

Interview – Anne Phillips

Written by E-International Relations

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Anne Phillips is the Graham Wallas Professor of Political Science in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2003 and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in 2013. She holds honorary degrees from the Universities of Aalborg and Bristol, and in 2016 received the Sir Isaiah Berlin Award for Lifetime Contribution to Political Studies. Her most influential work is *The Politics of Presence: the Political Representation of Gender, Race, and Culture* (1995). As well as engaging with issues of democracy and representation, she has addressed the relationship between equality and difference; the uneasy relationship between feminism and liberalism, feminism and multiculturalism; and the dangers in regarding the body as property. In recent work, she has returned to a research theme of her PhD thesis (published as *The Enigma of Colonialism*) to pursue the challenges of thinking political theory beyond the Euro-American axis. She recently published a book title *Unconditional Equals*, where she “challenges attempts to justify equality by reference to a shared human nature” and argues for a genuinely unconditional equality.

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

I can best answer this by reference to what I myself most want to read at the moment: this is research that illuminates current dilemmas by drawing on historical research. I am not myself an historian, though my first research project (for my PhD) involved historical research in the Colonial Office archives, and I have taught courses on the history of feminism stretching back to the nineteenth century. For most of my working life, however, my focus has been almost entirely contemporary: debates in feminist and political theory, around issues of equality, democracy, representation, multiculturalism, and so on. It has only gradually crept up on me just how much exciting work there now is that approaches all those issues through a more systematic historical lens. The long-standing feminist scrutiny of classical texts has been joined more recently by work in a post-colonial mode, with much fascinating work on the relationship between liberalism and empire, exploring canonical thinkers like Kant or de Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill, and the ways their thinking on questions of race and empire reproduced – or even helped produce – the prejudices of their age.

It has become ever more clear that understanding what was assumed, included, and excluded, from early versions of equality, freedom, democracy or rights, provides crucial clues to the lacunae in ways we currently employ these ideas. In one sense, I already knew this: it’s right there in the feminist critiques of liberalism that significantly shaped my own thinking, works like Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* (1988), which demonstrated how the exclusion of women in early stories of the social contract became so deeply embedded in the liberal tradition. But reading some of the recent work on race, colonialism and empire, I have come to appreciate more fully that this is not only a matter of feminism’s relationship to a seemingly progressive liberal or Enlightenment tradition. In my own recent work, I have therefore returned to some of the early articulations of equality to tease out more fully not only how people could make claims about ‘all men being born equal’ without feeling obliged to justify the exclusion of women, but also how they could seemingly not notice that ‘all men’ excluded the enslaved or the colonised or those too poor to be regarded as fully human. I cannot accept the benign story of these exclusions that represents them as understandable failures of imagination; the consequences have been far more damaging than this suggests. So for myself, I feel I am learning a great deal from engaging more fully with historical research that has not previously been a major part of my preoccupations. For me, this is the most exciting current work.

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

In my adult life, my first self-definition was as a Marxist and anti-colonialist, and I wrote my PhD thesis as a critique of colonial policy in British West Africa, particularly a critique of the way the colonial administrators represented themselves as benign protectors of their African subjects against the more rapacious forms of capitalism. I was somewhat embarrassed by the time it was published (as *The Enigma of Colonialism*) because my self-definition by then was very much as a feminist, and yet the work barely engaged with questions of gender. It was also very top-down history. If I were writing it now, I would immerse myself much more in the history of resistance to colonial power, in the politics on the ground, rather than focusing on what colonial officials thought about the risks of such resistance. But two aspects of that early work continue through to later work. First, it gave me an abiding suspicion of notions of tribalism or primordial ethnic division that are still too often employed in commentary on African politics. It also gave me an abiding suspicion of progressivist arguments that read history through the inevitable unfolding of a logic, whether this be a logic of capitalism or modernity or Enlightenment ideals. History is full of both continuities and discontinuities, and whatever advances we make, in relation to democracy or equality or freedom, can always be reversed.

I've already mentioned Carole Pateman as one important influence on my thinking in the 1980s; her work and that of Iris Marion Young and Wendy Brown were especially important to me in demonstrating that feminism cannot limit itself to making liberalism more consistent. The message fitted well with my own scepticism about the liberal tradition, which had derived up till then more from my socialism. This was a time when one thought of liberalism as preoccupied with the freedoms of the individual, and socialism as representing equality, and the choice between the two seemed (to me) clear and obvious. One of the complexities since then is that there has been a significant reframing of liberalism – in both politics and the academy – as the standard-bearer, not just for freedom, but for equality, democracy, and human right. This has made it harder to define oneself as *against* liberalism, for that now sounds like saying you don't care about equality or democracy or human rights. But it has clarified, at the same time, the way liberalism gets deployed as marking the superiority of the West, as justifying global hierarchies, and that further confirms reasons for scepticism towards the tradition. In thinking through these new tensions, I have found the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty particularly helpful, especially the arguments in *Provincialising Europe* that underscore the violence and contradictions and denials that mark the history of so-called modernity, without in the process repudiating the ambitions implied in that history pointing towards equality or human rights. Sylvia Wynter's work has also been important to me, again because of a double movement that exposes the profoundly impoverished and exclusionary conceptions of 'the human' that shaped modernity, while simultaneously embracing the possibility of a better humanism.

What role does the protection of women's rights play in justifying colonialism or newer forms of imperialism in West Asia and Afghanistan?

There has been a long history of this. It is part of the ways in which, first, the European colonial powers, and later the USA, claimed modernity almost as their personal property, and assumed a missionary role in promoting values of gender equality or women's rights. It would be a mistake to overstate this, however. In the history of colonialism, justifications came rather low down the list, though it's true there has always been some kind of narrative people have used to make sense of what they were doing. In the Spanish conquest of the Americas, the justification was in terms of bringing the word of Christ to otherwise benighted savages. But it is impossible to read accounts of that period without feeling overwhelmed by the cynicism and hypocrisy. In the sixteenth century, Spanish colonists were encouraged by a system of licenses to clear the lands, burn the villages of the indigenous peoples, and transport them to settlements where they could be used as forced labour; but so as to keep up the semblance of legitimacy, each slave-raiding and land-grabbing episode was to be preceded by the reading of the so-called *requerimiento*, demanding obedience to the King and Queen of Spain and access for the religious orders to preach the true faith. According to Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican priest who became a passionate defender of the indigenous peoples, this document was read out in Spanish, often in the middle of the night and at a distance from the village, and if the villagers didn't immediately comply, they could be deemed to be 'Christ-deniers' and legitimately enslaved.

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The parallel deployment of women's rights in narratives of self-justification is a much later phenomenon – as it had to be, given how little attention was paid to women's rights in the colonial centres prior to the twentieth century. Colonial administrators did intervene against what they perceived as unacceptable practices, sometimes in association with local reform movements: this was the case with the banning of widow immolation in British India, for example, an initiative promoted and supported by many Indian social reformers. Colonial administrators were also uneasy with polygamy and child marriage (though some took to both practices themselves) but even those most high-minded in their criticism rarely did much to defend the rights of women and girls. The imperatives of colonial rule usually required the co-operation of local notables, and this tended to temper any reforming spirit. We also know that colonial rule tended to bring with it ideas of primogeniture that significantly reduced the opportunities for women to hold land, and assumptions about women's primary role being in the household that dismissed any previous role as spokespeople for their communities. It's much more as ideology than as practice that colonialism presented itself as bringing redress against the cruel and brutal treatment of women, but it did become one possible resource when anti-colonial movements and sentiment began to put colonial empires more on the defensive.

If anything, I see the justificatory deployment of women's rights as becoming more central in the *post*-colonial period, when we see the mobilisation of narratives of protection as part of the justification for military intervention, for example in Afghanistan. This reflects, not so much a heightened awareness of and sense of responsibility for women's welfare – though of course there are those for whom this is the compelling concern – but more a general unease with unjustified interventions. I think people are less secure these days about the legitimacy of intervening in the affairs of other countries –after all, self-determination became one of the supposedly defining values of the twentieth century – and there is a more pressing need than in the past to reassure oneself that interventions are not just about oil or some other geo-political concern. In this context, the cause of women's rights has come handily to the fore.

How have feminist movements of the Global South contributed to the dominant understanding of feminism prevalent in the West? Have they shed light on the contradictions underlying Western feminist theory?

The biggest contribution is in requiring us all to think our feminism in the context of a world shaped by imperial conquest and still carrying the consequences of that. But there are two more that have been particularly important to me. The first is around understandings of agency and autonomy. Agency has always presented difficulties for feminism. If you see gender as a pervasive set of power relations that structures not only our societies but our very ways of thinking (and while we may use different languages to capture this phenomenon, I think all feminists work with some version of that view), then at least some of what we, as women, may claim to want or enjoy will be an expression of or capitulation to that gender power. So there is a side to feminism that inclines to the view that women don't yet really know what they want or need. In Western feminism in the 1970s, this was part of what the practice of 'consciousness-raising' was about: it involved re-examining the previously taken for granted, and coming to see that practices you took as normal, or problems you saw as peculiar to yourself, were part of a structure of patriarchal power. The risk (and the reason no feminist I know now willingly employs the term 'consciousness-raising') is that while this arises from a notion of *all of us* as mired in patriarchal power, it can encourage the idea that this is especially the case for less enlightened 'other' women, those perceived as living in societies even more highly structured by gender than one's own. Just as the protection of women's rights has played a role in justifying imperialist intervention, so too the scepticism about women's self-definitions can play into a 'saviour' mentality that assumes a binary between West and the Rest. Feminist movements from the Global South have been quick to challenge this, and that challenge, to me, has been one of the really important contributions over recent decades. It has forced a more thoroughgoing exploration of what is meant by agency, a re-examination of the significance feminists from the West have tended to attach to autonomy, and a greater recognition of the dangers of that 'saviour' mindset.

The second – and related contribution – is around how one conceives of gender equality. For me, equality has always suggested breaking with the multiple conventions that attach particular roles, occupations, responsibilities, and rewards to one sex rather than another: so ending the worldwide assumption that women will be the primary carers for the young, sick and old; ending the worldwide assumption that men will be the primary decision-makers; basically

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ending all those gender divisions of labour that allocate roles and positions and opportunities to us according to our presumed sex. I have been impatient with what I see as the self-serving justifications of 'equal but different' or 'separate but equal' that have worked throughout history to obscure and naturalise inequality. I don't claim this as the view of all Western feminism, but it has certainly been my view, and that notion of an equality 'beyond gender' is I think more common in the West than elsewhere.

Feminist movements in much of the Global South have been less focused on this, and in particular, less focused on the idea of an almost arithmetical equality within the household. They battle against violence against women; they want women to have equal access to land and opportunities and decision-making; but they have on the whole been less preoccupied with the equal distribution of care work or household responsibilities. In the light of this, feminists in the West have had to think more seriously (or if they haven't yet, they should) about whether they have been operating with overly specific notions of equality that do not chime with the ambitions or preoccupations of feminist movements elsewhere. In truth, I haven't as a result significantly modified my own vision of a gender equal world, and I do still think there should be no gender division of labour! But I agree with the kind of argument Serene Khader, for example, develops in her *Decolonizing Universalism*, where she encourages us to focus on what as feminists we should be against rather than what we are for: encourages us to challenge oppression and *inequality* rather than promote singular and overly specific visions of what the ideal equality would look like. This seems right to me, and is one of the ways in which feminist movements of the South have helped reformulate dominant conceptions of feminism in the West.

In your recent book, *Unconditional Equals*, you suggest that equality must be construed as a belief people assert when they “refuse to be seen as inferiors”. How does this contribute to contemporary debates on “equal” citizenship for immigrants/ refugees?

What I want to convey there is an understanding of equality as something people assert and claim rather than something conferred upon them, an understanding of equality as enactment rather than recognition. The central argument in my book is that equality has historically been made conditional on fitting a particular prototype of the human being, a prototype in which (to adopt the term employed by Sylvia Wynter) the white male European is 'overrepresented'. For centuries, a seeming commitment to human equality has been systematically undermined by a tendency to attach conditions, such that proclamations about human equality could coexist with the exclusion of the overwhelmingly majority of the human race. The status of equal became attached, not to all humans, but to those fitting a particular human norm; equality was justified by reference to a supposedly shared human nature, but the way that nature was specified then turned out to be a basis for exclusion. The specification has sometimes involved a particular image of rationality (frequently deployed to deny women any claims to equality); sometimes a notion of the moral capacities separating those deemed capable of being civilised from those considered impossible to educate (a standard line justifying slavery and colonialism); and in the current era of global migration, the specification often draws on ethno-cultural-religious characteristics that are taken as conditions for equality.

The obsession across much of Europe with what Muslim women wear on their heads is one particularly mad illustration of this: these women may have notional equality of citizenship, but unless they conform more closely to the prototype human as understood in contemporary versions of national identity, they are not going to be treated as equals. So laws are introduced banning face coverings, banning 'overt' expressions of religious identity, dictating what citizens can and cannot wear. It is all rather ironic in these times of the Covid pandemic, when everyone is instructed to cover the face in public gatherings, that so much political capital could be made out of banning those few women in Europe who choose to wear niqab. But what is also striking – and encouraging – is the resistance. Even where there are no legislative bans, there is a lot of harassment on the streets of Muslim women wearing headscarves, and the temptation in such instances is to deal with pressure and potential harassment by keeping one's head down – or more precisely in this case, by uncovering one's head. But immigrants and refugees increasingly refuse to accept an unquestioning assimilation to dominant norms as the price they have to pay for equality. They are refusing to accept the status of inferiors. I think my conception of equality as unconditional, and equality as something we claim rather than are given, is pertinent here.

How can anti-colonial manifestations of equality and emancipation (especially of race and gender)

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complement and refine the same notions which developed in Europe?

I think the only answer I can make to this is that they do, though often with a significant time-lag. As I said in an earlier answer, there is much fascinating work currently being carried out in Europe and America that addresses the intimate ways in which Enlightenment ideals were bound up with the violence of colonialism, and explores what Devin Vartija calls (in his recent book) *The Color of Equality*. But Aimé Césaire was writing about this in 1950 (that's more than seventy years ago!) when he argued that two centuries of worthy and self-satisfied pronouncements about the rights of man had done nothing to stop the dehumanisation of France's colonial subjects, but had worked rather to obscure and justify this. Ideas seem to swim in and out of view, and it's shocking how often one finds oneself rediscovering something that was clearly laid out decades ago, how often past insights get lost. Indeed I sometimes think the movement of ideas between countries and continents, with refinements and learning in all directions of travel, is more consistent and more highly developed than the movement across time. The ideas inspiring anti colonial movements *have* both drawn on and transformed European ideas of equality and emancipation: it's not so much a question of 'how can they', for they have and did. In much European discourse, however, this is conveniently forgotten; the story is yet again retold as if it is entirely Euro-American.

I have been thinking about this also in relation to women's engagement with international relations, sparked by reading a recent collection edited by Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler that looks at key figures – many of them now almost entirely forgotten– in the history of *Women's International Thought*. It's astonishing to find out both how central women scholars were to the development of International Relations, and how engaged some of them were with anti-colonial struggles. So much history gets erased.

In your work, you call yourself a “skeptical multiculturalist and a reluctant cosmopolitan”. What drives you to these beliefs? How are debates on these issues shaped amidst a tempered globalisation due to COVID-19?

The scepticism about multiculturalism is largely a scepticism as regards conceptions of culture. When one talks of there being many cultures, or engages in discussion about how to address tensions between cultures, or debates whether there are any cultural rights, it is all too easy to fall into a reification of 'culture' that treats it almost as a thing. We live our lives as cultural beings, yes, for sure. We imbibe particular ways of thinking or talking or living from the communities in which we grow up or those in which we currently live, yes, of course. But the talk of 'cultures' conjures up something stronger than this. It carries the suggestion of something more rigorously defined, internally coherent, clearly differentiated from other 'cultures', and exercising on us an almost determining force. There are people within cultural communities who would very much like their cultures to be like this. They would like to think that their own culture was unique among cultures; they would like everyone in 'their' community to abide by what they regarded as the appropriate cultural norms; they regard attempts to modify any of those norms – for example, in a more egalitarian direction – as a betrayal of the culture. This is the conception of culture that feminists have been battling against in country after country for decade after decade, for it is a conception that appeals to the way things have always been done as an alibi for resisting change. It is also, sadly, the conception of culture that some feminists fall into when they talk of the misogyny at the heart of some 'culture', almost always some culture other than their own. This too reifies culture, treating it as internally coherent, clearly differentiated from other 'cultures', and exercising an almost determining force on its members.

We need multiculturalism – the alternative is mono-culturalism, which offers people equal citizenship only on condition of assimilation to currently dominant norms – but I have argued in *Multiculturalism Without Culture* for a conception of multiculturalism that refuses this static, thing-like 'culture'. That's my sceptical multiculturalism. My reluctant cosmopolitanism is a kind of mirror image. Insofar as cosmopolitanism claims a universal equality of all humans that transcends national, cultural or religious barriers, and commits to policies that will promote this equality, then I'm for it. But there are risks in transcendence, which often takes the form of projecting from one's own necessarily parochial experience to what one then assumes to be true of everyone everywhere in the world. I might project from the importance I attach to being able to make my own choices about my own life to the idea that this is what matters most to everyone in the world; or I might project from the importance I attach to my family and community that these are what everyone most needs to be able to flourish. There is a potential for arrogance in

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cosmopolitanism that needs to be watched very carefully.

As for the Covid effect, in the early months of the pandemic, I had a momentary hope that we might come out of this into an era of greater solidarity at both domestic and international level. In the UK, as elsewhere across the world, appreciative publics were applauding the courage and dedication of an army of previously unrecognised workers. We had come to see that our lives depended, not only on the doctors and nurses, but on the often poorly protected and almost always poorly paid care workers, cleaners, transport workers, ambulance drivers, security guards, supermarket staff. Scientists worked night and day to produce vaccines that would make the world safe, and in the case of Astra-Zeneca, promised to make these vaccines available through the world at cost. Countries drew up their plans in an outbreak of international co-operation, and it looked, for a brief moment, as if that better side, less transcendental side, of cosmopolitanism was coming to fruition. But reality soon reasserted itself. The virus proved disproportionately to affect the poor, the migrant workers, those living in overcrowded conditions, those in an ethnic minority; international initiatives to combine against the pandemic were watered down by the tendency to set one's own citizens above those of any other country; and the economic consequences of lockdown turned out to weigh far more heavily on women, and those in lower-paid and precarious occupations. This was indeed a tempered globalisation, both in the way it reduced levels of global trade and exchange, and in the failure of more ambitious global initiatives to tackle the challenge of pandemic.

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

Bear in mind that I am not myself a scholar of international relations. I describe myself as a political theorist, and though I try to think theory in a way that is internationally informed and avoids the most glaring pitfalls of provincialism, I have been largely Europe-focused in my preoccupations and readings. I have to repeatedly re-educate myself into the larger world. So any advice is more generic than specific to International Relations. I would just say: keep challenging received opinion. I know this is harder to do as a young scholar because you are still struggling to establish yourself and secure your position and may need the support of patrons who are overly invested in that received opinion. But it is also easier, in another sense, because you have not yet succumbed to the orthodoxies that surround every area of scholarship. We need your inventiveness and creativity more than ever.