

## 10th Anniversary Interview – Nicolas Onuf

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DEC 7 2017

**E-International Relations (E-IR) was founded 10 years ago this week. During that time we have interviewed over 150 academics, policy-makers and journalists. To celebrate E-IR's 10th anniversary we asked some of our existing interviewees two further questions reflecting on the last decade in International Relations.**

Nicolas Onuf recently retired as Professor Emeritus of International Relations at Florida International University and occasionally teaches at the University of Southern California, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, and Kyung Hee University in Korea. His publications include *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (co-authored with his brother Peter Onuf) and *International Legal Theory: Essays and Engagements, 1966-2006*. Professor Onuf discussed the professionalization of scholarship, the influence of his book 'World of Our Making' and his top ten tips for flourishing in academia in an interview with E-IR in 2014.

### **What changes have you seen in International Relations or your field over the last 10 years?**

The big change is IR's globalization. It shows up in many ways – disenchantment with IR 'the American way,' a dramatic increase in IR's substantive reach at cost to coherence, 'turns' instead of 'debates' – sufficiently obvious that I see no need to comment on them any more than I already have in public forums. There is, however, one change that I feel compelled address. Some background: I take myself to be a theorist, and I have claimed as much (and no more) throughout my career. I matured in a time when scholars in IR relied on 'grand theory' for their sense of what the field was for, and about, and 'great books' set forth grand theory for successive generations. I have always believed IR makes no sense as a claimant discipline or pedagogical undertaking in the absence of grand theorising.

In the last decade, grand theory has lost its grandeur. No great books come to mind. The last books consciously shaped by grandly theoretical concerns – Deudney's *Bounding Power* and Lebow's *Cultural Theory* – are now a decade old. When the editors of the *European Journal of International Relations* devoted a special issue to 'The End of International Relations Theory?' in 2013, I can well imagine younger scholars thinking to themselves, if you have to ask this question, then you already know what the answer is. And good riddance. No one will be surprised that I feel otherwise. As IR grows ever shaggier, its foundations ever shakier, its reason for being ever more shadowy, we need grand theory; we *need* great books to give shape to what we do. The alternative is to acknowledge the mismatch between our scholarly practices and our institutional commitments, to admit that IR is terminally provincial, to give our up disciplinary pretensions.

### **What books, or other media, published in the last 10 years has made an impact on you and/or the discipline?**

I do have principled reservations about IR as a discipline—reservations that cost me very little in institutional terms. I have been reading less and less IR as time goes on. Of the books I have read in the last decade, the most impressive is Daniel Levine's *Recovering International Relations* (2012). Mostly about grand theory, it is a prologue to a 'sustainably critical international theory,' and not a deliberate, systematic effort to formulate a grand theory as such. There is one book, however, that I do wish to bring to attention. It's Morton Kaplan's *Transcending Postmodernism*

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(2014), introduced by and written with Inanna Hamati-Ataya. Kaplan's *System and Process in International Politics* (1957) is, of course, one of the greatest of our great books. I studied it, I pondered it for years, I wrote about it, I treasure my copy.

Kaplan styled that early book 'an attempt to analyze international politics systematically and theoretically,' and proceeded, with no further ado, to 'the analysis of systems of action.' The book *is* systematic within stated limits – it is a closed system (a 'framework') for examining a stipulated number of closed systems (six 'models' of an international system in a state of equilibrium). While Kaplan considered history a 'great laboratory,' theory is where one begins. In keeping with the times, he saw no need to situate his framework within the broad reach of social theory or declare his philosophical allegiances.

Thanks chiefly to postpositivist ferment reaching IR in the 80s and 90s, great books can no longer enter the world so unadorned, grand theories so simply stipulated. Theories need a cushion, rather like Lakatos's protective belt, to insulate them from a complicated world that includes messy evidence, competing theories, incompatible worldviews, and hostile critics. As Hamati-Ataya pointed out, Kaplan is routinely characterized as a naked positivist despite subsequent decades in which he wrote philosophically informed books and essays showing him to be nothing of the sort. Ranging across disciplines, this body of work has never found an audience, least of all in IR. With Hamati-Ataya's indispensable assistance, Kaplan massaged it into in a single, accessible volume presenting and defending a distinctive 'world view.'

Some elements in Kaplan's worldview resonate with my own, some don't. When he wrote, 'our predictions are made within the framework of closed and bounded theories, models, or systems,' I quite agree, and yet, philosophically speaking, I would go further. Our reality is made within such a framework; models are all we have – in mind. Whether either of us has transcended postmodernism is not the point. The book is a compelling reminder that any 'sustainable' theoretical undertaking requires an introspective rationale, a public examination of one's motives and premises. Why this, why now? What about? For whom? Where to? It hardly matters – at least to me – if we call this enforced modesty 'reflexivity' (as Hamati-Ataya did in her Introduction), although it is inevitably personal (as Kaplan said himself).

Morton Kaplan died in September, his great book ritually honored but little read. If we are ever to speak of international relations systematically *and* systemically, *Transcending Postmodernism* gives Kaplan the grand theorist a renewed relevance. If we give up our disciplinary pretensions and choose not to speak of international relation in such terms, we would still have Kaplan's help in theorizing the collective experience of modernity – an experience in which 'the international' – whatever we mean by this turn of phrase – continues to figure centrally.