

Why Popular Culture? Why Now?

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, FEB 2 2015

With this new blog channel being launched by E-International Relations, it seems appropriate to ground the posts that will appear in this space in the coming months and years. In order to do so, I wish to respond to two rather unoriginal questions: 'Why Popular Culture?' and 'Why Now?' I will start with the latter of these two queries first, before returning to the former.

Looking back over the past two months, there are a number of pressing issues in the realm of international relations that demand our attention: US-Cuban rapprochement; the collapse of Yemen's political system; the resumption of hostilities in eastern Ukraine; the supplication of Western governments to a new head of House Saud; the threat to the EU posed by Greece's new anti-austerity program; etc. However above all, two stories have captured the 'popular imagination' (a politically pregnant phrase, if there ever was one): North Korea's hack of Sony over the impending release of *The Interview* and the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. In both instances, these IR imbroglios were situated somewhere in the middle of what a group of Newcastle scholars have labelled the 'popular culture-world politics continuum'.

As I discussed in my 23 December 2014 E-IR article on the subject, U.S. President Barack Obama's last major political speech of U.S. in 2014 zeroed in on Pyongyang's culpability in cyber-attack with laser-like precision. Within weeks, it was revealed that the Pentagon had already verified North Korean involvement in the hack, clearly reinforcing the link between popular culture and global affairs in a way we have not seen since the controversy over the depiction of Kazakhstan by the Cambridge-educated jokester Sacha Baron Cohen. More interestingly from the perspective of the PCWP continuum, the film itself (when it finally released via a series of online delivery platforms) engaged in a rather sublime sort of IR in its own right, particularly towards the end of the narrative. Spoiler Alert: Once the Western 'heroes' dispatch Kim Jong-un, North Korea undergoes a rapid and massive political change, aurally set to the Scorpions' power ballad 'Winds of Change' (1990). Given the popular linkage of the song to the denouement of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany, *The Interview* thus knowingly becomes a site of IR rather than just a pawn in international brinksmanship. This is only reinforced in the movie's representation of a nearly instantaneous adoption of the Skype and other new media by the North Koreans, eager to embrace the technologically-abetted consumerism of the West, bringing the whole controversy full circle.

In the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks perpetrated by two French-born brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, the purported reason for the shooting, which left eleven people dead at the offices of the satirical weekly, was revenge for cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. Eerily reminiscent of the furore caused by the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoon controversy, but with a much bloodier blowback, the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings placed a spotlight on 'Western values' associated with 'free speech', but also reminded us of the influence and indeed power of popular culture in a world no longer bound by national borders. Today, there is a deterritorialised global media milieu where any artefact can move quickly from one part of the world to another, prompting unpredictable results (as was the case with the amateurish, quasi-pornographic 'film' *Innocence of Muslims* which prompted violent riots in parts of the Middle East and a number of Muslim countries in 2012). In the wake of the attacks, the hashtag #jesuischarlie and various other forms of digitally-mediated protest became common around the globe, further imbricating popular culture in political behaviour and, by extension, world politics.

Despite the fact that many established scholars in the field of IR continue to dismiss or minimize the role of popular

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culture in the discipline, it is becoming increasingly evident that understanding popular culture's role in international relations is not only necessary, it is vital. Popular culture not only reflects power in the international system, it also constitutes it. To continue to treat films, comic books, video games, YouTube videos, social-networking phenomena, and other forms of popular culture as data 'outside' the realm of 'proper' IR is not only intellectually irresponsible, it is dangerous.

This blog channel will attempt to make sense of the relationship between pop culture and world politics. Sometimes we will fail, sometimes we will succeed, but in every instance, we will make sure that we take popular culture seriously. If we can all agree on one thing following the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, if I can borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, it is that when we speak of popular culture, we are speaking of politics.

About the author:

Dr. Robert A. Saunders is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.