Interview – Amit Julka

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Amit Julka is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Ashoka University, India. He is also the co-coordinator of the Making Identity Count project, an initiative that aims to map prominent discourses of identity across major powers using a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques. His research revolves around Gramsci's concept of *senso comune* (mass common-sense) and its impact on international politics. Apart from common-sense, he is also interested in interpretivist methods, national identity, and questions of political economy. He also co-hosts Mitti Pao!, a podcast on the politics and culture of South Asia. His most recent publication is Gendered Honor: How Mass Common Sense Shaped India's Foreign Policy in Jammu and Kashmir, 1947–1950 in *Global Studies Quarterly.*

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Before I even come to my area of research, I should mention that my choice of discipline (International Relations) was mostly incidental. I was a computer engineer turned South Asianist working at a think tank with very little clarity about what to do ahead, when a colleague mentioned that 'I sounded like a constructivist' because of my interest in language. I had no idea what that word meant, and even when it was explained to me as a paradigm, I thought of it as an ordinary insight (that language/ideas matter). Let me explain – it is not that I felt language as unimportant, but I thought that it was astonishing that there wasn't an established consensus around it.

It was only after coming to grad school (NUS), when I took a social theory course with Ted Hopf, that I experienced a significant shift in my thought. During this course, we wrestled (quite literally) with primary texts such as Berger & Luckmann, Bourdieu, Gramsci, Giddens, among others. It was then that I started to understand the foundations of critical/constructivist thought within IR, and this brought me to Gramsci and Bourdieu, which led to my interest in senso comune (mass common-sense), or the taken for granted ideas that constitute our social world.

In the context of your work on senso commune (commons sense), how do you theoretically conceptualize the notion of a citizen-centric IR? What role does this "common sense" play in influencing the foreign policy of a nation?

Let me first give a clarification – there is a conceptual distinction, at least in my head, between citizenry and the masses. 'Citizen' is a very specific imagination of an individual, both as an analytical category or a notion of the self. It assumes a certain form of political society, and the construction of a conscious individual identity predicated on the espousal of certain political ideas. Senso comune is something entirely different – to me, it belongs to the realm of the seemingly prosaic, and even the societal subconscious. It does not assume the development of an individualist consciousness, or specific state-society relationships.

Now the question of influence – since common-sensical ideas/practices are often a mish-mash of beliefs that are

implicitly assumed/subconsciously held, they help make certain things seem automatically legitimate/natural. And here comes the second assumption – I assume that diplomats and policymakers, despite their pretensions, are a product of larger society. Consequently, they may, to a certain extent, partake in this common-sense, and thus, foreign policy decisions that are aligned with common-sense may appear more naturally legitimate than uncommonsensical ones. Which implies therefore, that the probability that commonsensical foreign policy options are enacted is more than that of uncommonsensical ones. In a way, common-sense filters up from the masses to the elites without either party being aware of it.

With respect to citizen diplomacy and historical reconciliation, what is the significance of shared memory in the process of reconciliation between India and Pakistan after 75 years of partition? Can shared memory play a greater role in collaborative diplomatic praxis?

Not necessarily, and there are several reasons for this. Firstly, even when we speak of shared memories, say of Hindu-Muslim bonhomie pre-1947, we also underplay its contradictions – did that bonhomie include marginalized castes, or even women within the same house? This does not mean that those memories are not important, but that without being part of a concrete, progressive politics, nostalgia cannot be a solution, and worse, morph into something more regressive.

The second issue that we have to address is that we often think of our ideological differences (regarding the partition for instance) as existing on solely a social level – that a certain section of society thinks this way, and others differently. But these contradictions regarding our shared memories also reside within the individual, and there is a certain role of audience effects here, or what Goffman calls the frontstage/backstage. As humans, we can hold contradictory beliefs, and be selective about articulating them. So, for instance, I have seen people who have said vile things about Pakistan otherwise, but have shown excellent hospitality to individual Pakistanis, and commiserated/pined about their desire to overcome differences. One way to interpret the latter gesture would be to think of it as insincere, but that too is an incomplete explanation. Another way to explain the same is to think of our individual and societal common-sense as being potentially contradictory, and that these contradictions have probably only intensified due to political and social processes. So, within this framework, shared memory must then become a site for us to reckon and acknowledge our contradictions. Perhaps a better way to put it is that we don't have shared memory, but shared contradictions.

What role do you think more micro-historical approaches play in studying IR and how could such approaches be made more mainstream?

As someone who has tried (vainly) to paint a very 'macro picture' of this mythic beast called Indian mass common-sense, I am not the right person to answer this question. However, given that our discipline does not even live up to its own name – we spend most of our time looking at inter-state relations rather than inter-national relations(!) — there is a need to extricate the nation, or even multiple nations out of the assumed 1:1 correspondence of the nation-state. This makes the work of scholars working on micro-historical approaches central to reimagining the discipline.

The second is the question of mainstream approaches. So, the main question is – why is the existing mainstream canonical in the first place? This is related to questions of political economy. IR as a discipline is particularly tied to both state and capital. This means that academic advancement, funding opportunities, and visibility is dependent on the alignment of your research (broadly speaking) with the value that it generates for state/capital. Students are also subject to these forces – in light of an increasingly precarious academic job market, training/research in areas that emphasize/focus on the micro-historical is disincentivized. This is very understandable, because if one has to go into the private sector, there has to be a saleable skill set that can be brought to the table, and thus, we return to the question of political economy and the hold it has over academic output.

So, how do we make micro-historical approaches more mainstream? I don't have a good answer, but I suspect it will require a fundamental restructuring of academia itself, along with a rearticulation of our relationship with larger social structures.

With the rise of populist regimes in South Asia, how is diplomatic discourse impacted especially in the context of historical revisionism and territorial debates?

In my limited understanding, much of our understanding (and disdain) of the term populism comes from a liberal standpoint. This standpoint is never explicitly articulated, but it is evident in the way it clubs right-wing and left-wing populisms together. Populism for me is any kind of politics whose turf is mass common-sense. Any ideology, whether its aim is to capture or retain hegemony, has to contend with the terrain of common-sense, and the right to re-articulate it. Now, within this frame, the problem is not populism itself, but the regressive/right wing variant of it, which others marginal groups and minorities. Left wing populism on the other hand can be a progressive force, which re-articulates common-sense to align with the interests of the working class and marginal groups, making capital its 'other'.

In South Asia, in particular, a major aspect of this 'othering' process is the resultant historical revisionism that takes place and its emphasis on a revival of the golden age of nations. To go back to the problem of shared memory and our inability to confront the contradictions within it, briefly, it is the unresolved contradictions, and the suppressed fears that they generate, that are then exploited by these groups. As far as territorial debates are concerned however, our attitudes predate the onset of current regimes – it is rooted in our postcolonial anxiety, and the desire for fixity, which a certain idea of territory provides.

What are you currently working on?

This answer should be read as what I 'should' be working on. My most immediate concern is developing my book manuscript on common-sense. Aside from that, I am currently working on writing a methodological introspection based on my experience of working for the Making Identity Count project, and a co-authored manuscript that applies Raymond Williams' ideas to the phenomenon of ideational resonance. Apart from that, I am also reading essays by the Punjabi literary theorist Najm Hosain Syed to better understand the link between art and society.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

I think the first piece of advice is that unless you come from affluence, do not put all your eggs in the academia basket. Now, don't get me wrong – I thoroughly enjoy my job, but I am also aware of how privileged/lucky I am to work where I do. I had to grapple with a year of unemployment to get here, and it was just as probable that academia would not have worked out and I would have to seriously consider alternative options. So, use your time to also build transferable skills – pursue methods courses, learn languages, and if possible, get 1-2 years of experience in the 'outside world' before starting your PhD.

There is also a lot of romanticization about academia that one has to unlearn, and that fault at least lies in the way grad schools and senior scholars have trained us to think about academic careers. What gets forgotten is that academia has changed and morphed into something almost unrecognizable over the last two decades and those who have 'made it' have their own selection bias regarding the pursuit of noble ideals that might not always be practical/practicable in an oversaturated job market. The reality is that academia is an increasingly neoliberal enterprise, and if your labour is going to be exploited, then opting for a high-paying private sector job is better than endless rounds of insecure adjunct positions.

Another aspect in which I have been fortunate is that I had an extremely supportive PhD committee. However, this sadly is not the experience of many PhD students. So, if possible, do some prior research on prospective thesis advisors — watch out for red flags, which can include the following – not attentive enough towards grad students (typically the rock stars), emotional/mental abusive tendencies, and those unwilling to go to bat for you. Also, if you do find yourself in such a situation, do not feel that you are condemned to your fate, it may be possible to change your supervisor — talk to your department. However, even if that isn't possible, remember that your PhD isn't your whole life, and not worth the toll on your mental health. A PhD is tough, but it should be tough for primarily intellectual reasons, not because of unsupportive advisors or departments. So, do your research, and remember that you have a choice.