Interview – Arjun Chowdhury

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, APR 5 2024

Arjun Chowdhury (PhD Minnesota) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia where he teaches introductory and graduate courses on International Relations and Security Studies. His primary areas of research include conflict, security, peacekeeping and foreign policy studies. He is the author of *The Myth of International Order: Why Weak States Persist and Alternatives to the State Fade Away* (Oxford: 2018), which won the Robert L. Jervis-Paul W. Schroeder Best Book Award from the American Political Science Association as well as the Hedley Bull Prize in International Relations from the European Consortium for Political Research. He is currently working on a new approach to systemic IR theory and an article from this project is forthcoming in Security Studies.

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

In recent years, I have been most excited by work in historical IR – e.g. recent books by Swati Srivastava, Ayse Zarakol, Andrew Phillips but there are lots of others I can name – and how it has pluralized our view of world politics. Some of this work has expanded attention to different types of actors, like private companies and pirates, and imperial and racialized patterns of world politics. I will note that the latter themes are not new: Siba Grovogui, Sankaran Krishna, Roxanne Doty, and others were writing about this in the 1990's and early 2000's. I have argued elsewhere that the prior scholarship represents a road not taken at a time when there was great theoretical ferment in the field. That ferment has resulted in greater pluralism, yes, but also greater fragmentation. Which brings me back to the recent works in historical IR: to see these important themes being revisited now gives me hope that we can incorporate them into our theoretical frameworks.

Specifically, I think that by looking at the protean nature of thinking about race, or human variation more generally, which *is* associated with material power – it was the more powerful actors who espoused racialist views – we can arrive at a better theorization of how ideas have effects on world politics. The modal understanding of constructivism, which identifies the effect of ideational phenomena like norms because they militate against self-interest is exhausted in terms of theoretical insight. Ideas can exercise effects even when they are associated with power and self-interest, but to identify these effects we need some variation in ideas themselves, and that's what historical IR gives us.

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

While I don't subscribe to all of the views associated with the approach, I have become more sympathetic to the neoliberal/public choice argument that regulation and state intervention can have negative consequences. I'll elaborate more on this below, but I came to understand in the research for my book that as the power of the state and its role in everyday life has expanded, we in the study of IR have oddly moved away from seeing the state as a threat to its' own people, which an earlier generation of scholars like Ted Gurr or James Scott were quite cognizant of. But the prevalence of civil war (or the backlash against public health directives in many developed countries) suggests that many people in much of the world don't agree with us! I'm not saying that a rebel leader in Congo reads Mancur Olson or Milton Friedman, but I think that the analytical frameworks those scholars provide helps us understand the negative consequences of what Scott called 'high modernism.'

Do you think that the understanding of what constitutes a 'security issue' in International Relations has changed in the last decade or two? If so, what kind of changes have you observed?

I would date the change prior to the last decade, but the understanding that security is linked to political and economic development has become more entrenched. The research on how improving opportunities for women, from women's suffrage to women's education, reduces violence between states and within them exemplifies this. This is not entirely a benign development, because we should wish to support women's empowerment unconditionally, i.e. even if it did not reduce the likelihood of conflict. More generally, it should not be necessary for an issue to be deemed a security threat ('securitized') for security scholars to study it; for example, we shouldn't have to deem low levels of women's education a security threat to study if and how civil war can diminish women's education. Scholars of international security should be able to study normatively important issues as dependent variables – i.e. the effects of conventionally understood security threats – as much as we study them as independent variables – i.e. the cause of those threats. Having said that, a more capacious set of topics is better for the field of international security because they interest more scholars to enter the field.

What are some security issues or threats that you personally feel have yet to receive sufficient attention from International Relations scholars and why?

I think IR scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the expansion of state power in developing countries as a potential problem to other states and to the citizens of those states. Insofar as Iran, for example, poses a security problem, most IR scholars would point to the type of regime it has. What goes unnoticed is that Iran has had a broadly similar regime for four decades, but its' ability to threaten others, e.g. by supporting proxies, has grown over time as its state capacity has increased. IR scholars have long associated low state capacity with all kinds of problems: the outbreak of civil war and poor development outcomes. But the inverse is not necessarily true; the expansion of state capacity may create problems too. Among these problems: continued economic distortions from subsidies and protectionism, the increase in restrictions on journalists and NGO's in much of the world, and increasing surveillance of citizens by a range of states, including some, like Rwanda, that would have been deemed 'failed states' just a few decades ago.

In your book, you argue that the international system is dominated by 'weak states' and this will not change in the near future. How do you categorize a 'weak' state and what leads you to the conclusion that they will continue to dominate the international system?

A weak state is a state that cannot monopolize the control of violence and faces difficulties delivering services to its population. Such states are anything between 2/3rd and 3/4th of states in the system. In my book, I argued that this definition, and thus our understanding of what a state is and should do, is not transhistorical: it is only since the early twentieth century that the ideal-typical polity is expected to monopolize violence – the Weberian definition is from 1917 – as empires were the normal form of polity before, and imperial rule often involves intermediaries with their own ability to wield violence. Equally, until 1900, almost no state taxed in excess of 10% of GDP and spent more than 2% of GDP on services. Now almost all states tax and spend more. So why do I say any, much less most, states are weak states?

I say this for the same reason I say weak states are here to stay, namely that raising taxation in the absence of costly interstate war, and thus making up the gap with strong states, is hard. So while contemporary weak states, which mostly emerged after 1945, tax more than they used to, they still tax less (10-20% of GDP) than states that engaged in costly interstate war in the early 20th century (30% of GDP). However, weak states are still expected to provide more services than states were expected to in the early twentieth century and intervene in the economy, which given their lower tax base and tax ratio, is harder to do. Weak states are held to much of the same standards as strong states, what I call 'expectations of order' and this, beyond the persistence of the gap in revenue, is a recipe for discontent, which in the extreme case leads to civil war, disrupting the monopoly on violence, hindering economic activity, and reducing taxation further.

You have written that developing countries should rethink their approach to state-building at a normative

level. Could you expand on how these approaches should be reconsidered and what, if any, is a more efficacious strategy for developing states?

A key misunderstanding about weak states is that the government is absent and must be strengthened. But if you look at indicators like immunizations or food subsidies, or bureaucratic procedures like getting a driver's licence, weak states are actually involved in and regulate a lot of everyday life, and this involvement has grown over time. Weak states do a lot of things, poorly. This means that citizens in a weak state demand services from the state but also encounter the state as a hindrance or even a threat. Citizens might thus oppose both centralization and marketization, which are the standard solutions to bad governance. The intellectual challenge then becomes to think in terms of a balance of power between citizens and the government which enables ongoing bargaining. This is tricky! Too much bargaining power for citizens might threaten the government and lead it to crack down; too little might lead to unrest.

Have you observed any particular trends or developments in the formulation of Canadian and/or American foreign policy in response to the various violent international conflicts that have erupted in the past few years?

I can't be the first to notice this, but we are seeing a unique combination of restrictive trade policies and multilateral engagement and institution-building with the Biden administration. Logically, we should see free trade combined with multilateralism, as we did in the 1990's, or protectionism combined with isolation, which is what Trump promises. I don't know whether this will continue. But if it continues, what might happen?

On the one hand, this combination responds to domestic discontent with freer trade, especially with China. But on the other hand, it is hard to engage politically with allies when your economic policies put them at a disadvantage, and the likely consequence is tit-for-tat restrictions on trade. It's easy to forget that the last three decades have seen the coincidence of freer trade and rising GDP for most states. Rising GDP, in turn, has coincided with improvements in health provision and education: the gap in life expectancy between non-Western populations and Western populations has increasingly converged, after diverging between 1850 and 1950. Of course, this has been distributed unequally, but we've seen the alternative, and it is poverty in much of the world!

Realistically, what role – if any – do you think institutions like the United Nations can play in meaningfully responding to major security issues in the current age?

The UN has always suffered from the burden of unrealistic expectations, of being perceived as what Mark Mazower called an 'enchanted palace.' Let's recall that in 1946, 54% of Americans agreed with the question: 'do you think the UN should be strengthened to make it a world government with power to control the armed forces of all nations, including the US?' Now, a pollster wouldn't even ask the question!

However, even though the more maximalist expectations of the UN are now mostly dispelled, we now know that it can do some things well, and it should focus on those. For example, the UN can enforce a peace deal in a civil war when both sides want to stop fighting but cannot compel peace when one or both sides are committed to fighting. This might sound a bit lame, but consider that peace agreements are both very common and very often violated; better enforcement of peace agreements could decrease violence and potentially end civil wars earlier. But this would mean that in situations of pitched fighting or one-sided violence, the UN should acknowledge it has little role to play. It sounds hard to stomach that international organizations have little role in the most difficult contexts, but there is little evidence that such involvement has good effects, and in many cases, like the UN's long-term presence in Haiti, it has actually reduced the popularity of the IO with the local population.

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

A mediocre draft is better than the most brilliant idea. You should get in the habit of writing – whether a little every day or a lot over a period allotted exclusively to writing. Set yourself a target date by which you expect to have written enough to feel you are making progress, but not so much that it will take several months to achieve (a reasonable

target is around 15-20 pages or 4000-6000 words). On that date, print out what you have written to give yourself a sense of where you are and where you are going. Give yourself a small reward – a nice meal, a day off – then repeat.