Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation

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It is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills.

Simone de Beauvoir

International politics is a man's world, a world of power and conflict in which warfare is a privileged activity. Traditionally, diplomacy, military service, and the science of international politics have been largely male domains. In the past, women have rarely been included in the ranks of professional diplomats or the military: of the relatively few women who specialise in the academic discipline of international relations, few are security specialists. Women political scientists who do international relations tend to focus on areas such as international political economy, North-South relations and matters of distributive justice.

Today, in the United States, where women are entering the military and the foreign service in greater numbers than ever before, rarely are they to be found in positions of military leadership or at the top of the foreign policy establishment. One notable exception, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who was US ambassador to the United Nations in the early 1980s, has described herself as 'a mouse in a man's world'. For in spite of her authoritative and forceful public style and strong conservative credentials, Kirkpatrick maintains that she failed to win the respect or attention of her male colleagues on matters of foreign policy.

Kirkpatrick's story could serve to illustrate the discrimination which women often encounter when they rise to high political office. However, the doubts as to whether a woman would be strong enough to press the nuclear button (an issue raised when a tearful Patricia Schroeder was pictured sobbing on her husband's shoulder as she bowed out of the 1988 US presidential race) suggest that there may be an even more fundamental barrier to women's entry into the highest ranks of the military or of foreign policy-making. Nuclear strategy, with its vocabulary of power, threat, force, and deterrence, has a distinctly masculine ring; moreover, women are stereotypically judged to be lacking in qualities which these terms evoke. It has also been suggested that, although more women are entering the world of public policy, they are more comfortable dealing with domestic issues such as social welfare that are more compatible with their nurturing skills. Yet the large number of women in the ranks of the peace movement suggests that women are not uninterested in issues of war and peace, although their frequent dissent from national security policy has often branded them as naive, uninformed or even unpatriotic.


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In this article I propose to explore the question why international politics is perceived as a man's world and why women remain so under-represented in the higher echelons of the foreign policy establishment, the military and the academic discipline of international relations. Since I believe that there is something about this field which renders it particularly inhospitable and unattractive to women, I intend to focus on the nature of the discipline itself rather than on possible strategies to remove barriers to women's access to high policy positions. As I have already suggested, the issues that get prioritised in foreign policy are issues with which men have had a special affinity. Moreover, if it is primarily men who are describing these issues and constructing theories to explain the workings of the international system, might we not expect to find a masculine perspective in the academic discipline also? If this were so, then it could be argued that the exclusion of women has operated not only at the level of discrimination but also through a process of self-selection which begins with the way in which we are taught about international relations.

In order to investigate this claim that the discipline of international relations — traditionally defined by realism — is based on a masculine world view, I propose to examine Hans Morgenthau's six principles of political realism. I shall use some ideas from feminist theory to show that the way in which Morgenthau describes and explains international politics, and the prescriptions that ensue, are embedded in a masculine perspective. Then I shall suggest some ways in which feminist theory might help us begin to conceptualise a world view from a feminine perspective and to formulate a feminist epistemology of international relations. Drawing on these observations, I shall conclude with a reformulation of Morgenthau's six principles. Male critics of contemporary realism have already raised many of the same questions about realism that I shall address. However, in undertaking this exercise, I hope to link the growing critical perspective on international relations theory and feminist writers interested in global issues. Adding a feminist perspective to its discourse could also help to make the field of international relations more accessible to women scholars and practitioners.

Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism: A Masculine Perspective?

I have chosen to focus on Hans Morgenthau's six principles of political realism because they represent one of the most important statements of contemporary realism from which several generations of scholars and practitioners of international relations have been nourished. Although Morgenthau has frequently been criticised for his lack of scientific rigour and ambiguous use of language, these six principles have significantly framed the way in which the majority of international relations scholars and practitioners in the West have thought about international politics since 1945.\(^5\)

Morgenthau's principles of political realism can be summarised as follows:

1. Politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature which is unchanging; therefore it is possible to develop a rational theory that reflects these objective laws.
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2. The main signpost of political realism is the concept of interest defined in terms of power which infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics, and thus makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible. Political realism stresses the rational, objective and unemotional.

3. Realism assumes that interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid but not with a meaning that is fixed once and for all. Power is the control of man over man.

4. Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action. It is also aware of the tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action.

5. Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. It is the concept of interest defined in terms of power that saves us from moral excess and political folly.

6. The political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere. He asks 'How does this policy affect the power of the nation?' Political realism is based on a pluralistic conception of human nature. A man who was nothing but 'political man' would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints. But, in order to develop an autonomous theory of political behaviour, 'political man' must be abstracted from other aspects of human nature."

I am not going to argue that Morgenthau is incorrect in his portrayal of the international system. I do believe, however, that it is a partial description of international politics because it is based on assumptions about human nature that are partial and that privilege masculinity. First, it is necessary to define masculinity and femininity. According to almost all feminist theorists, masculinity and femininity refer to a set of socially constructed categories that vary in time and place rather than to biological determinants. In the West conceptual dichotomies such as objectivity vs. subjectivity, reason vs. emotion, mind vs. body, culture vs. nature, self vs. other or autonomy vs. relatedness, knowing vs. being and public vs. private have typically been used to describe male/female differences by feminists and non-feminists alike. In the United States, psychological tests conducted across different socio-economic groups confirm that individuals perceive these dichotomies as masculine and feminine and also that the characteristics associated with masculinity are more highly valued by both men and women alike. It is important to stress, however, that these characteristics are stereotypical; they do not necessarily describe individual men or women who can exhibit characteristics and modes of thought associated with the opposite sex.

Using a vocabulary which contains many of the words associated with masculinity as I have defined it, Morgenthau asserts that it is possible to develop a rational (and unemotional) theory of international politics based on objective laws that have their roots in human nature. Since Morgenthau wrote the first edition of Politics Among Nations in 1948, this search for an objective science of international politics, based on the model of the natural sciences, has been an important part of
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the realist and neo-realist agenda. In her feminist critique of the natural sciences, Evelyn Fox Keller points out that most scientific communities share the 'assumption that the universe they study is directly accessible, represented by concepts shaped not by language but only by the demands of logic and experiment'. The laws of nature, according to this view of science, are 'beyond the relativity of language'. Like most feminists, Keller rejects this view of science which, she asserts, imposes a coercive, hierarchical and conformist pattern on scientific inquiry. Feminists in general are sceptical about the possibility of finding a universal and objective foundation for knowledge that Morgenthau claims is possible. Most share the belief that knowledge is socially constructed; since it is language that transmits knowledge, the use of language and its claims of objectivity must continually be questioned.

Keller argues that objectivity, as it is usually defined in our culture, is associated with masculinity. She identifies it as 'a network of interactions between gender development, a belief system that equates objectivity with masculinity, and a set of cultural values that simultaneously (and cojointly) elevates what is defined as scientific and what is defined as masculine'. Keller links the separation of self from other, an important stage of masculine gender development, with this notion of objectivity. Translated into scientific inquiry this becomes the striving for the separation of subject and object, an important goal of modern science and one, which Keller asserts, is based on the need for control; hence objectivity becomes associated with power and domination.

The need for control has been an important motivating force for modern realism. To begin his search for an objective, rational theory of international politics, which could impose order on a chaotic and conflictual world, Morgenthau constructs an abstraction which he calls political man, a beast completely lacking in moral restraints. Morgenthau is deeply aware that real man, like real states, is both moral and bestial but, because states do not live up to the universal moral laws that govern the universe, those who behave morally in international politics are doomed to failure because of the immoral actions of others. To solve this tension, Morgenthau postulates a realm of international politics in which the amoral behaviour of political man is not only permissible but prudent. It is a Hobbesian world, separate and distinct from the world of domestic order, in which states may act like beasts, for survival depends on a maximisation of power and a willingness to fight.

Having long argued that the personal is political, most feminist theory would reject the validity of constructing an autonomous political sphere around which boundaries of permissible modes of conduct have been drawn. As Keller maintains, 'the demarcation between public and private not only defines and defends the boundaries of the political but also helps form its content and style'. Morgenthau's political man is a social construct which is based on a partial representation of human nature. One might well ask where the women were in Hobbes' state of nature; presumably they must have been involved in reproduction and childrearing, rather than warfare, if life was to go on for more than one generation. Morgenthau's emphasis on the conflictual aspects of the international system contributes to a tendency, shared by other realists, to de-emphasise elements of cooperation and regeneration which are also aspects of international relations.
Morgenthau's construction of an amoral realm of international power politics is an attempt to resolve what he sees as a fundamental tension between the moral laws that govern the universe and the requirements of successful political action in a world where states use morality as a cloak to justify the pursuit of their own national interests. Morgenthau's universalistic morality postulates the highest form of morality as an abstract ideal, similar to the Golden Rule, to which states seldom adhere: the morality of states is an instrumental morality which is guided by self-interest. Morgenthau's hierarchical ordering of morality contains parallels with the work of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. Based on a study of the moral development of eighty-four American boys, Kohlberg concludes that the highest stage of human moral development (which he calls stage six) is the ability to recognize abstract universal principles of justice; lower on the scale (stage two) is an instrumental morality concerned with serving one's own interests while recognizing that others have interests too. Between these two is an interpersonal morality which is contextual and characterized by sensitivity to the needs of others (stage three).

In her critique of Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Carol Gilligan argues that they are based on a masculine conception of morality. On Kohlberg's scale, women rarely rise above the third or contextual stage but Gilligan claims that this is not a sign of inferiority, but of difference. Since women are socialized into a mode of thinking which is contextual and narrative, rather than formal and abstract, they tend to see issues in contextual rather than in abstract terms. In international relations, the tendency to think about morality either in terms of abstract, universal and unattainable standards or as purely instrumental, as Morgenthau does, detracts from our ability to tolerate cultural differences and to seek potential for building community in spite of these differences.

Using examples from the feminist literature, I have suggested that Morgenthau's attempt to construct an objective, universal theory of international politics is rooted in assumptions about human nature and morality that, in modern Western culture, are associated with masculinity. Further evidence that Morgenthau's principles are not the basis for a universalistic and objective theory is contained in his frequent references to the failure of what he calls the 'legalistic-moralistic' or idealist approach to world politics which he claims was largely responsible for both the World Wars. Having laid the blame for the Second World War on the misguided morality of appeasement, Morgenthau's realpolitik prescriptions for successful political action appear as prescriptions for avoiding the mistakes of the 1930s rather than as prescriptions with timeless applicability.

If Morgenthau's world view is embedded in the traumas of the Second World War, are his prescriptions still valid as we move further away from this event? I share with other critics of realism the view that, in a rapidly changing world, we must begin to search for modes of behaviour different from those prescribed by Morgenthau. Given that any war between the major powers is likely to be nuclear, increasing security by increasing power could be suicidal. Moreover, the nation-state, the primary constitutive element of the international system for Morgenthau and other realists, is no longer able to deal with an increasingly pluralistic array of problems ranging from economic interdependence to environmental degradation. Could feminist theory make a contribution to international relations theory by...
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constructing an alternative, feminist perspective on international politics that might help us search for more appropriate solutions?

A Feminist Perspective on International Relations

If the way in which we describe reality has an effect on the ways we perceive and act upon our environment, new perspectives might lead us to consider alternative courses of action. With this in mind, I shall first examine two important concepts in international relations, power and security, from a feminist perspective and then discuss some feminist approaches to conflict resolution.

Morgenthau's definition of power, the control of man over man, is typical of the way power is usually defined in international relations. Nancy Hartsock argues that this type of power as domination has always been associated with masculinity since the exercise of power has generally been a masculine activity; rarely have women exercised legitimised power in the public domain. When women write about power they stress energy, capacity and potential says Hartsock, and she notes that women theorists, even when they have little else in common, offer similar definitions of power which differ substantially from the understanding of power as domination.17

Hannah Arendt, frequently cited by feminists writing about power, defines power as the human ability to act in concert, or action which is taken in connection with others who share similar concerns.18 This definition of power is similar to that of psychologist, David McClelland's portrayal of female power which he describes as shared rather than assertive.19 Jane Jaquette argues that, since women have had less access to the instruments of coercion, women have been more apt to rely on power as persuasion; she compares women's domestic activities to coalition-building.20

All of these writers are portraying power as a relationship of mutual enablement. Tying her definition of female power to international relations, Jaquette sees similarities between female strategies of persuasion and strategies of small states operating from a position of weakness in the international system. There are also examples of states' behaviour which contain elements of the female strategy of coalition-building. One such example is the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) which is designed to build regional infrastructures based on mutual co-operation and collective self-reliance in order to decrease dependence on the South African economy. Another is the European Community, which has had considerable success in building mutual co-operation in an area of the world whose history would not predict such a course of events.21 It is rare, however, that co-operative outcomes in international relations are described in these terms, though Karl Deutsch's notion of pluralistic security communities might be one such example where power is associated with building community.22 I am not denying that power as domination is a pervasive reality in international relations, but sometimes there are also elements of co-operation in inter-state relations which tend to be obscured when power is seen solely as domination. Thinking about power in this multidimensional sense may help us to think constructively about the potential for co-operation as well as conflict, an aspect of international relations generally downplayed by realism.

Redefining national security is another way in which feminist theory could
contribute to new thinking about international relations. Traditionally in the West, the concept of national security has been tied to military strength and its role in the physical protection of the nation-state from external threats. Morgenthau's notion of defending the national interest in terms of power is consistent with this definition. But this traditional definition of national security is partial at best in today's world. When advanced states are highly interdependent, and rely on weapons whose effects would be equally devastating to winners and losers alike, defending national security by relying on war as the last resort no longer appears very useful. Moreover, if one thinks of security in North-South rather than East-West terms, for a large portion of the world's population, security has as much to do with the satisfaction of basic material needs as with military threats. According to Johan Galtung's notion of structural violence, the lowering of life expectancy by virtue of where one happens to be born is a form of violence whose effects can be as devastating as war. Basic needs satisfaction has a great deal to do with women, but only recently have women's roles as providers of basic needs, and in development more generally, become visible as important components in devising development strategies. Traditionally the development literature has focused on aspects of the development process which are in the public sphere, are technologically complex and are usually undertaken by men. Thinking about the role of women in development and the way in which we can define development and basic needs satisfaction to be inclusive of women's roles and needs are topics which deserve higher priority on the international agenda. Typically, however, this is an area about which traditional international relations theory, with its prioritising of order over justice, has had very little to say.

A further threat to national security, more broadly defined, which also has not been on the agenda of traditional international relations, concerns the environment. Carolyn Merchant argues that a mechanistic view of nature, contained in modern science, has helped to guide an industrial and technological development which has resulted in the environmental damage that is now becoming a matter of global concern. In the introduction to her book, The Death of Nature, Merchant suggests that, 'Women and nature have an age-old association — an affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history'. Hence she maintains that the ecology movement, which is growing up in response to these environmental threats, and the women's movement are deeply interconnected. Both stress living in equilibrium with nature rather than dominating it; both see nature as a living non-hierarchical entity in which each part is mutually dependent on the whole. Ecologists, as well as many feminists, are now suggesting that only with such a fundamental change in the way we view the world could we devise solutions that would allow the human species to survive the damage which we are inflicting on the environment.

Thinking about military, economic and environmental security in interdependent terms suggests the need for new methods of conflict resolution which seek to achieve mutually beneficial, rather than zero-sum, outcomes. One such method comes from Sara Ruddick's work on 'maternal thinking'. Ruddick describes 'maternal thinking' as focused on the preservation of life and the growth of children; to foster a domestic environment conducive to these goals, tranquility must be preserved by avoiding conflict where possible, engaging in it...
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and restoring community when it is over. In such an environment the ends for which disputes are fought are subordinated to the means by which they are resolved. This method of conflict resolution involves making contextual judgements rather than appealing to absolute standards and thus has much in common with Gilligan’s definition of female morality.

While non-violent resolution of conflict in the domestic sphere is a widely accepted norm, passive resistance in the public realm is regarded as deviant. But, as Ruddick argues, the peaceful resolution of conflict by mothers does not usually extend to the children of one’s enemies, an important reason why women have been ready to support men’s wars. The question for Ruddick then becomes how to get ‘maternal thinking’, a mode of thinking which she believes can be found in men as well as women, out into the public realm. Ruddick believes that finding a common humanity among one’s opponents has become a condition of survival in the nuclear age when the notion of winners and losers has become questionable. Portraying the adversary as less than human has all too often been a technique of the nation-state to command loyalty and increase its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens but such behaviour in the nuclear age may eventually be self-defeating.

We might also look to Gilligan’s work for a feminist perspective on conflict resolution. Reporting on a study of playground behaviour of American boys and girls, Gilligan argues that girls are less able to tolerate high levels of conflict, more likely than boys to play games which involve taking turns and in which the success of one does not depend on the failure of another. While Gilligan’s study does not take into account attitudes toward other groups (racial, ethnic, economic, or national), it does suggest the validity of investigating whether girls are socialised to use different modes of problem-solving when dealing with conflict, and whether such behaviour might be useful to us in thinking about international conflict resolution.

*Toward a Feminist Epistemology of International Relations*

I am deeply aware that there is no one feminist approach but many which come out of various disciplines and intellectual traditions. Yet there are common themes in these different feminist literatures that I have reviewed, which could help us to begin to formulate a feminist epistemology of international relations. Morgenthau encourages us to try to stand back from the world and to think about theory-building in terms of constructing a rational outline or map that has universal applications. In contrast, the feminist literature reviewed here emphasises connection and contingency. Keller argues for a form of knowledge, which she calls ‘dynamic objectivity’, ‘that grants to the world around us its independent integrity, but does so in a way that remains cognizant of, indeed relies on, our connectivity with that world’. Keller illustrates this mode of thinking in her study of Barbara McClintock whose work on genetic transposition won her a Nobel prize after many years of marginalisation by the scientific community. McClintock, Keller argues, was a scientist with a respect for complexity, diversity and individual difference whose methodology allowed her data to speak rather than imposing explanations on it.

Keller’s portrayal of McClintock’s science contains parallels with what Sandra
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Harding calls an African world view. Harding tells us that the Western liberal notion of rational economic man, an individualist and a welfare maximiser, similar to rational political man upon which realism has based its theoretical investigations, does not make any sense in the African world view where the individual is seen as part of the social order acting within that order rather than upon it. Harding believes that this view of human behaviour has much in common with a feminist perspective. If we combine this view of human behaviour with Merchant’s holistic perspective which stresses the interconnectedness of all things including nature, it may help us to begin to think from a more global perspective which appreciates cultural diversity but at the same time recognises a growing interdependence which makes anachronistic the exclusionary thinking fostered by the nation-state system.

Keller’s ‘dynamic objectivity’, Harding’s African world view and Merchant’s ecological thinking all point us in the direction of an appreciation of the ‘other’ as a subject whose views are as legitimate as our own, a way of thinking that has been sadly lacking in the history of international relations. Just as Keller cautions us against the construction of a feminist science, which could perpetuate these same exclusionary attitudes, Harding warns us against schema which contrast people by race, gender or class and which originate within projects of social domination. Feminist thinkers generally dislike dichotomisation and the distancing of subject from object that goes with abstract thinking, both of which, they believe, encourage a we/they attitude so characteristic of international relations. Instead this literature points us toward constructing epistemologies which value ambiguity and difference, qualities that could stand us in good stead as we begin to build a human or ungendered theory of international relations containing elements of both masculine and feminine modes of thought.

Morgenthau’s Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation

In the first part of this article I used feminist theory to develop a critique of Morgenthau’s principles of political realism in order to demonstrate how the theory and practice of international relations may exhibit a masculine bias. I then suggested some contributions which feminist theory might make to reconceptualising some important concepts in international relations and to thinking about a feminist epistemology. Drawing on these observations, I will now conclude with a feminist reformulation of Morgenthau’s six principles of political realism, outlined earlier in this paper, which might help us to begin to think differently about international relations. I shall not use the term realism since feminists believe that there are multiple realities: a truly realistic picture of international politics must recognise elements of co-operation as well as conflict, morality as well as realpolitik, and the stirrings for justice as well as order. This reformulation may help us begin to think in these multidimensional terms:

1. A feminist perspective believes that objectivity, as it is culturally defined, is associated with masculinity. Therefore, supposedly ‘objective’ laws of human nature are based on a partial masculine view of human nature. Human nature is both masculine and feminine: it contains elements of social reproduction and development as well as political domination. Dynamic objectivity offers us a more connected view of objectivity with less potential for domination.

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2. A feminist perspective believes that the national interest is multidimensional and contextually contingent. Therefore it cannot be defined solely in terms of power. In the contemporary world the national interest demands co-operative rather than zero-sum solutions to a set of interdependent global problems which include nuclear war, economic well-being and environmental degradation.

3. Power cannot be infused with meaning that is universally valid. Power as domination and control privileges masculinity and ignores the possibility of collective empowerment, another aspect of power often associated with femininity.

4. A feminist perspective rejects the possibility of separating moral command from political action. All political action has moral significance. The realist agenda for maximising order through power and control prioritises the moral command of order over those of justice and the satisfaction of basic needs necessary to ensure social reproduction.

5. While recognising that the moral aspirations of particular nations cannot be equated with universal moral principles, a feminist perspective seeks to find common moral elements in human aspirations which could become the basis for de-escalating international conflict and building international community.

6. A feminist perspective denies the validity of the autonomy of the political. Since autonomy is associated with masculinity in Western culture, disciplinary efforts to construct a world view which does not rest on a pluralistic conception of human nature, are partial and masculine. Building boundaries around a narrowly defined political realm defines political in a way that excludes the concerns and contributions of women.

In constructing this feminist alternative, I am not denying the validity of Morgenthau’s work. Adding a feminist perspective to the epistemology of international relations, however, is a stage through which we must pass if we are to begin to think about constructing an ungendered or human science of international politics which is sensitive to, but goes beyond, both masculine and feminine perspectives. Such inclusionary thinking, which, as Simone de Beauvoir tells us, values the bringing forth of life as much as the risking of life, is becoming imperative in a world where the technology of war and a fragile natural environment are threatening human existence. This ungendered or human discourse becomes possible only when women are adequately represented in the discipline and when there is equal respect for the contributions of both women and men alike.

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6. These are drawn from the six principles of political realism in Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 5th Revised Ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973), pp. 4-15. I am aware that these principles embody only a partial statement of Morgenthau’s very rich study of international politics, a study which deserves a much more detailed analysis than I can give it here.

7. This list is a composite of the male/female dichotomies which appear in Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) and Sandra Harding, *op. cit.*


16. There is evidence that, toward the end of his life, Morgenthau himself was aware that his own prescriptions were becoming anachronistic. In a seminar presentation in 1978, he suggested that power politics as the guiding principle for the conduct of international relations had become fatally defective. For a description of this seminar presentation, see Francis
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23. ‘New thinking’ is a term that is also being used in the Soviet Union to describe foreign policy reformulations under Gorbachev. There are indications that the Soviets are beginning to conceptualise security in the multidimensional terms described here. See Margot Light, *The Soviet Theory of International Relations* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), ch. 10.


26. See, for example, Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987). This is an example of a growing literature on women and development which deserves more attention from the international relations community.


32. Keller, op. cit., p. 117.


34. Harding *op. cit.*, ch. 7.

35. ‘Utopia and reality are . . . the two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place’, E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 10.