

The Silenced Women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Written by Dylan Kissane

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Having moved through classical realism, structural realism, various liberal perspectives, a little game theory and constructivism, I round out POL 210's introduction to international relations theory with a class on critical theory, specifically a focus on Marxism and feminism.

This class is a new addition to the course this year and, having taught it yesterday for the first time, I think I am happy with how it went over. With regards to the feminism elements, in particular, I think it was a portion of the class that the students could engage with, debate and discuss, and even be a little bit shocked in encountering.

To illustrate the silencing of women in international discourse, I used as a central case the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I introduced this as I would introduce any other civil war: how long has it been going on, what is the death toll, who is winning and who is losing, and how have outside powers (in this case Rwanda) become embroiled in a local conflict.

The goal here was to demonstrate the typical discourse around war: quantitative, masculine and competitive. I hinted, though, there might be something more than this happening in the DRC. My students, almost all of whom I have taught at one point or another for a different subject, had mostly clicked to this and were ready to watch two short video clips meant to provoke discussion of the silencing of women's stories in the DRC.

The first was an informative piece selected to introduce students to the life of women who have been victims of rape in the DRC. While students might be somewhat aware of happenings in that African state, starting with an informative, journalistic piece allows even the less informed students to have a base of knowledge. This video – 'Rape as a Weapon of War in Congo' – runs less than five minutes but describes clearly how women have been victimised and then silenced after suffering from wartime rape in the DRC.

I follow this up immediately with another short video from the perspective of the rapists. Titled 'Congo Soldiers Explain Why They Rape', this clip is shockingly blunt and incredibly difficult to watch. Soldiers explain how they have raped 2, 8, even 25 women, justifying their actions and excusing those of others. One soldier goes so far as to argue that if his sister or wife was being raped he would not intervene as long as it was rape 'for the country'.

At the conclusion of the video I follow up with three discussion questions: Why do you think we don't hear very much about rape as a war crime in the DRC or other places? How can rape be prevented during times of war? Why do you think women's experiences in war are silenced?

The discussion that emerged was rich, if a little ethnocentric. The notion that a Western soldier, including a French soldier, might have, in the past or presently, raped a woman in wartime was uncomfortable for students but was explored all the same. I hope that students left the room a little more informed about the horrors of war for women and the human depravity that thousands of years of 'civilisation' has still failed to extinguish entirely.

My sole error – and one that will be corrected when I teach the class this afternoon – was not to ask students to

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arrange themselves in the classroom so that they could work in groups with both male and female students. Instead of gender diverse groups I found I had two or three groups of female students and two or three groups of male students, and I don't think this lent itself to the very best discussions.

Call it a lesson for the professor and a reminder that students aren't the only ones learning in a CEFAM classroom.

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