

Using Gender Lenses to Decolonize Trauma and Memory in IR

Written by Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte

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In the last two decades or so, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has opened itself up to psychological approaches that attempt to (re)think its traditional object of inquiry – the behaviour of states in an anarchical system – with a larger framework of reflexivity regarding its own (the system's) anarchic being. As a result, issues of collective identity formation, self-other relations, emotions, memory and trauma motivated several new works that have tried to challenge ontological and epistemological assumptions cemented by canonical IR authors such as Hans Morgenthau, John Herz, Robert Jervis and Kenneth Waltz.

Particularly in the case of memory and trauma, this new trend in the literature tried to grasp how traumatic events influence – and are influenced by – norms, identities and interests in world politics. As Jenny Edkins argued in her seminal work *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, questions of trauma and memory have become two expanding areas of scholarship that try to engage with what she calls the “the traumatic dimension of the political” (Edkins 2003: 9).

Notable examples of this kind of literature may be found in discussions about practices of memorialization and remembrance (Gillis 1994, Sturken 1997, Winter and Sivan 2000, Bell 2006, Zehfuss 2007), culture trauma (Greenberg 2003, Alexander et al 2004, Kaplan 2005), collective and transnational memory (Caruth 1996, Levy and Sznajder 2010), collective memory and foreign policy (Langenbacher and Shain 2010), and witnessing and reconciliation (Hayner 2001, Booth 2006, Lind 2008). While some of them engaged with different issues and applied different approaches, others were more firmly located in the field of International Relations (Edkins 2003, Bell 2006, Resende and Budryte 2013, Auchter 2014). They all have tried to bridge an existing gap regarding the role of trauma and memory in world politics, even going beyond the traditional focus on the Holocaust as the paradigmatic case of global traumatic event to include other traumatic experiences, without erasing important historical differences between them. While yielding interesting insights into the ways in which identities are (re)constructed in IR, this body of literature has only scarcely engaged with gender perspectives. The intersections of the two bodies of literature—feminist perspectives in (and on) IR and the study of traumatic memory in IR—offer a promising avenue for research.

Trauma, Memory and Global Conflict

More recently, the study of the intersections between trauma and memory related to global conflict received renewed attention in the aftermath of traumatic events. These include 9/11, the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, the 2004 Pacific tsunami and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, which could easily be interpreted as examples of traumatic events from Stolorow's (2007) characterization of our age as an “age of trauma”. Modernity, he claims, has provided us with a range of tranquilizing illusions that has long allowed us to keep on living, to function socially. Today, however, we are forced to deal with globally threatening situations – such as climate change, world hunger, genocide, nuclear proliferation, terrorist attacks, finance and economic crisis – that produce collective trauma on a global scale as the very possibility of their occurrence thrust us in a situation of existential anxiety due to the shattering of what Stolorow calls “the absolutism of everyday life” (2007: 16). For Stolorow, the essence of psychological trauma lays in the experience of unbearable affect, which may not be explained in terms of the quantity

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or intensity of the pain inflicted, nor as a result of a traumatic event per se. It has to be interpreted as the breakdown of mechanisms we counted on to assist us when processing a traumatic event.

For Caruth, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled and repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996: 11). It is, quite simply, something that lies beyond the realm of normal experience, outside the frontiers of language or normal comprehension, on the “limit of writing,” as elsewhere argued by Blanchot (1995: 7). Trauma expresses the momentary incapacity of language to describe reality: exposure to an event so disturbing and destructive that our system of reference for reality is shaken to the core.

Jenny Edkins holds that trauma makes people feel betrayed in their expectations about the order of things: “It brings to the surface existential questions which at least in the modern world we prefer to keep submerged” (2002: 245). This is why trauma always implies recognizing realities and limits “that most of us have not begun to face” (Edkins 2002: 245). The human mind is incapable of processing trauma in the same way it processes a normal event. Standing “outside ordinary experience,” trauma does not slot into the framework of normal social reality, which is why there is no language for it or any of the other tools on which one would normally rely to make sense of the world. According to Caruth (1996: 4), it is precisely the “un-assimilation” of a traumatic event – its refusal to be an object of human knowledge – that lets trauma slip back and haunt the individuals that experienced it.

As Edkins rightly points out, a traumatic event is one that “shatters our expectations and our preconceptions of how the world functions” (2001: 8). Following trauma, she claims, our world maps fail us: old frameworks and language stand helpless, and the categories we had carefully built up for dealing with experience are destroyed. In this sense, trauma and security are linked insofar as the former destroys the “metaphysical certainties that were normally taken for granted,” whilst the latter is an “illusion” that allows us to function (Edkins 2002: 246). We are thus painfully reminded of our own vulnerability as fragile human beings, living an impossible, absurdly tenuous existence.

Trauma, then, becomes part of the experience of recognizing our mortality. Life can be bearable only if we buy into a kind of unwritten pact, especially in Western culture, of wilfully forgetting how tenuous our condition is. Trauma gives us a sudden, painful reminder of how useless and impossible such a compact actually is: we are mortal and we are vulnerable, and the idea of total security is no more than a device used to trick ourselves into believing that we can escape death, relieving ourselves of the anxiety brought on by the recognition of our mortality.

Gender, War and its Aftermath: Feminist Perspectives in (and on) IR

Similar themes—war traumas, including rape, construction of masculinity and femininity in relation to militarism, and representations of lived experiences in mass media to mention just a few—are explored in a rich and growing feminist literature in (and on) International Relations (for a summary of perspectives, see Sylvester 2002, Shepherd 2010, Sjoberg 2010, and Tickner and Sjoberg 2011). Although it is impossible to make generalizations about this diverse body of literature, it is probably fair to suggest that the authors who are not afraid to embrace a “feminist” label are likely to ask questions about “silences within silences” in the study of trauma in global politics. In other words, they highlight the role of gender and culture in conceptualizing memory and trauma. Most importantly, they ask how the concept of “trauma” is constructed differently in various cultures, including the so-called “non-Western” cultures, as well as how gender articulate the way suffering is ranked (e.g., why are some traumas – in this case, male-dominated one, perceived as more important than others?).

The connections between memory, trauma and gender become visible in the feminist studies of post-conflict societies. In any conflict, the notion of collective memory can superimpose on individual recollections of events thus serving a political project by shaping public discourses around the remembrance of some experiences and the forgetting of others. As a result, it silences and makes invisible the individual experiences that can question and destabilize the dominant political narrative of sacrifice and “victimhood” in times of conflict and violence. More often than not, a gendered perspective is applicable here, where many women’s voices are excluded so that the nation can retain its patriarchal values, gendered hierarchies and norms. Collective memory is closely associated with a collective forgetting of what many “ordinary” women did during the war. They become the “ordinary lives,” the “bare

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life” innocent victims as characterized by Agamben (1998), and collective memory serves as consent for a politics that values male sacrifice as paramount in wars.

In many cultures, women are considered the story tellers and hence they are instrumental in keeping collective memory alive through songs and folklore (Manchanda 2001). Yet they tell mostly stories of male value, courage and sacrifice. They express their grief, loss and pain in the memories they share, but usually omit references to how they themselves constitute a political community and participated in violent resistance. It is significant, however, that women’s militant activities, support to the armed militancy, and their political aspirations often do not find their way into stories that are remembered publicly. In many cases, as demonstrated by feminist research, the collective memory has recognized and celebrated the militarized masculinity of men who have taken up arms for the cause of freedom (Parashar 2011). These memories are gendered in how they choose to value men and erase women’s experiences of the militancy, especially in their participation as agents rather than as victims. Due to the demands of patriarchy, collective memory only remembers the “good” women who suffered and grieved while the men engaged in the politics of violence.

Post conflict societies tend to struggle with women’s rights and experiences. Many women find themselves marginalized in the peace processes. Gendered memories validate a masculinist narrative of the nation where women are often portrayed as the victims in a conflict. Feminist scholarship has successfully challenged this notion and has articulated that the silencing of women’s voices is political, and that a comprehensive lasting peace is not possible without including women. Furthermore, women play various roles in war, including combat. The challenge is bigger than merely making a case for women, for the real issue is about recognizing the contested nature of memories and memorialization and how bodies are claimed as “political beings or as bare life” (Edkins 2003: 246).

Indeed, the argument for including gender as a category and to take seriously women’s voices in conflict resolution and peace building is not based on the notion that women speak with one voice at any given moment or that they have similar experiences and memories of the conflict. It is based on the belief that women rarely receive recognition for their contributions as providers and caregivers, let alone for their roles as social and political organizers (Pankhurst 2003). The multiplicity of their roles is ignored and gender discrimination is perpetuated by obfuscation of women’s non-traditional wartime activities. As Pankhurst argues, they “receive much less support than male fighters in post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation projects.....even though domestic violence increases during and after war” (2003: 160).

Feminist Politics of Witnessing and Hope as a Way to Decolonize Trauma and Memory in IR

In some ways, feminist perspectives outlined above resemble the arguments of those who argue for the decolonization of Western trauma theory, with its focus on the inherent limitations of language to express the experiences of trauma and suffering. For example, Stef Craps, one of the proponents to decolonize trauma theory, went as far as to suggest that “the traumas of non-Western or minority groups must also be acknowledged on their own terms” (2013: 3). In the eyes of Craps and other authors advocating for the decolonization of trauma theory, such an approach requires the inclusion of the lived experiences of subordinated groups by paying attention to real human bodies, power politics and humiliations that can last a long time (for example, under colonization).

Jasmina Husanović, a feminist philosopher and activist from Tuzla in Bosnia, offers some insight on how to respect such lived experiences while at the same time recognizing the universality of trauma and its ability to transcend cultural differences. She focuses on women who have experienced and survived rape. Husanović argues that it is necessary to pay close attention to power structures that commodify trauma and find ways to transcend them. She starts out by articulating a set of questions inspired by feminist thinking: “What is her voice, where is her space, how is [sic] her politics?” and maps out a series of “feminist theoretical and political interventions” that include art (2009: 15).

Dwelling on the ways to deal with traumas in societies that have experienced political violence (such as Bosnia), Husanović articulates a stinging critique of liberal attempts to handle traumatic memory with “white gloves” and nationalist attempts to own traumatic memory. When writing about liberals trying to handle memory with “white

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gloves,” she is referring to the attempts by the international community to apply instruments of “transitional justice.” Such instruments can include trials of perpetrators, truth commissions, and reparations for the victims. Unfortunately, often the lines between the perpetrators and victims are unclear, and transitional justice becomes an illusion. Likewise, the attempts of nationalist politicians to claim their exclusive rights to traumatic pasts (and to use these pasts to pursue their own political goals) can be equally detrimental.

Husanović outlines her own original way to deal with traumas. She believes that it is important to search for openings in civil society, which include spaces free from state intervention where art can help societies to deal with trauma. Husanović pleads for attention to be paid to real women’s bodies, so as to create spaces for radical relationality. This is a type of feminist politics, a “politics of witnessing and hope” (Husanović 2015: 103). The goal of this type of politics is to restore dignity to the bodies that have been “defaced, erased and/or violently made non-relevant in the operative biopolitical regimes” (2015: 103). By making these bodies visible, and by providing resources to those at the very bottom who struggle for justice and survival, such politics can be transformative.

In her works, Husanović emerges as a scholarly activist, as a writer who embraces action research, working together with civil society activists in searching for ways to undermine the power structures that commodify trauma and impose polarizing stories about traumatic experiences. Husanović’s story suggests another dimension that scholars interested in the study of trauma could reflect on: she argues that someone who writes about trauma needs to be an activist as well, to not be afraid to commit to social and political change. If taken seriously, this argument has serious methodological and philosophical implications.

To conclude, in this essay, we attempted to outline the main contours of the emerging literature on memory and trauma in International Relations. Although many authors working within this paradigm do not yet explicitly embrace feminist lenses, some of the main questions addressed by this body of literature—including the construction of identities and shaping of interests—are also of interest to feminist IR scholars researching the ways in which gender relations shape global politics. By highlighting the works of Jasmina Husanović and other feminist scholars, we outlined several strategies that apply gender lenses and thus enrich and transform the study of memory and trauma in IR. Instead of fixating on hierarchies of suffering (that are related to the complex legacies of genocidal wars), Husanović draws on radical relationality—a belief that it is possible to transcend ethnic and national divisions, and to find connections between different traumatic experiences. Her feminist politics of “witnessing and hope” implies a search for spaces that are open for dialogues, creativity and difference, thus offering a new avenue for the study of trauma and memory in IR.

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