**IR Theory in Practice Case Study:**
**The 1999 Kosovo Crisis**

**Section 4**

**IR Theory and the 1999 Kosovo Crisis**

*From reading Chapter 12 of* The Globalization of World Politics (3e.)*, you should now be familiar with the basic tenets of some Alternative International Relations* (IR) *theories. You are advised to consult this crucial chapter if you have not done so already as its contents will not be repeated here. Where you see bracketed chapter references, for example (see ch.4), this refers to the relevant chapter in* The Globalization of World Politics (3e.).

**Introduction**

You should be aware by now that International Relations Theory has undergone something of a sea change since the beginning of1990's. You will also be aware that, in general, humanitarian intervention has been viewed as a quintessentially "liberal" foreign policy. Did Kosovo 1999 change all that? Are we entering an era of "postmodern" warfare - combat where traditional epistemologies and world-views are being left behind? As well as considering this question you should also consult the Realist, Liberal and Marxist sections of the case study for important challenges to Alternative theoretical approaches. The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 12 of *The Globalization of World Politics* (3e.) illustrate important aspects of the Kosovo crisis from these alternative theoretical perspectives. As with the previous sections, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways alternative international theories might help you think about the Kosovo crisis. However, we will briefly focus on 1) the importance of discourse and identity politics; 2) the construction of the security dilemma; and 3) rape in Kosovo.

**1) The importance of discourse and symbols**

The importance of discourse and the need to construct counter-narratives was highlighted perhaps nowhere more in the 1990s than in the wars in the former Yugoslavia. One of the central themes of Alternative international theory, especially **post-modernism**, is that symbols, metaphors and **representations** are integral to world politics and security. **Symbolic politics** helps to define political and security agendas and the ways in which politics is perceived, used, and justified. "Self" and "other" definitions are thereby created and transformed in mutually constituting ways. For example, in an effort to unify and organize behavior in terms of "group-ness" a system of ascribed ethnic categories and

**political identities**, histories, memories, past glories, wars and suffering have be invoked. Using ethnic symbols to assemble support for exclusionary policies between Serbs and Albanians is thus a form of representational politics intimately connected to issues of global security (see ch.13).

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**Box 4.1: The exploitation of 'Truths'**
The case of Kosovo illustrates what happens when political leaders exploit the most demeaning Truths about the other to create intense feelings of insecurity and vicimization. [T]he conditions which foster a politics rooted in antagonistic Truths: a culture of victimization and a history of real and imagined domination of one group over another, long-term human political and social oppression of a disfavored ethno-national group, structural poverty, unmet human development needs, media manipulation of misunderstanding among the general populace, and the absence of civil and political institutions which allow for divergent opinions.
*Julie Mertus, Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War, p. 4*

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For example, the "ethnic conflict" narrative has been a significant way in which representations of conflict shape war. Persistent media representations (until very recently) portrayed the conflict between Serbs and Kosovar-Albanians as ethnic and ancient, ignoring that it was not whole ethnic groups but sections led by elites, and that many people on both sides wanted to live peacefully with each other. By employing a narrative that **depoliticized** the conflict (ignoring the political objectives served by violence) the conditions were created to justify international inaction until 1995 in Yugoslavia and1999 in the case of Kosovo.

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**Box 4.2: The Ethnic Conflict Myth**
Ethnic conflict is a strategic myth in the sense that it is not ethnic groups that are fighting each other, but sections of ethnic groups led by those who claim to speak on behalf of the supposed whole. These ethnic groups are not actually fixed, completely separate groups of people - their separateness is created and moulded through representational practices.
*Barry Buzan and Eric Herring, The Arms Dynamic in World Politics, p. 186*

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The reproduction of the myth that we were witnessing an "ethnic conflict" is accomplished through a narrative describing the war as Albanian-Muslims versus Serb-Christians. The prominence given to ethnic divisions in virtually every account of the conflict was highlighted in the continual mention of the census statistics of 90% Albanian-Muslim and 10% Serb. This also served to ignore the existence of other ethnic groups in the territory, such as Roma, who faced intimidation from both Kosovar- Albanians and Serbs.

## 2) The social construction of the security dilemma

What has conventionally been conceived as the enduring and natural predicament of international relations (see ch.7 and 13) and more recently ethnic conflict – the "security dilemma" - is conceived by some alternative theories as a construction open to dispute, to be transcended and denaturalized. If you have not already done so, you should refer to the Realism section of this case study and Chapter 12 of *The Globalization of World Politics (3e.)* for an explanation of traditional approaches to the security dilemma. The criticisms of the realist account from an alternative perspective are twofold. First, a **historical-sociologist** would suggest that it is problematic to transpose the concept of the security dilemma onto "ethnic groups" thus merely replacing the state with an equally problematic entity as the **object of security.** This uncritical assumption of the prior existence of ethnic groups ignores what has made them politically relevant in Kosovo and how the creation and manipulation of security dilemmas partially constructed ethnic groups in the first place. Realist **epistemology and terminology** is thus unable to comprehend dynamics of **intragroup identity formation**. Realism assumes what is to be explained: the existence of the security dilemma in relations between Serbs and Kosovo-Albanians. The politics behind the construction of the security dilemma, principally by Serb-nationalists, is ignored by Realist-inspired accounts. An alternative analysis can be constructed in which, through scare mongering via **media manipulation**, Serb-nationalists created rather than responded to a "natural" security dilemma in relation to Kosovo-Albanians.

The second criticism of Realism concerns the political and military dynamics of the conflict between Kosovo-Albanians and Serbs. What determines the acuteness of the security dilemma is uncritically accepted by Realism, a natural feature of relations between groups. The inherently offensive military power of ethnic communities is assumed, ignoring the processes of political identity creation and recreation responsible for the designation of other groups as a threat. An alternative **normative** approach to the security dilemma might be based on the belief, according to Nicholas Wheeler and Ken Booth, "that what is possible in world politics is expandable, so even though the security dilemma has been a regular feature of interstate relations in the past, the expansion of community between peoples can provide an **escape from its grip**" (1992: 57). In short, the so-called laws of international relations do not function independently of our understanding of them and efforts to change them.

## 3) Rape in Kosovo

Mainstream realist discourses of war have traditionally discounted the impact of war on women and how the rape and humiliation of women can be a **deliberate policy of war** (see ch.30). This traditional conception has informed the response of reports of mass rape throughout the ages in which no real attempt was made

to put an end to such atrocities or convict those who were guilty. **Feminist** scholars have long tried to forge the link between the historical marginalization of women and the regular practice of turning a blind eye and/or excluding analysis of the systematic rape of women in war. Since the public exposure of the rape of mainly Bosnian-Muslim women in the 1990-95 wars in the former Yugoslavia, however, some progress has been made with the trying of rapists at the War Crimes Tribunal at **The Hague**. This was the first time **rape as a war crime** had been successfully prosecuted. During the run up to the Kosovo intervention the British Government went as far as citing incidence of the systematic rape by Serb forces of Kosovo-Albanian women, along with other human rights abuses, as one of the justifications for the military intervention (Kennedy-Pipe and Stanley, 2000: 78-9). Whether or not NATO's bombing campaign did much to prevent rape, like the other human rights abuses, is less clear. In fact, it might have made it easier for Serb forces and paramilitary groups to clear villages and rape women as some sort of "revenge" for the NATO bombardment. Kosovo-Albanian women have not only suffered attack by Serb military forces. They have also suffered domestic abuse and rape by Kosovo-Albanian men - before, during, and particularly after the crisis.

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**Box 4.3: Gender and Ethnic Myths**

nationalism became 'written on the body'. Slurs against Kosovo Albanians shifted…, a sexualized imagery of Albanian men and women was adopted. In the mainstream Serbian and Yugoslav presses, Albanian men were declared to be rapists… Albanian women were portrayed as mere baby factories… Accused in the past of being culturally inferior, Albanians increasingly were depicted as genetically inferior.

*Julie Mertus, Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War, p. 8*

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http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=132
"The Kosovo War Took Place in Orbital Space". Click here for a theory interview of Paul Virlio by John Armitage.