

## Interview - Laura Sjoberg

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Laura Sjoberg

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Laura Sjoberg is a leading scholar of feminist international relations and international security. Her research focuses on gender and just war theory, women's violence in global politics, and feminist interpretations of the theory and practice of security policy. Professor Sjoberg is currently homebase editor of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, and has edited several books and special issues, including *Gender and International Security: Feminist Perspectives*, *Security Studies: Feminist Contributions* (a special issue of the journal *Security Studies*), *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives* (with Sandra Via), and *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (with Caron Gentry), among others. She is the author of *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War Theory*, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (with Caron Gentry), and *Gendering Global Conflict: Towards a Feminist Theory of War* (forthcoming). Professor Sjoberg is an Associate Professor of Political Science and affiliate faculty in Women's Studies at the University of Florida. She holds a PhD in International Relations and Gender Studies from the University of Southern California, and a law degree from Boston College.

In this interview, Professor Sjoberg discusses gender and war, queer theory, women and gender in the International Relations discipline, and her new blog [relationsinternational.com](http://relationsinternational.com).

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?**

I think there are too many to count. Maybe the most productive thing to do is to talk about the stuff that gets my attention, both positively and negatively.

I like the resurgence of queer theory (some say that it is the rise of queer theory, but those people would be ignoring Cynthia Weber and Spike Peterson's work in the 1990s that was clearly queer theory). I like that the interdisciplinary gender studies work IR scholars are thinking about and relying on is increasingly sophisticated. I like a whole host of work that is taking violence seriously, and analyzing what it might be – Anne Runyan and Marysia Zalewski's *International Feminist Journal of Politics* article on the violence of feminisms, Brent Steele's recent book on scarring, Caron Gentry's work on everyday terrorism (and Rachel Pain's in political geography) – I like the idea of thinking about what violence is, and how omnipresent it is. I like what feels like a resurgence of the political will to change in the disciplinary 'left' – Daniel Levine's efforts at sustainable critique, Tony Burke's security cosmopolitanism, the CASE collective, etc. I like renewed thinking about the methods that we use to do what we do – from a project I am working on (with J. Samuel Barkin) on quantitative methods for critical theorizing to Patrick Thaddeus Jackson's *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*. I like the extent to which (maybe because of blogging, maybe not) policy issues and contemporary problems seem to be being taken seriously. I like the idea that we are included in our research – Christine Sylvester's work on sense, Naeem Inayatullah's *I, IR*, and the like.

I don't like the tendency to apply the work of evolutionary biology to International Relations. I think, as applied, it has normatively problematic racist, sexist, and heterosexist implications. I am also not a big fan of the conflation of constructivism as an ontological understanding of how the world works, and constructivism as political theory. I don't like unreflected incorporation of one paradigm into others, or pluralisms that are covers for exclusivities. I don't like the extent to which the rush to publish makes our work more full of mistakes than ever before, yet we seem less and less ready to admit mistakes and imperfections.

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

I feel like I am constantly learning from the people around me. A number of the biggest changes in the ways that I think have been a moment of looking at something differently than I did before – whether it was the pictures of Lynndie England in the *Los Angeles Times* (and finally asking myself why, as a feminist, I found them shocking) or the relationship between feminist and queer theorizing (as I tried to understand the mobilization [or lack thereof] around the siting issue for ISA in New Orleans). Others have been inspired by reading the absolutely brilliant work of other scholars in the discipline *as I read them* – Lauren Wilcox’s recent work on embodied security, Carol Cohn’s recent work on the political economies of conflict, Cynthia Weber’s recent work on queer IR. Still others have been something finally clicking – I think that I didn’t really understand how instrumental to my thinking Hayward Alker’s work on argumentation is until years after it was too late to tell him. I guess, for me, I read a lot, and I try to think critically about what I read, and that seems to change the ways that I think. I feel like there are core changes in how I think – for example, I’m less committed now than I was a decade ago to the project of salvaging just war theorizing from its gendered assumptions. Then there are parts of my thinking that are foregrounded and backgrounded given what projects I am working on at the time. For example, some of my projects emphasize my interest in queer theorizing, some emphasize my interest in mainstreaming gender analysis in the discipline of IR, some emphasize both. Some of my work is quasi-positivist, other is firmly post-positivist – these aren’t changes in thinking as much as they are different parts of the spectrum of my thinking. When I think about how I want to think, and how I want my thinking to change, Cynthia Enloe’s voice echoes in my head: she says to always be curious, and to have that curiosity be a feminist curiosity. I hope that I do that, and I hope I keep doing that for the rest of my career.

### **What are the most important/interesting areas of IR theory that are underdeveloped today or understudied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?**

I don’t think I can be an authoritative voice on this. I think I can think about what I need and want to do better, and think about with more rigor, and study more. I am interested in understanding the complexities of military masculinity better than I have before – reading Aaron Belkin’s *Bring Me Men* made me think that I need to know more about the ways in which heteronormativity and homonormativity shape military masculinities – a line of inquiry which has inspired a project of mine on male prostitution in and around the US military. I want to think more about the question of agency in individual violence in global politics. My work on women’s violence in global politics has been recognized for its suggestion that it is important to think about women’s agency, but critiqued for its failure to explore the complexities of the notion of agency. Those critiques are, in my mind, right, and I think it is important to iron out those questions. That is one of a couple of reasons that Caron Gentry and I are working on a second edition of *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*. I want to think with more depth about the relationship between queer theory, feminist theory, and ontologies of global politics. I also want to think about how to distill my thinking on those issues into a way to present it to students in a classroom. That’s why I’m working on a textbook, tentatively titled *(Gendered) International Relations*. I know I’ve evaded the question – but I don’t think that I can tell other people what to think about. And this is plenty of exciting stuff for me to think about in coming years, I think.

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

To the extent that theoretical paradigms tell us the politics and assumptions of the research that are contained in them, then I think that they are useful. I think that scholarship is not only perspectival (in the ‘where you stand is where you sit’ sense), but also felt, experienced, and engaged. If our self-classifications are useful to front those things in our own work and read them in others, then they are doing something productive. On the other hand, if they are themselves signifiers of scientific legitimacy, then the ‘paradigms’ are probably more problematic than good, as is the case if being a part of a particular paradigm serves as an excuse not to talk to people (or read research) outside of it. On the other hand, I think David Lake’s rejection of the ‘isms’ is as epistemologically narrowing as a number of scholars’ endorsement of a particular ‘ism.’ So, to me, it is not so much a question of what a particular paradigm explains or doesn’t, as of the signification of the deployment of paradigmatic categories. That is not *per se* positive or

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negative, but it is loaded with both disciplinary history and disciplinary politics. I don't think our utterances of those paradigms can escape that. At the same time, I think they can transgress it (e.g., when I call my work structural realist, which may even be true, depending on how you read it). I guess I've come to be convinced that there's nothing politically harmless that one can do or write in this discipline, and nothing that purely furthers knowledge. There's also nothing that is pure evil, or that makes no contribution to knowing in the discipline. Instead, research is a game (and a politics) of making the most of the middle ground, and making the most ethical and informed choices that one can. To me, sometimes that involves a discourse of disciplinary norms, of paradigms, and of traditional structures of knowledge. Sometimes it requires eschewing all of those.

### **What do you think has been feminism's greatest contribution to IR? What could more mainstream theorists learn from feminism?**

That feminism should be mainstream IR? And should be in mainstream IR? I don't know if I have a good answer to this question either. I think feminism shows IR that it is important to understand gender, genderings, and gendered expectations in order to understand global politics, and to understand global politics in order to understand gender. I made a post four years ago now about the common myths about feminist IR, where I talk in more detail about the misperceptions that IR has about feminist work. I think that the next step for IR is figuring out not only how to take feminism seriously, but how to take nuanced, complicated feminisms seriously.

### **You have chaired the International Studies Association's Committee on the Status of Women. Given recent research showing that women are under-cited in IR and under-represented at the highest levels of the discipline, what kinds of things can departments, publications, and others do to begin to rectify the gender gap?**

I think there is a really productive dialogue on these questions going on between the editors of major journals, and that there is a push to collect more data to figure out exactly where women are being left out of the process, how, and why. One thing I think the data has showed us is that there is a gendered submission gap – that is, that most elite journals in the discipline get submissions that underrepresent women for their representation in the field. This is, in part, I think, a recruitment issue, but also a reflection of the gendered structures of the discipline inhibiting women's submission.

The data also show that women's publications are under-cited, both controlling for self-citation and exacerbated by women's tendency to engage in self-citation less than men do. While some would argue that women need to cite themselves more, or that the gendered imbalances of citation will self-correct as women populate the senior levels of the discipline with more regularity, I think that network analysis shows citation cartels, that 'the people to cite' in most subfields are understood to be (largely, if not exclusively) men, and that 'women's work' is valued less in the discipline compared to 'men's work' under the substantive veil of the mainstream.

Certainly it is useful for departments to support women, to watch out for their service obligations, and to recognize the ways in which their structures are gendered. It is useful for journals to recruit submissions from women, to watch for gender balance in reviewers, to watch for gender balance in citations in accepted and published pieces, and to look for gender balance in book reviewers and authors of books reviewed. These things will put a dent in the problem. But I don't think it can be stopped without recognizing the structural masculinism not only of the discipline, but of the institutions that house its departments. That's the big step, and one that I don't see being easy to take in the near future.

### **You wrote the introduction to the 2009 *Security Studies* special issue on Feminist Contributions. What, if anything, has changed in the study of gender and security since then? What implications has the special issue had for the study of international security, more broadly?**

I think I need to speak on that one in terms of what I hope it did, and what I hope it does – because I think it is too early to tell for sure, and because I never want to be one of those old scholars blustering on about the importance of my own work. I had a couple of goals with that project. First, I wanted *Security Studies* (both the journal and the

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subfield) to take note of gender in some way that was not just people asking questions about what women may or may not do differently than men. Second, I wanted work that was prominently placed in gender/IR (and/or gender/security) that was done by junior people and by people outside the United States. I think that sometimes the (substantive and representational) composition of the authors that we pay attention to in the discipline is a self-reinforcing cycle, where people are interesting because we read them because they are (by definition) interesting. So I think that maybe four of the six people who were authors of that special issue did not have a PhD at the time that their articles were accepted, and another was a recent PhD. The sixth author was from South Africa. I was actually pretty junior myself. Third, I wanted to say that it is possible to communicate to/with the (American) mainstream of the discipline *in feminist terms* without giving up many of the epistemological commitments of feminist theorizing. I think that special issue did those things, and the follow-up book (*Gender and International Security*, published in 2010 by Routledge) did those things in an even more inclusive manner, substantively and representationally.

I wanted that collection to make space for people in the (American) mainstream of IR to talk about gender; to make space in publication outlets (book publishers and journals) traditionally valued for tenure in the United States to publish about gender; to make it possible for dialogues between feminist scholars and mainstream scholars about gender to be deeper; and to establish the argument that gender matters to doing what security scholars do well. I don't know whether or not I and that work accomplished that – but I do know it is being accomplished. The Gender and International Relations series at Oxford University Press has published almost a dozen feminist books so far – half of which were junior scholars' first books. Temple University Press, Stanford University Press, New York University Press, Cornell University Press, and Columbia University Press have all published very good feminist IR books since then. While there remain journals that feminist work hasn't broken into (particularly in the American mainstream of the discipline), that picture is looking more hopeful than it was six or seven years ago as well. For better or worse, the term "Feminist Security Studies" (which I first used in 2006 applying for the ISA workshop for this special issue and edited volume project, though I am not sure that was the first use of it) has become engrained not only among feminists who study issues of security but also as a referent in security studies.

Still, I hope that feminist work (my own included) does not rest easily on or fall prey to the division between security studies and political economy in the discipline writ large. I think that one of the original strengths of early feminist work in the discipline was that it recognized security as both incredibly broad (with economic, personal, cultural, health, and nutritional dimensions) and as something that was not to be privileged above political economy, environment, or other concerns in global politics. I thought at the time it was possible to say that feminism matters to this narrow, reified notion of security that most people in the discipline use *at the same time* that it has the potential (and the desire) to explode and transform that category. I still think/hope it is, and that's in part at least what *Gendering Global Conflict* is as well.

**Your recent book *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* focuses on gender and gender-based subordination as key drivers of global conflict. What causal factors of war does elevating gender help to uncover?**

A feminist theory of war, in my view, sees war as both reflective and productive of gender norms in global politics, and gender norms in global politics as both reflective and productive of war in global politics. *Gendering Global Conflict* looks at structural gender equality, cycles of gendered violence, state masculine posturing, the influence of emotions, gendered power, gendered war narratives, and gendered nationalisms in order to understand both war and gender better. The book suggests that war is broader, longer, and deeper than traditional analyses can demonstrate, and that such a view of war shows not only a wider variety of causes, but a wider variety of experiences than are traditionally seen as a part of war.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of IR?**

I hope I'm still one of them (a young scholar in IR). But if I don't get to be – I think the best advice I have is to learn from the people who have gone through it, and to pay it forward in terms of advice and support. I have just started a string of professional development posts on my new blog, [relationsinternational.com](http://relationsinternational.com). It's a series of lessons I (and other regular bloggers at [relationsinternational](http://relationsinternational.com)) learned the hard way early in our careers. I am hoping that is useful to

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others, who can then build on those lessons and share with those who follow them.

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*This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is a Director of E-IR's editorial board. She is a PhD student in International Relations at Georgetown University.*