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MAKING SENSE OF

THEORY

edited by

JENNIFER STERLING-FOLKER

8.2

Julie Mertus

Liberal Feminism: Local Narratives in a Gendered Context

Marysia Zalewski (1996) has observed the multiple usages of theory in the field of international relations: as a tool, as a critique, and as everyday experience. One intellectual tradition that exemplifies these three usages, but that has been marginalized in international politics, is liberal feminism. As this book demonstrates, there are many ways to analyze international relations problems. Studies based on liberal feminism uncover the subjectivity of traditional approaches to international relations by "searching for silences" and imagining the addition of "unheard voices." Feminist methods "emphasize conversations and dialogue rather than the production of a single, triumphant truth" (Charlesworth 1999b: 379). This approach has particular resonance as applied to Kosovo, an area where local voices have been eclipsed by international interests and truths remain contested (see Mertus 1999a).

To the field of international relations, liberal feminist critique contributes both a methodology and a deep normative critique. "While the crux of the term feminist is method," Katharine Bartlett explains, "there is a critical aspect of feminist method that is substantive in nature. Feminist method works from a hypothesis which, in its simplest terms, boils down to something like this: the circumstances of women are unjust in significant respects and ought to be improved" (1999: 34). The approach to IR "as it should be" must be responsive to women, reflect their experiences, and seek to transform their lives in a manner that recognizes individual agency and corrects disproportionate power imbalances (Slaughter and Ratner 1999: 416). The liberal feminist does draw on the traditional themes of liberal theory, stressing the importance of individual rights, the rule of law, and other supportive institutional mechanisms. But it is the combination of feminist methodology and normative critique that makes liberal feminism so useful in analysis and problem solving.

This chapter reads like no other in this book because, unlike other chapters, it employs feminist methodology. Feminist methodology includes personal experience as a theoretical starting point, narrative, contextual reasoning, and multiperspectivity (Schneider 1986). The application of feminist methodology distinguishes this chapter in four ways. First, even before I outline the theory, I begin with a note on my own personal experiences in Kosovo and throughout the text I value other narratives. Second, although I

remain interested in the exercise of power at the "top" of the international arena, I understand world events by listening to local narratives and drawing lessons from "below." Thus, instead of focusing on such "big" actors and structures at the top—like NATO, the United States, the Yugoslav army—I look at the "little" actors and structures at the bottom—village women leaders, grassroots anticonscription organizations, and shoe-string humanitarian efforts. Third, unlike other contributors to this book, I am interested not only in applying my assigned theory to the abstract issue of Kosovo, but also in how specific local actors use or resist the theory. Finally, because I am self-reflective and aware of the contested local context, I know that it is not enough to present liberal feminism absent a critique. Accordingly, this chapter also challenges traditional notions of liberal feminism and exposes shortcomings in its application to Kosovo.

■ The Starting Point for Feminist Methodology: Personal Narrative

It was the winter of 1994. With the master plans for genocidal conflict being promulgated just blocks away from our Belgrade flat, and with the gates of the decaying city opening only to admit despair and eject hope, I sat around a kitchen table with a group of women who tried to imagine the dawn of a just world. "There would be no borders!" exclaimed one. "No police checkpoints!" another woman chimed in. It became a free-for-all. "No fighting militaries!" "No militaries at all!" "No, maybe just one military!" "No wars, no militaries!" "No passports!" "No green cards!" "Rights for women!" "Rights for gypsies!" "Rights for all minorities!" "Rights for everyone!" "No need for rights, equality for all!" The women around the kitchen table were of all ages and backgrounds—doctors, lawyers, journalists, psychologists, human rights investigators, and antiwar activists. We shared some common experiences, enough so that we had a familiar language and way of understanding, yet disagreed with each other on just about everything except for the need for more diverse participation in the international and local politics running our lives. The issue of Kosovo was a divisive one, but even the most nationalist among us vowed to work for peace. The electricity flickered off and on, and the grocery shelves were bare, but we were still filled with hope. "If only there were more women running things . . ." more than one activist was heard to say, fully aware of the power of women to inflict harm, but somehow convinced that the addition of our voices could make a difference.

It was the summer of 1998. The war in Bosnia had been over for nearly three years, but the low-intensity conflict that had been going on for a decade in Kosovo was now beginning to roar. Over 75,000 people had been displaced from their homes as Serbian forces flooded Kosovo and battles erupt-

ed between Serbs and Albanians. This time I was sitting around a kitchen table in Pristina, the dusty capital of Kosovo. The heady "can do" feeling of the women's activism that had, as in Belgrade, once infused Pristina, had long since dissipated. The doctor, nurse, journalist, student, and school teacher sitting around the table were as busy as ever, "doing something" to resist what they experienced as Serbian occupation, but their activities had become increasingly defensive—and grim. Instead of providing family planning education for girls and young women, they were counseling war-traumatized children and gathering emergency supplies for families trapped in the front lines. They were angry at their Serbian friends, who had not called or e-mailed—not even the ones who had come to visit when relations between Belgrade and Pristina women's groups thawed after the World Conference on Women in Beijing and the signing of the Dayton peace accord in 1995. "Maybe they are afraid," I suggested. "What do they know about fear?" the journalist snarled and the women erupted in agreement. "They don't care really." "They only care about themselves." "Everyone is first part of their nation and then a woman." With no hope left, the women turned to talking about what they would do when "the war begins." "I will send my sons out, but I will stay," one woman vowed. And that is exactly what she would do, becoming one of many women who was raped in the war of 1999.

As I look back on those and many other kitchen table sessions, I recognize that these groups of women sat far outside state structures, while powerful decisionmakers carried on, oblivious to their existence. Nonetheless, I came to understand that the "kitchen tablers" are central to understanding the larger issue of political and social conflict in Kosovo. By using the modes of governance that are part of transnational civil society, it is the kitchen tablers who try to shape the way people think about social-change issues. Kitchen tablers use the language of human rights treaties and seek the support of liberal state institutions, but in so doing shape the understanding of the words to fit their local lived realities. Thus, not only do kitchen tablers have access to liberal discourse as a tool to advance their claims, but to some extent also they *are* the discourse. The kitchen tablers, inundated with the demands of outsiders pressing a liberal agenda (from yesterday's warmongers to today's peacebuilders), have at their disposal various liberal feminist techniques, and their choice as to how to proceed shapes local and international understandings of liberal feminism. The insight I gained from the kitchen tablers informs the following outline of liberal feminism as well as its application.

■ The Theory and Its Applications

The theory and politics of liberal feminism are shaped by a conception of human nature, individual agency, and rationality identified with liberal

political theory (Donnelly 1999: 81). Also known as bourgeois feminism, the theory "is grounded in the claims of the classical liberal philosophy developed by Locke, Rousseau, Bentham and Mill for equal rights, individualism, liberty and justice" (Andermaier, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 1997: 123). The notion of *progress* is important for liberals; liberals share a faith in the progressive unfolding of humankind's ability to reason and a belief that disputes can and should be resolved by recourse to rational argument. They urge that international relations can and should be regulated through fair application of universal laws. Beyond this, however, liberals disagree with one another on many key issues, including whether human nature is essentially benign and cooperative or sinful and competitive; the proper relationship between state and society; whether and when a state can intervene in another to promote international norms; the proper weighing of the shared values of community against liberal tolerance; and the role of capitalist markets and free trade in securing justice and peace (Smith 1993).

The diversity of liberal thinking has accommodated many feminists with different informing ideologies and agendas, but with a belief that women's equality with men may be promoted through a system of legally enforceable individual rights (Vincent 1986: 152). Here lies the radical potential of liberalism for women advancing their claims under a rights framework. Women are empowered as capable subjects of the law (and not mere objects), and states (and in some cases other duty bearers) are burdened with the duty to recognize and respond appropriately to their demands.

The idea of individual rights necessitates recognition of the agency and identity of the individual that may exist apart from the community (Donnelly 1999: 81). Nonetheless, the liberal recognition of individual worth does not negate the importance of communal life. Individuals are not free-floating entities; they exist and gain meaning through social relationships and communal responsibilities and duties (Brown 1999). Identification and enforcement of the individual rights of women depends greatly on community (Cabill 1980: 284). Thus a liberal feminist agenda may very well incorporate a communal orientation along with recognition of the rights of individuals within communities.

Three feminist approaches to international relations problems that have relevance to the case study at hand can be identified (see table 8.2.1). While the first approach is most commonly identified with liberal feminism, both the second and third approaches have been used by liberal feminists who blend the liberal emphasis on individual rights and institution building with more structural critiques of women's subordination.

Where are the women? That is the question most associated with liberal feminism. This first approach, characteristic of "equality" feminists,

Table 3.2.1 Feminist Approaches to International Relations Problems

Problem	Explanation	Solution	Long-Term Result
Women invisible (unless same as men)	Men run world; men run IR; women's role not valued	Add women	See women; value women
Way of "being in" world distorted (in a manner that obscures gender power); who counts, what counts, how the game is played	"Male lens"	Use of descriptive gender lens/"gender perspective"	Transform ontology; expose constructed nature of difference; expose gender power
Way of "knowing" world distorted (constitutive concepts incomplete); state, sovereignty, security, development, power/authority	Process of acquiring knowledge; political; informed by ideology	Add gender as a tool of analysis; reorient top-down approach; link to other analyses of domination/subordination	Transform epistemology; expose political nature of methodologies; generate demands for change

looks for the ways in which women are "invisible" in international relations analysis, unless, that is, they are "like men" and play male roles (e.g., Margaret Thatcher or Madeleine Albright). The explanation for this problem has been articulated variously as (1) "men run the world," thus there simply are few women in the kinds of positions that matter in international relations; (2) there are women who should be made visible, but men run the field of international relations and they will not or cannot see women; or (3) women have been there in the international relations landscape all along, but their role has been undervalued and thus overlooked. In the case of Kosovo, this would mean not only identifying women occupying positions of power traditionally reserved for men—for example, noting Edita Tahiri's influential role in Ibrahim Rugova's government—but also valuing women wholly apart from men, and recognizing as important actors in international politics the women that others overlook—the village school teacher, the urban female doctor (see, e.g., Entoe 2000).

A liberal feminist examining the landscape of a transitional society like Kosovo would note the absence of women in positions of power and stress the consequences of the failure of local and international actors to take into account women's differing interests, skills, and expectations (see Mertus 2000b). The most simplistic IR policy prescription furthered by liberal fem-

inism has been characterized as "add women and stir," the notion that inclusion of females satisfies feminist demands for equality. In other words, all we need is more women everywhere, but particularly in decisionmaking positions in the space identified as public.

The second feminist approach moves beyond "adding women" and finds that the orienting assumptions of international policy analysts—their very way of being in the world—is distorted in a manner that privileges men. Zalewski has observed that the issues deemed important and relevant in international relations, assumptions about who and what counts and how the game is played, reflect the interests of the powerful (i.e., the masculine) while the less powerful (i.e., the feminine) are pushed to the margins (1995: 350). The explanation for this problem of ontology is the use of a male or masculine lens that accepts differences as natural and overlooks the deeply embedded impact of patriarchy. "That there are these differences [between men and women] is undeniable," Zalewski urges, "but what really matters, in terms of effects on people's lives, is how these differences are interpreted and acted upon" (1995: 344). The use of a gender perspective thus "can be used to challenge dominant assumptions about what is significant or insignificant, or what are central or marginal concerns" in Kosovo (Stearns 1998: 5). For example, a gender-sensitive ontological status would encourage analysis of the impact of state-condoned "public" violence on violence within Kosovar families and, conversely, the influence of identities and values fostered in family life on the existence of "public" violence. Furthermore, attention to women as the leading cultural transmitters within Kosovo would help us to understand how individual and collective identities and sociocultural meaning systems that support violent conflict are (re)produced and resisted (Peterson 2000: 18).

The third feminist approach finds that the dominant approach to understanding international problems is distorted by an epistemological orientation that relies on a set of inadequate claims about the world. The typical top-down analysis focuses on states, sovereignty, security, power, and conflict and overlooks individuals, social movements, cooperation, and human relations. At the same time, the significance of these constructs in relationship to women's subordination is obscured. The explanation for the shortcomings, J. Ann Tickner has asserted, is that "knowledge constructed in terms of binary distinctions such as rational/emotional, objective/subjective, global/local, and public/private, where the first term is often associated with masculinity, the second with femininity, automatically devalue certain types of knowledge" (2001: 133). The mere adoption of a gender perspective will not correct the epistemological bias. The political nature of the construction of knowledge must be interrogated and challenged. The goal of this more radical gender analysis in Kosovo would be to transform epistemological orientations and in so doing uncover and challenge sites of