

# *Theory Talks*

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## THEORY TALK #28

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### MARYSIA ZALEWSKI ON UNSETTLING IR, MASCULINITY AND MAKING IR THEORY INTERESTING (AGAIN)

#### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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## MARYSIA ZALEWSKI ON UNSETTLING IR, MASCULINITY AND MAKING IR THEORY INTERESTING (AGAIN)



IR is perhaps one of the most gender-biased fields in Social Sciences: typically, any IR ‘specialist’, whether scholar or practitioner, is a white, middle-aged man. Generally, few questions are being asked on how this influences how IR got constructed and how this conditions the questions we ask. In this unsettling Talk, Marysia Zalewski shows how our search for ontological security limits the scope of possible answers, how teaching IR should fundamentally change to attract students, and how the mainstream focus of IR tends to push women off the map.

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

This is a typical ‘IR question’ since it presupposes there is (or perhaps ‘should be’) a central issue that we could/should all agree on. Also I think there’s a huge difference between a central ‘challenge’ and a principal ‘debate’ – whereas the latter might be confined to the scholarly community, with little to do with what either the public or politicians think is a pressing issue, the former we might understand to be more related to what matters to ‘ordinary people’. As such these can be (often are) very different. (Do ‘ordinary people’ spend much time arguing the difference between realism and neo-realism or constructivism and poststructuralism?) I really don’t think that just because we are all supposedly dealing with the international sphere in IR, there should necessarily be a central issue or debate that we should agree on as being central. There is such a massively wide range of issues we might be concerned with ... a problem for me is that the things that tend to end up scoring highly on IR’s priority list (biggest challenges) are the things that have tended to mirror the interests of major powers in the world – whether that’s the American government or Western powers more generally, which, by the way, are (surely not coincidentally!) still overwhelmingly dominated by elite men. Even if war, conflict or really the incidence of violent deaths could be ‘sort of’ agreed upon as the central issue in IR; why isn’t IR’s central concern poverty given it still produces the highest body count?

The central issue I myself try to address is gender. I don’t claim it should be the central debate in IR, but I do try to demonstrate or illustrate that gender is actually very central to the constitution and practice of international politics. And it is consistently difficult to get people to really understand that.

### **How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

I see my scholarship not so much informed by IR, but rather as informed by my introduction to the important realm of ideas as well as to how structures work (or don't) in societies; but also how discrimination continue to wreak devastation despite the wealth of opposition to them. What theory is and does has also been central to my work all along. And funnily enough, the first person to ever inspire me to really think of these issues was an evening class teacher whose name I have unfortunately completely forgotten! I did an evening class in sociology in the mid eighties, and my teacher was a through and through Marxist scholar and an enormously passionate and inspiring teacher. He even managed to make the debates about structure and agency really interesting! But when I reached the section on feminism in the textbook we used, I had a bit of an evangelical moment: 'oh my god! So this is how it works!'

Subsequent to this when I was at the University of East Anglia during my undergrad years, I had Steve Smith as one of my lecturers in IR, and he influenced me quite a lot, although many of our classes then were on nuclear weapons (Carol Cohn would have had a 'field day!'). In terms of authors that were pivotal for my thinking in 'feminist IR', I definitively have to include Cynthia Enloe (and especially her 1989 book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*), but also Carol Cohn, Jindy Petmann, Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan as well as more 'generic' feminist authors for example Mary Hawkesworth and Wendy Brown. I remain inspired by these people (personally well as intellectually).

### **What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?**

- Not do IR in a conventional way! Conventional IR tends to mitigate against working with 'the globe' in anything like an inclusive kind of way. Go to and live in different countries if at all possible; look to different disciplines, like sociology, anthropology, politics, philosophy, literature... To be a good IR student, paradoxically, you have to go outside of the fixed categories of IR. I know it can be difficult to figure out where to look, especially since mainstream IR tends to present students with neat categories, but that's part of the joyous adventure of intellectual discovery. Teaching curricula should really learn to work with this more innovative and interactive approach to teaching that engages knowledge from different fields or spheres of our eclectic human experience: link theory to political practice to photography to literature. That is, if the resources are there of course, they are not always available in academia ...

**Theory is often approached as a homogenous part of IR work, the vague ivory-tower chapter that precedes 'what the book is really about'. Grand theory, furthermore, has given way to mid-level theorizing, has come to occupy the center stage of the field recently, as Christian Reus-Smit argues in Theory Talk #27. How homogenous is (IR) theory?**

The idea there is something as 'grand theory', or that theory becomes the 'nasty' part of IR work, is a shame... Many of my students do indeed seem to want to jump theory to go to 'the real stuff'. I think this has more to do with the way we often teach theory rather than with theory itself. Usually it goes like this (or some version of this): we start out with realism, then comes liberalism, then perhaps structuralism, Marxism or constructivism or poststructuralism, perhaps

followed by a week on the environment or feminism or some ‘other add-on’ ... in subsequent papers or exams, students often have to discuss the big debates - or feel they have to – this becomes the ‘real’ thing. As such, because of the way theory is presented, it is very difficult for something like feminism to be seen as relevant. It becomes relegated to something related (only) to (only) women, inevitably then as something exogenous from the core debates, which one can thus easily ignore.

I teach a course called ‘Gender, Sex and Death in World Politics’, and I teach it as a theory course – but not really using the word theory (much). It includes ‘issues’ such as human rights, gender, masculinity, films and so on. I try to show the students how theory is not something we ‘build’ in the academic world and then apply to the real world ‘out there’, but rather that theory is something we do, or practice, through our actions. If theory gets thought of the other way around, and with a focus on what the most powerful see as the most important, we get exactly IR theory: a circular reasoning that keeps the world going in ways we perhaps don’t want. Mainstream IR theory generally works to reinforce or justify existing power-relations (typically what elite white men are doing). Thinking about theory encourages us to reflect (with rigour) on the way we tell our stories. And this really matters. Any one ‘issue’ engenders many stories – what matters to me theoretically is how some stories or theoretical narrative become regarded as the most important ones to choose. To give you, as an example, as you know I work on gender. Sometimes I take ‘IR issues’ such as war and confront them from a gender perspective. This (theoretical) ‘angle’ facilitates the construction of a very different story than what a ‘Kenneth Waltz’ or ‘Alexander Wendt’ might give you. Theory is what we do; which involves the different decisions we make about how we approach issues that matter to us, whether this is as researchers or as politicians, or as (though sometimes simultaneously – though which ‘identity’ becomes the ‘important’ one?) mothers or as soldiers.

To summarize: we should not teach (IR) theory in conventional ways, but rather explain and demonstrate how theory constructs not only our understanding of the world, but through that, constructs our worlds.

**If one searches the internet for material on a specific issue within IR, the results will likely approach hundreds if not thousands of pages. Those can be skimmed down to some hundred publications on a single issue, written probably from a number of perspectives. IR, thus, has multiple paradigms with each its own ‘truth conditions’. But the big questions don’t seem to get answered by any of them. Is that the sign of a field in crisis?**

That the big questions do not get answered is most certainly not a sign of a field in crisis. It might be a sign of the gatekeepers of the field in crisis, which is different. It’s a sign of intellectual engagement, intellectual energy. The problem is rather the idea that there are these big questions, which, as I’ve said, usually reflect the interests of the (already) powerful. Linked to the assumption that there are big questions, there is an assumption that there are big answers, and that it is our aim to find them.

But the field goes up and down, depending on social and cultural conditions, like most academic fields; but clearly since 9-11 IR has vigorously returned to an explicit focus on the supposed ‘big questions/issues’; the ‘evil enemy’; good versus bad, war against terror, the axis of evil... We’ve

seen these ‘big questions/issues’ clearly emerge through the Bush administration, which deflected attention away from a whole other range of issues that we might have been looking at.

**My website now counts 27 interviews, all white men but one. The world population consists for about 50% of women. Is this simple demographic fact sufficiently represented in thinking about IR?**

... I bet you know what my answer will be to that! It’s a complicated matter... IR is still very narrow, dominated by the US agenda - intellectually and scholarly - so what about the rest of the world? Most geographic, demographic or ‘other’ ‘facts’ still get ignored by mainstream IR; that poverty is the number one killer; that (actually) 51% of the world population is female, that water and food are more important to most people than weaponry; that gender and other constituted categories profoundly impact on the practices of international politics. Despite this, there is a great deal of feminist work being done on international politics, although you might not find most of this work in IR.

Some might ask (they do!): ‘what has feminism contributed to the study of IR the last 20 years?’ One of my responses is that this is perhaps not quite the ‘right’ question (or we should at least query the assumptions that lead to its asking ...). I would suggest that feminist scholars have made massive inroads in constituting international politics in theory/practice – though not (always) as a ‘contribution’ to IR ...

**Now maybe a stupid question: how can we map the field of gender or feminist studies? There’s an awful load of different positions in this field, relating to how much is biologically determined (sex) and how much culturally (gender); if different cultures means different genders; and what an equal world would actually look like from a gendered lens.**

Gender analysis clearly suggests there is a distinction between masculinity and femininity. But the feminist argument is that this distinction doesn’t have a nature or essence – rather gender is a social construction. Yet gender becomes to have the appearance of essence; it becomes planted, crafted on and rooted into biological sex through our practices. Starting, however, by interrogating this distinction (and its enforcement and resistances), you can do so many things. Some scholars explicitly engage obvious political agendas, for example in regard to working toward justice for women. There are countless egregious harms done through gender and arguably especially to women. It is important for many feminist scholars to keep the attention on women and to link scholarly work to, for example, governmental policies. These feminists clearly find policy agendas important as well as the aim of achieving change in society. Other scholars focus more explicitly on deconstructing how gender works. This might be in teaching or in definitions of the state; or the workings of international war crimes tribunals; or in policy meetings on gender mainstreaming; or what women in an East-Timorese supermarket think is important in international politics. For many feminist scholars it is, as Cynthia Enloe puts it, very important to keep women interesting. It’s just so easy for women to slip off the agendas of political and intellectual significance, especially in IR.

More explicitly on your question – it's not that it isn't important to think about and study the different approaches feminist and gender scholars employ in IR; but it is perhaps more important to cautiously analyze what the mapping of feminism in IR does to feminism ('answer' = given IR's methodological and ontological commitments - feminism tends to disappear off the 'map' of 'real' significance).

And what would an equal world look like? Perhaps this is out with the scope of our intellectual imaginations? Our conceptual structures and languages are so deeply constituted with and by gender ...

**With Jane Papart, you've co-edited two important and distinct books on the 'man question' in IR ('The Man Question in International Relations' (1998, read a short review here) and 'Rethinking the Man Question', 2008). You argue that IR is constructed around masculinity, and that destabilizing the subject of man might destabilize the whole field. I can already see some politicians and scholars thinking: 'but is that a good idea?' However, I'd like to ask how the masculinity of the field might be deconstructed and, more importantly, what kind of change that might bring to our approaches not only to the international reality, but also to international theory.**

Well, here again, we're looking for concrete answers to concrete questions ... what counts as concrete? Why aren't, for example, the shopping practices of women worldwide part of the core Q-and-A's in IR? I am not necessarily suggesting that this is the key question that we've forgotten to ask (though it might be ...); rather I argue that the sense of sureness and certainty we're looking for (and often assume) in IR is problematic. I suggest we remain cautious about the ontological security – through specific forms of questioning - we're trying to achieve.

In the 'man question' books we are not arguing that IR is constructed around masculinity – rather that gender is central. But as the focus on gender is often assumed to be 'only' about women it is extremely important to understand that men are a 'gender' (and gendered) too – and that masculinity, as well as femininity, is crucial to analyze. Keeping a sharp eye on masculinity demonstrates that the whole of IR is gendered – a point more easily (if wrongly) missed if the focus remains too closely on women.

But more explicitly on your question; masculinity is constantly being destabilized in the field; indeed, the persistent shoring up of masculinity(ies) defines the field in large part. To understand the depth of this I insist that we need to take gender seriously. Taking gender seriously changes how we think about what's real; what violence is; where power lies; what power is; and about what's important. But taking gender seriously is persistently mis-understood. For example the UN pays much attention to rape and sexual violence in war and conflict. That seems to be good, but we need to ask if all the legislation really changes anything. Perhaps not much. Rape and sexual violence has so much to do with perceptions of what it means to be a 'good' soldier; a 'good' man, and what women of another country or social group represent in any given conflict... and indeed what counts as rape, or what counts as sex. The recent conviction of the

Austrian man Josef Fritzl is interesting to consider in this context. He might be of major interest to IR scholars engaged in research on violence, war and conflict. It is generally considered that Fritzl must be crazy – mad - insane. Yet are his acts of raping and imprisonment so far outside ‘normal’ masculinity? ‘Yes and no’ - the answer is both. My question here is indeed a ‘big’ and provocative one – but can his acts really be simply answered/dismissed through the (constructed) category of madness? Taking gender really seriously might imply a reconstruction of the generic first year undergraduate IR course to focus on women, feminism and gender – and start off the first lecture with the case study of Josef Fritzl. That would indeed be radical.

That you ask if the deconstruction of masculinity in IR would be a ‘good idea’ shows how important and unsettling the question is (as is masculinity), not only for mainstream IR students but in general. This unsettling is a good (political/intellectual) thing given because gender is everywhere in our daily practice; it is ‘simply’ conventionally rendered invisible by a common understanding that this is just the way ‘it is’. Once you start dismantling these boundaries of gender, or really showing how fragile they are, it becomes, well, unsettling. And that’s exactly how ‘teaching gender’ should be.

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