

Gendering Universalisms in International History

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Gendered critiques by historians and feminist international relations scholars have been animating international history for a good thirty years by complicating the supposedly binary relationships between states and societies, private and public, and local and international that traditionally structured the discipline.¹ In this essay we would like to ask what a sensitivity to gender might add to international histories that are shifting their focus away from intergovernmental relations towards a reassessment of internationalisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through studies of transnational social movements, international organizations and norms, or practices of global governance.² We are especially interested in how gender might contribute to a major emerging theme of international history today: the history of internationalism and international organizations as a struggle between competing or converging universalisms – ‘imperial and anticolonial, “Eastern” and “Western”, old and new’ – that sought to speak in the name of all humanity, rather than as the triumph of an international order imposed by the “West” on the rest.³

Back in the 1980s social and cultural historians inspired by feminist and postcolonial theory were among the fiercest critics of a narrowly defined international history, arguing that gender, like class and race, could no longer be ignored if historians were to achieve a more complex understanding of international relations. Emily S. Rosenberg argued more than twenty years ago for the inclusion of women and gender into US foreign relations history.⁴ Rosenberg’s four points seem to remain valid today: historians continue to work on exceptional women in foreign policy, on women as transnational actors, on discourses related to gender that cross borders, and on women in

¹ Many of the considerations in this essay were developed within the framework of the workshop ‘Intimate Internationalism. Women Transforming the Political in Postwar Europe, East and West’, organised by the authors at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam, 1-2 October 2010. We are grateful to the participants for sharing their work with us and to the Gerda Henkel Stiftung for the generous funding.

² While recognizing the huge potential for gendering the broad themes of global or world history, for reasons of space we will focus here on international history and its transnational settings.

³ Sunil Amrith/Glenda Sluga, New Histories of the United Nations, in: *Journal of World History* 19 (2008), pp. 251-274, here p. 256.

⁴ Emily S. Rosenberg, A Round Table: Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations: Gender, in: *Journal of American History* 77 (1990), pp. 116-124.

international development.⁵ Feminist and gender-conscious scholars were also among those who sought to recast international history by looking outside ‘diplomatic exchanges and corporate boardrooms’ towards ‘places like movie theatres, department stores, schools and homes’.⁶

Feminist international relations theorists shook up the field further in the late 1980s by showing how sexual and international orders – masculinism and militarism, above all – are mutually constitutive: the Cold War, in the early work of Cynthia Enloe, was exposed as a ‘thicket of gendered relationships’, not simply a ‘contest between two superpowers, each trying to absorb as many countries as possible into its own orbit, but also a series of contests within each of those societies over the definitions of masculinity and femininity that would sustain or dilute that rivalry’.⁷ The lively literature on the “home front” of the Cold War probed the heteronormative definitions of gender, sexuality and the family that reaffirmed the politics of national security in the private sphere.⁸ Masculine identities were shown to be constitutive of the reasoning and actions of the US foreign policy establishment.⁹

The collapse of the Soviet bloc eventually laid to rest one of the dominant paradigms of international history over the past 40 years, and the one that engaged the feminist scholars cited above: international relations as superpower contest between the US and USSR. However, gender, sexuality and the family are no less central to the international politics of human rights and humanitarian interventions, recognition of which has recently provoked scholars to reassess the history of universal ideas of international order over the last two centuries, in an effort to escape triumphalist narratives about the apparent victory of western liberal democracy in the post-Cold War world.

Gender as a category of historical analysis has itself been implicated in the debate about competing and converging universalisms: as a product of the western (metropolitan) academy, a cultural construct that assumes a particular set of western sexual relations masquerading as a universally applicable category of historical analysis, proponents of gender have also been accused of propagating a false universalism. As Giulia Calvi has recently argued, gender became an accepted category of historical analysis as a result of transnational mediations, and was introduced into different national historiographies by scholars who were trained in the US. ‘Focusing on this asymmetry’, Calvi continues, ‘allows us to rethink the epistemology of gender as

⁵ Kristin Hoganson, What’s Gender Got to Do with it? Women and Foreign Relations History, in: *OAH [Organization of American Historians] Magazine of History* 19 (2005), pp. 14-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After. Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, Berkeley 1993, p. 19.

⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound. American Families in the Cold War Era*, New York 1988.

⁹ Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood. Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy*, Amherst 2001.

part of a broader picture, where issues of space and its historical construction are of great relevance in the production and dissemination of knowledge.¹⁰

A whole series of theoretical and methodological debates have shaken the field of gender history in recent times, ranging from controversies over intersectionality to the queering of sexual and social relations.¹¹ Even in gender's broadest and vaguest definition as a 'social construction to designated "male" and "female" bodies' – critics have dwelled on the binary and oppositional terms as well as the universal claim that are at the very core of this definition.¹² Scholars like Joan Scott have thus returned to the relationship between gender and sex in order to confront some of these criticisms. 'When gender is an open question about how these meanings are established, what they signify, and in what contexts', she concluded, 'then it remains a useful – because critical – category of analysis.'¹³

The new international history, written very much from the perspective of social, cultural and transnational history, seems to offer an ideal way of both historicizing ideas and practices of gender in relation to international norms, social movements and global governance, and also of using the insights of gender, feminist and queer theory to "defamiliarise" the history of internationalism. For example, how might historians integrate gender into transnational studies of these universal orders in a contemporary, and provincialised, Europe?¹⁴ Following Kiran Patel's understanding of transnational history as a research perspective rather than a new paradigm or separate field, we support an integrative approach that looks for connections, flows and circulations across nations – with the nation always remaining in tension with these cross-border phenomena – and also between state and private actors.¹⁵

Yet two important new studies on the recent history of human rights and the United Nations – crucial areas of study for historians seeking to reassess the history of internationalism over the last two centuries – scarcely mention gen-

¹⁰ Giulia Calvi, *Global Trends: Gender Studies in Europe and the US*, in: *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010), pp. 641-655, here p. 643.

¹¹ Most prominent is the intersectional approach that draws attention to the mutual interdependencies of categories such as class, race and gender, see Helma Lutz/Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar/Linda Supik (eds), *Framing Intersectionality. Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, Farnham 2011.

¹² For a recent summary see Jeanne Boydston, *Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis*, in: *Gender & History* 20 (2008), pp. 558-583, here p. 559.

¹³ Joan W. Scott, *Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?*, in: *Diogenes* 57 (2010), pp. 7-14, here p. 14.

¹⁴ Excellent reflections (though not concerned with gender) are suggested by Patricia Clavin, *Time, Manner, Place: Writing Modern European History in Global, Transnational, and International Contexts*, in: *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010), pp. 624-640.

¹⁵ Kiran Klaus Patel, *Transnationale Geschichte – Ein neues Paradigma?*, 2 February 2005, URL: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/type=artikel&id=573>>.

der.¹⁶ Nonetheless, social histories tackling the problem of constructing international orders – such as the post-1945 human rights regime – on the ground, as well as from above, reveal very well how a gender-sensitive approach can expose the contradictions within a human rights regime that attached rights to both individuals and families. Postwar Europe is proving fertile ground for such investigations. Atina Grossmann makes the point that the UN Declaration contained principles such as the right to an adequate standard of living (including food), that for groups such as Jewish displaced persons, ‘were not just symbolic or legal issues in an emerging international human-rights “regime” but concrete (and contested and complex) matters of material and social entitlement.’¹⁷ In her study of Europe’s ‘lost children’ in the late 1940s, Tara Zahra, too, demonstrates how relief workers ‘embedded historically specific ideals of family, gender, and child rearing in emerging conceptions of universal human rights’ and argues that ‘the universalist rhetoric of human rights and the gendered hierarchies that underpinned postwar relief efforts reflected conflicts between a still inchoate notion of human rights and older humanitarian traditions.’¹⁸

To test theoretical and conceptual features of contested universalisms one might also look at women’s agency: How, for example, did transnational feminists or women’s movements negotiate the universalisms “on offer” during the twentieth century at the UN or in other international forums?¹⁹ Studies that show how ideas about gender equality or female solidarity circulated across Eastern and Western Europe during the emerging Cold War have the capacity to dislodge the western bias that has dominated European gender history since its inception, and in addition can challenge historical narratives about the Cold War as an era that allegedly witnessed the mobilization of whole civilizations. New research on the Soviet-sponsored Women’s International Democratic Federation, a global organization claiming 80 million members that has been dismissed in histories of international women’s organizing as a Stalinist

¹⁶ Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton 2009, and Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History*, Cambridge 2010. For a more gender-sensitive approach, see Jean H. Quataert, *Advocating Dignity. Human Rights Mobilizations in Global Politics*, Philadelphia 2010.

¹⁷ Atina Grossmann, Grams, Calories, and Food. Languages of Victimization, Entitlement, and Human Rights in Occupied Germany, 1945–1949, in: *Central European History* 44 (2011), pp. 118–148, here p. 122; for a more general argument see: Carola Sachse/Atina Grossmann, Human Rights, Utopias, and Gender in Twentieth Century Europe, in: *Central European History* 44 (2011), pp. 1–12.

¹⁸ Tara Zahra, “The Psychological Marshall Plan”. Displacement, Gender, and Human Rights after World War II, in: *Central European History* 44 (2011), pp. 37–62, here p. 38. See also Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children. Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II*, Cambridge 2011.

¹⁹ For such an approach see Glenda Sluga, René Cassin: *Les droits de l’homme* and the Universality of Human Rights, 1945–1966, in: Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 107–124.

puppet, shows that its members negotiated the universalist themes of the postwar order such as anti-colonialism and anti-racism alongside questions of gender equality and difference.²⁰ Raluca Popa's recent study of Romanian and Hungarian representatives to the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in the 1970s is another exemplar of the benefit of questioning cold war dichotomies through empirical research. She not only demonstrates that state socialist countries were instrumental in pushing for International Women's Year (subsequently appropriated in western scholarship as an achievement for organized feminism), but also that women from socialist Eastern Europe identified with the aim of gender equality, and not only with the promotion of peace, the alleged "socialist" theme of International Women's Year.²¹

Historical studies that place women's activism in a transnational setting complicate the categories that have structured (national) feminist histories, such as the primacy of women's organizational autonomy. Chiara Bonfiglioli's work on Italian and Yugoslav women in the early Cold War not only sheds light on women's transnational organizing across the East-West divide in Cold War Europe but also shows that the categories of 'autonomy' or 'primacy' are prescriptive. There was neither a natural pre-eminence of 'gender based goals' nor simple control by the state; women rather developed 'multiple and complex' forms of agency that reflected their multiple loyalties in a context of poverty, violence and contested national allegiances.²²

Gender-conscious empirical studies like these problematize the origin and evolution of universalist ideas and practices by emphasizing transnational flows and entanglements.²³ They also explain how individuals and organizations were forced to negotiate – often painfully – their commitments to such different and competing universalisms. Lastly, they underline that the relationship between women's organizations and state actors in formulating and diffusing universalist ideas remains inconclusive for both sides of the Cold War ideological divide. In the future, historians might extend these transnational

²⁰ Francisca de Haan, Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), in: *Women's History Review* 19 (2010), pp. 547-573.

²¹ Raluca Maria Popa, Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides. Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women's Year, in: Jill Massino/Shana Penn (eds), *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist East and Central Europe*, Basingstoke 2009, pp. 59-74.

²² Chiara Bonfiglioli, Cold War Internationalisms, Nationalisms and the Tito-Stalin Split. The Union of Italian Women and the Antifascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia before and after 1948, conference paper given at the workshop 'Intimate Internationalism' (fn. 1).

²³ For a similar approach see Janou Glencross, *How the International Women's Movement discovered the 'Troubles'. Brokered and Broken Transnational Interactions during the Northern Ireland Conflict, 1968-1981*, Frankfurt a.M. 2011.

perspectives to the gendered politics of “Europeanization”.²⁴ The history of the European Union, one of Europe’s numerous responses to the increased internationalization of the twentieth century, has to our knowledge yet to be studied from the multiple perspectives of social, gender and transnational history. Meanwhile, the increasingly sophisticated empirical work highlighted in this essay suggests that the study of gendered universalisms remains essential for a critical understanding of international history.

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²⁴ On “Europeanization” see Martin Conway/Kiran Klaus Patel (eds), *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Approaches*, Basingstoke 2010.