Interview - Patricia Owens

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Patricia Owens is Reader in International Relations at the University of Sussex. She joined Sussex after holding positions in London and Oxford University (where she received a teaching excellence award). Her most recent book, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* , will be published in the Studies in International Relations series with Cambridge University Press in the summer of 2015. Her first book,*Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford), was the subject of a roundtable in the journal *International Politics*. Currently co-editor of *European Journal of International Relations*, Patricia was a Managing Editor of *Security Dialogue* and *Cambridge Review of International Studies*, and on the boards of *Humanity* and *Journal of International Political Theory*. She is co-editor of the leading undergraduate textbook in IR, *Globalization of World Politics* (Oxford, 2013), now in its 6th edition and translated into Arabic, French, Korean, Polish, Greek, Turkish, Slovene, and Macedonian. Patricia has held a number of fellowships and competitive awards, including at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard; a Visiting Professorship at UCLA; the Seton-Watson Research Fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford; the Jane Eliza Procter Fellowship at Princeton University; a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Southern California; and a Visiting Scholarship at UC-Berkeley, supported by a grant from the Social Science Research Council.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

This is a difficult question to answer. I think my worldview was quite strongly shaped as a child of migrants to Britain from its first colony, Ireland. One parent arrived in the 1960s as an economic migrant from the Republic and the other to get away from poverty, but also, of course, the violent conflict in the North. I think any critical perspective on politics, class, empire, and identity was formed from an early age. Certainly the thinker that has done most to shape my worldview is the German-American theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), who I also read for the first time when fairly young. In terms of changing how I understand the world, she helped me get past a lot of the theoretical tribalism it's easy to get sucked into as a doctoral student. The shift at this stage was the early realization that I didn't need to belong to any particular '-ism', which is no small feat in a field like IR organized around this way of thinking, or that one had to be *either* a theorist *or* an historian.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in IR at the moment?

For me, the most exciting research – and most intellectually urgent task for IR – is rethinking the relation between history and theory. The history problem in IR is obvious and well known. There is little understanding of the basics of historical research, such as source interpretation and historical method; the significance of context, temporality, and scale; and how to do good historical writing. It is still more or less openly acknowledged that history is supposed to 'fill in' the empirical details for theory, even among those claiming greater historical depth, such as international historical sociologists and members of the English School. Part of the problem is that these approaches are far more sociological than historical. They are excited about the intellectual possibilities of things 'socio', but they have ignored the historical origins of distinctly social theorising, of when and why sociological explanations for human affairs first emerged and what this history might reveal. In my view, the dominant international theories are deeply ahistorical and anachronistic in this regard. To use Buzan and Little's words, IR has failed as an intellectual project. If it's to be reconstituted, then we need a fundamental rethink of history *and* theory *and* the relation between them. How, as non-

trained historians, can IR scholars and theorists write convincingly about the past? A form of this question is increasingly being asked at the Sussex Centre for Advanced International Theory (CAIT) and the LSE Research Group on History and Theory.

Your new book, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*, is due out this summer in the Studies in International Relations series of Cambridge University Press. The book will explain a new history and theory of counterinsurgency/armed social work. What new ground will this text cover and what are your aims with this book?

The book retrieves the older, but surprisingly neglected, language of household governance, *oikonomia*, to show how the techniques and domestic ideologies of household administration are highly portable and play a remarkably central role in international and imperial relations. In contrast to the ahistorical and anachronistic adoption of social language across IR, I think there is an important story to be told of when, where, and why the social realm first emerged as the domain through which human life could be intervened in and transformed. *Economy of Force* tells this story in terms of modern transformations in and violent crises of household forms of rule. In two late-colonial British emergencies in Malaya (1948-1960) and Kenya (1952-1960), US counterinsurgency in Vietnam (1954-1975), and US-led campaigns in Afghanistan (2001-2014) and Iraq (2003-2011), so-called 'armed social work' policies were the continuation of *oikonomia* – not politics – by other means. Though never wholly succeeding, counterinsurgents drew on and innovated different forms of household governance to create units of rule in which local populations were domesticated. Military strategists conceived population control as sociological warfare because the social realm itself and distinctly social forms of thought are modern forms of *oikonomikos*, the art and science of household rule.

The argument has big implications for international theory, as well as the history and theory of counterinsurgency. Rather than objective theories of modern society and their interrelations, various forms of liberalism, political realism, social constructivism, and Marxism need to be situated within the history of the rise and violent transformation of the social realm. They are fragments of competing paradigms of social regulation. Ironically, the dominance of distinctly social forms of thought has obscured the household ontology of the modern social realm. Each of the major traditions is explicitly based on, or implicitly accepts, the erroneous notion that modern capitalism destroyed large-scale forms of household rule. So the book not only offers a new history and theory of counterinsurgency. It offers a new history of the rise of the social realm and political history and theory of household governance.

Research for the book was supported by a yearlong fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. There'll be a symposium on *Economy of Force* at *Disorder of Things* later in 2015.

You've written about an interesting aspect of recent liberal state wars: how civilian deaths are constructed as "accidents" of warfare. You've argued that this narrative shifts common notions of moral responsibility and makes civilian deaths permissible, as opposed to impermissible. It's certainly a controversial case, but do you think Israel's recent bombardment of Gaza could represent a political consequence and even a severe abuse of this "accidents" narrative?

I do not think Israel's Operation Protective Edge is hugely controversial in this regard. During the bombardment, over 2000 people were killed, mainly civilians, including 500 Palestinian children. The Israeli government claimed that it was seeking to destroy Hamas' ability to send rockets into Israel, and it took all required precautions not to directly target civilians. Specific civilian casualties could not have been predicted as unique events. Hence, they were accidental in contrast to Hamas' deliberate targeting of Israeli civilians. However, the notion that Israel is not responsible for the predictable deaths of civilians in Gaza is a severe abuse of the accidents narrative. It goes against the idea that we are responsible for the reasonably predictable consequences of our actions, common notions of moral responsibility, and basic international humanitarian law. Even the US State Department condemned Israel's bombardments of UNRWA schools, though not the occupation.

The article you refer to, 'Accidents Don't Just Happen', was written in response to NATO's Kosovo and Afghan wars. To understand how civilian deaths become permissible when constructed as accidents, I looked at the historical

development of the modern legal doctrine of negligence in the United States, a move away from the strict liability of accidents, which emerged through a series of court rulings in favour of risk-taking corporations in the middle of the nineteenth-century. We can actually learn something about the construction of 'accidents' in war by looking at the history of how injury and death caused by corporate accidents in the heyday of industrialization became normalized and legitimated in harmonization with the needs of the new entrepreneurial system. I further developed some of these ideas in one of the chapters of my Arendt book, 'How Dangerous it can be to be Innocent: War and the Law', reprinted in an edited volume on Hannah Arendt and the Law.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Arendt's work is her examination of technological advancements and war, and the problems yielded by such advances because, as the instruments of violence transform, so too does the fundamental "social check" on violence. Indeed, Arendt's writing on robot soldiers seems eerily prophetic as the current usage of drones seems to alienate the larger population from sovereign decisions over life and death, and so violence is executed far more freely and without the checks and balances associated with involving humans in warfare. Given that further technological advances in modern warfare seem inevitable, do you think that matters will only get worse?

In her essay 'On Violence', Arendt briefly mentions robot soldiers when making her well-known distinction between power and violence, a distinction that has been incredibly influential for proponents of creative and strategic non-violence. Power springs up between people as they act together; it belongs to the group, and disappears when the group disperses. It is a collective capacity. Violence, in contrast, is an instrument. It is the use of implements to multiply strength and command others to obey. The state apparatus can channel this power. Indeed, this a necessary precondition for the administrative state's accumulation of the means of violence. Yet, power and violence are not the same and, for Arendt, power is much more important and effective than violence. So in that passage of 'On Violence', she writes,

No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed. Even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers. Only the development of robot soldiers, which… would eliminate the human factor completely and, conceivably, permit one man with a push button to destroy whom ever he pleased, could change this fundamental ascendancy of power over violence. Even the most despotic domination we know of, the rule of master over slaves, who always outnumbered him, did not rest on superior means of coercion as such, but on a superior organization of power – that is, on the organized solidarity of the masters (1969: p.149).

Drones still need human pilots back at the base. So they are less like robot soldiers than remotely piloted aircraft, killing people and destroy things through aerial bombing. Though far less revolutionary than a truly autonomous robot solider able to occupy territory, drones are still a hugely significant development in the technological and cultural history of war. And they do indeed mean, as you say, that sovereign decisions over life and death can be executed more freely. In this regard, surely things will certainly get worse before they get better.

In Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere, Obama has authorized a targeting policy that, according to a recent Reprieve report, kills on average twenty-eight people for every intended target. Targets of attack are determined by electronic surveillance, rather than human intelligence. The President seems to believe that he can authorize a drone strike anywhere in the world and can authorize the killing of US citizens overseas. In Arendt's lexicon, we might say that power is in danger of losing its ascendency over violence. However, she would have applauded the acts of non-violent civil disobedience around drone bases in the US and protest across the world as exemplary acts of power as the collective capacity to change the world.

Another interesting area of Arendt's thought concerns the effects of bureaucratization of public life combined with technological advances on society. What do you think Arendt would have made of the recent scandal involving the NSA and its PRISM program?

What would Hannah Arendt have made of…? It's now a cliché of Arendt commentary that one of the greatest things about Arendt was her unpredictability. That said, I think there can be little doubt that as a theorist and historian of

totalitarianism, Arendt would have been extremely concerned about the degree of global mass surveillance, much of it conducted by private corporations with public money, as well as related government attacks on journalists providing this information to the public. Arendt would probably have placed the expansion of the surveillance and intelligence state in an imperial frame. She would almost certainly have celebrated Edward Snowden and the many other whistleblowers that have exposed the extent of the surveillance apparatus constructed by the United States and its subordinate allies, especially Britain (GCHQ recently received £100 million from the NSA). Snowden has rightly been compared to Daniel Ellsberg, the whistleblower who released the Pentagon Papers, the internal US Department of Defense history of its war in Vietnam. We can glean something of what Arendt might have thought from her long essay, 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers'. Toward the end of that piece, she spoke of people who had 'made up their minds not to be intimidated, who would rather go to jail than see their liberties nibbled away' (p.46). Snowden is one of these, risking his life for the sake of the republic.

The new edition of *Globalization of World Politics* was recently released, which you edited with John Baylis and Steve Smith. One of the most interesting things about this new text is the inclusion of more non-Western examples and perspectives on global politics. Why do you feel there has been a hesitance for many scholars to draw from non-Western thinkers, and what insights do you feel non-Western thought can offer the discipline as a whole?

First of all, much more needs to be done to decolonize the main IR textbooks and the wider field. Partly to this end, the next edition of *Globalization of World Politics* will have a newly commissioned chapter on race and racism. The discipline has been more comfortable directly addressing issues of class and gender. We need to do much, much more to address racism and racialization as fundamental structures of world order. More generally, the hesitance for many IR scholars to draw from non-Western thinkers has been well explained by postcolonial scholars in terms of the discipline's fundamentally Eurocentric conception of world politics. IR is hardly an objective social science. The main theories have ignored race and effectively defended Western – and white – supremacy. It's well known that the original name of the leading US foreign policy magazine, *Foreign Affairs*, was *Journal of Race Development*. It became the *Journal of International Relations* in 1919, and only *Foreign Affairs* in 1922. Its harder for non-Western scholars to get published and cited in the main IR journals; harder for them to get jobs in the elite Western universities and to travel to the main professional conferences in Europe and North America; we know issues around language and so-called 'area studies' training; how racialization is ignored by most scholars of world politics; and how racism works in academia more generally. There are obvious problems with grouping and defining diverse traditions of thought as 'non-Western'. But clearly IR has an enormous amount to gain from undergoing a thorough decolonization, which would then – by definition – open up the field to radical new insights and forms of thought.

An interesting part of this new book is the section examining the various theories of International Relations. Do you think the existence of various discrete theoretical paradigms (realism, liberalism, etc.), and the division of the discipline into such paradigms, help explain international politics today, or do they, as some argue, largely talk past one another and therefore obscure more than they illuminate?

These traditions of thought (realism, liberalism, Marxism, etc.) do not constitute actual *paradigms*, as Patrick Jackson pointed out in an earlier interview on *E-International Relations*. They are better understood as theories or traditions and, of course, the distinctions between them as such explain very little. If there is still any doubt, see a recent special issue of *EJIR* on the 'end of IR theory'. I'm also less bothered that traditions might talk past one another than that we have a compelling account for why that might be so (ideology, careerism, power, etc.). However, the division of the discipline into discrete theories tells us a lot about the history of the discipline itself and, I'm afraid, how world politics continues to be taught in most politics and IR departments. Certainly, in the production of textbooks, there's a tension between introducing students to a particular object of study – world politics – and the discipline that purports to study it. The first edition of *The Globalization of World Politics* came out in 1997 and it would have made sense to the original editors, Baylis and Smith, to show how different theoretical 'lenses', not just those dominant in US textbooks, view world politics. At the time, R. B. J. Walker, Ann Tickner, David Campbell, and Jim George all praised the book for its more comprehensive and diverse approach to theory. I became an editor from the fourth edition in 2008. For me, the biggest problem is not that the traditions talk past one another. It is that teaching students to think about theory this way is what potentially reifies and reproduces outmoded distinctions

without a great deal of reference to the historical context of their emergence. We need to teach students to be aware of the historical and interpretative frameworks that are usually implicit (and only sometimes explicit) in different ways of teaching theory.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations just starting their careers?

First, do everything you can to read very good writing, which is usually found outside academe. The quality of writing in the social sciences is generally very poor. Get a copy of Helen Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing*, or an equivalent, and try to do better than average. Second, join a union and be as active as you can be. Especially in Britain, higher education is undergoing a major transformation: massive cuts and privatization; casualization of labour; increasing obsession with metrics and rankings; increasing tuition fees and 'students as consumers'; dubious 'new providers'; the proliferation of middle-managers; erosion of belief in universities as a public good; attacks on pensions, pay, and working conditions. And, yet, even in this context, it is still a privilege to hold a permanent academic appointment. So, if you manage to get one of these, be as good a colleague and teacher as you can be.

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This interview was conducted by Al McKay. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.