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Book Review: The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire

Secil Dagtas

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The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire. Cynthia Enloe. 2004. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 367 pp. \$50.00 (Hardcover). \$21.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Secil Dagtas¹

Feminist scholars increasingly challenge the state centered discipline of international relations (IR) for its gender-blindedness. As a pioneer of such critique, Cynthia Enloe focuses on the marginalization of women in the hegemonic IR framings and explores ways in which the very lives of ordinary women worldwide are constitutive of the international system and the global political economy. Her recent book, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (a collection of her essays, articles, interviews and an autobiographical piece), is part of the same endeavor towards the construction of a feminist world politics. Once again Enloe tells stories of women mostly in non-Western contexts, unveiling the processes through which the invisibility of these women in mainstream international politics reproduces a male-centered international system and global economy.

The Curious Feminist, which is not really an expansion of her prior work, reflects on Enloe's personal/political curiosity about the invisible women in IR and explores ways to fill up their silence. Enloe argues that to understand politics in general, and IR in particular, we need to develop a feminist curiosity that "specif[ies] the conditions and decisions that turned women into victims" (104). 'Feminist curiosity' provides ways in which to answer Enloe's famous question: "Where are the women?" Yet this focus on women does not fully address a central gender question: what makes it possible for certain masculinities to be privileged over other masculinities and all femininities?

The book's strength lies in Enloe's integration of women's stories with her own life story, more so than in her previous books, including *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1990), *The Morning After* (1993) and *Maneuvers* (1999). The most powerful parts of the book are her conversations with well-known feminists and her autobiographical writing. These illustrate how the personal (her own life story as well) is simultaneously political, and international, and elaborate on the relationship between academics and activism. For Enloe, theory and practice are intertwined. She says that "[t]o theorize means that you are going to be tested in reality. Theory is an explanation and if one gets explanations wrong, it has serious consequences" (88). That is why Enloe wants to "test [her] theories on the page with the reader" (88). Writing in everyday language and engaging not only with women in academia but also with women such as "mothers [who] are lawyers, full-time volunteers in organizations, newspaper readers, diplomatic wives or CIA wives" (84), she 'tests' feminist theory with the reality of the everyday practices of women. Yet, one wonders if her audience includes the *other* women about whom Enloe writes, such as South Korean women workers or Kurdish women confronting ethnic conflict, as well as men.

Men are not Enloe's imagined audience, and in her writings they are depicted mainly in terms of how their actions impact women. The chapter "All the Men are in Militias, All the Women Are Victims", however, deals with the story of one man: a Serbian soldier sentenced to death by the Bosnian-Herzegovinian government for raping and murdering

¹ Secil Dagtas is a MA Candidate in the Department of Social Anthropology at York University in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

women. Countering criticisms of her ‘marginalization’ of men, Enloe explores in this chapter how masculinity is constructed systemically through official institutions and interstate relations. Yet her argument is still that “constructing ideals of masculine behavior in any culture cannot be accomplished without constructing ideals of femininity that are supportive and complimentary” (107). Enloe insists on underlining the importance of women’s perspective and of taking their lives as the starting point, in the context of globalization and state policies that preferentially disadvantage women with the retreat of the state, in the feminization of the work force in the growing informal sector, and in the changing patterns of migration. This deliberate focus on women does not automatically mean that men are missing in her analysis. The chapter “Margins, Silences and Bottom Rungs” can apply equally to all marginalized groups including men, to the extent that systemic marginalization of certain men is integral to local/national/international power structures. What is missing is an elaboration of masculinities and femininities hierarchically located in different spaces.

The inclusion of non-Western bodies in *The Curious Feminist* inevitably raises issues of race, class and ethnicity. Enloe cautiously describes the particularities for every woman in her book. However, she defers analyzing the complex power relations between differently positioned and socialized women with different (and sometimes contradictory) experiences. Her optimistic feminism and belief in the successes of women’s movements that bring women together makes her emphasize commonalities among women, and not the differences. For these differences, there should be a better explanation than “[imperialism] can send out fissures among the advocates of women’s rights.” (278)

Overall *The Curious Feminist* is insightful and useful. Enloe’s comparative analysis of global gender inequalities in everyday political processes is accessible, personal/political and an innovative approach in developing feminist questions and curiosity in IR. Her analysis, and struggle against these inequalities, however, could be enhanced if an examination of the power relations among women (and among men) were added to those of power relations between men and women, and between women and states, militaries and transnational corporations. Ultimately the book can engage both new and regular readers of Enloe, provoking them to raise new feminist questions about IR.