

## Interview - Stephen Hopgood

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Stephen Hopgood

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/07/03/interview-stephen-hopgood/>

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUL 3 2015

Stephen Hopgood is Professor of International Relations and co-Director of the Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice (CCRJ) at SOAS University of London. He is also the Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences. From 2009-2012, he held a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, which culminated in the book *The Endtimes of Human Rights*. This follows on from his ethnography of Amnesty International, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*, which won the American Political Science Association Best Book in Human Rights Award in 2007. He is also the author of 'Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred,' and more recently of 'The Last Rites for Humanitarian Intervention: Darfur, Sri Lanka and R2P.' Professor Hopgood is also a regular contributor to the website openGlobalRights, where his blog posts include 'Human rights: past their sell-by date.'

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

In the field of IR broadly conceived, this is a tremendously important time where theory is having to run fast to keep up with what's happening in the world. Indeed, with the nature of the modern state and states-system under intense pressure, it's probable that the academic field as a whole is losing (or has already lost) its definition. Those theorists who have always sought to question the way security and the states-system are conceived, thereby questioning the discipline's own genealogy, may find, as anthropologists have, that their field is no longer recognizable. The result may well not be a *discipline-wide* flowering of new ideas, theories, concepts, and empirical studies, but a fracture rooted in questions about the purpose of knowledge. We can see that fracture already.

On the one hand, we have the efforts of critical scholars of all kinds – feminists, post-structuralists, post-colonialists, constructivists, environmentalists, queer theorists – along with many diverse kinds of empirical work that puts the experience of the non-Western and the non-hegemonic at the forefront of analysis. Gender, race, sexuality, and alternative histories are of central importance here, as is rethinking security. This transgressive and progressive potential brings with it energy, excitement, and a sense of freedom. On the other hand, however, we face a stark reality: the state (and states-system) still exists, it remains hugely powerful, and it still does many of the things it has always done (witness the politics around Syria, or counter-terrorism). While our conceptual boundaries have been made extremely problematic, the state itself has, with 9/11 as cover, grabbed even more power unto itself through surveillance and lawfare. IR has often been the strategic laboratory for this state, this knowledge flowing into policy discussions in a variety of ways, not least how state officials are taught and trained, and that function will not disappear.

Thus the field of IR will be highly fluid and heterogeneous at the edges, but will remain fairly familiar at the core. And as that core is mainly located within universities and think-tanks in the United States, or in organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations, followed perhaps increasingly by strategic thinking in China and India, the critiques will remain marginal and unlikely to have much impact. New journals arise, but they don't challenge the hegemony of the mainstream. So fragmentation isn't a sign of a field maturing *as a whole*, but of fuzzy disciplinary boundaries and a solid core of modern mirror-for-princes literature that seeks to understand and counsel political power (whether or not that power even listens).

One result of this (perhaps the resentment of the marginalized) is to complain ceaselessly, as I do often, about the

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hypocrisy of American foreign policy. This avoids the sorts of questions, like whether it is morally acceptable and/or politically prudent to bomb ISIS, that few of us of a critical intellectual inclination want to address for fear of alienating our natural allies and being labeled neo-imperialist or, even worse, 'liberal'. We refuse this in the name of rejecting moral absolutes, including liberal subjectivity. This critique of liberalism is made constantly in my intellectual circles (again, also by me). But that critique is made possible by that very same liberal environment we live and work in, and I am acutely aware of this. This links, for me at least, to another sort of question concerning Weber's fact/value distinction. I had a colleague who refused to teach the current, authoritarian politics of a particular country because she disagreed ideologically with the regime governing the country. She would teach its politics as she thought it ought to be taught, from the ethical standpoint of the dispossessed. I would once have been more sympathetic. But now I want to say, surely you can make the distinction in your own mind and for your students between explaining how a regime works and validating it? I struggle with this aspect of critical theory, but it is another marker of the fracture I am outlining.

It relates to developments in epistemology. In the last 30-40 years, we have seen the fracturing of word from world. In very crude terms, is the world constructed through language, or does it have a base, material, interest-driven reality that can be explained and even predicted (a reality of which we humans and our 'nature' are a predictable part)? The extreme answers to this question are provided by post-structuralists on the one hand and data-driven behaviouralists on the other. In the middle, we have a variety of positions ranging from constructivism (the world is made but can then be analyzed more or less as the interactions of rational agents) to mainstream political science, where assumptions are made about rationality, complex concepts are defined rather than problematized, and falsifiability and generalizability are prized. Needless to say, this latter approach, combined with the data-driven version of social science, is a lot better at providing policy-relevant analysis.

All of this is taking place in the context of rapid, seismic empirical changes that I would suggest are in some cases unprecedented in the modern (post-1815) era. The shift away from Europe and maybe even away from the West, the reduced (if still pre-eminent) influence of the United States, the return of Russia geopolitically, the rise of China, the coming roles of Indonesia and Brazil, unpredictable economic forces (including current arguments about a long-term crisis of growth that dates back decades), global inequality, state collapse and state-making (ISIS in Iraq, most obviously), humanitarianism's failure in Syria, the role of human rights and international justice, religious resurgence, and potential environmental catastrophe, to name only a few issues. And underlying all of this is the digital revolution whose implications for people, money, power, war, and politics we haven't even begun to understand.

So I don't think there really is any one thing we might call 'IR' anymore. There is a core of strategic questions about the transforming state and a bewildering, inspiring, exciting, but potentially ineffective world of diverse analysis that crosses the boundaries of several disciplines as we have historically conceived of them. Consumer demand for certain kinds of new and exciting courses, in one case, and for career advancement within the state, in another, will exacerbate this fracture. But my bottom line is: the world is moving much faster than we are.

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

I confess to feeling ambivalent about the results of the developments above. There is far too much vacuous theory about theory where the questions raised are artifacts of prior theory, not of social practice. Endless language games, akin to the worst kinds of Catholic casuistry or meretricious legalism, that ensnare graduate students in their captivating web. For me, theory has to have some explanatory payoff beyond stimulating debate with other academics. It must have some empirical referent, leverage, or power. Or some ethical weight. Maybe the answer to 'how do we *know*?' really is 'we can't really know, that's an archaic way of thinking.' But then we face the danger that poor philosophy gets treated on a par with genuine insight because there is no means of discernment. It is whatever feels right. Or discernment is left with the hierarchically organized arbiters of taste, further embedding institutional power. Or, as in my argument above, 'power' of the fairly familiar and unsophisticated kind just rolls on with its willing servants in attendance. The increased focus on the micro-physics of power – common to much human rights work, too – is also a recognition that the big stuff won't change anytime soon and that a difference might be made by focusing on the quotidian.

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So I've tried to move away (with varying degrees of success) from what we might call high theory as just not very helpful in making sense of the fast-moving world. Give me an analysis of the politics of big data over a conceptual discussion of the idea of the digital, or of the economic and social forces that drive migrants across the Mediterranean, rather than yet another analysis about homo sacer and bare life (more fun to read, less informative). We need both, of course, but I think the current settlement is too binary, with theory more deaf to empirical realities than vice-versa.

But then again, the vast amount of data collection and database-building underway is in my view unlikely to tell us very much that's important either because a) the data still needs explaining, b) we don't know whether the material we are collecting is the right stuff to explain what's going on, and c) the quality of much of the data is poor given the vast number of variables involved and the coding problems with complex social phenomena. A frankly utopian, ultra-modernist belief in the power of statistical social science to explain complicated and elaborate human behaviour is just as unhelpful as, and probably more dangerous than, more continental philosophy for IR which is, in my view, an empirically-driven social science.

I say all this as someone with no natural inclination towards statistical analysis and a much greater affinity for social theory, from Agamben through Foucault to Zizek. But I am, as is obvious, a little disillusioned. I've also become a believer over time in material structures more than the capacity of idealism (and conceptual discussion alone) to be an agent of change or illumination. Rather than ask what is a 'migrant,' it's often better to go and talk to migrants, track their histories, understand their politics, and theorize out of that empirical reality. Look empirically (with Bourdieu, for example) at what the upper middle class is doing (how big it is; how it earns its money; what aspirations it has; how it relates to governing elites, the lower middle class, and the precariat; and how it intersects with the global) and that will tell you more than almost anything else about the politics you'll find. I remember a book title I saw once, something like *The Chinese Bourgeoisie's Long March Back to the World Market*. Could any other one-line sentence tell you as much as this does about what's going on in China now?

All of which is to say I have become more interested in the concrete *politics* of ideas rather than in ideas in and of themselves. Hence my work might be characterised as 'the political life of human rights.' I am much more interested in what is *actually going on*. It's of course true that while structure and materiality seem to me the place to start, they only take us so far (leaving aside for now the question of whether, and if so which, agents built those structures and what 'imaginaries' inhabited those agents already). The social life of politics also needs to be understood and, crucially, it is often a lot more engaging to research, and write and read about, historical agents and their plans and ideas and strategies than to spend all one's time with structures, even normative ones. A world of statistical social science would be as dull and impenetrable as a world where Derrida and Badiou are the only language we have with which to understand what's happening around us.

**In your recent book *The Endtimes of Human Rights*, you state that the “foundations of universal liberal norms and global governance are crumbling.” What are the key reasons for this and should efforts be made to prevent it?**

My answer here builds on what I have argued above. The most fundamental change is the dissolution of the West, its material (and political) power waning, and its ideological legitimacy challenged. The world of institutions with which we are familiar is based on foundations laid by the powers that are declining. The split of word from world seems to me to be a further, era-defining, epistemological change (largely a natural evolution of the death of god, of transcendent authority, in affluent Europe).

The key contemporary (post-1989) reasons for this shift include the comparative advantages of new entrants to world markets; imperial overstretch (to use Paul Kennedy's phrase); new sources of funding from outside the West (China, the Gulf States); a counter-hegemonic power in China that is, critically, not anti-capitalist in practice, despite its formal ideological position; technological change (both in business, and personal and social communication); the sclerosis of old-style welfare states which cannot meet their citizens aspirations at the same time as they keep deeply unequal social relations intact; and much more besides. It is like a correction. Renewed nationalism in some parts of the world (states mobilizing their populations for various social projects) and newly visible religion in others (the

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religious politics of many places more globally salient now, rather than new). This has also got to be tempered with a class analysis, the global middle class not requiring a specific territory, its money movable wherever the return is best or where it is safest (witness wealthy Brazilians moving to Miami). But it does need a state or states to safeguard the system as a whole. This question will be raised in a serious way during our turbulent times.

More than anything, the gap in economic, military, and political power that was so vast after 1945 between the United States and Europe, and then between the West and everyone else, has simply narrowed. Could the United States leverage its economic and diplomatic power against China, Russia, Indonesia, Brazil, and India simultaneously? It's hard to think so. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is a direct challenge to US economic hegemony, but what can the US really do to stop it? For the first time in the modern era, we have a system of states that is more truly global. This is like a new 1815, with new and very different players. And with war, between nuclear armed states, a highly unlikely option.

Whatever world these new states will form, why would we think, as John Ikenberry has argued, that new entrants will simply play by the existing rules? Because it's more efficient to rule by consensus, and liberal institutions are fairly easy to join and get along with? That might work in some areas where major states have a symmetry of interests, like nuclear proliferation, terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, transport, and trade. But in others – human rights, for example, but also international justice – why would China and India simply agree to adopt the language and rules written out in Geneva, the Hague, and New York? To take one obvious example, the execution of drug traffickers in Indonesia seems to have had widespread public support. This seems eminently democratic. Why must a state get rid of the death penalty for crimes considered heinous, against the wishes of its own people? There is simply no telling comeback to this, either in a moral or religious idiom. Most advocacy responses are utilitarian (it doesn't work, you might execute an innocent person). In the end, Western human rights advocates don't like the death penalty. That's not much of an argument. Only by galvanizing middle class opinion in Indonesia might this change. In a similar vein, while states might talk about international justice, they rarely, if ever, envisage it for their own leaders. In Asia, for example, no state has joined the International Criminal Court (neither has the United States, of course).

The question of what efforts might be made to prevent such fundamental change makes little sense. First, these are vast forces at work, unpredictable and multidirectional, so it's not obvious anything could be done because it's not clear what state of affairs we would desire to restore or bring about. Certainly not a return to business as usual. Second, much blatant hypocrisy, venality, and brutality by Western states is exposed by this new shift, the ridiculous attempt by Britain's prime minister David Cameron to extol the virtues of Magna Carta while destroying its spirit by imprisoning people without trial is just one more example of a trend going back centuries with deadly results. Indeed, nothing exemplifies how much the world has changed than the presence of the UK and France as permanent members of the security council, an absurd echo of a long-distant imperial past (although they remain a useful pair of allies for the Americans). This is a teaching case of the benefits of institutionalizing power when you have it, yes, but is also totally out of kilter with contemporary political realities.

Third, who is to say that a world of greater ethical, political, and cultural diversity will not be more peaceful, equal, and environmentally sustainable? I may be personally sceptical about this, having a fairly pessimistic view of the capacity for other-regarding behaviour rooted in my understanding of human desires. The inevitable tensions built into freely-interacting social forces, and the reluctance of those with money and power to relinquish it, are other factors that might suggest scepticism. But I may well be completely wrong on every score. We have a great deal of good non-discrimination legislation in the West, but still we see persistent and structural inequality and abusive treatment of women, for example. Perhaps another way beyond legalism might be found? I'm not naive about this. As a total atheist, I could never accept the legitimacy (let alone the rationality) of religious rule. But if it delivered a better quality of life for people, might it not be preferable?

**In recent years, in order to promote human rights globally, large western organisations such as Amnesty International have tried to adjust, by restructuring or improved branding. How effective do you think these strategies are likely to be?**

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Not very, is my answer. I see centrifugal forces at work. One sort of branding works within the global media and fund-raising space, which requires a particular self-presentation – you can make a difference, you can save people, you ought to do good. The local activism space is very different. Here, what raised money in London or New York may not be what local activists want to work on. They may be radical in their critique of the very people who give them money. They may see social justice as more important than political justice, even if both are valued. They may, in short, understand their human rights differently from a global organization and want to set different priorities. But the money is in the North and the people are in the South. So the question becomes, who decides?

In other words, Amnesty is trying to ‘move closer to the ground,’ but in order to adapt, it may have to become ‘not Amnesty,’ allowing such internal diversity that ‘human rights’ means different things to different people in different parts of the organization. I doubt this model, where you have two narratives, the global and the local, is sustainable. The Human Rights Watch model is very different – it isn’t about to have its policies and priorities set anywhere but New York. So it is opening local research offices to better collect data for its global and national lobbying efforts. It isn’t building membership. But this makes its legitimacy easier to question. These global giants might also poach strong local leaders or become rivals to local NGOs for funding and for publicity, thereby displacing activism. They might even generate local and national backlash. I don’t deny that their global lobbying efforts can help give normative language and legal leverage to other activists, and that they might protect (to some degree) national and local advocates who would otherwise be targeted.

But divergence, the two narratives, is for me a structural reality (sometimes replicated at a national level between urban elites and non-metropolitan activists). Therefore, global human rights NGOs are not really solidarity-based organizations (quite apart from their having to deal with states who monitor transnational human rights work). The best we can hope for might be money with few strings attached, and partnerships explicitly between local human rights organizations and global NGOs (in other words, co-branding). This might lead to better transnational mobilization. Another strategy would be to focus on building support among the middle classes in emerging powers, but this is close to Amnesty’s traditional strategy and it hasn’t worked historically because it tends to miss the most politically active people in the country.

### **You have questioned the effectiveness of campaigns and activism based on the notion of universal human rights. Is this type of activism still useful? Is there a more effective alternative?**

Much of my answer here is referenced in what’s written above. If there is a more obviously effective alternative, someone would be trying it already. Maybe they are in the area of poverty and solidarity, and maybe the Roman Catholic Church is its name? That would not be a good development for gender or LGBT rights, of course.

The question of what you do when your message isn’t being heard is a perennial one. Do you change your message? Do you keep on going, hoping your time will come? Universal human rights are a tough sell in many places. As philosophers like Bernard Williams have argued, why should our own interests and projects and plans, and by extension those of the people we love and care about, not count for more with us than those of other people we don’t know? (For the converse, see Peter Singer’s utilitarianism). Also, how does one argue for human rights with notions of common humanity or the Universal Declaration, in the face of national heroes, saints, and the reality people face of social conflict, ethnic violence, and crime (see the Indonesia example above)? Legalized and abstract human rights are not enough to mobilize people to move en masse, which partly explains more recent moves to anchor rights in ‘dignity’.

This is not the same as saying that human rights are wrong or don’t exist. The question of whether there are human rights seems to be to be insoluble. The question is: how politically effective can human rights be in the cause of normative progress? I may doubt my own right to dictate gender norms for another society, but this doesn’t entail I think our views on gender are ethically comparable. I might just prioritize autonomy and national self-determination over gender equality. I may still think that discriminatory and violent treatment of LGBT people in many societies is morally wrong, but what political argument can I muster when I have no standing there? Kant via Rawls? The UDHR again? The Yogyakarta Principles? How persuasive will any of this be to those who cite, for example, national history or gods in response?

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But if one is then pragmatic – if one says we'll try to get women to be allowed to remove the veil on weekdays – has one abandoned one's principles? People don't become women's rights activists to argue for medicalized female genital cutting and only beating women under certain circumstances. They become activists to eliminate these significant harms to women. The end is non-negotiable. Savvy resisters know this. They aren't fooled, seeing pragmatism as only ever a wedge for widespread social change over time. I would prefer a world without violence against women, and human rights clearly have some role to play in legitimating that goal at the global level and in creating legal norms and processes to try to force states to comply, but they are only one mechanism and, crucially, their capacity to make a difference locally is, in my view, highly limited. Here, change must be endogenous, slow, and consensual. This means it may take generations. FGC is a good example of something that is making extremely slow but distinct progress in certain areas. There's no magic bullet to make it happen faster without destroying a lot of social value in the process. Human rights play a part, but only a part, in this, and their definition is contextual and contingent.

**Do your arguments concerning the poor prospects for western human rights activism apply to the activism industry more broadly? Do you see increasing online activism as a solution to any of these issues?**

I think the phrase 'activism industry' is a giveaway. The many organizations that do some good, but that must sustain large-scale global operations to do so, inevitably have a vested interest in their own survival. They end up raising money out of every crisis or need, and making sure they are visible (right now, for example, in Nepal), even if they can't add much value. Organizations and movements which are genuinely more transnational, are owned by local people as much as by internationals, and which have mechanisms for internal dialogue and democracy might be effective and sustainable, but they are hard to create and hold together, as I argued above. And there are already many social structures that work in this way. The most obvious are religious organizations – churches and mosques – allied to diaspora communities and remittances, that work to apply pressure or provide assistance. Then there are major foundations, like the Gates Foundation, that have made great strides with their partners in terms of polio eradication, a major achievement. But once we stray into more political areas, things become more difficult. Questions of money, priorities, legitimacy, and governance all become critical.

Online activism isn't the answer. It's unrivalled as a source of information and coordination. And it is an extremely effective way of raising money and awareness on a huge scale almost instantaneously. But in the end, the views of only certain people make a difference. Voters, or social movements, in situ, marching, chanting, occupying, striking, creating immediate political and economic costs for those in a position to change policy or law are the most effective means of applying pressure. Avaaz has tens of millions of members, but what does that matter to any parliamentarian whose constituents aren't massively represented among Avaaz's members? How many of them vote in my constituency or donate to my campaign is the pertinent question.

Spreading democracy might even undermine the power of online activism by making a handful of really organized and determined people waging a campaign for, say, better funding of local schools the only ones who matter to an elected representative. This will draw online activists to two other means of mobilization (given naming-and-shaming has limited utility). One is the law, where votes count less than judicial interpretation, and the other is consumer demand, particularly where companies are concerned. Here, I think pressure can be applied. Get consumers to rebel against Google, and Google then has both the incentive to change and the power to pressure governments. The tax evasion and doubtful labour practices of these global giants don't promise much in the way of progress, sadly. Finally there are the hackers, like Anonymous, whose potential to be a major disrupter of established power is huge and hardly tapped as yet.

**Many analysts of the International Criminal Court have suggested that the Court has given primacy to international criminal justice when dealing with accountability. Would you agree with this suggestion? Do you think other mechanisms of transnational justice should be considered?**

Yes, the court has an interest in global justice being seen to be done, because that is the only form of justice it can dispense. Its argument that its cases have a deterrent effect is poorly evidenced at best, leaving the claim it can end

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impunity questionable. Much as with my discussion of universal human rights, is the aim justice as defined by those who suffered, or justice as it accords with the Rome Statute? Who experiences the harm? The people who are attacked, but in the idea of 'crimes against humanity,' something else is contained – the idea that we all suffer and therefore that we can rightfully undertake retribution for the crimes done against 'us,' the international community.

I've made clear at length in my book *The Endtimes of Human Rights* that I think the ICC is a white elephant in the sand dunes of The Hague, a global human rights institution built for a world that no longer exists. Major powers like the US, China, India, Indonesia, and Russia are not signatories and show no signs of doing so. How the transition to post-conflict is handled must vary with the opponents involved, the nature of the crimes, the reason for the conflict, the way the war was fought, why peace was secured, and so on. This process must be locally owned in some form. If amnesties might help peace, which is surely the priority, then why are they such a problem? Because they undermine the idea of justice? But only global justice. Diversity in justice mechanisms and an understanding that what constitutes justice no longer has a single monopolistic answer are a necessary starting point. You ask if they 'should be considered,' which raises the question, by whom? The nature of the agents involved is exactly what is in question. Who has the authority to judge? The ICC is in the business precisely of building this authority, but in my view it is a doomed task, European post-imperial hubris writ large.

**In a recent article you argue that, although responsibility to protect (R2P) has had some success, the chances of true humanitarian action have been reduced. Do you feel that this is due to problems with the concept of R2P, or are there other factors playing a greater role?**

R2P suffers from some of the same problems as the ICC. Who is it for, who or what gives it legitimacy, when is it used? There are so many obvious R2P cases – Syria, Ukraine, Sri Lanka, Israel and Gaza – where we know that R2P will never be used. From the start, like the ICC, the whole concept has been instrumentalized politically and is used for contingent reasons, if and when it suits one or more powers. I don't think this is a failure of *political will*. That phrase means nothing as far as I can see. It is political will – if such a thing exists empirically – to choose to do something different for other reasons, the cost-benefit ratio coming out against action. The 'international community' assumes questions about what states *should* do have clear answers, but they do not. States – especially the P5 – will do what works for them, given a wide array of pressures and interests. They are not subject to the moral law in any meaningful way. The US state tortured and disappeared people after 9/11 and even if someone one day faces trial for this, the state itself, when faced with such exigencies, will once again do something similar, in my view, as in any subsequent war there will always come a time when firing a nuclear missile will seem preferable to the alternative (defeat and occupation).

So R2P isn't a failure, it's just another example of a way of thinking about curbing state power that must ultimately fail in a system with several powers with diverse interests. R2P is probably necessary, as with universal human rights and the ICC, to remind us at least that there is a moral course of action available (although what that course is, is often not obvious, e.g. in Syria).

For me, by far the most effective form of international norm is international humanitarian law, for the simple reason that the reciprocity mechanism gives states an incentive to abide by the law if they care about their own civilians and soldiers. The law is sustained by self-interest, regardless of any moral content it has. This is something that can and does work. It should be bolstered and as far as possible expanded with that basic reciprocity mechanism at its core, admittedly a challenge when non-state actors are so much a part of conflict. This seems preferable to me to the new campaign to try to convince the P5 not to use their veto on controversial security council decisions. This might work to convince members of the global human rights movement that the show is still on the road, but it is not going to make any difference when it is needed, as even a cursory knowledge of the global political process will confirm.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Politics?**

To be a happy, active, engaged scholar in the world to come, I'd suggest the following: a) learn more languages, b) travel seriously outside the West, c) take a statistics course, d) do empirical work alongside theory, and e) read as much from outside your subject as from within the IR disciplinary literature.

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