

## Interview - Toni Hastrup

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Toni Hastrup

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**This interview is part of our Black History Month features. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.**

Toni Hastrup is a Senior Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Stirling, Scotland, UK. Her current research interests centre on the gender dynamics and processes of institutional transformation within and among regional security institutions. Her publications include *Charting Transformation through Security: Contemporary EU-Africa Relations*. Elsewhere, she has published widely on the regional aspects of implementing the Women Peace and Security agenda. Toni Hastrup is joint editor-in-chief of JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies and is on the editorial boards of several other journals.

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

Gosh it is difficult to choose if I am honest. Recently, I have been fascinated by the practices of knowledge production and that has led me to lots of work on decolonial thinking/the decolonial turn. Honestly, I am still coming to grips with it, but it really speaks to me at a fundamental level and across my broad research interests be it on Africa-EU relations, the Women, Peace and Security agenda, feminist foreign policy or how we understand Brexit. I find decolonial approaches in IR very exciting. I am thinking especially of the works of people like Olivia Rutazibwa, Meera Sabaratnam, Marsha Henry, Robbie Shilliam, Lisa Tilley, Yolande Bouka (she's such a wonderful story teller) – there are so many. I am also looking out for Kelly-Jo Bluen's work as well – her PhD project is really amazing. Let's just say I am fascinated by the brains of these people. Their work confronts the Whiteness of the academy both in scholarship and representation head on and I think thanks to them, I am finally starting to feel this place may be for me too.

Within EU studies, I am part of a collective of feminist researchers pushing for a greater applications of feminist insights into the study of and policymaking in the EU. I find this, too, a really important area of debate. And I am lucky to have fellow travellers in particular Roberta Guerrina, Katharine Wright, Annick Masselot and Hanna Muehlenhoff. Finally, although I know many people groan at any mention of a 'turn' in IR, the practice turn is making a lot of sense to me. I just have to figure out how all of these work together :) But I'll say again, it is difficult – as a journal editor I read a lot of interesting and important work and many of them contribute to pushing the boundaries of our discipline.

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

I have been most influenced by living in many different countries. I lived most of the first 16 years of my life in Nigeria. I came from what might be called a middle-class family – my parents had two degrees – but we didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up. Life wasn't easy. But growing up, I believed, because I was told that if I worked hard enough (read, do well in school, get educated) you could do anything, be anything – I after all have to do better than my parents. That was the aspiration, and I had evidence. Over time my parents were more financially secure, they seemed to get the promotions they applied for and although it was a struggle paid for my education abroad. In the Nigerian context, a predominantly black African country, meritocracy seemed to really work. Racism was not really something I thought of – it was foreign, only existing in Toni Morrison, or Baldwin's works. It didn't happen to people I

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knew, I only read about it. Let's just say my own experiences since age 16 have been interesting, brutal, humbling... When people ask me where I grew up, I don't know how to answer really because I'd say my grown-up self happened after I left Nigeria. More than 20 years later, I'd say yes, absolutely, how I understand the world has changed profoundly since then. I still very much enjoy my things and cannot deny the profound privilege I have had – 'studying abroad', working within a very elite profession – but capitalism as it is, is a scourge. Look at austerity, look at its impact on the poor who are made poorer, on women and especially women of colour (Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel have done some fantastic work on this) How do we still think this is how things should work, if only we improve it a bit? The Amazon is burning... we can't go on like this. Plus, meritocracy is BULLSHIT and white settler colonialism needs to die a fast death. So, how I understand the world now leads me to say these things.

### **What is the importance of Black History Month and what does it represent to you?**

I'll be honest and say I only started paying attention to Black History Month relatively recently, partly because of my students – I wanted to celebrate them. Despite the numbers of Black students at university, they are often invisible within the grand structure of higher education. Students are approached as a neutral category and we know this is far from helpful and ultimately unsupportive. In my own life, I like to think every month is black history month, a time to celebrate Blackness in all its glory and with pride. In reality it often feels, especially within university settings, that it's the month management remembers that we are here. In the UK, we have a significant BAME student attainment gap, ethnicity pay gap where Black academics are the most affected, are the most precarious and we seem not to be good enough for the top roles at Universities. Interestingly enough, this thing we've known for years gets re-upped every October and we are told there is 'commitment' to fixing it all. Another year goes by and we can expect the same again next October. I'm sure there are lots of allies really working hard to be supportive and to change things, but really, if it wasn't for my students, the official BHM will just be another month.

### **What are the major challenges facing the African Union concerning conflict management and resolution?**

There are two main categories of challenges I see for the AU. The first is internal. The AU is a young institution that it is going through the process of developing its capabilities while having to make use of what it has now to attempt to solve the various crises of the continent. Moreover, it is very much an intergovernmental organisation that is dependent on its member states in terms of important decision-making. This means that often, I feel that priorities are ill-defined even when people are working towards specific policy goals in the everyday. When policy is ill-defined, there is no impetus for it to take hold, and bureaucrats may be called to move on to the next thing – so there is no institutionalisation. The second challenge is to an extent external, but perhaps it is still internal too. The AU is still dependent on donors for its everyday function. I believe its largest donor is still the EU although it relies on bilateral funding from European member states too, as well as China and the United States, among others. While I'd argue that the AU has shown agency in determining what it does with that funding meaning I don't think partners necessarily dictate what it can or can't do, this model is not sustainable. And while the past may suggest some agency on the AU's part, the extent to which this is likely to continue given the multiple crises in the EU context is questionable. Herein lies the problem. There is of course an acute awareness of this, which is why a reform programme has currently been embarked on in the AU, spearheaded by Rwanda's Paul Kagame. There are some good ideas there. But where this reform of regional integration via the AU takes us is yet to be seen. Will it make a positive impact on the lives of Africans or will we just have a well-run institution in 5 years? What is it we are really working towards here?

### **How might Brexit impact Britain's relationship with African countries?**

Although the UK has not actually left the EU, it is useful to think of Brexit as a process that will be ongoing for a while, starting in June 2016. In some of the research I have done with Nadine Ansorg, University of Kent, we argue that how well the relationship fares will depend on Britain's own global positioning after exit. In a no-deal scenario, the UK is in for a rude awakening in terms of its economy. If the response to the financial crisis, austerity, is a foreshadowing of a typical response, then we may expect that the UK will be more closed off in its global entanglements where there is no immediate benefit. In the Commonwealth, the UK has sought to prioritise the relationship with New Zealand and

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Australia and India to an extent. Beyond this, it is mainly committed to getting a trading partnership with the United States. Africa is thus not high on the agenda of its International Relations as far as I can see. Should a recession occur in the UK due to a no-deal Brexit, I reckon the UK will roll back its aid commitments to Africa, after all there has already been talk of this from certain Conservative quarters. Beyond this, and where obviously, Britain is a powerful country within the international system, there is the question of whether it will wield its power for good or ill, anywhere in the world... Let's just say I worry.

### **What has been done to increase the participation of African women in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS)? How could this be further improved?**

I think a lot of work has gone into highlighting the spaces in which women are missing in the context of African security. The one area that the African Union has been focusing on with regards to participation and in fulfilling not just WPS but existing regional imperatives too, is the training more women mediators. Moreover, I think it is important to note that African women have already been involved in the WPS agenda. We already enjoy the fruits of their labour so they are participating.

But of course, within a specific conflict resolution context, one can argue that women are often missing from the decision-making table – at least they are not as visible. It is now an established narrative in the conflict and peace studies literature that many 'official' mediators are men. By official, I am talking about the ones who get face time and recognition for the agreements that count. Those men bring their own experiences to bear in these processes. I think this is expected. It is unsurprising then that many agreements seem to absent the reality of women's lives and experiences. The argument could then go that having more women trained in these roles removes the excuse that there just aren't enough qualified women, increases symbolic representation and allows these women to bring their experiences of existing to the table as well. So, one way of improving it is training. But I think it is more than this. There needs to be a willingness by those who've taken up space for so long to step back. There are women who are already doing their stuff, but do they get recognition? Are they acknowledged? It's not unique to Africa though. And that we shouldn't forget, I think.

### **How do the practices and implementation of the WPS agenda compare in the African Union and European Union?**

I'd argue that the AU is more advanced in their practices of WPS implementation than the EU. But that's way too general – both institutions have evolved differently, and the entry point for the WPS agenda has been different in both institutions. Whereas African women activists have found a foothold within the AU's institutions, the inclusion of WPS within the EU has been led mainly by civil servants who are bound by the existing rules of the institution. Moreover, there seems to have been more effort put into separating the inclusion of gender perspectives into the EU's development practices from its 'security' practices (despite the supposed link between the two) than actually having a way forward on WPS for almost 20 years. The AU didn't have that luxury. Insecurity fed into poverty and vice versa in terms of the lives of women on the ground. And there is still so much to do. Where the AU did not have direct oversight, African women, and organisations pressed forward making space for themselves, however tiny, within the regional institutions, whether it was AU or ECOWAS. Things are changing too for the EU though. Recently, there has been more of an opening in the EU to ideas from civil society and the academic community, mainly due to some strong champions within the External Action Service especially. The result of this has been fruitful – see for example, the new Strategic Approach on WPS and the recently adopted first action plan. The creation of these documents in themselves do not mean radical change as people need to continue to champion them – we can't get too carried away; but, almost 20 years after the first UNSCR, it is a promising start.

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

Read beyond your discipline; read more women, more works by Black and Indigenous people. Engage with that work and cite that work. Centre the knowledge of marginalised communities especially when you have relied on them for your work. Be empathetic to your colleagues and always pay it forward. You know, when Toni Morrison died, a particular quote of hers was making the rounds, it was something she said to her students "When you get these jobs

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that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.” The better Toni also had a better way with words and this too is my advice. I hope I am practicing this.