Conversation With…. Wendy Larner

Ruben Kremers*

Department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS), University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
*Correspondence: r.s.kremers@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

Professor Wendy Larner is an internationally acclaimed social scientist whose research sits in the interdisciplinary fields of globalisation, governance and gender. She graduated from Carleton University in 1997 with a PhD in Political Economy and has since worked at the University of Auckland (1997-2005) and the University of Bristol, where she became Research Director, then Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law (2005-2015). In December 2015, Professor Larner assumed her current role as Provost of the Victoria University of Wellington. Professor Larner visited the University of Warwick in June 2017 at the Institute for Advanced Studies' invitation.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, Methodology, Feminism, Post-Colonialism, International Political Economy.

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process

Introduction

Whether it be telecommunications, call-centres, the fashion industry, or the university – when Professor Larner addresses the theoretical dilemmas of the political economy she speaks to and through the very palpable realities of economic life. A distinct liveliness runs through her writing that I was immediately attracted to when reading her work. She once described her method as "weaving theory into the practical world". And indeed, there is a practical vitality to her research that provides for a kind of critical inquiry, which is not satisfied with simply 'thinking through' or 'urging caution', but wants to act, create space and effect change. Not surprisingly, then, that her recent work on the future of the university also serves as a reflection of its present opportunities: the push towards interdisciplinarity, for instance, or the increased recognition of key insights from feminist and post-colonial scholarship.

Larner's intellectual work has forged a path for 'splitters' as she calls them. Scholars like me, who do not feel comfortable with mammoth statements about capitalism, globalization, states, or markets, although they do not deny their necessity, validity, or importance; scholars, who want to build on the achievements of feminist and post-colonial scholarship and further

complicate grand theory by seeking out its blind spots and silences; scholars, who wonder what critical work a focus on smaller worlds, on everyday rhythms and daily practices may accomplish. So, I was thrilled to hear about the opportunity to meet Professor Larner in person. I wanted to hear about her recent research, but I was also curious about her journey as an academic.

What follows is our interview, and an attempt to weave her academic insight and her personal experience into a conversation about the current challenges of academic life. The first section 'Opening doors in the Western academy' asks how we may built upon the current import of feminist and post-colonial methodologies into the mainstream of the social sciences. The second section 'Of clumpers and splitters' explores Larner's past and present experiences in pursuing these methodologies. The third section 'Turning the University Inside Out?' examines Larner's recent research on collaborative projects and interdisciplinarity. The final section 'Looking forward' outlines Larner's thoughts on how to respond to the challenges posed by recent advances in big data analytics, epigenetics, and climate change, and it gives a quick outlook on Larner's personal plans for the near future.

Opening doors in the Western academy

RK: I would like to begin our conversation with a discussion of what you have recently described as a distinct opportunity for social sciences today, namely the current momentum for collaborative research projects that seem to facilitate a mainstreaming of methodologies traditionally found in feminist and post-colonial research. You likened this momentum to the appearance of a number of half-open doors. So, what doors do you think are currently half-open and why do you think they are opening now?

WL: I think the answer to this question is necessarily contextual. It will look different in different places. As I think about this question from Aotearoa New Zealand, one of the obvious examples is the politics of indigeneity. Just this afternoon, I attended the lecture of a leading Maori scholar. This is a good example of the kinds of intellectual activity I would like to see more of in our universities. The lecture was located on the University marae and moved back and forth between Te Reo and English. What we call Mātauranga Māori, Maori knowledge, is becoming increasingly well-established within New Zealand universities. Elsewhere this discussion will take other forms; for example, the UK debates around de-coloniality. How will the politics of de-coloniality shape a more diverse academy in your country? What needs to be done differently and with whom?

My more general point is that such debates are much more visible than they were a generation ago. Indeed, it seems to me that the Western academy is having a deeply reflexive moment. Given that feminist and postcolonial researchers have been exploring these kinds of questions for much longer than many of their academic colleagues, I think it is no surprise that the kinds of thinking that we find in these research domains are becoming much more visible within our universities.

Of clumpers and splitters

RK: As a scholar, you have yourself been a protagonist in exploring these questions that are now entering into the staider traditions of political economic research. So, let us quickly revisit these earlier days. What inspired you to pursue these sets of questions in your early career?

WL: I have a Canadian PhD, and there are two things about my PhD experience that are worth reflecting on. First, I was a New Zealander who came out of New Zealand in the early 1990s and went off to Canada at a time when the so-called 'The New Zealand Experiment' was receiving quite a lot of international attention. You may or may not know the story: In 1984 New Zealand elected a Labour government that introduced a radical economic reform programme and a social reform programme at the same time. This meant that in the New Zealand context, deregulation, marketization and privatisation coincided with important progress in the Maori land claims process, the establishment of a Ministry for Women's Affairs, homosexual law reform and the country also went nuclear free. So, the 1980s was a very interesting mix of both economic and social liberalism. Now when I arrived in Canada, all sorts of people were talking about the economic reforms in New Zealand. But they were only seeing one side of the story. To them, New Zealand looked like Thatcher's Britain. I spent quite a lot of my first few months saying, 'no, that is not what is happening in New Zealand, it is more complicated than that.'

Second, this experience made me think much harder about the political-economic frameworks available at that time. Monolithic stories about homogeneous economic processes did not help me at all with the kind of work that I was trying to do. What I could see was a whole variety of world-shaping politics – including the interventions of feminists, Maori and social movements – that were either being made invisible or recast as 'more neoliberalism'. In my PhD thesis I looked for analytical tools that would help me think through these apparently contradictory processes, and the ways in which they articulated or came together in what we might now call an 'assemblage'. At the time, feminist and Foucauldian conceptual frameworks influenced me most. The debates on 'situated knowledges' were prominent, J.K. Gibson-Graham were beginning their early work on the diverse economy, and 'governmentality' was finding its way into the

Anglo-literature. Building on socialist feminist traditions I had been exposed to in my earlier degrees, I began to work with these different sets of theoretical tools, to make visible and engage with contradictory political-economic processes, actors, and ambitions.

RK: In developing these analytical tools, what were the practical challenges you faced?

WL: The coming together of political economy, governmentality and feminist theory is now taken for granted in the social sciences. But at the time this was not the case. During my PhD I was the only one who would go to the feminist reading group, the cultural studies reading group (because that was where governmentality was being discussed) AND the Marxist reading group because I wanted to work across all those terrains. To give you another example, my colleague William Walters and I regularly attending the International Studies Association conference during that time. But people at that conference did not know what to make of us when we suggested that governmentality might help international studies scholars think differently about the global. Even more heterodox accounts pre-supposed pre-existing actors positioned in pre-existing ways. We were much more interested in understanding how these actors (or subjects to use the language we preferred) came to be understood in particular ways, and encountered each other in particular spaces. To use a now well-known phrase, our aim was to 'make the familiar strange'. Political science and international studies remained wedded to pre-existing actors – states, markets, civil society – for longer than human geography which has always been a more heterodox discipline. But even within human geography, at that time I was an iconoclast. I insisted on naming what I was doing 'political economy' and the subtitle to my PhD thesis was 'towards a poststructuralist political economy'. Yet, I was departing from Marxism and neo-Marxism which were the taken-for-granted theoretical lenses of political economy.

That said, it is also important to note that I have remained in conversation with those scholars who work within these more conventional political-economic approaches. Human geography is a very collegial discipline, and the debate over the value of programmatic approaches versus the more situated analyses that I favour has become a bit of a disciplinary joke about the difference between 'clumpers' and 'splitters'. Clumpers tell big stories about powerful actors and monolithic processes. Splitters complicate those stories, always insisting there is more going on and that political-economic processes are more heterogeneous than clumpers acknowledge. This disciplinary conversation has been going on for a good 15 years or so, and both constituencies have shifted their perspectives because of it. So, it was important for us to have this debate. Indeed, the

fact that scholars of a variety of theoretical persuasions – feminists, neo-Marxists, post-colonial scholars - were often in the same room arguing respectfully and productively with each other is one of the reasons that I eventually found an intellectual home in human geography.

RK: Would you say that as a consequence of these conversations across the social sciences, it has become easier to work interdisciplinary for early career researchers?

WL: I do think that it is now easier to work in an interdisciplinary way, in part because universities are supporting and funding interdisciplinarity in a way that a couple of decades ago was not the case. So, it is easier in that regard. But the challenge with being interdisciplinary at an early point of your career is that it is harder to find an academic community. Disciplines provide you with that community. If you are a political scientist you hang out with political science colleagues, you go to political science conferences, and you can make your way up the political science academic ladder. Disciplines also provide important theoretical building blocks. It is a good old cliché, but when we are standing on the shoulders of giants we need to know who those giants are otherwise we risk reinventing the wheel (to mix metaphors!).

For example, during my last couple of years in Bristol I taught an interdisciplinary methodology course together with a complexity scientist who works on educational theory and a poverty researcher who ran randomised control trials. This was a great experience but what really struck me was that many of the graduate students in the course couldn't understand why we thought that interdisciplinarity was such a big deal. They often started from the premise they were somewhere in between disciplines, and were building their research projects accordingly. But this meant that sometimes I was listening to people talk thinking: 'You have never read Marx. It is quite clear that you have never read Marx. And Marx would have so much to say about this!' So, I do think finding the balance between understanding our intellectual legacies, and being able to ask new questions in new ways is the balancing act that we need for successful interdisciplinarity.

Turning the university inside out?

RK: Coming back to our earlier discussion of changes in the social sciences, I would like to move on to talk about your current research, which engages with the changing dynamics within and around the university. In June you were here at Warwick to present your recent work in a talk titled 'Turning the University Inside Out?'. What do you mean by this phrase?

WL: This phrase is taken from a workshop held as part of the ESRC research programme 'Productive Margins'(www.productivemargins.ac.uk), which is led by my friend Morag McDermont at the University of Bristol. My argument is that if we look at the literature on the contemporary university there is a lot of talk about the ways in which universities are increasingly industry and government facing, with a corresponding re-orientation towards applied knowledge. In particular, the critical literature often presupposes the rise of the so-called 'neoliberal university' and worries about questions such as 'Is this the end of the blue skies university? What happens to the university as critic and conscience?' (to use that wonderful phrase that is enshrined in the New Zealand education legislation). What I am arguing is, yes, universities are indeed increasingly industry and government facing. But we also need to pay attention to the other relationships being built within and through universities, such as relationships with NGOs, community organisations and social movements. These are also profoundly shaping our academic environment. For a long time, social movements and activists of many different political persuasions were very critical of the so-called 'ivory tower' university. Now there is a new generation in the university, many of whom have been or still are part of the activist world. What happens once we begin to explore the opportunities those relationships bring?

The Productive Margins programme is a terrific example of this. This programme brings together law, humanities and social science academics and seven community organisations. It aims to redesign regulatory frameworks for social inclusion, showing how people 'on the margins' can produce new ways of thinking about and performing regulation. Rather than re-supposing that the academics would control the research programme, consulting with the community organisations when we needed to, the programme was awarded over a million pounds for a research proposal premised on the principles of co-production. Our proposal basically said: 'Here is one small example of what these research projects might look like, we are going to co-create the rest of them between the academics and the community organisations, and experiment with various forums and formats.' In turn, this programme has had implications for funding models, institutional and personal relationships, the nature of research outputs, and modes of dissemination. My point is that the contemporary university is being reshaped through all sorts of relationships, for all sorts of political agendas. It is not just the growth of government and industry engagements. That is only one bit of the story.

RK: I can see a recurrent theme emerging here. More than ten years ago you wrote an article with Richard Le Heron in which you made a similar point. You wrote: "A greater appreciation of political possibilities, coupled

with a perceived need to consciously develop them, might allow academics to re-imagine the neo-liberalizing university in quite different ways." How far have we come since? Does it still make sense to talk of a neo-liberalising university?

In my opinion, we are at a very interesting moment in the long history of universities. It is important to remember that universities have reinvented themselves over and over again, and take different forms in different places. While there is currently a lot of talk about relevance, my view is that universities also need to hold open the spaces in which fundamental questions about the future of our economies, societies and environment can be asked. That is one reason why I am doing the job I am doing now. I am increasingly convinced that if universities cannot hold those spaces open, nobody can. For example, in my university we are having a very serious conversation about what it means to be a 'values based' university. How can we embed Mātauranga Māori in our teaching and research? What does it mean to be a health promoting university? Can restorative justice processes be used instead of more disciplinary approaches? What do we need to do differently to address social inequalities? How will we become carbon neutral? I know these conversations are alive in many universities today, and I want to see them furthered, deepened and broadened. But if we keep telling ourselves stories about the always exploitative neoliberal university, we will not see these conversations, and we will drive ourselves into a cul-de-sac from which it is very hard to return. So, yes, we must be critical, but what kind of political work are our critiques doing? Personally, I would rather focus on the kinds of critiques that open up new possibilities. So that is the very clear link between my analytical work, my political work and now my institutional work…

RK: …and yet, is it not difficult sometimes to uphold this critical commitment in your role as a Provost?

Well, I have chosen my university carefully (laughs)… Of course, you can't just do this by yourself. But in my experience many people are up for these conversations. Academics, professional staff, students, the people we engage with, they all care deeply about their universities, what our wider futures might look like, and the role universities might play in shaping those futures. So, I inhabit my role as Provost by consciously making space for the kinds of politics and possibilities that I am talking about. For example, one of the first things I did when I arrived at Victoria was create an early career academic programme, building on my experience with the Antipode Foundation (www.antipodefoundation.org). In both cases, the explicit intention is to build a network of early career scholars who can support each other, think collectively about how to make a difference in their universities, and who can work together to address overly

individualised processes. The Institute of Advanced Studies at Warwick is doing great work in that space, too, by the way. But you never work under the conditions of your own choosing, and universities are large complex organisations. That is the politics. It is about creating spaces where you can push things along and make a difference, while at the same time recognising that you will not always get your own way. You also need to learn how to work effectively in these spaces; for example, you can write good business cases for innovative early career academic programmes, and good grant applications for research programmes like Productive Margins.

Looking Forward

RK: I'd be interested to hear a bit more about your ideas regarding the role of the university in this era. In particular, I'd be interested to hear your take on discussions about the crisis of the social sciences in face of the expansive production and use of 'social' data outside the university. The risk of redundancy for inferential statistics in times of Big Data analytics for example.

WL: Let me be very clear. I am convinced we need to think very hard about the future of the social sciences, and there is no guarantee we will continue to occupy the spaces we do. Big Data is only one way in which the social sciences might be diminished in the future. The rise of epigenetics is another. If things like poverty have a genetic explanation, the taken for granted approaches and conceptual frameworks we use as social scientists to explain poverty will need to be re-worked. And then there are the debates about the relationships between the human and the non-human in an era of catastrophic climate change. Developments in these three areas – big data, epigenetics, climate change – all have potential to hollow out the traditional social sciences. And when the importance of social sciences is no longer taken for granted, we will need to have compelling answers for those who will question the value of what we offer.

We have some of these answers already. For example, our ability to think critically and conceptually, to make the familiar strange, and to problematise the questions being asked. Social scientists are very good at that. We excel at showing how social life is more complicated than others may presuppose. Moreover, if we go back to where we started this conversation, social scientists also understand ontology, epistemology, and reflexivity. We understand there is more than one way to understand the world, issues of ethics and processes of subjectification and so on. But it is also clear, we need to think harder about the kind of intellectual work we do in this changing terrain. I worry about the social sciences in terms of our ability to persuade others of the ongoing relevance of our

disciplines. I do not think that we are going to be irrelevant, but I do think we will need to think differently in the future, and that providing robust answers to those sceptical of the social sciences is a profound challenge.

RK: In my last question I would like to address your personal plans for the near future. Are you planning any new research projects? Or will you be mainly occupied with your role as a Provost?

Yes, the latter. It will be mainly my Provost role. I am still examining PhD theses, because I care about early career academics and their work and it is a really nice way to stay on top of current debates. And every now and then, as with the Warwick invitation, I go and give a talk. I also recently co-edited a book that came out earlier this year titled 'Assembling Neoliberalism'. But I think that these more formal academic contributions will become more infrequent, at least in the near future. What I am trying to do now is bring my conceptual approach to bear on my engagements with the university. Treating the university as my empirical object if you like. This means I am reading much more of the literature on universities and new knowledge formations, and trying to use those to inform my day to day activities within the university. In this sense, I have not given up on my academic engagements, I am just using my intellectual and critical sensibilities in a different kind of way.

References

Higgins, V. and Larner, W. (2017), Assembling neoliberalism: expertise, practices, subjects

Larner, W. and Walters, W. (2000), 'Privatisation, Governance and Identity: The United Kingdom and New Zealand compared', Policy and Politics, 28 (3), 361-77

Larner, W. and Le Heron, R. (2002), 'The spaces and subjects of a globalising economy: a situated exploration of method', Environment & Planning D: Society & Space, 20 (6), 753

Larner, W. and Walters, W. (2002), 'The Political Rationality of "New Regionalism": Toward a Genealogy of the Region', Theory and Society, 31 (3), 391-432

Larner, W. and Le Heron, R. (2005), 'Neo-liberalizing Spaces and Subjectivities: Reinventing New Zealand Universities', Organization, 12 (6), 843-62

Larner, W. and Walters, W. (eds.) (2004), Global governmentality: governing international spaces (London and New York: Routledge)

To cite this article:

Kremers, R. 2018. Conversation With…. Wendy Larner. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 6(1), 1-10. Retrieved from: http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/article/view/243