

The Call for a New Subject: Gender and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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LILLY FELK, JUN 11 2020

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis uniquely reflects the vulnerability of the individual both to fall ill at the hands of a pandemic, as well as the vulnerability of whole states and the interconnectedness of the world in social and economic terms. Alongside calling into question issues like the role of the state or the sufficiency of different countries' health care systems, the corona crisis thus also challenges the traditional understanding of the subject in International Relations and politics more generally. The theory and practice of IR are underscored by an understanding of the subject as a rational, male, able-bodied, independent and free agent. This ideal builds the foundation for traditional theories of realism and liberalism, which remain influential for contemporary IR and world politics, and the current neoliberal and capitalist world system. This system has been built on the legacy of liberal market expansions and the realist pursuit of self-interest and seems to mostly have ignored the vulnerability and interdependency of the subject, which Covid-19 brings to the foreground in a magnified manner. Only relatively recently, this ideal has been challenged by some scholars. With the rise of critical theories like feminism and gender theory, substantiated arguments have been drawn up to demonstrate the insufficiency of the ideal of the able-bodied, male and independent subject in its ability to describe the experiences of much of the population and to demonstrate its contribution to keeping alive relationships of domination.

In the following, existing feminist re-evaluations of the subject will be examined in light of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis and the argument will be made that the reconfiguration of the liberal subject proposed by feminist and gender theory can make valuable contributions to the practice of IR, especially in light of the issues brought forward by the pandemic, which have become especially critical based on the androcentrism within societies across the world. In order to make this argument, the essay will start by highlighting the prevalence of the liberal subject in modern IR discourse and the masculine bias inherent in IR and world politics. After, it will argue that a feminist understanding of the subject will benefit the practice of IR through reconfiguring the common understanding of the subject in terms of her vulnerability and agency and relate this to current healthcare systems. Secondly, it will underscore how a feminist reading of subjectivity can shed more awareness on the interconnectedness of all units internationally and the relevance of this understanding for further realms, such as the environment. Lastly, it will be argued that a feminist reconfiguration of the rational subject can improve the understanding of issues of morality in the modern world.

At the bottom of the economic and political structure of current society, which is affine to capitalism and neoliberalism, feminists have identified an understanding of the subject as male, able-bodied and independent, which can be traced back to the time of the Enlightenment. Concepts and theories of IR, such as liberalism and realism, are modelled on this subject ideal and authors like Anuradha Chenoj hold that concepts like the idea of the state are based on a masculine understanding derived from the idea of the sovereign man put forth in much of the traditional realist IR literature.^[1] Additionally, supposedly male attributes like violence and chauvinism are integrated into scholars' understanding of concepts of war and states, which are understood as natural reflections of these characteristics.^[2] This leads to the prioritization of national security in realism.^[3] In putting the national interest and the identification with the nation-state before anything else, realism at the same time denies the possibility of prioritizing other identity markers over nationality, such as gender.^[4] At the same time, designated female attributes like peace, nurture and passivity have not found much relevance within the theory or practice of IR.

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With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, care and nurture have become more obviously essential to the survival of many and are now a more urgent subject of international relations, too. Changing the usual dynamics among nation-states, states like Germany have now taken in other nationals for intensive care and countries like China have sent medical utensils to assist the United States.^[5] Feminist theorists like Martha Fineman have long argued that it is essential for IR and world politics practice to accept and appreciate the inherent vulnerability of the subject, which is ignored in the traditional understanding of the subject as able-bodied and independent. Fineman sees vulnerability as “universal and constant, inherent in the human condition.”^[6] She proposes the vulnerable subject as the new alternative to the “autonomous and independent subject” of neoliberalism.^[7] A state system based on an understanding of the subject as vulnerable is seen by her as being able to respond to the needs of the individual in a more appropriate and equal way.^[8]

When relating these arguments to the Covid-19 crisis and the insufficiency of many health care systems in dealing with the increasing number of patients, the validity of Fineman’s argument becomes blatantly obvious. Rather than investing in strong health care systems or even developed education systems, states like the United States have invested in the economy or the military – a traditionally “male” domain, whereas female domains such as care and childrearing have been neglected.^[9] This aligns with the argument made by gender theorists that typically masculine institutions or traits are still being valued above feminine institutions and traits.^[10] When it comes to care institutions, many scholars have emphasised that those institutions are often gendered while big parts of care carried out by females is simultaneously still unpaid.^[11] Since having to be cared for stands in direct opposition to the pervasive idea of the able-bodied and independent male, all elements of life related to care are thus seen – even though not always consciously – as subordinate.^[12] The insufficiency of the healthcare system based on the gendered neglect of that sector in many countries is now proving to be detrimental and demonstrates the potential benefits that a realization and acceptance of the vulnerability of the individual proposed by feminist writers can contribute to a future improvement of the way states respond to the vulnerability of their people.

The ideal of the able-bodied and not vulnerable subject is directly connected to the similarly ambitious ideal of being fully independent, which is another realm of the subject which feminist accounts propose to revise in favor of a fully interdependent subject. The ideal of independence underlies much of the contemporary economic system and has structured engagement with issues of care, too.^[13] Whereas the ideal actor in IR is able-bodied and independent, the elderly or sick subject is constructed as the other and as less valuable.^[14] In a society where independence is valued, care as a form of dependency is often viewed as an undesirable state,^[15] which can be witnessed in the discourse on the elderly, for example, who are often described in infantile terms.^[16] This demonstrates that failing to correspond to the ideal actor leads to a decrease in status and power within society.^[17] In many states, for example in Germany, this has led to a missing emphasis on developing strong health care systems as well as a missing appreciation for health care personnel.^[18] Alternatively, feminist authors have suggested a re-evaluation of the ideal of independence and an embrace of dependency and interdependence instead. For example, Bill Hughes sees it as important to underscore the prevalence of caring in the life of the individual and the interdependency of all individuals unrelated to their gender or sex that follows from everyone’s need for care.^[19] Other feminists advocate for a replacement of the independent “worker-citizen” with the “carer-citizen”, for whom caring and the moral responsibility to care build the fundament of her or his relationship to others.^[20] The current pandemic has led to an increasing (visible) vulnerability of the population and a larger-than-usual dependency on the official health care system.

Thus, care, something typically seen as female and hence as less valuable, has gained status and the interdependency of individual and individual, individual and state but also state and state is becoming more obvious. This interdependence not only manifests in the deepened dependencies on others in several ways, but also in the way the virus has spread from one end of the world to the other, thereby showing – quite metaphorically – the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the world. Additionally, apart from the obvious dependence on medical experts when infected, the economic, social and political dimensions of the crisis also demonstrate an interdependence beyond this aspect. Thus, restaurants now suffer due to their reliance on the demands of the population in economic terms. Similarly the dependence of many European countries on the supply of medical utensils and medicine from countries like China, reveals the interdependence of different states in economic and political terms.^[21] Virginia Held describes this realisation of interdependence as being at the bottom of the idea of a “relational self”,^[22] which is a prevalent idea within feminist studies and has become an especially important and now

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inescapable insight for IR theorists through the pandemic. Not only can accepting this characteristic of the individual potentially benefit the care system in the long run, which will make society better equipped for future crises, but it will also be useful in dealing with other issues that rely on the realisation of interdependence, such as environmental issues. Thus, feminist and gender theory hold an important change of perspective on the concept of the subject for IR.

Lastly, feminist challenges of the idea of the inherent rationality of the subject can be helpful in reconsidering the role of morality and moral considerations within IR. Even though realists traditionally claim that morality is not influential for making choices in the international sphere, issues of humanitarian intervention and the debate about R2P, as well as responses to terrorism undoubtedly render moral considerations a crucial part of IR. In questions of morality, the most common ethical approaches – Kantian and Utilitarian – rely on universal principles and the application of those principles through the use of reason.^[23] In traditional politics, “women have been seen as emotional rather than as rational beings, and thus as incapable of full moral personhood.”^[24] On the other hand, critical traditions fundamentally challenge the idea of the objective and rational knower – based on the Cartesian cogito – who can know anything through employing a rational process of thought.^[25] Instead, scholars like Held propose a greater appreciation of emotion in issues of morality.^[26] This view is adopted by many feminists and gender theorists who try to challenge the emotional-rational binary, which they see as corresponding to the female-male dichotomy. Marilyn Gottschall holds that challenging the male-female dichotomy ultimately leads to a challenge of the self-other dichotomy and notions of ethics, too.^[27] Her findings suggest that separating gender and epistemology will enable a new view on the moral subject and its levels of autonomy.^[28] Gottschall views feminist theory and gender theory as contributing to a reconfigured understanding of ethics based on a new vision of the subject as no longer a purely rational and independent actor.^[29]

This aligns with the arguments of other gender theorists, who place emphasis on a more context-driven rather than abstract-universal analysis of moral issues. Gilligan, for example, identified that females often act in order to maintain relationships with others rather than based on abstract rules.^[30] Thus, instead of an understanding of the subject as rational and of morality as something applied in a rational and universalist fashion, feminist theories can demonstrate the importance of emotion inherent in all human beings and the benefit of this for IR analysis.

Emotion and moral considerations have also played a large role in the ongoing struggle with the Covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence of the suffering induced by this pandemic, large-scale civic solidarity has arisen across the world and is being demonstrated by expressing solidarity with the care personnel through the clapping for the NHS in the United Kingdom, for example.^[31] It is hard to deny that this crisis has not led emotions and morality to take a prominent place in world politics. Already, the discourse on the further development of this crisis and on whether one should prioritize the health of the especially vulnerable part of the population and allow the economy to suffer, or whether states should start loosening the safety measures for the benefit of the economy and thus the majority of the population, is a highly moral one. In addition to stressing interdependence and rejecting the individualism of the current system, feminism can contribute to exploring the space between the individual and the universal, such as through exploring ties between friends or parents and their children.^[32] These more context-driven considerations of morality might be helpful in explaining the moral stance of individuals in regard to the discourse on Covid-19, too, depending on the vulnerability of their loved ones to the virus rather than based on a rational moral principle. Overall, the urgency of reconsidering the prominent rational moral subject in favor of a more emotional and context-driven moral subject can once again be demonstrated by the ongoing pandemic and traditional moral discourses in IR would benefit to appreciate the emphasis on the female values of emotion and context in moral decision-making.

Overall, this paper hopes to have illustrated the major contributions a change of the view on the subject based on proposed subjectivities by gender and feminist theory can make to the realm of IR. Not only do feminists and gender theorists underline the androcentrism of modern societies and the underlying assumption of the ideal of a male, independent, able-bodied and rational being, but they further propose to realise the vulnerability, interdependence and emotionality inherent in the individual. This paper has argued that those attributes become especially clear through the current Covid-19 crisis and the concomitant issues within the care sector especially. Thus, if IR wants to be able to continue to make relevant contributions and help states to be better prepared for similar crises in the future, as well as reach a more holistic understanding for the approach of other global issues like issues of the

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environment, re-evaluating the notion of the subject permeating much of the discipline along the lines suggested by gender and feminist theorists provides a necessary step into the right direction.

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Notes

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[3] Ibid., 22.

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[15] Ibid., 210.

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[24] Ibid., 325.

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[32] Held, 339.

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