

Interview - Jennifer Hochschild

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 6 2016

Jennifer Hochschild is the Henry LaBarre Jayne Professor of Government at Harvard University, Professor of African and African American Studies, and holds lectureships in the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is the President of the American Political Science Association and was in 2011 the John W. Kluge Chair in American Law and Governance at the Library of Congress. Jennifer is the author or co-author of numerous books, including most recently as co-author of *Do Facts Matter?: Information and Misinformation in American Politics* (Oklahoma University Press, 2015).

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

Electoral politics at the national level in the US is fascinating, as well as scary, right now. Many Americans have prided ourselves on the US avoiding the sort of right wing populist (or left wing populist, from a different vantage point than my own) movements of the type seen all over Europe—but now we have the former, and maybe the latter. We used to have a pretty clear consensus that “the party decides” the presidential nominee; that may still happen, but not smoothly, to put it mildly. More deeply, we have a terrific case from which to study whether, how, when, etc. “demography is destiny;” there are reasons to argue both that racial and ethnic minorities are reshaping or will reshape American politics, and that traditional structures, institutions, attitudes, and resources will prevent any real change at least for a very long time. Finally, the rise again of robust protest politics (Occupy, Tea Party, Black Lives Matter) make the role of non-electoral politics a vital field of study and debate for the first time in many decades. Finally, maybe class politics is returning to the United States, and some wonderful work is exploring the politics and political science of economic inequality.

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

I started my career studying class divisions, and focused only on whites in order not to complicate my analyses too much with race. Various readers and commentators pointed out that one cannot study class in the US, or maybe anywhere, without also studying race. I then switched my attention primarily to race politics (not only for purely intellectual reasons), and discovered that one cannot study race without also studying class. I then (this is now almost two decades into my career) studied the intersection of racial and class politics—at which point people made the compelling argument that “race” in the US (and elsewhere) isn’t a simple binary, and one must think hard about what “race” is, how many “races” there are, boundaries between groups, the role of migration etc. Also I became convinced that looking at these issues solely in the US is too parochial, so I shifted focus in several ways: 1) studying immigrant political incorporation in various countries; 2) studying multiple facets of racial/ethnic/group dynamics in the US, and 3) studying what “race” is, and how it is created or defined or whatever. That led me to the study of the politics of genomic science, which is where I have landed now.

In your most recent book *Do Facts Matter?*, co-authored with Katrina Levine Einstein, you note that a well-informed electorate remains essential to a successful democracy. With that said, how much of a threat to democracy is the concealment of political facts?

It will come as no surprise that I think concealment of political facts is dangerous to a democracy, setting aside the

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difficult-to-define but essential set of facts that address national security and, sometimes, the personal privacy of prominent individuals. I like the way this question is framed since it points the finger where I think it belongs – at politicians, courts, appointed actors, other public officials etc. who are crucial in determining whether an electorate can in fact become well informed, even if it wants to. I would add here that I am pretty much a free speech fundamentalist.

I have some sympathy for the desire for safe spaces, the concern about microaggressions, the fury at insensitive or hostile speech or speech-acts—but for prudential, political, and normative reasons, I think the dangers of controlling speech are vastly greater than the dangers of excessive speech. That holds especially for political actors.

A great deal of your research on African American history focuses on race, ethnicity, and immigration. How do you see those issues being translated in the current rhetoric of the 2016 Democratic and Republican primaries?

The answer is probably pretty clear; among other things he has done, Trump has made it publicly legitimate to use language about others, however defined, that seemed socially impermissible a year ago. The rhetoric of his followers, Trump himself, and perhaps other Americans must not be curtailed but it is hurtful and potentially dangerous to American politics. I suppose the most important question is whether the rhetoric simply brings to the surface views that people were not expressing but would act on when given the opportunity, or whether the rhetoric is itself creating, hardening, or spreading offensive and dangerous views about other groups. It's hard to know how to answer that. Nonetheless, Obama's increasing willingness to talk openly of race, and public attention to Black Lives Matter, the DREAMers, etc. may embolden people other than the Trumpites to address race explicitly and even debate with one another without so much nonuseful fear of saying the wrong thing. So freeing up the rhetoric of the left could be beneficial even if freeing up the rhetoric of the right could be harmful—is that special pleading? Probably...

On the 2016 primaries, what do you make of pressure groups that are trying to address racial inequalities like the Black Lives Matter movement?

Go for it. Some are naive, or obdurate, about the exigencies of electoral politics, but that is fine; pressure from the left can push necessarily-compromising politicians away from the safe middle of the road.

Returning to the field of international relations, which areas would say are either too heavily focused or neglected?

The joke about the subfield from people outside it is that too many articles are written in a way that a boulder of theory (“constructivist,” “realist,” “liberal,” etc.) overpowers a few rocks of fact or a few new arguments. But that may not be fair, and if it was true at some point, it may well be outmoded. Given my own research and teaching interests, I'd like to see more on the international dimensions of migration, science policy, and economic inequality – but I'm not qualified to say that these fields are neglected or others too heavily focused on.

Do you believe progress has been made over the last few decades in the field of international relations, and how do you see the field evolving in the decades to come?

Again, I'm not really the right person to answer this, but from the outside I see more direct engagement with the field of comparative politics, and even American politics, which is great. I'm all for any research that breaks down our rather reified subfields in pursuit of a genuinely interesting question or important problem – so the conflation of comparative political economy and international political economy seems like real progress. Do we have enough attention to the comparable subfield elision with regard to violence and security (is ISIS terrorism in Brussels a matter of “comparative politics” or “international relations”? – both, clearly.) Again, migration policy and politics is a matter of both domestic and international politics; so are the issues of environment and climate change, genetically modified organisms, epidemics and pandemics etc. So I think, or perhaps I hope, the field will evolve toward attention to really big and important problems and perhaps away from major Theories with a capital T.

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What would you say is the most important advice for a young scholar in IR?

All young scholars these days need to be pretty sophisticated about one or several methods, to know which methods address which problems and how, and with what epistemological underpinnings. For my taste, the problems one studies and teaches should be front and center—the method(s), theory(ies), discipline(s) are brought in as needed. But perhaps a young scholar should have a good sense of whether senior members of his/her department have the same starting premise (rather than being literature or methods-driven, for example). A young scholar need not, and probably should not, follow their lead unless it is a good fit—but one should know where one stands. Avoid departmental and institutional politics! A swamp with no useful bottom. Don't shirk teaching, departmental service etc., but do protect your time to write, care for children and partner, get some exercise etc. How to do that—good question! Generously provide collective goods, but find nondefensive ways to say no. One of my wise friends said, “we are hiring a mind, not an article.” I think what that partly means is “quality, not quantity” of publications, teaching, service etc.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is a Deputy Features Editor at E-IR.