

## **Feminism and Constructivism: Worlds Apart or Sharing the Middle Ground?**

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The discipline of international relations (IR) is witnessing a “constructivist turn.” In this article, we argue that the new preoccupation with constructivism provides a unique opportunity to further understanding between feminism and the IR mainstream. Feminism and constructivism share a commitment to an ontology of becoming that can serve as a common basis for conversation. Yet there are also profound differences between feminists and constructivists. First, most IR feminists approach gender and power as integral elements in processes of construction, whereas most constructivists consider power to be external to such processes. This failure to conceptualize power and gender as social and pervasive leads constructivists to miss an important part of the empirical reality of power politics. Second, constructivists tend to ignore the implications of a postpositivist epistemology, whereas for feminists the question of “Who knows?” is crucial. We argue that the constructivist failure to problematize the research process as a social (and therefore political) process of construction is logically inconsistent with an ontology of becoming. We introduce empirical materials to illustrate the advantages of feminist approaches. We hope to advance a dialogue between feminism and constructivism because the two approaches add to each other and in combination can yield better theoretical and empirical understandings of the world.

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Seeking greater understanding across theoretical divides, and the scientific and political cultures that sustain them, might be the best model if feminist international theory is to have a future within the discipline.

— J. A. Tickner (1997:630)

We will only “understand” each other if IR scholars are open to the important questions that feminist theories raise, and if feminists are willing to formulate their hypotheses in ways that are testable—and falsifiable—with evidence.

— R. O. Keohane (1998:197)

The imagery of increasingly better understanding based on clearer and more open communication and rational tactics misses a crucial issue. This is that what structures these debates “remains unspeakable [and unhearable] within the very terms in which the [debates] proceed.” I use Judith Butler’s point here to argue that it seems incongruous to expect a fruitful outcome (for feminists) from a debate between feminists and

mainstream International Relations theorists if the debate is structured around representations of woman as derivative, marginal and intellectually suspect.

— M. Zalewski (1998:864)

“You just don’t understand”—this is how Ann Tickner (1997) entitled her description of the “troubled engagements between feminists and IR theorists,” which, she argues, have been characterized by misunderstanding and a disregard for feminist interventions. Tickner locates the reasons for the trouble in differing ontologies and epistemologies. Robert Keohane’s response to Tickner seems to confirm her argument: “IR scholars” will understand only if feminists renounce “ideology” and commit themselves to “the basic method of social science” narrowly conceived as hypothesis testing (Keohane, 1998:196). In light of this position, Marysia Zalewski’s conclusion is compelling: feminists and mainstream international relations (IR) scholars will never understand each other as long as the quest for understanding is based on “the politics, epistemologies and ontologies of the other,” on a logic that maintains woman in “repression, censorship and nonrecognition” (Zalewski, 1998:864, quoting Irigaray). Indeed, many feminists have found it possible to go on with their empirical research only after shaking off the strictures of the discipline (e.g. Enloe, 1989, 1993; Moon, 1997). Others continue the work of deconstructing the discipline and the practices it gives rise to (e.g. Weber, 1999). Apparently, they eschew the very goal of shared epistemologies and ontologies: “We will never convert someone who is not already converted. We will never touch the heart that lives on another planet” (Zalewski, 1998:864, quoting Hélène Cixous).

In this article we seek to move forward a debate that seems to have reached a dead end. Taking up again Tickner’s quest to find a terrain of understanding between feminists and IR theorists, we suggest that the third (or fourth, see Wæver, 1996) debate of the late 1990s has provided a new basis for an engagement between feminists and the mainstream. Specifically, we argue that constructivism shares ontological grounds with feminism and thus provides a unique window of opportunity for understanding.

With ideas and concepts borrowed from sociology, constructivism made a prominent appearance in IR in the late 1980s. Since then, the U.S. mainstream has appointed it the grand alternative to rationalist approaches, whereas in Europe it is more frequently seen as occupying the middle ground between rational-choice approaches and postmodernism (Adler, 1997; Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner, 1998; Checkel, 1998; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). In positioning constructivism as a new middle, Europeans avoid the silencing of postmodern approaches typical in the United States. But describing constructivism as a third force occupying a consensual middle ground is perilous for other reasons. Advocates of such a positioning skirt basic questions of epistemology, ontology, and axiology while morphing fundamental incompatibilities into questions of ranking and ordering variables and of more rigorous and more parsimonious explanations of reality. In effect, they fail to take seriously the postpositivist critique.

In using the language of a middle ground we are thus entering treacherous territory and some words of caution are in order. We do not advocate a theory merger following the path of “shotgun wedding, unhappy marriage, no-fault divorce” that Shelton and Aggar (1993) identified in the troubled relationship of feminism and Marxism. This would risk papering over considerable diversity among feminists and constructivists as well as making light of profound differences between the two. Furthermore, it would risk styling feminism as supplementary to constructivism, thus reproducing its marginality by framing it as derivative. As Ann Tickner reminds us (1997:620), feminism is a rich body of

theory that offers much more than adding the particularity of women and gender to a general picture. Or, in Cynthia Weber's words (1994:337), feminism does not need a father theory; it is neither a "good girl" nor a "little" or a "bad girl." Thus, although our primary goal is to seek points of dialogue, as Tickner suggests in the epigraph, we also want to reveal points of friction that emerge from the othering of women that Zalewski finds characteristic.

We base our dialogue on the idea that feminism and constructivism share an ontology and develop the notion of a "feminist constructivism" that defines our own standpoint. Many feminists in IR agree that gender, one of their most important analytical categories,<sup>1</sup> is a social construct. Indeed, feminists in IR were talking about social construction long before the notion captured a broad audience. We argue in this article that constructivist ontology forms a "planet" on which both feminists and (at least some) IR theorists could live and talk. However, many feminists are profoundly uncomfortable with the styling of constructivism as the grand alternative or new middle ground, and most self-identified constructivists have followed the example of most of their rationalist colleagues in ignoring feminist literature and gender analysis. Our challenge is therefore to stake out a middle ground that does not obliterate feminism and to search for a terrain that enables engagement on equal terms.

We believe that a dialogue between feminism and constructivism is important because the two approaches add to each other and in combination can yield better theoretical and empirical understandings of the world. Elsewhere (Locher and Prügl, 2001) we argue that constructivism contributes to feminism a theory of agency. Here we reverse the emphasis, showing that feminism contributes to constructivism an understanding of power as an integral element of processes of construction. Because they leave the social construction of power undertheorized, constructivists lack the tools to explain how gender and power reproduce, how and why certain constructs emerge as more influential than others. They miss an important part of the empirical reality of international politics. Furthermore, constructivists not sensitive to power as a social and gendered construct risk epistemological inconsistencies. If constructivism wants to be more than liberalism in a new cloth, if it wants to retain its critical potential, it needs to take seriously the epistemological critiques of feminists and postmodernists.<sup>2</sup>

We proceed in two stages. First, we explore the intersections of feminist and constructivist thought in the area of ontology, highlighting compatibilities and problems. Second, we explore feminist and constructivist epistemologies by problematizing the position of the knowing subject. We conclude by probing the empirical relevance of our theoretical arguments. We locate ourselves on the borderlines between feminism and constructivism, attempting an engagement based on empathetic cooperation, a feminist method Christine Sylvester has proposed for IR. This approach entails "a process of positional slippage that occurs when one listens seriously to the concerns, fears, and agendas of those one is unaccustomed to heeding when building social theory, taking on board rather than dismissing, finding in the concerns of others borderlands of one's own concerns and fears" (Sylvester, 1994:317). In adopting such shifting positions we negotiate our own ambiguous standpoints not only between constructivism and feminism but also between the U.S. and the German academic worlds that we have experienced and that separate us now.

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<sup>1</sup> Others are "women" and "sex," in addition to "race," "class," "ethnicity," and other markers of difference.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper we skirt the question of how feminism relates to postmodernism. Clearly many feminist insights into power are indebted to poststructuralist theorizing, and there are feminists in IR who more faithfully adhere to poststructuralist principles than we do in this paper. Although we are aware that the emphasis on "texts," in particular in the work of Derrida, is difficult to reconcile with the constructivist focus on "agency," we believe that a constructivist reformulation of poststructuralist insights on power need not diminish their force.

### An Ontology of Becoming

The new enthusiasm in the United States about constructivism as the alternative to rational choice and as a middle ground between utilitarian approaches and postmodernism in the European debate imposes an unwarranted homogeneity on constructivist scholarship. In practice, self-identified constructivists subscribe to a diverse set of sometimes incompatible propositions. Contention exists around core assumptions and philosophical foundations. Some subsume constructivism under writings probing ideational causation (e.g., Yee, 1996), some take norms and social context as its crucial explanatory variables (e.g., Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996; Risse-Kappen, 1996), some consider institutionalization and intersubjectivity its key concerns (Ruggie, 1998a, 1998b), whereas others find its central preoccupation to be language (Onuf, 1989; Fierke, 1997). Some constructivists draw their insights from philosophical realism, some from the sociological classics (Durkheim and Weber, often via Anthony Giddens), some from Wittgenstein and speech act theory, some from the writings of French poststructuralists.<sup>3</sup>

But what diverse constructivisms do have in common is an ontology: a way to depict the world. Constructivists describe the world not as one that is, but as one that is in the process of becoming; they replace a “positional” with a “transformational ontology” (Dessler, 1989:444; Ruggie, 1998a:863; Kubáľková, Onuf, and Kowert, 1998; see also Wendt, 1987:355). Taking their clues from sociology, constructivists argue that international life is social: international relations are constructed when people talk, follow rules and norms, are guided by world views or institutions, perform rituals, and engage in various social practices. The constructivist focus of inquiry therefore is social phenomena, such as norms, rules, institutions, language, or productions. These phenomena mediate agency (ontologically privileged in behaviorist and rational choice approaches) and structure (ontologically privileged in structural realism and world systems theory). Rather than subscribing to the incompatibility of explanations from different levels of analysis, constructivists argue that agency and structure are co-constituted.<sup>4</sup> Structures reproduce through the practices of knowledgeable agents while at the same time enabling these practices.<sup>5</sup> Depending on their orientation, constructivists variously take norms, rules, institutions, or language as the media of this reproduction. These social forms are intimately implicated in world politics not only because of their regulative, but also because of their constitutive, effects: they guide conduct while at the same time creating objects and agents.

An ontology of becoming allows constructivists to account for aspects of world politics that neorealism and neoliberalism obscure. First, constructivists have put in the center of attention the constitution of international agents. No longer are sovereign states and other international agents considered as given and preexisting entities, but national interests, state identities, social movements, and transnational networks appear in need of explanation (e.g., Wendt, 1994; Risse-Kappen, 1995a; Finnemore, 1996; Kowert, 1998; Neumann, 1999). Second, because they focus on the construction of interests and identities, constructivists can explain shifts in strategies. For example, war making and negotiations are not instrumental tools toward an end but constitute the enactment of diverse games and rules on which reasoning actors draw (Fierke, 1996; Duffy, Frederking, and Tucker,

<sup>3</sup> For a categorization of constructivists (including some feminists) according to philosophical bases, see Ruggie, 1998a (880–882). Price and Reus-Smit distinguish “modernists” and “postmodernists” (1998:267ff). Ruggie does not identify Wittgenstein as providing philosophical roots separate from the sociological classics and thereby papers over substantial differences. For a forceful argument in favor of a Wittgensteinian constructivism, see Fierke, 1996, 1997 (45); also Onuf, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of the protracted agent-structure debate, see Gould, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> The writings of Anthony Giddens have provided inspiration for many constructivists in IR on this issue. See Giddens, 1984. Giddens is discussed in Onuf, 1989 (36) and Wendt, 1987 (356).

1998). Third, in combining agency and structure, constructivists have been able to develop rich understandings of social change. This has made the approach attractive to those who seek to explain the transition from the medieval to the Westphalian system, the end of the Cold War, or the transformation of world politics through the strengthening of “global civil society” (Koslovski and Kratochwil, 1994; Klotz and Lynch, 1996; Ruggie, 1998a).<sup>6</sup>

Like constructivism, feminism is diverse in range and orientation, and not all feminists employ a constructivist ontology. Yet, among Western feminists the contention that gender, and indeed woman, is a social construct has been influential. Liberal ideas of women’s equality, socialist ideas of a sexual division of labor, the Freudian suggestion that identities are produced, and functionalist ideas on sex roles all had come together by the middle of the twentieth century to thoroughly undermine any suggestion that gender was a biological or natural given (Connell, 1987). Writers in the second wave of the feminist movement in Europe and North America linked these insights to an analysis of women’s subordination, suggesting that gender not only was a social construct, but also created women’s oppression. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, published in France in 1949 and in the United States in 1952, was a landmark documenting this relationship, drawing on structuralist thinking. Increasingly, and in parallel to movement slogans that suggested “the personal is political” and “the political is personal,” feminist writings explored gender messages in areas beyond households and personal identities: in myths, ideologies, and patriarchal institutions, such as the family, the state, and the division of labor (e.g., Barrett, 1988). Working in different research traditions, feminists approached these themes in very different ways.

When we juxtapose feminism and constructivism in the following, we primarily refer to the writings of feminists that are self-identified scholars of international relations, many affiliated with European and North American associations of international relations or political science, teaching in various (mostly U.S., Canadian, British, and Australian) universities. They constitute a community of scholars who read and refer to each other’s work. A set of programmatic writings (including Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992; Peterson, 1992a; Sylvester, 1994; Whitworth, 1994) helped create this network of scholars about a decade ago and still provide an important point of reference. Yet, while feminist IR scholars share a (sometimes vague) commitment to the field of international relations, most are committed to the notion of social construction, albeit on the basis of diverse theoretical and empirical orientations (compare Steans, 1998).

Starting from critical theory, social construction appears as an interaction of the Coxian triad of material conditions, institutions, and ideas in the works of Sandra Whitworth (1994) and Deborah Stienstra (1994). In this perspective, social construction designates an opposition to the material world and is characterized by malleability and context dependency. V. Spike Peterson combines the structuralist notion of a fundamental dichotomy between genders with an understanding that people are socialized into their genders while social expectations and ideologies reproduce notions of masculinity and femininity. She refers to gender as a “systematic social construction that dichotomizes identities, behaviors, and expectations as masculine and feminine.” It is, according to her, not “simply a trait of individuals but an institutionalized feature of social life” (1992b:194; see also Peterson and Runyan, 1993:5–7). Tickner (1992:6), following Connell (1987), introduces the notion of “hegemonic masculinity,” a cluster of character traits including toughness, courage, power, independence, and physical strength that

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<sup>6</sup> Note that this ability to explain change is lost in approaches that take norms or culture as explanatory variables (Kowert and Legro, 1996). This lies at the basis of Finnemore and Sikkink’s puzzling statement that “like other theoretical frameworks in international relations (IR), much of the macrotheoretical equipment of constructivism is better at explaining stability than change” (1998:888).



define a cultural ideal. Sustained through its opposition to devalued masculinities and femininities, hegemonic masculinity perpetuates masculinized power structures, including those that frame international relations as a practice and a field. The notion of hegemonic masculinity has lent itself to studying identities in international affairs by employing an understanding of social construction as discursive. Charlotte Hooper (1998, 2000), for example, analyzes discursive practices of world politics and discourses of globalization as sites of social construction. Similarly, Christine Sylvester (1994, 1998) draws on discourse theories to develop an understanding of social construction that privileges “temporary homesteads” over stable identities. For her, “socially constructed” means “that men and women are the stories that have been told about ‘men’ and ‘women’ and the constraints and opportunities that have hereby arisen as we take to our proper places” (Sylvester, 1994:4). Cynthia Enloe (1989, 1993) perhaps most explicitly combines the modern and postmodern tendencies revealed in these approaches. She claims that relationships between governments depend on the construction and reconstruction of gender and that such relations produce certain notions of femininity and masculinity. Gender in her work emerges as constitutive of international relations and vice versa, global politics create gender.

We would do force to these writings if we were to subsume them under the label “feminist constructivist.” But we do borrow from them eclectically to develop our own feminist constructivist position. This position insists that agents make world politics but also understands masculinities and femininities as an effect of such politics. It furthermore suggests that the focus on identity does not exhaust feminist constructivist approaches to IR. Such approaches can subsume as well studies of socialization, institutions, norms, and other social phenomena currently underrepresented in the study of gender in IR.

Feminist constructivists share with other constructivists in IR an ontology of becoming. This, however, does not preclude differences. First, IR feminists insist that gender is pervasive in an international world that is socially constructed: “the personal is international” and “the international is personal” (Enloe, 1989:196). Thus, gender inheres in all international politics. It has shaped and enabled processes of state formation, war and peace, and revolutions (Peterson, 1992a; Tétreault, 1994; Pettman, 1996). It has informed international political economics (Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Han and Ling, 1998; Chin, 1998; Adler, 1999), is pervasive in international organizations and the practices of global governance (Whitworth, 1994; Stienstra, 1994; Meyer and Prügl, 1999; Prügl, 1999), and has shaped foreign policies (Moon, 1997). For IR feminists it is impossible to talk about any of these processes without talking about gender. In contrast, constructivists tend to consider gender subtexts in IR as marginal to explanations of most phenomena that interest them and gender politics outside the realm of power politics.

At the core of this divergence are different conceptions of power. Unlike most constructivists, IR feminists consider power a social construct and gender a code for power. Many have adopted (explicitly Tickner, 1992:7, 1997:615; Grant and Newland, 1991) Joan Scott’s definition of gender as consisting of two elements: social construction and power. According to Scott, “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (1986:1067). The first part asserts a reality of social construction: gender creates social forms based on a binary construction of masculinity and femininity. The second part infuses power into social construction: messages of gender always also express messages of super- and subordination. Few constructivists in IR have similarly theorized power as a social construct, often treating it either as a material quantity or as located in the institutions of the state.

Among feminists in IR, two approaches to power stand out. The first conceives of gender constructions as part of a larger system of subordination, typically

capitalism or, less commonly, patriarchy, or some intersection of the two. It is tied to the Gramscian tradition as elaborated by Robert Cox and often employed by those feminists whose empirical work focuses on the global political economy. Here gender constructions emerge as an ideology, revealed in beliefs, ideas, and institutions that stabilize the system. Power is located in such ideologies and in this way is external to identities. Indeed, writings in this tradition are rarely concerned with identity formation as an exclusionary process but instead treat gender as a social status that intersects with other statuses (e.g., class, ethnicity) to realize various contextually specific forms of super- and subordination. According to authors taking this approach, states, firms, and international organizations play a crucial role in the construction of gender. They create and diffuse a hegemonic ideology that facilitates certain forms of capitalism, and gender constructs are part of this ideology (e.g., Whitworth, 1994; Stienstra, 1994; Chin, 1998; various chapters in Kofman and Youngs, 1996).

A second group of IR feminists does not describe power as ideology but sees it located in the formation of identities. These writers argue that the subordination of women is enmeshed in modernist discourses that understand the self as the source of agency and create this self in opposition to an "other" that provides a reference point of what the self is not. Coded in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and other status markers, the self emerges through a denigration of this "other." Gender is a particularly powerful code because it is co-constituted with sex, its presumably "natural" correlate. Binary metaphysics, language, and symbolic order structurally connect gender and sex, merging biology and culture and creating an all-embracing and apparently natural gendered reality. As a code for power, gender and sex thus contribute to anchoring modern identities. Gender constructions are not ideologies that impose themselves from the outside but a foundational aspect of the modern subject, a necessary ingredient in the formation of identities. Drawing on the understanding of gender dichotomies as an underlying element of subject formation, IR feminists have argued that such dichotomies map onto the pervasive oppositions that organize modern science, politics, and international relations: subject/object, fact/value, public/private, protector/protected (Tickner, 1992:6–8; Peterson, 1992b:202). They have explored in particular the way in which gendered others and naturalized identities have enabled particular security practices, finding a connection between the construction of hegemonic masculinities and the legitimization of wars (see various chapters in Zalewski and Parpart, 1998; Elshstain, 1987; Cohn, 1987; Tickner, 1992:ch. 2; Weber, 1998).

Constructivists have dealt with power in various ways, but only a few have taken the analysis of power as far as feminists have (compare also Doty, 1997). First are those who have not put power in the center of their analysis but have implied two conventional understandings: domestically, power means legitimate authority; internationally, power is a material resource. In both cases, power is treated as a quantity that actors (states, militaries, interest groups) have and that they use differently depending on political cultures or identities (e.g., various articles in Katzenstein, 1996; also Wendt, 1994). Understanding power as a quantity would take feminists no further than to say that women don't have it. It tells little about how power is constructed and reproduced. A second way in which constructivists have talked about power is by suggesting that institutions both create the world and delimit possibilities (e.g., Wendt and Duvall, 1989). The suggestion that institutions delimit the world is familiar to critical feminist theorists; the idea that power both enables and constrains is a central element of feminist writings concerned with identities. A third constructivist understanding of power pushes the issue further and reformulates, in constructivist language, the insight of feminist critical theorists: all rules and institutions always entail rule, that is, they systematically distribute privilege to create patterns of subordination (Onuf,

1989:75). In this understanding institutions exercise power in providing guides to practice, but these guides are always tainted, promoting formations of rule such as hierarchy, hegemony, or heteronomy (Onuf, 1989). Such a conceptualization of power lends itself to showing systematic forces of subordination aligned along the axes of gender, race, and other statuses. It enables an investigation both of gendered power in institutions and of the way in which agents participate in reproducing or challenging it.

In sum then, although feminists and constructivists in IR tend to share an ontology of becoming, different groups of constructivists differ in the status they accord power in the process of becoming. Because feminists consider power as always present in social construction and because they understand gender as a code for power, they treat gender as a core variable in analyzing international relations. Some constructivist accounts resonate with such feminist understandings, but those that take power as a quantity rather than a process fall short. Whereas for many IR scholars constructivism thus mainly offers a departure from the fixed and stable entities of utilitarian approaches, for IR feminists social construction entails a new understanding of “power politics.” This difference has epistemological implications. Because the premise of socially constructed genders sheds light on the political purposes enmeshed in science projects, IR feminists, unlike many other constructivists, have retained an interest in epistemology. They have used an ontology of becoming as a springboard toward refiguring knowledge creation and toward the realization of feminist values within the field of international relations.

#### **Epistemological Considerations: Who Knows?**

Neo-Kantian philosophers have sought to locate grounds of knowledge in the human mind. Underlying their epistemologies is a model of consciousness whose reference point is historical individuality conceived as a trait of human nature. Interpretations of the world are possible because of the presumed unity of the human condition (Delanty, 1997:46–47). Although social scientists have disputed each other intensely on methodological grounds, writers in the orthodox positivist and in most variations of the hermeneutic traditions have shared these epistemological assumptions. Since they locate grounds of knowledge in the mind, their claims over scientific legitimacy often remain at the level of abstract logic, disembodied from the knower and the social and historical context in which he/she is embedded. Such epistemologies are problematized in both constructivist and feminist accounts.

In the middle of the twentieth century there was a profound shift in the epistemological premises that formed the base for the Western philosophical tradition. The “linguistic turn,” associated with Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1958), launched a powerful and widely echoed critique not only of the subject-object split but also of the dominant correspondence theory of truth and language. Breaking away from the common understanding that linguistic statements of the world can be assessed against reality to see if they correspond, Wittgenstein proposed instead that language itself constitutes the world (Fierke and Jørgensen, 2001:4–5). Reality appears as a linguistic construction that is created through and not outside language. Despite differences, many contemporary philosophers share the constructivist premises of the later Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. They include, for example, J. L. Austin, John Searle, Anthony Giddens, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Peter Winch, and Francois Lyotard as key figures whose ideas have profoundly influenced constructivist thinking (Fierke and Jørgensen, 2001:5).

Since Wittgenstein, philosophers and theorists of various kinds have contributed to the relocation of grounds of knowledge from the (individual and atom-



istic) mind and the realm of abstract logic to the larger social context. Claims to know, so goes the postpositivist argument, involve a relation to a socially constituted normative order. Based on this argument, critical theorists have contested the idea of an ethically neutral and value-free science and have attempted a reconceptualization of the normative foundations of science. Habermas (1979, 1984, 1987, 1988) argued that knowledge is constructed through interactions of subjects who negotiate in communicative exchanges common definitions of the world. Interpretations of reality come about through a communicative affirmation or challenge of validity claims. Knowledge is always produced in specific social and historical contexts, reflecting the interests and culture of the groups in question. What counts as knowledge can be assessed against standards of rationality but is ultimately tied to a particular social and historical location.

Similarly, Rorty (1979) has pleaded for an end to epistemology, considering it a figment of the modern separation of mind and body that has created humans as a "glassy essence" occupied with mirroring a material truth "out there." He suggests that philosophy should be "edifying," its purpose not to found truth claims but to keep the conversation going. Adopting a pragmatist orientation (but not Habermas' "universal pragmatics"), Rorty considers "truth" as "no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on" (1979:385). There is no Archimedean point from which to judge such truth. The focus of "epistemology" thus shifts from assessing the relation between human beings and their objects of inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification and to the historical changes of such standards (1979:389–390).

Although the linguistic turn has thus had profound implications in philosophical debates about epistemology, there is today little agreement (and indeed little discussion) about epistemology among constructivists in IR (Klotz and Lynch, 1998; Ruggie, 1998a:880–882). Whereas Kratochwil and Ruggie (1986) have insisted that an intersubjective ontology contradicts a positivist epistemology, many others consider constructivism part of the "normal science" camp, depending on "no special methodology or epistemology" (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, 1996:65; see also Hopf, 1998:182). Dessler's (1989) and Wendt's (1987, 1999) efforts to ground constructivism in scientific realism serve the purpose of legitimizing a positivist research program that stands in profound tension with the ontological premises of constructivism. On the other hand, some constructivists have developed Kantian (Onuf, 1989:38–40) and pragmatist epistemologies (Adler, 1997:326) that are committed to the idea of social science (as a methodology), yet recognize that all insights are socially embedded and therefore temporary. They acknowledge that an ontology of becoming does not exempt scientists. Scientific investigation, like any other social practice, constructs a world; scientists thus are caught in the "double hermeneutic" of construction. Ironically, this acknowledgment does not lead to a broad discussion of epistemology. Rather, once constructivists have acknowledged the social embeddedness of science, epistemology fades into the background. Questions of what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge claims can be justified, and what purpose knowledge creation serves have largely dropped out of constructivist debates.

Different takes on epistemology also depict tendencies in the geographically and intellectually differentiated IR debates in the United States and Europe. The U.S. debate deals to a certain extent with "science questions" because it has defined constructivism in opposition to rationalism, which in the U.S. context is largely associated with positivist epistemologies. In contrast, the European (and especially the German) IR community tends to view constructivism as epistemologically compatible with utilitarian approaches: they are both part of a general postpositivist enterprise. This in turn has led to the apparent consensus that epistemological questions need no further investigation and that the real chal-

lenge for constructivists consists of empirical studies through which theoretical claims and hypotheses can be tested against each other (Risse-Kappen, 1995b:182; see also Zangl and Zürn, 1996:358–362). The omission of epistemological issues in the German IR discussion is actually presented as one of its strengths and advantages over the U.S. debate (Risse-Kappen, 1995b; for a critique see Jaeger, 1996, and Zehfuß, 1998).

The difference between the U.S. and German IR debates concerning epistemological issues has to be seen in the light of the rather distinct intellectual histories of the social sciences in these countries. With Max Weber's writings (1951) or, at the latest, since the famous "Positivismustreit" of the Frankfurt School in the 1960s, orthodox positivist positions lost their dominance in the German social sciences, whereas such thinking remained much more influential in the United States until lately. Whereas the main epistemological division in the United States appears between positivism and postpositivism, many scholars in the German debate would locate it between the broad fields of postpositivism on the one hand and postmodernism on the other. The two debates are obviously informed by different understandings of the term "postpositivism": in the United States it indicates a radical shift away from claims to objective, value-free, universal knowledge that, among others, are considered inherent in rationalist approaches. In Germany, postpositivism is understood as a much broader category that, as Risse-Kappen (1995b) argues, offers space for the *homo economicus* as well as the *homo sociologicus*. Here a postpositivist approach is seen to encompass "normal science" standards but leaves out postmodernism and its various theoretical variations. Since postmodern thinking is rather marginal within the German IR community (but see, for example, Albert, 1994, 1999; Diez, 1996), a divide along those lines does not provoke epistemological battles.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas epistemology is thus a secondary matter for most IR constructivists, it continues to be a central topic in feminist debates. Supposedly epistemological orientations that separate empiricist, standpoint, and postmodern feminists have been broadly popularized in IR (Sylvester, 1992, 1994). The labels are somewhat unfortunate, since they conflate methodology, epistemology, and ontology. Arguably feminist empiricists favor certain methods, postmodern feminists subscribe to a particular (constructivist) ontology, and only standpoint feminists have put forward a specific epistemology. Thus, it is not surprising (or contradictory) that many feminists have combined postmodern and standpoint orientations (including Sylvester, 1992; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988), that there are few instances of "pure" feminist empiricism, and that feminist philosophers of science have argued for a feminist empiricism based on "naturalized" epistemologies that "ground" knowledge in epistemic communities and demand that standards of scientific critique be subject to public scrutiny (Nelson, 1993; Longino, 1993).

In political science, one of the most influential feminist epistemological formulations has centered on the notion of a "feminist standpoint," a concept profoundly indebted to critical theory. When Nancy Hartsock introduced the term in 1983, she argued that material circumstances set limits to what can be known, that the perspective of the ruling group is "partial and perverse" but structures the material relations in which all are forced to participate. Consequently, oppressed groups must struggle for their own vision to expose existing relations as inhumane. Along the same lines, Sandra Harding called for a "critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims" (1991:142). She argued that "women's experiences, informed by feminist theory, provide a potential grounding for more complete

<sup>7</sup> An exception was the debate between Thomas Diez and Tanja A. Börzel on the meaning of postmodern approaches for studying European integration in the *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* (Diez, 1996; Börzel, 1997).

and less distorted knowledge claims than do men's" (1987:184f). In this way the feminist standpoint provided a vehicle for women's liberation.

The notion of a feminist standpoint has received considerable scrutiny for its ontological premises. Many denounced the essentialist assumption of a common biology, the same psychosocial situation, or a shared experience of motherhood and domestic work that seemed to underlie its diverse theorizations. Hartsock has denied the charge of essentialism pointing to her Marxist epistemology, which views knowledge as historically specific and accomplished through practice. But she also (1998:239) has acknowledged that her original conceptualization did not allow theoretical space for differences arising from race or sexual orientation and has argued the need for pluralizing the notion of a standpoint. This was not a minor concession. In abandoning a unitary feminist standpoint, feminists have lost a grounding of knowledge in the privileged position of the subordinate that provided Hartsock a measure for truth. If there is no unitary feminist standpoint but many standpoints of groups involved in different relationships of power, whose truth claims should be considered the right ones?

In order to counteract the relativism this step seemed to imply, some feminists have sought to develop a new understanding of objectivity. Harding (1991) introduced the notion of "strong objectivity," demanding that knowledge claims be evaluated in relation to the social situation that generated them. Haraway was thinking along similar lines when she suggested that "feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (1988:581). Like Harding, she suggested that knowledge claims emerged from particular social situations and needed to be judged against such situations. Haraway elaborates that the purpose of doing science is not only searching for truth, but providing new visions, alternative accounts that make a difference in the world. The value of knowledge is thus measured against the futures it can produce. In this understanding knowledge creation retains common scholarly practices such as comparison, critique, and defense, but the standards are changed. Truth is not simply a matter of correspondence but emerges (however provisionally) from arguments and discursive exchanges that are critically aware of location, not simply of the array of oppressions subsumed under labels such as race, sex, and class, but more importantly of "the sense of being *for* some worlds and not others" (Haraway, 1997:37).

In aligning themselves with a pragmatist philosophy of science, some constructivists in IR share with feminists a "conception of truth as situated, perspectival, and discursive" (Hekman, 1997:356). In the words of Price and Reus-Smit (1998:272), constructivists make "small-t" truth claims that are empirically and logically plausible yet always also contingent and partial. Or in Adler's formulation, interpretation is "an intrinsic part of a scientific enterprise" (1997:328). But although these constructivists follow feminists in "grounding" knowledge in social contexts, they do not take Haraway's additional step of critically reflecting on the location from which their knowledge issues, of thinking through the political and ethical implications of their knowledge claims. By failing to problematize the partiality of their claims, they avoid responsibility for their political effects.

But once it is acknowledged that claims to know create not only a social but also a political reality, at least two additional issues arise for a constructivist epistemology. First is the necessity to be aware of the larger sociopolitical context in which knowledge is created and of the way in which such knowledge relates to the perpetuation of specific constellations of super- and subordination. Critical theorists have extensively discussed this issue, putting in the center of epistemological questioning not truth but interests. Epistemology then turns from probing philosophical justifications of truth claims as they relate to an objective reality to probing political justifications of knowledge claims as they relate to a constructed reality. The epistemological issue for social scientists is not only the search for better correspondences but also the political questioning of "*Cui*

*bono?*”—the specification of the political purposes that their knowledge serves. Few constructivists have been willing to “pollute” their science with an explication of political agendas, retaining the fiction that the knowledge they produce reflects an objective reality and not a provisional and partial set of propositions emerging from a particular sociopolitical context.

The second issue for feminists centers around the question “Who knows?” For Adler the relevant standards from which to judge truth are those developed by a “community of scientists” who engage in “choice, deliberation, judgement and interpretation” (Adler 1997:328–329). Thus the epistemic privilege of science is preserved. This allows constructivists to put aside epistemological considerations and continue in their construction of knowledge by whatever methods the scientific community finds acceptable in the particular historical context. However, if truth claims are dependent on the consensus of a “community of scientists,” as Adler, Ruggie, Risse and other constructivists claim, then the question how these communities are constituted is important. Feminists have pointed out that these communities are rather exclusive, not only in the sense of excluding people who lack power, but even more so in excluding the standpoints of those less privileged, the ways of knowing that make sense from their perspective. If the purpose of science is not only searching for truth but also providing visions of a better world, then subjugated knowledges constitute an important source of understanding and a creative resource to envision what could be.

In problematizing the position of the knower, feminist writings have extensively worked through the epistemological implications of an ontology of becoming. Feminist epistemology points away from the solitary human mind toward socially constituted and politically legitimized groups of knowers. It problematizes the privileged access to knowledge accorded a scientific community that employs agreed-upon methodologies (whether logically positivist or interpretive). It gives legitimacy to many communities of knowers committed to a diverse range of standards of justification and creating a scientific debate that consists of a variety of open, transitory, limited, and partial knowledge claims. From our feminist constructivist perspective, it is the discursive encounter of such knowledge claims, issuing from people’s diverse locations, that can produce emancipatory knowledge. Thus, feminist epistemology needs to “start from women’s lives” (Harding, 1991:150), giving purpose to the search for truth and to world-changing practices.

In taking seriously questions regarding the grounds of knowledge within an ontology of becoming, constructivists (like feminists) thus find themselves not only on the terrain of epistemology but also on the terrain of ethics and politics. The problem of justification shifts from abstractly evaluating truth claims to assessing in context their political and ethical implications. As Hartsock (1997:373) argues, “the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political rather than purely ‘epistemological.’” Or, in Haraway’s (1997:36) echo of Marx, the point of science is “to make a difference in the world, to cast our lot for some ways of life and not others.” What these ways of life should be cannot be known with certainty in advance; they are themselves a product of ongoing critical construction that should benefit from a science committed to social critique.

### **Conclusion**

In probing the overlapping terrains of constructivism and feminism in IR we have found grounds for understanding in an ontology of becoming. Shared ontological commitments lead constructivists and feminists to a shared research focus centering on concepts such as norms, rules, identities, and institutions. Yet, despite these common ontological starting points, feminists and constructivists

have pursued quite different research paths. Feminist research differs in particular from the type of constructivist research that has excised the focus on power. One could argue that this constitutes a diversity to be celebrated. Feminist interventions would then just add one point of view to a pluralism of constructivisms. Contrary to this perspective we have argued that some constructivist approaches encounter logical problems precisely because their epistemology does not follow through on the premises of their social ontology. Furthermore, their failure to conceptualize power as social and pervasive leads them to miss an important part of the reality of power politics. In lieu of a conclusion we would like to probe the empirical relevance of our theoretical arguments. If constructivists incorporated feminist insights, how would their research change? What do feminists do in their empirical research that constructivists are missing? We see at least two major areas of empirical research where feminist constructivists have made unique contributions.

To begin with, whereas power has virtually dropped out of most constructivist accounts, feminist constructivists empirically investigate power in the process of construction. The significance of this type of inquiry becomes evident in a comparison of research on state identities. Constructivists have focused on the importance of understanding state identities in order to explain national interests and state practices (e.g., Wendt, 1999; Jepperson et al., 1996). Indeed, national interest, emerging from state identity, replaces the classical realist variable, power (simply understood in terms of material resources), as the key explanatory variable in these constructivists' accounts of state action. Yet, their treatments of identity rarely explain why states adopt one identity over another or how identity construction proceeds. As Kowert and Legro observe in their critical reprise to the Katzenstein volume on norms and identity in world politics, "about the *process* of identity construction, the authors have relatively little to say" (1996: 469). Feminists and other constructivists, especially those who heed poststructuralist insights on the nexus of power and knowledge and those who are aware of the Onufian linking of rules and rule (e.g., Weldes, 1996; Laffey and Weldes, 1997; Alexander, 2000), find an answer to this question in a social understanding of power.

Feminists specifically probe the way in which gender, race, class, and other status distinctions serve as codes of super- and subordination that powerfully suggest preferred forms of identification. For example, feminist analyses of diverse nationalisms show that gender constructs, such as the framing of the nation as a female body raped by a colonial power, or the eroticizing of the nation as a loved woman's body, have enabled specific political projects, such as national liberation or national defense, associating transgressions of state boundaries with sexual danger (Pettman, 1996:49; Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). Focusing on identity construction of developmental states, Christine Chin (1998) has interpreted practices surrounding foreign domestic labor in Malaysia as defining a middle-class identity that constitutes the Malaysian state as modern, and Leslie Ann Jeffrey (2000) has interpreted the punitive Thai prostitution policy as enabling an image of the Thai state as modern and efficient. Both emphasize that this identity is made possible through the subjection of particular female subjects. In the area of security policy, Steve Niva has explained the U.S. approach to the Gulf War as an exercise to restore American manhood after the trauma of Vietnam (Niva, 1998). In all these analyses, identity is not simply an explanatory variable but a complex outcome of discursive strategies that encode power by evoking privileged understandings of masculinity at the expense of femininity.

There is more at stake here than the privileging of one identity over others. The emphasis in this feminist work is less on identity as an explanatory variable than on the process of identification, on the way in which identity formation evokes gendered power, on the way in which gender is structurally pervasive in



all practices and discourses. Thus, what is at stake is not a moral claim to “be nicer to women” but an ontological and epistemological claim about what power is about and how power works.<sup>8</sup> By ignoring gender, constructivists miss a key element of this picture.

A second and related area where feminist constructivist approaches have contributed to empirical work in international relations concerns the epistemological privileging of certain communities as the prototypical participants in and knowers of world politics. Breaking away from (neo-)realist state-centrism, constructivists have focused extensively on nonstate actors. For example, some have researched local, national, and transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) fighting for human rights (chapters in Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999), for peace (Risse-Kappen, 1994; Evangelista, 1998), or against apartheid (Klotz, 1995). Others have investigated the role of social movements in political transformation processes (Chilton, 1995) and discussed the influence of activists organized in transnational advocacy networks in areas such as violence against women and nature protection (chapters in Keck and Sikkink, 1998). This broadening of perspective toward including diverse sets of actors has stimulated novel and creative empirical research and helped to provide a more complex but also more comprehensive account of international politics.

Despite these advances, constructivists severely limit themselves because of their positivist inclinations and because they ignore feminist epistemological insights. In most cases, constructivists approach NGOs, movements, and advocacy networks as “objects” of inquiry and describe the knowledge and world views of these objects. The primary purpose for including them often is to probe whether their existence “makes a difference,” that is, whether their activities can explain certain policy outcomes. In taking this approach constructivists refuse to attribute to NGOs, movements, and advocacy networks a status as creators of knowledge equal to that of scholars; that is, they refuse to endow them with a true “subject” quality. This not only reinforces the dominant top-down bias in IR scholarship and serves to maintain epistemological privilege but also prevents scholars from seriously engaging with the knowledge proposed by such nonstate actors. What does this knowledge reveal when juxtaposed with hegemonic conceptions? What kinds of exclusions, injustices, inequalities, and shortages of care in the existing world does this knowledge uncover? What kind of a future does this knowledge promise? What new kinds of exclusions and inequalities are embedded in this knowledge?

These are precisely the questions that are at the center of feminist constructivist inquiry. Feminists have validated diverse and unusual bodies of knowledge about political and international life—not only those of NGOs, but also those of Philippinas working as nannies and domestic servants abroad, of sex workers servicing foreign soldiers in Korea and tourists in Thailand, of home-based workers forming international alliances to gain recognition as employees, of participants in the Greenham Commons peace camp in England or in foreign-funded women’s cooperatives in Zimbabwe (Enloe, 1989; Pettman, 1996; Chin, 1998; Moon, 1997; Prügl, 1999; Sylvester, 1992, 1999). These stories reveal the ugly underbelly of a globalizing economy, the insecurities created by U.S. security policies, the exclusionary biases in international labor codes, and the dependencies emerging from development policies. They reveal that gender is present in all aspects of international affairs, that it is a structural feature of international life. In feminist research, these stories gain a status perhaps more valid than the stories of those who occupy power positions in the making or the study of international politics. By moving beyond the “high politics” of the official knowl-

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<sup>8</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point and for suggesting this formulation.

edge constructors of IR, feminist writings of this kind broaden the ontological terrain of disciplinary international relations, subverting its exclusionary boundaries and revealing hidden aspects of international politics that many constructivists fail to recognize. In giving a voice to those considered marginal in international politics feminist writings validate their knowledge and position it to disrupt hegemonic accounts. But more than that, the interpretations of those on the margins serve to frame feminist projects, juxtaposing what is with what ought to be, rarely yielding prescriptions for a better future, but providing a powerful point of departure for a better understanding of the world.

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