Interview - Emilian Kavalski

Written by E-International Relations

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Emilian's most recent book is *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers* (Bloomsbury, 2012) and he is the editor of eight volumes, including *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos: Reflections on Complexity and Global Life* (State University of New York Press, 2015).

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

Where do I begin – there are so many exciting things happening in IR these days. I'll just list the three "decentrings" that have been of particular interest to me – namely, (1) the decentring of the human and the emergence of non-anthropocentric IR; (2) the decentring of the West and the emergence of various non-Western approaches to IR; (3) the decentring of the 'malestream' and the emergence of feminist and queer perspectives in IR. I will not expand on each of these individually as this will take too much time and space, but for me the debates that underpin these three themes frame what passes for "the most exciting" today, not least because they amply demonstrate that IR is not an exact or homogenous science, but a dynamic field of on-going contestation and struggle.

Your framing of climate change as a global security threat challenges the abilities of existing state mechanisms of governance to cope. Do you think climate change is best addressed by existing multilateral institutions of governance, or do you propose the formulation of new institutions?

Indeed, climate change challenges current governance capacities. Yet, it is a security concern, not because of the way in which it stretches the capacity of existing institutions, but because of its incommensurability with the anthropocentrism underpinning these institutions. In this way, my work calls for reimaging the way we think about climate change. Relying on complexity thinking for such a rethink, I argue that global life consists of more than just political communities and the polities that they inhabit—that is, if I am to paraphrase the popular adage, IR is not only about what happens "inside/outside" the state, but also about what happens "around" the state. It also reveals that the "international system" is embedded within wider structural conditions and interactions located within the environment "around" the conventional focus on inter-state relations—an environment, which conceptually constitutes as well as causally conditions (although not in a mono-causal and linear fashion) states and other actors. Such framing of the challenges posed by climate change attest to the potential for exponential transformations triggered by incremental changes and demand security (and not only) governance mechanisms capable of living with the power of the contingent and chaotic forces of global life.

Much of your work is focused on climate change and global warming. Given the complexities of this issue, and its interconnectedness with multiple existing constructed and natural systems, your use of systems theory as an analytic lens seems logical. In light of the increasing numbers of transnational security threats faced by states, do you think systems theory as an analytic tool has been overlooked by

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scholars of international relations?

The short answer is yes – systems theory and, especially, complexity thinking (also known as complexity theory and complexity science) has been overlooked. In particular, it offers relevant analytical tools, policy models, and governance mechanisms for imagining global life other than what it currently is. Yet, if I am allowed to qualify the premise of the question – namely, is systems theory relevant for addressing the "security threats faced by states" – my slightly longer answer is that complexity thinking provides much-needed avenues for going beyond the state-centrism that still dominates much of IR and which makes a significant contribution to the very security threats that IR scholarship is tackling today. This does not mean obviating the state altogether as some might assume (or claim), but instead demands looking at world affairs as a gimballed pattern of relations – in this setting, just like a ship's compass (or gimbal), the state-centric level is only one of multiple interdependent concentric circles of relations that constitute the framework of international interactions. It is for this reason that I prefer to use the term "global life" – as opposed to international relations or world politics – to refer to the fragility, dynamism, and mutuality that characterizes the multiple levels and interdependent systems whose on-going interactions constitutes IR.

Do you think the application of classical realism international relations theory to China's rise is contributing to a misunderstanding of the grand strategy underpinning China's rise? And if so, how?

I am not sure I understand the question completely. I guess we can have a long conversation on what one means by "classical realism" and what are the bearings of each variant of "classical realism" on the understanding and explanation of China's rise. I do agree that the friend or foe dichotomy that seems to dominate so much of (Western) IR thinking impacts on how we engage China. That is to say, and I am aware that what follows is a generalization but I'm going to go ahead with it for the purposes of illustration, the scripts provided by IR suggest that China can only "become like us" or "defy us". In this respect, the lenses available to us make it difficult to provide frameworks for explanation and understanding that challenge such bifurcated outlook – for instance, what if China is moving in a different direction than the ones provided by either the "friend" or "foe" narratives? Therefore, I have tried to demonstrate in my work on this topic that what fascinates IR about China's growing prominence in international life is not so much its particular effects – that is, not just because of the content of its practices – but mostly because for the first time in nearly 300 years there is a need to engage world politics as a process driven by a non-Western actor and underpinned by a non-Western understanding of international relations. In other words, the attention to the current "power shift to the East" is not least because it is done by China and not by France, Italy, or Canada.

Such a claim should not be misunderstood as a suggestion that if any other international actor was doing what China does today it would not have been "interesting" or "important". No, my point merely is that what makes the current pattern of international interactions particularly "interesting" is that it is being done by a non-Western actor, which happens to be China. If you remember during the 1980s and the early 1990s the concern in the IR literature was that Japan is going to become the next superpower and the debate was how would the US/West live under Japanese leadership. I take such preoccupations as an indication of particular Eurocentric/Anglophone/colonial/racist (whatever you would like to name them) attitudes that backstop so much of mainstream IR thinking and practice. In this respect, if I am to go back to your question, it would do good for IR to remember Morgenthau's "classical realist" injunction of "the inevitable gap" between "the science of political science" (or what he also called "good—that is rational" international politics) and the fact that the "political reality" of world affairs "is replete with contingencies and systemic irregularities" (or what he labelled, international politics "as it actually is"). Recognizing the complexity of global life would allow a less culturally encumbered encounter with China's rise.

How might an application of an Asian school of international relations theory better assist western scholars and analysts interpret China's geostrategic ambitions?

Frankly, such schools would open up different vistas – from the ones already available to us – for interpreting and engaging China (and other international actors). At the same time, this should make possible for a critical rejuvenation of the IR field as a whole. Having said that one should not essentialize and Orientalize "Asian" schools of IR – at the end of the day, as scholars such as L.H.M Ling and John M. Hobson have demonstrated, the "worlding" that currently animates IR is largely a recognition of its hybridity.

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In relation to the intergenerational dependencies that are one of the Anthropocene's defining characteristics, how might state and multilateral institutions of governance adapt to the novel political planning challenges posed by such dependencies?

Your question belies a significant part of its answer – namely, because of the "intergenerational dependencies" our policy-making and institutions should develop longer-term planning. By longer-term planning, I mean planning that goes beyond the next election cycle or stakeholders' meeting. Such policy-making calls for an ethic attuned to a dynamic global life in which the effects of our actions will be felt later, elsewhere, and by others. Equally importantly, living in the Anthriopocene demands policy-makers and publics willing to live with uncertainty and unpredictability. So much of our current governance mechanisms are predicated on (what others have termed as) the "illusion of control" or the "theatre of security". This has prevented the development of resilient policy-making and institutions capable to live with insecurity and risk. In a forthcoming volume that I have edited *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos: Reflections on Complexity and Global Life*, a number of the contributors address precisely the ways in which such resilient and risk-tolerant modes of governance can be developed.

Why has there been such reluctance on the part of policymakers and politicians to embrace the core tenets of earth system governance to make the structural governance adjustments necessary to best cope with the unique challenges such as climate change posed by the Anthropocene?

As I have indicated above, it is not least because of their focus on being re-elected in the next election round; which also speaks about our (as electorates) complicity in maintaining the current policymaking model. At the same time, the complexity and scale of the issues that dominate life in the Anthropocene demand transdisciplinary and eclectic knowledge of physics, biology, chemistry, geology, etc. – which very few politicians, IR scholars, and voters possess. In the 1970s, Ernst Haas called for renaming the field of "international politics" into "ecopolitics" in order to capture both the complexity of the challenges that we face and the demand for new transdisciplinary knowledge to address them. His call is just as pertinent and relevant today as it was in the 1970s

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

Be curious, do not be afraid to be confused, and remain open to surprise in your encounters with global life.

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This interview was conducted by Andrew Reynolds on behalf of E-IR.