Interview - P?nar Bilgin

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

The study of International Relations is increasingly insular; each of us is communicating, collaborating and debating in our own worlds (understood in thematic, not geocultural terms). I follow the developments in two of these worlds: critical security studies and postcolonial studies. It would be very exciting if the former were to start paying more attention to the latter's critique and we had a genuine debate. In my 2017 book*The International in Security, Security in the International*, I sought to bring critical security studies and postcolonial studies into dialogue by taking stock of past contributions and pointing to future directions. There is also the 2006 article by Barkawi and Laffey on 'The postcolonial moment in security studies'. Notwithstanding such efforts, what we find in critical security studies is, at best, acknowledgement of the ills of colonialism and/or limitations of Eurocentrism. What I would like to see is a debate generated by proper engagement that goes beyond such one-line acknowledgement or a cursory reference to Fanon.

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

There was little I found exciting in IR until I was introduced to Ken Booth's early work on (what later came to be called) critical security studies (see his article on 'Security and Emancipation' and his and Wheeler's chapter on 'Contending philosophies about security in Europe'). That's how I ended up in Aberystwyth for postgraduate studies. I was part of the first group of five students taking the course on critical security studies in 1995-96. I would be hard pressed to call this a 'shift in my thinking'—more a moment of introspection. For I was already in a search for a different account of world politics, and I found that in critical security studies. Had I not been introduced to critical security studies, I may not have stayed in IR or in academia for that matter. This is because, at the time, I found alienating the incongruence between insecurities experienced in the geographies that I observed and what IR offered in lieu of explanation. Reading Booth's works and later finding myself in the privileged position of studying with him motivated me to stay in academia.

The second moment of introspection came in 2004, when Ole Waever and Arlene Tickner invited me to a part of a group of scholars to study 'geocultural epistemologies'. I chose to write a paper on the study of security in Turkey. What I discovered when conducting research for that paper kept me thinking. Here was another incongruence: this time between insecurities experienced in Turkey and what Turkey's IR offered in lieu of explanation. In the next few years, I made a few attempts to make sense of my research findings. It was not until I started to engage with postcolonial studies that I slowly began to make sense of IR scholarship in places outside of Western Europe and North America as 'almost the same but not quite' (to borrow from Bhabha). In search for 'difference' as orientated by the 'geocultural epistemologies' group, I found Turkey's (and some others') security scholarship to be 'differently different' (see also my article on 'Thinking past 'Western' IR?'). Here I should acknowledge two other important

influences on my work during this period, namely L.H.M. Ling and Mustapha Kamal Pasha. The former's 2004 book on *Postcolonial International Relations* was a source of inspiration. The latter's invitation to join an ISA panel on 'Thinking Past Western IR?' started it all. My third moment of introspection is yet to come!

Your research draws on and combines International Political Sociology with postcolonial thought and critical security studies. Can you explain how this approach enhances understanding and theorising of the international?

I see my work as drawing on critical security studies and postcolonial studies. International Political Sociology has emerged as an intellectual home for the kind of work I have been doing. This is not to say I have not learned a lot from my IPS colleagues; just that it is not my starting point. In the handbook I co-edited with Xavier Guillaume, you will see that I understand IPS as a coalescence of creative responses by IR scholars to already existing dissatisfactions in the study of world politics. Otherwise, I find that some IPS work to pay little more attention to the international than some mainstream studies insofar as they are not always attentive to what Jabri has referred to as the "mutually constitutive relationship between the social and the international".

You argue in your volume *The International in Security, Security in the International* that the international is tied up with "others' insecurities, experienced in a world that is already worlded [...]". Can you explain your argument? Why is it important to investigate others' insecurities?

This book emerged as my two research agendas began to converge; namely, my long-standing research into critical security studies and my newly-found interest in 'geocultural epistemologies'. One the one hand, critical security studies has focused on the constructedness of insecurities, and pointed to the ways in which "one's basic ideas – political theories and philosophy – about what makes the world go round" shape his/her conceptions of security (Booth 2012, *Theory of World Security*). Yet, thinking about world security in a world of multiple differences requires inquiring into what others (who also constitute the international) think about the international as shaped by those 'basic ideas'. On the other hand, postcolonial studies have offered 'contrapuntal readings' of the colonizer and the colonized to point to the (re)production of colonial differences and postcolonial insecurities. While postcolonial studies' insights are relevant not only for the colonizer and the colonized but all those who have been shaped by "the continuity and persistence of colonizing practices" (Chowdhry and Nair 2002, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations*), students of postcolonial studies have paid somewhat limited attention to broader issues regarding world security (but see Barkawi's works, also cited above).

My book suggests that addressing the task of thinking about world security in a world of multiple differences requires building solidarities across our divergences within critical theorising about world politics and security. The building blocks that make up the answer I offer are already available in critical security studies and postcolonial studies. However, over the years, these two bodies of scholarship have grown increasingly apart from each other with the former overlooking the insights offered by the latter, while at the same time seeking to shield its emancipatory approach against criticisms regarding its 'Eurocentrism'. Such criticism, I argue, should not lead us to lose sight of the potential for learning if not solidarity between their students in the attempt to respond to our challenge (thinking about security in a world of multiple differences). Here is what I suggest: "Inquiring into the international in security" entails incorporating others' conceptions of the international into the study of security. But then, how do we access others' conceptions of the international? This has turned out to be a challenging task as I suggested above. Those who looked at IR scholarship in other parts of the world were thwarted in their efforts when they found that IR scholarship in other parts of the world did not always seem to offer 'different' conceptions of the international. This is where my two research agendas converge, given the puzzle I encountered while researching on 'geocultural epistemologies': "why is it that IR scholarship in other parts of the world is not as 'different' as expected?". I argue that, rather than explaining away such apparent 'similarity' as a confirmation of mainstream IR's universalism, or a result of misplaced assumptions of 'difference', we could begin our inquiries into others' conceptions of the international by juxtaposing others' insecurities and IR scholarship in other parts of the world. This is what I term as inquiring into security in the international—inquiring into how others' insecurities shape (and are shaped by) their conceptions of the international (including their IR scholarship, which does not emerge or evolve in a vacuum, but responds to a world that is worlded, and should be analysed as such).

In *The International Political "Sociology of a Not so International Discipline"*, you call on academics to move past dominant ways of approaching the international. How can we do this?

Calls for 'opening up IR' were voiced in the early 1990s. I am by no means the first person to make such a call. My point in the said piece is the following: focusing solely on how IR is studied in different parts of the world is not likely to get us far in terms of 'opening up IR'. In making this point, I distinguish between two different ways of opening up IR: the so-called 'non-Western IR' project and inquiring into IR's constitutive outside. I have made a case for the latter in my more recent work. The piece you are referring to argues that 'non-Western IR' is a project of knowledge production that occludes the very avenues it is supposed to open. For 'opening up' IR is not only about being more open to scholars with postcodes different than ours, as it is sometimes understood. Opening up IR is also (and I think more so) about opening our field up to approaches shaped by different epistemological and ontological outlooks so that the study of IR would better reflect how the international is understood and practiced in different parts of the world (here I am thinking of Chan's writings from the 1990s). It is by virtue of failing to appreciate scholars from outside Western Europe and North America "as a possible contributor to a critical thought and rejection which could be significant beyond its immediate geographical origin" (Slater 1998, *Post-colonial questions for global times*) that the project of 'non-Western IR' occludes the very avenues it is supposed to open. For the idea about opening up IR is not to replace one parochialism with another, but to reflect on the limitations of all kinds of parochialism whether they stress universalism (as with aspects of so-called 'Western' IR) or relativism (as with the project of so-called 'non-Western IR').

In your article *Thinking Past Western IR*, you speak of "assumptions of radical difference" between "the West" and "the rest". How have these assumptions influenced how we as researchers approach International Relations as a science?

As I said above, this piece was written as a response to debates within the 'geocultural epistemologies' group. What I call "assumptions of radical difference" are prevalent in some aspects of those debates; those who expect others with different positionality to have very radically different scholarship. The science/not distinction (which also shapes your question) is an extension of that assumption. When we look closely into IR scholarship in other parts of the world, especially when we pay into its sociology and especially international political sociology, what we see belies such assumptions. It is important to treat non-Western scholars as our contemporaries with their own agendas (scholarly and/or political), as opposed to presuming that 'we' know.

In your chapter on *Colonial Globality, Postcolonial Subjectivities in the Middle East*, you propose to view the postcolonial as the constitutive outside of the global. How does this help us to challenge knowledge about the global or the international that we take for granted?

The notion of 'constitutive outside' I borrow from Stuart Hall. In IR, Inayatullah and Blenay were the first to identify and explore the potential of this notion. My point in the said piece being that some experiences (as with the Middle Eastern) are not a part of prevalent IR narratives means just that: they are 'outside' of our prevalent narratives. They are nevertheless 'constitutive' of experiences here, there and everywhere—including 'Western' experiences which are otherwise portrayed as 'autonomously evolved'. Hence the notion of 'constitutive outside'—outside of narratives, but constitutive of experiences. Inayatullah and Blaney recommend 'excavation' as a method for inquiring into IR's constitutive outside. I follow Said's method of 'contrapuntal reading'. Here is a mini example.

In the recently revised edition of your volume on *Regional Security in the Middle East*, you open up the understanding of 'region' and 'security'. How does this enable us to think differently about regional security in the Middle East?

The book distinguishes itself from previous (critical) approaches to regional security by opening up both 'region' and 'security'. Different from those studies that bracket one or the other, this study takes seriously the constitutive relationship between (inventing) regions, and (conceptions and practices of) security. In doing so, I follow the lead of Waever, Booth and Wheeler's writings from the early 1990s; they considered multiple visions of security in 'Europe' as productive of multiple 'Europes'. Similarly, there is not one Middle East but many, shaped by the insecurities of

those who voice them. While mainstream and critical approaches alike reflect the insecurities of those who are interested in what they define as the 'Middle East', this book focuses on how present-day insecurities have their roots in practices that have, throughout history, been shaped by its various spatial representations—what I term the 'geopolitical inventions of security'. In doing so, the book lays the contours of a framework for thinking critically about regional security in the Middle East. At a moment in time when Middle Eastern insecurities are portrayed as consequences of the 'artificiality' of the 'Middle East' as a region and/or the borders of Middle Eastern states, inquiring into the relationship between (inventing) regions and (conceptions and practices of) security offers an appropriate starting point. For example, what I term the 'Middle East approach to regional security' is warranted by a particular concept of security that shaped and was shaped by Cold War Security Studies—a concept that is decidedly state-centric, military-focused and directed outwards. This approach has its origins in the security concerns and interests of external actors. The 'Middle East' as a term and as a spatial conception is a product of British search for security in this part of the world before and during WWI. Britain's role was gradually assumed by the United States during and after WWII. One major implication of Anglo-American prevalence has been that much of the thinking done on regional security in the Middle East has been based on particular conceptions of 'security' and 'region', both of which have been shaped by British and US insecurities and interests. This is where the book begins. I will not give away the end!

In your chapter on *Securing the Postcolonial*, you point to the necessity of engaging with postcolonial critiques of cosmopolitanism when we think about security in the Global South. Beyond the critique, do you think that postcolonial approaches could and/or should also develop their own version of cosmopolitanism?

In that chapter I make two points, one of which you underscore: the need to pay attention to postcolonial critiques of cosmopolitanism. This is a point made previously by Mignolo and Rao, and I follow. The second point is that we should not stop there, but also pay attention to postcolonial engagements with cosmopolitanism. This second point is as important as the first one. Not the least because emphasising only the first leaves untouched (what I call) 'communitarian approaches' to security (all versions of realism would fit here, including 'subaltern realism'). What you see in the works of Grovogui, among others, is an analysis of postcolonial engagements with cosmopolitanism. Grovogui calls for broadening the basis of discussions on cosmopolitan engagement, and I follow. Here I find an opening for students of critical security studies and postcolonial IR to have a conversation on emancipatory practice.

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

Write regularly; do not wait for a moment of inspiration. I keep the following quote by Picasso near where I work: "Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working."