

Spatialising The Political and “Nomadic Subjectivity”

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/27/spatialising-the-political-and-nomadic-subjectivity/>

UYGAR BASPEHLIVAN, JUL 27 2019

This essay will critically analyse Jenny Edkins' reading of the relationship between the political and the international in her "Politics, Subjectivity and Depoliticisation" (1999) and reveal the ways in which it disallows analytical space for marginal sites and subjects of political conflict. It will first go over Jenny Edkins' reading of the political/international divide and her interpretation of "political subjectivity". Then, it will designate her interpretation as exclusively "temporal" and "masculine". Instead, this essay will argue for a reconceptualization of the international/political relationship on a spatial dimension that opens up analytical space for marginalized and non-masculine subjectivities that exist within the liminal spaces of the international.

Jenny Edkins and the Political/International Divide

Jenny Edkins differentiates between "the political" and "the politics" as the broad and narrow sites of socio-political life. In Edkins' account, politics is the narrow site of routinised, technologized organization of society that is centred around the relations and networks within and between autonomous sovereign entities that consist of "elections, political parties, government, state apparatuses, diplomacy, wars, international treaties etc" (Edkins, 1999, p.2). This understanding of politics includes what the discipline of international relations consider as "the international". The core institutions of international relations, such as anarchy, sovereignty, balance of power and diplomacy are all situated within this routinised and technologized site of politics. The political, on the other hand, in Edkins' formulation, designates a moment of constitution that allows the re-structuring of the society where the symbolic orders and frames of reference of this routinised politics are decided. Therefore, the political is "the establishment of the very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as not politics" (Edkins, 1999, p.2). These are moments of radical and unfounded openness where a society can be structured from the ground up.

According to Edkins, "the political is a moment of subjectivity" (Edkins, 1999, p.7). In moments of the political where the symbolic, social and political foundation of a society is called into question, actions acquire a radical potential. Subjects do not only act within a narrow field of established politics but hold the potential to exercise creative agency. In these moments, acts are unfounded, taking place "without the authority of any existing political system or community" (Edkins, 1999, p.7). Subjects hold unprecedented accountability and responsibility in their actions. The future is open and can be shaped at will. Edkins uses Žižek's example of the October Revolution as an example of this political moment of subjectivity. "V.I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, the Mensheviks- demonstrate that for them, at least, the outcome was certainly not as obvious as it appears when later described as arising out of a wider historical process" (Edkins, 1999, p.8). The political agency these figures exercised in the moment of transition that was the October Revolution, therefore, disrupted the routine of politics and the international and configured radical and alternative means and symbols of politics.

When the moment of the political passes, the day-to-day site of routinised politics and the international returns. Subjectivity disappears and the moment and the violence of the political is concealed behind a social fantasy or "ideology". "At that moment, once the foundational myth of the new social or symbolic order is (re)instated, the subject as such disappears, and with it the "political"- to be replaced by "politics" (Edkins, 1999, p.8).

Thus, Edkins establishes a binary of the political and the international. This binary is situated within a temporal plane.

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Political is the absence of “the international” where its conditions are being decided. The constitution of the international occurs outside and before the international. I will call this the idea of the political as a moment. What kinds of political and historical erasure does this understanding produce? I will argue that this understanding of political as a moment has two significant weaknesses. First, I will call for a need to problematise the temporal reading of the political/international relationship and subsequently for a need to reinstate the relationship in a spatial dimension. Secondly, I will problematise the reading of the political subject as a “transcendent masculine subject” and rather will argue for the need to seek the political in the “immanent nomadic subjects” that exist in the margins of the international.

Spatialising the Political and “Nomadic Subjects”

Edkins’ reading of the political/international divide challenges the supposed ahistoricity of the international. She traces the foundational instances of the international and reveals the mechanisms through which the political is hidden. However, her analysis seems to presume the fixity of the international after its initial constitution. The claim that subjectivity disappears in the routinised site of the international implies that its conditions and frames of reference remain uncontested and fixed after the moment of the political. The idea of the open, unfixed moment of constitution reproduces a post-constitutional fixity of orders that wait to be disrupted in the next moment of the political. The history of the international proceeds in a linear fashion (fixed-unfixed-fixed).

This formulation, I argue elide the constant, everyday challenges to the international that occur at its spatial margins. Institutions of the international such as the state, sovereignty and, borders are not “decided” in a hyper-historical moment of openness, but rather are constantly and violently produced and reproduced in the margins of the world. As R.B.J. Walker contends, “states are constantly maintained, defended, attacked, reproduced, undermined, and relegitimised on a daily basis” (Walker, 1993, p.168). We ought to read the international/political binary, not as separate moments that exclude each other, but existing simultaneously in constant struggle with each other in the margins of the international; in contested border areas, in stateless peoples, in refugees etc.

In order to situate the international/political divide in the spatial, I will employ Homi Bhabha’s concept of liminality. Homi Bhabha refers to liminality as “a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change” (Chakraborty, 2017, p.146). Although Bhabha’s analysis primarily focuses on discursive practices, these liminal spaces can also be sought for in physical, marginal sites where power is not depoliticized, routinised but rather contested. “These include geographical borders, market places, ocean crossing, seashores, and various other kinds of thresholds” (Chakraborty, 2017, p.146). These liminal sites are where the seemingly fixed institutions of the international are contested, undecided and have to be fixed violently, almost in a day-to-day fashion.

We can reconceptualise the political/international relationship as a spatial relationship moving in a centrifugal fashion. The international exists in the core, in metropolises where high-level diplomats live and in the politics of international statesmen, diplomats, treaties and international organisations. In the core, sovereignty, state borders and the ontology of the state are relatively depoliticised and uncontested. The political, on the other hand, exists in the liminal periphery where disenfranchised and marginalized people repeatedly disrupt the routine of the international. Herein, we find a constant struggle of forces that aim to fix the international and those who seek to disrupt it. Violence is not in the past to be concealed by an ideology of the present. Violence is present in the periphery to be concealed by an ideology of the core.

In this regard, it is perhaps more accurate to formulate the seemingly fixed, depoliticised institutions of the international as not “constituted”, but “practiced” or “performed”. By performed, I mean; “reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler, 1993, p.2). This reiteration is not necessarily discursive, but can also be material. Theorising the practices of “mapping” and “bordering”, Claudia Aradau claims that: “mapping is felicitously performative” that includes “the arrangement of human bodies, border posts, infrastructures and other entities in line with the map” (Aradau, 2014, p.26). By the constant arrangement and rearrangement of bodies and materials, the border is made. Gatekeeping, therefore, emerges as indicative of how these institutions are not necessarily depoliticized after moments of constitution, but have to be materially and

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discursively stabilised in everyday practices. These stabilisations are not, however, routinised and depoliticized as claimed by Edkins. Rather, they are adaptive processes/practices that respond to forces that aim to disrupt the seeming fixity of things in innovative fashions. “The structure is neither fixed nor a given, rather it is constantly produced and reproduced and any reproduction is slightly different from a previous production” (Aradau, 2014, p.31). These practices often take the form of a struggle. If there were no contestation, there wouldn't be a need to repeatedly perform or practice these institutions. Struggle and contestation disallows the routinization of bordering and rather necessitates its continual exceptionalisation where the border is always a zone of conflict. This conflict is dialogical. It is a violent exchange between forces that unfix and forces that fix where new strategies of transgression and suppression are tested daily. These peripheral zones of everyday contestation where the international is unmade and remade are where we can locate the political.

Let's consider the example of the United States-Mexico Border. Each day, large crowds of migrants gather together to cross the border to enter the United States illegally. They invent innovative and disruptive ways to pass through the highly-militarised border and clash with the gatekeeping forces of the United States government (Nevins, 2002). At the border, what seems to be depoliticized and routinised in the core is contested, made unfixed. The sovereignty of the United States and the fixity of its borders to the South, that were supposedly fixed in the constitutional moment of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, are instead revealed to be unfixed and in need of constant protection. The United States border policy reflects an everyday need to “make the border” that unsettles the idea of the “moment of constitution”. As Ana Alonso reveals, against deterritorialising forces that unmake the border, “the state responds to by affirming sovereign power, developing techniques to recentralize authority and institutionalizing forms of reterritorialization” (Alonso, 2005, p.29) that include “technologies such as unmanned drones, underground sensors, infrared scopes, distributed computing and IDENT, an automated fingerprinting system and database” (Alonso, 2005, p.36). In this everyday struggle between deterritorializing and reterritorializing forces, we find a zone of conflict that is deeply political. As schoolchildren in the routinised, depoliticized and ideological site of the core are taught about an abstract and seemingly fixed border to the south of the United States, the children in the periphery violently transgress these abstract institutions, challenge their fixity and clash with bodies and materials that move and are moved to make the border.

In this spatial understanding of the political/international relationship, how can we understand subjectivity and how does it differ from Edkins' Zizekian reading? The temporal reading of the political as a moment assumes a subject that is capable of stepping outside of the deep entanglements of a certain frame of reference and exercise truly unfounded agency. This understanding of subjectivity, I argue, is a masculine reading of subjectivity that presumes a fixed, unitary subjectivity that can be wholly disentangled and disembodied from structures and frames of reference. Rosi Braidotti's schema of traditional sexual differences can provide a helpful distinction as it designates masculine subjectivity as traditionally understood as “capable of transcendence” and feminine subjectivity as “confined to immanence” (Braidotti, 1994, p.159). Reading “the political” as a moment of transcendent subjectivity where the subject is disentangled from “the international”, thus prioritizes a distinctly privileged entity that is not confined to multiple, interconnected and deeply naturalized sites such as “femininity or coloniality” but can wholly disentangle itself and truly act unfoundedly. It is, therefore, no surprise that the revolutionary subjectivities of the political designated by Zizek in his October Revolution are all white men. Whereas Lenin, for instance, was able to transcend capitalist relations in his moment of subjectivity and act unfoundedly, the October Revolution was still a site of highly patriarchal and racialised politics where women were still confined to immanence, incapable of transcending. I argue, thus, this idea of the “political moment” as an exceptional moment of subjectivity erases those non-masculine subjectivities that are confined to politics of the ground and that have to fight, struggle and aim for micro-changes without ever truly transcending.

Thus Braidotti contends; “I do not believe that changes and transformations, such as the new symbolic system of women, can be created by sheer volition. The way to transform reality is not by willful self-naming” (Braidotti, 1994, p.171). Against this presumption of transcendent masculine subjectivity, Braidotti proposes the nomadic subject as a feminine site of the political. This nomadic subject doesn't exist in a moment of total and absolute openness but rather is immanent in the simultaneous existence of and fluidity between openness and closeness as occurring in the immediate and everyday. “Nomadism is not fluidity without borders but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries. It is the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing” (Braidotti, 1994, p.36). This understanding of

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the subject allows us to locate political subjectivity not as momentarily outside, but always within and against, subjecting the international to constant vigilance and violence. The literal nomads of the US-Mexican border, for instance, in their racialised being and in their poverty, are never allowed transcendence nor depoliticization but rather have to always exist in-between. This in-betweenness in the margin necessitates constant transgression where the border has to be disrupted and unmade. This tension is where we can locate an alternative and peripheral political site where subjectivity is neither transcendent nor non-existent.

Conclusion

This essay argued that Jenny Edkins' conceptualization of the political/international relationship has two particular weaknesses that necessitate attention. Firstly, it problematized the temporal conceptualization of the political as a moment that occurs outside the routinised, fixed politics of the international. This understanding, it claimed, assumes a post-constitutional fixity of things where subjectivity disappears and institutions become deeply depoliticized. Instead, the essay argued that we should locate the international/political relationship not on a temporal plane, but rather on a spatial plane where the liminal sites of contestation such as border areas are zones of constant and everyday political conflict. The international is unmade and remade through everyday practices where bodies, materials and discourses are arranged and rearranged in response to the innovative ways in which marginal subjects transgress what ought to be fixed. Secondly, it contended that the reading of the political subject as a subject outside is a traditionally masculine reading that prioritizes those individuals that stand in the privileged position to transcend the international. Instead, the essay argued that we ought to locate the political in nomadic subjects that can neither transcend nor be depoliticized but have to exist, by the virtue of their marginal existence, in constant clash with forces that strive to fix and stabilize the international. Consideration of these liminal spaces and subjects should allow us to theorise the international/political divide in analytically more nuanced and diverse ways where the political sites and voices that are overlooked in Edkins' reading can be revealed.

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Date written: March 2019