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CONVERSATIONS

Doing feminism: a conversation between Cynthia Enloe and Roxani Krystalli

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Introduction

"As we go forward in the twenty-first century," Cynthia Enloe writes, "feminists inside and outside academia need to be on our guard against a cynical form of knowing. We need to send the roots of our curiosity down even deeper" (2004, 18). In this conversation, we have endeavored to do just that. In August 2019, we exchanged several emails about the politics of seriousness, the meanings of politics, and the different ways in which we have understood ourselves and our feminist work over time. We wanted to turn the usual curiosity that we orient toward our questions on international politics toward the topics of identity, writing, academia, failure, and joy. These, too, are feminist questions, not only because they prompt reflections on power but also because they invite us to take seriously the issues of joy, well-being, and the meaning that we each find in how we do our work. A lightly edited version of this conversation can be found below.

Conversation

Revisiting seriousness

Roxani: A few years ago, many of us at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy were working to create what is now the Gender Analysis in International Studies program. In the spring of 2014, I invited you to give a talk on making patriarchy visible to those who may resist seeing it. As part of that talk, you had said: "The big question in life is 'Whom do you want to be taken seriously by?'" That stopped me in my tracks. You have talked over the years about how "seriousness" and notions of authority and credibility are gendered, but I

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interpreted this particular comment to be not about external posture or reputation, but about internal compasses. I'm curious to hear how you arrived at this question of "Whom do you want to be taken seriously by?" I assume the answers shift over a lifetime, so I'd also love to know: how have you thought about answering it at different points in your life?

Cynthia: Oh, Roxani, I remember that conference at Fletcher so well. The room was electric, wasn't it? I think the very best academic gatherings are ones where everyone realizes that the stakes are high – not just individual careerist stakes (when those dominate, the air is sucked out of the room), but more authentic collective stakes in transforming a program, an institution, or our combined civic commitments.

Perhaps that's what motivated me to think about who I want to be "taken seriously" by and the risks of getting that wrong. I think it was in grad school (at Berkeley) when I first started realizing that I needed to be taken seriously by certain people in order to be seen (by others) as a "real" political scientist.

That's one of the hallmarks of the cultures we're socialized into in most grad programs, isn't it? We are encouraged to think in terms of careers and who will help us move forward in these things called careers. Simultaneously, we are encouraged to think hierarchically, to imagine that the people we need to be taken seriously by are those up the academic ladder, professors at our own schools, or professors at other schools who write influential books. Careerism and hierarchy – shaped by ethnicized, racialized patriarchy (the senior faculty in Berkeley's large Political Science department in the 1960s were virtually all white and male, even if they had intense differences politically) – is a potent combo.

That is, most of the cultural socializing pressures we feel in most grad programs in most countries in the world do not push us to want to be "taken seriously" by the people whose lives we observe (unless, perhaps, those people are economic or national security elites), much less by "ordinary" citizens.

So, for me, becoming a feminist – well after grad school, well along in my "career" – was to begin to shift who it was I wanted to be taken seriously by, whose assessment of what I wrote or what I said I worried about. I can vividly remember when I first worried about what Adrienne Rich would think of my book! This was the book *Ethnic Soldiers*. Only at the page proof stage – too late to change more than my index entries – did I realize that if, by some weird miracle, the feminist thinker and poet Adrienne Rich ever picked up *Ethnic Soldiers*, it would appall her. Becoming a feminist also made me worry about what the British women activists then encamping around the nuclear base at Greenham Common would think of *Does Khaki Become You?* (originally published in the UK). And then, as I became more consciously a feminist, I,

of course, began to take my own mother's experiences and ideas more seriously. What would my mother think of what I wrote?

Does any of this ring true to you? Maybe being a self-aware feminist analyst all the way through your grad years and your taking active part in feminist activism inoculated you against some of this careerist, hierarchical socialization.

Roxani: Oh, it certainly rings true, Cynthia! One of the challenges of working in hierarchical environments is that those settings sometimes make hierarchy seem immutable and inevitable. Feminism opens the window and lets in some air. In my life, it has served as an invitation to consider more critical ways of being a researcher, a writer, or an activist (acknowledging, of course, that feminist universes are rife with their own hierarchies). The idea that a good researcher is "objective" and not explicitly engaged in activism or politics did not fully resonate, so I was relieved to find that feminism gave me permission to inhabit the multiplicity of these identities. Feminism – from Adrienne Rich to Audre Lorde and their conversations (1981) – is full of poets who teach and scholars who march and there is a freedom of *being*, if you will, to this model that appeals to me.

Feminism, accountability, and writing

Roxani: One of the ways in which the question of "Whom do you want to be taken seriously by?" manifests in the lives of scholars and activists (and activist scholars!) is in our writing. We must ask not only whom do we write *about* and *with*, but also *for*: who are our imagined audiences? This affects the style and tone of our writing, our citational practices, and the places where we publish. One of my personal disappointments in certain corners of academia is witnessing the framing of accessible writing as "not theoretical" or "not academic enough" – with those, of course, being code words for particular kinds of credibility and signals for which work should (not) be taken seriously. How have you thought about how (and for whom) you tell stories through your writing and how has that affected where and how you publish over time? And how have you dealt with the politics of seriousness that crop up along the way?

Cynthia: You could probably hear my teeth grinding … at the presumption that "serious" academic writing has to be inaccessible writing, or has to be writing for the "club," for just the insiders within some research specialty. "If it's accessible, then it must not be theoretical" … Grrrrr.

Serious writing actually is writing about serious subjects in a conscious, careful, engagingly nuanced manner that a wide assortment of readers can comprehend enough so that they can challenge what one is saying. Feminists

have taught us this: write (or speak) in ways that allow you to be held accountable for what you are writing or saying. Obscure modes of writing don't make one "intellectual" or "sophisticated." Rather, they create a defensive shield that makes one unaccountable.

Roxani, do give a couple of examples of when you yourself have been tempted to adopt a mode of writing or speaking that you had a gut sense was inaccessible. Or give an example when you consciously resisted that temptation – but felt as though you were taking an academic risk!

Roxani: I love your framing of accessibility as linked to accountability. By way of your request for examples, I will give you two – speaking to my failure to appropriately wrangle language on one occasion, and to the structural policing of seriousness in writing on another.

Some time ago, I was revising a piece I had written about the political claims of those who identify as victims of the armed conflict in Colombia. I shared a draft translated into Spanish with one of my research interlocutors. I had known him for years and he has shaped not only my research, but also my understanding of what we mean when we talk about "political work." He said to me: "Look, I think this all sounds very important. Very formal, very academic. I just don't see myself in it." He and others who identify as victims were extensively quoted in the piece, so he was not referring to a failure to center their voices. Rather, in his words, he "could just not get past the parentheses and quotes." My understanding of what it meant to theorize and to put one's life in conversation with others' writing about it had actually resulted in my obscuring the narratives I had sought to elevate. In a recent interview, the writer Kapka Kassabova said "encounter – with people and place – is central in my writing" (Danek 2019). This resonates deeply. The people I encounter lead legible, intelligible lives. The conversation with my Colombian interlocutor reminded me of the stakes of preserving that legibility, even as I filter the narration of those lives through scholarly literature and theoretical translation.

And yet, I do not want to suggest that the barriers we are discussing would be removed if we just told better stories. Such a view would erase the structural factors that preserve hierarchy, as well as the ways in which people embody them. An example of how those structures work can be found in the advice that both I personally and colleagues more broadly have received, in person and through innumerable threads on social media. There is a sense that writing "non-academically" should wait until an undefined later: until after tenure, until security (without asking if those are desirable or achievable priorities). "Non-academically," in this context, can refer to style, or to outlet of publication (e.g., in literary journals or media, not peer-reviewed academic journals), or to subject matter. It gives me pause when I hear people suggest that writing about love, or nature, or joy, or grief, or home, or a

sense of place somehow dilutes one's "Serious Writing." Sara Ahmed once said that "apprehending the world from a feminist standpoint of view is apprehending more, not less" (Mehra 2017). I'd like to see a widening of the spectrum of the lives we give ourselves permission to lead – and write about – as scholars.

Cynthia: This nuanced description of your conversation with your long-time trusted Colombian male interlocutor makes so clear how deep the puzzle is that we should be grappling with. If we are not puzzling, we are not doing feminist writing.

Identities and labels in academia and beyond

Roxani: This brings me to my question on identity, which captures what Laura Shepherd has called the continuous journey of constituting and disciplining an "I" in our research and lives (2016, 2). I am curious about the labels that resonate and their evolution over time. What does "I am an academic" or "I am a scholar" mean to you? Is that a resonant identification for you and, if so, how does it sit alongside others, like "I am a feminist"? And if it's not a resonant identification, are there labels that you feel more accurately capture the core of what you do in the world? Or are we best off resisting the labels altogether and telling the longer, messier story of who we are and what we do?

Cynthia: Ah, what do I call myself? I'm most comfortable – I feel most authentically who I am – calling myself a teacher. I've learned so much trying to teach, always being surprised, stretched, on my proverbial (sometimes actual) toes. I may also occasionally use "researcher" and more rarely "analyst." But, really, whether I'm in a classroom or writing or having coffee with a colleague or giving an invited talk, I am a teacher. Teaching not in the sense of knowing everything, but in the sense of learning, sharing, and encouraging. It's as a teacher that I feel most wide awake.

In practical terms, this is one of the reasons I keep pushing for teaching – extent, quality, commitment – to be taken seriously in all hiring and tenure and promotion decisions. I have never bought into the false tension of teaching versus publishing. I've learned that, at their best, teaching, research, and sharing research through publishing feed each other in ways that keep us honest and make our lives more engaged.

But not buying into the false rivalry also means constantly trying to find ways – and joining with other faculty members to press for those ways – to ensure that teaching is validated, supported, and explicitly evaluated.

Tell me how you identify yourself and what you are doing when you are at Fletcher, when you are in Colombia, and when you are there in Scotland – and what have you found are the hard choices.

Roxani: I have asked myself two questions about self-identification in recent years. First, what is the work that we expect labels to do? Sometimes I say "I am a feminist researcher" or "I work in the humanitarian field" and I expect the labels to do the work for me, as though they automatically tell a single story about my questions, methods, influences, and interests. I have tried to resist this assumption and to put myself in the position of telling the longer, more complicated story instead. At its most honest, my story unfolds in the "and," in the hyphen and slash: feminist researcher *and* practitioner in the field of humanitarian action and peace building, interested in the politics of victimhood during transitions from violence *and* in knowing the names of plants, birds, and clouds alike.

Second, what are the labels we resist or fear claiming? I derive lots of joy from going to book festivals or author events at independent bookshops. At these events, I have heard published authors say, "A writer is someone who writes." And yet, I struggle to call myself a writer. There is some sense that certain labels are earned by linking one's livelihood to them, that some identities have to be accorded by others. I try to resist that sense too, in part because of its capitalist origins and gatekeeping implications, and I am trying to imagine how our relationships and sense of self would be different if we let our curiosity and interests drive our identifications.

The many meanings of politics

Roxani: I would now like to turn to another identification or definition: how we understand politics and "the political." The oft-cited feminist dictum would have it that "the personal is political" – and, as you've added, the personal is international! Much feminist work centers on locating politics, and on making the argument that certain behaviors, bodies, and choices are political. The political, in this case, rarely refers exclusively to the formal, official politics of parliament and elections (though it certainly includes them). What do we talk about when we refer to the "everyday politics" we embody and encounter? What do *you* mean by "political" or "politics," Cynthia? And what are the stakes of treating something as *not* political?

Cynthia: For us to usefully see the political in many of social life's nooks and crannies and even in surprisingly intimate spaces is not, I think, to claim that "everything is political." If we make this vast assertion, then I worry that politics will disappear.

So, instead, I try to pose a question: where in what I am observing or tracking is the political? Asking that question pushes me to be more careful, more

specific, more analytically useful in determining what constitutes power and where power operates (Enloe 2017).

One of the great contributions that anti-sexual harassment feminist activists have been making to all of our thinking – since the late 1970s (any new awareness of what is political and where it is operating usually can be dated; we haven't been collectively smart about politics forever!) – is their shining bright lights on the workings of unequal and patriarchal power in ordinary workplaces in seemingly undramatic workplace interactions: for instance, the male foreman's casual touching of a woman working on an assembly line; the male job interviewer asking questions of a woman candidate about her sex life; the male boss telling his more junior female colleague about his marital problems; the male supervisor asking a female subordinate out for after-work drinks and plying her with liquor for the alleged sake of "collegial bonding."

I'm still learning about what can constitute power and when and how – and with what consequences – all forms of power operate. I'm grateful for the years spent investigating the workings of ethnocentrisms and racisms, because then when I became a feminist, I had those continuing curiosities in my mental tool kit. That has been crucial to my own ongoing learning about the myriad working and sites of politics.

Roxani, could you talk a bit about how this question of where and what is politics in your own Colombian work? Figuring this out is never abstract, is it? It's grittily grounded in one's everyday efforts to make sense of what you're seeing and hearing.

Roxani: My interlocutors in Colombia – ranging from those who identify as victims of armed conflict, to former combatants, to members of state armed forces, to feminist human rights defenders – have really shaped my sense of what it means to embody and enact politics. The language around this was immediately striking to me, with many people reflecting on what it means to be a "political subject" (*sujeto político*). I notice the ways in which this is language many of us would benefit from in the "peacetime" communities in which we live. Imagine how different our public life could be if more of us asked what it means to be – and relate to others as – a political subject!

Language is also telling of the work that politics involves. My interlocutors in Colombia often speak of "doing politics" (*hacer política*), similarly to how they speak about "doing memory" (*hacer memoria*), rather than merely "being political" or "remembering." I like those expressions because they make visible the work of politics. Narrating politics as work is one way to not hide the effort (and affective labor) it requires.

So, what is that effort? One of my interlocutors who identifies as a victim of the armed conflict described it like this: "Doing politics means to claim,

demand, argue, propose, and organize. It means to exist publicly, to be in conversation. 'Political subject' requires a collective understanding, not individual leadership." The emphasis on collectivity and political community feels important in an environment in which our attention (including scholarly attention) can be so individuated. It reminded me of Lauren Berlant's claim that "one 'does politics' to be in the political with others" (2011, 260).

Finally, I try to pay attention to the moments that some claim are not political. I attended a gathering of women who were former combatants of various non-state armed groups. One of their lamentations was, in their words, that "love disqualifies the political project of women." As one of the women said about her experience with being interviewed or profiled for events and publications, "'she was the mum, sister, wife, or lover of a guerrillero' is always the explanation of how the women got there." It speaks to an ongoing failure on the part of some of us to understand the meanings people assign to both intimacy and politics – and the politics of intimacy.

Cynthia: "Doing politics" and "doing memory" – these two phrases used so consciously in Spanish by your Colombian interlocutors …. This makes one reflect, doesn't it? The "doing" means working at it, investing conscious effort in taking part in civic life – even when it is discouraging, even when it's risky, even when it's unpopular. And working at memory – using one's own precious energy and time to recall what you'd rather forget or what others would rather you pretended you've forgotten – and then recalling later more fully or more clearly yet again …

Reflecting on failures and finding joy in the academy

Roxani: Some of what I find so compelling about your work is the candidness with which you admit to your own feminist failures. In every article and book of yours I've read, and in so many of your public talks, you talk about how you had missed gender analysis earlier in your life and career, how you had not been fully attuned to it. This is such an important conversation in intersectional feminist movements today: what are the things we have missed, overlooked, or erased – even unwittingly – in our research, writing, teaching, and activism? How can we candidly admit to them, so we can foster deeper and more honest conversations? What advice would you have for those of us who want to be better at reflecting on and narrating our failures?

Cynthia: You're good to underscore the "doing" too of recording one's own mistakes, one's own omissions embarrassingly belatedly realized. It certainly can be painful to share with others one's own analytical and relational failures. I think I speak about them because I want to be sure that no one – a listener, a reader, a student – imagines that someone who's been lucky enough to get

this far along hasn't made some serious mistakes along the way. Portraying the path to alleged "academic success" as smooth (or just implying that it is), paved evenly with research and teaching achievements is, of course, blatantly ahistorical; it's "false advertising." It is also discouraging to everyone else. It makes this thing that looks like "success" seem unobtainable to mere mortals. That portrayal then simply makes academia even more exclusionary.

My second reason for talking about my own failures is because it is really interesting to explore. Why didn't I ask that question then? Why didn't I notice that then? Why didn't I take that seriously then? Why, why, why? Asking those awkward "whys" can turn up such interesting revelations. So it's not just eating humble pie that's useful. It's (uh-oh, here comes an unhappy metaphor) actually dissecting that humble pie and one's own appetite for it!

Roxani: And from an unhappy metaphor, onwards to joy. What brings you joy, Cynthia? Where do you look for it? And where does it surface and surprise you?

Cynthia: Ah, joy. I think joy seems so uncompromised, and thus so fleeting. It's too rarely collective, so often private, personal, and pretty quirky, don't you think? That doesn't make joy – experiencing it, recalling it – unimportant. But it does make it hard to describe and explain. How to explain how genuinely joyful it feels to me to be standing and singing a rousing version of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" at a Fenway baseball game with 37,000 other singing fans?

What I've been noticing more nowadays is what "peace" looks like and feels like. Peace is not the same as joy, though without peace it's hard, isn't it, to experience joy and to openly cherish what brings joy?

For instance, just taking the subway to a dentist appointment without fear can be reflective of peace. Or connecting with a diverse circle of friends to provide support for another friend who's facing worrisome health problems can both reflect and deepen peace. Even debating with neighbors who have a wide range of personalities and priorities about how best to make local housing affordable, knowing that we'll eventually manage to sort out some of our sometimes sharp differences, can reflect and sustain peace. In other words, I'm increasingly aware these days that peace is not haloed, it's not filled with unending joy; it can be thoroughly – reassuringly – mundane.

You and I, Roxani, I have a hunch, have learned this about the often surprisingly un-headlined qualities of peace by having listened closely to those women and men who have had peace ripped away from their daily lives.

Roxani: Thank you, Cynthia, for this conversation, and for all the ways in which your work invites us to think about feminist curiosity and "peace without a halo." It was a real joy to speak with you.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Roxani Krystalli is a Program Manager at the Feinstein International Center and is completing a PhD at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. She is interested in questions at the intersection of gender, critical humanitarianism, transitional justice, and peace building.

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