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Feminist Global Political Economy and Feminist Security Studies? The Politics of Delineating Subfields

Maria Stern, University of Gothenburg

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When considering possible conversations, synergies, overlaps, similarities, conflicts, and distinctions between two subfields or “camps” (Sylvester 2010), the question of limits looms large. Where, why, and how are the limits of feminist security studies (FSS) and feminist global political economy (FGPE) currently being drawn, and to what effect? Building upon previous conversations about the relationship between FSS and FGPE, particularly as they were discussed in the Critical Perspectives

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section in *Politics & Gender* (June 2015), as well as those about FSS and FGPE more generally, I briefly touch on a few central points regarding the politics of boundary drawing and the practices of feminist research.

THE STAKES OF STAKING FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE?

International relations (IR) is certainly blessed with the birth of many new fields and subfields, and it is heavily pregnant with even more. While arguably never uniform (see Allison 2015), feminist IR has become an established field that embraces numerous areas of focus and a wide range of approaches, such as FGPE and FSS, that are creatively combined in specific research endeavors. That specialized areas of research offer scholars dynamic and rich “homes” for theoretical, methodological, and empirical development attests to the robustness of feminist IR. Nonetheless, like many before me, I wish to reconsider the appeal — indeed, the seduction — of cordoning off fields and subfields, of telling and retelling different versions of their stories and origins (cf. Allison 2015; Enloe 2015; Hemmings 2011), and of defining (however loosely) what they do and don’t do in terms of knowledge production. *Why and to what aim* do we engage in such field-defining and field-developing, opening and reintegrating exercises?

This is not meant as a flippant question. On the contrary, I ask it with the utmost respect and seriousness. For if the point is to address the ills of the world — in particular those having to do with gendered, raced, or classed inequality, violence, and injustice — then a robust conversation about how best and comprehensively to do so is indubitably in order.

Surely, a well-demarcated field provides a community of scholars who share a similar language and frame of reference, as well as purchase. Deep engagement with a body of research within which one can situate one’s work inspires many to tackle challenging and vital domains of inquiry and identify and remedy crucial gaps in knowledge. Clearly distinguishing a field also allows for developing a brand in the marketplace of academic hiring, journal publishing, and grant opportunities. When areas of study are marginalized in interrelated economies, the need for clear demarcation can be a necessary survival strategy. By defining a field, it — its members and body of scholarship — can be substantiated, institutionalized, and rendered legitimate in the neoliberal education market. At the same time, this market increasingly

governs and polices our opportunities, our careers, and even our thinking (Brown 2015; Zalewski 2013).

LINES OF DISTINCTION?

How, then, do we delineate FGPE or FSS?¹ As is clear from the topic of this forum, there is a growing impetus to distinguish *between* FGPE and FSS. In this conversation, FGPE and FSS emerge as different from each other along several lines of demarcation. These include assumptions about FGPE's emphasis on the importance of materiality in relation to FSS's focus on the power of discourse (Elias and Rai 2015, 428; Hudson 2015, 414; Meger 2015, 417–18). Others distinguish the fields along the lines of their empirical research topics. According to True, for instance, FGPE pays explicit attention to material and structural "inequalities in local household and global political economies" (2012, 29), whereas FSS, she argues, largely neglects these linkages and focuses on direct coercion and fatalities in a war or armed conflict rather than everyday violence in peace or on the home front" (2012, 28). Discussions also center on differences between the general aim of the research undertaken. Some advocates of an FGPE approach or method distinguish FGPE as aiming to address the root causes of violence and notice the linkages between political, social, and global structures from the global to the household and individual levels.

In contrast, FSS is portrayed as narrowly focusing on the acts of violence (such as rape), thereby missing underlying causes (Meger 2015, 417; True 2012, 29) or the continuum of violence that spans "peace" and "war" (Cockburn 2013; True 2015, 421; see also Kelly 2012). Relatedly, for some (Elias and Rai 2015; Hudson 2015), another deep fault line between FGPE and FSS falls along a familiar structuralist/poststructuralist divide; FGPE, according to these accounts, largely embraces structuralist ontologies (cf. De Goede 2006), epistemologies, and methodologies, while many FSS projects tend to embrace poststructuralist ones.

The point here is not to agree with or refute these categorizations but instead to highlight some of the ways that FGPE and FSS are being distinguished (and thus produced) in relation to each other. It is

1. Both subfields have been defined in relation to the perceived "mainstream" fields of GPE and security studies, respectively (see Cohn 2011; Elias and Rai 2015, 428; Elias and Roberts 2016, 787; Hudson 2011, 588; Peterson 2006, 499; Sjoberg 2015, 410; Tickner 2011, 576; Wibben 2011, 592; Wibben 2016, 139).

noteworthy, however, that explicit characterizations of FSS as importantly separate from FGPE are largely addressing FGPE as a solution to the perceived limitations of FSS, not the other way around (see also Sjöberg 2015, 412). Whether or not one recognizes the pictures of FSS or of FGPE painted in contradistinction to each other, it is clear that, according to many of these accounts, FGPE has been marginalized and overlooked in a feminist IR that has become factitious and that is oriented around mainstream security studies and IR (see Sjöberg 2015).

Nevertheless, in revisiting the lessons learned about the dangers of the politics of identity — even academic and feminist identities — we are reminded that as we strive to secure, know, develop, or even open our fields through (re)naming them and (re)marking their limits — even in the hopes of “reintegrating them” from their supposed status as separate spaces — we simultaneously inscribe them as fields that have both an inside and an outside. In so doing, the limits between what they are and what they are not; what they do, include, and achieve in relation to that what other fields do, include, and achieve are drawn in bold lines. Yet, as with all discursive limits that serve to differentiate and to mark difference, the boundaries imbue the subjects they delineate with meaning: an FGPE emerges in contradistinction to an imagined FSS (and vice versa). The politics of inclusion and exclusion, among other politics, risk perhaps more in terms of emancipatory knowledge than they offer.

A DIVIDED FIELD IN PRACTICE?

Furthermore, when we pay attention to what scholars are actually doing, to what kinds of questions they are asking, and to how they are seeking answers, the picture of a divided field of feminist IR scholars (that could usefully be reintegrated) loses much purchase, as the definitional limits that differentiate them remain slippery. These limits are already being challenged, blurred, ignored, refused, or moved in myriad ways in scholarship classified as FGPE, as well as FSS, as well as by those who reside (un)comfortably in both subfield homes *and* those who had little idea that such homes existed as shelters and incubators.

What is striking in the rich scholarship associated with both subfields is the composite creativity displayed in seeking to unravel webs of complex social, political, economic, and cultural processes, relations, practices, and subjectivities; find linkages; and hone in on pressing problems that refuse the spatiotemporal coordinates and the orders that circumscribe

our imaginaries. We find scholarship that asks questions about violence in all its myriad of forms and that interrogates the “continuum of violence” (Cockburn 2013; True 2012); that takes as its point of departure the “everyday” (see Elias and Rai 2015; Parashar 2014); that embraces structural as well as poststructural ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies (Hudson 2015; Sjöberg 2015); that traces processes of embodiment in relation to security and economic practices (Elias and Roberts 2016; Wilcox 2015); that focuses on materiality (Abdelnour and Saeed 2014; Agathangelou 2004); that gleans insight from theories and methodologies recognized as belonging to FGPE and FSS (Chisholm and Stachowitsch 2016), as well as much more.

REVISITING FEMINISM

There are a host of good reasons for delineations, even schismatic ones, between subfields as well as the impetus to (re)integrate already distinct fields.² There is also much to be said for moves to erase, transgress, ignore, and subvert those limits that are being continually crafted and that seemingly provide a solid foundation for vital scholarship. As Zalewski’s work (2006, 2013) reminds us, feminism’s political purchase may lie in its failures (Stern and Zalewski 2009), its refusals, and its openings instead of in our attempts to pin it down, even ever so slightly, through the politics of (self-)naming.

Maria Stern is Professor in the School of Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg: maria.stern@globalstudies.gu.se

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2. In recent attempts to define FGPE in relation to FSS, the absence of what True labels an “IPE method” (True 2012, 25, 29) and attention to the “root causes” of sexual violence in FSS could be seen as compelling reasons, for instance, to delineate a FGPE subfield. Has FSS, as True (2015, 421) and Meger (2014 418) agree, narrowed its focus in such a way that crucial questions about unequal material resources and continuums of violence remain out of focus in recent attempts to understand conflict related sexual violence? This inattention to FGPE surely emerges in relation to the agenda of globalized security politics. Clearly, attention to how and why the limits of FSS come into focus reveal much about the power relations at play and the different viable currencies circulating within both academia, as well as on the global policy playing field.

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Beyond the “Helpless Nepali Woman” versus the “Fierce Maoist Fighter”: Challenging the Artificial Security/Economy Divide

Rahel Kunz, *University of Lausanne*

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Recent discussions over similarities and differences between feminist security studies (FSS) and feminist global political economy (FGPE) approaches invite us to reflect on the underlying assumptions about knowledge production within feminist international relations (IR) more broadly (Allison 2015; Enloe 2015; see also the introduction to this forum). I use Nepali women ex-combatants’ life stories to make two specific points relating to these discussions.¹ First, I illustrate how the separation of security and political economy issues cannot fully account for their life experiences. Second, and by way of overcoming this separation, I show how by beginning with life stories, we can develop a holistic analysis that challenges the broader Eurocentric politics of feminist IR knowledge production.

Gender narratives in Nepal are shaped by the divide between security and political economy: there is a tendency to focus either on security issues, such as on sexual and gender-based violence or the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, or on political economy issues, such as gendered development or migration dynamics. This analytical divide manifests itself through gender tropes in media and

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