The Growth and Future of Feminist Theories in International Relations

J. Ann Tickner
Professor of International Relations
University of Southern California

An Interview with Sarah Buchwalter, Jesse Finklestein, and Louise Sherman
Providence, RI, 8 October 2003

J. Ann Tickner is a Professor in the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California. She was also director of USC's Center for International Studies from 2000-2003. Her most recent book is entitled Gendering World Politics, Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era, *published by Columbia University Press (2001). She is currently engaged in a writing project on feminist methodologies for IR.*

***Brown Journal of World Affairs*:** What has been your overall personal experience as a woman feminist theorist in the field of International Relations?

J. Ann Tickner: I have certainly found the experience very rewarding. It has been wonderful to be part of a community of scholars who are building a new approach in the discipline of International Relations (IR). Feminist approaches got started at the end of the 1980s so we've had about 12 or 13 years and it's been a very exciting and intellectually stimulating time. In 1989, I spent some months at the London School of Economics and it was very interesting that there were scholars and graduate students there who were beginning to think along the same lines, but independently of those of us in the United States. About the same time Jindy Pettman wrote a feminist critique of IR in the *Australian Journal of International Affair*s. It was intriguing that, in three different parts of the world, similar themes were emerging at about the same time.

Since that time there's been some great work in feminist international relations

Copyright © 2004 by the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*

that critiques the discipline from a gendered perspective and articulates some new feminist approaches. There is now a growing body of empirical work that looks at global issues from a feminist perspective and highlights research about women. There are a lot of wonderful scholars in this field and it's been a privilege to be a part of it.

***Journal*:** How has your work evolved throughout your career? How has this process been affected by the way in which your theories are viewed in the greater international community?

Tickner: When I was a graduate student in political science at Brandeis University, the potential dissertation topics that interested me were rather different from mainstream IR topics. I was always concerned with issues of justice, human rights, and development, particularly with respect to North/South relations. Until Robert Keohane came to Brandeis—well after I had begun the program—I couldn't find anybody who was willing to supervise my dissertation. My choice of topics was motivated in part by Johan Galtung—a famous Norwegian peace researcher—who, at that time, was writing about self-reliant development. Galtung defined self-reliance as small-scale economic and political development that emerged from the grass roots. So I ended up writing this rather unusual dissertation, which combined political theory and international political economy. I analyzed the political thinking of Thomas Jefferson and Mahatma Gandhi in terms of their views on self-reliant development. I compared the early development of the United States with post-independence India. I concluded that, in both countries, power politics won out over the type of small-scale development favored by Jefferson before he became president and by Gandhi. This sounds as though it is a long way from feminist IR, but, looking back, I was always concerned with marginal voices and looking at global politics from the ground-up. My work was always rather far from the mainstream of the discipline. Thus, I moved easily from this earlier work to feminist IR, which is concerned with many of the same issues.

My interest in feminism began in the mid-1980s when I was teaching at Holy Cross College, a hospitable environment in which to do non-mainstream work. Each year I taught the introductory undergraduate IR course for our majors. This was during the Cold War so there was a heavy emphasis on security issues and nuclear strategy. I noticed that a number of my female students would come to my office and say, "I'm just not cut out for this kind of stuff." When I asked them to explain why, it would often come down to the fact that they thought the male students were somehow more qualified to talk about weapons and military strategy. Often they felt disempowered around these issues. In trying to understand why they felt this way when many of them did very well in the course, I began to look at some feminist work in other fields to find the answer to this puzzle.

The first book I read that helped me with this puzzle and really influenced my thinking about how IR is a masculine gendered discipline was Evelyn Fox Keller's *Reflections on Gender and Science*. It is a wonderfully perceptive feminist critique of the natural sciences as gendered masculine. When I read the book it made me think that a lot of what Keller had to say about the natural sciences would actually apply to IR. By this I mean the way we construct theories in IR and how we evaluate them. I then started reading more feminist theory, but feminist theory from other disciplines, because feminist IR theory did not really exist at that time. My book, *Gender in International Relations,* was the first singly authored feminist text that critiqued the discipline from a gendered perspective. While, of necessity, I constructed my critique out of feminist theory from other disciplines, I also tried to seriously engage with IR. I have always tried to acknowledge, and engage with, the things that IR can tell us, but there are many things we need to know that it doesn't tell us.

***Journal*:** What are the themes of your current project?

Tickner: I am undertaking a writing project about feminist research practices for IR. I would like to direct it towards graduate students who, when they want to take up topics having to do with gender, race, and other similar issues, find that there are not many methodological guidelines upon which they can draw–at least not in IR. We need more texts that focus specifically on feminist methodologies for IR.

***Journal*:** Where do you see feminist theory heading in the future?

Tickner: I am hopeful that feminist theory will continue to flourish, but I am also aware that it is hard for it to gain acceptance, particularly in what I am calling the mainstream of the discipline. As I said before, there is a lot of excellent "second generation" feminist empirical work, but there's also a lot of gate keeping in the discipline. At the moment there is an extremely tight job market in academia and I think that graduate students often feel pressured to adopt more mainstream approaches because they think it will help them find academic jobs. This is too bad because there's so much interest and demand on the part of students, not only for feminist IR, but also for other critical perspectives. The dominance of rational choice and game theory is very strong and the tolerance for critical perspectives, other than a certain form of constructivism, is not very high. It's worrisome.

***Journal*:** As feminist discourse and theories appear to be developing a greater legitimacy within the discipline of IR, how do you see feminist theory best implemented

beyond academics in the current world system? Do you think feminist theory runs the risk of being able to speak only to other academics?

Tickner: I was actually rather heartened that you thought that feminist theory had already achieved this legitimacy! It has amongst some people, but it is still rather precarious as I just mentioned. However, I do notice that a lot of introductory IR textbooks now have a section on feminist approaches. I think we are making progress.
I agree with you about the problems of writing for academics. However, I would like to emphasize that I think that more conventional IR theory is also written for academics. I don't think you can talk only about feminists being guilty of this, but maybe that's not what you meant. I think much of IR theory is quite esoteric, removed from the "real world" and hard for lay people to understand. In my view, it is quite astonishing how much of our discipline has so little to tell us about what's actually going on in the real world today.

Feminist theory is a tool for those who want to write about gendered perspectives in IR. It seems unfamiliar and esoteric to some because we are not used to gender analysis and, in IR at least, we don't have the requisite training for it. Gender is a sociological category; it doesn't fit well with the methodologies, more typical of mainstream IR, that draw on microeconomics and rational choice. With its focus on social relations, feminist theory is more akin to sociological perspectives.

A lot of the empirical IR feminist work that's now coming out, is grounded in the "real world." Or maybe we should talk about multiple "real worlds" since the worlds that feminists are writing about have frequently been hidden from the agendas of international politics. Take Kathy Moon's book which talks about military prostitution in Korea, or Elizabeth Prügl's work on home-based labor. Jacquie True has just finished a book on the effects on women of the post-Communist transition in the Czech Republic. And all of Cynthia Enloe's work is grounded in the "real world" although not the same "real world"—the world of states and states*men*—that IR has studied. While some feminist theory may be esoteric, much of it has evolved out of social movements and political practice. Frequently, feminists emphasize constructing theory out of practice, particularly the practice of everyday lives of ordinary people. I think that this is a strength of feminist theory. However, many IR theorists don't think that it's a legitimate way to build knowledge.

***Journal*:** How do you think the greater IR community perceives feminist theory?

Tickner: I don't think the greater IR community understands feminist theory very well. If you limit the question to mainstream IR, they honestly believe that feminist

approaches to IR are not "scientific". I think this is one of the greatest barriers to mutual understanding, and it's why I have begun to work on methodology. IR scholars will often say that it is really interesting to bring women into the picture but that you have to do it in a "scientific" way. The methodological problems are much harder to resolve than the legitimacy of the subject matter. I think that mainstream IR theorists are quite willing to think that they might learn something from the kind of work we do, but they find the way we go about doing it problematic.

Another problem is that gender is always equated with women. We must understand that gender is also about men and masculinity—something that is central to international politics since so much of the discipline is about men and masculinity. A big problem is that many people who don't understand feminist theory very well assume that it can tell us something about women, but they don't assume that it can tell us anything about global politics more generally. This is important but it is very hard for scholars who don't work in this perspective to understand.

Another obstacle is that gender is something that is very threatening to people's identities. When you talk about feminism or gender, many people feel personally threatened. It's often very difficult to get beyond this personal worry and move on to acknowledge that gender can help us understand the world better. Questions such as, "Oh, so you don't like men?" or "Are you trying to tell me that women are more peaceful than men?" continue to crop-up. But I am hopeful that this problem is diminishing in your generation now that feminist literature is included in more IR courses.

***Journal*:** What is the relationship between marginalization and women in feminist theory?

Tickner: Feminism *is* a perspective from the margins because so many women throughout the world have been marginalized. Not all women of course. Feminist theory emerges from what we might call a standpoint of those who are disempowered and subordinated but there are certainly other theories that come from similar standpoints - Marxist class analysis, for example. Indeed, certain strands of feminist theory draw on class analysis. Feminisms have emerged out of multiple standpoints. I do think it is useful to analyze the world from marginal perspectives because you see things that you do not see from the center. In fact, 1990s' feminism was very focused on difference - that is women's differing positionality, based on their race, class, ethnic origins, nationalities, etc.

The bigger worry for feminist theory is the danger of seeing women as victims who lack agency. Another related worry is that more empowered women speak for those who have less power and voice. For example, there has been much criticism by Third World feminists of Western feminists' inclination to speak for them. One of the

positive aspects of this is the emergence of African-American and post-colonial feminist theories. This has also been a big issue around the Middle East and U.S. foreign policy—the view that women "over there" are helpless victims to whom we need to reach out and offer our enlightened ideas. That is a difficult issue for feminists and women in the Middle East more generally who do need our support but who also ask us to respect their right to liberate themselves in ways that make sense for them.

***Journal*:** How does socialization influence how feminist theories are received in the IR community?

Tickner: The way we view the world is a matter of socialization that starts when we are very young. We are socialized into seeing the masculine as norm and the feminine as deviant from this norm. Hence feminism is viewed as suspicious because it demands radical change in the way we view and understand the world. The way to change this—the kinds of knowledge that we find useful to make sense of our world—is to have people socialized into seeing the world differently. But, since feminist agendas involved getting rid of gender hierarchies that exist in all societies, they have radical political implications, too.

***Journal*:** How does gender socialization apply to the political realm?

Tickner: Gender socialization is huge. Gender is a code word for the idea of masculinity as the ideal type—the way states and their citizens ought to behave, particularly in matters related to foreign policy. Too often our adversaries get portrayed as weak and feminized. And "they" often view "our" women as out of control. It's amazing how often these gender stereotypes are used by reactionary forces who, in the name of preserving culture, are actually enforcing greater control of women's lives. Often, when women become the bearers of cultural traditions, it means more repression.

***Journal*:** How would you compare the Islamic and secular nations based on their structure and views on women?

Tickner: In general I think that secularism is better for women although one must respect the views of those women who struggle for their rights using a sense of religious identity. There have been some very depressing reports from Iraq recently about how women feel much more insecure post-Saddam Hussein than before. I have read several stories in the *New York Times* which say that things are actually getting worse for women because, as religious fundamentalism is on the rise, women are being pushed back into

the private sphere and are suffering from increased sexual violence. Based on interviews with Iraqi women, the *Times* also stated that the occupation forces have not paid much attention to these problems. Even were there to be a more democratic Iraq we cannot assume that things will be better for women. Very often when you look at what are applauded as progressive transformational moments in history you find that things did not actually improve for women.

***Journal*:** Do you perceive the U.S. occupation of Iraq as a masculine approach to managing conflict?

Tickner: I would like to talk first about what "a masculine approach to managing conflict" might mean. Certainly no policy maker would use this term. That in itself is something we should find interesting.

Let me begin by discussing the definition of gender, which is very much encoded in our everyday lives and practices. We all know what masculine means but we are not called upon to define it very often. Gender is about a set of relational characteristics that we associate with masculinity and femininity—characteristics such as power, autonomy, rationality, and agency are seen as typically masculine. Other characteristics, such as weakness, dependency, emotion and passivity, are associated with femininity. However, these are not necessarily attributes of individual women and men. In fact, one of the exercises that I do with my undergraduates, who often have never consciously thought about gender in these terms, is to ask them to come up with lists of characteristics they would associate with masculinity and femininity. I write them on the board in two columns. When I ask them which characteristics they identify with, most of the students will identify with the masculine ones, even though the majority of them are women. But they know that these are the characteristics they should display to be successful in the public sphere. So we all know what masculinity means – the norms to which we aspire in our public lives and which come to be seen as universal.

However, I would like to point out that when you say a "masculine approach," it's not *the only* masculine approach. It's what I and others have called "hegemonic masculinity." It's this sort of masculinity that we don't have to explain. We know that it is something that we should try to live up to. But most people don't act this way, including many men who often feel quite uncomfortable with trying to "act like a man". Nevertheless, it legitimates certain ways of behaving and delegitimates others including other forms of masculinity. It is interesting to map these hegemonic masculine characteristics onto the international behavior of states. To me, this is a big problem. It's not that these ways of acting—seeking power, being autonomous—are always bad, but it does tend to delegitimate other valid ways of behaving that use more cooperative, less

power-centered strategies. And often these alternative ways for states to behave are judged inferior by being associated with women and femininity.

I think that the way that we're going to get beyond this problem is by questioning these gender stereotypes. We must be able to acknowledge that, while autonomy is important, there may be times when more interdependent, less autonomous, more multilateral strategies might be more appropriate. If you pay attention to academic and media accounts of foreign policy, it's amazing how much of it is described and evaluated in these gendered terms. I ask my students to analyze newspaper articles in terms of this gender coding. They find it all over the place although often they say that they had never noticed it before. Feminism is all about questioning what we normally take for granted.

So to get back to your question, yes, I do think that the war in Iraq is a masculine approach. The emphasis on a strong military response closes off other more conciliatory options. This is not the same thing as saying that men always favor the use of force while women always favor more peaceful responses. Women supported this war, too, although there was a significant gender gap on the issue, at least until the war started. What I am saying that we are *all* socialized into regarding masculine norms as the correct way to operate—particularly in matters of foreign policy. This has the negative effect of shutting off other options. And the framing of the war on terrorism as good versus evil reflects the kind of dichotomous thinking that feminists find deeply problematic, as I have illustrated with my definition of gender. Feminists have written a great deal about the dangers of either/or categorizations and the tolerance for ambiguity, both of which could be useful here.

***Journal*:** One of your arguments in your article "Feminist Perspectives on 9/11" was that 9/11 happened in part because al-Qaeda thought the United States was becoming 'feminine' and thus vulnerable. How can you incorporate a feminist perspective into current discourse about the war on terror?

Tickner: I don't think that this was the whole reason why it happened although I don't think that al-Qaeda expected such a massive response from what it perceived as a country unwilling to fight, a view that was often articulated through reference to the "feminization" of the United States. And Bin Laden used gender coding to rally his supporters behind fighting against "weak, wimpy, feminized" Westerners. But he also talked about Westerners as crusaders, which isn't a feminized image. The gender messages were very strong but they were very complicated.

And we feminize Islamic nations. Our foreign policy plays on the notion of feminizing the "Other", but only certain others. We did not feminize the Soviet Union to the same extent. They were our adversaries, but they were rational people to whom we

could talk sensibly about not blowing each other up. This selective feminization of other nations is quite racial—we tend to feminize non-white nations. There is a fascinating literature about the gendering of colonialism: for example, the British discourse of nineteenth century imperialism was highly gendered with those who were colonized frequently depicted in gendered feminine terms.

An interesting complication today is that, as I said, "they" are also feminizing "us." To quote Osama bin Laden, "Our brothers who fought in Somalia saw wonders about the weakness, feebleness, and cowardliness of the U.S. soldier." In this speech, Bin Laden goes on to berate the U.S. military for having women in it. There's a lot in the rhetoric of al-Qaeda about the West being weak and feminized. And there's a lot of talk in the Middle East about the dangers posed by liberated western women that serves to police middle eastern women and keep them out of public life.

But we must remember that religious fundamentalist discourses of all faiths, Christian as well as Muslim, inside as well as outside the United States, talk about the dangers of the United States becoming feminized if women get too much power. And, as I said in the article you mentioned, it gets much more pronounced in times of upheaval and insecurity as it did after 9/11.

***Journal*:** What influence can women in power have? How can women in positions of power achieve a feminist agenda?

Tickner: Women *are* in power, though not in large numbers. They are playing all sorts of roles. There have been women presidents, prime ministers, and even ministers of defense. But how much better it will be when we no longer refer to them as "women presidents" but just as "presidents!" Women have had powerful roles just like men. I am aware that in some countries this is not possible, but in many it is. The big question is why there are *so few* women in positions of power even in countries where legal equality has been in place for a long time. The power that gender role expectations exert can tell us a lot about this.

The question of feminists in power is a different one. It is a much more difficult issue. There has been a lot of speculation about whether women would more likely pursue feminist agendas if they were in a majority of leadership positions. We have so little empirical evidence on this score that it is very hard to say whether it would make a difference. I am intrigued by the Scandinavian states which have a fairly large proportion of women in political power. Could there be a connection with these states' friendliness to social welfare policy—better day care, etc.? It is very hard to say whether these relatively women-friendly policies happened because there were so many women in power, or vice versa. But I do have the sense that it might make a difference if you had

a critical mass of women in power.

And if we didn't have such hierarchical gendered societies it would certainly be easier to get things on the agenda that feminists believe in. But it's a big leap to think that people who identify themselves as feminists would be in power anywhere. In the United States, Hillary Clinton has been vilified for being a feminist but she's pretty cautious about this identification. It is very important to think *why* the term "feminist' carries so many negative connotations. This is a very political issue that has a lot to do with preserving power for those who already have it. WA