

## Interview – Darshan Vigneswaran

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Darshan Vigneswaran

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Darshan Vijay Vigneswaran is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam. With expertise in migration, state building, political geography, and outer space, he leads research projects on 'Migration Politics in the Global South' and 'Decolonizing Outer Space'. He is also a Senior Editorial Fellow for the journal *Migration Politics* and a Senior Researcher at the African Centre for Migration and Society, WITS University. Dr. Vigneswaran has published numerous influential papers and books, particularly in migration, territoriality, and sovereignty, including *The inconsistency of immigration policy: the limits of "Top-down" approaches* (with Ernesto de León), *Hacking migration control: Repurposing and reprogramming deportability* (with Anja K Franck), *Migrant protection regimes: Beyond advocacy and towards exit in Thailand*, and *The terrestrial trap: International Relations beyond Earth* (with Enrike van Wingerden)

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

I'm currently watching a new field of research emerge – and that in itself is exciting. We have been doing historical and policy-based studies of outer space for decades, but the critical and inter-disciplinary research on this topic has only just begun. Pioneers like Daniel Deudney, Dimitrios Strokos and Mai'a Cross have laid out pathways that IR will be following for many years to come. Empirically, IR lags far behind other disciplines, and particularly anthropology. People like Janet Vertesi, Linda Messeri and David Valentine have been providing us with the sort of up-close understanding of the politics of the space industry that IR needs to begin asking meaningful questions about. Debates, unfortunately, are still a few years away.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

My professional work is intensely social and interactive. So my 'influencers' are not necessarily canonical. On politics generally, I would say that the most significant change has been to basically give up on the concept of 'the state' entirely. Every time I see that concept deployed, or use it myself, I just feel so thoroughly uneasy. It is just such a chimera. So unhelpful. People like Loren Landau, Julia Hornberger and Anja Franck have encouraged me to look to more organic and bottom-up processes of constructing political order. And they do it through richly qualitative work in the Global South. This sort of work not only provokes doubt about some of the very lofty ideas that circulate in IR circles, but also opens up our theories to genuinely emancipatory political possibilities.

As regards the recent move to outer space, I think Enrike van Wingerden is by far the most influential person. She is a straight up genius, and my bet is that you'll be citing her name a lot in the years to come. She has an intellectual daringness combined with genuine empathy and humility—a rare combination. When it comes to outer space, I think she just had a good nose for sniffing out a budding and exciting field. Our piece together on the 'Terrestrial Trap' was such a joy to write because, once you start to think about outer space, it is so obvious that IR scholars 'Don't look up' to the skies above. At the same time: it needed to be said before we could move on.

### **What sparked your recent interest in outer space research, and why do you believe IR scholars should focus more on it?**

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I've been interested in territoriality and mobility for a while. Colleagues in my cohort will tell you I developed an unhealthy obsession with John Ruggie's work on the topic while writing my dissertation. Back then I was really curious with the fact that the territorial 'design' of political order is hard-wired really early on in their history and can become pretty deeply institutionalized for long periods of time. So, I think these lessons can be transposed to outer space.

Now, a word of caution: let's not be space cadets. Space colonization and exploration are projects that won't fully mature for generations to come. It will take time to grasp all the profound implications of space for IR and territorial societies. However, it would be naive to believe that space has yet to emerge as a significant political arena in recent years. Just look at the approximately 8,000 satellites currently orbiting overhead, which play a central role in modern warfare, identity formation, and understanding climate. Even at this level, space clearly holds importance.

Space politics then becomes much more significant when we add people to the mix. Who will rule over a mining colony on the moon? What sort of claims will the residents of Blue Origin's orbital habitats be able to make to things that we on earth regard as basic rights? The problem is not that we don't have the answers to these questions. We don't even know where to look for these answers. Is NASA in charge? Is it a research community in China? Is it a bunch of venture capitalists in India? As with any new research field, there is so much 'mapping' to do. So much we don't know.

### **How has colonial thinking and practice influenced our understanding of outer space politics?**

I'd say I'm a little 'old school' (feel free to just say 'old') when it comes to decoloniality. I like a lot of the grounded work of historians and anthropologists who have been influenced by post-colonial theory. And I read a lot of cut & dry colonial history too. Now, no analogy is perfect right? But, there are some striking similarities – and I think potential lessons to be learned from previous colonial ventures on earth, that can help us think about upcoming ventures in outer space. We can think about the importance that 'adapting the human body to new environments' played in early formulations of the concept of race. We can think about the role that communication lags played in the fostering of the autonomy of early colonists. We can think about the radical transformations in the political economy of places like London and Amsterdam which gave rise to the speculative ventures of European colonialism. So, in these ways, I think there is a lot to learn from the basic structure of earthly colonialism for the study of space colonization. There are, of course, a lot of mistakes we may hope not to repeat.

Of course, as Natalie Trevino notes, critics often come up with the obvious (and just a little bit racist) retort: 'but there ain't no Indians in outer space'. While this is true (though see India's new *Ganganyaan* crewed mission to low earth orbit), it misses the point a little: that analogical reasoning can help us think through emergent political structures in outer space.

### **Why do you think it is paramount for IR research to question 'Earthly' and human habitational notions when thinking about extraterrestrial spaces?**

I think Jason Beery made the point really well in his explanation for why territorial sovereignty does not work in outer space. Back in the 1970s many newly independent, post-colonial states supported an argument that we should just extend state national airspace *ad infinitum*. This was important because it would have given all states exclusive control over their geo-stationary orbit. To over simplify: geo-stationary orbit is some of the most valuable real estate in our solar system because it is the place where satellites effectively stand still over the earth's surface. Own that space and you gain a lot of ability to control your territory.

Well, Beery uncovered this really interesting argument which US lawyers used against this idea of territory *ad infinitum*. It starts with some basic astronomical facts: the earth is rotating; the moon is orbiting the earth; the earth and all the other planets in our solar system are orbiting the sun; and the whole solar system is moving through space at immense speeds. Once you take these facts into account, territory *ad infinitum* becomes a complete non-starter, because it would give you a kind of kaleidoscopic form of sovereignty. Celestial bodies are moving in and out of the territorial jurisdiction of different states all the time, offering no certainty whatsoever regarding key sovereignty

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questions of ownership, jurisdiction and allegiance. What this means in practice, is that the ideas we have developed to order politics on earth are not going to cut it in outer space. We need a whole new set of territorial ideas, or maybe ideas that are not territorial at all?

The habitability point is a little tougher, but the basic idea is that space is very, very deadly. It is an awful place for humans. If humans are going to live in outer space environments, they are going to require a whole host of material infrastructures for that purpose. And as we know, infrastructures are inherently political, raising questions of ownership, access etc. So, if we are going to start thinking about outer space politics, we have to start from an assumption that doesn't obtain on earth: that there is no potential for life, let alone culture, civilization etc. without the political organization of infrastructure. It is for these reasons that Enrike and I argue that IR needs fresh tools to theorize the politics of outer space.

### **Do you expect outer space politics to play a substantive role in processes of state and border formation? Why?**

I'm going to dodge this question three times and then hopefully satisfy you with an answer of sorts. First, social scientists shouldn't be in the prediction business. Second, as you can see above, I'm a little allergic to the concept of the state. Third, outer space already dramatically shapes processes of state formation by shaping the character of contemporary warfare, surveillance, communications etc.

Going further, I think we are seeing a fascinating form of politics emerging in a very new and understudied realm. In the interface between national space agencies, corporate consortia, research institutions, space advocacy agencies and international space law initiatives, we are seeing huge amounts of technological innovation, resources and political will being devoted – in a way not seen since the Cold War – to the goal of making space profitable and habitable. Even if plans to make the Moon into a gas station, asteroids into mining camps, and Mars into our means of escaping a potential earthly apocalypse; even if all these plans prove to be non-starters (and there is a lot of both sober bureaucratic planning to suggest that all three are viable) the redirection of attention and resources to outer space ventures has already been hugely transformative of earthly politics. So, even as folly, outer space matters. If you're looking for predictions that go further than this, you need to go to Silicon Valley, Hollywood or Vegas.

### **How might non-state actors influence outer space politics as they gain greater access to space exploration resources?**

Other than the fact that SpaceX just successfully tested the largest rocket ever built, which they plan to use to establish a colony on Mars? To be a little less glib, I think the answer is that we just don't know. So much is happening outside of the purview of government space agencies. Research communities manage to uphold knowledge sharing norms, thereby subtly undermining inter-governmental 'space races.' Speculative investor meetings are assigning value to celestial entities that no-one has ever landed on, let alone mined. Mark Zuckerberg, Stephen Hawking and a team of collaborators are working together to send 900 credit-card sized spaceships across the galaxy in the hope they will find a habitable planet orbiting Alpha Centauri (our nearest star). Beyond the grasp of space agencies, there is just so much, dynamic and uncharted activity that almost no-one in our discipline is paying attention to. I think that's going to change in the coming years. Wait...didn't I promise: no predictions?

### **Returning to what you call 'Earthly politics' and your extensive research on migration and asylum in the Global South, what current trends on migration policy call your attention the most and why?**

To be honest, I don't think much has changed. Racism is deeply embedded in the territorial structure of the international system. This basic characteristic only becomes more pronounced over time. Meanwhile researchers – myself included – spend most of our time finding new ways to theorize this unchanging fact. A lot of my work over the past few years has been devoted to more epistemological questions about the state of the field and what we should do with the emerging 'discipline' of Migration Studies. My basic conclusion? Burn it to the ground.

Apologies to my friends and colleagues who are vested in the enterprise, but I just don't think you can structure a

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scholarly discipline around the 'the migrant' or 'migration' as objects of study. Both concepts are indelibly statist and racist. There is no escaping that basic fact. So, scholars interested in the plight of contemporary migrants would do well to move on, as many political geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists already have, to other concepts and other fields with more critical, less moribund ontologies.

### **How do you perceive the development of 'migration governance' in migration-receiving countries in the Global South compared to models from the Global North?**

Must I? I guess this is the point I've been hammering away at in my work for a fair while now so I should address it in some meaningful way. Perhaps I can give you the most recent version of my thinking here. As I said in the early part of the interview, I don't think the concept of the state helps us understand the politics of migration in any meaningful way in the places I study (Thailand, India, South Africa, Myanmar, Nigeria etc.). I like the concept of protection regimes much better: more horizontal, norm governed ways of regulating how violence is deployed in relation to mobility. I find that this concept has a lot more purchase and helps explain outcomes much better than the idea of the states. While this concept is drawn from research conducted in the 'South' there is no reason it can't be applied to explain observations in the 'North'. Unfortunately, I don't see it knocking off the Political Science/IR concept of 'the state' any time soon, because scholars in Europe and North America are convinced that the state exists and unwilling to give up on this extremely powerful shorthand description: even if it describes less and less with each passing day.

In my recent work I've been taking one last shot at trying to convince the mainstream by exploring just how disorganized, or to be more precise, erratic and inconsistent so-called migration 'states' are. Using some very standard quantitative data on immigration policy, Ernesto de Leon and I demonstrated that migration policymaking is fundamentally inconsistent, switching between more exclusionary and more welcoming policies all the time. What's the upshot here? Well, I think this finding really opens the pathway to a much more bottom-up understanding of migration regimes, as something constituted through every day and often informal practice. This is something anthropologists have been telling us for ages. Will Migration Studies finally listen? I have doubts.

### **What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?**

Reputation over impact. Send your respect down the academic hierarchy; don't just venerate up. And when listening to, or reading, the work of a scholar from another country or institution, think carefully about the different ways in which their knowledge that has been financed, and the different way their research career has been made.