

## Delving into the Whirlwind: Some Exploratory Notes on Everyday Life and Gender

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### Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that the human sciences in general and mainstream sociology in particular have long ignored everyday life as a theoretical problem. As a result, our social-scientific discourses on social life have become impoverished for it. I will argue for the need to incorporate everyday life as one of the central component of analysis in sociology. However, the very qualities of everyday life, its pervasiveness, complexity and evanesce, have rendered this area opaque to conventional approaches of sociology. In addition, feminist research has alerted us the fact that we experience everyday as gendered subjects which further complicates the matter. Here, I seek to explore ways to render everyday life and the gender subjectivity of everyday life more amenable to investigation, particularly within the Malaysian context. I will suggest that there exists a tradition that has specifically dealt with everyday life and gendered subjectivity of everyday life as a theoretical problem. It is my position that one can never truly produce the last word on this subject but rather a tentative first word where one can only extend an invitation for further investigation into this area.

“By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. ... This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty...” Charles Baudelaire.

### I) Introduction

The French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre was fond of invoking Hegel’s maxim that ‘the familiar is not necessary the known’ when referring to the phenomenon of everyday life. Or as Highmore (2002) aptly puts it,

As the notion of ‘everyday life’ circulates in Western cultures under its many guises ... one difficulty becomes immediately apparent: ‘everyday life’ signifies ambivalently. On the one hand it points (without judging) to those most repeated actions, those most traveled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, the day to day. This is the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met. But with this quantifiable meaning creeps another, never far behind: the everyday as value and quality – everydayness. Here the most traveled journey can become the dead weight of boredom, the most inhabited space a prison, the most repeated action an oppressive routine. Here the everydayness of everyday life might be experienced as a sanctuary, or it may bewilder or give pleasure, it may delight or depress. Or its special quality might be its lack of qualities. It might be, precisely, the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive (p. 1).

Although the everyday constitutes what Lefebvre calls as the ‘connective tissue’ or ‘common ground’ of all our experiences and practices of social reality, yet it has remained largely overlooked as an aspect of social existence by mainstream sociology. The reason for this state of affairs could be that the very qualities that make up the everyday, its pervasiveness, complexity and evanesce, has eluded the analytical gaze of the discipline to render it malleable for study. Or just perhaps, as Lefebvre has pointed

out that ‘there would always remain something fundamentally mysterious and obscure about its workings’ (Gardiner, 2000, p. 2).

What emerge from the discussion above are the questions of (i) *how are we to think of the everyday?* And (ii) *how are we to investigate the everyday?* These questions are particularly relevant to the Malaysian context as our social practices and subjectivity is embedded in the everyday and yet this area remained virtually unexplored.

Therefore, this paper is written with three objectives in mind: first, to discuss a counter tradition in thinking about the everyday which seeks ‘to *problematize* everyday life, to expose it for hidden contradictions and tease out its hidden potentialities, and to raise our understanding of the prosaic to the level of critical knowledge’ (Gardiner, 2000, p. 6)<sup>1</sup> in contrast to the interpretive tradition of mainstream sociology which has limited its task to describing the everyday. Motivated by what Habermas dubbed as an ‘emancipatory interest’, this tradition takes the everyday as the starting point of its inquiry into the wider nexus of the historical and social developments of contemporary society; secondly, to tease out some ideas which we can utilize fruitfully in theorizing the everyday within the local context; and finally, as a work in progress report which I hope to get feedback from my readers to help me further explore this area.

## II) Figuring Everyday Life: The Whirlwind as a Metaphor of the Everyday

As Highmore (2002) has noted earlier, the everyday is marked by an aura of ambivalence which one feels familiar and at home with and yet curiously contains within it the unfamiliar and strange. How are we to make sense of this experience? I would argue that the everyday are the effects of the development within modernity. To quote Highmore (2002) again,

In modernity the everyday becomes the setting for a dynamic process: for making the unfamiliar familiar; for getting accustomed to the disruption of custom; for struggling to incorporate the new; for adjusting to different ways of living. The everyday marks the success and failures of this process. It witnesses the absorption of the most revolutionary of inventions into the landscape of the mundane. Radical transformations in all walks of life become ‘second nature’. The new becomes traditional and the residues of the past become outmoded and available for fashionable renewal (p. 2).

Although everyday modernity resembles a heterogeneous and ambivalent landscape nonetheless I will argued that all such experiences and practices shares two ‘structural’ features which makes it qualitatively different from the everyday of previous historical epochs.

Firstly, the everyday consist of a new experience of temporality and the routinization and regimentation of the body connected with the sphere of work. From the road sweeper to the employee of a large corporation, the everyday consists of synchronizing daily life around the clock with its hours and minutes accompanied by the inexorable regularity of

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<sup>1</sup> Italics original.

working behavior. As a consequence, everyday work has become, in the words of Weber (1976):

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should lie on the shoulders of the saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage (p. 181).

More importantly, this iron cage has spilled over to virtually all aspects of life where now the tyranny of time and the routinization and regimentation of the body are the central defining features of everyday from which no one escapes.

Secondly, the everyday is suffused with the 'phantasmagoria'. The phantasmagoria is characterized by the commodity that disguises human social relations in 'the fantastic form of a relationship between things' (Marx, 1976, p. 165). In other words, ours is the age of consumer where commodities are paraded to invoke desire even if the ability to purchase such goods is restricted. Is it surprising then, the temple of our age is the shopping mall where thousands congregate daily. In addition, sights and sounds that are designed to invoke the desire for ever-new commodities constantly bombard us. This phantasmagoria has brought about a whole new set of cultural complexes which colour all aspects of our daily existence ranging from work to the family.

Thus, to think about the everyday requires us to place it within the larger historical context of modernity where our daily experiences and practices are ensnared in the

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, ... (Marx and Engels, 1848, Bourgeois and Proletarians section, para. 18).

The everyday then, to use a metaphor, resembles a whirlwind tearing out all that stands in its way. What is required now is to find a way to delve into this whirlwind in order to form a critical understanding of the everyday and ultimately to transform it. It should also be noted that to explore this issue properly requires us to remember that we experience the everyday as *gendered subjects*. We cannot ignore the issue of gender all together when addressing the everyday if we want to plumb the depth of everyday life.

As I have noted earlier, the state of our knowledge concerning the everyday within the Malaysian context is dismal. I believe that the time is ripe to explore the issue of the everyday within our local milieu. And it is to this task that I want to turn our attention to by looking at an alternative tradition that has addressed the everyday as a problematic. However, it should be noted that this tradition by itself does not form a single coherent

theoretical position on the everyday but rather it is made up of a diversity of voices and positions that attempts to make sense of the everyday where each thinker attempts, in the words of Baudelaire, “to distill the eternal from the transitory”. Nonetheless, the common thread that binds all these thinkers in this tradition is their attempt to create a poetics of the everyday that is capable of not only understanding but also transforming the world.

Because of the constraint of time, I will be focusing on the ideas of Walter Benjamin and Dorothy E. Smith, as representatives of this alternative tradition, to help us think through the ways to delve into the gendered subjectivity and practices of the everyday. It should be noted here that I am not interested to discuss the substantive theoretical reflections on the everyday but rather the methods which we may utilize to investigate the everyday.

### **III) Reading in the Ruins: Walter Benjamin and the Detritus of Modernity**

One of the major difficulties that confronts anyone who turns to the works of Walter Benjamin for an account of the everyday is that he did not produce a systematic theoretical account on the subject but rather scattered throughout his writings in disparate areas such as literary criticism, cultural history, theology and philosophy among others lies his theoretical reflection on the everyday which he weaved into whatever subject he was writing on at the moment. As Peter Osborne (1995) noted, the ‘everyday life flows through the whole of Benjamin’s later writings’ but ‘it is rarely to be found reflectively, as the object of an explicit theorization’ (p. 180).

However, for our purpose here, I will be exploring Benjamin’s monumental but uncompleted magnum opus *The Arcades Project* (1999) in order to discuss a fruitful approach to the investigate the everyday. This project was originally conceived as a historical study of nineteenth century Paris that seeks to trace the modern everyday where Benjamin spent the last thirteen years of his life collecting materials for the project. Unfortunately, he died without completing the projected magnum opus and what we have is a large collection of notes, images, quotes and citations that is capable of being ordered and reordered in endlessly different configurations.

Although uncompleted, this work is still worth exploring as it contains many suggestive ideas on encountering the everyday for investigation. The starting point of Benjamin’s investigation is the assumption that modernity has brought about a new social configuration unlike anything which humanity has experienced before. For him, as with Marx, the modernization process that started in the nineteenth century Western Europe has destroyed not only the traditional forms of material and social life but also in its incessant drive towards revolutionizing the production process has reverberations towards the everyday. To understand his view on modernity, one needs to turn to his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (Benjamin, 1982) where in a crucial passage where he utilized a painting of Klee to invoke the image of the angel of history whose

... eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in

front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (p. 259-60).

*The Arcades Project* (1999) seeks to understand the dynamics of the modern epoch by charting the everyday as wrought by modernity. Highmore (2002) gave an apt overview of the *Arcades Project* (1999) when he stated that:

Benjamin's approach to history is through 'trash' – through the spent and discarded materials that crowd the everyday. In this everyday material world different temporalities exist side by side: the latest version alongside last year's model. Everyday life registers the process of modernization as an incessant accumulation of debris: modernity produces obsolescence as part of its continual demand for the new (the latest version becomes last year's model with increasing frequency). But for Benjamin the modern everyday is not to be found just in material objects; the world of affects, of sensations is equally important. Benjamin's project charts a time of both increased accumulation and intensified sensation. In Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999) nineteenth century Paris is the scene for tracing the modern everyday. Here the city is orchestrated by the flow of commodities and their apparitions (advertising, cinema and so on). The Paris of the *Arcades Project* teems with bodies, images, signs, stimulants, movement, and is experienced as a perpetual assault on both tradition and the human sensorium alike (p. 61).

Benjamin's (1999) ambition in this work was that just as

Marx lays bare the causal connection between the economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible *Ur*-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life ... [N1a,6].<sup>2</sup>

And to achieve this end, he intended

..., to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. [N2,6]

We can observe that this work seeks to problematize the everyday as a way of comprehending the larger historical forces at work in the beginning of the twentieth century. For this reason, he viewed the everyday is nothing more than a heap of debris waiting to be investigated. Therefore, he proposed the following method of investigation:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them [N1a,8].

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<sup>2</sup> Italics original.

As I have noted earlier, the very qualities of the everyday, its pervasiveness, complexity and evanescence, makes this phenomenon difficult to capture using the theoretical grid of the conventional human sciences. Thus, by utilizing the montage method, Benjamin wants to transcend these limitations. For Benjamin (1999):

These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the “human sciences,” from so-called habitus, from style and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. ... It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal in nature but figural <bildlich>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image of the now of its recognizability- bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded [N3,1].

The aim of this method was not only to articulate this hidden aspect of social reality of modernity that has for long been submerged. More importantly, Benjamin wanted to create a poetics of the everyday that is capable of apprehending the everyday and make it available for criticism in what he calls as dialectics at a standstill. And in the *Arcades Project* as well as his other writings, we can discover Benjamin’s rich detail on the everyday as examples of the literary montage method.

Nonetheless, Benjamin’s work is not without its limitations. Highmore (2002), in his fair assessment of Benjamin, pointed out:

In the work of ... Benjamin, the sphere of everyday life is seen as quintessentially urban. The modern metropolis is seen as a realm where the problem of the everyday is unavoidable. Partly this is due to the spectacular technological changes brought about by modernity; partly what is due to the romanticism of the city. At this point we should look to see what is being excluded from this approach to everyday life. How would the everyday lives of women feature in this project? For the most part women are absent. Part of the project of developing ‘theories of the everyday’ is going to be rescuing pre-feminist theory from its ‘gendered orientation’. ...

In approaching the everyday, ... Benjamin has begun to explore the possibilities of forms of representation that move away from realism and naturalism. Most significant has been the engagement with the avant-garde forms. The radical practices of montage offers a vivid way of making the familiar strange, and it is this as much as anything that will offer something like a methodological base to this tradition of ‘everyday studies’. To what ends such montage practices are employed (in the name of the everyday) is not determined in advanced, and we have little idea of how Benjamin might have brought together his massive *Arcades Project*. Benjamin’s suggestive hints about a poetics ... remain abstract (p.74)

It is with this limitation in mind, we need to seek the ideas of other theorists lest we fall into the same limitation of Benjamin, particularly the gendered subjectivity aspect. It is for this reason, I will continue on my discussion by taking on the ideas of the feminist sociologist, Dorothy E. Smith, who seeks to only to extend our understanding of the everyday by taking into account the gender aspect.

#### **IV) The Critique of “Malestream” Sociology: Dorothy E. Smith and the Feminist View of the Everyday**

The starting point of Smith’s investigation into the everyday is her critique that mainstream sociology is partially responsible in creating a discourse that neglects the everyday, particularly as experienced by women. Like Foucault (1980), she argued that there is an intrinsic link between power and knowledge where the existing power structures of society has a vested interest in maintaining a portrayal of the social world that legitimizes their socio-political interests (Gardiner, 2000, p. 182-183).

For her, the discipline of sociology is deeply implicated in the power/knowledge structure which tends to produce a status-quo view of social reality irrespective of its protest otherwise. As Gardiner (2000) has perceptively puts it:

The discipline of sociology typically claims that it is concerned with the investigation of real social events and processes. It has even arrogated to itself a kind of ‘underdog ethos’. However, Smith claims, this ostensive identification with relatively marginalized and dispossessed segments of the population is blied by the fact that sociology is actually concerned, not with the domain of actual social experience, but with second-order textual constructions that are at a considerable remove from the delicate and largely hidden texture of everyday social relations. In this sense, overt political or moral commitments are largely irrelevant. ... Sociologists, generally speaking, only ‘know’ the lifeworld in a vicarious sense. This gulf is actively perpetuated by the institutional character of sociology itself, which is engaged in a process of abstraction and hypostatization by virtue of its very history, organizational status, and commitment to what Bauman (1987) terms ‘legislative reason’ (Gardiner, 2000, p. 183).

The reason for this state of affairs is because mainstream sociology is too infatuated with positivistic and objective scientific methodology which has largely ignored or downplayed the importance of the everyday life and the ‘private sphere’ as domain of investigation. In its place, sociologists offers an abstract model of social structures and linear historical progression that explains a social world that is orderly thus enabling the sociologists to predict and by implication to control the social world. Such a positivistic account of the social world according to Smith is ‘extralocal’, i.e., “in the sense that it is removed from ‘local and particular settings and relationships’” (quoted from Gardiner, 2000, p. 184). Smith argues mainstream sociology has distorted the social world by presenting us with a picture that systematically distorts and excludes the actual social experiences people experienced in their everyday life (Gardiner, 2000, p. 183-184).

She is adamant that there exist a multiple interpretations of the social world, not least those proffered by the social actors themselves. For her, sociological discourses only serves to de-legitimize non-authorized narratives because it does not coincide with the interests of the existing power structure while giving an authorized narrative of the social world that tends towards the status-quo and thus maintaining the existing power structure.

More damningly, Smith asserted that men have dominated sociology since its inception in the late nineteenth century. As a consequence, the discipline tends to focus its inquiries into the ‘public domain’ of the social world that are connected with the power structures of society, i.e., the political and economic structures, which has historically excluded women. She accused mainstream sociology as being ‘malestream’ sociology which only reflects the male point of view while excluding a female point of view on social reality whereby such narratives ‘robs women of any real agency, of any meaningful capacity to understand and transform their world’ (Gardiner, 2000, p. 191).

Given her feminist leanings, Smith sought to developed a female centered sociology that respects the everyday and in this way the experiential quality of women’s social experiences that avoids the pitfalls of ‘malestream’ which tends towards abstracted narratives of the social world that dovetails with the interests of the existing power structures.

Smith (1988) puts it thus:

The approach adopted here is one which treats the topic as assembled for our examination from the ongoing actual practices of actual individuals, among whom are ourselves. We are talking about the same world we inhabit and our knowledge of it; our share in its ongoing accomplishment is the basis on which we can claim to know and speak of it. The social forms, organization, and relations tapped into by the concept are actively concerted. Its social relationship is achieved in and through what actual individuals are doing in the everyday setting of their lives. The concepts, categories and images in which we talk and find ‘femininity’ are part of those practices. They are embedded in and intelligible only in the context of the complex of which they are part, as well as being integral to its organization and accomplishments. The complex, I shall argue, is not adequately comprehended using notions such as culture which address the phenomena with which we are concerned at the level of meaning, normative pattern, or signification. The concept of culture has been important recently in restoring our sense of the active engagement of people in the making of their social worlds and has been a valuable corrective to the banalities of the causal models, whether Marxist or sociological, which transform what people do into the effects of processes at work behind their back. It has the disadvantage, however, of transposing what people actually *do* into phenomena of meaning or signification. Analysis then focuses on the system of signification or symbols. The actual process as an ongoing, evolving, unfolding social organization of the actual practices of actual individuals escapes. Instead, we are given an abstraction constructed at one remove from the actualities of the active, lived process which is the original (p. 37-38).

A reconstructed feminist sociology must abandon the concept of gender as a universal and all-embracing concept. In its place, this concept should be viewed only in relation to the ‘extralocal’, i.e., embedded within a specific historical and local context. For Smith, the gender dimension in the modern everyday is embedded within the wider context of

the dynamics of capitalism that encourages certain forms of gendered (female) subjectivity and social practices. Therefore, in the place ‘malestream’ sociology which offers ‘an abstraction constructed at one remove from the actualities of the active, lived process which is the original’ (Smith 1988, p. 38), a much more fruitful approach would be to explore gender (female) subjectivity and social practices from within a specific social and historical context which attends to the specificities rather than the abstract conception of gender that involves a multiple and sometimes contradictory relations.

The approach into the everyday and everynight world of the female, Smith (1988) asserts

... is materialist, though not in the sense of a reductive strategy attempting to reduce social forms of consciousness to determinants located in economic relations. Rather, Marx and Engel’s insistence on viewing social existence as the ongoing activities of actual individuals under definite material conditions is taken as paradigmatic for the analysis of phenomena of social forms of consciousness (Marx and Engels, 1976). The strategy of attending to social processes as the ongoing activities of actual people can be extended to phenomena which have formerly been approached as subjective or as cultural ,i.e., as socially given forms of subjectivity. Social forms of consciousness, ‘femininity’ included, can be examined as actual practices, actual activities, taking place in real time, in real places, using definite material conditions. Among other matters this means that we do not neglect the ‘textual’ dimensions of social consciousness. By texts I mean the more or less permanent and above all replicable forms of meaning, of writing, painting, television, film, etc. The production, distribution, and uses of texts are a pervasive and highly significant dimensions of contemporary social organization. ‘Femininity’, I am going to argue, is a distinctively textual phenomenon. But texts must not be isolated from the practices in which they are embedded and which they are organize. ... we must be concerned with the reading or viewing of texts, with how people organize their activities in relation to texts, and therefore with skills and practices and with how relations mediated by texts and textually determined practices work. Hence our focus investigates a lived world of ongoing social action organized textually (p. 38-39).

In short Smith (1988), taking on a line of thought suggested by Foucault, proposed to view everyday and everynight social practices and consciousness as a textual discourse that is embedded within a historical context. The idea here, like Benjamin’s literary montage, aims at apprehending the everyday in order to subject it for critique of the capitalist structuring of the female subjectivity and practices of the everyday.

## **V) The Everyday and the Local Context: An Invitation and a Tentative Conclusion**

In the preceding discussion, I have sought to sketch a theoretical tradition which seeks to actively engage the everyday not so much as an objective of theoretical contemplation but as a praxis. It is my hope that this paper will generate some interest among the readers to consider utilizing the tradition discussed here to delve into the whirlwind of the everyday in order to bring about a social-scientific discourse that avoids the pitfalls of ‘malestream’ sociology while at the same time creating a critical discourse of the everyday that can bring about a more equitable society. It is my position that one can never truly produce the last word on this subject but rather a tentative first word which extend an invitation to others to explore this uncharted territory in the Malaysian context.

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