

Interview – Ian Manners

Written by E-International Relations

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Ian Manners is Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. He has previously worked at Roskilde University, the Danish Institute for International Studies, Malmö University, University of Kent, Swansea University, and the University of Bristol. Manners works at the nexus of critical social theory and the study of the European Union in planetary politics. He has authored and edited numerous books including *Transnational Solidarity* (2020), *Ontological Insecurity in the European Union* (2019), *Foreign Policies of EU Member States* (2017), *Research Methods in European Union Studies* (2015), and *Det europeiska projektet: juridik och politik – historia och framtid* (2013).

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

In the field of ‘planetary politics’ – politics of the whole planet as if all and every life was, is, and will be equally important – I see a mixture of interesting and depressing research/debates. Interesting research and debates are just glimpsable in the realisation that transatlantic international relations are as damaging to the planet and its peoples as transatlantic trade was in the previous 400 years. More holistic writing that puts together disaster capitalism and climate emergency, such as Naomi Klein and David Wallace-Wells, is particularly important. Reading the work of scholars thinking in this direction, such as Richard Grove’s *Green Imperialism* (2010), Karen Litfin’s *Ecovillages* (2013), Kate Raworth’s *Doughnut Economics* (2018), or Danny Dorling’s *Slowdown* (2020), helps inspire and imagine a less depressing planetary future.

In the subfield of the European Union (EU) in planetary politics, interesting research and debates in normative international theory, critical social theories, and reimagining global justice in planetary politics have accelerated over the past two decades of study. The normative political theories of Catherine Guisan (2012) and Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2013) emphasize recognition and reconciliation in EU external actions, while Gurminder Bhambra (2016) and Olivia Rutazibwa (2010) set out decolonial theory. The critical theory of Veit Bachmann (2020), pragmatic theory of Ana Juncos (2017), Annika Björkdahl’s (2019) study of the everyday, and Gergana Noutcheva’s (2016) emphasis on the local, are all important in EU external actions. Similarly, the poststructural theory of Thomas Diez (2013) and Münevver Cebeci (2018), moral theory of Syuzanna Vasilyan (2020), and critical International Political Economy of Ben Rosamond (2014) provide critical social theories of EU external actions.

The political psychology of Michelle Pace (2018) on trauma, emotions, and memory, and of Trineke Palm (2020) on emotional contestation in EU external policies, both emphasize the bi-directional interaction of psychology and politics in EU external actions. Critical theories of gender, race, and intersectionality are advanced in the work of scholars such as Roberta Guerrina, Maxine David (2012), Katharine Wright (2016), Toni Haastrup (2019), and Petra Debusscher (2020) analysing the intended and unintended consequences of EU external actions through the Women, Peace and Security agenda, Brexit, and gender+ policies. Taken together, this research sets out more holistic, contextual, and inclusive means of studying and changing the EU in planetary politics.

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

My changing understanding of the world has accelerated since I first watched Stuart Hall teaching ‘society and social

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science' on television for the Open University in the early 1980s. Growing up in Thatcher's Britain, then studying my undergraduate degree in International Studies in Reagan's USA, was a crash course in the politics of neoliberalism as the privatisation of public life. Thinking of life as social, to be viewed from the ground up, was important to my understanding of the world during the 1980s through reading Clifford Geertz, Stephen Jay Gould, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Eric Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Will Hutton.

Returning to study and work in London and Bristol during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first significant shift in my thinking was caused by 'planet politics', as Martin Woollacott put it in 1989. The fallout from Chernobyl and the greenhouse effect made it far clearer that the planet was in trouble. Reading Petra Kelly, James Lovelock, Clive Ponting, and Lynn Margulis shifted me from atomistic to holistic thinking. So my PhD studies at the University of Bristol in the early 1990s tried to make sense of what and how change was coming to Europe with the end of the Cold War by focusing on climate change, migration, reconstruction and development, EC enlargement, and defence policy in the 'new Europe'.

The second significant shift in my thinking occurred when I was introduced to the critical social theory of Craig Calhoun, Julia Kristeva, Chantal Mouffe, and Bonnie Honig as part of the process of moving to Sweden during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Calhoun's work in particular shifted my thinking from seeing small islands of theory such as Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas' Frankfurt School; Derrida and Foucault's postmodernism; Bourdieu's habitus, field, and capital; Haraway and Fraser's feminist theory; hooks and Spivak's politics of identity and recognition, and towards understanding them as part of the ocean of critical social theory.

The third significant shift in my thinking of the world occurring during family sabbatical leave in Melbourne and Australia during 2012-2013. Working and interacting with independent thinkers, in particular Robyn Eckersley and Philomena Murray, as well as experiencing first-hand climate shift on a continental scale in one of the world's most fascinating and fragile ecosystems, led me to re-evaluate the holistic nature of my understanding of critical social theory, normative power, and planetary politics. Since then I have tried to interweave the critical social theories of Antonio Gramsci/Stuart Hall/Chantal Mouffe with those of Hannah Arendt/Bonnie Honig, together with a critical understanding of the EU and of normative power, all within the context of holistic understanding of planetary politics.

Could you briefly explain what is meant by the term planetary politics? How does the term help explain the EU and its use of normative power?

Writing in 2003, Karen Litfin argued 'planetary politics ... are characterised by truly planetary relations of causality that can only be understood and addressed holistically'. More specifically, she means that 'planetary politics entails a distinctive set of dynamics' including North-South dilemmas, local-global linkages, intergenerational time horizons, a precautionary approach, and holistic understanding (Litfin 2003: 470). Planetary politics means that economic, social, ecological, conflictual, and political relations and crises cannot be considered independently – they are symbiotic. Planetary politics means that anthropocentric, Eurocentric, and ethnocentric understandings of the planet must be rejected – they are symptomatic of the problem. And the first problem is quite simple – as the earth's mean land surface air temperature has already increased by 1.53⁰ C (IPCC 2019: 7) and all 15 'tipping elements' (Steffen et al 2018: 8255) cascade, this is leading to three certainties of the climate emergency. First, rising sea levels and resulting episodic coastal flooding will affect at least 20 million more people by 2050 and potentially double to triple that number by 2100 (Kirezci et al 2020). Second, under the most optimistic climate projections, the expected number of people displaced from the human temperature niche is 1.20 billion ±0.34 billion by 2070 (Xu et al 2020). Third, rising temperatures will cause more deaths than all infectious diseases by 2100 (Carleton et al 2020).

The EU should always be understood within the context of planetary politics, rather than the result of purely endogenous processes. Existing explanations of the EU as a political system are redundant because to be useful the system analogy would need to be more closed, rather than part of an exogenous planetary system. The normative power approach is a critical social theory response to addressing planetary politics. The approach is *normative* in arguing that agonistic cosmopolitical theory linking local politics with global ethics provides a normative basis for critique in planetary politics. The approach is *explanatory* in approaching political actors as 'communities' sharing different communitarian, cosmopolitan, and cosmopolitical relationships in ways that provide an understanding of

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actors in planetary politics. The approach argues for an analytical focus on the use of ‘normative justification’, rather than physical force or material incentives, which provides a practical guide for the practice of normative power in planetary politics. Normative justification involves shared actions in concert that reshape conceptions of normal for the planetary good.

What role do symbols and myths play in European integration?

Working within cultural studies in the 1980s, Stuart Hall argued that systems of representation are the systems of meaning through which we represent the world to ourselves and one another. Symbols, myths, and rituals are meaning-making discourses and practices through which the EU is represented. Collective symbols and myths are fundamental to understanding issues such as European social solidarity, citizens feeling of belonging to the EU, political advocacy for and resistance to European integration, and concrete political actions in planetary politics. It is important to clarify that symbols are understood not just as the official ‘icons’ of the EU (the flag, the motto, the anthem, the day, or the Euro), but as including official and non-official images and representations of the EU. Similarly, myths are understood not as imaginary or unreal folklore, but as cultural and political narratives that provide meaning of the EU in society. Symbols and myths include performative ‘rituals’, ‘totems’, and ‘taboos’. Such rituals and practices of meaning making ensure that symbols and images, myths and narratives are represented and inscribed with particular understandings for the producers and consumers of European (dis)integration. Hall used reception theory to understand the encoding/decoding of producers and consumers. Hence, the final step is to realise that EU symbols and images, myths and narratives, rituals and practices are read, and must be interpreted, through critical political psychology.

This use of symbols, myths, and rituals is crucial for understanding the dynamic processes of meaning making through both popular and elite representations of the EU. My work on symbols and myths in the 1990s analysed how both pro- and anti-European integration forces agreed the environmental imperative on climate change, a declaration on asylum, the creation of the Euro, enlargement to include former communist states, and a defence component. These agreements were reached because different meanings of these symbolic, yet insubstantial policies, were represented in the outcome. Because levels of knowledge are so low, and meaning-making representations so high about the EU, symbols and myths are determinative in debates about European integration, as witnessed in the Brexit referendum. Because of poor education, public media and democracy, the overwhelming majority of UK citizens lack sufficient objective knowledge of the EU to be able to form a reasoned opinion during and after the referendum – Eurobarometer data demonstrates that among older, larger member states, UK citizens are the least knowledgeable, most incorrect, and most unable to answer simple questions on the EU (Manners 2018: 1215). This means the Brexit debate is almost entirely made meaningful by the (re)production of symbols and myths of identity and difference; demanding a critical political psychology of European integration.

An article in The Economist concluded that Denmark is the most likely of all EU nations to be the “awkward partner”. Do you think this is a fair assertion?

As the application of Stuart Hall’s critical social theory to symbols, myths, and rituals demonstrates, popular political culture determines the representation and meaning of the EU in peoples’ lives. Besides the UK, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are now popularly represented as ‘awkward partners’. Popular journalism uses such representational tropes to convey shorthand meaning in a brief way. It is never true in an objective sense, but reflects domestic encodings of popular right-wing meaning which must be subject to critical decoding of reception.

Denmark, like the UK and Ireland, joined the EU two decades late. And like the UK (and all other member states) likes to think of itself as exceptional – the happiest country in the world. Just like all other western European countries, Denmark suffered economic recession in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, which led to its Fixed Exchange Rate Policy with the D-Mark then Euro since 1982. Since joining in 1973, the Danish economy has outperformed all other western EU economies. In 1992 anti-European movements in Denmark represented the referendum as a campaign against European currency, police force, army, and citizenship replacing the Danish krone, police, army, and citizenship. These representation were successful and Denmark was granted ‘reservations’ in these areas,

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which were meaningless as Denmark was already pegged against the D-Mark/Euro, police and defence cooperation is intergovernmental, and national citizenship was never going to be replaced by EU citizenship.

In 2007-2008 I led a research team at the Danish Institute for International Studies into the longer-term consequences of these ‘reservations’ two decades after the Treaty of Maastricht. We were shocked to find how confusing and undermining they were to ordinary Danes and Danish diplomats alike. Danes seemed to have no idea the Danish National Bank spent much of its time defending the peg against the Euro, or that Danish politicians and diplomats had no say in shaping justice or peacekeeping issues in the EU. Worse still, the ‘reservations’ seemed to have relegated Denmark to a second class status in the EU, where many of its diplomats spent much of their time trying to cover-up or compensate for their exclusion from whole areas of economic, social, and foreign policy making. The idea that Denmark might return to the status of an equal partner in the EU had been displaced by far-right, anti-European representations of the EU and the Danish ‘reservations’.

It is inaccurate and unfair to represent Denmark as an ‘awkward partner’ in the EU, although it benefits neoliberal journalists and far-right Danish politicians to play along with this representation. Danish society, economy, ecology, and politics must primarily be understood within the context of its position within Europe and within the EU. However, it is certainly true that since 2001 Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland have all experienced the growth of far-right parties who have played a crucial role in moving nationalist politics and xenophobic/racist/misogynist discourses to the right. For these movements, self-representations as ‘awkward’ ethno-nationalist members are the political goal.

How can Critical Social Theory help explain European integration?

Critical Social Theory (CST) in its broadest sense is a transdisciplinary approach to the social sciences that applies critique to the status quo in order to emancipate humans and the planet from the negative consequences of modernity. A broad understanding of CST includes historical materialism, Frankfurt School theory, cultural theory, critical race theory, post-structural theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory. The *transdisciplinary* approach of CST demands the reorganisation of disciplinary practices in order to transgress and transcend pre-existing frames of knowledge organisation found in the social sciences and humanities, in particular history, sociology, economics, ecology, and politics. A historically-grounded *critique* is essential because, as Robert Cox and Catherine Hoskyns made clear, ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose’ since ‘theory constitutes as well as explains the questions it asks (and those it does not ask)’. Scholarship and activism within CST is concerned with understanding how ‘tradition’, the ‘status quo’, and the ‘mainstream’ are self-perpetuating practices of *modernity* that have significantly negative consequences for humans, society, and the planet as a whole.

Besides the study of symbols and myths, and normative power, CST can help explain European integration by, first, facilitating a critique of ideological common sense that encourages a move beyond accepting the status quo of power relations to open space for thinking another EU is possible. Second, CST can help the understanding of agonistic cosmopolitics that link local politics with global ethics to demand EU democratic sovereignty that is contentious, not hegemonic; that is pluralistic, not majoritarian; and that is both multicultural and cosmopolitan at the same time as strengthening grass-roots democracy and local solidarities. Third, CST scholars of political economy are rethinking public interest in social market economics in response to the economic and financial crisis across Europe, and the planetary organic crisis in general. Fourth, CST empowers an understanding of transnational solidarity in European integration through rethinking cosmopolitical democracy. CST scholars argue that the political, economic, and social crises of contemporary multiculturalism, citizenship, and solidarity demand more cosmopolitical solidarities.

A recent article you co-authored examined the European Union as a Global Gender Actor. How can gender help explain the EU’s external actions?

I have been very fortunate to work with a number of inspirational feminist scholars, in particular through publications with Andrea Pető (Pető and Manners 2006), Annica Kronsell (Kronsell and Manners 2015), Catarina Kinnvall (Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2019), and most recently Petra Debusscher (Debusscher and Manners 2020). Feminist theorising and the study of gender can help explain the EU’s external actions in a number of ways. Firstly,

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by identifying the explicitly gendered assumptions about masculinity, such as ‘bullishness’, ‘martial potency’ and ‘Martian masculinity’ in EU foreign and defence policies (Manners 2010; Kronsell 2015). Secondly, such theorising and analysis can expose the implicitly hidden gendered consequences of EU enlargement and development policies, and the way in which they undermine gender equality mechanisms (Woodward and van der Vleuten 2014). Thirdly, feminist theorising intersects with work on class and race, amongst other forms of identity and inequality, to encourage intersectional thinking about EU external actions that are themselves cross-cutting, for example in development, refugee, or climate policies (Kajiser and Kronsell 2014, Debusscher 2015).

Petra Debusscher and I argue that the emerging body of literature on gender in EU external actions makes it possible to explain, understand, and judge the EU in planetary politics by rethinking the nature of power from a gender perspective. We argue that to develop gender and EU external actions over the next decade, it is necessary to rethink the study of the EU as a global gender actor. This encompasses a reassessment of the ‘EU’, ‘gender’, and the ‘global’, as well as the development of a holistic macro-, meso-, and micro-analysis. Our article concludes by proposing a distinctive theoretical and methodological approach which involves a holistic intersectional and inclusive study of gender+ in EU external actions, particularly in the context of planetary politics.

What is the most important advice you could give to early-career scholars of International Relations?

I am very wary of giving advice to early-career scholars of IR entering the profession in the 2020s as the pressures and stresses are so much tougher than those I have experienced. Reflecting on my own experiences I would generally advise to get out a lot more. By this, I mean to get out of the building, the academe, the profession, a lot more in order to engage with the world first-hand. I think the hyper-liberalisation of academia and the profession has generally damaged everyone by replacing quality with quantity, and by making it a lot harder for disadvantaged groups to enter and stay in the profession.

In terms of actual research practice I would generally advise an outside-in, bottom-up approach to any research question – whether it’s natural science, social science, or humanistic science – in order to capture wider and more pluralistic interpretations of planetary politics. Working ‘outside-in’ means to begin the search for empirical observations from outside the core of the field, then to move in towards the concerned core. Working ‘bottom-up’ means to begin the search for empirical observations at the lowest level of organisation and importance – in particular the everyday and local level. In my mind, it is only through adopting this approach to any research question that we may begin to escape the ideological common sense, paradigmatic defence, disciplinary mainstream and orthodoxy that are constitutive of academia, and preventative of planetary politics.