

# Sovereignty within Feminist International Relations Theory

La soberanía dentro de la Teoría Feminista  
de las Relaciones Internacionales

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Recibido: 03 de noviembre de 2020 | Aceptado: 03 de febrero de 2021

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18272/eo.v6i0.2049>

## **Abstract**

The text represents an analysis of the concept “sovereignty” and “nation-State” through different feminist theoretical approaches within the International Relations field. The main objective is to deconstruct these two highly masculinized concepts, which are also historically constructed from an androcentric logic. From the diversity of theoretical approaches of feminism in international relations, this analysis includes a simplified journey through some of the most relevant ones, which given the limited space of the article, have been also reduced to its essentials. The theories included are liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, empiricist feminism, standpoint feminism, postmodern feminism, and decolonial feminism. All the previous theoretical approaches will be used as tools to deconstruct “sovereignty” and “nation-State” with the main objective to challenge universalizing conceptions and highlight the role of conceptualizations in the construction of gender relations in our society.

## **Keywords:**

Feminisms, Feminist International Relations Theory, sovereignty, gender

## Resumen

El texto representa un análisis de los conceptos “soberanía” y “Estado-nación” a través de las diferentes corrientes teóricas feministas dentro del campo de Relaciones Internacionales. Como objetivo principal se destaca la necesidad de deconstruir estos dos conceptos altamente masculinizados y construidos históricamente desde una lógica androcéntrica. Enfatizando la diversidad de corrientes teóricas del feminismo en Relaciones Internacionales, este análisis incluye un recorrido simplificado de algunas de las teorías más importantes que, dado el limitado espacio, se las ha reducido a sus esencias. Las teorías incluidas son feminismo liberal, feminismo marxista, feminismo radical, feminismo empirista, feminismo de punto de vista, feminismo posmoderno y feminismo decolonial. Las corrientes teóricas previamente planteadas serán usadas como herramientas para deconstruir estos conceptos desde sus correspondientes perspectivas, con el fin de desafiar concepciones universalizadoras; al igual que destacar el rol de las conceptualizaciones en la construcción de las relaciones de género en nuestra sociedad.

## Palabras clave:

Feminismos, teoría feminista en Relaciones Internacionales, soberanía, género

*Feminist scholars shaped by their activist experiences considered it a moral imperative to include women's voices and to change both the subjects and the objects of study (Tickner 2006).*

What does a woman represent to the nation-State? This is a huge question that is not commonly addressed when studying these highly masculinized concepts. As a response to that, “feminist scholars used gender analysis to deconstruct the theoretical framework of international relations, and reveal the masculine bias pervading key concepts such as power, security, and sovereignty” (True 2010, 5). Feminist theory focuses its study on explaining “women’s subordination or the unjustified asymmetry between women and men’s social and economic position” (Sjoberg & Tickner 2003, 171). This notion of gendered relations of power gained more importance since the Postpositivist<sup>1</sup> era of international relations (IR). In 1988, “*Millennium* was the first journal in the field that devoted a special issue to *Women and International Relations*” where feminist theorization finally became recognized within the discipline (True 2010, 4). However, feminist theory represents a theoretical approach with an enormous variety of feminisms, which differ both ontologically<sup>2</sup> and epistemologically<sup>3</sup> between them. Likewise, it is crucial to be aware that concepts are not static or immutable; conversely, they change according to history or perspective. Therefore, the deconstruction of concepts from different lenses constitutes an imperative work for the enrichment in the construction of critical theory. Similarly, it is important to notice the existence of diverse feminist approaches in order to emphasize the theoretical diversity within this field and understand feminisms from their inherent plurality. To sum up, from critical theory there is the need to question the power of both the structures and the concepts that govern societal organization.

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1 It refers to International Relations theories that epistemologically reject positivism or the idea that empiricist observation of natural sciences can be applied to the social sciences.

2 It is a branch of philosophy that studies how we understand the existence and being. Mostly, it can be divided into two categories: monist and dualist ontology which try to solve the body-mind problem.

3 It is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and its implications. It is related to the validation of knowledge through different methods.

As a consequence, the main objective of this text is to deconstruct concepts from different theoretical perspectives, especially highly masculinized concepts, such as sovereignty and nation-State, that have been historically constructed from an androcentric <sup>4</sup>logic.

Before starting with the analysis within each theoretical approach, it is relevant to conceptualize the term sovereignty from a feminist perspective. It is usually seen by the lens of IR Feminism “as a foundational problem in the masculinist distortions of the nature of politics and political agency” (Youngs 2004, 83).



In other words, sovereignty is continuously reinforcing and reproducing a manly State where masculinities represented in the public sphere are seen as better than femininity that is understood as part of the private sphere. Nevertheless, this is a simplified explanation of how sovereignty is seen from the feminist IR lens. That is why this text briefly analyzes this concept from the various forms of feminism that can be covered within the IR field. First, sovereignty will be analyzed from a liberal feminist perspective considering its recognition as the mainstream within the discipline. Second, the concept will be studied from Marxist feminism which is other traditional IR theoretical approach used for feminist studies. Third, an analysis of sovereignty from radical feminism is also considered. Fourth, a perspective of sovereignty from feminism empiricist and standpoint feminism is included. Fifth, the concept is explored from postmodern feminism. Finally, sovereignty is analyzed from decolonial feminism. It is important to clarify that given the space dedicated to each theory; the text constitutes a quick overview through feminist approaches in which its complexity has been reduced to its essentials.

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<sup>4</sup> Social practice that places the male and his interests as the central axis for the construction of social structures and relationships.

Firstly, liberal feminism aims for the integration of women in the contemporary society. Generally, they use positivist methods which prefer quantifiable evidence and “believe that the removal of the legal obstacles can overcome women’s subordination” (Sjoberg & Tickner 2003, 171). This means that for it, sovereignty and State are important conceptual tools to regulate the bodies from a position of legitimacy. Women subordination is produced and reproduced in the State by laws and public policies that do not offer the same opportunities and rights to women. As a consequence, liberal feminism uses sovereignty to pressure the State to include women in its system in order to be legitimate. That is not only presence of women in stances of power, but also the presence of their interests embodied in both laws and public policies. For liberal feminism, the State would only achieve a real level of sovereignty until it fulfills the demands of women to be included as part of their agendas which is a legitimate right within a true sovereign nation.

Contrary to the approach of liberal feminism, there is Marxist feminism, which is another strong theorization within IR that has been revisited countless times by various feminists. However, all of the different approaches that feminism has given to Marxist theory have in common a dualist ontology<sup>5</sup> where women’s emancipation is possible. That is to say, they believe that there is an essence of women that can be liberated from the system. For Marxist feminism, the structure led by economic interests of the capitalist system is what oppresses women. In the same sense, it argues against the patriarchal structure which capitalism is always reproducing; and in order to change that, it needs a restructuring of both economic and cultural stances. For Marxist feminism, the oppression of women is not the product of ignorance or intentional actions of individuals but product of the political, social and economic structures associated with capitalism (Salomón 2002, 33). In this approach, sovereignty, like the State, are tools of the elite to reinforce the capitalist system that oppresses all the women of the world. This is a universalized perception of women, where sovereignty is just a constructed

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<sup>5</sup> It is an ontological approach that assumes separation of mind and body or matter, because it considers that they have different foundations. It is built on binary thinking.

barrier that prevents the union of all proletarian women against the operating system, since it is considered that all women have almost the same problems.

Radical feminism, in turn, requires the creation of a counterculture that emphasizes female values over the mainstream, which are male values. “The radical feminist focuses on the lives and experiences of women... showing how women’s activities are made invisible on the international scene” (Code 2002) and also within the State. It believes that the system has made women invisible over time and the goal is to fight and destroy the system in order to construct a new one. From it, sovereignty is as problematic as the State is because both are male reproductions of their masculine values. These values are reproduced since childhood where the State, for example, through education teaches the hegemonic differentiation of genders and its supposed roles in society. This approach conceptualize sovereignty as a social construction reinforced by social institutions such as family, religion and State as a result of the hegemonic values in our society that contribute to a patriarchal domination.

Epistemologically, there are two important variations of feminism: feminism empiricism and standpoint feminism. Feminist empiricism uses a neopositivist epistemology <sup>6</sup>, which “considers that sexism and androcentrism present in scientific research are social biases that can be corrected with strict adherence to the scientific method” (Harding 1986, 23). From this perspective, sovereignty is not that relevant or mentioned because its main focus is the philosophical strategy to construct knowledge and conceptions; therefore, sovereignty here is just an androcentric conception produced by “bad science” which has not applied an efficient and objective use of the scientific method. There is also standpoint feminism which “rejects the notion of a mediatic truth, arguing, on the contrary, that knowledge is always influenced by a multitude of factors related to a particular individual position in a particular socio-political formation and at a specific point in history” (Rodriguez 2001, 285). In this conceptualization, the concept of sovereignty is no

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<sup>6</sup> It is an epistemological approach that limits the validity of scientific knowledge to the empirical and verifiable.

longer this general word that includes all the thinking within a country, but a construction that depends on its context and the different conceptions of each individual within its unique positionality.

To sum up, the conceptualization of sovereignty depends on the ontology and epistemology of the individual and as a consequence we cannot take for granted a universal conceptualization of this term.

Likewise, there are other postliberal theorizations of feminism such as postmodern feminism. This approach constitutes a critique toward the homogenization of the category “woman” as a unique and universal identity. It problematizes the construction of a unitary feminist subject and its rationalist construction, so instead it highlights the plurality of identities that each subject carries within itself. As a consequence, this approach argues against rigid structures and propose different epistemologies to apprehend society and specifically, the difference between genders. Postmodern feminism can be classified into two variants. The first, essentialist feminism, which “focuses on the study of forces and limitations of an inherited identity” (Sylvester 1994, 16) where this identity power depends on its social construction and reproduction. As a consequence, in this approach sovereignty is constructed and reinforced by its discursive scope which reproduce a manly State. According to this approach, a new conceptualization of sovereignty requires a new discourse that reflects these new real identities of women. Meanwhile, non-essentialist feminism “seeks deconstruction of authority and idea of sovereign man, where identity is not understood or exists but depending on the other” (Sylvester 1994, 16). This constitutes a monist ontology<sup>7</sup> or understanding of the society where sovereignty is no longer an important structure that can define or reproduce a static and unique will of a whole nation. Sovereignty as well as the State is constructed in a relational way where individuals are not isolated entities but they build each other. Therefore, to reconceptualize sovereignty within this approach it is required to restructure social relations and understand

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<sup>7</sup> It is an ontological approach that believes that the universe is formed by a single substance, so it does not assume separation with respect to the mind-body problem.

sovereignty as a mobile concept, spatially and historically located. From postmodern feminism, sovereignty represents a structural conception that limits and organizes society, which needs to be rethought. These two variants of postmodern feminism agreed against the idea of sovereignty as a static and universal conception.

Finally, feminism is also related to colonialism and represented by decolonial feminism. This theoretical approach is highly related to intersectional feminism, where categories like race, ethnicity, and others are taken into account. Decolonial feminists focus precisely on breaking the representation of third world women by western feminists and creating spaces to hear the silenced voices of racialized women which do not enjoy a position of privilege. However, they do not like to use the label of 'third world' because it is considered a vestige of colonialism. They want "to introduce a multiplicity of perspectives, traditions, and approaches to the question of identity, culture, and power" within the intersectionality of gender (Grovoqui 2013, 248). From this approach, sovereignty is seen only as a tool to reinforce the colonialism that still prevails in our system. It considers that the State no longer responds efficiently to their diverse identities, conversely, State and sovereignty are concepts that only reflect the will of the privileged ones which usually are male, white and middle/high class. From this perspective sovereignty is seen as a vestige of the colonial world, so they want to get rid of this conception. Instead, decolonial feminists propose new ways of organizing the world different from sovereignty and State. As an example, there is communitarian knowledge to construct new forms of societal organization founded on the ontologies and epistemologies of minorities such as the work of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in Bolivia.

In conclusion, feminism in IR is fundamental to understand hyper-masculine concepts and to study gender as a transversal variable of analysis within the discipline. Moreover, it is fundamental to be aware there are many types of feminism that are deeply different within IR feminism and in which the concept of sovereignty also has diverse meanings, representations, and roles. Each approach has its own conception and functionality of sovereignty but most of them agreed on the fact that

this concept reinforces and reproduces unequal gender relations and its reformulation is urgently needed. As a consequence, this text constitutes a simplified journey among diverse leans of Feminist IR Theory, which, even within themselves, have several nuances that have been reduced to essentials in this paper. Finally, this exploration aims to deconstruct concepts that are rarely questioned and, at the same time, constitute a simplified journey among diverse leans of Feminist IR Theory, which, even within themselves, have several nuances that have been reduced to essentials in this paper. Finally, this exploration aims to deconstruct concepts that are rarely questioned and, at the same time, constitute guiding axes of how we organize societies; therefore, in order to build them more equitably, it is vital to start rethinking the concepts that govern us.

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