

Making Feminist Sense of 'The Americans'

Written by Lucy Hall

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LUCY HALL, MAY 20 2015

It is becoming increasingly difficult to dispute, much less ignore, the intersection(s) between popular culture and global politics. As Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton, persuasively argue, the release of the movie *The Interview* and the attacks in Paris on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* brought into 'stark relief the immense impact that popular culture artefacts can have on the international political landscape'. William Clapton and Laura Shepherd recently discussed the potential of using popular culture in teaching and research to open International Relations (IR) 'to much more holistic, much more nuanced and ultimately much more diverse forms of knowledge about the international'. Making feminist sense of the popular television series *The Americans* draws on Hamilton and Caso's opening to the edited collection on the intersection(s) between popular culture and IR and responds to Clapton and Shepherd's invitation to explore this juncture in relation to our pedagogical practices and the production knowledge about the international.

The Americans follows the espionage activities of two deep undercover KGB agents, Elizabeth and Phillip Jennings. Set in Washington DC during the early 1980s *The Americans* contrasts Elizabeth and Phillip's real job of the 'Death to America' variety with their family life. The show's creator Joe Weisberg is a former CIA officer, who also authored *An Ordinary Spy* a fictional account of a CIA officer's first foreign deployment.

There are many aspects of *The Americans* that sparked my feminist curiosity. The disposability of women's bodies when they get in the way of obtaining important information on the CIA's Afghanistan group to the sexualized recruitment strategies. The constant intermingling of personal/political – familial/international is an overarching theme in *The Americans*. Inspired by the work of Cynthia Enloe, I read *The Americans* as a small-screen representation of the feminist critique of the public/private divide.

Each episode of *The Americans* complicates the supposedly neat divides between public/private—domestic/international, of which feminist scholars of politics and law have long been critical (Pateman 1989; Thornton 1995; Boyd 1998; Chinkin 1999). The juxtaposition of the domestic life of Elizabeth and Phillip Jennings and their 'Death to America' work represents the false distinction between the public and private spheres, and reminds us that the boundaries between 'public' and 'private', are 'deeply political and inherently constructed' (Munro, in Edwards, 2011: 65). *The Americans* also underlines that the presumed public/private divide is gendered.

The Americans does not ignore the feminized domestic space of the family and how it influences and is influenced by global politics. Elizabeth and Phillip frequently discuss their 'Death to America' work in their bedroom or around the kitchen table. Under the pretence of 'folding the laundry', Elizabeth decodes encrypted messages in the basement of their suburban home. Their political work is carried out in mundane, familial, *personal* settings, behind the façade of routine domestic work. In contrast, Phillip and Elizabeth's relationship with their daughter Paige becomes increasingly 'public' as they grapple with Moscow's plans for Paige to become a second generation 'illegal' in the hope that she would eventually infiltrate U.S. intelligence agencies.

The Jennings family's not so private or personal relationships resonates with Enloe's contention that the 'personal is political'; that relationships we imagine to be private or social are actually infused with power (2014: 328). Read backwards [as Enloe suggests we do (2014: 348)], we also see that politics is intensely personal for the Jennings family. Projected to the global realm *The Americans* brings to the small screen Enloe's troubling feminist insight: the

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'personal is international' and that the '*international is personal*' (2014: 351 italics in original). Unlike main(male)stream IR theory, *The Americans* constructs a narrative of Cold War politics that relied on the presumed *apolitical* roles of wives, mothers, daughters, girlfriends, lovers, mistresses and secretaries.

In *The Americans*, feminized roles serve as important conduits in the conduct of global politics. Martha Hanson, for example, is both FBI agent Gaad's secretary and girlfriend (later wife) to Phillip Jennings's alter ego, Clarke Westerfeld. 'Clarke' works for the Internal Affairs Division of the Committee to oversee the United States counterintelligence agencies and under this guise and through his relationship with Martha is able to obtain information on the inner workings of the FBI. For Clarke/Phillip Martha is an 'asset' in an important intelligence operation. For Martha, the relationship becomes deeply personal; she falls in love and agrees to marry him. The portrayal of this KGB operation as relying on Martha – the secretary – 'challenge[s] the conventional presumption that paying attention to women as secretaries tells us nothing about the dynamics of high-level politics' (2014: 4). Paying attention to Martha, as the KGB does, tells us (and the KGB) a lot about the inner workings of state security agencies. Martha is illustrative of what Enloe describes as the 'far-reaching political consequences of feminized loyalty, feminized secrecy, feminized record-keeping, feminized routine, masculinized status, and masculinized control' (2014, 4).

The depiction of Cold War politics as deeply personal resonates on a number of levels with feminist IR theory. It echoes Enloe's argument that:

[M]aking useful sense—feminist sense—of international politics requires us to follow diverse women to places that are usually dismissed by conventional foreign affairs experts as merely 'private', 'domestic', 'local', or 'trivial' (2014, 3).

Furthermore, *The Americans* read as a representation of the personal is political palindrome writ large, demonstrates that the political cannot be fully understood without taking into account the personal (Enloe 2014, 350).

Adopting the work of Cynthia Enloe is just one example of how *The Americans* could be read through critical IR perspectives. Similar to postcolonial scholars *The Americans* challenges the very idea that the Cold War was indeed 'Cold'. The series depicts the engagement of the U.S. and the Soviet Union in 'hot' conflicts in Nicaragua, Afghanistan and South Africa illustrating that understanding the periodization known as the 'Cold War' is geographically contingent. As Shampa Biswas importantly reminds us, the Cold War, 'so central in most discussions of international security – was experienced as quite "hot" by the people of Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan and many other states that served as "proxies" for superpower rivalry' (2013, 90).

Making sense of *The Americans*, through a feminist (and other critical perspectives) illustrates the diverse ways which popular culture can complicate and critique disciplinary boundaries that determine what we can 'know' about IR and how it can be taught. Reading *The Americans* through an Enloe inspired lens offers an example of the potential to explore the feminist critique of the public/private divide and the implications of this dualism evident in the masculine bias of mainstream IR theory.

About the author:

Lucy Hall is a doctoral candidate at the University of New South Wales, Australia. Informed by a feminist critical constructivist approach, her PhD research focuses on the discursive construction of humanitarian protection norms in global politics. Alongside her interest in the politics of humanitarian protection, Lucy also shares an interest in popular culture and global politics.