



BOOKS FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES

Women's International Thought: A New History

Edited by Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 354 pp. ISBN: 978110879873 £22.99 (paperback)

Reviewed by Dr Roxana Banu*

Lecturer in Law, Queen Mary University of London

*Corresponding author. E-mail: r.banu@qmul.ac.uk

doi:10.1017/S1744552321000550

According to international-law scholar Thomas Baty (1869–1954), the state is an idea (Baty, 1930). So is the corporation (Baty, 1920). Presumably then, the conceptual (and physical) contours of states, federations, corporations and empires are constantly redrawn through ongoing reflection, rhetoric and civic engagement. Baty's mere question 'Do ideas have rights?' points to the perplexity of designing states and empires through intellectual reflection (Baty, 1920).

Conceiving of states and empires in this contingent and instrumental way appears both liberating and frightening. If nothing is set in stone, an ongoing, more inclusive and democratic process of redefining various forms of association is made possible. And if the state is an idea, a whole range of expressions can be subsumed under *thought* about the state, including revolutionary and secession acts, pamphleteering, advocacy, journalism, dinner-table conversations, diary entries and so on. In a sense, we all inevitably have *thoughts* about the nature of states, corporations and empires, and may express them in a whole range of ways and fora. But not everyone's thoughts count equally in the ultimate design and operation of states and empires. States are both human creations and the production of a few minds selected through arbitrary, discriminatory and often violent processes. Oftentimes, the selection process of whose views 'count' is made through a loose but consequential distinction between *thoughts* and *thought*. The former is supposed to identify a range of individual ideas, possibly unarticulated and contradictory, whereas the latter suggests a more structured and consistent way of thinking about these concepts (p. 306). This loose distinction between thoughts and thought often ends up being coupled with distinctions between genres and fora, which are thought more conducive to one or the other. Dinner-table conversations and pamphleteering are often understood as ways of expressing different disorganised thoughts, whereas academic writing and government memoranda are conducive to 'serious' thought on the matter (pp. 133–135). One is labelled trivial and therefore easily ignored, and the other one is celebrated and supported. All of these distinctions are familiar to feminists who have long fought against labelling women as emotional, rather than rational, or as prone to distortions of thought and memory when giving testimony in court, or as unworthy to access institutions where the only recognised form of thought gains political salience.

This feminist insight has already contributed to a process of discovering unknown or forgotten female figures in various areas of the humanities. However, in international law and international relations (IR), it led primarily to the production of feminist schools of thought, rather than feminist history. Recently, both fields are beginning to ask where female actors might be found in the history of their fields. Immi Tallgren's forthcoming edited collection *Portraits of Women in International Law* (2021) contains portraits of several dozen women in the history of international law. Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler's *Women's International Thought: A New History* catalogues fifteen women's incredibly rich engagement with international matters, bringing questions of race, domination and colonial subjugation to the fore in a powerful and inspiring way. This volume represents a wonderful invitation to rethink the politics of the distinctions between thoughts and thought, and

between their sites of production. Along the way, it raises a whole range of methodological questions about the writing of intellectual and social history more broadly – in the context of the historical production of the field of IR at the intersection of many disciplines.

These marvellous chapters stand on their own, as well as together. There is an enormous wealth of insight pouring in from every chapter and every female protagonist. Take, for example, Simone Weil's attempt to spread the responsibility for the moral injury of hegemonic quest and for the hypocrisy of imperialism as widely as possible by conceptualising a karmic circle. German occupation of France was portrayed as karma since Germany applied 'colonial methods of conquest of domination to the European continent' after France attempted to 'carve out for herself black or yellow human flesh and gaining the hegemony of Europe' (p. 79). Or consider Eslanda Robeson's calling out the hypocrisy of sending African Americans to war in the name of freedom and equality when their own rights were denied in America: 'it will be extremely difficult for the State Department to persuade Negroes to go abroad to trumpet the cause of freedom and equality' (p. 109). This perversion of the state was to be expected since, in Emily Greene Balch's view wonderfully outlined by Catia Confortini, the state 'is an aberration', its uniqueness lying in its 'coercive and divisive character, but above all [in] the fact that it is the group which commands armies and navies' (p. 256). Furthermore, the 'unholy alliance' of the state with capitalism meant that business profited and helped perpetuate war, while governments used businesses to promote their nationalistic and imperialist agenda (pp. 258–259).

Not only is each chapter an impressive repertoire of insight on its own; there is also much to be learnt from the themes that cut across the chapters and from what they reveal about the interactions between these women within various networks. Imaobong Umoren describes the remarkable efforts of Eslanda Robeson to forge connections with other women at the UN, with Black Caribbean and African activists in interwar London and with Asian female politicians and activists. Lucian Ashworth's chapter focuses specifically on the network of women who were part of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) drawing out the tensions between liberal and social feminism. Robbie Shilliam focuses on a wide range of Pan-African organisations in his brilliant chapter on Amy Ashwood Garvey. Keisha Blain documents Mittie Maude Lena Gordon's founding and publicising of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia in Chicago and her vision of Afro-Asian solidarity. Catia Confortini shows beautifully how women relied on a nexus of fora for solidarity and a more effective way of carrying their projects forward outside of the male-dominated academic institutions. Her account of Emily Greene Balch documents how the settlement house for women that Balch co-founded, the women colleges where she studied and taught, and the WILPF 'provided the freedom, networks, and political communities where her and other women's international feminist thought could develop, flourish, and be challenged' (p. 246). This intellectual infrastructure that women built and sustained is fascinating in itself and worth further historical investigation.

The almost simultaneous appearance of volumes cataloguing historical women's engagement with international law and IR is itself noteworthy and to be celebrated. But it also brings into focus many interesting questions, two of which I aim to explore further. First, how does the project of claiming particular actors manage to redraw the boundaries and scope of different disciplines and is this ultimately an unproblematic critical exercise? Could one claim any of the women whose thought is outlined in these volumes in either discipline among law, history, philosophy and IR and, if so, what does that tell us about the contours of these fields at different times and in different locations? Furthermore, who should do the claiming and from whose perspective? As an example, *A Gallery of Portraits* includes two of the women who are catalogued as 'canonical thinkers' in IR in *Women's International Thought*. Furthermore, *Women's International Thought* closes with the thought of two protagonists who could undoubtedly feature in a volume on international law, even by conventional metrics. Krystyna Marek addressed a classical question of international law – whether state sovereignty exists prior to or by virtue of international law – and was admitted to the Institute de droit international in 1979. Vera Micheles Dean earned a master's degree in international law from Yale and her PhD dissertation from Radcliffe focused on international law and IR.

The main theme of *Women's International Thought* is to insist that the history of IR understood as a broad basket of questions on foreign affairs drawn from history, law, activism, journalism and so on be taken seriously – maybe more seriously – than the history of the university-based IR discipline emerging later. For example, Lucian Ashworth argues that an engagement with the women of the WILPF shows that feminism ‘was central to the early questions about the nature of the international sphere in the English-speaking world. It is the university-based IR after 1950 that is the newer arrival’ (p. 157). But is there a continuity between these two histories such that the women engaging with international affairs before 1950 should be or would have wanted to be considered part of the canon of the later discipline of IR? Note, for example, Geoffrey Field’s remarks in the chapter on Elizabeth Wiskemann that ‘very few formal academic IR programs existed before the 1950s and those who wrote about international relations were usually journalists, historians, economists, diplomats, or legal scholars’ (p. 198). But we are also told that Wiskemann got her ‘first real university job’ in 1958 with a Chair in IR at Edinburgh (p. 198). What should this split between IR as a broad basket of insights on foreign affairs and the slow institutional emergence of IR as an academic discipline in the late 1950s tell us against the background of Wiskemann’s own biography? Was Wiskemann in or out of the IR canon? From whose perspective should this question even be posed? And which canon should one even be concerned with? For example, Field notes that before her academic appointment, Wiskemann ‘was a highly respected commentator on contemporary Europe’ and that ‘she always liked to think of herself as a scholar-journalist’ (p. 198). But Field notes that in thinking of herself primarily as a journalist, ‘she risked being depreciated as merely or primarily a journalist’ (p. 190). Was that her own fear or a contemporary reflection of our own biases of what counts as a solid IR contributor? What should we learn from this slippage in considering journalism an important site of international thought while insisting that it should not be seen as ‘merely’ journalism?

If Wiskemann saw herself primarily as a journalist, was uncomfortable with the integration of IR into the social sciences and towards the end of her career identified more as a contemporary historian (p. 216), what precisely is the value of insisting that she be placed in the canon of IR as opposed to say history or journalism? It would seem that we either consider IR as a particular field with defined, though inevitably porous, boundaries within which one can be placed or we would become distrustful of any boundaries between fields whatsoever such that there would be very little value in insisting that these women be placed under any particular field. This is a perpetual challenge of critical projects: should one navigate within and revise an existing canon and an existing field or should one move past them altogether? As the editors wrote elsewhere, it may be a bit of both but there may also be unexplored tensions in trying to navigate both projects simultaneously. Interestingly, both international law and IR now grapple with the same questions that feminist historians faced in the humanities.

A similar puzzle about reading a historical figure from a contemporary perspective or the protagonist’s own perspective comes through in Barbara Savage’s chapter on Merze Tate in which she notes that Tate ‘saw herself as an historian of international relations, a field she conceptualized broadly as multidisciplinary’ (p. 279). This is because of her acknowledgement that ‘economics, geography, political science, political philosophy, international law and geopolitics are inextricably interwoven with history’ (p. 279). If, as Barbara Savage acknowledged, Tate ‘produced work that rarely fit neatly into a single discipline’ (p. 283), it would seem odd to insist on her placement in the canon of any one of them in particular. Or Rosenboim also catalogues how, for the British economist and sociologist Barbara Wootton, ‘the benefits of European federalism could be best identified at the intersection of Economic, Sociology and International Relations’ (p. 303), thus resisting a singular focus on any particular discipline.

There is therefore a tension between two themes. On the one hand, a conclusion of the project might be that IR swallows a whole range of fields within its purview. On the other hand, some of the protagonists seemed to insist that something can be learnt about foreign affairs by bringing to bear insights from different domains – history, law, philosophy, journalism, activist – the contours of which might be porous but still relevant.

One way of reconciling this tension would follow Karen Knop's suggestion that the boundaries of any particular field are 'inventions' but nonetheless analytically useful (Knop, 2019). The women included in this project could be understood to have provided different lenses on questions of foreign affairs from different fields with invented but analytically significant angles. Wiskemann could therefore plausibly insist that a historical approach is indispensable in capturing the significance of contemporary geopolitical events without having to merge history and IR. She could similarly perceive journalism, academia and historical writing as different ways of capturing, cataloguing and intervening in debates on global geopolitical questions while understanding that these represent different genres with their own vocabulary and audiences.

In that sense, Geoffrey Field's wonderful chapter on Elizabeth Wiskemann and the edited collection as a whole allow us to see how the boundaries within different fields and between them and IR were invented before and after the 1950s and in different ways in different countries. Reflecting on whether or not these women should be claimed in both international law and IR is therefore not so much about asking about their belonging, *ex post*, in some historically contingent field. Rather, it would be about inquiring into their participation in the process of inventing international law and IR. Their thought might allow us to appreciate when and why international law and IR were invented as separate fields and what we have missed in failing to bring them into conversation with each other, if not fully join them.

A second related theme that emerges from reading these almost simultaneous engagements with feminist history in international law and IR relates to the sheer framing of this critical lens. A *Gallery of Portraits* steers clear of the exclusionary categories of intellectual history and a canon. Browsing through the gallery of portraits is meant to stimulate reflection on these women's lives and professional trajectories as well as their positionality within different fields and genres at different times from different perspectives. *Women's International Thought* takes the project of discovering unknown or forgotten women a step further, by insisting that they be included in the canon of IR and that the contributions of these women be catalogued as 'international thought'. For example, Robbie Shilliam insists that women's inclusion (in particular the inclusion of women of colour) serves an important role given that 'to frame the boundaries of what is recognizably international thought is too often to make vicarious elite white European men out of non-elite non-white non-European non-men' (p. 159). To those who would suggest that not all political actors should or need to be treated as theorists, Robbie Shilliam responds rhetorically: 'Is it satisfying, then, for this intellect to be lost in the crack between politics and theory, movements and texts?' (p. 160). Similarly, Kimberly Hutchings argues that although Rosa Luxemburg is 'hardly a neglected figure in general', there is value in 'reinstating her specifically as part of the IR canon' (p. 52). In other words, this is a project that moves towards a new canon of international thought, as announced in the title of the anthology that is a companion to this volume (Owens *et al.*, 2021). This different framing of this emerging feminist history in international law and IR could be nothing more than a reflection of the editors' own point of view, but one wonders whether international law is by now simply oversaturated with a history of the greats and has become entirely distrustful of the critical potential of revisiting the canon. Has international law by now embraced Gerry Simpson's pointed critique of monumentalisation: 'Monuments, as we know, do not simply fail to remember: they actively "un-remember" that, which is not commemorated' (Simpson, 2019, p. 24)?

In order to bring these two puzzles emerging from reading this wonderful volume across the disciplinary boundaries into light, reverting to Thomas Baty's thought may provide a useful vantage point. Baty was a transgender English international-law scholar, founder and contributor to *Urania* – an underground publication rejecting gender distinctions – writer of utopian gender-non-conforming novels under the pseudonym Irene Clyde and adviser to the Japanese Foreign Ministry from 1916 to 1941. Like some of the women in the volume, such as Eslanda Robeson, Baty shared in 'the repeated political efforts to craft a positive portrayal of Third World freedom fighters and struggles' (pp. 100–101), which culminated in his penning of Japan's justification of its invasion of China. Like Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, whose thought is wonderfully depicted by Keisha Blain in the volume, Baty faced dire

consequences for the support of Japan. Baty had their British citizenship removed, while Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, along with twelve Black activists in Chicago, was charged with the crime of sedition for her pro-Japanese stance and sentenced to two years in prison. And like other protagonists of the volume, such as Emily Greene Balch, Baty was simultaneously fearful of anarchy while critical of the state's 'masculinized apparatus' (p. 258).

Opening this review with Baty's thought is not meant to show that one particular figure could have been, but hasn't been, included in the volume. One of the great merits of this volume is precisely in opening, rather than closing, the door of discovery of forgotten female actors in the international arena. But pondering on this highly controversial and mysterious figure is helpful in showing the complexity of situating someone who deliberately wrote in multiple genres and multiple fields under the canon of any one of them. Baty wrote in both private and public international law, on a whole range of questions about empire, jurisdiction, race relations, classical natural law theories, individual autonomy and many more. But they also wrote opinion pieces on education reform and the role of the state, utopian novels set in a gender-non-conforming world, journalistic pieces in the underground magazine they co-founded, as well as opinion pieces on foreign affairs in *Contemporary Japan* (Murase, 2003). Baty's entire work can be seen as contemplating the boundaries between different fields and genres, while constantly crossing them. Baty's gender-non-conformity was discovered only post-mortem, making it extremely difficult to join their writing in *Urania* and their utopian novels with their writing in IR and international law (Patai and Ingram, 1993). Similarly, Baty insisted on distinctions between private and public international law, suggesting both that these distinctions are contingent and invented, and that they matter for analytical purposes. Whether only for strategic purposes or not, Baty further claimed that their op-eds in *Contemporary Japan* be understood as journalistic interventions of a private individual, rather than expressions of foreign affairs or even legal policy (Oblas, 2001). And even Baty's understanding of their role as an adviser to the Japanese Foreign Affairs Ministry relied on all sorts of distinctions between and joining of the domains of international law and foreign affairs. To complicate the picture even more, Baty was at the time included within the canon of international law as a White European man. At the same time, Baty was a transgender person pushing for the 'world-wide acclaim to the Feminine as supereminent' (Baty, 1954, p. 300). Their placement within a canon of IR fluctuated depending on the political salience of their views at different times for different audiences. A great deal of this complexity would be lost, it seems to me, by insisting that Baty should be placed within the canon of any particular field, in large part because Baty was both an insider and an outsider, as well as simultaneously committed to and critical of any boundaries between disciplines and genres of writing. Much of this can be said of several of the women whose thought is outlined in this remarkable collection.

In reading this extremely rich volume, some may remain sceptical about the critical potential of revisiting the canon. Some may wonder whether it would do these women justice to include their immense contributions under the traditionally exclusionary categories of intellectual history or under a canon. For those, Robbie Shilliam's concluding remarks in his chapter on Amy Ashwood Garvey offer a powerful response:

'There is a tendency to engage with Black thought as not really theory, but rather "lived experience," the "street," "anecdote," "feeling." Such exotism abounds and leaves the white adrocentrism of social and political thought intact. Yes, Black thought is all this ... *and* it is written and read and enacted in logical analytical constructions by Black intellectuals. It is not a case of either/or.' (p. 177)

Similarly, it may be possible to get lost in the exercise of discerning just how broad the basket of IR can or should be. This too should not distract from the immense contribution of these women. The women in this volume could very well be seen as simultaneous historians, economists, IR scholars and lawyers who can tell us an awful lot about the history of inventions of these fields alongside and separate from each other. This is in large part because their exclusion or the marginalisation of

their thought indicates a path not taken in the history of the drawing of the boundaries of these fields. In a remarkable way, women's history across international law/IR would offer one of the most powerful windows onto the history of invented disciplines.

References

- Baty T** (1920) The rights of ideas: and of corporations. *Harvard Law Review* 33, 358.
- Baty T** (1930) *The Canons of International Law*. London: J. Murray.
- Baty T** (1954) *International Law in Twilight*. Tokyo: Maruzen Co.
- Knop K** (2019) Foreign relations law: comparison as invention. In Bradley CA (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on Foreign Relations Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murase S** (2003) Thomas Baty in Japan: seeing through the twilight. *British Yearbook of International Law* 73, 315.
- Oblas P** (2001) In defense of Japan in China: one man's quest for the logic of sovereignty. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 3, 73.
- Owens P et al.** (2021) *Women's International Thought: Towards a New Canon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patai D and Ingram A** (1993) *Rediscovering Forgotten Radicals: British Women Writers, 1889–1939*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press.
- Simpson G** (2019) Unprecedents. In Tallgren I and Skouteris T (eds), *The New Histories of International Criminal Law: Retrials*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tallgren I** (ed.) (2021) *Portraits of Women in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.