

Interview - Christian Lequesne

Written by E-International Relations

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Christian Lequesne is professor of political science at Science Po's Center for International Studies (CERI), where he specializes in European Studies and Diplomacy. He is co-founder and co-chief editor of the *European Review of International Studies*, and his latest publications include *La politique étrangère. Approches disciplinaires* (co-edited with Hugo Meijer) as well as *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay*. He participates in the ESRC project 'The UK in a Changing Europe' and is Sciences Po's principal investigator within the H2020 EU-LISTCO project on European foreign policy.

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

I have two fields of research: the study of the European Union (EU) politics and the sociology of diplomacy. I will concentrate my answer on the second topic. An interesting development appeared ten years ago and grew in the literature. It is to consider diplomacy as a set of practices as such, rather than as a contextual variable of International Relations (IR). This evolution corresponds to the practice turn in social sciences. Following the teaching of the English School of IR, scholars such as Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Iver B. Neumann and Vincent Pouliot have renewed the study of diplomacy in concentrating on actors' practices. The idea was to stop describing diplomatic phenomena such as sovereignty or legal regulation with a complete disregard for the fact that they are human activities set up by individuals with a reference to materiality. Unfortunately, practice theory in diplomacy is now suffering from what has happened with a lot of other IR theories – that is, people do not invest enough in fieldwork and speak of practices without carefully looking at the actors' practices through sociological or ethnographic work. I was struck by this evolution after participating in a panel on practice theory and diplomacy at ISA 2019 in Toronto. Some scholars who were presenting were empirically very very poor. The result was that they just talked about practices as an abstract concept, reproducing the same kind of broad generalities that practice theorists wanted to avoid in the first place. You cannot pretend to do serious practice theory in staying in your office with a laptop. You must do fieldwork. The answer to my bold observation will be: 'you are doing ethnographic fetishism!' But I am afraid this is purely rhetorical.

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

Oh my God, it has changed thousands of times and it is still changing every day. To be serious, in the 1990s I was less convinced than I am now of the importance of state power and of inter-state relations in IR. I am considering the role of the state in IR with greater importance, even inside the EU. This is why I will publish the third edition of *The member states of the European Union* with Simon Bulmer in 2020. But I do not consider the state as a rational monolith, like the neorealist scholarship. I am interested in a complex state, which is a mix between fragmentation and centralization. I do not think that we can limit the study of IR, the EU or diplomacy to NGOs and international institutions.

Your latest book, *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay* (the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs), examines diplomacy through direct observation. Why did you choose this research method, and what challenges did you face?

The inspiration has clearly been the sociology of practices. I did not want to write about French foreign policy-making

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without understanding the actors who are making policies on a day to day basis. My works in political science have always been on the same method: starting with a microsociology of agents to understand the macrostructure of politics. To do that, you need to observe and interpret the agents' activities: both what they do and how they speak about what they do. For me, social sciences are necessarily interpretative. Positivist studies which pretend to establish causality just by crossing quantitative variables have never convinced me.

What is the significance of rituals and decorum in diplomacy?

Rituals and decorum are still crucial of course. One of the most fascinating (but understudied) topics in diplomacy is the role of protocol. It should not be analysed just as a set of techniques but as politics. The way you treat your partners formally in diplomacy, how you eat with them, how you organise the press conference, etc. says a lot about the relationships you want to build. Social sciences must investigate more protocol and rituals in diplomacy as political objects. Diplomats specialising in protocol are prepared to speak a lot to scholars because they are rarely approached, contrary to most of their other colleagues in the foreign services.

There are several examples that demonstrate why protocol should be studied. There was a clear political message behind French President Hollande's refusal of a formal request from Tehran that no wine be served at a dinner at the Elysée Palace with Iranian President Rohani. By the way, the dinner was canceled and replaced by a tea party at 4 pm. In diplomacy, the way you put people around a table, the sites where you meet them are political acts. When Brazil's President Bolsonaro says that he has no time to welcome the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Luc Le Drian, but at the same time publishes a picture of him at the hairdresser, it is a political act. There are fascinating studies to be done.

What challenges and opportunities do diplomats face in a world where openness and transparency have been gaining traction as guiding principles of foreign policy?

They must learn how to speak to various publics and not only to their fellow diplomats. They must interact with new social media, including to counter fake news. They must also explain what they do to a domestic audience which contributes to the legitimacy of diplomacy. A 'good' diplomat is not only a person who specializes in foreign affairs. He/she must also be well aware of domestic politics in his/her own country. When I did my research inside the Quai d'Orsay, I was fascinated by the time senior diplomats devoted to the issues around speeches. How are we going to speak about that? What are the risks of misinterpretation of what we are going to say in the international but also domestic audiences? Diplomacy has always been a speech act but it is probably more the case now because of the diversity of communication tools. Speaking does not mean only delivering official statements. Speaking is also addressing private settings and limited assemblies. There are several levels in the communication of a diplomat. Practitioners still insist a lot on the need for them to create 'good' human relations with others. Sometimes scholars do not take this self-description very seriously, considering that institutions matter much more than individuals in decisions. I do not agree. A diplomat with a sense of human empathy could influence a decision precisely because he/she is able to create trust. That is why it is so important to carefully study relations among agents of diplomacy.

What has your research on France's diplomatic apparatus taught you about its defining features, and about France's standing in the world today?

France is a state which still has the ambition of a global diplomacy. It is a state whose decision-making is still centralized, notably because of the powers held by the President of the Republic in the diplomatic field. It is also a state which has more ambitions than resources. French diplomacy does not always have the necessary material resources to pursue its policy goals. For instance, President François Hollande and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius wanted to intervene in Syria in August 2013, but they did not have enough military resources. When Obama switched his answer to 'no' after having said 'maybe', the French leaders had to stop their plan and were disappointed. But they tried. France is a country with some diplomatic nerve.

How could France's position within the European Union evolve post-Brexit?

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Macron's France will consider that he must be proactive on the main EU reforms (Economic Monetary Union (EMU)), Schengen, European Defense). But this will reach two clear limits: 1) the other EU 27 and especially the Germans are less prepared to be proactive on EU issues than in the past, and 2) French domestic debates cannot be neglected. What does it mean to respect the EMU rules if the French social climate does not allow for the government to reduce public spending?

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

When studying social sciences be yourself and be eclectic. Read everybody and try to extract what you find interesting from the diversity of readership. But never assume that studying social sciences means following a single author. A good scholar is somebody who quotes authors but not always the same one. I find it terribly worthless when people are just quoting and re quoting the same pieces. I find it even worse when people define themselves as addicts of a given scholar. It means that they need a guru to think.

The second piece of advice is to always catch academic debates at the international level. Participating in international networks is absolutely crucial to making good science. I am glad that the situation regarding internationalization is changing in France with the new generations, even if some very parochial debates about 'socio-histoire', and Bourdieu's 'théorie du champ' are still reproduced by some young French scholars with a total lack of comparative perspective. Parochial grouping has very limited purpose in social sciences, except bringing security to those who belong to the grouping and control the recruitment procedures. 'He/she thinks like us, let's have him/her!' What a bore! An interesting department or research center of social sciences is composed of people who have different paradigms and is international in essence.