rather, the primary meta-theoretical question relates to Eurocentrism, that is, ‘To be or not to be a Eurocentric, that is the question.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Given my answer to the last question, I am not sure that methodological pluralism has reached an accepted status in the US yet. However, John M. Hobson has produced a very thoughtful and engaging book that asks very provocative questions. Unfortunately, I doubt many IR scholars in the US have read it and would be rather puzzled by Hobson’s claim. But certainly the Eurocentrism of the discipline is something to which we should be paying attention. I find it curious how little IR has recognized its imperial roots or engaged in any discussion of imperialism. As Brian Schmidt and other historical revisionists have told us, when IR was borne at the beginning of the twentieth century, imperialism was a central preoccupation in the discipline. Race also has been ignored almost entirely by IR scholars.

To Hobson’s specific claim that the important question for IR now is about being or not being Eurocentric rather than about being positivist or postpositivist, I do have some problems with this. I am concerned with Hobson’s painting positivism and postpositivism with the same Eurocentric brush. Yes, they are both Eurocentric; but postpositivists or critical theorists – to use Cox’s term – are at least open to being reflective about how they produce knowledge and where it comes from. If one can be reflective about one’s knowledge it does allow space to be aware of one’s own biases. Those of us on the critical side of Cox’s divide can at least be reflective about the problems of Eurocentrism, whereas positivists don’t consider reflexivity to be part of

producing good research. Nevertheless, Hobson has made an important statement. He has written a masterful and insightful book and I recommend it all IR scholars.

Last question. Your recent work is part of an emergent collective dialogue that aims to ‘provincialize’ the Western European heritage of IR. In a recent article entitled ‘Dealing with Difference: Problems and Possibilities for Dialogue in International Relations’ you highlight the need for non-Eurocentric approach to the study of IR. In IR, what are the prospects for genuine dialogue across methodological and geographical borders? Where do you see this dialogue taking place?

This is a very tough issue. There are scholars like Hobson who talk about a non-Eurocentric approach, but given what I said about resources, about language barriers, and about inequalities in the ability to produce knowledge, this is difficult. As I’ve said at many times and in many places, the power difference is an inhibitor to any genuine dialogue. So, where is dialogue taking place? Among those, such as Hobson, who advocate a hybrid approach that takes other knowledge traditions seriously and sees them as equally valid as one’s own. And mostly on the margins of what we call ‘IR’, where some very exciting work is being produced. Feminism is one such site. Feminist approaches are dedicated to dialogic knowledge production, or what they call knowledge that emerges through conversation. Feminists believe that theory can emerge from practice, listening to ordinary people and how they make sense of their lives. I also think that projects like the one undertaken by Wæver and Tickner (which is still ongoing) that is publishing contributions from scholars from very different parts of the world is crucial.

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Related links

- [FacultyProfile at American University](#)
- Read Tickner’s *Hans Morgenthau’s Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation*(Millennium, 1988) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Tickner’s *You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists* (1997 International Studies Quarterly) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Tickner’s *What Is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions* (2005, International Studies Quarterly) [here](#) (pdf)

