

Interview - Susan Spronk

Written by E-International Relations

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Susan Spronk is associate professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa. Her research focuses on the experience of development in Latin America, more specifically the impact of neoliberalism on the transformation of the state and the rise of anti-privatization movements in the Andean region. She coordinates *Studies in Political Economy*. Her latest research project funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada) examined the local democracy and water service delivery in Bolivia and Venezuela. She is also a research associate with the Municipal Services Project, an international research project that focuses on policy alternatives in municipal service delivery in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Her most recent book is *Crisis and Contradiction: Marxist Perspectives on Latin America in the Global Political Economy* (Haymarket Press, 2015) co-edited with Jeffery R. Webber.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

Since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 there has been a resurgence of the left in electoral politics, particularly in Europe and North America, which also has had a positive impact on the academe. The most exciting contemporary debates include the debates on 'social reproduction feminism' and inter-sectionality. Another exciting area of research and debate is the work on food sovereignty, since it is connected to some of the world's most vibrant social movements such as Via Campesina and slow food movements demanding 'deglobalization' of the food system and advocating for healthy and tasty food, which produces work that can influence our own practice. And, I continue to find inspiration in the debates about the nature of capital and the state, particularly in the context of the New Left in Latin America and the race and class debates in South Africa. I hope one day to delve more deeply into the work on Atlantic history, as the scholars in this field produce some of the best scholarship on colonialism and the social construction of racism.

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

I am from the Canadian Bible belt in rural Alberta, and I had not been exposed to Marxism before starting graduate school in Political Science at York University. Marxism was rarely on the syllabus during my undergrad degree. When I arrived at York I was so excited to learn that there are as many varieties of Marxism (e.g. Althusser versus Thompson) as liberalism (e.g. Hayek versus Rousseau). I learned as much from my graduate student peers as from my many wonderful professors. After graduation, I was invited to become a researcher with the Municipal Services Project and moved to Ottawa, which deepened my resolve to also do policy-relevant work *as a Marxist*. My work in Bolivia and particularly Venezuela, where the grassroots activists in the barrios are also asking themselves the question 'what is socialism,' has also inspired my notion of Marxism as deeply committed to praxis. I still read theory, however, and recently finished the 3 volumes of *Capital* with academic friends in Ottawa, which was a transformative experience.

The governments of Venezuela and Bolivia propose that they are building '21st Century Socialism', yet despite their lengthy periods in office significant continuities remain. Are these limitations inherent to movements that attempt to build islands of socialism within a capitalist world?

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There are definite challenges with trying to build socialism in one country, of the sort pointed out by Marx, Engels and Trotsky years ago. Trotsky's insights on permanent revolution have much applicability in Bolivia and Venezuela—particularly his argument that socialist transitions are possible on the periphery (although neither can be described as having achieved socialism). I follow Claudio Katz and Michael Lowy who emphasize that the most problematic continuity is the failure to break with destructive forms of extractivism that will lead to ecological collapse. They advocate for an ecosocialist alternative that does not eschew the necessity of industrialization to improve the material existence of the poor, but envisions alternative forms of production based upon local and renewable sources of energy, redefines the nature of commodities (which entails production of use rather than exchange values), and promotes the democratization of decision-making around production and consumption, including visions for democratic planning on a global scale.

In many countries neoliberal restructuring has had a devastating impact on the power of trade unions. Can we see any signs of labour movement revitalization today, and if so what strategies are best suited to the contemporary world?

At the core of stories about revitalized labour movements are stories about union democracy, rank and file activism and progressive leadership that fight struggles that go beyond the interests of union members. In the context of neoliberal globalization, the constant threat of relocation of production to lower wage zones has dampened the militancy of many industrial workers' unions, which were considered the vanguard in the 20th century. Today, public service workers who deliver health, education, transportation, and other basic services, have been at the forefront of many of the most successful struggles against neoliberalism. In the public sector, workers benefit from alliances with other community organizations. Together they have mobilized the language of universal human rights to defend public services and improve working conditions, since the latter is intimately connected to the quality of public services (e.g. more nurses and teachers, better healthcare and education). Ultimately, these public workers and the communities who support them can also play an important role in pushing for the decommodification of essential services, which is one of the most effective ways to advance social equity goals, particularly with respect to gender equality. The unions involved in the project sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation on Energy Democracy are also ones to watch, as questions about energy transition as a way to mitigate climate change is the central problem of our time.

Despite their massive efforts many radical social movements in both the Global North and South fail to make any significant impact. Others who do make a difference often appear to become co-opted, with their demands blunted and grassroots demobilized. How can social movements with radical demands successfully engage the state?

When assessing the politics of co-optation it is first important to recognize that social movement leaders are not necessarily co-opted when they settle for less than they have originally demanded. And as Canadian indie journalist Dru Oja Jay put it in a recent essay about Trudeau's victory in Canada, "To people who have their eyes on the prize, every movement win short of complete victory is going to feel like cooptation. The key is to maintain momentum and set new goals, rather than criticizing the people who celebrate the current win or complaining that it falls short." Successfully engaging the state requires working both 'inside' and 'outside' the formal arena of power. The observations of Piven and Cloward about poor peoples' politics in the 1970s still ring true today: direct action—strikes, occupations, and so on—remain essential tactics to push those who govern to make better decisions in favour of the poor and disenfranchised, even when the government in office is a 'friend'. One of the most difficult problems for left movements when left parties gain office is the hollowing out of the activist cadre. Radical social movements are wise to make collective decisions on who will work 'inside' and 'outside' of the state.

You have published extensively on the struggle against water service privatization in Bolivia. What are the key lessons that we can draw from the Bolivian experience to better understand the 'Water Wars' of other countries such as Ireland and Italy?

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The virulence with which populations will defend water resources often comes as a surprise to rulers. Battles against water privatization are essentially about democratic control over resource use. The universality of the human need for water—an element that is essential to life—also means that it is possible to build broad coalitions to keep water in public hands, sometimes with unlikely allies. For example, the Catholic Church played an important role in the referendum in Italy. One of the most enduring lessons of the Cochabamba Water War, however, is that in the context of poorly performing public services, the ouster of the private company is just the beginning of the struggle. To date, only about half of the residents of Cochabamba receive water from the public utility as there are serious limits to supply. In poor communities of the global South where there is a serious infrastructure deficit, the solution to the water problem requires a staged approach to support local communities for self-provision and the coordination of longer-term solutions through the building and financing of infrastructure and the regulation of water takings, which requires the state.

Scholars such as Patrick Bond have conceptualised the BRICS as ‘sub-imperialist’, while others like Radhika Desai have insisted that the BRICS are challenging ‘western supremacy’. What can a Marxist perspective tell us about the role of the BRICS in world politics?

I side with Patrick Bond in this debate, particularly the attention that he places on the ways that these regimes reproduce forms of uneven and combined development and neoliberal capitalism. That said, there is also a question as to whether these five countries should be considered a single entity at all since they are diverse with respect to their imperial ambitions and the relationships of the capitalist classes who reside within their borders to those elsewhere. China is the only country that poses a potential threat to US hegemony given the size of its economy and its imperial ambitions in Africa and elsewhere, but until the US dollar ceases to be the world reserve currency, the days of *pax China* seem unlikely. As Panitch and Gindin point out, the fate of the capitalist classes in the two countries is inextricably linked (e.g. US MNCs have invested heavily in China’s manufacturing industry, Asian banks have accumulated US dollar reserves), but the Federal Reserve and the US Treasury remain the managers of global capitalism, in addition to roles played by US-based institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, CIA, and most obviously, the US military in keeping the world safe for capital accumulation.

Throughout your academic career much of your research has focused on developments in countries of the Global South. As accusations of intellectual colonialism are still very much alive, how can scholars from the ‘developed’ world account for the position of relative power and prosperity that they approach their research from?

As an academic from “the global North,” I have always thought hard about what role I want to play in writing my small part of history, especially since most of my academic work is about subjects from “the global South.” My political convictions as a feminist, anti-racist, and international socialist have helped me to navigate around these complicated politics of intellectual colonialism, since I find people of all race, creed and color with similar politics the world over. If I was instead to embrace a radical essentialism, the only people I should be writing about are middle class, white women from Alberta, but that would be boring and useless. Instead, I try to use privilege to fight colonialism and imperialism instead of make apologies for it. In an ethic of solidarity and to challenge the unequal power structures that I have benefited from and work within, I have used a few strategies: supporting students and scholars from subaltern groups; reading and citing the work produced by people from the community that I am studying; writing journalistic essays in the language of the communities in which I work; and whenever possible, co-authoring work with members of the community that I am doing research with, including non-academics.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political economy and international relations?

First, read as much as possible outside of your discipline. I have more in common with Marxists from economics and anthropology than liberals from political science and development studies. Mainstream political science in North America tends towards empiricism on the one hand and abstract formalism (e.g. quantifying everything). These days, I feel more at home in critical human geography than in ‘political economy’ and ‘international relations,’ since the debates are enriched by a close attention to context and the politics of space and place. Second, if you are a

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graduate student, pick a generous supervisor who has an excellent reputation. They are there as your mentor and cheerleader, not just your critic. And read Amory Starr's guide to graduate school.

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This Interview was conducted by Laurence Goodchild. Laurence is Deputy Features Editor of E-IR