

# The Feminist Perspectives on Power

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/13/what-have-feminist-perspectives-contributed-to-our-understanding-of-power-in-the-discipline-of-international-relations/>

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### **What have Feminist Perspectives Contributed to our Understanding of Power in the Discipline of International Relations?**

It would require a quite unfair generalisation of this diverse field of study in order to address within the confines of this essay the contribution to the discipline of 'Feminist International Relations Theory' as a whole. I begin then, by considering what is similar about feminist approaches to the discipline. Although feminist theorists adopt quite different perspectives and methods for understanding international relations, all agree that women are variously missing, ignored or excluded from international politics. Feminist theorists examine the constituent parts of international relations and expose how these are deeply gendered and, conversely, how gender relations are completely ignored by the discipline. They therefore posit that the discipline ought to engage with the issue of gender as integral to the subject matter, and as having a significant impact on men and women's lives as a result. Recent developments in feminist theory have also introduced "work on the significance of inter-sectional identities, post-colonial critiques of western feminism, and gender as a legitimating discourse"[1].

Traditional theories assert that international relations ought to be understood solely in terms of the masculine concepts state, sovereignty, war and power. Feminine notions, primarily in the domestic sphere, are not considered to be relevant. As such the dominant Realist and Liberal theories in the discipline maintain a sharp dichotomy between interstate, political, public, masculine and intrastate, domestic, private, feminine and assign significance only to the former, thereby disregarding the impact of the latter. It is not possible in the space of this essay to explore in depth the ways in which all of these concepts are exposed as gendered by feminist theorists, and the significance that so doing has for the discipline of international relations. Power emerges as central in traditional theories, to both the study and practice of international relations. In this essay I will explore how feminist theorists have interpreted the concept of power, as it exists in traditional international relations theories, as it manifests in international order and how it might be reformulated to better accommodate gender into the discipline, allowing a deeper and more accurate understanding of the international.

The discipline's static notion of power may be one reason for its inability to predict or explain recent major changes in world order; a significant example of this was the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Because of its narrow conception of power, traditional theorists could not explain how a non-state actor with relatively little power on the international stage, could undertake an operation against the United States, a global 'superpower', subsequently changing the focus of foreign policy throughout the West, granting (rhetorically, at least) defensive legitimacy to the 'War on Terror' and forcing the discipline to rethink its pre-existing ideas about where power lies in the international arena. Feminist perspectives may shed some light on this changing dynamic, since power is conceived not just narrowly as centralised political, military or economic might, but as more widely emerging from within states, and particularly from the margins.

Feminists often contend that traditional theories conceptualise power as power over others. One such interpretation is Tickner's feminist analysis of Morgenthau's Six Principles of Political Realism. She observes that Morgenthau's principles are gendered from the outset, as he builds his theory from a concept of human nature which he describes using distinctly masculine language – "To begin his search for an objective, rational theory of international politics,

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which could impose order on a chaotic and conflictual world, Morgenthau constructs an abstraction which he calls political man, a beast completely lacking in moral restraints".[2] Morgenthau constructs a theoretical, abstract political wilderness in which rational men compete for power in an anarchical environment. This abstraction is analogised with the state, thereby forming a notion of politics separate from considerations of the personal and domestic. Morgenthau's picture of international relations is therefore based upon a foundation of distinctly masculine concepts of abstract, universal, rational politics, divorced from feminine notions of the personal, emotional and private. This dichotomy "is based on the need for control; hence objectivity becomes associated with power and domination".[3]

Tickner suggests that Morgenthau's efforts to dichotomise and objectivise the study of international relations masculinises his theory, and defines the notion of power around which his principles are based. These realist foundations give rise to a male-gendered state which "for survival depends on a maximisation of power"[4], and the power of which is based on domination of the other.

Enloe adds another interesting feminist perspective on traditional theories' notions of power. She notes that, "by concentrating so single-mindedly on what is referred to euphemistically as the "center", scores of analysts have produced a naive portrait of how international politics really... works"[5]. Traditional theorists assert that the only power relevant to the study of international relations is that of the state. Realists are interested primarily in military power and degree of state security, liberalists on the market, on institutions and so on. In common to all is that power is concentrated at state level whilst power from within the state, and particularly from the margins of society, is disregarded.

Enloe highlights two issues with the state-centric concept of power. First, she notes that power "only exists within a relationship. So omitting myriad strands of power amounts to exaggerating the simplicity of the entire political system"[6]. Put simply, by considering only what is going on at state-level, theorists are likely to overlook the many other areas where power lies in international relations and potentially to draw incorrect assumptions about cause and effect as a result. Enloe's adds that "A second consequence of this presumption – that margins stay marginal, the silent stay voiceless, and ladders are never turned upside down – is that many orthodox analysts of international politics are caught by surprise"[7]. This emphasises an issue raised previously, that traditional theories are unable to account for major shifts in international relations because of their singular focus on the power of the state.

By way of example of the misjudgement of the state-centric view as expounded by Enloe, consider the origins of the Arab Spring. These revolts led to enormous upheaval in the Middle East, the repercussions of which are still being felt throughout the world – yet these were not caused by the exercise of state power. Rather the protests were sparked by the self-immolation of an oppressed market stall holder, whose ill treatment by the police and government caused outrage amongst others in the margins of society. This sentiment was spread throughout the region, again not through state direction, but via social media where similarly oppressed peoples empathised with the plight of the Tunisians and joined in the backlash against their own oppressors. If the analyst of the recent international politics of the Middle East concerns themselves only with power-shifts at state level, they cannot hope to make sense of recent events. In this case, the cooperative power of marginalised peoples was the driver for change, and the international relations theorist might have been better able to predict the Arab Spring had he taken note of shifts in power at the domestic, private level.

The observations above pertain primarily to traditional theories along realist lines; power as state-led domination framed in terms of security maximisation. Yet as mentioned above, military strength is not the only measure of state power employed by orthodox theories, particularly not by those in the liberal tradition. As we move further from the World Wars and the Cold War into an era of globalisation, we see a shift in focus towards power measured in terms of a state's position in the International Political Economy (henceforth, IPE). How does a feminist perspective on the IPE impact upon a traditional understanding of international relations? Pettman writes:

The IPE reconstitutes identities and citizenship rights along with labour and productive relations. In these circumstances, it is impossible to separate foreign and domestic politics, or the economic from the politics or social. This necessitates a rethinking of notions of state, sovereignty and security in IR. It demonstrates, too, that the global

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political economy segments the changing international division of labour along nationalised, racialised and ethnicised as well as class and gender lines.[8]

Pettman argues that if we do not take gender into account when analysing the changing IPE we cannot possibly hope to make sense of it. The male labour which is accounted for in traditional theories does not and cannot exist in isolation of women's unpaid labour in the domestic sphere. Additionally, women increasingly account for a large percentage of unpaid and poorly paid labour in both the developing and developed world (and across these boundaries in the case of transnational companies' outsourcing of labour, for example). By concentrating only on masculine labour in analysis of the IPE and ignoring feminine contributions, traditional theorists also disregard marginalised peoples who are similarly un- or under-paid, yet who are integral to the status quo of the IPE. Hence, traditional analyses are gendered and present an inaccurate representation of power-relations within the IPE. Pettman's contention above is that to correct this misconception, power ought to be reformulated to take into account the changing nature of the division of labour in a globalising world.

What do these feminist observations about the nature of power as conceptualised in traditional theories mean for the discipline as a whole? Power is interpreted as state-centric, masculinised and understood as domination or power over others. According to the feminist perspective, this formulation of power is misleading as it ignores the oppressed other and the power relations required to keep them there, and means that traditional theories disregard the many strands of power emerging from shifting gender, class and ethnic relations in the margins of society that can impact upon international relations alongside the central power of the state. Traditional theories' reliance upon these conceptions of power therefore amounts to an inaccurate and inapplicable explanation of the processes and patterns of international relations.

In order to rectify this misinterpretation of power, feminism offers a number of insights into how power may be reconceptualised to be more accurately representative of where power comes from in international politics. First, the feminist perspective contends that in order to generate a more inclusive understanding, theories of international relations ought to place less emphasis on the dichotomies it has traditionally created in order to separate different activities within social, political and economic life into spheres that are and are not relevant to its purpose. The classic false dichotomy raised by feminist theorists is that of the private or personal, versus the public and political. That orthodox international relations theories exclude domestic considerations from their understanding also excludes women, and narrows the field of enquiry of the discipline to only male-dominated, male-gendered high politics. Feminist theorists argue that such dichotomies ought to be broken down in order for the discipline to better understand where power is located in international relations. A significant contribution of feminist perspectives to the discipline has been to raise the issue that traditional theories not only do not include women, but cannot hope to do so unless theoretical frameworks are substantially reworked. Peterson writes:

....feminists have exposed the contradictions of 'adding women' to constructions that are defined in terms of masculinity, such as formal, politics, public authority, economic power, rationality and freedom. Insofar as fundamental dichotomies are historically gender-coded and structurally oppositional, 'adding women' requires changing the meaning... of 'given' categories in Western thought and practice.[9]

Traditional theories therefore would need to rework the foundations and concepts of their understanding of international relations in order to accommodate an understanding of power which is not so singularly state-centric and based on domination.

If we accept that traditional theories' methods lead to a skewed portrayal of power, how then does the feminist suggest that the analyst understands where power comes from, and how it impacts upon international politics? Enloe suggests that in order to fully appreciate the causes of the observable effects within the changing international system, we need to reflect not only upon top-down power exercised by the state, but bottom-up and lateral power-relations. She contends that "It is only by delving deeper into any political system, listening more attentively at its margins, that we can accurately estimate the powers it has taken to provide the state with the apparent stability that has permitted its elite to presume to speak on behalf of a coherent whole".[10] Feminist theory challenges the international relations analyst to understand power as integral not only to the maintenance of world order by and

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between states, but also within states as legitimising and stabilising of them.

Following from these observations about the nature of power in international relations, feminist theorists posit new understandings about the exercise of power. These have included framing power in terms of cooperation, as opposed to domination. This reformulation has been applied in terms of the way that questions of power in international relations are approached (that is, the methodology employed by the analyst), and in terms of recognising the impact of cooperative power alongside the power as domination understanding which, according to feminist critiques, is the more widely studied within the discipline.

In terms of methodology, feminist scholars recognise the importance of including women's perspectives and accommodating 'feminine' viewpoints into the methods with which the discipline is approached. Weldon, for example, endorses a collectivist approach[11] to the study of international relations, whereby knowledge is gained through interpretation of the perspectives of particular groups (for example women in specific communities) with views pertinent to the international phenomenon being studied. Standpoints are recognised as emerging by virtue of membership of a group, rather than from the individual perspective, since "They emerge from interaction among marginalized group members, from discussion of their lives....", and, "...the relation between marginalized standpoints and dominant standpoints is critical for advancing our collective understanding of the problems that interest us"[12]. Applied to the study of power, it is clear that such an approach will provide significant information about power-relations within communities which when considered alongside observations of power-relations between oppressor and oppressed, state and citizen and so on, will enhance the analyst's understanding of power in international relations.

Feminist theorists also emphasise the importance of cooperation between individuals within states, and between states themselves, as forms of feminine power that are not recognised by orthodox analysts. Tickner writes, "Power as domination and control privileges masculinity and ignores the possibility of collective empowerment, another aspect of power often associated with femininity".[13] She does not presume to suggest that traditional theories are wrong in their understanding of power in international relations. Rather, the point is that because of the gendered nature of the discipline, power that emerges through cooperation is overlooked, and not understood as power at all. The example of the Arab Spring uprising cited earlier is one which exemplifies the exercise of collective power having a profound effect on international politics, yet we may apply this feminist understanding to interstate power relations also. Conceived of in traditional terms, it may reasonably be presumed that power lies only with the states that have the strongest economy and military, and dominate weaker states. But does this present a complete portrayal of interstate relationships? If we take a feminist perspective, power relations within the international take on a quite different shape and one which more inclusively represents where power lies. There are many cases in the history of international relations in which smaller states cooperate and form alliances, working together to generate a measure of power which sets them collectively on a par with dominant individual states, for example the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The language of the ASEAN Charter further indicates the collective, 'feminine' mode of power employed by the organisation; one of its aims, for example, is to "promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building"[14].

I have concentrated here primarily on feminist criticisms and reinterpretations of traditional notions of power, since this has been a particularly central yet contentious concept in the study of international relations. What feminist theorists have contributed to the subject is to highlight how traditional theorists' understanding of power is narrowly state-centric, top-down and gendered. They have shown how traditional concepts of power concentrate on masculine notions of power as domination and disregard power emerging from the margins of society, or through cooperation between the dominated. What this adds to the discipline is to rework foundational concepts to make them less gender-biased and more representational. It urges traditional theorists to rethink the boundaries of their enquiry to take account of power relations emerging from the margins, to provide a more accurate explanation of what is going on in international relations. Whether these considerations will be taken up by international relations scholars remains to be seen, as feminism currently remains "categorized as a critical voice, rather than a mainstream approach"[15] within the discipline. However, feminism's contribution to international relations ought not to be overlooked or underestimated, since expanding its understanding of power may help to remedy the discipline's historical inability to

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predict or account for phenomena which have drastically impacted upon international relations.

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[1] Hutchings (2008) p.103

[2] Tickner (1988) p.432

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Enloe (2004) p.19

[6] Ibid., p.23

[7] Ibid., p.24

[8] Pettman (1996) pp.162-3

[9] Peterson (1992) p. 194

[10] Enloe (2004) p. 42

[11] Weldon (2006)

[12] Ibid. P. 72

[13] Tickner (1988) p. 438

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[14] ASEAN Charter (2007), <http://www.asean.org/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>, p.5 (accessed 5 December 2012)

[15] Hutchings (2008) p. 105

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