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Rethinking ‘Protection’ in International Relations: A Collection of Interventions

Luise Bendfeldt, Emily Clifford, Hannah Richards and Louise Ridden

Ideas of protection litter both the academic literature and daily practice of International Relations (IR), yet protection itself – what it means, what it does, what it is – has so far eluded sustained and rigorous attention. The field of IR rests instead upon the central tenets of the state, power, sovereignty, and security, leaving protection largely implicit within these concepts. As four Early Career Researchers based across Europe and inquiring broadly into the politics of nonviolence, bordering, national defence, and gendered harm, we find this silencing curious. In our respective areas of IR, we have asked what this might *do* for practices of power and their associated knowledges. With this intervention we take to task the conceptual allusivity of protection by centring both its treatment in the discipline and, perhaps more crucially, how it might be reimaged following sustained, feminist inquiry.

This intervention builds from the early successes of our research agenda and the organisation and hosting of an externally funded workshop entitled *Narrating Protection in IR: Questioning the (in)visibility of the inbetween* at Uppsala University in January 2024. From there, we have brought together a number of researchers to contribute empirically and theoretically varied research articles that explicitly problematise the concept of protection.

This is a significant contribution, firstly, because protection is arguably *the* central concept underpinning the founding myth of IR as a discipline. For many scholars, and members of the public, the promise of protection legitimises the state system and underpins claims to state sovereignty. And yet, our research, teaching, and learning often fails to read between the lines of these stories, moving too quickly towards evaluating the use and abuse of state power. This largely uncritical approach to the spaces in-between IR’s key concepts is demonstrated by the oversight of protection in IR textbooks. Recent editions of ‘Essentials of International Relations’ (Mingst and McKibben, 2021), ‘Introduction to International Relations’ (Grieco *et al.*, 2022), and ‘The Globalisation of World Politics’ (Baylis *et al.*, 2023) make many references to the instrumentalisation of protection narratives (such as the Protection of Civilians Agenda), but none explicitly or comprehensively engage with protection as a concept in its own right. This is true of both traditional and critical IR (e.g., Edkins and Zehfuss, 2019). Even the ‘Routledge Handbook on the Responsibility to Protect’ (Knight and Egerton, 2012) does not have a chapter on what protection means, does, or is. Undoubtedly,

literature concerning the enactment of narratives of protection is useful in understanding the political power of the ideal of protection. Nonetheless, without attention to that which underpins IR's key narratives and assumptions we risk undermining our own analytic efforts.

What is more, the under-theorisation of protection has implications that stretch far beyond fears of academic laxity. How we conceptualise protection shapes how we understand and respond to key moments and challenges in international politics. Travelling across disciplinary boundaries, ideas about protection draw together scholars interested in everything from war and humanitarianism to climate policies, migration, or internet usage. Subsumed under the broad rubric of security – which is, itself, highly contested, subjective, and shifting (Stern, 2005) – IR literatures use narratives of protection to capture everything from the arms trade (Stavrianakis, 2016) to global vaccine rollouts (Felter, 2021), the environment (Theil, 2021), border controls (Van Houtum and Pijpers, 2007), and human rights legislation (Donnelly and Whelan, 2020). These contributions take a significant step in drawing attention to how an uncritical embrace of protection discourse can place value on particular kinds of life. Thus, imperiling the efforts of many in the discipline to generate knowledge in support of the construction of better futures. Without interrogating protection conceptually – asking what protection is, who gets to invoke the term, to define it, and to instrumentalise it – IR loses the ability to adequately challenge the power hierarchies upon which large chunks of international politics rest.

Importantly, these interventions hold the idea of protection open. This is essential, as any ontological investigation into what protection *is* necessitates epistemological questions about how protection is *known*, *understood*, and *felt*. As feminist scholars, we seek to make sense of the everyday – that is, how protection narratives are experienced in the everyday lives of those who we are told are being protected. To do so, it is important to explore the question of narration: what happens when civilians define protection in their own terms? How might such protection look? Scholarship to this effect is in its relative infancy; Lyytinen's (2015: 48) work with Congolese refugees draws attention to the 'physical, imagined, lived, and relational elements' of 'protection space'; Ramsay's (2017) research with resettled refugees in Australia challenges narrations of protection that rely on linear temporalities; Gray (2022) argues that rather than a 'thing', protection in armed conflict is a relational network, narrated and enacted by communities themselves; and Ridden (2023) argues that nonviolent imaginaries of embodiment, space, and temporality allow for an undoing of binaries which

are present in traditional approaches to the protection of civilians, such as peace/war, civilian/combatant, safe/unsafe.

This intervention highlights and builds on this work by bringing into conversation a variety of perspectives on protection from different contexts. In so doing, these contributions necessarily blur boundaries between the everyday, the national, and the global, with specific focus on the affective politics of protection. The individual pieces that make up this intervention each introduce new ways of knowing, experiencing, and practicing protection that pave the way for emancipatory politics and knowledge production.

Whilst the interventions contained in this piece have varied perspectives, they all touched upon themes of embodiment, relationality, care and decentring the state as *the* protective force. To begin with, Katharina Wezel and Katharina Krause use an embodied analysis to consider protection as attentiveness to our shared vulnerabilities. Through the example of pandemic-mandated facemasks, they recentre the body in protection discourse and, in turn, start a discussion about protection as an ambiguous and socially mediated process of becoming with insecurity. With this, they challenge the binaries embedded in IR's health-security nexus.

Building on embodied relationships of protection, Luise Bendfeldt and Victoria Basham explore protection beyond the state by centring 'constellations of care'. They argue that conventional alternatives to state protection, such as charity, aid and relief often simply supplement state protection rather than challenging the status quo, past injustices and their ongoing effects. Instead, Bendfeldt and Basham advocate for forms of protection based on community, solidarity and mutual aid - to ensure protection of all living things in the here and now *and* a liveable future. Extending this critique of hierarchies of protection, Hannah Owens and Polly Pallister-Wilkins employ critical feminist analysis of 'trainings' offered in Jordanian refugee camps to uncover the racialised, gendered, and classed hierarchies of the Global North humanitarian industry. They demonstrate the ways in which the so-called localisation agenda fails to challenge structural violences, by building on interviews with those staying and living in refugee camps, and instead produces residents as dependent and vulnerable 'others'.

Continuing the questioning of assumptions most fundamental to existing protection practices, Anastasia Prokhorova and Louise Ridden engage with the idea of self-protection, troubling the idea that it is a universal and self-evident right. Through the case studies of unarmed civilian protection and mass hunger strikes, they ask: who or what is the ‘self’ in self-protection? In so doing, they begin to unravel the neatly bound body to show that protection, and the self, are complex and relational processes. This embodied relationality is deeply temporal. To finish, we turn to Emily Clifford and Hannah Richards’ discussion of the temporalities of protection and, in particular, its future politics. By problematising the promise of protection put forward by the British armed forces in response to sexual violence within their ranks, they identify and challenge the institutionalisation of linearity and the possibilities this inhibits. Clifford and Richards thereby reveal the utility of a future politics for understanding the tensions inherent to protective relations, creating space to think about the diverse temporal experiences contained and constrained within them.

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