**LEVERHULME WOMEN AND THE HISTORY OF**

**INTERNATIONAL THOUGHT PROJECT**

**Christine SYLVESTER**

Interviewer : Sarah DUNSTAN

Date : 18 March, 2019

*I am conducting an interview, over the phone, for the Leverhulme Women and History of International Thought Project with Professor Christine Sylvester. Would you mind giving me your name for the recording and spelling it, please?*

Yes. Christine Sylvester. C-h-r-i-s-t-i-n-e S-y-l-v-e-s-t-e-r.

*And are you happy for me to call you by that name during the interview?*

Yes, sure.

*Wonderful. Let’s begin. The first thing I’d like to ask you about is your background. Where were you born?*

I was born in Connecticut, in the middle of the state, on the coastline … not on the beach, but on the coastline. Connecticut is a progressive state, historically, compared to some others. The US is so big it really matters where you grew up.

*Definitely. What did your parents do for work?*

Sorry, what did they do for …?

*For work.*

My family background is working-class. My father worked in a munitions factory during World War II and then, afterwards, he owned his own shoe store. My mother did the 1950s thing of being a housewife and not working outside the home. She always said that the husband wouldn’t like it if she went out to work. Even though he didn’t make much money, we were part of the aspirational working-class. In other words, we wanted to be moving up the typical American class ladder if possible.

We had a lovely house, sold to us for under the actual value so, we were not dirt poor but it was definitely Italian/American working-class.

*And did you have a strong sense of that hybrid national identity when you were a child?*

No. Some grandparents spoke broken English and I wasn’t allowed to pick up on Italian and speak it. That was very typical of the time in the fifties. People who had immigrant backgrounds were trying very hard to integrate, to be seen as Americans, just as they do today. I was aware of that then and when I was applying to college, something my mother at least encouraged.

I told her I had an interview and she said, ‘Well, don’t tell them you’re Italian.’ The anti-intellectual attitude towards Italians was common then. Each ethnic immigrant group was criminalised, in a sense, by the groups arriving before them. Italians were considered sort of dumb or likely to be good athletes; indeed, my father was on one of the feeder teams for the New York Yankees.

They were perceived as certainly not people who would aspire to, well, getting a PhD or going high in the professional world. That attitude passed after a while but that was my mother’s concern as I applied to college –I would not be accepted owing to my ethnic background.

But one other thing I should say about my background is very, very important in understanding anything about me. My father deserted our family when I was thirteen. He went off with another woman he met, and her kids. I actually saw them together one time and they didn’t see me, but the whole sordid affair made a strong impression because I had been close to him. He taught me to play baseball and to swim, and he was proud of my athleticism. Once he left, I never saw him again. You know, this happens to women all over the world, but it was unusual in 1960s America. It wasn’t a time average people were getting divorced.

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My mother, unfortunately went into a bit of a crisis and started taking lots of pills, including Valium. She was moody and sort of weird. I took refuge in sport, playing basketball in the winter, softball in the summer, even coached a little girl’s softball team when I was in high school. Other than that I went to the library where there would be no arguing. Let's say I went to the library to have a calm environment, some peace and quiet.

So it was tumultuous family situation and I often think that in the world of academia a background like that, even in the United States, a very diverse country, is not common at all. Many of my academic colleagues come from a background where there were books in the house. We had only a few, and the selection was never refreshed. If I wanted to read I went to the library.

I really picked up on all of the books I was able to access there. At fifteen I read all the Shakespeare plays. Not because I had to. Not because anyone would ever have thought of telling me to do that. Simply, I got interested in one and I heard he was really important and I should read all of them, so I did.

The better parts of my family life I carry with me to this day. I still go the gym five or six days a week and exercise pretty hard. I became an academic, which was almost in the cards after years of reading in libraries. With my background, I was either going to be a complete failure in life, an utterly traumatised individual, or I was going to move further into my bookish comfort zone and become an academic.

*I think that’s really brave of you to share that story as well. I think, too often, there’s a tendency to create a kind of perfect trajectory that isn’t revealing …*

Yeah, I know, I had no perfect trajectory. And even when I went to college … to university, we call it college here … I had to live at home with my moody mother and commute, because that’s all we could afford. I went to a women’s Catholic college. I was quite happy there. But the adventure of going away to university, I never had that. I worked all the way through university three nights a week and all day Saturday in a shop, just to be able to pay some of the bills.

When I look out on the faces of my students now --I think they’re great --relatively few of them are working their way through university. Many have internships, though, which is usually unpaid work credited toward a degree. I would have loved an internship in Washington, but at that time, only well-connected people got such things. Also, these days many fly off to Spring Break in Florida, something I never would have been able to afford.

*It’s a very different lifestyle. Were many people at the college you were at also working at the same time as studying?*

No, not that I recall. No, or if they were, they were working in a family business, a little bit on the side. I had to go out and find work and did that from age sixteen on. I was in college from 1967 to ’71, the height of the Vietnam War, when students were very, very politicised, and so was I. But I never understood how they could afford to go to big marches in Washington, DC or find time for the consciousness raising groups that formed to teach ourselves about Vietnam and Vietnamese people. I really wanted to go to those too, but I kept wondering, ‘Doesn’t anybody else have to work?’

When you grow up a certain way, you think other people are growing up that way too, to some degree, and then you find out, ‘Wow! That is not really the case.’ ‘These people have a tremendous amount of time and money. I was very anti-war, very much influenced by my generation. At the same time, there was a side of me that was a bit conflicted because I was the first person to go to university in my family and at various moments that opportunity looked like it was going to collapse when students started boycotting classes. I didn’t want to boycott my French class, for example, on the grounds that book learning had nothing to do with the war, that French was pure “establishment.” In fact it had a lot to do with Vietnam. Many speak French there as result of the colonial experience.

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Sometimes I would be the only one in a class, but it wasn’t because I didn’t agree with the protests and boycotts. I just couldn’t pass up this opportunity to get educated. I wasn’t in a position to thumb my nose at “bourgeois” higher education.

*Yeah, definitely. And that’s a really interesting insight into the way that … protest is in many ways a privilege and is something that’s only accessible to particular … people in particular situations.*

Yeah. I also wanted, very badly, to go to Woodstock. All my friends were driving up from Connecticut to upstate New York … to go to ‘this cool festival.’ And I loved rock music, I still do to this day and go to many concerts. But I had to work that Saturday. Sometimes I felt I was having a totally different and smaller college experience than others. Watching films of Woodstock now, I remember being on the margins looking in with some longing.

*Definitely. You mentioned that you were the first person in your family to go to college. Of your schoolmates, did many of them go to college too or were they at the same college as you?*

I went to an academically oriented Catholic high school and everyone there was going to college. It was an easy step to go on to a Catholic women’s college –and these often had excellent academic reputations. I lived near enough to Yale University to commute there, but Yale did not admit women undergraduates at that time.

Some students were from other places in the United States and a group of us came from around the New Haven area. Like me, some commuted to save money, even though the cost was quite low at the time compared to now. American universities today are very expensive, and some of the best ones regularly admit the kids of their graduates –called legacy admissions. There has been an admissions scandal around celebrities paying to get their kids into places like the University of Southern California, Yale and Harvard. I mean, phew! My family consisted of my mother and me, and a missing father who was barely sending any support. My mother went out to work in a jewellery store. It was really very hard, you know, to even get the $3000 for my tuition. My ageing car kind of collapsed several times on the road.

I didn’t have to work that hard intellectually but I had to work financially to stay where I was. Some of the working class or immigrant students I teach now need to hear such stories to feel ‘It’s ok, you can do it. You can do it if you try.’

*Definitely. One of the things we’re hoping to do with this project is to have stories like yours available to people so that they know they can do it.*

And that’s why I’m telling you all this, actually. I don’t seek sympathy. But after getting a BA, I pursued a Masters’ at Boston University because I could stay in somebody’s apartment I knew there. And then I got my PhD at a place I was passing through, with my boyfriend at the time … the University of Kentucky.

I thought, ‘Well, I don’t have anything else to do right now and the university offered me money. I thought that’s great. For the first time I don’t have to work.’ So I signed up. And it was wonderful. I worked with Karen Mingst who gave me advice and encouragement that I pass on to my PhD students today. There were few women in IR at that time and I really lucked out getting one of the best. The university also treated me well. But you’re only as good as the work you put into any program. ‘Go anywhere you can and excel’ –that’s my message to students today.

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I want to be a role model for working class and immigrant students.

*I think that’s very important. Can I go back and ask you … you mentioned that you were studying French in your undergrad. What other subjects did you study and how did you choose them? Were they your favourite subjects at school or …?*

Well, I was always interested in international relations from the time I was a very tiny child, and the reason is because, whatever the year was … ’56/’57 … the Soviet Union put up Sputnik. And we heard, my mother heard … that you could see it if you went out at such-and-such a time in the evening. If it was not too cloudy you might be able to see this thing moving across the sky very high, much higher than a plane My mother decided that was a cool thing to do so we went out in the evening. My father was there at the time. They got bored quickly but I was lying on my back looking up at the sky. And then I saw this thing. I can remember, as a small child, tracking it. It wasn’t wriggling around. It wasn’t like a falling star or any shooting star or anything like that, which I was used to. It was too far up to be a plane. And when I was certain about all this I just said, ‘There it is.’ I wanted to know where it was going. I kept saying to my mother, ‘Where is it going? I want to go with it.’ And I kind of chased it a little across the lawn.

That was the time of the Cold War. ‘The Sputnik belonged to the enemy …’ ‘What enemy?' People around me seemed to be fascinated by Sputnik but were also afraid of it. I stayed interested, curious. And then when I was about eleven/twelve … John Kennedy ran for president and his candidacy hooked me on politics.

I never lost interest in American politics from that time on, but I really wanted to understand the world. I wanted to be out in the world and I wanted to be comfortable there. I didn’t want to worry. I didn’t want to be scared of “it.” I wanted to take on the international. Once I was able to get out in the world, I embraced it.

And when I got into higher degree training in political science and international relations I was so disappointed that it seemed to entail doing endless statistics. A lot of quantitative analysis, as in five short courses in statistics for my PhD training in the USA. I kept wondering, ‘Well, where’s the world in all of this?’

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And I had a chance, at that time, to go abroad. I spent my senior year as an undergraduate in Germany. Later, I was visiting a friend in East Berlin in the summer of 1989, en route back to the States from a research trip to Zimbabwe. I had been to the GDR before and remembered Checkpoint Charlie, the seemingly impermeable Berlin Wall, the guards. I was startled to see that wall breached by civilians a mere three months later! I had not picked up any indication there that this was coming, even though one of my friends was pretty high up in the East German government. I realized how abruptly the international and its relations can, under certain circumstances, change. By 1996 Russians were suddenly appearing in the classes I was teaching then. It was just explosive change, and I wanted to hear what these people were saying.’

*Definitely. That’s really interesting. Where did you go when you got the chance to go for your senior year abroad?*

I went to an English-speaking university in Germany … Schiller college … where I finished up. Then I started my Boston University training in International Relations on an American military base in Mannheim Germany. I was one of only two women in a class of mid-career officers, who needed another degree to get promoted. And I was totally intimidated by them.

*I can imagine. It would have been a very different environment from a Catholic women’s college.*

Yeah. These men came to class in their uniforms, were very good at expressing themselves, and had been in combat situations in Vietnam. I thought many times 'Ok self, you’ve taken this too far now.’

But then we had a paper or exam or something and the professor, who was from the home campus of Boston University, called me into his office days later. I thought ‘I’m dead. I’m really not good at this, I can tell.’ It was a class on the history of wars from the Greeks to the present time. And he said, ‘You have a real interesting perspective on this.’ I said, ‘I do? Come on … really?’ And he said, 'The military guys, they’re good. They’ve been in war and have their own perspective on it. Yours is much broader.’ And he encouraged me to go on for a PhD. I was truly shocked.

So it happened in Germany that the world opened up to me. I never came home from it entirely. Actually, I rushed into the world at every opportunity.

The reason I’m with UConn now, in my home state of Connecticut, is that, I’m what they call a targeted hire. I got a phone call while I was at the University of Gothenburg, in Sweden from the head of the political science department at UConn asking if I would be interested in working there. I wasn’t sure, because I had worked outside the USA for almost twenty years of my career --at the Australian National University and then at the Institute for Social Studies in the Netherlands and then Lancaster University in the UK. At the time I heard from UConn, I was the Kersten Hesselgren professor for Sweden.

And I was happy there and in Europe. Coming back to the States after nearly twenty years working abroad was ok, but I do miss the intellectual community I slotted into outside the US, a community that looks at the world through philosophy and the humanities far more than most American IR does. Arriving back under the Obama administration pleased me no end. But then it became a terrible time in the USA politically with Trump –though it’s pretty terrible in the UK too, with Brexit.

*Definitely.*

But I feel content knowing the world experientially by now. Before I moved away from the States in 1994 my research was on Zimbabwe and feminist analysis, two topic areas that were missing in IR. This field operates in abstractions. I used to wonder about Kenneth Waltz, whose abstract neorealist theory of the international held no people. How could he take so many people out of international relations while writing at Berkeley University? If he looked out of his window he probably could have seen anti-war protesters there taking on American foreign policy. Maybe they were making too much noise and so he wrote them and all ordinary people out of his IR.’ American IR eats up the Waltzian approach, loves it.

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And having spent time with women in Zimbabwean cooperatives who were seeking to enter the international market, I wondered why most people were anathema to most IR?’ Several of us were asking that question at the same time about the absence of women: where are they in IR? Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe, and Jean Bethke Elshtain were in that crowd. Jean died a few years ago, by which time she had fallen from grace among scholars of feminist IR. I liked her as a person and as a mentor. She took me under her wing and said, as at Boston University years earlier, ‘You know, you should really do this. You have a different way of doing this, a maverick view of feminist IR … you should really do this.’

I went off in that direction while I was a visiting professor in economics at the University of Zimbabwe in the early 1990s. That’s where I discovered people who were inside international relations but not included in IR. I’ve been to Zimbabwe about thirty times and have two books on Zimbabwe. I spent a lot of time in Southern Africa.

As a result of that, I was seen by some as doing development studies and was offered a position at the Australian National University, and then at the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, where I was a professor of Gender and Development. But I found that field rather formulaic and burdened with western assumptions and NGO checklists at the local level. So, when I had an opportunity, I moved to the UK, to Lancaster University, where I did women’s studies initially and switched to the Politics and IR department as professor of IR and Development Studies. I would still be there except for the fact that the university did something that you cannot do here. And that is, alter a department drastically without any input from the faculty. At Lancaster the very successful Politics and IR department was made to merge with the less successful Religious Studies and Philosophy departments. That was decided at the top. Everybody was taken by surprise and pandemonium broke out when we heard the news.

I’m thinking to myself, ‘I’ve done enough but I’m not gonna do that too.’ And, within two years, 95% of the department had left or retired. Myself, I moved on, just as I did from the ANU earlier when the successful National Centre for Development Studies was put on notice that it was being closed down.

At that point I went back to my old interest in war and am still located intellectually there, where I study war as experience not as an abstraction. That angle has had me viewing war from points of view in the arts, humanities, political sociology, museums and memorials. Across my ever-evolving interests, I kept looking for ordinary people and asking why did we write out people like me or my family or the peasant women I interviewed in Zimbabwe? Why aren’t they in IR in general and in its studies of war?

Lately, if you go to the International Studies Association meetings, the world is there. It never used to be. It’s really a very different organization to what it was when I got my degree in 1980. And so is the field of IR, which offers far more latitude now to define the international and its relations. Indeed, I’ve written about IR as having a camp structure today. Many topics and approaches are now replacing the narrow state-centrism of the past.

I have done a lot of different things within what I felt was my field of IR. Again, I trace that confidence to move about the world and its relations to a family background where university was an unknown and familial expectations were few but encouragement from academics filled the gaps. I didn’t know it was somewhat odd for an IR scholar to go to Zimbabwe and write Zimbabweans into IR. There was a freedom that came from my strange background. Not only did I see the world differently than a lot of people who had more professional backgrounds.

I just insisted in going my own way and was fortunate to get published fairly easily. I mean, it wasn’t a hassle. I didn’t struggle.

*So when you did your PhD at Kentucky, was it with the idea that you wanted to turn it into a book pretty quickly? Was that on your mind?*

Not at all. I threw the dissertation away, figuratively, because I had to do a quantitative study to get an IR/political science degree in the USA. I had interviewed people at the United Nations, across all member nations, about their attitudes and their perspectives on peace, and then used prediction logic to combine and array the data, as they say. One part became an article in the *Journal of Peace Research* in 1980. But I was vexed that politics was nearly absent in a study filled with tables and statistics. When I was done, I thought, ‘No more of this!’

So I had the degree but I chafed under the American approach and didn’t know enough yet about British IR. In 1980 the two sides of the IR pond were not conversing with each other much. I didn’t know that the field was different there in ways that would work well with my interests and ideas and my quest to find the relations of the international and the people who were part of those relations.

*Can I ask why Zimbabwe? What drew you to that particular …?*

Oh, that’s a good story. I needed to get to Africa. I had taken courses in African politics but had not been there and I wanted to go. I found out, by asking around, that there was a press group going from the Boston Globe newspaper to report on the new Zimbabwe. It was within two years of finishing my PhD and, I hoped to talk my way onto the press tour. It worked. I was the “Africa specialist” on the trip, naïve as I was.

I went to Zimbabwe with some very good journalists (among them a young Michael Rezendes whose work on priest abuse in Boston later landed him a Pulitzer and a movie –*Spotlight* that won an Academy award).

Just two years after the end of a liberation struggle, Zimbabwe was still finding itself. I wrote an article for *The Progressive* magazine and then just kept going back on my own on summer grants from whatever university I was working at. Did that as long as I could. I would still be going except that the political terrain changed after 2000 and a lot of the women I interviewed for my earlier research on women’s labor were not working anymore. Factories had closed down during hard times. The women who worked on commercial farms owned by whites were fired when those farms were taken over by the war vets (so to speak) and given to Harare elites who knew nothing about agriculture. It all became very nasty and I couldn’t find my people anymore. The university of Zimbabwe also shut for quite a while and I was not about to hang around in Harare with expats. If I was going it was tosee and talk to Zimbabwean people.

I did go back in the early years of the new millennium but not with the same regularity as before. Zimbabwe is a very difficult place now, poor, struggling, and constantly fleeced by its once revolutionary leaders.

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When I was at Gothenburg University, as the Hesselgren Professor, I met and then supervised a Rwandan PhD student. Supervision in Sweden included a trip to Rwanda to oversee her field work in rural areas.

I was able to go with her and spend time in rural areas and with her family. She’s finished now and works at the University of Rwanda. African politics, places, and people remain very dear to me.

*So when you were first applying for jobs after your PhD, did you look for positions that would allow you to concentrate in African politics?*

No. I just applied wherever I could get a job. I first worked at the University of Maryland for one year. I valued my colleagues there but also ran into what the #MeToo Movement now would be picking up on. Not so much sexual assaults, in my case, as exploitation of my research for department gain, in a successful government grant that should have included me but did not.

When I said to the department head, ‘but I contributed to your project, you know.’ the he head of department said ‘Yes, well … umm. This is the way you learn in academia.’ And I realise now that was an abusive situation of sorts.’

Then I worked in New York City for the World Order Models Project which no one remembers today. It was a project aimed at bringing about a world of peace, prosperity, and ecological balance. When I figured out that very little intellectual input from women scholars was solicited or present among project participants, I decided that this “think tank” work was probably not up my alley. I wanted to get back to academia.

I took a job at Gettysburg College and taught undergraduate students, even though. I wanted to be in what we call a ‘Research 1 University.’ That is what most universities in Britain are: research-oriented with teaching. In the US we have layers of universities: Research 1 universities and liberal arts colleges that focus mostly on teaching. I ended up leaving the USA in the mid-1990s when I was offered a really good position at the Australian National University, in their National Centre for Development Studies, based on my work in Zimbabwe.

*And what was it like there? How was it in comparison to the United States?*

Well, I found that Australian academia could be nastier than I knew. I watched good outside speakers come in and get, sort of, trashed by colleagues. The atmosphere at ANU was also rather pompous. And, the geopolitics of Australian IR had them focusing mostly on Asia and the Pacific, with little attention paid, at that time at least, to Africa.

They wanted me to develop a research interest in Asia/Pacific. They had carved out for themselves a whole niche in that area.

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I found my research agenda constrained. When I got an opportunity to go to the Netherlands, as a professor, I just went. It was good to come back to the northern hemisphere where things were happening around the European Union. I had to brush up on the region but was still working with development and students from Africa.

*Was it a research-only position at ANU or were you doing teaching?*

I was in the research school at the time. I wasn’t in what they called the faculties, where undergraduate teaching took place. I taught only graduate students and only one course a semester, and my students were all from overseas. I liked that.

I was really surprised, though, how little interest Australian academia showed in African studies. When they had conferences on Africa, there would be ten people attending. ‘What? A fifty-country continent is the next stop after Perth.’ It’s a long flight but then you’re right in southern Africa.

*Was there an interest in Commonwealth parts of Africa? So, for example, the connection with South Africa or was … just in general they weren’t interested?*

I just didn’t find very many people interested at all. ANU people were very kind to me and I liked working there. At the same time, ANU feeds politics and international relations graduates into government. If they know what the agenda is of the government then they will cater to it on some level. I hadn’t been at a university like that before. The ANUworked closely with the Australian Aid Agency and fed its Asia/Pacific agenda.

*That’s really interesting. So when you moved to the Netherlands, they were much happier for you to have a focus on Africa and southern Africa?*

Yes. They wanted the whole range of developing regions covered. You were to teach but also do projects abroad and bring in money to your programme. The Dutch Institute of Social Studies was almost an arm of the progressive government at the time. That changed when the government moved to the right, but when I was there, ISS was well situated to affect Dutch development policy in areas that interested me.

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With a more right-wing government, which has been in power, really, since then, there was reduced interest in giving foreign assistance at the same levels they had earlier, and there were cuts in grants in aid. The working environment became difficult and the Institute tried to restructure itself to compensate for the changes. There were plans to merge with another university and alter some programmes. The situation was tense. I had married a Brit by then and when the opportunity emerged for a position in the UK, I just thought, ‘Well, maybe that’s where we should go. That’ll be it. That’ll be the final thing. We’ll stay there.'

Each place I go for work I buy a house and plan to stay, but then circumstances change around me and the neo-liberal, corporate university makes sudden moves. That’s more evident in Europe and Australia than it is in the States. I mean, the key thing about American academia in higher education is tenure. Once you have tenure they can’t just take your field away except in dire circumstances. And academic freedom is an important norm. You run your own courses without external examiners looking over your shoulder. You’re meant to be a bona fide, mature professional.

No one looks at what you’re doing, unless there’s a complaint from students or some issue has come up. I find the faculty here also have more input into the university agenda. I felt very insecure in Europe about whether I was going to be able to stay or whether they were going to define my job away as part of a restructuring.

When the call came from the States, I thought, ‘Well, maybe, there is more job safety there.'

*I think when you operate in that kind of emotional context of precarity and uncertainty about the future, it certainly changes the way that you think about your job …*

In fact, at Lancaster University I had to reapply for my professorship! It was under Gordon Brown’s brief tenure. He wanted to restrict hiring to people from the European Union. So if you had a job there and you weren’t a European Union citizen they readvertised your job when the time came to renew your work permit. Well, that caught me just when my work permit was expiring. I was in a panic. I ended up ok owing to a very good human resources department at Lancaster. To this day I thank them. They readvertised my job over Christmas in a very small northern English town where nobody would apply for a professorship, and they made up a job description that was impossible for anyone to fill but me.

So I was fine. Nobody applied, and I wasn’t under any pressure to leave. But the fact I had to go through that nonsense was insulting. And I thought, ‘Ok. I’ve had it.’ Time to go home.' That was 2005. I left the UK in late 2011.

*Do you think that was common practice in the UK at that time?*

Oh, yes. If you were seeking someone for the Spanish department it would be difficult to hire anyone from Latin America, because they would not be EU, you know. Same with getting a Russian to teach Russian politics or something like that. Yet now Britain is *leaving* the EU. It’s one of the ironies of Brexit that the UK embraced the EU as the appropriate market for academic job seeking and now it’s throwing the EU overboard.

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Under Gordon Brown, in particular, there was real pressure to vet immigrants and I was an immigrant who did not have citizenship. A number of us were in that position. I had an American student there, a PhD student, Cami Rowe, who determined she wanted to stay in England. Her first job was at Goldsmith’s, but she said, ‘I’m always worrying about whether my visa’s going to be extended because they always make it sound like it might not be.’ Just as the US does to some people right now under Trump.

When you’re in that situation, it’s not that you don’t like being there. I had a lovely Georgian house in the Lake District. I really liked where I lived and my husband had a job there and everything was fine. But international relations changed and it had the result of putting my job, my livelihood, at risk through no fault of my own. And here I was having to reapply for my own job. And others had to as well.

*Definitely. You mentioned that you were at the … was it the University of Zimbabwe or at a university in Zimbabwe for a …?*

It was the University of Zimbabwe on a visiting basis in the economics department, which at that time was a strong political economy department. When was I there? The mid to late-eighties. I was on sabbatical leave from Gettysburg College and was there for a year, with the university.

*What was your experience of the department there in contrast to your other international experiences?*

It was a great time there. Everybody was buoyant, they were optimistic. The war was over, things seemed to be going along ok. Mugabe seemed to be ok. There had been some worry but everyone was sort of reconciling and there was so much long postponed research to do. Everybody was researching, everybody had a bounce to their step. It was almost as if chains had been taken off of people, intellectuals and ordinary people, and they were really wanting to talk about their experiences. I just thought it was a most wonderful place.

And then Mugabe sort of relinguished his mind around the Millennium as he kept thinking he was losing power. He cracked down on opposition harder and harder but it was nothing like what happened later on, when the economy crumbled from poor policies and corruption in high places became the norm.

*So were your colleagues in the department … were they mostly Zimbabwe trained or were they from all over …?*

Often they were Zimbabweans who spent the war in England --even in the US a bit -when the war ended they came back to the university. That led to a little tension with some of those who had worked there the whole time, through a terrible war actually. But the general feeling in the 1990s was ‘Forget it. Forget about tensions, we can start new. We’re starting new.’ ‘We’re independent. We can do it our way.’ And everything was changing overnight. It was the most wonderful experience for most Zimbabweans who had suffered a harsh seven-year war.

My research there was on women producers in the new Zimbabwe. What is “woman” in Zimbabwe in the post-independence period? I interviewed women across four economic sectors. Spent a lot of time with commercial farmworkers, factory workers, women in coops and women in small-scale farming, which was called peasant farming. I went to sites with union reps, and some government departments that wanted to learn the condition of women in rural areas. There were many people who said ‘We’ll take you.’ I am so grateful.

**0:54:53**

The trade unions wanted to get in the factories, to find out what women thought. So they would drive me there and if the factory owner --who was often a white guy still --didn’t really want me around, the union would remind them that under the new constitution it had a right to do business on the shop floor. I was their business for that day and I’d go right onto the shop floor and talk to the women workers. It was really a hand-in-glove, mutual support system for research. The agricultural extension workers would say, ‘ask him about whether they’re happy with the job we’re doing,” which was part of my study anyway. And the women workers talked and talked. Yes, they were all so relieved with the post-war situation and new opportunities on their horizons.

*That sounds like an amazing experience and an amazing time to be in Zimbabwe.*

It truly was.

*So, when you came back and you were writing up this work, how did you go about thinking about how you wanted to publish them?*

Well, I’ve always thought of myself as an academic. So I published in the usual academic places, in this case a variety of African Studies journals, like *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. I wrote two books on Zimbabwe. One is ‘Zimbabwe: The Terrain of Contradictory Development.’ That is an overview book of Zimbabwe’s political economy from colonial days onward. The second is ‘Producing Women and Progress in Zimbabwe,’ based on my interviews with women producers.

And, as I said, I would still be doing that kind of work if the environment was conducive to spending time out in the rural areas talking to people. When I interviewed, say, commercial farmworkers, they were busy. They couldn’t put down their hoes and stop to talk to me. There was a supervisor watching and they were working on a bushel-of-goods basis on white farms. So I would go out in the fields and work with them, just so I could talk to them. They thought it was hilarious that this person was so bad at the hoeing compared to them. It was a small moment where the power was reversed and they could tell me how to do things. ‘No, no. Hold it this way. No, no.’ It led to a healthy social environment for talking to people.

At that time, there were no institutional review boards for research. What do you call them in England? Ethics boards that have to ok your research before you can do it. It was assumed you were ethical if you got a PhD, and I was. There was a freedom then that enabled a researcher to change her questions in the middle of the study if they weren’t working or broaden the scope a bit. You didn’t have to get permission from committees back home that might not know anything about your fieldwork situation. I do resent some of this latter-day imposed oversight. Back then was a terrific time to be an academic. You could go out and freely talk to people about what they wanted to discuss, not only what your approved questions allowed them to discuss.

*It certainly sounds like it.*

Yeah, yeah.

*Did you have graduate students coming to work with you who wanted to emulate your kind of fieldwork?*

I’ve had a number of mostly international students, who have come and worked with me for a PhD. One Ghanaian man did work on women farmers in Nigeria. A Korean woman studied women shopkeepers in South Korea. The Rwandan was interested in how women are doing now in terms of reconciliation in the rural areas, where the killing was the worst in 1994.

Swati Parashar is probably my most famous PhD student. She finished about five/six years ago. She got the last interviews with Sri Lankan militant women. The Tamil Tigers lost the war and many of the women were slaughtered. I remember Swati came to me while she was writing her final PhD proposal and she said, ‘I hear rumours that the British will soon start these research review committees, that have to approve your research. I bet they won’t let me go into a war zone.’ So I said to her, ‘Well, you better go now.’ ‘Just take full responsibility for yourself. Make sure your family understands if something happens this was your decision.’

**1:00:05**

No suing the university or any of that kind of thing.’ And you know, to this day we’re so happy she went, because she talked with people who aren’t there to talk to anymore. This is what I worry about, you know. If you study war through actual experiences, you have to be there once in a while. You can’t just stand over here or you end up studying abstractions or turning people into stick figures. I understand that the boards don’t want you to be injured and they don’t want you to injure others. But sometimes they impose conditions that are not relevant to combatants in war zones. A researcher is not likely to injure a woman carrying an assault rifle if you ask her, ‘How is it?’ She won’t be traumatised by your question –by the war, perhaps, but not by a researcher’s question. These committees are well-intentioned but they haven’t been where you’ve been and they don’t have a feel for the places you’re going.

Americans are overprotective, but there are limits to what you can protect in war situations.

*Certainly, yes.*

I’ve had a lot of PhD students who wanted to do fieldwork like that but changed to archival research instead, mostly because they can’t bear going through a

long, drawn-out research review process. I also remember an Afghan undergraduate student who wanted to talk to Afghan women in refugee camps in the Middle East. They wouldn’t let her, said she was asking too many personal questions. She revised her proposal several times and finally gave up on the project. Review boards set research agendas by making it difficult to do interviews or even go to war zones. We can end up knowing little about the cultures we engage in wars.

You know, if you’re a feminist researcher, you want to hear other people’s voices. You believe in voice and difference. Many people lack the resources or they don’t have opportunities to get their voices out there now. In the States, I can’t help thinking that one of the concerns has less to do with protecting vulnerable people than avoidinglitigation.

*Definitely. It’s a dire indictment on the state of the field. Along those veins, I have two questions that I think are definitely related and one is … I really like what you’re saying about how it’s really important to listen to people’s voices and to recover voices that aren’t necessarily heard and I wonder to what extent you think about the responsibility of the scholar, particularly the scholar of international relations …*

I was in Australia when that was the biggest concern in women’s studies and feminist circles was, ‘You may not speak for the other.’ In other words you may not do research unless you are from the community being researched. People have to speak themselves. Fine. If the university, instead of sending me as a researcher, gives them the possibilities of broadcasting their views, great. But what ends up happening when resources are not available in local areas, is nobody gets heard except local elites interviewed by journalists and by scholars who easily pass review board requirements.

I have the heart of a journalist, I think. I like to go out and get the story from local people, whatever that story is. One can try to speak with the other or help get her voice out. 'Let’s get this into the debate.' I have very little tolerance for well-intentioned but misguided censorship.

When I lived in the Netherlands I witnessed the big Hirsi Ali scandal. She was a Somalian-Dutch MP, the only person who looked like her in the whole parliament. And a brouhaha developed because she argued, as a feminist, that Islam keeps women down. The Dutch did not want to upset its large Muslim community and gave her a hard time. Dutch feminists utterly turned their backs on her, would not even support her right to say this, let alone consider her viewpoint.

**1:05:13**

She was under threat. She lived in my neighbourhood and I would see her walking down the street with enormous Dutch bodyguards around her and I’d think, ‘No, this just shouldn’t be.’ I’ve written articles about Hirsi Ali –as the difficult feminist, the self-proclaimed feminist whose argument would fit very well with parts of feminism that proclaim religion a patriarchal oppression. In order to silence her, parliament stripped her of her seat and her citizenship! They argued that on her original citizenship application she had put down a name that wasn’t her last name. It was her grandfather’s last name. It was actually perfectly legal to do, to indicate a family name. Her story is so impressive. She was put on a plane in Somalia by her father to go to Canada for a forced marriage, she got off the plane when it refuelled in Germany and somehow made it to the Netherlands. I mean, to me, this is an exemplary feminist story. We should be cheering her remarkable determination and bravery irrespective of whether we agree with her position or not.

I kept saying to my feminist colleagues ‘We’ve got to do something, we’ve got to do something for her.’ ‘Oh, no. Oh, no. She’s upsetting people. She’s upsetting the Muslims.’ I said, ‘You know, if you’re going to play in the political arena you’re going to upset somebody. She has a right …’

So, now, anyway she’s living in the States and she’s gone very quiet. The Netherlands did reinstate her citizenship. They did realise, after the fact, they’d gotten a little out of hand. This type of situation really bothers me. It’s not that I agree with everything she’s saying but I feel that feminists should not allow other difficult feminists to be endangered by shifting rules of true feminism that can be too strict on what you’re allowed to say, what position you are allowed take. Some feminists present challenging positions, but they are important to hear out and debate.

Jean Elshtain also suffered the difficult feminist problem in the States. She supported the American war in Iraq. So most of the feminists in IR abandoned her and forgot all about her ground-breaking early work. This quick-to-abandon business is something I don’t like. You know, does everybody have to be on the same page? Do they have to be on the American page of feminist theory? Or the Dutch page? Or whatever is in vogue at that moment?

I moved away from writing feminist stuff a bit because I was ambivalent about where I wanted to be on these things, not on positions but on the politics of feminism. Now I’m more comfortable there because I think the #MeToo Movement is good in many ways, even though it can get out of hand. My bottom line is that you just don’t tell a feminist from Somalia, who has gone through all types of struggles, that somehow she’s doing something wrong.

*Do you remember the first time that this idea of gender as a category of analysis or feminism itself as a term, sort of came into the way that you were thinking about the world?*

Well, pretty early on. I was reading feminist theory at a key time in the development of the western women’s movement. You had the liberals, who just wanted to give every woman equal rights. You had radicals who wanted to kill patriarchy. There were also socialist and Marxist feminists. You had all of these different points of view. Initially I was reading just to keep up with it, appreciating all the approaches around. My first feminist IR piece applied feminist categories to international relations theory, like realism and neo-realism and neo-liberal Bob Keohane stuff. That took off really fast. It was like a gate opening quickly.

**1:10:02**

There was a series of conferences on feminist IR held at the University of Southern California, Wellesley College and also at LSE. We were the first really to knock at the doors hard and, of course, we presented ourselves like ‘Don’t Mess With Us.’ We’re here.' We presented our ideas on gendered IR as a masculinist endeavour and privileged worldview. If you look at the world through a window above the sink where you were washing dirty diapers, your world looks a lot different.

Post-modern thinking was also coming into vogue at that time and challenging old truth paradigms It was a very exciting place to be. You just jumped in.

I remember my first conversation with Ann Tickner. She was at Holy Cross, a Catholic university in Massachusetts. She brought out her feminist IR book and it rapidly became one of the gospels of feminist IR. Jean Elshtain was known already for her private/public book. Cynthia Enloe asked the quintessential question: Where are the women in international relations? We all converged around our common interest and found each other at that one key moment, and that made feminist IR powerful.

I was really primed from my time in Zimbabwe to bring these women into the field. Together, we made a very powerful assault on the discipline, and it was an assault. If I stand back now I think we were a little rough on the IR guys. I mean they did come to our conferences and present papers. What were their contributions? Bob Keohane wanted to integrate feminism into his neo-liberal institutionalism. We didn’t give much space to the idea that we should insert ourselves into then-dominant IR paradigms instead of starting our own. I think we left the impression that if you don’t come our way, we will happily go it alone.

I was the head of the first feminist theory and gender studies section of the ISA. We were the first group to ask for and receive money from the organisation for a study on the status of women in the ISA and international relations. That study became a launchpad for feminist IR within the American professional association. Ann Tickner has stayed in feminist IR. So has Cynthia Enloe. They are both major voices round the world now. There are also numerous new scholars coming to feminist IR, far too many to recount here.

*Definitely. And have you seen a change in the way that people have responded to your arguments, both in terms of your published work and also in terms of say, for example, in teaching?*

I’m considered a bit of a difficult feminist myself because I have branched out into other areas of research over the years, such as war as experience, a topic that sits at the margins of feminism, even though it is based on the feminist idea that everyday people’s experiences are important in understanding international relations.

**1:15:03**

My former PhD students tell me that it is said I abandoned feminism.’ Of course I didn’t. You don’t abandon something like that. You just take it in a different direction. I did write a book on 'War as Experience,' using massive amounts of feminist IR. Most recently I have segued into studying how the American wars in Vietnam and Iraq are being curated and recurated through objects exhibited in museums, left at war memorials, and featured in war novels.

I regularly teach an undergraduate honours course in gender and war, and critical war studies at the Masters’ and PhD levels. I bring feminist IR ideas to both courses. Yet I must say I’m really worried about war, for everybody—every body. America’s endless wars are grounded in a militarism so deep that it has become a new normal, ever present even in calls to bring home our troops. It’s just an evolution in my interests. I’ve had a long career, you know. I finished my PhD in 1980 and I’m still at it, and doing ok. You can’t stay fresh, I think, unless you move in a variety of directions and keep learning.

But it means that certain audiences that knew me in a certain way, as a Zimbabweanist, for example, think I sort of dropped out. And, somehow, in academia you’re not supposed to do that. You’re supposed to be true blue and stay with a topic, dig into it more and more. I haven’t dropped off. I’m exploring new areas of concern in today’s international relations.

*Definitely. I know that you mentioned earlier that you published your work on Zimbabwe, both in African Studies journals as well as in IR and I wonder how you see that relationship between international relations as a field or a discipline and studies’ groups (if you like) like African Studies or other area studies?*

Well, of course, postcolonial analysis has really picked up on who’s influencing whom and how. But the women I interviewed in the 1980s and 90s in Zimbabwe were already in international trade relations. Some in the cooperatives were figuring out how to export their handmade items A lot of the factory women sewing on old-fashioned sewing machines would tell me ‘We’re making clothes for the United States.’

These interactions are not necessarily part of the canon of IR but you can begin talking about commercial farmworkers in a number of countries, including American farmworkers and agricultural guestworkers in France, who are increasingly running into “immigration” dilemmas that were not as evident earlier. It is not just about them but about opening our minds and our field to people travelling in the world for basic work or fuelling markets abroad with their goods.

All this opens up a door for ordinary people’s experiences of the international to register in the formal field of International Relations. Their relations to the international are sometimes pivotal, not marginal to some really real international relations taking place within the IR radar range. It is important to keep revisiting the questions of who is in the international? Where is the international located? Whose international do we tend to study and whose international is overlooked? There is a lifetime of "whose” to investigate. I’ve only grazed the surface.

**1:20:02**

In 'Curating and Re-curating the American Wars in Vietnam and Iraq'I look for relations of the international in war cemeteries and memorials in Washington. I go to museums and I read novels by Vietnamese and Iraqis and Americans to see how a range of people affected by the wars we study in IR get bypassed as keepers of war knowledge. I look at how people who have lost someone to war curate lost and present life at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial. A small version of that Memorial trucks around the country so people who can’t get to Washington, and were in the Vietnam War or knew about it, can go to see this instead. I have visited this Wall That Heals on its journeys through parts of Connecticut.

I go on to Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, where American military killed in Iraq and Afghanistan are buried. I find ordinary people struggling with the department of Army over whether they’re allowed to put flowers and memorabilia at the graves or whether that demeans the death by civilianizing it.

All these people have a different war experience. Yet only some war experiences are taken on board in the field of IR. People haul in all kinds of stuff and arrange it at a cemetery plot and they stand back and look at it and then move something over an inch. They carefully curate their memories and arrange their war for us to see. They might leave open letters they want people to read. The curator of that letter might still be there and come up and talk to me about the issues she –usually a woman –raises. How often does that happen in a formal museum? They are apt to say, ‘My husband died of agent orange in the Vietnam war.' We’ll talk about that then, which is an experience very different than interviewing someone or standing in front of a professionally curated exhibit in a museum. It is entirely led by the curators of their war objects, not by me qua researcher.

Not only is this a way to expand our knowledge of war but it’s a different kind of methodology. When people are grieving I can’t bring myself to interview them. I’ve learned a kind of quiet observation, a methodology of deep looking, of just being there. I listen, watch, look –and sometimes cry.

I go to a Smithsonian museum exhibit for what can seem like a thousand times and see something different each round. All these various places where knowledge on war is lodged is made visible by a range of curators. And the war novels are incredible curatorial sites. They reveal all the undersides of war that the more pristine memorials avoid.

And that to me is a real achievement –to learn about American wars in Vietnam and Iraq from both professional and ordinary curators of them.

And then, after gathering information on war as their experience, I think it is important to discuss these curations in a straightforward manner. One of the problems I have lately is with over-theorising, especially in the European tradition of IR –the tradition in which I’m most comfortable. It bothers me that French male philosophers have such a hold there, are always being cited first. An article starts with Foucault or starts with Ricœur and it’s almost as if it is improper to say much on one’s own until the philosophers have set the stage How about starting with the people we actually talk to for research, or our own observations, or the expert points of view of women scholars, of whom there are many?

**1:25:03**

I’ve done the philosopher-embrace thing too. I’m done doing that now. I don’t want to theorise away all the tidbits of war knowledge that emerge from my study. I just want to present different sites of war memory/knowledge and consider what we can learn from them as ordinary curators of international relations of war. When I read an article in a British journal, it often ends where I think it should begin. Ok, we’ve gone through all this and now where are we? I teach European approaches to IR and have held regular positions in Europe and I’ve seen how it works. I think we should start trying to reach regular readers. This is important stuff. We shouldn’t just be writing for each other.

So this book out now, I think it’s more accessible if you’re interested in war. Not very theoretically informed?…’ Yep, that’s right. That’s on purpose.

*So do you think it’s the responsibility of the IR scholar to speak to a much broader audience than academe?*

Yes! I watch a lot of CNN and when I was in Britain I watched a lot of BBC. And those commentators are very bright and many of them are admirably out in the world in places research review boards would be reluctant to see us go. They analyse the news via panels, much the way academics analyse ideas on our panels at the ISA or BISA. ‘What do we think is going on in Zimbabwe?’ There can be five different points of view on that question. Although very few media commentators are academics, they’re doing our job for us because reporters can go to the field and deliver clear messages about events. Our academic language and theoretical allegiances are so specific or dense that we don’t get invited on those shows.

We can spend a whole career working on a problem that they’re talking about much more effectively, and to a larger group of people. We get too caught up in little capillaries of knowledge. Why just write for each other? Where does that take us? It gets us published but is that what we all joined IR to do? To just talk to other IR people?

*Absolutely. And I think that’s absolutely fascinating and I think that’s a perfect place to bring the interview to an end but before I do so, I’d just like to ask if there were any questions that you wanted me to ask that I haven’t asked you, that you … topics that you’d like to talk on or …*

No, I thought it was very good.

*Well, thank you very much for that.*

**1:28:55**

End of interview

Transcribed by Stephen Flinn (July, 2019)