Interview – Felix Rösch

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Felix Rösch is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sussex in Brighton, UK. He works on encounters of difference in transcultural contexts, particularly focusing on transatlantic relations and exchanges between Central Europe and Japan, investigating their effect on international political thought. He also studies diplomatic practices and the role of emotions in international politics. Amongst others, his work has been published in *Cooperation & Conflict*, *Review of International Studies*, *Ethics & International Affairs*, *European Journal of International Relations*, and *International Studies Perspectives*. His most recent books include *Power, Knowledge, and Dissent in Morgenthau's Worldview* (2015), *Modern Japanese Political Thought and International Relations* (2018), and *Realism: A Distinctively 20th Century European Tradition* (2021). Felix co-edits the *Global Political Thinkers* and *Trends in European IR Theory* book series (both with Palgrave Macmillan).

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

There is a range of very exciting scholarship happening in International Relations at the moment. The study of emotions is still going strong in the discipline and so is practice theory and the study of rituals. It also seems to me that ontological security contributions are ever increasing in recent years. Realist scholarship has also made a comeback since Russia invaded Ukraine. I hope that this renewed interest will help to get a more nuanced understanding of realism that goes beyond the crude version of John Mearsheimer. Besides, I am very happy to see a rising interest in historical International Relations and at the latest EISA conference, conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) papers were numerous. This is a noticeable difference from when I briefly engaged with conceptual history during my PhD more than ten years ago, when the work of Reinhart Koselleck was still pretty much unknown in IR.

What we see in these debates, is what has drawn me to International Relations in the first place. It is a discipline that engages with insights of many different disciplines, such as history or sociology, and investigates to what extent they are useful to understand international affairs. This makes not only for lively debates in the discipline where we can find our own niches and topics; it also gives us the possibility to widen our perspectives on the world. However, I am also sometimes worried that we have now too many campfires, to use Christine Sylvester's trope, with too many songs played around them that eventually renders it difficult for wider debates to be heard by everyone. And if we do have such debates, like Global IR or multiplicity, their campfires seem to go out before the songs around these fires could reach their full potential.

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

This is a difficult question to answer. In some ways, I am still the same person I was when I started studying politics at the University of Jena in the early 2000s. I still believe that differences shouldn't be a source of fear but be seen as something that makes life beautiful and as necessary since only through them can we widen our own horizons and gain an understanding, however limited, about ourselves. And in acknowledging these differences, I still like to search for commonalities in what makes us human.

In other ways, however, I very much changed my view on the world since then. This is because I was fortunate

enough to meet people who widened my horizons and who instilled courage in me. My PhD supervisor, Hartmut Behr, was the first one to show me that I can be a scholar and saw worth in my thoughts. I always struggled with self-doubt, probably because I don't have an academic background, being the first one in the family with a PhD, and because during my school years, a lot of my teachers – to put it nicely – did not really increase my self-esteem. In Newcastle, where I did my MA and PhD, I also had a group of lecturers – Kyle Grayson, Simon Philpott, Matt Davies, and Martin Coward – who showed me that International Relations can be so much more than the so-called "high politics". I learned through them that even comics are sites of international politics. They suggested that I read Roland Bleiker's work. I never had the chance to meet him so far, but his *Aesthetics and World Politics* was a real eye opener to me. When I had my first post at Coventry University, I got to know Atsuko Watanabe, who at that time did her PhD at Warwick. Ever since I had read a little book on Japanese political thought by Maruyama Masao, I was fascinated that late 19th and early to mid-20th century Central European and Japanese political thinkers could grapple with similar questions and develop a somewhat similar outlook on life, even though they were embedded in two very different intellectual constellations. Through her, I have been able to deepen my understanding about Japanese political thought to an extent that I would have never been able to achieve by myself.

Your approach combines comparative political theory with international historiography and international political sociology. In what ways has this combination of approaches strengthened your analysis of knowledge production and exchange in transcultural contexts?

In my work, I normally proceed inductively. If you would ask me, if I consider myself a realist scholar, as I often engage with realist thought in my work, then I would say no. I do not like to classify myself and I struggle to put myself in a specific camp. This is probably not the best career strategy, but I can only ever be true to myself. The thought of classical realists like Hans Morgenthau, Hannah Arendt and so many others early- to mid-20th century scholars speaks to me, as I find inspiration in their work to think about contemporary world affairs, but I do not want to restrict myself in only engaging with them and I do not agree with all aspects of their thought. So, I try to keep an open mind, learn from the work of others, and see what approach or method helps me to understand a particular situation or event. It is from there that I ask myself if working on a specific case or aspect helps me to understand world politics in a more substantial way. I do not have the intellectual capacity of Hannah Arendt, but I like her phrase "thinking without a banister" in this regard, as I try to be open-minded and interdisciplinary in my approach. It is for this reason that I often – although not exclusively – engage with comparative political theory, international historiography, and international political sociology.

How has your focus on 19th- and 20th-century transcultural knowledge production contributed to understanding contemporary global challenges and new possibilities for more dialogical exchanges of knowledge?

In my work, I particularly look into the 19th and 20th centuries because, following Barry Buzan and George Lawson, the global transformations that took place during this time still impact world politics today. Industrialisation, technological advancements, nationalism, communism, imperialism are just a few of the developments that completely overhauled the socio-political fabric, impacting our lives to this day. So, one reason why I study these centuries is to understand why the world we live in today – and not a different world – came into being. What happened back then also impacted political thought and knowledge production in general. There is therefore a second reason why I study this period of time: I am looking into its political thought not to find answers or solutions for today's global issues, but to find inspiration in the work of scholars like Morgenthau, Arendt, Koselleck, Simmel etc. Inspiration here refers to something similar to what the German philosopher Odo Marquard had in mind for scholarship at large. One tries to detach oneself from one's life-world, to have the space to reflect upon this life-world from a different vantage point.

In a 2017 article you argue that mid-20th century realists pursued a method of "unlearning" through critiquing and moving beyond the modern imaginary. Can you explain more in detail what you mean with this concept and how it influenced the development of realism?

I understand realism particularly as a critique of the effects of modernity on humans. These were concerned about

the depoliticisation that modernity had caused on societies, taking away agency from people to contribute to the construction of their own life-worlds. As I tried to show in the paper, this was not only the case for Western realists like Hans Morgenthau but also other scholars who tried to get to grips with what they experienced as modernity. This means that there was not one modernity but many, and consequently scholars put different foci on their critique. For some, this may have been rapid technologisation, but for others it was the experience of imperialism and the violence it entailed. There was, for example, a modernity debate in Japan during the first half of the 20th century in which scholars also tried to free themselves from the grips of Western modernity, imperialism, and Western political thought that started to dominate debates there.

To be able to critique whatever modernity these scholars encountered, I identified a method in their thought that I called "unlearning", meaning that realists like Morgenthau or the Japanese political scientist Maruyama Masao deliberately tried to remove themselves by engaging with thought prior to their modernity. They did not do that in order to find answers to specific problems, but as a source of inspiration to reflect on current affairs differently and imagine a world in contrast to the one they experienced. This is evident in Morgenthau's Aristotle Lectures that Anthony Lang edited almost 20 years ago. Morgenthau delivered these lectures almost throughout his entire career in the United States and he not only went through Aristotle's writings with his students theoretically but used his work to prompt wider debates about American society and politics.

In the same article, you argue that the realist critique of modernity stems from an affinity with critical theory through its focus on epistemological questions over predetermined ontologies. How could realist methodologies be further informed by or built upon concepts and approaches from critical theory?

Classical realist scholarship and critical theory, at least when we think of the Frankfurt School type of critical theory, developed quite literally in tandem. If we take Morgenthau, arguably the most famous classical realist scholar in International Relations, he finished his PhD in Frankfurt and was in close contact with scholars from the Institute of Social Research. He regularly attended their lectures and worked for Hugo Sinzheimer, the most famous German labour lawyer at that time. In Sinzheimer's office, he worked alongside – amongst others – Franz Neumann and Ernst Fraenkel. So, it is not so much a question of thinking how classical realism could build upon critical theory or vice-versa, but of acknowledging that both evolved within the same intellectual constellations. It is therefore sad to see that until today, classical realism is conflated with neo-realism, which stems from a very different intellectual tradition; in doing so, a great opportunity is missed to further explore these intellectual constellations between classical realism and critical theory. Classical realist scholars are being criticised for something that they never endorsed but criticised themselves. For example, Morgenthau was concerned about racial and gender inequalities, questioned the squandering of natural resources, and was highly critical of the nation-state because it created a belligerent outlook on the world and because he had experienced himself what horrors nationalism can inflict on people. As William Scheuerman has shown, Morgenthau and others wanted to transcend the nation-state to create a more peaceful world.

In your work you examine the role of art and popular culture in shaping both emotional and experiential understandings of world politics. Can you discuss some examples of this and the insights it provides?

The reason why I like to use art and popular culture in my teaching and engage with it in my research is threefold. First, through art and popular culture, we can get a different perspective on the world, as Roland Bleiker showed. We may experience aspects of the world that were hidden to us, for instance giving a voice to actors that were neglected or even silenced before. Let's face it, artists – like scholars – grapple with something that they experienced in life and that had a profound impact on them. Often, it was an unpleasant, horrible, or even life-shattering experience.

Second, I engage with it because it gives me hope and I want to pass on this hope to my students. Even though in International Relations we often deal with horrible events, such as war or genocide, art gives us hope that the world can be different because humans, in all their despair, can still create something beautiful, powerful, and touching.

Finally, I use art in my teaching to open new worlds to my students. At my previous institution, I taught many students who were from a working-class background and/or were the first in their families to attend university. Many of them

had never been to a theatre play before. This is because tickets are expensive here and the still-existing class society in the UK often makes them believe this is only something for the "elite". Over the years, I took students to theatre plays, museum exhibitions, classical music concerts, and architectural tours. I also weave it into my teaching. For example, I used some of Max Frisch's theatre plays to reflect on the rise of populism with my students and I discussed with them Goethe's Faust to reflect on how the global transformations of the 19th century changed our life-worlds and impacted on world politics. I also traced some Banksy street art while in London with students, as it encouraged discussions about a variety of topics, from migration to the privatisation of public spaces.

In a 2021 article you analysed dance patterns during the Congress of Vienna in order to understand the impact of affective dynamics on practice changes. Can you explain more about the link you see between cultural practices like dance and broader emotional dynamics? What drew you to specifically focus on dance patterns?

I was first drawn to dance through pedagogy. I was teaching a module that introduced students to different conceptualisations of power and wanted to help them understand that if you have an Arendtian understanding of power – the ability to act in concert – rather than the classic Weberian one, you get a very different outlook on the world. The "other" is then no longer a source of threat and fear but someone who can enrich your life and widen your horizons. After having spoken to dance scholars at my previous institution, modern forms of dance like contact improvisation seemed to be the perfect practice to perform this kind of power. One can dance alone or even with several people, there are no age and gender restrictions and even as a beginner one can quickly perform the most basic dance moves. Ballroom dances like the waltz would not have been ideal for it, as it reifies for example a patriarchal perspective with the man having to lead a female dance partner. From there, I started to wonder if dance (or other forms of sociability) had or has an impact on world politics and vice versa. Performing any form of playful association (Georg Simmel), of course, is always emotional. It creates affective dynamics between the performers and even the audience. Performers themselves experience the entire range of emotions from fear to anger to joy and exaltation. This is because these practices are particularly multidimensional, meaning that a wide range of sensory modalities are being stimulated which in turn cause particularly intense emotional reactions.

What are some of the main challenges that higher education is currently facing and how can teaching practices and models continue to evolve to properly address them?

It seems that the very idea of the university is in danger across the world. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, the neoliberalisation of higher education literally destroys universities. In Germany, the #IchbinHanna debate rightfully criticises, amongst others, temporary contracts for the vast majority of scholars. We are living in a time where knowledge and education (particularly the humanities and social sciences) are under attack, where education has been commodified and devalued. The university today seems to be a far cry from what Karl Jaspers conceived as its ideal more than 60 years ago. Rather than celebrating and protecting it as a place where self-determined communities of learning can form, where people can pursue knowledge freed from practical and political constraints, and where people from all over the world can come together, education has been turned into an ideological playground and treated with disrespect. Students are left with huge debts and referred to as "customers". People with too much power and too little moral concerns publicly discredit serious scholarships as "Mickey Mouse degrees", although they gained their Mickey Mouse degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in the world. I think as educators, we have to resist such discredit by helping our students to find hope and courage and to understand that these developments – which reflect what happens to societies at large – do not have to be accepted and that living in a different world is possible. I am not sure if there are specific practices but we can provide a space in our seminars and lecturers for students to think critically together with their fellow peers and imagine our communities and the way we live together differently.

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

This is difficult for me to answer, as I do not want to sound condescending. I do not consider myself senior enough or having accomplished enough that I could give advice to others. The advice that I could provide is at best banal, but I wish that scholars who enter the profession now would keep their passion and remember what drove them to do

research in the first place. Being a scholar – particularly in this current political and economic climate – is not always easy and requires a lot of strength from us. I wish that they are as fortunate as I was in encountering colleagues who can encourage them to keep on going forward and continue to work hard, as all of their voices deserve to be heard. I also wish that they stay modest and can meet critique with grace and love as only through critique can we deepen our knowledge and together make a bit more sense of the madness that we call reality. Laura Shepherd put it so nicely in a recent E-International Relations interview: “Generosity is not just about resources; it is about generosity of spirit, of accommodating and welcoming with love even those people and ideas that challenge us.” This is the kind of discipline I like to work in and this is the kind of discipline I hope will continue to exist through the work of younger IR scholars.