

Embodied Subjectivities in International Relations

Written by Lauren Wilcox

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LAUREN WILCOX, AUG 5 2014

The body or, rather, the embodiment of the subject is often an 'absent presence' in International Relations (and in social and political theory, more generally). In my forthcoming book, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations*, I argue that theories of war and violence in IR depend on assumptions about the relationship between bodies, subjectivity, and violence that are often more implicit than explicit. There is no singular theoretical apparatus or philosophy for theorizing the subject as corporeal or embodied; contemporary social and political theorists as diverse as Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry, Franz Fanon, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, and Iris Marion Young have all dealt with this topic at length. However, as feminist scholars have been at the forefront of theorizing the subject and, in particular, the embodiment of the subject as a site of political struggle, this essay will focus on feminist theorization and particularly the work of Judith Butler.

In her highly influential "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals" (1987), Carol Cohn evocatively describes the disembodied ways in which nuclear strategists talked about the possibilities and outcomes of nuclear war. Cohn notes not only that bodily violence is invisible in discourses of nuclear war, but contemplation of such violence is necessarily impossible within the strategic discourse of the nuclear strategists. What's more, Cohn talks about her experience as a participant observer learning to think and speak like a defense intellectual: "The experience of mastering the words infuses your relation to the material. You can get so good at manipulating the words that it almost feels as though the whole thing is under control" (Cohn 1987, 704). Her critique of the disembodied nature of theory, her emphasis on her own experience as an embodied individual in this space, and the connection between disembodiment and control are three features that contribute to making Cohn's piece a classic in the field, but also speak to key themes of feminists in their insistence on taking seriously what it means to be a subject that is embodied.

Feminists have turned a critical eye toward discourses that purport to authoritatively describe bodies, especially women's bodies, and discourses dealing with sexual difference. Feminists such as Donna Haraway, for example, have stressed the embodiment of the subject such that pretenses to objectivity or a 'view from no-where' that is essentially disembodied is not only impossible, but an ideological tool of domination (1991). In short, feminists have not been content to allow the biological, medical, or psychiatric disciplines to provide a definitive account of 'the body', but have analyzed these disciplines as specific practices that have constituted bodies in particular ways. Rather, feminists have argued that 'the body' as we know it is an object that is the effect of practices of knowledge production. This is to say, there is no 'essential' or 'natural' body—the body does not constitute 'rump materialism' (cf. Wendt 1999, 130-2), that is, some kind of 'brute fact' that has an independent material existence outside of ideas or discourses. Judith Butler famously rejects the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory that upholds 'sex' as a natural body feature and 'gender' as a cultural layer upon this body. For Butler, there is no such thing as 'the natural,' 'the body,' or 'the material'; rather, *matter* is understood as "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity... we call matter" (1993, 9).

For Butler, 'becoming' a body does not mean that gender is imposed on subjects (as implied by the phrase 'culturally constructed'). Gender, as an aspect of our bodily reality, is not set—in fact, it requires constant work to be upheld—but neither is it something an existing agent can change. Rather, it is a core component of the subject itself—"there need not be a 'doer behind the deed'... the 'doer' is variously constituted in and through the deed" (Butler 1990, 142). Norms are internalized not by a preexisting subject encountering a norm and possibly

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internalizing it, but rather the subject *becomes* a subject through the internalization of norms. One becomes a subject through literally becoming *embodied*. Theorizing our bodies as socially constituted means that power does not just act on our bodies, but forms our bodies and subjectivities in ways that we are not fully aware of or can control.

Butler's critique of the naturalness of sex as an effect of discourse ties 'realness' and intelligibility as effects of norms. The normative body is an adult, but young, healthy, male, cis-gendered, and non-racially marked body. Bodies that do not conform to the normative standard, or which defy the model of the singular sovereign individual living in a singular body, bodies which are marked by excess, lack, or disfigurement, challenge and threaten the normative model of the body. This constitutes a form of violence, which Butler refers to as normative violence: the violence and erasure that attends to such bodies and lives that do not fit the standard model of embodied subjects.

Butler's concept of normative violence is valuable to IR theorists because it insists that norms are lived through the body. As such, her work does not address question of 'the body' as much as the nature of 'embodiment,' that is, what it means to live as an embodied subject. Being embodied entails being subject to norms that one did not necessarily choose, and living them through one's body; a body that can never quite live up to the normative standards of integrity, completeness, and appropriateness demanded of subjects in order that they 'count.' While some bodies 'embody' these norms more fully than others, none escape the contingency and unpredictability of bodily life.

While bodies are produced as certain kinds of bodies with certain capacities through the workings of various discursive normative regimes, embodied subjects, however, are not fully determined by the regimes that they are inscribed in. Elizabeth Grosz uses the Möbius strip as a metaphor or model for theorizing the relationship models of the psyche that produces the body from the 'inside out,' as well as how the body produces the psyche from the outside in (1994). This is meant to capture something of the dynamics of embodiment: while we can theorize the myriad ways in which bodies are produced, shaped, formed, molded, inscribed by social and political practices such as systems of knowledge and representation and disciplinary regimes, this view constrains bodies to passivity as objects to be manipulated by outside forces. From more of an 'inside out' perspective, feminists also focus on experience as an embodied form of knowledge that is an important epistemological element of feminist theories of International Relations. Christine Sylvester's recent work is emblematic of this approach in her instance that war is experienced through the body and that "experience is... the physical and emotional connections with war that people live – with their bodies and their minds and as social creatures in specific circumstances" (2013, 5, italics removed).

An example that I discuss in my forthcoming book is of airport security assemblage and the experiences of transgender people, particularly in relation to the various biometric practices that seek to define human bodies as information to be read for signs of truthfulness, and therefore safety, or anomalies that convey danger. Biometrics are rooted in a biopolitics of examining, diagnosing, and classifying individual bodies in order to maximize the health of the population, transforming bodies into objects to be measured, mapped, and manipulated. Airport security involves an assemblage of technologies and practices that produce bodies in specific ways. In particular, I argue that the body is digitized, encoded, and made into an image or representation of the body.

These technologies are not just about seeing further and more accurately into what the body conceals. These technologies are bound up in power relations that constitute the knowing subject who interprets the signs from the scanners and X-rays into a judgment about the riskiness of a particular, individualized body. The biometric discourse conceptualizes bodies as informational flows and patterns. In the scanners, bodies are not just signs to be read, but the bodies themselves are digital representations of bodies that are examined for signs of suspicious anomaly by authorized personnel or by a computer program. The ability for bodies to be transformed into information is, however, dependent upon a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agent pressing a pink or blue button, signifying whether the person about to be scanned is read by security personnel as a man or woman. [1] Security is a practice that enacts certain normative standards of gender in order for one to be 'read' correctly as a safe or a risky body.

At the same time, embodiment as the experience of living in a body, as opposed to the body as a sign of discourse, is still very relevant. The gap between the supposed "neutrality" of the body scanners and the experience of trans- and gender-nonconforming people illustrate this principle. A "misalignment" between gender presentation and sexed embodiment that may be revealed by a body scanner therefore represents a security threat to trans- individuals, as

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would a gender presentation that does not match the sex listed on a person's government ID. In the US, the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (NTAC) has reported that one in five transgender travelers have felt harassed by TSA agents, and has documented stories of transgender people who were detained for several hours because their bodies did not conform with the agents' expectations in either body scan images or pat-downs. Trans- people have been subject to detention, strip searches, humiliating questions, and reviewed by bomb squads because their bodies do not match the expectations of security personnel.

The experiences of trans- people in airport security assemblages (or of trans- people in general) illustrates that while there are powerful norms, practices, and discourses that produce bodies marked in certain ways (of which gender is one powerful practice), such norms are total or complete or, as Butler puts it, "bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is compelled" (Butler 1993, 2). Distinguishing between bodies and embodiment, N. Katherine Hayles reminds us,

Embodiment is akin to articulation in that it is inherently performative, subject to individual enactments, and therefore always to some extent improvisational. Whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person (1993, 156).

The bodies of trans- and gender-nonconforming people demonstrate this point aptly: *bodies* can be made into information, digitized and referenced by technological assemblages as safe or unsafe, but our lived embodiment is much more complex and exceeds the norms that constitute our bodies. Embodied subjectivity as a category is open to the ways in which people experience a "felt sense" of their bodies, desire, and sexual feeling in ways that do not necessarily correspond to sex, gender binaries, or heterosexual norms. Outside of feminist IR, the study of bodies and embodiment is relatively new in International Relations, and there is still much more work to be done to think about the ways in which being subjects come to be embodied in international relations.

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[1] For more about the politics of gender, trans- people, and airport security assemblages, see Sjoberg and Shepherd 2012, Beauchamp 2009.

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