

Interview – Caron E. Gentry

Written by E-International Relations

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Caron E. Gentry is Professor in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews, where she is currently serving as Head of School. Her main research agenda focuses on gender and terrorism. Her most current monograph is *Disordered Violence: How Gender, Race, and Heteronormativity Structure Terrorism*. Her other publications include *Mothers, Monsters, Whores, Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, both co-written with Laura Sjoberg. Her articles on gender and terrorism have been published in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *Critical Studies on Security*, *International Relations*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, among others. She also writes on feminist political theology.

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

As far as I'm concerned, feminism must be actively intersectional. Intersectional feminism ought to be centred on oppressions and those who have actively experienced that oppression, as argued by Marsha Henry. It strengthens feminism to acknowledge how the different power structures often operate in tandem. To acknowledge these different oppressions means to acknowledge different positions, experiences, and voices. For too long, I would fall into the (white) (Western) trap of claiming to amplify or speak for those who have been marginalised or are marginalised. This is a mistake. I don't need or want to speak for others. Instead I want to be an active listener and learner.

I also find any research that brings new approaches or information into IR really exciting. I find the work of two of my colleagues at St Andrews really fascinating. The first is Dr. Aurora Ganz, who aims to bring the *sounds* of security into Critical Security Studies. For her, the idea came from experiencing the pandemic in a region with a very strict lock-down; yet the application of such an approach is endless and filled with the possibility of new understandings. The second is Dr. Malaka Shwaikh and her work on resistance and prisons, specifically in the Palestinian context. Her work looks at women who hunger strike and how that embodied practice simultaneously resists colonial and patriarchal power.

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

I think that education is a life-long journey and I know, especially now that I am in a heavily administrative job that leaves little time for research, that I crave new knowledges and new ways of thinking. When I was writing my latest book, *Disordered Violence*, I experienced writer's block for the first time since I was an undergraduate. That summer, I plugged away at different chapters, but nothing was gelling. Reviewers for a different project suggested Critical Race theory. Reading this work was revelatory – even though I 'knew' some of the arguments and could have articulated them in elementary ways – this work solidified for me the way that the world operates – in gender *and* racialised *and* heteronormative ways (amongst other sites and structures of power). Therefore, I was able to approach the book manuscript with renewed purpose and with a crystallised, truly intersectional argument.

What is the importance of International Women's Day and what does it represent to you?

The first time I was introduced to International Women's Day was during my PhD! Even though I had attended an all

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women's college for my undergraduate in the United States, for whatever reason, this was a new concept to me. I was in Amman, Jordan, for field work and the woman that I was interviewing made a point of the fact that we were meeting on International Women's Day. International Women's Day resonated quite strongly with her and was central to her identity, especially as it is impossible (as it should be) to divorce her personal from her political identity. I have always wondered about these differing approaches to International Women's Day. I truly believe that International Women's Day had not entered my consciousness until I was more exposed to non-Western and non-North American thinking. I've always wondered how much this says about my own engagement with North American exceptionalism – and I see this undoing and unpicking as an ongoing and iterative project.

You have highlighted a 'duel' meaning of feminisation in International Relations. What are those 'duel' meanings, and how does feminist theory help us to better understand feminisation?

The two different feminisations that I identify in that article come from very different sources. The first, of course, is V. Spike Peterson's idea of feminisation as devalourisation, which means that a patriarchal system that so values masculinity that any hint of feminisation is a weakness, a failure. The second source is the Decline of Violence theory as posited by Nils Petter Gledistch et al., Joshua Goldstein, and Steven Pinker. Declinists argue that violence has dropped globally over the 20th Century and that there are key 'civilising' forces at play in this. One such force is 'feminisation,' when societies become more peaceable as women's political, economic, and social status rises.

The problem that I have with feminisation as posited by Declinists is that:

- 1) They continue to point to women's insecurity as an issue that happens mainly (or only) outside of the West;
- 2) There is a minimisation or wilful ignorance of women's insecurity within the West and the lack of security of women's rights. For just one example, look at the precariousness of women's reproductive rights in Poland, Ireland, and the US as evidence of this;
- 3) There is no accounting for the masculinist and colonial underpinnings of the Decline of Violence theory, particularly Enlightenment liberalism;
- 4) Finally, there is an underlying assumption that women are more peaceful, even though we know there is evidence to the contrary.

Thus, I think intersectional feminist theory helps interrogate the interior logics of the Decline of Violence theory, arguing that this dependence on abstractions of the West and women may be its undoing.

You have argued that violence against women in the developing world is seen as a security concern to the West, while violence against women in the West is minimised or ignored. How has this compounded Western exceptionalism and how can it be challenged through intersectional feminism?

I wouldn't say it compounds Western exceptionalism as much as they are in a performative feedback loop: Western exceptionalism is dependent upon the notion that women are better off in the West, financially, bodily, and politically. It is, as I write in the article highlighted in the previous question, the light that saves Western exceptionalism. Western exceptionalism is ontologically insecure – it has to constantly rely on 'truths' to support its claims. Those who believe in and rely upon Western exceptionalism to maintain a white and masculine order need to be able to point to women in other places as worse off. It allows the West to continue being the 'better angels' (à la Steven Pinker) or the saviours of humanity (Mutua 2001).

I think intersectional feminism continues to challenge the narratives that support Western exceptionalism by pointing out the untruths. It shows not just that women in the non-West have both agency and choice but that they are not pawns for someone else's arguments. This also means calling out the notion that Western civilisation has become more peaceful based upon the notion of some biological essentialisation of women as a pacifying force. Women's voices and political choices might indeed be more peaceable, but this needs to be seen as a choice born of

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deliberation which leads to seeing society and politics in a different way – as a choice and perspective, by the way, open to all people, not just women.

In your co-authored book *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, you and Laura Sjoberg open with the question “Does women’s violence expose feminism’s weaknesses?” How did you answer this question and why is it important to study women’s violence?

When Laura and I were first working on and publicising *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, we were both surprised at some of the resistance to our argument that women’s decision to use violence for political ends was agential. I believe the resistance was born out of the same instinct or desire as the Declinist’s feminisation, to see women as more peaceable than men. While again, this may be true because of a deliberative choice, feminists can’t also be clouded by any form of essentialisation. We have fought too hard to show gender as a construction and as a power structure. To fall back on anything that smacks of abstraction or essentialisation undermines the progress that we have made. Furthermore, if the personal is political, and if women can be politically driven, then we have to be able to acknowledge that they may make a choice, however complicated, complex, and messy, to use violence for their own end.

Your new book *Disordered Violence: How Gender, Race and Heteronormativity Structure Terrorism* examines the narratives of eight terrorist actors. How do gendered, racial, and sexualised assumptions influence how their story has been told?

I think the assumptions are *everything* to how we tell the story of terrorist actors. When conducting an intersectional analysis as I do in this book, I keep pushing myself to ‘ask the other question’ as suggested by Mari Matsuda – if it looks like gender, where is race? If it looks like race, where is class? If it looks like class, where is heteronormativity?

As I write about in the book, one day I was teaching about the first generation of the West Germany Red Army Faction and its triumvirate leadership of two women, Ulrike Meinhof and Gundren Ensslin, and one man, Andreas Baader. While I could easily talk at length of the gendering of Meinhof and Ensslin (go and read Amanda Third’s excellent article on Meinhof!), I began a tangent on Baader. Some of the stories that surround Baader include his style choices (tight velvet trousers) and that he was rumoured to have had a sexual relationship with his gun. A student interrupted me to point how gendered this was. And of course it was! So, why hadn’t I interrogated this before, especially when I had written about the neo-Orientalist discussion of the 9/11 hijackers (their visits to strip clubs and use of porn) and bin Laden (the false claim of finding porn in his Pakistan compound) as sexualised?

These linkages across time, and of two very different actors, became the bedrock of the chapter – of trying to see other linkages between all eight figures. Additionally, as I kept asking the other question of all eight figures, further representations came to light. For instance, class was quite obvious when looking at Baader. Like many other Marxist-Leninist groups, the Red Army Faction members tended to be upper-middle class and well educated. However Baader was not university educated; and from a working class background, his class was used to indicate a proclivity towards violence. The method of asking the other question was really valuable and worthwhile, and it revealed some fascinating dynamics within Terrorism Studies and International Relations.

What does faith, coupled with feminism, bring to our understanding of international relations?

Authenticity and intentionality. We are all guided by particular beliefs and I believe that shapes our understanding of how we approach our research, scholarship, and teaching. To deny this is to deny something fundamental in ourselves. It doesn’t mean that we have to all actively embrace a faith, but I think it does mean acknowledging what drives us.

Additionally, as a Christian, I’ve had Christians confront my feminism: how can I possibly be a feminist and a Christian? Equally, I’ve had feminists confront my Christianity: how can I possibly be Christian and a feminist? I know that Christianity has used power structures to fulfil its own agenda and has done a great deal of harm. Yet, faith is not the institution. And my faith and my feminism do dovetail: both are deeply committed to upending power structures

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and reaching out to the vulnerable.

What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars, particularly women?

Be your authentic selves. Stay curious— don't let the abusive system of academia get you down. Find a mentor. Look at this article: "Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome" and look at own your expertise.