Posthumanism and Feminist International Relations

Elina Penttinen, University of Helsinki

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Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen (2011) seek to use evolutionary biology as a form of metafeminism, or as an ultimate cause to understand the roots of patriarchy. Patriarchy as a system that ontologically creates women's discrimination and legitimates violence is widely accepted within a range of feminisms and has been the foundational argument of feminist scholarship. The concern that is raised here in regard to Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen's article is not the validity of their concern with investigating the relationship between inequity in family law and violence against women, but the basis of their argument in evolutionary biology. In this essay, I bring posthumanism and especially new (vital) materialism as a way to build bridges with the feminist evolutionary analytical approach (FEAA) and constructivist or linguistic-oriented approaches in International Relations (IR). Posthumanism is an approach to social theorizing that addresses the impossibility of the nature/culture distinction in novel ways.

Inserting evolutionary biology into a social science framework provokes a sense of danger for feminist studies. Certainly, this sense of danger is legitimate given that the theory of evolution and stories, such as survival of the fittest, have been seen to "originate" from nature and have been used as the basis of imperialist, colonialist, and fascist politics in the past. Thus, biologism seems inappropriate for feminist purposes of critiquing discriminatory systems of power that have themselves used biologism as the basis of arguments proffering the inferior status of women. But the desire to critique this article also tells its own story that is worth turning attention to for a moment. The call to address the evolutionary analytic approach from a range of feminist perspectives implies that it is perhaps an incorrect way to engage in feminist scholarship. Interestingly, Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen try to avoid such confrontation by calling for recognition to their approach as not taking away from other approaches in feminist IR. After all, they claim, we are or should be working toward a common goal. In my view, this assertion of a common goal should function as a call for an open-hearted conversation that builds more on what we have in common than what separates us in feminist IR.

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So, what is this unease with evolutionary biology as a feminist approach telling us? In light of posthumanism and new materialism, it would have to do with the way in which nature has been dismissed as passive and irrelevant for social theorizing since the linguistic turn, which has focused on how knowledge/power discourses shape the relations in the social world, create subjectivities, and excludes others. Post-postivist and social constructionist approaches have been critical of the applicability of theories and methods derived from natural sciences for studying the social world. Surely, the laws of nature do not apply in the social world of humans. The focus on language, discourses, and narratives as the sphere through which the social world is constructed and which is, in turn, embodied by human beings, distances nature even further from the social world. Social subjectivity is enacted on the body, and the materiality of the body, such as the ongoing regeneration of cells, and is irrelevant for the focus of theorizing agency and subjectivity in the social world. And so, the poststructuralist framework reiterates or leaves untouched the mechanistic conceptualization of nature. In turn, nature, including the biology of the human body, is seen as passive, mute, irrelevant, and separate from the social world. This conceptualization reiterates also the idea of humans as being special creatures on this planet earth, and having a birthright to knowledge.

The beauty of Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen's insistence on FEAA as the basis of their research is that it teases out how the unquestioned belief in nature as passive, mechanistic, and ontologically separate from human systems still informs our inquiry. We are comfortable seeing human beings situated in the world, as in having subjectivity in the world, but the materiality of our being, or the materiality of this planet earth, which offers us space and time, is left out of the equation. It is easier to see the effect humans have on nature, than nature having agency in regard to the self-created cultures we see ourselves living in (Bennett 2010).

The demand to discuss the Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen article from a range of feminist perspectives reveals that we need to revisit why feminists have dismissed nature and the theories that stem from natural sciences. In other words, the tension with this article leads us to reopen the question of how we understand the nature of nature and how matter comes to matter in terms of our inquiry on gender and politics.

Posthumanism calls for an understanding of the new ontology of matter, which is derived from postclassical physics and new biology. It seeks to inquire how social theorizing should be developed given the fundamental flaws of the mechanistic-deterministic Newtonian

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worldview (Barad 2007). Coole and Frost (2010, 6–7) summarize new materialist scholarship into three overlapping themes. First, posthumanism and new materialism recognize the relevance of the latest developments in natural sciences, namely particle physics and the new technologies that follow such as quantum computing, teleportation, MRIs for the purpose of philosophical inquiry of the nature of matter, and the nature of being. Second, new materialism focuses on the ethics of the new technologies and their impact in global political economy. Third, posthumanism as a research practice is an ontologically nondualist, pluralistic, and open-ended form of inquiry. As such, it is a rather post-Cartesian and indeed posthumanist approach instead of anti-Cartesian and antihumanist. It strives to create a research practice that builds on nondualist conceptualizations of culture-nature and life-matter and to engage in an open and creative conversation with the contemporary natural sciences (Barad 2007, Bennet 2010, Coole and Frost 2010). The materiality of the world is seen as a process of continuous becoming and reconfiguration, which humans are part of, instead of being in the world or in control of the world. This idea is derived from postclassical physics that reveals matter to be hardly a stable, inert substance that is unmoved by outside forces. Instead, matter is seen as far more "complex, unstable, fragile and interactive than earlier models have allowed" (Coole and Frost 2010, 13). Matter is not reducible into independent particles but exists as forms of forces, energies, and waves.

Relevant in the posthumanist understanding of nature is the acknowledgment that nature is more productive and resilient than is accounted for in constructivist or poststructuralist social theorizing. Indeed, a posthumanist understanding of nature means recognizing how impossible it is to separate human beings or social systems from the natural world. For example, mundane everyday acts of humans affect global climate change, exceeding the idea of linear cause and effect. Moreover, research shows "the suggestive correlations between the demographics of criminal behaviour and the geographic distribution of industrial pollutants" (Coole and Frost 2010, 18).

What is notable is that the new materialism and posthumanism follow poststructuralist critiques of old materialisms, namely critical realism, Marxism, and scientific realism. Yet rather than falling into the lure of critical and negative analysis, the new materialist approach seeks a creative and experimental approach. The practice of new materialist research "is congruent with the pluralist, contingent rhythms of

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materialization noted within new materialism's other main strands" (Coole and Frost 2010, 25). This means recognizing also the diversity of lived experiences, which do not comply with abstract theorizing in social sciences. It means situating human beings, ideas, and values within material forces, which are seen according to the framework of emergent causality, as probabilities and tendencies instead of linear causality.

The way in which Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen describe their use of the feminist evolutionary approach can be seen as leaning more toward a posthumanist or new materialist conceptualization of emergent causality than the old materialisms and according to a mechanistic world view. Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen (2011, 463) explain how the FEAA does not imply determinism, linear causality, or gender essentialism, referring to the myth of women being more peaceful than men. They frame their understanding of evolutionary forces as nondeterministic, suggesting probabilities and open-ended outcomes, to which evolution is a "significantly influential force but can be mitigated." This can be seen as referring to human agentiality as part of the evolutionary forces. As such, they bring back nature and materiality into social theorizing and seek to inquire how feminist research can be done on the basis of evolutionary biology and psychology. This allows them to look at the entanglement of sexuality, reproductive forces, male dominance, and the close, intimate relationship of humans as part of the ongoing reconfiguration of the world. As such, I interpret feminist evolutionary analysis as a form of curiosity toward the materiality of humans and how this plays out in addressing the pertinent question of violence against women.

Thus, I would suggest for Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen that, instead of aspiring toward a form of metafeminism that seeks to identify and explain the ultimate cause of violence of women, it would be more useful to engage in a creative and experimental conversation with a new materialist approach on biology and evolution in their research on violence. New materialism could be useful for Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen to lift off some of the epistemological baggage that comes with a strong reliance on biologism. In order to further creative and experimental conversations, feminism, as a practice within the study of politics and international relations, needs to recognize the ontological entanglement of the world of which humans are part. This is ultimately a question of ethics and responsibility. It is hoped that there is a way of practicing compassionate feminism as we work toward the common goal of enhancing security and well being in and of this world.

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Elina Penttinen is Lecturer in Global Political Economy, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland: elina.penttinen@helsinki.fi

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What Does Evolution Have To Do with Legal Enclaves?

Jesse Crane-Seeber, North Carolina State University
Betsy Crane, Widener University

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While we applaud Hudson, Bowen, and Nielson (2011) for demonstrating the correlation between two modes of contemporary sexist oppression (inequality in family law and violence against women), we are concerned about how they embed a contested narrative of human evolution into otherwise straightforward findings. We argue that claims about human evolution are unnecessary to their argument, and, more importantly, that the version of feminist evolutionary analysis they describe is less feminist than it could be.

Introducing family law as a key site of contestation over power and authority, the authors set out to address the "relationship between inequity in family law [. . .and. . .] physical violence against women" (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielson 2011, 455). Pertinent to our critique, they next describe unequal family law as a legacy of "persistent patterns of patriarchy throughout human history" whose explanation benefits from evolutionary hypotheses about the "ultimate causes" of men's and women's different and conflicting reproductive strategies (Hudson,

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