Interview – Hidemi Suganami

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Hidemi Suganami studied International Relations as Tokyo, Aberystwyth, and London Universities. His first academic appointment was at Keele University in 1975, where he later became Professor of the Philosophy of International Relations. In 2004, he moved to Aberystwyth, where currently he is Emeritus Professor of International Politics. His publications include: *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (CUP 1989); *On the Causes of War* (Clarendon Press 1996); and, with Andrew Linklater, *The English School of International Relations* (CUP 2006). Over a number of years, he has been studying philosophical issues surrounding causation and causal explanation in International Relations.

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

With respect to the subject-matters of *substantive empirical research*, it may plausibly be argued that some are 'more exciting' ('relevant', in need of urgent attention) than others in IR at the current juncture of world politics. For example, challenges of the climate catastrophe, ever-intensifying global economic inequalities, refugees and migration, xenophobic populism, terrorism, violence against women in conflict zones, to name but a few.

However, with respect to where Adam Humphreys and I, specifically as the co-authors of the book,*Causal Inquiry in International Relations*, see most exciting research/debates happening in *our* field, the answer needs to be given in relation to what we see as having happened in the relevant literature – on (meta)theory and methodology of IR – for the past several decades.

One notable feature of IR as an academic discipline is its familiar tendency to give an account of its evolution through a series of 'great debates'. However, these 'debates' have tended to produce more heat than light and the discipline is often characterized as 'divided'. Some see the divisions as fundamental. Consider, for example, Bull's contrast between 'traditional' and 'scientific' approaches, often misleadingly equated with the difference between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods; Hollis and Smith's contrast between those who seek 'explanation' and those who explore 'understanding', or Wendt's distinction between 'causal explanation' and 'constitutive explanation'; and the so-called 'third debate', which is said to be between 'positivists' and 'post-positivists', or between 'rationalists' and 'reflectivists'. There have also been important attempts to overcome such divisions, for example, by 'broadening and deepening' the concept of causation (as found in Milja Kurki's *Causation in International Relations*) or to reduce the inter-factional intolerance by drawing attention to the irreconcilable, yet supposedly equally legitimate, philosophical foundations on which contending approaches are claimed to be built (as found in Patrick Jackson's*The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* and also in the conclusions of Kurki's book). But these works in turn remain unpersuasive in some of their most fundamental claims. It appears that, instead of progressing through a series of 'great debates' over the past decades, IR has reached an impasse in the (meta)theory field and it has accumulated different ways of talking about itself, often based on certain purportedly fundamental conceptual distinctions treated as 'given'.

In choosing to focus on 'causal inquiry' as our book's subject-matter, Adam and I, of course, do not advocate that everyone doing research in IR *should* engage in causal inquiry, but we do observe that causal claims – or statements to the effect that a set of events *brought about* another set of events – where 'events' are understood broadly to include conditions, situations, structures, and so on – are frequently made, and often even by those who claim *not* to

be doing causal research. Our key aims were to engage in debunking various received wisdoms with respect to causation and causal explanation which have accumulated over the decades in IR, and social science more broadly, to articulate what we present as 'the deep logic of causal inquiry', which holds irrespective of the method of data collection and analysis adopted, and to warn of the various difficulties encountered in causal research in IR and of the problems of making unwarranted claims based on the findings obtained. Among the wide range of criticisms we provide, one of the most fundamental is what we call 'the culture of generalization' underlying many IR works in the causal field.

It would not be appropriate for us to claim that our work is emblematic of 'the most exciting research/debates happening' in IR, but it has the potential to stimulate such a debate since the book confronts and undermines many of the received wisdoms in IR about causal inquiry – both in conducting it and in talking about what it is and how to do it.

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

The 'shifts', in *my* case, are mainly in the questions I have focused on rather than what answers I have found persuasive. When beginning to study International Relations at Tokyo University in the late 60s, the curriculum was woefully underdeveloped; and there were not many worthwhile books to read. I took intellectual refuge in the study of international law, and through that, I came across the writings of Hans Kelsen, one of the greatest names in international law and jurisprudence in the twentieth century. He draws a clear distinction between the 'science' of (socially given) *norms*, such as positive international law, and the 'science' of *facts* (natural or social), the latter of which, according to him, seeks causal knowledge of empirical events/phenomena.

My interest in the former led me, when I began my postgraduate studies in IR, and, subsequently, undergraduate teaching of that subject, in the UK, to uncover what came later to be known as the writings of the 'English School' (ES), whose primary purpose was to identify the social norms, broadly understood, of inter-state relations and then to explore their functions and history. This has led me to engage in critical exegetical analysis of some of the key contentions of the ES, and especially to explore the relationship between international law and state sovereignty, often misunderstood, with undesirable political consequences. On this particular topic, I am indebted to C.A.W. Manning, a legal theorist who became a founding member of the ES. He also showed me the need to study 'philosophical aspects of International Relations', pointing, among other things, to the importance, for those intrigued about IR's identity as a body of knowledge, to acquaint themselves with the philosophy of social science. This was in the early 70s at the London School of Economics during my PhD studies.

In talking of 'science of norms' and 'science of facts', Kelsen had used the term 'science' broadly, as did E. H. Carr, who spoke of the new 'science' of International Politics in his seminal work, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, which was one of the very few books available to me as an undergrad studying IR in the 60s. When I moved to the UK, the 'field' was in the midst of what I later learnt was called 'the second great debate' about the epistemological status of IR as an academic discipline/intellectual pursuit, in which Hedley Bull (later of the ES fame) had championed the cause of the British 'traditionalist way' as against the American 'scientific way'. I was interested in this debate but continued to focus my attention for a period on the normative structure of international relations until after I published my first book *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (1989), based on my doctoral research in that subject field. I then began to focus more intensively on problems of causation and causal explanation in international politics and history, and wrote my second book, *On the Causes of War* (1996).

My combined focus, at that time and in that book, on 'causation'/'causal explanation' and 'war' stemmed from two sources. One was my continued interest in the nature of IR as an academic discipline, which had troubled me from my undergrad days. A way to tackle this question, in a manageable way, seemed to me to focus on one of IR's key concerns: to uncover the causes/provide a causal account of significant events/phenomena in world politics. The other source was my encounter, when I began my postgraduate studies in the UK, with Kenneth Waltz's*Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis (1959)* , which I found more intriguing, and hence more interesting to engage with in detail, than his later work *Theory of International Politics (1979)*, which, as the foundational text of so-called

'neorealism', many of the very well-known IR Theorists – the late Andrew Linklater foremost among them – treated as their point of departure for developing their own theoretical perspectives on world politics. As an aside, I should add here that in academic terms, a 'lifelong' friend, collaborator, and colleague, Andrew was a guiding light, by his own example, for a serious scholarly pursuit.

I found Waltz's 1959 book 'more intriguing' than his later book because, under the at-first-sight quite unproblematic surface – his famous 'three-image' framework – I kept on thinking that something was not quite right about it, whereas I found it much easier to identify what was wrong about his 1979 book – but that is another story! I spent several years working out what was 'not quite right' with Waltz (1959) and how to transcend his (meta)theoretical analysis, which resulted in the publication of *On the Causes of War*. I wrote that book under the influence of the analytic philosopher of history, W. H. Dray, combined with the so-called 'narrativist/rhetorical relativist' in the theory of history, Hayden White.But I began wondering about how to resolve the underlying tension between these writers – and between the two opposing positions: 'causal realism' which is implicit in Dray but, in IR is usually associated with Roy Bhaskar and 'causal idealism' which is wrongly attributed to David Hume in IR.

It is through my encounter over a decade ago with my co-author, Adam Humphreys, that I began to read more recent works on the philosophy of science, especially the works of Bas van Fraassen, which helped us to transcend the prevailing realism/idealism dichotomy, and to move onto a more substantive discussion on the methodology of causal inquiry, which our book articulates in detail in an original and philosophically informed way. My familiarity over the decades with analytical philosophical writings on causation and causal statements helped me to make my own contribution to our discussions. In this area, I am also indebted to the philosopher Jonathan Dancy, who, at the beginning of my lecturing career at Keele University, agreed to teach with me a 'Philosophy and IR' joint module; it was an eye-opening experience for me to witness his 'Socratic method' of interrogation. All in all, therefore, what shaped my scholarship in the theory and metatheory of IR came from outside of IR, as well as inside.

In *The Return of the Theorists*, you have used a format of fictional conversations between characters and prominent theorists like Kenneth Waltz and David Hume to discuss their ideas. What are the merits of this approach for academic writing?

Halfway through drafting the first chapter of *Causal Inquiry in International Relations*, on Hume's understanding of causation, I began to find the hyper-enthusiasm expressed in his writings quite charming and amusing. I thought the chapter on Hume was going to be quite hard for those who are not used to the critical exegesis of 18th-century philosophical texts. And so, partly for my own amusement, and partly for pedagogical purposes, I tried to write a comedic and deliberately anachronistic version of his thought on causation. This helped me get the real gist of Hume's thinking on causation, which in turn helped me revise the draft of Chapter 1 further. I kept the comedic version in my drawer for some time but had a chance to show it to Ned Lebow who found my essay terribly funny and quite effective, and so we decided to edit a book together. The rest is history; but since Professor Lebow was contributing a lot of essays to the collection, I thought I should add at least one more, and asked my friend, Adam Humphreys to join me in 'questioning Waltz' at an imaginary viva where Adam and I were to act as examiners for young Waltz.

All the contributors and the editors had much fun, and we hope that the readers will find such essays an easy way to find out more for themselves about what the authors represented in the book are arguing. The essays, however, are not at all non-serious just because they are, for a large part, written in a comedic style. They are designed to bring out effectively some of the salient features of the writings of the great thinkers who contributed to what IR came to be.

The concept of 'international society' in *The Anarchical Society* assumes a certain level of order and cooperation between states. How do you think this idea can be applied to current global issues like the rise of populism, the breakdown of multilateral institutions, or the resurgence of nationalism?

Looking back, I am not sure whether, over the years, I was more interested in the critical exegesis of the argument of the English School, epitomized in Bull's book, *The Anarchical Society*, or I was actually advocating, as if a member of the ES myself, that their picture represents how we should understand the world of world politics to be like. Many

readers took me to be doing the latter, while I was myself more conscious of doing the former. Dr Kasia Kaczmarska, Senior Lecturer in the School of Social and Political Science at Edinburgh University, who specialized in the Russian idea of 'the Russian world' for her doctoral research, for which I played a supervisory role, took me to do the latter and kept on pointing out to me that the ES version of world politics is unsound on 'anthropological grounds', meaning that the world isn't working like that.

I resisted for some time, but having witnessed Russian actions over Ukraine and the way the rise of populism is spreading transnationally and affecting the quality of order in international life as well as inside the state, I have finally come to let go of my relatively positive assessment of the ES, at any rate as world politics has been unfolding in the recent decades.

To answer the question more directly, I find that the ES way of thinking about world politics misses out so much of what needs to be made sense of in the current phase of world politics that it has lost some, or even much, of its pedagogical value as a starter on the freshers' menu, for which, to be fair, it had been intended and which it may have achieved to a greater extent earlier in the disciplinary history of IR.

You argue that causal analysis in IR is inherently political. Could you elaborate on what you mean by this? How do you see the political dimensions of causal inquiry playing out in the field?

There is a fundamental difference between claiming – *first*, that a particular causal interpretation of a given episode may have a political dimension in that it may reflect the analyst's political bias and may also have political implications and – *second,* that a causal inquiry itself, regardless of what it comes to claim substantively, is inherently political. In the article, co-written with my friend and colleague, Professor Milja Kurki, we discussed these issues. I broadly accept the *first* but am no longer sure how to demonstrate the *second*.

I think those who *reject* causal inquiry as such tend to say that engaging in causal inquiry is politically conservative, etc, but I do not believe that. Interests in causal inquiry may reflect rather the liberal and melioristic beliefs about the world but this need not necessarily be the case with everyone interested in conducting it. I do recall saying elsewhere that narrative representations of the origins of particular wars involve a set of conceptual categories to construct them and these are the very categories which the governments engaged in war tend to use in explaining their mode of entry into the war. To this extent, continuing to generate narratives of war origins may be reinforcing the discourse of war as an instrument of state policy and to that extent 'conserv-a-tive'.

I need to stress, however, that anything I have said in my previous publications in this area – causation, causal explanation – must be understood to be superseded by what is found in *Causal Inquiry in International Relations*, except for a couple of points already noted in my earlier writings and repeated in the book, one of which concerns the pragmatic dimension of causal explanation, i.e., an important fact that causal explanations must adequately address the questions being asked, which reflect the puzzles behind the questions, and that these puzzles will reflect the questioner's interests, which may reflect their political orientations.

Many critics from post-positivist and critical theory traditions are cautious about the politics embedded in causal analysis. What do you think they are missing in their critique, and why do you believe their concerns are inadequate or incomplete?

What is missing in their critique of causal analysis is, in the first place, the distinction between – *first,* the politics which *may be* embedded in the way a *specific* causal question is formulated, prompting a causal inquiry, and how that question is answered, and *second*, the politics which is *purported* by some post-positivists and critical theorists to be embedded in *any* causal analysis; I believe their concerns are 'incomplete' unless their critique begins with, or incorporates, this critical distinction.

Second, to the extent that they are, on political grounds, 'cautious about', or sceptical of, causal analysis *as such* a mode of inquiry, their negative or dismissive attitude towards causal analysis is in turn 'incautious' in terms of what they envisage 'causal analysis' is and entails. Generally speaking, they tend to assume 'causal analysis' to operate

necessarilywithin the parameters of what Patrick Jackson has identified as the 'neopositivist' methodology. Some of them are also concerned that causal inquiry is necessarily about fixing the 'origins', that it is necessarily 'technologizing', or that it is committed to establishing 'the truth' about history, instead of offering 'interpretations'. In *Causal Inquiry in International Relations*, Adam and I reject the 'neopositivist' methodology, and are critical of the 'culture of generalization' of which that methodology is a manifestation; and, in an article co-authored with Milja Kurki, I provided a detailed critique of these other allegations, which to my mind verge on inuendoes, about the problematic nature of causal inquiry.

Once these critics realise that Adam and I are not advocating doing causal inquiry to the exclusion of other forms of inquiry, but rather drawing attention to the difficult problems which are encountered when we *do* engage in causal inquiry in IR, and to the dangers of possibly not noticing that what they are doing may contain a causal dimension, they will probably not feel so strongly alienated from causal inquiry in IR as we spell it out.

How do you envision causal inquiry contributing to a more nuanced understanding of global politics, particularly in terms of addressing power dynamics, inequality, and agency?

As we clarify in the Conclusion of our book, we see 'causal inquiry' as one of several modes of inquiry that can be conducted in the study of world politics. Normative, interpretive, critical, and historical approaches are also significant, although, as we argue, causal inquiry is not necessarily incompatible with these other modes of investigation. And, just as there are more, or less, adequate ways of engaging in such investigations, there are of course more, or less, satisfactory ways of conducting causal inquiry, some 'contributing to a more nuanced understanding of global politics', irrespective of the aspects of that subject field concerning which the inquiry is made.

A 'more nuanced understanding of global politics, particularly in terms of addressing power dynamics, inequality, and agency' from a specifically causal viewpoint is a rather vague formulation. But I assume the question is roughly about how to present a non-simplistic, non-doctrinaire, understanding of how/why inequalities are generated in world politics, how/why relative powers of states shift, and what forces constrain the autonomy of the governments in pursuing their foreign policy goals.

In addressing such big and abstract topics, it is essential, as we took pains to explain in our book, to examine a *concrete* episode in a specific time and place. Causal inquiry, whatever its ultimate aims, must begin with a historically specific case. With respect to that case, we must be clear about what the puzzle is that needs addressing and why, and we must formulate precisely what the question is to which we are to seek a causal answer regarding the case in question.

It is important not to be lured into supposing that there is a ready list of 'contending explanatory theories' – often characterized as 'isms' in IR Theory – on the menu from which the researcher should select one 'as the approach adopted in this study' or that the aim of the inquiry is to test the contending 'isms' against the facts of the case. What we must do, as we explain at length in the book, is to make a plausible list of genuinely incompatible causal explanations (or, to be more precise, what in the book we call 'explanatory statements') concerning the specific outcome, and rule out those explanatory statements which cannot be supported persuasively by empirical evidence. To provide a satisfactory causal explanation, moreover, the explanatory statement must address the question being asked in a relevant way, thereby resolving the puzzle.

Such an approach will not guarantee the production of the right answer with certainty; the answer arrived at must be understood to be 'subject to further investigation', a qualification especially vital in the field, such as world politics, where, for the most part, it must be assumed that the causal process, presented as explaining the outcome in question, operated in an 'open' system. While not guaranteeing the correct answer with certainty, the path outlined above, and explicated in detail in our book, will contribute towards generating a more 'nuanced understanding of global politics' in causal terms, whatever the specific question the investigator finds worth addressing.

You note that there are problems in how causal findings are presented and evaluated in IR, often with overblown claims about generalizability. How can scholars better assess and communicate the scope of

their causal conclusions?

By avoiding the careless use of *the present tense* when reporting on the findings from their study samples. By avoiding implying that the study sample is representative of the population to which the sample findings can be applied especially where the population includes *future* instances. And by avoiding treating 'internal validity' and 'external validity' of a sample finding as though they were twin attributes of the findings themselves: external validity is, indeed, 'external' to the study sample findings and needs to be investigated by comparing the conditions under which the findings were made and the conditions under which the findings are to be employed as a basis, whether in explanation, prediction, or prescription.

What are the core ideas you hope researchers in IR will carry forward from your book, and how do you see it shaping future research on causation? How can future research in IR balance the complexity of philosophical debates with the need for clear, actionable methods in empirical research?

First and foremost, to clearly understand that causal statements (often mis-characterized as either 'singular' or 'general') are either 'concrete' or 'abstract', and that 'abstract causal statements', such as 'revolutions cause wars', are not *generalizations* but '*propensity* statements', meaning that they imply *not* that 'revolutions (for instance) *usually* or *always* lead to wars', but rather that they will do so '*under the right conditions*'.

Secondly, to appreciate that a concrete causal statement logically implies an abstract causal statement and that it is only a concrete causal statement that could be directly supported by empirical evidence. Third, to appreciate therefore the necessity to find persuasive evidence to support a concrete causal statement in the specific circumstances of the episode in question.

Fourth, to understand that the way to provide persuasive support for a given concrete causal statement is to show that other causal statements in genuine competition with it are not valid in relation to that episode. Fifth, to appreciate that these principles are elements of the 'deep logic of causal inquiry', which are methodologically neutral, that to follow this logic, it is not necessary to accept the metaphysical belief in the mind-independent reality of causal powers in the world, and that, contrary to the common supposition, causation has no *intrinsic* connection with correlation.

We believe that if our book has an intended impact, it will be to bring home to causal researchers in IR the importance of the study of concrete episodes in their specific circumstances and to weaken the institutionalized academic barrier built between IR and History insofar as these disciplines are concerned with causal questions.

Philosophical debates are often complex. To arrive at a clear articulation of the 'deep logic of causal inquiry', Adam and I did engage in a fairly complex conceptual analysis and logical reasoning, characteristic of philosophical works. However, we did our utmost to make our argument clear at every step, and the key outcome of our sustained analysis, 'the deep logic of causal inquiry' is spelled out in the book step by step already in a 'clear and actionable' way. There is no need for researchers to re-engage in articulating the logic or even to follow *all* its steps self-consciously as it expresses what they may already be doing, perhaps unconsciously, if they are conducting causal inquiry methodically.

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

Ask yourself what precisely your central research question is, and why you think it is, in the form it is stated, particularly puzzling and important. Ask if that question has a causal dimension, where 'causing' is understood simply to mean an event bringing about another event where 'event' is understood broadly to include situations, structures, and so on. If yes, then consult this book to avoid getting stuck in unproductive alleyways.