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Understanding Globalisation through Critical Gender Perspectives

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How Do Critical Gender Perspectives of IPE Enhance our Understanding of Globalisation? Discuss with reference to Free Trade.

Globalisation is a problematic term because it is used to describe a multitude of processes, with its most loose definition being 'the growing interdependence and interconnectedness of the modern world' (DFID, 2000). A broad definition of globalisation makes it difficult to approach as an area of study in IPE. A focus, however, on economic globalisation driven by corporate power, opens up avenues of study that seek to identify the effects of new global distributions of production and consumption. The international community has narrowed down on a consensus of free trade principles and the reduction of trade barriers, the outcome of a series of multilateral trade rounds under the auspices of the GATT (HoLSCEA, 2003). This has subsequently elevated the Transnational Corporation to powerful heights to the extent where just five hundred TNCs control seventy per cent of all international trade (WTO, no date). Underpinning TNC domination is its persistent reliance on reserves of low cost labour and favourable tariff conditions in zones allocated for the production of export commodities (EPZs). The manufacturing, garment and technology industries that dominate the EPZs in areas such as South China, Hong Kong and Malaysia are, for some, the 'poster boys' of the global liberalisation policies and embody the economic miracle that is said to have occurred via the East Asian Export Orientated production (Truong, 1999: 133). The process of Foreign Direct Investment in these zones, whereby TNCs thrive on the host nation's liberalised free trade policies, was described by the economist, John Dunning (2002: 246) as both 'efficiency seeking' and 'progressive' in what has now become a new age of global production.

Dunning's (2002) 'progressive firm perspective' propagates ideas of the firm as a neutral and rational actor in the global economy. However, this has been thoroughly contested by scholars of IPE. Critical perspectives of this liberal orthodoxy challenge this depoliticisation of the production process and the perceived neutrality of market forces in action in a free market system (Elias, 2005: 205). Karl Polanyi's theoretical perspective has had a profound influence on the way the firm and later the TNC has been conceptualised. Polanyi (2001) emphasised the need to view the market, and key actors in it, as being embedded within systems of social relations. Put simply, Polanyi paved the way for looking at the TNC as being made up of, and producing real social power relations. Inherent in this understanding are both exclusions and inequalities.

This essay is concerned with a particular axis of inequality, namely gender. I will firstly situate the study of gender alongside a traditional critical axis of inequality, class. By doing so I hope to show how gender, as a dynamic of inequality, moves beyond traditional class analysis and offers new insights into social relations exacerbated by the globalisation of production. I will then demonstrate how critical gender perspectives have enhanced our understanding of the particular workings of the TNC in both China and Malaysia in a way that was not possible before by including gender as a critical mode of analysis. I will propose that gender perspectives add layers of complexities to our understanding of women in the labour market. Finally, I will draw on the wider implications of gender perspectives in developing our understanding of the structures of production.

Throughout this paper, I will be sensitive to the particular phrasing of the question, which seeks to address how

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critical gender perspectives of IPE *enhance* our understanding of globalisation. The word 'enhance' indicates an addition to that which has gone before. I will indeed argue that a critical gender perspective builds on traditional dynamics of social inequality, such as that of class and ethnicity. However, I am keen to demonstrate how the salience of these traditional dynamics still exists in the gender literature. It is the salience of class and ethnicity that can blur what the sociologist Bourdieu labelled the "central axis" of gender as dynamic of social differentiation and inequality (Bourdieu in Truong, 1999: 147). Therefore, I will argue that certain gender perspectives that are able to demonstrate gender as a key dynamic in the processes of factory work have moved beyond enhancement to *changing* our conception to suit the modern-day dynamics of the globalisation of production.

The understanding of gender as a visible category of analysis is predated by more traditional analyses of social exclusion. It is vital therefore to situate gender alongside that of class analysis to demonstrate its unique analytical potential. Fundamentally, a Marxist approach to class does not distinguish between male and female workers (O'Brien and Williams, 2010: 284). In Marxist analysis, the concept of class, deriving from relations forged around the mode of production, subsumes all pre-existing social divisions. This subsumption renders the division caused by gender, invisible by the central category of class (O'Brien and Williams, 2010: 284). The effect of this gender invisibility means that a statistic involving gender, such as 'in 2000...women account(ed) for 80 per cent of the workforce in the export industries of South-East Asia', would be of no interest from a Marxist perspective given that the working class has no gender (Randriamaro, 2006). Yet, it is precisely such a statistic that has relevance for those who approach the topic from a gender perspective. A gender perspective therefore asks why and under what conditions is *female* labour sought after in these zones?

While Marx predated the 'globalisation of production' in its current form, some influential Marxist writers have reconstituted class analysis to study the dynamics of the firm. Michael Burawoy (1985) extends the labour process theory of Marx to involve a more complex conceptualisation of how workplace politics is shaped. Burawoy develops an understanding of different factory regimes that can apply alternative methods of political control within the firm. While a Marxist, Burawoy differs from Marx by drawing a more complex picture of how systems of class control can manifest themselves. Burawoy does pay lip service to axes of exploitation as 'production apparatuses' that can reproduce social relations of domination, such as gender and race, originating outside of production (Burawoy, 1985: 14). Crucially for Burawoy however, gender exists outside of production and he makes it clear that he prioritises class, which then absorbs the external relations of domination. For Burawoy therefore, gender is still not a matter of defining significance in the labour process, which for him is 'independent of the particular people who come to work, of the particular agents of production' (Burawoy, 1985: 39).

Robert Cox (1999: 9) argues that the 'globalisation of production is reconstructing the world labour force in ways that challenge nineteenth and twentieth century notions of class structure'. While this is a convincing statement, it begs the question, what can fill the void? With the growing recognition that it is often women who are depended upon to work in EPZs, the answer lies to some extent, as I will demonstrate, in the ability of gender perspectives to cast new light on the particular processes involved.

The package of rural reforms in China, implemented in the 1980s, raised the productivity of agricultural output considerably. However, on the other side of the coin was an inevitable, rapid increase of unemployment in China's countryside. (Lee, 1998: 41). It is estimated that by the mid-1980s, 30 to 40 per cent of China's rural labour force was surplus to the requirements of agricultural production. (Lee, 1998: 41). As the Chinese state gradually lifted regulatory barriers to rural-urban migration, migrant workers swelled to numbers over 80 million, indicating the number of surplus of rural labour, but also the attraction of the EPZs and coastal cities as a place of work (Chan, 2001: 7). A similar pattern can be seen in Malaysia's recent socio-economic past. A new economic policy pushed through by the Malaysian government in the 1970s meant that export-orientated manufacturing was high on the country's agenda (Crinis, 2002: 154). Furthermore, an increase of FDI during the 1970s and 1980s pulled in surplus rural labour and foreign reserve labour that was absorbed into the industrial labour force (Crinis, 2002: 155). Indeed, this demand for labour was so great that by the early 1990s Malaysia achieved full employment. (Crinis, 2002: 155). Within the discourse of economism, these case studies act as exemplars of the equalising effect of market forces after the retreat of government regulatory policies. Indeed, it can be said that in both cases, FDI and deregulatory governmental policy has pushed the inefficient surplus labour in the rural backwaters into the pull of industrial

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employment. Marxist social analysis alternatively, yet equally as simplistically could explain these two examples as the transformation of the rural peasantry into the urban working class.

A gender-based approach however, highlights the deficiencies in the economic-based approach and the Marxist social analysis. Gender itself is able to provide a more detailed analysis of the labour market that is closer to the social, political and economic circumstance of both China and Malaysia. Both liberal and Marxist discourses, while worlds apart conceptually, assume that the labour market is socially and culturally homogenous. The category of 'urban working class' for instance, does not allow room for alternative ways of explaining a labour market's composition based on the particular localised context from which it has been formed.

At this impasse of Marxist categorisation, a critical gender perspective offers a more complex yet localised form of categorisation. For instance, the new category of 'mingong' or 'peasant-workers' on appearance challenges the traditional Marxist polarity of 'rural peasantry' and 'urban working class' (Pun, 2004: 32; Smith and Pun, 2006: 1461). By merging the two, Pun, a gender scholar, adopts something that is closer to the historical social and cultural make-up of China. Due to the hukou system in China, which formally determined where a person lives and works, traditionally rural people were banned from moving to the cities. Yet, the relaxation of the hukou system in China from the 1980s onwards, has created a situation where there is temporary citizenship in towns and cities for rural people (the majority of whom are women) (Huang, 1999: 92). As citizenship is temporary, temporary working contracts are the norm in these zones, both low paid but also short-lived (in most cases contracts lasted just one year) (Chan, 2001: 9; Pun, 2004: 32; Smith and Pun, 2006: 1461). While Marx's category of a single 'working class' does not capture this nuance of labour restriction in China where rural people are not transformed wholly into a single homogenous class, gender perspectives offer new conceptual avenues to understand these unique processes.

Similarly, gender studies of the Malaysian workforce have also used more complex forms of categorisation that expand on those gone before. Juanita Elias's study (2005) of a TNC shop floor in Malaysia led her to understand the social make-up of the factory as being far more complex than a homogenous 'working class'. Elias (2005: 210) argues that rural Malay women, more than urban Chinese women, were targeted by TNCs to the extent where the firm pays the bus fare to bring in new recruits from the rural areas. Elias therefore understands the composition of the labour force, not as a neutral space, where the rural Malay coincidentally forms the majority, but as a one based on particular societal inequalities. This is aided by the adoption of new categories. For both Pun (2004) and Elias (2005), ethnicity is a key determinant in drawing female labour into factory work. It is the 'rural peasant' background of women workers in Shenzhen that makes them second class citizens according to Pun's (2004: 32) study, and it is the 'rural Malay' ethnicity that according to Elias (2005: 209) has the connotations of 'docility and diligence' that is sought after for/ factory work in Malaysia. Moreover, studies conducted on everyday forms of resistance *within* the workplace in Malaysia have found they serve only to uphold stereotypes held by the male management of the rural Malay women as 'irrational' (Elias, 2005: 211; Ong, 1987). While Elias (2005) and Ong (1987) argue that this feeds into the discourse of gender domination, whereby the rational management (man) dominates over the irrational/emotional (woman), one must challenge this reductionism. Indeed, it could equally be argued that it is the fact that the women are *rural* Malay that makes them irrational in the management's eyes. Furthermore, the fact that women of Chinese origin in Malaysia occupying positions of authority in factories further emphasises the importance of ethnicity as an axis of inequality over that of gender (Crinis, 2002: 163).

Gender perspectives' ability to reflect the nuances of different societies' and culture's labour markets enhance our understanding of the process of women's absorption into factory work, which is key to the global distribution of labour. By drawing an ethnically visible working class, for instance, the large amount of female employment in EPZs can be explained by the effects of having a rural background in both China and Malaysia. Recruitment drives in rural Malay areas, and the temporary status of the peasant-worker in Shenzhen, question both the liberal notion of a neutral supply and demand in recruitment and the Marxist notion of the homogenous working class. Having said this however, fundamental to these types of gender perspectives is the salience of ethnicity as critical determinant of the women's identity. In both cases it appears that the prefix, 'rural' determines their fortunes rather than them being 'women'. Indeed, Huang (1999: 98) highlights that the jobs, pay and working conditions of female migrant workers were substantially worse than local women's. This stresses the importance of a rural identity being a critical determinant. It is hard to see under these circumstances how gender can play an analytically critical role. While these

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studies develop our understanding by pointing to the salience of ethnicity, gender is still blurred as an axis of inequality.

More comparative gender perspectives (Lee, 1998; Crinis, 2002) are able to elucidate how gender itself can be a critical dynamic that determines the movements of the labour market. By comparing separate factories within the country of study, certain gender perspectives can show how localised gender dynamics shape the decisions of the women in the labour market. Lee's (1998: 160) study of two South China factories owned by the TNC, Liton, in Shenzhen and Hong Kong demonstrates how, despite both having different social make-ups, in both cases it is gender that defines the dimensions of the labour market. Lee (1998: 83) argues that it was the personal perceptions of 'appropriate work' that was a major consideration in the young, women's choice to work at the factory in Shenzhen. Via extensive interviews, Lee demonstrates that factory work was deemed a 'morally acceptable' job for young women from rural Guangdong, as opposed to work in salons or restaurants (Lee, 1998: 83). The fact that the morally unacceptable jobs often paid more than factory work, would further suggest that the powers of decision making based around identity should not be underestimated (Lee, 1998: 83). Furthermore, it was a different notion of femininity that governed the decisions of the older, married women entering employment in the Hong Kong factory. With a desire to re-enter paid employment and uphold certain familial responsibilities, the decisions to choose the Liton factory were often based on the factory's flexible working hours and flexibility in granting leave (Lee, 1998: 102). Conversely, Crinis (2002: 159) notes that in Selangor, Malaysia, the decision by older women to engage in 'homework' (subcontracted manufacturing work) was also made with notions of femininity and familial responsibilities in mind. Married women in Selangor prefer to work at home in order to rear children (Crinis, 2002: 159). Moreover, these too were decisions made regardless of wage levels. Lee (1998: 105) notes that higher wages but inflexible hours in *dim sum* restaurants in Hong Kong were not favoured over factory work. Similar, yet more extreme conditions prevailed in Malaysia, where women chose to forgo higher pay for electricity, holidays and fringe benefits in order to work at home (Crinis, 2002: 159). This gender perspective therefore introduces 'femininity' as a defining feature in the movements of the labour market. A gender perspective's notion of femininity highlights the importance of decision making within a particular socio-cultural context that could contravene 'economic rationality' and the supposed wisdom of supply and demand. It also suggests that neither class nor indeed ethnicities are the principal identities at work in dictating the movements of the labour market.

Thus far, I have demonstrated how gender perspectives enhance, and in some cases, change our understanding of how women have been drawn into garment and manufacturing work in EPZs. However, in order to situate these perspectives within a broader picture of the changing nature of global production, capital mobility and the divisions of labour, I will engage with the discourse of production dislocation and control. One of the most influential thinkers of this topic, Manuel Castells (1996: 475) notes the growing dislocation occurring in globalising production whereby: 'labour is disaggregated in its performance, fragmented in its organisation, diversified in its existence, divided in its collective action.' For Castells, the nature of production vis a vis the TNC is becoming increasingly fragmented. This fragmentation plays into the hands of the TNC as it is organised to extract maximum profits through this loosely connecting network of production. Under this system of globalisation, labour loses its collective identity, capital exists far away from the labour process and social relationships of production have been disconnected. While Castells certainly did not offer a gender IPE perspective, gender perspectives have the potential to embellish Castells' theoretical framework with real examples of how labour can be fragmented and therefore controlled along the axis of gender.

Smith and Pun's (2006: 1460) understanding of the 'dormitory labour regime' in the factories of Shenzhen appears to compliment Castells' framework. Underpinning their understanding of the regime is the notion that the '*mingong*' (peasant-worker) is not free to move and work at will, and, it is in this state of semi-autonomy that women workers' freedoms are contained (Smith and Pun, 2006: 1461). The TNC, China Wonder Electronics, for instance, is able to capitalise on this state of flux to meet the demand for transnational capital. This keeps the national labour force both precarious and housed in labour dormitories (Smith and Pun, 2006: 1462-1465). Furthermore, the authors develop our understanding by highlighting the vertical inequalities that exist within a company's chain. Their case study of China Wonder's subcontracting chain found that the provisions given to top end Hong Kong management and clerical staff differed hugely with the poor and unsanitary conditions for production workers at the bottom end of the hierarchy (Smith and Pun, 2006: 1464). To the extent of giving an exemplar of Castells' framework, Smith and Pun

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(2006) embellish our understanding of this globalisation process.

Smith and Pun (2006), however, treat the workforce as homogenous. The '*mingong*' are defined by Pun (2004: 32) as 'women workers' and even 'the young semi-proletariat class'. The effect of this homogenisation is that our understanding of gender's role in the working process is hidden. Smith and Pun's use of gender is similar to that of Burawoy's neo-Marxist understanding. Burawoy (1985: 14) sees kinship, ethnicity and gender as 'soft supports' for the workers. Far from being fundamental to the process of production itself, gender in a sense remains a dormant identity, remaining within the wider category of class (Burawoy, 1985: 14). This perspective therefore, is limited to demonstrating all *mingong* as equal, but also as faceless victims of labour fragmentation. An attachment to class as an overarching narrative of control and resistance hides the complexities of gender studies. Other gender perspectives however can move beyond this limitation and move beyond Castells' framework.

Crinis' (2002: 159) conception of a 'dual labour regime' in Malaysia, and Lee's (1998) comparison between a Hong Kong factory and one in Shenzhen moves beyond Castells' deterministic framework. They do so because they elucidate horizontal differences between the female workers. Crinis (2002: 157), in keeping with Castells framework of the Network Society, notes that in Selangor, Malaysian firms have cut costs by moving from factory operations to homework. The existence of homework according to Crinis (2002: 159) has created a large casualised workforce dominated by married women, paid on a piece rate system at lower rates and receiving few benefits. Furthermore, the extremely low rates of unionisation in homework would provide further substantive evidence upholding Castells fragmented vision where workers are unable to unite against an elusive capitalist system (Crinis 2002: 163). While it is true that this evidence points to the existence of a labour fragmentation, Castells' vision is deterministic and leaves little room for the idea that a worker's choice or preference might be factor in the production process. It is after all the preference of the woman to stay at home and balance work with family life in Selangor (Crinis, 2002: 159). Similarly, as previously demonstrated, Lee's study suggests that the TNC is in a dialogue with the preference of the worker. In Shenzhen the young unmarried woman has very different needs from the older married woman in Hong Kong; yet both different notions of femininity help guide their agency of choice (Lee, 1998: 83). These gender perspectives that stress agency and diversification *between* women cause the realisation that the decision of the TNC cannot simply be understood as one done in the interest of cost-effectiveness and labour control. In both China and Malaysia, there is evidence of a constructive dialogue between real people and their workplace that, to some extent, determines not just their working conditions, but the structure of TNC production. The choice of women to stay at home to work in Selangor plays a role in constructing the 'dual labour regime' (Crinis, 2002: 159), where factory work *and* homework co-exist. Moreover, this calls into question a framework such as Castells', which assumes labour fragmentation and diversification as evidence of a grand TNC's strategy to control its workers.

In 2007, Penny Griffin announced confidently that 'gender(ed) IPE analysis is absolutely central to fully understanding and explaining the processes and practices of the global political economy' (Griffin, 2007: 719). This, however, is only true to a certain extent. Gender as a form of analysis in IPE is still wedded to influence of Marx and Marxist categorisation. It is the continued attachment by some to the definitive categories of class that ensures gender can only provide a brief enhancement of our understanding of globalisation. Gender perspectives however, which move beyond class and other catchall categories and which demonstrate gender as a decisive axis in societies, are uniquely placed to inform the study of IPE, and take it to new horizons. Most importantly, as the study of globalisation keeps moving forward into new fields, gender perspectives can act as a perpetual reminder that the grand economic developments are never distinct from real people who make real choices.

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