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Looking Forward, Conceptualizing Feminist Security Studies

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X11000420

In previous work, I characterized Feminist Security Studies as pluralistic, but transformative:

> Research in Feminist Security Studies reformulates mainstream approaches to traditional security issues, foregrounds the roles of women and gender in conflict and conflict resolution, and reveals the blindness of security studies to issues that taking gender seriously shows as relevant to thinking about security. Together, these works, as a research program, show that gender analysis is necessary, conceptually, for understanding international security, important for analyzing causes and predicting outcomes, and essential to thinking about solutions and promoting positive change in the security realm. (Sjoberg 2009a, 184; see also Sjoberg 2006, 2009b; Sjoberg and Martin 2010.)

That statement, I think, strikes a valuable balance between engagement and skepticism of the "mainstream," and (relatedly) between (in Cohn's terms) "Feminist Security" Studies and Feminist "Security Studies." The mission it describes is far from fulfilled, and the work far from finished, either on its own terms or as relates to "security studies" in mainstream international relations. Still, recently, I have been rethinking whether that is the (only) statement I would like to make about Feminist Security

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X11000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Studies as an emerging subfield. Returning to that text almost five years after I initially wrote it, I see it as both important and importantly banal. My understanding of Feminist Security Studies is changing.

Why? In part, my research has moved in directions that do not fit neatly into that narrative. Substantively, I have been exploring the production of gender roles by and for conflict and conflict resolution (Confortini and Sjoberg 2010; Sjoberg 2010a; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2011), paying attention to when *women* threaten *women's* security on the basis of gender (Sjoberg 2010b), thinking about the gendered nature of international "structure" in Waltz's (1979) terms (Sjoberg 2011a; see Elshtain 2009), and trying to learn the ways that gendered conceptions of leadership interplay with gendered securities (Sjoberg 2009c). Theoretically, I find myself questioning my own and others' privileging of traditional concerns of security over traditional concerns of political economy, though the two are intrinsically interlinked (Tickner and Sjoberg 2011). I take seriously the ways that queer theory looks critically at the politics of the visibility of women/gender/transgender and apply it to security studies (Sjoberg and Shepherd 2012). I think across disciplines about tools that Feminist Security Studies could use, from women's/gender studies, geography, sociology, English, and anthropology, to broaden our conceptualizations of security and its component concepts (Sjoberg and Via 2010). Stylistically, I have been confronting the question of accessibility (and its potential trade-offs with depth) in Feminist Security Studies (e.g., Tickner and Sjoberg 2010), as well as our potential responsibility to include policy analysis in our work (Sjoberg 2010c; 2011b). Epistemologically, in reaction to critiques of the discursive violence in my work, I am less sure of the felicity of my "weak ontology" understanding of Feminist Security Studies (Sjoberg 2006, citing White 2000). All of these research directions, along with the conversations in this Critical Perspectives section, have challenged and expanded my thinking about what Feminist Security Studies is and might become.

The biggest challenge to my thinking came in my attempts to write a coherent monograph laying out the research program (Sjoberg 2012). One draft was 300,000 words; another was a kind of choose-your-own-ending (epistemological) adventure; several more privileged one approach I found important at the expense of others. The final draft, however, was inspired by my contribution to an edited volume honoring Hayward Alker (Sjoberg 2011c; see Marlin-Bennett 2011) to see pluralism differently. Particularly, I am interested in Alker's argument that scholarly contestation is not a means for getting to an end of a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X11000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press

knowledge, a truth, or a field definition; instead, knowledge, truth, and field definition are *in the contestation* (Alker 1996; Alker and Biersteker 1984) and could help us rethink Feminist Security Studies.

Along these lines, I have come to see the substance of Feminist Security Studies as a dialectical-hermeneutic argument, an approach that has implications for its process and its product. In this understanding, the purpose of doing research in Feminist Security Studies is to raise problems, not to solve them; to draw attention to a field of inquiry, rather than survey it fully; to provoke discussion, rather than serve as a systematic treatise. The conflicts and contestations both among feminists in Feminist Security Studies and between feminists and security that have come up in this conversation are not an outline of problems that need to be solved or divides that need to be crossed, healed, or closed. Instead, those debates, along with how they are handled and addressed, constitute Feminist Security Studies.

Feminist Security Studies, then, neither needs to solve nor ignore either the fundamental differences among feminists or the dissonance between Feminist Security Studies and security studies as a discipline. Instead, Feminist Security Studies is defined not only by its fundamental contestabilities but also by its actual contestations. Feminist Security Studies is not the sum of the different approaches or the winner of the debate between them, but the narrative generated from their arguments, disagreements, and compromises.

Given this way of thinking, I read and react to the other contributions to this Critical Perspectives perhaps differently than I would have in the past. With Tickner, I think that it is important that Feminist Security Studies speak with (and to) the policy world. With Cohn, I see reflexivity as a crucial part of the praxis of research in Feminist Security Studies, and believe it is crucial to evaluate who and what we, as scholars in the subfield, really want to study and who the audience for our work is. With Hudson, I want to see an inclusive community of Feminist Security Studies. But with Wibben, I want the community of Feminist Security Studies to approach its research from a distinctly feminist perspective and practice a feminist politics of knowledge building and research. With Wilcox, I want to push feminist theorizing to relate the ideational to the material, symbols and bodies, in evaluations of security. In my vision of the subfield's future, I want to argue that feminist scholarship should simultaneously meet the terms of mainstream security studies' demands for rigor *in feminist ways* and work to change the terms of the debate. But a number of the participants in this conversation would disagree

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X11000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with a primarily transformative mission for Feminist Security Studies, and hold different understandings than I do about what it means to research "in feminist ways."

In fact, while the essays in this Critical Perspectives section have a lot in common, they bring up challenging questions in their disagreements. Cohn's question of whether we do "Feminist Security" Studies or Feminist "Security Studies" reverberates through the essays and comes with no easy answers. Debates about epistemology and method remain complex, and their results contested, as we see across the contributions here, and especially in Hudson's and Wibben's essays. How to incorporate embodiment into Feminist Security Studies work, and what it means for the research program, is a question likely to challenge the enterprise in coming years. These challenges and tensions are, I believe, real, and fundamental.

Still, to see these debates as needing to be "won" or "solved" is, I think, unnecessarily limiting, and somewhat unrealistic, in terms of the discourses of the field. But seeing them as debates that do not need to be had would leave one wondering what is distinctive about feminism, what it adds to theorizing security, and whether a field without borders becomes infinitely regressive. I think a dialectical-hermeneutic approach is the "middle ground" between undesirable extremes of polarization and hyperpluralism. It suggests that we might see these questions as axes of conversation, and the conversations around them as the core of Feminist Security Studies.

I believe that an approach that sees these debates themselves as the substance of Feminist Security Studies, their contours its borders, and their narratives its development and growth is creative, dynamic, and rigorous. It embraces debate and disagreement, but provides a framework for navigating it. This Critical Perspectives section, even as it discusses what the field is and how to navigate it, also creates, performs, and constitutes Feminist Security Studies. In that spirit (and not only in that spirit), I hope it has raised as many questions as it has answered.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X11000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press