

Acting Time; or, The Abolitionist and the Feminist

PAUL KIRBY

University of Sussex, UK

I

Twenty years ago, two feminist scholar-activists reflected on the gap between their radical analysis and the standard world-view of disciplinary International Relations:

Realists do not deny that women suffer in wartime and that they suffer in particular ways. Off the record (not in print, not at the podium) a realist may acknowledge the common use of rape as a weapon of war. But the realist will not go further. He or she will not accept that the construction and articulation of gender identity, or sexual identity or racial identity, might play an important part in the causation, enactment and continuation of war. (Zalewski and Enloe 1995, 295)

This was an apt diagnosis of theoretical myopia in the 1990s, and remains a powerful feminist complaint today: traditional security politics obscure gender violence. Moreover, the problem is not just the Realists within IR theory, but statesmen (still usually men) themselves. After all, they are – so we imagine – the applied Realists.

Yet today it is possible for a UK Foreign Secretary, and a Conservative one at that, to consider the prevention of sexual violence in conflict his legacy project – not just off the record, but in print and at the podium. William Hague, when he still held the office, was indeed dedicated and even offered an account of gender violence as an important part of war. No other foreign policy of his tenure bore his personal mark as strongly as the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI). To be sure, there were other priorities, and some commentators maintained that the PSVI and the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (ESVC) were distractions from issues including

Britain's strained relationship with the European Union, the rise of Islamic State, or the crisis in Ukraine.¹ Against the standard expectations of masculine national interest, it was a states-*man* who advanced the feminist line in public: wartime sexual violence *is* high politics, its occurrence is no inevitability and we have a duty to end it forever.

This reversal in feminist fortunes – from margin to center – was not as total as it first appears (see also Kirby 2015). From the very start of the PSVI in May 2012, NGOs had signaled their dissent with the fixation on the *wartime* character of rape. In many cases reiterating the importance of women's political participation and wider measures of equality, they sought to expand Hague's vision. Like Zalewski and Enloe before them, they wanted violence against women recognized as present in many everyday forms of international political life. The Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) network stressed "that *sexual violence is only one of many related forms of gender-based violence* in conflict situations and should not be addressed in isolation", and that "this violence is *linked to gender-based violence against women and girls in peace time* and is driven by the same underlying factors – namely women's unequal status in society" (GAPS UK 2013, 1, emphases in original). For ActionAid, the PSVI should have from the start been working on "reducing all forms of violence against women and girls in times of peace, as well as times of war, recognizing that these are intrinsically linked" (2013, 1). Testimony to a UK Parliamentary Committee emphasized the same themes: gender violence exists on a continuum, "peace" and "war" cannot be easily separated, and gender equality – and not the punishment of individual perpetrators – is the appropriate means of change (House of Commons International Development Committee 2013, 5). In the run-up to UN Security Council Resolution 2106 – tabled during the UK's chairmanship of the Security Council, and a key diplomatic strand of the PSVI – there was sufficient concern for fifty-eight civil society groups to write,

that women's right to full participation in all matters of peace and security is being overlooked and women are increasingly being seen and treated mostly as passive victims of violence and abuse ... focusing solely on sexual violence will deny due attention to other key issues such as violations of human rights; unequal distribution of income and resources; exploitation of natural resources; land rights, corruption and injustices – all of which are the root causes of conflict. (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders 2013)

The ESVC Summit was the scene for a similar study in contrast. Delegates arrived to a protest outside the venue shaming the UK government for its refugee and asylum policies, which perpetuate the mistreatment of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. The continuum between war zones and the everyday politics of rape was nevertheless lost on PSVI co-chair, Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees and film star Angelina Jolie Pitt, whose opening speech framed the difference starkly:

I have met survivors from Afghanistan to Somalia, and they are just like us. With one crucial difference: we live in safe countries, with doctors we can go to when we are hurt, police we can turn to when we're wronged, and institutions that protect us. They live in refugee camps, or bombed out streets, in areas where there is no law, no protection, and not even the hope of justice. (Jolie Pitt 2014)

Nothing could more clearly manifest the break from the continuum of violence thesis. Us and them. Peace and war. Civilization and barbarism. The remarks were all the more bitter given the funding crisis faced by domestic violence shelters in the UK, the recent scandal of the Sapphire Unit (a part of the Metropolitan police set up to deal specifically with rape crimes which had in fact been manipulating statistics) and recent estimates of some 97,000 victims of rape and serious sexual assault in the UK each year (Independent Police Complaints Commission 2013; Home Office, Ministry of Justice and Office for National Statistics 2013).

II

Given these tensions within the PSVI, and its relative neglect of non-wartime sexual violence, it is perhaps surprising that feminists were so well recognized by the British government in its wake. There were royal honors awarded to Jolie Pitt, now a Dame of the British Empire, and also to Madeleine Rees of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Brigid Inder of Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice and Ingrid Elliott, an international lawyer who took a central role in drafting the PSVI's *Protocol on Documentation and Investigation*. Despite feminist criticisms of the PSVI, feminist NGOs appear to have been won over to the Whitehall approach. This move may in turn revive talk of ethical foreign policy. Indeed, civil servants consider their engagement with civil society to be something of a model case.²

What, then, is the political significance of the PSVI? It may seem that there are two opposing views available: the critical, wherein the British state predictably failed to integrate the *substance* of feminist analysis into its activities, and the diplomatic, which holds that effective (or even *feminist*) foreign policy in fact required a simplification of analysis, the better to secure the attention of other states – a theory not of power, but of ignorance. Which is to say that sexual violence occurs not because of patriarchal structures or other social dynamics, but because there has not yet been enough moral education of statesmen – hence the ubiquity of that nebulous notion of “awareness raising.” Some of the Summit's greatest victories are said to have been won quietly, as Hannah Wright notes in this same forum: NGO staff and advocates gathered in corridors and hotel rooms, and government delegates were persuaded to meet behind the scenes with activists from their

own countries, rather than in grand public gestures. With that in mind, the Foreign Secretary and his team are better understood as chaperones and cajolers than as policy entrepreneurs, enabling new connections as well as setting a broad agenda to which future summits will be forced to return.

This is not to say that more assertive measures – chiefly, prosecution – have been ruled out, but those measures are largely earmarked for non-state, ostensibly irredeemable perpetrators of sexual violence: the rebel groups, insurgents and sexual terrorists of the Global South, rather than the militaries of sovereign states and allies, who are encouraged instead to reform institutions and mildly adjust spending priorities. Thus the Summit’s final summary explains that government delegates agreed on the need for accountability, responsibility and cooperation, while being rather vague on the mechanisms for preventing abuses by those very governments. Again, there is no great mystery to this tension. While critics may point to the emptiness of the Summit’s eventual language, they ignore that all diplomacy has this rhetorical form: it is as much public performance as policy.

The limits of the podium, and perchance of state power itself, thus become apparent. As Lene Hansen warned, sexual violence seen through a *national* security lens runs the risk of collapsing the continuum of violence into narratives of bad military actors and bad nation-states (2001, 62–65). That governments would tend toward such a reading of gender violence is to be expected. It is thus telling that perhaps the most specific commitment delivered during the Summit was the UK government’s promise of military support to Nigeria against Boko Haram. The connection of this aid to the plight of women and girls will sound the alarm in many a feminist security scholar’s ear.

A certain national triumphalism is also present, as the UK positions PSVI and the Summit within a long history of normative power, the rhetorical lynchpin of which is the abolition of slavery. The parallels were made repeatedly in Hague’s public appearances from the launch of the PSVI to the Summit itself (see, for example, Newman 2012; Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2014). On this account, it was the moral action of the abolitionist William Wilberforce and others – whom Hague calls “our forebears” – that ended the slave trade, an achievement to be emulated in the case of sexual violence (Hague 2013).³

Security is a performance as much as an action *out there*. The performances at the Summit, like all public politics, were acts. As acts, they seem compelling by their very existence. Witnessing them – being the audience for speech – is a form of involvement, of public declaration in turn. That rhetoric deserves its own recognition. As a kind of *politicizing*, with all of its restrictions and evasions, this display is not reducible to the question of what concrete institutional policies follow, but without those policies – the banal and granular specificity of which people will be paid to do what, and

where – the performance evaporates for those it is intended to save. The question is what kind of feminist politics remains.

Paul Kirby
Department of International Relations
School of Global Studies
University of Sussex
Falmer
Brighton, BN1 9SJ, UK
Email: p.c.kirby@sussex.ac.uk

Notes

- 1 As in John Humphrys' interview with Hague on the BBC *Today* programme, 16 June 2014.
- 2 This observation draws on a series of interviews carried out with civil servants and others close to the PSVI's work.
- 3 Since Hague is also a biographer of Wilberforce, it is little stretch to identify in the PSVI an attempted reenactment of his legacy.

Notes on contributor

Paul Kirby is Lecturer in International Security at the University of Sussex, UK. His current research focuses on the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative and its relationship to questions of gender equality, security and ethical foreign policy.

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