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Interview – Natalie Jester

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, OCT 17 2022

This feature is part of a series of interviews with the contributing authors of *Foundations of International Relations*.

Natalie Jester is a Lecturer in Sociology and Criminology at the University of Gloucestershire. Her research focuses on in/security and identity on digital platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and online news websites asking what practices of violence these discourses make possible. She is author of 'International Security' in McGlinchey, Stephen (2022). *Foundations of International Relations*. Bloomsbury: London.

Your chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* deals with the ways in which IR deals with the idea, and the practice, of security. How did you first get involved in thinking about this particular issue?

When I was about thirteen years old the country in which I live, the UK, decided to go to war in Iraq. I had seen news of other wars and acts of large-scale violence before this, but I think the Iraq war was the first big international current affairs issue that I had thought about in significant detail. I decided that I was not persuaded by the arguments in favour of the invasion, and spent my school lunchtimes walking around trying to persuade my fellow pupils to sign it. I sent it to my MP and received an incredibly patronising response, which I probably still have somewhere.

In terms of your journey from one-time student to academic, how did you find your way and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

I began with an interest in domestic politics; this is what my undergraduate degree was in. During the course of my studies, I developed a growing interest in gender. In my final year, I took a class on Gender and Politics with Sarah Childs, and together this pushed me towards an interest in feminist international relations. I realised during my Masters that I had a particular interest in security and digital data and did primary research, which was not common at the time. It was during this that I realised that I wanted to pursue a PhD. I was lucky enough to get a lectureship a few months after my PhD was awarded. In a nice bit of circularity, I actually published my Masters thesis as 'Army recruitment video advertisements in the US and UK since 2002: Challenging ideals of hegemonic military masculinity?' in the journal *Media, War and Conflict*.

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

This is an easy one! I have two answers: the first is that my mind was completely blown as an undergraduate by Jutta Weldes' Pop Culture and World Politics class. It taught me that security matters can be understood through discourses and that we consume these all the time. The second is an answer that I have seen people give often: Cynthia Enloe. As soon as I read her book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, that was it. It made me realise that every issue is a gender issue, and that we should see security not only as tanks and tactics, but as women's ability to walk home safely alone, for example, too.

Do you think it is more important for academics (and students by extension) to dedicate most of their time to understanding the world, or instead actively to working to change it?

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For me, it has to be a mix of both. I think you need to understand the world, in all of its many complexities, in order to know what is wrong with it and how to fix it. There is certainly a lot that needs changing...

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in and around the discipline of International Relations?

One of the most exciting things happening within international relations research is the broadening of scope to be more truly pluralist. There was a time when you might have been laughed at if you said you were doing feminist IR and, whilst this isn't taken as seriously as it deserves, it is now a common theme within conferences, for example. Similarly, and drawing from other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history and literary studies, international relations as a whole is starting to pay greater attention to issues of race and colonialism. This work has always been happening, it is just that it has taken a while for the mainstream to be more aware of it (and to become more comfortable engaging with other disciplines).

To approach this from a slightly different angle, I also think that there's some really interesting work being done around the Internet and international relations/security, broadly conceived. It is an ever-expanding space and one that is not yet fully understood in academic terms. I'm especially enjoying the outputs from the *Militarization 2.0* project, and the books *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* and *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age*.

What is the most important advice you could give to students who are starting their journey with International Relations?

Always keep the human in mind. When we're studying international relations, we might sometimes forget that we're fundamentally talking about people's lives. It's never just about borders or presidential speeches, but about billions of people whose lives are shaped every day by what goes on in the international realm.

Those who read your chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* will take away many ideas and thoughts with them, but is there something specific you would like to leave in their minds?

There is more to the issue of security than I was able to discuss in this chapter; it was a huge struggle to decide what to include. It's a bit like an essay that you're really enjoying writing – when you get to the end you wish you had more words. If you're interested in the area of security, I would strongly recommend that you consider reading more around the critical approaches. The other chapters in the textbook provide a really nice foundation for this exploration as you already know about colonialism, gender and critical theories. All of these approaches have a lot to say about security studies as well and as I've said above, I think these are worth the most exciting debates are coming from at the moment.