British International Studies Association

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Gendering the Politics of Public Memory

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The construction of public memory about violence and conflict is an inescapably political project. The shape that public memory takes matters; it is part of the process through which collectives construct hegemonic narratives about who 'we' are, and what 'we' value. In most cases, scholars have suggested, the dominant stories that have been told about conflict – most clearly through the construction of the memorials that populate public spaces – have contributed to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the (gendered and racialised) status quo. There have, of course, always been cracks in dominant memory formulations; counter-memories struggling for space, perhaps most notably through artistic expression. In the contemporary moment, moreover, such struggles have gained increased global public attention, as disparate groups in multiple places make claims to public representation that question conservative stories of national unity and strength. On the one hand, we see progressive movements seeking to pull down monuments that reflect values they wish to see banished from contemporary society; on the other, we see efforts to conduct memory work, in multiple formats, that offers support to alternative and/or progressive values. This panel intervenes into important contemporary public debates by unpacking the complex role that gender plays in shaping examples of memory work in different spaces. The papers draw on empirical case studies focused on the construction of memory around sexual violence, around conscientious objection, and around terrorist attacks.

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