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Marta Bashovski & Norma Rossi

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Introduction: political subjectivity in times of crisis

Marta Bashovski[a] and Norma Rossi [b]

[a]Campion College, University of Regina, Regina, Canada; [b]School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK

ABSTRACT

Modernity is often understood as a time of crisis. Health, humanitarian, economic, and environmental crises are just some crises characterizing the present. This special issue investigates these interwoven crises by investigating the subject *in* crisis, as making sense of how our worlds are changing requires interrogating how we ourselves are changing. How can we *apprehend* the subject and forms of subjectivities implied when evoking specific crises responses? In this introduction, we suggest reading current crises as expressions, effects, and accelerations of a longstanding epistemological crisis sustaining the modern articulation of subjectivity. To trace the subjectivity/crisis link we mobilize Derrida's notion of aporia, which exposes the unresolvable tension(s) at the foundation of concepts, to survey how subjectivity has been examined in political theory and international relations (IR) and to posit the continued necessity of immanent critiques of modern subjectivity. We conclude by setting out the individual contributions to this special issue.

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Contemporary crises

The contemporary – and, more broadly, the modern – have long been understood as times of crisis (Edmonson & Mladek, 2017). Unsustainable human development is the cause of both economic and environmental crises (Chakrabarty, 2018; Dolphijn, 2018; Fraser, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2015; Serres, 2013; Touraine, 2010); liberalism and its international order have been put in crisis by the ongoing war in Ukraine and the rise of far-right populisms (Brown, 2019; Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Fukuyama, 2022; Ikenberry, 2018); centuries of colonial and racialized violence have condensed into a crisis of anti-Black police violence and mass protests in response (Camp & Heatherton, 2016; King, 2020; Maynard, 2017; Taylor, 2016; Táíwò, 2020); and intra-state conflicts and economic inequality have produced mass migration and humanitarian crises (Bátora & Fossum, 2020; Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Olsen, 2019).

Following the eruption of an unprecedented global health crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – an unmatched set of political, economic, and social responses to this crisis have been enacted across the globe. The possibility of novel politics contained in the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has itself prompted significant intellectual responses in the field of international relations and

CONTACT Norma Rossi normarossi@hotmail.it

beyond (for examples, see: Delanty, 2021; Devakumar et al., 2020; Brubaker, 2021; Gray & Gills, 2022; Lipscy, 2020; McIvor et al., 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Spash, 2021; Zizek, 2020; Paul & McBride, 2020; Scotch, 2021; Walker, 2020). As we live through these crises, we are also trying to understand them, to make sense of the present and the possibilities, and possible futures, that may emerge from these crises. In short, the aim is to diagnose the present and prescribe possible futures.

There is a longstanding tradition of examining questions of crisis – including considering what is meant by crisis itself – historically and at any particular moment. Such debates on the question of crisis have, significantly, taken place in the pages of *Globalizations*. These debates often draw from Gramsci's distinction between conjunctural, or periodically occurring crises, and organic, or structural crises, which demonstrate the loss of coherence between political, economic, and cultural elements of society (Gramsci, 1971). These debates have tended to emphasize crises of capitalism, and specifically capitalism's growth imperatives, limits, and contradictions (Gills & Morgan, 2021; Gills, 2010), identifying crisis as an expected consequence of neoliberal economy (Amin, 2010), and explaining how mainstream economics has emphasized continued growth rather than reform to head off impending ecological collapse (Gills & Morgan, 2021).

These discussions have also identified crises of capitalism as 'multiple crises' (Houtart, 2010), which encompass multiple aspects of society, including the economic, political, and environmental. These more expansive articulations of crisis have allowed for a broader understanding, beyond a focus on economics (Hajek & Opratko, 2016, p. 218). For instance, Gills considers crisis through a modified historical materialist lens that takes together material processes and structures and conceptual forms and structures. He emphasizes that a lack of coherence, or 'unity' between the two produces destabilization (Gills, 2010, p. 278), a crisis that is both structural, in terms of material structures, and 'paradigmatic', in terms of the epistemological legitimations required for the system to function (p. 279). While our orientation in this special issue is closer to such understandings of crisis in terms of epistemological legitimations, these existing discussions have nonetheless tended to focus on how epistemological assumptions are normalized to maintain capitalism's growth imperative (Hajek & Opratko, 2016, Da Costa & McMichael, 2007). For instance, Hajek and Opratko focus on how certain events are defined as crises or not, depending on the types of gendered and racialized subjects experiencing them (2016, p. 219). In this way, the epistemological question of crisis becomes a question of redefinition.

In this special issue, we seek to contribute to understanding these series of interwoven crises, or 'multiple crises', by focusing specifically on the subject in crisis. Trying to make sense of how our worlds are changing requires interrogating how *we* ourselves are changing: as workers, as citizens, as subjects (Brown, 2020; Enloe, 2020; Hajek & Opratko, 2016; Rossdale, 2015; Rushing, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Zizek, 2020). We thus treat crisis not primarily as an effect of material factors (environmental degradation, crisis of capitalism, challenges to the liberal order), or an incoherence between structural and conceptual forms, but rather as a constitutive epistemological condition of modern subjectivity. Put differently, we engage the relationship between crisis and modern subjectivity from an epistemological perspective. Our orientation is to read the proliferation of contemporary crises through the lenses of this longstanding epistemological condition of crisis. This means reading current crises, as reflected in the contributions to this special issue, as expressions, effects, and accelerations of a longstanding epistemological crisis which sustains the modern articulation of subjectivity.

This orientation reflects a tradition of political theory that takes as its foundation that the connection between subjectivity and crisis *is* a constitutive condition of modernity. From this

perspective, conceptions of modern politics are founded upon understandings of the modern subject as a rational, self-creating, autonomous knower and actor, a *sovereign* individual, and individuated, subject (Ashley, 1989; Blumenberg, 1983; Campbell & Dillon, 1993; Ferguson, 2000; Foucault, 1970; Odysseos, 2010; Walker, 2015; Williams, 2001). This subject emerged, as Ferguson has put it, as the resolution of the crises – political, theological, economic, and epistemological – that inaugurated modernity as both a temporal period and as a way of knowing (Ferguson, 2000; Foucault, 1997; Williams, 2001).

As an autonomous knower and actor, the modern subject is also framed through a positioning vis-à-vis the foundational dualities and classifications through which modernity defines itself: modern/pre-modern, civilized/uncivilized, state/non-state, dynamic/static, rational/irrational, past/present, inside/outside, self/other. In this way, the form of the modern subject determines a spatiotemporal location and orientation, where to be an acting, knowing subject is to be located within a particular (Euro-modern) trajectory, in relation to a particular kind of human community, the state. To be otherwise is to be excluded from the status of an acting and knowing subject (Drexler-Dreis & Justaert, 2019; Epstein, 2021; Fabian, 1983; Ferguson, 2000; Martins Simonetti, 2023; Mudimbe, 1988; Mudimbe, 1995; Quijano, 2000; Said, 1985).

The modern subject is not, however, reducible to the individual and is indeed both paralleled and doubled in the form of the modern state and scaled in the modern international (Ashley, 1987, 1989; Epstein, 2016; Walker, 1992, 2018; Waltz, 2001). Early critical examinations of the modern subject in/of international relations particularly focused on unpacking the ways in which sovereignty is shaped and dependent upon the parallel sovereignty of the state in the system of states and obedient subjects within the state (Walker, 1992). Further, they examined how violence cannot be excluded from the figure of the reasoning political subject, as reason itself is complicit in the violent exclusions of political subjectivity (Campbell & Dillon, 1993, p. 2).

Yet, the form of modern subjectivity is both paradoxical and unstable, haunted by crisis. The subject is paradoxical because its foundational dualities simultaneously affirm and deny its presence and autonomy. These dualities work as the coordinates for the subject as knower, as a possible master of knowledge. Through these dualities, the world, and the self, is rendered fully knowable, fully representable, and hence to be mastered. However, the subject's sovereign autonomy is simultaneously conditional on the subordination to these dualities and classifications (Ashley, 1989; Foucault, 1970). For example, these dualities define the limits of what it means to be a reasoning subject (Connolly, 1988; Foucault, 2001) as one who can reason – understand the world and act in and on it – while also establishing a line between who can *become* reasoning and who cannot, where the latter is destined to disappear (Weber, 2017). Moreover, these limits define who belongs to the present and who to a temporalized past (Helliwell & Hindess, 2005) while also enclosing the subject within the limits of a racialized, gendered, and heteronormative order (Weber, 2017). Judith Butler expresses this paradox between sovereignty and subordination in modern subjectivity, claiming that these constitutive expressions of exclusion and inclusion, 'signify subordination and existence at once' (Butler, 1997, p. 21). In effect, the modern subject's autonomy is predicated upon subordination to the limits set by its foundational dualities.

Second, modern subjectivity is unstable because the very dualities on which this process of reproduction has been grounded have been demonstrated to be groundless and precarious. This groundlessness has been extensively documented as the universality of the state and the modern subject have been put in question by anticolonial and decolonizing movements which have revealed the arbitrariness and violent effects of the distinctions between modern and pre-modern, civilized, and uncivilized (for example, Fanon, 2008; Mamdani, 1996; Nayar, 2014). This precarity has also

been uncovered by psychoanalytic and gendered critiques challenging the public positionality and internal coherence of the modern rational heteronormative subject (for example, Braidotti, 1991; De Laurentis, 1986; Irigaray, 1985; Lacan, 2002; Spivak, 1988). Even the temporal coordinates of past and present, old and new can be shown to be an effect of the unauthorized authority of modern subjectivity rather than a pre-existing condition (Davis, 2012; Fasolt, 2004; Lundborg, 2016).

In one especially influential formulation, Jacques Derrida has expressed the paradoxical, unstable, and groundless conditions of the subject in crisis through the concept of aporia. For Derrida, the aporia at the heart of the subject is an unresolvable tension that not only exists as the foundation of a concept, but also defines it. It is distinct from a contradiction or an 'antinomy' because of the centrality of the tension to the understanding of the concept itself (Derrida, 1993, p. 16). As Derrida puts it, an aporia is an 'interminable experience [that] must remain if one wants to think, to make come or to let come any event of decision or responsibility' (16). Paradoxically, in naming the subject, 'we must refer to what does not yet exist' (4). The aporia exposes not only the arbitrariness of modern dualistic categories but also how these are always already in crisis and subject to processes of erasure. These conditions demonstrate the ways in which ideals such as the modern subject remain in a position of dependence to that against which they define themselves (Derrida, 1993, 2003, 2009).

The sovereign subject, in other words, is grounded in crisis, where it finds those categories and dualities sustaining its affirmation are continuously perishing (Edmonson & Mladek, 2017, p. 15). Indeed, the sovereign subject depends on the continuous practices of drawing boundaries between concepts and categories, creating antagonisms which are 'mutually incompatible and jointly necessary' (Tedesco, 2012, p. 340). Approached from such a perspective, modern subjectivity reveals itself to be inherently fragile: in Foucault's terms, man as modern subject is born at the same time as he is pronounced dead (1970; Barry, 2020). Caroline Williams has called this the 'paradox of the subject,' where the subject's very existence is dependent upon an aporetic quest for the stable foundations of modernity, foundations that themselves depend on the stability of the subject (2001, p. 8). Hence, on her formulation, the modern subject 'persists, even in philosophical discourses which appear to announce its dissolution' (2001, 190). In multiple ways, then, crisis, is the 'underlying grammar' of modern subjectivity and it is central to analyses questioning the intelligibility and the representation of a subject born already in crisis.

In deploying this concept of aporia, therefore, we aim to trace the link between subjectivity and crisis as a constitutive longstanding condition that must drive our diagnoses of current crises. From this perspective, we can see how the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understood as an isolated and exceptional crisis. Rather, the COVID-19 crisis has not only dramatically accelerated, intensified, and amplified existing crisis dynamics, but has also revealed how our political institutions 'already work as conditions of crisis' (Walker, 2020). It is therefore important to consider the current crisis not only as an exception that breaks with the norm, but also in relation to underlying continuities and already existing conditions. From this perspective, COVID-19 is an accelerating factor of an 'already unsettled world' (James & Steger, 2022, p. 426; Spash, 2021). For instance, the racialized and gendered power dynamics constitutive of the pre-COVID-19 'normal' order continue to shape and are exacerbated in this crisis. We can understand this enmeshed relationship between structural crises of structures and crises of subjectivity by examining the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. The racism enabling police brutality is also responsible for the disproportionately high number of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) who have died as a result of COVID-19 in both the US and the UK (APM Research Lab, 2020; Bion, 2020; Public Health England, 2020). Equally, from a gendered perspective, the

disproportionate negative effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women's working rights (Goertzen, 2020) as well as the rising levels of gender-based violence in lockdowns (Human Rights Watch, 2020) are two reminders of the exacerbation of these power dynamics. This intensification of existing inequalities further complicates attempts to understand the relationship between the exceptionality of this crisis and the 'normality' of other (longstanding) crises. Thus, to avoid seeing the COVID-19 crisis in isolation, or as exceptional, as a set of new circumstances disconnected from pre-existing conditions of modernity, we argue for a need to refocus our attention on the modern subject as a site of and in crisis, as well as a site for imagining political alternatives. Regardless of the possible envisaged responses, responses to crisis are predicated upon a subject who is threatened by the crisis and whose agency is called upon to react. However, the identity of such a subject or subjects cannot be taken for granted. While the modern subject has long been a key site for investigation, as both the foundation upon which modern political institutions (the state, capitalism, modernity itself) have been constructed, and a site of tension in the fabric of modern political possibilities, it has always been a fragile concept. How, then, can we seek to understand the subject in crisis? How can we *apprehend* the subject and the forms of subjectivities implied when evoking specific responses to these crises?

The remainder of this introduction proceeds in two parts. First, we examine how the concept of the modern subject has been problematized in international relations (IR) theory in the past three decades in order to argue that the implications of these aporias have been insufficiently examined. We show that a range of IR theorists have effectively challenged the discipline's reliance on a very specific form of the modern subject. However, we suggest that while recent theorizing has rightly emphasized the fragile and the exclusionary character of the canonical form of modern subject, it must also attend further to how the form of modern subjectivity persistently shapes modes of political imagination and practices. Second, we conclude this introduction with an overview of the contributions to the special issue, which, one the one hand, continue critical IR theory's deconstruction of the form of the modern subject, examining contemporary and historical crises as expressions of the precarities of modern subjectivity and, on the other hand, imagine alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and knowing.

Reframing the subject of international relations

In the field of IR, which has generally taken the modern subject as its basis, critical analysis of the modern subject as both foundation and problem has been relatively recent, emerging only in the past thirty years (Odysseos, 2010, p. 21). The precarious nature of modern subjectivity has been a core aspect of critical, poststructural, and anticolonial approaches to IR as the notion of an autonomous rational subject has appeared ever more in crisis and radically at odds with contemporary challenges and transformations (Walker, 1999). The work of Richard K. Ashley (1987, 1989) demonstrated how dominant realist conceptions of international order and political subjectivity depend on the figure of the modern subject, 'reasoning man [as] modern *sovereign*' (1989, p. 3), while Michael Dillon and David Campbell showed the foundational function of security to the construction of the subject (1993, p. 29). Siba Grovogui extended and deepened this argument to show that the European conception of sovereignty depends not only upon the rational modern subject as sovereign but the denial of both subjectivity and sovereignty to non-European subjects in foundational texts of international law (1996). This denial of the subjectivity of non-European peoples, Grovogui explains, has meant that non-Europeans have been unable to participate in the foundation of the rules of international law and international politics. Non-Europeans have been

blocked from participation in the international and contributions to IR from those outside the Euro-modern West have been systematically overlooked and underrecognized (Anghie, 2004; Meiches, 2019; Sinclair, 2018). In turn, this has enabled the construction of non-European subjectivity and sovereignty only in relation, and in contrast to, a particular Eurocentric form of rational modern subjectivity. This framing has long-lasting implications insofar as questions of self-determination and sovereignty for colonized peoples are severely undermined by the conceptual foundations of both sovereignty and subjectivity. This critique has especially exposed the violent material effects of the epistemic violence of modern subjectivity informing IR (for example, Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Henderson, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, 2018; Shilliam, 2013; Tucker, 2018). Ashley and Walker (1990) further called into question the foundational crisis at the heart of IR's conceptual project and its presumption of stable knowledge and an autonomous knower. Their work showed how the subject's constitution relies on a series of foundational, and deeply unstable dualities such as inside/outside, self/other, rational/irrational, intensifying IR's conceptual crisis by destabilizing the discipline's claimed sovereign authority and the stable dichotomies upon which this authority is based (1990, p. 377–378). Similarly, Der Derian and Shapiro have examined the layered, overlapping ways in which foundational understandings of subjectivity and global politics have been mutually constituted and reproduced not only in scholarly literatures but also in artistic production (Der Derian & Shapiro, 1989). Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat have further engaged with this argument to show '[t]he picture of the rational, conscious, autonomous individual has vanished' (1999, p. 4), demonstrating that the foundational dualities of modern subjectivity are bound up with a social order which transforms, rejects, and sometimes affirms these distinctions. In this own work, Shapiro has extended and applied this argument to emphasize processes of subjectification as always partial and contingent not only on particular identities and self-locations, but also, significantly, on practices of subjectification enacted by states (Shapiro, 1999, 2005). It is important to stress, then, that these critiques of modern subjectivity in IR, simultaneously reveal its crisis but also stress its persistence.

Crucial to the persistence of the modern subject is the inextricable link between subjectivity and sovereignty. Edkins and Pin Fat emphasize sovereignty as a 'master signifier' working to structure/give meaning within a social order (7). As master signifier, sovereignty is 'simultaneously a principle, and institution, and a practice' (Walker, 2004, p. 242) which continuously reinstates the aporetic dualities constitutive of modern subjectivity. In re-stabilizing these dualities, sovereignty stabilizes the notion of a 'cohesive whole subject' (Stern, 2005, p. 26) while reinstating the limits and possibilities for change and emancipation. Sovereignty, therefore, as a master signifier, consistently reinstates modern subjectivity by re-grounding it in dualities already in crises. As such, the link between sovereignty and subjectivity is thus one shaped by crisis, where, as Edmondson and Mladek note, 'the sovereign function has emerged repeatedly from crisis in order to quell crisis' (11).

These critical literatures in IR, albeit now several decades old, are particularly helpful for our project as they centre the epistemological weight of both the foundations of the modern subject and attempts to expose its aporias. In so doing, these literatures demonstrate the sovereign subject's simultaneous fragility and resilience. In other words, the aporetic nature of subjectivity and its condition of crisis does not mean that it can be easily dispelled – to the contrary, this tension only facilitates the persistence of existing forms (Walker, 2016). Thus, emphasizing the juxtaposition between crisis and aporia is especially relevant today, as while the above set of deconstructions and critiques have become somewhat canonical in critical IR circles, a much broader set of literatures on subjectivity in IR has emerged in the intervening decades.

In more recent years, IR scholars have theorized a number of subject positions beyond that of IR's rational modern subject, positions both individual and collective. These forms of subjectivity are often explicitly articulated as emerging from and as effects of sites of crisis and as aporetic. For example, Jabri's examination of the postcolonial subject that 'negotiates and seeks to reclaim terrain of the political' shows how this subject exceeds conceptual and theoretical capture (2013). The refugee subject embodies the limits and contradictions of modern subjectivity, based on aporetic distinctions between inside and outside (Dillon, 1998; Nyers, 2006). Aradau's work on the construction of 'political grammars' of mobility challenges knowledge claims about the migrant subject as a subject of security (Aradau, 2016; Aradau & Perret, 2022). Feminist and queer IR theories have also focused on discarding the gendered and heteronormative character of modern subjectivity and on emphasizing the material and embodied aspects of subjectivity (Weber, 2014, 2015, 2016; Wilcox, 2015). Similarly, psychoanalytically informed accounts of subjectivity have argued that contemporary protest movements articulate a form of collective subjectivity that exceeds the 'self-other orientation' constitutive of modern subjectivity (Zevnik, 2015, 2016) and that a politics of desire for the security of specific national identities plays a significant role in the construction collective political subjectivity (Solomon, 2015). The politics of emotions in the construction of political subjectivity has been examined through emotions as varied as humous and anxiety (Gellwitzki, 2022; Wedderburn, 2021; Zevnik, 2021). Newer articulations of subjectivity are also framed specifically in terms of the kinds of openings to thought they may create, while also resisting nostalgia for the promise of the rational subject or a reproduction of its aporetic dualities. For instance, in his account of articulations of decolonial subjectivity, Vieira stresses the centrality of a post-Western subjectivity defined in terms of its 'hybridity' (2019, p. 150). These approaches have productive possibilities, as Odysseos evokes a decolonial ethics to challenge and displace the racialized coloniality of the modern subject (2017).

One such approach is through questions of form, or the rejection of conventional scholarly writing to favour narrative modes and emphasize stories both personal and fictional. For instance, el-Malik (2016, this issue) narrates examples from life events – her own and others – in order to theorize the effects of ambient violence on political subjectivity. Similarly, Shapiro juxtaposes the habits and movements of 'aesthetic subjects', or fictional characters whose activities offer theoretical insights, against each other to produce literary montages that offer not only distinct understandings of subjectivity, but also challenge the generally accepted ways in which IR theorists and others have understood subjectivity (Shapiro, 2012).

These and other contributions have shattered the idea that the subject is anything more than 'ever will have been' (Edkins & Pin-Fat, 1999, p. 1). Indeed, hybrid, destabilized articulations of subjectivity need not be seen as a problem but, rather, as an opportunity. For example, Rosi Braidotti argues that 'defending an open-ended and relational vision of the subject opens the possibility for different types of ethics and politics, through which 'great value is given to ant-nationalism, anti-racism, and resistance' (2010, p. 408). Or, as Shiera el-Malik has argued, subjectivity has 'radical potential' for undermining dynamics and structures of power (2016, p. 214).

In this sense, the subject functions as a promise rather than a settled foundation. This promise can be insidious, however. On the one hand, the categories through which the modern subject is defined and understands him/herself – as knower, as free, as autonomous – can never be complete. On the other hand, the articulation of other forms of subjectivity offers a promise of the possibility of centring excluded ways of knowing and being that expand the limits of subjectivity from particularized Euro-modern understandings of freedom, autonomy, and knowledge. While these new literatures are crucial in animating a plurality of subjectivities, it is important to also take into

consideration that the forms of subjectivity being diagnosed are circulating within discursive formations informed by modern subjectivity. For example, as decolonial writers have articulated, colonialism is both a material and an epistemic form of domination. This produces forms of resistant subjectivities, which are always susceptible to reaffirming the very modern Eurocentric categories, they seek to contest (Grosfuguel, 2011; Nandy, 1983). This is the insidiousness of the promise of modern subjectivity, and as Ramón Grosfoguel argues, if this insidiousness is epistemic, it then requires a sustained epistemological critique (2011).

To this end, while we insist that exploring the possibilities and implications of excluded and proliferating forms and expressions of subjectivity is crucial, we also maintain that these explorations must take place in conjunction with a continuation of the deconstructive critique of modern subjectivity as a persistent epistemological structure. While there is a strategic need to explicitly reject and refuse continuing engagement with the Euro-modern literatures and categories that both affirm and critique modern subjectivity, there is also a need to continue to engage these categories as they continue to structure/inform the aporetic conditions through which we struggle.

Put differently, while imagining forms of resistance and alternatives is vital, we locate these in conjunction with a persistent immanent critique of the modern subject. For this reason, we maintain our attention on the signs of continuation within the multiple contemporary discontinuities and accelerations of contemporary 'grammars' of power and resistance (Edkins & Pin-Fat, 1999, p. 3), at the heart of modern subjectivity. Keeping the question of modern subjectivity central to interrogating contemporary crises has specific advantages. First, recentring the analysis of the aporetic subject exposes modern subjectivity not as a solution to crises but a site of crisis itself. Second, looking at the aporetic subject as a site of crisis resists claims of novelty and arguments that crises are external to the form of the modern subject. Instead, our approach underscores that crises are immanent to the very formation of subjects and must be understood as constitutive of these subjects. This view of subjectivity – as aporetic and constituted in crisis – allows us to resist two types of solutions, which tend to oversimplify the crisis of the modern subject. The first are nostalgic solutions which suggest a return of the normal. (Ashley & Walker, 1990). As normality is not untouched by crisis, 'modern subjectivity' cannot be restored if it is the site of crises itself. The second and opposite types of solution appeal to the new, but in doing so, often end up reproducing the aporetic dualities one is trying to escape as, again, these are constitutive of the subject in crisis. (Closs-Stevens, 2013; Walker, 2009) Instead, formulating solutions to contemporary crises must be weary of the risk of restoring the grammar of 'modern subjectivity'.

For these reasons, the search for alternatives must be accompanied by a continuous investigation of the epistemological conditions of possibilities of modern subjectivity. We thus resist the calls to simply abandon the modern subject and instead argue that calls for new forms of subjectivity must be taken as necessarily entangled with an immanent critique of the modern subject. The creative potential of the 'new', resides, in other words, in the interstices of the 'old'. Each of the contributions of this special issue demonstrate, in different ways, how these two aspects – the need for continuous immanent critique of modern subjectivity and the search for alternatives – are mutually necessary to a diagnosis of what is at stake in contemporary crises. Through sites as varied as military subjectivity, diplomacy, anti-austerity protests, postcolonial violence, and the city, the contribution examines the question of the subject in crisis as an epistemological question.

The first contribution (Riemann and Rossi, 2022) focuses on an immanent critique of modern subjectivity by looking at changes affecting military subjectivity. Through an analysis of mainly UK and US military advertisements, they argue that neoliberalism is increasingly penetrating and transforming military subjectivity through its quest for boundless individual freedom. This quest is in an

aporetic relation with the disciplinary military subject, expressing the limit condition constitutive of the citizen's freedom. Rather than a subject, neoliberalism transforms the individualized (military) subject into a limitless 'project' always in need of further optimization. This analysis, therefore, speaks to a changing meaning of freedom in late modernity. The freedom of modern subjectivity is intrinsically aporetic as it relies on the acceptance of its limitations to exist. However, by drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han, Riemann, and Rossi argue that neoliberalism's quest for boundless individual freedom (of the neoliberal military subject) has accelerated the crisis of modern subjectivity and exposed this aporetic condition. Therefore, this change has profound implications for how freedom and emancipation can function as 'liberating' tools for critique in late modernity, if their meaning has been transformed by neoliberalism's ethical commitment to creating limitless projects enslaved to their own need for solipsistic self-optimization. This tension leaves open key questions around what forms of dissent are possible, if the limits of subjectivity are subdued by neoliberal freedom, and how it might be possible to think resistant subjectivities in contemporary times.

Proceeding from these questions, Marta Bashovski's contribution suggests that questions of freedom must be read through an 'epistemology of dissent'. She examines how interpretations of the anti-austerity protests in 2009–2013 are revelatory of claims to shifting modes of interrogating and understanding political subjectivity (Bashovski, 2022). In doing so, Bashovski juxtaposes a reading of Foucauldian texts on the epistemology of the modern subject with sympathetic and progressive journalistic and scholarly accounts of the protests and the protesters. These accounts focus on the crisis of the unitary modern subject and the emergence of a multiplicity of alternative and resisting subjectivities such as the multiple resisting subject (Hardt & Negri, 2017; Dean, 2012, 2015), the autonomous subject (Graeber, 2013), and the networked subject (Castells, 2012). Yet, although the experiences of those directly involved in the protests might differ, Bashovski shows that these interpretations of the protests tend to rely upon and reproduce the modern unitary subject as their constitutive political form. This analysis exposes the epistemological hiatus between the lived experiences of the protesters and the possible theorizations of their enacted alternative subjectivities, displaying the limits of understanding such alternatives beyond the modern subject's epistemological categories. Bashovski thus raises questions of how to think alternatives to the modern subject in crisis beyond immediate experiences of dissent, and the extent to which these alternatives can be understood in ways that do not reproduce existing modalities of modernity and their aporias, leaving open the question of the appropriateness of our epistemological frameworks to diagnose the present.

The following contribution, by Sam Okoth Opondo, investigates both the epistemology of modern/colonial subjectivity and possible alternatives through the site of diplomatic encounters. Opondo builds on Mudimbe's archaeology of African gnosis (1995) to expose the practices of Western epistemological order. This order is constitutive of the key features of the international, demarcating, on the one hand, what can be defined as belonging to the international, its knowledge, and its accepted forms of critique from, on the other hand, what is not and those who are not, international. The modern/colonial subject emerges from these demarcations. While highly resilient, this order can be subverted in a multiplicity of ways, as Opondo demonstrates by engaging with Mudimbe's decolonial thought to articulate an analysis of diplomacy, dissensual friendship, and hospitality. Challenging methodological and disciplinary demarcations, Opondo works at the interface between philosophy and literature, juxtaposing Mudimbe, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Derrida with Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist *Binti Trilogy* novels. This allows him to show how 'African inventions and inventiveness … enable us to raise the question of diplomacy, humanity,

knowledge, hospitality, and friendship anew' (Opondo, 2022). To do so, Opondo traces the practices of what Michael J. Shapiro has called aesthetic subjects, who 'mobilize philosophical and diplomatic thought through planetary and technological imaginations that challenge pre-established patterns of recognition, attention, and association' (Opondo, 2022). This type of engagement requires meditative thinking that demands a suspension of the judgement and a condition of openness in relation to crisis. Such orientation, as Opondo demonstrates through his reading of Okorafor, requires resisting the modern urge to resolve crisis and to reinstate fixed lines and boundaries, by instead living at the margins, without, however, being marginal. The self in crisis thus makes one sensitive to the subject's multiple forms and 'composite fabric[s]' (Margulis & Sagan, 2007, p. 43 in Opondo, 2022).

Shiera S. el-Malik also examines the subject as a 'composite fabric' and its simultaneous entanglements with colonial knowledge and violence. The article constitutes a set of 'preliminary thoughts regarding connections between contemporary ambient violence and the ghostly remnants of the violence of "another time" that continues to do its work today' (el-Malik, 2023). Unfolding in six interwoven parts, el-Malik investigates the relation between the 'ambient violence' of past and contemporary forms of modern/colonial subjectification through eugenics. The six sections of el-Malik's contribution also, however, offer an orientation to develop alternative threads of social meaning, to counter the dominant violent frames of sense-making, and 'to think about alternative ways of being'. Through an engagement with Glissant's 'deep relationality', Fanon's atmospheric violence (2004, p. 15) and his writings and practices against a culture of eugenics (2008), while building also on Sylvia Wynter (2001), el-Malik develops 'sociogenics' as an alternative epistemological principle. Sociogenics allows for the understanding of individual and collective subjectivities in terms of forms of socialization rather than fixed biological dynamics which enable racialized identification. Colonial violence, therefore, is understood as 'sewn' into the social fabric (el-Malik, 2023). To begin the process of unsewing, el-Malik deploys Angela Davis' and bell hooks' critical engagements with Fanon (1988, 1996) as a means of diagnosing the persistent violence embroidered in the social fabric but also to simultaneously think about 'alternative weaves'. These alternatives mobilize threads of love and compromise that produce possibilities of healing for the modern/colonial subject.

Like Opondo and el-Malik, Davies and Tedesco deploy the weave of the social fabric as a central metaphor to produce the modern subject (2023). By refusing the over-determined subject produced by IR's levels of analysis frame, and turning to the under-studied, and under-determined space of the global city, Davies and Tedesco posit the possibility of creatively mobilizing the city as an 'aesthetic subject' which enacts a 'wild politics' where 'urban fabric becomes an apt material metaphor for the fabrication of forms of subjectivity that are neither individual nor sovereign' (Tedesco & Davies, 2022, p. 8). They do this by, first, engaging with Spivak (1988), and Dean's (2016) articulations of the subject in crisis to demonstrate the subject's aporetic and aesthetic boundaries before applying this analysis to a study of China Mieville's novel *The City and the City* as a model for reading the urban fabric of the city as aesthetic subject. Reading Mieville's city as subject demonstrates the subject's wild political practices as the city both provokes encounters and disruptions of the urban fabric which open new possibilities of subjectivity. At the same time, however, Davies and Tedesco show that wild political practices cannot and do not always breach the limits of modern subjectivity, which are constantly policed and reinforced. In this way, Davies and Tedesco demonstrate the doubled, aporetic production and disruption of political subjectivity, and the simultaneous necessity for both immanent critique of modern subjectivity and the production of alternatives through its disruption.

In his conclusion, Shapiro moves from an autoethnographic reflection about interior design magazines to an interrogation of the workings of predatory capitalism in contemporary times of crisis. Shapiro asks why in the context of ongoing global crises (including pandemics, environmental disaster, and extreme poverty) 'our attention still fails to focus except very episodically, on the suffering of distant others'. Through mobilizing the aesthetic subject, and drawing on fictional works, Shapiro argues that in order to 'acknowledge those who are most vulnerable' it is necessary to 'come to intimate terms with global crises'. In so doing, he emphasizes the importance of the interventions in this special issue, as the subject of crisis needs first to question the very epistemology of being in crisis. In addressing aporias of subjectivity in times of crisis, the six contributions in this special issue bring to bear distinct methodological and theoretical approaches – including narrative approaches, media, and literary analyses – to analyse how questions of subjectivity have been asked and answered in IR and contemporary politics.

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Notes on contributors

Marta Bashovski is assistant professor of Politics at Campion College at the University of Regina, Canada. She teaches and writes on the history of political thought, the politics of knowledge, narrative and aesthetic methods in political thought, and the politics of resistance and dissent. Her work has appeared in *Global Studies Quarterly, Millennium: Journal of International Studies, Theory & Event, Journal of Narrative Politics, Hybrid Pedagogy*, and elsewhere.

Norma Rossi is Associate Lecturer in International Relations at the University of St Andrews and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Her research focuses on the co-production of authority and subjectivity at the intersection between legal, political, and social dimensions with a specific focus on war and security. She has published in various peer-reviewed journals including *Global Crime*, *Journal of Intervention and State Building*, *Defence Studies*, *Peace Review*, and elsewhere.

ORCID

Norma Rossi http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5825-5047

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