Interview – Paul Kirby

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Paul Kirby is a Co-Director of the GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary, University of London. His work has largely focused on gender governance, feminist theory, and critical war studies, with side interests in pop culture and the philosophy of social science. At the time of interview, he is doing archival work for a history of feminist encounters with foreign policy and statecraft and beginning a project on the governance of masculinity in world politics. Recent publications include 'The Future of the UK's Women, Peace and Security Policy' (with Hannah Wright and Aisling Swaine), New Directions in Women, Peace and Security (co-edited with Soumita Basu and Laura Shepherd); 'Sexual Violence in the Border Zone', on the limits of the European Union's gender initiatives in Libya; and a new analysis of eighteen years of the Women, Peace and Security ecosystem, co-authored with Laura Shepherd. Also with Laura Shepherd and to be published with Columbia University Press in early 2024 is *Governing the Feminist Peace: Vitality and Failure in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*. Paul is also the author of the gender chapter in the Baylis, Smith and Owens textbook *The Globalization of World Politics* and has previously written for e-IR on the digital commons and open access International Relations. Despite everything, he still tweets.

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

The first bit of good news is that the 'fields' of gender, critical war studies, international theory and disciplinary history are now so productive that I am left totally inadequate to the task of surveying them. When you can catch your breath, that *is* exciting: what makes up 'International Relations' is much changed from two decades ago, and overwhelmingly in a positive direction.

With a bit more precision, there's an incredible sophistication and care of critique in something like Rahul Rao's *Out of Time* and (a little while ago) Megan Daigle's *From Cuba with Love*. The call for a 'martial empiricism' issued by Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove and Nisha Shah really resonated with me, and is being taken up with great flair on topics from the messy history of bomb disposal to the collective ideology of the tank-warrior and the living saving properties of the military videogame. I'm an ingenue in disciplinary history and the history of political thought so all of it is bright and alluring at the moment. I've learnt much from Duncan Bell's work on imperial thought and Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale's *South Africa, Race and the Making of International Relations*, and was recently left energised by Nicholas Guilhot's caustic account of counter-revolutionary realism. The Women in the History of International Thought project has been hugely important in recovering theory by the canonically excluded. This is all too impressionistic, but I'm generally encouraged by the deepening inroads of critical thinking on race and gender, and the accompanying reassessment of what International Relations has been (see, for example, Jasmine Gani and Jenna Marshall's recent special issue of *International Affairs*), even as we're not always so sure what to do with it next.

Less celebratory, but also more urgent, is the critique of American and Western European feminism in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. In the months after February 2022 too many relied on a brutal idea of 'peace', a myopic view of race and empire, and even indulged high-realist armchair geopolitics. Inexcusably, Ukrainian and East European perspectives were almost entirely absent from the initial 'western' feminist response, including in IR. So I've been trying to head the critiques levelled by Tereza Hendl, Maria Sonevytsky, Yuliya Yurchenko, Olena Lyubchenko and others. That's less a question of scholarly debate than hard thinking, though Míla O'Sullivan and Katerina Krulišová

have also set out the stakes for the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

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

There's a long catalogue of things I had a distorted or inadequate understanding of. As a younger scholar my view of gender power was probably too binary, my sense of international theory too shaded by antagonistic traditions, my compass too parochial. I wish I had spent more time on political economy and languages. It turns out some of the big disciplinary debates were more vibrant than I gave them credit for. But more significant has been the effect of passing time and a little experience: confidence to rove more widely and tackle fresh questions and literatures. Right now, Megan O'Mahony is making me think about transnational memory practices and how we come to understand our own responsibility and vulnerability through them. 'Inter-disciplinarity' is a cheapened phrase, but I feel better equipped to draw from different traditions on their own terms rather than trying to render them comprehensible to IR. At the moment that's taking me back to historical thinking and sideways into critical legal and anthropological work on governance feminism. So less an accounting of past failures than a hopefulness that you can still think in new ways. My PhD supervisor – Kim Hutchings – was very important in cultivating that ethos. Nigel Dodd and George Lawson taught me to love theory without being doctrinaire. I came up with a cohort of original, kind, and courageous scholars (they know who they are), which of course only makes the imposter syndrome worse. I've been lucky to write for so long with Laura Shepherd, who has provided a model of collaboration and care, even if I'll never replicate her levels of productivity. Within the disciplinary envelope I rush to read anything new by Rahul Rao, Robbie Shilliam, Laleh Khalili, Tarak Barkawi, Debbie Lisle, Anna Stavrianakis, or Kerem Nisancioglu. I'm also doing my best to learn from an exceptional collection of new colleagues at Queen Mary on topics from anticolonialism to biometrics to environmental sovereignty to the British Labour party.

How is the study of Women, Peace and Security evolving? Is there need for a more integrated approach within International Relations?

Research on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has exploded in the last decade, with several research centres, many dedicated courses or weeks, and a flow of PhD projects. That there are over a hundred countries and dozens of international and regional bodies formally adopting WPS yields a rich field of case studies, and the agenda is now arguably the easiest entry point for explaining the relevance of gender to armed conflict, diplomacy and international society. Study can barely keep pace with reality, even as many students are closely involved in shaping reality. That's a mixed blessing: we know more than we ever have, though largely about failure and co-optation. But 'WPS' has also become oddly reified, and the ease of selecting this or that policy document as an empirical focus has probably drawn attention away from other topics, and directed efforts to policy engagement with at best mixed effects. It may even be that integrating a week on WPS into an IR course on global governance becomes a way to *not* address the deeper challenge of multiple feminisms and gender perspectives.

What are the key misconceptions when discussing the embodiment of rape as a weapon?

Two seem especially significant: that only women are targeted, and that rape is a cheap and interchangeable weapon. I doubt there are many researchers who still hold the former view, especially after work by folk like Chris Dolan, Heleen Touquet and Philipp Schulz. But the idea that women are exclusively placed as the embodied symbol of the community, and therefore targeted by armed groups acting according to a brutal logic, has been incredibly powerful in mobilising international action. The trouble comes when the narrow view of 'the body as a battlefield' obscures a continuum of violence happening in all sorts of sites before, during and after the official timeline of conflict, and where we neglect the diverse targets and logics of sexual violence, including against men, sexual and gender minorities, and those who otherwise trouble male/female dichotomies.

More complicated is the idea that male embodiment makes rape easy or 'efficient' for armed groups to mobilise. This isn't so much a misconception as an under-theorised premise, but one that I think we have reason to doubt. It rests on an idea of the natural soldier that has long been criticised in other forms, and seems to me to brush past all the most challenging questions about how an institution would go about mobilising bodies for this kind of violence in the

first place. That's partly an inheritance of radical feminist conceptualisations of the male body as a tool of patriarchy that continue to influence the way we talk about gender violence. But, as the work of Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern in particular have shown us, wartime embodiment and meaning are more awkwardly related than we might suppose from the outside.

What does feminist foreign policy look like in practice?

We don't yet know. Even more so than the (related, but not synonymous) WPS agenda, feminist foreign policy is a grab-bag of promises, advocacy campaigns and governance efforts. Its most prominent Swedish version has recently been renounced, and what remains varies widely in what is included in the problem (violence against women, arms sales, top-down development models, low participation by women in foreign and defence ministries) and the level of political commitment to apparent solutions. There are academic and activist templates for what could be done better, from policy coherence to redistribution. A recent example is Gender Action for Peace and Security's call for a more 'disruptive' approach. There's plenty to endorse in these manifestos, but it's hard to shake the suspicion that the state is an unlikely agent for radical change, and advocates are inevitably unable to settle some of the profound differences *between* feminist approaches or in the hyphenation of feminism with anti-militarism, internationalism, environmentalism, decoloniality, intersectionality or anti-capitalism.

What is a particularly salient example of 'hyper'-masculinity in global politics today?

The immediate example that comes to mind is Andrew Tate, the hugely-influential TikTok misogynist. Tate is currently the main representative of an ideology flourishing on social media that rehabilitates 'traditional' ideas of strict gender order, in an almost cartoon villain style, alongside conspiracy theorising, white supremacy, extreme sports and conspicuous consumerism, effortlessly facilitated by algorithm (I'm constantly being pushed Jordan Peterson clips). The tendency is a weird amalgam of nostalgia and novelty, characterised by jokey disavowal but also deadly serious, an obvious grift yet inspiring deep devotion. Tate's absurd caricature of manliness overlaps oddly with a school of 'beta masculinity' which paradoxically emphasises victimhood, fragility and grievance, as Debbie Ging has explored, and which animates recent acts of 'incel' terrorism.

We shouldn't discount the reach of the new misogyny, but its obviously 'hyper' aesthetics also lays traps. There is a danger of fixating on deviance alone: a quantum of 'toxicity' in a minority of men that predisposes them to cruelty, entitlement and violence. We see this in moves to apply a terrorism and deradicalization frame to masculinity, as if to mount a police operation on gender. The spectacle is of course encouraged by incels and fellow travellers in an online world of everyday harassment, pompous manifestos and cynical clickbait. What must be kept in view are the more 'structural' distributional and productive qualities of patriarchy: global care and value chains, the gendered division of labour, parental leave, pay gaps, access to education, socialisation and advertising, the ubiquitous barriers to freedom.

You wrote in 2016 (*When white men rule the world)* about the masculinities and femininities "deployed in the creation of political community". How has this phenomenon evolved since then? Does it have a role to play in the increasingly polarised world of politics?

I wonder if anyone today still doubts the role of masculinity in international politics. Of course, for many 'mainstream' scholars and 'centrist' citizens, gender became important only to explain a populist pathology: Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Orbán. The history of community, the state, and politics itself is inseparable from the history of gender, but the connection has often been subterranean, unrecognised in official discourse which normalised a certain kind of masculinity. Today the conflict over the gender parameters of political community is much more explicit, and more often framed against a horizon of greater freedom or a return to mythologised tradition. In 2016 I was writing about Trump, and his project is faltering, but not as we might expect. Trump in fact did significantly better with white women in 2020 than in 2016, though the Supreme Court's subsequent overturning of Roe v. Wade seemed to dent that support in the midterms. That black women trended in the opposite direction indicates that gender alone is a poor basis for psephology, and shows why we the need to think about race, class, education, and more in electoral coalitions. Women's rights nevertheless remain at the heart of uprisings in Iran, in Rojava and for social movements

countering the far-right in the Americas. In Brazil women were the leading force in ending Bolsonaro's presidency, though again with important intersectional caveats. Political movements are mimicking each other in anti-feminist talking points and legislation, as well as through closely related (and often closely coordinated) attacks on gay and trans rights from Russia to Uganda to Florida.

And yet compared to the period after 9/11, there also seems to be less reliance on feminist and faux-feminist ideas in western foreign policy discourse. There is greater scepticism about humanitarian intervention or gender-egalitarian state-building, given the disastrous consequences of wars sometimes justified in such terms. The change has its own calamitous effects, as seen in the exit from Afghanistan and the unforgiveable failure of governments to live up to even minimal promises of refuge and loyalty. The inter- and trans-national uses of gender are now distinctly less liberal, as in the demonisation of the always-suspected-adult male in the anti-migration politics of places like Britain. In the context of the war in Ukraine, gender takes on the well-worn garb of warrior masculinity and the fate of nations, even as women participate in new and terrifying ways. Meanwhile 'feminist foreign policy' falters. As ever, there are contradictory processes at play. If it's true that gender is becoming more central to contentious political discourse domestically but also less salient to liberal world order projects while increasingly characterising transnational anti-feminist organising, then we are in the midst of a strange rearticulation of the inside/outside distinction.

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

Take all advice with a fistful of salt. Well-meaning mentors might give advice based on the conditions of their academic youth rather than what you'll face. Hiring practices won't be the same by discipline, country or even department. The ideal balance of scholarship, public engagement, activism, teaching and service is contested. Be especially wary of step-by-step guides promulgated on Twitter or elsewhere by people whose situation may be quite different from your own. Many higher education systems are under attack – whether through culture wars, defunding, casualisation or the threat that technology will soon replace the faculty altogether. Some older models of knowledge-making and sharing are increasingly broken (the corporate journal system is one major example). Those waters are uncharted, and no one has a monopoly on navigating them.

All that said, I had three advantages in my academic youth, only somewhat in my control. The first was a group of academic friends of basically the same career stage and disposition. Griping, navigating and reasoning together was more valuable than any one mentor figure. Second was learning to trust in my own interests and theoretical commitments, even where these didn't feel entirely 'IR' or guaranteed to speak to the most popular problems of the field. This is the sort of advice that is easier to give that to take, but cultivate that deep relationship to your material, whatever it might be. The third (a work in progress) was a willingness to wrestle with the conditions of academia. That can take many forms, depending on the workplace democracy available to you, and sits uncomfortably alongside an awareness that you can't do everything, and that you should resist the pressure to do everything. This is tricky work if you're attached to your research, and once you consider a wider community of students and scholars. The institution won't love you back, but what does that imply? Whether there are lessons in that I can't say.