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Reflections on the special section, “‘Well, what is the feminist perspective on international affairs?’”: theory/practice’

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* This article, which takes the form of a conversation between Cristina Masters and Marysia Zalewski, is part of a special section of the November 2019 issue of *International Affairs* on “‘Well, what is the feminist perspective on international affairs?’”: theory/practice’, guest-edited by Helen M. Kinsella and Laura J. Shepherd.

CM: In 1995 you published what is now an iconic feminist article, ‘Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?’,¹ the very instigation for the celebration and critical engagement with your work in this special section. Your opening line addresses your title and, in your words, the question feminists in International Relations ‘have been asked many times’. In the opening section, you also suggest that the reason for the frequency of this kind of question was likely to do with the ‘explosion’ of feminist research in the discipline. But the two words that really stand out for me in the title of the article are: ‘well’ and ‘the’. With the former, I have a sense that you were trying to convey that at the time of writing the article there was both a demand for, and an impatience with, feminist scholarship in the discipline. With the latter, it seems to me that you were already trying to alert the reader to the problem of addressing feminism in the singular and as a unified voice. Can you speak to what prompted the article and why you asked the question in the way you did?

MZ: I was in the middle of doing my PhD when I wrote this article, though there were no feminist scholars in the department including my supervisor. This was not uncommon at the time—‘Gender & IR’ as a topic had only just got off the ground in the early 1990s and so it was very early days for the field. And despite overt interest in feminist theory, perhaps especially given it was situated as part of the post-1989 ‘critical wave’,² there was also a *lot* of scepticism. I suppose also given my PhD was centrally about feminism (and not ‘IR’ as traditionally understood), I was getting a *lot* of questions on the lines of—but is this really IR? What real difference does feminism make? Isn’t feminism about a single issue (usually understood to be women)? How can a focus on women possibly help to theorize about the important issues of international politics? (Though my PhD was not about women.) So when this very journal [*International Affairs*] invited me to write an article, I guess I took up the opportunity to think through these vexing and difficult questions—and this is certainly how I felt about them at the time. And with hindsight, I think you are exactly right, Cristina, about the word ‘well’ (and each word of all writing is important)—there was an increasing sense of exasperation and irritation inflecting the questions. And of course the war in the former

¹ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?’, *International Affairs* 71: 2, 1995, pp. 319–56.

² Marysia Zalewski, ‘Feminist approaches to International Relations theory in the post-Cold War period’, in BBVA OpenMind, *The age of perplexity: rethinking the world we knew* (London: Random House, 2017), pp. 166–83.

Yugoslavia was in its violent throes at the time—and I suppose the ‘relevance’ of feminism (especially with its assumed attachment to feminized subjects) easily seemed very much in doubt. There was too easy a ‘falling back’ on to simplistic and un-theorized understandings of the work of feminist theory—inasmuch as I could ‘sense’ this at the time as I was largely self-taught, so it was very much an intellectual and personal struggle for me.

CM: In the conclusion to the article, you boldly state: ‘Scholars in International Relations are concerned to understand more about how the world works. As we approach the twenty-first century this will have to mean more than just “telling stories like we’ve told them before”; doing the latter merely recycles old answers.’ Added to this, you suggest two ways forward for telling stories differently. First, direct more attention to marginalized groups—women, for example. Second, move to what you call ‘intellectual eclecticism’. Rereading your article in 2019, I am very much struck by how it still resonates. Do you think ‘we’ are telling stories differently? Paying more attention to the margins? Policing intellectual borders less? Open to greater intellectual eclecticism? Would you be saying something quite different writing this article today?

MZ: Much depends on who the ‘we’ are (as always). But for our discussion in this special section, we are working with the study of global politics, particularly through the discipline of IR, as well as the varied policy-making sites that are positioned within the global political realm. Feminist scholarship has clearly proliferated since 1995; as one example—the ‘Feminist theory and gender section’ at the International Studies Association (ISA) convention is one of the largest sections and hosted some 40 panels at the 2019 annual convention in Toronto. Much work is published—feminist scholarship is indeed abundant in the discipline. And yet I’m not sure we have moved very far in ‘telling stories differently’. Here I’m referring more to methodological and epistemological commitments as opposed to empirical ones. I am personally and intellectually committed to the idea of the ‘otherness’ of feminist theory—or at least the potentialities of ‘otherness’. In the 1995 article perhaps the opening quote indicated this: ‘The essence of feminism is the radical reinterpretation of tradition.’ In a more recent article my articulation of this is: ‘Core to the critical work of

feminist theory is the disruption of conventional thinking patterns.’³ I’m not sure this disruption has transpired—at least in terms of IR as a discipline.

It is interesting that the geographic area I reflected on briefly in the 1995 article was ‘eastern Europe’. Interesting given the contemporary attacks on gender studies in various countries formerly part of eastern Europe, most notably in Hungary where Prime Minister Viktor Orban has banned the study of gender in the country’s universities, stating that ‘the Government’s standpoint is that people are born either male or female, and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially-constructed genders, rather than biological sexes’.¹ This part of the world is not alone, of course; think of Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro—described as the ‘Trump’ of Brazil, and an ultra-right conservative—who is vehemently opposed to people who fall outside a very strict and hegemonic gender and race norm. And of course the Trump administration itself pushing for a legal definition of gender as immutable and fixed at birth. And when I reread the 1995 article I noted that I had named a specific Polish politician, Januz Korwin-Mikke, quoting his especially sexist remarks. It is perhaps remarkable that the very same person (now an MEP) was very recently (in 2017) admonished for making absurdly sexist comments in the European Parliament.⁴ The investigation into his comments has recently been dropped. An idiosyncratic example possibly; yet one only has to reflect on Trump’s ‘grab them by the pussy’ comments to wonder about this, as well as to ponder very deeply on your question, Cristina, about whether ‘we’ are really telling stories any differently now. Or perhaps to ask how ‘difference’ can remain.

CM: I want to come back to the ‘the’ with regard to feminism and how this really trips up non-feminist IR scholars and policy-makers. Does it matter that feminism in the discipline is understood to be diverse and contested? And what would this mean in conversation with policy-makers and the politics of translating this into policy and practice?

MZ: Perhaps it doesn’t matter that feminism is diverse and contested. Or that feminism is always plural. Perhaps it matters more that feminism is never central in IR. I think it remains the case that feminism is positioned ultimately to be ‘about issues’, and as a ‘contribution’

³ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Forget(ting) feminism? Investigating relationality in International Relations’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, pub. online 12 July 2019, pp. 1–21.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVMr4MBMUOw>.

and not as a radically ‘other’ way of theorizing which might be engaged to radically alter the discipline. I know my presentation of feminism might seem idiosyncratic, or claim too much for feminism or even seem to hint as something too ‘pure or innocent’ about feminism. This is not my intention. It is clearly the case that some feminist theorizing has been found severely wanting in regard to race and being embedded in white privilege, as well as having too secure an attachment to gender as a binary (rather than keeping gender open as a question which is my preference). But to introduce a thought or question from literary theorizing—‘who controls “the plot”’? Those steering the plot invariably draw attention right back to themselves and very familiar agendas.

But the policy world is different from academia and indeed some of the more successful or noticed strands of feminist theorizing have had a significant impact on policy-making. The acceptance of the profound and differential impact of ‘learned gender’ and its varied hierarchies has opened up many spaces for policy-makers to push agendas not possible before. Though it is very difficult I think for the policy world to work effectively (or politically) with more nuanced and complicated ways of theorizing about gender. I think that academic (critical anyway) work and policy work are subject to different needs, roles and expectations. It’s a really hard ‘ask’ for policy-makers to *not* be ‘sure’ about gender—but for me, this tells us there is something wrong with what we think gender is, or rather what we have ‘made it to be’. But while policy-makers can’t afford to linger (too long) on that—it is our duty (even though I feel uncomfortable with this word) as critical feminist academics to do that lingering, though this does not need to imply more time, perhaps a luxury contemporarily, but rather different time, feminist time perhaps.

CM: The collection of articles in this special section suggests that your presentation of feminism is less idiosyncratic than you think! The ‘application’ (if you will) of your scholarship to help think through global finance, toxic masculinity and extremist violence, the Women Peace and Security agenda, and sexual violence in war, intimates that there is something expansive and enabling about your mode of radically ‘other’ feminist theorizing. Two things that all the articles linger on are the everyday and questioning ‘the unquestionable’ (Elizabeth Pearson), and these are, I would say, *signatures* of your research. Maria Stern, for instance, mentions how your thinking makes the concepts we use so comfortably—sexual violence, masculinity, gender—‘slip out of our grasp’, refusing ‘any demand for firmer ground’. She says: ‘By easing ourselves into her rhythm, we learn to pay

attention to both the possibility for, and the markings and violations of, borders as integral to any understanding of specific violences. She therefore pushes us towards the limits of violence as we think we already know it.’⁵ What strikes you about these articles? How are they pushing and reworking ‘the limits of violence’ and ‘what we think we already know’?

MZ: Picking up on the idea of ‘lingering’, one thing that all of the essays in this symposium clearly do is take the time to linger. To stop a while to see what thinking and theorizing paths they want to take. This is one way in which I see a strong relationship between my work and the work in the essays (and the authors’ wider *œuvre* of scholarship). ‘Lingering’ (theoretically, conceptually) is hard to do in both academic and policy worlds where there is increasing pressure to rush to ‘make’ knowledge, to ‘build’ theory, to secure resources and to get articles published. Difference of any sort doesn’t stand much of a chance in this hurricane of speed and oftentimes greed. Mainstream or safe theorizing and acting is much safer—there’s a mainstream ‘glamour to sameness’.⁶ But think of Maria standing in her pyjamas momentarily stilled by the hotel fire alarm waiting for instructions! Yet her choosing to linger in thought on this bizarre mundanity moves her to theorize freshly and innovatively about sexual violence. Or Elizabeth’s obdurate holding on to the ‘thinking from before’ to make sense of the seemingly very new, or rather the very present in so-called ‘toxic masculinities’ and the new right.⁷ Or Paula’s meticulous and undaunting taking on of some of the dominant and seductive contemporary work on sexual violence against men.⁸ Or Sam fearlessly taking up the baton of ‘failure’ to actively open up space for ‘knowledge claims in other forms’ in her work on UN Security Council policy-making.⁹ Or Penny’s unrelenting critique of global

⁵ Maria Stern, ‘Courageously critiquing sexual violence: responding to the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, p. 000.

⁶ Olivia Laing, *The lonely city: adventures in the art of being alone* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), p. 59.

⁷ Elizabeth Pearson, ‘Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question reposed’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 000–00.

⁸ Paula Drumond, ‘What about men? Towards a critical interrogation of sexual violence against men in global politics’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 000–00.

⁹ Sam Cook, ‘Marking failure, making space: feminist interventions in Security Council policy’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 000–00.

finance, persistently staying with the everyday right in the face of this mega-hegemon of global politics.¹⁰

They have all taken the feminist time to linger and find the spaces (that *are* there) that the conventional and mainstream so swiftly obscure in the panic to ‘know’ and to ‘produce’. All of this work helps us to better see and feel those limits of violence and power and to keep finding ways to push and keep pushing at them.

CM: I’m struck by how much you work with others to produce important interruptions and pauses in feminist and critical work in global politics. Most of us are lucky if we find one person we work and write closely with, yet you—as so richly detailed and evidenced in the articles celebrating your work—have co-travelled with Maria Stern, Paula Drumond, Penny Griffin, Anne Sisson Runyan, Cynthia Enloe, Jane Parpart, Elisabeth Prügl and many more. I see this as one of your important methodological contributions: producing and deconstructing knowledge (un/re/thinking what we too comfortably ‘know’), pushing boundaries and making uncomfortable (or invoking ‘provocations’, as Drumond refers to them) through dialogue and dialogically. I wonder what possibilities, criticalities, creativities are opened through this ‘co-travelling’ as method?

MZ: Your comments about collaboration are interesting. On Lisa Prügl’s ‘Feminist theory and gender studies’ section eminent scholar panel at the ISA annual convention in 2019, every one of us remarked on Lisa’s fantastic strengths in collaboration. Lisa commented that she hadn’t thought of herself as doing much collaboration—and I feel very much the same way. I have very been lucky finding such great people to work with, though this has mostly happened without a real initial plan. It’s usually been about nascent ideas—or more usually questions—and as I fumble around in my head with them, I guess I’ve felt that I can’t bring them to fruition or ‘real’ light/life on my own. So yes, co-travelling is very important as a method to produce feminist knowledge about IR, which actually is simply knowledge about international politics (not ‘just’ a ‘contribution’).

CM: Your engagement with feminism as something of a fraught intellectual project reminds me of Jack Halberstam’s reckoning with Gayatri Spivak’s challenge to western feminisms

¹⁰ Penny Griffin, ‘The everyday practices of global finance: gender and regulatory politics of “diversity”’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 000–00.

and feminists to ‘not disown another version of womanhood, femininity, and feminism’ because it might not fit neatly with one’s own version of a feminist project. Much like you, I think, he urges us to *inhabit* ‘a feminism that fails to save others or to replicate itself, a feminism that finds purpose in its own failures’.¹¹ This is a daunting and no doubt discomfiting feminism, but *how* you keep alive feminism as a source and site of ‘radical potential’ in your work; where feminism’s radical offering to the world lies in its failures rather than its successes, which says something about feminism’s ‘non-innocence’.¹² Clare Hemmings would say that feminism ‘is both caught and freeing’.¹³ I think your work captures this non-innocence but still leaves us with a sense of hope and hopefulness about future possibilities that often might get lost in appreciation of your feminist musings and interventions. Do you consider your work hopeful?

MZ: I want to say it is up to others to make that judgement, though I also want to simply say—yes! Yes—because I think keeping open thinking spaces, pushing them open—even if that sometimes feels uncomfortable or conflictual, this is always ‘hopeful’. And the collective of work that I see as ‘feminist International Relations’ (in all its varied permutations and disagreements) is unfailingly unwavering. The constant setbacks, the re-emergent violences around gender/sex, the outright misogynies currently globally visible—these are very hard to cope with, and very hard to keep re-theorizing. As you said earlier on in this conversation, Cristina, ‘rereading your article in 2019, I am very much struck by how much it still resonates’. I agree. But reading the excellent work in the articles here certainly offers me hope, and they represent just the tip of the feminist iceberg.

CM: Indeed they do, and hopefully will encourage those who might think less about gender, think less about feminism, to linger for some time on the articles in this special section and on feminist IR more broadly. As you remind us again and again in your eclectic mode: paying attention to feminist questions matters very much if we hope to adequately address the most pressing issues we face—the global killing of women, the ‘slow death’¹⁴ of racialized

¹¹ Jack Halberstam, *The queer art of failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 128.

¹² Clare Hemmings, *Why stories matter: the political grammar of feminist theory* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.

¹³ Hemmings, *Why stories matter*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 100.

communities around the globe, climate change, the rise of the right and fascism, and constantly recurring conflicts, to name but a few—and *all* of them propped up in some form by hetero racial capitalist patriarchy. Two decades on from ‘Well, what is . . .?’ it couldn’t be clearer that critical feminist scholarship on global politics remains necessary, and most definitely not an option.