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On Intimacy, Geopolitics, and Discipline: In Conversation with V. Spike Peterson

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On intimacy, geopolitics and discipline

Elena Barabantseva and Aoileann Ní Mhurchú in Conversation with V. Spike Peterson

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In this conversation we consider the personal intellectual journey of one academic (V. Spike Peterson) in an attempt to consider "the academic" as produced within a web of intimate global relations. Our basis for discussion is a public conversation with Spike at the University of Manchester (UK) in October 2016 that sought, in the spirit of the concept of "the intimate" that inspires this piece, to encourage more personal and informal engagements than the typical lecture format. [1]

In her recent publications Spike foregrounds the concept of "the intimate" as a terrain of inquiry that productively transgresses conventional dichotomies and disciplinary boundaries by emphasizing co-constitution and processes of attachment (Peterson 2017). Put another way, "the intimate" as a lens for analysis in her work enables us to see geopolitical dynamics as a relationship across/among thinking, feeling self(s) and a wide array of practices of governance and regulation through the institutions and political economies of marriage, social reproduction, householding practices and accumulation processes (Peterson 2010; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). It prompts a rethinking of "issues" in IR (such as globalization, nationalism, security, political economy) as processes of subjectification, implicating us all in the web of global/local relationalities, rather than objects of inquiry that we simply study from a distance. As such, the focus is on "the subject" within a dynamic web of familiar, informal, desiring, affective, personal, sexual and disciplinary relationalities.

Given the centrality of "the intimate" in Spike's work, we wanted to understand her life through this concept; that is, to consider the sources and forces (the intimate web of relationalities) that have constituted her personal, professional and intellectual life. We asked Spike to identify three themes integral to her journey into and through academia and three images of symbolic meaning to this journey. These images guided our conversation, which seeks to provoke reactions beyond simply words and to engage Spike's journey in terms of memories and feelings about interventions in IR, as well as her relationship to research and teaching. We argue in the final

section that this narration draws attention to a range of emotions that are inseparable from how the processes of "doing IR" are shaped, molded and disciplined. In this manner, we consider the importance of emotions as enabling the web of relationalities within which IR sits.

An intervention

Waking up

V. Spike Peterson (Spike): Coming of age in the 1960s—that feels like a very long time ago, even to me—meant a lot of "waking up" in my life. This [photo] is a massive march on Washington against the Vietnam War, which along with the deaths of four protesting students at Kent State, and violent resistance against African Americans demanding civil rights and access to schools, had very strong politicizing effects and shaped how I came to understand, question and want to change the world I was living in. I had grown up in a conservative household and a very white, middle-class environment, but my emerging political activism led me far from that terrain.

Aoileann Ní Mhurchú (Aoileann): Can you talk a bit more about how your activism influenced what you did in terms of your PhD and continue to do now?

Spike: I entered a doctoral program after a decade of backpacking overseas, so I was pretty critical of the IR scholarship I encountered at the time, which failed to resonate with the world I had experienced while traveling. I found feminist work, post-colonial studies and other critiques of racism that were emerging in the 1980s more relevant and interesting. I tried to make these critical perspectives visible in my own research, which sought to historicize state-formation and inequalities as an intervention in disciplinary IR.

My dissertation, *An Archeology of Domination: Historicizing Gender and Class in Early Western State Formation* (1988), argued that modern European state-making owed more to earlier processes, especially their normalization of social categories and hierarchies, than IR theory recognized. Admittedly, there is a great deal of variation in human societies. But the state's regulation of sex and property through heteropatriarchal marriage arrangements produced and normalized specifically sexed/gendered subjects, property-based membership claims and insider-outsider social categories (Peterson 2014a). By the time of state-making in Europe, these are simply taken for granted in IR discourse, and their contingent, contested history is simply erased.

Those of you in the field know it is very resistant to critical and alternative perspectives, and I would say especially in those decades IR was like economics in disdaining whatever could not be "counted" or readily categorized. Resistance to acknowledging neo-colonial inequalities, race relations and feminist struggles is still shaping the world politically and impoverishing IR analytically. Early on, I attempted to demonstrate that things were more complex than the accepted paradigms of IR would allow. Trying to promote feminist and other critical perspectives in IR is obviously a hard sell and I am still working on it.

In the early 1990s, however, a variety of "dissident" interventions created some openings and you could imagine small moves in IR. We organized feminist panels and gender conferences, and students also made a significant difference: they asked their professors why gender was not being included in IR coursework (Tickner 2014). So thank you to students for making the professors shift, which is especially evident in the United Kingdom, though less so in the United States. In spite of resistance, which continues, feminist interventions expanded in IR, as well as the array of questions asked, literally, from the intimate to the international.

Aoileann: The concept of intimacy has always been important in your work and analytical intervention(s), so can you say a few things about why it's useful? And how your life experiences helped you realize the importance of intimacy?

Spike: It seems to me that my career-long engagement with IR is about trying to persuade the discipline to take the personal seriously, whether we are talking about race, gender, affect or sexuality. Intimacy for me is a productive way to engage that insight, and there is a bit more space for that in the past decade due to a proliferation of writing in terms of feminist work but

also queer theory and post-colonial studies. Critiques of imperialism have increased attention on race, gender, sexuality and nationality, all of which involve emotions and intimate connections. I think the most generative aspect of "intimacy" is that it isn't spatially specific. Dichotomies have been relentlessly critiqued but continue in use, especially when invoking spatial connotations — public versus private, or even developed versus underdeveloped. Intimacy doesn't fit as readily; it is a subsequent iteration of deconstructing public-private and insisting that what is deemed "private"—whether it is personal, sexual or emotional—is inextricable from, indeed mutually constituted by, contingent "structural" processes and practices. Intimacy obviously conjures different things for different people. I think its study is a very expansive project and one can connect with it in various ways—ideally, to make visible what others have not seen or thought about connecting. And yes, I think that it matters in ways we have not explored adequately. IR still needs a lot of shaking up and "intimacy" affords one opening for doing so.

Enjoying the Ride

Spike: This second image is from travels in Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of the Congo] in a VW Beetle driven across Africa. I spent five years in Africa, most of the time hitchhiking and travelling on my own. You'll just have to imagine what that was like! It certainly was challenging, but backpacking around the world in the 1970s was an incredibly interesting and rewarding experience. I confess that learning to *enjoy* what was often a very rough ride required

an attitude adjustment on my part, but I did come to enjoy it, and especially to appreciate what I learned through the challenge of crossing borders and engaging cultural differences. I gained a sense of global realities and inequalities that has clearly shaped my work. I learned a great deal by seeing things for myself, observing how people live, what they deal with and how well they cope in often daunting conditions. Given this awareness, I try to make some difference with the work that I do: studying topics that might improve our analyses and inform a progressive politics. Given the world I observed and experienced, I became critical of capitalism as a culturally as well as economically corrosive system, and my resentment of it has only deepened with time and its corporate, neoliberal manifestations.

I returned to the United States in my mid-thirties and pondered my future. Having funded my college education and travels through clerical work, I was sure I didn't want that as a career. I already had a master's degree and (mistakenly) thought, "It won't take very long to get a PhD and perhaps teach at a junior college." I entered the IR doctoral program at American University in Washington, DC, attended the first graduate seminar, returned to my communal living situation and announced, "Oh shit! They expected me to know something about the study of IR before I got here." I had never taken a political science or IR course, and it was a curious encounter. I pretty quickly decided that mainstream IR was not all that interesting. While I do consider international relations crucially important to understand politically, the academic discipline of IR doesn't offer as much as I expected or wish that it did. Feminist and poststructural critiques drew more of my attention, but they were occurring outside of IR, and within IR I felt pretty isolated. I started the PhD program in 1980, continued to work half time, and finally completed my dissertation eight years later. A major obstacle was designing a dissertation that would "pass" as IR scholarship, when I didn't find conventional themes appealing. I was more interested in feminist scholarship, which at that time was questioning the "origins" of gender inequality; where and how it developed and became institutionalized (Gailey 1985; Lerner 1986; Silverblatt 1988). Drawing on this research enabled me to craft a dissertation historicizing normalizations of social hierarchy in processes of archaic state formation.

Aoileann: Could you give us some examples of what it was like to be female in academia after you completed your PhD in the 1980s?

Spike: After struggling to identify an "acceptable" dissertation topic, and completing it pretty much in isolation, I was on the job market for what seemed an endless three years. I did have

interviews, either because my research was so unusual and/or I was a token female on the short list. Only conventional IR positions were advertised, and being interviewed by "oh-so-serious" political scientists and orthodox IR scholars was uncomfortable at best, and often quite distressing. I clearly wasn't—and couldn't pretend to be—a good fit for "straight IR." Though my topic was intriguing, few were willing to engage the critiques of status quo scholarship it entailed. In general, I rarely felt like I was being taken seriously either as a female *or* as a critical scholar. I was worn down by feeling relentlessly disregarded and was ready to give up. Then the University of Arizona advertised a gender and politics position—*not* because the Political Science Department believed this was valuable but because feminists demanded this when negotiating with UA administration for a women's studies program. I survived another painful interview process and, because I desired a tenure-track line so much, I was thrilled to be hired.

Regarding feminist and other critical perspectives in academia, there is the often-noted divide between disciplinary IR in the United States and other English-speaking countries. For a variety of reasons, IR in the United States remains problematically positivist, modernist and masculinist (Peterson, forthcoming). This is obviously a significant impediment to feminist, queer, postcolonial and other critical thinking. Of course, there have been changes in the field, primarily due to cumulative critiques of orthodox epistemologies and the discipline's misleadingly labeled "third debate." By the early 1990s feminist and poststructuralist IR "dissidents" published path-breaking interventions (e.g., Tickner 1988; Ashley and Walker 1990; Peterson 1992; Sylvester 1994). But after initial collaborations, a split developed, and regrettably continues, between critical feminists and (non-feminist) post-structuralists. I understand feminists as committed to a *transformative* critique of IR as theory/practice, one that takes the contingent, complex and even contradictory intersection of social categories as central to analyzing and attempting to ameliorate power asymmetries. So, although there have been significant and exciting developments in the margins of IR inquiry, the mainstream to me looks much the same as it did thirty years ago. In particular, it remains just as uninteresting—yet increasingly problematic—in its failure to deliver more relevant, informed, critical and actionable scholarship in a world that desperately needs more adequate understanding of how power operates. The point is not to produce "*the* answers" but to critically question how multiple inequalities—their harms, resentments and destructive practices—are re/produced and might be transformed.

Paying Back

Spike: This is my office at home. I do love being an academic—it's certainly the best job in the world for me. I had had a fabulous time in my travels and adventures—I had learned a lot about myself and a lot about the world—but it was time to "pay back." As an activist, to end up in the ivory tower, one of the most privileged sites in the world, is a little embarrassing, and I have tried to justify this privilege by what I call "kicking ass" in the classroom and pointing things in more critical directions. I still consider myself a hardened activist, and I still participate in demonstrations and other forms of resistance, but the classroom is where I feel I have the most responsibility and greatest opportunity to try to make political change—and I do try.

While a critique of capitalist-racist patriarchy informs all of my work, I am more often identified as a feminist theorist. I endorse this characterization, primarily because I believe at this particular historical juncture—not all the time, because it will change—feminism as I understand it has a particularly important edge. Feminists have a bit more to say than many other critical perspectives, because they actually claim a commitment to changing the world and they take intersectionality seriously. Being marginalized as they have been, feminists had to be more creative, explore more questions, make more connections, be more reflective and, especially, cross more boundaries in order to do their work.

Aoileann: Your work stands across many fields: gender studies, sexuality, psychology, human geography, anthropology, cultural studies and IR. There are now various journals (what some

people call camps) where people can speak from different perspectives about politics. Is there a danger that they are now speaking within their own areas and own particular work rather than doing the type of cross-disciplinary work you have been championing?

Spike: All of the above. As I reflect on these things—and I do a lot of reflecting—there are just different trade-offs for any particular approach, and individually, one has little control over determining whether we have camps, a "discipline" or cross-disciplinary work. Everyone has their own preferences about what we want to look at, and what we want to contribute. One tires of battling the walls of IR for acceptance. You want to get on with your own work instead of continually arguing with or appealing to a resistant mainstream. I think "camps" become separated and entrenched in part because you cannot get on with more innovative inquiry or pursuing greater specificity if you keep having to *justify* your research questions or concerns. At the same time, so much is out of one's control, and with so many different actors and interests in play, the effects of individual choices are rarely predictable. I simply can't envision any single formula for assessing the trade-offs between the specializations of micro-oriented camps 'versus' more macro-oriented disciplinary or cross-disciplinary work.

I personally do think working across disciplines is essential to knowledge production that more adequately interprets social relations. Yet while cross-disciplinary work is relevant, it is both difficult and less likely to be rewarded. Institutional practices clearly shape incentives and trade-offs. In particular, most journals—and especially those prioritized in academic assessment processes—feature a mono-disciplinary focus. Cross-disciplinary research has fewer publishing sites and less predictable reviewer practices, and it complicates questions as often as it generates answers. Institutionalized impediments are hard to get around or change quickly. Mono-disciplinary journals are significant for promoting silos of information, which can afford crucial knowledge specializations. At the same time, we also need to have more macro- or cross-disciplinary and holistic analyses to better understand the larger picture. At present, I think we are ill prepared to address the larger questions and crises confronting us.

What I do wish is that we were better able to alter the politics of the mainstream because orthodox IR matters in the world. That does not seem to be happening, so different camps and individuals seem to be going their own way; perhaps because there are few obvious alternatives, especially if one is engaged in critique. Again: there are no simple answers, only trade-offs that require conscious and continuing assessment.

Audience member: Do you think scholars are doing enough with regards to raising awareness and social consciousness in the area of privilege?

Spike: I think the only answer I can give to that is the one I give to a lot of questions: it depends. Certainly there are some who are doing their absolute damnedest, and I imagine there is a great deal of literature that isn't being promoted or read because of power structures that minimize the circulation of critical work. Perhaps a better question is, *if they are not doing enough, then why aren't they?* Is it because they don't wish to, don't think about it, or fear being rejected or even fired for it? I expect some of these reasons to be operating, but I am not knowledgeable enough to speak about the effects in general. I certainly don't know what it means to hold individual authors "adequately responsible" for the effects of their work!

Yet here I am, holding hegemonic IR responsible for not delivering adequate analyses. Because IR is *the* discipline uniquely focused on the study of world politics, I do believe it has a greater responsibility than other disciplines or fields of inquiry to ponder, investigate and help us understand how power operates nationally, transnationally and globally. And I don't think we have done a very good job. There are no quick fixes, and everyone is facing institutional and personal pressures that shape our life opportunities and careers. It's not clear to me whether or how individuals are doing enough.

Aoileann: You have said elsewhere that you enjoy teaching in particular, that the questions and challenges that come from students "keep you going and force you to keep growing" (Peterson 2003, xvii). In terms of paying back, could you say a little bit more about what you see teaching is adding to your career and also what you see as the possibility or potential of teaching?

Spike: It's a bit complicated. I primarily teach undergraduates, and I love it, because they are very open and I try very hard to make classes interesting. My main objective in teaching is to try to create awareness of how power operates not just directly—the familiar understanding of intentional "power over"—but indirectly, through the less obvious power of normalized beliefs and institutionalized practices. I find that my students at the University of Arizona (where I've taught since 1990) have rarely thought about how we are all, and all the time, implicated in operations of power. Over the years I have adapted research on the inequalities of privilege to illuminate how all of us participate in reproducing systems, institutions if you will, that are

differentially valuing what people do and how much their lives matter. For example, all of us have privilege in this room, simply by being here in an institute of higher education. In our racist world, I gain unearned advantages by being "white" that are *denied* to those who are not perceived as "white." Those with privilege rarely think about it, typically don't want to think about it, and the world I live in doesn't encourage critical thinking, especially about institutionalized inequalities. Most of the time most of us follow paths of least resistance that reproduce status quo practices, including those that privilege some *at the expense of others*. I use many examples to try to defuse the defensiveness that critiques of inequality typically generate. I remind students that none of us is completely responsible for the systems or ways of being we inherit, but we are all responsible for what we *do* with privileges we inherit.

In the classroom I am pretty informal and, I hope, accessible. I let students know how much I care about teaching, about promoting critical thinking skills, and about working toward a more just and less destructive world. In my experience, students respond favorably to my being real and opening myself up as a human being who *still* struggles to better understand what is going on and what is to be done. They respond positively when I ask how *they* feel about a topic or event, how it affects them, and what kind of world they *want* to be living in. It is important to me that they feel heard and not just lectured to.

Audience member: In terms of making a difference, Spike, you said at one point that what you would really like to do is alter the politics of the mainstream, and that you hadn't seen academics doing that very well. Can you provide any examples of academia or wider society positively influencing politics? Or identify ways in which academics do and/or can facilitate progressive change?

Spike: Well, that is the question, isn't it! How does large-scale social change occur? It is a perennial question for those seeking to change the world. But the first question is whether people *want* to change the world, and this depends on so many factors and competing interests. I do believe that resistance matters, unionization matters, securing rights and the vote matters, and elections matter for making political change. I do believe in organizing, but it has to be a process that recognizes complex intersections—of emotional investments, cultural beliefs, normalized practices and institutionalized structures. I do think it's possible to provisionally identify those connections and produce more nuanced analyses to better inform activism. It is important to

emphasize the non-innocent and "provisional" status of interpretations, not to presume we have *the* answers, which is a seductive but problematic claim.

And I definitely believe we have political effects through our teaching. What frightens me most at the moment is the reluctance to criticize capitalism, which concentrates power among the very few and through media shapes how most of us (think we) "know" the world. With my students I can rave on about queer theory and gender politics, and they are willing to engage, but they resist any critique of capitalism. I get it: the United States is built on capitalism and people are sold on it. Alternatives lack credibility and are readily dismissed as communist plots—but we need alternative visions!

We have to acknowledge that we don't know exactly where we are going, but that shouldn't stop us from pursuing different paths. We do know some things about making change. If you want to get rid of litter, you have an anti-litter campaign. If you want to support diversity, you have a campaign to inform people. These work in some ways but rarely address deeper issues. I think perhaps it's more difficult these days to engage in a kind of collective social movement than it used to be. Social media and the internet create more possibilities for campaigning. In the United States, social media made a difference in the fight for minimum wages and for Black Lives Matter. So engaging these issues might be easier by using this media because people can actually see things happening rather than being mystified, as might have been the case in the past. But I am not very smart about social media, so you should ask someone younger!

Audience member: I am an anthropologist, and one of my jobs is going out and talking to people and finding out how they are feeling. I've noticed that no matter how accessible we make our work, a lot of people still just don't care about changing things. Instead, many of us are mostly focused on getting by, figuring out how to survive day to day and discovering practical solutions to problems in our everyday lives—and not really wanting to make the structural changes that we may think are necessary. I think from an anthropology point of view you have to incorporate that into the challenge as well.

Spike: Well said! It is about how we personally are situated, how we engage the world, how we think about having an effect on the world, and what effect we might want or not. May I just return to the observation that we exist as individuals but always within a context of norms, expectations, rules, economic trade-offs and so on. There is no single or simple formula for

discerning what is "best," and as you pointed out, each of us confronts a range of choices and constraints. Our responses depend in part on who we are as individual subjects. Some people are fighters and can really take the heat from being in the public eye, and can do certain things because of that energy. Other people can write effectively, other people can organize, other people can raise really wonderful children: all are politically important projects. For me it's trying to identify how power operates through systems (if you will), and how these are hurting all of us *differently* but significantly. Overall, I think we all need to attempt to take responsibility for whatever choices we make. How do they affect the worlds we live in? You can never answer that specifically, but to not ask it—as if you are independent of larger effects—I think that is problematic.

Concluding reflection/s

This multi-voice narration reflects the intertwining between broader political processes and the intimate, we suggest, by holding a mirror up to the myriad of emotions that go into studying, researching, seeking to understand and teach (or more broadly communicate) international relations. It points precisely to the intertwining of the political processes that make IR possible as a disciplinary field (to be talked about, engaged with and worked upon) *with* emotions (such as frustration, anger, disappointment, hope, affection) invested in and generated in the process of academic practices. In doing so, we attempt here, in keeping with a growing tradition (e.g., Sylvester 2011), to situate IR in/around thinking, feeling, desiring bodies. Emotions of course are increasingly the mainstay of discussions in the Social Sciences (in particular fear and risk); however this particular narration is different as it challenges the normalized idea that "ordinary people's emotions are affected, sponge-like and passive, at the bottom" (Pain 2009, 472). Instead, emotions in this piece are understood as actively *producing* IR.[2]

What is foregrounded in this piece is the emotions involved in decisions about the issues that academics and students study, and the positions they take in the discipline of IR regarding what the field of IR should look like. Spike, most notably, talks about emotional investments in her long term struggle to contest limited understandings of what IR can look like, to create more room for critical scholarship in the discipline, and to translate research for a general audience. These emotions are also visibly experienced and expressed in the questions and comments made by the audience. In this piece therefore, frustration, solidarity, disappointment, joy and fear do not appear as irrational distractions that hinder analysis and reflection. Rather, they are powerful forces that motivate and inspire engagement and enable the production of deeper, more complex

and nuanced analysis about IR. This is precisely because emotion is presented as integral to how the contours of IR are sketched out—literally the way the study of IR is "known." Take for example Spike's teaching: she asks students to reflect on their feelings with regard to IR issues studied by them in the classroom. This arguably allows them to think about the feelings of people involved in IR events that they study (e.g., linked to struggles for democracy, human rights, sovereignty) and to recognize the importance of feelings for how IR is discussed and articulated, as well as enacted and disciplined by academics, policy makers and governments. By starting with the example of protests against the Vietnam War, emotions are shown to be always already part of and bound up within the field of (events and practices we call) international relations. Indeed, one of the questions from the audience points directly to the centrality of the concept of survival as an inescapable part of our world today. Thus, by beginning to unpack the processes and forces that connect us in a web of intimate relationalities in this piece, we can see how we can develop our understanding of IR in a richer manner. It allows us to take seriously the emotions that go into living in and shaping this global society, day in, day out, as an act of survival.

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Notes on contributors

V. Spike Peterson is currently researching how state-sanctioned marriage historically produced and continues to regulate sexual/familial practices, racialized hierarchies, citizenship—and hence migration—options, and starkly unequal resource distributions within and between states/nations.

Elena Barabantseva researches nationalism, mobility and borders in contemporary China. She is currently participating in the China-Europe *Immigration and the Transformation of Chinese Society* research project (ESRC Ref ES/L015609/1) focusing on marriage migration to China.

Aoileann Ní Mhurchú is co-editor of *Critical Imaginations in IR* (2016). Her current research focuses on connections between vulnerability, resistance and creativity in international politics, focusing on artistic practice in vernacular language and music.

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[2] This narration also avoids reducing emotions and their complexity to one overarching emotion such as fear (see Pain 2009 on the problems with this).