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Chapter 5

Postmodernism (Constructivism, Feminism, Critical Theory, Poststructuralism)

The fourth and newest system-level theory of international relations is known as **postmodernism**. This paradigm incorporates a rather diverse array of theories developed over the last twenty-five years, including constructivism, feminism, critical theory, and poststructuralism. Although these theories offer distinct views of international relations, they are united by their rejection of empirically based positivist traditions that are the cornerstone of the first three theories of international relations presented in this text.

Unlike realism, liberalism, and class system theory, postmodernism focuses primarily on the importance of ideas and culture in shaping our understanding of international politics. Postmodernists argue that traditional theories of international relations are inherently subjective and merely reflect the biases and motivations of the people who created the theories in the first place. Many postmodernists argue that it is impossible to construct an objective or unbiased theory of international relations and therefore focus on how our understanding of international relations is shaped by our beliefs and social identities.

At the root of the argument between postmodernism and mainstream IR theory is a difference over epistemology. **Epistemology** is the study of the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge. Put another way, epistemology focuses on how we know or attain knowledge. Traditional theorists of international relations (realists, liberals, and class system theorists) believe that it is possible to acquire objective knowledge of the world. These mainstream approaches rest upon the assumption that it is possible to develop rational and testable theories to explain international relations. This can be accomplished by relying on the methodologies developed by the natural sciences and adopting them to explain social phenomena such as domestic and international politics. This school of thought is called positivism.

Positivism is a philosophical movement characterized by an emphasis upon science and scientific method as the only dependable sources of knowledge. Positivists believe that reliable knowledge can be acquired only through experimental investigation and empirical observation. So traditional IR theory is based on the belief that it is possible to identify objective facts and use them as a basis for developing testable hypotheses upon which we can form theories of international relations.

Postmodernists, on the other hand, question the validity of positivist epistemology. The postmodernist critique of conventional IR theory can be divided into three basic parts. The first part involves hermeneutics and its effect on theory development. **Hermeneutics** is the study of how we interpret, explain, and draw meaning from language. Postmodernists differ with traditional theorists over the value of language as a tool for understanding the world in which we live. The positivist views the world and reality as constructed through the orderly system of language, while postmodernists distrust the reliance on language as the path to knowledge.

Second, many postmodernists argue that there is no such thing as objective, value-free theory. Theory is merely the product of our perception of reality. In fact, postmodernists contend that theory simply reflects the values of the individuals who construct the theories. Therefore, they are skeptical about whether the methodology of the natural sciences can be applied to the social sciences. Postmodernists emphasize the difference between theories in the natural science such as chemistry and biology as opposed to social science theories such as political science. In chemistry, elements have distinct properties and react in particular ways that can be replicated in laboratory settings. These chemical reactions occur regardless of what we believe or want to happen. Social scientists, on the other hand, study human interactions that cannot be isolated in

controlled laboratory conditions. Thus, the study of human beings is far more complex and subject to influences outside of the control of the social scientists. So when social science scholars study IR theory, there is an unavoidable relationship between theory and practice, between what political leaders think about how the world works and how they behave in the world.

Third, postmodernists' uncertainty about the objectivity of language and the ability of theorists to produce value-neutral theory caused them to search for alternative ways to interpret IR theory. This skepticism regarding the ability of language to represent an objective view of reality led them to the literary and philosophical theory of deconstruction. **Deconstruction** is a theory about language and literature that postmodernists adapted to analyze theories of international relations. Deconstruction is an analytical method that seeks to take apart, or "de-construct," verbal and written language in search of the hidden meanings implanted inside. Deconstruction offers social and political context to our understanding of language. It is a view of language as it exists not only in books but in speech, in history, and in culture. For the deconstructionist, language creates human reality. Language provides the broader cultural background that gives meaning to social conventions and concepts. In short, deconstruction is used by postmodernists to demonstrate that language and therefore knowledge is a human construct that is subjective.

In the chapter's first reading, Yosef Lapid introduces the basic underpinnings of postmodernism. Lapid presents both the promises and potential problems associated with postmodernism. The author begins by asserting that the postmodernist paradigm represents a serious challenge to our understanding of social science and consequently our study of international relations theory. Lapid reminds us that we need to be aware of the potential weaknesses of mainstream analytical methodology used in traditional theories of international relations. The author concludes with a warning that uncritical acceptance of postmodernism can lead to theoretical relativism, in which all theories are considered equal regardless of their intellectual merit.

As noted earlier, the postmodernist paradigm represents a diverse and wide number of images in international relations. In order not to overwhelm students by presenting examples of all the key theories within postmodernism, we limited our attention to the two most influential and widely known branches of postmodernism. Therefore, we will focus on constructivist and feminist theories of postmodernism.

Constructivism

The first branch of postmodernism is called constructivism. **Constructivism** is based on the claim that our understanding of reality is socially "constructed." By this we mean that constructivists place great attention on the role of ideas and beliefs in shaping our understanding of the world. They emphasize the identities and interests of individuals and states and the ways in which those preferences are a product of society. Constructivists examine the processes by which leaders, groups, and states alter their preferences, shape their identities, and learn new behavior.

Constructivists share the postmodernist position that knowledge is not just about what we observe but also about the meaning given to those observations. This view rests on the principle of social constructivism. **Social constructivism** is the study of how people's identities, values, and ideas are defined by their group affiliations. Social constructivism examines how ideas and identities are created, how they change, and how they shape the manner in which states act on the international stage. The constructivist approach to international relations centers on states as social actors whose actions adhere to international and domestic rules. Put simply, constructivists assert that the behavior of states is driven by rules, norms, institutions, and identities. Like other postmodernists, constructivists place great emphasis on the malleability of world politics and how social norms shape and change the nature of international relations. For example, conventional IR theory concepts such as power, anarchy, and state sovereignty are not objective (empirical) phenomena but are actually ideas given meaning by us. The constructivist approach is to study how these ideas and values came into being and how they affect the way states act.

The constructivist view of international relations is based on five basic assumptions. First, constructivists contend that ideas, beliefs, and identities of individuals and groups are key to understanding the nature and course of international relations.

Second, constructivists believe that people's identities, ideas, and values are created or "constructed" in large part by their group affiliations. In other words, who you are and what you believe is in large measure the result of where you live and to what groups you belong. A young Afghan's view of the world will be dramatically different from that of a young American's. The values, ideas, and goals of each are, in part, the product of their distinct cultures, group affiliations, and social upbringing.

Third, constructivism places greater emphasis on social factors than on material factors such as military and economic power. Constructivists assert that people create social reality. This means that social factors such as ideas, values, and identities are most important in understanding international politics.

Fourth, constructivists contend that conflict or cooperation between states is largely the result of their values, views and ideas about each other and their place in the international system. For example, one of the architects of constructivism, Alexander Wendt, has argued that the realist principle of anarchy does not offer a satisfactory explanation of why conflict occurs between states. Realists argue that anarchy is an objective reality, whereas Wendt believes anarchy is subjective. Therefore, according to Wendt, anarchy exists only when people believe it exists. Most importantly, constructivists examine how anarchy is understood by states and how this understanding has shaped and continues to shape their actions.

Fifth, constructivists place great emphasis on explaining change in international relations. Change is a focal point for constructivists because their theory of the social construction of ideas holds that the way people and groups view the world can change dramatically over time. Overall, constructivists believe that concepts such as nation and sovereignty, democracy and terrorism are all socially constructed ideas with socially constructed definitions, and are not permanent, objective truths that are impervious to changing interpretations.

The last assumption may demonstrate why constructivism has drawn more serious scholarly attention since the end of the Cold War. Stephen Walt, a noted scholar of international relations theory (see his article in Chapter 1, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," page 29), pointed out that constructivism is the only theory that offered a plausible explanation for the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Constructivists argued that the end of the Cold War was a direct result of former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's embracing of new ideas and the gradual decline of the acceptance of communist ideology by elites within the Soviet Union.

In his selection, Alexander Wendt critiques realism and offers constructivism as an alternative theory of international relations. Wendt offers a brief overview of the major assumptions of the constructivist approach and contends that postmodernists are united by their focus on how world politics is socially constructed. Wendt stresses the ultimate subjectivity of interests and their links to changing identities. Finally, he emphasizes the importance of ideas and culture in shaping the behavior of states.

Feminist Theory

Before we begin our discussion of the feminist branch of postmodernism it must be noted that not all feminist IR theorists fit into the postmodernist paradigm. In fact, many feminist IR theorists remain positivists and reject the fundamental principles of the theoretical approach of postmodernism. The point here is to emphasize the diversity within the feminist approach to international relations theory and that this chapter spotlights a major but not exclusive view of feminist writings on IR theory.

The analysis and articles presented here examine international relations and established theories of international relations from a feminist viewpoint. That is, they introduce the element of gender into our understanding of foreign policy and the behavior of states. Gender, with respect to

political science, does not narrowly adhere to the traditional biological delineation between men and women. Rather, the term **gender** encompasses the social and cultural distinctions as well as the differences in conventional roles between the two sexes, not simply clinical or biological classifications. Further, when we associate a particular role with an individual or group, we generally mean the function or behavior patterns normally connected with a particular position. Hence, **gender roles** are the jobs, tasks, and activities that are traditionally associated with either men or women as a group.

A key component of feminist theory is its questioning of the validity of the distribution of power, a key component in the behavior of and relations between states as the system currently stands. Feminist theorists do not believe that the accumulation of power, balance-of-power politics, and domination implicit in such an arrangement represent reasonable standards for the conduct of international affairs. Feminist theory also argues that the current system fails to promote the interests and roles of women in the world community. Traditional theorists' ignoring of women's contributions and issues renders the entire history and present system of, as well as the approach to, international politics one-sided, masculinist, and not fully representative.

Feminist theory may be viewed as a multifaceted effort to change the course and conduct of international relations in a way that incorporates the unique character and contributions of women. One aspect of feminist theory is its emphasis on the unique perspective and contributions that women bring to human relations and its analysis of these relations. This approach highlights the distinctions between men and women in terms of role, interests, capabilities, and so forth, arguing that women do not need to compete with or surpass men on every issue. Emphasis is placed on positive differences rather than negative competition. Feminist theorists argue that differences in women's expertise and perspective on various issues bring vitality, expand possibilities, and offer a new breadth of understanding to accepted norms and established theories of international affairs. For example, women's traditional skills and experience as primary caregiver and nurturer in the family setting and in society would presumably give them a greater range of abilities in the public spheres of conflict resolution, negotiation, and diplomacy. Overall, women's greater capacity to bond, form lasting relationships, and empathize with others provides them with a natural advantage over men in these situations—a point never considered in traditional international relations theories.

Postmodern Feminist IR Theory

As in constructivism, social identity is a primary principle for **postmodern feminist** theory. Feminist postmodernists emphasize the social construction of gender roles and their impact on the structure of society and international relations. Postmodern feminists remind us that gender-based concepts and attitudes are social constructs that are created and rooted in interconnected systems of male dominated power. Consequently, feminists focus on the gender-related—often oppressive—themes and subtexts that litter a field dominated by men since its inception and still dominated by men today. A **subtext** is a hidden, underlying meaning or interpretation that can presumably be discerned by close examination of the words and phrases chosen by the author. Thus, both overtly and unconsciously, the analysis, worldview, and terminology widely used and accepted in the study and practice of international affairs is dominated by a male perspective.

Feminist theorists often use the term **androcentric** (male-centered) to describe the idea that mainstream theories of international relations (particularly realism) ignore alternative viewpoints and, instead, rely on essentially masculine interpretations of world affairs. The male approach—filled with images of power, strength, domination, and war—is quite distinct from the female approach—characterized by images of peace, equity, social justice, and environmental balance. By recognizing these inherent and pervasive inequalities and exposing the hidden masculinist agenda in the world political system, these feminist theorists hope to create a broader overall setting for enlightened discourse. And, since women have historically been outsiders in this global power game, this new approach would likely benefit peripheral nations (Third World, less-

industrialized societies) that have also commonly found themselves on the fringes of political influence.

Obviously, feminist theory encompasses several viewpoints in a progressive dialogue on international relations theory. There is, however, agreement within the ranks of the debate on some key issues. To begin, the frameworks for both the practice of and theorizing about international affairs have been constructed to fit male conceptions of the world, life, and human interaction. In addition to setting up these frameworks, men have played and continue to play the primary role within them. Feminist theorists generally agree that the inclusion of women, in any of the forms mentioned above, would have a significant, positive impact on the policy-making process and the policies themselves. Such changes would stem from the perspective and experience of women in society and would benefit the world community by promoting greater equality throughout the system, as well as policies emphasizing nonviolent solutions and alternatives.

Writings in Feminist Theory

The articles selected for this chapter represent a sampling of the work being done on feminist theories of international relations. J. Ann Tickner's piece offers a frank discussion about the tensions between feminists and traditional IR theorists. The author examines the theoretical and methodological differences between feminist scholars and others. Tickner contends that feminists do not fit into the conventional state-centric and structural approaches and that this is one of the primary reasons why feminist IR theory is so misunderstood by conventional scholars in the field. Finally, Tickner explains how feminist perspectives of the conventional concept of security can contribute to our understanding of contemporary international politics.

In the next reading, Robert Keohane responds to J. Ann Tickner's article by providing an explanation of why feminist theory lacks widespread acceptance by mainstream IR theorists. In fact, Keohane asserts that much of the fault lies with feminists themselves. He decries the excessive politicization of the debate between feminists and traditional theorists and argues that this problem prevents serious discussion on feminist IR scholarship. Keohane concludes that feminist IR theorists must do more than offer critiques of mainstream IR theory. Instead, feminists need to develop systematic, testable, and falsifiable hypotheses because this will facilitate a more constructive scholarly dialogue between feminists and traditional IR theorists.

The selection by Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prugl offers some unique insights into the similarities and differences between constructivist and feminist approaches to IR theory. The authors acknowledge that both theories share a fundamental agreement on the importance of the role of social construction of ideas and identities in understanding international politics. Many feminists agree that gender is a social construct, and this position forms the cornerstone of commonality between constructivist and feminist approaches to IR theory. But the authors contend that constructivism ignores key feminist epistemological insights and that there are profound differences between feminists and constructivists.

The final reading, by Saba Gul Khattak, is an interesting example of a policy-relevant feminist analysis of the utility and impact of the use of force. The author uses the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, to demonstrate the importance of understanding the problem from the perspective of Afghans in general and gender in particular.

A Critique of Feminist Theory

One of the greatest strengths and contributions of postmodern feminist theory is that it examines the construction and role of gender that mainstream international relations theory ignores. It stands to reason that if men have dominated the course and conduct of international relations, and men have designed theories on this subject, that overall perceptions have been gender influenced. Just as two people witnessing the same event might describe it differently because of their unique backgrounds and preconceptions, it is likely that the predominance of men

in international affairs has had an effect on the foreign policy behavior of states and theories about world politics.

Feminist theory has also made important headway both in uncovering the masculinist approach to international relations theory and in promoting the interests, goals, and equality of women in the field. Essentially, feminist theorists have moved beyond isolating the gender inequities in our traditional ways of looking at things and have also established various methods for redressing these inequities. These methods seek to incorporate a greater number of issues important and relevant to women's lives or to expand the percentage of women in the foreign policy establishment. As the disparities in power and influence between men and women equalize, the nature and conduct of international politics may very well change.

A major criticism of the feminist paradigm, however, is its failure to provide a comprehensive theoretical construct for analyzing international relations. Conventional theorists might suggest it is not sufficiently rigorous, lacking an organized, cohesive framework. As a prescriptive theory, feminism falls into the trap of focusing too much of its efforts on how the situation in world politics, and the study of world politics, might be changed. What feminist theory does *not* supply are the explanatory and theoretical tools to conduct a thorough analysis.

We might also question some of the standards that are established in the context of feminist theory. Are feminists guilty of relying on their own stereotypes of gender characteristics? By using selective characterizations—women are more cooperative and peaceful, while men are more violent and aggressive—feminist theorists risk reinforcing the same gender stereotyping they are trying to overcome.

Despite our initial point, crediting feminist theory with uncovering gender bias in a male dominated field, there are skeptics who question the utility of this view. Critics contend that international relations theory should explain and predict behavior based on how the world actually operates. Since men hold the vast majority of leadership positions, scholars must study their behavior. Critics also point out that gender may not provide a sufficient explanation for past and contemporary international politics. Larger forces (human nature, disparities in wealth and power, anarchic world system, to name just a few) shape the behavior of various actors on the world stage, irrespective of gender. As evidence, critics point to the fact that when women have assumed leadership positions and confronted the same global problems that men have confronted, their actions have been similar to men's.

Feminist theorists respond to these arguments in a number of ways. First, feminists contend that illustrating that women and men behave differently is not engaging in stereotypes. It simply challenges scholars to appreciate the extent to which traditional theories of international relations rely solely on male conceptions of reality and ignore the perspectives and concerns of women. Second, they argue that feminist theories of international relations should not be judged by conventional, male-dominated rules of objectivity and analysis. Feminism is an innovative approach that seeks to inject a "feminine" perspective into the study of international relations. With this new perspective come new ways of analyzing global politics that cannot, and should not, be judged merely on how well the theories hold up to conventional social science methodologies and practices.

Whether we agree or disagree with these critics, feminist theory is now an important perspective in the field of international relations. In our study of how individuals behave in a global setting, differences between the sexes cannot be ignored. As men and women address gender issues in practice within society at large, it must certainly be time to address them in theory.

Critique of Postmodernism

Even a cursory reading of this chapter makes it clear to the reader that postmodernism is a complex, diverse, and intellectually challenging view of international relations theory. Broadly speaking, postmodernism provides an engaging critique of the social sciences more generally and to IR theory specifically. The postmodernist evaluation of positivism reminds us of the limits of IR theory and offers a useful lesson that IR theory is not an exact discipline that contains immutable

truths that can be relied upon with certainty. Its emphasis on the subjectivity of ideas, theories, and even methodology is an important counterweight to mainstream conceptions of IR theory. Moreover, both the constructivist and feminist branches of postmodernism point out that language, group identities, and gender roles are socially constructed concepts that have a profound impact on the conduct of our lives.

In general, postmodernists concentrate on important questions that the other paradigms sometimes ignore. Specifically, constructivists focus on why and how change occurs in international politics. Feminists ask whether gender roles affect our view of global politics and whether our understanding of international relations has been narrowed by male-dominated cultures. What this demonstrates is that theories are important not just for the answers they supply but for the questions they ask. The postmodernists have broadened the agenda of IR theory by posing some very valuable questions that the other paradigms had customarily de-emphasized or disregarded. Criticism of postmodernist theory centers on three major problems. First, postmodernism rejects the positivist underpinnings of mainstream IR theory but it doesn't present any clear alternative with which to replace it. Second, postmodernism is merely a critique of traditional IR theory and nothing more. For that reason, critics contend that postmodernism is more accurately viewed as a radical approach to the study of theory in general than it is a cogent theory of international relations. Third, many mainstream IR theorists question the intellectual rigor of postmodernists who shun mainstream social science methodology and rely solely on non-falsifiable assertions regarding the nature and course of international relations. Finally, the postmodernist emphasis on the social construction of reality and the lack of objective truths leads many to wonder whether postmodernism is simply an anti-intellectual exercise that leads us nowhere.

Postmodernists respond by saying that traditional approaches to IR theory are too constraining and that the value of postmodernism cannot be judged by the conventional methods employed by mainstream IR theorists. Instead, postmodernism represents an attempt to broaden the horizon of international relations theory and employ new viewpoints and methods for understanding the changing nature of international relations. This debate is sure to continue for many years, but one thing remains certain: The postmodernist image of global politics has assumed its position as one of the major systemic theories of international relations.

Key Concepts

Androcentric (male-centered) describes the idea that traditional theories of international relations (particularly realism) ignore alternative view points and, instead, rely on essentially masculine interpretations of world affairs.

Constructivism is a postmodernist theory of international relations that is based on the claim that our reality is socially constructed. Constructivists place great attention on the role of ideas and beliefs in shaping our understanding of the world. They emphasize the identities and interests of individuals and states and the ways in which those preferences are socially constructed.

Reconstruction is a theory about language and literature developed in the 1970s that postmodernists have adapted to analyze theories of international relations. Deconstruction is an analytical method that seeks to take apart or "de-construct" verbal and written language in search of the hidden meanings embedded inside.

Epistemology is the study of the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge.

Gender encompasses the social and cultural distinctions, as well as the differences in traditional roles, between the two sexes, not simply clinical or biological classifications.

Gender roles are the jobs, tasks, and activities that are traditionally associated to either men or women as a group.

Hermeneutics is the study of how we interpret, explain, and draw meaning from language.

Positivism is a philosophical movement characterized by an emphasis upon science and scientific method as the only dependable sources of knowledge. Positivists believe that reliable knowledge can only be acquired through experimental investigation and empirical observation. Traditional IR theory is based on the positivist epistemology.

Postmodernism is the name of the paradigm that incorporates the following theories: constructivism, feminism, critical theory, and poststructuralism. Postmodernism asserts that it is impossible to construct an objective or unbiased theory of international relations and instead spotlights how our understanding of international relations is shaped by our beliefs and social identities. Postmodernists believe that reality is shaped by perceptions and that knowledge is highly subjective.

Social constructivism is the study of how people's identities, values, and ideas are developed by their group affiliations.

Subtext is a hidden, underlying meaning or interpretation that can presumably be discerned by close examination of the words and phrases chosen by the author.