

Interview - Louise Fawcett

Written by E-International Relations

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Louise Fawcett is Professor of International Relations and Wilfrid Knapp Fellow and Tutor in Politics at St Catherine's College, University of Oxford. She will take up the post of Head of Department, Politics and International Relations, in January 2017. Her research focuses on International Relations-based subjects, particularly the history, politics and international relations of developing countries and international institutions. She has a number of publications, including *International Relations in the Middle East* (4th edition 2016), *Inter-regionalism and the European Union* (with Mario Telo and Frederik Ponjaert, 2015), *Iran and the Cold War* (2009), and *Regionalism in World Politics* (with Andrew Hurrell, 1995).

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

This is always a hard question to answer because each scholar will have a different view about what is exciting in his or her respective field at any given time. What I find exciting is the way that International Relations is gradually being forced to live up to its name 'international' rather than just a re-run of the old stories about powerful states of the Western world. Though the idea of *Global* International Relations is hardly new in one sense – indeed it sounds like a contradiction in terms – the need to rethink IR in light of the changing balance of power and in response to contributions which acknowledge the importance of perspectives from the so-called South is ever more compelling.

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

I've always tried to think about the non-Western world in my research and show where and how it matters, whether in my work on the Middle East, Latin America or regional organisations. My first book, *Iran and the Cold War*, considered Iran's agency as an early Cold War actor. My second research project, by looking at regionalism among developing countries in the post-Cold War era, moved away from then-dominant trends by considering regionalism – regional cooperation – outside Western Europe and taking it seriously. More recently, I spent a year or so studying the voluminous works of a post-independence South American scholar and statesman, Andres Bello, who made an important contribution to international relations and law from a uniquely *Americanist* perspective. I've been encouraged by all those IR scholars who take the developing countries seriously and believe in their agency. At a time when the US is still very much the hegemon in the academic study of IR, it is gratifying to see how more and more scholars are interested in pushing out its boundaries. This means taking the whole world as your point of reference, not just selective parts of it. My thinking has developed along these lines.

Twenty years ago you edited a book *Regionalism in World Politics* which highlighted a resurgence of regionalism in the post-Cold war world. How central do you think regionalism is to world politics today?

I've actually just had to think about this in the context of a recent meeting at the International Studies Association in Atlanta where we discussed a new handbook on comparative regionalism which contains a hefty 27 chapters on its many different aspects. The slimmer book I edited with Andy Hurrell back in 1995 has held its own rather well, and when you compare the chapter heads a lot of the debates are still the same. However, the world of regionalism has obviously changed. Two things in particular: first, it has become more global – everyone is doing it. Second, Europe is no longer the obligatory model and point of reference; it is also not the panacea as recent crises in the Eurozone

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reveal. Other regions have looked to Europe, learned from Europe, even copied Europe, but non-European regionalisms have their own dynamics and distinctive pathways. Also some of the early enthusiasm about 'new regionalism' after the Cold War has waned. We still talk about new regionalism, but it has not delivered on all its expectations – the state has not retreated in the face of growing integration, nor has it been pushed back much by non-state actors, though these are undoubtedly important. In one sense we are living in a more regionalised world, but regionalism is just one part of an increasingly complex multilateral architecture.

Considering a specific regional organisation, how has the Arab League developed since the Cold War? Would you consider it effective?

It's interesting to choose the Arab League as an example, since regionalism in the Middle East has often been considered as limited and even a failure. There was a brief moment when everyone was talking about the Arab League's take up of the R2P doctrine over Libya, but on closer inspection this was less about deepening cooperation and more about the actions of a few powerful states and their allies. I don't like the terms success and failure when applied to regionalism. We need to know what we are measuring and understand local context. What the Arab League shows clearly is how varied and fragmented regional projects are. The League has not lived up to expectations – say in the area of economic cooperation – but it has provided a forum for states to discuss common issues and policies. In the current regional unrest it appears quiescent, but I doubt it will disappear and there will be new opportunities for regional level action.

Which regional organisations, or elements of them, would you highlight as effective models or practices? Could you elaborate on why these aspects may be more effective?

Rather than looking at elements or single organisations I would refer back to my point about the global take up of regionalism and its diverse arenas. Newer issue areas like peace operations are particularly interesting since it was once thought that regionalism could only be about economics, and security would always be a poor cousin. This is obviously not true: many regional organisations are doing more in the security than economic sphere as the African peacekeeping case shows. ECOWAS – the Economic Community of West African States – despite its name, has conducted a number of peace operations. At a time when European institutions are in crisis, other overtly less ambitious regional organisations are showing signs of survival and adaptability to new 21st century challenges.

In an article for *International Affairs* you considered the Iraq War 10 years on. What are some of the long-term effects of the war on the international relations of the Middle East? Do you think these were predictable?

The Iraq War has had multiple consequences for the region, which have become entangled with the effects of the Arab Spring. Of course the Iraq War shouldn't be looked at on its own, but as the culmination of a series of regional events dating back to earlier Gulf Wars or even the Iranian revolution. A notable effect of the Iraq War was a change in the regional balance of power. By weakening Iraq it improved the situation of Iran and its ally Syria in the short term; this exacerbated already existing regional tensions, while contributing to the growth of sectarian divides. The fact that such outcomes appeared unpredictable was partly because of the West's inability to calibrate the regional situation and its belief that imposing democracy from above was feasible. Though the Iraq War and its consequences have reduced the appetite for external intervention, regional politics remains fragile and contested: there is no quick fix as regards regional stability.

In your introduction to *International Relations of the Middle East* you commented on the popular and persistent perception of the Middle East as a region of conflict and war. Are you optimistic that this perception might change?

The perception of the Middle East as a zone of conflict and war is a sticky one; when wars around the world were declining after the Cold War the Middle East seemed to buck the trend. Today the region ranks very high on major conflict indicators. I don't like absolutes and would prefer to juxtapose the vision of a war-like region with that of a Middle East which, in earlier times, operated as a more seamless space; one where different nationalities and

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religions peacefully cohabited. This cohabitation has been as much a part of the history of the Middle East as the pattern of conflict which today seems prevalent. Western powers are partly to blame, not only for their part in creating the system in the first place, but by constantly intervening in regional affairs to suit their own interests and purposes. Time will tell when and if there can be a return to a more peaceful and harmonious order. There is huge talent and will among the peoples of the region to carve out a better future for themselves.

In a recent article on Iran's place in the contemporary international system, you argue that Iran should be considered as an aspiring regional power rather than a 'revolutionary' state or security spoiler, as it is often considered. Why do you think this is a more appropriate representation of Iran's foreign policy?

If you consider some of Iran's recent policy moves, notably the 2015 nuclear deal, but there are others, there is a strong pragmatic streak which belies the revolutionary label. That doesn't mean Iran has no revisionist aspirations: it does, like other so-called rising powers. Rising power is an ambiguous term but Iran has significant capabilities and wants to be taken seriously as a regional, even global player. This was true under the last Shah and remains true since the installation of an Islamic Republic. Understanding this helps to place Iran in proper perspective. Iran is not averse to playing by the rules of the game, it just wants to have a say in the construction of those rules, particularly where its own politics, economics and security are concerned.

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

Keep an open mind – avoid fads and methodologies that don't deliver substance. To understand IR you need to look hard at the world, or the region you want to study. Think about its geography, history and peoples. Beware generalising theories that are poorly informed and offer little of practical relevance. You need to do good history to do good IR. As the famous Italian historian, Benedetto Croce, commented: 'All history is contemporary history'.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is Associate Features Editor at E-IR.