Interview – Kimberly Hutchings

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/10/24/interview-kimberly-hutchings/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, OCT 24 2014

Kimberly Hutchings is Professor of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary University London. She started her academic career teaching philosophy at Wolverhampton University then moved to the Department of Politics at Edinburgh University, where she taught political and international theory and was also Head of Department (1999-2002). She spent 2003-2014 in the International Relations Department at the London School of Economics, where she was Professor of International Relations (from 2007) and also Head of Department (2010-2013).

Professor Hutchings' main publications include *Kant, Critique and Politics* (1996), *International Political Theory* (1998), *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* (2003), *Time and World Politics* (2008), and *Global Ethics: an introduction (2010)*. She is Lead Editor of the Review of International Studies, the journal of the British International Studies Association (2011-2015). Her ongoing work includes work on the ethics of war and collaborative projects (with Elizabeth Frazer) on the conceptual and practical boundaries between politics and violence.

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

My starting point for understanding the world was Hegel's philosophy, read along broadly left-Hegelian lines, and as an alternative to more Kantian influenced approaches to both knowledge and ethics. From a Hegelian perspective, you can't separate the subject from the object of knowledge and both are historically produced. I've therefore always been committed to the idea that the world and our knowledge of it are socially constituted and mutually mediating, and have focused on mutual dependence and connection as a key feature of the social relations we inhabit, including within the international realm. This has been one reason why I have found the feminist ethic of care to be a more promising way into thinking about international ethics than more traditional consequentialist and deontological paradigms. Over time, I have become more influenced by the arguments of Foucault. For me, Foucault accomplishes something that Hegel doesn't emphasise sufficiently, which is the inherently political dimension not just of intersubjective relations, which arguably you can find in Hegel's 'master/ slave' dialectic, but in the production of subjects in the first place. I have found Foucault, and other poststructuralist thinkers, a better way into theorising politics than we find in the older, enlightenment, historicist tradition. When it comes to feminist theorising, I owe a great deal to the very different philosophical approaches of Sarah Ruddick and Judith Butler, I am profoundly influenced by Ruddick's account of peace politics, and intrigued by how Butler's recent work on non-violence supplements some of Ruddick's insights. Most recently, specifically in trying to think about the relations between politics and violence, I have been heavily influenced by the work of Arendt, Gandhi, and Fanon, respectively.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in the field of international relations theory at the moment?

I am particularly interested in the major development of postcolonial and decolonial thinking in IR. I'm fascinated by the challenges of attempting to incorporate these kinds of ideas into IR, because of the profound ways in which they undermine 'mainstream' IR thinking. There are strong parallels with how feminist work has entered into the study of IR and often ended up exploding the highly disciplinary parameters not just of IR, but of social science more generally. For this reason, I am also interested in the idea of autoethnography, and attempts to displace the authorial subject in the production of IR knowledge. In this respect, the most exciting theoretical debates in IR, for me, are the

ones that are most transgressive of the whole category of 'IR theory'. At the other end of the spectrum, however, I am also very interested in current work on the ethics of war and debates between more traditional just war thinking and the cosmopolitan arguments of theorists such as Jeff McMahan; these seem to me to open up the possibility of a deeper critical engagement with the idea of just war.

What are the most important/interesting areas of the social sciences that are underdeveloped, unfunded, or understudied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?

This is a very difficult question. I have several answers. The first is that I think in general we are seeing a turn towards the valorisation of large-N quantitative research and the devalorisation of more qualitative work. It's not so much that some areas of social life are under-studied as that they are increasingly having to be studied in a particular way, which entails limits on the kinds of question it is possible to ask. My second answer is that I am interested in the points at which work in social science runs up against other disciplinary orientations – here the work of Christine Sylvester on the experience of war seems to me to be a good example of the kind of work we need more of – this is work that engages directly with experience and uses a repertoire of resources for addressing experience that draws on the arts as well as the social sciences. My third answer, which relates more specifically to areas I work in, is to do with the field of international ethics. I think too much work in this area is still dominated by unhelpful philosophical paradigms about the meaning of ethics; we need ways of thinking about cosmopolitanism, global justice, and the ethics of violence which go beyond traditional Kantian and utilitarian paradigms.

Does the existence of the various discrete theoretical paradigms in International Relations (realism, liberalism, etc.) help explain international politics today, or do they, as some argue, largely talk past one another and therefore obscure more than they illuminate?

The IR paradigms are useful more for the purposes of organising textbooks than as sources of insight into international politics. Actual research on aspects of international politics is always working with a much more specific set of starting points than we find in the umbrella frameworks of realism, liberalism, etc. Having created these theoretical boxes, when you teach, you spend most of your time picking them apart and explaining why they are not mutually exclusive, etc. Of course, any starting point will enable some kinds of illumination and tell you something about the world, and there may well be more room for different perspectives to learn from each other when they are addressing issues at a more concrete level than the 'paradigm'. However, I do think it's the case that there is a tendency for IR and other social sciences to create mutually exclusive research domains, which are then institutionally reflected in particular journals and departments, etc.; this may be an inevitable consequence of the politics of the academy.

International Relations is often been described as a West-centric discipline. Though conceivably interest in non-Western thought has gradually increased, why do you feel there has been a hesitance for many scholars to draw from non-Western thinkers, and what insights do you feel non-Western thought can offer the discipline as a whole?

This is a complex question. According to one way of seeing things, the construction and development of the social sciences was an inherent part of the nineteenth century development of western, imperialist, capitalist states. The point and purpose of the social sciences was to control and nurture populations at home and abroad. And the philosophical underpinnings to the emergent disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and IR were drawn exclusively from the specifically western ideas of the enlightenment. From this perspective, it is difficult for social science to take on 'non-western' thought almost by definition, since it will only count as social science if it is in a western mode. There is, however, another way of looking at things, which is that the whole construction of 'western' versus 'non-western' is problematic, that the histories of multiple trajectories of thought and knowledge are intertwined and mutually contaminating, and that there is no reason why disciplines such as IR should be seen as exclusively 'western' in the first place. My view is somewhere in-between these two positions – I think there is more complexity and flexibility in thought that would normally be labelled as 'western' than some would argue, and I also think that we are seeing more and more interesting work that draws on 'non-western' traditions or that problematizes any easy distinction between 'western' and 'non-western', for example, scholars such as Lily Ling,

Robbie Shilliam, or Pinar Bilgin. At the same time, I am deeply conscious of the implication of social science in essentially imperialist projects of control and management – we do need to be aware of the politics of knowledge production and use, and this is more important than whether knowledge counts itself as 'western' or 'non-western'.

You've produced a highly significant body of work on the ethics of political violence, particularly through reference to the ideas of Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Mahatma Gandhi, who have differing views on the subject. Do you ultimately feel that as humans we have a natural inclination towards violence, and do you think that there is a rational element to the human use of violence?

I'm very wary of the idea of a 'natural inclination' towards violence, perhaps because I belong to the gendered position that has precisely been associated with not being naturally aggressive. There's nothing more natural about violence as we experience it in relations with each other, whether in the personal or the public sphere, than there is about peaceable relations with each other in the private or public sphere. The violence we need to understand and judge as scholars and citizens is always mediated through a whole variety of material, cultural, and institutional conditions. In terms of rationality, again, there is no 'pure' context for assessing the rationality of violence. The world is constructed in such a way that the use of violence as an instrument for political ends is apparently rational in certain circumstances – even though this apparent rationality is repeatedly undermined by the consequences of violence, intended and unintended, for perpetrators and victims. Arendt, Fanon, and Gandhi disagree about many things, but they agree on the dangers of thinking about violence in purely instrumental terms.

You've written about the concept of time and world politics, which is arguably a significantly underexplored intellectual terrain. Time is certainly central to our existence as individual and social creatures, but do you agree with the view that questions about time and the way in which humans organise society around it are, on a deeper level, questions about human mortality and the need to ensure that human society continues in the face of this certainty of death?

There's no question that there is an existential dimension to human thinking about time. It could be argued that the progressive, teleological philosophies of history that continue to frame much social scientific thinking are secularised versions of a Judeo-Christian story that provides some kind of promise of immortality to counter the certainty of individual extinction. However, even if our 'being towards death' is what makes us a temporalizing creature in the first place, I think this doesn't exhaust the meanings of different temporalizing moves. There is an embrace of apocalypse as absolute annihilation in some of the more pessimistic accounts of world time, such as that of Virilio. More interestingly, much postmodern and postcolonial thinking about time is inspired by a sense of temporal dislocation or multiplicity, in which there is a lack of fit between organizing temporal frames through which the world is understood. The Judeo-Christian story is not everybody's story and there are very different ways of responding to the certainty of death. The inescapability of temporality in human judgment is hugely politically significant, and self-consciousness about it means that we can think explicitly about the political effects of different temporal framings.

Academe has often been described as a male-dominated environment, and many have argued that it is difficult for women to succeed in this sector. What more do you feel can be done at an institutional level to ensure that there is a greater degree of equality in academe, and what is the most important advice you would give to female scholars of International Relations just starting their careers?

Focusing here on contexts like that of the contemporary UK, I think it is important to bear in mind that the gender biases of academia are not so different to those in other professions, and that it is outside of the professions in the massive casualization and under-valuing of women's work that we find the most pervasive and life-chance-affecting discrimination. In terms of the specific context of the academy, there are a variety of things that can be done in terms of institutionalising gender equality policies, particularly in relation to appointment and promotions procedures. For example, making sure that there is equity in pay between men and women at the same stage of achievement, and that trouble is taken to identify women candidates, and that there are women on appointments and promotions panels. Good parental leave arrangements are essential, for example, ensuring that women coming back from maternity leave are given time to re-establish their research. Over and above procedures, however, there are issues to do with academic culture that also need to be addressed. Increasingly, academia is becoming a highly competitive

environment in which it is hard to reach professional goals without costs to personal and family life, and in which research is valued over teaching and administration. Since women are still likely to carry the lion's share of caring responsibilities, in particular in relation to children, it is harder for them to give the priority to work that is demanded. It is also not unusual to find a gendered division of labour within academic departments, in which women colleagues devote more attention to teaching and administrative duties than their male colleagues, for which the women will not be rewarded. For young women academics at the start of their career, I think it is most useful to network with other women academics in your institution and in the profession more broadly, and to work together to challenge gender discrimination. Also, if it's possible, join a union!