**‘Getting Intimate to Rethink International Relations’ workshop**

**by Jennifer Hobbs**

The Critical Global Politics (CGP) Cluster in conjunction with the Global Political Economy (GPE) Cluster were delighted to host ‘Getting Intimate to Rethink International Relations’, a workshop organised around Visiting Leverhulme Professor V. Spike Peterson’s pioneering work on intimacy. Comprising two panels and a roundtable, at this workshop six presenters spoke on how particular pieces of Professor Peterson’s work had influenced, challenged and provoked their own research and/or thinking as to how we understand International Politics [a full list of the works engaged with in this event is available at the end of this post].



Panel One:

Thomas Tyerman
Adrienne Roberts
Elena Barabantseva

Panel Two:

Cristina Masters
Laura McLeod
Roger McGinty

What does the intimate mean?

Following a series of provocative panel discussions, several key themes emerged: firstly, concerning the nature of the intimate itself. Anyone familiar with International Politics as a discipline will understand the tendency for buzzwords to emerge, become popularised, and then discarded. An almost exhausting series of ‘turns’ within the discipline has left us with a plethora of analytical fads once fetishized, believed to be identifying a minute and new phenomena,  that have now fallen out of fashion and been discarded. Is the intimate doomed to become another buzzword? In trying to answer this question, the difficulty of defining ‘the intimate’ (and indeed, the politics of seeking such a definition) came to light.

Discussions focused on the ways in which the intimate allows us to subvert the dichotomy between the personal and the political. By focusing on the intimate, we are able to avoid some of the oppositions we often come across in theorizing. Unlike the local, the intimate is not set against the global; and it does not stand in dichotomy to the political as the personal so often does. Using the intimate as an analytical tool does not mean these oppositions are never invoked; but it was suggested that the intimate, by not immediately conjuring up them up, gives us some breathing and thinking space to consider the ways in which the international is infused with the intimate.

The difficulty of then defining the intimate came to light, as did the desirability of doing so. The intimate was highlighted as a useful way to ameliorate the danger of slipping into a neoliberal focus on the individual subject and ignoring structural and collective issues. As a potential reframing of ‘the personal is political’, there were however concerns that a focus on the intimate may run the risk of depoliticizing the personal. In response to this, the intimate arose not as a focus and fetishisation of the individual, but rather as a way to examine the relationships between people and things. Rather than a set field of study, the intimate was suggested to perform a more deconstructive manoeuvre, interrupting oppositional understandings of IR and pushing us to examine the ways in which people call each other, and things, into existence. Indeed, the fluid and contextual nature of the intimate, while making strict definition difficult, was precisely what allowed such challenging and disruptive enquiry.

Affect and affective things

Focusing on the intimate as relationships broadened the scope of political enquiry, as things as well as people began to become visible. Borders, 4x4s, documents, stories, families and debt all emerged as items in relation with the theorist and others. Not only did the intimate make things visible in these complex webs of relation, but it also drew attention to the affective power of things, and their ability to act and interact with us. Panel discussions highlighted how these affective relationships with things inevitably complicate the political picture, making visible a variety of power dynamics that we cannot otherwise see. For example, Dr McLeod discussed how inhabiting the same institutional space as the writers of the annual Secretary-General Report on Women, Peace and Security indicators during field research in New York provoked difficult questions as to how to judge the annual reports, once the complex relationships multiple actors had to the document were brought to light. Professor McGinty’s attention to the interior space of the 4×4 brought to light a simultaneous formalization and informalization of war economies, making visible the gendered logics structuring peacekeeping spaces as well as the flexible and innovative resistance from rebel forces in re-appropriating vehicles. Dr Roberts explored the question of affective economies of debt, and reflected upon the question of how financial institutions and actors have mobilized affect in order to create an intimate tie between individuals and their debt. This brought the intimate work that constitutes the social aspect of financial relationships into view.

Complicity

Finally, paying attention to the intimate brought questions about complicity to the fore. As a mode of relation, the intimate reaches across numerous divides to push us to ask how we are all implicated not only in each other, but in sustaining and enabling patterns of violence. For example, Thomas Tyerman’s research linked intimacy with borders to take an understanding of borders as a practice that is performed by someone, at someone – but also rely on a history of racial and colonial violence, which we are all implicated in. Dr Barabantseva’s work similarly showed how something as intimate as the family can be destabilizing or supportive to state governance, exploring how the changing structure of the ‘legitimate’ Chinese family works to reproduce and sustain (inter)national configurations of power. This focus on how everyday relationships are complicit in larger power structures was also present in Dr Masters’ presentation, which explored the power of stories to be intimate and personal while simultaneously telling a tale about geopolitics. Our stories are our own, and they are not our own – they are highly individual narratives which, at the same time, are the stories of many people. Conceptualizing the intimate as a type of relation therefore not only disrupts certain normalised ways of doing and thinking, but pushes us to consider our own place in both the rupture and suture of these relationships and consider the (international) power dynamics we both support and threaten in our everyday lives and most innocuous actions.

**Professor V Spike Peterson’s work that was featured in panel discussions:**

‘Gendering Insecurities, Informalization and ‘War Economies’ (2016), in W. Harcourt (ed.), Palgrave Handbook on Gender and Development: Critical Engagements in Feminist Theory and Practice. Hampshire (UK): Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 441-462.

‘Towards queering the globally intimate’ (2016), Political Geography [online], DOI: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.01.001

‘Family Matters: How Queering the Intimate Queers the International’ (2014), International Studies Review, 16 (4), pp. 604-608.

‘Rewriting (Global) Political Economy as Reproductive, Productive and Virtual (Foucauldian) Economies’ (2002), International Feminist Journal of Politics, 4 (1), pp. 1-30.

‘Rereading Public and Private: The Dichotomy that is Not One’ (2000), SAIS Review, 20 (2), pp. 11-29.