

Interview – Jan Lüdert

Written by E-International Relations

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Jan Lüdert is an Associate Professor at City University of Seattle where he serves as Director of Curriculum and Instruction. He is a current Visiting Research Scholar at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at City University of New York's Graduate Center as well as a Research Associate with the German Research Fund 'Dynamics of Security' project at Philipps Marburg University. He is an alumnus of the World Affairs Council Fellows and Liu Institute for Global Issues Scholar programs. Jan is a committed and award-winning educator as recognized by the prestigious Killam Teaching Award as well as Blackboard's Exemplary Course Program Award. He was selected to participate on the Emerging Scholar Forum at the International Studies Association West in 2019.

Jan earned his Ph.D. at the department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. He holds a First-Class Honors Masters of Arts in International Relations from the Australian National University and a BA in Public Policy from Hamburg University for Economics and Politics. Jan studied at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania focusing on sociology and economics. As a senior manager he coordinated grassroots' community programs in Botswana for Skillshare International. Jan's research interests include International Relations, Intergovernmental Organisations, Non-State Actors, Global Norms, Human Rights, Security Studies, Teaching, Learning, and Technology.

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

This is always such an interesting, yet equally difficult question to answer, because so much is happening in the world of politics that requires our attention: the rise of China; the future of the global liberal order; the European Union after Brexit; the role of intergovernmental organisations such as NATO and the UN, and the relevance of non-state actors ranging from principle-based to private corporations and organised crime; disinformation and social media; new technologies in warfare; the impact of cryptocurrency in global finance; and, of course, global health governance in light of the Covid-19 pandemic all come to mind.

My personal commitment has been, and continues to be, in IR theory with a special interest in critical constructivism and global norms research. Specifically, my focus on advancing research in these areas is to ask how multiple actors engage in norm contestation processes through international institutions. I trust that by broadening our perspectives beyond statism and functionalism to include a variety of other actors — especially those that have historically been marginalised or are seen as epiphenomenal — as well as the venues through which they engage, we may untangle the growing complexities of global governance with greater precision.

In terms of innovative debates, I do have a couple of books on my reading shelf, which I highly recommend: Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire* and Richard Price & Kathryn Sikkink's *International Norms, Moral Psychology, and Neuroscience*, which was published in the Cambridge Elements Series.

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

We are all, in our unique ways, connected to world politics and, depending on our context, have been shaped — in our thinking and trajectories — by global events during our lives (by saying this, I suppose I just gave myself away

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with a rather social constructivist presupposition on change and continuity). In my case, as someone who grew up in communist East Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall was such a historical marker. In fact, without this momentous change, I would not have — or at least, it is highly unlikely that I would have — had an opportunity to work in international development in sub-Saharan Africa and go on to pursue graduate work in Australia, at the Australian National University, and for my doctorate at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

What is more, 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, the 2008 global financial crisis, the acceleration of climate change with its human security implications, the Covid-19 pandemic, and technological transformations in the deepening digital age, are all critical events in our lifetimes. Global politics as such is never boring, and always reminds us how critical it is to seek solutions under conditions of increasing complexity and solve thorny problems that evade simple solutions. My own thinking, as stated above, has been shaped by the recognition that we ought to better account for how various actors' interactions are involved in solving these numerous global challenges and utilising opportunities. My own view is that statism and functionalism, while helpful in answering some big and important questions, are ill-equipped to address these real-world 21st century issues, and tend to focus on multiple sources of authority and how they produce outcomes instead. As such, I embraced a stance of eclectic theorising — one that is based in application and empirical analysis.

How important are normative practices of appropriateness in global politics today? Are they necessary for the smooth functioning of the international world order, or a hinderance?

The short answer is normative practices are essential. Norms are the bedrock of social interactions, and while not always visible or tangible to the naked eye, undergird almost everything we do. To take a simple example of appropriateness in action: we all stop at a red traffic light, not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because if we ignore the red light, we put ourselves and others in danger. That is to say that norms and their practices have consequences as well. We all agree that waiting for the traffic light to turn green is appropriate, and act — for the most part — accordingly. In fact, if stopping at a red light was optional, accidents would be commonplace and traffic jams, the new normal.

That said, norms in global politics must also be comprehended as evolving: they are not only prescribing or proscribing behaviour (what is right or wrong), but they are also 'normalising' by creating a type of extended equilibrium of global interactions. They create stability. A good example here is the wide condemnation of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Russia, in disregard of the territorial integrity norm, went against the consensus that states cannot invade and take over another country or territory. Indeed, Russia's 'inappropriate' action — as an example of breaking with the norm — highlights that the world community views the territorial integrity norm as a critical foundation to peace and security. In other words, somewhat counterintuitively, the territorial integrity norm, by being violated by Russia, was reaffirmed and strengthened as a foundation for stability. Now, whether norms are a hinderance or not, is a question that, to my mind, is largely empirical. We must study the contestations of norms and the equilibria to which these contestations lead, in order to assess whether they hinder or advance the smooth functioning of the international order. Here, it is important to ask not only what norms are contested but also *cui bono* — who benefits — from a given set of norms and their undergirding assumptions of appropriateness. In my own research, I contributed to this by analysing how the norm of self-determination evolved and became contested at the United Nations during the decolonisation era and beyond.

How do non-state actors such as NGOs and activists challenge state sovereignty in their efforts to address global crises and conflicts today?

At the core of this question lies a deeper question: who is in charge? In other words, answering how state sovereignty is contested requires investigating how authority relationships work. Of course, and to be clear, NGOs and activists, unlike states, engage in such contestations not via force or coercion, but use other tools, such as persuasion, naming and shaming, leadership, creativity, and innovation, to name a few. These actors challenge prevailing sovereignty arrangements (which, as I argued elsewhere, are historically contingent) by putting new issues on the agenda (think human rights), forwarding new interests (think climate change), establishing new communities (think transnational networks), and adopting novel modes of interaction (think social media). This is to say that these actors draw on

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different types of authorities with the goal of affecting state behaviour — whether implicit or explicit. In addition, as my own research advances, when we speak of state sovereignty, we need to understand it as a foundational institution — a grundnorm — that is made up of multiple normative parts, including self-determination, non-interference, and territoriality. A focus on mutability is, in my view, not only worth considering in light of NGOs and other activists' questioning of sovereignty, but also because states behave as if sovereignty matters.

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council have been thought to be disproportionately powerful in the decision-making processes of the UN, and calls for its reform have been widespread in the last few years. What is your opinion on this issue, and do you think these global power imbalances can be resolved?

The UN is now in its 75th year of existence and, as a multilateral institution, appears to be at a critical juncture. On the one hand, it is as essential as ever, especially as we must collectively confront trans-territorial challenges such as migration, climate change, and global pandemics. On the other hand, the Intergovernmental Organisation (IGO) faces deep criticism for its apparent lack of efficacy and responsiveness to these very challenges. Of course, calls to reform the UN Security Council are not new, but given these 21st century realities, a focus on preparing one of the UN's most critical venues for the future remains crucial. UNGA Resolution 62/557 in fact identified five areas to be considered in UN reform efforts: membership composition and size, the veto power, and regional presentation, as well as updated methods of work and the precise relationship between the General Assembly and the Security Council. I believe that the success of these negotiations depends in large part on the willingness of the five permanent members, China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US. Unfortunately, I see little hope, especially for the US, Russia, or China, to relinquish their veto power. Ultimately, member states other than the five powers must lead the way towards meaningful reform and band together to induce change in the permanent member's outlook. This will likely be a protracted and rocky path ahead, but one worth pursuing.

The UN Trusteeship Council was originally established to supervise the transition of trust territories in the 20th century from colonies to sovereign nations. After a brief hiatus, it was reopened in 2013. In an era where many nations still experience the remnants and aftershocks of colonialism, what is the significance of the Trusteeship Council today?

The opening of the Trusteeship Chambers you are here referencing was a symbolic act, and a reminder of how the UN affected the era of decolonisation in Africa and Asia. It should not be confused with a new era of responsibilities for the Trusteeship Council, whose functions have become redundant when it suspended operation in 1994 with Palau's independence. Still, as my co-authors Maria Ketzmerick (University of Bayreuth) and Julius Heise (Philipps Marburg University) and I find, the importance of UN Trusteeship as a field for inquiry is far from over. To this end, we are currently completing an edited volume for Routledge's Global Institutions series titled *The United Nations Trusteeships System: Legacies, Continuities, and Change*. Contributors consider the past and present of the Trusteeship System by assessing consequences and legacies of decolonisation in contemporary society, international organisations, and international politics. Our impetus is simple: while highly controversial, trusteeship involvement in the post-war decolonisation era was largely orderly, and conflict has been the exception. Averting conflict, of course, is a central concern for the study of Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) and IR Security Studies.

Although, as mentioned, the dormant Trusteeship Council has been in a state of inertia since the late 1990s, its fundamental principles resonate in contemporary interventions with neo-trusteeship characteristics. Our research on UN trusteeship exemplifies broader processes of institutional deliberation, norm contestation, discourses and practices concerned with intervention and state building, as well as the opening of IGOs to non-state actors, especially those from the periphery. The central objective of our edited collection is to investigate how international supervision of non-sovereign states is imagined, discussed, and exercised by various actors. Rather than viewing UN trusteeship as a bygone phenomenon, which marked the end of an epoch in colonial history, we contend that UN trusteeship still matters, particularly in view of the recent resurgence of trusteeship models, such as in Kosovo, East Timor and elsewhere.

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What are the resistance strategies employed by weak states (measured in terms of economic, military and political power) when practicing global politics with limited resources?

Thank you for posing this question, which incidentally is part of another research project I am undertaking with Stewart Prest at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. We are working with several scholars on an edited volume to seek answers to these very questions. To borrow from a Rolling Stones lyric, we take as a starting point the notion that “you can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you get what you need.” Indeed, in an era of increasing great-power rivalry, the international system continues to provide examples of relatively weak states employing diverse strategies in pursuit of desired outcomes in the face of significant disparities in available resources.

Drawing cues from James Scott’s celebrated book *Weapons of the Weak*, contributors for our edited collection articulate and illustrate alternative perspectives that treats weak and peripheral states as purposeful agents in their own right in the international arena, adopting characteristic and at times successful repertoires of resistance, innovation and subversion when confronted with the apparently overwhelming nature of the existing international governance institutions and the power relations on which they are based. Employing a threefold analytical framework distinguishing between material, institutional, and discursive approaches, the volume maps out and empirically investigates a range of strategies employed by weak states. For instance, authors ask how leadership in the digital economy is shaped by states like Malta, and how smaller states draw on multilateral development banks as a weapon of the weak, while others consider the role of Icelandic statecraft in winning the so-called Cod wars, or offer insights into Cuba’s medical internationalism. As a result of this collaboration, we hope to define a set of scope conditions with the intention of disrupting mainstream IR theory, which has tended to ignore these types of actors despite their importance, and thus paint a fuller and more complete picture of global politics.

In your recent book for E-IR, *Signature Pedagogies in International Relations*, you build on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research to explore different educational techniques in IR. What are some of the most important educational methods that should be employed when teaching IR today, and how can it impact the practice of global governance by the future generations?

By its very multidisciplinary and wide-ranging nature, International Relations as a field of study calls for pedagogical practices that are diverse and intersectional. This volume brought together an impressive cohort of IR educators from over a dozen universities worldwide. Together we explore field-based and classroom-based, creative, and experiential learning; all with an eye on preparing students for a wide variety of future careers.

In terms of methods, some explore gamification or simulations, storytelling, or Model United Nations (MUNs). As we find, all signature pedagogies share a common goal: inspiring students and teachers alike to take charge of their studies, and align with a vibrant understanding of global citizenship and associational life. For instance, one author places emphasis on “facilitating thoughtfulness,” and yet another on disrupting “surface structures in our thinking.” Another colleague pays heed to “ontological agility” and the de-provincialisation of IR. Ultimately, we all find common ground around the purpose of fostering the next cadre of global citizens equipped with the knowledge and courage to make a difference in the world.

As such, applied, active, and engaged methods of instructions — in all their different guises — help students in their learning and preparation for their careers. At the same time, as one author argues, this points to the liberal arts tradition of “know thyself” first as a means for knowledge acquisition, but more than that, as a spark to life-long learning, with analytical ability, curiosity, and imagination at the centre of learning about global politics.

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

Giving advice is always tricky — reminding me of Baz Luhrmann’s song “Everybody’s Free (to wear sunscreen)” — but nonetheless, there are two pieces of advice that I find may be helpful: be persistent, and understand your value. As a young scholar, strive to build your research and publication record. This also means accepting that not all submissions are going to be successful. Try again and improve based on the feedback received. Establish resilience

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and embrace critique as a chance to improve. In addition, seek ways to add experiences in teaching and learning, and those related to academic and administrative service. For instance, seeking out collaborations with colleagues working on the same research agenda, developing innovative curricula, or joining conferences as a chair or discussant, are all ways in which you can improve your expertise while expanding your network. Some of my most productive collaborations started by volunteering at large conferences, or offering my help to colleagues. Second, to be successful in IR — or anywhere, really — entails realising your unique value and walking your own path. For some of us, this means showcasing our ability as a prolific writer and researcher, and for others, it is to excel in teaching and learning. Yet again, you may strive to bridge policy and academic work by focusing on building your skills through consultancy or work in the public sector.

By being authentic, realising our strength, and establishing a clear vision for ourselves, we are able to communicate our values, irrespective of whether it is in the university setting, at international organisations, or in the non-governmental or public sector. In my own case, I have always enjoyed teaching IR and continuously work on becoming a better educator, which, apart from training others in pedagogy, led me to work on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research. As one of my mentors always says: “Onwards!” Oh, and finally, wear sunscreen!