Interview - Sophie Harman

Sophie Harman is Professor of International Politics at Queen Mary University of London where she teaches and conducts research into global health politics, Africa and International Relations, Global Governance and Visual Method. She has published several books and articles in these areas. In 2018 the Political Studies Association (PSA) awarded Sophie the Joni Lovenduski Prize for outstanding achievement by a mid-career scholar, and in 2019 she was nominated for the BAFTA for Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director, or Producer for her work on *Pili*. Her new book, *Seeing Politics: film, visual methods and International Politics* is published in July 2019.
This interview has been edited from a recorded conversation.

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

I think some of the most exciting research happening at the moment is in aesthetics, emotion and affect in International Relations. This is really starting to build from those scholars who did the initial important groundwork saying, "these things matter for International Relations", to people now thinking about how they can work in visual forms. What is really important about these debates is not only how they draw across disciplines, but how they show that IR has something to say to disciplines of art history or visual anthropology etc. It really appeals to students as well, I think this is because we live in an increasingly visual world and are affected by the things we see.

I also think a lot of the work happening within decolonial feminism and decolonial IR is really exciting, particularly because of the impact it's having on how we look at ourselves as researchers and how students are really engaging with these debates in different ways. What has been good as of late is how the discipline has opened up to these debates without the usual navel-gazing about whether opening up will hollow out what we do as International Relations. As someone who has worked on global health politics for over a decade, it is quite exciting that you have a lot of new scholars coming in and refreshing and reviving debates. This can only be a good thing!

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

I think the way I understand the world is constantly changing, it's about always challenging what you think and then coming back to your original position. A really big example of that would have been the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2015. When I was in Sierra Leone doing research around military with Adam Kamradt-Scott from the University of Sydney, I remember being really confused and thinking that I would have wanted the military to have intervened if I was here, but then I thought, "what are you thinking, you don't like the military, this goes against your feminist arguments!". So that challenged me to think about these extreme situations and the blind spot of not realising that militaries have been intervening in health for years, and how we overlook that from a very Eurocentric point of view.

There are lots of scholars who have prompted shifts in my thinking. Firstly, like lots of scholars I have intellectual debt to people like James C Scott; obviously, being a feminist – Cynthia Enloe, Audre Lorde, V Spike Peterson, Lily Ling; in African Studies Achille Mbembe, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Jean-Francois Bayart. Roland Bleiker's work on visual politics was like a reassuring, insightful friend throughout my film project. More recently I've been reading a whole range of work from scholars such as Simukai Chigudu, Lene Hansen, Laleh Khalili, Adia Benton, Elzbieta Korolczuk, Agnieska Graff, Jennifer Thomson, Ian Taylor – a real mix! . For my new book, Manisha Desai's work has really

influenced me; the dual politics of possibilities, sitting in uncomfortable spaces and advancing in that kind of way has been really huge for me. And finally, there's lots of colleagues that I've worked with who are just wonderful – for example Sara Davies, Clare Wenham, Simon Rushton, Ruth Blakeley, Craig Murphy, Amy Barnes, Will Brown, Frank Lisk – and who are very inspirational in terms of their collegiality and the quality of the work they do. I also read a lot of fiction which I find really helps with my research, as well as seeing and understanding the world.

Also, working at Queen Mary has had a huge impact on my thinking. I moved from City University and started working at Queen Mary in 2012 at a really exciting time. Having colleagues like Nivi Manchanda, Robbie Shilliam, Kim Hutchings, Holly Ryan, Engin Isin, Jef Huysmans, Sharri Plonski, James Dunkerley, and Clive Gabay has really opened my eyes to things I have taken for granted or never thought about. The students have had a huge impact on me too. The last 6 and a half years have been incredibly rewarding, fruitful, and informed my career in really significant ways.

You published an article which responds to claims that the Trump presidency is to blame for global health failures, such as restricting reproductive health and dependency on the US financing model. What is the danger of blaming Trump wholly for these failures in global health governance?

Having attention towards Trump around issues of sexual reproductive rights and global health issues is really important, not only because of the amount of money the US invests in global health but also because of the ideas and the signalling of direction of global health. The way it's motivating and galvanising attention from people who previously may not have been interested in these issues before is really good. However, the limit here is that it is not just Trump and the US that is threatening reproductive health: curtailment of reproductive rights is the norm around the world. Global health often has a narrative around it – that it's a safe space, that everybody in global health is trying to do good and if the politics just did what global health advocates would want it to do then everything would be fine. But this at best shows an unwillingness or inability to address these issues, and at worse, overlooks some of the very structures that allow sexual and reproductive health rights to be curtailed and how this is really the global norm. The idea that Trump is all to blame for failures in global health governance is not true, yes it's a big factor, but often what happens is that figures like Trump and Bolsonaro become these totemic people in this debate and the very structures that allow them to replicate these kind of narratives is ignored, to the detriment of women's health.

The article I wrote with Sara Davies is trying to encourage us to see this as an opportunity to look at ourselves as well. You can also see that with anti-vaccination debates, particularly with measles, where everyone was blaming Trump and the far right but in reality, this has been bubbling for quite some time now – it has been a canary in the populist coalmine. The article is encouraging us to think about the wider structural issues around why people don't trust experts. Look at the studies we have on vaccination of polio from Nigeria to Pakistan to see the logic behind not trusting these public health initiatives, it's not just Trump's tweets that are causing this, there is a real issue here.

In your recent BAFTA nominated film *Pili* you serve to tell the story of real women living with HIV/AIDS in Tanzania. What initially made you choose to conduct this research visually through film, as opposed to using other "conventional" methods?

The reason for making *Pili* was due to a number of factors, the first was seeing the impact of film on students and teaching. In teaching global health politics and global governance, you see how students respond to films in ways that they don't necessarily respond to the written word. Students often want to learn more about what they've seen in a film, it's often a trigger for more research. Then I started to get frustrated that all of the films, particularly on HIV and AIDS – which there are many – whilst they are excellent, have very historical narratives usually set in the 1980s in Europe or North America, for example *We Were Here*, or *How to Survive a Plague.* You also increasingly see it on popular TV programmes like *Pose* – yes, I love *Pose*, but it's a very specific narrative of social history. So, my thinking was: if you look at HIV who does it affect? It predominantly affects women in sub-Saharan Africa, where are their stories? There was MTV *Shuga*, but again that's focused more on middle-class Africans in Kenya and Nigeria. I therefore realised these films didn't exist, so my idea was to see if we could create something and produce it in a way that allows people living with HIV to tell their stories themselves. Instead of coming in and imposing that narrative, I tried to think of ways they could do it, so encouraging the co-production of research by saying for example, "let's take

your knowledge of living with HIV, with my knowledge of the wider political economy of HIV, and the filmmaker's knowledge of how to put that into a compelling story and let's see what happens".

The motivation for *Pili* came from a combination of that frustration, mixed with how we can do it in a co-produced way, and also audience. We write academic texts, we talk about these issues in policy forums, and I try to get my work out there as much as possible, but nothing really changes. The more I visit these communities in Tanzania – and I have been since 2005 – I do see change, but the stories of being a left one, of it not just being about the drugs but everything around it e.g. the health system, all of this keeps coming out, so I thought let's change the medium and the method, and keep the message. You don't want to keep doing the same thing. Coming back to one of your first questions about influence and exciting things in the discipline, you go to conferences such as ISA and BISA and you sit on feminist panels about making women visible and issues that need more attention, but we don't ever change our methods of how we do that. We talk about how important these issues are, and we have exciting pieces of research, but I was getting frustrated that nobody was actually doing anything about this, so that's why we tried something different. This isn't to criticise people who work in these forms or do really great research, I'm very clear to say that I don't think all academics should become filmmakers, but for me I couldn't keep going to these meetings again and again without anything changing.

How can the use of alternative visual methods, such as film, expose new areas of research and challenge existing methods used in IR and beyond?

A lot of people in IR *read* films but they don't *make* films; there are a handful, but they tend to be short films or documentaries form, for example James Der Derian's work and Cynthia Weber's project *I'm an American* (this was a hugely influential project at the start when I was thinking about *Pili*). My work is trying to push the idea of how to do documentary and narrative films and challenge the kinds of methods we use in IR. I think IR is actually quite static and boring when it comes to methods, especially in comparison to other social science and humanities disciplines. I think there are so many exciting people involved in IR, but methodologically I don't see that much exciting stuff happening. My fear is that those who want to do the exciting research are early career researchers and then they do grant applications where the funder is perhaps unsure of the method or nervous that they can pull it off, and I think that's stifling a bit of creativity which is a real shame. Lots of people question how film can be a research method, how it can be valid, and whether you can replicate it, and I would say no, it's not a positivist method but that doesn't mean it can't have rigor to it as well. I hope the success of the film and hopefully the book will be a jump off point to challenge people into thinking they can do something different, but at the same time acknowledge that it *is* a research project, so the ethical dimension is huge. Sometimes in visual politics people might use visual images they haven't got consent to use; the ethics is a bit of a challenge, but it just needs more careful thought, it's not impossible. That's partly why our project is a story, to help with some of the identities of the women in it.

In response to some of the work I've done around this, people have questioned whether it counts as academic research and whether the Tanzanian women can tell us anything. If I went and interviewed someone from the Tanzanian government and then wrote it up, you would only know that was academic research because you would triangulate it with your own knowledge, it's the same here – taking these women's experiences and knowledge and triangulating it with your own knowledge as an academic. People try and dismiss this because I'm predominantly working with illiterate women, which I think is a huge oversight; obviously it's incredibly patronising, possibly sexist and racist, but it also implies a denial of their knowledge. Lisa Tilley talks about this in terms of extraction – how we take knowledge, extract it, and then pass it off as our own. It's important to acknowledge that, in terms of thinking where we source knowledge from and how that knowledge is attributed. Challenging that sort of stuff is really important to me, and I think it's going to grow in IR.

When undertaking feminist or decolonial research such as this, how do you, as you put it in your article on the topic, "make the invisible visible in a way that recognises the agency of the invisible"?

Making the invisible visible in a way that recognises the agency of the invisible is really problematic and there is no easy answer to that. I think you do it based on mutual respect and understanding of the aims and outcomes of the work, and not devaluing one another's knowledge. You have to be really mindful and upfront about the differences

between yourself and the people you are working with, and your own positionality and their positionality in that; in the same way that you don't reify the academic, don't reify the partner. It was interesting how over the course of the relationship with some of the women I was working with, the power dynamic shifted from me having all of the power as the main producer of the project (and being quite uncomfortable with that!), to them having quite a bit of power when they knew that ethically they could withdraw from the project at any time. There is an agency on both sides, it's not a reification of the "sacred poor" but it's also not a reification of the academic.

This also occurs over the longevity of a project; after Pili became relatively successful with the BAFTA nomination and its release in the UK, director Leanne Welham and I would do all of the Q&A's after the screening, but the danger here is that you overwrite the narrative. The whole story is meant to be about the women in the film, but obviously those women aren't speaking at the Q&A's, we are. We are aware of the tensions there and are constantly rethinking these issues, but we know we have to do these things to sell the film, and the women also want the film to make money so it's a means to an end. The idea of visibility is to let the represented represent themselves, but then sometimes you end up representing them and it all becomes a bit thorny and messy. Manisha Desai's work has been really influential for me for this reason. What is interesting about feminist decolonial research, particularly in film making, is that it makes you be as honest as you can. On one hand you want to cover up the uncomfortable, messy bits because we are encouraged not to talk about it when we think about our research outputs and methods. Nobody talks about the compromises you have to make in order to do research because obviously there's an ethical dimension to that, but doing research – especially qualitative research – where you have these huge inequalities is a messy business. When writing *Seeing Politics* I realised that I couldn't write it without being completely honest about my own failings in this as well.

In your upcoming book *Seeing Politics*, you discuss how "government gatekeeping" and the "global hierarchies of film governance" serve to control and marginalize stories and people. Can you expand on what you mean by this?

It's one thing to want to tell the story of people living with HIV, but it's also about how governments and the wider mechanisms of film governance can actually curtail our access to these people and their stories. The government gatekeeping discussion was directly a response to some of the issues I had navigating the procedure and bureaucracy of the Tanzanian film board and getting permits. This isn't specific to Tanzania though, I imagine the UK government isn't delighted that *I, Daniel Blake* shows foodbanks, so all states are slightly concerned about that.

As a result of the issues we faced in getting a film permit, we started to engage in some of the more informal processes of politics; the bigger the gates in the formal structures, the more the bureaucratic procedure, the more you find yourself going around the gate. All states gatekeep in terms of access to resources and taxation etc. but in particularly resource poor settings where you have patronage, this gets exacerbated. Making a film is the first time I have ever done research that has actually involved money and paying people, and that created a whole new dynamic of the research process as it inferred that I had wealth and that I could do things that I couldn't necessarily do. This meant that the more I was trying to navigate the formal gate, the more I was using informal networks to get things done, which was then embedding me into a whole world of patron/client relationship that I wasn't necessarily happy about. However, this is what people have to navigate every day, so it was quite interesting in that way.

One chapter in my book looks at how state-based gatekeeping is pervasive throughout society in Tanzania and the wider political economy of global film governance and how this has an impact on the stories we see. For example, if you want to make a film in Tanzania you have to consider whether the film board know you, whether you have the resources to do it and also if you can get it past their censorship, which is also quite tricky. Then you take it to the global level and try to gain an audience, but it's not like you make a good film and then someone gives you a sales deal and puts it in the cinema – that's not how it works, there is a wider structure of how you get things out there. Increasingly, when I started engaging in these mechanisms of governance, there was this tension that you have to engage in the very structures that stop these stories coming out in the first place. For example, the idea that audiences around the world just want to watch *The Avengers* and are not interested in films from women, subtitled films, women of colour, African women or Swahili, gets reproduced by the market. The challenge is how to engage in those structures without actually making it worse in the long term.

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Written by E-International Relations

You tweeted last month that ISA 2019 will be your "last ISA until locations change so all colleagues and researchers working in international studies can attend". What motivated you to make this decision?

The issue of visas and access to conferences has always been a problem, as has the ability for people to go around the world and do research in other countries, so this is not a new issue. My experience is that big membership organisations like ISA always say that they're making changes, they're going to Ghana or people can skype in for example, but the progress of change on these issues is slow. Obviously, this isn't about me, as a white British woman I know am very privileged, and can attend these events with minimal hassle, but my experience of trying to organise workshops with international speakers in the UK or panels at ISA suggested that things are getting worse not better in terms of restrictions on entry for scholars. Every time I have a project and I think about working with scholars from abroad and bringing them over for meetings to the UK, I know it's going to be very expensive for them and potentially quite dehumanising because of all the hoops the Home Office has to jump through. Obviously, I don't think ISA really care if I go or not, and it is not just about ISA.

It is very welcome that ISA were trialling the reimbursement of people who were unable to attend ISA in Toronto because of visa issues, and that they are doing reviews of where else in the world they can host these major conferences. Having been on the BISA executive and knowing a lot of people on the ISA executive, I know how hard it is to put these conferences together, and how hard some really dedicated people are working to address these issues inside these organisations. I think for now, I want to see where they go, even if I always enjoy the experience of going, and have great colleagues that do attend. Also, maybe don't tweet when tired!

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

It's really hard to give advice without being really clichéd! Firstly go with your gut instinct – if you want to do something and you know something is right, stick with it. When you're working with people and collaborators go with your gut instinct as well, ask people who have worked with them before; don't just collaborate with people because you like their work. Beware that collaboration can potentially be an exploitative relationship – not always, collaboration can be wonderful – but be careful around that.

Also get good mentors, that's really important. I think often with young scholars their mentors tend to be their supervisors, which is great if your supervision works well, or in a first job you might be given a mentor who you don't work well with – get a different one, seek out a good mentor. Mentors are hugely important at every stage of your career, but particularly at the early stage because things come up where you need someone who has been working in the field for a while to tell you that your grievance is justified, how to elevate a complaint or how to be strategic with your career, for example. As well as this, having really supportive friends around you is important. Everybody needs someone that they can have a bit of a whinge to, as well as a friend who can be honest with you and tell you to stop whinging. Mentors can help you navigate your time and be realistic about careers and then friends can help keep you sane through it all. I think my career has gone well because I've managed to have really good, supportive friends and mentors inside and outside of academia – not in a patronage way but in ways that they encourage you to do the research you want to do.

I think being strategic with your career is also important in terms of setting out what you want to do and not saying yes to too much that can distract you from what you're actually interested in. You've got to focus on why you are doing it and what motivates you, be it research or students etc, as we can all get a bit carried away with the REF and things like that. If you're just doing it for a four-star REF piece, you're not going to produce a four-star REF piece. It would be misguided of me to suggest that these things aren't important to an early career researcher, but if you get carried away with instrumental ways of getting jobs and things like that I think you can become quite unhappy and disillusioned quite quickly. Academia can be fun, I know being an early career researcher at this time is really hard, but I think it's really important to remember that this is the one career where you can go and research whatever you want.