

In the Ruins of Canonicity: Women and their Practices of Thought

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I begin with heartfelt gratitude to all who have laboured on the *Women and the History of International Thought* project, for the heroic production and reproduction of an enormous amount of carefully curated material on the international thought of a large number of historical women across the North Atlantic. The project is a joyous and relentless wrecking-ball against the immurement of these women and their work, walled-up behind the ideologically and politically restricted founding myths of the field propagated during the Cold War, and the canons that these myths underpinned.

Notwithstanding the considerable intellectual contributions that these recoveries make individually and collectively, the first contribution of such a project is the physical one – an impactful re-presencing of that which was hidden, lost and/or displaced. The sheer volume of the volumes is its own statement. Beyond this, the highly prominent publication venues for the outputs of this project – *APSR*, *ISQ*, Cambridge University Press – can be read not only as signs of its rigour and seriousness, but also, one infers, an attempt to insure against future erasures and forgetting.

Indelible, too, is the effect of working through the collected outputs of the project: meeting (mostly for the first time) intellectual after intellectual, their education, their thinking about the imperial/international, their networks and entanglements, their position(s) in the global social order of the time, and the navigation of these conditions. The temptation is, naturally, to account for these women as individuals who were in some sense exceptional in terms of their intellectual talents, tenacity and connections, such that they broke the patriarchal mould of their times to make their mark on the world.

Whilst such an account is not wrong, the *WHIT* project points to something else more interesting as well – that there was something about the Atlantic-global context of the late 19th/early 20th century in which there were multiple spaces and nodes where women could be engaged in and lead intellectual and political projects. Clearly, one major contributing factor was the infrastructure and technologies of empire, serving as both a connective frame and a shared object of identification and/or critique. At the social level though, one develops a picture of a richly autonomous and associational life emergent from and reworking its fibres – pacifist, socialist, anti-colonial, feminist religious, of workers, of artists, of poets and novelists, as well as scholars and writers – contemplating war, empire, racism, revolution, capitalism and so on, in speech as well as print. Women could be and were the organic intellectuals of these spaces, as much as they were also integral to their material (re)production.

This reflection leads to a perhaps more discomfiting question – did International Relations (IR) become *more* patriarchal after the world war of 1945, and if so why? The project intimates some answers to this, for example in Owens' (2021) introduction to thinking about

the field in the anthology. One is that at the early stages of thinking about IR as its own field, there was considerable space for 'amateur' scholars to occupy and cultivate its foundations, as many women did. The corollary implication is that as the field 'professionalised' during the Cold War, many these figures were more often driven out, particularly as the field became closer to government and the security establishment.

Relatedly, and second, with 'professionalisation' clearly came a narrowing of international theory to those forms of thought which influential figures in the field chose to recognise as its own. Whilst the *WHIT* project clearly identifies women who identified with or sought to defend the disciplinary object of 'IR', many wrote in traditions that drew on political economy, literature, history and so forth, which were weeded out as IR asserted itself more and more as a 'American social science'.

A third consideration that emerges from the narrative is that many active women and the causes that they espoused were disproportionately affected by the anti-communist and anti-revolutionary tendencies of the field as it became consolidated. Whilst the history of women's international thought is clearly not only a leftist history, it is clear that many important women thinkers surveyed here were either explicitly Marxist or identified with associated causes and networks, e.g. anti-colonialism, pacifism and so on. The erasure of these figures and their insights from the Anglo-American academy, and particularly the field of IR, is clearly at least compounded by this tendency.

These reflections point towards what for me is one of the other central contributions of the *WHIT* project, which is the way it opens up what we might call the 'problem of canonicity' itself. It starts from the recognition that canons exercise 'disciplinary' power in the Foucauldian sense, and that the shaping of canons is constituted by acts of gendered, raced, classed, ideological, geographical exclusions and so on. The project dwells in this problem-space, with a devastating account (especially in the *APSR* article) of how even more contemporary and seemingly 'critical' accounts of IR's canon have failed to recognise and include the international thought of women. In discussing the strategies that might be used to address this, the project problematises the possibility of rejecting canons, and lands in favour of recovery, reconstitution and reconstruction as ways forward. There is a recognition in the Introduction of the Anthology, subtitled 'Towards a new canon' (Owens, Rietzler et al 2021) that both canonising and anthologising are nonetheless slightly fraught endeavours, with the dangers of tokenistic or shallow engagement in this process. Notwithstanding the qualifications, the project still makes a resounding case for itself on the terms it has defined.

However, there is still something unsatisfying about a seeming return to canonicity in the end, even a heavily qualified one, and the project recognises this. Methodologically, the project heavily historicises and contextually locates the women at the centre of its stories, emphasising the material conditions, institutions and connections that enabled their work, as well as the political problems and dilemmas they faced. This precisely moves against the idea of the 'timeless wisdom' that might be preserved in a canon or the heroic conception of the individual thinker with which that approach is associated, even as we identify themes such as militarism or imperialism that continue to resonate in the present. Substantively, as a strategic choice to enable the recovery of women's international thought, the retention of

canonicity as a principle of pedagogical and intellectual organisation also still feels like a terrain which would always militate against the engagement of women as thinkers, both individually and collectively.

In this respect, we might think briefly about how de-colonial thought has confronted the erasures of anti-colonial, anti-racist, Black and indigenous thought. In these cases, a reconstitution of the 'canon' has received less emphasis as a strategy than a recovery and reconstitution of different 'archives' (el-Malik et al 2017) and of 'living traditions of knowledge' in the words of Shilliam (2021). By moving from thinking about 'canons' to 'archives', we can recognise the existence of multiple knowledge traditions, which are unequally powerful and prominent in the world, and we can also recognise the processes through which some traditions or archives can establish themselves as canonical with respect to certain fields. We can, but do not have to, integrate them into a single conversation or edifice from the outset – we can inhabit and engage them on their own terms, and also put them into creative dialogue with each other for pedagogical and other purposes.

Moreover, it is also perhaps difficult to capture the full range of 'thought' described by the *WHIT* project through thinking about how a canon might be reconstituted. The project is clear that 'thought' is to be understood capaciously, not just incorporating 'theories' that position themselves as such but the wider work of interpreting the world through ideas and concepts and lineages and so forth, which may be written, but which may also be communicated and recorded in a larger range of formats (Owens and Rietzler 2021). Thinking about thought this way, which seems absolutely critical from both an intellectual and epistemic justice standpoint, seems to imply that we should push away from the canonical organisation of knowledge and one which perhaps more readily engages with shared problems, concepts, themes and issues.

To elaborate this last point, we might turn our attention to the present to ask a version of Enloe's question: where are the women whose thought is engaged with and shaping the world today? Some of them are in the academy or publishing world, certainly, but many of them are also on the street. If we look at movements from the Arab uprisings of the early 2010s to Fees Must Fall to Black Lives Matter and the climate strikes, women, and particularly younger women, have played a central role in the leadership and elaboration of these political movements; in less spectacular ways women are also central to the institutionalisation of these concerns in an everyday sense. No doubt, it is the prominence of young women in many of these movements that is in part a focus of the derision and backlash around it. How can a canonical approach to the field capture the profound shifts in political orientation of which these women-led movements and living traditions are the motor? Could a re-organisation of our pedagogy - around problems and movements and archives – generate a more holistic, more historical conception of international thought?

To conclude, I return to the warning inferred from the project – that the 'progress' of women in intellectual careers is not historically linear but dependent on various material institutions and practices which can become fragile. Today, we confront a crisis of social reproduction through the pandemic which has strongly accentuated the gendered division of labour and the household as the primary site of reproduction (Stevano et al 2021), as the

state itself increasingly retreats from guaranteeing the well-being of its citizens. Women's working conditions are their thinking conditions; in the smaller elite world of the contemporary academy, lockdowns immediately produced a surge in article submission rates for academic men relative to women (Viglione 2020).

Perhaps more obliquely, this feels like one more reason to embrace the ruins of canonicity and the more conventional ways in which we organise and recognise intellectual production. We can teach canons as historical objects, we can teach against canons with archives formed on different historical timelines and we can teach thought as a set of responses to specific problems. The *WHIT* project has done something remarkable in this respect – it has both joined a conventional canonical battleground, blowing many assumptions up in the process, and has also intimated pathways out of and away from this way of organising thought. It will now be up to us as to how we use this most valuable resource.

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