# Intimate Geopolitics Workshop, 03/11/2016-04/11/2016

By Jennifer Hobbs

‘Intimate Geopolitics’, a two day workshop organised by Aoileann Ní Mhurchú and Elena Barabantseva, brought together researchers from a wide array of disciplines to explore the links between ‘the intimate’ and ‘geopolitics’. Comprising three panels and a roundtable, the workshop also hosted Visiting Leverhulme Professor V. Spike Peterson as the keynote speaker.

Professor Spike Peterson spoke on the topic of ‘The Love of Marriage’, examining how marriage has worked to shape racial politics and global inequalities. Focusing mainly on the practice of marriage within North Western contexts, Professor Peterson argued that marriage matters for international politics, and that state power has operated through the love and affection many people feel for marriage as a social practice and legal institution. Beginning with an analysis of European ‘evolution of man’ narratives, Professor Peterson explored the ways in which heterosexual, monogamous coupling has been presented as natural and necessary for human evolution and social order. With the development  of early archaic states, processes of political centralization formally codified ‘marriage’ as a patriarchal, heterosexual institution effectively ‘constituting’ sex as an asymmetric binary of male-female bodies and gendered divisions.  The regulation of sexual relations and the creation of heteropatriarchal households facilitated centralized state control, as well as promoting group allegiance and establishing (inheritable) claims to property and citizenship. The development of writing was central to this process, allowing these categories, practices and rules to become ‘normalized’ by institutional sedimentation.

During the rise of the modern state and European production of racialized nationalism, explicitly ‘white,’ monogamous, Christian marriage arrangements were encouraged or imposed in colonial territories, and sexual and familial relationships that did not conform to the Western ideal of marriage were seen as inferior, improper, and uncivilised. Marriage therefore also helped to ideologically legitimise colonial power and European society, helping to foster racial ideologies and North/South inequalities. Professor Peterson also examined the growth of ideological narratives of marriage in the West as being a ‘love match’, arguing that this disturbs traditional understandings of marriage which were very much a family affair. European disdain for ‘arranged’ marriages thus not only ignores the history of marriage in the West, but also works to stigmatize marriage practices and familial arrangements in other countries and cultures.

Professor Peterson ended by reflecting on the way marriage matters in the current ‘migration crises’, arguing that inequalities between nation today are so stark that one’s citizenship is the single best predictor of an individual’s life prospects. Birthright citizenship (born on the soil or of a citizen parent) entails  marriage arrangements, so that the institution of marriage matters for determining one’s citizenship, one’s life prospects, and whether migration (to improve prospects) is available as a strategy.

**Panel One: (Queering) Geopolitics, the state, and the everyday**

Jon Binnie’s presentation ‘Theorising the Space between Intimate and Queer Geopolitics’ explored how the concept of ‘intimacy’ could function as a hinge, bringing together feminist and queer geographies and thus providing us as a space in which we can question the kinds of intimacy we feel comfortable talking about. Drawing on Claire Hemmings’ work, Binnie explored the notion of intimacy as a metaphor for sex, arguing that in the creation of the label of ‘the intimate’ we enable discussion around certain intimacies whilst continuing to render others invisible.  
Joe Painter’s work ‘Imagining the Inside-Out State’ considered how the state and state institutions are imagined forms, produced by socio-technical practices that tend to rely upon an inside/outside, interior/exterior distinction. Painter suggested an alternate way to imagine the state is in the form of a Klein bottle, allowing us to see how the institutions we commonly consider to be neatly contained within the state are in fact deeply intertwined in that which we consider to be exterior to the state. He argued that paying attention to the heterogeneity of the state not only draws attention to the fragility of the state as an institution, but also to how the intimate and everyday processes are entangled in state geographies.  
Elena Barabantseva’s ‘(Infra)structures of Marriage Migration: Navigating the Material/Emotional Nexus of Governing the Intimate in China’ examined the Chinese state’s regulation and monitoring of familial and intimate relations. Situating her research at the border between China and Russia, Barabantseva focused on the Chinese state narratives of Russian women marrying Chinese men, drawing attention to the material and emotional forces which shape international migration and socio-political processes. This not only brought to light the extent to which history is entangled in the present (with a long tradition of mythologizing Chinese-Russian marriages) but also the prominence of racially informed discourses and anxieties about the ‘lack’ of Chinese women in the contemporary Chinese state.

**Panel Two: Language, Home and Securing Community**

Reiko Shindo’s research into ‘Community as a Place of Homely Bliss?: Speech, Languages, and Community’ explored the real and intense emotional attachments people have to a Hobbesian notion of states (as a place of protection and safety), and how this affective way of ‘reaching’ towards the state entails difficult contradictions for people to navigate. Utilising works of fiction, Shindo explored how the interaction between different languages within states positions community as a place of conflict and struggle, rather than homely bliss. For the subjects in Shindo’s research, language gave migrants both a tool for entry into a community, whilst also representing an ambiguous desire for deviance. ‘Foreignness’ thus can be seen as something that cannot be fully translated, and works to draw attention to the possibility of irreconcilable differences within a community and how these are experienced.  
Anne-Marie Fortier’s presentation ‘On (Not) Speaking like a State: Broken English and the Intimacies of Policy’ questioned practices of speaking/hearing like a state. Drawing from fieldwork on citizenisation policies in Britain (i.e. requirements – language and other – expected of immigrants seeking permanent resident status or citizenship), Fortier considered the linguistic intimacies of those who are unable to, or refuse to, speak and hear like states. The use of broken English by migrants points to a potential Other ownership of the English language, and the often violent denial of linguistic ownership is also a denial of citizenship. Hearing like a state highlights how individuals are conscripted into the securitization of the nation, sometimes reluctantly (in the case of, for example, civil servants conducting English language proficiency exams), and sometimes enthusiastically (such as those who choose to attack foreign language speakers).  
Thomas Tyerman’s work, entitled ‘Everyday Segregation and ‘Humanitarian’ Eviction: the Intimate Violence of the Calais Border’ examined the ways in which humanitarian language was integral to the state segregation and eviction of migrants. As well as a traditional security response to the Calais Jungle which revolves around the erection of ‘hard’ borders, a ‘humanitarian’ response has also emerged. This humanitarian response implies a particular politics of sight, which positions some humans as ‘forgotten’. Tyerman argued this problem of sight was not about not seeing and forgetting the humanity of refugees, but rather a more basic problem of not caring about the refugee Other’s humanity, a problem exacerbated by an apolitical deployment of ‘compassion’. Humanitarianism thus came to be linked to an idea of ‘firmness’, becoming mutually complementary to deterrence and the maintenance of border security.

**Panel Three: Bodies, Borders and Messy Ontologies**

Aoileann Ní Mhurchú’s presentation ‘Inhabiting the Border and Alien space: Exploring the Global Intimate across Citizenship and Migration’ explored how intimacy allows us to see the rhythms that resonate across familiar binaries in international politics – exclusion/inclusion, rootedness/flow, etc. Drawing on fieldwork conducted with a multicultural women’s network in the North of England, Ní Mhurchú argued that migrant women’s lives foreground the connections between formal processes of migration and informal ones, suggesting a dual logic of both/and as well as neither/nor. In particular, the marriages of migrant women which often open new, desirable subject positions whilst simultaneously operating at a loss to others suggests a new understanding or borders as something that are inhabited, rather than cleanly moved across.  
Joe Turner’s work ‘Domesticating ‘Unruly Households’: The (re)emergence of the (Un)developable subject in the UK’s Troubled Families Programme’ argued that not only is social policy in the UK gendered and classed, but also highly racialised and sexualised. Turner situated the TFP in a wider history of colonial governance, seeing it as part of a broader context of British attempts to domesticate ‘unruly’ households into the heteronormative international order. Families which do not conform to white, Western, heterosexual arrangements are thus opened up for intervention, with racialised and sexualised fears about ‘chaotic’ lifestyles being reproduced in the bodies of children. The persistence of colonial anxieties in the social work policy point to the ways in which imperial logics of control are at work in the British state’s regulation of intimacy.  
Megan Daigle’s research, entitled ‘“This is how we travel”: The Geopolitics of Sex in a Closed System’ explores how pleasure is bound up in questions of power. Drawing upon relationships between Cuban local and foreign tourists to foreground the relationships between romance, love, sex, the intimate and the international, Daigle’s work asked what it means to connect across a border that is profoundly ideological. Here, bodies become a space not only where state repression is exercised (particularly in misogynistic and racialised ways), but also as providing various means of crossing/transgressing borders through sexual and romantic relationships with foreigners.  
Michelle Obeid’s ‘‘In the shadow of ISIS’: Critical Subjectivities at a Disrupted Border-Space in Lebanon’ examined the fluctuating spatiality of borders, as well as politics and subjectivities. Focusing upon border relations in the town of Arsal, a border-town in northeastern Lebanon, Obeid argued that the consequences of a huge population influx from Syria and the increasing militarisation of the border can be productively thought through in terms of ‘entrapment’ and ‘moving backwards in time’, where subjects feared a profound transformation of the self in the light of (or, ‘in the shadow of’) Da’esh incursions.

**Roundtable**

Led by Will Schroeder and Rachel Pain, the roundtable brought together key themes from the workshop. Will Schroeder led a consideration of intimacy as knowledge creation, as a method, and as an embrace of ideas. Here intimacy not only prompts us to think of concepts such as cadence, violence, affect, entrapment, etc. but also asks us to think about the extent to which we as researchers offer our participants a chance to become intimate with us. Intimacy was discussed as a mutually transformative process, although the question of its transformative potential was also challenged by a new set of concerns. Rachel Pain, most notably, asked on whose work we deploy when attempting to think through the intimate, drawing attention to the whiteness and maleness of key theorists and highlighting the lack of indigenous, black, and postcolonial theorists. She also pointed to the importance of thinking about violence within intimacy, referencing her own work on intimate war (domestic violence). Intimacy was also considered as working to obscure certain voices as much as it drew in others, forcing us to consider how we can be intimate with voices we do not want to hear (and the extent to which we are all already complicit in this).