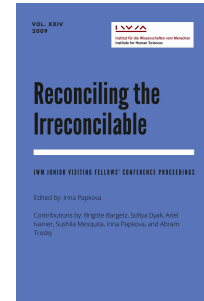


# The Politics of the Everyday: A Feminist Revision of the Public/Private Frame [1]

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According to Carole Pateman, the feminist critique of the dichotomy between public and private “is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately what the feminist movement is about” [2]. This critique is probably most clearly articulated in second-wave feminists’ claim that “the personal is political” [3]. Although the terms public and private are used quite differently in feminist debates, there are two assumptions that can be considered as common grounds. On one hand, the dichotomy itself is criticized as it implies a hierarchical, sexualized and gendered binary order. On the other hand, the assumption of a clear distinction between these two spheres is called into question.

Meanwhile, the public/private distinction is used – not only in feminist debates – in order to analyze transformations of the social, the economic, and the political. In the 1970s, for instance, Richard Sennett was concerned with the “increasing tyranny of intimacy” [4]. Currently, public/private is often discussed in the context of neoliberal transformations like the privatization of parts of the state, the ignorance of structural inequalities in public debates, and the economization and individualization of the social. Thus, Janine Brodie argues that “the current moment of restructuring can be viewed as a concerted discursive and political struggle around the very meaning of the public and the private” [5].

However, the public/private frame has also provoked much controversy: It has been questioned if it provides an instructive feminist concept for analyzing power structures. Due to its androcentric and Eurocentric assumptions, the concept of public/private has been criticized for ignoring and making invisible certain power relations. Taking the limits of the public/private frame, I would like to propose the concept of the everyday as an alternative concept for analyzing current transformation processes. Thus, the paper is divided into three sections: I start with pointing out three fundamental weaknesses of the public/private frame. Then I briefly outline some aspects of the notion of the everyday. Finally, I point out the advantages and analytical strengths of a conceptualization of the everyday.

## I. Beyond the public/private distinction?

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As mentioned above, it is possible to identify some common ground between those feminist positions which, despite being critical of the public/private dichotomy, still think of it as a useful framework. In this context, public/private is often considered as an analytical concept, rejecting the “mechanistic separation of the two spheres” [6], while not denying the real consequences following from the dichotomy. After all, the definition of what is private and what is public is decisive for the allocation of power and resources[7].

At the same time, the public/private frame is strongly criticized, mainly because of its epistemological and political shortcomings. Feminists have disputed the concept referring to both its specific meaning and its appropriateness for analyzing different forms of sex and gender oppression.

For the purpose of this paper, I will consider three criticisms in some detail. Firstly, the public/private distinction has been criticized to reproduce a dichotomous thinking that it was meant to overcome in the first place[8]. As critics point out, dichotomies like public/private, mind/body, reason/emotion, etc. are not neutral and innocent but imply powerful and exclusionary hierarchies. Starting from a critique of the opposition reason/emotion, Raia Prokhovnik therefore seeks to elaborate an alternative to dichotomous thinking by exploring the potential of a relational theory. Dichotomous thinking, she posits, inevitably entails an opposition between two identities that are hierarchically ordered. Subsequently, she identifies four specific problematic aspects: Because dichotomous thinking is gendered and sexualized, it “leads specifically to the denigration of women”[9]. An additional conceptual problem occurs when the dichotomy is accepted as dominant cultural metaphor and thus powerfully determines further ways of thinking and acting. A third problem arises with dichotomy when it is applied to the conception of truth, which presupposes “that only one party can be right” whereas “the other must be wrong”[10]. Finally, Prokhovnik argues, thinking within a dichotomous frame leads to constituting two and just two parts of a whole, and therefore rejects a “prospect of heterogeneity”[11].

Whereas Prokhovnik’s critic of androcentric dichotomous thinking relates to its epistemological and philosophical foundations, Chris Armstrong and Judith Squires question the empirical-analytical value of the dichotomy. They doubt that the public/private distinction may be an adequate instrument for keeping up “with the current means by which sexual inequalities are perpetuated”[12]. Conceiving the distinction rather as empirically irrelevant and politically ineffective, they share Diana Coole’s suggestion that the categories of public and private should be discarded and replaced by “new maps”[13].

Secondly, the usefulness of the public/private frame has been criticized by Black feminists as a liberal and white concept. Pointing out that public/private does not mean the same thing for different women, these critics reveal the concept’s Eurocentric bias. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, argues that for African-American communities, public and private may not be useful categories, since they rely on the “archetypal white, middle-class nuclear family” [14]. Since racial oppression has impoverished many Black families, Black

women and other women of color seldom fit this model[15]. Poor families, she argues, do not have the same distinction, equating private with home and public with work, as Black women's paid labor is often domestic labor. Therefore, black women's labor has also often been neglected by feminist discourses.

Furthermore, the public/private frame not only fails to recognize the realities of African-American women and other women of color, it also enhances the production of deviance. This is the case when the public/private frame is taken as a "normative yardstick" for explaining why "Black women's work and family patterns deviate from the alleged norm"[16]. Thus, Patricia Hill Collins proposes to challenge the public/private concept because of its underlying normative constructions.

Let me turn now to the third critique. The dominant feminist critique of the liberal public/private distinction focuses on the patriarchal oppression of women in the realm as well as through the existence of the separated realm of the private. However, some feminists question this conception because of its devaluation of the private. While acknowledging the private as a place of deprivation and violence – historically as well as at present – they enhance a more ambivalent vision of the private by emphasizing its empowering potentials. Thus, Bell Hooks points out that home can constitute a site of resistance and of "self-conscious constructed identity"[17]. "Historically," she concedes, "African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however, fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist." [18] Following Bell Hooks' concern with the political significance of home, Iris Marion Young proposes to rethink the meaning of "house and home" as deeply "ambivalent values"[19]. While she agrees with the feminist critique of the private's oppressive and exclusive dimensions – also by pointing to her own experiences as a child of a single, nonconformist mother in the 1950s –, she explicitly highlights the liberating dimensions of home and homemaking. She stresses the positive values associated with home, like safety, individuation, privacy and preservation, without denying that these aspects are always ambiguous and "can be conservative and reinterpreted, rigid and fluid"[20]. Emphasizing the "critical liberating potential" [21] and therefore a more positive vision of the home, both Hooks and Young, reject a public/private opposition that mainly focuses on the private as the sphere of deprivation, and instead bring forward a more ambivalent conception of the private.

## **II. The Everyday as Problematic**

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Thinking about the everyday or everyday life was explicitly prominent in different disciplinary fields at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s. In British Cultural Studies[22], for example, referring to the everyday implied the contestation of a concept of high culture, most prominently articulated by Raymond Williams' notion of "culture as a whole way of life". In the field of the new emerging "Alltagsgeschichte" (History of everyday life), the introduction of the concept of the everyday implied an understanding of history in terms of processes and as a product of people's daily appropriations[23]. At

the same time, feminist research in different disciplines discovered the everyday as an object of inquiry as well as a field of political struggle[24]. “Everyday” was eventually used in so many different meanings and contexts that, at the end of the 1970s, Norbert Elias asked what this “fashionable notion of the everyday”[25] was all about. He criticized that the everyday was mainly conceptualized as a distinct and autonomous social sphere, as unchangeable and universal.

Recently, there has been a revival of the concept of the everyday in the social sciences and cultural studies[26]. As Rita Felski maintains: “The everyday is everywhere in recent work in the humanities, but to what end?”[27] Unlike views of the everyday as a distinct social sphere that is either conceived as taken-for-granted, inauthentic and impoverished or, by contrast, exclusively “assigned to resistant subordinates”[28], I would like to introduce a critical concept of the everyday[29]. In this context, I turn to Michael E. Gardiner, who brings forward the “critiques of everyday life,” which he understands as counter-tradition to those micro-sociological approaches that adhere to a formalistic and purely descriptive concept of the everyday as “a non-contradictory and essentially unproblematic component of social existence”[30].

The everyday as critical concept is not an unchanging and distinct social sphere. Rather, critical conceptualizations of the everyday (e.g. by Michel de Certeau, Antonio Gramsci, Agnes Heller, Henri Lefebvre, Dorothy Smith) situate it in specific historical and political contexts. Perceiving the everyday as “polydimensional” [31], these theories focus explicitly on the everyday’s ambivalences, in particular on its relations to power structures and its hidden empowering potentials. The everyday then is not only an object of inquiry, but also something to be transformed. “Adherents of the critical approach to the study of everyday life therefore take an explicit ethico-political stance, and place considerable stress on the potential for individual and collective agency to transform existing social conditions, a strategy which is anathema to practitioners of mainstream social science.”[32]

Dorothy Smith specifies such a view by conceptualizing “the everyday world” not as phenomenon or object, but rather as problematic: “The concept of a problematic is used in part to bring the sociologist and the sociological inquiry into a different relation to the society by constituting the everyday world as that in which questions originate.”[33] Taking the everyday as problematic is then based upon her feminist critique of androcentric sociology, which not only excludes women as scientific producers, but takes masculinity as taken-for-granted norm and therefore largely excludes experiences, activities and knowledge from everyday life. Drawing on the everyday as a critical concept then implies to ask who and what is being excluded and what forms of exclusions become apparent when using the everyday as an analytical tool.

Dimensions of a critical conceptualization of the everyday can also be identified in Agnes Heller’s work on everyday life. [34] She argues that everyday life cannot be analyzed in isolation from social relations and institutions but must be understood in its specific socioeconomic and political context. Focusing on the question of how society is produced and reproduced, Heller particularly concentrates on the reproduction of the individual

human being in everyday life. The reproduction of society, she claims, cannot be detached from the daily reproduction of the individual within its specific social, economic and political context.

### III. Taking up the everyday

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The public/private frame and the concept of the everyday share some common ground when taking into account their critique of androcentric science. Feminists have drawn on both concepts in order to reveal different (disciplinary) exclusions: of women as scientists, of women's experiences, of questions of sex and gender relations, of patriarchy, etc. Moreover, both concepts are confronted with gendered and sexualized denigrations. Associating women with either the sphere of the private or the sphere of the everyday, they are often regarded as being "naturally" subordinated to the public sphere of male transcendence.

Although I do not want to deny these equivalences, I focus on the analytical divergences between the two concepts. Taking up the critiques of the public/private framework, I will point out the conceptual advantages of the notion of the everyday.

As Nancy Hirschman and Christine Di Stefano point out, the feminist claim to politicize the private has offered a "radical challenge to the notion of politics itself and has instigated a redefinition of politics to include things that 'mainstream' theory considers completely non-political, such as the body and sexuality, the family and interpersonal relationships" [35]. However, drawing on the notion of the private for rethinking a broad notion of the political renders this claim complicit with one problem mentioned above. More precisely, focusing on the private means taking the public/private dichotomy as a foundation and is therefore running the risk of reproducing the very dichotomy it strives to overcome. Instead of bringing into play the concept of the private – which cannot be separated from the public, since the private itself is a political invention – I suggest using the concept of the everyday, which is not confronted with this problem because everyday life includes both public and private issues. Taking the everyday as problematic makes it possible to include spaces, actions, and attitudes that are supposedly private and therefore excluded from main- and malestream concepts of the political without reproducing the public/private dichotomy by concentrating on either of the two spheres.

A second critique regarding the public/private dichotomy is related to its Eurocentric bias. Departing from the liberal public/private frame, Black women's work, or more accurately, their paid domestic labor, has often been ignored. I propose that using the concept of the everyday makes the ignorance and exclusion of domestic labor or reproductive work less likely. As mentioned above, Agnes Heller understands the reproduction of society as necessarily linked to the reproduction of the individual human being. Thus, domestic work – whether it is (badly) paid or not paid at all – is an integral part of the reproduction of a person and cannot be excluded from a conceptualization of work. Starting from the concept of the everyday allows for moving beyond the

confinement of paid productive labor to the public sphere and unpaid reproductive work to the private sphere and to thus make visible, for instance, the paid domestic labor of Black women.

Moreover, the notion of the everyday helps to rethink the concept of work itself in order to include, for example, usually unpaid emotional or care work – a task that is currently highly important. According to Birgit Sauer, re-politicizing a notion of work is especially necessary for promoting gender equality in post-Fordist times. [36] Thus, some scholars question whether the differentiation of productive/reproductive labor is still an adequate concept for describing current working relations. Luzenir Caixeta, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Shirley Tate and Cristina Vega Solis, for instance, argue that the form of paid labor has changed insofar as formerly associated attributions with domestic labor, for example emotional work, is currently especially required in paid labor relations, such as in the information, media or service sectors. [37]

Taking Heller's critical concept of the everyday which focuses on the reproduction of society provides a way for politicizing a concept of work without sticking to the productive/reproductive frame. However, taking up the concept of the everyday does not offer a critical framework for the question of who is doing which work and how much one gets paid for it. Nevertheless, taking the everyday as basis for a critical revision of a concept of work, may at least initiate further questions in this direction.

Stressing the political and positive meaning of the home, a third critique of the concept of public/private has been the positive connotation of the public accompanied by a devaluation of the private. As mentioned above, the everyday shares with the concept of the private some of the negative and gendered connotations when it is conceptualized as taken-for-granted, mundane and inauthentic. Yet, taking it as critical concept opens up ways of theorizing how everyday life is also a site of power relations and a continually politically contested field. The critique of the everyday then explicitly highlights its ambivalent moments. Although everyday life is in many theories conceived to be structured by (capitalist) power relations – which are often conceptualized in terms of reification and alienation – the everyday is never fully determined by these processes, but always also as site of emancipatory moments and counter-hegemonic struggles.

The feminist critique of the public/private dichotomy has been an important contribution to feminist research. Exposing the gendered and sexualized dimensions and the inherent hierarchies, feminists have revealed the public/private distinction as an influential liberal power mechanism of modernity. However, taking seriously the critiques of this concept, I would like to propose a revision from the perspective of the everyday. In particular, in view of some androcentric and Eurocentric biases, I suggest that taking into account the concept of everyday life makes it possible to overcome some of the public/private framework's analytical shortcomings.

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*Notes:*

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[2] Carole Pateman (1989): "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy", in: *ibid.*, *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Cambridge (Polity Press), p. 118

[3] "The Personal is Political" is the title of an article by Carol Hanisch, first published in 1970 in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. As Hanisch writes in her new edition of the article in 2006, the title was chosen by the editors of *Notes from the Second Year* (see online: <http://scholar.alexanderstreet.com/download/attachments/2259/Personal+Is+Pol.pdf?version=1> [20-10-2008])

[4] Richard Sennett (1977): *The fall of public man*, Cambridge (Cambridge Univ. Press)

[5] Janine Brodie (1994): "Shifting the Boundaries: Gender and the Politics of Restructuring", in: Bakker, Isabella (ed.), *The Strategic Silence. Gender and economic Policy*, London (Zed Books), p. 55

[6] Birgit Sauer (2001): "Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit revisited. Grenzziehungen im Neoliberalismus und die Konsequenzen für die Geschlechterpolitik", in: *Kurswechsel*, No. 4, Öffentlich/Privat – neue Grenzziehungen, p. 6; my translation

[7] Cf. Nancy Fraser (1997): *Justice Interruptus: critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition*, London/New York (Routledge); Birgit Sauer (2001): *Die Asche des Souveräns. Staat und Demokratie in der Geschlechterdebatte*, Frankfurt a.M./New York (Campus)

[8] Cf. Chris Armstrong and Judith Squires (2002): "Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy: Relational Space and Sexual Inequalities", in: *Political Theory*, No. 1, p. 261

[9] Raia Prokhovnik (1999): *Rational Woman. A feminist critique of the dichotomy*, London/New York (Routledge), p. 37

[10] Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman*, p. 33

[11] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 31-38

[12] Armstrong and Squires, "Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy", p. 261

[13] Diana Coole (2000): "Cartographic convulsions: public and private reconsidered", in: *Political Theory*, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 347

[14] Patricia Hill Collins (1991): "Work, family, and black women's oppression", in: *ibid.*, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, New York/London (Routledge), p. 46

[15] That the gendered and sexualized distinction of “public man and private woman” cannot be maintained empirically has been strongly disputed by feminists pointing for example to the active participation of women in public in different historical contexts, to current movements of girl power, or to the feminization of the workforce.

[16] Collins, “Work, family, and black women’s oppression”, p. 47

[17] Iris Marion Young (1997): “House and Home. Feminist Variations on a Theme”, in: *ibid*, *Intersecting Voices. Dilemmas of gender, political philosophy, and policy*, Princeton (University Press), p. 160

[18] bell hooks (1990): “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance”, in: *ibid*, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston (South End Press), p. 42

[19] Young, “House and home”, p. 134

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 156

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 134

[22] Raymond Williams (1958): *Culture and Society. 1780-1950*, New York (Columbia University Press); Richard Hoggart (1957): *The Uses of Literacy: aspects of working-class life with special references to publications and entertainments*, London (Chatto and Windus); Edward P. Thompson (1963): *The Making of the English Working Class*, London (Gollancz)

[23] See Alf Lüdtke (1995 [1989]): *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, Princeton (University Press); Lutz Niethammer (1983-1985): *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930-1960*, 3 volumes, Berlin et al. (Dietz)

[24] See Dorothy Smith (1987): *The everyday world as problematic: a feminist sociology*, Boston (Northeastern University Press); Dorothee Wierling (1995 [1989]): “The History of Everyday Life and Gender Relations: On Historical and Historiographical Relationships”, in: Lüdtke, Alf (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life. Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, Princeton, (University Press)

[25] Norbert Elias (1978): “Zum Begriff des Alltags”, in: Hammerich, Kurt/Klein, Michael (ed.), *Materialien zur Soziologie des Alltags* (Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Sonderheft 20), Opladen (Westdeutscher Verlag), p. 25, my translation

[26] See *Cultural Studies* (2004): *Cultural Theory*, Vol. 18, Issue 2 & 3; David Chaney (2002): *Cultural Change and Everyday Life*, Basingstoke/New York (Palgrave); Michael E. Gardiner (2000): *Critiques of Everyday Life*, London/New York (Routledge); Ben Highmore (2002): *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, London/New York (Routledge); *New Literary History* (2002): Special Issue: *Everyday Life*, Vol. 33, No. 4; John Roberts (2006): *Philosophizing the Everyday. Revolutionary Praxis and the*



*Fate of Cultural Theory*, London/Ann Arbor (Pluto Press); Michael Sheringham (2006): *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford (University Press)

[27] Rita Felski (2002): "Introduction", in: *New Literary History*, Vol. 33, No. 4, p. 607

[28] Critical Stephen Crook (1998): "Minotaurs and other Monsters: 'Everyday life' in recent social theory", in: *Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 3, August, p. 536

[29] Cf. Michael E. Gardiner (2000): *Critiques of Everyday Life*, London/New York (Routledge)

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 6

[31] Gardiner, *Critiques of everyday life*, p. 6

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 9

[33] Dorothy E. Smith (1975): "What It Might Mean to Do a Canadian Sociology: The Everyday World as Problematic", in: *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers canadiens de sociologie*, Vol. 1, No. 3., Autumn, p. 368

[34] Agnes Heller (1984): *Everyday Life*, London (Routledge)

[35] Nancy J. Hirschmann and Christine Di Stefano (1996): "Introduction: Revision, Reconstruction and the Challenge of the New", in: *ibid.* (eds.), *Revisioning the Political: Feminist Reconstructions of Traditional Concepts in Western Political Theory*, Boulder (Westviewpress), p. 1-26, here 6

[36] Birgit Sauer (2006): "Geschlechterdemokratie und Arbeitsteilung. Aktuelle feministische Debatten", in: *ÖZS*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 54-76

[37] Luzenir Caixeta, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Shirley Tate and Cristina Vega Solis (2006): „Politiken der Vereinbarkeit verqueren oder“....aber hier putzen und pflegen wir alle“. Heteronormativität, Einwanderung und alte Spannungen der Reproduktion, in: *Kurswechsel*, No. 2, p. 22

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