

Interview – James Arvanitakis and David Hornsby

Written by E-International Relations

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This feature is part of a series of interviews with the contributing authors of *Foundations of International Relations*.

James Arvanitakis is Director of the Forrest Research Foundation. The Foundation provides scholarships and fellowships to outstanding intellects from around the world to conduct research at one of Western Australia's five universities – UWA, Murdoch University, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University and University of Notre Dame. Prior to this post, he was the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Engagement and Advancement) at Western Sydney University, Principal Consultant at the Astrolabe Group, and Executive Director of Fulbright Australia. **David J. Hornsby** is a Professor of International Affairs and the Associate Vice-President (Teaching and Learning) at The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University. Prior to arriving at NPSIA, he held academic appointments at University College London where he served as the Head of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy (STePP) Department and at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg, South Africa where he was the Assistant Dean of Humanities (Teaching and Learning). He currently maintains honorary professorships at both UCL and Wits.

They are the co-authors of 'Poverty and Wealth', in McGlinchey, S. *Foundations of International Relations* (2022: Bloomsbury).

Your co-authored chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* deals with poverty and wealth in the global system. How did you first get involved in thinking about this issue?

JA – It was a very personal journey. I had worked in finance as an economist for ten years and decided to take a sabbatical. I had been a booster for free market economics and after spending time travelling in some low-income nations, I witnessed child and indentured labour. It radically changed my view of the world, and I started a journey, first through social justice organisations where I worked in both Australia and other parts of the world (including conflict zones) and then as a researcher and academic, to understand how global poverty remains entrenched.

DH – I lived and worked in South Africa for close to a decade and, as our chapter highlights, it's one of the most unequal societies in the world. In South Africa you are confronted with extreme poverty and wealth on a daily basis.

In terms of your journey from one-time student to the academic and professional fields –how did you find your way and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

JA – I have had four careers: finance, human rights/social justice advocate, academic and now the Director of the Forrest Research Foundation. For me, I have always had a thirst for knowledge and curiosity – and each career is driven by this. I am inspired to towards promoting dignity – but there is no clear career path, just one that takes advantage of the opportunities that open to me.

DH – Like many I stumbled into the academic life, testing and trying new things which opened doors along the way. I started out in the biological sciences before realizing my passion lay in politics and international relations. Due to great mentorship and a willingness to go to new places I was able to forge this career, which has been a real privilege

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

JA – The changes I have seen have been driven by my experiences and observations: from witnessing child and indentured labour, to the way the free market explosion betrayed the Russian people after the fall of the Soviet Union, to the way funding into schools and health care have been sacrificed so poorer nations can meet the financial obligations demanded of them from international institutions like the World Bank, I have come to understand that the free market works and is a powerful tool but must exist within parameters overseen by regulations and regulators who represent the public good. Without this, poverty will continue to be exacerbated.

DH – I grew up in Canada. The opportunity to live and experience so many places has really shaped my worldviews. But nowhere more significant than that of South Africa which challenged me to reassess fundamental assumptions both disciplinary and personally.

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 to working to change it?

JA – These two things are interrelated – we cannot have one without the other. My advice is that you should ‘pick your activism’: that is, change the world in the way you feel comfortable not what other’s think you should do. Some people protest and rally, others use non-violent direct action, some donate, and others write about the need for change. All these are perfectly valid – your desire to build a better world should be a lifetime journey not a phase.

DH – There is no way you can change the world without first understanding it, or elements of it. It is a critical task for anyone aspiring to be an academic to maintain a deep sense of cultural and intellectual humility. Doesn’t matter how much you read about a place, to fully understand it, you need to immerse yourself in it and accept that there are other ways of knowing and being that are just as valid and enriching. The best approach to facilitating change is to pursue understanding at the same time.

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

JA – The thing about IR is that no matter whatever you focus on, the debates and research being prioritised change very quickly. Just in the last few months, Russia invaded Ukraine raising issues of sovereignty and tensions in Europe that we had not seen since World War II. Before this happened, we were questioning the relevance of NATO and the relationship of the USA to Europe. Britain, having withdrawn from the EU seemed to be cutting more and more ties with its European neighbours. Within days of the Russian invasion, everything changed. These are concerning developments, but they also remind us of the importance of international institutions like the United Nations which are often side-lined. Now many who criticised the United Nations are turning to that organisation for leadership. The world is constantly changing, and each event is worth understanding. It does not always make for comfortable research and analysis, but it shows that the tools we have developed in the discipline of international relations have never been more important.

DH – In the Global South, no question.

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

JA – Embrace complexity and curiosity. Never look for simple answers or accept any single ideological position. Learn to have brave yet respectful conversations. Never get caught in a thought bubble – you will always be better personally and professionally if you surround yourself with people that are willing to challenge you. Embrace the educational power of discomfort and purposely read and understand from authors you disagree with. Finally, the career path you are likely to experience is more like a game of snakes and ladders than anything linear – it’s ok to go backwards as a way of going forward.

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DH – Don't be afraid to take risks and to try new things and places. There is so much to learn by immersing yourself in a new environment and approaching the world with openness and humility.

Those who read your chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* will take away many ideas and thoughts with them, but is there something specific you would like to leave in their minds?

JA – Humans created the systems around us – even the unfair elements of these systems. If humans created them, then humans can change them.

DH – Whilst poverty and wealth are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, poverty does not need to be a requirement of our socio-economic system. As a collection of communities we can all be affluent.