

Interview - Ruth Blakeley

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JAN 10 2019

Ruth Blakeley joined the University of Sheffield in 2017 as Professor of Politics and International Relations, and Director of the White Rose Doctoral Training Partnership for the Social Sciences. Her research focuses on a range of issues across the areas of international security, terrorism and political violence, and the global governance of human rights. Her interests include US power, imperialism, US and UK foreign policy, state violence and state terrorism, and torture. She is particularly interested in the relationship between the evolution of the international political economy and state violence. These interests lead her to frequently engage with questions on the potential of human rights norms and laws as vehicles for political and social change. Ruth is currently lead editor of *Review of International Studies* and is the incoming Vice-Chair of the British International Studies Association.

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

Gains made in the second half of the twentieth century in the realization of human rights for greater numbers of people are now under threat. Those threats come from a variety of sources, particularly far right populist movements which have emboldened racism, xenophobia and misogyny, as well as pressure to roll back hard-won rights for the LGBT community. This has led to important discussion and debate about how real and sustainable those gains were. It has led to serious reflection on whether there has been too much emphasis placed on civil and political rights, while social and economic rights have been largely ignored. The effectiveness of global governance regimes has been called into question. The motives of powerful states in the Global North that present themselves as the arbiters of human rights are being subjected to greater scrutiny. These debates are taking place at the same time as postcolonial, decolonial and gendered analyses are gaining traction, and presenting serious challenges to assumptions that have been held within IR as a discipline for decades. Taking seriously the lessons we need to learn as a discipline from those who have been historically marginalized from power in politics and in academia makes this a very exciting time to be thinking harder about what it means to promote, support and defend human rights.

This has also led to some serious thinking about research methods. Human rights practice and scholarship have both increasingly been influenced by the measurement and quantification of rights. Such work is, of course, important for establishing what has been achieved and what still needs to be done. But measurement and quantification of rights are not without their own politics. Some of the most challenging debates in the field in recent years have been about the ways in which power influences what is measured, how it is measured, who it is measured for, and what impact this has on rights, understood in their most emancipatory sense. Sophisticated techniques for measuring rights are generally a privilege owned and enacted by scholars and practitioners situated in the Global North. There is a risk that these highly quantitative techniques displace harder-to-do, but absolutely critical on-the-ground investigation that provides the richest and most meaningful accounts of human suffering. There are also important questions to be asked about how quantitative data on rights is used by the powerful, whether as a tool of aid conditionality, of privileging some groups over others, or as sources of surveillance.

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

First of all, I have to credit my parents. From a very young age they encouraged a curiosity about the wider world, and they fostered an empathy for human suffering. They provided me with opportunities to travel, including to places very

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different from my relatively privileged upbringing in the UK. An important early encounter was with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. I was so struck by the decades-long struggle of these tenacious women, who were relentless in demanding truth and redress for human rights violations perpetrated by the Cold War dictatorship. Many had seen their children kidnapped and disappeared, had learned of the extensive use of torture, and knew that some of their daughters who gave birth in captivity, had their babies taken away and given to military families to raise as their own. This was a formative experience in terms of learning what it is that human rights-focused NGOs do, and why. Much more recently I have had the privilege of working very closely with human rights NGOs and litigators to uncover the extent of the CIA's Rendition, Detention and Interrogation programme. Working with them has taught me a great deal about the need for an unfailing commitment to academic rigour, and being completely up front about areas of doubt. I have also learned from them that there is no substitute for the first-hand testimony of those who have been subjected to serious violations of human rights.

You are co-director of the Rendition Project with Dr. Sam Raphael – a research initiative providing a comprehensive analysis of the CIA's Rendition, Detention and Interrogation (RDI) programme. How has this research been undertaken and what have you found?

The CIA's RDI programme was highly secretive, and involved the development of a secret prison network intended for the indefinite detention and torture of terror suspects in violation of international law. The programme was characterized by systematic and sustained torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (CIDT), against at least 119 people (but most likely, many more) in some cases over many years. Sam and I have drawn on years of investigation by a small group of journalists, lawyers, parliamentarians and human rights investigators to uncover the broad workings of the programme.

Our work focused on three core aspects of the programme. First, we sought to examine the evolution of the CIA's 'black sites' – secret prisons built and run directly by the CIA for the deliberate holding of terror suspects outside the law, and interrogating them using torture. Our work involved establishing the locations of the sites, the periods they operated, and the extent of involvement by the host countries. Second, we have investigated how the CIA programme operated, specifically, how prisoners were transferred between detention facilities. Critical to this aspect of the work was the aircraft that the CIA owned through a series of shell companies (to hide their existence) or which it contracted through complex contracts with multiple companies (again to hide their actions), to transfer prisoners through the prison network. This aspect of the research was possible through the acquisition of thousands of billing records and air traffic control flight records. Through this work, we were able to map the network of prisons, as well as identify more than 60 individual rendition operations. Third, we sought to identify and develop clear profiles of as many of the prisoners as possible, tracking their fate and whereabouts during their time in CIA custody and afterwards, including locations of capture and detention, movements through the secret network of prisons, and details of their torture. Our work has provided the most comprehensive account to date of the workings of the RDI programme. We also proved that the UK was much more involved than previous governments had admitted, and after years of making the case that the UK colluded extensively, our findings were finally corroborated by the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee in June 2018.

Through this, you have provided extensive empirical research exposing the UK government's involvement in the rendition and torture of terror suspects post 9/11. Do you think the recent investigation into Detainee Mistreatment and Rendition by the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee has gone far enough?

In January 2017, Sam and I gave evidence to the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) investigation, led by Dominic Grieve, MP. In our evidence, we carefully explained our methodology and demonstrated why our findings on UK complicity in the RDI programme were robust. We also spoke at some length about what we saw as significant weaknesses in the guidance that the government gives to UK intelligence agencies and military personnel on collaborating with third party states where there is a risk of torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, the so-called 'Consolidated Guidance'. At the time of giving evidence, Sam and I were unclear about how thorough the ISC investigation would be. It was only when it published its findings in June 2018, in the form of two reports, that we had any inkling of its rigour. We were very pleased to see that its assessment of UK complicity was devastating. The ISC

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corroborated a number of our earlier findings, but also demonstrated that UK collusion in torture and CIDT was even more extensive than we had been able to prove.

Thanks to the work of the ISC, we now have overwhelming evidence that British intelligence services knew about, suggested, planned, agreed to, or paid for others to conduct rendition operations in more than 70 cases, and colluded in the detention and abuse of prisoners in numerous ways. The details are harrowing – one MI6 officer was present while a prisoner, was transferred in a coffin-sized box, which was sealed and then loaded onto a truck to a waiting US aircraft. Investigative journalist, Ian Cobain, has demonstrated that this prisoner, codenamed Cuckoo in the ISC report, was Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, who was transferred by the CIA from Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan to Egypt. Under torture in Egypt, he told his interrogations that there were links between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons programme, and that Saddam Hussein was assisting al-Qaeda with chemical and biological weapons. On his return to CIA custody he recanted these claims and said he had fabricated the story in the hope of making the torture stop. By then, however, his claims had been cited in the justifications for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In hundreds of further cases, UK officials were aware of detainees being severely mistreated by their allies, including on at least 13 occasions directly witnessing it, and 25 incidents in which detainees reported abuse to UK officials. While this was sometimes reported, the ISC found no evidence that UK personnel ever intervened directly to prevent the abuse. Indeed, the ISC concluded that there seemed to be a concern not to upset the US. Despite being aware of abuse, UK personnel continued to supply questions to be asked of detainees under torture, and received intelligence from those who had been tortured, even though they were aware of the mistreatment. The ISC found 232 cases 'where it appears that UK personnel continued to supply questions or intelligence to liaison services after they knew or suspected (or, in our view, should have suspected) that a detainee had been or was being mistreated'.

The second of the 2018 ISC reports focuses on the 'Consolidated Guidance', issued to all security agencies and the military from 2010 onwards. The ISC described 'dangerous ambiguities' in the Guidance. This is clearly illustrated by the confusion among Ministers about how concerns relating to prisoner abuse should be treated. Ministers were unclear on whether they could lawfully allow operations to go ahead where there was a risk that prisoners would be mistreated. Disturbingly, when giving evidence, senior Ministers including Theresa May, Amber Rudd, Boris Johnson and Philip Hammond all made references to ticking bomb scenarios as potentially justifying operations where torture might be used. By allowing Ministers to approve actions even where there is a 'serious risk' of torture or CIDT, the Guidance implies that torture or CIDT may serve some useful or necessary purpose in the gathering of critical intelligence. Decades of research has shown that torture and CIDT do not result in the acquisition of reliable intelligence, and more often than not, torture and CIDT have counter-productive effects. A public consultation has now been launched by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner (IPCO) on reform of the Guidance, to which Sam and I have made a submission, and we await publication of the Commissioner's findings.

In your article on British torture in the 'war on terror' you outline a "peculiarly British approach to torture". What are the characteristics of Britain's involvement in torture during the 'war on terror' and how were they able to seemingly evade complicity?

In the paper, we argue that UK intelligence and security agencies have been guided by a very particular approach that emerged immediately after the declaration of a 'war on terror' by the US, and the start of military operations in Afghanistan. As British intelligence on the ground in Afghanistan began to interrogate those held by counterterrorism partners, guidance was issued by headquarters in London, driven by two fundamental principles. The aborted Detainee Inquiry led by Peter Gibson found that access to prisoners in Afghan detention facilities was permitted by MI6 providing that two strict conditions were adhered to: 'a) that at no time were they to be under SIS (MI6) control "as this would mean that we would incur Geneva Convention responsibilities for them", and b) that they "would not be subject to coercion or torture and generally treated humanely"'. By adhering to these principles the UK could remain full counterterrorism partners of the US and other allies. It could target those considered threats to national security by ensuring that they were subjected to harsh treatment on the dubious assumption that they would elicit valuable intelligence. At the same time, the UK could insulate itself from allegations of abuse, with both the intelligence and security agencies themselves and ministers with responsibility for the agencies able to maintain their

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narrative of denial, and to continue to insist that the UK counterterrorism effort was underpinned by a robust commitment to human rights.

When MI6 and MI5 were given permission by the Americans to interrogate US-held prisoners in Afghanistan, in early January 2002, it quickly became clear to British agents that prisoner mistreatment was occurring. One MI6 officer who conducted an interrogation of a US-held prisoner reported to London on 10 January 2002 'observations on the circumstances of the handling of [the] detainee by the US military before the beginning of the interview'. The details of this report remain classified, although the reply, copied to all MI5 and MI6 officers in Afghanistan, admitted that prisoners 'may not be being treated in accordance with the appropriate standards':

With regard to the status of the prisoners, under the various Geneva Conventions and protocols all prisoners, however they are described, are entitled to the same levels of protection. You have commented on their treatment. It appears from your description that they may not be being treated in accordance with the appropriate standards. Given that they are not within our custody or control, the law does not require you to intervene to prevent this. That said, HMG's [Her Majesty's Government] stated commitment to human rights makes it important that the Americans understand that we cannot be party to such ill treatment nor can we be seen to condone it. In no case should they be coerced during or in conjunction with an SIS interview of them. If circumstances allow, you should consider drawing this to the attention of a suitably senior US official locally. It is important that you do not engage in any activity yourself that involves inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners.

Under the Convention Against Torture, to which the UK is a signatory, the guidance issued by the UK was wholly inadequate. State representatives have a duty at all times to report torture and CIDT.

You recently published an article on conducting effective research into state complicity in human rights abuses. What challenges/barriers have you faced when conducting research into the CIA's RDI programme?

The greatest challenges have been dealing with the secretive nature of the programme. Evidence in relation to it is necessarily partial and fragmentary. Piecing together the history and evolution of the RDI programme has been a painstaking process, and in numerous instances we have not been able to draw confident conclusions. Triangulation of sources has been critical, and where doubt exists, we have had to be entirely transparent about this, not least because human rights litigators have used our work in domestic and international courts in their efforts to seek redress for victims. We have developed robust methodologies for establishing levels of certainty and communicating doubt.

The Rendition Project is a collaboration between academics and human rights practitioners and also works with a range of other investigators, lawyers and journalists. Do you think collaboration such as this is important when aiming to produce practically relevant academic research? What benefits does this collaboration bring?

The Rendition Project would quite simply not have been successful were it not for the incredible support and collaboration of dozens of human rights investigators, litigators and investigative journalists. Working with them has been the most enriching experience of my career to date. A candid word is needed here about normative commitments. We have gained the trust and support of the human rights community in part because Sam and I are committed to using our scholarship to help prevent human rights abuses, and to hold states to account when they violate international law. This common ground with external collaborators has been a crucial foundation for our co-produced work. Were we simply impartial bystanders, motivated purely by intellectual curiosity, I do not think we would have seemed terribly credible. Importantly, we would not have been committed to giving anything back to those who have worked patiently with us and given time and resources so generously, with higher goals in mind.

The benefits of this collaboration have been numerous and include: gaining access to and building relationships with inspiring human rights practitioners working at the coalface; being able to draw on vastly greater sources of hard won data than would otherwise be possible; developing and honing our own research skills by learning from the decades

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of work that human rights investigators have done to acquire and produce evidence of human rights violations; developing more effective strategies for communicating our research findings beyond the academy; improved clarity in our writing; becoming savvier about engaging policymakers; and finally, building lasting friendships with like-minded people.

Following on from your research into human rights abuses, you recently published an article on drones, human rights and international law. How can a historical materialist framing reconceptualise the drones programme for the targeted killing of terror suspects?

Theoretically, all of my work is informed by historical materialist approaches. I am interested in exploring how power and resistance are at work in the global political economy, creating conditions in which new forms of collective self-determination become imaginable and materially possible. In the drones article, I argue that rather than seeing drones as a unique and novel development in warfare, their use for targeted killings should instead be understood as a continuation of the imperial and neo-imperial violent practices of powerful liberal states. State violence has been central to the imperial and neo-imperial projects of powerful states for centuries. Its use is deliberately intended to instill fear among populations to quell dissent and to force populations to acquiesce to the agendas of powerful political and economic elites. In the paper I analyse the targeted killing programme in relation to both the evolution of air power as a form of policing, and to the US' unconventional war doctrine developed during the Cold War and characterised by illicit actions that violate international law. I also look at the mechanisms by which the US and UK have sought to conceal their complicity in human rights violations, and in cases of exposure, have attempted to establish mechanisms for evading accountability. This includes putting in place architectures aimed at shielding those responsible from prosecution under national and international law. In this sense, I seek to show how the targeted killings programme represents the most recent iteration of decades-long efforts by powerful liberal states to identify and target insurgents considered a substantial threat to US material interests for internment, interrogation or killing, and to legitimise their actions and evade accountability for these extensive human rights violations.

There is a great deal of evidence to support the argument that military lawyers are intimately involved in efforts to use the law to justify and legitimise various aspects of war. We should make ourselves aware of this exercise in "lawfare", but to eschew the law is to throw the baby out with the bath water. Securing human rights has always and will always be a struggle. As the death tolls increase, and the devastating societal impacts of the targeted killing programme escalate in growing numbers of countries, the struggle to wrest unaccountable sovereign power from the state and its agents should continue. With that in mind, where human rights emanate from a human trait to resist oppression and domination, they have a crucial role to play in holding officials to account when they seek to allocate sovereign power to themselves, free of transparency and accountability.

What is the most important advice that you would give to scholars studying international politics?

I have been struck by how casual we sometimes are as a discipline about the impacts we might have through field work. When our work focuses on extreme violence and torture, how well placed are we to engage with its victims? The academic interview process can, at worst, resemble an interrogation, and even if it does not, it may result in a victim re-visiting the trauma in unhelpful ways. We need to take seriously our ethical responsibilities and be honest about our limitations. Very early on, I took the decision not to interview the victims of CIA torture. The vast majority are Muslim men, and many of them were subjected to extreme sexual abuse. It would be highly inappropriate for me as a woman to interview them about their experience. Furthermore, I have no training or experience in appropriate and therapeutic techniques required to obtain testimonies without causing further harm. Instead we drew only on testimonies from victims that had been obtained by qualified professionals. I would urge anyone working on human rights violations to take seriously the ethical implications of everything that you do, and to understand your own limitations. Similarly, think hard about the politics of the methods and techniques you use, and pay attention to the ways in which methods empower some while constraining others, sometimes with perverse and regressive effects.

I would hope that all of us are engaging in international politics research because we want our work to effect change. Think about the societal changes you would like your research to contribute to, and identify the project, funders, and academic and non-academic partners that will help make that possible. Do the hard work of building genuine

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relationships of trust with people and organisations in the wider world who share your convictions and vision. Only take on projects you are inspired and excited by. Be humble, listen and learn from others beyond the academy, and be generous in return. True collaboration is not about your research impacting upon others. It is a two-way street and your own research and academic practice should be as transformed by the experience, just as it is transformative to others.