Privileging “the Family” in Analysis of War: A Provocation

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Abstract

This essay argues against privileging “the family” as a unit of analysis or social formation in need of protection in the aftermath of war. Research approaches that foreground the family as a war and postwar unit of analysis too often overlook the fact that “crisis” is typically the regular shape of individual and familial life for the poor, working classes, and non-citizens in times of relative peace. The working and poor classes, whether in family units or outside of them, are less likely to be considered worthy of state protection and support before, during, or after war. Indeed, the males among them are the most likely to be compelled to serve in war. The poor and working classes are more likely to depend on overwork, whether they live in or outside families, and to experience poor housing, violence, illness, and early death. Research that focuses on family dynamics as people suffer and cope with the outcomes of war and displacement can easily miss less visible and more powerful systems and locations that dramatically shape options before, during and after war.

Keywords: Family, War, Conflict, Gender Roles, Socio-Economic Conditions

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I am also cautious about privileging the family as a unit of analysis in the wake of war, given its ideological and material importance in the larger society as a location of heteronormative reproduction, extraction, and accumulation of resources. The family, argues Kathi Weeks, “is enforced through economic constraint and juridical rule as well as through the manufacture of consent” (Weeks 2021, 2). Western feminist political theorists have shown that the relationships of women to political communities are mediated by their relations with men. In *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex* (2012), Gayle Rubin, for example, argues that communities built on the exchange or gifting of girls and women between men reproduce labor power and generate surplus, a *relational* process that, through kinship, transforms sexual differences into a gendered system of power. Rubin argues, “Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights, and people—men, women, and children—in concrete systems of social relationships” (Rubin 2012, p. 46). Carol Pateman in *The Sexual Contract* (1988) shows how the so-called “social contract,” which Western political philosophers argue is the basis of states, is a sexual contract between men of a certain class that includes women as subordinates in a heteronormative “private” sphere constituted at the same time as the “public.” Unlike other contracts in liberal society, in marriage “an ‘individual’ and a natural subordinate enter into a contract, not two ‘individuals’ (Pateman 1988, p. 55).

Marriage “is never a private contract between two persons” since it involves legal recognition and the distribution of resources and privileges (Warner 1999, p. 117). Feminist scholars in the Arab world and elsewhere have demonstrated that marriage, sex, and families are forged within established material and ideological strictures (Hoodfar 1997; Hughes, 2021). State-authorized forms of marriage and reproduction within them are dependent on citizenship, among other factors, making the family a matter of modern state interest and intervention (Joseph 2000). Most Arab states give men and not women the ability to pass on citizenship to non-citizen husbands and children from such relationships (Hasso 2011; Joseph 2000). Universally, religious and state legal systems link children to their fathers rather than their mothers and determine whether citizenship is determined by “blood,” place of birth, or nationality of the grandfather or father. Racial and not only gender ideologies inform such laws, particularly when marriage involves people from different ethnic, national, or religious groups and citizenship statuses (Sinke 1999). Arab states increasingly understand the authorized family unit as “the basic unit of a stable modern *national* order” (Hasso 2011, p. 14). Some of these societies have long produced crisis discourse about divorce rates (Kholoussy 2010). Powerful families, moreover, have often consolidated and expanded their political power and economic wealth by capturing the state, for example in the case of the Saudis, who collaborated with Western imperialists (Al-Rasheed 2013).

Sex and marriage have implications beyond the family no matter how intimate they may seem (Brennan 2004). Families are arrangements of economic-sexual exchange structured around housing, breadwinning, and reproducing the household and its members. The conditions of the usually legal contractual relationship of marriage and its responsibilities vary tremendously. Nevertheless, to understand families as political-economic units is to recognize that unequal labor extraction and accumulation are fundamental to them. Moreover, most people experience violence and exploitation within rather than outside intimate relations. Intimacy does not erase the material logic that underlies married families. Indeed, the affective and spatial dimensions of intimacy personalize familial relations to the detriment of meta-analysis.

Racialized non-citizen domestic workers, who perform eldercare, childcare, cooking and cleaning duties for low wages, are increasingly crucial to socially and biologically reproducing families and households (Dai 2017). Such “commodification of intimacy” is central to marriage and reproductive and household labor and is made more complex by cross-national migration (Constable 2009). States coordinate with each other and with capitalist enterprises to facilitate the import and export of migrant workers, expanding the range of extractive relations beyond families whose members are related by biology or law (Frantz 2008). Imported family workers experience high rates of “unnatural death” within their intimate workplaces in a country such as Jordan (Abder-Rahman *et al.* 2021). Migrant workers’ lives within host families and the families that send and receive them have become important concerns in “internal affairs” and international relations of states (Bergem 2006). Domestic workers, usually women, are dependent on and constrained by the intimate familial sphere in which they work and the host society’s legal and policing systems, even if the employer is not repressive. In her research on South Asian migrant women who worked in Kuwaiti households and converted to Islam, Attiya Ahmad found that conversion did “not eclipse existing kin-based and ethnonational differences that structure domestic workers’ asymmetrical and hierarchical relations with their employers” (Ahmad 2017, p. 147).

States and empires have historically adopted policies and laws that address intimate matters and police families because they are in fact not merely intimate (Donzelot 1979). Governments need families to

reproduce, raise, and control children who will become workers, taxpayers, soldiers, and caretakers. Empires and states engage in multiple ways in fertility and birth control practices to secure their military and labor needs (Dermici & Somel 2008). Depending on the context, a government may be concerned with high or low fertility rates, low marriage rates, or high divorce rates for similar reasons.

Demands to protect heteronormative families are often set up in zero-sum terms against the economic, legal, and cultural needs of non-familial and non-heteronormative relationalities (Warner 1999, 90-91). In situations of war and displacement in the Global South, other power matrices come into play for victims, including homonationalists (Puar 2013) and feminist reinforcements of Western imperialism. These systems do not quite serve the needs of victims of war who seek assistance outside the authorized family or who are queer sexual or gender subjects. Sima Shakhsari found that in small towns in Turkey where queer and transgender refugees were placed by UNHCR and the central government, narrow and essentialist "zones of recognition" subjected them to slow death by literally wasting their time and lives. She shows that recognition of rights violations is always arbitrary, contingent, and temporally limited, in that those sometimes considered worthy of being saved are at other times thoroughly disposable (Shakhsari 2014).

Family cohesion, no matter the features and qualities of particular families, can protect members to some degree in war and displacement, since these contexts typically lead to loss of state welfare services, destruction of infrastructure, economic devastation, scattering of friends, and divergence from prewar spaces of civic and social solidarity. Wars create political vacuums and destroy fragile social and economic networks that the poor and working classes especially rely upon. War and refugee settings, moreover, encourage the proliferation and retooling of new and old actors: militias, multilateral and foreign government aid organizations, missionary organizations, and host police and military forces. War and displacement diminish well-trod spatially bounded networks and relations even as they congeal others and produce new boundaries, paths, and spaces of sociality and work.

In civil wars, armed actors often commit sexual violence against "other" women, particularly when a conflict over resources or political power accentuates ethnic or religious differences, as was the case in Kenya in the 1990s (Nyamongo 2007). In their study of the Syrian war that began in 2011, Khuloud Alsaba and Anuj Kapilashrami write, "the scale of violence and the multiplicity of actors grew as the conflict progressed, exposing Syrian women and girls to… kidnapping, forced disappearance of women political activists and female members of families of male activists, executions, rape and other sexual violence, torture, enslavement, forced recruitment by militias, forced detention and denial of fair trials" (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016, pp. 7-11). Displacement to other countries pushed families worried about the economic and sexual insecurity of their daughters to compel them into marriages as teenagers (Ibid. p. 7).

Rosemary Sayigh found that in the cases of poor Palestinian refugees who fled to Lebanon after the 1948 expulsions, displacement and loss of land may have hyperbolized the importance of families as sources of cultural solidarity and material support in a hostile diasporic context (Sayigh 1979, pp. 127-128). State-imposed barriers to returning home and meeting with dispersed family members reinforced the impulse to rebuild families: "All accounts of the early period show the refugees groping to re-establish family contacts and, in spite of the terrible conditions in the camps, neither the rate nor age of marriage fell" (Sayigh 1979, p. 128). Cathrine Thorleifsson (2014) found more recently that poor

Syrian refugees in Lebanon expanded their notions of family to include non-kin in order to “cope” and survive.

Laila Farhood’s study of hundreds of families that survived the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) examines the impact of war-related “stress,” “coping,” and adaptation strategies and how war and insecurity are mitigated by “family resources” (Farhood 1999). She finds many negative impacts on mental health, especially for mothers dealing with “war separation” from husbands and “economic strain” produced by war (Farhood 1999, p. 194). Families of “lower socio-economic status” were the most likely to considerably reduce their “consumption of basic food such as meat, fish, and poultry during the war” (Farhood 1999, p. 198). Farhood concludes that “families with fewer economic constraints, higher educational levels, and higher satisfaction with their social support adapted more effectively” to the war (Farhood 1999, p. 201). Based on interviews with refugee women in Canada, Berman *et al.* (2006) show that the women carried the “disproportionate burden of the consequences of war,” largely because their preexisting responsibility to “care for, protect, and nurture their families” is intensified in hostile and unfamiliar conditions (Berman *et al.* 2006, p. 34). As with all refugees, trauma, alienation, social isolation, culture shock, lack of language knowledge, inability to access employment, lack of money, and limited or no legal status in host societies cause great suffering, including depression (Ibid. 36-39).

“Family” is a historically situated construct that has never had the same meaning for all its members, operated uniformly, or been legally defined in the same way. Actual families, moreover, are historically fragile in form and content. The violence, destruction and upheaval produced by war are obviously devastating for human and nonhuman life and ecologies that become targets of war. War produces new, intimate geographies and conditions, not all of which are familial. We should be mindful of the fact that legal, policy, and aid interventions are fundamentally shaped by state interests in original and host societies and can easily reproduce if not exacerbate preexisting “public” and “private” inequalities.

Ethnographic “scaled down” research (Weeks 2021, p. 3) on family dynamics during and in the wake of war, including a focus on the agency, entrepreneurial effort, and creativity of family members, underplays the larger violent symphonic forces at work. These include the dangers posed by civilian aid organizations, governmental and non-governmental, which perpetuate bureaucratic and material violence on victims of war living in conditions of insecurity and deprivation. In an ideal world, war would be addressed in ways that alleviate immediate suffering, address fundamental causes, and provide resources that allow people and communities to heal, rebuild, and have substantial input in setting priorities. Rehabilitative responses would, moreover, allow for a range of social solidarities in home and host settings and be sensitive to the complex needs of differently situated members of war-ravaged communities, rather than reduce them to the family.

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