



FORUM ARTICLE

The ‘brutal fecundity of violence’: Feminist methodologies of International Relations

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Abstract

This article highlights Marysia Zalewski’s scholarship as reflective and generative of the multifarious sources and contributions of feminist IR and its ‘scavenger methodologies’, which seek to centre subjects, processes, and practices historically excluded, ignored, and minimised. The productive depth of her scholarship is evident in the uniqueness of each article in this collection, all of which distinctly document the uses to which Zalewski’s writings can be uniquely put. Each of the articles performs a ‘turning operation’ of sorts on the elementals of feminist IR (gender/women/power/difference) and brings further elaborations of masculinities, sexualities, silences as well as screams, that shift and change what is taken to be feminist research/method – at each point disordering our sensibilities and our assumptions as to what we do when we do feminist work.

Keywords: Feminist; Methodology; Zalewski; Gender; Power

Introduction

This forum demonstrates the richness of feminist theorisations of politics and International Relations (IR) through careful immersion with the formative work of Marysia Zalewski, a key figure in British IR scholarship.¹ Each of the forum’s articles creatively engages with her scholarship and its grounding in specific political moments, drawing attention to the meaning and use of particular concepts when/as mobilised in service of political goals. Collectively, the forum also reflects an orientation towards theory as a collective generation of concepts and practices by drawing Zalewski into conversation with other notable and emerging feminist IR scholars. Consequently, this forum, again taking its cue from Zalewski, offers a broader argument about the importance of examining ‘words to think with’ as constitutive of politics and practice,

¹See, in particular, and in addition to prolific collaborative work: Marysia Zalewski, ‘The debauching of feminist theory/the penetration of the postmodern’, *Politics*, 11:1 (1991), pp. 30–6; Marysia Zalewski, ‘Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?’, *International Affairs*, 71:2 (1995), pp. 339–56; Marysia Zalewski, ‘“All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up: Theory, theorists, theorising”, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 340–53; Marysia Zalewski, ‘Where is woman in International Relations? “To return as a woman and be heard”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:4 (1998), pp. 847–67; Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism After Postmodernism: Theorising Through Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000); Marysia Zalewski, ‘“Women’s troubles” again in IR’, *International Studies Review*, 5:2 (2003), pp. 291–302; Marysia Zalewski, ‘Do we understand each other yet? Troubling feminist encounters with(in) International Relations’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9:2 (2007), pp. 302–12; Marysia Zalewski, ‘“I don’t even know what gender is”: A discussion of the connections between gender, gender mainstreaming and feminist theory’, *Review of International Studies*, 36:1 (2010), pp. 3–27; Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (London: Routledge, 2013).

the ways in which feminist scholarship is grounded in the interstice of theory/practice, and the crucial necessity of feminist approaches.

Feminist scholars have long been challenged by sympathetic and sceptical interlocuters to precisely outline the value of their contributions and the methods by which they proceed. Underlying these queries is the presumption that the answer must be parsimonious and singular, and that the explanations adhere to the conventions of the field. And, yet, such expectations are themselves contrary to the commitments of feminist scholars. Rather, as Marysia Zalewski deftly put it, feminist IR is a ‘wonderful evasive concoction’.² This description is delightfully accurate for it draws explicit attention to the constriction of the field of International Relations’ ‘criterion of measurement’.³ Feminist IR is difficult to wholly capture according to dominant terms of the field because its substance and approaches are often those which are precisely excluded by the ‘mainstream’ of IR.

Drawing from diverse traditions of feminist and critical political and social theory, feminist IR scholarship is produced in multiple forms, unified only in its attention to the operations of power, gender, and sexuality – albeit differently defined and documented. Indeed, the vibrancy of the field of feminist IR is in part produced in and through debates and disagreements over what such a label (feminist), and the study of such concepts (power/gender/sexuality) – which are themselves fundamentally intersectional with other axes of difference), conjure and entail. The denomination of *feminist* IR is not simply a modification of the field, a mere addition to a governing heuristic or simple expansion of the scope of concern, rather it signals the transformation of its constitutive concepts and importantly, as we outline here, its methodological approaches.

It is transformative of the field because, in part, feminism has never claimed to be purely objective. Rather, there is an explicit politics to feminist IR that is rooted in broader global cultural contests over what feminism is, who it is for, and how it shapes and informs the context and contours of daily life and scholarly practice. Feminist IR scholars insist that substance and study of IR – from subject to method – is not value neutral regardless of the putative claim and conventional demand. Instead, feminist scholars specifically acknowledged and investigated the centrality of power and position in the production of knowledge. Wrestling with how power animates knowledge, in turn, equally animates a re-examination of our political and ethical responsibilities as scholars – both in regard to the methods and subjects of research.⁴

As Laura has explained elsewhere, ‘feminists challenge, in our research practices, we disrupt, and we look opposite, beyond and sideways at the conventional sites of enquiry. We unsettle that which is frequently take for granted, including the very categories we use to think with, the identities we perform and those structures of comfortable, comforting, privilege and power we enjoy.’⁵ Consequently, feminist IR scholars not only actively contribute to the exploration of ‘world’ politics, but also explore the “‘worlds” of dissidence, stories of co-option, domestication and ghettoization’ all too frequently overlooked.⁶ To recognise and make visible that which has been otherwise ignored or obscured requires and, indeed, subsequently disorders not only the conventions of research but also its methods.⁷

²Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 57.

³Marysia Zalewski et al., ‘Celebrating twenty years of British gender and IR’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11:3 (2009), pp. 305–33 (p. 306).

⁴See also Meera Sabaratnam, ‘IR in dialogue ... but can we change the subjects? A typology of decolonising strategies for the study of world politics’, *Millennium*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 781–803.

⁵Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Research as gendered intervention: Feminist research ethics and the self in the research encounter’, *Crítica Contemporánea: Revista de Teoría Política*, 6 (2016), p. 7.

⁶Raluca Soreanu and David Hudson, ‘Feminist scholarship in International Relations and the politics of disciplinary emotion’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:1 (2008), pp. 123–51 (p. 124).

⁷See also Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2015).

Feminists ask ‘new’ questions that place women’s lives and those of ‘other’ marginalized groups at the center of social inquiry. Feminist research challenges conventional ways of knowing to create rich new meanings, a process that Trinh (1991) terms becoming ‘both/and’ – insider and outsider – taking on a multitude of different standpoints and negotiating these identities simultaneously.⁸

Fundamental to this potentially emancipatory imaginary, its possibility and practice, is the exacting critique of gender for which feminism is known. Gender is analysed not just a lived category of identity, although it is that, but also as hierarchical relations of power and of differences. This is different than the theorisation of gender as a dichotomous oppositional variable (still and often conceived of as binary and ‘loosely synonymous with “sex”: M/F).⁹ Two of the most powerful questions that Zalewski has posed, questions that have guided her own work and the work of countless others for two-and-a-half decades, are deceptively simple: “What work is gender doing?” and: “What about women?”¹⁰ Asking ‘what work’ gender is doing is to document gender as an ordering principle, a structural logic, and as an actant. Asking ‘what work’ gender is doing is to meticulously document and evaluate the operation of gendered power across a host of sites and texts of world politics. Feminist IR scholars also introduced ‘women’ as a politically salient category of analysis, first asking ‘where are the women?’¹³ and, after necessary and concerted critique of the presumptions of (whether it be of racial, sexual, gender, ability, or other axes) sameness of all women’s experiences, to then pose more nuanced and explicitly intersectional questions of which women are where, when, and why?¹¹

Notwithstanding those necessary contributions, feminist work in IR has been presumed, and is often made, marginal.¹² It continues to be deemed largely irrelevant or, if not that, in need of disciplining – in the sense of ordering – to make a ‘proper’ disciplinary contribution.¹³ This repeated demand to become ‘proper’, reflects the discomfiting effects of feminist IR, acknowledged by both its practitioners and its critics, but is identified as positive only by the former. There is no need to rehearse the reasons why and how this occurs, even while acknowledging the slow acceptance of feminist IR and its worth to the field writ large. What is important to recognise this repetition highlights a radical potential recognised by the continued pressure to conform.

Disruption and disorder are so often taken as purely negative – perhaps especially for a field whose origins lie in colonial administration wherein the quest for ‘proper’ order bears a particular

⁸Citing Trinh T. Minh-ha; Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ‘Feminist research: Exploring, interrogating, and transforming the interconnections of epistemology, methodology, and method’, in Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (London: SAGE, 2012), pp. 2–26 (p. 3); see also Sara de Jong, Rosalba Icaza, and Olivia U. Rutazibwa (eds), *Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning*, Teaching with Gender (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁹Terrell Carver, *Gender is not a Synonym for Women* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996), p. 18; Helen M. Kinsella, ‘For a careful reading: The conservatism of gender constructivism’, in Terrell Carver (ed.), ‘Forum on Gender and International Relations’, *International Studies Review*, 5:2 (2003), pp. 287–302 (pp. 294–7); see more recently, Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Beyond the erotics of Orientalism: Lawfare, torture and the racial-sexual grammars of legitimate suffering’, *Security Dialogue*, 45:1 (2014), pp. 43–62; Cynthia Weber ‘Why is there no Queer International Theory?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:1 (2014), pp. 27–51.

¹⁰For a classic articulation, see Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2nd edn, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

¹¹For a brief overview, see Helen M. Kinsella, ‘Feminism’, in John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019 [orig. pub. 2016]), pp. 189–203.

¹²For a classic articulation, see Jill Steans, ‘Engaging from the margins: Feminist encounters with the “mainstream” of International Relations’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5:3 (2003), pp. 428–54.

¹³See Cynthia Weber, ‘Good girls, little girls, and bad girls: Male paranoia in Robert Keohane’s critique of feminist International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23:3 (1994), pp. 337–49.

history.¹⁴ Yet, disruption also leads to emancipation, while disorder forces the questions of why *this* world order? Moreover, disruption as methodology is itself productive: '[r]ather than throw up one's hands at the disorder, feminists ... work with the controversies and debate our theorising elicits, embracing tensions and contradictions'.¹⁵ Importantly, disruption is not an end unto itself. Rather, as a method, it highlights the affective and institutional investments in certain forms of stability and coherency which, in turn, support hierarchies of value and of life – witness the rise of 'anti-gender ideologies' targeted specifically at the disruption of a white patriarchal cis order.

Significantly, as Zalewski reminds, feminists bear no privileged position and are 'never outside the scene of violence' that such identities and practices draw on and reproduce. As Anne Sisson Runyan writes in this forum, the violence of feminism, or 'feminist violence', is a provocative claim and concept, but is rooted in both the histories of feminism that have never been solely pacifistic or internally consensual and the urgent need to reconceptualise the use of violence and orders it allows. Thus, the move is a twofold. On the one hand, it remains that an analysis of gender identities is an imperative starting point in the study of political identities and practices.¹⁶ And, on the other, the work that gender does to organise how we think about and encounter the world is not only disruptive but also productive in multiple forms.

World politics is revealed, through this methodology of excavating gender, to be a complex, detailed, messy affair, more akin to a Jackson Pollack abstract than a *Superman* comic strip: 'the mixture of the unruliness of sense, combined with the conjoining of seemingly random unconnected things which become stories in their own right, is both disturbing and joyous ... nothing is foreclosed'.¹⁷ Picking up on this, Choi writes in her contribution that within the context of creating something anew, not knowing what feminism is, what gender is, what women are is not a detriment, but a moment of continual imagination – what Zalewski might call low theory. A guiding commitment in Zalewski's theoretical work is the prior question of what theory is, and who gets to theorise: 'International politics is *what we* make it to be, the contents of the "what" and the group that is the "we" are questions of vital theoretical and therefore political importance'.¹⁸

This attempt to make unfamiliar the 'what' and the 'we', and the insights such a move provides, is found in Zalewski's more recent work on theorising the sexualities of sexual violence, and, in this forum, in Anne Sisson Runyan's careful study of the US Women's March, and Shine Choi's analysis of images of the North Korean nuclear crisis. It is also made clear in Elisabeth Prügl's careful consideration of the stakes in negotiating feminist commitments in international forum and through specific political practices, stressing the importance of keeping these relationships mobile and inconclusive, as certainty works against the need for continual assessment of 'what should these relationships be?' Interestingly, Jane Parpart argues that is not just feminist questioning (of the 'what' and the 'we') that is significant, but also feminist silences. To read this forum is to listen to the silences, and to the voices, of feminist scholars within the discipline of International Relations, and to seek out more to hear.

Marysia Zalewski's scholarship informs these feminist commitments, while her own trajectory reflects the multifarious sources and contributions of feminist IR and its 'scavenger

¹⁴Isaac A. Kamola, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019)

¹⁵Christine Sylvester, 'The contributions of feminist theory to International Relations', in Smith, Booth, and Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, pp. 254–78.

¹⁶V. Spike Peterson, 'Political identities/nationalism as heterosexism', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1:1 (1999), pp. 34–65.

¹⁷This comparison belongs to Cynthia Enloe. See Cynthia Enloe, 'Margins, silences and bottom rungs: How to overcome the underestimation of power in the study of International Relations', in Smith, Booth, and Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, pp. 186–22; Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 127.

¹⁸Zalewski, 'All these theories', p. 352, emphasis in original.

methodologies' that seek to centre subjects, processes, and practices historically excluded, ignored, and minimised.¹⁹ The generative depth of her scholarship is evident in the uniqueness of each article in this collection, all of which distinctly document the uses to which Zalewski's writings can be productively put. Each of the articles performs a 'turning operation' of sorts on the elements of feminist IR (gender/women/power/difference) and brings further elaborations of masculinities, sexualities, silences as well as screams, that shift and change what is taken to be feminist research/method – at each point disordering our sensibilities and our assumptions as to what we do when we do feminist work.

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¹⁹J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 13.