

# Fighting Patriarchy like it's 1938: Virginia Woolf, Trailblazer of Feminist IR

Written by Constantin Gouvy

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/19/fighting-patriarchy-like-its-1938-virginia-woolf-trailblazer-of-feminist-ir/>

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Published in 1938, only one year prior to E. H. Carr's famed "first 'scientific' treatment" of international politics (Hoffmann 1977 p.43) in *The Twenty Years Crisis*, Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* has comparatively had more difficulty in establishing itself as a work of International Relations (IR), to the extent that the political relevance of her writing has remained obscure and elusive to many of her critiques (Wilson 2013 p.42). Building on the "serpentine insinuations" at play in her wider body of work, *Three Guineas* however represents the culmination and materialisation of Woolf's political philosophy of struggle against public and private structures of domination enforced by a patriarchal social system (Carroll 1978 p.102; 110). As such, *Three Guineas*'s arguments were inaudible to many of her contemporaries (Poole 1991 p.96), and they remain disparaged today (Steans 2003 p.430). This essay will contend that *Three Guineas* should be read as a transgressive, iconoclastic, and avant-gardist classic of critical and emancipatory feminist and gender IR (Carroll 1978 p.126), whose challenge to the gendered epistemological boundaries of "mainstream IR" contributed to removing the conceptual blinkers of the discipline and enlarging its frame, thereby exposing and shedding light on a corner of the canvas thus far invisible and unattended. This essay will first map out the epistemological assumptions of "mainstream IR" and the critiques put forth by feminist and gender IR. It will then assess the significance of *Three Guineas*'s in questioning these epistemological assumptions, assessing chiefly its challenge to the methodological and substantive definitions of mainstream IR.

First of all, it is necessary to define the "mainstream" standard against which *Three Guineas* is to be compared. Realism and neo-realism have overall dominated the field since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, to the extent that, for a time, the latter was held as the "orthodox" approach in the discipline (Tooze and Murphy 1991). A looser conception of the "mainstream" allows for encompassing the competing approach of neo-liberal institutionalism (Steans 2003 p.429). This "mainstream" is unified by similar epistemological assumptions which have exerted significant influence on the type of questions asked and the modes of enquiry deemed acceptable and legitimate in the field.

One of the assumptions mainstream IR rests upon is that it is possible to apprehend the world objectively, and therefore possible to use scientific methods to study it (ibid). As a result, the trend in the dominant branch of American IR has been distinctively "(neo)-positivist" in inclination: preoccupied with the status of the discipline as a "real" or "hard" science, mainstream IR champions narrow scientific methodological strictures (Squires and Weldes 2007 p.188). An example of this can be found in the strict methodological guidelines prescribed by Hoffmann. Rhetorically asking his reader what methods should be used in IR for "reducing the mass of facts to scientific analysis and order", Hoffmann decries the eccentricity and transgression that consists in using a "cocktail of methods borrowed from other sciences", such as sociology (1959 p.358). Substantively, mainstream IR considers the object of study in the discipline to be the relations, whether cooperative or conflictual, between states within an anarchic international system (e.g. Waltz 1979). International politics are seen to take place in a milieu which has its own "coherence and uniqueness", and its own "rules of the game" (Dunn 1948 p.143, Hoffmann 1959 p.346). This conception presupposes a number of binaries: international v. domestic, public v. private, and insider v. outsider most notably. Mainstream IR focuses on the first item in each of these binaries seen as dichotomous, and discards the second (Squires and Weldes 2007 p.188).

These assumptions are anything but trivial if one considers the language of politics not as a neutral medium but as

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“an institutionalised structure of meanings that channels political thought and action in certain directions” (Connolly 1993 p.1). To borrow Connolly’s metaphor, the links between the structure of politics and the terms of political discourse are comparable to the relationship between a judge and a jury: the judge, acting as interpreter of the law, sets the frame for the jury to deliberate over a case. To accept without revision the concepts defined by the mainstream is therefore to accept terms of discourse loaded in its favour (ibid p.2). In order to understand the structure of (international) politics, one must then critically engage with the conventions that govern these concepts (ibid p.3).

The assumptions upon which mainstream IR operates are thus intrinsically political. Aware that the power of determining “respectable” methods is a means of control and domination (Daly 1973 pp.7-12), feminist and gender IR literature has actively engaged since the 1980s in reformulating IR beyond what the mainstream contends qualifies as part of the discipline, and what acceptable means of enquiry are (Squires and Weldes 2007 p.185). These gendered canons, it argues, not only regulate through methodological stricture who is made intelligible and can participate in the discussion, but also what qualifies as a legitimate object of study by setting strict substantive boundaries (Squires and Weldes 2007 p.188). As a result, feminist and gender IR scholars have actively contested the relevance and legitimacy of the “discipline-defining” dichotomies discussed above and exposed their gendered character, demonstrating that “malestream” IR was a masculinised discipline (Squires and Wildes 2007 p.189; 192). Building on this perspective, this essay will demonstrate that *Three Guineas* was as an avant-gardist work of feminist and gender IR which almost anachronistically lifted the “conceptual blinders” (Connolly 1993 p.1) that characterise mainstream IR and keep a corner of the canvas of international politics unattended.

As an unidentified object in the realm of IR, *Three Guineas*’s transgressive method and language challenge the codes prescribed by mainstream IR reviewed above. From the outset, Woolf positions herself in *Three Guineas* as an outsider. As a “generalist” rather than a “specialist”, she contends she has at her disposal neither the usual tools nor methods usually prescribed for the study of (international) politics (e.g. Woolf 2000 p.258). For this reason, she resorts to using a new form of evidence to substantiate her claims and a new language to formulate them, demonstrating that using the prism of gender to look at world politics alters not only *what* one sees, but also *how* one sees (Peterson and Runyan 1993 p.18).

First, defending her methodology, Woolf explains she has no choice but to “rely upon such evidence as [she] can collect from history, biography, and from the daily paper” (Woolf 2000 p.258). The only evidence that is available to women of her class, she argues, it is also a “marvellous [...] yet largely untapped aid to the understanding of human motives” (ibid p.121). Woolf’s choice of biographies or photographs as evidence to substantiate her claims entails that she builds her arguments through the rhetorical strategy of *martyria* (defined as using proofs from her own life and other people’s), thereby blurring the lines between the masculine public and the feminised private, seen as irrelevant by mainstream IR. Her method then comes to embody her plea that the personal is political (in substance as much as in method) (Ratcliffe 1993 p.408), preceding feminist IR by nearly half a century (Carroll 1978 p.117). Similar pluralist methods can be found in later literature such as Enloe’s path-breaking *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* that relied on such varied materials as photographs, postcard illustrations, and songbooks (e.g. Enloe 2000 pp.25; 43; 74). Moreover, in ordering this evidence, Woolf blurs the lines of another dichotomy: insider v. outsider. By “wearisomely buttress[ing]” her arguments with an “apparatus of scholarly citation and case-making” (Sherry 2003 p.237) “in the tradition of academic scholarship” (Feldman 2004 p.128), Woolf appropriates some of the essential codes of the mainstream in the discipline and thumbs her nose at the latter by using “insider conventions” to contest the methodological boundaries of the field (Mackay 2003 p.138).

Second, concerned with how to formulate her arguments, Woolf explains that not only do men and women “see the [world] through different eyes” (Woolf 2000 p.133), but their language is different too. Considering Woolf’s broader work, it becomes discernible that she considers the language of (international) politics, the “conventional language of politics” as she attacks and rejects it in *To The Lighthouse*, as gendered, as that of patriarchy, and states her preference for speaking “not in any language known to men” (Wilson 2013 p.37). This search for a new language is echoed in Woolf’s 1920 essay *Men and Women*, where she enjoins female writers to try “the accepted forms, [...] discard the unfit, [and/or] create others which are more fitting”. This quest culminates in *Three Guineas*, in which Woolf declares she wishes to “find new words, new methods” (Carroll 1978 p.127), and in doing so, to forge a new

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form of expression free from the gendered canons of the discipline, a new model of resistance to oppression (ibid).

Through a series of rhetorical devices that trigger the emotional (e.g. *martyria*, repetitions, rhetorical questions) Woolf places emotions at the heart of this new language, pushing to the fore an element of international politics thus far obscured in discourses of International Relations (Ratcliffe 1993 p.401). Because emotions have been associated with women, children, and weak men, they have been seen as a weakness or a danger in patriarchal western culture, and as such are “unspeakable” in western epistemology at large (ibid). The implication is that there is no “common sense logic” in mainstream IR for processing the emotional, whose validity is then denied in order to protect the status-quo (ibid). *Three Guineas* thus challenges mainstream IR epistemology's patriarchal tendency to “fetishize” a distanced objectivity which mystifies the emotional through labels such as “irrational”, “nonsensical”, or “illogical” (ibid p.405), all of which Woolf was accused of at the time of the book's publication, not least by Dalrymple (2002) or Leavis who described Woolf's argument as incoherent because its method was “emotional” (Leavis 1938 p.204).

Third, Woolf also challenges established canons in the format of the medium she devises for *Three Guineas*, and the mode of delivery of her argument, which allowed her to bring the emotional to the fore. Described in turn as “more than a polemical essay but less than a social or political treatise” (Wilson 2013 p.36), but also “an epistolary essay, a compound public letter” (Froula 2005 p.259), as well as a “political pamphlet” (Woolf 1967), *Three Guineas* was certainly a “provocative” and “controversial” book, to borrow the words of Theodora Bosanquet (Wilson 2013 p.41), and so even as far as in its form. *Three Guineas* can be interpreted as having distinctive artistic and visual qualities, so that the book conjures up – through its use of various letters and photographs, biographies and newspaper clippings – a series of carefully designed images akin to an artistic exhibition, whose purpose is to make the invisible structures of patriarchal domination visible to all (Lilly 2003), engaging the reader on an aesthetical and emotional level as much as on an intellectual one (Wilson 2013 p.45). And indeed Woolf herself refers to the biography excerpts she quotes in *Three Guineas* as “pictures of other people's lives and minds” (Woolf 2000 p.125), tying in with her endeavour of bringing down the barriers between the public and the private, the personal and the political.

From the perspective of mainstream, positivist IR, Woolf's method, language, and choice of medium qualify as an aberration. However, her iconoclastic endeavour to question the strict methodological strictures of the mainstream can be seen as a necessary precursory step in challenging her reader to reconsider what does and does not qualify as international politics (Squires and Weldes 2007 p.189) by disputing the legitimacy of the international v. domestic and public v. private dichotomies and the narrow scope championed by mainstream IR. As such, *Three Guineas* embodies the notion that gender IR is not simply an alternative pair of spectacles one puts on to look at an unchanging object of study, but a wide angle lens that pushes back the boundaries of the frame.

For Woolf, the public and the private realms are “inseparably connected” (Woolf 2000 p.270), despite patriarchal endeavours, whether in Britain or in Nazi Germany, to confine women in the private sphere, and make the public world the preserve of men. Drawing from Hitler's speech in 1936 before the Nazi women's association and various newspapers' headlines in Britain, Woolf draws a parallel between Hitler's fascist agenda and her compatriot's patriarchal programme (2000 p.175; 269). For Woolf, the personal and private are both political and gendered (Feldman 2004 p.128), and patriarchy and women's oppression are closely linked with fascism and war. She notably warns that it would be both men's and women's ruin if, “in the immensity of [men's] public abstractions [they] forget the private figure, or if [women] in the intensity of [their] private emotions forget the public” (Woolf 2000 p.271). Woolf can thus be seen as a precursor in showing that the rigid boundaries erected in the international v. domestic and public v. private dichotomies removed gender relations from the legitimate field of enquiry (Steans 2003 p.434). In this sense, Woolf can be seen as a precursor of Enloe's authoritative analyses which, some thirty odd years later, built on the arguments the book had laid out and widened the conceptual notion of what qualifies as “the international”, demonstrating the essentially international, public, and political aspects of the manifestly domestic, private, and personal (e. g. 1983, 1989, 1996).

At the time of the book's publication, however, Woolf's arguments belonged to a category of speech that was “inadmissible” and therefore inaudible (Poole 1991 p.96). Her focus on the relevance of the personal for the political, of the private for the public, led earlier generations of critics to depict her as disengaged and apolitical, or interested in unworldly ways in art and personal relationships (Mackay 2003 p.127), so much so that the political content of her

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work often went “completely unnoticed” (Carroll 1978 p.99). The iconoclastic nature of *Three Guineas* has further made it the target of gendered claims passed off as objective truths because the book fell outside of the contested boundaries of the gendered mainstream of IR (Ratcliffe 1993 p.400). Bell, in his time, saw the connection between the private and the public, the domestic and the international in *Three Guineas* as “tenuous” and “inadequate” (Bell 1972 p.205). More recently, Dalrymple claimed in his scathing and vitriolic critique that “the personal and the political [never were] worse confounded (Dalrymple 2002). The implications of her work, however, are of significant importance. As a precursor of later feminist and gender IR literature, *Three Guineas* can be said to question some of the most fundamental methodological boundaries of mainstream IR, and the “discipline-defining” dichotomies that regulate the scope of the discipline’s legitimate purview (Squires and Weldes 2007 p.190), making further enquiries on the gendered nature of war and international politics possible.

To conclude, this essay has argued that *Three Guineas* should be regarded as an avant-gardist work of feminist and gender IR which anticipated the scholarship by nearly half a century, not so much in the answers it sought to provide, but rather in the questions it opened to enquiry. Challenging the gendered epistemological underpinnings of what qualified in her time and still does today as mainstream IR, *Three Guineas*’s transgressive method, language, and style opened the door for methodological pluralism in the discipline, and sought to shed light on and formulate an element of international politics obscured and mystified in mainstream IR: emotions. *Three Guineas* can furthermore be considered a critical work of contemporary relevance because it redefined the scope of the legitimate purview of the discipline, breaking down the artificial and gendered barriers between international/domestic, and public/private. In sum, by challenging established understandings of what ought to be studied, with what tools, and to what end in IR, *Three Guineas* opened critical and emancipatory avenues of reflexion essential to feminist and gender IR today.

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