**Intimate Geopolitics and Global Inequalities: The pleasure and pain of border crossings’ – Professor V. Spike Peterson**

**By Jennifer Hobbs**

Professor V. Spike Peterson took part in an ‘in conversation’ event with Dr Aoileann Ní Mhurchú that eschewed the traditional lecture format, instead creating a more informal and relaxed atmosphere that encouraged a dialogue between Professor Peterson and the audience. Organised around three key themes, the conversation explored Professor Peterson’s journey into academia, the state of the academy upon her arrival, and how her work has developed over time.

**Waking up**

Professor Peterson discussed coming of age in the 1960s in the United States, and a growing awareness of political issues and social inequalities.  Referencing the Kent State shootings in 1970, systemic racism and civil rights struggles, and protests against nuclear weapons and US involvement in Vietnam, Professor Peterson described her own political awakening and increasing activism.

**Enjoying the Drive**

Professor Peterson spent most of the 1970s learning about the world through personal experience:  travelling as an overland backpacker, stopping when necessary to work, noting cross-cultural differences, stark inequalities and a tremendous vibrancy of people and cultures. In addition to travels in Asia and Europe, she spent five years journeying around Africa, sometimes by sharing a car but often hitch hiking on her own. For Professor Peterson, these experiences encouraged thinking about how power operates to construct ‘difference’ and how crossing borders–territorially, culturally and intellectually–is often difficult but inherently interesting and always instructive. She noted that these insights continually inform her research, which seeks to understand how inequalities and their harms are historically constructed, become normalized, and might productively be transformed.

**Living Out Loud/Paying Back**

On her return to the United States, Professor Peterson entered the International Relations (IR) doctoral programme at American University in Washington, DC. She expressed an enduring frustration with the mainstream of the discipline, and chose to focus on epistemological debates in social theory, especially critiques of science and ‘power’ that feminist and postcolonial scholars were generating. Feminist attempts to historicize inequalities and, in particular, to offer a genealogy of patriarchal relations, informed Professor Peterson’s doctoral research and provided the inspiration for her thesis.

Despite IR’s focus on the state, Professor Peterson identified a problematic lack of research into early archaic states. Disregard of this turning point, which featured large-scale sedentary populations and hierarchical divisions of labour, authority and entitlement, was argued by Professor Peterson to problematically ‘miss’ the significance of early political centralization (state formation) for  the invention of writing and—through the regulation of marriage, property and membership claims–the institutionalization and normalization of patriarchal, resource-based and insider vs. outsider inequalities. Professor Peterson’s feminist genealogy of early state making not only proved to be an enduring research interest but also drew attention to the under-acknowledged power of writing:  in particular, to codify ‘for the first time’ (and through an exclusively elite male lens) social categories and ideological legitimations that continue to inform western philosophy and political theory. As part of continuing research, Professor Peterson emphasised the importance and necessity of critical, cross-disciplinary and intersectional theorizing.

Professor Peterson also discussed her recent work featuring ‘intimacy’—in the broadest possible sense—as productive for exploring intellectual and political questions. Professor Peterson explained how her engagement with IR is fundamentally about trying to shift Disciplinary IR from its positivist, masculinist and imperialist tendencies, and insisting on more historical, critical and complex analyses of power. This includes taking ‘the personal’ seriously:  that race, gender, sexuality, etc., are constitutive of international politics. Feminist, queer, and postcolonial works have cleared space for this argument in recent decades (particularly the re-emergence of critiques of imperialism in light of current events). Professor Peterson discussed how ‘the intimate’ may enable productive conceptualizations and inquiries less constrained by conventional IR dichotomies, especially those that categorically divide public from private, political from personal, and reason from emotion.

Finally, Professor Peterson ended by reflecting on ‘what we can do’ to challenge systems of inequality, given that we are both enabled and constrained by our specific circumstances. She urged us to recognise those constraints, while also advocating that we take responsibility for the choices we make, and ask ourselves – how does this affect the world we live in?