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Interview - Robert O. Keohane

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Robert O. Keohane is Professor of International Affairs, Princeton University. He is the author of*After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy (*1984) and *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World* (2002). He is co-author (with Joseph S. Nye, Jr.) *of Power and Interdependence* (fourth edition 2011), and (with Gary King and Sidney Verba) of *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994). He has served as the editor of the journal *International Organization* and as president of the International Studies Association and the American Political Science Association. He won the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order, 1989, and the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science, 2005. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Academy of Sciences. He has received honorary degrees from the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and Science Po in Paris, and is the Harold Lasswell Fellow (2007-08) of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening today in the field of international relations?

I think that the field of international relations – which should be called "world politics" for reasons that will become obvious below – has historically been most interesting when one of two developments occurred in the world: 1) there were new activities and processes to describe and attempt to explain; and 2) events took place that called into question existing theories – that created anomalies. In the first category I would include the appearance of systematic balance of power politics that appeared to create a sort of stability in a decentralized system, in the 18th and especially the 19th centuries; the creation of important intergovernmental institutions, especially after World Wars I and II; and the increasing levels of activity and significance of non-state actors, apparent in the 1970s and occurring at an accelerating rate after 1991. Also in the first category is sustained attention to human rights (most apparent after about 1975), as well as the so-called "democratic peace," which received attention from the early 1980s on. In the second category are the stability of the post-World War II bipolar system (anomalous for balance of power theory), which led to more attention to structural theory, especially in the work of Kenneth N. Waltz; and the generation and persistence of substantial international cooperation, which were anomalous for Realist theory, including structural theories.

Some of the most exciting research in the field now, in my view, seeks to describe and explain transnational regulatory activity, in which non-state actors seek to create institutions and rules designed to improve governance of particular issue-areas, including climate change. To what extent does such activity challenge the state and to what extent does its efficacy depend on state power? Do the most important effects of such activity bypass the state or go through it, by influencing domestic politics? These are important questions for students of world politics, which would not easily be encompassed by "international relations."

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

One way that how I understand the world has changed is that I now begin more explicitly with rationalistic theories of international relations than I did before 1980 or so. It seems to me that it should be a "rebuttable presumption" that agents use available information and adapt their behavior so that they expect it to lead to outcomes that suit their

preferences. This does not mean that they are perfect calculators – much less that they have full information – so they often make mistakes. But it does mean that if we understand their preferences, and how they view the world, we can make reasonably good estimates about their likely behavior. Of course, there will always be some "madmen in authority," in Keynes's phrase, who act differently; but usually, their policies will come to grief. Think of Hitler, and of Stalin and Mao in their last years.

Adopting a rational theory as a baseline also means that we can adopt what I called in *After Hegemony* a "functional theory of institutions." Institutions are meant to serve the purposes of their founders, who think rationally about the effects they will have. Hence we can speak about the "rational theory of institutions.' I do not use the phrase, "rational institutions," since many institutions are organizations and organizations never act as unitary rational actors would. But institutions can be understood, in part, as the creation of rational and self-interested actors who were sufficiently powerful to be able to shape them.

However, this rational institutionalist baseline is not sufficient. Especially since the 1990s, the richness of work in the field of world politics has led me to diversify my analytical framework for understanding the world more diverse. Domestic politics leads to behavior that is not rational from a unitary actor framework, even if the domestic political contenders are rational in pursuing their own interests. Ideas are often very important, including ideas that resist being assessed as rational or irrational, such as religious beliefs. People do to a considerable extent construct their own cognitive worlds; even if they behave rationally given those basic constructs, we have to understand these constructs to understand behavior. That is, a belief in rationality does not necessarily imply that material factors form the basis of preferences.

Nevertheless, I remain essentially a rational institutionalist: I think that the best core theory of world politics is one that begins with the incentives faced by powerful actors – incentives that are affected by domestic politics, ideas, intergovernmental institutions, and increasingly by the activities of transnational actors.

Which areas within international relations theory today do you see as either too heavily-focused or neglected?

I have been critical of work in the field that seems narrowly technical to me, not speaking to major questions. I wrote an article in the *Review of International Political Economy* on this subject in 2009 and do not wish to repeat its argument here. My answer to your Question #1 implies my general position: I think that we need to pay attention to what is happening in the world and not become too focused on esoteric arguments or questions the answer to which does not matter.

Many scholars cite the end of the Cold War or September 11th as events that radically changed their thinking. Has there been a singular event in history that has defined or radically altered your thinking?

First I would mention the Vietnam War. I was born in 1941 so was in my mid-20s when the war escalated, and I became an anti-Vietnam activist, chairing a political organization in Pennsylvania and speaking against the war at various anti-war events on college campuses. Ever since Vietnam I have been cautious about US military intervention in civil wars or against ruling regimes, especially in large and complex societies with values different than our own. I was therefore against the 2003 invasion of Iraq and I am not in favor of sending large numbers of Americans to Syria or sending large numbers of troops back to Afghanistan.

The end of the Cold War and September 11 were obviously very important events but they did not fundamentally change my thinking. I have focused on how international institutions can promote cooperation. The scope for such cooperation was vastly enlarged by the end of the Cold War but the need for it, and how we understand it, did not change. September 11 was different from earlier terrorist attacks only in magnitude so it is not clear to me why it should have fundamentally changed the thinking of scholars who had been paying attention to world politics.

You are regarded with Joseph Nye for having written *Power and Interdependence* (1977), but the buzzword synonymous with 'interdependence' today is globalisation. What do you make of the

relationship between globalisation and democratisation, as well as the relationship between globalisation and hegemony?

Indeed, globalization is the current word to describe the complex networks of interdependence in the contemporary world. Since globalization is a more systemic term, it fits the contemporary situation better.

Whether globalization reinforces democracy depends on the dominance of powerful democratic states: insofar as they are the most important actors in world politics, the networks of interdependence inherent in globalization are likely to promote democratization, at the margin. But the essential wellsprings of domestic political regimes are themselves domestic, so we should not expect a radical shift toward democratization as a result of globalization. (If the dominant actors in the world were authoritarian, globalization could promote authoritarian politics, also at the margin.)

Hegemony refers to the dominance of a single power. It is independent from globalization. One could have a hegemon in a globalized world (arguably the US between, say, 1991 and 2003), or one could have a hegemon in a non-globalized world. And either type of world could have no hegemon.

In *Anti-Americanism in World Politics* (2006) Peter Katzenstein and yourself note that there are four types of anti-Americanism: liberal, social, sovereign-nationalist, and radical anti-Americanism. With that in mind, how effective do you believe the Obama administration has been in abating the fervent anti-Americanism inherent during the George W. Bush presidency?

This is an empirical question. My impression is the Obama administration has alleviated fervent European anti-Americanism, which was primarily liberal and social (to use our categories, which are themselves analytical constructions, so I would not have said that there "are" four types of anti-Americanism). However, the way to find out about current levels of anti-Americanism, in Europe and elsewhere, is to check the Pew polls. I am doing some work on anti-Americanism in the Middle East and it is clearly virulent and unabated. See my paper on this subject with colleagues in *Perspectives on Politics*, March 2015.

Do you believe progress has been made over the last few decades in the field of international relations, and how do you see the field evolving in the decades to come?

The theoretical frameworks for understanding world politics (not "international relations") have been diversified, which is a good thing: we have a richer set of concepts to work with. Analytical tools, both qualitative and quantitative, have been refined and improved. Game theory has led us to understand that we cannot predict strategic interactions, which are (insofar as they verge on being zero-sum) inherently unpredictable. We have some at least partially tested theories that did not previously exist – for example, about the creation of international institutions or the impact of trade or human rights rules on state behavior. These are all worthwhile advances. But the analytical advances of the field will only have value, as I have emphasized, if the field focuses on important real problems and does not seek methodological purity above all other goals.

What would you say is the most important advice for a young scholar in IR?

As you develop important analytical skills, also: 1) read and understand the works of the best thinkers of previous generations, since they often contain depth and insight even if not informed by the most recent techniques; 2) ask yourself what the most important questions that interest you are, not simply the questions you have ready-made tools to answer; 3) keep your eyes open for new issues and new anomalies, since as a young scholar you are likely to perceive them more quickly than more senior scholars; 4) most important, while understanding conventional wisdom, challenge it. Maintain a skeptical attitude toward intellectual authority.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.