Interview with Prof. Cynthia Weber on the occasion of the presentation of her 'I am An American' project at the METU International Relations Conference, Ankara, Turkey, 17-19 June, 2009.

Professor Cynthia Weber presented her project " 'I am an American': Video Portraits of Unsafe US citizens" at the METU International Relations Conference in Ankara, Turkey, on 18 June, 2009. Her project develops a critical response to the American Ad Council's post-9/11 "I am an American" television advertizing campaign which featured 30 and 60 second Public Service Announcements (PSAs) broadcast on US television in which a montage of US citizens of various ages, races, religions and ethnicities look directly into the camera and declare, 'I am an American' while emotive Americana music plays in the background. According to the Ad Council (which is the leading producer of PSAs in the US), the 'I am an American' campaign 'helped the country to unite in the wake of the terrorist attacks' by 'celebrat[ing] the nations's extraordinary diversity (Ad Council, 'I am an American (2001-Present)', http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=141). However, Prof. Weber notes that in reality not all differences in American society were included in the US celebration of its post-9/11 tolerance of difference. Her alternative 'I am an American' project focuses on those US citizens who, because of their differences, were not tolerated after 9/11 and were made 'unsafe' by the US state. In so doing, Prof. Weber wants to caution against a generalised US ideal of citizenship and a unified US national identity. She also wants to draw attention to the contradiction between being a citizen and being a human that lies at the heart of this US ideal of citizenship and this presumably unified ideal of US national identity and how the US state attempts to resolve this contradiction by privileging a particular kind of 'safe' citizen and 'safe' citizenship.

Editor in Chief (hereafter EC): Prof. Weber, the aim of this interview is to have a better understanding of your current project " 'I am an American': Video Portraits of Unsafe US citizens". However, you have played a very important role in changing the way we look at traditional international rela-

tions theory. Can you please describe to us the evolution of your thinking in developing alternative visions of IR and how you characterize your current work with respect to what you have already done?

Cynthia Weber (hereafter CW): My academic work has always been informed by my politics. As a US citizen, I have long been concerned with the US as a hegemon and what the effects of US hegemonic power are domestically and internationally. So since my days as an MA student, my intellectual question has been the same as my political question, which is 'Given the realities of US hegemony, how might I/we make the exercise of US hegemony more responsible – not only politically but also morally and ethically?' I've been engaging with this question theoretically and practically ever since. In doing that, I'm not so sure that I have, as you put it, changed the way we look at traditional International Relations theory. Instead, I think what I've done is put to use neo-Marxist, poststructural, feminist, and queer political theory and IR theory innovations elaborated by other theorists – certainly Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Lucd Irigaray, and Judith Butler but also John McLean, Bob Cox, Rick Ashley, R.B.J. Walker, Mike Shapiro, Tim Luke, James Der Derian, Bill Connolly, Cynthia Enloe and Carol Cohn, for example – in pursuit of my political project about US hegemony.

If I've done anything innovative in terms of IR theory, it has more to do with trying to get students to 'unlearn' traditional IR theory so that they can leave aside some of the tedious and frankly politically parallelizing debates the field is mired in so they can think about what it would mean for them to do politically engaged and ethically responsible IR in theory and in practice. I've done a lot of that 'unlearning' work by using popular culture, and particularly popular films.

And so the move from writing about films to making films seemed to me like a necessary one. I mean, the more I wrote about and analyzed films, the more I argued that films do a tremendous amount of political work by doing cultural work. So if I wanted to make more of a political impact with my work – to have it be engaged by not just IR academics but by everyday US citizens unconnected to the academy – then making films was an obvious way to go.

EC: Following what you have just said, your "I am an American" project tries to develop a link between different constructions of morality and popular films. How do you conceptualise this link in the case of this project?

I argued in my last book *Imagining America At War: Politics, Morality, Film* (London: Routledge, 2005), that films about war contain within them what I called 'moral grammars of war'. Moral grammars of war are codes or contexts (or both) about the good and the bad that structure narratives of in-

terpretation about war. And in structuring these interpretations about the good and the bad of war, these films also construct a representation of an

identity who holds these values and is anchored in this moral grammar of war, specially in that case some imagined post-9/11 America and American.

In that book, I analyzed post-9/11 popular cinema and how it circulated conflicting moral grammars of war about the US after 9/11. In this project, I am responding to another mediatic post-9/11 moment – the American Ad Council's 'I am an American' Public Service Announcement (PSA) that began airing on US television 10 days after 9/11. This PSA is part of a post-9/11 US moral grammar of war on the war on terror. What the PSA does is attempt to establish the US melting pot myth – that all US citizens equally belong to the US nation because they have 'melted' into it and, beyond this, that it is our individual differences as melted US citizens that makes the US nation strong – as the basis of US citizens' responses to one another during the war on terror. So, the idea here is that we should not judge US citizens as good or bad, as with us or with the terrorists, based upon their race, religion, ethnicity, age, sex or gender. We should tolerate difference because difference is what makes the US what it is politically, ethically, and morally.

At first glance, this is a very positive moral grammar of war because it argues for the tolerance of differance as the foundation of normative individual US citizen responses – by US citizens who are predominately white, Anglo, and Christian – toward all melted US citizens, no matter their differences. Except the PSA doesn't include all differences as equally 'melted' into its ideal image of America and Americans. It excludes, for example, any explicitly identifiable signs of Islam and of Muslim Americans, as well as of Arab Americans, Indigenous Americans, and queer Americans. What this means is that the PSA is not just circulating a moral grammar of war about the tolerance of difference; it is circulating a moral grammar of war about where the limits of tolerance can and should be drawn by post-9/11 US citizens. In other words, the PSA is implicitly promoting or at least minimially not forclosing on the intolerance of some differences (having to do with those who presumably 'hate us') while promoting the tolerance of other differences (having to do with those who are so like us that they presumably could not 'hate us' because they are 'us').

What this means, then, is that the PSA constructs a mobile system of differentiation that marks some citizens as safe and others as unsafe. Unsafe citizens are US citizens who either will not or cannot make their differences normatively conform to the national ideal of the one composed of the many. These are, for example, Muslim and Arab Americans who after 9/11 suddenly were regarded by other US Americans as not sufficiently melted into the

US or indigenous Americans who historically have not been invited to melt into the US. My project is about these unsafe US citizens.

The people I interviewed include patriotic soldiers who paid a high price for their citizenship like Lupe Denogean, who received 'fast-tracked citizenship' only after he was severely wounded in the current Iraq War, and US Army Muslim Chaplin James Yee, whose patriotic service at Guantanamo Bay led to his own detention when he was wrongly accused of being a US enemy combatant. I also interviewed people who protested the Iraq War, like Peace Mom Cindy Sheehan who set up camp outside of President George W. Bush's Crawford, Texas, home because she wanted to ask the President 'For what noble cause did my son die in Iraq?' And I interviewed people on both sides of the immigration debate in the US, which since 9/11 has become another domestic front in the War on Terror. These include folks like the founder of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps Chris Simcox who organizes civilian patrols on the US border to track undocumented migrants and turn them over to US Border Patrol and human rights activists like Shanti Sellz who provide humanitarian aid to migrants who might otherwise die in the desert. Finally, I interviewed people who were 'collateral damage' in the War on Terror, like Hurricane Katrina evacuees who were called 'refugees' – these were Greg and Glenda Avery – or civilian Muslim Americans like Julia Shearson and Abe Dabdoub who are on the terrorist watch list for no apparent reason other than their religious faith, or indigenous Americans living on the US/Mexico border who have been subjected to extraordinary surveillance since 9/11.

I invited these unsafe US citizens to narrate in the first person their experiences of citizenship after 9/11 and to declare not only 'I am an American' but also what *kind* of US American they are (a political refugee *from* the US, the son of an immigrant without papers, a wrongly accused terrorist spy). I did this project both to give them voice and to explore the complicated meanings and practices of citizenship, tolerance, nationalism, patriotism, justice and memory woven into and around the seemingly simple declaration 'I am an American'.

EC: It seems that you are giving more importance to films and images than words and texts in conveying your messages. Why do you think films are more effective?

CW: There's a reason why I'm not only writing books and articles anymore. I'm making films because they leap across that boundary of the academy out to the public realm. These films (as well as the photographic series that accompanies them and their expressions as screening and gallery exhibitions) are aesthetic and affective objects and experiences that people without academic backgrounds get at a gut level. Hopefully by moving from textual practice to aesthetic practice, instead of just writing about a political

question or a research question, I'm placing that question within the person watching the films or attending the exhibition so that they might say, '*who might we/I become*? What's our/my responsibility here? How might we/I live differently?'

To have US citizens be confronted by compatriots like Phil McDowell and Jamine Aponte, both Iraq war resisters, who say, 'I'm a political refugee *from* the United States, I'm in Canada seeking asylum because I don't want to go back to the United States' – that blows your mind! It's completely contrary to the poem that's at the base of the Statue of Liberty: 'give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free' – it's like, 'I'm yearning to be free by *leaving* the United States!' That confronts US Americans with these positions that they might not otherwise be thinking about. And this is one of the points of the films – to turn US citizenship on its head so it can be critically interrogated by US citizens. One of the strategies all the films in this project use to do this is to reverse the US motto that the Ad Council's PSA ends with – *E Pluribus Unum*, 'Out of Many Differences, One Nation, One People'. I turn that around in my films, to out of one ideal of nationhood, one ideal of community, many experiences of citizenship. And out of one idea of *safe* citizenship, there are many experiences of *unsafe* citizenship. I'm not trying to be clever by reversing this motto. What I'm trying to show is that the motto itself is reversible, that the state can change its mind at any time, and someone who is safely inside the 'one' can become unsafely outside of the 'one'.

EC: You are taking as your starting point the American Ad Council's 'I am an American' advertising campaign. You are arguing that this campaign uses US 'national sentimentality' and 'technologies of mechanical reproduction' to create an 'imagined community of Americans' hurt by the 9/11 event. Why are you critical of such an attempt? Isn't this the way societies protect themselves? You are referring to Alsultany' concept of "diversity patriotism" to describe the way this imagined community of Americans is created and you criticise the idea of the tolerance of difference as the foundation of the modern US nation . But again isn't this ideal still an ideal of what many societies want to achieve- tolerance of difference, Many societies do not recognise even the existence of any difference,

CW: Yes. While my project is focused on the case of the US after 9/11, it is a project that speaks to how tolerance and intolerance work in relation to any state and society experiencing a moment of national trauma. So while the US formulation of tolerance is culturally and historically specific – grounded in both the original US motto of *E Pluribus Unum*, Out of Many, One and in the US ideal of the melting pot myth – the broader questions raised by the project about self/other, tolerance/intolerance are questions that are confronted by all states and societies.

I want to be clear, though, that as critical as my project is about how the post-9/11 US fails to live up to its ideals of the tolerance of difference, I still very much appreciate and applaud the US and its citizens for having these aspirations at all. Theoretically, one can level critiques against the idea of tolerance on many levels – like about how tolerance also already implies intolerance or about how tolerance is always a judgement and a presumed gift by the normative subject offered in relation to the 'other', without questioning the normativity of the normative subject and the 'otherness' of the 'other', for example. But with all of its problems, it is a much more desirable concept and aspiration than many of the alternatives. So in critiquing how the post-9/11 US fails to live up to its ideals, my project is not meant to be 'anti-American'. It is meant to return to the question that frames all of my work – how might the US act more responsibly in the post-9/11 world as a post-9/11 subject (as individuals US citizens or as a collective sovereign nation-state)? How can that be done politically, morally, and ethically?

EC: You have referred above to the distinction which the American state makes between safe and unsafe citizens and describe unsafe as differences that do not conform to the American ideal. This is indeed the dominant sovereign state practice everywhere. Does this mean that we are bound do live with a notion of safety and unsafety as long as the sovereign state exists? Is there a way out of this circularity? This is after all the only way the system is constantly reproducing itself, by creating new definitions of safety and security created by different circumstances?

CW: Part of what it means to be a sovereign nation-state is to tackle the problem of the relationship between states, violence, and citizens on behalf of the state. How can the state ensure that citizens use their violence on behalf of the state and not on behalf of some other state or NGO or individual? What I've called 'safe citizens' are those citizens who mobilize their violence on behalf of the state. These are citizens who, from the state's point of view, are safe for the state. This does not mean that the citizens themselves, though, are safe from the state (this is a very different matter, and, from this point of view, there is no such thing as a safe citizen; see Weber, 'Designing Safe Citizens', *Citizenship Studies* 12(2):125-142).

So, yes, you are right that there is a circularity here, of creating zones, practices, and ontologies of danger and of safety/security. And that so long as we are working within an international system that is marked by sovereign nation-states, this circularity will continue. What becomes important, then, is to investigate how this overall logic functions differently, in different states and societies, at specific moments of history, so that while it is the same thing over and over again in a general sense it is never quite the same thing. And once we have an account of that, we need to ask what kinds of politics – what political possibilities – might emerge that morally and ethical-

ly challenges how sovereign states designates zones, practices, and ontologies as dangerous and as safe.

EC: Your 'I am an American' project is sometimes criticised for 'memorializing September 11' and giving support to the claims of the Ad Council. How do you respond to this criticism?

CW: I think it would be pretty difficult to confuse my project with a project that is supporting claims that the American Ad Council circulated in terms of what a unified US society should look like and whether or not that is a good thing. That is what the Ad Council's PSA does. İt is not what my project does. I make this clear in my project not only by featuring unsafe US citizens in my films – US citizens who were not part of this presumed unity – but also by making a play on the US motto, which ends the Ad Council's PSA. İn the Ad Council's PSA, the US motto appears in its original form, as *E Pluribus Unum,* which means Out of Many, One. Yet in every one of my films, I turn this motto around so that it reads *Ex Uno, Plures*, Out of One, Many. My project, then, is explicitly about showing the fragmentation of the US state and US society, about how this fragmentation does not and cannot ever add up to one coherent identity, and about the violence that is exercised on everyday US citizens when they don't fit in.

I focus on September 11 because the Ad Council does and because the US state does. You know, I will 'forget September 11' when the US state forgets September 11, when it stops trying to mobilize it to its political advantage. And that isn't going to be anytime soon! In the meantime, I do mobilize all these alternative US identities – these identities of the unsafe US citizens and the identity of a fragmented US state – for the same reason that Judith Butler mobilizes a US 'we' – because, as she explains it, this 'we' offers 'a way of working one's way out of a position to which one has been assigned' (Judith Butler, 'Frames of War', public lecture for the Research Institute for Cosmopolitan Cultures, Manchester University, February 5, 2009).

On one level, then, my project is all about my own political struggle to responsibly engage with my US citizenship. On another level, though, it is my hope that my project will encourage US citizens to rethink the positions to which they have been assigned by the US state regarding their citizenship, identity, tolerance, nationalism, patriotism, and sense of justice in the context of the War on Terror in the first instance, but also beyond this context and beyond its nationalist parameters. What this means, then, is that my project is not about 'memorializing September 11'. Instead, it is meant to stand as a counter-memorialization to 9/11, one that interrupts official US memory about 9/11 not by naively trying to forget September 11 but by haunting this official US memory with what it insistently 'forgets'.

EC: Visual films by nature describe the human dilemmas that we are faced. How do you see the link from the disturbance which the films create to actual human praxis to developing an alternative morality? What is to be done?

CW: My films are meant to pose political, moral, and ethical dilemmas about US citizenship and the US state after 9/11. In part, they do this by challenging the Kantian idea that what makes someone a good person is to be a good citizen. What the films show is the gap between humanity and citizenship and how citizenship excludes all manner of ethical expressions of humanity while it also encourages some unethical expressions of humanity (as in the case of the Minutemen, for example).

In posing these dilemma, the films hopefully broaden the area of and capacity for critical self-reflection by US citizens in relation to their citizenship practices, in relation to the domestic and foreign policies of their state, and in relation to their humanity.

EC: Who do we want to become? What is the "we" which we want to create? Your video forces us to face this question.

CW: Indeed, 'who might we become?' is the political and ethical question. And it is the question the films address to US citizens who watch them. The films say that we need to look beyond the limits of citizenship – and how it limits the tolerance of difference – as the foundation for our humanity. Beyond that, it is up to US citizens to reflect on the specifics of what a moral US subjectivity will and should look like in practice.

EC: What about your future work? How do you want to develop these themes which you have worked out in your 'I am an American' project? What do you think about developing an "I am a Turkish' project?

CW: It is definately possible to do a project focused on the articulation 'I am Turkish', just as it is to do on on 'I am British' or 'I am a national of any other state'. Because, again, these national identity claims are also claims that attempt to fix a specific understand of the nation and its moral grammars. So all of these could be articulated.
Because I am a US citizen, I will leave it up to others to undertake these projects if they are so inclined.

My future plans for the 'I am an American' project are to develop two further streams of inquiry around the claim 'I am an American'. As the project now stands, it is really about claims to liberty and justice and how these have failed in practice to measure up to US ideals about them. I am currently developing two further series of films – one about claims to life and another

about claims to the pursuit of happiness. You might recognize that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the three areas of rights that US citizens claimed for themselves in the US Declaration of Independence. So by focusing on this bundle of claims, I hope to get further insights into how these claims are lived in all their complexity by modern-day US citizens.

EC: Prof. Weber thank you very much for giving us this opportunity to review your 'I am an American Project.' Your work has been a source of inspiration for all those who feel "unsafe" one way or another. It demonstrates that citizenship status is intimately linked with state insecurity, is bound to create problems of exclusion, and will act as an obstacle to develop our human potential.

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