

## Interview - Meera Sabaratnam

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Meera Sabaratnam

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Meera Sabaratnam is Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS University of London. Her research interests are in the colonial and post-colonial dimensions of world politics, within IR theory, history and contemporary policy and practice. She is the author of *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique*, and her articles on decolonising IR have appeared in *Security Dialogue* and *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. She is the co-founder and co-convenor of the Colonial / Postcolonial / De-colonial Working Group of the British International Studies Association, and Chair-Elect of the Global Development Section of the International Studies Association. She is an active campaigner on questions of higher education policy. She currently chairs the SOAS Academic Senate and is a member of the Decolonising the University Working Group, and has written on questions of the use of metrics in research assessment exercises and open access policy.

### Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in International Relations Theory?

Are there any exciting 'debates' happening in IR Theory? I don't ask this to suggest that the field is not thriving but, at least from where I am standing, IR scholars tend to work in clusters of people that already agree on a lot of things. Their conversations then take the form of elaborating or refining those things (theories, methods, findings) rather than deep 'debate' as such, of the type we used to see – I'm thinking for example of those heat-and-light exchanges between Tickner, Weber and Keohane over feminist theory, Wight and Doty over ontology and so on. On the one hand, this is a good thing because it allows for the cultivation and flourishing of many traditions, but also means that scholars are not accountable to those who might challenge them. So, for example, somehow the Democratic Peace debate manages to rumble on despite comprehensive challenges to its argumentation and logic, particularly from scholars working in the post-colonial tradition such as Krishna, Barkawi and Laffey and so on.

That said, there is a lot of work that I find inspiring and challenging in the field and on its borders. I'll limit myself to three clusters but once you start looking there is lots going on. One of these areas is postcolonial sociologies and historical sociology – the work of Gurminder Bhambra, Julian Go and Sandra Halperin particularly stand out for me here, as well as the work being done on uneven and combined development (UCD) within IR. All of these have significantly 'thickened' the basic objects of the international (e.g. nations, borders, empires) and forced a significant re-appraisal of this idea of the international as an empty, anarchic space. Second, I would say there is a cluster of work on technologies of violence and governance which is really exciting – Alison Howell, Melanie Richter-Montpetit, Patricia Owens come to mind, as well as some of the work on resilience and liberal ways of war – on the latter Mark Neocleous is consistently interesting. The depth, insight and variety offered to our understanding of political power and violence in domestic and global spaces is something I have found mind-expanding. Third, perhaps unsurprisingly I think the work on race and racism is long-overdue and extremely thoughtful – in the recent landmark volume by Anievas, Shilliam and Manchanda there is a lot to recommend but Errol Henderson's piece on white supremacist logics in the roots of realist and liberal thought is a must-read.

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

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One big change has been that I have become more pessimistic. I became interested in International Relations in part because of the stories that were told about its capacities to mould war and peace. I was interested in learning about peacemaking and diplomacy etc because of my Sri Lankan heritage, and up to that point I had essentially had a liberal/English School account of how the world worked. This suggested to a large degree that it was ultimately 'tameable', and that peace was a matter of having the right tools and people. I took a postgraduate course at the LSE with Mark Hoffman (who later became my PhD supervisor) on Conflict and Peace Studies which radically challenged that naïve and conservative optimism about war and violence, opened up war and peace as conditions within political orders, as well as introducing a more critical lens on the prospective role of 'well-intentioned' international interveners in the Global South.

Not so much a 'change' but a formative experience relates to my ongoing interest in the power of theory in underpinning the stories we tell about the world. During my PhD I was lucky to be part of a really rigorous, lively and diverse International Theory seminar at the LSE, run then by Kirsten Ainley and George Lawson. Every week, a speaker – ranging from world-famous professors to PhD candidates – would send around a paper in advance, and the seminar would interrogate it from every angle. Over the five years I was there as doctoral student and then fellow, I rarely missed a session. With the same community of people over the same period I was involved with the journal *Millennium* which had a similar effect on my interest in how different theories and traditions construct the world.

The other obvious change has been in my interest in the colonial / post-colonial structure of the international, which was shaped most influentially by meeting and becoming acquainted with the work of Robbie Shilliam, but which has since had many more inputs, such as becoming involved with the Global Development Section of the ISA. This last influence has in some senses been the most profound in terms of forcing me to re-think what I thought I knew.

**As the co-convenor of the BISA Colonial, Postcolonial and De-colonial Working Group, you are striving to investigate the colonial question in IR. Can you describe the activities of this working group and why it is important to have such an institution in place?**

Well, as we all know, institutions matter. The possibilities for scholarship are intimately shaped by the capacity to amass resources for projects, develop networks, cultivate big ideas, connect with communities of practice, have a collective memory and organising function of how to get things done and so on. By establishing the CPD Working Group we sought to create this space for thinking about the 'colonial' question, particularly in the UK IR community, where there was no obvious meeting point for scholars on these issues. Slightly disparate conversations were taking place in traditions such as historical sociology, or area studies groups such as Africa but contributions were often subsumed under other conversations. Within BISA we are also now one of the largest working group in terms of members and still attracting new members.

What we have done is connect people, mostly via the mailing list, but also through organising themed workshops, panels and other activities. The mailing list now has hundreds of members across the world and in different disciplines. We have focused a lot on early career scholars in part for equity reasons (as they have fewer resources to draw on) but also because are so many who have been inspired by the basic themes and concepts used. Robbie, Mustapha and I also began the *Kilombo: Colonial Questions and International Relations* book series with Rowman and Littlefield International to provide a space for publishing monograph-length works addressing key questions.

Just four years later it seems (at least to me) inconceivable that such a network should not exist, and perhaps if we had not begun this group in this form something else would have sprung up. The challenge for the long term is maintain the momentum for the group as a serious and productive space which generates important thinking. Within the upswing in general interest it is easy to become a flavour-of-the-month idea which is used to spice up otherwise bland work; the success of the group will be in its capacity to cultivate serious and innovative scholarship after the seeming-novelty of the terminology has worn off.

**You are part of the Decolonising the University movement at SOAS, which is part of other nation-wide and international movements. Can you explain how coloniality affects higher education?**

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If we accept, as Quijano argues, that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same process, then all of our modern institutions, including higher education, have been forged in a context of coloniality. That is to say, more simply, that the colonial experience is constitutive to modern transformations. Speaking in a broad sense, this means that the organisation of knowledges, ideas, labour, capital and processes within modernity have tended to uphold Western supremacy over 'lesser' areas of the world. Obviously the picture is more complicated than that at the level of detail but the concept of coloniality draws our necessary attention to the structural dimensions and tendencies of this relationship. Thus the idea of coloniality tells us that the underlying dynamic of modernity is not necessarily universalising or equalising, but reproduces a hierarchically ordered world.

What does this mean for higher education? Put simply, for a long time in many countries universities were (and remain) institutions for reproducing the elite of a country – the governing classes. In the West, and in its formal and informal imperial spheres, these classes were often involved in the project of maintaining empire itself or managing post-imperial relations. This was not simply a side project but central to how many European powers at least conceived of themselves – as Empires and not 'nation-states' – some until quite late into the twentieth century. Whilst scholarship and higher education was not simply a handmaiden to this political project, many within the Western academy (and the Western public) nonetheless accepted many parameters of this common sense – that the West were the natural rulers of the world. I would suggest that this common sense has never been fully dislodged, despite the radical and world-shaking campaigns for decolonization and racial equality. Universities were part of the struggle for decolonization, of course, and provided meeting spaces for intellectuals from the colonized world to develop ideas, strategies and alliances for the unrest that proceeded.

Higher Education today has come some way towards becoming a mass activity (in a very qualified sense) rather than explicitly elitist but nonetheless many of the things it teaches, values, prizes and defends cannot be disentangled from the histories of Western supremacy. I do not think this history can be wished away – the problem I have is when this history is made invisible or its values rendered universal, when actually it is contestable, flawed and amenable to re-thinking.

### **And how to decolonise the university concretely?**

There are multiple dimensions for thinking about the university as a colonial space, and which might be amenable to 'decolonising' work. 'Decolonising' in this sense means identifying ways in which the university structurally reproduces colonial hierarchies, re-imagining them and putting alternatives into practice.

Obviously, one area which draws a lot of attention is the question of the curriculum – who is on it? What do they say? Who is it for? One model of the university sees academics as the bestowers of knowledge onto the student community. To decolonise the curriculum however means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue about what is being taught and how it frames the world, and collaboration between teachers and students on what might be done differently. It is not enough to simply complain that a curriculum is one-sided, if we cannot point to other sides of the story. That however requires time spent on researching and sharing alternatives, and time spent talking about it. It requires conversations about the relationship between the situation of the author and the nature of what they are saying. These all take time and goodwill. The conversations may also require an expanded understanding of how and where relevant knowledges can be engaged.

However, this is not the only element. We see hierarchies linked to colonial power within universities in terms of their workforce policies and structures – there is often a high correspondence between seniority / salary and less diversity in terms of race, gender and nationality. Questions of employment precarity – particularly affecting hourly-paid staff and outsourced staff are mapped onto a broader situation in which some staff are treated as much more 'disposable' than others. To decolonise the university, we need to think about how we can ensure a system where all those who engage with the university to make their living, or to study, can do so under conditions of dignity, respect and security.

A third element in decolonising the university is in thinking about how students experience the university differently.

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Race, gender and class have all been demonstrated as bases for lower student attainment and experiences of exclusion from the university environment. These are linked to the university's historic identity and mission, as well as wider structural inequalities within society. These are not surprising, but point to ways in which – if we want the university to be a genuinely publicly-oriented and liberating space – we as a scholarly community should be working to change it.

### **Do you think SOAS is unique in this regard or can this movement be transposed to other universities?**

I think the most recent agitations began elsewhere – probably the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa was one of the most significant drivers of change, and this is also being read through uprisings in North America and so on. SOAS is somewhat unique insofar as the students are particularly alive to these issues, and perhaps the staff are relatively well-versed in the issues and debates that emerge. That said, both the issues and the prospective responses are structural in character – in that sense we should be having these conversations in all universities.

### **Part of your research is dedicated to decolonising the study of politics, namely in your forthcoming book *Decolonising Intervention*. Could you explain how a decolonising approach affects our understanding of international intervention?**

The book makes the argument that the literatures on international intervention and statebuilding tend to leave out the perspectives and experiences of the targets of intervention – that is, the intended beneficiaries. It says that this is not accidental but the consequence of habits of Eurocentric thinking – whereby the Western subject is privileged as a site of knowledge, experience and relevance to the political world. The book constructs methodological strategies for overcoming this bias – through engaging the historical presence, political consciousness and material realities of the targets (i.e. the intended beneficiaries) of international intervention.

This changes how we think about the politics of international intervention. Many writers have tended to locate its political significance in terms of its effects on sovereignty, the nature of 'liberal-local' interactions (hybridity, resistance, friction etc) or in terms of the problems of practice. Using a decolonising approach in this study however demonstrates the centrality of other dynamics – namely the problem of material dependency as a condition for engagement, the desire of donors to continuously re-insert themselves into planning and policy processes, the relative disposability of the targets of intervention in terms of their time and views, and a structure of entitlement in terms of consuming the resources of intervention.

I argue that these dynamics – which significantly condition the outcomes of intervention – are made intelligible through thinking about the colonality of power as a structuring condition for intervention. Without this understanding, these dysfunctional dynamics look relatively solvable / mundane. And yet, it is the case that despite an understanding of these dynamics, they are never addressed in a systematic way. My argument is that this is because their foundation is not poor practice but a wider problem of how intervention is structured; that is, through presumptive hierarchies of competence, entitlement and leadership that systematically undermine the attempt to build something more solid.

### **How can the current state of world politics be best described?**

It is tempting to give a one-word answer to this question; 'scary' / 'hostile' / 'tumultuous', but that would be pretty meaningless. We are certainly in a period where the love-in over liberal economic and political globalisation is to some extent over – this pervades the recurrent debt crises, the rise of right-wing and fascist organisations to prominence, the increased militarisation of different spaces and territories, the re-negotiating of treaties or ignoring of international organisations and so on. Obviously, it was only a love-in in some quarters – many suffered more continuously under globalisation, particularly in the global South. And moreover, many of the apparent changes mask what is still continuous in terms of the mobility of capital, the rights of corporations and so on. Because the changes will affect the Western countries most ostentatiously, we will be tempted to overstate their structural significance.

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

I suppose learning to get outside of your comfort zone and thinking habits, however you do it, is what makes you a good scholar. This is the hardest part of good scholarship – fighting your own prejudices, beliefs, identity and so on, and opening up your horizons to as wide a possible array of influences and engagements. Most of us, especially as careers progress, get more complacent or are tempted to re-package things we have already done. In addition, the structure of academic careers in the global neoliberal university means that this kind of fundamental challenge becomes a high-cost and high-risk activity. So whatever you can make time for in the early stages of your career will improve your scholarship across the board.

The other thing is to think upwards. Feminist and anti-colonial scholars have hung on to the insight that you can learn more about processes and systems when you focus on those subjects who are most marginalised or disempowered by it. This sensibility is empirically testable, but I can think of very few situations, if any, in which our shared understanding would not be hugely improved by an engagement with people who endure the consequences of them. If we want International Relations to become a more democratic, global and humane project, this kind of work is indispensable.

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This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffmann. Alvina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.