



‘Add Women and Stir’

Gender and the History of International Politics

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It is now nearly a quarter of a century since Joan Scott famously bemoaned the absence of women in the history of ‘High Politics’. In the 1980s, Scott, an historian of women and class, was a key protagonist in the cultural turn in the historical discipline, which included the accommodation of post-structuralist theory, and pushed advocates of women’s history towards the study of gender as a ‘useful category of historical analysis’.¹ At the time, her emphasis on gender as a category of analysis ‘was a call to disrupt the powerful pull of biology by opening every aspect of sexed identity to interrogation’, since the insistence on the ‘fixity of that opposition... [on the essential “truth” of sexual difference] is itself the product of a certain history, and not one we should consider inviolate’.² More recently, Scott has refined her view, concluding that to focus on gender ‘is about asking historical questions: it is not a programmatic or methodological treatise’.

Gender was the methodological mantra around which I formed my own historical consciousness of the past. I was as eager as any feminist historian to push aside what we termed the ‘add women and stir’ approach, on the grounds that adding and stirring a new ingredient into our analysis of the past was less sophisticated than coming up with a whole new recipe for writing history. Adding women, it was assumed, did not adequately shift the parameters of male-dominated masculinist

history, since it did not help us understand how men and women were positioned in the past, and why they so often held such distinctive positions. In this essay, I want to argue that we should revisit the methodological value of the ‘add women and stir’ approach because, a quarter of a century after Scott’s call, and despite the ‘gender turn’, women are still missing in action as agents in the history of ‘High Politics’. Indeed, it can be argued that (as many feminist historians long feared) the gender approach to history has tended to reinforce women’s absence from the central events of the past as historical actors, even when they have been there.

Despite available evidence of women as agents and subjects in the arena of international history—whether involving war, peacemaking, diplomacy, or foreign policy—the core narratives of international politics remain notably depleted of women, even in the new international history, particularly as it is now focusing on international organisations. In some recent synthetic English-language histories—from Paul Kennedy’s *Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations* (2007) to Mark Mazower’s *Governing the World: The Rise and Fall of an Idea* (2012)—there are no women in over two hundred years of history. And, unlike some international historians, Kennedy and Mazower do not even address gender. I say ‘even’, since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that they cover were

coterminous not only with the ‘invention’ of the international, but also with the emergence of what came to be known as the gendered separation of spheres. The template of gender difference that historians associate with the rise of industrialised England was idealised, idolised, and emulated across the European continent as a new bourgeois class sought to distance itself from older aristocratic authority and power. As importantly, aristocratic and bourgeois women were crucial agents of the new ‘international’ politics as well as the new gender norms. Even a little historical research quickly illustrates that women were intellectual as well as social agents in the shaping of international political norms in nineteenth-century Europe, including new concepts such as nationality and humanitarianism, and in the international practices that we think of as diplomacy. No matter what approach you take to international history—whether focusing on the more traditional controversies of political thought and foreign policy, or the creation of international institutions—women were usually involved. In the twentieth century, women’s presence in the realm of international politics expanded along with the opportunities created by the new liberal internationalism that led to the establishment of organisations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. Indeed, histories of pacifism and feminism have long recorded the engagement of European women with internationalism. However, their evidence and findings are rarely integrated into what non-feminist historians understand as serious international history and the study of *Realpolitik*. Similarly, the gender histories of international politics, many of them concentrating on the Cold War, that have proliferated in the last decade or so have added little to our knowledge of the roles of individual women in these same political scenarios. Instead, in international history gender hardly ever concerns women. Recognising the presence of women has the potential to fundamentally shift our perspective on what is important in the past, as well as to illuminate the role of historians in silencing women, their actions, and their ideas.

The following discussion draws on some examples of the presence of women in

international political histories through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where they are often assumed to be absent. This is not an argument for throwing gender aside, but a call to remember the usefulness of adding women, of the recovery and reintegration of women *who were there* as political agents into the stories we tell of the international past, even when the historical questions seem, at first glance, to be male dominated and non-gender-specific.

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The history of Versailles and international peacemaking in 1919 after the end of World War One is a staple of international history. ‘Versailles’ and ‘1919’ have become shorthand for the epoch-marking developments that led to the validation of nationality as a principle of international politics, and the creation of the League of Nations as the iconic organisation establishing a new era of cultural and political internationalism. Predictably, in these histories women are rarely mentioned as agents or subjects of significant moment. Yet, once we begin to look for women, they seem to turn up everywhere, organising peace conferences parallel to the main events from which they were excluded, sending delegations demanding for women the same ‘self-determination’ being awarded to nations, usually through their international organisations, such as the International Council of Women, or the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and being rejected. However, historians who bother to examine the documents of these organisations, alongside more conventional archival records, will discover that even the marginalisation of these women and their demands was central to how the peacemakers understood the international politics in which they were engaged. They will also discover a story that radically alters our understanding of the processes around which the forms of international politics that we take as normative were ‘invented’. When compelled to consider the political status of women in the new world order, key political leaders and experts involved in the peace process insisted that, except as it related to labour legislation and the League of Nations, sexual difference was an issue of ‘domestic’ or national



significance.³ All the delegates that comprised the so-called Council of Ten—the political leaders of the United States, Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the Maharaja of Bikaner—believed that the status of women was a question for national decision-making. How ironic then that their agreement was proof of an international consensus that women’s status was a marker of national sovereignty.

Recovering or adding women to the history of 1919 and ‘stirring’ casts new light on the reconstitution of the principles and norms of international relations during the postwar peace-making, on the very definitions of ‘sovereignty’ and the constitution of national politics in the realm of international politics. It reveals that women organised to represent their interests, and sought national rights in the domain of international politics; that women’s ‘self-determination’ was as significant (for them) a dimension of the new international postwar order as the principle of national ‘self-determination’; that the political marginalisation of women in the international sphere required ideological work, of a kind that reinforced the international as the domain of masculine interests, and national sovereignty as significantly determined by sovereignty over the status of women. That is, each male-led nation-state could emphasise its difference

and the legitimacy of its sovereignty in terms of how it treated its women, or the kinds of rights women had or did not have for cultural or historical reasons in that specific nation-state. This approach also illuminates as a shared international principle the process of transnational agreement that rendered women subject to national sovereignty.

Adding women and stirring in this same period also reminds us that European women were key figures in the propagation of International Relations as a discipline. In 1919, and in the interwar years, female members of the Institut International de la Paix, the World Congress of International Associations, Institutions Internationales, the Workers Educational Association, the Association for the Study of International Relations, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and other organisations, as well as individual women such as Louise Weiss, editor of *L’Europe Nouvelle*, and Helena Swanwick, editor of the British Union of Democratic Control’s mouthpiece *Foreign Affairs*, organised summer schools throughout Europe on international politics. They recommended texts by women, including the English author Lucia Ames Mead on patriotism and the new internationalism, and German members of the Women’s International League for Peace and



(above)
Jane Addams on the platform of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2nd International Congress, Zurich, Switzerland 1919.

PHOTO: SWARTHMORE COLLEGE PEACE COLLECTION (JANE ADDAMS COLLECTION 00064).



(above)

Fourth Session of United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, May 1950. Before opening meeting, from left to right, are: Mrs Alva Myrdal, Principal-Director, UN Department of Social Affairs, Representative of UN Secretary-General; Mrs Hannah Sen, of India, Vice-Chairman; Madame Marie Helene Lefauchaux, of France, Chairman; Madame Lina P. Tsaldaris, of Greece; and Mrs Olive Remington Goldman, of the United States.

PHOTO: UN PHOTO

Freedom, Lidia Auersperg and Gustava Heymann on psychological perspectives on internationalism.⁴ They nurtured an idealist view of International Relations that by the 1930s was superseded by that of realists who hardened the study of International Relations into a masculine discipline (channelled through the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Geneva Graduate Institute of International Studies). Just as earlier women's efforts to influence the peace of 1919 were excised from the historical record, women's texts and their preferred subject areas were eliminated from itineraries of international studies.

Once we start looking before and after 1919, it is clear too that women's international organisations have a long history, as does their interest in international politics. What we might call an emerging international public sphere, comprising not only international relations, but international organisations, was crucial to the demands women made for the same national, state or even imperial rights exercised by men and denied them. It is little wonder then, as Virginia Woolf noted in *Three Guineas* (1938), that so many women became advocates of a new liberal internationalism or sought to involve themselves in the new international organisations.⁵

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The end of World War Two, and the emergence of a new and more enduring internationalism

focused on the United Nations and on the conceptualisation of 'human rights', is also told as a story without women, even though women were prominently there. In mid-life, Alva Myrdal trod the road chosen by so many men who have come to stand for the international idealism of the mid-twentieth century. As an employee of the United Nations (UN) Social Affairs secretariat in New York from 1949 to 1950, Myrdal was a bureaucratic cog with the title of (acting) 'Top-Ranking Director' and then, from 1950 until 1955, lower down the pecking order, as Director of Social Sciences at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in Paris. In both these

positions she remained the most senior woman in that whole labyrinthine organisation. Her high level appointment was completely uncharacteristic of trends until then in the new international world order: she was a woman and a feminist. At the same time, she represented that sector of international civil servants, in the early post-World War Two years of the UN and UNESCO, who had no education in the service of European empires, as well as the aspirations of women for a political voice and a place in the politics of the world, as the novels of Frank Moorhouse have reminded us.⁶

In the 1940s, Alva Myrdal stood at the nexus of a dense web of international networks built around her interests in education, pedagogy, social psychology and social welfare. It was Alva Myrdal, along with her husband Gunnar, who had helped bring into existence the Swedish social welfare model, a symbol of modernisation under the aegis of social democracy. At the close of World War Two, she understood the challenge to world peace and security as the alarming economic and social inequalities between European and colonised societies. During her short tenure, she brought to the UN and its agencies a perspective informed by her feminism and interest in social welfare. She was convinced that the Swedish model of progress from a rural to modern society could be adapted to colonial settings through 'planned social development'. The Swedish precedent had shown, she claimed, that giving women as

well as men a greater stake in the improvement of quality of life had, in half a century, led that country out of its feudal past into a more democratic and modern future.

Myrdal was intent on putting the 'social' into the UN, in a way that would radicalise what she saw as the exciting international social welfare potential of 'Technical Assistance', the concept that institutionally predated 'development' in this period. From 1949, by which time development was being backed by the United States as a Cold War strategy, she was determined to bring to the programme an agenda of balanced modernisation, built out of her repertoire of accumulated social welfare expertise, concentrating specifically on questions of housing, the maintenance of standards of living, social welfare services, the prevention of crime, social care of immigrants, and the status of women.

After her year at the UN, Myrdal worked for five years as Director of Social Sciences at UNESCO, where she brought her feminist agenda to bear on the organisation as much as she could and became involved in the conceptualisation of development in the social sciences. In 1956 Myrdal gave up on international organisations, feeling they had become caught up in their own bureaucracy and that it was too hard to effect change 'on the ground'. Although she had been able to introduce a more women-centred policy, something the first UNESCO Director-General, Julian Huxley, had resisted despite repeated requests from the UN, she had become increasingly disillusioned with developmentalism. In 1964 Myrdal told a reporter that the Western world did not have the right to impose modernity elsewhere. Her argument was in effect a product of her frustration at the level of influence of new American non-governmental organisations such as the Ford Foundation, offering debt-intensive versions of modernisation, on the UN's work in India. Half a century later the UN fully took up her emphases on the importance of working with local communities rather than imposing development from on high, of listening to the women in those local communities, and of working with the standard of living rather than gross domestic product as a measure of



action and success. These became the rationale for the continued relevance of the UN and international institutions we know as Human Security. Myrdal can, in effect, be added to this history as the 'mother' of Human Security.⁷

If we add Myrdal, how does international history as we currently understand it change? Myrdal's story incorporates the significance of feminism as an ideology in this period. That history also reminds us that in this international schema the demands of feminism were often placed in opposition to the demands of anti-racism. That is, women felt they had to compete with other forms of incommensurate differences that hinder opportunities and rights. This was particularly so after 1948, when the new international discourse of 'human rights' again focused on 'self-determination' of

(above)

Anne Louise
Germaine de
Staël-Holstein,
1766–1817.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA
COMMONS, PUBLIC
DOMAIN

a national/cultural kind, and women's rights were sectioned off to the Committee on the Status of Women.⁸

Adding Myrdal also links us to the role of women in the history of diplomacy and foreign policy. When Myrdal decided to give up on UNESCO she became the first Swedish female ambassador, and eventually a crucial advocate for local solutions to the challenges of development, funded directly by wealthy national governments such as Sweden. Stirring women back into European history connects us to a longer European story of women's often 'informal' yet conventionalised roles in the history of diplomacy—whether as monarchs, dynastic networkers, or spousal *ambassadrices*—from the early modern period to the modern age.⁹

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Sceptics might argue it is much easier to add women to the international history of the twentieth century, a period when the democratisation of politics and rise of social

'liberalism', 'culture', and 'nationality' are attributed to her influence.¹⁰

The story of Staël as 'thinker' requires reincorporation of Staël's 'diplomatic' roles. The period that most interests me begins while she was in exile, fleeing to Russia, then Sweden, then England, at the heart of her movable salon, knitting together a European culture of ideas and politics through her networks, correspondence and writings.¹¹ By 1813, as Napoleon's forces were in increasing retreat, common parlance in England and on the continent had it that there were three powers in Europe: Britain, Russia, and Germaine de Staël. Her celebrity had been carried across the Continent and Atlantic by her open and unforgiving opposition to Napoleon and the popularity of her novels and her original studies of national literatures and cultures (categorised by some of her contemporaries as a form of 'political science'). Even in an age when women were tolerated as novelists, Staël's status as a female 'genius' was exceptional. She was among

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movements gave more women the opportunity to participate in international political life. Yet this modern history merely illuminates the absence of women in a *longue durée* narrative where they were in fact also present, as historical actors in the ideological as well as political constitution of a modern Europe. Which brings me to my last example, the end of the Napoleonic wars, 1814, and the influence of Germaine de Staël on what I think of as the invention of the international as a political space. In taking Staël as my subject, my intention is to also to reflect on the possibilities of both historical 'recovery' of women as political agents, and the relevance of that history for understanding the place of gender in 'High Politics'.

Germaine de Staël's major writings traverse the period of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the early Restoration. Her studies of Italy and Germany are still regarded as prototypes of a new cultural nationalism, just as the specific terms

the prominent elaborators of the practical terms of liberty that became the conceptual axis of political debate in the post-Napoleonic world, a consequence not only of her ideas and discussions, but also of the influence she exerted through her salon and her political interventions.

At this crucial juncture in European history, we find Staël at the centre of diplomatic negotiations, working her networks, her correspondence and publications, and her celebrity, in St. Petersburg, Stockholm, London, and Paris, in the interests of forging and maintaining a coalition against Napoleon, and in favour of a new liberal European order to replace his rule. In the context of the larger political shift that historians have identified, in the 'sense of inherent limits, acceptance of mutual rules and restraints, common responsibility to certain standards of conduct and loyalty beyond the aims of one's own state',¹² Staël insisted on the relevance of liberal principles to the domain of international peacemaking that would follow Napoleon's defeat. Included in her political

repertoire of liberal ideas were anti-colonialism and anti-slavery.

In the last years of her life, as Staël railed against the limitations of the Restoration established by the powers that had defeated Napoleon, she wrote *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*, a defining text of liberal ideology, the first conceptual history of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, and the culmination of her thinking about political liberty. Liberty of person, belief, religion, required and guaranteed the representation of public opinion and mitigation of the arbitrary exercise of power. In effect, political power required regulation through the practices of 'public liberty' and 'the protection of individual rights by establishing a regime limited by fundamental laws and a constitution'. The text elaborated this applied view of liberty, its history, and its universal applicability. She wrote in *Considérations*:

Is the question the abolition of the slave trade, or the liberty of the press, or religious toleration? Jefferson thinks as La Fayette, as Wilberforce [...] Is it then from the calculations of interest, is it from bad motives that men so superior, in situations and countries so different, should be in such harmony in their political opinions?¹³

The story of Staël's effacement and marginalisation is as instructive for exposing the implicitly gendered character of international liberal theory and its lineages. Staël's biographers have persistently pondered whether she was more the prompter of liberalism than the maker of a 'liberal age'. Other assessments suggest that the greatest impact of her work occurred after her death, during the revolutions of the 1830s, the Risorgimento and national liberation movements of the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ Few have pondered the significance of her 'womanhood' to her precarious intellectual position, even though in her own lifetime it was that fact that caused her the most difficulties. The relevance of Staël's gender was obvious to her contemporaries who simultaneously reviled and celebrated her work and her political persona.

Since then, the 'problem' of Staël's gender has persisted, as is apparent when one considers synthetic accounts of liberalism, and other 'recovery' projects. In the new *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Constant*, which, as its editor Helena Rosenblatt explains, is intended to salvage Staël's companion Constant from the margins of liberalism, one author makes the point that it is impossible to discuss the influences on Constant without touching on Staël, although he does it in a specific manner: 'And leave aside', says Gauchet, 'Madame de Staël, with whom he [Constant] collaborated too closely to permit attribution of responsibility for specific ideas. Nevertheless, Constant's answer was still fundamentally new, if only in the sharpness of its formulation.' This new answer, it is explained, was the view that the details of liberty are inspired by the need for ways of preventing arbitrariness or tyranny in political power.

In a very recent and separate history of political thought in France since the eighteenth century, Jeremy Jennings follows a long description of Constant's ideas with a footnote in which he adds that the argument for which Constant is best known—the distinction between the 'liberty which was offered to men at the end of the last century [...] borrowed from the ancient republics' and a modern 'private' conception of liberty—was first advanced 'by Madame de Staël in her *Circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution*, a text written in 1796, but published almost two hundred years later'. The point for Jennings is that Constant was the more ardent advocate of this view and therefore the focus of discussion.

Ironically, if Staël's work was more seriously considered, it would be difficult to ignore women as the subject of liberalism and political thought, since she herself singled women out as having a specific kind of subjectivity and role in the constitution of a liberal society and state. For example, when Staël evoked the dystopia of arbitrary government, she used as her example women exerting influence in the public sphere for personal advantage, compared with the situation 'in free countries [...] where] the true character of a woman and the true character of a man can be known and admired', since there was no need to learn to manipulate individuals when institutions objectively and transparently

