

## Interview - James Der Derian

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - James Der Derian

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**James Der Derian** is Michael Hintze Chair of International Security and Director of the Centre of International Security Studies at the University of Sydney. He writes books and produces documentaries on war, peace, media and technology. His works include *After 9/11* (2003), *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (2009), *Human Terrain: War Becomes Academic* (2010), and *Project Z: The Final Global Event* (2015). James is currently working on a book and documentary film, *Project Q: The Question of Quantum*. This interview was conducted during the Q3 Symposium in February 2016.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in the field of critical security studies?**

I really think the most exciting research on peace and security has been happening outside of any single academic discipline. I mean, if you want to learn about the greatest cyberwar since STUXNET, do you go to any of the academic journals, or even Foreign Affairs or Foreign Policy? No, the story of Nitro Zeus, the plan to take down Iran's infrastructure, was broken by a filmmaker, Alex Gibney, at the Berlin Film Festival. Political science is too busy looking in the rear view mirror, to prove how we got here with models and numbers, to deal with *now*. Meanwhile forecasting in security studies has become monopolized, even militarized, in the form of computer simulations and wargames. The future might be unwritten, but you've got to engage in some risk-taking, you have to look over the horizon, look beyond the disciplinary boundaries. The future is looking pretty dire, so there's always work to be done.

One of the reasons why I felt compelled to start Project Q with the Carnegie Corporation was because of this failure to speculate, to get outside the groupthink of academic disciplines, especially the fixation on whether great powers are rising or falling. I think it's time to give the 'Thucydidean trap' and 'Prisoner's Dilemma' a rest. I mean, it's been years since my students at the Massachusetts State Prison were flattered but also befuddled that such a tired metaphor was being treated as some kind of universal heuristic. It's also why I've done my best to steer clear of political science departments in favour of interdisciplinary international studies centres. And by interdisciplinary that doesn't mean gathering ten political scientists and one economist, as someone put it at the Q Symposium today. We bring together physicists, biologists, historians, and social scientists as well as extra-disciplinary thinkers and actors, like novelists, filmmakers, artists, performers and, as you saw at Q, a bunch of guys in uniforms – the Royal Australian Navy has a thing for quantum.

As for 'being critical', I think it is a matter of finding right method for the right referent. Obviously one helps constitute the other, in that Deleuzian sense of making theory worthy of the event. For me that has been trying to figure out what makes us safe and what makes us feel endangered. The answer is going to differ, across time, cultures, genders and so on, so how can you say there is any single method, or some 'heroic' critical theory that is going to make it right? And it's always a job of playing catch-up. My own research has been driven by the acceleration of everything and the need to escape institutional and disciplinary inertia.

I guess 'being critical' means recognizing that the most critical issues facing us almost always exceed the traditional boundaries of power and knowledge. I would also attach an emancipatory or humanitarian aspect to 'critical' security studies, but I don't think that is sufficient – or that it *necessarily* makes us better scholars or practitioners. I have little time for those who attack others not being sufficiently 'critical' in the academic study of IR. This really hit me when we

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were making *Human Terrain*, our documentary about the US military's recruitment of academics into the war effort. This was a hugely controversial program among academics. But you could argue, and we had people on camera inside and outside the military, argue, that they were the 'real' critical thinkers, those inside in the universities saying any dialogue with the military was complicity in a war crime, and then those in the military saying they were the critical thinkers, bringing in outsiders – anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists and international relations experts – to understand the 'other', reduce casualty military and civilian casualties, build schools, be more humane, etc. 'Critical theory' doesn't suddenly render any action or actor beyond critique. Look at how the Israeli Defense Forces sought to introduce Deleuzian concepts into their strategic thinking; of the appropriation of critical thinking by the US military itself that become appropriated for traditional purposes like intelligence gathering and killing bad guys. So for me it's not the ends – even an emancipatory politics – that suddenly sanctifies a mode of thinking. For me criticality is reflexivity, a constant self-questioning about matching means and ends.

So I don't think there is one universal method or ethics that makes critical security studies superior to all other approaches. My own view is that as the world becomes increasingly heteropolar – a neologism that I'm still hoping to get into the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) – when you have such a wide range of different actors amplifying their messages and actions through access to networks, and operating simultaneously across multiple levels of power, individual, local, municipal, urban, state and system, then you need to adopt increasingly heterodox methods.

All said and done, I don't miss the theory wars that would often erupt when you asked these kinds of questions in the 1990s, when we – 'the posties' or one sort or another – were coming under really vociferous and attacks from all sides, for being too critical or not critical enough. I mean, a lot of really good critical thinkers said it's not worth it – or worse, were not hired, promoted or even forced out in that revered practice of the confidential referee. To be sure, we were dishing it out as well, but we were – or speaking for myself, – I was motivated by the need to open up a space for different views to be heard, not to shut down other voices. And we always punched up, not down. But on the other side, to the 'left', it deteriorated into a weird kind of petty narcissism, of name-calling, even ad hominem attacks, all for what? To prove who was more radical? More freedom-loving? I don't know, maybe it was just a turf battle gone bad. But I thought there was a lot of willful misreadings to start a fight and keep it going long after most people, including the next generation of scholars, just weren't interested.

This is not to let traditional security studies off the hook – by their own standards of explanation, prediction or even prescription, there's a pretty dismal track record, from the end of the Cold War to the Iraq War to the Arab Spring and after. Not only did they fail to anticipate or understand these changes, but they – and here I do not make much of a distinction between the neoconservatives or the liberal hawks – often helped make or legitimate the global messes that haunt us today. The realists have a better track record in this regard, certainly when it came to the Iraq War. Some liberal apologists who got it wrong, like Michael Ignatieff or Joe Nye, would say the realists might have been right but for the wrong reasons. Give me a break – how does that argument hold up for the families on both sides who lost sons and daughters? I don't want to let the realist completely off the hook – they continue to have a weird kind of nostalgia for bipolar stability, that was always more of chimeric than a reality, especially for those who suffered from the inequalities and the injustices that stability maintained.

**Your work spans across diplomacy, critical theories and practices, information technology and cyberwar. Now you have landed onto quantum physics. How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

I'd like to pretend there was one key thinker or one big book, but the driver has been and remains global events; the event itself but also how the effort to make sense helps *make* the global event – or worse, helps repeat it over and over again, as in the worst cases of war and genocide. So maybe you could say Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence has influenced me most!

If there is a common theme or effort in my work it is probably the changing nature of war and diplomacy, particularly the asymmetries that have emerged out of the revolution in military affairs, infowars and cyberwars, and how new 'centres of gravity' like the 'human terrain' have become so important. Now military and diplomatic power takes the form of full spectrum dominance, which means prevailing in the electromagnetic spectrum as well as on the

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battlefield or at the negotiating table.

I suppose my interest in quantum physics is just a natural progression in what I see as the increasing virtualization of global politics. I don't see the nuclear revolution as beginning with the dropping of the bomb, but rather with Planck's discovery of quanta, Einstein's of space-time, Bohr's formulation of the wave function, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, and Schrödinger's concept of entanglement. These represent all of the big conceptual and experimental breakthroughs of what should really be considered a quantum revolution rather than a nuclear revolution, that made possible not just the bomb, but transistors, lasers, LED's, and the mobile phone. Now we might well be entering the last stage of this revolution, with the operationalization of quantum computing, communications and control and intelligence – what I call QC3I. There are some big differences – like an impending world war – but there are also some worrying similarities to the 1930s. So, fully understanding the nature of fascism, Einstein and Szilard sent a letter warning the President of the United States that nuclear fission had more than peaceful applications. They understandably wanted to anticipate and defeat Nazi innovations in this area, but the result was a crash military program that led to the dropping of two atom bombs on Japan. Only afterwards did they, or world leaders or political scientists, begin to consider the full implications of the use of nuclear weapons. We need to get ahead of the quantum curve, to seriously consider what kinds of norms, rules and governance are appropriate for the next stage of a quantum revolution.

I also have to trouble your question a bit. You list all of the fields that I have worked in the last couple of decades and it certainly sounds like I jumped around! I don't take that as such a bad thing. I have always preferred the fox over the hedgehog, to invoke Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction of thinkers. But I'm willing to take it further. When the world is changing so fast, we need to change our ways of thinking as well try to keep up with the objects referent. Otherwise we'll never get out of what looks to me like a permanent war, or at best an interwar, in which we fail to actualize any kind of real peace. I mean, look what happened to that 'peace dividend' that was supposed to happen after the cold war ended. This is probably why I prefer interwar dilettantes like Walter Benjamin over most of our current pundits on global issues. They knew no matter how bad it was, it could get worse.

I've tried to avoid labels and pigeonholes my whole career, with not much success. But I'll cop to one – critical pluralist. I'm more focussed on change than stasis, for a lot of reasons, some normative but most are related to technology as the driver. The 'InfoTechWarPeace Project' and 'Global Media Project' at Brown University and now 'Project Q' at Sydney University were created, because I thought we could only anticipate the best and mitigate the worst effects of technological change through critical, pluralist approaches. So as quantum is actualized through technology, we need to hope for best but prepare for the worst – which includes weaponization. Quantum innovation could well make the world a safer and better place, in areas like medicine, climate change, and economics; but based on prior history, I think we need to hedge our bets. For instance, there are big advantages to institutions and organizations, private and public, that will have the power to de-crypt classical RSA-protected messages and in turn encrypt all communications with quantum keys. We also have to start to get our heads around the idea of quantum artificial intelligence.

**What does quantum physics have to offer to the study of international affairs and critical security studies? And how knowledgeable of quantum physics one should be in order to engage with these emerging debates?**

The power/knowledge issue is the main reason I started 'Project Q'. Quantum, like 'atomic', has always been surrounded by a mystique, and, thanks to the Sokal hoax and other efforts to keep quantum for the scientists, quantum has taken on a taboo for non-physicists. So it's been hard to develop a fluency outside the natural sciences, this in spite of the fact that when quantum mechanics first emerged in the 1920s, it was debated by philosophers, like Bergson and Whitehead, as well as by physicists. And it was a pretty vociferous debate, between Einstein and Bergson, but also between Einstein and Bohr, and Whitehead and Russell, and I could go on. The public benefited from these debates and they were covered by just about all of the major newspapers of the day. But now professional specialization, academic parochialism, and just the complexity of the topic have really attenuated that debate.

So it's not just a matter of physics serving up a new method or even cosmology for the social sciences. It goes much

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deeper. It might sound a bit new age-y, but I think we are born quantum and become classical. As we grow up, we want more certainty, predictability and rationality in our lives, and just as our consciousness begins to align with Cartesian, Newtonian, and more linear modes of being, so too with our social being and institutions. As adults who are fully trained – some might say fully trapped – in the Western Enlightenment cosmology that emerged in the 17th century – it takes considerable effort to understand or accept many of the counter-intuitive tenets of quantum. This is especially difficult without access to the mathematical formalism that proves many of the weirder aspects of quantum mechanics, like superposition and entanglement. I was lucky, I guess, to be able to spend time a year at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton and then to hang out at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen, where I first became confident in my ability to understand and write about the broader implications of quantum. At first I tried to avoid the quantum taboo, and I dressed it up as a ‘virtual theory’ of IR – as it turned out, not very successfully! – but with the support of others gradually came out of the closet.

Now quantum just seems to make more sense to me than the classical models: maybe it’s just a reverse aging! But if you take a hard, unjaded look at the social sciences and international relations, it does seem strange how we cling to 17th century concepts, ideas, and metaphors, like states behaving as action-reaction billiard balls. Really? What about all the mediating forces and non-state actors that are constantly in play? Are those states or balls bounded by a closed system or table? And I am not laying all of the blame on older sciences, like rational choice. The classical or English School certainly bears some of the blame, for its anti-scientific – which is to say, anti-American – attitudes. The challenge is to reopen the dialogue between disciplines, build some bridges between the natural and social sciences but without watering or dumbing it down just so we can communicate. It takes some will and some work on both sides to develop the necessary fluency.

### **What does quantum physics add that we don’t already have in the social sciences?**

Therein lies the crux of the matter, one that has often divided the three Q Symposia that we have held so far. There are those who see global reality as a quantum state, in effect, as a new kind of materiality, which in its most radical form is panpsychist. With increased interconnectivity and virtualization, the new materiality is better understood through quantum concepts like indeterminacy, uncertainty, tunnelling (the ability to communicate through barriers) and probably the most important one, entanglement. Now this comes up against all kinds of opposition, not, I would say, unlike what quantum mechanics first experienced in the 1920s: it just doesn’t make sense! But that is to assume a timelessness and spacelessness to common sense. After the Gedankenexperiments and then laboratory experiments, the suspect ideas took on a theoretical authority, and eventually took material form in practical apparatus like the transistor, laser, MRI and other technologies.

Of course, this all begins and most would say is confined, because of classical decoherence, to the microscopic level. But we are witnessing quantum behaviour at the macroscopic level, partially because of new experiments with more refined tools of measurement in a variety of fields, including biology, chemistry, and neuroscience. The most promising area in in the quantum sciences, with the development of Bell’s Theorem and Shor’s Algorithm, is in quantum computing. But even before we will see the operationalization of quantum computing, communication, and intelligence – and that date keeps getting closer, from 30 years to more like to 5 or 10 at the maximum – I think there will be growing acceptance of a broader quantum cosmology. I for one believe that the interconnectivity, simultaneity, and ubiquity of global media have produced very real quantum effects. And I believe that the speculative research on quantum consciousness, will, like the early Gedankenexperiments on quantum mechanics, bear fruit for the social sciences. Because Alex Wendt is leading the way in this important area, I am sure others will find it OK, even necessary, to follow. We need more, not less of this kind of speculation in IR. The key impetus of Project Q was to start the debate about quantum *before* rather than *after* it goes operational, and to have a meaningful conversation about the political, philosophical, and societal implications. Quantum physics can’t do it on its own alone, nor can the social sciences; they have to work together.

**At the conference I identified three types of conversations that were going on. One was about the metaphysics of quantum physics Jairus Grove was talking about, meaning how the philosophy underpinning quantum physics is reshuffling the way we understand reality. The second one was Alex Wendt’s approach to quantum mechanics and how they can be used to understand international**

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**phenomena. The third dealt with the militarization of quantum physics, investing in quantum research for military purposes. I thought that these conversations sometimes diverge from each other. Sometimes social scientists and quantum physicists are frustrated at each other. What's your take on these conversations?**

I am a fan of sceptics – just ask Colin Wight! I truly believe the best progress – epistemic, ethical, political – comes through a respectful dissensus, not consensus. We welcome strong disagreement at Q Symposia, as happened this afternoon with our roundtable on Alex's book, on the question of whether quantum phenomena can take place in wet, warm, squishy environments like the brain. It was great, because we had biologists and physicists as well as social scientists and philosophers willing to argue both sides of the debate (witness debate at [projectqsydney.com](http://projectqsydney.com)). Most people in IR think that we all have to be engaged in the same research program to make any progress. But I think Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour and others have pretty effectively demolished that view. What we're doing at Q is to create a safe zone to share dangerous thoughts. It's no accident that we stage Q at Sydney's former quarantine station – it's kind of like bringing everyone to that island on *Lost*!

**What are the dangers of using quantum as an epistemology for IR, given that it is a natural science and it can be as tyrannical as positivism has been?**

Yes there is always that charge, coming from various streams of IR. On the one side you can have someone saying 'it's just the latest expression of "science envy"'; and then on the other side someone will point out that modern physics and continental philosophy were intensely enmeshed and interdependent from the get-go. Heisenberg and Bohr were never reluctant to engage in philosophy; nor were Bergson or Whitehead afraid to delve deeply in theories of relativity or quantum mechanics. As a former student of Hedley Bull, I understand fully the need and the reasoning behind his anti-science polemic of the 1960s; but I do believe Bull and others who followed too closely in his footsteps – the so-called English School – might have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. We do need to distinguish science from scientism, engage with the former and be wary of the latter, or IR theory will continue to miss out on many of the great breakthroughs from complexity and chaos theory to more non-linear, emergent and probabilistic theories that challenge both classical and positivist theories of IR.

**In my understanding, quantum physics focuses on processes rather than patterns. So I'm wondering how does this affects the structure/agency debate?**

Quantum is a structural science, confirmed by empirically proven experiments. However, the *interpretation* as well as operationalization of quantum has all kinds of agential implications, not least because of the observer or measurement effect. Structures obviously – and literally – matter, but from a quantum perspective, the uncertainty principle, superposition, and entanglement all inject elements of acausality and indeterminacy into linear or structural arguments. Probably the most sustained effort in this area has been Karen Barad's work on what I believe she or others following her work call 'agential realism'.

**Do you have suggestion about methods? Does Quantum IR make conventional social sciences methods outdated?**

The world is pretty diverse and complex, so I think it best to take a pluralist perspective on methods. I side with Barthes: method is the spectacle in the text – some is OK, but too much, and it becomes a methodologism that overpowers the text. I think that quantum will supplement, certainly challenge, but probably not replace other approaches. It could be like Einstein in 1935 when he wrote the famous E-P-R article in which he argued that 'spooky action at a distance' – or entanglement – is just too weird to be true: there must be a 'hidden variable'. That dissent drove the QM theorists to the lab, where years later Bell's Theorem effectively – and most physicists would now say definitively – proved entanglement was the real thing. I mean, to say something is out of date makes it all kind of a fashion show. Quantum is not a fad. Suits with big shoulder pads are a fad: I don't wear them anymore, but hey, if somebody else wants to, go for it. I keep one in my closet just in case.

**What would you say is the most important advice for a young scholar in IR?**

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I can't say. I mean, when I began my career in IR was ripe, over-ripe, for a big change. What was important then is probably not so useful today. And even if I had perfect hindsight today, I'm not sure how my life experience might help others, because the only constant I experienced from a very early age seemed to be constant change. And later, in my adult life, I was lucky, in the sense that the force of circumstance usually proved to be more fortuitous than necessitous. I mean, I went to McGill University because it was cheap – no higher fees for foreigners back then – but also because I had a crush on a girl that went there; so I got to take every course taught by Charles Taylor, which profoundly shaped my future intellectual directions. On the advice of Peter Gourevitch, I took time off from McGill to go to Paris to hear Stanley Hoffman's lectures at Science Po; but instead I ended up apprenticing for a professional photographer, hearing Foucault lecture at the College de France, and discovering Paul Virilio at a remarkable photographic exhibition on bunker archaeology. I came back to the US after McGill, unsure what to do next, met with Hayward Alker and thought he was the guy; but then I picked up the wrong scholarship application and ended up at Oxford studying under Hedley Bull rather than MIT. After Oxford, desperate to escape an academic life, I tried to make it as photojournalist in New York City; failed terribly, had to take a job serving tea and cookies to students at Columbia University, and the next semester I was hired as an adjunct to teach them diplomacy. It turned out that the academic life, like democracy, was not so bad compared to the alternatives, so I followed my girlfriend up to UMASS-Amherst, where I got a job in a department with Jean Elshtain and Bill Connolly, which was probably the best intellectual and collegial yin-yang one could ever hope to find in a university setting. My first year there I gave up the still for a video camera, started a public-access TV program on global events, and took the camera with me on my research trips. I gave up tenure to accept Tom Biersteker's invitation to be a researcher professor at the Watson Institute for International Studies, the closest thing ever to an academic-practitioner nirvana, not least because making documentary films was considered as valuable as writing journal articles. And then, on something of a lark, I went to Sydney for an interview, and discovered the best colleagues in the best city on the planet, heard Nick Lowe live at the Sydney Opera House and was lucky enough to have found a life-partner who was also willing to take big leaps without looking back.

Would I recommend all that as a career path for an IR scholar today? Not on your life – not on anybody else's life. IR was the Wild West back then, and I'm afraid the frontier is closing. But who knows, it might open up again.

I find the worse thing about the current priority for the academic production of knowledge is the constant checking of papers, as Michel Foucault put it – all, of course, in the name of rigor, or excellence, or some other professionally neutral criteria. This is why Foucault said it is always better to play the jester than the priest when facing academic policing.

I'd like to think I've made a it bit easier for young scholars to find a way around the border guards, to find an audience – or just not to have to worry about not finding an audience. The best thing my generation can do is open some doors and help the next one make it through without having to compromise their beliefs, neutralize their creativity, mute their message. And then we just need to get out of the way.

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*This interview was conducted by Federica Caso. Federica is an Editor-at-Large at E-IR.*