

POLS 588, 05
September 2005
Bernt Poelling-
Vocke

Why do we need a gendered account of world affairs?

In contemporary, western societies it appears as if gendered accounts of world affairs could be viewed as a past artefact and nothing worth considering in the light of, supposedly, those increasingly liberal lives and times our “inclusive” societies enjoy. As rightful as this might appear at first glance, as wrongful does it appear if we shift our glance from solely domestic to global observations – or just take a harder look at what really happens back home. Upon closer analysis, the liberal rhetoric might appear out of sync with reality.

Our neighbour has just received his always silently smiling mail-order bride, on the other side of the street we see old Heinrich watching the Bundesliga while his wife prepares dinner, Karim, our unemployed Indian neighbour can be seen at the neighbourhood’s coffee-shop 24/7 while we know that his wife is sewing equally long hours in their small attic-apartment. A friend of us is suffering from the “feminization of poverty”, as her husband’s decreasing salary at the Porsche factory forces her to find some spare time for low-paid cleaning, spare time hard to negotiate between the time-consuming tasks of childrearing and home-maintenance.

Especially our friend’s situation seems to deserve special attention, as current neo-liberal practices appear to fuel a global “feminization of poverty”. Margin-hunting transnational companies prefer women labourers, naturally good with their hands (a reason why sewing women are “unskilled” and sewing men often “skilled”) in many growing free trade zones. Our own government’s policies preach increased personal responsibilities in all areas of life, which often hits women, effectively managing most households, more severe than men. It could also be argued though that it was the rise of formal capitalism and contractual relationships in the economy that transcended their origins and led to the social evolution of the wife into an equal partner in a contractually shaped relationship, the modern marriage, but most feminists would not agree that the overall development has been overwhelmingly beneficial for 51% of the world’s population, or that it has at least not reached a satisfactory level.

As JJ Pettman states, World War II might have been evaded if women had shaped world history, and based upon such observations it has to be questioned whether the sphere of politics is not dominated by the wrong half of humanity, if we accept the claim that neo-liberal reality has not achieved influential parity. It is also questionable whether most females perceive it a good idea if the proposed construction of the NBA’s Brooklyn Nets’ new arena receives subsidies of 150 million dollars, money that could be much wiser spend for pressing social expenditures instead of the replacement of a functional, 25-year old property quite capable of hosting 41 public exhibitions of chronically mediocre men’s basketball.

The example might appear extremely marginal, but it could be argued that the underlying message and priorities transcend the game of hoops. Also, if Ronaldo zooms in on German goaltender Oliver Kahn in the unquestionably biggest, regular, peaceful event in world history, the World Cup of Soccer, billions of female eyes are glued to the TV, while far fewer male’s even know that a female equivalent of this tournament exists. Interestingly, they only start paying attention when US player Brandi Chastain rips of her jersey after winning the 2003 gold medal game against arch-rival China and unconsciously reveals an afterwards bestselling Nike sports bra. “It is not about the bra”, her title-robbing book (following Lance Armstrong’s “It is not about the bike”) about playing hard and putting the fun back into competitive sports (not an overwhelmingly famous theme among male political writers, who historically focused more on balances of power than joy in international politics), is of course about the bra. Without the bra, Brandi would have had nothing to say. Or at least nobody would have listened or read.

If sports serve as a metaphor for world affairs, as they have in famous events such as the Cold War 1972 summit series between the ice-cold rivals Canada and the Soviet Union, South Africa’s 1995 Rugby World Cup gold medal or the upcoming 2010 World Cup of Soccer, the All Black’s haka or the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, few female highlights come to mind, and barely any if we ignore those involving bras. “Where are the women in global sports?” runs parallel to “Where are the Women in Global Politics” (JJ Pettman), and just as women have always competed on the sports-field, they have always been a part of politics as well. World history, not fundamentally different from sports history, appears not to have noticed.

But it is not just that less attention is being paid to what women have to say. In many cases, cultural barriers refrain them from taking part in the game. Often bra-spotting movies (Adidas, in this case) such as “Bend it like Beckham” prove this. Not only is the world’s most successful female, soccer movie named after one of the game’s brightest, male stars (not necessarily talent-wise), but Parminder Nagra, the movie’s Indian female protagonist, has to overcome the time & mind-consuming obstacles of a patriarchal immigrant family and expected chores at home before progressing towards a professional soccer career in the United States. In the movie’s defining scene, Parminder has to convert a free-kick and imagines her opponents’ defenders as her own kin. By overcoming history, she liberates herself, which is what feminism is often about. Nevertheless, feminists would just argue that having David Beckham posters on the wall in order to picturalize her dream might be a relatively questionable starting point.

Feminism is influenced by numerous lines of thought. Feminist postmodernism focuses on showing counter-histories of world affairs, radical feminists focus on the oppressive patriarchy in society and, among many others, Marxist feminists focus on the dismantling of capitalism, as it fosters unhealthy social relations between elites (predominately male and the “famous few”), ordinary men, gays and women. Third world feminists argue that they do not need affluent, northern feminists arguing their case, as world affairs need more than a gendered approach along the general lines of “male” and “female”.

In conclusion, little appears more valid than gendered accounts of world affairs. If 51% of the world’s population own 1% of the world’s wealth, make up more than half of recent migrants, earn 10% of the world’s income, represent 9% of the world’s governments and spend more time working than their male counterparts, either doing family duties or working in the informal sector of the economy, world affairs as constructed by male-dominated history are in dire need of a “herstory”. As long as “herstory” differs from “history”, there cannot be a single account of world affairs.