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Feminism is a project not an identity

Jo Littler interviews Sylvia Walby

Sylvia Walby is a sociologist who has written extensively on gender inequality, patriarchy and feminism in, for example, books such as *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), *Patriarchy at Work* (1986), *Gender Segregation at Work* (1989), *Out of the Margins* (1991), *Gender Transformations* (1997) and *The Future of Feminism* (2011). She was a founder of the Feminist Studies Association and the European Sociological Association. Her work theorising social change includes books such as *European Societies* (1999), *Contemporary British Society* (2000), *Globalization and Inequalities* (2009) and the recent book *Crisis* (2015). In recent years much of her work has been on violence, including *The Concept and Measurement of Violence against Women and Men* (2017) and work for the UN on violence against women. She is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London, UK, and UNESCO Chair in Building Peaceful Societies through Research on Gender Equality. In this interview Sylvia Walby talks to Jo Littler about gender inequality; why feminism is better understood as a project than as an identity; how gender dynamics were sidelined during Covid; ways to understand crisis; and what we mean by 'violence'. This interview took place on 14 December 2021.[i]

Jo Littler: *In* Theorizing Patriarchy *you theorised patriarchy by splitting it into six different categories: paid work, housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state. But later you largely stopped using the word patriarchy in favour of 'gender regimes'. Why did you stop using the word, and what do you think about the current rebirth of interest in it?[ii] Can 'patriarchy' be used alongside 'gender regimes'?*

Sylvia Walby: The term 'gender regime' and the term 'patriarchy' refer to exactly the same concept, which is a system of gender inequality. The underlying meaning is identical. I shifted the term because people were misinterpreting me: when I was first using the term patriarchy, people misinterpreted me as being biologically essentialist, and ahistorical, and I wanted to talk about changes, and varieties, and the possibility of change. People were saying that they couldn't see that in any text which referred to the concept of patriarchy. So I decided I would translate myself! And from 1997, I translated myself from patriarchy to gender regimes. I did say in the book *Gender Transformations* that I was merely translating, and I meant exactly the same thing. Not everybody accepts that it *means* exactly the same thing, but that's my position. So I'm intrigued about the increased interest in the term. I'm very comfortable with that. Can it be used alongside? Yes absolutely, they mean the same concept. There is the possibility of a non-patriarchal gender regime, but I don't know of any.

You also describe feminism as a project, rather than an identity. Why?

The concept of a 'project' contains the implications of change, of movement, of fluidity, of possibility. The concept of 'identity' is very fixed. I'm not comfortable with the concept of identity because of its tendency to essentialise, albeit on the level of culture rather than biology; hence I find it a relatively unproductive term compared with the advantages of using the concept of 'project'. Indeed, the concept of 'project'

is better than 'movement' because it contains notions of *practices*, as well as of ideas. So, yes: project, rather than identity. I wrote about this in my book *Globalization and Inequalities*, in the chapter 'Civil Societies'. It was part of my attempt to develop the concept of civil society - using that term rather than culture or ideology - and to deliberately take civil society as a broad concept.

You often pay attention to forms of feminism that might not conventionally be labelled as such (such as union activity) as well as to historical/social complexities (e.g. what happened between, or across, 'feminist waves'). Is this a Gramscian feminism? To what extent do you locate your work in that vein?

Well, to start with, it's about coalitions and alliances and about the breadth of the project for gender equality. The trade union question is really important. The trade unions are one of the most important organisations in the contemporary world pushing for gender equality in the economy. And yet, because gender is not unions' *primary* concern, a very narrow definition of feminism would tend to exclude the trade unions, even though they're an important part of a coalition of civil societal forces pushing for gender equality. I think it's really important that we have the concepts to be able to capture those alliances and coalitions; and that we have the capacity to include organisations and projects for whom feminism isn't their only or lead component. In order to include the trade unions, it's necessary to use that notion of feminism as a project; and to have a proper understanding of intersectionality - of the relationships between different groups pushing for progress and justice.

Is it Gramscian? Gramsci's a very important writer. It's not only Gramscian, but it's inflected by Gramsci, absolutely. I think there are multiple Gramscian components. One is the interest in coalitions and large-scale issues. What's hegemonic and what's counter-hegemonic? What does it take to build a bloc, to build an alliance which is concerned not only about the things which *directly* concern that group, but also about a broader understanding of what it would take to create the broader societal transformations which improve the standing of not only that group, but other groups too? So from that school of thought, I adopt not only the concepts of 'civil society', and 'projects', and the importance of coalitions and alliances, but also the way of connecting them back to macro-societal processes - and the significance of the macro-societal level in understanding the ways that politics are organised and the possibilities for change.

You have been involved in, and associated with, 'gender mainstreaming', which is an approach to policy-making that takes gender into account. For some people, such a move would probably involve a dangerous complicity with neoliberal regimes. What's your take on this - and on why gender mainstreaming is important? How are you involved in gender mainstreaming now?

I think of gender mainstreaming as being about more than policy. It's a way of thinking about the relationship between radical politics and the mainstream. It's deliberately designed to think about the tension between radical, critical, alternative ways of thinking and the contemporary embodiment of power: especially, but not only, in the state. And most politics is about the relationship between the two. It's neither situated in a separatist focus upon the radical, critical space, nor is it a focus upon the existing forms of power. It's all about the relationship between them. And so

'mainstreaming' is a movement in both directions. It's about how feminism changes the state, but is also changed *by* that process. Both sides change: both feminism and the mainstream will change during that process of gender mainstreaming. So I think of it as a dynamic: there is inherently tension there, and that tension can be productive. There are risks, of course, that one side can consume the other … the one that you point to is whether feminism simply gets absorbed, is too weak to withstand the pressure to be absorbed into the mainstream. It's possible, but it's far from inevitable. And if feminism means other than sitting in its own private space, it's inevitably engaged in that process of mainstreaming, which is the relationship between critical, radical thinking and existing forms of power. Almost all contemporary politics is engaged in mainstreaming of some kind.

Can you give examples of when it's been successful?

The history of feminists' engagement with violence against women is an example. Once, women were outside the protection of the state if they were subjected to gender-based violence. The state did very little for them. Feminist politics built separate feminist institutions such as rape crisis lines and refuges for women who suffered domestic violence. But these feminists didn't actually *stop* with the building of these institutions: they were also trying to engage with the state. For instance, they wanted access to public housing and for the welfare state to deliver income support to women who left their husbands. They wanted to change the way that the criminal justice system operated so that there would be sanctions against people who'd been violent. So that's a set of politics which, even though it might have appeared as if they were only setting up separatist institutions, actually engaged very productively and over decades with challenging orthodoxies. I think the movement of violence against women, gender-based violence, domestic abuse, #MeToo, are often instances of gender mainstreaming which have been effective in changing things. Not sufficiently; but they've all been effective in securing some kind of change in that tension between the radical, critical thinking and the existing basis of power.

And a more negative example …?

A negative example would be how contemporary feminism, in trying to engage the state to act against men's violence against women, has inadvertently led to increased securitisation and excessive use of coercive state power - rather than the development of specialised targeted welfare to assist women, the weak and the disadvantaged (as was the earlier focus of feminism). In this form of politics there is a tension in calling upon the state in a way that potentially enhances the development of a too powerful, coercive state, as compared with the development of targeted welfare forms. Balanced reaction is important; it's important to have nuanced arguments about the extent to which a particular kind of intervention is counterproductive or not. There *should* be sophisticated political discussions, supported by research in the academy, so that we can accurately determine in which instances such a 'calling-upon' part of the state is effective, or is counterproductive. I don't think it's always obvious. I don't think slogans like 'selling out' or 'complicit' are very helpful. I think these are things to be examined in detail, with assumptions of goodwill and good faith, but nonetheless to critically examine exactly what are the outcomes of particular kinds of intervention.

Your approach is engaged with both theoretical and abstract complexities and with materialisms and systems of power - as displayed in for example your books Globalization and Inequalities *(2009) and* Crisis *(2015). How might you update* Crisis *now?*

The book *Crisis* was written with a focus empirically on the financial crisis of 2008. It was written as a theoretical text, but that was its main empirical example. How do we understand the relationship between crisis and society? What did it mean for a crisis such as that to emerge? How do we understand the potential for change in positive and negative directions? Could the crisis be simply reabsorbed? Was it something which was relatively small-scale and absorbable? Could it give rise to significant change, or would it be potentially catastrophic? The book was an attempt to explore the relationship between crisis and society, using the example of the financial crisis, and to examine how large-scale change always engages with gender relations.

Even though the type of change I was looking at wasn't primarily focused upon gender, it was making an argument that you can't understand macro-level societal change unless you understand how those macro-societal processes are also gendered. It was also an attempt to engage with complexity theory: change is not simply linear, where the cause has proportionate effects. It was an argument about the importance of non-linear effects: the possibility of very major effects from relatively small changes in relatively small events. I think the concept of crisis the book developed is applicable to lots of other kinds of crisis. My example was finance, but I could have used others. I could have used the climate crisis, which is still with us. Or, now, Covid. Covid is a crisis: what are its possibilities and outcomes going to be? I think some of the theoretical developments in that book are still relevant for the analysis of Covid. There is a possibility of a cascade of changes; something which appears to be quite small can have very large effects.

The book analyses how crises are 'cascading' into ever-increasing crises. Yet what about the non-linear elements – for example, might you take the Biden election as not being an intensification of that crisis …?

The concept of cascade is really important. It's an analysis of society as being made up of multiple systems. Society is a system, made up of multiple systems, of two main kinds: regimes of inequality and institutional domains. The notion of the crisis 'cascading' is that it cascades through these interconnected systems. It's not that the whole society will move at once, but that, step by step, one system could change another. But there is no inevitability; and any specific system could absorb it. I used the example of the financial crisis, for example, to examine effects upon the real economy, which had effects on the state. There was no inevitability that there should be austerity. You might say the same with Covid: there's no inevitability that the closing down of the economy had to mean austerity. The government can simply print money! And if we compare the two crises, the government in this instance *has* simply printed money, whereas it didn't in the previous one.

During the previous crisis, many people said it was inevitable that the economic crisis would lead to austerity, but I didn't think that was inevitable. The current crisis shows it wasn't an inevitability: fiscal problems for the state don't have to give rise to austerity, that's not a necessary consequence. The financial crisis, combined with

austerity, causes a series of further changes. It led to an exacerbation of other existing inequalities in civil society: it led to forms of scapegoating; it led to the intensification of ethnic inequalities; it led, in part, to the Brexit vote, which itself then led to another 'cascade'. But there was no *inevitability* that the Brexit referendum was going to go the way it went, or that the interpretation of the Brexit referendum would be such a hard Brexit. It didn't *have* to mean that. So it's an attempt to run a systems level-analysis, while still containing a component of contingency.

You recently wrote an article, The Gender of R, which argued that any attempt to reduce the transmission of Covid needs to pay attention to the gendered dynamics of care. You've also written other pieces about Covid and social theory.[iii] Can you outline what you've come to focus on in your social analysis of Covid and the pandemic?

In the piece in the *European Journal of Social Theory*, I argued that we should take seriously public health as a social-democratic intervention, and that pushing back on Covid required the kinds of social-democratic projects of which public health is a really important part: public health and social democracy are closely intertwined. Theoretically, it was an attempt to address the question of whether all state actions were intrinsically authoritarian. So it was an argument against Agamben, and the mobilisation of some Foucauldian writers who were arguing in the very early days of the pandemic that all state interventions were inherently problematic.[iv] Instead, I argued that we really should be theorising state interventions through the lens of social democracy and public health. In that article I argued very strongly for public health interventions to push back the extent of Covid and save lives.

The libertarian impulse has, I think, been highly problematic. We've seen an extraordinary coalition of left and right libertarians opposing the development of public health interventions. Some early theoretical work in this area inappropriately fed what has since become a strong anti-vaxxer movement. The article was also an attempt to theorise public health, because it's so important, and I think some social sciences had almost forgotten about it: it had become separated off to 'the health world' and was no longer central to social science. But in the last couple of years, through the lens of Covid, we've begun to rethink the place of public health, which involves not just the provision of care after somebody's sick, but strategic interventions to *prevent* people becoming sick.

My attempt to 'gender' this was by focusing on how gendered public health interventions were concerned with care and the household. I wanted to draw attention to the transmission of Covid inside households, and *between* people who cared for each other. This was being neglected. We were seeing the transmission of Covid in patterns of care, care between generations, grandparents and children, intergenerational household forms of care, domiciliary care; but what became the sole focus of attention were institutionalised forms of care, especially care homes. I thought we saw a serious underestimation of the extent to which Covid would be transmitted through domestic relations of care. When the UK government talked of closing down parts of the economy, they ignored care! The voices about care were not at the table making the decisions: they were typically excluded from the conceptualisation of what it meant to 'close things down'. So we saw very little, and very late, support for forms of care which would not transmit Covid. I compared it to

what was happening in China, where from early on they were setting up 'in between' hospitals. When you've got Covid you don't want to infect your nearest and dearest. Why would you tell somebody who had Covid to go home and stay with their family? Why didn't we offer people somewhere else to go? In China, they were offering alternative forms of accommodation: you could go somewhere else, and not infect your children, your partner or your grandparents. The UK's provision of resource, money and targeted welfare seriously underestimated the significance of gendered welfare interventions which were necessary to prevent Covid's spread.

Another example was people's capacity to stay away from employment if they knew that they were infected with Covid. If you didn't earn very much money, if you didn't have proper sick pay, then you didn't have much incentive to stay at home. There has therefore been a highly classed, gendered and racialised dimension to the Covid crisis, in which the failure to deliver basic resources like proper sick pay meant that we didn't interrupt Covid's transmission to the extent that we could have. In that way, I was trying to think through what a feminist political economy of Covid would look like, and to think through measures that would lead to the reduction of its transmission. Unfortunately, I think it's still relevant.

Your work has been quite invested in the idea of economic growth - i.e. you have written about the concept of making economic growth more inclusive, and feminist, and mobilising it as part of a social-democratic, rather than neoliberal, programme. Yet there are a fair number of other environmental/ left/ feminist thinkers (such as Kates Soper and Raworth) working in the grain of the ecological economics tradition who definitely do have a problem with it. What do you think of that? Is there not any problem with economic growth for you?

I think economic growth can take various forms. It's not inevitable that economic growth takes a neoliberal or destructive form. And it's that variation I'm really interested in. Think of the varieties of capitalism, varieties of gender regime, the varieties of economic growth. There's no inevitability that economic growth *has* to mean the destruction of the planet. There's no inevitability that economic growth *has* to mean capital accumulation or generate inequalities. For example, if we're going to go green, we need to completely restructure our energy sources. The renewable energy sector is growing, it's transforming, it's really important, and is part of the way there. Now, that's a process of economic development which involves the closing down of old industries and the growth of new ones. It means the development of wind power and of solar power. It means putting turbines in rivers. It means the increased insulation of homes. There's a series of economic activities which are necessary to reduce the amount of carbon that we emit. So that's a process of economic development: economic growth, if you like, which is necessary for the transformation of the economy in a progressive direction. It's the same for gender equality. In order to transform society in a gender-equal direction, we need to transform the economy. We need institutionalised childcare, we need nurseries. We need to invest in the human capital associated with the training of nursery staff and teachers. We need to invest in healthcare and a variety of forms of care. All of these are forms of economic growth. I've typically summarised them as social-democratic. It depends where you sit as to how you interpret the concept of social democracy. In Britain, we can use it quite abstractly. In other parts of Europe it's so tied up with specific political parties that the term is harder to use. But in a British context, it's relatively straightforward to

say that a social-democratic trajectory can entail forms of economic growth, investments in human capital rather than merely fixed capital, and transformations of the economy in a green and gender equal direction. Which means economic growth *can* be good: it all depends upon how it's constructed.

For instance, in the chapter on progress in *Globalization and Inequalities* I compared the extent to which economies grew using different proportions of carbon: how much carbon there was per dollar of GDP. Different countries have different rates of economic growth in relationship to it. So it's always been possible to imagine economic growth having different effects, and green economists have always been able to count it. So it is possible...

So no time for the de-growth movement?

Okay, it depends what's meant by the economy here. And we might say, well, is the development of *care* part of the economy? Do you really want to stop the development of collective forms of care? I don't want to argue for that. If you are narrowing the concept of 'growth' merely to profit then we can all agree. I think the concept of growth is too important to be narrowed in such a way. I think it's really important to keep a concept of a dynamic transformation of the economy, of which growth is simply a part, and to keep the focus on the nature of the *transformation* of the economy, not just to think about whether it's growing or not and about GDP.

Okay, yes, I agree with that. Let's turn to sociology. To what extent has sociology, in your experience, been a hospitable home for feminism?

I think sociology has been very hospitable. It's been a site of engagement with society, it's been open to offering an important, scientific, analytical response to contemporary societal developments. I think the heart of sociology has been in an intellectual response to contemporary societal developments. Sociology's always done that - from Marx, Weber, Durkheim looking at the challenges of industrialisation and capital accumulation, to contemporary developments in society. Is it always hospitable? It's a complicated space, so you should expect to have argumentation about what kinds of space it should be. We've had discussions about the extent to which there should be a separate analysis - Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Feminist Studies - and the extent to which it is separate or integrated. Multi-disciplinary research centres have involved really important practices which have allowed for that joint development of those forms of analysis. So yes, I think sociology has been hospitable, but the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary spaces have also been very important. There is inevitably a tension between the two, and I would like to think of that as a productive tension which keeps these debates live.

So that's an answer that is mainly oriented around the theoretical tools, rather than 'lived' university experience and working cultures. What if you looked at it from that perspective?

That's asking about universities, rather than sociology. Are universities hospitable environments in which women can operate? Historically, that's been extremely varied. Women were excluded from universities. It's only relatively recently that we've had women in senior position in universities, and we've seen high levels of

contestation when women have attempted to take positions of leadership or authority within the university. So universities have been spaces in which the inclusion of women has been highly contested - even as universities themselves often think that they constitute the most liberal spaces in society! I think universities usually understand themselves as being more hospitable than would be warranted by the experiences of people in any minoritised group. The challenge is always to draw upon the goodwill of that self-understanding, in order to deliver effective transformation of institutional practices, so that they actually live up to their ideals, rather than engaging in defensive reactions to their critics. It's a contested space. All contemporary organisations have been challenged by the transformation of gender relations in which women are increasingly entering higher levels of employment. Universities have engaged with this, as have other organisations, and it has generated varied experiences on the ground.

Why did you start to work on violence?

I've always worked on violence. Very early on I was interested in the development of the new forms of politics and provision in relationship to refuges, and in the media representation of rape and the way that it was portrayed in newspapers. *Sex Crime in the News* was one of my earliest publications.[v] Whilst I'm often thought of as having written particularly around political economy, that was always there. So why do I focus so strongly on it *now*, is I think the question. I think violence is critical, theoretically underestimated, and a site of major contemporary political contestation. A lot of the left is led from either political economy or culture, and has treated violence as something to be regarded as empirically, but not theoretically, relevant. Many theorists of capital accumulation don't notice violence: they say, 'oh yes, that's horrible', but it's not built into their accounts. Much of the development of cultural studies and the radical politics around cultural studies didn't treat the *physicality* of violence seriously; and insofar it was addressed, treated it as a discourse, or something newspapers wrote about, or something that you saw in media and film. And I was always interested in the *physicality*. That is, in how violence is a form of power with its own specificity, its own rhythm, modality, patterns and form of deployment and regulation. It's not reducible to other forms: to political parties, to the economy, to the polity, or culture, or civil society - it's distinctive (although, of course, related).

Theoretically, I thought it was a mistake that contemporary - by which I mean post Second World War - social science underestimated it. But before that, violence did have a place in sociological thinking. For Weber, it was fundamental: the modern state had a monopoly of legitimate violence in a given territory. Weber's account of the state analysed its relationship to tax-raising powers and to war, as well as the power to regulate violence and civil society. Durkheim's book *Suicide* is about violence against the self. It's an argument for the significance of thinking through violence and its distinctive forms to understanding society.

So, theoretically, I thought it was a mistake to ignore it. It *matters* as a form of power for gender inequality. And analysis led through political economy underestimated the extent to which violence shaped women's lives. There was a constant feminist political pressure to take violence more seriously that the left typically ignored; they

treated it as an epiphenomenon, something which is marginal, empirically relevant, theoretically not significant for drivers of change in society.

My next point is about the significance of violence *politically*, which again, I think, is often underestimated. I think the interpretation of violence is very important for contemporary political alignments. Feminist movements concerned with violence against women have long argued for the improvement of welfare and the reduction of gender inequalities as part of their understanding of what drives violence in society. They know there's an interconnection between gender inequality and violence against women: that gender inequality has *caused* violence and was the *product* of violence. That there's a deep interconnection between inequality and violence, and that the strategic way forward was welfare - either by specialist feminist organisations or by persuading the state to provide the general forms of welfare necessary to reduce gender inequalities and to provide the targeted forms of welfare support needed to escape the violence. Feminist movements from the 1970s onwards had had a radical, social-democratic interpretation of violence, which was politically an important contribution to the development of counter-hegemonic thinking - indeed, what *ought* to be, hegemonic thinking in contemporary society; and the left was wrong to ignore it and to treat it as not very important.

The alternative interpretation of violence has been to see it as a form of pathology: as something which is the consequence of drugs or mental illness, and therefore is not understood as connected to inequality. That is an influential interpretation. It's also unfortunate, because it tends to ignore the significance of inequality in generating violence. A further interpretation of violence is that it's something that's so terrible that we should increase the coercive powers of the state in order to subdue it. Some of the debates around terrorism have moved in that direction: we have seen an argument for the increased coercive capacities of the state. Violence is becoming - if it has not yet already become - an important terrain of political argumentation between the major political alternatives in contemporary British, European, and indeed global society. The capacity to intervene intellectually in this area, which is - and will increasingly be - a hot political issue, is important. So I'm situating myself as a researcher in this field, generating the data, and coordinating the development of better data, so we can have a better scientific understanding of violence, which can then feed these policy and political debates - because I think this will become a critical turning point in the contemporary political conjuncture.

How does this relate to what some people would call a 'fourth wave' of feminism: a renewed, often transnational, focus on violence against women and girls, everyday sexism, #MeToo, that cluster of issues?

It's gone global, very effectively. Today, violence is a very important focus of transformational feminism. It's articulated in multiple ways, but I think there's a clear understanding that gender inequality drives violence, and it acts as a very important site for transnational political developments. There are different sides to it - different forms of violence have been constituted as the sites of particular campaigns. They feed on each other, and that's important - I wouldn't want to say any one of them is *the* most important. We are seeing wave after wave of these politics. #MeToo is one of the latest, another site where we see a particular way of understanding how coercion and violence come to the fore. Some of these contemporary developments

have argued for the connection between physical violence and other forms of coercion. There are some very interesting intellectual and policy questions around what constitutes the boundary between these issues, and just how far the concept of violence can be and is being usefully extended. The debates around #MeToo have been important in pushing some of those issues forward.

There's been a recent upsurge in feminist academic interest in violence, such as the recent books by Jacqueline Rose and Judith Butler. How does your focus relate to such work and how is it different? I know, for example, your specific different definition of violence is that it has to involve a physical, or bodily, component.

I think it's important that violence is being taken seriously across all the social sciences. Everyone is picking it up within their own theoretical framework, so it's not surprising that Butler will relate it to her theory of performativity. It seems to me appropriate that different disciplines, theoretical and political frameworks would look at the question of violence through their own concepts and forms of engagement with the world. Some writers have interpreted violence through the symbolic and the cultural and I think that underestimates the specificity of violence. You need the physical, the bodily dimension. There is something distinct here.

You don't want to be biologically essentialist about it, but there is something distinct about forms of power which involve forms of physical harm; pain, death, and the threat of these harms. There are certain forms of irreversibility which are unlike other forms of power. Forms of economic power can go backwards and forwards, but once you've physically maimed a body, that movement is much less likely. In terms of history, once one group has used violence against another, it's really hard to go back. The reversibility of violence as a form of power is much less than other forms of power, such as cultural or economic. So I'm making an argument for the *specificity* of violence as a form of power: and not to underestimate that. I'm not saying that a cultural analysis of violence is inappropriate, but I argue for the significance of violence as its own distinctive form of institution. I interpret violence as a fourth 'institutional domain': perhaps that's the crux of it.

I connect all kinds of violence. I connect, deliberately, violence between individuals, between groups, between the state and individuals, and say that they form an institutional whole. You can see it empirically, that these forms of violence cluster: if you have a practice of violence in one area, you typically get it in another. States with a high likelihood of going to war, high rates of militarisation, are also in societies with very high rates of homicide and increased likelihood of using capital punishment. These forms of violence, even at these different levels that are highly correlated, feed each other in a way that I want to then describe as an 'institutional domain'. Social scientists have typically *fragmented* violence in their disciplines. We give interpersonal violence to the criminologists; we give inter-state war to the political scientists: we separate it into the different disciplines. I think it's important to overcome some of those disciplinary fractures in order to be able to do a proper analysis of violence: to bring those fragments together in order that we can more appropriately understand the significance of violence for society, and so we can build the kinds of policy and politics that are important for the transformation of society.

A lot of sociologists treat war as exceptional, whereas I think of it as a war system: certain kinds of social systems generate wars. War is not exceptional if you have a war system. In some disciplines, like criminology, the tradition has been to see violence, like crime, as happening from the bottom up: 'It's the disadvantaged who do it'. I think that's wrong. Empirically it's incorrect: most violence is top-down, it's the powerful who do it to the weak. Feminist analyses have long argued that typically it's more powerful people who do it to the less powerful, and more typically men to women. Anti-racists argue it's more typically white violence on black, not the other way around. Stuart Hall's work on the social scapegoating of 'the black mugger' was a really interesting early example of that: showing how the construction of violence as if it came from below is so problematic, when most violence actually is top-down. And so, to pull all these threads together: the understanding of the construction of violence in society is an important part of the construction of contemporary politics around multiple forms of inequality, of which gender is one part, but not the only one.

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Jo Littler is part of the *Soundings* editorial collective. Her interviews with left feminist academics are being gathered into a book.

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[i] Thanks to Hannah Curran-Troop and the Gender and Sexualities Research Centre at City, University of London for this transcription.

[ii] See Rosemary Hill and Kim Allen, '"Smash the patriarchy": the changing meanings and work of "patriarchy"', *Feminist Theory*, Vol 22 No 2, 2021, pp165-189.

[iii] Sylvia Walby, 'The Covid Pandemic and Social Theory', in *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol 24 No 1, 2021, pp22-43: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1368431020970127.

[iv] See Giorgio Agamben, 'The invention of an epidemic', in 'Coronavirus and philosophers: M. Foucault, G. Agamben, S. Benvenuto', *European Journal of* Psychoanalysis, 2020: https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/.

[v] Sylvia Walby and Keith Soothill, *Sex Crime in the News*, Routledge 1991.