

Interview – Laura Sjoberg

Written by E-International Relations

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Laura Sjoberg is British Academy Global Professor of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway University of London. Her research addresses issues of gender and security, with foci on politically violent women, feminist war theorizing, sexuality in global politics, and political methodology. She teaches, consults, and lectures on gender in global politics, and on international security. Her work has been published in more than 50 books and journals in political science, law, gender studies, international relations, and geography. Her recent articles have explored, failure in critical security studies, characterizations of women in and around the Islamic State, what counts as feminist work in Security Studies, sexuality in US-Cuba rapprochement, gendered insecurity, and everyday counterterrorism. Dr. Sjoberg has recently taught in the areas of international law, gender and armed conflict, international relations theorizing, and international security.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There's a lot of very interesting stuff going on right now. I feel like I cannot read enough, especially work of Early Career Researchers pushing the boundaries of what has been accepted as the field for a long time. I feel like I thought there was some radicality to what I was doing a couple of decades ago, but as I read the creativity and bravery of newer scholars' work now, I'm just blown away. Both new decolonial work in IR and work that has drawn attention to decades- or even centuries-old traditions that Western IR failed (or, more aptly, refused) to see is really important to constantly interrogating one's assumptions about the world, and confronting one's violences in it. Though 'queer IR' comes late to IR, and early queer work in IR was not recognised as such, the work is also such a fundamental set of critiques about how 'IR' is known and practiced that I cannot understand how I ever thought without those tools (though, unfortunately, I did, a lot). For a while I was really worried that 'IR' qua 'IR' would either continue to be a list of isms or 'end' theoretically or thinly veil either or both of those in 'analytic eclecticism.' Either that did not really happen or the IR I read ten years ago is not the IR I am reading now – either way, I think it is better for it (or I am, or something). While I'm not a big fan of 'turning' to this or that, I really enjoy reading/watching/engaging visual and artistic work in IR, and really like the amount of critical disciplinary sociology work going on that asks questions about the value of what 'we' do and how 'we' do it.

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

I'm not sure I'm equipped to answer a question that big, and my thinking has changed in lots of ways. Perhaps the biggest way that my thinking has changed is that I have less of a sense of certainty about how I see the world, and less of a sense of the need for authority in my thinking, talking, and writing. The longer I spend in the field, the more unexpected dimensions of gender in global politics I find. It is interesting to keep learning about different complexities, nuances, and ideas that I had not previously discovered.

How is a gendered lens fundamental to understanding global politics and conflict?

I have an 'official' answer to this that I've published a number of times, which argues that gender is necessary, conceptually, to understanding international security, important to analysing causes and predicting outcomes, and essential to thinking about solutions and promoting positive change in the security realm. I think I first wrote that

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almost fifteen years ago, and it echoes the words and ideas of scholars that inspired it at the time, including Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe, Carol Cohn, and Christine Sylvester. A lot of that still reflects how I think about gender and security. I do not think you can know what (in)security is, either in theory or in practice, without considering not only gender but sex and sexuality, and their intersections with race, class, and ethnicity. I think many of Security Studies' explanations for what happens in global politics are incomplete and/or just wrong because they ignore, or collapse the dimensionality, of gender. While I'm less sure now than I was two decades ago that the security realm is open to 'solutions' and 'positive change', I do think that security policy is better when it takes a complex and intersectional understanding of gender into account. But I think that there is also more to it – that gender and (in)security are so intrinsically interlinked that neither concept can be understood, articulated, or studied without reference to and engagement with the other. Asking what security looks like through gender lenses, then, provides multiple answers, all of which shows the centrality of gender and sexuality to (in)security and the centrality of (in)security to gender and sexuality.

What are gender hierarchies? How are they intertwined with international security?

I have thought of gender hierarchies as things which explicitly order actors on the basis of associations with sex and gender, which are hierarchies. I have thought of gendered hierarchies, which deploy associations with sex and gender to signify organization of actors along other distinctions, including but not limited to race, class, religion, culture, and nationality. I think both are crucial parts of the fabric of the global political arena. My argument is that gender as a hierarchy manifests in structural gender hierarchy in global politics, which produces those individual-level gender hierarchies. Gender as a hierarchy is processual and productive, and it produces gender hierarchies which serve to order positionality, both among people and among actors in the global political arena. Security hierarchies in global politics are gendered, and the gendered dimensions of those hierarchies are important to study. Across gendered hierarchies, feminization takes place, where the dominant actor or actors use feminization as a "strategy of power." This is one of many reasons that feminist work has taken gendered power seriously.

What prompted you to begin incorporating queer theory into International Relations and how did you approach your studies?

My interest was largely prompted by hearing people treat queer theory, queer people, and queer politics as outside of the concern of IR generally and sometimes gender and IR specifically. It seemed to me very clear that an interest in gender includes interests in sex, sexuality, and gender identity – and some of the best work that I have read (like Cynthia Weber's *Faking It* and Spike Peterson's "Nationalism as Heterosexism"). I think I started writing about the things that interested me as a politics of asserting that these things mattered in IR. My mother was a scholar of psychology whose specialisation was trans* transitions, and that was fairly influential in my early writing in/on queer/IR. Queer IR research has grown so much in the last decade that I don't feel like my previous work is anywhere near the state of the art. Among others, the work of Cynthia Weber, Melanie Richter-Montpetit, Darcy Leigh, Rahul Rao, Nicola Smith, Manuela Picq, Paula Drummond, Dean Cooper-Cunningham, Julio Diaz-Calderon, and Lauren Wilcox has incorporated queer analysis into a lot of areas in IR where it had previously been neglected but has been sorely needed. As 'queer IR' continues, it is less dependent on 'IR' as such and more interested in queer analysis of global politics, which I think is a good thing.

You discuss the problems with (in)visibility in world politics in your article trans- bodies in/of war(s): cisprivilege and contemporary security strategy (co-authored with Laura J. Shepherd). What do invisibility and hypervisibility respectively mean for trans-bodies?

I'm going to say I don't know, and I can't know. As Laura and I argued back then, it is important to see both the invisibility of genderqueer bodies in accounts of war and the visibility of genderqueer bodies in contemporary security strategy are both specific forms of discursive violence that have specific and detailed performative functions in security/global politics. That argument is certainly orthogonal to understanding what happens to genderqueer bodies in global politics, but I think there is other work that does a much better job on these questions than I have or could.

In the context of non-cisgender groups, how does the "othering" of groups reinforce violence?

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The existence of 'in' groups relies both on the constitution of a constitutive other 'out' group, and on the (often violent) inclusion of those who 'don't quite fit' into the in-groups. This takes many forms: heteronormativity, homonormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, homonationalism – all of which are international, all of which are violent, and all of which are both global and contextual.

How can academic discourse move away from discussing sexuality and gender in terms of binaries, and move towards discussing a plurality of privileges and challenges that exist in International Relations?

Temptations to simplify things, to make them straightforward, to look to make things better, to be certain, are out there – but the best work, and there's a lot of it out there, pays attention to contingency, complexity, and plurality. I think the way we can move the field is paying attention to, and highlighting, that work. One recent example is Rahul Rao's (2020) *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*, a book which is built around a complex analysis of the relationships between liberalisms, sexualities, postcoloniality, race, and legal discourses. Like other recent queer work, the book is intersectional, engaged, and a *tour de force* of empirical and theoretical work.