

## Interview - Aleš Karmazin

Written by E-International Relations

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E-IR has partnered with the journal *Politics* to bring a series of interviews with authors of a special section of its November 2016 edition titled 'Resurrecting IR Theory'. In this interview, Aleš Karmazin discusses the concept of Chinese correlative ontology and how it challenges binary logic and puts forward a more nuanced vision of societies. Aleš is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, Praha, Czech Republic.

You can find the full article by the author here (requires login / access).

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in IR Theory?**

Based on the topic of my paper, I should probably say that developing non-Western IR theory is *the* thing today. But I don't think so. The potential of these debates has not been fulfilled due to several reasons. One could mention many of them, let's state only two. Firstly, there is a certain element of essentialization. The effort to demarcate what is Western vs. non-Western and/or what X's national tradition has been dominant. I am sure it limits our possible inspiration from non-Western sources just because we often insist that it must remain non-Western. My paper could be partly blamed for that as well although I tried to keep critical distance towards these categories. Secondly, I think there are still many aspects and layers to be uncovered and developed on the basis on non-Western philosophies. In other words, I think we can dig even deeper than so far.

This takes me to the point about the most exciting debates in IR. For me, it is surely articulating limits of the political (and also of modernity). I think this is a very fundamental endeavor, obviously without any final destination. Considering IR scholars, I especially like how R.B.J. Walker has opened the endeavor and how e.g. Sergei Prozorov continued. However, the endeavor can have many faces and other examples of it might be given. Quantum theory in social sciences does a very similar thing. Obviously this kind of research is not very frequent but I am sure it would at least partly illuminate us about limits what can be thought, said and done.

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

I'm still at the beginning of my academic career without experiencing many radical shifts in the ways how I see the world. I have remained quite close to constructivist lenses (broadly speaking) both in IR and social theory more generally, however, without definitely privileging any (of many possible) sprouts it. It so despite I would argue that constructivism is now dead as an IR theory (perhaps it has never existed as IR theory) although it will definitely remain here to influence how we analyze and see the world.

Besides themes and persons I mentioned in the previous answer, Bartelson, Neumann, Reus-Smit, Spruyt, Suganami or Wendt are some of those who have been providing me with the most fascinating intellectual adventures although I may not necessarily agree with all of them in the end. The English School of IR influenced me quite a lot as well for nicely articulating big questions about international order, however, without such intellectual thoroughness as those I just mentioned.

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### What is correlative ontology?

I'm still not sure how much I like this term which I came up with as I needed a name for abbreviating a complex concept (situation). I am quite hesitant to define it more generally than beyond 'Chinese correlative ontology' I dealt with in the paper but let's try. It could be understood as ontology involving units which necessarily co-create each other and get embedded into each other although they might seem to exist independently. More specifically, I borrow from social ontology which is inspired by traditional Chinese philosophy (mainly Confucianism) and its verbalization by philosophers like Roger Ames and David Hall. The individual, or rather 'the subject', in the language which goes outside ideology of individualism, is presented as strictly relational, processual and correlative *becoming* rather than *being*. Subjects, relations, and environment(s) are undividable parts of a holistic configuration in which one entails many. The subject's characterization (and the subject's 'subjectivity') is a result of transactional and cumulative engagements. As such, it is neither ontologically nor morally discrete and self-sufficient.

### What is the specific Chinese character of correlative ontology? What is the difference, for instance, from Hegelian philosophy?

Correlative ontology might be contrasted with several (often mainly Western) imaginations about what the subject is. Perhaps the most telling contrast can be found when juxtaposing correlative ontology and the Christian idea of soul which is believed to capture and preserve the subject's demarcation or essence. The contrast with Western liberalism is quite clear as well. Although some authors made some steps towards disaggregation of the subject (e.g. Kant was dealing with human faculties), it is a sharply different case (as the subject continues to stand as an ultimately discrete and self-sufficient being). Partly in a similar fashion, Hegel's dialectics (to point just this feature of his philosophy) starts with entities which are having its own characteristics and especially exclusiveness (A cannot contain non-A). On the other hand, what I label Chinese correlative ontology recognizes that A always contains many non-A's and, if fact, is co-constituted by these elements. Social relations A and non-A establish then constitute A.

There are however many other Western traditions and authors who are much more comparable with correlative ontology. To mention just some, a few streams in post-structuralism (Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, probably Derrida and Spivak), processual philosophy (e.g.. Whitehead) or some elements of pragmatism and existentialism would be particularly fascinating to compare.

### What is identitarian pluralism? How does Ancient Chinese philosophy help us to respond to it?

It was Sergei Prozorov who identified identitarian pluralism as an important element in modern political philosophy and IR theory. Identitarian pluralism limits political imagination to binary opposition (self vs. other, anarchy vs. hierarchy, particularism vs. identitarianism) and to an ever-present possibility of radical alterity. It is present in Hegel's work where dialectics means a clash between A and B in which one (or both) might be destroyed. However, the significance of identitarian pluralism is probably most apparent in Carl Schmitt's work. In his work, the possibility of difference is inscribed into politics in its very definition which leads to essentialization of dangerousness of everyone. Others are potentially dangerous just because they are different despite it is just an identitarian difference and no matter how different they are.

Correlative ontology, then, draws a radically different picture. It helps to realize that our interactions with other identities are not destructive, but rather with potential for our own enrichment. However, what is most important is it points that we would be nothing without taking elements of/from others (outer environment). We would cease to be *socially meaningful* or in a more extreme articulation, we would cease *to be*.

### How does correlative ontology solve the English School's opposition between solidarism and pluralism?

Identitarian pluralism stands behind many aporetic relations which were so difficult to overcome in modern philosophy and IR theory. The opposition between solidarism and pluralism is one of them. Although the English School often presents itself as a *via media* between realism and idealism, it actually ends up in reproducing the

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realist vs. idealist dichotomy in the debate on humanitarian interventions. In an abbreviating (and perhaps even caricaturing manner), it could be said that the main difference lies in the fact that pluralism says we have distinct communities while solidarism claims we have one world with a certain fundamental interconnection. As very well known, the debate about humanitarian interventions derives from that opposition.

**This leads to our next question on an issue that you address in your paper: what are the implications of correlative ontology on our thinking on humanitarian intervention?**

Correlative ontology cannot solve a complicated question about what to do in situations which might invoke a humanitarian intervention. However, through emphasizing the dimension of practically lived and deeply embedded connections between people, it rather challenges the binary logic and puts forward a more nuanced vision of societies. Thus the distinction between self and other is challenged, but also the distinction between the subject and community becomes ontologically more complex. My paper should give a more comprehensive and nuanced picture how correlative ontology helps to challenge “solidarism *qua* universalism” and “pluralism *qua* particularism”.

With a certain degree of self-defense as not being able to say something really practical at this point, let me go back to the very end of my first answer. I think that pushing the limits of our imagination is important. What (and how) can be thought changes what can be said which, then, may change what can be done.

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*This interview was conducted by Davide Orsi. Davide is a Commissioning Editor at E-IR.*