

Interview – Peter Vale

Written by E-International Relations

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Peter Vale is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, and Nelson Mandela Professor of Politics Emeritus at Rhodes University. In this interview, he discusses themes from his chapter 'Crossings and Candles: Reflecting on International Relations' in *Foundations of International Relations* (2022, Bloomsbury).

How did you first get involved in thinking about International Relations?

As the chapter suggests, I have been living and thinking about my place in the international – and IR as a template to understand it – most of my life. Indeed, it has helped to shape my very identity...my sense of it is that the discipline has followed me, as much as I have followed it. I have found it difficult to even begin writing about the world international relations makes without reflecting on a nearly fifty-year career in both the theory and practice of the discipline. This is because my engagement in it is indivisible from who I am. To make the same point in a slightly more elevated mode, although trained in the tradition that a scholar's gaze is objective, my academic journey has been one of continuous crossings between the personal, the political and the professional. My early career was conducted during a particularly nasty period of apartheid in 1970s South Africa. Not only was the minority-white-ruled government cracking down on all forms of political dissent, it was also wedded to a fierce anti-communism. In these circumstances it was difficult to exercise objectivity when it came to thinking about things political. Those years taught me a valuable lesson in life and learning: to believe that there is a totally objective or value-free view in International Relations is to call up the old Russian proverb that 'he lied like an eyewitness!' We all come to know the world through our own experiences. Because of this, even the most objective person has predetermined understandings about the world.

In terms of your journey from one-time student to academic, how did you find your way into this profession, and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

Largely less, than more, I started as a journalist, but was increasingly drawn into the academy. My initial interest was at the foreign policy end – but that clashed with finding a way in which mainstream Realism (which was all that was on offer) could help to rid the country of the wretched apartheid system. That largely failed, mainly, because the Cold War constantly got in the way... So, I increasingly crossed that great South African divide which was (as it remains), race. A late rush of activism, and some pointed academic writing, got me into trouble with the late-apartheid state who paid me the compliment of seizing my passport for just over a year. The authorities were far more interested in my partner, Louise, who was working in education. Under emergency regulations, she was detained for several months by the security police.

The end of the Cold War speeded apartheid's demise: the resulting transition was an interesting (and enticing) period. With others, I tried to stand between the two sides when it came to building a new diplomatic corps and fashioning a new foreign policy. But it was quickly plain that the skills academics were not wanted by either side. This said, some ghost writing in which I was involved continues to have had a lasting impact on policy debates. After this, I had brief flirtation with higher education – and its disciplining technologies: at one point I crossed into HE management but quickly returned to the real thing.

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In recent years, I have followed the discipline to places unfamiliar to me – India, the Philippines, Singapore, and Brazil: in each place, IR seems to be an awkward fit.

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

When I started out in the field there were few critical thinkers in the field especially in South Africa. Luckily, however, social thinking in the country was in the midst of an exhilarating upheaval which was loosely associated with New Left thinking elsewhere. It was to have a dramatic impact in Sociology and on the study of History. At one point, I lived in both theoretical places – in IR and in a kind of academic double life! This ended when I encountered the Aberystwyth School. That set me off reading in (and thinking about) Social Theory which remains, in my view, still largely underexplored in IR. But my enduring concern has been the issue of race in/and IR...this issue, and the poverty line which overlaps it, remains the biggest issue facing the world after, of course, climate change.

Do you think it is more important for academics (and students by extension) to dedicate most of their time to understanding the world, or instead actively working to change it?

What a question? Can I answer it in an oblique fashion by saying that my favourite journal – by a long, long shot – is the Melbourne-based, *Thesis Eleven*.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in and around the discipline of International Relations?

Decolonisation, decolonisation, decolonisation...

What is the most important advice you could give to students who are starting their journey with International Relations?

First, never stop asking Lucius Cassius' question, *Cui Bono?*

Secondly, the more languages you learn to speak, the more you'll understand.

Finally, to quote my chapter from the book, I draw to a close by turning to a quote by W. L. Watkinson, an English Methodist minister: 'It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness'. It is also the motto of Amnesty International, a non-governmental organisation. The idea of 'crossings' in the title comes from my confession, made at the outset, that the personal, the professional and the political have been interwoven in my approach to the discipline over five decades. A parallel image drawn in the title encapsulates a belief that International Relations, especially in its critical mode, is a kind of candle that casts light in often very dark places. There is a paradox that stalks the discipline of International Relations: as it speaks of peace, the gift of sovereignty – which is its currency – looks out upon messy and often very violent social relationships. There are no uncontaminated places in the making and remaking of these social relationships. There is thus no space where International Relations can escape the hot breath of compromise, concession or conciliation. However, the task that lies beyond is to recognise that despite all that we are taught about the global system and what we experience as individuals, this is still a largely unexplored world. It remains a space of infinite possibilities and a site of great hope.

Below is a series of videos featuring Peter Vale where he discusses his research and his approach to International Relations.