

## Interview – Adam B. Lerner

Written by E-International Relations

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Adam B. Lerner is Senior Lecturer of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London and Deputy Director of the Royal Holloway Centre for International Security (RHISC). His first book, *From the Ashes of History: Collective Trauma and the Making of International Politics*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2022. It received the 2023 ISA International Ethics Book Award and an honourable mention for the 2023 ISA International Theory Book Award. His journal articles have been published in *International Studies Quarterly*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *International Theory*, *International Studies Review*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *International History Review*, and *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, among other outlets. He co-hosts the Duck of Minerva's podcast and his journalistic and opinion writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Politico Magazine*, *Pacific Standard*, *The Caravan*, and *The Print*.

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

This is a great question, but a difficult one, as what one considers both 'exciting' and 'novel' depends on the niche one occupies in the discipline and the vantagepoint that offers. So, with those caveats, I'd say that, given my interests, I see three areas as particularly exciting. First, I think IR is starting to deal more explicitly with global justice in historically-grounded ways, particularly in relation to the legacy of imperialism, mass violence, and climate change. This was the primary motivation underlying my first book on collective trauma, but since writing it I've encountered three phenomenal books—Catherine Lu's 2017 *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics*, Duncan Bell's 2019 edited volume *Empire, Race, and Global Justice*, and Daniela Lai's 2020 *Socioeconomic Justice*—that have inspired me to think about these issues in new ways and motivated new projects. Traditionally, global justice has been debated primarily by political theorists/philosophers and it's often been dominated by Rawlsian ideal theory. I'm encouraged that these scholars are not only opening a dialogue between IR and Political Theory, but creating a truly interdisciplinary debate open to non-ideal theory and empirical insights.

Second, I'm always excited when current events make academic debates come alive and force us to reconsider prior assumptions. This is especially the case when they're debates I teach and am trying to get students excited about. Over the past few years, I've seen this in particular with two issues. Most recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has inspired renewed interest in ontological security and memory politics—both of which are subjects I teach to third-year students. There have been some fantastic new contributions of both that are really moving those fields forward. Second, the Black Lives Matter movement has inspired deeper engagement with racism, imperialism, and slavery's role in shaping the international system. This is massively important work and I've tried to incorporate as much as possible into my teaching. Since these debates are important to both my teaching and research, I'm always appreciative when scholars working on these issues write for popular media or even make Twitter threads in real time to convey their expertise to students.

Third and finally, since I have a background working in India and studying South Asian history, I'm always on the lookout for new work on the region, especially on Indian political thought and foreign policy. Unfortunately, South Asia still does not receive the attention it deserves in IR (though there are some notable exceptions). I'm hopeful that, in the coming years, there will be a wave of fantastic work to correct this.

### How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most

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### significant shifts in your thinking?

Aha, well, my partner makes fun of me for never changing my mind, but that isn't true! I do change my mind, but for the bigger substantive shifts, I think it takes some time and usually a lot of self-reflection. Professionally, I think this process typically occurs in one of two ways. The first is encountering mentors and friends, then adapting something you admire about the way they think to your own worldview. During my PhD, I remember trying to emulate Yale Ferguson's appreciation of the relationship between *longue durée* historical change and IR, the clarity of Sean Fleming's writing and thinking, and Duncan Bell's facility with interdisciplinarity and critical reading of political thought in historical context. I like to think all three have stuck with me. Since working at Royal Holloway, I've learned a lot from Laura Sjöberg—especially how to engage in critique in empathetic and constructive ways—as well as from Ben O'Loughlin, who does a great job keeping his theoretical interests in conversation with current events. All of those scholars (and many more) have made an imprint on how I understand the world.

The second avenue is when I read a book that hits you over the head with how good it is and makes you want to write something responding to it or building on it. A clear example of this during my PhD came from reading Emma Hutchison's *Affective Communities*. I had been interested in writing about the intersection of trauma studies and international politics for a while, but I was completely floored by how successfully she brought those fields together. That book really inspired me to work hard and think of new ways to push that subject matter forward. More often, though, I take inspiration from great books outside of IR that get me excited about expanding the discipline in new ways. For example, Anne Harrington's *Mind Fixers* was an important book for me in reshaping how I understand psychology and its limitations, and Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* was important for me in thinking about how I relate journalistic insight to academic knowledge production. You'll find citations to all sorts of non-IR books in my work and typically that reflects some eureka moment I had stepping outside IR's traditional confines.

### **Much of your research shows a great deal of appreciation for psychological and sociological concepts. What are the benefits of applying such concepts from neighbouring disciplines to our understanding of IR? Are there any limitations?**

There are enormous benefits to interdisciplinarity, but, when done uncritically, it can come with risks. Let's start with the benefits. International Relations is, at its heart, an inter-discipline. Our core subject matter—how people interact on the largest scales of social and political organization—has murky boundaries. When these boundaries are defended too dogmatically, the field collapses into a relatively boring, elitist, and conservative enterprise. What's exciting about IR is the way it implicates so many questions relevant across the humanities and social sciences and tests their applicability in global contexts. What's the nature of power and authority across time and space? How do we negotiate relationships of sameness and difference? Why and when do people resort to violence and how can we encourage alternatives? We'd be an impoverished field if we closed ourselves off to insights from adjacent disciplines that have dealt with these subjects in diverse ways. We'd be left with static, limited, and ahistorical concepts with little ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

However, when we take methods and concepts from other disciplines without critically assessing their limitations at the scale of international politics, we not only undermine our scholarship, but also threaten to hollow out the discipline's identity. Take, as an example, the concept of trauma, which has an interdisciplinary history but, in recent decades, has been most thoroughly studied and debated in psychology. Psychologists typically understand trauma via the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which was first codified in 1980. In that field, scholars typically build knowledge through clinical studies and laboratory experiments. These may be worthy methods for investigating individuals' psychology, but the knowledge they produce is not *necessarily* transferrable to the level of the state or the international system. When we uncritically scale theories and concepts from the individual psyche up to IR, all sorts of issues unique to our subject matter disappear. How and when does individual psychic trauma interact with institutionalized power, with international norms, or with gender politics? The same critique can be made of uncritical adaptation of methods. Do methods developed in other disciplines adequately take IR's distinct subject matter into account? Will they obscure dynamics IR scholars should instead try to highlight?

This is all a longwinded way of saying that interdisciplinarity is vital, but it requires reflexivity. There are ample

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examples of scholars who navigate these waters successfully and (in a less public forum) I could offer a few examples of scholarship that drowns in them. Training in reflexive interdisciplinarity is vital, but too often neglected in our field's pedagogy.

### **Why do you believe collective trauma acts as a foundational force in international politics?**

Across IR, scholars seem to agree that mass violence is central to our field—whether this is mainstream scholarship's focus on interstate war in rebalancing the international system, feminist scholarship's insight into gender violence and oppression's role on the world stage, postcolonial theory's insights into racial and economic exploitation ...examples abound!

My book begins by agreeing that mass violence has historically been central to the making of international politics, but it argues that, if this is the case, we can't accept facile linear understandings of its role. I refer to this linear approach as the problematic 'event model' of mass violence—understanding mass violence less as a dynamic structural force and more as an 'event' that begins and ends in real time, producing discrete effects on pre-existing actors. To remedy this, I adapt insights from interdisciplinary trauma studies literature to examine mass violence's complexity—how its legacy reverberates over time and interacts dynamically with other political forces. Though understanding collective trauma requires attention to its interpretation by diverse actors in diverse contexts, I argue that IR can absorb insights from neighbouring disciplines and can craft a lens attuned to collective trauma's impacts over the long-term. Employing this lens, we can see how collective trauma reshapes how individuals and groups understand the relationship between 'us' and 'them', their trust in international institutions, and the foreign policy responses they imagine as necessary to remedy, prevent, and respond to mass violence's recurrence.

This is what I mean by foundational—collective trauma can inspire a reimagining of the very basis of international politics. Paying increased attention to collective trauma not only enriches our discipline, but also, by better incorporating the perspectives of those who *experience* mass violence, might be able to push our discipline in more ethical and less elitist directions.

### **In *From the Ashes of History*, you outline a new approach for understanding collective trauma in IR, defining it as a multilevel crisis in representation. What does this mean and what makes your approach different?**

The idea of trauma as a crisis in representation is central to trauma studies literature across the humanities, social sciences, and medicine. The idea here is that, in individuals, experiences of trauma are best understood as providing a violent 'shock' to the system that disrupts processes of meaning-making. Often, individuals can only process traumatic experiences after a latency period, and, when they do, they typically find that they are incredibly difficult to convey in everyday language. While everyday language aspires to mutual intelligibility, experiences of trauma are so extreme that they're outside the realm of common understanding. In many cases, we see individuals turn to figurative language or hyperbole to try to describe experiences that are, in many ways, indescribable.

My book focuses on what happens when representations of trauma—particularly *narrative* representations—expand to macro-political contexts, transforming many individuals' trauma into a collective political phenomenon. I argue that the initial crisis in representation inherent to narrating trauma is magnified and reproduced as trauma is politicized and collectivized. This happens in multiple ways. First, political narratives are often articulated by elites on behalf of subalterns and this distance magnifies the tension inherent to the initial crisis in representation. Second, trauma often inspires a feeling of betrayed trust in institutions, while macro-scale politics—especially international politics—often requires institutions representing and acting on behalf of individuals. Third and finally, experiences of mass violence often create poverty and material destruction, both of which can reinforce trauma's initial impacts and prevent communities from working through trauma.

This is why I define collective trauma as a multilevel crisis in representation. The tensions inherent to narrating individuals' traumatic experiences reverberate as trauma scales to international politics and our analysis needs to engage these multi-layered impacts. Scholarship attuned to collective trauma can better understand the politics of

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trauma's representation and, in turn, trauma's impacts on identity and policymaking.

**In your book, you take a narrative identity approach to demonstrate collective trauma's importance in defining international politics. How can this approach transcend the age-old instrumentalist-idealist debate that pervades IR?**

A narrative identity approach understands identity as fundamentally structured through narration—the connecting of otherwise disparate elements of social and political life into a cohesive whole, distinct from others across time and space. The narrative identity approach is often associated with the philosopher Paul Ricoeur but has subsequently been developed by scholars like Margaret Somers and Marya Schechtman. It's made its way into IR in a few different ways—most notably Erik Ringmar's wonderful article “On the Ontological Status of the State.” Narrative, these scholars argue, is ontologically productive—it creates the identities of social actors and provides a basis for their interaction. We understand who we are and who others are in the world by linking together otherwise disparate elements and events in implied causal chains. In essence, we understand who we are in relation to others by telling stories.

I'm particularly fond of the narrative identity approach for a few reasons. First, I find it intuitively meaningful—it resonates with my lived experience. Second, when applied to discourse analysis, it yields compelling results, demonstrated by a wide array of fantastic examples of empirical scholarship. And third, it overcomes what I view as a particularly foolhardy debate in much social science literature over whether identities should be understood primarily as instrumental tools of savvy political actors or genuine articulations of motivations. If identities are purely instrumental, many would argue they're epiphenomenal and thus not worthy of substantive analysis. However, understanding identity as solely ideal seems politically naïve and liable to miss identity's manipulation.

A narrative identity approach rejects this as a false dichotomy. Because narratives are subject to continual interpretation, they can serve multiple purposes at once, their purposes can change over time, and, further, their purpose should not be assumed prior to analysis. Take, for example, the case of Donald Trump. Though many would argue that his articulation of American identity is a tool for his own political aggrandizement and thus not genuine, for it to be effective it needs to resonate with his supporters. Some may view Trump's articulation of identity as solely a useful political tool, but others might find ideal meaning in it—they might find it resonates with their lived experience. We can't assume that it's solely one or the other, especially not prior to figuring out how differently positioned actors interpret it.

**Which other methods are effective in conceptualising and assessing collective trauma in international politics?**

Fundamentally, I'm a methodological pluralist. In the book I rely primarily on critical discourse analysis with some quantitative content analysis mixed in. However, I think many other methods would prove useful in investigating collective trauma—from semi-structured interviews to oral history, social media analysis, and many more. I won't pretend to know what directions other scholars might take my theoretical framework—I count myself lucky if they're interested at all!

**You have often attempted to challenge what you see as mainstream IR's problematic assumptions, recently highlighting its engagement with mass politics and nationalism as sexist, racist and pessimistic. What brings you to this conclusion?**

Though scholars may aspire to use concepts in a neutral way, concepts always come with historical baggage. Indeed, many of the concepts central to IR are deeply intertwined with histories of gender violence, imperialism, slavery, and other forms of oppression. It's vital that we welcome intellectual history into the discipline so that we can pull up these roots and create informed dialogues around continually improving our theoretical toolkit.

To that end, I recently wrote a piece for *International Affairs* about how bigoted pseudo-scientific assumptions, particularly from the discredited field of 'crowd psychology', were central to the way early IR scholars understood

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nationalism as a social phenomenon. Crowd psychology is most associated with the work of Gustave Le Bon, who's 1895 *The Crowd* was an instant pop psychology bestseller. The book had a profound impact, mainstreaming racist and sexist pseudo-scientific ideas about how women and non-whites come together as groups that are easily susceptible to political manipulation. In the article, I argue that IR's relatively thin engagement with nationalism and its history is, in part, linked to Le Bon's influence on early IR scholars' work. Indeed, understanding Le Bon's spectre in the discipline helps explain why those scholars most associated with the modern IR discipline did not consider nationalism's role in achieving self-determination for colonized people. The article is open access, so I'd encourage anyone who's interested to check it out!

### **Are you content with the extent to which critical scholarship has challenged the problematic assumptions of mainstream IR? Can more be done?**

This is a difficult question to answer. The short answer is no, I think IR could use much more critical scholarship uncovering biases that limit and undermine our ability to create knowledge, cultivate empathy, and solve problems. However, at the same time, I'm also immensely grateful to be in a community of scholars doing exciting work that forces us to rethink how we understand world politics. Examples of incredible recent work are so many that you couldn't possibly read all of them!

All this relates to a larger reflection on the state of IR and academia more generally. Academia is a difficult field that, unfortunately, operates with incredibly scarce resources—an ultra-competitive job market, limited research funding, and the stresses that come with more work encroaching on already busy schedules. But while I do wish some of these structural issues could be solved, we can't let our laments blind us to how much ingenious work is being produced under difficult circumstances. I continually find myself in awe of colleagues and try to celebrate them whenever possible.

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

This is tough, because I still consider myself a pretty junior IR scholar! If I had to give advice to my younger self, I would emphasize three things: First, be generous with your praise and your time, especially when it comes to supporting friends and colleagues. Second, focus on cultivating your own scholarly voice. Third, work hard, but not so hard that you compromise your physical health. Missing sleep or exercise and eating poorly will always come back to bite you.