

# Three commentaries on Gillian Youngs' 'Feminist International Relations'

## I

### **Dominant and destructive masculinities**

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Since the early 1980s, several feminist approaches have argued that the ways in which war, nationalist movements, global economic relations and development strategies affect women adversely should command greater attention in the field of International Relations. Exponents of such approaches have criticized mainstream analysis for neglecting gender differences, for describing an essentially masculine world and for prolonging the invisibility of women. At stake in this discussion are the nature of international political reality, how best to analyse it and how to understand its consequences for women—especially vulnerable women. The upshot of the feminist analysis is that reflections on the state, anarchy, or the struggle for power and security are inadequate unless they address what Gillian Youngs calls 'the complex of gendered and other power relations' which not only 'sustain' power but '*explain it*' (emphasis in original). The larger critical project to which feminism belongs has maintained that students of international politics need to be alert to the ways in which descriptions of international relations may seem neutral and impartial but yet have political effects. Accounts of the world can confer legitimacy on political and economic arrangements which privilege the interests of some social groups and disadvantage others. This may happen unwittingly rather than intentionally. Such themes form the backdrop to Youngs' summary of some of the main developments in recent feminist writing on international relations.

Gillian Youngs reminds us of how these intellectual tendencies, which were first placed on the agenda by Marxism, have been advanced by feminist scholars. She expresses the frustration that much mainstream IR proceeds without regard for the achievements of feminism. Its impact is, she maintains, 'at best limited and at worst non-existent' in the conventional literature. But feminists will not alter this state of affairs, she argues, without greater engagement with mainstream concerns. The strategy of her article is to show that feminism can beat the dominant approaches at their own game of trying to explain international political reality. Understanding the dominant conceptions of state power, collective identity and international relations involves grasping 'the complex of gendered

and other power relations' which are the real underpinnings of the social and political world.

How should this complex of power relations be explained or accounted for? The article attaches great importance to variants of masculinity but takes great care to stress that their dominant traits should not be regarded as gender-specific. Youngs argues that mainstream and feminist approaches can combine to analyse the form of masculinity which has come to prevail since the appearance of the modern states-system—the form analysed by Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Lukács, which sees the natural world as something to be controlled and adopts a similarly instrumental approach to the social world, including international relations. Youngs argues that intellectual efforts on 'both sides' of the discipline—feminist and non-feminist—can shed new light on collective mentalities which explain international political structures and processes.

A large-scale empirical project is required to take this argument further. How did one version of masculinity come to prevail over others in the modern period and in earlier times? To select one example, which may warrant closer attention given its importance for the development of the West, how did the masculinity of the early Christian thinkers who embraced non-violence come to be superseded by a masculinity which defended force, albeit within the context of the just war tradition? We need to know more about the rise and fall of notions of military chivalry and uninhibited war, and we need to know more about the relationship between masculinities and these phenomena, both inside and outside the West.

The neorealist may claim that the dominant forms of masculinity in the modern world are not cause but effect: they have prevailed through a process of natural selection which has demonstrated their effectiveness in dealing with a world shaped fundamentally by geopolitical competition and conflict. But quite how this form of masculinity came to dominate, how far its supremacy occurred by eliminating or marginalizing other masculinities, how far the latter and kindred mentalities have clung on, and whether they can give rise to different conceptions of international politics are intriguing empirical questions. One of the merits of Youngs' argument is that she identifies how mainstream and other approaches might agree on the broad outline of an empirical research programme which would examine competing hypotheses about the emergence of dominant masculinist mentalities. Several years ago, Robert Keohane invited the exponents of new theoretical standpoints to construct an empirical research agenda which would explain global political structures and processes. Leaving aside the controversies of that time, Youngs shows how recent feminist scholarship can engage with mainstream concerns and advance empirical enquiry without compromising its normative commitments.

The empirical project that Youngs defends is strongly anchored in normative orientations and is therefore sharply divided from most mainstream analysis. She argues that 'malestream international theory' has helped to 'perpetuate a dis-

torted and partial world view that reflects the disproportionate power of control and influence that men hold, rather than the full social reality of the lives of women, children and men'. Moreover, an analysis of power should not be 'a discourse of and about the powerful' but should examine 'how power works ... to situate individuals and groups differently in terms of contrasting levels of capacity, control, influence and freedom'. The aim of empirical analysis, then, is to explain asymmetries of power and to challenge them in accordance with ethical assumptions about how social resources, capabilities and opportunities can be distributed more fairly.

Whether mainstream analysis, especially in the United States, is prepared to yield ground on the importance of objectivity or detachment is a moot point, although works such as Pogge's recent *World poverty and human rights* may contribute to this process. The dominant approaches to international relations, especially in the United States, remain wedded to 'scientific' explanation rather than normative enquiry. Nevertheless, a growing literature offers normatively grounded empirical analyses of 'real world' issues. If Youngs' overview of much recent feminist literature is correct, then recent developments in feminist writings on IR could usefully strengthen existing connections with normative international theory and build on the major contributions of such writers as Molly Cochran and Fiona Robinson.

Engaging with those approaches is an essential part of defending the philosophical foundations of normatively grounded empirical research. But there may be other spin-offs which fit the study of masculinities described in Youngs' article. If the world is in part a struggle between competing masculinities, then it may be profitable to analyse how different ethical traditions favour one conception of masculinity over another. It becomes necessary to identify the ethical traditions which pose the main challenge to destructive masculinities and which provide resources for envisaging and creating a world in which different moral and psychological traits predominate. Notwithstanding the controversies which have surrounded it, Gilligan's discussion of the 'ethic of care and responsibility' remains crucial to this discussion (as do Tronto, Robinson and O'Neill's reflections on the nature of this ethic and its relationship with other approaches). Feminist studies of 'connectedness' with other human beings and aptitudes for empathy with distant strangers who are adversely affected by the most powerful groups in global society have been especially important developments. One of the central contributions that feminism can make to both mainstream and other critical perspectives can be found in its emphasis on *human* capacities and moral emotions that offer some hope of a solution to the problems that dominant and destructive masculinities create for vulnerable men, women and children. Whether these ethical capabilities and emotional responses and sensitivities are more prevalent among women or men, or among the members of any social group for that matter, requires further empirical investigation. Readers of *International Affairs* should be indebted to Gillian Youngs for advancing this argument. We look forward to additional contributions in future issues.