

TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPROACH OF THE VISUAL POLITICS OF HUMAN SUFFERING: ADVANCING EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES

EM DIREÇÃO À UMA ABORDAGEM CRÍTICA DA POLÍTICA VISUAL DO SOFRIMENTO HUMANO: ESTABELECENDO PREMISSAS EPISTEMOLÓGICAS E METODOLÓGICAS

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Abstract: This article brings to light a subject of supreme importance to the International Relations (IR) academic community on critical research. Much like any IR critical approach, an analysis of the visual politics of human suffering through epistemological and methodological premises is defined by post-positivist and praxeological accounts. The question of relevance of this article for the IR critical theory is, therefore, the framing of a phronetic perspective provided by post-positivism and the logic of enactment provided by praxeology as integral parts of a reflexive reading over visual politics of suffering and its constitutive power of mediation. By establishing these epistemological and methodological premises, it contributes to critical evaluations about mediation and existing structures of power. For this, it considers an emancipatory commitment, so the naturalness notion of the international structure and the traditional relations of dominance and struggle for power would be challenged. In bonding different IR approaches, such as constructivist, post-structuralist, feminists, and others alike together into the same epistemological and methodological accounts, IR critical theory becomes the main counter-argument provided by this article in attempting to resist rational positions that determine whose suffering human beings see, and whose suffering tends to remain unseen to them.

Key-words: Visual politics. Human suffering. Post-positivism. Praxeology. Power of mediation.

Resumo: Este artigo traz à tona um assunto de suprema importância para a comunidade acadêmica das RI focada na pesquisa crítica. Assim como qualquer abordagem crítica das RI, uma análise relativamente à política visual do sofrimento humano através de premissas epistemológicas e metodológicas define-se por bases pós-positivistas e praxiológicas. A questão de relevância deste artigo para a teoria crítica de RI é, portanto, o enquadramento de uma perspectiva frônese oferecida pelo pós-positivismo e a lógica da promulgação fornecida pela praxeologia como partes integrantes de uma leitura reflexiva assente na política visual do sofrimento humano e seu constitutivo poder da mediação. Estabelecendo tais premissas epistemológicas e metodológicas, pretende-se contribuir para avaliações críticas sobre mediação e as estruturas de poder existentes. Para tanto, um compromisso emancipatório é levado em conta, de modo que a noção de naturalidade da estrutura internacional e as tradicionais relações de domínio e luta pelo poder seriam desafiadas. Ao unir diferentes abordagens como a construtivista, pós-estruturalista, feministas e outras afins nas mesmas bases epistemológicas e metodológicas, a teoria crítica de RI torna-se o principal contra-argumento aqui promovido na tentativa de resistir as posições racionais que determinam o sofrimento humano que vemos e qual sofrimento tende a nos permanecer invisível.

Palavras-chave: Política visual. Sofrimento humano. Pós-positivismo. Praxiologia. Poder da mediação.

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Initial considerations

Visual representations of human suffering may bring to mind dramatic images of war and conflict, with corpses or people in vulnerable conditions, like refugees desperately fleeing oppression or civilians too weak to move due to the ravages of violence. These images do convey human suffering, and they are consequences of all forms of barbarism. But, in order to understand the politics behind these images, they should be observed through critical lenses, whereby epistemological and methodological premises would enable us to identify their dynamics, complexities, limitations, usage and subsequent practices.

Looking at the visual politics of human suffering, through critical lenses, means to explore epistemology and methodology, diving into the reflexive analyses and possible ways to reinterpret media and humanitarianism in a more constructivist and emancipatory perspective. In doing so, the existing debates on the power of mediation that remain secondary would likely attract more attention within the IR academic community.

To explore the visual politics of human suffering according to a critical examination, one should firstly take into consideration that, as Robinson (2018, p. 62) comes to explain, “[...] images need to be understood as part of strategic attempts to exercise power through so-called organised persuasive communication”. He also (Robinson, 2018, p. 62) argues the following: “for the viewers of images, this realisation demands that we look beyond the image to understand the political context that it emerges, whose interests might be served, and the strategic intent of the source of the image”.

In this manner, it is worthwhile to investigate visual politics by stressing out its constitutive power of mediation. For this, the idea of ‘staging’ can be helpful. For Chouliaraki (2006, p. 61), “[...] the power of mediation works by ‘selecting’ and ‘staging’ the events it reports, and by promoting its own norms concerning how we should feel, think, and act on the world that this selection and staging entails”. Carrying out this idea of ‘staging’ further, a theatrical metaphor that gives a special attention to casting can be borrowed.

Leander (2011, p. 299) highlights that “attention to casting means a break with the many approaches of IR (be they neo-realist or ‘discursive’) where the cast vanishes because the structure/discourse is all that matters”. She (Leander, 2011, p. 299) is also convinced that this is “[...] a break with the accounts assuming that the actors in IR are only (or mainly) anthropomorphized states and/or institutions”.

As one may observe throughout this article, the idea of ‘staging,’ coupled with the attention to casting, are critical views of the visual politics of human suffering and its constitutive power of mediation. Although they are unusual readings of world politics, they carry out critical assessments on the haggling of visual politics in the international realm. Additionally, these two readings call a spade a spade when it comes to defining the main actors of visual politics. Unlike the neo-realist theorists, who define actors just as states and institutions performing pre-determined roles, the idea of ‘staging’ and attention to casting describes them as statesmen, policymakers, and privileged members of political and economic elites capable of speaking and making decisions about the issues of great priority for them. Their intention is to show everyone through images on the stage, or on what is here called ‘arena of representation.’

Pursuant to Leander’s (2011, p. 299) concept, “the cast is composed of the rich, powerful males acting on behalf of the institutions that we study in IR”. The cast is represented by what she (Leander, 2011, p. 300) calls “[...] real identifiable people (and institutions) with names, positions, pasts and identities”. They rule powerful states, mass communication channels, political coalitions, and companies worldwide.

In this sense, before advancing the epistemological and methodological premises of the visual politics of human suffering, it is crucial to give special attention to casting and ‘staging,’ once they can identify the privileged actors making use of the power of mediation in order to tell their audiences about the world and how things, problems, and issues must be seen. What this article intends to do, therefore, is to explain through critical epistemology and methodology that these previously mentioned actors are well-aware of the role played by visual representations of suffering in the preservation of the power of mediation.

1. What is visual politics of human suffering?

In IR study, Bleiker (2018) opened up critical debates on visual global politics. He (Bleiker, 2018, p. 4) somehow reinforced the Rancière’s perspective that “[...] images are political in the most fundamental sense: they delineate what everyone, as collectives, sees and what everyone does not and thus, by extension, how politics is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, carried out, and legitimised”. To complement this perspective, Sliwinski (2018) bears Chouliaraki’s idea of ‘staging’ in mind.

She (Sliwinski, 2018, p. 175) argues that “circulating more quickly and in more venues than ever before, images function like the stage material of a grand, tragic play – providing the medium through which world spectators exercise their capacity to imagine humanity as one entity”.

This capacity is a false pretence, insofar as Chouliaraki, Orwicz and Greeley (2019, p. 301) explain that “visual representations of human suffering never simply speak of humanity. Rather, they speak within specific political, institutional, and technological contexts in order to make ‘universal’ claims to truth and ethics”. In these contexts, visual politics leads us to think of Débord’s “Society of the Spectacle” (2002), whereby a falsified reality is produced.

For Débord (2002, p. 4), “the spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality”. He (Débord, 2002, p. 4) comes into argument that “reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. The reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society”. One should keep this in mind if one is to overcome alienation through emancipatory aspirations.

For this, IR critical theory stresses out a long-term project of human emancipation. In this, the first step to do would be to recognise our place as society in the tragic play, beginning with understanding the behaviour of those powerful actors who make benefit from the political use of images to shape our political imagination about the world, and the issues involving human suffering, more specifically.

Recognising our place in the spectacle means to understand the dynamics of the visual politics, which is made for everyone to believe in particular and prearranged humanitarian claims, where everyone’s sentiments of pity play an important role in debates over intervention in some specific humanitarian crises.

Since human suffering of distant others began to be mediated by the Western mass media, world leaders began to develop security discourses of a global civil society based on human rights standards and democratic values. This context exacerbated after the Cold War, when, as Chouliaraki (2006, p. 61) reminds, “[...] CNN or the BBC addressed the spectator as a global citizen of the ‘be the first to know’ or ‘putting news first’ type”. In doing so, she (2006, p. 61) adds the following: “their news broadcasts also reproduce a certain version of world order, defined by space-times of safety and danger and hierarchies of human life”.

As a result, mediation became a governmental technology, which is, for Chouliaraki (2006, p. 61), “[...] neither purely regulatory nor purely benign. Mediation combines the exercise of rule on spectators by promoting modes of conduct”. As a source of power, visual politics came to reproduce hierarchies of power, shaping our imagination about the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other,’ and leading everyone to develop certain modes of conduct as viewers of the suffering of distant people.

For Robinson (2018, p. 62), “the underlying premise of the CNN effect was that advocacy journalism was transforming the conduct of states and underpinning a fledging norm of

‘humanitarian’ intervention”. As he (Robinson, 2018, p. 62) adds, “the ensuing challenge was to explore how a post-Cold War global media environment was shaping global power regulations”. Sontag (2003, p. 81) says that “[...] public attention was steered by the attentions of the media, which means images. When there are photographs, a war becomes ‘real’”.

Sontag (2003, p. 81) also asserts that “the feeling that something had to be done about the war in Bosnia was built from the attentions of journalists which brought images of Sarajevo under siege into hundreds of millions living rooms”. In her Sontag (2003, p. 81) opinion, “this illustrates the influence of photographs in shaping what crises we pay attention to and care about”.

Since then, it became usual the selection of images of human suffering by the Western mass media, whereby governmental leaders could create a security narrative to persuade their audience of the legitimacy of interventionist policies. As Robinson (2018, p. 66) points out, “one of the key findings of research into the CNN effect and the humanitarian interventions during the 1990s was that seemingly apolitical and altruistic interventions were often based on selfish national interests”. In his point of view, “images of suffering became part of the justification of foreign policies” (Robinson, 2018, p. 66).

Visual politics emerged, therefore, as a mechanism to depict the pain of others, but also to entrench the existing power relations in ways that spectacles involving a ‘Self-superior’ and the ‘Other-inferior’ could be performed. These spectacles of visual politics are, for Boltanski (2004, p. 145), “[...] asymmetrical distribution of good and evil, a division between evil, assigned entirely to the persecutor, and good, which would then be the share of the unfortunate and those who assume responsibility for denunciation and accusation”. Within this context, the film industry came to have a deeper bite in the power of mediation, thus serving as an important mechanism to achieve political projects.

For instance, the threat or advent of conflicts spurred Hollywood to make popular films that constantly addressed the foreign challenges of the US and other Western democracies (Philpott, 2018, p. 144). Hollywood always used its power of mediation as a means of communication to portray the American and Western identity as the ‘Self-superior.’ This happened during the Cold War, when films performed by American heroes (mostly white and sexually attractive men) who saved the world from the Soviet threat. After the Cold War period, this dynamics of representing non-Western enemies to be defeated continued, but with the stigmatisation of Muslims and Arabs. Visual politics is about the most powerful actors using or taking benefit of all kinds of imagery productions, for instance newspapers, films, music, television, and social media, to tell everyone about how political and geopolitical imagination should be constructed.

The seeing and scripting of the popular films might help human beings to think further about how geopolitical imaginaries work and how friends and allies can be distinguished from enemies and suspicious others (Dodds, 2018, p. 159). Recognising the power of popular film, Bush's advisers, for example, were keen to frame the War on Terror as a black-and-white story that opposes "us" versus "them." This popular visualisation of supposed enemies strips them of their humanity and makes their killing not just possible, but desirable (Philpott, 2018, p. 144). But, not only popular films, other kinds of media-related communications can help privileged leaders and elites to demonise non-Western peoples by using images of suffering in their attempts to convince the public about the positive outcomes that securitising moves (e.g. humanitarian intervention) can bring. As Bleiker (2018, p. 4) contends, "in the world politics, the ensuing implications are particularly pronounced". In his argument, "our understanding of terrorism, for instance, is intertwined with how images dramatically depict the events in question, how these images circulate, and how politicians and the public respond to these visual impressions" (Bleiker, 2018, p. 4).

In visual politics of human suffering, the function of images is, according to Chouliaraki (2006, p. 56), "[...] reduced to the 'signal'". As she (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 56) convincingly explains, "the image as a signal is present in Manuel Castells' argument that 'the media tend to work on consciousness and behaviour as real experience works on dreams, thus providing the raw material out of which our brains works". In this sense, Bleiker (2018, p. 16) seems convinced that "there are inevitably power relationships involved in the nexus between visibility, society and politics".

What is important to grasp about visual politics of human suffering is that it is a tool used by those who uphold the power of mediation. It also aims at constructing collective consciousness according to the emotional contents selected to be presented to the audiences. This prescribes spaces of hierarchies in IR that imprison human beings in their dynamics in the way they are led to care about some humanitarian crises and encouraged to forget others. Understanding this dynamics is an important beginning to a necessary conceptualisation of an epistemological basis of analysis about the visual politics of human suffering.

2. Developing an epistemological basis of analysis

As previously observed, the visual politics of human suffering and its constitutive power of mediation is closely associated with institutional authority and regimes of knowledge. Therefore, when it comes to developing a critical approach about the visual politics of suffering, its comprising epistemology must tackle these issues. For this, the positivist epistemology that assumes a value-

free nature of knowledge must be challenged. That is to say, the positivist notion that transfers methods of natural sciences to social and political sciences, separating the subject from the object, must be put into question.

Following this line of thought, Onuf (2013, p. 206) comes into the argument that “positivism embodied in the figures of Morton Kaplan, David Singer and Kenneth Waltz enforced the ontological unity of nature and society by endorsing it, ratified the Comtean compact dividing nature and organizing sciences into level”. Yet in this reading, Onuf (2013, p. 206) also indicates that “[...] the world-making made the newly consolidated centre of world power seem historically inevitable, inseparable from the development of the modern world and, as such, warranted by nature”.

In contrast, Booth (2007, p. 94) believes that “critical theory considers the study of human society to be different from that of the physical world”. If one only looks at human society as very much alike to the natural world, a deficient perspective of the world system may be reproduced, whereby actors playing pre-determined roles in the tragic play can solely mediate visual representations of human suffering.

In this “naturally given spectacle,” visual politics is put into action to reinforce the adoption of exceptional practices through the creation of threats and demonised others. Visual politics is itself a regime of knowledge and a positivist way of looking at world politics often promotes it. From this positivist perspective, knowledge is indeed produced and reproduced pursuant to a particular and correspondent reality coming from a restricted club of privileged actors playing the leading roles in the tragic play.

This classical epistemology reflects what Der Derian (2009, p. 194) refers to as “[...] the continuing domination of a philosophical realism in IR – from its logical positivist to rational choice forms”. At a common sense, says Der Derian (2009, p. 194), positivists “[...] suggest a natural preference for conceptual rigour and clarity”. Onuf, Booth, and Der Derian are critical scholars with different approaches, and their differences are not a matter of concern in this article.

What is actually imperative to understand is that they have something in common: a post-positivist epistemological view of IR. That is, their rejections of the epistemological stance of rational choice theory. Their rejection of a ‘foundationalist’ account of the world, in which knowledge could be grounded by the correspondence of theory to a knowable reality. Post-positivists do not deny the existence of a ‘real world’ but they do deny our ability to grasp that world without the aid of theoretical categories, which cannot themselves be validated by an un-theorised reality (Brown & Ainley, 2005, p. 58).

Other IR critical scholars, who take the postulates of post-positivism in their epistemological accounts of the world system, are Buzan and Hansen. In their criticisms about the realism and liberalism, they say that these classical IR theories “[...] have followed the positivist route, combining in what Keohane coined as ‘rationalism,’ while critical constructivists, post-structuralists and most feminists have opted for a post-positivist, ‘reflectivist’ approach” (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 35).

For these post-positivist traditions in the IR critical discipline, they take the assumption that the world system is not composed of discrete entities of events that can simply be observed in their objective reality by actors who are outside of it and can survey it through a panoptic gaze. It is not possible to “see” or make sense of events in the world system without recourse to theoretical categories and assumptions.

In fact, even recognising an “event is dependent on theoretic assumptions (Duvall & Varadarajan, 2003, p. 77). In questioning for whom and for what reasons theory is or is not relevant, most of the post-positivists may agree with the famous Cox’s saying of “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox, 1981, p. 128).

What the leading roles performing the tragic play suppose the reality is, has a direct impact on the construction of knowledge; and the epistemological stance that reinforces this position comes to fulfil the needs and purposes for which the IR traditional theories were employed. However, this does not mean the absence of truth and reality. Perhaps one of the main goals of post-positivism could be well explained by the poststructuralist approach developed by Der Derian (2009, p. 194), which is “[...] to refute the claim that there is an external being, supreme epistemology, ultimate theory that can prove, adjudicate, verify an existence or truth independent of its representation”.

Within this context, a post-positivist epistemological premise on visual politics tackles this issue by recognising that the international structure is not given, natural, and pre-determined, and that the knowledge about human suffering cannot only be subjected to the most privileged actors controlling the power of mediation.

A critical epistemological premise on visual politics of human suffering is engaged in a demystification of reality by acknowledging that human agency can shape and reshape social structures, as well as redefine the knowledge about human suffering and its visual representations. Advancing a post-positivist account of the visual politics means to carry out further a social-intellectual dialogue that confronts regimes of knowledge. In this process, a redefinition of visual politics through sociological terms should be taken into consideration, and it is solely post-positivism that could provide the best critical ways of analysis for making this happen.

Hence, by adopting a post-positivist account of the visual politics, that confronts the regime of knowledge created by the power of mediation, one can realise that, as Chouliaraki, Orwicz and Greeley (2019, p. 301) emphasise the following: “whether shown and seen as photographs, displayed on analogue and digital screens, or experienced in the aesthetic form of artworks, memorials and monuments, the visual is used to produce responses”. They also come into the interesting conclusion that “[...] visualizations of suffering are invariably caught up in the politics of what it is to count as human, or not, what it is to witness, and what it is to respond in the name of humanity” (Chouliaraki, Orwicz & Greeley, 2019, p. 301).

In this politics of what it is to count as human or not, the process of making the suffering of some visible and more significant plays a key role. This process is also about making the suffering of some others invisible, less significant, and less reacted to. Whose suffering one sees and how one sees it, and whose suffering remains unseen to others, are subject to political governance and power.

This is substantially a matter of politics of humanity (Kotilainen, 2016, p. 96-97). For Robinson (2018, p. 65), “beyond the persuasive power of the image itself, visuals are also important in terms of the overall visibility of a humanitarian crises as defined by how much media attention it receives”.

One fundamental perspective that post-positivism offers to study this process, thereby, is the phronetic perspective. Chouliaraki (2006, p. 7) says that “the critical spirit of phronetic research comes from the study of how everyday news enact ethical values that come to shape our present as a particular historical moment”.

Unlike the positivist epistemology – which believes on the continuity of patterns and events in world politics, and it is not concerned with past knowledge and/or past events that created possibilities for change – the phronetic perspective is closely associated with the post-structuralist enquiry. This is due to what Chouliaraki (2006, p. 8) refers to as “[...] analytics of power that demonstrates how news discourse draws on historical themes and genres that have come to define our collective imaginary of the Other”.

In her viewpoint, “the element of historicity connects the question of how with the question as to why news discourse today shapes the ways in which we see the world via television in a biased way” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 8). But, not only through television, this sort of discourse repeats itself in the digital media. As Bleiker (2018, p. 7) explains, “various factors – from algorithms to the legacy of old media and the interference of states – can structure and mediate the flow of images”. He (Bleiker, 2018, p. 7) also takes as examples the “political events, such as

protest marches or terrorist attacks, which gain immediate media attention when they take place ‘in the heart’ of the Western world”.

The enormity mediation of these events shapes what is considered as worthy or unworthy of attention. According to a phronetic perspective, based on historicity, one may have a deeper understanding of the dynamics of visual politics. Then, to begin with understanding this dynamics, Boltanski (2004) reminds an argument about the influence of mediation in the foreign policy of powerful states.

He (Boltanski, 2004, p. 184) explains that “the argument usually invoked is that state leaders would dare to intervene only if under pressure from their own national public opinion or, at least, only if they conclude that this public opinion will support them”. Pursuant to Boltanski (2004, p. 184), “a consequence of this reasoning is that spectators are given a completely preponderant role, at least in democratic states, in the series of mediations which have to be activated in order to end or reduce distant suffering”.

Robinson (2018, p. 66) also affirms that “in recent years we have often witnessed appropriations of humanitarian narratives in order to justify Western military action”. Therefore, he (Robinson, 2018, p. 66) takes, as examples, the “images of troops delivering food aid in Iraq, or of liberated Afghans flying kites over Kabul following the fall of the Taliban in 2002,” which, in his point of view “[...] have become part of strategic attempts to persuade audiences of the moral legitimacy of wars and conflicts that are often disingenuously presented in humanitarian terms”. Then, in Robinson’s (2018, p. 66) line of thought, “images are part of deceptive communication that leads us to believe that our government’s actions are righteous, when, in reality they may well be profoundly harmful”.

About the terrorist attacks of 11/09, for example, Bleiker gives an interesting analysis of the television coverage and the enormity of the event. In Bleiker’s (2018, p. 25) words, “[...] the coverage not only made sense to the public but also already framed the parameters of the political response”. He (Bleiker, 2018, p. 25) also adds that “the prevailing script had already delineated what it meant to stand up in times of crises, how to rally around the nation and its deals, and, not least, how to act and retaliate with purpose and determination”. As he (2018, p. 25) indicates, “the result was the War on Terror that entrenched hostile perceptions of others and eventually led to more violence and terrorism”.

In this way, the phronetic perspective that comes to rescue history to study everyday news in the enactment of the ethical values shaping our political imagination can tell everyone a lot about images serving as mechanisms of foreign policies. As Boltanski (2004, p. 184) points out, “[...]”

leaders, who almost have a monopoly of the ability to act on the international stage, rely upon the representations that have of the emotions, desires and intentions of the spectators to take the initiative of intervening”.

In this context, Boltanski (*apud* Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 8) argues that “the aestheticization of human pain and the portrayal of the scene of suffering as populated by benefactors of evil-doers are crucial effects of discourse that originate in Hellenic and post-Enlightenment genres of public representation”. He (*apud* Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 8) concludes that “in their re-appropriation by electronic media, these historical effects of discourse do not cease to operate as strategies of power, but, still continue to produce and reproduce hierarchies of place and human life.

Ultimately, any critical approach based on a post-positivist epistemological account of the visual politics of human suffering must consider this phronetic perspective. Not only because this perspective rescues history to study the construction of our present political imagination over issues involving human suffering, but also because it gives us the proper knowledge to be aware of the reality constructed for us and to become more critical viewers of images and their absence.

In the IR critical study, post-positivism offers a fertile ground for cultivating our critical evaluations over manipulation and alienation. By challenging the naturalness of the international structure and by giving the proper tools to turn back into history to investigate the aestheticisation of human pain, a critical epistemology on the visual politics of human suffering should push the boundaries of what can be seen, observed, analysed, thought, and done in future social researches about the implications of all types of media (conventional or alternative formats) in IR-related issues and problems.

3. Establishing a methodological way of thinking

All sub-fields of IR theory apply methods, and the majority of them engage scholars and students in discussions about their application. Standard methods of traditional IR theories, for example, are put into question in broader debates within the IR critical academic community. Standard methods revolve around quantitative analysis of war, strategy, and tactics. They have also a focus on formal modelling accounts of balance of power, struggle for power, and military alliances. However, these methods reinforce rational choice theory, upholding a narrow focus on military power due to their state-centric interpretations of security.

Bearing this in mind, critical examinations on the visual politics of human suffering must establish alternative methods that operate hand-in-hand with the post-positivist epistemology, i.e. methods able to challenge the construction of the knowledge resulting from the power of mediation.

These alternative methods should push primarily the analysis of visual politics of human suffering away from the state-centric notions and the narrow conception of rationalism.

In general, terms standard scientific methods of traditional IR theories maximise all sorts of important values, such as logical coherence and rigour, but they do a poor job when it comes to the decisive purpose of human cognition: the efficient and efficacious production of useful knowledge (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009, p. 702). The methods that seem to be the alternative to better analyse the decisive purpose of human cognition are those that Booth (2007) name as methods of critical theorising. These methods aim to, as Booth (2007, p. 39) firmly indicates, “stand outside the status-quo, identify the oppressions within existing structures and processes, and develop the resources for change”.

In Booth’s (2007, p. 39) interpretation, “critical methods consist of a theoretical commitment and a political orientation”. This means going beyond the traditional way of methodologically looking at the world system with objective lenses that only observe struggles for power and military capabilities of states. It means to develop an alternative methodology that looks at the forms of dialogue within the public sphere.

All this considered, a critical methodology on the visual politics of human suffering should be judged by its contribution to sociology, and one of the methods of critical theorising that best represent this contribution is praxeology. Linklater (1998, p. 5) comes to argue that “praxeology is concerned with reflecting on the moral resources within social arrangements which political actors can harness for radical purposes”.

Praxeology is, in his point of view, “[...] preoccupied not with issues of strategy and tactics, but with revealing that new forms of political community are immanent within existing forms of life and anticipated by their moral reserves” (Linklater, 1998, p. 5). In the analysis of the visual politics, praxeology plays an important role when it comes to revealing new forms of political communities able to include the forgotten tragedies marginalised in the power dynamics of mediation.

As one may already notice, the ones possessing power over representational practices can also determine whose suffering is visualised, made visible, and significant, consequently having the power over who is suffering matters. Therefore, what determines iconisation, representability, and circulation of atrocity images is the political context (Kotilainen, 2016, p. 96). Within this context, Linklater (1998, p. 5) asserts that “modern praxeological analysis must aim for larger objectives, specifically the project of drawing upon moral reserves provided by modern ideas of freedom and equality in order to criticise systems of unjust exclusion”.

Exclusion is the rule and not the exception in the visual politics of human suffering. Images depicting pain of distant others are selected to appear in the everyday news according to the interests of those actors possessing power over representational practices. This makes everyone bears witness to certain events of suffering and not others taking place in regions or in circumstances where the interests of those controlling the power of mediation are not at stake. Forgotten tragedies represent the exclusionary character of the visual politics. They happen to afford little matter for the Western interests, receiving less attention by the mass media.

Moreover, applying the praxeological method to analyse the visual politics of human suffering, through a critical approach, is worth-while, not only because praxeology avoids the focus on the rational choice, but also because it sheds light on the logic of enactment. Aradau and Huysmans (2013, p. 9) prefer to use the term ‘enactment’ instead of ‘construction’ or ‘constitution.’ This is because enactment keeps what they conceptualise as “[...] fragility of the entities thus made in focus,” whereas “‘construction’ and ‘constitution’ tend to emphasize stabilization”.

They (Aradau & Huysmans, 2013, p. 9) also point out that “the notion of enactment has been introduced in methodological literature to make it impossible to treat methods as a matter of bringing theory into contact with reality, contemplation with factuality, representation with that which they represent”.

In their conclusion, the logic of enactment “[...] makes and remakes worlds, identities and things in a fragile, continuously changing way” (Aradau & Huysmans, 2013, p. 9). This is an intriguing logic provided by praxeology, particularly when it comes to investigating the production of information, knowledge, and reality by visual representations of pain and suffering of distant others.

Riddled with ideas of freedom and equality aimed at including forgotten tragedies, the praxeological account dives into the logic of enactment to determine how fragile can be standard methods of IR analyses. This is due to their selectivity techniques that exclude social realities in order to analyse power from above, focusing on power relations between governments and political and economic elites at a macro level.

What these methods do not recognise is how fragile could these power relations be if society takes the logic of enactment for granted. This means investigating domination and mediation and their power dynamics from below, i.e., in a more Foucauldian sociological interpretation. Then, enactment is the notion held by critical scholars to explain the potentials of society to become a powerful agency able to transcend the existing power relations through emancipation and civic engagement against domination.

Linklater (1998, p. 37) takes into consideration the Kantian praxeology, insofar as it offers, in his viewpoint, “[...] an empowering vision of the future possibilities in the expectation that emancipation could eventually play a transformative role by delegitimizing existing (and oppressive) structures and by steering human collective action to new political objectives”.

By considering Kantian praxeology a foundation of emancipation to make and remake worlds, Linklater (1998, p. 37) believes that “[...] collective actions could best respond to the new historical opportunities to secure the gradual transformation of oppressive structures”. Linking this assumption to the visual politics of suffering, Robinson (2018, p. 67) reminds everyone that “[...] our key challenge is to become critical viewers of images and the absence of images. The challenge is as gargantuan as it is crucial for it is an essential first step in our defence against manipulation and deception”.

Using praxeology to understand visual politics of suffering means to promote a logic of enactment that enlarges human beings’ moral boundaries to include the forgotten tragedies in an open dialogue within the public sphere. These forgotten tragedies exist within and in the surroundings of the Western world, such as the humanitarian crises at the US-Mexico border and the migration issue at the Mediterranean Sea.

These tragedies receive little attention in the visual politics, and they must be discussed in our society, so that sensibility and resistance would be able to flourish as components of an emancipatory project within the Western societies. If it is to comprehend visual politics of human suffering through critical lenses, one must improve our reactions and responses to the pain of distant others.

In IR academic debates, this can be done by developing a praxeological methodology that acknowledges the human agency as a potential actor to promote radical changes in humanitarian issues, either by acting, writing, or speaking out on behalf of the forgotten victims of human suffering. For IR students, for example, there is nothing more appropriate than reflecting on constructivist accounts of knowledge production. A new methodological way of thinking can provide this interesting exercise.

Final considerations

In this article, the key epistemological and methodological premises of a critical approach on the visual politics of human suffering has been introduced. IR theory is rooted in post-positivism and praxeological bases of analysis. From these bases of analysis, it was possible to reach a consensus that informed everyone how the power of mediation contributes to the construction of reality,

according to a regime of knowledge. The critique about mediation consists of confronting its dynamics, whereby privileged actors tend to use their power over representational practices to tell everyone about the world and how one sees it.

Therefore, to dismantle this dynamics, epistemological and methodological accounts based on post-positivism and praxeology must be taken for granted, so critical dialogues towards a more media-literate understanding can be made at a macro level within the academic community and the public sphere, more generally. This is because IR traditional theories do not capture a vision of the possibilities in the transformative role played by emancipation.

In contrast, critical scholars – despite their different approaches – share alternative perspectives and logics of research. Some of them are the phronetic perspective, which rescues history to study everyday news in the shaping of our political imagination, and the logic of enactment, which explains society as a powerful agency able to transcend the existing power relations through emancipation against domination and alienation.

This article also sought to identify new ways of rethinking mediation by advancing premises that can be used by IR students in their attempts to empower society according to an emancipatory project of research. This is an arduous task, and it requires the use of critical methods that are familiar to constructivist, poststructuralist, feminist, and other alike theorists. Whether using post-positivism to question reality, power relations, and their regime of knowledge and authority, or invoking praxeology to study society and the immanent possibilities for change, a critical research environment can flourish.

Either by contesting the regimes of knowledge or by investigating human consciousness as agent for social change, IR critical theory invites everyone to explore the visual politics of human suffering through a multidisciplinary approach, engaging everyone in a more historical-sociological inquiry in a way that human knowledge would be oriented to idea of deconstruction and emancipation.

For epistemological and methodological accounts of critically exploring the visual politics of human suffering, there is no other path to follow, but that of empowering civic engagement. That is why this article oriented epistemology and methodology to the understanding of the dynamics of visual politics in a reflexive way.

To achieve reflexivity about the dynamics of visual politics, it was necessary to observe that humanitarian crises are often presented to everyone through visual representations of suffering in accordance with deliberate intentions. This makes some crises visible, while others remain unseen,

hence producing meanings that justify humanitarian interventions. This scenario only benefits privileged actors with well-formulated policies and intentions.

Thereby, it falls to IR students living in democratic countries, to consider alternative research programmes that might offer the proper tools to build up a new and different knowledge about visual politics. This cognitive exercise should be based on critical evaluations on issues surrounding the abstract politics of international relations discipline. For this, questions about the legitimation of knowledge must be raised, and public debates and open dialogues within the academic community about the power dynamics of visual politics of human suffering must be strengthened. In this context, post-positivism and praxeology are important aspects for consideration.

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