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Feminist Theory and the European Refugee Crisis

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Primarily due to the widespread unrest, chaos, and destabilization the Syrian Civil War causes, the international community currently serves as witness to hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life struggling to flee their native countries. These men, women, and children are in search of a more peaceful, stable, and fulfilling life abroad, particularly in various European countries. However, the reality of that journey is a treacherous, life-threatening trek that will, at best, result in a tumultuous arrival in a country ill-equipped to handle such a rapid influx of individuals. Are the refugees collectively making a poor decision to flee their homelands in search of a better life elsewhere? Or perhaps, could the system—or lack thereof—for assisting refugees in pursuit of safety be fundamentally flawed?

The dominant approach to handling the European refugee crisis is state-centric, meaning that the focus of discussions pertaining to the European refugee crisis centers on state policies and how those policies reflect the best interests of said state. However, by applying the ideals and main tenets of feminist theory in international relations, such as focusing on domestic policies and the experiences of the individual, the suffering of refugees fleeing war-torn regions such as Syria could be greatly diminished.

This essay will focus on the ways in which the traditional, realist approach to resolving the European refugee crisis has largely failed those affected most deeply by it. It will also balance that discussion with a consideration of how the application of some of the core values of feminist theory in international relations would bring a unique perspective to the situation, which could in turn serve as a framework for coping with the ever-growing and increasingly complex problem that is the European refugee crisis.

Because feminist theory operates in opposition to the notions commonly advanced by those who fall under the realist school of thought, it is essential to first generate a working

understanding of realism in international relations. One of the most prominent theorizers of realism, Hans Morganthau, contends that,

the security of the state is attained and preserved through the maximization of power, particularly military power. Elements of national power include secure geographical boundaries, large territorial size, the capacity for self-sufficiency in natural and industrial resource, and a strong technological base, all of which contribute to a strong military capability. (Steans 1998, 32).

Essentially, realism argues that states are the most important actors in the international system, are rational, and have the primary purpose of ensuring their own survival by whatever means necessary. The three main tenets of realism include: groupism, egoism, and power-centrism (Dunne 2008). Ultimately, realism traditionally asserts that the security of a state depends wholly on its military power and its ability to defend itself, especially during times of conflict (Steans 1998, 106).

However, realism portrays the international system in a limited scope because it is a worldview constructed primarily by men in positions of power. Feminist theorist J. Ann Tickner supports this notion in her assertion that,

masculinity and politics have a long and close association. Characteristics associated with 'manliness,' such as toughness, courage, power, independence, and even physical strength, have, throughout history, been those most valued in the conduct of politics, particularly international politics. Frequently, manliness has also been associated with violence and the use of force, a type of behavior that, when conducted in the international arena, has been valorized and applauded in the name of defending one's country. (Tickner 1992, 6)

In the so-called 'third debate,' post-modern thinkers, including feminists, are challenging ideas generally taken as conventional wisdom by proponents of realism. This school of thought and skepticism regarding traditionally held views about the construction of the world made its entrance to the world stage in the 1980s. Tickner asserts that,

all knowledge is partial and is a function of the knower's lived experience in the world. Since knowledge about the behavior of states in the international system

depends on assumptions that come out of men's experiences, it ignores a large body of human experiences that has the potential for increasing the range of options and opening up new ways of thinking about interstate practices. Theoretical perspectives that depend on a broader range of human experience are important for women and men alike, as we seek new ways of thinking about our contemporary dilemmas. (Tickner 1992, 17)

When it comes to a crisis as dire and complicated as the European refugee crisis, it is imperative that the international community is willing to consider innovative approaches for handling such a situation. This is a way in which feminist theory in international relations could be useful in formulating a unique and perhaps more helpful way in which to respond.

Other feminist scholars in the field of international relations also attest that the traditional conception of international relations puts forth a dichotomous and antagonistic worldview that pits actors against one another. In the words of Tickner,

distinctions between domestic and foreign, inside and outside, order and anarchy, and center and periphery have served as important assumptions in theory construction and as organizing principles for the way we view the world. Just as realists center their explanations on the hierarchical relations between states and Marxists on unequal class relations, feminists can bring to light gender hierarchies embedded in the theories and practices of world politics and allow us to see the extent to which all these systems of domination are interrelated. (Tickner 1992, 19)

Analyzing the construction of the world system as well as dominant perceptions of the world can challenge outdated and oppressive mentalities that harm the people currently in the greatest need of assistance worldwide.

This habit of establishing a dualistic perception of society discussed by Tickner does a great disservice to the so-called 'outsiders'. In a realist's perception of the world, what is unknown or foreign is most often perceived as a threat to the state. Because the realist's most important goal for a state is to ensure its survival, those seen as alien to the state – including

stateless refugees – will likely be responded to with violence. This would advance the issues at hand, rather than make productive progress on the matter.

One political scientist and author, David Campbell, writes that,

the legitimation of state power demands the construction of danger ‘outside’. The state requires this ‘discourse of danger’ to secure its identity and for the legitimation of state power. The consequence of this is that threats to security in realist and neo-realist thinking are all seen to be in the external realm and citizenship becomes synonymous with loyalty to the nation-state and the elimination of all that is foreign. (Steans 1998, 109).

Essentially, for the status quo to carry on, it is imperative to perpetuate this idea that outside actors threaten states, who must ramp up their military power to protect themselves. As evidenced by history and contemporary politics, this is not the most beneficial or amicable way to do business.

For example, some refugees claim that they witness acts of violence committed against those attempting to seek refuge within Turkey’s borders. Though the state claims to have an open door policy for refugees and currently is hosting 2.2 million Syrian refugees, the transfer of people into the country is not always a smooth transition. One individual who claims Turkish border guards beat them states,

one of the guards hit me on the back of my head and in my ribs with the butt of his rifle and I fell over and started to bleed. Then another guard kicked me in the head and broke my glasses. It hurt so much I vomited. I don't know why they attacked me. Maybe they thought I was a smuggler? (King 2015)

A researcher on the topic of refugees, Gerry Simpson, substantiated that statement by saying that, “Turkey's border closure is forcing pregnant women, children, the elderly, the sick and the injured to run the [gauntlet] of Turkish border officials to escape the horrors of Syria's war” (King 2015). Greeting already destitute individuals searching for peace and safety by

terrorizing them is only adding insult to injury, and in no way improves the situation for the refugees or enhances the security of the country that the border guards in question aim to protect.

The feminist approach to international relations contends that a worldview that utilizes force as a primary tool for maintaining order perpetuates the presence of sexism in the international system because it centers the ideals of masculinity— power, military might, etc. — over the priorities of all other involved groups. Feminist theory also provides a broader scope for understanding global problems because it focuses on the lived experiences of a wide range of individuals, not just those of the policy makers ranked at the top.

Another feminist thinker, Tricia Ruiz, contends,

in challenging the concepts of a state defending its national interests, feminists would ask: who is defining the national interests? If women were included in such discussions, would the national interest be interpreted differently, and if so, how? How would such an outlook change foreign policy? (Ruiz 2005)

These are questions are of paramount importance when considering how best to achieve the most agreeable conditions for all parties involved in the seemingly overwhelming European refugee crisis.

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), “the movement of children and families across the continent is largest since World War II” (Children on the move 2015). The incredibly large numbers of refugees seeking safety in Europe makes the task of relocating them safely all the more difficult. Unsurprisingly, in the European refugee crisis, problems arise even before refugees reach their destinations. A great number of the hopeful refugees and migrants seeking shelter and security abroad do not survive the journey because of the deplorable travelling conditions. Fresh in the minds of any socially conscious individual is the image of the body of a toddler washed ashore in Turkey after the boat carrying he and his family capsized, or the story of over 70 refugees found dead in the back of the truck that whose drivers intended to

carry them to safety in Austria. Sobering statistics tell us that, in “this year alone, 2,850 people have drowned in the Mediterranean” (Bajekal 2015). This is not just unfortunate— it is unacceptable.

However, rather than reflecting upon the multitude of deadly occurrences borne out of the chaotic and dangerous European refugee crisis for what they are – personal tragedies – the dominant perspective is that the majority of refugees in Europe are there as the result of illegal trafficking. In the traditional conception of world political affairs, illicit activity involving a country’s border poses a threat to the national security of the country in question. One scholar on the subject, Reinhard Lohrmann argues that, “by accelerating and amplifying the phenomenon of irregular migration, traffickers of migrants undermine governmental rules of entry as well as asylum and immigration procedures” (Lohrmann 2003). This perspective both evolves from and reinforces the notion of dualism in international relations, as previously discussed.

Most refugees know this story all too well. As recently as November of 2015, there were upwards of 1,300 refugees stranded on the border of Greece and Macedonia, as the countries did not allow them passage into their lands. Unfortunately for people such as these, Balkan countries such as Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia are limiting the number of refugees they will accommodate. These countries are accepting Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees, but turning away individuals seeking refuge from countries such as Pakistan, Morocco, and Liberia on the grounds that they are ‘economic migrants’. One United Nations spokesperson brought additional depth to understanding the true desperation of this situation by explaining,

these are very tired people, they have had long journeys, they are in very harsh conditions, [They are] frustrated—they cannot understand how it is possible that a week ago other people from the same country could cross and now they cannot. (King 2015)

Stranded individuals expressed their outrage and frustration in various ways. From a group of ten men sewing their mouths shut to partake in a symbolic hunger strike to masses of migrants attempting to tear down a barbed wire fence preventing them from crossing a border, to migrants throwing rocks at riot police, it is no secret that the situation of refugees is growing bleaker and more agonizing by the day (King 2015). Leaving people to wait in exile is to remain stagnant, as suffering lingers and violence perpetuates itself.

To give a contrary response to the question of how to prevent a proliferation of tragedies such as these, one feminist thinker, Doreen Marie Indra, suggests that, “there is of course no unitary feminist view on anything save for a deeply felt commitment to understand the living experiences of people” (Indra 1993). This is an approach that is vital to our understanding of the plight of refugees, which will therefore lend insight on how to best engage in discussion on this extremely complex subject. In fact, according to Tickner, “when we consider security from the perspective of the individual, we find that new thinking is beginning to provide us with definitions of security that are less state-centric and militaristic” (Tickner 1992, 53).

One group in Slovenia is doing just that. Volunteers from across the world have gathered to lend aid to the refugees in need. They have set up tents and cook up to 1,200 meals a day for the hungry to supplement what the Slovenian government is able to provide. One volunteer tells a reporter, “we don’t have uniforms. We don’t have big shiny Red Cross suits and we all look like we’ve slept an hour” (Frayer 2015). This rag-tag team of volunteers run their operation solely on donations they receive. Their operation is evidence that when people work together to help their fellow citizens of the world, remarkable, life-sustaining work can be accomplished.

In many ways, the rise of social media is lending insight and depth to some of the overwhelming statistics thrown around in news coverage of the European refugee crisis. One of

the most notable social media outlets utilized to shed light on the individuals most greatly impacted by this crisis is a Facebook page titled “Humans of New York” that boasts 15, 758, 681 followers (Stanton 2015). A photographer, Brandon Stanton, chronicled the journeys of various refugees in their attempt to reach Europe by snapping photographs of them and including a brief vignette describing their experience. In this way, over 15 million people worldwide had a connection to the human story of this enduring crisis – not just the political, military, or economic struggles so frequently discussed as a result of it. Something as seemingly simple as a post on Facebook educated millions of people about the realities of the situation refugees are currently facing as they flee to Europe. It also likely convinced scores of individuals who would otherwise not think twice about this deeply troubling situation to donate their time, money, and energy to a charity or organization – such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, publicized through the Humans of New York page – working to assist refugees at the grassroots level.

This discussion of the rise of social media and its influence on humanitarian crises, such as the European refugee crisis, is of growing relevance as social media becomes a tool for globalization and connecting individuals across the world to their human story. However, this discussion about Humans of New York is also incredibly relevant to the consideration of the implementation of some of the main ideals from the feminist theory of international relations. Feminist theorists contend that personal stories can be the most captivating call to action, and that is just what Stanton accomplished through these vignettes. One article on the topic says, “we keep hearing about refugee crises, but Stanton shows us the people behind the statistics by relaying their heartbreaking stories” (Cutler 2015). As one feminist scholar, Jill Steans writes, “feminist discourse has also emphasized human connectedness, dialogue and cooperation over

dominance and violent confrontation” (Steans 1998, 120). More than the bombarding of overwhelming and hard-to-conceptualize statistics, the sharing of these stories of personal tragedy and triumph inspire understanding and action.

The refugees that manage to survive the life threatening pilgrimage to Europe will likely find themselves in less-than-ideal situations ranging from sleeping on the streets, getting herded like cattle, sprayed with tear gas when attempting to cross borders, or perhaps ending up in a refugee camp. In fact, in August of 2015, hostility and brutality received refugees who were courageous enough to reach the border of Greece and Macedonia. Over the course of the summer, an estimated 44,000 refugees entered Macedonia. In August of 2015, the rapid arrival of refugees culminated in a chaotic and desperate situation for the asylum seekers. Not only were they hungry, exhausted from weeks of travelling, and without a place to stay, but Macedonia and Greece treated them as though they were criminals or prisoners. To manage the large crowds, the Macedonian military fired two stun grenades, and the Macedonian police sprayed the crowds with tear gas. In the words of Ivo Kotevski, a spokesman for Macedonia's Interior Ministry and the Macedonian police, “since Macedonia is not part of the European Union it does not have access to additional assistance, and simply cannot accommodate large numbers of migrants in a humane way” (Damon 2015).

That is a pitiful and shameful mentality to have when the future of so many people hangs in the balance. Steans, writes that, “resources devoted to arms expenditure could be spent on health, education, development, and in this way the most vulnerable people would derive immediate benefits” (Steans 1998, 111). If governments put greater emphasis on providing basic necessities to innocent people seeking safety, rather than greeting them with violence, the issues at hand can be dealt with in a more constructive and pragmatic way.

A way in which the needs of refugees could be better-met while producing sustainable, positive effects is to have education and mental services readily available to refugee children. This will in turn reestablish a sense of normalcy and security among the displaced populations. Feminist theorizers would agree that providing for the basic needs of individuals, rather than focusing solely on the security of a state's borders, is pressing. Steans asserts, "when security is viewed outside of the nation-state context and in terms of the multiple insecurities that people face, the argument that what is really needed is a global perspective on security becomes persuasive" (Steans 1998, 127).

Although it is imperative that countries meet the basic nourishment and security standards for refugees so that they may survive the enduring crisis, it is just as, if not more, important that they have the opportunity to be educated, so that they can be catalysts in discontinuing the cycle of violence and conflict that persists in the Middle East. Remarkably, "it is estimated that around 43 million children out of school in the world are in countries affected by conflict and crisis" (Cassidy 2007). It would be a grave mistake to overlook this crucial fact that will have far – reaching and long – lasting effects if there is no action to remedy the situation. To put it in perspective, according to The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "190,000 children applied for political asylum in Europe in the first nine months of this year, twice as many as last year" (Murdock 2015). The future of the world truly is at stake here and how the international community reacts to this situations matters deeply. UNICEF asserts that, "unaccompanied adolescent boys are among children most at risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and trafficking" (Children on the Move 2015). To prevent children, and especially young men, from experiencing coercion into violent and destructive activities, we must invest in their futures to promote a more stable, peaceful, and positive future for us all.

Because schooling is not typically an important service to provide during an emergency situation, there is not tremendous support, financial or otherwise, to ensure its provision.

However, two scholars on the issue of education during crisis, Jackie Kirk and Elizabeth Cassity argue,

education – and schooling in particular – can provide physical protection, but also provide cognitive protection in terms of life – saving information and messages conveyed. Furthermore, education can provide children and youth with important psychological supports by reestablishing routines, a sense of normalcy, and hope for the future, as well as through positive interaction with peers, with trusting adults and opportunities for expression and exploration of feelings, ideas, hopes, and concerns. (Cassity 2007)

Ensuring that the youth deeply affected by crises such as the European refugee crisis have access to education will have long-lasting positive effects. Not only will it occupy them in the short term and help them cope with the tumultuous circumstances they find themselves in, but it will be incredibly beneficial as they reach adulthood and become job seekers. Rather than turning toward violence as a lifestyle, they will have the opportunity to enter the workforce educated and skilled.

One group is investing in the futures of refugees by providing job opportunities for a small group of them at the Magdas Hotel in Vienna. The hotel, owned by a Catholic charity called Caritas, just recently opened. Of the 31 people employed at The Magdas Hotel, 20 are refugees from a variety of countries such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria, which creates an interesting mix of individuals who work closely together to run the hotel. The general manager of the Magdas Hotel admits that they are not in business with the intention of making much money, but rather, "we are looking at how we can train the people who work here better all the time", even providing them with German and English language classes

(Kakissis 2015). Not only does having a job benefit refugees financially, but working alongside such an eclectic group of people breeds tolerance and understanding – the antithesis of bigotry.

Another incredibly important way to promote a more secure future for refugees is to make mental health services more widely available. Because the large majority of refugees experience incredible tragedy and traumas, it is important to focus on their mental, psychological, and emotional health. A staggering number of refugees have likely faced the loss of their loved ones and homes, as well as a life filled with the fear of violence. On top of that, they must live in sub-standard conditions in an unfamiliar place, where violence too often greets them, rather than with basic necessities, much less mental health practitioners. However, the

World Health Organization

estimates that after an acute onset major emergency on average about 1 in 6 people (10–15%) will suffer a mild to moderate mental disorder. In addition, about 1 in 30 people (3–4%) will have a mental disorder that is so severe that it undermines their ability to function and survive in a chaotic emergency environment. (Hanna 2015)

To assist health departments in this seemingly overwhelming endeavor, the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal has established recommended steps for ministries of health care to take, including

embed mental health and psychosocial support in national health and emergency preparedness plans; (2) put in place national guidelines, standards and supporting tools for the provision of mental health and psychosocial support during emergencies; (3) strengthen the capacity of health professionals to identify and manage priority mental disorders during emergencies; and (4) utilize opportunities generated by the emergency response to contribute to development of sustainable mental health-care services” (Hanna 2015).

By providing mental health care to individuals, they will be better-equipped to cope with the chaotic, violent, and overwhelming situations that face them daily as they struggle to seek refuge.

Essentially, while states may continue to close their doors to refugees or greet them with violence at their borders, feminist theorists would contend that there is a better way to approach the European refugee crisis than the traditional methods carried out in the past. From a moral and ethical standpoint, governments must create a better way to handle crises such as the European refugee crisis; perhaps taking some key elements from feminist theory in international relations would assist in the pursuit of formulating a better approach to these crises. To be more specific, what would benefit refugees most would be to have their most basic human needs met, as well as making their mental and emotional well-being a priority, rather than having states' decision makers immediately relegate refugees to the status of 'threat' and deny them these fundamental necessities. Our response to the European refugee crisis will have a paramount impact on the future of the refugees and of the world as a whole. In the words of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' High Commissioner, Antonio Guterres,

we have only a narrow opportunity to intervene now as this potentially lost generation confronts its future...Abandoning refugees to hopelessness only exposes them to even greater suffering, exploitation and dangerous abuse. (Syria Emergency 2015)

At the end of the day, what serves as the most jarring call to action is the reminder that humans share many commonalities and therefore must work together collectively to create a more hopeful, positive, and peaceful future. Feminist theory in international relations can serve as a vantage point for the world that reminds humans of their own humanity, and urges the actors on the world stage to approach crises from that perspective. By focusing on the individual experiences and needs of a vast array of individuals, the suffering and violence in the world can be lessened, which will allow humans to advance into the future with more tolerance, kindness, and understanding, rather than with continued violence and ongoing suffering.

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