

Interview - Jonna Nyman

Written by E-International Relations

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Jonna Nyman is a Leverhulme Fellow and Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Sheffield, UK. Her research broadly centres on security politics, with a particular interest in energy security, climate politics, and China. She has recently published a monograph with Oxford University Press, titled *The Energy Security Paradox: Rethinking Energy (In)security in the United States and China* (2018, OUP). She also co-edited *Ethical Security Studies: A New Research Agenda* (2016, Routledge) and has published articles in the *Review of International Studies*, the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, and *Millennium*. Nyman is currently undertaking a major three-year research project funded by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship, titled 'Securing China: Understanding security politics beyond the West'. Her research has been supported by external funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council and the Leverhulme Trust. In 2018-2019, she will be spending time as a visiting researcher at Harvard University, at the University of Copenhagen, and at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs (UI).

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

There are so many right now I'm not sure where to start! I think critical IR is on fire at the moment, there are so many (especially early career) scholars doing new and exciting research. At the moment, I'm probably most excited about all the work that connects in some way to post-Western IR: from debates on decolonizing IR and security studies, to work on race and racism, to scholars thinking about how to theorise IR and security in ways that attempt to escape the traps of Eurocentrism – whether by working on non-Western philosophy or by theorising from the 'bottom-up', worlding security studies by bringing in the experiences of those not at the 'center'. The growing number of non-Western scholars engaging with these questions also stands out.

I've also become more and more absorbed by new debates on methods, especially thinking about co-production of research with participants, but also creative methods more broadly, including visual methods. I'm increasingly engaging with photography as a method and have also experimented with participatory photography. Lastly, I think the growing interest in everyday IR is producing fascinating insights. I say growing, but of course, like many other 'trends' in IR, this is something feminist scholars have worked on for a long time. The way much of this work engages with lived experience is something I'm very interested in as part of my current project, particularly the ways in which it brings in and engages with the role of emotions, embodiment, and atmospheres.

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

When I started my academic journey (so to speak), I was very much focused on inequality, injustice, and environmental degradation – and the ways in which these fit together. This still underpins work on security ethics and my work on energy security. But as I got more exposed to other critical work, particularly in security studies, I started thinking more about how security is (re)produced in particular ways and what the unintended consequences are. When we talk about security, that involves several choices with huge implications: what (or who) do we choose to protect? From what threats and how? And, who gets to make these choices? So, I'm interested in *how* different meanings of security are produced and become considered common sense, and what the effects are. In particular, how some securities or insecurities become politically significant, over others, and what practical and normative

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consequences these choices have.

My interest in these kinds of questions about security that continue to underpin my work was really prompted by Laura Shepherd, who is not only a fantastic scholar but also an inspirational teacher. I was lucky enough to be taught and supervised by Laura at the University of Birmingham, and her engagement, enthusiasm, and rigour remain an inspiration for me. I also have to mention Anthony Burke here. His passion for thinking creatively about ethics, positive action, and change has continually challenged me and encouraged me to keep going, both in our collaborative project on Ethical Security Studies and on a personal level.

You recently published your book, *The Energy Security Paradox: Rethinking Energy (In)security in the United States and China*. What is the paradox and why does it matter?

In this book I trace energy security practices in the United States and China between 2004-2016, focusing on how energy is understood as a security issue and what the consequences are. Drawing on over a 1000 official documents, texts, and speeches, a series of elite interviews, and six months of immersive fieldwork, I show that as energy becomes incorporated in state national security agendas, providing continuous supplies of fossil fuels for the state remains at the centre. This narrow understanding of energy security is now considered to be 'common sense', but I show that it enables and encourages zero-sum competition between states over fossil fuels, driving up demand and increasing tension and mistrust between states, producing insecurity. This harms prospects for cooperation at a time when states need to work together. But it also encourages continued consumption of fossil fuels, the main cause of climate change and further destruction of the planet which humans depend on to survive. Therefore, policies which are undertaken in the name of energy *security* actually make states, the environment, and human beings *less secure*: this is what I call *The Energy Security Paradox*. I use this to challenge the link between energy and national security, by showing that it is counterproductive: it does not produce security in any meaningful sense.

The energy security paradox matters because the decisions we make about energy shape our present and our future. Energy security politics has a direct impact on the continued survival of human life as we know it, and the earth cannot survive if we continue consuming fossil energy at current rates. But thinking about energy security has failed to keep up with these changing realities. We are facing a climate catastrophe that threatens all of our futures.

Crucially, the book also explores possibilities for change, looking at contestation over the meaning of energy security to explore why and how common sense has emerged. Here, I go beyond states to consider both state and non-state actors that contest and resist common sense energy security practices, forwarding radical alternatives. This, in turn, illustrates fluidity in the concept of security and shows that both the meaning and the value of security depends on how it is used. I propose using existing attempts to think and practice energy security differently as a basis for reimagining energy security in more ethical ways. So I propose a radical reconsideration of how we approach and practice energy security.

Should energy be securitised?

I don't necessarily think energy should be securitized. As I argue in my book and in my paper on the value of the security, I think the value of security ultimately depends on the context. Securitization is not inherently 'bad', but neither is it inherently good. I think when it comes to energy, in particular, securitization can be helpful; but only if we can use that to change priorities and reallocate resources in a way that moves us towards a more sustainable development path. For me, that necessarily has to involve a broader understanding of security and the ways in which policies undertaken in the name of security have the potential to cause harm. Current energy security policies make states, the environment, and human beings *less secure* – this is what I call the 'energy security paradox', a concept I develop in my book. Energy security has evolved from simply meaning a basic need for energy, to become almost synonymous with protecting state fossil fuel supplies, in the name of national security. But energy security doesn't have to centre on states. Energy security does not have to mean maximising 'our' fossil fuel supplies to avoid dependence on others. It could equally involve cooperative measures to develop effective and sustainable energy resources for the benefit of all. The conditions and threats of the Anthropocene demand a shift away from exclusive national security politics and towards an inclusive and cooperative politics of protection and care. When we talk

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about energy security and securitization, we need to think about what kind of security we think is desirable. And this ultimately comes down to bigger ethical questions about what kind of world we want.

You are currently undertaking a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship on ‘Securing China: Understanding security politics beyond the West’. Can you explain your approach to the topic and your findings so far?

This project really came about because of my work on energy security in China. As someone with a background in critical security studies and an ongoing love-hate relationship with securitization theory, I just kept running up against things on the ground that didn't quite 'fit'. When I talked to people working on energy security in China, I found that existing theories didn't really help me to make sense of what was happening on the ground. Security studies draws largely on Western historical contexts, political systems, philosophies, and empirical cases, to theorise security politics. In the words of John Hobson, most IR theory produces a 'parochial or provincial analysis of the West that masquerades as the universal' (2012: 18).

In this project, I wanted to really flip this on its head, and start with China. So, I'm tracing key changes in Chinese security practice that have occurred over the last five years and using this to theorise how security works in China today and what the effects are on Chinese social and political life. It is a mixed-methods project, which draws on documentary and archival research, but also interviews with elites, private sector and civil society actors, alongside ethnographic methods, including 8 months of immersive fieldwork and participant observation, ethnographic photography, and participatory photography.

Could you tell us the positive and negative experiences of your 8 month-long fieldwork in China?

Spending an extended period of time on fieldwork in China in 2017-2018 really made me fall back in love with research. I couldn't have done it without the generous financial support of the Leverhulme Trust. It gave me the time and space to explore where I wanted the project to go, and I have to say the negative experiences are few and far between. I always love spending time in China, and this time I also had the opportunity to travel which gave me a much deeper understanding of how security politics changes and diverges across the country. I was based in Beijing but travelled to around 10 other provinces, including the far Western region of Xinjiang, and these experiences have really shaped my thinking. The chance to engage with a wide range of scholars from different institutions across China was invaluable – I've met so many kind colleagues who were incredibly generous with their time and pushed me intellectually in different ways. I also have to mention the food, since I've effectively eaten my way across China.

In terms of negative experiences, they were largely practical. It's becoming harder and harder for foreign scholars to visit China, not only because of shrinking institutional support for visas but also because the current political climate in China makes it difficult for Chinese colleagues to host Western academics. I think this is a real pity, both because it risks leaving Chinese colleagues increasingly isolated from the rest of the world and because both foreign and Chinese scholars really benefit from exchanging ideas and collaborating. Fieldwork is also very tiring, and it takes its toll. On my last trip I got sick several times, and was briefly hospitalised, and when I got home it took me about a month to fully recover. I think it was primarily exhaustion. We don't talk about this enough, either.

How has China's approach towards energy changed over the 21st century and does the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative offer a new global energy governance model? How does the discussion of China's energy security compare to that of the USA?

It's changed hugely. Energy security wasn't a big area of concern for China until 1993 when it became a net oil importer, and that really sparked a focus on supply security, particularly of oil, and an emphasis on diversification, both in terms of where those imports come from and in terms of thinking about other sources of fuel. This remained the primary focus in the early 2000s, as we can see in the 'going out' policy which encouraged the big state-owned energy companies to go abroad to seek new supplies. But the energy demand shock in 2004 broadened the debate, opening up space for thinking about the need to change consumption patterns. We see this shift reflected in the 11th Five Year Plan too. From this point, there is a distinct shift to emphasize sustainability, with the gradual introduction

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of targets on energy consumption. That said, the tension between energy and environmental policy remains today, in particular, because of China's ongoing dependence on coal.

I have mixed feelings about OBOR, or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It's certainly significant, in terms of both the scale and scope of investment, but I don't think it's offering an alternative model as such. As work by Jinghan Zeng and others illustrates, it's largely fragmented and driven by a range of different interests, many of them commercial rather than political. That said, the investments do create potential long-term dependence on China for recipient countries, which can have implications down the line.

When it comes to energy security there are more similarities than differences in how the debate in the US and China is framed. Although their energy mix is different (in particular because China is so coal dependant) they both obsess over energy independence and self-sufficiency. Today, China has a much deeper understanding of the need to tackle the environmental consequences of rapid development and energy consumption, while the United States is faltering because of the current administration.

What can we do about Eurocentrism in the field of security studies?

We can listen. We can support non-Western scholars, and critical work investigating subjugated or previously overlooked knowledge and experiences. We can go to conferences outside Europe and North America. Study languages! There are so many things we can do to play a part in tackling the Eurocentrism of security studies. It's not enough to simply point at stuff and call it Eurocentric. Or to sit around and complain about it. No one can do everything, but we can all do something.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars studying international relations and/or security studies?

Be curious! Above all follow your curiosity and be open to surprise. Curiosity, surprise, and also confusion, are what bring me back to research again and again. It is often daunting to admit when we are surprised or confused because we tend to want to look like we know and that we have the answers. But as my students discover year after year, I have more questions than answers. I think curiosity is what continues to keep me (relatively) sane, so the advice I always give to students when they ask me about research projects or dissertations is to follow what they're interested in, what puzzles them. And to be open-minded about their potential findings, open to surprise.

Cynthia Enloe's book *The Curious Feminist* has really influenced my thinking here. But I came to it via my colleague Joanna Tidy, another fantastic scholar and curious feminist. Which brings me to support networks: find like-minded people, build support networks, nurture them, and support each other. This advice applies to students and scholars of any level and age. We need each other, and together we can create a supportive space of curious scholars working collaboratively and pushing and challenging each other in productive ways.