

Interview - Nicholas Onuf

Written by E-International Relations

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Nicholas Greenwood Onuf is renowned as one of the founders of constructivism in International Relations. He is also known for his important contributions to International Legal Theory, International History, and Social Theory. Onuf's most famous work is arguably *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (published in 1989), which should be on every IR student's must-read list. His recent publications include *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (2006, co-authored with his brother Peter Onuf) and *International Legal Theory: Essays and Engagements, 1966-2006* (2008). Onuf is currently Professor Emeritus of International Relations at Florida International University and is on the editorial boards of *International Political Sociology*, *Cooperation and Conflict*, and *Contexto Internacional*. Professor Onuf received his PhD in International Studies at John Hopkins University, and has also taught at Georgetown University, American University, Princeton, Columbia, University of Southern California, Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, and Kyung Hee University in Korea.

In this interview, Professor Onuf discusses the professionalization of scholarship in IR and the effects this has had on the field in the US and globally; the influence that constructivism and *World of Our Making* has had on social theory; the transformations he has noticed in International Law Theory; and his top ten tips for flourishing in academia.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?

I am not sure I see any exciting debates at this moment. I am not even sure we ever had a debate in the usual sense of the term. There have been moments better characterized as a parting of the ways. I like to think I participated in one in the late 1980s. Since then, well, these 'ways' have grown further and further apart. If such partings are generational (as I think they are), then we should now be seeing another such moment. If we do not (and I do not), then it is because IR has lost all coherence as a field—there is nothing left to render apart. Not that this distresses me. At the last parting, I suggested that we should think of international relations as a species of social relations and abandon IR theory for social theory.

What are the most important/interesting areas of IR Theory that are underdeveloped or understudied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?

As I just intimated, I do not believe IR theory can be made interesting. The question is, what area in social theory, broadly conceived, could help us—everyone interested in what we still call international relations—do our thing. Inasmuch as we in IR have rummaged around in social theory pretty superficially (and I count myself here), there is no area that could not be put to better use. That said, I am myself most interested in cognitive, evolutionary, and moral psychology these days. Mostly because I like to read around, and this stuff keeps me thinking.

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

I take this question—the way I *understand* the world—to concern the philosophical assumptions informing my scholarship. For the first 15 or 20 years of my scholarly career, I was a philosophical ignoramus. Still am, of course, though I can say that I have plunged into several philosophical seas and not drowned. I started off as an unthinking,

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and therefore utterly conventional, philosophical realist. Doubts came with exposure to postmodern and radical feminist theorizing, and theorists, in the early 1980s. Reading Wittgenstein pushed me into the linguistic turn and Oxford-style ordinary language philosophy helped me rethink the links between speech, rules, and rule, and thus the premises of much of social theory. I do not recall when I first dug into Kant's First Critique, but I have never recovered from the experience—I still think of myself as a thoroughgoing philosophical idealist, not at all discomforted by the material *appearance* of the world. Around 1990, I took the better part of a sabbatical leave to read Aristotle from front to back, with cascading effects on my scholarship.

Having taught and spoken on IR theory all around the world, how would you say IR is studied and understood as a discipline in the US versus the UK/Europe, or indeed in South America or Asia?

I resist calling IR a discipline for reasons that should be obvious from my reply to the first two questions. Educated as I was in the US, I have always thought of it as a field of study in the discipline of political science, and I always took seriously the presumption that it was a field sufficiently at odds with the rest of political science to warrant excursions into other disciplines. In my case, this was history from the beginning (later reinforced by working with a brilliant historian who happens to be my brother). I also worked extensively in international law, but this was complicated by the vocational thrust of legal education in the US. Yet another complication is the vocational orientation of the so-called professional schools of international affairs, in which I taught for many years. Here again, disciplined scholarship and, especially, theory take a back seat to practical training and 'real-world experience.'

Now, I think it is an open question as to whether IR is understood as a discipline in the rest of the world. There are, of course, the trappings of a discipline now almost everywhere: journals and professional associations specifically devoted to IR, not to mention clannish behavior. The big difference between the US and elsewhere is the lack of separate IR departments in the US and their proliferation in many other countries. This is a large result of the globalization of IR, while political science has always been and will always be country-specific for obvious reasons.

So let me shift the terms of discussion here just a little bit. What I saw happening in the US over the last five decades is the professionalization of scholarship (and more generally the professionalization of the professions). This was the deep issue in the so-called second debate: disciplined, highly trained US scholars, committed to rigorous positivist science, lording over English gentleman-scholars as dabblers. As a wealthy country, the US could afford the big science model of the scholarly profession, and reaps significant rewards in doing so—all this contributed to the imposition of set standards for scholarly performance, the normalization of scholarly practices, and the hegemonial presumption that everyone else in the world should and eventually would do things our way.

It is no surprise that some scholars in the US resented this development and there is less discipline than demanded, but professionalization won out domestically and has made great inroads in the rest of the world (just consider the RAE process in the UK and the English School today). Combined with so many other facets of US hegemony, the globalization/professionalization of IR in accordance with the big science model has also been a source of resistance, which I see (and sympathize with) whenever I am abroad. I also see a significant improvement in standards for scholarship. Even if higher standards are a consequence of US hegemonial discipline, as I think they are, they are nevertheless to be welcomed.

What did you feel was missing from IR theory, with Realism and Liberalism as the main schools of thought, that you felt a new school of thought—Constructivism—was needed? What blanks do you feel it fills in in our understanding of International Relations?

At the time I wrote *World of Our Making*, most of us in the US took realism to be the field's frame of reference—indeed the umbrella theory that gave IR its coherence. Liberalism was on the outs, along with international law and institutions; realism had combined with a commitment to positivist science in deciding what counted as a contribution to knowledge. I did not feel a new approach was needed or, for that matter, that liberalism needed to be resuscitated. There are no 'blanks'—the very term implies a philosophical/social theoretic stance contrary to the one that I have already sketched.

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As I said in response to question 3, I had come increasingly to feel that a bottom-up revolution was needed. I also thought that a background in international legal theory gave me (and my friend Fritz Kratochwil) something distinctive and important to contribute to the cause. Constructivism's subsequent erection as IR's third pillar—in the US, no less—signaled the end of the uprising, the banishment of post-positivist, feminist, and critical renegades, and the normalization of IR as social science. As I suggested in my response to the last question, normalization and professionalization are hegemonial practices fueling the US vs. rest of the world dynamic. The question takes for granted that constructivism has been normalized. To the extent this is so, it is less by discipline than exclusion. That I, as a would-be revolutionary, should be among those who are effectively excluded is no great surprise.

What implications do you think that your book *World of Our Making* has had on the study of IR?

World of Our Making gives IR scholars an opportunity (incentive, excuse) to look beyond the world of states and their relations and ask how it, or any 'world,' has come to be what it is as a social arrangement, how people engage in world-making and to what effect, and how these two processes are, as we say perhaps too glibly, co-constitutive. The book also gives scholars good reasons to consider speaking as doing, rules as indispensable to social life, and rule, not anarchy, as the abiding condition of world politics.

I would say that constructivism thus conceived asks too much in a world where scholars have become ever more specialized in their interests and procedures. For that reason, it gets honorable mention when it gets any acknowledgment at all. Various people have gone ahead and worked on performative speech, rules in practice, and much else that I brought to attention, though often enough without realizing that I had already dealt with these matters. Few indeed have followed my initiatives with respect to rule and exploitation in world politics, even though there is much discussion of hegemony and hierarchy.

If identity and interests are a pre-given as constructivism argues, how would you argue that this framework can be used to help academics and students of IR understand and analyse current affairs, e.g. the crisis in Syria or in the Ukraine?

I would never say that identity and interests are pre-given. In my opinion, anyone who does say this does not have even the remotest idea what it means to talk about *social* construction. As a general proposition, ongoing processes of identity- and interest-formation give us little help in understanding crises in world politics. The converse proposition is, however, another matter: What is the impact of crises on processes of identity- and interest-formation? When, for example, Stefano Guzzini talks about identity-triggers, I think he is on to something.

In *International Legal Theory*, you outline the key developments and problems in the field of International Law. What do you feel the most transformative have been and how have they affected the study and practice of International Law? Since its publication in 2008, are there any problems or developments that you wish you could address?

When I first started working in international legal theory, I saw three large issues needing further work. I used to think of them as the three S's: the sources of international law, subjects of international law, and sanctions in international law. I wrote a great deal about the first, and some about the third, and very little about the second. I had my reasons at the time, but, looking back, I should probably have concentrated on the second, which has proven to be transformative. Instead I became increasingly interested in the properties of (legal) rules as instruments of social control, and this converged with a longstanding interest in world-order thinking and duly eventuated in my work on conditions of rule, to which I alluded earlier.

International Legal Theory marked my exit from active scholarship in/on international law. By happenstance, my departure coincided with a spirited revival of theoretical work among international lawyers, and something of a rapprochement between IL and IR. I have no regrets about bowing out when I did, because so many people today are working on the three S's in blissful ignorance of what I and others had written about decades earlier. The one exception is the discussion of 'the fragmentation of international law' as a reaction to accelerating functional differentiation in global administrative practice. Unlike me, Kratochwil has continued to engage international legal

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theory; his forthcoming book, *The Status of Law in World Society*, has far more to say about this development and its implications than I could possibly hope to.

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

As an old dog, I routinely dispense advice to young scholars whom I know well enough to think that my advice fits their circumstances. Rather than trying to guess what, in general, constitutes the most important advice I can give, let me list a few things. Ten, actually—ten rules for flourishing as a scholar in IR:

- 1) Preparing at length for classes does not make you a better teacher. Insofar as it dampens spontaneity, students will think you are boring; this will undercut the self-confidence you thought your lengthy preparations had purchased for you. And, of course, it steals valuable time from your scholarship.
- 2) Writing is a craft; writing well takes most of us a great deal of work. The usual practice is to think of a problem or issue, formulate a project, do 'research,' and then write it up. Bad idea. Keep writing at every stage, even if, in the end, you throw out most of what you have written. Writing makes the problem clearer, points up what more you need to do in the way of research, and, most of all, keeps your writing skills well-honed.
- 3) Don't send sloppy, badly crafted papers out for review. As a frequent referee, I see them all too often. Many referees will punish you, not always consciously, for doing so, even if they think you are on to something. Once you think you have a well-crafted piece of work, do send it out, because most referees and editors take their duties seriously and will give you valuable feedback.
- 4) Be cautious about taking on collaborative projects. We all know that scholarship is a lonely occupation. Collaboration reduces the loneliness quotient and can result in better work than any of the collaborators could have produced on their own. It can also result in a piece of work that no one is entirely happy with. Sometimes collaboration causes damaging tension and bad feelings because of temperamental differences, greater or lesser commitment to the project, and perceived inequities in the distribution of work. All that said, collaborating with my brother on two book projects was hugely rewarding. That it might have been hugely risky never occurred to us.
- 5) Be even more cautious in participating in symposium projects. Their thematic foci may not match your interests very well; they tend to be superficially refereed and thus are not taken seriously; they also tend to disappear quickly from view. There are exceptions—symposia that mark major developments in the field—but you'll have a pretty good idea if a particular symposium project has that potential. As a senior scholar, I contribute to symposia because it is fun to do projects with friends and I can afford the luxury. Most of all, avoid editing symposium volumes. This involves collaboration under the most difficult conditions. It is extraordinarily time consuming. Wrangling recalcitrant contributors is too often a thankless and disheartening responsibility.
- 6) Do not take on too many projects at one time. You will spread yourself too thin, miss deadlines, and make it all the more likely that you will succumb to the 90% rule—you run out of steam when any given project is 90% done and only needs some fine-tuning to be sent off. You will end up with a drawer full of nearly done projects that you have progressively lost interest in and will therefore never finish.
- 7) Dissertations are apprentice projects, immediately recognizable as such. Turning a dissertation into a book is probably the smart thing to do, but it will often take longer than writing the dissertation did. For most of us, it takes five years to write a good book; *World of Our Making* took me ten years. Whether you have that much time, institutionally speaking, is another matter.
- 8) Read every day. When I get up in the morning (early) and get my coffee, I read for 45 minutes. In my case, it has always been something that I do not have to read for whatever I am doing at the time. While this has broadened me immeasurably, for many scholars, a fixed time for reading is an opportunity—perhaps the only opportunity—to keep up on the literature in the field.

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9) Whether to jump on a trend in the field's scholarship, try anticipating a trend, come late to a trend but treat it critically, jump around from thing to thing, or plug away at something few others seem to be interested in is a tricky question, having much to do with temperament. It requires you to ask yourself how ambitious you are, how much you need validation from others, how long you can stay focused on one thing, et cetera.

10) On the assumption that you are smarter than most people (or you would not be a scholar), seek out people whom you know to be smarter than you in various obvious ways. On the one hand, the more of these people you know, the less intimidating you will find them, and the more you will learn from them. On the other hand, knowing really smart people will remind you of your own limitations and help you be less arrogant. Arrogance is, of course, a constant hazard in our line of work. I like to think that hanging out with people who are smarter than I am has been the key to my own success as a scholar. Some of them have been my students. (I could name names, but it would not be appropriate here.) As for making me less arrogant as a human being, anything I might venture to say about that can only sound—what is the right word?—arrogant.

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The interview was conducted by Rachel Denison. She is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR, and has a Masters degree in International Relations from the University of Sussex.