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Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, by bell hooks, London, Pluto Press, [1984]2000.

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REVIEW

Ending Global Violence Through Radical Feminist Theory: The Teachings of bell hooks on Power and Domination

bell hooks's Black Feminist theory and praxis radically redefine understandings and experiences of 'power' across academia and in daily life. As relevant today as ever, hooks' work holds the emancipatory tools and revolutionary potential to end the violence – epistemic, structural, and physical – that still permeates human relations 40 years on from the book's first edition. This review essay of hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* explores these dynamics and their pertinence for studies of political violence and civil war.

bell hooks's passing in December 2021 sparked numerous acts of remembrance from writers, activists, students, and academics who had mobilised her work for 40 years. hooks[1] was an accomplished writer, a mentor to many and a key voice within Black feminism, critical cultural studies and critical race theory across the world, known for her committed writing and teaching. Her work constitutes a significant corpus of intellectual and activist takes on pressing global issues of oppression, social justice, domination and violence. hooks once explained:

> We've always thought about heroes as having to do with death and war. When we think of the heroic journey, it's rarely a journey that's about love, you know … it's about deeds that have to do with conquering and domination, so part of what I wanted to say to people is: living as we do in a culture of domination, to truly choose to love is heroic.[2]

Taken from a 2016 episode of *Speaking Freely*, these words point to the need for our societies to start thinking of the notion of power differently from current conceptualisations that place 'conquering and domination' at the heart of their definition and purpose. The radical features of hooks's work lie in the fact that she pushes for a critique of 'modernity' in which the issue is less the existence of power as a direct form of constraint, than the hierarchical structure of power in the form of oppression. If the goal of exercising power is no longer to subdue and to defeat, then it is possible to achieve revolutionary change that will reduce the hierarchical and oppressive nature of human interactions. hooks's intellectual corpus (grounded in her own experience of violence)[3] puts forward the idea that it is only possible to end all expressions of domination if we stand ready to rethink the ways we conceptualise and practice 'power'.

In our 'modern-colonial' world, armed conflict and political violence often stem from and are fuelled by issues of domination: unequal power relations between state structures, market institutions and peoples along racial, class and

gender lines that glorify the subjugation of some by others, and in doing so, perpetuate violence. hooks's career and activism explicitly address issues of violence – physical, structural and symbolic – with the purpose of moving beyond reforming our existing oppressive social structures to work instead towards the establishment of a new social order without sexism, racism and classism. Echoing the interview quote above, she used the notions of 'radical love',[4] 'revolutionary parenting' and 'political solidarity/sisterhood' to offer a glimpse into how we can address – both as individuals and as a (global) society – many of our contemporary social ailments and end violence against women, and in so doing, against all. In the light of this, I discuss one of bell hooks's seminal works: *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* ([1984]2000). The book offers a compelling case for re-examining, through an intersectional feminist ethos, how we teach, theorise and understand (armed and societal) conflict, political violence, domination, and power relations on a global scale.

hooks's feminist theoretical contributions are crucially important to the study of conflict and violence in global politics because her work is 'based on the belief that politics of domination as manifest in imperialist, capitalist, racist and sexist oppression must be challenged and changed so that a new social order can emerge' (hooks 1986, p. 126). While feminist theory often informs the study of conflict, peace and political violence (see, e.g., Parashar 2009, Väyrynen *et al*. 2021), specific engagement with hooks's work is still scant across disciplinary traditions that seek to explore these problems. Yet, (re)reading hooks provides fresh theoretical and methodological insight for those of us who take an interest in (post)conflict dynamics, state formation/fragility, coloniality or political violence in the 'Global South' and seek to interrogate the ways we study these issues.

Some might justify this sparse engagement with hooks's work, arguing that her feminist theory lacks the capacity 'to enumerate Third World countries' oppressed situations, which in itself contributes to the profundity of oppression in post-colonial societies' (Biana 2020, p. 20). hooks' intellectual and pedagogical interventions have been scrutinised for being arrogant, too radical, western-centric, focusing on the plight of African American women, and excluding other women of colour, and women from the global South. Yet, as I argue, hooks's writings and theoretical interventions reach far beyond the confines of American politics; we can use her 'concept of "white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy" in order to cover all grounds of oppression' (Biana 2020).

'This phrase [white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy]' Make Fitts explains, 'has come to signify the structure and the systemic interlocking of oppressions that grant power and privilege to some, while disproportionately disadvantaging others' (Fitts 2011, p. 112). It is precisely the historical dynamics and perpetuation of the 'white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy' that is often pivotal to the emergence and perpetuation of violent conflict, exploitation, as well as state and political violence (see for instance Ossome 2015, White 2020). In this sense, hooks continues to challenge all structures of domination by proposing a different way of conceptualising and practicing power as a life-affirming force, and away from conquest and oppression. Speaking from my own research agenda, which centres on problems of modernity, epistemicide

and the ordinary politics of state and political violence in 'postcolonial'[5] African contexts, I see hooks's *From Margin to Center* as a crucial piece of work that can help us uncover the various ways structural and epistemic violence still informs much of how we understand conflict and political violence (in the global South) both within academia and our western societies at large.

The following review dwells on the book's major contributions 1) in unravelling, via an intersectional feminist ethos and methodology, the critical angles still missing from the study of the 'postcolonial' and the 'post-conflict' state in Global South politics and in African societies in particular; 2) in uncovering the effects of structural violence (race, class and gender) in constructing colonially inflected, dominant narratives that 'invisibilise' non-western knowledges in the social sciences; and finally and relatedly, 3) in imagining new ways to conceptualise and practice 'power' in a global society characterised by a polymorphic crisis that manifests through sexism, imperialism, violent conflict, environmental degradation and socio-economic injustice.

State Domination and Political Violence

My first point focuses on the current debates surrounding the 'postcolonial African state', long seen as a threat to international security (Abrahamsen 2005, Krämer 2020). Over the past decade, discussions on 'African statehood' have moved away from western-centric diagnostics, methodology and theorisation that previously dominated the study of the 'African state' via discourses of state failure, weakness, and fragility. Early on, critics of these perspectives pointed to a 'strong but unsupported presumption that the centralised/liberal state is better suited to provide order, justice and security', which 'strips African societies of any actual internal dynamics other than the ability to disintegrate' (Niang 2018, pp. 2–11). In response, much research now analyses the hybridisation, privatisation and negotiated dimensions of state formation in Africa through less Euro-normative approaches that account for the sophisticated and historically contingent politics of real governance, state effects and everyday governmentality (Schlichte 2005, Hagmann and Péclard 2010, Gupta 2012, De Herdt and Olivier De Sardan 2015, De Herdt and Titeca 2019). While these constitute major contributions to rethinking the (problematic) ways the 'international state form' translates in various postcolonial contexts (Lombard 2016), few studies also consider the possibility that it *is not* the hybridised or privatised 'postcolonial state' that is the primary vehicle of armed and/or state violence, but the global propagation and 'stickiness' of the modern/liberal state model itself (Niang 2018, Perazzone 2019, 2020).

'The present white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal state' (as hooks calls it) we find within the western world was indeed forcibly imprinted onto African societies via what many African intellectuals and activists call *maafa*—the 'great disaster' in Kiswahili, replacing the term 'colonisation' (Prandy 2022). *Maafa* aimed to impose, disseminate and maintain 'modernity' through a dominating state structure that 'relies on the family to indoctrinate its members with values supportive of hierarchical control and coercive authority' (hooks [1984]2000, 38). Against African resistances, colonial states mobilised exploitative economic

ventures, Catholic education and discriminatory socio-spatial organisation in attempts to (re)organise African communities into a collection of (male-led) households, housewives, breadwinners, and (often unpaid) workers that were to be integrated into a modern lifestyle (Hunt 1990, 1991, Lauro 2005, 2011). It is a similar state that is, to this day, reaffirmed through global economic interactions and international intervention in the form of exogenous development, post-conflict reconstruction and peace and statebuilding endeavours (Sabaratnam 2013, Bhambra and Holmwood 2018, Finkenbusch 2021).

By way of example, international and domestic policies have insisted on reinforcing and fostering state bureaucratic capacity across African countries, to ensure better public service delivery and formal population control. While seemingly positive, such efforts at (re)establishing good governance have ignored and muffled other organic ways of practicing governance (through mediation, spirituality, lineage, or collective action). Policy-making and expert accounts still tend to portray these practices as illegal, irrational, corrupt or informal practices that weaken 'proper' state functions and institutions (i.e., Lombard 2016, Perazzone 2018). International interventions in the form of DDR and SSR programmes,[6] peacekeeping missions, public administration reforms, or transitional justice are large-scale policy devices that thus seek to reinforce central state authority, believed to be a privileged avenue for achieving long-term peace.

Along with other radical feminist thinkers however, hooks repeatedly showed that the western state, including in its liberal-welfare shape, 'continues to serve as an ideological support system providing the necessary critical and analytical impetus for the maintenance of a liberalism' that keep structures of oppression intact (hooks [1984]2000, p. 21). In concrete terms, much literature has dealt with the ambiguous relationship between gender and state power in the western world (Gordon 2012), pointing 'to state violence as not just spectacular incidents but also mundane practices such as home inspections, the denial of a welfare check, bureaucratic obstacles and the myriad other dehumanising ways that recipients are always already seen and treated as "welfare queens"' (Kandaswamy 2010, p. 254). Such state practices and policies – meant to protect and assist marginalised communities – paradoxically translate into state violence towards women, the poor and minorities (Pateman 1988, Wilson 2002, Piven 2018).

Despite abundant evidence that various iterations of modern statehood generate second-class citizens, inequalities, as well as racial and sexist discrimination, these concerns are rarely integrated into the study of international interventions aimed at improving public service provision, state authority, or administrative capacity in African contexts in the aftermath of armed conflict. Compounded with the rapid 'emergence of new powers and hegemonies in the South' and 'Southern States now shaping development norms and modalities' (Eriksson Baaz and Parashar 2021, p. 289), this long-lasting adhesion to the western state model continues to obstruct global emancipatory politics that could end the modern liberal state as 'an alienating machine' (Niang 2018, p. 25). This, in turn, would allow for alternative forms of social and political organisation which would rest more on inclusionary politics and less on hierarchical human interactions. In this vein, liberalism still 'constitutes a formidable obstacle

to an oppressed social group's emancipation [. . .] If selfishness, aggressiveness, the drive to conquer and dominate, really are among defining human traits, as every liberal philosopher since Locke tries to convince us, the oppression in civil society—i.e., in the social sphere not regulated by the state – is a fact of life' (hooks [1984]2000, p. 21). The 'drive to conquer and dominate' that often underlies historical processes of state formation around the globe can also be found in knowledge production.

Activism and Epistemic Violence

This leads to my second point. Recent events (think of the #RhodesMustFall and 'decolonise the curriculum' movements, or National Geographic's formal acknowledgement of its racist coverage),[7] have recast the treatment of Global South politics by disciplinary traditions in the social sciences (i.e., conflict and development studies, IR, history, African studies), the media, and university campuses as intellectually problematic and even morally corrupt. The fact that attacks against post/decolonial, feminist and critical race theory are now a recurring feature of far-right and conservative news coverage and social media[8] shows how epistemic violence still informs much of the project of modernity (Mudimbe 1988, Grosfoguel 2007, Trouillot 2015, Abrahamsen 2017, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, Mertens *et al*. 2022) that has subjugated many and prevented people from 'engaging with a different framework' and 'a different narrative' worldwide (el- Malik and Kamola 2017, p. xiii). This echoes hooks's key concern with building a political and societal system that exists outside of oppression (which does not mean outside power) and is simultaneously attentive to intersectionality, avoiding therefore the perpetuation of inequalities in ways that we do not always see.

Research within IR, conflict studies and related fields would benefit greatly from engaging with radical feminist thought (see inter alia, Parashar *et al*. 2018, Medie and Kang 2018) precisely because just like 'white women who dominate feminist discourse, [and] for the most part make and articulate feminist theory', the (privileged white) men who have dominated the study of politics and conflict often 'have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state' (hooks [1984]2000, p. 4). The parochialism of knowledge production in academia and in the classroom is something that is now recognised and addressed by a growing number of scholars who understand issues of positionality, (self)reflexivity and criticality to be central to the public mandate of academia. This is a particularly salient issue for IR, African studies, conflict studies and other related fields which have long suffered from 'the production of categories and concepts from which it becomes difficult to think differently' (Charbonneau and Sandor 2019, p. 437), therefore motivating 'demands for inclusive, decolonised, transnational academic communities' (Marks and Bisschoff 2019, p. 139).

hooks however, goes further. Two decades before *A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), *From Margin to Center* planted the seeds for understanding learning and education as acts of resistance rather than the tools for elite reproduction.

Here, hooks explicitly prescribes that we see 'the importance of verbal communication [. . .] for the dissemination of feminist ideas', especially 'with the intention of taking feminism *out of the university*[9] and into the streets and homes of this society' ([1984]2000, p. 110). Her point speaks to making academia less scholastic and self-referential (in the vein of Frantz Fanon[10] and Edward Saïd[11]) where scholarly and political activism can reach beyond university walls. This refers to language and writing, but also to the international political economies of research funding, publishing structures and theory. Before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term (Crenshaw 1990), hooks's intersectional perspective on violence and domination provides lessons we can all learn from, including in the field of decolonial and critical thought. With a practical approach in mind, hooks suggests that

> in a door-to-door campaign to reintroduce feminist politics to a wider audience, women would have the opportunity to ask questions, clarify issues, give feedback. If, in a single year, women [academics] stopped spending thousands of dollars to organize [academic] conferences that are attended by only a select group of individuals, the goal of that year could be mass outreach in every state. (hooks [1984]2000, p. 110)

The same holds true for marginalised communities across the Global South; communities whose experiential knowledge and intellectual contributions are still sidelined, silenced or ignored in academic research, writing and teaching (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019).

Although hooks's courageous take on education and activist outreach still inspires too few endeavours to change how we teach (violent) conflict and political violence in the classroom (Hooks 2014) where 'the suffering of others' can 'become an intellectual game rather than an ethical problem',[12] academics have begun to wonder about and experiment with an alternative research and pedagogical ethos (Parisi *et al*. 2013). Receiving feedback, asking questions and challenging the situatedness of knowledge production, as hooks suggests, is something many of us now seek when interacting with our students, peers, and colleagues. Examples abound of individual and collaborative efforts to make learning a more progressive and inclusive process.

Whether for classwork or fieldwork, a number of scholars have discussed unequal treatment of global South researchers, including 'brokers' and 'fixers' in (post)conflict environments, as well as issues of publishing, ownership, and critical methodologies.[13] Others have specifically addressed southern researchers' invisibility within both academic and policy circles (see among others, Parashar 2019, Nyenyezi *et al*. 2020). Many actively look to counter asymmetrical power relations with collective efforts to establish more equitable collaboration in research, teaching and writing (think of decolonising curricula, scholars at risk subsidies, South/South university partnerships, feminist pedagogies, North/South joint teaching programmes). However diverse they might be, underlying these efforts is the common goal of identifying and addressing the adverse effects of power relations

grounded in establishing hierarchies among individuals, cultures and societies.

Life-Affirming Power

Following this, my third and final point thus turns to what I believe constitutes one of hooks's most significant contributions. Underlying the processes of oppression and the structures of domination described above lie the conventional ways in which we conceptualise and practice power. 'In this society' hooks reminds us, 'power is commonly equated with domination and control over people or things' ([1984]2000, p. 83). 'Despairing of the possibility that feminist revolution will occur many women [. . .] now focus their attention on gaining as much power and privilege as they can within the existing social structure' ([1984]2000, p. 83). In hooks's point of view, this has happened because the leading voices of liberal feminism represent 'a small minority of women who have hegemonic control over feminist discourse – the development of the theory that informs the practice' ([1984]2000, p. 16). In the same vein, the classist, imperialist, sexist and racist tendencies that still undergird knowledge production and the manner in which our modern society has organised through war, capitalist exploitation and state domination in recent history are grounded in conceptualisations of power that refuse truly transformative politics. With definitions of power that still primarily centre on ideas of conquest, control and subjugation, for many radical thinkers, contemporary dominant/liberal narratives have failed to cultivate a 'power of disbelief' ([1984]2000, p. 91) that would enable us to question such definitions and have consequently worked only to sustain existing social structures rather than offer political and social alternatives.

Within peace and conflict studies, an example of this are policymaking endeavours meant to address ex-combatant disarmament and reintegration into civilian life – I mentioned DDR and SSR above. Existing programmes aim to provide training and livelihood to former combatants in order to prevent remobilisation, enforce the legitimacy of state institutions, impose a monopoly over the legitimate means of violence and achieve long-term peace. New police and army units are formed and trained by western police forces precisely at a time where democratic, liberal states in Europe and North America are experiencing worryingly high levels of police backlash, violence and arbitrary arrests against their own citizens.

Despite much academic research dealing with this issue, virtually none of these efforts have questioned the unequal power dynamics at work in the society combatants are expected to reintegrate, leaving intact the existing socio-political order, one where 'the systemic naturalisation of capitalism and disavowal of race and coloniality kills people' (Rutazibwa 2020, p. 224), which may have led many to pick up arms in the first place (Vlassenroot *et al.* 2020). Along with other radical Black feminists, hooks thus invites us to integrate 'a radically different concept of power', one that would be both 'creative and life-affirming' and nurture a 'different value-system' ([1984]2000 p. 86) in both our intellectual and daily praxis.

hooks's affirmative definition of power gives us the opportunity to rethink the relationship between past and present violence and opens avenues for shaping a future in which people pursue different organisations of their societies. In her own words, hooks explains that *From Margin to Center* 'is one expression of the current attempt on the part of concerned feminist activists to formulate a liberatory theory, one that is more inclusive, that challenges rather than perpetuates domination' (hooks 1986, p. 125). The values she developed are grounded in the 'increased comprehension of, advocacy for, and participation by people living at the margins of both society and the feminist movement' (Fitts 2011, p.115). Taken further, this could be mobilised in how we interact with our peers and colleagues from the Global South, and who we include, for instance, in our study of the power dynamics that create marginalised groups, violent conflict and political violence. People who have been historically and structurally stranded in 'the margins' should be recognised as 'makers of theory and as leaders in action' (hooks [1984]2000, p. 161). Nearly 40 years after *From Margin to Center* was first edited, the struggle continues. The emergence of a new generation of scholars writing form these margins and striving to enunciate demands for radical change through their work testifies to this and shows how the immense legacy hooks has left to our care is still as powerful as ever.

Notes

1. bell hooks is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, and her grandmother's name. In this article, as in her literary works, bell hooks is never capitalised. This is how she, along with other feminist activists, chose to write her name following her decision to take the focus away from her persona and onto her ideas.
2. bell hooks on *Speaking Freely* with Ken Paulson, 29 March 2016. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2bmnwehlpA.(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2bmnwehlpAAccessed (11 April 2023).
3. See bell hooks (2020) 'Violence and Intimate Relationships. A Feminist Perspective'. Laura L. O'Tool, Jessica R. Schiffman and Rosemary Sullivan (eds.), In *Gender Violence*, New York: New York University Press.
4. For a helpful analysis of hooks' notion of 'radical love', see Glass (2009).
5. For a discussion on the term 'postcolonial', see Brydon (2004), or Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018.
6. Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) programmes.
7. See Susan Goldberg, Editor in Chief. *For decades our coverage was racist. To rise above our past we must acknowledge it*. National Geographic, published 12 March 2018. Available at https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/from-the-editor-race-racism-history. Accessed 26 April 2023.
8. See Maïka Sondarjee, *Critical race theory and feminism are not taking over our universities*, The Conversation, published on May 1, 2022. Available at https://theconversation.com/critical-race-theory-and-feminism-are-not-taking-over-our-universities-175030. Accessed April 15, 2023.
9. Author's italics.

10. Fanon, Frantz. [1952]2008. *Black skin, white masks*. London: Pluto Press. See also, Ahluwalia, P., & Zegeye, A. (2001). Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko: Towards Liberation. *Social Identities*, *7*(3), pp.455–469.
11. Saïd, Edward (1978), *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage; Edward Saïd, (1983), *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
12. Aidan Russell in Teaching about Troublesome Violence | IHEID (graduateinstitute.ch), accessed 17 April 2023.
13. *Civil Wars* in particular has published recent work on this.

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