

# How Do Everyday Objects and Practices Relate to IPE?

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The international dimension of life cannot be segregated from the domestic, and the domestic does not exist as by a whim of something or someone. The “*ceteris paribus*” approach to theory is extremely useful to allow a single mind to grasp the complexity of the world, but it can become a trap and a self-fulfilling cycle. The field of International Political Economy (IPE) is characterized by its ability and goal to study “global social transformation” and tackle what International Relations (IR) failed to properly grasp (Amoore, 2002, p. 38), but it seemed to have fallen into this trap, along with IR, for most of the previous century. Attempts to study these transformations, by orthodox rationalist and constructivist approaches as well as critical theory, failed to properly deal with the false “whim” of the masses (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007). By atomising and standardizing the individual, theory risks becoming alienated from reality and a servant of preconceived ideals of scholars, opening the door to some of the criticisms currently *en vogue* such as being Eurocentric (Hobson, 2013), problem-solving (Cox, 1981) and elite driven (Davies & Niemann, 2002).

This essay, by engaging mainly with recent literature of Everyday IPE, attempts to show how a study of everyday issues and actors allows for a break from the theoretical assumptions about social behaviour and interactions, thus permitting a fresh perspective over frequently tackled topics within IPE, such as trade, finance, crisis, globalization and so forth, but also opening new fields of inquiry that allow for an enrichment of the field. I start by first providing a theoretical context of the problems and issues surrounding an exclusive elite-centred and top-down approach to IPE study, followed by a conceptualization and theoretical perspectives of what is understood by “everyday”. Finally, it is discussed how a turn to everyday interactions between, so far, marginalized actors is helping to enrich the field mainly due to the rise of Cultural Political Economy (CPE) and Everyday IPE, and how this turn should be improved so as to sharp its contributions to all areas and theoretical frameworks of study.

### Theoretical Limitations of Elite-centred Exclusivity

*“Some of the important properties of solid materials depend on geometrical atomic arrangements, and also the interactions that exist among constituent atoms or molecules”* – William D. Callister Jr., in *Materials Science and Engineering: An Introduction*.

When Economics decided to part ways from the other social sciences and adopted a “natural laws of physics” approach to its study, it seemed to have left the class of introduction to material science mid-lecture and assumed a homogeneous atomic behaviour for the *homo economicus*, which fitted the models well but distorted reality in the process. Mainstream rationalist and constructivist theory in International Relations, at a less extreme level, has seemed to have committed the same lackadaisical behaviour for most of the previous century. Either by the materialist approaches of “atomized utility maximizing” individuals or constructivist study of the ideas, norms and values that guide their behaviour (Broome, 2009, p. 4), the focus on how “materials” interact and their “atomic structures”, that is to say, the focus on high-level interactions between states or, at the very best, elite and organizational behaviour, created a veil that hid the “larger reality of global affairs” (Davies & Niemann, 2002, p. 561). This veil made from the idea of the masses as mere receptors or blind “institutional dopes” (Campbell, 1998, p. 382) undermined the social character of international relations and segregated the elite from everyday concerns, becoming, what Davies & Niemann entitled, “alienated relations” (2002, p. 568).

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International Political Economy did not exactly move away from this tendency, and even the critical approaches, that tend to give greater focus to identity issues, remained bound to an elite-focused and top-down analysis (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007). Post-structuralism's critique of the discipline foundations and assumptions, such as those of the rational individual, remained for long the closest IPE ever was from being able to properly study this "atomic interactions" by giving greater focus to issues of culture and politics of everyday life (Goede, 2003). Nevertheless, it arguably failed to properly address Davies' mystifications of the realities of global politics, concealing the contradictions present in any society and created by social relations, by establishing positive actors and identities (Konings, 2009, pp. 76-77) with a conceptualisation of this relations as "overdetermined and resistant to change" (Davies, 2005, p. 154). However, mainly picking on the work of organizational culture, ideas and norms of constructivist scholars and the "atomic" scope of post-structuralist studies, a greater focus and a deepening of this areas started to emerge with the rise of culture as the centrepiece of Cultural Political Economy.

Fuelled by constructivists' neglect of the role of habits and practices, and the inflexibility of the post-structuralism's agent, CPE set out to fill this gap by understanding culture as being constitutive of political economy and as defining the relationship between "basic actors and objects in the economy". It was thus justified by enabling a better understanding of the core questions asked so far in the field but also opening up new fields of inquiry within political economy (Best & Paterson, 2010). Although it is debatable whether this focus on culture was not taken too far by "overstat(ing) the explanatory capacity of cultural and epistemic practices" (Konings, 2009, p. 73) and retaining the same "vices" of the post-structuralist approach (Staricco, 2017, p. 339), the fact is that, with time, a greater focus has been given, within the field of IR and IPE, to overall atomic interactions, be it social relations or everyday practices and issues, with the blind "institutional dope" becoming less dope and less blind. But how in fact this microcosmos, that is everyday practices and objects, relate to the field of *International Political Economy* is a crucial question. One, however, that is gradually been answered, together with CPE, by a recent wave of Everyday IPE scholars (Watson, 2013) (Broome, 2009) (Langley, 2008) (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007) (LeBaron, 2010) (Davies, 2005) and that can only begin to be answered by dealing with the seemingly superfluous keyword – everyday.

## Different Perceptions of the "Everyday"

The everyday was first tackled as a concept by Henri Lefebvre, whose work many Everyday IPE scholars revived and revisited (Davies, 2016) (Davies, 2005) (Davies & Niemann, 2002) (Langley, 2008) so as to build the proper theoretical framework for further research. For Lefebvre, the everyday is "a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct" given the disengagement of function by "modernity". It is transversal to the major aspects of social life, the banal, the monotonous and repetitive that, almost as a contradiction, changes everything (Lefebvre & Levich, 1987). The study of the routine of everyday life thus becomes critical to understand this changes and provide a link between the theoretical ideological claims and the reality of everyday experiences (Davies & Niemann, 2002).

A slightly different approach has been taken by some scholars focusing on the everyday experiences, with a greater focus on the resistance of everyday actors to elite-driven policies (Hobson, 2013) (Seabrooke, 2007) (Brassett, 2016). The study of everyday actions of non-elites as those which contest policy or are manifestations of an uncomfortableness with the environment, be it by initiatives, movements, or individual and simple acts of rebellion, become the focus of analysis of policy success, power relations and so forth. Even though both approaches are critical to answer different questions and raise different problems within an agent or non-elite-centred approach, the latter exposes itself to Davies' critique of resistance being a break from the everyday (Davies, 2016, p. 25), as an answer to Hobson and Seabrook's attempt to provide a bridging definition. The latter established everyday actions as those which non-elites "shape, constitute and transform the political and economic environment" while not necessarily through resistance, thus allowing the "everyday" to take on a more broad meaning within IPE (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007, pp. 15-16). Not only associated with Lefebvre's idea of routine, but also incorporating the acts engaged by those who are marginalized by mainstream approaches, the non-elites, the masses or the subordinate. To understand what is actually meant by "everyday" practices and objects requires a delimitation of the scope of analysis which in this case incorporates both approaches.

## A Turn to Everyday IPE

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There is a very close proximity between CPE and Everyday IPE especially given the strong interconnection between culture and the everyday practices and objects, and the meanings we give to the latter (Best & Paterson, 2010). The difference thus lies in the importance and attention one gives to the cultural attributes of the everyday and how it is relevant for the analysis of specific issues. However, both approaches provide good motives for the incorporation of the everyday in IPE, both seeking to become transversal to the different theoretical frameworks that currently dominate the field. Just like the importance of studying the interactions between constituent atoms or molecules in materials science, there is a recognition by both approaches that in both IR and IPE “social relations, including international relations, are realized and produced by people and thus require an analysis of the processes involved in this production” (Davies & Niemann, 2002, p. 567). Much like how economics built models for the pre-established ideals of how the economy works, so do theoretical frameworks within IPE, through a persistence in an elite-focused and top-down analysis, seemed to create theories for, instead of, the state (Watson, 2013, p. 9). An everyday approach to the study of IPE thus allows, not only to better understand top-down relations, such as why certain elite-driven policies might be unsuccessful in changing people’s behaviour (Broome, 2009), but also bottom-up interactions between elite and non-elite agents, such as how incremental changes in societal perceptions and everyday practices informs and persuades “political elites and norm entrepreneurs” (Seabrooke, 2007).

But this ladder between elites and non-elites is far from being the only way a study of the everyday can increment and change the field of IPE. Adding everyday experiences to personal background, that is to say, focus on the individual as “living in ‘x’, in addition to being from ‘x’”, allows for a critical analysis of why and how certain individuals, groups or societies, deal and interpret policy, thus helping to move away from a problem-solving western-centred approach and adding value, not only to post-colonial thought, but also to all conventional theories and areas within IPE (Tickner, 2003) (Hobson, 2013). This potential to answer Cox’s dichotomy between problem-solving and critical theory becomes evident with the ability to analyse what so far was taken for granted by mainstream approaches, as well as, by doing so, build the foundations for a “big picture” understanding which is flexible in its analysis of changing circumstances and realities (Cox, 1981, p. 129). The intersection, as proposed by Lefebvre, of all major aspects of life of the everyday helps build this greater perspective over reality, with issues, seemingly isolated, such as finance, gender, entertainment and resistance (Brassett & Rethel, 2015) (LeBaron, 2010) (Brassett, 2016), coming together harmoniously to provide new and different explanatory powers to IPE. Finally, this flexibility comes not from an imposition or necessity, but naturally from the very definition of everyday life and the reality of institutional change within this dimension which allow for a proper framing of specific “moments of crisis and uncertainty” (Seabrooke, 2007, p. 808).

Where, in the past, IPE scholars “beg(an) with a picture of the principal economic interests at stake and their forms of organization, then investigate how these interests transit through institutions of national political economies” so as to study the interactions between the domestic and the international and how it affects the economic framework (Frieden & Martin, 2003, p. 119), with a turn to Everyday IPE, scholars will be able to start with something less static and predefined which may change, or add to, our perception of how these interactions actually occur. However, to achieve this, the study of the everyday should be subjected to a proper, or stronger, theoretical framework within the field, thus allowing for a less “descriptive understanding of everyday life” (Davies, 2016, p. 24), and actually engaging critically with the former the same way most Critical IPE engages with international systems. Also, it should not seek to limit its scope to some areas of the everyday and commit the same mistake of creating new pictures of reality (LeBaron, 2010). Once there is a commitment to study social “atomic” interactions and a recognition of the importance of analysing the practices and objects that are at the heart of this interactions, Everyday IPE needs to have the critical ability to find, study and dismantle all these pictures and transforming them into what they really are.

All in all, instead of asking how everyday practices and objects relate to IPE, one could easily ask how everyday expectations about the economy, or routine practices of saving and borrowing, relate to the financial system (Seabrooke, 2010) (Langley, 2008), or how the social and economic relations within the household affect, and are affected by, the global economy and capitalist relations (LeBaron, 2010), or even how social relations and norms within firms influenced policies aimed at achieving macroeconomic stability in former Soviet republics (Broome, 2009). All these have positive and complex answers that derive from the everyday practices and everyday objects’ constitutive nature, with their meanings, agency and signals, of the economic relations between and within the domestic and the international realm, which form the backbone of International Political Economy.

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## Concluding Remarks

The field of IPE is characterized by being so diverse and heterogeneous that is even questionable to call it a discipline (Amoore, 2002, p. 39). However, for long, this diverse characteristic seemed to be limited on all fronts given the inability, or unwillingness, to move beyond preconceived and inflexible notions of the nature of social relations and study of individual practices and agency. A focus on the interactions, interests, norms, culture and change of high-level systems, such as the state, markets, organizations or firms, kept silent the hidden cosmos that laid underneath. A study of everyday practices and objects, the relationship between the two and of the individual who gives them meaning, is the way some IPE scholars are attempting to unveil this microcosmos and better understand the changes that occur at the high-level systems but that actually start, and are shaped by, these atomic interactions.

This essay started by exposing this issue and how mainstream IPE was limited by it, undermining the social character of international relations, not analysing the contradictions that arise from it and exposing itself to academic bias. It then proceeded to confront the two main approaches to the concept of “everyday” within IPE scholars, understanding that it is not just a study of the routine of daily life but in fact, the study of the issues and actors marginalized so far by the conventional approaches – the non-elites. It went on to show how a turn to the everyday in IPE may add to, or change, conventional perspectives over issues tackled so far in the field as well as open new fields of inquiry that have the potential to enrich it. It also has the ability to move away from a western-centred approach by making room to a more “neutral” analysis of marginalized societies and the realities of their everyday issues, as well as engage with a more critical theory that doesn’t “take institutions and social and power relations for granted” but questions their origins and how they change (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Finally, to achieve a relevant future within the field of IPE, a stronger theoretical framework for the study of everyday non-elites is required to allow an actual critical engagement with this realities and not limiting itself to a pure descriptive account. The everyday practices and objects thus relate to IPE the same way atomic interactions relate to material science, it is the origin of most institutional and high level output and change that in turn are part of the cornerstone of International Political Economy.

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