

## Interview - Sara Salem

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUN 24 2019

Sara Salem is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at the London School of Economics. Sara's research interests include political sociology, postcolonial studies, Marxist theory, feminist theory, and global histories of empire and imperialism. She is particularly interested in questions of traveling theory, postcolonial/anti-colonial nationalism, and feminist theory. She has recently published articles on Angela Davis in Egypt in the journal *Signs*; on Frantz Fanon and Egypt's postcolonial state in *Interventions: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*; and on intersectionality as a travelling theory in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, among others.

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

I think one area that has given us a lot of interesting material recently are the debates around postcolonial theory and decoloniality, particularly how these two bodies of work overlap on certain questions and in certain ways but also diverge in other ways, and what it would mean to bring these two together and think of them alongside one another. I've been really interested in the debates around the term decolonizing, what it means to say that or to call for the decolonization of things like the curriculum, the university, the museum. In particular, I found this debate quite interesting from a global perspective, in terms of thinking about how decolonization is something that did happen in much of the world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and yet was obviously incomplete in very important ways. So what it means to think about decolonization as a global and ongoing process rather than to sometimes center it as something that's emerged in places like the UK or the U.S. In particular, how here in the UK 'Rhodes Must Fall' is often associated with the University of Oxford rather than the University of Cape Town. Connected to this is the question of what it means to deploy the term 'decolonize' and what kind of politics this brings with it. I think here in particular of Tuck and Yang's article *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*, where they point out the centrality of land to the question of decolonization and that we should be aware of the politics on the structure of settler colonialism when we deploy the term decolonization. That's definitely one area that I see a lot of really interesting debates happening.

Another area that's also connected to this question of decoloniality and postcolonialism is the interesting work coming from the question of the international or internationalism. There is a lot of interesting research being done on what anti-colonial movements or anti-colonial states or state projects envisioned, not only nationally, which is often the lens through which we understand these movements, but also internationally. A really interesting new book, *Worldmaking After Empire* by Adom Getachew, argues that many of these anti-colonial movements should not be understood as just national movements, but actually were projects that tried to remake the world. They are projects of world-making. I find this a really fascinating area of work that shows that there's just so much more to be done around that particular historical moment. And it also provides a really important counterpoint to the fascination with things like globalization or cosmopolitanism because, in a sense, internationalism or anti-colonial internationalism can be understood as a much more radical and expansive project in terms of what it tried to achieve at the global level, particularly its focus on anti-capitalism and anti-racism.

Another area that I see a lot of really exciting research and debates happening within is around the question of how we can understand the complexities of global capitalism and what this means for how we understand resistance to it. I've become really, really fascinated by research projects that basically just track one single commodity or one single item around the world and use that to tell us a bigger story about capitalism and resistance to it. I became really into this genre when I read Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, which

## Interview - Sara Salem

Written by E-International Relations

basically traces a particular type of mushroom across space and time. The book shows both the power and limits of global capital as well as the very different types of resistance to global capital that we can own. You really see in this very detailed ethnographic work how commodities are made, sold, how they travel and all the different processes that are necessary for this to happen. Another example of this is Sven Beckert's amazing book *Empire of Cotton*. And there is a new book that I'm really looking forward to reading, Janet Carsten's *Blood Work*, which similarly traces blood as it moves from one context to another.

And finally – I mean, I could go on for hours – one more area in which I find myself increasingly interested in is the question of intimate histories and archival practices. I think this is not necessarily a new area of research, but it's an area of research in which we increasingly see fascinating work being done. I recently finished Saidiya Hartman's book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which is a really, really amazing example of the ways in which intimate histories can tell us so much about bigger questions around politics, race, economics, inequality, gender, sexuality, and all these bigger structural debates that we've been engaged in. What it means to actually rethink what we know about the intimate, about archives, about who is an archival subject, what has been erased from the archive. All of these questions are really prominent now and are becoming more and more central to the way in which we think about history. I think this is also really important and has been talked about quite a lot, especially in histories of places like the Middle East, where we really have to think about where the archives come from, what the archives tell us, what kind of stories or subjects they value, and therefore what the limits of these archives are. In that sense, Hartman's book is a really interesting way to think about how we can approach the silence or exclusion of the archive without necessarily saying that there's nothing we can say here or there is no story that we can tell. That's also a really interesting area of research that I think is becoming more and more prominent. Connected to that, there's a really good book coming out soon by Hazel Carby, called *Imperial Intimacies*, which also talks about the question of empire through the intimate and through the Internet archive.

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

This is such a big question. I think that more recently I've really come to think about how my own personal history and my own positionality or location has had a major influence on the way I think about the world. In particular, being half Egyptian, half Dutch, having grown up in Zambia and then lived in Egypt, I'm really interested in the ways in which these different contexts, but also the relationships between these contexts, have made me think about particular subjects in particular ways. For example, I'm really conscious now of how the connections between Egypt and Zambia are negotiated in both Egypt and in Zambia at different historical moments, what this has to do with a history of Pan Africanism, or the history of anti-colonialism and independence in Africa during the 1950s, and how this in many ways has actually shaped my own approach to anti-colonialism and Pan Africanism.

More recently, I've become much more attuned to how personal histories are embedded in the way we think about broader academic questions. But I think, in general, there are two moments at which my thinking was very significantly altered. The first moment was my exposure to postcolonial studies, largely through canonical figures such as Edward Said, Spivak, Baba, and so on. And later, my exposure to scholars like Frantz Fanon. This also made me think quite a lot about how we understand or position postcolonial studies, how some scholars will date it to Edward Said while others will go back much further to Fanon and Césaire and so on. Also, my exposure to those debates around what postcolonial studies is, the role of anti-colonialism in postcolonial studies, the relationship between the material and the representation in postcolonial studies. I remember that getting into those debates really shifted the way I thought about a lot of things.

Another major moment was coming across – and it connected to the first moment – two bodies of work: one is postcolonial Marxist theory, the other the Black Radical Tradition. For me, those two bodies of work have really made me feel much more confident in the way I think about the connections between the postcolonial and the material, and have made me think a lot about how we can rethink what we mean when we say, for example, 'the Marxist canon'. Which voices get centered in that and which voices are then always seen as just alternative voices. I have actually realized that the Marxist canon has essentially always been an extremely diverse canon, made up largely of thinkers from either racialized populations within the Global North or from the Global South. Those traditions have

## Interview - Sara Salem

Written by E-International Relations

also been massively influential on the way I think about my own work.

And finally, in terms of feminist scholarship, I've been hugely influenced by people like Chandra Mohanty and Claudia Jones, who made me think a lot about the intersections of gender, race, class and all of these multiple structural inequalities, and how they come together at different moments. Chandra Mohanty's article *Under Western Eyes* is one that was definitely one of those articles that I remember reading and thinking something has shifted in the way that I see the world. And it's become such a favorite of mine to teach as well because you can often see that moment in the classroom in terms of how students respond to what she's arguing in that piece.

I think the coming together of these different moments has probably produced the way I think about a lot of things now. This has also really underlined for me why it's so important for us to think about the way we teach and what we teach because I've realized that I've only been exposed to many of these canons or many of these traditions so much later in my own education, mostly during my PhD. I sometimes wonder what it would've meant to have read these scholars and engaged in these questions when I was doing my undergraduate degree, or when I was in high school. I wonder what having had more time with all of these questions and all of these thinkers would have meant, and it's made me realize the urgency with which we need to think about what we are including in what we teach and how we teach it as well.

**Your research draws on and explores the connections between postcolonial theory, Marxism, feminist theory, and political sociology. Can you explain how this approach enhances understanding and theorising of the international?**

I think this matters in how we understand the international in several ways. One is that the international is really one of those concepts that remains very Eurocentric in the way most people understand it or approach it, in the sense that it's understood to just speak about a particular Westphalian structure dominated by Anglo-American and European supremacy. On the one hand, it's important that we acknowledge this supremacy and the presence of both colonialism and neo-colonialism in the creation of the modern world. But on the other hand, I really think it's important that we search for, highlight, emphasize other ideas of what the international could have been when these ideas cropped up, what these ideas imagined, what kind of futures they spoke about or what kind of utopias they dreamed of. I'm thinking here in particular of Third Worldism, the Communist Internationals, Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism, and so on. I think this has become such an important aspect of my work in that it really critiques a lot of the inevitability or determinism that we have in certain disciplines, including international relations and politics. For me, postcolonial theory, Marxism and feminist theory all provide very interesting counter-points to what the global can be or could have been at certain moments – coming back to the body of work that looks at this moment of anti-colonialism that we see in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only from state-led projects, which is often where the focus is, but also from radical thinkers, from students, from workers, peasants, feminists. There were so many groups during this moment that imagined and dreamed of different futures and different possibilities. And these really disrupt our assumptions about what the international has always been and what the international can be. I think it's important to do the work of unearthing these if only to pause and say, actually, the world could be otherwise.

I'm especially interested in how these futures were very much conscious of creating a world or creating an international that was based on very different values, which were much more attuned to questions of solidarity, cooperation, different ways of thinking about what the world is and how we should live with nature. I'm also interested in how these movements troubled the neat binary between national and international—I'm thinking here specifically of Pan-Arabism. And all of these points, I think, are increasingly urgent in our current moment as well. Going back to these points at which we see an opening in global politics, where alternate visions of what the international could have been are really, really important. I'm thinking here of Vivienne Jabri's book *The Postcolonial Subject*, as well as the book by Getachew I mentioned either. Even at a more conservative level, if we look at certain moments like the Bandung conference that took place in the 1950s, we could see a more radical idea of internationalism come up than what we traditionally envision when we think of the international, again focused very much on questions of independence, of sovereignty, of mutual cooperation. And although all of these notions can be criticized as being quite Eurocentric and still reproducing a colonial understanding of what states should do, I think they also point to an understanding among many of these people in many of these states that the old international just wasn't working,

## Interview - Sara Salem

Written by E-International Relations

wasn't just, wasn't fair for the majority of the world's populations, so what can we do about that? In a sense, that's still a question that we're grappling with today.

**In a recent article on hegemony and dependency in postcolonial Egypt, you re-read Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* to examine Egypt's capitalist class. How does Fanon help us to make sense of the capitalist expansion in the postcolonial world?**

I think Fanon has a lot to tell us about capitalist expansion in the postcolonial world. Fanon and his intervention of why we should 'stretch' Marxism, and in particular his centering of colonial development and colonialism as the underpinning structure that allows capitalism to expand in the colonies, remains invaluable to scholars of capitalism and class formation across the world. For my article, I found Fanon really useful in articulating the ways in which Egypt, as a colonized nation, was structured economically and politically to allow for certain forms of extraction and that this had massive social, political and economic ramifications. In particular, as Fanon famously argued, it creates a dependent bourgeoisie and basically a dependent ruling class that is connected to foreign capital, or British capital. This ruling class is not ruling in the interest of Egypt. It's essentially just a middleman between British or colonial capitalism, and Egypt, or the colony. Fanon's core argument is that this bourgeoisie continues to reproduce itself into the postcolonial moment. So we don't necessarily see a rupture at decolonization if decolonization does not also bring about an end to this basically dependent class.

In the article, I argue that on the one hand, this is a really useful way of understanding the creation of Egypt's colonial economic system, but that actually in places like Egypt – and I would argue in other places as well – in the postcolonial moment, we do see a rupture with this dependent class, for example with the emergence of Nasser and the Free Officers. On the one hand, they did resist colonial capital to some extent, obviously for reasons to do with creating their own base and their own power structure. There are also moments like the nationalization of the Suez Canal and various industries or the land reform program that they ultimately tried to implement. All of these moments signify some form of resistance to colonial capitalism. But on the other hand, you do still see what Fanon is talking about in Nasser and the Free Officers, which is a replication still of colonial institutions and colonial modes of governance, including capitalism, including the nation-state and nationalism. All of these institutions, again, continue into the post-colonial period. While in some senses, the Egyptian case breaks away from the depiction of the dependent bourgeoisie because we do see a form of an independent bourgeoisie emerge, in other ways we can see clearly what Fanon warned us about, which is that decolonization, unless it's radical enough, will essentially replicate the same inequalities and the same connections and dependencies that were created under the colonial system.

**In another article, you used the documentary *Four Women of Egypt* to trace the development of the Egyptian women's movement of the 1950s–1970s. Can you explain how feminist organising and theorising was affected by the neoliberalisation of Egypt?**

In my article for Hypatia, I used a documentary entitled *The Four Women of Egypt* to explore how the Egyptian women's movement from the 1950s to the 1970s understood the questions facing Egyptian society and Egyptian feminism. They essentially tried to show that this moment is a really interesting historical moment because you can very much see the emphasis that many feminists were putting on the coming together of colonialism, economic inequality and gendered forms of inequality. In this film, which traces the lives of four very prominent Egyptian feminists, we can see how they approach various questions and various events and have really complex ways of understanding the intersecting structures that were producing gendered inequality. What I found particularly fascinating about this documentary is how clearly an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist framing emerges around questions of gender equality and inequality.

This documentary sets the scene for the 1970s, when Egypt's neoliberal project begins, by pointing to how there was almost a shift from a very incisive critique of capitalism to what we see in the 70s and 80s, which have less of a focus on anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism and shift instead to different types of debates in feminist organizing. Obviously, some scholars like Islah Jad have talked about how partly this was a consequence of a shift towards NGOs and how the Arab women's movement in many ways became based within NGOs and the many complications this brought with it. But partly I think this is also to do with the advent of the neoliberal project itself and

## **Interview - Sara Salem**

Written by E-International Relations

the effect that this had on Egyptian women. In particular, during this moment we see an increase in social reproductive work that women have to do. We see an increase in general work that women have to do. Also, many families during this era become families in which both the mother and father have to work. We see rising food costs, rising unemployment. All of these societal shifts that are happening, I think, are also equally responsible for the shift that we see within the feminist movement itself.

**Exploring Angela Davis's encounter with Egyptian feminists in the early 1970s, you show in a recent article that a material analysis of gender provided the basis for solidarity between African American and Egyptian feminists. How exactly did this shared understanding of gender allow feminists to solidarise transnationally?**

What I really found fascinating about this encounter are the ways in which both Angela Davis and the Egyptian feminists that she meets understand the basis of their solidarity. This solidarity, for them, was really rooted in a shared political project of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, which were seen as central to gender liberation. Throughout this article, I try to show how they navigate this question of solidarity. On the one hand, it becomes clear that the starting point from which they were able to come together and have these very important political discussions was their shared understanding of global neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism at this moment in time. There are very interesting moments, for example, where Angela Davis points out the similar ways in which African American women in the U.S. are racialized in particular ways by white supremacy and how this again has similar effects on the ways in which Arab women are understood or racialized. These types of anecdotal connections were really important to how she understood Egypt coming from the U.S. and to her own familiarity with the way white supremacy and in particular white feminism actually serves other women who are not white.

On the other hand, I think, a lot of the solidarity also stemmed from the ability of these women, both Angela Davis and the Egyptian feminists, to understand the role of capitalism and anti-capitalism in feminist organizing. A lot of the solidarity similarly came from a position of resistance to this global emerging neoliberal project. This is also something that comes across very clearly in the chapter that Angela Davis wrote on her visit. She notes quite clearly the dramatic effects that are happening in Egypt because of the beginning of Sadat's Infitah project, which is basically a new liberal project.

In the article, I try to show that it was these twin forms of resistance that created the possibility of solidarity between Angela Davis and the Egyptian feminists she met, and that the creation of the solidarity was by no means sort of smooth or natural. It very much did include discussions or disagreements. It did have to navigate important differences in class and positionality and race and so on. But ultimately it was this shared belief that gender justice, or justice in general, was very much dependent on adopting an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist positionality. This was what created the basis of solidarity.

**In your opinion, is there transnational solidarity between feminists in the Global North and the Global South today?**

The question of transnational feminist solidarity today is obviously a very complex one. I think that globally, this is a moment in which we're almost seeing an ebb in global transnational solidarity, especially compared to the highs of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, when it almost seemed like there was just much more imagining and dreaming of these transnational connections than what we see today – although I do think this has been shifting over the last few years. Increasingly people are realizing the importance of these transnational connections. I think this is largely because of how universal the rise of the far right has been, but also the climate crisis. These questions really draw us all into them and necessitate some kind of transnational response. I do think that there is a shift now, again, to think of the problems we face from a more transnational perspective.

I still think that, as I argued in the piece on Angela Davis, shared politics should be based on a common political project or common assumptions that we make about the way the world works and on how we can free everybody based on those assumptions. In that sense, anti-capitalism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism and gender liberation should still be very central to any transnational feminist project and should be the basis from which we are able to

## Interview - Sara Salem

Written by E-International Relations

think together, work together and organize. I think the feminist project is still very much affected by the legacies of white feminism and its exclusions, the legacies of how feminism has, for so long, been defined as a project of liberal feminism. This still poses a very big challenge to the ability of feminists globally to come together around a project that is very much against what white feminism has been pushing forward for such a long time. A project that is actually about anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and all of these questions that should be at the center of the feminist project rather than a simplistic idea of gender liberation. I would say in thinking through transnational feminist politics today, which are happening in many places, it is these questions of a common political project that are very central.

**Intersectionality has become a buzzword in current political debates. Revisiting the concept, you and Rekia Jibrin explore how intersectionality has moved away from its radical roots and has increasingly become something performative. Can you explain how intersectionality has been diluted, and what role neoliberalism in academia has played in this context?**

It is really important for us to state that intersectionality comes from a very radical place and its roots are very much in black feminism and third world feminist movements. This is something that really needs to be repeated over and over in light of the ways in which intersectionality's origins have almost been literally whitewashed in recent years. In many ways, once concepts enter the academy or become widespread in the academy, they tend to lose some of their radical potential. This is what has happened, to some extent, with intersectionality. Sirma Bilge has written really good articles on the whitening of intersectionality, so the ways in which white feminists, for example, have increasingly argued that they came up with this concept or that they were doing intersectional research even before the term was coined.

We see a lot of feminists today claiming to do intersectional work without necessarily doing the work itself. Intersectionality has almost become a prerequisite to feminist research today. It's become something that is very easily mobilized or quickly used without necessarily having an interest in work that is actually reflective of what intersectionality was calling for, or what black feminism or third world movements actually meant when they said that we need to think about the world intersectionally. It is increasingly urgent that we point to these radical roots of intersectionality and really think carefully about the lineage of the concept itself in order to still think about it in a radical way, rather than to give in to this tendency for radical concepts to become buzzwords as soon as they enter the academy or more and more people start to use them.

**To reclaim the radical edge of intersectionality, in your recent paper on *Intersectionality and Its Discontents* you propose to ground intersectionality in Marxist feminism(s). How does this help us to regain intersectionality's critical potential?**

In terms of intersectionality and Marxist theory, I think they're one way of reclaiming, or remembering actually, the radical roots of intersectionality, and to precisely to locate its history within black feminism and third world feminist movements. Many of these movements were very much materialist in orientation, so took seriously the question of anti-capitalism as central to projects of gender liberation. In calling for us to think of intersectionality from this Marxist perspective, it's less that I think we should add Marxism to intersectionality, but more to say that questions of capitalism and anti-capitalism have always been central to intersectionality. Many of the feminists who first used this concept or who did this work actually either referred to themselves as Marxists, were involved in anti-capitalist mobilizations or understood intersectionality itself as a very structural form of analysis. My goal is more to re-center this materialist element within this legacy of intersectionality rather than to call for anything new.

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

I think the most important thing that I continue to learn is to really interrogate what we mean by the 'international' in international relations. Often, 'ir' ends up just being 'r', so it's about relations between nation states rather than a critical or thorough approach to what international relations actually means. So, my main advice would be to think carefully about what the international means to you as a scholar, how you position yourself within this international, to what extent a discipline like international relations is actually global – I don't mean global only in terms of what parts of the world it talks or writes about, but also in terms of the representation of scholars from around the world, the

## **Interview - Sara Salem**

Written by E-International Relations

representation of knowledges, of ways of understanding, of ways of being, ways of writing, ways of thinking from around the world. How international is the discipline itself, and what is the aim of the discipline politically? I think that a question that we at this particular moment should really pay attention to, which is that knowledge production is never neutral. We're always intervening in something. We're always producing something. So, what are the political stakes of the knowledge that you're producing? Is it contributing to something that you see very as important in the world today? Is it doing more than just furthering our own careers (which of course it always does as well)? I found this question of the political stakes of research a very important question in my own trajectory. That's something I would definitely say is important for younger scholars to think about as well.

Aside from that, just an acknowledgement that academia is very difficult. It's very isolating. It comes with so much pressure and anxiety. So, another piece of advice would be: you're doing great. And academia is not everything.