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Feminism and IR and the Conditions for Critical Dialogue

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“Feminism and IR and the Conditions for Critical Dialogue”

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My objective in this paper is to problematize the call for dialogue and engagement between feminists and non-feminist International Relations (IR) scholars. I will concentrate on two pieces of scholarship to discuss the issue of dialogue: first, Robert Keohane's "Beyond Dichotomies: Conversations between International Relations and Feminist Theory's" (Keohane, 1998); and second, Anne Tickner's (1997) "You Just don't Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists." In both pieces the question of dialogue is of most importance. The two pieces are in fact related to each other as Keohane's piece was partly conceived as a response to Tickner's. Both authors call for further engagement between feminists and the mainstream of IR. The basic underlying premise for both Keohane and Tickner is that dialogue is both possible and desirable. My position in this paper is that while it may be the case that dialogue is both possible and desirable, it is necessary to specify the conditions of possibility for such dialogue. Drawing from a critical feminist stance, I argue that Tickner's and Keohane's call for dialogue is problematic. In the specific case of Keohane I argue that through his notion of theoretical, epistemological and theoretical continua his analysis effectively constructs a restrictive space for dialogue. I furthermore argue that Keohane incurs in restrictive practices when he effectively dismisses Cynthia Weber's work. In the case of Tickner I argue that her call for dialogue fails to methodologically reflect what she encourages at the theoretical level. Tickner's stance, I argue, can be interpreted as a call for acceptance rather than a demand for equitable dialogue between feminists and mainstream IR scholars.

My paper is organized in the following manner: first I briefly outline Keohane's argument and provide a critique that focuses on what I consider to be a restrictive sense of dialogue in his work. I will then analyze Tickner's argument. As mentioned above I specifically focus on the way in which Tickner fails to apply her theoretical feminism at the level of method.

Finally, the paper's reintroduces Keohane and Tickner under a different light and highlights some of the ways in which their arguments can be fruitfully employed to construct pockets of dialogue across IR. This section is followed by a brief conclusion.

How Critical can Feminism Be? Robert Keohane and his Engagement with Feminism

Dialogue between different theoretical approaches is important, no doubt. For Keohane wider engagement within a community of scholars working together will produce more subtle and discriminating analyses. According to Keohane, using "publically known" methods which are "checked by a community of scholars," dialogue can produce positive results (Keohane, 1998: 196). In order to make dialogue effective however, the academic community must rid itself of Tickner's pernicious dichotomies which pit positivism against post-positivism, problem-solving theory against critical theory, and hermeneutical, history-based, socially constructed, humanistic and philosophically oriented traditions against atomistic, asocial and covering-law approaches (Keohane, 1998: 194). Any dialogue must depart from Tickner's dichotomy and embrace Keohane's notion that, instead of dichotomous positions, what really exists are continua. Moreover, for Keohane the real issue is not problem-solving vs. critical theory but how far into these continua these should go. In the specific case of critical theory the real issue becomes how far criticism should be allowed to go. For Keohane criticism should not go as far as to produce mere "opinion" with no analysis. In other words, one of the poles of Keohane continua is represented by theories, methods or epistemologies which produce "mere opinion."

But what constitutes acceptable "analysis"? Is analysis necessarily causal? In several passages of his paper Keohane hints at the importance of causality without mentioning whether it is a necessary condition of analytical scholarship. How far or close should one's analysis come to

causality before it is deemed acceptable? Would Keohane accept dialoguing with the work of prominent feminist Patricia Hill Collins who argues that many black women's notion of knowledge building is rooted on their daily life experiences, conversations and stories (Tickner, 1997: 621)?

Before offering possible answers to the question posed above, it would be useful to say a little more about feminism and how it relates to Keohane's position. To do this it would be helpful to introduce Spike Peterson's discussion of feminism in relation to IR (Peterson, 2004). According to Peterson, there are, broadly speaking, three types of feminisms that contribute differently to IR. The most promising and potentially fruitful of them all is the type of feminism which necessarily questions power structures. According to Peterson, "reconstructing feminist theory," or what I refer to in this paper more generally as 'critical feminism,' is fruitful largely because of its capacity to disrupt power grids and revolutionize preconceived conceptual structures and institutional arrangements. Thus Peterson highlights a crucial aspect about feminism: feminism must ask questions about established orders that exclude, marginalize and oppress women (and femininity) as well as about its origins and mechanisms of reproduction. In reference to IR this would entail asking why are certain mainstream IR theories, departments, journals and so on, more important, respected, supported and encouraged than others. A further implication of Peterson's point is that that feminism emerged as a stance/theory that questioned unequal conversations and dialogues. Consequently feminism must approach a conversation or a call for dialogue and debate from a critical stance by asking about the conditions of possibility for such dialogue, conversation or debate. This entails asking questions about the power resources (both discursive, material, linguistic and institutional) that will determine the conditions for equitable dialogue.

Returning to the questions posed above regarding Keohane's continua, one could argue that such continua pose a problem insofar as they create *a priori* spaces of exclusion. Keohane's analysis of conceptual, methodological, theoretical and epistemological continua produces a restrictive thrust which can easily lead to the marginalization of dissenting voices. As a point of departure it would be useful to point out that the basis of Keohane's analysis of Tickner's dichotomies appears to be based on a misconception of Tickner's separation between critical and problem-solving theories. Tickner's conceptualization of these theories comes from Robert Cox (1980). For Cox, as for Tickner, a historical view, a philosophical tradition, non-positivist a social construction of reality methods are already contained within what they refer to as "critical theory." In other words the only distinction made by Tickner is the distinction between critical theory and problem-solving theories. However, Tickner's argument is not based on a conceptual/logical dichotomy. Tickner's conceptual separation between critical and problem-solving theories should be seen as an ideal-type designed to capture tendencies of representation within academic theorizing – a useful abstraction. Representing theories and methods as continua however *is* problematic insofar as continua are constituted by poles which would have to be defined and accepted by the larger community of academics. The danger in this is that theories or approaches that lie at the poles of each continua risk being marginalized and set aside, especially if a method or theory lies at the pole farthest away from dominant theories or methods.

Since my concern here is with feminism and IR, it is worth asking: how far can feminism go into the critical end of a continuum? A tentative answer to this question can be found in Keohane's reluctance to engage Cynthia Weber in any form dialogue. This refusal can be interpreted as a concrete outcome of his argument. Weber's critique of Keohane's work is dismissed by Keohane for apparently not dealing with the "real issues" in his arguments

(Keohane, 1998: 193). By focusing on Keohane's conceptualization of continua one could argue that Weber's dismissal and marginalization from dialogue results from her positioning towards the critical end of one of Keohane's continua. However, Weber's critique of Keohane's work certainly deals with "real issues" about his work. It seeks to uncover male values in it and discuss his empowered position as a male writer (Weber, 1994: 337, 338). And regardless of whether Weber is "mistaken" about the points she makes, the issues she deals with are not only real but important as well, especially for feminists.

Finally, it would be worth noting that Keohane's argument overemphasizes the importance of rational argumentation and the weight of arguments in his conceptualization of dialogue. While the weight of an argument is important, perhaps more important are the conditions of possibility for rational argumentation as well as the contextual factors surrounding processes of academic dialogue. As Spike Peterson's argument suggests, for feminists the conditions of engagement between feminists and non-feminists in IR must address not only the relative weight of arguments but the spaces and conditions in which these arguments are put forwards and debated. Issues such as discursive and institutional power conditioning dialogue are of extreme importance and it is the job of feminists to ask questions about them. Thus, by ignoring the conditions that determine the possibility for equitable dialogue to occur, Keohane fundamentally ignores the argumentative basis of much of feminism. Thus, one can conclude that Keohane's call for dialogue can be extended only to feminist writers that remain relatively "moderate" in their critiques. Put differently Keohane's notion of dialogue is restrictive of overly critical voices (like Weber's) and methodologies that are not consistent with his continua's sense of a moderate critique.

To Be or not to Be a Feminist: Ambiguities in Anne Tickner's Call for Dialogue

As mentioned in the previous section, from a feminist standpoint any call for dialogue must assume a critical stance about its conditions of possibility. Consequently, it is worth asking whether Anne Tickner's call for dialogue applies this feminist methodological position. In other words is Tickner methodologically consistent with the theoretical feminism she defends? As I argue below Tickner is not. While her overall argument is rooted on a theoretical defense of feminism her methodological approach (her uncritical call for dialogue and appeal to be heard by mainstream IR) is not. In this particular respect Tickner's paper lacks reflexivity, and, much like Keohane's, does not question the conditions of possibility for equitable dialogue.

Before I continue it would be worth noting that by a methodological stance I am referring to Tickner's call for dialogue itself and her demand to be heard and understood by the rest of IR. Her method in relation to engaging with the rest of IR scholars thus is to call for more effective dialogue and demand for a better understanding and more active engagement with feminist arguments.

The basic argument presented by Tickner is that the lack of responsiveness by mainstream IR to feminism is largely rooted in misconceptions or misunderstandings of what feminists really are saying. Towards the end of her essay Tickner concludes that perhaps the best way to open lines of communication between men and women is "to take each other in their own terms rather than apply the standard of one group to the behavior of the other" (Tickner, 1997: 630). This solution, while appealing, undermines the very basis of much of the feminist critiques she embraces in her paper. If power conditions were equal, if patriarchy were not a powerful force, if knowledge always stood on an equal basis for its public acceptance, perhaps agreeing to disagree would be a pertinent choice for feminists. However, much of the spirit of feminism, as

Tickner theoretically accepts, is precisely about opposing such an idea. In this sense it should be noted that the objective, from a critical feminist standpoint, is not to change the minds of individual academics but to make evident that the exclusion of “women/femininity is a fundamental structuring principle of conventional thought, discourse, and theorizing” both within and outside IR (Peterson, 2004: 39).

Ticker’s motivation, as Keohane (1998: 193) puts it, is frustration resulting from the absence of sustained responses and understanding from the mainstream of IR to and of feminist arguments. Tickner’s methodological response is to call for better understanding, more engagement and more dialogue. Tickner’s theoretical references often encourage a questioning of power structures that marginalize women, their arguments, methods, epistemologies and theories. In the case of IR this likely entails questioning the very notion of IR as a discipline, its history and the way its institutional representatives, its most emblematic figures and its most favored research programs, journals and so on enjoy a position of privilege. Tickner’s methodological approach ignores these issues when she implicitly assumes that such a dialogue is possible without an analogous exposal of the deeper power structures that prevent equitable dialogue in the first place. Tickner wishes to be heard, understood, and engaged with by IR scholars without questioning the space of and conditions for such engagement. In other words, even though Tickner speaks in favor of feminism she neglects to practice what feminism teaches. Tickner asks for more space in the discipline when the discipline itself (its institutions and prevailing discourses) may be part of the problem.

Feminists, as Tickner herself shows, claim that conventional or, more specifically, dominant knowledge(s) are derivative of power structures that have left women and their intellectual contributions marginalized (Tickner, 1997: 620, 621). In this sense, Tickner’s lack of

a critical stance vis-à-vis IR itself is puzzling. To change practices in IR, one must not call for understanding but approach this lack of understanding of feminist arguments as *symptomatic* of a deeper, more entrenched problem within and beyond the discipline. As Peterson notes,

insofar as mainstream theorists do grasp the systemic implications of taking gender seriously, they may resist the disruption of disciplinary givens (and career trajectories?!) that extensive rethinking entails. This may involve resistance to problematizing objectivity, abandoning disciplinary givens, rethinking models and methods, reframing research agendas, recognizing complicity, or taking responsibility for the power wielded by theorists (Peterson, 2004: 43).

An author mentioned in Tickner's text is Carol Cohn (Tickner, 1997: 622). Much like other feminists cited by Tickner, Cohn's research brings up a series of important issues regarding the conditions upon which fruitful dialogue can actually emerge. An important contribution made by Cohn in her piece "Sex and Death of Defense Intellectuals" is to reveal that dialogue takes place in spaces that are not necessarily "neutral." Dialogue, she suggests, is conditioned by where it takes place and by the discursive fields in which it unfolds. Cohn's research shows that entering dialogue in conditions of linguistic and discursive asymmetry (where one agent must adopt another's language in order to, for instance, be taken seriously) will likely result in cooptation rather than dialogue. Cohn also suggests that language itself has a structuring role vis-à-vis thought processes. In other words, the conditions for dialogue must consider its institutional conditions, its discursive conditions and the language employed in dialogue. Being attuned to these elements prior to entering dialogue is crucial for as Cohn notes, the possibilities of cooptation are real. In relation to dialogue between feminists and mainstream IR, one could argue that IR has its own language and feminists who do not speak it may seem unintelligible or even as not dealing with "real issues." Words such as "anarchy," "state-system," "geopolitics," "real politik" or even "realism" may play a similar role to Cohn's "technostrategic" language.

Thus, drawing from Cohn one can further emphasize the need to adopt a critical approach to dialogue and to appeals to be heard by those whose language we do not necessarily speak.

In sum, what Tickner's argument does not do is consider the conditions of possibility for real, equitable dialogue *analogously* to her call for dialogue. Methodological consistency with her feminist theoretical sources would have encouraged Tickner to consider that "conceiving of gender as analytical and structural means that ways of thinking and even specific theories may be characterized as more or less masculinist (objective, rational, realist, quantitative, rigorous, parsimonious, formal, scientific, demanding) and hence more or less valorized" (Peterson, 2004: 41). In view of these points Tickner's stance can be interpreted as a call for acceptance rather than a *demand* for dialogue on equitable terms. In this sense Tickner is relinquishing the feminist claim for equality and equitable relations by conferring those who ignore feminists the power to accept or reject her plea.

Feminism and Dialogue

Before concluding it would be worth making a few remarks about how to identify potential contributions of feminism in fostering dialogue. As Peterson shows a common denominator between much of feminism is to stress that a feminist path to dialogue is a path that must analogously call for dialogue and be critical of the conditions of possibility for such dialogue. In important ways this entails that scholarly dialogue must be made more democratic not only by listening to dissenting voices but opening up actual and effective spaces for marginalized voices to be taken seriously. This includes openings in journals, funding for scholars from underprivileged regions, fostering exchange programs among other things. Similarly, and despite important shortcomings, Tickner's paper offers an important contribution

insofar as she emphasizes the propositive and non-dogmatic character of feminism. As Tickner notes,

feminists often draw on the issue of conversation when pursuing their goal of sharable understandings of the world. Skeptical of the possibility of arriving at one universal truth, they advocate seeking understanding through dialogues across boundaries and cultures in which the voices of others particularly those on the margins, must be seen as equally as valid as one's own (Tickner, 1997: 629).

In the spirit of this quote it would be pertinent to bring Keohane back to the conversation and ask how Keohane's vision of dialogue may be put into constructive practice. I would suggest that Keohane's analysis is more amenable to establish a dialogue with "institutional" or "liberal" feminists. Perhaps a good example of this would be the research of Charli Carpenter. Carpenter's research presents features that, while problematic from the point of view of more critical feminisms, provide an opportunity to develop a constructive collaboration with liberal-institutionalist IR scholars like Keohane. Even though Carpenter's analysis is mainly discursive, her method is not 'overly' critical. Her approach to power analysis is rather limited and provides little in the way of "standing outside establish orders" to determine how they became dominant. Carpenter questions gender essentialisms and shows concrete ways to improve the situation of civilian victims of armed conflict. Carpenter, furthermore, presents a concretely defined evaluative method to discourse analysis which could be seen, as Keohane would put it, as being "consistent with a broad conception of the scientific method" (Keohane, 1998: 196). Carpenter's approach while critical of gender essentialisms (something Keohane approves) and certain policies following from their application, does not, as mentioned above, deconstruct power structures themselves. Instead her focus is on offering concrete but alternative (feminist) mechanisms of cooperation between, for example, advocacy networks, belligerent forces and

larger institutional structures. Thus, Carpenter's frames approach can contribute to Keohane's own analysis of international institutions.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the possibilities for dialogue exist. There are, however, also important constraints and contextual factors that need to be analyzed, as mentioned before, analogously to any call for dialogue. Much of feminism, as shown by Peterson, is highly concerned not only with discrediting gender essentialisms, or producing equal treatment for both sexes. Feminism is fundamentally concerned with power: power in language, power in institutions, power in discourse, power in structures and social relations and how power is manifests itself as the marginalization, exclusion, and subordination of women and femininity. In the case of IR, critical feminism would raise questions such as why are certain theories more accepted than others? Are male and patriarchal values expressed in popular IR theories? In this sense any engagement between the mainstream of IR and critical feminism would have to be approached from an open yet vigilant stance.

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