

## Interview - Lisa Tilley

Written by E-International Relations

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Lisa Tilley is Lecturer in Politics and Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She is also co-convenor of the Colonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial Working Group of the British International Studies Association (CPD-BISA); co-founder of the collaborative research project *Raced Markets*; and Associate Editor of the pedagogical resource *Global Social Theory*. Her work draws on various theoretical approaches to 'the colonial question' in analyses of processes of accumulation and expropriation, especially along urban and rural extractive frontiers in Indonesia.

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

Race has really been the neglected, or deliberately proscribed, category in political economy, the field I am trained in. In fact, the exclusion/displacement of race from analyses of power and the economy is not separable from broader projects of exclusion/displacement of racialised persons in real life spheres. As such, a great deal of work needs to be done to rewrite global political economic histories, revise the core concepts we work with, and redesign curricula to properly account for the complex legacies, and elaborate renewals, of colonial racial ordering. There is, of course, extensive work on race already in existence which continues to be marginalised from most teaching and from disciplinary canon formation. The most vibrant scholarship on political economy is undoubtedly crafted (as it always has been) by Indigenous and otherwise racialised intellectuals and, at its best, this work attends to racial ordering in relation to class, gender, and sexuality too.

In recent years, the interventions in this area have been inspiring. From Glen Coulthard's conversation with Fanon and Marx in *Red Skin, White Masks* – which made a vital contribution to scholarship on land and labour expropriation – to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's work on Indigenous resurgence, nationhood, and internationalism. Our understanding of racial capital, regimes of ownership, labour markets, and finance capital has been greatly expanded variously by Brenna Bhandar's magisterial work *The Colonial Lives of Property*; Iyko Day's *Alien Capital*; Elizabeth Esch's *The Colour Line and the Assembly Line*; and Peter James Hudson's *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean*, among other ground-breaking new texts. Further, Sara Salem, Robbie Shilliam, and Gurinder Bhambra are each revising historical genealogies of welfare in relation to race, eugenics, and the colonial making and governance of racialised and classed populations. Their work is vital in the present political moment in Europe especially, where old lines of exclusion from the distribution of resources and political rights are expanding. Olivia Rutazibwa, Kalpana Wilson, and Althea-Maria Rivas are all doing important work to interrogate 'development' as a discipline and as an industry which, by design, has so profoundly failed to move the world closer to structural change since formal decolonisation.

Beyond political economy and development, Jasmine Gani is doing consistently inspiring work, both to confront the old white totems of the canon (such as Kant) and to recover and recentre the lost gems of anticolonial thought. And, with a cognate focus, Musab Younis has done much to enrich our knowledge of pan-African anticolonial movements and the possibilities for 'other' internationals. Reaching into critical security studies, Ali Howell, Nivi Manchanda and others are doing important analyses of 'martial politics' and militarism through a race lens. Finally, and with respect to citizenship and mobility, Lewis Turner and Luke de Noronha are each doing really smart and fine-grained work on refugees and deportations – work which not only adequately accounts for race, but also deepens the way we understand racialisation processes in the present.

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

My own understanding of the world is unsettled and still in formation. I think white scholars, in particular, have a great deal of unlearning to do before they can work out their place in intellectual life and engage with the collective production of knowledge in humble and politically useful ways. Unlearning is as important and continuous as learning if we are to cultivate scholarship and teaching practices which have a chance of challenging structures of inequity and oppression. White scholars also have a particular responsibility in terms of breaking down what we've inherited and in terms of working towards structural reparations. For example, global analysis and critique is very much justified, considering that our capital, states, and corporations operate globally in deadly and destructive ways in our names. However, the way we've been taught to act in the world by, say, the development field/industry needs wholesale unlearning.

In terms of academic research, most formative to my thinking have been the generous engagements of urban poor activists in Jakarta and land activists in Kalimantan and other outer islands of Indonesia. As with most communities engaged in struggles, they're all well aware of how the relations they are embroiled in are theorised in the abstract in academic work, and they're also well aware that those abstract theories often bear little resemblance to their own dynamic realities. Much scholarship is rendered redundant when we start with real life situated struggles.

In terms of published work: Pramoedya Ananta Toer's varied writings; Ann Laura Stoler's early book on *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt*; Syed Hussein Alatas' *The Myth of the Lazy Native*; *Women, Race and Class* by Angela Davis; many wonderful texts by Sylvia Wynter; various interventions by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui; Blaney & Inayatullah's *Savage Economics*; and of course, the obvious classics by bell hooks, James Baldwin, Said, Fanon, and other prophets all had a huge impact on the way I understand the world, especially as I encountered each during particularly formative periods.

### **Why is it problematic to separate scholarship on race, class, and gender into distinct categories and what are the political implications?**

Those categories, along with sexuality, remain vital, but we have worn ourselves into some detrimental grooves which maintain our focus on one category or another. Are you a gender scholar or a class scholar? Pick an allegiance! Scholarship bringing all of these into relation has a long and expansive history and yet our conferences and research groups, and as a result our literature, remain somewhat divided and insular. I know I have also been guilty of this, but to look at a particular problematic only through a gender or class lens, for instance, is to miss the way these are produced and 'act' in relation. Much more work could be done, for example, on the production of class in relation to racial projects; the production of gender orders in relation to the prescriptions of white femininity; and racialisation in relation to class and gender. None of these can be adequately understood in complete isolation, yet abstract scholarship around each isolated category rolls on regardless.

### **What is the relationship between sites of political struggles and academia? Can theory be subversive?**

At the launch of Olivia Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam's *Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* I was asked the question: "Should post-/de-colonial theorists have a constituency in the same way that Marxists are supposed to have one?" My immediate thought was that the order of influence should be flipped and ideally we'd talk about a constituency with a theory (or a set of theories). Theory is best produced in sites of struggle by those at the knife edge of structures, power dynamics, and devastating processes of expropriation. This is not intended to downplay the importance of academic works which capture critiques of power and give these a dynamic endurance. For instance, *The Wretched of the Earth*, as a grounded yet prophetic work, has a particular temporal agency which brings past struggles into the present and reveals the continuities between 'then and now,' as well as 'here and there.' Theory, at its best, can connect and inform struggles over time and across geographical space, and an important archive is ultimately built through a constant conversation between published texts and the production of theory in real time through political speeches, music, and art. Through the *Global Social Theory* site, we've always tried to make the case that politically engaged artists such as Nina Simone were also intellectual theorists who expanded the archive in

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their own ways.

The Academy has its uses, but it is rarely the site of origin of genuinely subversive theory. In the UK, the formal higher education system is becoming ever more elitist and increasingly filters out working class/racialised scholars through the fees regime, exploitative casual employment practices, and hiring practices which continue to favour well-heeled white men. This is a problem because those who have experienced forms of oppression are more adept at theorising them. So aside from pockets of radical knowledge production and pedagogy, the Academy continues to be a site where colonial science is rehearsed and entrenched against the grain of society-making projects which work towards a world without hierarchies and exclusions. Having said that, I know I'm supremely privileged to have a permanent job in HE, where I *can* still move through those critical openings and get schooled daily by the most inspiring students and academics!

**Your own work has been deeply inspired by these political considerations, as seen by your Raced Markets project which you co-convened with Robbie Shilliam. Can you tell us more about it?**

Raced Markets came out of a general frustration that existing work on race and political economy continued to be marginalised from teaching and 'discipline-making' publications by orthodox and critical scholars alike. The most seemingly sound and rigorous training in political economy in the UK will not equip students with the lexicon or the analytics to deal with the obviously racialised economic structures and processes which weigh heavy on the lives of most in our societies and help to author major conjunctures, not least the current Brexit/Trump/global far-right resurgence moment. Race is a central category in sociology – which is not to say that all sociologists engage with it centrally – but in political economy, as canonised and taught, it is rarely referenced in spaces considered to be central to the discipline.

No shade on anyone in particular, but I can think of scholars who centre race in the analysis when they write sociologically about, say, immigration policy or questions of social relations, but who can then switch to extensive political economy analyses of neoliberalism and leave race out altogether. This may, in part, be a side effect of an analytical separation of economy from society often seen in scholarly analyses, and it may be a relic of the (important) quest to locate race in the ideological realm, which has come at the expense of accounting for its material productions. In a more sinister way, it may also have much to do with 'post-racial' doctrines of 'colourblindness' which actively work against affirmative attempts to identify (and correct) complex forms of economic racism. Whatever the root cause, we do not have the embedded vocabulary or structures of theoretical rehearsal around race in political economy teaching and scholarship, leaving us poorly equipped to deal with the material realities of race. With all of this in mind, we started the Raced Markets project with a workshop, followed by a special issue of *New Political Economy* which is now online and will be printed in October 2018. These initial moves were intended to bring together scholars working on race in diverse ways and to definitively mark a place in the discipline for the development of established and new treatments of the political economy of race.

**Another project of yours investigates the relationship between the urban and the international, analyzing evictions and the state's dispossession practices in Jakarta. What are the broader implications of these expropriation regimes?**

First and foremost, forms of expropriation driven by international capital at the urban scale make the lives of racialised/working class communities intensely precarious, unsettling, stressful, and often deadly. This is justification enough for close attention to be paid to capital's relations and transformations within cities across the world. In turn, urban scale dynamics often have a significant impact on national and even international scale political economy. In Jakarta, an evictions regime which dispossessed the urban poor en masse led to a national political crisis which played out ultimately through a blasphemy case levelled against Jakarta's former governor in 2017. Back in London, the Grenfell fire atrocity in the same year shook the UK political system, although perhaps not as much as it should have. In 2007/8, the deeply racialised subprime crisis in the US housing market lit the fuse on a global financial crisis which still reverberates today. Each of these could only have been foretold by those living amidst and/or engaging analytically with urban dynamics; a form of engagement which scholars of International Relations or Global Politics don't tend to stretch to, by definition.

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All of my research has attempted to access problems of expropriation through granular level dynamics. I'm writing this in Jakarta at the moment where one evicted urban community has just won the right to remain in place on the site of their neighbourhood, Kampung Aquarium. All of their houses and businesses were flattened by the state in 2016 but, even then, the community refused to accept that this was the end of the fight. Many of them rebuilt on the site of their former homes and refused to move, staging an inspiring occupation which resulted in twenty-three tragic deaths of occupiers. Two years later, the government has constructed shelters for them, along with communal facilities and a *Musholla*, supposedly while more long-term structures are built on the same site. Such stories remind us that capitalism (and the need to resist it) is immensely wasteful and exhausting of human energies, but that capital's power is very much contested and negotiated – developers with all the might of international finance behind them don't always have to win.

Otherwise, I've been thinking lately in global historical terms about how 'slums' have been discursively and materially constructed through both discourses of hygiene and strategic neglect, such as exclusion from city sanitation infrastructures. 'Slum' is an incredibly active signifier which homogenises and degrades many of the highly diverse urban quarters throughout the Global South (and North) which stand in direct contradiction with the spatial and social logic of what we might think of as 'white space'. Many cities in the Global South were colonially written in a clear, Fanonian way as 'two towns' – the rationalised, geometric European quarter, and the complex and confusing 'native' spaces – the kampungs, the kasbahs, the favelas. The latter were all racialised as 'non-European' spaces and most have been stigmatised as 'slums' into the present – a discourse which actively makes them expropriable.

Hygiene and modernisation have been justifications for the wholesale demolition of neighbourhoods recast as uninhabitable slums by state agents across various global historical contexts. These expropriations have often been enacted with a 'hygienic,' modern alternative presented – especially in the form of high-rise public housing. However, within a relatively short space of time, such housing is again subject to managed decline and some of the most 'unhygienic' – in fact plain deadly – spaces, have been created in this way. We saw this with Grenfell, and the same story is condensed in Jakarta. The point I'm trying to make is that uninhabitability is always politically produced and allows for huge destruction in the form of evictions and relocations, only for modern public housing to be subject to managed decline, to again justify evictions. It's a cycle and we should always pause and question the 'slum' discourse.

**Your most recent Leverhulme project 'Race, Intimacy, and Extraction on an Internal Frontier' explores these questions further by looking at mining operations in Indonesia. Can you tell us more about this?**

This project began, again, with a located consideration of capital, colonial logics, and expropriation, but this time in a more remote and rural context. It comes out of work I have done with Indigenous groups across Indonesia's outer islands who struggle against the state and international capital on a daily basis. Really, I'm interested in how raced modes of expropriation, inherited from the colonial centuries, continue to be deployed in the service of international capital beyond formal decolonisation. However, I'm also concerned with building a more expansive picture of the complex ways social life is defended and negotiated along resource frontiers.

**In your piece 'Resisting Piratic Method by Doing Research Otherwise' you engage with the problems underpinning the political economy of knowledge. Can you explain what form 'piratic methods' take in research and how we can resist these extractive practices?**

This piece was written for a Sociology special issue but equally applies to research in IR and related fields. The article pushes research ethics towards incorporating scrutiny of the colonial political economy of knowledge we find ourselves in, which remains structurally extractive – knowledge profits still accumulate overwhelmingly with individuals and institutions in the Global North. It asks researchers to be mindful that the point of commodification of knowledge is situated along the false binary between amateur/unscientific and expert/scientific, and, often enough, along the global colour line. By way of corrective, the article asks scholars to approach knowledge generation as a plural and communal enterprise and to put institutional privilege to use in the service of distribution and social justice. Resistance, and structural reparations, are built partly through recognising scientific pluralism and working actively towards the intellectual commons.

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**I had the big pleasure of taking your methods class ‘The Colonial Question through Theory and Method’ as part of the London Interdisciplinary Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership – a course which is not usually offered as part of a PhD methods training. Why should someone who is writing a doctorate in the social sciences grapple with ‘the colonial question’?**

The aim of this course was to create a pedagogical space in which doctoral scholars could explore the broad terrain of work on the colonial question and navigate the intellectual flections in this field, while also navigating the tensions between anti-/post-/de-colonial literatures and associated political projects. Ultimately, this was intended to be a non-didactic space which enabled everyone involved to think through how the critical analytics associated with the colonial question could be applied to their varied disciplinary foci, which spanned IR, law, politics, and even life sciences.

I do think that those making the transition from student to scholar in social sciences should heed the lessons articulated by racialised and colonised intellectuals which are captured in these varied literatures. Even scholars not strictly working through a postcolonial or related framework need to attend to the ways in which our current order is the product of 500 years of European colonialism and the US imperialism it birthed. This history has a very living present but the denial of this is written into the fabric of our disciplines. For example, I don't think we've come close to comprehending how European colonialism not only destroyed industries and enabled the extraction of wealth, but also created the lasting means and mechanisms of extraction to enable the continued draining of the Global South. It's disingenuous, I think, to claim we can understand the global present without going through the colonial question.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young IR scholars?**

Don't compromise on your political convictions, always speak your truth, and stay aware of the consequences of your research and writings. The best work (whether we're talking about an undergraduate essay or a PhD) is written from an honest place rather than through an attempt to fit what seems to be valued in academia. Secondly, a certain truth can be conveyed through poetics, so don't be afraid to mix up the registers you work with every now and then. Thirdly, keeping the university going depends on all sorts of exploited labour, so pay attention to the plight of cleaners and other workers and get involved with their struggles. Finally, don't be fooled by the idea that knowledge can ever be a personal product. However much the Academy fashions individualism, knowledge is always collective, and collective ways of working are always the most productive and enriching.