

The concept of 'the everyday': ephemeral politics and the abundance of life¹

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Abstract

Against the background of a continuing interest in 'the everyday' in IR, this article asks what kind of analytics upon and within the world one mobilises through the concept of 'the everyday' and what consequences this may have for thinking about politics. In particular, it explores a conception of the 'the everyday' that foregrounds the abundance of human life and ephemeral temporalities. The abundance of life invites a densification of politics combined with an emphasis on displacing levels or scales by associative horizontal relations. The ephemeral introduces a conception of temporality that foregrounds the political significance of fleeting practices and the emergent nature of life. When applied to politics, this conception of 'the everyday' performs politics as emergent, as possibilities that are not already defined by fixing what politics can possibly be. The order of politics is then not understood in terms of an order of mastering the political but an immanently precarious succession of situations and practices in which lived political lives remain inherently aleatory, momentary, and emergent. In doing so, 'the everyday' draws attention to the immanent elusiveness and fragility of politics as it loses its ground, its referent.

Introduction

Claiming a turn to the everyday or a revival of interest in the everyday in the field of international relations would be overstating the point. Yet, there is a continuing interest in the power of subjects, practices, relations, sites, and things that are usually kept out of the political and analytical vision that is pervasive in IR. They are assumed to be largely insignificant to world politics, either because they are considered not to matter or because they are merely reproductive of given structural relations. Among many examples are lay persons in expert environments (Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007b), domestic servants in the world economy (Enloe, 2014), garbage bins (Acuto, 2014), a TV series (Davies, 2010, Rowley and Weldes, 2012), tourism (Lisle, 2016), Key Performance Indicators for security personnel in airports (Schouten, 2014), the vernacular (Jarvis & Lister 2012; Vaughan-Williams & Stevens 2016, Jackson & Hall 2016), and the sociology of IR as a discipline (Kessler and Guillaume 2013), to name but a few.

The concept of 'the everyday' is one of the concepts employed to express such an analytical interest in exploring the social and political significance of what some have referred to as 'little nothings' (Bayart et al. 2008; Macherey 2009). Their inclusion helps to correct skewed analytics of power that focus on elites or structural power. However, adding ignored actors, practices and things is not all there is to 'the everyday'. The concept also mobilises distinct philosophical, sociological and literary lineages that organise our understanding of lives and worlds. 'The everyday' is more than a particular kind of site, such as private life, or a particular quality of objects and persons, such as time sheets, everyday political idioms, or military wives, situated at an infra-political level. It is a nominalist device² that brings distinct lineages of thought to bear upon a wide ranging set of practices through which we engage the meanings of lived lives, including literature, political

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² Akin in function to Paul Veyne's understanding of a nominalist conception of history, see: Veyne, P. (1971/1978), *Comment on écrit l'histoire*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

analysis, plastic art, philosophy, film, folklore. An answer to the question ‘what is the everyday?’ then does not lead to listing a set of artefacts, sites or subjects but clarifies what specific operations one seeks to perform – in our case on the understanding of politics – through analytically mobilising particular lineages of thought that named themselves, or have been named by others, as ‘doing the everyday’. The first section develops this understanding of the concept of the everyday.

In the other two sections, we introduce two key operations that are central to the concept of the everyday in the lineages we draw on: taking life as abundant and time as ephemeral. More specifically, we explore the challenging implications for understandings of politics of foregrounding the abundance and continuous emergence of life. The familiar categories in IR of arranging political life such as ‘the state’, ‘the international’, ‘global civil society’, ‘elite politics’, or ‘the public sphere’, are not particularly well suited to engage multiple entangled and fragile lives that are highlighted by ‘the everyday’. They tend to fix and rarify in acting units, structural givens or metaphysical categories what is always emergent and abundant. Our aim in this article is to introduce how embracing the latter implies a distinct mode of opening the question of politics that cannot be reduced to introducing a different level of politics – infra-political or bottom up –, or scale – local or micro-politics. The stake in taking ‘the everyday’ seriously is thus not in the first instance a widening of politics by including small scale, local or bottom up conceptions of politics (for a recent argument in this direction Solomon and Steele, 2017), but a distinct analytics of politics as such. Taking flight from ‘little nothings’, the everyday disrupts claims that we already know what politics must be because we know where politics is – we know the sites of politics – and/or how politics takes place – we know the processes called political (Walker, 2010). ‘The everyday’ does not simply ask how little nothings come to bear upon a particular and pre-existing political field or site, but engages the problem of naming as ‘political’ subjects, sites, practices, or objects that are not already pre-existing as part of institutionalised conceptions of politics (see Bourdieu, 2012). ‘The everyday’ thus introduces the paradox of inventing a politics that is not named political.

What is the everyday?

What does it mean to speak and write ‘the everyday’? Does the concept designate a distinct reality such as the home, ordinary artefacts or popular culture? Or, does it perform in the first instance a distinct mode of thought, one that does not refer to a specific set of realities but that engages any reality in a distinct way? These two approaches are not mutually exclusive but foregrounding the latter implies a different answer to the question ‘what is the everyday?’ than the former. Rather than performing an ontological operation that replies with introducing a distinct scale of reality (e.g. local), distinct sites (e.g. ordinary rather than elite) or particular practices (e.g. routine rather than disrupting), we argue it performs an epistemological operation that brings a distinct mode of thought to bear upon the analysis. An answer to the question then requires to set out the mode of thought that is invested in the concept.

For the latter approach, a concept performs a nominalist rather than naturalist performance. A signifier like ‘the everyday’ does not ontologically overlap with the signified and the signified does not speak for itself. Assuming that the signified ‘speaks for itself’ is a naturalist move. The danger in such naturalism resides in not recognizing how the horizon of expectation of the researcher shape the analytical object at stake. A nominalist device, whether it is ‘the state’, ‘anarchy’, ‘silence’, ‘resistance’, or ‘the everyday’, is never simply a category designating a realm autonomous from its ‘naming as’, but always also performs two operations. One the one hand, it operates a delimitation as to what the concept entails objectively, as in what is ‘objectified’ into an analytics and serialised into an argument. On the other hand, it operates the introduction of a capacity to interfere, to change

something. This capacity does not come from the device as such but from how it works an analytical 'object' – such as tourism, ordinary language, garbage, etc. – in relation to a lineage of methods and approaches (Lury and Wakeford, 2012). The question 'what is the everyday?' then invites identifying the operations one is performing through the concept of 'the everyday' as they are linked to – and rework – lineages of thought that are also lineages of interference in debates. Such an approach prevents naturalising 'the everyday' as an 'authentic', but ultimately elusive, "bedrock reality" (Crook 1998: 523).

When participating for instance in a panel on 'the everyday' at an IR conference, one rarely is expected to conceptually design and define what the everyday is. The expectation is to locate the everyday in particular kind of objects, subjects, temporalities or sites that are considered outside the remit of an IR that focuses on high and low politics, on abstract entities like states, on global or regional institutions. 'The everyday' mostly is an invitation to bring in popular culture, individuals associated with daily life like streets, the private sphere, and common objects like bins or bicycles. These seek to displace an IR that analytically and politically locates significant practices in elites, aggregated entities and abstractions considered to be detached from daily concerns of a common people governed by them. Everyday objects, practices and people as such are not the main stake of the game, however. They are tools that bring different conceptions of the international, or more largely political life, to bear upon scholarly work; conceptions that decentre how politics and political relevance is usually thought through in the relevant fields of study within which these everyday analyses situate themselves.

As mentioned, this possible naturalism, however, may tend to overlook how contributions to studies of the everyday in international and global politics stem from particular intellectual lineages about what 'the everyday' is. That is to say, 'the everyday' as a concept may possess different contours depending on the lineages of thought on the everyday the analysis draws on (for different overviews, see Gardiner 2000, Highmore 2002, 2011, Hviid Jacobsen 2009, Macherey 2009, Sheringham 2006). The invention of the quotidian in Parisian intellectual, scholarly and artistic circles in the second half of the 20th century (e.g. Lefebvre in Davies, 2010, Davies, 2016), feminist lineages (e.g. Wibben, 2011), Gramscian lineages as transferred through James C. Scott's work (e.g. Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007b), Marxist lineages whether in Lefebvre's work (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]) or the *Alltagsgeschichte's* (Eley 1989), or Erwin Goffman (Rampton et al., 2017, Stump, 2017) invite different responses to what the everyday is as an intellectual device to disrupt and displace familiar analytical and literary repertoires, such as functionalist or structuralist sociologies or narrative styles driven by extra-ordinary turning points.

They share, however, that the everyday is in the first instance not a distinct realm of social life but rather a point of view on social life (Macherey, 2009). This is also the conclusion of Michel de Certeau's work on the everyday (de Certeau, 1990 [1980]). The original (French) title of his work on the everyday clearly indicates that it is about inventing the everyday – *L'invention du quotidien* – rather than retrieving a particular kind of natural realm as the English translation suggests: *The practice of everyday life*. This distinction is important as it makes clear that one may see 'the everyday' as a natural and directly accessible realm of sites, temporalities, subjectivities, objects and practices distinguishable from the extra-ordinary times and spaces of politics, and in them the promises of getting into the 'reality' of 'real' people and how they face the extra-ordinary times and spaces, usually oppressive or dominant, of politics. Yet, while there is an analytical and political relevance in so doing, the everyday should first be recognized, acknowledged, and discussed as an nominalist device. Its conceptual shape, in the multiplicities that it can take depending on the lineages within which it is (usually implicitly) set, is as important for understanding what kind of

claims one makes when writing about and on ‘the everyday’. It is a simple but necessary recognition that these claims may be limited, by the shape of the concept, in their ability to analytically embrace the multiple forms of what ‘the everyday’ may entail. As Michael Sheringham asks:

“Is it characteristic of such works to depict the everyday, or do they work on us in ways that train attention on our own experience, so that discourse on the everyday is ultimately pragmatic or performative in character?” (Sheringham, 2006: 15)

Our contribution here is to invite for further epistemological, methodological and theoretical reflections on what is implied by designating something as ‘daily life’ and ‘the everyday’; on what one analytically does when inventing the everyday by naming certain activities, sites, objects, times or subjects as ‘everyday’. In response to the question of ‘what is the everyday’ we seek to foreground reflections on what particular kind of analytics upon and within the world one mobilises through the concept of ‘the everyday’ and what consequences this may have for thinking about politics. In particular, we seek to explore how ‘the everyday’ foregrounds the abundance of human life and ephemeral temporalities. The abundance of life invites a densification of politics combined with an emphasis on displacing levels or scales by associative horizontal relations. The ephemeral introduces a specific conception of temporality that foregrounds human life as possibilities. The following two sections develop this conception of the everyday that closely follows existing uses of ‘the everyday’ in IR but that also seeks to make a contribution to it by inviting more elaborate engagement with some of the implications of engaging with the concepts of abundant and ephemeral politics.

Abundant political life

One of the key operations that naming ‘the everyday’ performs is to introduce an abundance of meaning, practice, things, and relations. It populates situations and times with a myriad of items, subjects and fleeting and happenstance moments. In the first instance, it is a very banal move of bringing more elements in play. Yet, inventing ‘the everyday’ does not treat abundance as simply a quantitative issue of adding more ‘stuff’. In adding more elements, naming ‘the everyday’ seeks to make political life common. It performs a set of operations that qualitatively change political analysis. In this section we discuss how the everyday engages with the analytical limits of elite focused sociologies and politicises through analytical densification.

From elites to common people

The concept of the everyday is used to disrupt elite focused sociologies that define the international as a political space in which mainly elites are acting and the common people as being mainly reactive or passively submitted to what takes place in these spaces. By including the political agency of the common people, the literature on the everyday moves from a relation between elites, usually the group identified most with the practice of international politics (for instance, the diplomats, see Morgenthau 1978: 146-150; 529-560), to either the relation between elites and ordinary people or to solely concentrate on the latter. Domains that were usually associated with “high politics”, such as the military, or taken from the perspective of states and international institutions, such as those linked to the international economy, become personal by applying analytical lenses, such as gender, to show how these domains are not only intertwined with personal stories of exploitation and resistance, but also how seemingly “un-”international topics, such as sex work, are actually central to understand the dynamics at work in shaping the international (Enloe 1989, Guillaume 2011). Another example can be taken from surveillance studies. Given the increasing acceptance that surveillance is operating in diffuse ways and at a distance making it difficult to locate sites for sustained collective mobilisation, resistance and politically significant practice has been increasingly

conceptualised in micro terms: the little things people do when seeking to avoid or trick the surveillance techniques when shopping, walking, claiming benefits, and so on (Gilliom 2001, 2005).

This operation implies more than simply adding ‘ordinary people’ as significant actors. It more generally seeks to address the failure of IR “to generate those questions that allow individuals to uncover the linkages between global politics and their everyday lives” (Davies and Niemann, 2002). Georges Perec (1989) expressed a similar sentiment asking where in news reporting is the stuff of the life we live, all the rest that passes every day. Davies and Niemann make an excellent argument and introduce a set of moves — in particular, drawing on Lefebvre’s work — that help to effectively embed what, from the perspective of the daily life of many people, must often seem abstract and/or distant. The more challenging issue, however, is whether problematising the global life should not spill over into an analytics that erases the two-world view itself, that erases a referential distinction between ordinary and extra-ordinary, between the global life of maids or season workers and the global life of elites. What we mean here is not that the lives of global elites are the same as that of the workers cleaning their hotel rooms but that an analytics of their global lives is done in a similar way and if they connect, like in hotels, they are not a meeting of the global and the local, the extra-ordinary and the ordinary but rather that this very encounter in all its habitual practices is what actually makes the global in that situation. In that sense, ‘the everyday’ foregrounds a horizontal conception of relations. ‘Horizontal’ does not refer to power relations being symmetrical but rather refers to an analytics in which processes like globalisation or sovereignty (on the latter, see De Carvalho et al., 2018), or entities like the state or world-systems, only exist as they are enacted in daily practices, relations and entanglements. In this understanding, ‘the everyday’ disturbs the distinction between micro and macro both in terms of scope and levels; it is not a reversing move that favours the micro over the macro. It deletes levels as key analytical tools and effaces the extra-ordinary or elite as the referent for becoming politically and analytically meaningful (see Guillaume, forthcoming). In doing so it foregrounds that processes like globalisation are “ours” because “they are the ‘dimension’ within which we make our ethics and bodies, within which we conceive our conduct of life, within which we suffer and desire, within which we subordinate and in which we are subordinated” (Bayart, 2004:11, translation is ours).

Hobson and Seabrooke’s work in *International Political Economy* argues for changing focus from dominant elites to everyday actors and to a level of everyday practices. The book does significantly change how we understand who shapes the global economy. Yet, the core move is to add a set of actors that have been largely ignored and then reverse the analytical lens from those considered meaningful and powerful to the latter.

“[O]ur central purpose is neither to marginalise the importance of the dominant elites nor to reify the agency of the ‘weak’, but rather to analyse the ways in which the weak affect and respond to the dominant and how in the process this interactive relationship generates change in the global economy.” (Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007a: 2)

They do not explore explicitly what the global economy would be if the very distinction between ordinary and extra-ordinary actors would be deleted. In making common, ‘the everyday’ does something quite different. It refuses to make a separation between a meaningful political order of things somewhere – in a UN or EU office in Geneva or Brussels – and another everyday order of things elsewhere – in the living rooms or the streets of either city. What is political, the extra-ordinary and ordinary, takes place commonly. Commonly means that revolutions, for example, are not either macro-spectacles or micro-enactments, but just enactments. The radical but ordinary transformation of a political regime and social structure (e.g. Skocpol 1979) is also the relational

unfolding of moments and encounters, of acts, that consist of repetitive practices and momentary happenings, within which that what is called revolutionary exists and takes shape and reshapes.

Obviously, one of the challenges is that this world of commonness is not a great idealistic equaliser but the commonness of life is full of controversies, stratifications, disputes, compromises, appropriations, asymmetries, and so on. Béatrice Hibou (2011), for example, develops a “political anatomy of domination” that opens up to such a horizontalising of power relations while retaining an analytics of domination. Drawing on approaches to the everyday she conceptualises traditional political questions about legitimacy, power, and domination in authoritarian situations by showing how banal economic practices and the everyday functioning of the economy participate in domination. At first sight this may read similar to what Hobson and Seabrooke do, but when working through the analytical moves she makes it becomes clear that more than a reversal between elite and quotidian actors and relations is going on. Like Hobson and Seabrooke, she is careful not to functionalise everyday practices as expressions of and sustaining a systemic logic but she also displaces the intentionality of dominations from a subjects intentions to exercise power to it being an effect of heterogeneous and multiple relations.

The latter makes it possible to unpack how domination is not a top down, or vertical, process but a horizontally enacted process in which political decisions and violent and coercive state practices are coexisting, and in many instances entangled, with the most banal economic practices that shape and reshape dominations. Yet, there is neither the idea that the multiplicity is functionally reduced to a systemic reproduction nor that authoritarian politics is simply made by a political elite that imposes it on a population. Rather, domination, legitimacy, and power are enacted through constellations of heterogeneous interests in the lives that people live. The same analytics applies to transactions in a daily market, what goes on in a cloths shop and national economic decisions, for example. In other words, domination becomes common. Yet, in being common domination turns from a given situation into series of moments, phenomena, practices that appropriate situations thus creating a more emerging sense of political life. Hibou’s ‘political anatomy’ avoids locking readers into a dystopian world by creating a sense that the horizontality of domination is a world full of possibilities without having to specify that if x, y and z would happen than a new world will be created.

To sum up, the concept of ‘the everyday’ works the limits of elite sociology by embracing the abundance of political life in a double move. It democratises political analysis by bringing specific political agents – whether women, workers, citizens, soldiers, individuals belonging to subaltern groups, scholars, etc. – back in our analytics of the international/global, by putting forth how they are affected by or engaging with the international/global in their quotidian lives and how ultimately their practices are a key part of the international/global. However, ‘the everyday’ does also seek to make the life of different actors common by entangling them through erasing scalar or level conceptions of politics.

Politicising through densification

The everyday does not just draw in or highlights distinct actors. It more generally draws attention to a wide variety of practices, subjects, relations, things that usually would not feature in political analysis. When Cynthia Enloe calls the international personal and the personal international she makes a key feminist move within IR that dilutes the distinction between common life and political life. One of its effects across feminist work is that multiple ‘new’ practices, events, subjects, and sites are brought into the analysis to demonstrate the hold of patriarchal analytics on our understanding of politics as well as to demonstrate the important part a multiplicity of often unaccounted for practices play in shaping the worlds we live in. Political life becomes abundant. Such operations approach politicisation distinctly. Instead of foregrounding moments of intensification, they prioritise analytically densifying situations and times.

Considerably increasing the number of subjects, things, relations and practices that matter in a given situation is not the same as asserting the complexity of a situation. In a sense, it is a far more banal move of simply bringing more elements into play. However, it is also a substantive analytical interference that seeks to challenge a mode of political analysis that conceptualises politicisation as a practice of intensification, of increasing the intensity that action establishes between a political unity or order (e.g. the state, or global institutions) and a set of events (Morgenthau 1933: 58). In public policy terms, intensification manifests itself in a process of moving stakes up the political and bureaucratic agenda and prioritising implementation of policy in this area. In security studies it takes the form of asserting exceptional existential threats to a referent object. Politics as intensity has close links with a temporality that prioritises exceptional moments as drivers of history. Crisis talk, emergency actions, renditions of radical breaking points in historical time are an important technique of intensification.

A focus on density works differently. It prioritises the need to thicken the sites of international politics, whether they are intense or not. For example, war can be read politically differently if it is linked to various mundane cultural processes through which military violence is made legitimate in specific circumstances (see Cardini 1992[1982]), including for example, producing and distributing a song by widows of soldiers, selling poppies to commemorate past wars, connecting heroism to violence in multiple popular media, including movies and video games, and so on. As a result, many more things, subjects and practices enter the site of war than diplomatic relations, mobilisation of military institutions, personnel and technology, and patriotic speeches by political leaders. Combining these thickens the situation, not in the anthropological sense of introducing cultural meaning, but in a textual sense of increasing the concentration of threads that make a situation, through which political claims about rights and care are enacted, that create legitimacy for certain forms of violence, etc. Asserting the abundance of political life thus implies a method of politicising through densification. Such an approach has implications for how one analytically renders the politics of security, for example. Rather than analysing speech acts of existential threats that render politics exceptional, it invites creating dense textures from relations organised through banal objects and practices such as Key Performance Indicators (Schouten 2014), lists (de Goede 2016), rubbish (Acuto 2014) or disputes (Huysmans 2016).

The everyday as working the abundance of life thus implies a set of distinct operations. Not everyone follows through on the horizontalising and densifying that we see as key analytical moves in taking life as abundant. In that sense, what we propose as two baseline operations of 'the everyday' are both quite general but also specific. They invite exploring a political analytics that refuses to see the everyday as a distinct level or scale of politics and that focuses on densifying textures.

Any analysis that makes political life abundant triggers a broader challenge, however, of how to avoid making everything politically significant and thus delete the distinctness of politics. If politics is everywhere and everything, does that not imply it is nowhere and nothing? That is a risk indeed: The risk of disappearing politics. Yet, this risk of deleting politics altogether by seeing politics everywhere is also paradoxically the condition for creativity, for giving attention to imaginative modes of politics and inviting imaginative analytics. 'The everyday' is then a device for engaging with conceptions of politics that hold that everything and everywhere can be political, in yet unnamed ways, but without letting this slip into politics being nowhere or nothing. The question 'what is the everyday?' then refers to how different scholars work this paradox of abundance into distinct interferences in our understanding of politics. This operation can be seen at play in for

example Hibou's work that we referred to earlier. She explicitly draws on lineages of the everyday to challenge both approaches that rarify domination to elite practices or state institutions and infra-political approaches that see politics everywhere. She creatively uses these lineages to reconceptualise familiar political categories of political intention and legitimacy (Hibou 2011).

Politics of the ephemeral; ephemeral politics

The second aspect of 'the everyday' that we propose to make central is its foregrounding of a distinct political temporality, the ephemeral, and an invitation to think through the implications for political analysis of embracing the 'indeterminacy of life'. The temporality of 'the everyday' we introduce is closely related to 'making life abundant' as discussed in the previous section. However, it draws attention to conceptions of political emergence rather than to horizontalising or densifying.

Everyday time and the ephemeral

Introducing specific temporalities, 'the everyday' is an invitation to study the political significance of ephemeral practices that would otherwise easily be dismissed as either irrelevant or insignificant because of their momentary or fleeting presence, such as graffiti and billboards (Trumper, 2016), banners (Artières, 2013), and appropriating city spaces through gardening activities (Iveson, 2013, Adams and Hardman, 2014) or simply through walking a city (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008). This ephemeral quality of the everyday seeks to challenge familiar modes of analysing time. International political history is often a history of 'great moments' or 'moments of crisis', such as wars or economic crises, in which the future course of history and what the international (system) will look like are at stake. 'The everyday' generally questions such conception of international political history in two ways. First, the notion of the everyday works to move away from the calendar-like temporalities of international events, such as a succession of peace and war, and its bird's eye view of what international time is by showing how the personal also is the international (and the international is personal; Enloe, 2014) and bringing in an analytics of how quotidian and ordinary temporalities are affected by or affecting the international. Second, the everyday is also used to bring in the power of routine in shaping situations. The international can for instance be shown to be the results of elites but not in a disincarnate extension of the state but in their own quotidian routines as diplomatic or security professionals in situations of bureaucratic competition (Bigo, 2000, Neumann, 2002, Neumann, 2007). The international is then not a sequential history of exceptional moments and events but rather a series of personal stories of those ordinaries affected by and affecting the international, or a history of reiterative practices linked to embodied routines. By shifting the analysis from extra-ordinary politics to the ordinary, 'the everyday' underlines a multiplicity of political temporalities and spaces as a distinct point of interest in defining what may be analytically or politically relevant and significant.

The ephemeral conception of the everyday that we seek to introduce does something similar but specifically draws attention to the political nature of fleeting moments and how they can paradoxically be simultaneously fleeting and durable. Camilo Trumper (2016) studies how temporary public art and other public expressions in urban areas in Chile, preceding and following the Pinochet coup, created distinct but always momentary political sites and between them politically appropriated the city of Santiago. His question is "How do we write a political history that takes these ephemeral entries and practices as essential sources of analysis?" (Trumper, 2016: 3-4). What makes ephemeral histories distinct is, in the first instance, the kind of activities considered to be politically relevant and significant. Yet, as Trumper's work brings out, the specific analytical challenge and contribution that the 'ephemeral' brings to political analysis is how what is fleeting can have duration without analytically destroying the possibilities created in fleeting practices.

“It [new forms of visual culture and new scopic regimes that emerged after the coup of 1973 in Chile] paradoxically offers a window onto the tense interplay of persistence and change that characterized the early years of military rule and that animated urban politics but is obscured by scholars’ emphasis on the coup as a single moment of rupture and violence.” (Trumper, 2016: 176)

Thinking politics as conjunctural is one way of working this paradoxical demand for retaining the fleeting quality of life while giving it duration. A graffiti rapidly drawn, displayed for a little while and as quickly removed or covered (Trumper, 2016), or, as Robert Darnton (2014) has masterfully described, the seditious anonymous poems in 1749 Paris – a common mode of communication for popular rumours in the streets of Paris –, all bear the mark of fleeting, thus likely insignificant and irrelevant, political practices. Yet they are all situated in series of events granting them a semantics of succession and political bearing. The artistic and linguistic practices that Trumper analyses in Chili are indeed momentary — graffiti applied and then removed —, but they have political signification because they have duration as they enable a form of political continuity within repertoires of political dissent and mobilisation. Similarly, in Darnton’s analysis of the so-called Affair of the Fourteen, what amounted to an ordinary practice of the street, resounding of “a true seditious cacophony of rhymed verses” (Darnton, 2014: 17), led to an uncharacteristically powerful and harsh response from the police. They became political because they conjecturally became relevant, the ordinary practice they amounted to played out in politically significant situations. Sheila Crane emphasises a similar challenge in her study of ephemeral tactics in the Battle of Algiers. Quoting Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]) she defines ephemeral as:

“... the means by which ‘every place becomes multifunctional, polyvalent, transfunctional, with an incessant turnover of functions; where groups take control of spaces for expressive actions and constructions, which are soon destroyed’ (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]:130). Importantly, in this formulation, the ephemeral is a conjectural space, a space of projective anticipation that is necessarily fleeting.” (Crane, 2015: 399)

This notion of time as intertwining succession, anticipation and fleetingness is what the concept of ‘duration’ seeks to capture. It is distinct from approaches that give moments or temporary artefacts meaning by making the relevance of momentary events or artefacts dependent on their connection to long-term reproductive practices or structural conditionings. In art and architecture the ephemeral is about representation that is not or cannot be done by static means of representation. It implies working with non-static forms or matter, with transformable or fading materials, as for example the Dadaists did. At issue is not just the temporariness of a building or a mural but rather that it eludes capture in fixed forms (Karandinou, 2013: 2; Purpura, 2009: 11). Similarly ephemeral time presents time as unstable, as without origin or end, as evading capture of how things really are, were or will be. Instead of process, time is made up of fragments that resonate, that perform together in succession, heterogeneity and multiplicity. José Muñoz, a performance studies scholar, expresses how this ephemeral time implies a particular mode of looking back:

“Ephemera... is linked to alternative modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of thing.” (Muñoz 1996: 10, quoted in Turner 2009: 159)

Instead of reconstructing a moment as if it is the real moment thus fixing its meaning, it constructs time as succession and presences of traces.

By shifting the analysis from extra-ordinary (international) politics to the ordinary, ‘the everyday’ underlines a multiplicity of political temporalities as a distinct point of interest in defining what may be analytically or politically relevant and significant. The political nature of these fleeting moments does not require the larger scale of longer time of (international) politics or the separation between times of continuity and times of change as they can be, paradoxically, both fleeting and durable. As a result, political analysis becomes more intensely sensitive to the enactment of — and, lingering within — possibilities (in Crane’s quote above “projective anticipation”) rather than constraints and reproductive patterns. It introduces a conception of time as indeterminate. Elizabeth Grosz emphasises how such conception of time as duration is always hesitant because implying multiple possibilities of unfolding; it is always emergent rather than smooth, linear, homogenous or continuous (Grosz 2001: 113). She speaks of time understood in terms of a logic of invention rather than a logic of identity or self-containment (Grosz 2001: 111). This logic differs from the romantic notion of subjective creativity or the romantic embracing of the moment as the authentic time that escapes structuration (Abu-Lughod, 1990, Brown, 1996). It is a paradoxical time that messes with temporal conventions by valuing the inherently fleeting nature of events, experiences, and practices while giving them a duration that does not destroy their creative possibilities by folding them to the structuring structures of politics, as to how they become relevant and for whom.³

Ephemeral politics

Although Trumper’s analysis of a multiplicity of public expressions and appropriations of the city is not built on the same lineages of thought as Grosz’ work, the method he uses to disrupt homogeneous and linear narrations of political history of the Chilean coup of 1973 expresses a similar disposition to connecting the quotidian with a logic of invention, with possibilities:

“Recognizing that archives and memory are both shaped by and reproduce historical silences, this book intertwines political, cultural, urban, and oral history to find the sometimes surprising, quotidian forms, places, and practices that people used to express their political concepts and concerns.” (Trumper 2016: 10)

Such expressions create political possibilities within what was politically a highly repressive situation. While Hibou’s work, to which we referred above, draws on lineages of ‘the everyday’ to focus on how domination in authoritarian regimes is multiple and heterogeneous as well as embedded in an abundance of practices rather than simply a centralised state practice, Trumper draws out how ephemeral practices and artefacts enact politics of contestation and dissent. His analysis emphasises that what counted as politics in Santiago was much more than and quite different from what the archival narrative of radical break from democracy to authoritarian destruction of politics foregrounds.

“‘Everyday urbanism,’ those quotidian forms of urban practice that included protests and marches, posters, murals, graffiti, street photography, and urban documentary film, became part of a broader political repertoire by which a wide range of santiaguinos entered into and shaped political debate.” (Trumper 2016: 6-7)

³ One of the key challenges in doing ‘the everyday’ in this way is how to write about something that can mean everything and nothing and that is perpetual becoming without reducing it to mere subjective selection. In other words, how to signify a particular situation, site, event ephemerally? What styles of writing can do this? How to collect abundant observations, data, senses and connect them in a such a way that the event, situation or site retains a sense of emergence, possibilities and multiplicity? There are multiple answers to these methodological question in existing work on ‘the everyday’. To just mention two among many possible examples. Perec’s use of lists is one of the methodological tools or styles he developed in literature. Cynthia Enloe’s style of writing what reads like bricolages or patchworks of events, subjects, sites, theories is another.

What is of analytical and political concern here is what we term a politics of the ephemeral. The political analysis aims at demonstrating how ephemeral practices, sites, and objects are not simply fleeting expressions of artistic, consumption, economic and other use value, but bear upon political contestation and governmental practices. Their politicality derives from its link to a politics that is already known as being political. The intention is similar to Goldfarb's 'politics of small things':

"the theoretical implications of the global changes in our recent past go beyond [...] large-scale transformations and geopolitical challenges. It is in the microstructures of social interaction that the innovations of political culture become apparent, as these innovations, in their interactive contexts, constitute public space. These microstructures, I suggest, form the foundation of democratic culture." (Goldfarb, 2006: 38)

Goldfarb is interested in making what he refers to as small things central to a conception of democratic culture. The ephemeral practices and artefacts in Trumper's analysis are political because they appropriate public rather than just private spaces, because they allow people to enact themselves as political subjects, and because they keep an agnostic conception of politics alive under military dictatorship. What is distinct in their approach is in the first instance the 'small' and 'ephemeral' nature of the practices and artefacts within which they inscribe political relevance. Hence, we name this an analysis of politics of the ephemeral, i.e. of how ephemeral practices take on political significance.

Yet, the concept of the ephemeral also invites a further question about politics that is related to the politics of the ephemeral but takes it in a different direction. So far, we have focused on how 'the everyday' performs an analytics of political time in which ephemeral phenomena and practices are central and which combines fleetingness and duration. However, ephemeral art or architecture also refers to what it means for architecture or art to become ephemeral: what does the concept of art or architecture become when it takes on the qualifier 'ephemeral'? Similarly, 'the everyday' in our understanding invites thinking through what it means and how to do a political analytics that takes politics itself to be ephemeral. Rather than using defined conceptions of politics upon which ephemeral phenomena bear, how to work with a concept of ephemeral politics, i.e. a politics that is not represented through fixed forms but through materials and practices that escape capture?

Ephemeral politics invites an approach to the political that echoes Maurice Blanchot's (1969) understanding of the everyday as epistemically undetermined. The 'quotidian', Blanchot writes, "does not let itself be seized. It escapes. It belongs to the insignificant, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but it may also be the site of all possible significations" (Blanchot, 1969: 357). Inventing the everyday is not only giving signification to something that may be insignificant, from the perspective of IR, but to something that may have no relevant signification beyond that which is given by naming it 'the everyday'. Writing 'the everyday' seeks to write something that when written has already escaped it yet is not insignificant. The indeterminacy of the everyday, in Blanchot's terms, thus implies a specific mode of signifying, one that "eludes objectification because [the everyday] consists in perpetual becoming" (Sheringham, 2006: 16). In other words, 'the everyday' says something about how practices, objects, subjects exist. It invites disrupting conventions of temporality and signification in IR by understanding politics as emergent and as a presence that is both too little and too much. Ephemeral politics takes as its starting point the unfinalisability of politics. "Unfinalisability is the notion that everyday life is a messy and open undertaking where freedom, creativity, innovation, and surprise make the world an incomplete and inconclusive place" (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 36-40, 90-96; see as well Hutson, 2000).

Such an approach may sound slightly odd but it is not unfamiliar. Trumper's (2016) analysis of ephemeral practices is political not only because he places art, billboards, or graffiti, in what has been named a political time: the military coup and the Pinochet regime that followed it in Chile. Sajed's argument about the importance of minor practices of dissent in eastern Europe during the Communists regimes is not only political because it explores minor practices in what is recognised as a highly political time (Sajed, 2011). They are also political because once they chose these sites and times — once they set the recognisable political referent — they implicitly or explicitly invite reading the practices and objects as a non-referential series that appropriate spaces, language, modes of expression or briefly shape what living in these political times is but without a strategy to capture or overthrow the 'centres of power' (Konrad, 1984, de Certeau, 1984 [1980]). They also express an abundance and emergence of politics that is connected but not reduced to familiar imaginings of politics such as modes of dictatorial regimes, mediated political spectacles, or political mobilisation through protest marches sustained by social movements.

Feminism has done similar work. Mobilising private or personal lives as political, they politicise by drawing on the instituted distinction between private and public, but they also immediately disrupt that distinction through series of banal practices and things picked from the abundance of private life thereby creating an emergent politics. Linger in a beauty parlour, a government department, or talking to female migrant sex workers, the abundance of private desires, family situations, shuffling of papers, small talk, and so on create an overflow of politics that is difficult to contain. It is a fleeting politics, a conversation that is there but then also gone, the small talk takes place but then one moves on to do something else (bell hooks, 2015 [1989]). Yet, it also creates a sense of how situations are continuously adjusted, reshaped, created. In doing so, they dislodge what politics can be in IR, not just by introducing ephemeral sites and practices but by doing so changing the possibilities of what politics can be. While drawing on the private/public distinction the stories told displace this distinction with conception of politics in which publicness does not define politics but is displaced by 'the personal is international and the international is personal' (Enloe, 2014: 343-359), by women's journeys (Sylvester, 2002) and so on. It is a set of analytical moves that brings attention to an imagining of political life that does not fit already received conceptions of politics by working an abundant and emergent political life. It is a conception of theories and analysis of politics as inventive that sees them as "throwing trajectories, or suggesting paths out into practice, rather than being used as 'tools' or 'applications'" (Rendell 2006: 10)

Similarly, Rob Walker challenged IR theory with a demand for imagining political life that does not fall back on essentialised accounts of politics, i.e. accounts for which there is no surprise in politics because we seem to already know what politics is — the sites as well as processes that can be political, that make something political (Walker, 2010). The politics of the ephemeral meets this challenge half-way by introducing new sites, objects and practices but tends to connect them back to familiar accounts of politics, such as debate in public sphere, revolution, mobilisation to pressure governments, and keeping possibilities for dissent and regime change alive. Walker's statement calls for something else, similar to work in feminist IR: to name something as political without knowing its political valence in the first place and without imposing an essentialist conception of politics in its very naming. It invites a mode of thought that focuses on emergent conceptions of politics in which what is political remains inherently unstable, fleeting, heterogenous. We refer to this reading of 'the everyday' as ephemeral politics to differentiate it from — but also retain its close relation to — the politics of the ephemeral.

The main point we want to introduce is thus that ephemeral politics implies that the naming of what matters as political is not necessarily an institutionalised reproduction of a fixed order of politics but continuously emergent enacting of what politics can be. 'The everyday' then performs a conception

of political time as ‘unfinalizability’, as possibilities that are not already defined by fixing what politics can possibly be. The order of politics is then not understood in terms of an order of mastering the political but an immanently precarious succession of situations and practices in which lived political lives remain inherently aleatory, momentary, and emergent (Macherey, 2009). In doing so, the everyday as ephemeral draws attention to the immanent elusiveness and fragility of politics as it loses its ground, its referent. Hence, the tension it creates, for example, with and within analyses focusing on structures of domination that fix in advance the terms of political stakes and practice. As Purpura reminds us in relation to ephemeral art, making ephemeral can itself be a political act. For example, the Dadaist’s turn to unstable materials and writing was a critical political move challenging the culture of sovereignty in which permanence is a virtue and preservation a right (Purpura 2018: 12).

Conclusion

In the article we reflected on the questions ‘what is the everyday?’ and ‘what is political about it?’ We proposed that ‘the everyday’ is a nominalist device that brings distinct modes of living and being political into thought. We contrasted this approach with understanding the everyday as referring to distinct sites, artefacts, temporalities or subjects that are qualified as ordinary, banal or little rather than extra-ordinary, exceptional, or big. It invites reflections on what kind of attention does ‘the everyday’ create and what kind of politics does one invent when working with the concept of ‘the everyday’. Although certainly not detached from studying distinct sites, artefacts, temporalities and subjects, such an understanding foregrounds articulating the distinct analytical operations one performs rather than specifying events, objects or subjects that can be or are identified as being ‘everyday’. For example, everyday politics is then not a distinct level or scale of politics – e.g. infra-political or micro – but an operation that can be applied at any level or scale.

We then introduced two analytical operations that ‘the everyday’ performs: making life abundant and making time ephemeral. Between them they raise a set of challenges for how to understand politics. Making political life abundant challenge elite political sociologies not simply by introducing the political significance of non-elite practices and sites but also by inviting modes of ‘flattening’, of ‘making life common’. It also invites understanding politics through densifying rather than simply intensifying processes. Making time ephemeral introduces the challenge of valuing politically what is fleeting without making its meaning depend on structural reproductions or expressing extra-ordinary and momentary crises or changes. We drew on the concept of duration to operate a distinct conception of time that is both fleeting and continuous while also remaining abundant, i.e. heterogeneous and multiple. In doing so, we linked ‘the everyday’ to lineages of work that have thought time as emergent and defined by possibilities rather than constraints, deep structures, or reproductive practices. We concluded by introducing how this operation renders politics itself ephemeral. It invites an analytics that does not simply looks at the political significance of ephemeral and abundant phenomena but that takes politics as ‘unfinalizable.’ In doing so, ‘the everyday’ implies a demand for imagining political life that does not fall back on essentialised accounts of politics, i.e. accounts for which there is no surprise in politics because we seem to already know what politics is — the sites as well as processes that can be political, that make something political. ‘The everyday’ does not just add ‘forgotten’ or ‘ignored’ elements to political analysis but it also questions that what is named ‘the political’ in political analysis is all there is to politics. It introduces a political temporality that is both emergent and always already gone. It takes seriously Blanchot’s conception that the everyday seeks to write something that when written has escaped it.

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