

Gender and Feminisms in IR: Reviewing Theory and Practice: Interview with Marysia Zalewski

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Marysia Zalewski is a Professor at Cardiff University, in Wales, and a renowned International Relations (IR) scholar. She has become a reference for her work with feminism and gender since the 1990s. She has published several books including *The 'Man' Question in International Relations* (edited with Jane Parpart, re-released in 2019 by Routledge), *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (2013) and *Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics* edited with Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prügl and Maria Stern (2018), among many other books and articles. Her work has brought important contributions in thinking feminist critical methodologies, as well as looking at everyday life as a productive site for empirical and theoretical analysis of how gender is implicated in international politics. She was in Rio de Janeiro for an event at the International Relations Institute of the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-Rio), where she was part of two panels called 'Rethinking the Borders between Gender and Sexuality' and 'The Rise of Conservatism and the Challenges to the Women, Gender and Sexuality Agendas.'

I interviewed her for about one hour, considering both her academic work and the political scenario in Brazil, as her visit occurred about one week before the second term of presidential elections in October 2018. We spoke about the role of gender in IR theory and practice as well as the political impacts of this term. We also talked about feminist strategies in writing creatively and doing feminist theory as an everyday practice, taking into account the political impact of theoretical and methodological choices. The interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Amanda: Okay, first I wanted to ask you about one of your most famous texts, which I believe is *All These Theories yet the Bodies Keep Piling up* (1996). Everybody reads it here.

Marysia: Well, yes, I've been to different parts of the world and that is the text that people seem to read a lot.

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Amanda: What kind of change do you think this chapter has brought since it was written in 1996, and did you imagine it would have such an impact on students?

Marysia: You never really imagine you are going to write something that is going to be read around the world. That's never how I thought – especially then – I don't know what impact it's had. I mean, I know lots of students have read it and it is used a lot in teaching, but what goes after that, I don't know, what kind of impact it has after that. I wrote it as part of a conference while I was at Aberystwyth University and there just seemed to be all these arguments between what seems to be all the 'big boys and girls' actually. And I couldn't quite get what was going on. Therefore, I wanted to think about why they were fighting about theory and fighting about methodology. I mean, not literally fighting! Yeah, but there was something really troubling to me about it. And I wanted to think it through. So, I don't quite know how it came up... the three different ways of doing theory. I am glad people like it and I wonder what it would be like to write it today, actually. Whether I would write it very differently...

Amanda: So, yesterday you mentioned that you think of gender as trouble but also gender as a troubling concept. I wanted to ask you: why do you think gender is important? And what are the challenges to IR when confronted with this concept? You have been working with gender for a long time in IR and I ask you this because it seems like bringing gender to IR is kind of a challenge for everybody who wants to do so.

Marysia: Those are many questions at once and there are many big questions there! I mean, I approach questions of gender in all kinds of different ways. I think gender is a really important concept. I think it's our key concept actually, whether we're working with feminist theory, or queer theory, because it's always raising the kinds of fundamental questions about how do we become these beings that have a sex or a gender attached to us, and how come all those popular power differentials get attached to them? And why does it matter so much to people – as we are all witnessing – ... It's not an easy or simple concept. And it's not a benign concept – it really is not benign. So, I'm very curious about how it has actually becomes kind of a comfortable concept, for example in the UN or politicians – certainly in the Global North. They seem to use it as if it's a friendly comfortable concept and it actually isn't, in my view. And I wonder about that and how something so radical has become so... almost banal. And in face of its popularity... you see it in the UN and all these international bodies are using gender all the time. But they are using gender in ways that don't really do anything and actually often do a lot of worse things like reposition women as needing protection, or actually as if we can 'use women to save our economy', you know, or 'men are evil'... or 'men can be the rescuers', you know, so using it in all kinds of problematic ways. So, on the one hand, I would never want to get rid of it. But, on the other hand, I do think we need to rethink what's going on with how we're using it. So, it's always a troubling concept, because it's meant to cause trouble, but I think it's in trouble if we just look at what's happening around the world. I think it's in trouble and it does all come... well, in some ways it does all come back to this idea of gender. However, it kind of permeates around sexuality and all kinds of different things. There's this question of sex

identity that is at the base of all of that. So yes, trouble, troubling, and we need to trouble it more.

Amanda: So that's why you said it's a radical concept today. It seems like a lot has been done around gender, but not so much has changed, if you look at IR as a discipline.

Marysia: It seems to be getting worse. The work of gender is not linear and sometimes it seems as if everything is getting worse.

Amanda: I thought about you saying that you think gender is a radical concept and also about when you said that it's kind of misappropriated. So, when you said that, I kept thinking about the Brazilian picture, for example, when gender is used in a very wrong way by some extreme-right groups saying that feminists want to destroy gender and they want to destroy what it means to be a girl or a boy and that there is this 'gender ideology' against gender itself. That's something that has become a big political question here, especially when the discussion involves children. So, I wanted to ask you how do you think feminists can rework that language in order to make themselves understandable to other groups outside of academia, for example?

Marysia: I don't think we can own the concept. I mean, I think we [feminists] have done huge amounts of work on gender. We are not the only ones using gender of course, people are working on gender every day, even when a father says to his son 'boys don't cry,' he's doing gender. So, we are all doing gender all the time and feminist scholars have done masses of academic work on it, but we can't control how it takes on different meaning outside in different environments. So, your question about how come feminist scholars make it more understandable, I think we have already done that. I think it's been done in many ways over and over again. So, I think it's our job to keep doing it, but I don't think it's our job to try and think of something... some new kind of different way to explain it to the people. They actually don't want to know. If we try and explain it to the woman who says 'well I don't care if Bolsonaro is sexist... I'm not going to sleep with him'... I mean there is massive confusion there, and I'm not talking about intelligence, because I think there's just a resistance to thinking about these things... because it means change and people don't want that change...there has been change. You know, people have had to defend what they've done, like the ones of 'me too' and Weinstein and all of that. It's come to a point where they have been exposed as doing wrong things and I think there's a lot of resistance there. So, that's kind of a roundabout way of saying 'I don't think we can do anymore.' I don't quite know what the answer is because that sounds quite defeatist. But I don't think it's a negative thing in the sense of ... like it's always beating ourselves up. Feminist scholars and activists have already made gender very understandable – perhaps others need to work harder. Though it depends what environment you're in, it depends what context you're in, I think in some ways one can be very strategic and talk about things in ways that don't look as if they're about gender and they don't look as if they're radical, you know and use language which is going to appeal even though you don't mean that. So, at this point, I don't know really what else we can do.

Amanda: I believe the problem is that our language is kind of appropriated and used in a completely distorted way. So that's why I asked you this question, because it seems like some things have been lost in the middle of the way...

Marysia: Well, I think a lot of people don't want to understand gender. Because people will have to give up their privilege. It's giving up white privilege or male privileges. People don't really want to. Or certainly they don't want to for too long. And that's a real problem.

Amanda: So I wanted to ask you about your book *Feminism After Postmodernism* (2000), in which you question the idea that there is a gulf between modernist feminists post-modernist feminisms. I wanted to ask you how do you think different feminisms, such as radical feminism and postmodern feminism, for example, can be reconciled in order to do politics differently?

Marysia: That book was based on my Ph.D. research. In the mid-1990s there was – at least in the Anglo-American tradition – a debate between modernists and postmodernists, even though such debates had been present in English literature and in sociology and philosophy for some time. But certainly in Western feminist theory, this debate seemed important. And again, for me there was a feeling of 'I don't get this' – this is where I usually start my work. I wanted to understand what was going on – what was important about it – why it mattered. The same kind of feeling with 'bodies piling up' piece. Though at that time I was very into being a radical feminist. But I wondered 'how can you reconcile these different feminist theories and what is the difference and why does it matter.' So I ended up writing the Ph.D. that became the book. And I came to the conclusion that there was actually less difference between liberals and socialists and radicals, even though they seem very different, but they work with some of the same underlying principles and it was postmodern, post-structuralist stuff, which is much more different, particularly around the idea of 'foundations' – that 'nothing is real.' Which is what I think now. Though, of course, this does not mean that things don't become real. They very much do – and people's lives depend on this process of 'becoming.'

Amanda: I have to say that I found it very interesting because I think that I agree with this kind of division that you made. I think that liberal, socialist and radical feminisms are much more similar than the ones that are understood as postmodern.

Marysia: Very much the idea that there is some truth. There is some core. For liberals, Marxists, socialists, of course there is, they're called radical, there is an absolute core. I mean, I am not so much interested in that temporal character like, 'oh, you know, radical feminism was then (in the past) and this is now.' These forms of knowledge never go away, and importantly, they are still feeding into contemporary feminisms of all kinds. Radical feminism is wonderful, actually. It has problems of course. But it's the only theory that still puts women first front at the centre and that's it. Liberal feminists are always trying to be 'like men' (in some way)... while socialists and Marxists are indebted to socialism/Marxism... radical feminism is still about women and that is still very unusual. So, now, I don't try and choose between them theoretically, I work with post-structuralist anti-

foundationalist kinds of approaches, but politically, I think they do mix actually. When you actually look at something like the UN, much of the gender legislation and policies 'look' very liberal, but there's a lot of radical feminism going at their heart. There has been a merging, I think those differences are less important than the difference feminists have with mainstream. I mean, poststructural feminism doesn't work so well 'out there,' at least in an applicatory way. That can be a problem. You can't go into, like we were saying, you can't go into NGOs or the UN and say well let's deconstruct this category and say woman is a fiction. It won't be acceptable.

Amanda: Even though identity politics has its limits, I think it's still what is basing most of the feminist movements.

Marysia: It's important.

Amanda: I think the question that remains is how to do politics differently, because I have a feeling that we're living in this paradox that we were talking about yesterday: we have never been so articulate in feminisms and so visible, but at the same time there is a reaction to that. That is something that I think is in everybody's minds, does it work doing politics the way we have been doing all this time. What should we do differently?

Marysia: That's the impossible question. I think we are in an unpredictable time. I mean, it is worse here than in many places, but the unpredictability of what people in power do, has left us all – in different ways – in something of a state of shock and then you are just literally scratching your head, because none of the usual strategies work. Though relying on reason is not always the greatest strategy. Somebody yesterday was really desperately trying to get people to understand and it's like 'they're not.' And this kind of wish obviously is kind of thinking that better education will do the job. We are very reliant on reason and articulation and rationality. I think trying to go on that path isn't going to work, that's not how these people are successful either, whether it's Trump or Bolsonaro. They're appealing to something else, to feelings, desires, it is about what people feel, not what they hear and think about. So, in a sense if we were thinking of another strategy, it would be about how can we use that strategy. Laura Sjoberg was talking about empathy yesterday...

We also cannot underestimate the power of the construction of the 'other.' The 'other' isn't someone you have sympathy or empathy for, because there are constructed as evil, for example they are terrorists or an abomination. We have many examples of this over history don't we? So, the notion of empathy relies on the belief that all people believe we're all equal and we are all deserving. And people clearly don't. And, so, again all of those usual normal things that we have been using, they are not going to work. But at that point, then, it's like 'what do you do?' There is a recent book by Donna Haraway (2016) called *Staying with the Trouble* and she writes about the idea that we are currently in something of a panic. And then there is a temptation to rush to solutions. Haraway suggests we might need to stop rushing/panicking; be still for a bit. This isn't necessarily literally and it will depend on the circumstances. If there is a fight, perhaps you're going to have to do your fight. But rather than rushing to a particular form of action, you just have to kind of always

ride it out, because it's impossible to know quite what to do... unless you're going to play the same game, which is then not about using reason, because they won't do that, you can't get it, reason isn't objective anyway... or, as Wendy Brown (2018) puts it in a recent piece about grit and determination, let's forget that for a while, because can't have that... but yeah, it's grit and determination, but try not to panic... that's easier said than done I know, especially here in Brazil right now.

Amanda: I wanted to ask you how do you feel about building a transnational thinking of gender and how do you think experiences in the global South impact on this, at feminist epistemologies... if you consider the need of a different epistemology in order to think the experiences of inequalities in the global South.

Marysia: Not necessarily a different epistemology, but different political strategies, I think that's the key. Again, you have to work with the local contexts, small or large... I mean, the Global South is large...

Amanda: Maybe you can tell me a little bit of how do you think we can build a transnational thinking of gender? What would be that path for you?

Marysia: I guess I feel a bit nervous or anxious about transnational... I know it's a 'thing' and a lot of people are doing transnational feminism, but I don't quite know what that means because I mean it's almost like a universal feminism, and that's not what it's supposed to mean, because there is not one feminism that fits all. Clearly, there were all the earlier feminisms of the 1960s or 1970s spreading the word around the globe, and of course it doesn't necessarily translate into different contexts. There are all the criticisms of that, of western feminism liberating your 'global sisters' or whatever. So, in some ways, I don't think it's our job, my job as a feminist from the global North to say what feminists from the global South should do. It's up to them actually, but I think it's our job to open spaces if we can. For example, I'm one of the editors of the *International Journal of Feminist Politics*, and definitely one of our missions or aims is to make it a more global journal because it is mostly global North people that are publishing in it and we are trying to do something which makes it more possible for feminist women of the global South to publish. And that's easier said than done... there's the language barrier for a start, but different access to different forms of writing and different expectations, and it's really difficult. So, we are trying to work out what can we do about this. Because we are a journal which is governed by the rules of journals and we have to have what we think of as the right standard. So, I am always wary about these grand strategies, you know, or grand names, like a transnational feminism. It just feels too big to me. I think you have to let people do what they do.

Amanda: I think it's interesting you mentioned about the way of writing because I think feminism is also about questioning academic writing. For me, that's an important thing. For example, I always feel like writing is an exercise, sometimes you have to be cutting yourself off a little bit to make yourself fit into academic writing. That's something that I think is an important part of feminist projects, writing differently, writing in an accessible way, putting other emotions into your writing. But that's definitely a challenge.

Marysia: And there are also different expectations, you know, when you're doing Ph.D. thesis, of course, to do that and you know in early career, it's quite difficult, but we are – me and other colleagues – are working on kind of creative writing. I don't know if you've seen my most recent book, which is called *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (2013) that is definitely differently written in non-traditional and creative ways (certainly for IR). And I and some other colleagues, have started a new book series which we have called *Creative Interventions in Global Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield International 2019). And we are exactly looking for very different ways of writing. It doesn't even have to be words, it could be pictures, whatever. There is a lot of work on this kind of work at the moment in IR and in certain sections of the ISA. Conventional methodologies do get in the way of writing creatively though. You're always having to cut things out that actually might be the most important things. So, I think it is a feminist job, certainly in the context of the book series to open up space for creative and innovative work.

Amanda: I'll ask you one last question. Can you tell me about what you think of theories and everyday practice, going back to the first question, because I believe it has so much to do with feminist practice but is also so difficult to grasp sometimes, for students...

Marysia: I think it's also part and parcel of my irritation with IR theory or methodology. and the idea that these things are separate. You know, that methodology or theory is something separate to whatever it is we're looking at or studying or whatever. Or that it's us who do Theory in Universities – but I think it's the other way around. I usually find things are the other way around, you know, theory is just how we make sense of the world, and by we I mean anybody out there, so theory is just about how we make sense of the world. So, Bolsonaro is a theorist as is anybody else. So how are they making sense of the world? And they're making sense of the world, you know based on all kinds of horrible things, you know, the women, these man, this is right and that's wrong and that is the theoretical perspective. I mean, you know, we can embellish that of course and place it in a liberal framework or not liberal and I think that's the way to think about theory, that direction. So, everybody is theorizing, everybody is making theory and some people are pushing at the boundaries, whereas other people like Bolsonaro or Trump, they want to close them down. So, when I say theory 'as practice' and I would still say that it would be interesting to look at that piece and to write it now and to see what that looks like... So the point about theory and everyday practices both about resisting the academic idea that say that we do theory after the fact almost, we impose theory on something, it's like yeah, because it's only about telling stories and making those stories make sense and a story can be a bigger or smaller story, could be a war, or you know, why your child can't have that. That's theory to me and methodology then is just about what we look to and how we make the connections then to help us make that story makes sense. Which doesn't sound like regular IR at all, which is always a good thing. Yeah, you know not advisable in your exams...

Amanda: I totally agree with that.

Marysia: But it is hard to keep that. I am enjoying it now.

Amanda: Those were my questions, thank you for answering them. I know I asked big questions, that's why I decided not to ask too many...

Marysia: Because you know, that's quite big and I extrapolated quite a bit!

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