

Feminist Scholarship, Bridge-Building and Political Affinity

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Introduction

In this short essay we consider, first, the reasons why feminist IR academics should seek to build bridges with each other, with other academics and with those outside the university. Second, we develop some tentative guidelines for how we should go about the task of bridge-building, drawing on our research into feminist activism at the World Social Forum. Our intention in so doing is not to reinforce what we have elsewhere criticised as a false dichotomy between activists and academics,¹ but rather to locate feminist IR scholars within a wider feminist community and their work within a shared political project. This paper could thus be seen as a form of bridge-building in and of itself. Along the way, we hope to draw out some of the problems of and boundaries to coalition politics for feminist IR academics, thus contributing to a dialogue on the possible ‘limits’ of bridge-building from a feminist perspective.

Why should feminist IR academics build bridges?

There are several reasons why feminist IR academics should take bridge-building seriously. The first has to do with an underlying epistemological imperative favouring the building of connections across differences. We do not mean to suggest here that all feminists share exactly the same epistemological starting point — Sandra Harding’s much cited distinction between feminist empiricists, standpoint theorists and postmodernists has long highlighted important differences.² However, it is our view that feminist scholarship does in general share a situated and dialogical approach to knowledge production. Thus thinkers as diverse as Patricia Hill Collins and Donna Haraway have argued that individuals cannot generate theories of world politics that transcend their social and geopolitical position.³ In a challenge, then, to the prevailing convention in academia of assuming a bird’s eye view of the subject of inquiry, feminist scholarship entails the explicit contextualisation of research questions and methods in terms of the political commitments and specific standpoint of the researcher.⁴ The necessary subsequent step for a fuller understanding of a subject is then to bring the knowledge generated by different standpoints into a collective process of dialogue.⁵ These dialogical encounters help not only to generate better answers, but also to raise questions and to provoke what Cynthia Enloe has called ‘feminist curiosity’.⁶ Thus, feminist IR scholars go to conferences, produce edited books, work on journals and network with those outside of academia not simply to propagate ‘our truth’ and further our careers, but also to listen, learn and share and to be part of the process of building collective knowledge across differences.

The second set of reasons why feminist IR scholars might seek to build bridges is, broadly speaking, political. As stated in the introduction, feminists of all varieties, within academia and beyond, should be seen as engaged in a shared political project to challenge and transform unequal power relations, particularly their gendered dimensions. Such a project necessitates bridge-building along a number of axes. Thus, for example, making links with other feminists within academia is essential for us not only in order to survive professionally and feel part of a community but also to generate a collective presence that can challenge the IR mainstream effectively. The

danger otherwise is that feminist IR scholars become isolated and our arguments always remain at the margins. Moreover, since feminist IR scholarship is part of a broader political project which seeks to speak to and from women's experiences and struggles, it requires feminists to foster connections with marginalised others, inside and outside academia, and to make them visible and audible. In sum, feminist scholarship is explicitly politicised and this brings with it manifold imperatives to build solidarity with others.

Having said this, it is clear that feminist IR scholars continue to face difficulties in their efforts to build bridges. We focus our comments here specifically on bridge-building with other academics in IR, and suggest that the challenges to this are again both epistemological and political in character. Perhaps most obviously, the approach to epistemology that we have suggested most feminists share is still far from typical of the IR mainstream, which searches for objective, scientific knowledge and struggles to relate to those doing politicised research. This is illustrated, for example, by the contribution of influential 'neoliberal institutionalist' scholar Robert O. Keohane to a feminist-organised conference panel on gender and international relations, in which he called for 'an *alliance* between two complementary critiques of neorealism', standpoint feminism and his own approach.⁷ Keohane's textual strategy to enable him to propose such an alliance involved the dismissal of other forms of feminism, particularly of the postmodernist variety, on the grounds that they are epistemologically incompatible. For Cynthia Weber, however, there is crucial difference between the approach of feminist scholars who look '*through* feminist lenses' and welcome differences in approach as enriching and potentially transformative of their own worldviews, and Keohane's text which '*looks at*' feminist differences from a 'singular scientific perspective'.⁸ There are clearly epistemological barriers to bridge-building with an IR mainstream that adheres to such a perspective.

We suggest that there are also political barriers which are at least as significant, if not more so. On the one hand, there are power hierarchies within the discipline that make it all too easy for those at the top of the IR tree to ignore or dismiss more marginal stories about the world - and to exclude the tellers, intentionally or not, from the conference panels, edited books, and journals which they control. In this case, feminists simply become invisible. On the other hand, the 'scientific' aspirations of mainstream IR encourage the dismissal of political differences as a valid source of intellectual tension and leaves little room for politicised scholarship. In this case, feminist scholarship may be recognised but it is likely to be dismissed as partisan and ideological. At this point, however, we should acknowledge the so-called 'third great debate' in IR over the past two decades, which has centred at least in part on a dispute over the relationship between power and knowledge. In this context, a number of 'dissident' or 'critical' IR scholars - including Marxists, Critical Theorists, green theorists and post-structuralists, as well as feminists - have produced and defended scholarship which is self-consciously politicised in the sense of being critical of power relations and aiming to contribute to their transformation. It is this commitment to politicised scholarship that makes bridge building with feminist IR scholars more likely.⁹ However, certain challenges remain. Perhaps most obviously, Marxists insist on the centrality and universality of production relations and class struggle, with the inference that gender may mediate production but remains nonetheless a second-order axis of power and oppression.¹⁰ Post-structuralists, in their turn, have expressed a reluctance to engage with feminism in the context of IR for fear of reproducing

unitary accounts of what is actually ‘a fractured and heavily contested discourse ... a site of active political struggle’,¹¹ and we have also heard articulated at conferences a wariness about a perceived ‘will-to-power’ in feminism. Finally, Critical Theorists have accepted feminist co-travellers as long they see themselves as part of the Critical Theory project.¹² In this last case, then, feminists are potential allies only in so far as they throw their weight behind the team and do not challenge the prevailing critical discourse.

Given these political as well as epistemological challenges, bridge-building can only be seen as a daunting task. As Berenice Johnson Reagon famously reminded feminists, ‘Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do’.¹³ Notwithstanding the difficulties and dangers, however, we suggest that bridge-building remains a fundamental imperative for feminist IR scholarship. In the next part of the essay, we turn to feminist activists to help work out guidelines for how it should be done.

How should we build bridges? Lessons from feminist activism

In what follows, we draw on our research into feminist activism at the World Social Forum and European Social Forum between 2003 and 2005.¹⁴ The activists to whom we talked do an enormous amount of networking, constructing multiple coalitions. Moreover, this kind of work seems to us to be fundamental to their vision of political struggle and social transformation, as indicated by a pervasive discourse in group documentation and interviews on the politics of ‘solidarity’ and ‘diversity’, ‘coalition politics’ or, as they frame it in Brazil, ‘articulation’. At the risk of over-generalisation, we wish to highlight four key features of this ‘coalition politics’ which seem to us to be widely shared.

The first concerns the *pragmatic* approach to the identification of coalition partners. By this we mean that, rather than choose potential allies according to fixed ideological or identity-based criteria, our feminist interviewees prefer to engage in issue specific campaigns with those prepared to work for the attainment of concrete, shared political goals. To this extent, they forge temporary alliances which are often strategic and contingent. As one interviewee put it in the context of the Indian Women’s Movement: ‘we worked in coalitions, which were temporary coalitions for the issue, they were not long-term coalitions where we had a common agenda for the country. They were very much floating ... but very much solid also, they were not lightly taken but highly debated’.¹⁵

A second and related point concerns the fact that our interviewees widely insist that ‘*solidarity has to start with an acknowledgement of and respect for differences*’.¹⁶

To put this another way, feminist activists seem to be engaged in the construction of a collective political subject which does not require full and permanent identification with ‘the Other’ and can never be taken for granted. This way of thinking about coalition politics stems from feminist critiques of assumptions about ‘global sisterhood’ over the past two decades as well as continuing internal struggles within transnational feminist organising. In response, a large number of the umbrella organisations that we studied displayed a clear preference for decentralised ways of working together which preserved the autonomy of each group within the network.

Notably full consensus, while important in specific strategic contexts, is not always seen as a requirement for making connections or taking action. As one interviewee put it, ‘we have a very strong principle of not dominating ... networking. So I will give somebody’s ... email to another friend and say, right, you get on with it’.¹⁷ Or as the self-description of another group states,

We work on the basis of equal relationships and input from our members rather than as a disciplined, ideologically homogenous, centrally controlled organisation. We believe that each group or individual is best judge of their own situation.¹⁸

Third, we find that many of our feminist activists see coalition-building as a *process* and one, moreover, which has a value in and of itself. This has two dimensions. On the one hand there is a widespread recognition of the intrinsic value of interpersonal relationships: that they offer emotional and psychological sustenance as well as a sense of belonging. In this context, a number of our interviewees told us the main benefit for them of attending the World Social Forum was the chance to meet and be with other activists. As one put it ‘I really love huge gatherings of people ... listening to people talk and all that vibrancy, you know, it is quite intoxicating’,¹⁹ while another called it ‘re-energising’.²⁰ On the other hand, coalition politics frequently seems to be about opening up lines of questioning rather than about providing all the answers. This can be seen, for example, in the strenuous efforts made by feminist groups at the Forum to institute a genuinely open-ended dialogue between different movement strands. As the moderator of one session put it: ‘What we are doing now is ... breaking barriers and building bridges ... we need to be together ... [and] we need to know why we need to be together ... And that is the beginning’.²¹

Finally, we would argue that feminist efforts to build coalitions are not only pragmatic and frequently open-ended, but also *principled*. To put this another way, coalition-building should not be seen as a free-for-all but occurs within boundaries. Although there are many context-specific answers as to where to where these boundaries should be drawn, it seems to us that the feminist activists we studied tend to gain their general reference points from their understanding of the political project which they share. More concretely, all our interviewees see themselves as committed to challenging gender inequality and working towards women’s liberation or empowerment. Thus, although their diagnosis of the problem may differ as well as the language in which they describe it and the strategies which they generate in response, there is a general recognition of gender as an unjust power relation intersecting with others, and of the need to articulate and defend a vision of a changed world for women and men. In fact, it is only in this context that bridge building becomes meaningful. As one interviewee put it, ‘to globalise solidarity means to respect different cultures ... [but] beforehand there is the important point to make that one cannot accept injustice or domination’.²² Another was explicit that this meant she would not work with what she called religious ‘fundamentalists’

we work with practically with all that are sensitive [to gender inequality] ... We have some very good relations with some of the women and men in the unions, but when we have to confront them, we have to confront them ... [But fundamentalism] the ‘unique thinking’ that believes in one truth ... The confrontation with them is going on permanently.²³

So what can we as feminist IR academics learn about bridge-building from these feminist efforts at coalition politics? We suggest that the first step is to define ‘bridge-building’ in more specific terms as the effort to build shared projects with others that share specific goals in ways that are attentive to diversity amongst ourselves and to the process as much as the end product of working together, and that are grounded in a shared overall commitment to the need to challenge and transform gender inequalities. This way of defining bridge-building may help us to distinguish it from the myriad of other interpersonal and institutional connections that shape our lives as academics. Most obviously, bridge-building involves more than a tennis match between two speakers debating competing knowledge claims. We also need to learn to see bridge-building as a process of value in and for itself, regardless of the outcome. Engaging in dialogue with sympathetic others and attempting to learn through their lines of sight can help us know each other better, respect each other more and cement intellectual and personal friendships. Certainly, we see bridge-building as a welcome opportunity to challenge our preconceptions about IR and feminism; to expose ourselves to new ideas no matter how uncomfortable; and to meet others who can offer us support and company along the way.

With regard to building bridges specifically with other feminist academics, we suggest that the chief lesson is the need for a non-hierarchical, inclusive approach. Most obviously, the dangers highlighted by our feminist interviewees of representational politics and speaking for others should warn us away from efforts to do the same for marginalised members of the feminist IR community, perhaps particularly junior colleagues. We need to find ways of uniting to make inroads in our discipline that allow junior colleagues and others to speak for themselves. Relatedly, we need to find ways to air what may be profound disagreements amongst ourselves openly and respectfully, to guard against gate-keeping and against incipient hegemonic projects within feminist IR itself. In this context, it is crucial to publish texts along the lines of *Feminist Contentions*, which highlight what we share and, just as importantly, how we differ.²⁴ As for building bridges with feminists beyond academia, we suggest there is a need to pay more attention to the specific ends of our alliances. We have argued here and elsewhere that activists in diverse contexts can provide important insights into how we should go about doing our research, how we should teach and how we can work together. But there is a danger here that academics define bridge-building in our own terms, that feminist activists with fewer resources and less control over knowledge production are being consulted and discussed but not incorporated as equal partners in defining the purpose of the encounter. We need to be more open to being changed in our academic practice by those outside of academia. One dimension of this, we suggest, would involve collaborating with those outside of the university to publish in more popular outlets with a wider audience.

What about building bridges with non-feminist academics, particularly those within the mainstream of our discipline of IR? We suggested in the first part of this essay that there were both epistemological and political barriers to such bridge-building. The practice of our feminist activists suggests to us that the question of who we should ally with and to what end is ultimately one driven by a generalised political affinity. This does not mean that potential collaborators have to identify explicitly as ‘feminist’ – notably, some of our interviewees did not feel entirely comfortable with the label. In our view, however, it does mean that they need at a minimum to take

seriously the kinds of questions posed by feminist IR, even if they ultimately disagree with the answers. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, potential partners need to take seriously the gendered inequalities and violence that shape the lives of women and men in different ways, and see this as a moral injustice which we all need to participate in transforming. Again, a unified conceptual language is not essential here – feminists themselves, after all, theorise gender inequality in a variety of ways using diverse conceptual tools. But the point is that there needs, as the basis of bridge-building, to be some level of shared commitment to the assumption that there is a problem that needs to be addressed and challenged.

Such an argument implies that it remains most likely that bridges can be built between feminists and those in the ‘critical’ IR camp rather than those in the IR mainstream, as it is in the former that we will find explicit recognition that a key task of academic work is to identify and challenge relations of domination and oppression. There are two important points of clarification necessary here, however. First, we have already made it clear that we need to avoid being sucked into bridge-building with critically-minded colleagues on a subordinated basis. Thinking of bridge-building as an ongoing process that does not require total and permanent identification may help us here. As an interviewee put it above, while we may continue to strive to work with those with whom we share political affinities, ‘when we have to confront them, we have to confront them’. Second, we should not rule out the forging of alliances with more mainstream IR academics, even if full-scale bridge-building as we have defined it is unlikely. For example, we can imagine the possibility of a strategic, temporary alliance with realists and neoliberals in the discipline in order to defend or promote a cause that relates to our profession and our ability to do it well, openly and freely. There is no reason why we cannot hold hands over very specific political issues, if only for a while. Nonetheless, for the foreseeable future, feminist IR academics are likely to continue to focus their efforts on building bridges amongst ourselves and within critical IR in order to become more visible and audible to our mainstream colleagues.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have argued that there are good reasons for feminist scholars to build bridges amongst ourselves, with others in the IR discipline, and with those beyond academia, but that this process is neither easy nor risk-free. Drawing on feminist activist practice, we have suggested that bridge-building be understood more specifically as a particular kind of collaborative process undertaken by those who share a political affinity. This helps us draw boundaries around the bridge-building process, to develop guidelines for how best it can be pursued, and to identify those with whom it is most likely to be effective. Without limiting the participation of potential collaborators, after all, bridge-building will degenerate into an academic exercise of intellectual sparring. Although that may be the meat and drink of much academic life, the point about bridge-building, surely, is that it offers the possibility of more purposeful and empowering sense of connection based on solidarity with others.

Endnotes

¹ Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca, ‘Bridging the Academic/Activist Divide: Feminist Activism and the Teaching of Global Politics’, *Millennium*, 35 (1), 2006, pp.119-37.

- ² See Sandra Harding, 'Conclusion: Epistemological Questions', in her edited collection *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 181-90.
- ³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), especially chapter 11; Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14 (3), 1988, pp. 575-99.
- ⁴ E.g., Adrienne Rich, 'Notes Toward a Politics of Location' in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W. W. Books, 1986), pp. 210-31, and Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity?' in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds) *Feminist Epistemologies* (London and New York: Routledge 1993), pp. 48-82.
- ⁵ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, chap. 11; Louise Nelson, 'Epistemological Communities' in Alcoff and Potter (eds) *Feminist Epistemologies*, pp. 121-59.
- ⁶ Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- ⁷ Robert O. Keohane, 'International Relations Theory: Contributions of a Feminist Standpoint', *Millennium* 18 (2), 1989: p.250, emphasis in original
- ⁸ Cynthia Weber, 'Good Girls, Little Girls and Bad Girls: Male Paranoia in Robert Keohane's Critique of Feminist International Relations', *Millennium* 23 (2), 1994, p. 339, emphasis in original
- ⁹ See, for e.g., Eschle and Manguashca, 'Rethinking Globalised Resistance: Feminist Activism and Critical Theorising in International Relations', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9 (2007): 284-301, and *Critical Theories, International Relations and 'The Anti-Globalisation Movement'* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- ¹⁰ See, e.g., Alejandro Colas, 'The Class Politics of Globalisation' in Mark Rupert and Hazel Smith (eds) *Historical Materialism and Globalization* (London: Routledge), pp. 191-209 – which refers to non-class forms of discrimination as pre-capitalist, making it clear that they are subsumed under the 'overarching antagonism between capital and labour', p.206. Justin Rosenberg also makes a case for the primacy of the material reproduction of society as the main faultline running through any society, p. 51 in his *Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994).
- ¹¹ R.B.J. Walker, 'Gender and Critique in the Theory of International Relations' in V. Spike Peterson (ed.) *Gendered States: Feminist Revisions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p.196.
- ¹² E.g., Andrew Linklater, 'The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory: A Critical-Theoretical Point of View' *Millennium* 21 (1), 1992, pp. 77-98.
- ¹³ Berenice Johnson Reagon, 'Coalition Politics: Turning the Century' in Barbara Smith (ed.) *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1983), pp.358-9.
- ¹⁴ For the last few years we have been working on an empirical study of feminist 'anti-globalisation' activism, involving almost 80 interviews, the collection of group documentation, and participation observation in and around the World Social Forum and European Social Forum between 2003 and 2005. We seek not only to map the composition, origins, beliefs and practices of such activism, but also to draw out its implications for thinking about the broader 'global justice' movement, and the 'politics of resistance' more generally. We wish to acknowledge the financial assistance of the British Academy, the Nuffield Foundation and the ESRC in enabling us to carry out this research.
- ¹⁵ Rukmini Rao, interview, Hyderabad, 6/01/04
- ¹⁶ Peggy Antrobus, interview, Dublin, 10/07/04, emphasis added
- ¹⁷ Cassandra Balchin on Women Living Under Muslim Laws, interview, London, 9/11/04
- ¹⁸ Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, 'About WGNRR: Who are We?', online at <http://www.wgnrr.org/home.php?page=1&sub=1&type=menu> (13/7/05).
- ¹⁹ Kalpana Kannabiran, interview, Hyderabad 10/1/04
- ²⁰ Lakshmi Lingam, interview, Mumbai, 20/1/04
- ²¹ Nandita Gandhi, at the 'Dialogue between Four Movements', Mumbai, 19/1/04.
- ²² Nalu Faria, interview, Sao Paulo 17/1/05
- ²³ Gina Vargas, interview Mumbai 18/1/05
- ²⁴ Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London: Routledge, 1995).