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REFLEXIVITY IN THE STUDY OF WARFARE: IS THERE ADDED VALUE FOR THE DISCIPLINE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS?***

Abstract

The article examines whether reflectivist approach to epistemology in the study of warfare can amend some weaknesses of the rationalist/positivist canon of mainstream International Relations (IR) theories. The author argues for the existence of a new epistemic situation for the IR researcher: an ontological transformation of the military profession in post-industrial societies that has created a sacralised civic duty to fight in war. The research of warfare is becoming more focused on the individual – who is either a reluctant combatant or a civilian victimised by military operations, but protected by international norms. The author hypothesises that the advantages of reflectivist epistemological viewpoint – embracing standpoint epistemology, situated knowledge, the concept of embodiment, Cynthia Enloe’s claim that “the international is the personal” – may provide a plausible alternative path in the quest for an answer to the question of how we learn about warfare as the central problem of international relations. The analysis shows how reflectivism encourages researchers to identify new, previously

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“hidden” or marginalised questions and thus expand the scope of inquiry of mainstream IR. The author concludes that, when it comes to the study of warfare in the early twenty-first century, the largest contribution of reflectivist approach to epistemology of IR is in overcoming the shortcomings of the traditionally rigid mainstream epistemological framework of the discipline, providing the grounds for future counter-hegemonic actions.

Keywords: reflectivism, reflexivity, epistemology, standpoint epistemology, situated knowledge, war, warfare, international relations, victimisation, embodiment.

THE PHENOMENON OF WARFARE AND THE POSITIVIST CANON OF THE IR MAINSTREAM

Systematic intellectual efforts to understand the nature of the ancient warfare can be traced back to at least the fifth century BCE, first appearing in ancient Chinese military thought. For political and pragmatic reasons, this tradition sought to provide general principles and rules for the optimal use of armed forces (Van Creveld 2000, 20–36). Centuries of philosophical debates and scientific interest for war and military organisation as a foundational social institution evolved in tandem with the advance of social sciences as modern scientific disciplines. As is usual in the case of studying a multi-layered and ever-present social phenomena, scientific debates over time crystallised around different, even opposing views of certain structural characteristics of war, such as causes and specific elements that differentiate it from other forms of violence. Nevertheless, there seems to be consensus that the ontology of warfare can be subsumed under the question: who is conducting the war? Numerous anthropological findings see war as a planned and organised armed conflict of political units, that is, as a social relation at whose core are political collectives which decide to impose their will by force on other, similar collectives (Otterbein 1985, 3; cf. Otterbein 2009). For the purposes of this text, we will adopt the view by James Dodd, a phenomenologist of violence who problematises war as organised violence, that measures the ability of one sovereign political entity to reconstitute

relations with other sovereign collectives under more favourable conditions for its interests (2009, 135–137).

The scientific description and explanation of the phenomenon of war – being one of the basic forms of relations among states and a means of achieving foreign policy objectives – has been a pillar of the IR disciplinary mainstream for the last century or so. IR disciplinary mainstream sees sovereign states as the leading, if not the only actors relevant for analysis of the reality of international relations (see Aron 2017; Waltz 2001; Waltz 1979). War is therefore considered a social phenomenon that can be properly understood and scientifically explained on the level of system/structure. This is the epistemological cornerstone in the analysis by the Realist school of IR, drawing on the positivist paradigm that social phenomena and processes can be explained by use of the same methods as those used for natural world, and that facts can be clearly differentiated from values (Neufeld 1995, 32–38; Spegele 1996, 22–50; Elman 2007, 11–20; Lišanin 2017).

According to this rationalist position, states act as rational actors endowed with instrumental reason in a given (and unchangeable) environment (Smith 1996, 21–23). In studying war, (neo)realists start with the assumption about the unchangeable, anarchic nature of the “primordial state” of international relations. They give ontological primacy to so-called high-level politics over the actions of commoners. Given that the primary task of the state is the preservation and improvement of national interests, war is a permissible and desirable foreign policy tool, which means that the decisions regarding war is exclusively a matter of sovereign power. Still, as it draws only on observation, strict empiricism reveals only a narrow segment of reality, since certain causes of social phenomena and process are not discoverable by mere observation. Even if taken as a valid source of knowledge, observation is not “uncluttered” by interference from previous theoretical and conceptual choices made in designing particular research. Concepts are impossible to abstract from the process of description of what has been seen or experienced, as they provide the scientific terminology to describe the object of study. Being the result of previous rational scientific procedure, they cannot be reduced to mere empirical observation.

“FIXING” THE POSITIVIST CANON: REFLEXIVITY

The post-positivist epistemological turn – with reflexivity as its metatheoretical “axis” – has emerged as an attempt to remove the methodological weaknesses from the mainstream IR theory. These methodological weaknesses are the result of explaining the behaviour of states with tools adopted from the natural sciences and economics – causality, hypothesis-testing through models and verifiability of research results through multiple repetition (see Neufeld 1993). The main objection from the reflectivist theorists of IR concerns the ease of political misuse of positivist “seriousness” of the realist epistemological position that stems from its unambiguously immense social influence and a seductive note attributed to its universality and timelessness (Booth 2007, 32–34).

The discipline of epistemology examines ways of knowing the world around us, that is, attempts to answer the question of how we establish the truth of what we consider knowledge, the grounds on which we claim we know “something”, as well as what distinguishes “true” knowledge from mere belief or guessing. Therefore, it is not surprising that the discipline of IR has evolved in the midst of internal tensions between advocates of positivism and post-positivist (reflectivist/critical) approach to epistemology, specifically over what research questions can be considered legitimate part of the discipline or whether the standards of this legitimacy are absolute or relative (Ferguson 2015, 3–12; Kovačević 2017, 198–202).

The struggle for credibility of each epistemological approach can hardly be reduced to dull intellectual arguing by “autistic” scholars in an academic setting. Steve Smith (1996, 13) reminds researchers that once IR theories become accepted in political debates as common sense – even despite their highly formal language – they are a powerful factor in formulating policy agenda in world politics, because the theories distinguish questions which can be spoken about reasonably from those which cannot. Thus, according to Smith, determining the area in which sound judgments on political matters can be made is actually an act of great political potential and power, and can consequently impact the quality of life for millions across the globe. Theorising about world events is at once an intellectual endeavour and political reality; the epistemo-

logical approach offers not only the way we know something, but how it could be rendered (in)visible to the researcher's eye (Chen & Cho 2016, 245). Therefore, the choice of epistemological perspective on a research problem selected from the reality of international relations becomes essential for foreign policy practice – potentially predetermining the possibilities of action, and has global emancipatory and ethical implications.

Realist IR theories accept the changes in state behaviour in the world arena, but are less interested in them than in the changes occurring within states, such as novel understandings of collective identity or interpreting the content of national interest (see Wendt 1999). For reflectivist epistemologists, the production of knowledge is always socially and historically mediated. For instance, Robert Cox (1981) maintains that the producers of knowledge are always inextricable from their context, identity and interests at play, making it impossible to have a researcher neutral towards her subject of study. For this reason, reflectivist theorists of IR choose a position of critical distance. The idea of achieving a certain degree of critical distance is mitigated by the position that distance from the context researched or observed, that is, an emotional distance required from researchers and subjects of the research, is only possible to a relative degree, and is never absolute (Damasio 2006, 237–238). Positivism excludes emotions from the research procedure, as they allegedly subvert the accuracy of empirical data; on the other hand, in so doing, it loses sight that equally to reason, emotions have a substantive function in the lives of people.

A more comprehensive answer about theorising international relations follows the original meaning of the Ancient Greek *theoria*, an activity of concentrated observation permeated with participation in what is being observed. War is not merely an abstract, elitist and bureaucratic tool of foreign policy conceived in “corridors of power”, but an ancient social practice shaped by the interaction of people organised into political communities. Since knowledge is also a matter of socially-determined cognitive paradigms, a reflectivist worldview struggles to acquire scientific authority as intellectual grounds for desired social change (Neufeld 1993, 68–69). Analysis focused only on official documents and activities of the state and its representatives is simply insufficient for a scientific

explanation of war as an essential pattern of the state behaviour in international relations. The reflectivist epistemological approach seeks also to study how the participants of an activity, looking to overcome the simplified view of soldiers as cogs in the state's war machine, are initiated always anew by nationalist passion and fear of the enemy (Waltz 2001, 179). As people act according to goals set by personal/group interests, that is, according to the meanings these goals have for them, so the scientific explanation of war should consider the person-centred epistemological approach of individuals caught in the maelstrom of social interaction that war creates. IR research does include a degree of individual analysis, but most often as psychological profiles, ideological beliefs, the role of political or military leaders and other high-ranked state and military officials in decision making process.

Marginalising or completely excluding commoners as participants or victims of armed conflict from research can hardly be expected to arrive at comprehensive description, not to mention deeper layers of scientific explanation of warfare. It is not only a matter of disciplinary weaknesses of a “rump” paradigm of war as a political and social phenomenon, but also about the indirect but long-term consequences of the social implications of such representation. A negative idea of human nature, as aggressive and bellicose, seeking domination and hierarchy, is not only one of the grounding premises of the realist view of world politics, but has become “common sense” in political practice and public opinion. Such views are easily exploited for purposes of creating an atmosphere of conflict among countries, which can only be resolved through military operations, making them seem inevitable and worthwhile regardless of cost or human suffering – i.e. breakout of war is “normal” because it is the natural state (Crawford 2011, 171–172).

For the reflectivist epistemological perspective, such oversimplified understanding of human nature rooted in biological determinism is wrong and dangerous, in particular because it is mined by political elites as a kind of pseudoscientific basis for delivering political positions that stoke mistrust and fear of the Other. The reflectivist approach seeks to deconstruct unresolved tensions in the study of the reality of international relations – in

particular those affected by the dialectical relation between the production of knowledge and social context – and examine weaknesses while looking for alternatives (Hamati-Ataya 2018, 17). In that context, the label of reflexivity also includes and emphasises theoretical insight into the researcher and their social positionality, as well as the resulting consequences to the social order – so-called situated knowledge (Jackson 2011, 199–200). To that end, according to Hamati-Ataya (2018, 28–29), reflexivity as a practice of position-taking is built into the very epistemological order of the IR discipline; while the absence of position-taking undermines our reflexive awareness and corrodes the demystifying role of social sciences.

HOW REFLECTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT MAY COMPLETE SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE OF WARFARE

Patterns of violent behaviour are imperceptibly woven into social practice and transmitted across generations through socialisation. The embeddedness of violence in collective memory, which we partially use in learning and acting in the world, is to an extent the result of internalisation of ideals of a political community interspersed in narratives of supremacy of noble ideals over the horror of experienced, direct combat. Still, as is common with ideals, the brutality of war easily dispels idealised images soldiers initially carry with them into battle. After carefully studying the facts of military operations and listening to hundreds of testimonies of soldiers wounded in the American Civil War, the famous American poet and journalist Walt Whitman noted lucidly that the true face of war will never appear in books (quoted in Fussell 1989, 290). It is little surprise then that for a long time there were no sources about the personal experiences of ordinary soldiers or indeed how they understood the role of wartime events in their lives (both before and after the war). Analysing individual experiences of war, as described in narratives of ordinary soldiers who participated directly in combat, as well as war as a social construct within Western culture, Yuval Noah Harari (2008) arrived at the insight that since the Enlightenment and Romanticism – specifically, the 1860s – war has begun to be valued and interpreted through a perspective

of being the ultimate life experience. In the period after the First World War, the reading public was flooded with war memoirs and novels, the first such books to examine war experiences from the point of view of generally accepted ideals of masculinity and moral ambivalence. This was a consequence of a greater number of mobilised men who supported a war that turned out to be far longer and bloodier than anyone was able to imagine it would be (see Bruley 2005).

Participants in armed struggle who personally experienced extreme war, interpreted it as the cornerstone of maturing and personal development, that is, learning fundamental truths about oneself and the world (Harari 2008, 160–196). Sacralised notions of the experience of war as a necessary personal formative element in the production of citizens or political socialisation seems today to have been dealt a blow in most post-industrial societies. Korać (2019) argues that in the so-called post-heroic age – marked by conflict as an industrialised activity that protects imperial corporate interests of post-industrial powers – the ideal of the citizen-warrior whose holy duty is to defend the homeland has been undermined by the ontological nature of the professional military. Military service in the early twenty-first century is just another commercial activity carried out in the labour market, suffering a drop in interest, entirely at the mercy of supply and demand, focused on avoiding loss as much as on the goal of the greatest possible military efficiency (Korać 2019, 22–28). The collapse of the citizen-warrior ideal can be partially linked to the current process of redefinition of democracy and the contemporary idea of the citizen: better educated and more politically active, they are also more egoistical and disinterested in the common good than ever in history (Stojadinović 2020).

Reflectivist scholars have developed a body of disciplinary knowledge dialectically, which allows for overcoming the clash between subjective meaning contained in experience and internalised meanings accepted on the level of society as a whole. For that reason, in this paper, I hypothesise that the ontological turn taking place in the early twenty-first century, in which warfare is changing from holy civic duty to a commercialised profession, inevitably places before the researcher of warfare the concept of the

individual (as either participant or victim). In search for an answer to how we may learn about war as a phenomenon that falls into the disciplinary realm of IR, I will test the claim that reflectivist epistemology satisfactorily complements the weaknesses of the positivist canon. It does so by taking into consideration the obvious split between subjective meanings contained in lived individual experience of war and the internalised meanings ascribed to fighting as ideal and duty, accepted by a member of a political community through socialisation.

Within the IR discipline, reflectivist epistemology is most developed in the work of feminist theorists, for which reason I will examine validity of the departing premise through the part of this body of work focused on warfare. As opposed to the theoretical mainstream that measures scientific advancement by how well the set questions are answered, feminist epistemology measures the adequacy of each research undertaking by which questions have been posed, and even more importantly, which have not (see Yadav 2018, 374–381). The starting point of any research study is the ontology of social relations that recognises the existential embeddedness of the individual in a hierarchical social setting, shaped by inequality of political, economic and social structures. Therefore, reflexivist research of states' actions in the international arena moves from the level of the individual – whose lives are bound within the given states as either military duty or conflict victims – and seeks to establish whether and in what way the dialectical relations of power/subjugation can announce the direction for emancipation through systematic explanation of practical wisdom of the oppressed (Ackerly & True 2006, 241–260). Instead of narrowing the disciplinary epistemological focus to interactions among bearers of power, privileged by the existing order, the reflectivist point of view allows for an understanding of how marginalised groups and collectives have come to be on the edge of the theoretical mainstream researcher's "field of visibility" (Jackson 2011, 184–185). Avoiding the epistemological blind spot of dominant grand narratives – rooted in the privileged social background of the researcher, usually bound up in the establishment, or political and military interests – is only possible by directing the research undertaking towards the central question: whose knowledge are we actually speaking of when we study war? Consequently, the

focus shifts from knowledge produced by state institutions, which is to say leading political and military actors, to learning about the structures and processes that create social marginality through war.

Standpoint epistemology reveals problems faced when, in seeking to justify the superiority of their knowledge perspective for the particular object of study (or greater objectivity of their findings), the researcher claims proximity to the object, usually a marginalised social group (see Harding 1991, 119–133). Donna Haraway (1988, 581) insists that the idea of objective knowledge is embodied in situated/positional knowledge, with the acknowledgment that the learning self is always multidimensional and aware of its limits. According to Haraway, situated or positional knowledge, although imperfect, surpasses the false promise of the “all-seeing eye” of contemporary positivist knowledge armed with advanced technology. Although technology allows for deeper and more distant observations of the material world, at the same time, it creates a sort of rhetoric of power disassociated from social responsibility for how we have come to learn about reality (Haraway 1988, 586). The production of our scientific knowledge as situated refers to the acknowledgment of the view that knowledge maintains specific conditions in which it is produced, including on some levels the social identity and position of the one producing it (Hoffman 2001, 59).

For the study of war and IR in general, standpoint epistemology is interested not in reaching scientific knowledge of difference among individual perspectives of the object of research study, but how to achieve scientific knowledge through deliberation and discussion between researchers and human subjects on questions, values and discourses that reveal a group perspective regarding that object of research study (Weldon 2006, 64–68). Given that knowledge is produced by communities or social groups, and not individuals, the application of epistemic principles of positionality in research practice means that acquired knowledge is a collective “product”, which includes and condenses even opposing views of the object of research study. In that manner, knowledge can better be considered “negotiated” than acquired by observation or theoretical reflection. We can say that standpoint epistemology includes the reconceptualisation of the individual, value and truth,

starting from three basic premises: 1) the learning subject is not situated outside social relations; rather, they constitute the learning subject; 2) political values are an inherent aspect of knowledge, and as such are epistemologically significant; and 3) knowledge does not objectively mirror the outside world, but is constituted by social practices (Campbell 2004, 14–16).

We have thus opened an alternative route in the search for answers to the question of how researchers can formulate and assess the scientific validity of statements about the reality of war. The significance of standpoint epistemology in the study of war is in its potential to overcome epistemic limitations issuing from the masculinist, white and Western character of the positivist mainstream in studying international relations. Standpoint epistemology does so by giving primacy to social embeddedness far outside political and military power circles that decide whether and how military operations will be undertaken. Standpoint epistemology presents a direct challenge to traditional rationalist and empiricist epistemological assumptions about the irrelevance of the researcher's identity in conducting research and obtaining findings. The status of researchers within the structures of social/political power presents the basic benchmark of legitimacy of the precondition for acquiring scientific knowledge. The researcher must possess a developed consciousness of their personal standpoint and subjective dimension of the lived experience of the interlocutor, while at the same time being keenly aware of the power dynamics that permeate the relation with human subjects (Stanley & Wise 1990, 23). For this reason, certain researchers include a self-reflexive aspect in the description of the findings and research dynamics. An intellectual autobiographical note confirms credibility of the researcher as an authority on a specific topic, the validity of their previous scientific results and arguments, that is, the warrant for their research on a given research problem.

It is reasonable to assume that a research project aimed at explaining all phenomenological levels of a specific armed conflict will not be approached in the same theoretical manner or studied using the same methodology, nor will yield equal findings and conclusions. Additional differences can emerge if the researcher belongs to the political elite (thus having a privileged position)

compared to coming from a layer of society that suffered direct destructive effects of combat operations. In the first case, it would be expected for the research procedure to include only empirical data, such as official narratives contained in statements by state actors and official documents about the designs and conduct of military operations (and that only when they become declassified). Such information is often biased because it is shaped to legitimise decisions of those in power or because it simply ignores the level of the individual. Kevin Dunn argues that the leading American and Western European thought on IR is to a large extent a product of a small community of socially privileged white theorists whose privileged position actively shapes the ways in which this discipline is constructed, reproduced, taught/studied and practiced (2008, 53–54). He goes on to claim that the establishment of particular historical experiences and cultural values of privileged members of the American and Western European scholar community as an epistemic norm for the rest of the world is not a matter of harmless “scholasticism”. Dunn’s claims have a twofold impact on the field of epistemology: 1) revealing the power of privileged scholars to define parameters of what is normal in the empirical world of IR, and 2) exposing their inability to construct difference (Dunn 2008, 55). He warns that the theoretical position on difference interpreted as a complete absence of common characteristics opens all too easily the possibility of conquest and elimination of Others from the face of the Earth. These insights are particularly important for the reflectivist researcher of warfare looking at how it has changed in the twenty-first century, yet still seeking to avoid the neoliberal ideological sediments regarding democratic peace gifted by the U.S. and its allies to rogue/outlaw states and uncooperative political regimes.

In the second case, the epistemological position of the researcher will be additionally directed at lived experience of victimised or marginalised groups in war, above all soldiers and civil populations (the elderly, women, children, but also wounded and disabled veterans). We have here an epistemological perspective directly or indirectly tied to the outcomes of decisions of the political and military leaders, which indicates difference, sometimes even opposition to the empirical and narrative reality of war. It would appear that the greatest obstacle to researching warfare

comes from the lack of recognition of the complex interaction between individual lived experience and the socially accepted narrative that filters that experience through collective moral norms and notions of heroism. Individual lived experience – whether of a soldier or civilian – gets absorbed into collective memory not as factual presentation of war events, but to fit social norms. Elshtain (1987) is right when remind researchers that they must pay particular attention to the experiences excluded from collective memory or are simply marginalised in narratives. Standpoint epistemology is at pain to point out the danger in the disciplinary mainstreams tendency to reject empirical data from discursively mediated lived experience of marginalised groups in war, with the explanation that hermeneutic, narrative, dialogic and contextual forms of knowledge are inherently inferior, due to their supposed particularity that disqualifies them from abstraction or scientific synthesis (Hansen 2010, 22).

The epistemological turn towards researching phenomena and processes on the micro level – instead on the macro level (actions by states and their institutions) typical for the disciplinary mainstream – also allows bringing together quantitative and secondary sources of information with qualitative and primary sources. This avoids the tendency of mainstream researchers to analyse a “world without people”, that is, of abstract and bodiless political subjects. In her book *Bananas, Beaches and Base*, Cynthia Enloe (1990) advances the thesis that the international is personal and the personal is international: social relations cannot be divided into the arbitrary binaries of politics (state, world events) and non-politics (intimate relations, the home, family). Rather, both planes are cornerstones of the production of knowledge about the international arena, including war. Taking the individual as the relevant unit of analysis, the reflectivist approach in feminist epistemology brings the research to the level of the home and human body, in an effort to include knowledge of how the war directly impacts the lived experience far behind the front lines. Such a perspective allows for the complex phenomenology of warfare to be revealed through personal interpretation within the political and social meanings of the body and how these meanings manifest in the international arena. Feminist epistemology examines the body as plural, and historically and culturally mediated. Thus, the concept and politics of

the body are important analytic tools for the reflectivist perspective on war as a lived, individual experience.

In decent societies, where democratic legitimation of war and effective protection for human rights are considered universal standards (Margalit 1996), the epistemic principles that allow the production of knowledge about how the conduct of war in general and military operations in particular impact the quality of civic life, must be taken into account if there is to be a comprehensive scientific explanation of warfare in the twenty-first century.¹ This ensures that marginal populations – those most economically and socially disenfranchised – do not remain rather invisible to the epistemic perspective of the privileged. It also opens the path to those non-privileged members of society to present their lived experience, and indirectly acquire social legitimacy and affirmation through inclusion into the body of scientific knowledge.

Pursuing questions of what we can know about war and how this knowledge can be gained, the reflectivist epistemic position emerging from feminism, endeavours to encompass previously invisible aspects of war by formulating innovative research questions (entirely left out of traditional positivist epistemology, considering them irrelevant to the study of IR). The reflectivist epistemological viewpoint is in part dedicated to ways of acquiring knowledge about politics of systematic and/or mass rape as a war strategy; it is also evidence in favour of the validity of the epistemic concept of embodiment in the study of warfare. Reflectivists claim that sexualised aggression is not a deterministic phenomenon, but structured, repeatedly reinforced and functional social behaviour. As such, it can hardly be considered incidental to the overall political plan (see Kirby 2012). The politics of rape rests on the fact that women and their bodies – seen above all through their biological, social, and cultural role of ensuring new soldiers who will protect the nation from decay and destruction – have a strong symbolic meaning within an ethnic community or state (see Shepherd 2007; Alison 2007; Sjoberg & Peet 2011; Aroussi 2011; Davies & Teitt 2012). Thus, in times of war, the female body itself becomes a front line and is exposed to above all sexualised victimisation as

1) Avishai Margalit describes a decent society one whose institutions do not humiliate its citizens (Margalit 1996, 10–11).

a military strategy. Rape of men is another form of domination, a means to strip the victim of masculinity and ascribe female characteristics by turning them into a sexual object, indirectly humiliating the ethnicity or nation to which the victim belongs (Alison 2007, 81). From this epistemic standpoint, particular attention is paid to ways of recognition and comprehension of forms of not reporting rape through trauma analysis, local prejudice, social stigma, fear of retribution, and means of gathering information for the purposes of official government reports (Davies & True 2017; Mackenzie 2010).

A second example of an innovative reflectivist approach to epistemology emerging from feminism is finding optimal ways of obtaining insight into the concealed process of masculinisation of women as professional soldiers, and how their participation in military operations impacts perceptions of traditional gender roles. There is a contribution to be made to the study of war in the early twenty-first century by revealing a sort of ontological split of women as combatants (King 2016; Parashar 2009; Kay Cohen 2013). On the one hand, women's contribution to military operations is diminished or denied; on the other, their often greater aggressiveness in battle – conditioned by the desire to prove that they are not the “weaker sex”, thus earning greater social recognition by patriarchal standards – is abused for the reproduction of traditional gender power dynamics in labelling them as biologically deviant “specimens”. As a new structural characteristic of post-modern warfare, women's active role deserves greater attention from researchers, and not to be merely considered emulation of masculine forms of aggression. Women also appear more and more as perpetrators of war crimes (Titunik 2009; Brown 2014). These are aspects of late modern warfare resulting from profound social changes that also impact the human factor in military organisation. Positivist scholars of IR, however, either do not notice or do not consider these relevant indicators of sustainable projection of military power.

Given that all kinds of official data – quantitative data in the form of statistics, reports on battlefield events – are biased, subject to political manipulation and obscure real power dynamics, reflectivist epistemology considers additional/alternative ways of

acquiring knowledge about warfare: chief among them are narratives and texts, interviews, case studies, hermeneutics, and a historical approach (see Ackerly & True 2008). In line with the position that scientific knowledge is situated knowledge, reflectivist epistemology allows studied subjects to participate in the shaping of research questions, thus contributing to the project results being applicable for the good of the community or the various groups, that is, social stakeholders. The researcher is even expected to forego the privilege bestowed by academic authority, so that they may better listen to interlocutors and be aware of their positionality. The ultimate purpose of insisting on acquiring situated knowledge is comprehension of ways the research output can be blended with political practice of empowering non-privileged population groups, those who usually bear the brunt of wartime destruction.

CONCLUSION

For centuries, epistemology has encountered researchers with two fundamental questions: what can we know and how do we know it? When it comes to scientifically valid knowledge regarding social phenomena and processes, these questions are not in the least “scholastic” or pretentious, as they imply an additional question: how does our understanding of the world impact our understanding of knowledge. For the research of international relations, in particular war as an eternal research question, it is not in the least inconsequential to first seek the answer to what constitutes a valid research question within the discipline in the first place, and then what would be the gravity of the answer to such question. In that sense, also presenting itself is the question how the personal standpoint of the researcher on the potential for transformation of IR reality then impacts the conduct of research. In this article I have endeavoured to analyse the epistemological standpoints researchers take in specific studies of the phenomenon of war, in order to show that reflectivist approach to epistemology in the discipline of IR can indeed clear up some weaknesses of the mainstream positivist cannon that insists on an exclusively system-centric and state-centric nature of the reality of international relations.

The positivist canon of the disciplinary mainstream does not recognise the ontological transformation of the military profession and “corrosion” of the civic duty of participation in war, two processes that have nearly imperceptibly unfolded in parallel over the last three decades. Since war is considered the sovereign expression of the will of the state (the leading actor in international arena), mainstream research does not recognise the perspective of the individual soldier or civil victim as epistemologically relevant – with the exception of high-ranking individuals, that is, leading actors in foreign policy and military decisions. Proponents of the realist school in IR theory abstract free will and the role of the commoner in executing large, state projects such as war, which carry risks and demand real sacrifices; yet, this also seems to discount the significance of the will of the people in success in war (as a foreign policy tool). In my view, this is an epistemologically privileged analytic model of a rational, disembodied human, abstracted from the social and political context in which she/he lives.

By deploying standpoint epistemology, Enloe’s thesis of the international being personal, and the concept of human embodiment, reflectivism in epistemology offers an alternative path in the search for answers regarding how we learn about war as an essential pattern of the state behaviour in international relations. The choice of epistemological position strongly impacts the results of research study, as well as the political utility of these results. It is therefore no surprise that epistemology is itself a field of conflicting views and tensions. Reflectivist epistemological viewpoint allows us to unmask the various differences in scientific explanations of warfare issuing from privileged positions: whether they come from narrow circles of power or have an ideological and vested interest in justifying a specific military undertaking. Moreover, reflectivism can contribute to opening new and reconceptualising old scientific problems in the domain of war, as well as envisioning novel explanatory models, pointing to obscured facts that call dominant theories into question – in general, the advancement of research methods and techniques.

The greatest potential weakness of reflectivist approach to epistemology of IR lies in the danger of potentially distancing the researcher from strict epistemological verification of the scien-

tific nature of new knowledge. There is a risk of turning situated knowledge into a self-reflexive research approach due to potential emotional overload for the researcher. Oftentimes, this happens because of the insistence of standpoint epistemology on a relationship of closeness and trust with the subjects of research study. Still, the role of emotions in research directed at people and their lives cannot be all too easily discarded. Developing the capacity for reflexivity as testimony – and not reflexivity as unsympathetic voyeurism – can provide additional value to the study of the reality of international relations. The researcher’s empathy can contribute to the body of knowledge an aspect of war invisible to the positivist mainstream. It can thus create a “critical moment” – in both academic and public discourse – from which to initiate counter-hegemonic practices that would prevent further marginalisation of those disenfranchised by war.

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