

Power from the margins: uncovering the silences and decolonising the canon

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Women's International Thought: A New History and *Women's International Thought:*

Towards a New Canon are refreshing, inspiring and long overdue. These volumes present innovative ways of thinking and constituting international thought that have been neglected and suppressed through the disciplinary construction of a canon that laid the foundations of international thought and relations. These volumes contain an invaluable breadth and depth of scholarship that recover and reassert the voices of many women thinkers and activists whose voices had been silenced, erased and at times appropriated to privilege, conserve and advance the voices of white men who assumed the authoritative role as knowledge producers. These volumes contain impressive and careful scholarship that uncovers the archives and reproduces these women's voices and lives. As a result, they reconstitute the entire discipline of IR. They comprise a major resource that will transform scholarship in these areas, produce new vistas, and, importantly, will reformulate the fundamental questions of what we understand knowledge to be: how, what and why we know as well as the crucial question of who produces what we know.

A central tenet that runs throughout this project is that the body of knowledge that constitutes international thought and the discipline of International Relations exists beyond the institutionalised space of universities and government to include political activist and public discursive spaces through which ideas and thought were articulated in speeches, the media and often books for the general public. Many women developed and articulated their ideas in these spaces for they were not always included in the institutions of higher education. If they were their ideas were frequently usurped or their intellectual work was not given as much

credit as their male counterparts. In the introduction to *Women's International Thought: A New History*, the editors note that 'some contributors ... examine a number of the practises that led to historical women's constitutive exclusion, ranging from sexist and patriarchal discourses and ideologies, to everyday practises of sexism and racism in their relations with academic mentors, the production and politics of multiple forms of ignorance, and the gendered politics of disciplinary formation' (Owens and Rietzler, 2021: 9). The very act of producing these volumes contests the gendered nature of the discipline and politics itself. The two volumes span the period of the end of the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, at a time when international politics shifted from being based on European colonial empire to postcolonial and Cold War global orders. At this moment, the study of International Relations began to take shape and become institutionalised as an academic discipline. Hence recovering the voices of these women is critical not only in terms of challenging and decolonising the field but also in showing how they were integral and instrumental parts of its construction and yet were neglected as knowledge and power became institutionalised. The work that has gone into producing these books is extraordinary. It has required meticulous scholarship to uncover the archive to learn about the role and voices these women had in intellectual spaces, in international organisations and activist circles of resistance. These include the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom composed of women from all over the world, Chatham House, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, internationalism and circles that promoted anti-imperialism, pan-Africanism and Afro-Asian solidarity. To be sure, not all women were feminists and radicals who contested masculinist power in its colonialist, patriarchal and white supremacist forms, some women supported imperialism and did not see or contest racism. It is especially important for students and academics alike to understand that the actors and stakeholders in international

politics have been and are far broader than male politicians, academics and public intellectuals.

Why has this knowledge not been taught at universities? Why has the work of women who were instrumental in building the public spaces of international politics and relations not been recognised until recently? Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler frame this, in part, with regard to 'IR's "not knowing", of "patterned forms" or "epistemologies of ignorance"' (Owens and Rietzler, 2021: 9). Part of the answer to such questions regards the agent. Who produces and reproduces knowledge and what knowledge do they reproduce? Until recently universities were mainly inhabited by men who tended to reproduce masculinist knowledge, patriarchal discourses and ideologies. Over the past fifty years, as more women have had greater access to higher education, more have come to occupy academic positions, although parity with white men is still sorely lacking (Hanretty, 2021: 3). Rather than reproduce patriarchal structures, many of these women have asserted feminist ideas. They (in particular the contributors to and editors of these volumes) have recovered and brought to the fore the historical archives and voices of women who contributed to and shaped world politics. As the demography of higher education slowly shifts to give space to women and people of colour scholars, so too do research interests; in these shifts we find greater space for critical and innovative thinking. Part of this work is to understand why these voices that were constitutive were not always passed on to posterity. This scholarship demonstrates that the body of knowledge which embeds and structures our political institutions and relations within and across borders *has been constituted* by women and people of colour and not simply by white men. The legacy and echoes of women's voices persist even if either suppressed or appropriated.

This recovery of women's international political thought challenges the canon of 'great thinkers' that sets the frame and boundaries of the discipline. The canon determines what questions and debates are valid as well as what knowledge should be learned, taught and passed on to younger people through educational systems. It establishes the format that knowledge production should take, usually as written text that follows a particular logic. The introduction of women as canonic and women's knowledge production that does not appear in the form of text not only reclaims their place in the canon but also questions its very existence: first, in terms of what it should include, with regard to thinkers and what counts as knowledge production; second, in terms of how it frames how we know, what questions and forms of inquiry are valid; and, third, its boundaries.

These books contend that the articulation of ideas, of thought need not take the shape of a text, of a treatise, an essay or book. Rather, knowledge comes in many forms. The first item in the anthology is a reading list. This captures a moment of knowledge transmission and what was considered worthy of learning, knowing and passing on. It is likely that this would not be granted a place on the canon. The assumption is that canonic thinkers engage in interrogative and analytical processes of stating, refuting and rejecting or accepting premises to find and articulate new ideas that have some sort of truth-value which in turn justify the creation of structures and systems. Yet, as these two volumes demonstrate, this activity also takes place outside the canon, outside of the set text, outside of the terms of debate and questions set by those who defend and conserve the canon and its institutionalisation in universities. The editors, contributors and women thinkers that populate these books show that thought and the rational justification of ideas can be articulated in the set text and in different knowledge forms that are no less interrogative, rational, theoretical and innovative. Moreover, they underline that many of men's works included on the canon advance non-

rational and discriminatory ideas that are used to dehumanise and oppress other human beings notably women and people of colour. Sexism, classism and racism were not only articulated in the thought of so-called great thinkers but also these operated to exclude the intellectual production of women and people of colour from the canon and from institutions of higher education.

This begs the question what is knowledge? Are the thought and ideas articulated in a speech or a poem not knowledge? Are these not the right types of format to be included in the canon? Many canonic thinkers produced speeches, poems and novels that we consider to be part of their body of work and deem worthy of study. Some did not produce any such works; their ideas and wisdom were transmitted orally and others recorded it wrote about these people. We know Socrates through Plato; Sojourner Truth's famous speech was recorded by a member of the audience when she used her body and being to reclaim her status as a woman. We piece together the fragmentary thoughts of many thinkers such as Cicero and use his speeches to illuminate the absences as we do with the correspondence of many thinkers to clarify their ideas. It is already the case that what counts as the right format for knowledge production to be part of the canon is broad. This raises the question of whether inclusion in the canon in general precludes certain types of knowledge, or whether reasons for inclusion are political.

In situating the relevance of Amy Ashwood Garvey in the history of women's thought, Robbie Shilliam (2021) invites us to theorise (with) Garvey as her written legacy has been presumed lost and only a few of her many speeches were recorded and preserved. Shilliam argues that it is possible to theorise with archival fragments and 'through her pan-Africanist circuits' (160). To do so situates us in the 'crack between politics and theory, movement and

texts'. He privileges such an approach to study someone who has contributed critical thinking and ideas to intellectual and activist movements that challenge the status quo because it presents us with 'living knowledge traditions'. He further cautions that by simply recovering texts written by forgotten women risks reproducing the 'exclusions and hierarchies congenial to canons of IR theory'. To Shilliam, theory does not simply occur in 'the form of a recognizable text and its author'; rather theorising can occur in the spoken word which can be 'more consequential than writing theory'. He lauds the 'race women' who stood up for racial equality and 'the uplift of Black peoples'. Such 'living knowledge traditions exceeds text' (160). As bell hooks sees it knowing is not about learning by rote and discipline, it is about finding the space in which to question and be critical. In this regard theory is liberatory (hooks, 1994: 7-12). The oral tradition has existed across time, space, cultures and has operated as a powerful way to transmit ideas and theory. In the western tradition, the canon reproduces fragments, letters, poems, memories and imaginaries. Yet when setting boundaries, the canon is operationalised to exclude.

The canon frames the debates and defines disciplines and their contours. It operates to present a particular set of thinkers who are thought to engage with each other in and around a set of fundamental questions that structure a particular body of knowledge. Nevertheless, it need not be exclusivist. It is worth distinguishing between the canon as an object, as a set of great thinkers from how it operates; for it is mainly academics who have established the list and make it function. At the same time, the idea of the canon disciplines academics and academics use it to set the boundaries of the discipline. To go against the canon requires unlearning.

The canon reproduces a set of ideas associated with the foundations of political thought extending back to Greece and Rome to the present day and recounts a particular story. This story frames how we read particular thinkers. Although attention is paid to historical context, we often read thinkers in relation to their on-going conversation across time and through the re-examination of core questions. Were we to take a thinker out of this frame and read them alongside a marginal voice, we might form a very different interpretation of the thinker. In my teaching, I introduce students to the ideas of politics through Aristotle alongside bell hooks on the boundaries of the political (Ramgotra, 2015). In another course on republicanism, we read Machiavelli with CLR James. This approach breaks up the canon, its chronology and historical narrative. It brings non-canonic thinkers into the debate and on par with those who are on it. This allows us to interrogate the canon as well as to read its thinkers in a critical light, in relation to the oppositional ideas and debates of their time and in relation to our present moment, not as contributors to liberal modernity but rather as voices that uphold many of liberal modernity's inequalities. Breaking up the canon also demonstrates that history is not only about progress, but also, rupture. Reading ideas non-chronologically gives space to develop new insights and interpretations. By studying Machiavelli, James, hooks and Aristotle on terms of equality we challenge the myth of great (white male) thinkers and the reception of them as embodying knowledge and authority. Another way to read political and international thought is through core concepts or questions and to organise thinkers accordingly and moving back and forth through time. Yet again, the canon controls the terms of the debates and relevant questions to be asked. Hence questions on race, imperialism and gender have been absent from debates and their presence in canonic author's ideas are frequently brushed over as idiosyncratic. Silence on these crucial questions shapes how we understand which knowledge and which questions are relevant or not.

Women thinkers developed methodologies to deal with the removal of important questions from our intellectual sight. Vivian May (2021) observes that Anna Julia Cooper's 'interpretive tactics and narrative strategies' included: 'naming and combatting the politics of absence; reading materials/archives/ideas against the grain; and raising doubts about prevailing social imaginaries and accepted paradigms that reinforced the status quo (e.g., by shifting historical timeframes, or refusing to accept that enslaved persons had no agency, or personhood, despite such biases built into the archives). Cooper also exposed contradictions, particularly those that seemed studiously ignored or smoothed over (e.g., how both French and US republics proclaimed democracy but were invested in slavery from the start) and considered questions of power, positionality and responsibility vis-à-vis Black women's ideas and histories - so as to better listen to (and not to "muffle") the ideas at hand' (32-33). These are critical tools necessary to reflect on how we deal with the contradictions of political and international thought and why it is important not to pass these over.

There is resistance to recreating our academic disciplines to be more inclusive of marginalised voices and to reframing how we read and teach the canonic thinkers once we question how they deal with race, gender, imperialism, oppression and exclusion. Many academics lack the knowledge and training to teach new thinkers and hence continue with the established thinkers. To include marginalised (and contestatory) voices presumes either an intellectual openness or a capacity to unlearn and unpick the structures that one has learned throughout their education. Our tendency to associate certain ideas with particular thinkers as a mark of their original contribution means that we do not always recognize that non-canonc thinkers may have also conceptualised the same idea in a different time and place, from a different standpoint. We tend to rely on what we know, to refer to the structures we have learnt and do not always accept new ideas and thinkers. This is even more difficult if we are

part of the nexus of power that the canon upholds. These two volumes provide tools with which to transform teaching and to engage scholars to question the epistemologies that shape how we know the world and recognise that these can be limiting. As younger generations train they can draw on these tools and reconceptualise the discipline. In so doing, we will create new silences and absences, but let us hope that we create a broader and more amorphous notion of the canon that not only is more inclusive, but also underscores a more egalitarian and less discriminatory politics both at home and abroad.

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