

## Interview - Inderjeet Parmar

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Inderjeet Parmar

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Inderjeet Parmar is professor, and head, of international politics at City University of London. He is chair of the Research Network on the Presidency of Barack Obama, and is currently collaborating with several scholars to establish a Trump Elite Networks Research project. He is past president of British International Studies Association (BISA) and a columnist at The Wire. His publications include Foundations of the American Century, Obama and the World: New Directions in US Foreign Policy (edited with Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge), and Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America. He is currently working on a new book project, Presidents and Prime Ministers at War: Race, Empire and Elitism in Anglo-American Wars from Korea to the Wars on Terror. Inderjeet also tweets and blogs regularly.

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

My research covers two or three interrelated areas. One is research on elites and elite power, and more recently, on opposition to elite power. Elite studies was very significant in the 1960s and 1970s but went into abeyance from the late 70s (probably due to the new right 'revolution' stealing the clothes of leftist critiques of elite power; and the increasing importance of structuralist theories). I think it is a really interesting area of study and it has begun to re-emerge over the last four or five years. The recognition of elite power in general, even if it is not followed through with elite theories, seems to be making a bit of comeback and I think we are not far from a position where it will become very significant again. That is partly because of real world events, which can be seen in the way in which decisions were taken in the run up to the Iraq war, which ignored broad swathes of public opinion.

Also, I think the financial crash suggested that the linkages between elites in wall street and the financial centres in politics and regulation were so strong that no real safeguards were taken, which then had an impact on rising inequality. When we track American presidential elections, particularly 2012 and 2016, you can see that anti-elite sentiment has been rising. I think that is one area that is very significant. People like Nana de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn from the Free University in Amsterdam are doing some really interesting work in this area – see especially the work of the Elite Power Investigation Centre (EPIC).

Related to elite studies is the study of so-called philanthropic foundations. Although I have been looking at Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford, there are new scholars on the scene who are looking much more closely at Dotcom billionaires, like Bill Gates of Microsoft and the Gates Foundation. Research is being done on the Gates Foundation's global health programmes by people like Sophie Harman at Queen Mary and the sociologist Linsey McGoeey at Essex University who has written a book on Gates' philanthropy and philanthro-capitalism. Generally, interest in large concentrations of corporate money that appear to be non-political, but are in fact very political, seems to be increasing.

There are also some changes within the area of foreign policy analysis. Some people who are studying American foreign policy or foreign policy analysis, are now looking at the impacts of foreign policy on the areas of the world with which they are concerned. Oz Hassan at the University of Warwick has looked at Egypt and the Middle East in American foreign policy, and actually visited Egypt and talked to the people protesting in Tahrir Square.

If you look at the origins of foreign policy analysis, it actually lies precisely in what scholars ended up doing, which

## **Interview - Inderjeet Parmar**

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was analysing the decision processes of the foreign policy makers in great powers. It is an American field in its origins and fundamentally originates from the Ford Foundation. When considering the example of nuclear decision making, such as during the Cuban missile crisis, foreign policy analysis takes into account a range of factors and looks at how elites in great powers make decisions and how they can make them better. It started as a project that was inward-looking and utilising information from sources on the ground didn't play as much of a role. Although area studies was supposed to partly resolve that, it has astounded me how long it has taken for scholars to move out of Washington DC institutions and that mindset. Unfortunately, there is a twin tendency in the other direction, partly because of the impact agenda of the REF (the Research Excellence Framework in the UK) that asks for us to have an influence on policymaking, which then draws us closer to those agencies themselves. I would say that if scholars are intelligent about it then the evaluation of policy and policy effects on the ground could be one way in which you could manage that process better.

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

One person was my personal tutor and supervisor when I was a student at LSE, Leslie Sklair. He was a professor in the sociology department and he wrote a book in the 1980s called *Sociology of the Global System*. That book drew my attention to a big omission in my own thinking, which was that I rarely ever saw the big picture. I tended to think about a narrow/niche area of research, focussing on an in-depth case study in a particular area, which seemed to stand as an episode by itself, isolated from the big picture of global contemporary issues and historical development. Sklair's book was a real eye-opener to me. Not that I did much about it, or could do much about it for a long time, but it certainly had a big effect on me.

Professor Stephen Skowronek (Yale) also made a significant impact on my thinking by helping me see the bigger story of American political development within which so much of my empirical work on US think tanks made a lot more sense. I still appreciate his humanitarian intervention on one of my articles almost 20 years ago. He did not have to do this but what he did taught me what a really good scholar-citizen looks like.

The other person that I think influenced my thinking was Stuart Hall, a sociologist at the Open University, particularly his book that provided a Gramscian account of the rise of Thatcherism. At the time, in the early 1990s, I was teaching a course on Anglo-America in the New Right era, at Manchester's American Studies department. I picked up that book purely because of an interest in Thatcherism but it provided me with a way to analyse the way in which American foreign policy had shifted in the 1930s and 1940s, away from isolationism and towards globalism. The book helped me to understand what a Gramscian analysis of American foreign policy shifts might look like.

### **Has Obama's foreign policy approach differed significantly from those of Clinton and Bush?**

The big answer to that is that I don't think there was a fundamental break after Obama was elected in 2008. At the time, people said he is inexperienced so give him a chance, and if he gets a second term things will really change. To his credit you can say that he had two great achievements, which did signify a break in those areas. One was the nuclear agreement with Iran, which is now under threat, at least rhetorically, though I think it will probably survive the Trump administration. The second was the rapprochement with Cuba and the reopening of diplomatic relations. This is also under threat, and I'm not sure it will survive as it is probably a bit easier to dismantle. But Obama did not act out of altruism but US self-interest as other states got into Cuba regardless of the US blockade. However, overall there wasn't a fundamental break. The underlying mindset of Obama's intellectual thought, and even the underlying trajectory of him as an individual included socialisation and incorporation in elite circles, which effectively delivered an approach to American power that was not that different.

The big difference was the historical time at which he came to office. He won an election after a disastrous war in Afghanistan, an even more disastrous war in Iraq, and a war on terror which was also going very badly. I think Barack Obama was seen as a new face that would moderate American foreign policy somewhat. In fact, he didn't change it very radically. Under Obama's first term military spending went up well beyond the level that George Bush had taken it up to, increasing it by around 30%. The surges in Afghanistan and the renewed efforts in Iraq were

## **Interview - Inderjeet Parmar**

Written by E-International Relations

continuations of much of the same, so in many ways, the actual apparatus and the lines of policy didn't shift much at all. That is not all because of him directly, but also because there is a massive institutional infrastructure which is already programmed in certain ways and I don't think he fundamentally rejected large parts of it.

I do think Obama wanted to close Guantanamo, but despite it being his first promise and one of the first things he signed as an executive order, he failed to do it and did not expend any political capital on the issue. In fact, the only way he has really tried to close Guantanamo is via drone strikes. This meant targeted killings, so you don't have to capture anybody, and therefore you don't need to hold them in places like Guantanamo, and you effectively become judge, jury, and executioner. This method increased a lot under Obama compared with George Bush. So I think you can say that Obama's agency played a role in his election after the crisis of 2006-2008, where public opinion was less enthused about the idea of American hegemony and unilateral action. Often change is the product of crisis. However, instead of changing things fundamentally, Obama just changed the tone, which he moderated. If you look at those areas where he did not inherit a particular policy, say on the Arab Spring, or Libya, he did very little. For example, he had the chance to ditch Hosni Mubarak early on during the Egyptian uprisings but he decided to back him. It was only when Mubarak was on his last legs that Obama turned against him and supported the democracy protestors. However, even when the elected government was in place and the ousted government was replaced by the military and Morsi, the US refused to categorise it as a military coup. If they had done so it would have meant that America could no longer give military aid to that regime.

The lack of change in policy or the underlying mindset within institutions was not a great shock and I had not expected a great deal of change with Obama's election. I outlined this in an article on Obama's foreign policy that I started writing in 2007, which was eventually published in 2009. When you look at his speeches, and his campaign advisors on his foreign policy and national security team, what they stood for, which think-tanks they belonged to, their past performances under Bush or Clinton (and sometimes even under Reagan), you could really see that he brought in the same group of people. Therefore, even though the circumstances were different, their approaches were going to be exactly the same, attempting to restore the vibrancy of American power, which at the time was in crisis. I think you just have to do some elite analysis, discourse analysis, and elite network analysis to see who these people are, where they come from, who they associated with, and how they had been socialised. We are starting a project that looks at these aspects in relation to the Trump administration.

### **Do you expect Trump's foreign policy approach to be much different to his predecessors?**

It is a bit more difficult to work out Trump than Obama because Obama was produced by the machine, which churns people out. Having dug a little deeper into the Trump phenomenon, he is different because he hasn't been socialised by the political system in quite the same way as others have. I think his personality, his extreme self-confidence and his rather unpredictable nature makes it a bit more difficult, particularly regarding his diplomatic style – what is that style going to be? How much damage might that do?

Regarding the substance of his potential policy I've been doing a lot of digging around on the think-tanks that he is associated with and it is quite interesting that he has been associated with several think tanks over the last 18 months to two years. After he announced his candidacy and got the nomination, he has been getting closer and closer to The Heritage Foundation, which is a conservative New Right think-tank in Washington DC. There is a very good blog called Think Tank Watch which keeps an eye on think tanks and shows that Trump is very close to The Heritage Foundation and that many of his appointees and his closest advisors are actually from the foundation.

Heritage does not stand four square against the general view that the US is a global superpower and that to maintain its power it should have a heavily armed military or the view that the US has got weaker since Obama came in and needs to bolster the military in every area. Donald Trump has actually taken the military policy of The Heritage Foundation as the core of his policy, so I think that this foundation is a good place to look. The foundation has produced a document called Blueprint for Reform and Trump seems to be taking his policy on tax, de-regulation, the abolition of Obamacare, climate change and so on, from there.

Deeper analysis and research will show that Trump held meetings with those from the Brookings Institute, the

## Interview - Inderjeet Parmar

Written by E-International Relations

Council on Foreign Relations, the CATO Institute and from The Heritage Foundation. So what you've got is someone building bridges with certain right wing groups at the core of Republican party politics, even though he looks like he is burning the place down. The latter strategy seems to be what he likes the media to focus upon while behind-the-scenes, hidden-in-plain-view, his behaviour with think tanks espousing low tax, small government, corporate de-regulation, climate-change-scepticism or denial, tells a very different story.

Fundamentally I don't think a great shift is likely. The only area which I am really uncertain about is Russia. I am still trying to work out what is going on, because Heritage does not support Trump's ideas of getting closer to Putin. It seems, from what has been said so far, that Trump has a great affinity with strong leaders and he has expressed admiration for people like Putin. Trump also appears to have a realist approach and perhaps accepts that you have legitimate security concerns when military forces collect on your border. To some extent, this is what has happened to Russia. If you look at post-Cold War policy in Europe, especially around the re-unification of Germany and the militarisation of Eastern Germany, the eastward expansion of NATO which is knocking on the door of the Ukraine is, in part, responsible for Russian intervention in that country.

In other areas like China, Trump is sabre rattling. He has already done something different regarding Taiwan, but the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 is effectively America's guarantee of Taiwan's integrity and sovereignty, even though the US has been recognising Taiwan as a kind of breakaway province. So there has always been an ambiguity over Taiwan and Trump is arguing that Taiwan be used as a bargaining chip. If China wants the US to accept the one China policy then they have to give the US something else on trade or on the islands in the South or East China Sea. So I think on those questions he might be more realist and more transactionalist in tone.

Fundamentally I don't think America is going to be an isolationist country. Trump calls himself an America firster, but I think he doesn't know the history of America first. The America First Committee in the 1930s was for defence and for the build up of fortress America to prevent attacks on home soil. For Trump I think America first means something completely different. It does mean that America's so called vital interests are first, as he defines them, but I think every president has tried to protect America's vital interests, from 1941 onwards. Former Presidents have largely coalesced around one key theme and that is that America is a global superpower, it has over 700 military facilities around the world that are not going to be closed. The US' defence starts on the border of China and Russia and I don't think Trump is going to change that. He might be more selective about certain things, he claims not to do nation-building, but so did George W. Bush just before 9/11.

There will certainly be stylistic changes and it is an open question whether Trump even lasts the full four years but I don't think we should underestimate him – he has got to the presidency and he is a lot smarter than we have given him credit for. When we dig back into his intellectual history (if you can call it that), and his willingness to listen to outside voices like The Heritage Foundation, then I think he is engageable and may be able to learn a great deal from them and navigate his way through. We have to be very careful not to focus too much on the stylistic elements of Donald Trump because he has a very clever way of signalling one thing and doing something else. Because of his controversial character scholars are under pressure to comment very quickly on what he is up to but we don't want to be reduced to reasonably well informed journalists. Now is the time to kind of step back a little bit and do some further analysis of this phenomenon.

### **Do you think those who elected Trump might be disappointed quite quickly?**

I don't know about quickly – and that is something that is quite significant. Trump has held victory rallies in nine cities, and even after he has gone back on many things, shown by some of his appointees and policy statements, people have still turned up in their thousands show support for him.

I do think that it was a bit of shock that someone who ran a campaign of misogyny and racism, attacking the entire established order, at home and abroad, was able to be elected. But the same kind of rhetoric, if not substance, was also coming from Bernie Sanders, so it is much more widespread. The more the establishment came together to attack Trump, the more popular he seemed to get. It seems to me that the only line of defence the establishment had left was Hillary Clinton, and although she won the popular vote by three million votes, the fact remains that she lost

## Interview - Inderjeet Parmar

Written by E-International Relations

the election. I think she was discredited on the left and right and a lot of the left stayed home in key constituencies and that allowed Trump to win.

Since the election Trump has made several appointments from Goldman Sachs which was the subject of his attacks on Hillary, stating that she was in the pocket of Goldman Sachs and Wall Street. Now he has appointed loads of them to his economic advisory council, his treasury secretary, and his chief strategist in the White House are all former Goldman Sachs employees. There are others from big business such as the energy sector, like Rex Tillerson appointed to the State Department. There are more generals in Trump's cabinet now than I think there has been since World War Two. You have billionaires, military men, and financiers and those from the established foundations.

The Heritage Foundation is at the heart of the conservative establishment and Trump was against the conservatives during the elections and for big government, high taxation of the rich, and more welfare, particularly for white working class people. He was going to give loads of money to people with up to four children to claim back all their childcare costs, so poor white people could apply for work and those costs would be alleviated. However, he has gone back on all those things. I think he already had a rhetorical campaign in mind, in which he fashioned a winning strategy and he knew what people wanted, and how to reach those people. Then he brought in people from the hard Right, and I don't think those people will be very surprised at all, I think they are going to work with him and I think they are going to educate him – not that I think he is a dupe, after all he is a billionaire himself and he behaves like one, he is not exactly a man of the people. So I suspect that they (the hard Right, big corporations) will welcome him with open arms, they will work with him and try and control some of his temperamental frailties.

I do think Trump will play the rhetorical race card if he doesn't deliver for the left-behind-by-globalisation voters – he is going to blame somebody else. When you look at Barack Obama and his support among the African-American community, in 2008, 2012, and even now, you see that Obama delivered very little for black people. Healthcare reform did insure a lot of people who weren't insured before but the overall situation for African-Americans hasn't changed very much. In fact it has deteriorated since 2008, particularly because of the financial crisis. However those people have held on to him and support him. The racialised identity politics that Donald Trump based his election on isn't going to go away. He is going to play that up – he is going to blame foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. I think he will legitimately continue to state how important it is to defeat ISIS, but that will also tap in to a type of rhetoric that he is going to ramp up, particularly if there is another terror attack on American soil.

The race card is not new in American or British politics. It comes at crisis moments, particularly from the right when they are in danger. Given the rhetorical campaign that Trump ran, I think he is going to revert to that. The victory rallies he has held have not been bridge-building rallies but he has been saying that he already said that the establishment tell lies and publish false polls. He was basically saying 'you're my people' and 'I stand with you' against the establishment. So some people will be disillusioned but I think that the race card is going to be played much more heavily in the next four years than it has before. His inauguration speech underlined this in stark terms.

**Your most recent book, Foundations of the American Century, considers the role of the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in US foreign policy. Can you outline the development of these foundations?**

These foundations are a product of the corporate wealth created through industrialisation in the US from the 1870s to the 1890s. So Rockefeller made money from oil and mining, Carnegie from steel, and slightly later on, Ford and the motorcar. These large concentrations of wealth came about at a time when the US was a rather inward looking country with no real global leadership. It was also a time when America was changing very rapidly due to industrialisation, urbanisation and immigration. So there was change at home, which also included threats from populists, socialists and anarchist which threatened the established order and there was change overseas where the French, British, Italians and Germans in particular were grabbing colonies across the world. The elites in America saw their opportunities slipping away. The creation of these foundations were a private attempt, when the American state was very weak, to create pools of knowledge for power, politics and political reform, to strengthen the American state and society and to prepare the American state for world leadership.

The foundations worked on the basis of building the executives agencies, the federal government, to strengthen

## **Interview - Inderjeet Parmar**

Written by E-International Relations

national government, at the expense of local government and congressional politics so that you had a strong state at the centre that would then manage America and the resources for it to have a greater say on the world stage. The foundations claimed to be scientific and objective but when you look at what they wanted it included aspirations to be a new great power. If you look at who their enemies were at home, it was mainly those on the left and the extreme right, people who wanted a different kind of radical change in the US. So the foundations were really system strengthening and preparing America for a stronger state at home and for greater global leadership overseas.

### **How would you describe the way/level of influence these Foundations have over US foreign policy at the moment?**

I think that Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie represent a segment of the broadly liberal establishment, although they do have linkages with those on the right. Today they still have a lot of influence in particular areas, though they have been superseded to some extent by foundations of the new right founded in the 1970s and 1980s such as the American Enterprise Institute, The Heritage Foundation, and CATO. Organisations like Brookings have moved far more to the right since the 1980s and it is now very hard to tell the difference between them these days. So what you have now is a bit of a shift to the right, plus new players on the agenda.

The biggest relationship that I have been studying recently is the one with China. The Ford Foundation has been in China since 1979 and puts hundreds of millions of dollars into its offices there. Now there are about 200 American foundations, think-tanks and university branches in China, something like 100,000 US students in China, and something like 200,000 plus Chinese students in the US. A lot of this has been built based on what the Ford Foundation did in 1960s, which was a system of studying China and building scholarly links between American and Chinese scholars and then building on those, right from the death of Mao on to today.

As China has reformed its economy and become more of a market economy, these foundations have played a role in the teaching of free-market economics in Chinese universities for example. They played a role in the institutions behind policy, economic policy reform particular. They have also played a role in rule of law programmes and civil society building. 95% of the funds from the Ford Foundation in the area of so-called civil society building have gone to what are called government organised, non-governmental organisations, which go under the acronym, GONGOs – and are the opposite of what civil society is actually supposed to be. What it looks like they have been doing in that area is building the basis of a stronger Chinese state, which has greater and deeper linkages within its population through these so-called civil society organisations. It is already a form of privatisation of great state power and putting it in some sort half way house between the state and the private, with American help. That is the biggest area of influence on American foreign policy and relationships at the moment.

It will be interesting to see how the foundations react to what Trump seems to be doing, which is ratcheting up the hostility, or at least the rhetorical hostility, with China. But there are great Sino-US interdependencies, networks, and interests that reflect what are probably unbreakable ties between the two states built since the 1960s and especially since Nixon and Kissinger embraced the incorporation of China into the US-led international system.

### **Do you think that these foundations, regardless of their political leanings, are a positive thing for foreign policy formulation?**

The foundations are positive if you support the American elite and their global agenda. I think they do furnish a great deal of the infrastructure of American influence, they create networks of people, money and ideas and around and within those networks there are mindsets that are sort of hard wired. The influence includes ways to solve problems – they don't provide the answer but how to think about a problem, and therefore exclude other ways to think about a problem.

These kinds of institutions work outside of the government, and are therefore formally private, but actually think in a similar way to the government, which is a great strength of American power and is probably unparalleled by any other power. In the British case you have the British Council and BBC World Service, which are somewhat comparable institutions but they have nowhere near the power of these American institutions that establish PhD scholarships,

## **Interview - Inderjeet Parmar**

Written by E-International Relations

teaching programmes, reform educational institutions and have scholarly exchange programmes. Students from China who go to the US can be trained for a PhD and develop methodologies, problem solving approaches and they then apply them to the challenges of the state and economic policy reform. These foundations have done this elsewhere as well, you can look at Chile, Indonesia, and Nigeria in the 1970s during the Cold War – they have been very powerful programmes for inaugurating neo-liberal free market regimes.

These foundations are creating an empire of the mind and give people a career within their network, which can go from a PhD fellowship, to a post-doctoral fellowship, to a permanent position, and big grants that allow people to do the intellectual work related to global and American political problems, which then becomes the normal way of thinking because it is linked to prestigious institutions like Harvard or Yale. The institutions then begin to teach and use the same books and studies, which has a multiplier effect through the whole system and consequently in other educational systems as well outside the country. I think empires of the mind are what are effectively created by these elite networks that these foundations are the drivers of and I think that is the really important feature. It thickens and deepens American power to beyond the military, corporate and diplomatic and political, to intellectual.

**The UK has often been referred to as the US' 'poodle' due to its support of US foreign policy. Do you think this is fair? Do you see this changing under a Trump presidency?**

No, I never have bought the poodle idea because of the historical work I have done using Foreign Office and Cabinet papers from the run up to, and during, the Second World War and the same in the American case. It is quite clear that Britain is no poodle as it is not the case that America shouts and Britain agrees. There is a co-incidence of interests on a lot of questions, particularly around the idea of a global institutional infrastructure. When US power was on the rise Britain was declining, relative to the US, and was unable to sustain itself as an empire independently. Britain wanted the best of both worlds – to sustain an empire, with an American alliance in tow. This is very clear from an analysis of Foreign Office Ministers and of Churchill, Attlee and others during the Second World War when there was a bipartisan consensus that an American alliance provides the best of both worlds, given that the British empire was in decline. It wasn't a decision to become America's poodle however, the price of the alliance is that sometimes, because America has greater power, both financially and militarily, Britain is going to have to go along with some things that they don't agree with. That is very different to being a poodle.

By referring to the UK as a poodle you end up trivialising something which is far deeper. It suggests that the personality of the Prime Minister is somehow responsible for the poodle-like behaviour and is a puppet to a foreign power. When actually they are acting within a historical context of consensus on the support of an American alliance. Some politicians that supported Brexit will think the vote to leave is great because in their view the UK can now have a far closer relationship with the US than they did before. A lot of them support the concept of the Anglosphere, a sort of global alliance of English speaking powers – at the centre of which is Britain and the United States, but also Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, some would even include Caribbean countries and India as well. By including these countries they de-racialise the idea by including some non-white countries and regions, but really at the core of it, it is the Five Eyes (an intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US). That suggests to them that there is a possibility for a North Atlantic free trade area, in which you could create new alliances and agreements with the US because of the Anglo-American attitudes to the world, the rule of law, movement of people and investment, a shared idea about the use of the military, and so on. So a lot of the Brexiteers on the right, and some allies of New Labour as well, think this is a good opportunity. Some may feel that Trump may even enhance the relationship. The only thing maybe that Britain had a role in Europe as part of the EU, as a sort of bridge between the US and Europe. But for the British elite it was never a real bridge that were empowering in its own right. Now it might feel that the shackles are off and Britain can do more with the US. The problem is that the economic and financial strength of the UK will be reduced for the next few years at least, because of Brexit.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international politics?**

Think beyond the project or the niche that you are currently working on. Always think about the bigger picture. This might be a contemporary or historical picture within which your project sits and considers the linkages between that and how global or national power works. We got to where we are today not by just appearing from nowhere but

## **Interview - Inderjeet Parmar**

Written by E-International Relations

actually because of historical development. So study that and put the immediate thing you are looking at in that bigger historical and global context.

Despite all the regimes of surveillance you now experience at universities, like the REF and TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK), you have to go with your passion and heart, and study those things you really want to study and know the answers to, not just what the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) or the Ford Foundation have declared they are interested in. Study those things that you think are the biggest questions and that you want answers to.

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*This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.*