International Political Sociology

The Mundane Matters

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By definition, the ''everyday'' appears inconsequential. How could paying attention to who makes breakfast add to our analytical powers? How could monitoring laundry take us deeper into causality? Surely, assigning weight to casual chats in the elevator or before meetings begin would be a waste of precious intellectual energy. The everyday is routine. It is what appears to be unexceptional. Devoid of decision making. Seemingly pre-political.

For an embarrassingly long time, I didn't pay attention to the everyday. I, of course, lived it. My relationships with others—parents, friends, colleagues, interviewees—depended on my everyday routines somehow meshing with theirs. But I didn't think to spell them out when I engaged in formal analytical efforts. I presumed that my task was to reveal the workings of—and consequences of—power, and that those workings would manifest themselves by standing out from the mundane. If this were true in my attempts to understand ethnic politics in Malaysia (my initial research), it would be, I imagined, all the more true when I began to investigate the causes and consequences of international politics.

I was wrong.

It was feminist analysts who opened my eyes to how wrong I was and what exactly I was missing in the dynamics of international politics by naively imagining that the everyday was pre-political, analytically trivial, and causally weightless.

The most famous late twentieth-century feminist theoretical pronouncement is, ''The personal is political.'' Its crafters were calling on women (and any men who had sufficient nerve) to look to the everyday dynamics in their lives to discover the causes of patriarchal social systems' remarkable sustainability. This call would have profound implications, we gradually learned, for understanding the flows of causality, the constructions of political cultures and the inter-locked structures of relationships between those actors we so simplistically call ''states.'' The sites for research, these pioneering feminists argued, were not just states' corridors of power, not just political parties' or insurgencies' strategy sessions, not just corporations' board rooms. The sites where we would have to dig for political causality were kitchens, bedrooms, and secretarial pools; they were pubs, brothels, squash courts, and factory lunch rooms—and village wells and refugee camp latrines. This was an astounding revelation: that power was deeply at work where it was least apparent. It was also disturbing for many social scientists, especially those who had found alluring the challenge of revealing the ''Big Picture'' of the international system, who certainly had not been initially attracted to their professions by images of themselves taking notes in a brothel, a kitchen, or a latrine.

In asserting that ''the personal is political,'' feminist analysts were claiming that the kinds of power that were created and wielded—and legitimized—in these seemingly ''private'' sites were causally connected to the forms of power created, wielded and legitimized in the national and inter-state public spheres —*and*, moreover, that state and economic elites each knew it, even if they rarely openly admitted it. That was why those with their hands on the levers of state, cultural, and economic institutional control were so preoccupied with designing and promoting marriage, prostitution, child care, and reproductive regimes that *both* would ensure that patriarchal domestic hierarchies continued to be of a sort that supported patriarchal public hierarchies *and*, simultaneously, would

perpetuate the useful myth that private and public spheres were structurally separate. State elites' preoccupations? Oh, surely they were taxation, labor unrest, trade imbalances, national sovereignty, and militarized security! Look again, warned the feminists. Feminist analysts were not contending that state elites were unconcerned about these things. Rather, they argued, state elites believed that sovereignty couldn't be guaranteed without state control over women's sexuality: likewise, that state elites believed that inter-state militarized rivalries couldn't be managed without most male citizens becoming invested in a certain mode of manliness.

Novelists had realized this for more than a century, especially writers of ''domestic'' novels. These were not stories of grand adventure or elite machinations. Rather, they were stories of the hearth, parlor, and dining table. Any reader of Jane Austen's or George Eliot's astute novels learned that the maintenance of inter-class and gendered power in the nineteenth century relied on the day-in, day-out ''below-the-radar'' reinforcements of particular domesticated sentiments and expectations—and that they, in turn, formed the pillars of a distinctive sort of imperial state. But scholars of international politics haven't been in the habit of recommending that their students read *Mansfield Park* or *Middlemarch.*

At first, in my fledgling attempt to test the analytical usefulness of ''the personal is political'' in the exploration of international politics, I wasn't sure where to look. Where was the mundane, the personal, the private, the domestic in the politics of militarized international politics, in the politics of globalized trade? Weren't international politics as far from the domestic as one could get? And, to be honest, I was afraid that I would lose my tenuous hold on my credentials as a ''serious'' political scientist if I let it be known that I was becoming interested in what went on in the parlor. Nobody, furthermore, had ever encouraged me to think that taking the lives of ordinary women seriously or plunging into the daily workings of femininity would earn me professional respect.

Then, of course, there was the problem that, as a mere political scientist, I had not been equipped to investigate the domestic sphere, much less intimate relationships, even if I could figure out where those sites were in international politics. In my conventional kit were tools to observe and make sense of policy processes, institutional structures, formal ideologies, public rivalries, and social mobilizations. Each of these tools seemed too blunt or out-of-scale for pursuing my new feminist-informed questions. But I had to begin somewhere, so I started thinking about two sites simultaneously, not sure what I'd uncover or whether anyone would recognize it as ''political'' or as ''international.'' The first was the assembly line of multinational corporate export factories. The second was the private households of male soldiers.

Both of these ongoing investigations would have lasting effects on how I investigated the ideas, rituals, players, structures, and formal policies whose interactions made and remade international politics. I would have to find the intellectual stamina to follow much more extended chains of causality, from the micro to the macro, from the mundane to the dramatic. Perhaps more challenging, I would have to overcome the cultural assumption pervading most social sciences that whatever was tarred with the brush of femininity was intellectually trivial.

While, initially, I explored the international politics of gendered export assembly lines and gendered military households separately, they eventually converged. National state officials and corporate managers were relying on masculinized militaries (and militarized police) to keep feminized garment, sneaker, and electronics assembly lines profitably rolling.

It was feminist-informed labor organizers of women in multinational factories who showed me the way. Women organizing export factory women workers in

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Hong Kong, South Korea, the Philippines, and Mexico in the 1980s had discovered through trial and error that the orthodox, that is, masculinized, formulas for organizing male factory workers didn't work for women. Concentrating on issues arising solely within the factory (for example, the speeding up of the assembly line) and on salary-focused demands derived from presumptions about paid work and workers' lives that were out of sync with the everyday realities of women factory workers would be ineffective. That is, to be successful as a labor organizer, one had to start from—not treat dismissively, not treat as trivial, not treat as private—the mundane dynamics of most women's wall-to-wall, dawn-to-dark lives. That is, to take on the international alliances between local state elites and the executives of Nike or Motorola or Levis, activists would have to not only ''think big''; they would have to ''think small.'' And they would have to do both simultaneously. This intellectual strategy adopted by feminist activists would guide me to a new analytical approach to international political economy. Oddly (or perhaps, perversely) enough, Jesse Crane-Seeber has found that US counter-insurgency strategists have discovered that it is as hard to persuade American male combat soldiers to take seriously the messy complexities of Afghan civilians' everyday lives as it has been for feminist labor activists to persuade conventional labor union organizers to take seriously the demanding, gendered lives of women factory workers (see Crane-Seeber in this Forum).

A woman working in a sneaker factory in South Korea or an electronics factory in Hong Kong or a garment factory in Mexico did not enjoy the masculinized luxury of imagining herself first and foremost to be a paid employee of a particular export-oriented company. She usually had to keep clearly in mind that, if unmarried, she must meet her own, her parents', and the state's expectations of her as a ''dutiful daughter,'' a young woman who would prioritize her responsibilities to her parents back in a poor rural village. If unmarried, she simultaneously (and she, her parents, and male government officials all hoped this fit neatly with her daughterly goals) had to be daily aware of her need to act in ways that kept her femininized respectability in tact, that is, that kept her ''marriageable.'' If the woman factory worker were already married, then she had to be sure that she behaved in everyday ways that put her marriage first, that sustained her public reputation as a ''good wife,'' and that did not embarrass or anger her husband. The threat of a husband's domestic violence against a wife displaying autonomy served not just the husband, but the foreign-investment dependent state and its multinational corporate sponsors. Remain stubbornly uninterested in the minutiae of domestic violence, and one stood little chance in making adequate sense of contemporary international political economy.

Analyzing these everyday realities had strategic implications for feminist labor organizers of factory women. They could not unthinkingly call after-work meetings as male organizers usually did, certainly not evening meetings, since merely attending an after-hours gathering could jeopardize many women's social standing as respectable young women or responsible wives. If such meetings became essential, then organizers and the women workers themselves would have to explicitly confront the definitions of ''dutiful daughter'' and ''good wife.'' Neither could be treated as mere side issues. Together, the women workers and feminist organizers also would have to politicize women's everyday understandings of feminine respectability and women's everyday experiences of domestic violence. Marriage, local cultural constructions of the ''good'' and ''bad'' woman, and violence against women, not just decent wages and shop-floor hierarchies, had to become integral to women's organizing strategies in multinational export factories. When they did, demands could be made in solidarity, strikes were more likely to succeed, wider community support for women workers could be mobilized. As Xavier Guillaume notes, acts of resistance may have global consequences, they may even be promoted by strategists who are involved in

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global networks, yet in the eyes of the individuals doing the actual resisting, their resistance may feel intensely local, even intimate (see Guillaume in this forum).

Listening to these feminist labor organizers and those women factory workers producing goods for overseas markets who joined their efforts led me outside the factory gates. I would have to follow these women workers home. I would have to take into account their relationships with their mothers and fathers, as well as their anxieties about their relationships with their husbands and boyfriends. If I were to make feminist sense—that is, more reliable sense—of the international politics of the trade in privatized goods and of states' stake in that trade, I would have to start giving serious thought to the gendered politics of marriage, the constructions of femininities and masculinities, and the strategies women use to avoid violence. I couldn't do any of this unless I devoted careful, sustained attention to women factory workers' everyday lives, before dawn until long after dusk. If I shrank from this task, I would risk under-estimating the amount and kinds of power shaping international politics. It was, I newly realized, too big a risk to take.

Everyday Counterinsurgency

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What makes an occurrence or practice ''everyday'' is the extent to which it is unremarkable, taken-for-granted, or ostensibly natural (see the helpful elaboration by Enloe, in this forum). War operations seemingly lie far afield from everyday activities, unless the focal-point is the experience of combat participants themselves. For those on a 12-month deployment overseas or unlucky enough to live near a foreign combat outpost, foot patrols, convoys, detentions, and checkpoints *are* everyday occurrences.

While International Relations scholarship typically treats combat as an exceptional state of affairs requiring explanation, the everyday activities of professional combatants (or militants in an occupied country) focus on preparing to purposefully kill other humans. Rendering the exceptional routine is the hard work required of combatants. Training regimes are designed to make this easier, with mock cities and war games as ''rehearsals'' for combat in Afghanistan or Iraq, all part of a determined effort to psychologically ''prepare'' warriors for killing (Grossman 1995:sections 1, 4; Rose 1999:15–52). From basic training onward, exercises automate responses to commands, while shooting drills make aiming and firing a weapon at a human-shaped target normal. In the repetition of these and other practices, a particular type of person is called for, and combatants must work upon themselves to ''be all that they can be'' (cf. Sasson-Levy 2007).

Paying attention to meaning-making helps reveal the everyday practices that let combatants ''normalize'' contemporary war operations. As Garfinkel wrote, ''society hides from its members its activities of organization and thus leads them to see its features as determinate and independent objects'' (1967:182). Focusing analysis on those ''activities of organization'' helps reveal the hard work people do to render their experience of the world meaningful. I aim to show what can be learned when the meaning-making practices of combatants are the focal point

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