

Review - The Politics of Exile

Written by Rhys Crilley

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RHYS CRILLEY, JUL 22 2014

The Politics of Exile
Elizabeth Dauphinée
London: Routledge 2013

The sky is overcast and there's a breeze blowing through the trees as I slowly read the last pages of Elizabeth Dauphinée's *The Politics of Exile*. Reaching the end I close the book and rest it on the grass beside me, simultaneously exhaling, lying back, and staring at the branches above me. The noise of a western city alive with mid-afternoon traffic surrounds me, and as I gaze up into the sky, the content of the book crashes around my head. I wonder where to begin with my review of a book that so candidly engages with war in Bosnia whilst simultaneously pointing a finger at the discipline of IR, bluntly stating "you're building your whole career on what I lost, and you never came to even ask me what it was like" (Dauphinée, 2013, p.167).

Written in a narrative form more akin to a novel than an IR monograph, *The Politics of Exile* plays with the boundaries of academic work. Dauphinée eschews the conventional ways of presenting research, and through storytelling she provides an insight into the Bosnian war, its aftermath and how we come to know of such things as scholars of IR. In doing so she forces the reader to think about the horrors of war and the futility of an objective, detached, and rational approach to International Relations.

The Politics of Exile centres around one researcher's encounter with a Bosnian Serb called Stojan Sokolović. Through an interweaving of the researchers narrative with those of a handful of individuals directly affected by the Bosnian conflict it illuminates several themes that are at the heart of IR. From war crimes, to ethics, through theory and method via identity politics, Dauphinée engages with these issues in a subtle yet thought provoking way. We begin in Canada, as a successful assistant professor of IR first meets a translator to check the Serbian in her forthcoming monologue. Soon we are thrust into the lives of a family in a Bosnia that is on the brink of war, and in less than 200 pages approximately 100,000 people have died and we have come face to face with a war criminal. As such, *The Politics of Exile* is a tumultuous journey through contemporary conflict, and it is one in which the tragedies, cruelties and absurdities of war are more vivid – more real – than any of the 'scientific', 'rigorous', or 'objective' tomes on war you'll find in university libraries.

More than just a book about war, *The Politics of Exile* is also a book that engages with the issue of what it means to research war. Throughout the book Dauphinée problematizes the ethics of research, the current state of academia, the relationship between researchers and the researched, and often we are presented with a scathing critique of contemporary IR. In just one page, the character of Stojan Sokolović serves to challenge and tear apart our beloved discipline through a dialogue with the protagonist. He states,

"Fuck your office... You're wasting your time, writing on Bosnia the way you do... What can you hope to know about Bosnia?... some things can't be made sense of, and trying to do it will only ruin your life... you can write about Bosnia or talk about Bosnia to students but what does this actually change? Everyone who died there will stay dead. And the truth in Bosnia is so covered in lies that you can almost never know if you'll ever know the truth" (Dauphinée, 2013, p.57)

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In presenting these challenges and critiques in such a way, we, as students and scholars of IR are confronted with some pretty difficult questions. What do we really do? Why do we do it? What, if anything, do we actually know?

Throughout *The Politics of Exile* I was constantly reminded of these questions and two related questions presented at the end of Stephen Chan's article *On the Pain of Susan Sontag*. He asks

"Who are we who write about the world in conflict? How dare we—a discipline reclining in front of screens and books and mirrors like an Odalisque painted by Ingres—the Sultan's luxuriant concubine, well-fed and watered, anxious to please, saying the right words from time to time, but not really getting in the way?" (Chan, 2010, p.379)

And it is these questions that haunt the protagonist throughout *The Politics of Exile*, and we are forced to think about how IR (and the social sciences more broadly) work, what they do, for whom, and for what purposes. Scholars working in the traditions of feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism and other critical approaches have raised these issues before, but there is something about the way these issues bleed out of Dauphinée's work that makes them all the more pressing, urgent and important. Ironically, the abstract issues of IR theory seem to take on a new worldly reality as those seemingly – but not certainly – fictional characters come alive on the pages, and we become wrought up in their experiences, emotions, struggles, lives, and tragedies.

Despite its strengths as a book about war and as an exploration of research, I found the largest asset of *The Politics of Exile* to be its inspirational quality that offers a glimmer of hope for a more exciting, interesting and innovative IR. It's a refreshing piece of work that shows that IR can be a creative, aesthetic political practice (Edkins, 2013) that disrupts and discomforts the conventional orthodoxy of supposedly objective social science where researchers are written out of research as if there exists some sort of Archimedean point upon which to observe and know the world. It's inspiring to see that IR can be done in a way that isn't just fit for the dusty shelves of ivory towers, it can be creative, innovative and actually interesting to read. Indeed, *The Politics of Exile* is probably the only IR book that I've ever truly been gripped by, reading it from cover to cover in a handful of sittings. It's also the only IR book I would happily recommend to any of my friends and family who don't 'do' IR. Perhaps the narrative form of *The Politics of Exile* may not be approved of by those still trapped in the world of King, Keohane and Verba, however I'd urge even the most ardent positivist to give it a chance as the prose is well written and the story enthralling.

To conclude, *The Politics of Exile* is an oxymoronic delight. It is a piece of research and a novel, an autoethnography and a work of fiction; it is of the discipline of IR yet it rejects IR and the associated disciplinary form and style. It is simultaneously thought provoking yet addictively readable, tragic and horrific yet thoroughly enjoyable. It is all of these things and well worth the attention of anyone interested in Bosnia, war, or the ethics and process of research in IR.

About the author:

Rhys Crilley is a Research Associate at the Open University, UK. He is currently working on an AHRC funded project 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"?'. His research explores social media, visual politics, and narratives in global politics. He tweets at @rhyscrilley.