Unit Five: Contemporary Approaches - Feminism and Constructivism

Dr. Russell Williams
Required Reading:
- Cohn, Ch. 5.

Class Discussion Reading:
- Rawi Abdelal, Mark Blyth, and Craig Parsons, “The Case for a Constructivist International Political Economy,” in Constructivist Political Economy

Outline:
1. Constructivism and IPE
2. Constructivism in Practice
3. Feminism and IPE
4. Gender in Practice
1) Constructivism and IPE

“Constructivism”: A “social theory” that stresses the importance of collectively held ideas in international politics.

- Ideas and identities are social constructed but are no less determinant then “material facts”
  - Difference between “social facts” and “material facts”?
    - E.g. Gold is a metal, or Gold is a precious metal
    - E.g. GDP

- Ideas, identities and “intersubjective” norms and values impact the behavior of IPE actors
  - Very different from materialist and rationalist traditions in IPE which assume “predictable rationalities”
Implications?

- Actors do not act rationally in a narrow sense . . .
  - Hard for IPE . . . . economics is obsessed with the study of people’s self interested and rational responses to “material facts”

- Can we predict behavior if actors do not have interests separate from their beliefs
  - Makes study harder – we need to know about actors beliefs, we cannot assume them
2) Constructivism in Practice

Not widely applied in IPE . . .

a) “Epistemic Communities”: A network of professionals or experts with a recognized claim to policy relevant expertise in a particular sector

- Help states define their interests on issues in IPE
  - E.g. Breton Woods (Cohn)
  - E.g. Financial industry regulators
b) The “immateriality” of economic policy: Key claim about economy is that actors’ understandings of economy are ambiguous - suggests everything is “ideological” . . .

- E.g. The “social facts” of unemployment rates
  - 1970s increased unemployment is bad = material fact interpreted through Keynesianism
  - 1990s increased unemployment is a good sign (workers are returning to the labour force/economy is improving) = material fact interpreted through neo-liberalism

- Both facts were probably correct at their time, but only make sense in a particular context
  - E.g. we have changed the way we measure unemployment, the way we provide employment insurance and the way we see unemployment

- Social facts guide behavior of governments and economic agents
  - How should a government respond to increasing unemployment?
  - How should an unemployed worker?
3) Feminism and IPE:

a) Intro: Small, but growing approach in IR & IPE
- Concerns are topical, but . . .
- Gender often ignored
  - Feminism is “pluralistic” and “marginalized” . . .

b) Fundamental concept:
- “Gender” → culturally constructed notions of masculinity and femininity
  - However, “constructions” privilege men
b) Gender in International Politics:

- IR/IPE a “backward” discipline = gender analyses has made least headway - Why?
  
  → IR/IPE practice is a “masculine” environment
  
  - Men in positions of power and authority
  
  → Disjuncture with other social science theories
  
  - IR theory is “masculinized” - Modern interstate system of politics derived from “gendered” concepts
    
    - Realists – Hobbes’ “state of nature”
    
    - Liberals - “prisoners’ dilemma”
    
    - Economics and gender constructions (E.g. Griffin)

c) Feminist approaches “deconstructive”

- Masculinity is “hegemonic” or “discursive”
  
  - E.g. Language of colonialism, globalization, development etc. etc.

d) Gender theory in both normative and analytical:

- Theory should be driven by actual experiences of people and of women

- Theory connected to practice – “Transnational Feminist Networks”
Feminist Theories: Various approaches - shared “commitments,” different methods

1) Liberal Feminism: Equal rights & access to the “public sphere”=Advocacy of international human rights

2) Radical Feminism: “Patriarchy” seen as source of oppression
   - Legalistic liberal feminism ignores sociological origins of those legal systems and rights . . . .

3) Socialist Feminism: Women’s oppression driven by both:
   - Relations of Production (Marxism)
   - Relations of Reproduction (Radical Feminism)
   = Synthesis of patriarchy and capitalism as the source of inequality

4) Postmodern Feminism: See modernist constructions themselves as a source of power and oppression – need for relativism
   - E.g. Universal rights of women may be problematic
4) Gender in Practice:

1) Impact of economic development on women
   - Critiques of neo-liberalism
   - Critics of development programs that exploit women
   - Globalisation/Post Fordism impact on women
     - "vulnerable workers"

2) Critiques of lack of gendered economic justice in international institutions
   - IMF structural adjustment
   - The UN system . . . .

3) Insights on shortcomings of other theories
Further Reading:
Conclusions:

- **Strengths?**
  - *Constructivism* and *Feminism* highlight the importance of ideas in IPE
    - IPE does seem very ideological
    - A useful corrective to “materialist rationalism”?

- **Weaknesses?**
  - The problem of economics – they are both “marginalized” in IPE by their focus on beliefs
    - Constructivism – the problem of change
    - Feminism – Marginalization - the problem of gender in “social facts”
For Next Time:

Unit Five: Contemporary Approaches - Feminism and Constructivism (October 15 & 20)

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