seriously! investigating crashes and crises as if women mattered


This new volume by Cynthia Enloe, titled *Seriously! Investigating Crashes and Crises as If Women Mattered*, brings Enloe’s feminist curiosity and distinctive voice to the gender dynamics of political transitions (post-war, post-crash, post-disaster). Its central question is the concept of seriousness and the process by which certain voices and topics acquire the label of ‘serious’ analysis, while others are marginalised. Seriousness, Enloe demonstrates, is a deeply gendered frame that (re)produces the association of masculinity with seriousness and femininity with marginality or triviality (pp. 15–18). The gender politics of seriousness are addressed in this collection of essays through discussions of some of the major geopolitical events that have changed the world over the past few years, with a focus on periods of transition; the chapters variously tackle sexism in academia, the global financial crisis, the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and UN interventions in Haiti, among other topics.

The unique pleasure of reading Enloe’s work comes, as usual, from the clarity and liveliness of her writing. There are few other feminist scholars who write about International Relations and Political Economy with such an engaging voice, or who are able to create such lucid and accessible accounts of the gendered complexities of political, economic and military governance. This collection of essays will provide an invaluable teaching resource to introduce students to feminist political analysis, in part because Enloe is especially adept at engaging the most sceptical reader and providing a compelling answer to her questions: what does gender mean, and why does it matter? Why do the lives of women matter for our understanding of global politics?

Each chapter in the book demonstrates the value of taking gender seriously, by moving beyond the ‘add women and stir’ approach towards a critical appraisal of femininity, masculinity and the relation between the two. When commentators and policymakers fail to take women (or the absence of women) seriously, they fail to see ‘men as men’ (p. 4). The importance of an analysis that grapples with masculinities is particularly evident in the two standout chapters that deal with global finance and the 2008 financial crisis.

Chapter 4, titled ‘DSK, vikings, and the smartest guys’, addresses masculinities in global finance and points to the links between institutional cultures that
perpetuate exclusive masculinities and marginalise femininity and the sexist policy decisions that are produced by these institutions. Enloe argues that prevailing notions of ‘seriousness’ in global finance confine gender analysis to the margins, and as a result, post-crisis reforms and regulations have reproduced dominant cultures of masculinity in financial institutions and thereby set the stage for another crisis. Chapter 5, on ‘Women in recession’, explores the gendered implications of post-crisis policy in the context of stimulus (in the US case) and austerity (in the UK case). Beyond a discussion of the gendered impact of infrastructure-focused stimulus and rollback neo-liberalism, the chapter highlights the work of the feminist activists who held governments accountable and developed the tools necessary to produce a powerful body of feminist research.

A highlight of this book is its meta-reflection on the practice of doing gender research and the strictures of ‘seriousness’ within which feminist researchers work. How does the perception of seriousness—and the pursuit of that label—impact on the act of doing research in the academy, in government or in global governance institutions? Here, Enloe confronts readers with a challenge: in making the case for taking women seriously, she is not merely lamenting the failures of mainstream policymakers and commentators, but asking feminists to think honestly and reflexively about the ways in which we may try to conform, seek credibility and aim to inhabit dominant forms of seriousness. What are the rewards handed out for not taking women seriously? (p. 4). Do we sometimes—for fear of being painted as too ‘radical’, too ‘naïve’ or too ‘niche’—downplay the importance of gender in a piece of research, in the politics of academic institutions or in our daily relationships (pp. 180–181)?

The only drawback to Seriously! is the occasional unevenness of its chapters. The book reads like a collection of independent essays and two transcripts of conversations between Enloe and interlocutors; as such, it sometimes does not quite cohere as a single volume. Nonetheless, this book will be of great interest for researchers across politics, economics, sociology and related disciplines; in particular, it will be enormously relevant to teachers and students of global politics and political economy. Seriously! continues to showcase Cynthia Enloe’s unique talent for translating complex ideas into engaging prose and producing timely and accessible feminist analysis that cuts across many sites of gender and power.

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