Interview - Justin Mueller

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E-IR has partnered with the journal *Politics* to bring a series of interviews with authors of a special section of its November 2016 edition titled 'Resurrecting IR Theory'. In this interview, Dr Justin Mueller discusses the themes of temporality, sovereignty and imperialism – and addresses the question '*when' is imperialism*. He is currently Lecturer at Northeastern University and his latest book is The Temporality of Political Obligation (Routledge 2016).

You can find the full article by the author here (requires login / access).

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

Appropriately enough, I am really excited about the increasing attention being paid to the role of time and temporality in world politics. E-IR's recent publication *Time, Temporality, and Global Politics* (2016) is just one testament to this, and includes some deeply insightful authors, like Kimberly Hutchings, who have influenced my own thinking. There is also amazing work being done with regards to the role of time in gender, sovereignty, democracy, race, war, and capitalism. In my own efforts to contribute to this, I have focused on issues of time and political obligation, freedom, social control, and more recently, imperialism.

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

I think that most of the changes of my worldview have involved the steady development of two trends. First, a longstanding drive to denaturalize and disenchant existing forms of social organization and power relations. Second, as an extension of the first, learning how to see the complex different ways in which inequality, domination, and hierarchy are created and sustained. I have been fascinated for as long as I can remember by how people come to accept, ignore, or even find fulfillment in different constellations of violence, systems of control, structures of authority, and mechanisms of disempowerment. My best guess is that I was exposed to the Holocaust, existentialism, and fantasy and science fiction writing (especially Ursula K. LeGuin, one of the most creative and analytically sharp social science fiction authors of all time) way too early for these not to leave an impact.

My earliest shifts were part of a rather haphazard process of getting into a lot of arguments, losing them, and then reassembling the pieces with better materials. Marx and Nietzsche loomed large early on. Marx let me think about inequality and class as a process for the first time, while Nietzsche provided an insurgent ethos for individuality, intentional doubt, and life fulfillment. The existential psychoanalysts and anarchists affected my thinking about authority and our internalized and intersubjective relationships with power. I encountered post-structural ideas by way of Max Stirner, oddly enough, and only later Foucault and company. Judith Butler and Cynthia Enloe let me really see gender in world politics, while Patricia Hill Collins, Joel Olson, WEB DuBois, Michelle Alexander and others allowed me to see the workings of race and racialization. Each of these encounters exposed something for me that I couldn't unsee afterwards and I cherish them for that.

The biggest shift in my thinking was encountering time and temporality as a mutable sociopolitical force, out of which we fashion shelter, tools, weapons, and direction for life. It connects to so much that is crucial for our existence, yet for this very reason slips into the background of practical life. My friend and former advisor, Michael A. Weinstein,

helped me see that for the first time in his seminars and several of his dozens of books, and learning to see it was a process that really took my breath away. Subsequently, it was through Henri Bergson and then Gilles Deleuze that I found more tools to examine time more carefully in political analysis. Reading great scholars of temporality like R.B.J. Walker also helped me link that mode of thinking with the peculiarities of world politics.

Distinguish for our readers between formal and informal imperialism, and how, despite their differences, they both maintain a troublesome answer to question of "when" is imperialism?

Formal imperialism refers to the formal control or acquisition of one state by another, and the integration (to some degree) of that conquered state into the power structure of the imperial home state or "metropole". Great Britain's official imperial control and administration of India is an example of formal imperialism. The concept of informal imperialism is usually used to refer to persistent forms of domination and exploitation of one state by another that are unofficial, yet still quite real. The role of economic institutions in maintaining asymmetries of power have been especially important for theorists of informal imperialism. The history of the dominance of the U.S.'s United Fruit Company in Guatemala is an example of this kind of imperialism. There was official independence of the subordinated country, however simultaneously there was preponderant economic control by the United Fruit Company. This control was sustained through the economic institutions of markets and concentrated company ownership, and was reinforced by coups, puppet regimes, death squads, and an occasional "police action" invasion as needed.

Both of these conceptions of imperialism allow us to see something important about relations of persistent domination, violence, vulnerability, and exploitation. In order to highlight the power relations within imperialism, the relations and processes constituting "internal" state rule are normalized, reified, and pre-emptively defined as different in kind than those of imperialism. The "external" is highlighted as imperialism, but only by obscuring and naturalizing the "internal" and the continuities between them.

Describe the relationship between a spatial and a temporal analysis of imperialism

The conventional spatial conception of imperialism treats imperialism as something that exists outside of the boundaries of legitimate state sovereignty. It is the notion that imperialism is what happens when political and economic power spill over their natural banks. The *conventional* temporality that supports this spatial conception of imperialism would be the idea that a state's imperialism "begins" where its sovereignty ends. In order for this way of thinking about imperialism to make sense, people have had to engage in what R.B.J. Walker refers to as a "discourse of eternity" wherein the state and its sovereignty is treated as an effectively timeless, semi-Platonic form of social organization encompassing things as diverse as ancient Athens and the modern United States.

If state sovereignty is treated as a given then a state's various zones, modes, and institutions of rule also become naturalized as givens. If the analysis relies on a sense of practical givenness, then resistance to this conception is seen as futile. The sovereign state is transformed into the default, against which other political relations are evaluated. Even while scholars may admit a state's historical contingency, they usually bracket it off from their conclusions about the naturalized character of state sovereignty today.

While treating state sovereignty as a given in order to conceptualize imperialism can have practical and normative value, it has negative side effects. It normalizes the overt and structural violence, domination, and inequalities that sustain that rule, which is itself a dubious practice for us as scholars to acquiesce to. But, it also affects the kind of political ontology we can use by pre-emptively limiting our ability to see continuity between sovereign state rule and imperialism.

The *critical* temporal conception of imperialism I use essentially refuses to grant this presumed qualitative distinction, and refuses to affirm the discourse of eternity and state legitimacy that undergirds it. Instead, in setting those aside and by showing the continuities between imperialism and sovereign state rule, we can then see sovereign state rule as *always-already* imperial in nature. A state doesn't "begin" to be imperial by overstepping its sovereign bounds. Rather, its effective exercise of sovereignty presumes its ability to engage in imperial processes of domination,

control, and exploitation, and asymmetric conditions of vulnerability between those in positions of dominance and those subject to their authority. These are constitutive features, inflected by things like histories of resistance to rule and elite concessions offered to sustain systemic stability. When conventional "imperial" activities appear to stand out to us it is not because they are different in kind, but because they are extensions of the always-already existing imperial practices supporting sovereign state rule without the varnish of legitimacy that subjects of states are usually socialized into perceiving (with the aid of a variety of other temporal constructs I discuss in my book,*The Temporality of Political Obligation* (Routledge, 2016)).

Why is using imperialism to frame the concept of sovereignty important for analyzing current global issues?

There are a few advantages that come with framing sovereignty as being contiguous with imperialism. Analytically, it helps us avoid pre-emptively (if implicitly) legitimizing relationships of domination, exploitation, and violence by refusing to grant states one of their primary tools of rationalizing themselves and the inequities that constitute them: the status of sovereignty and all its connotations.

This critical temporal conception of imperialism still allows us to make use of the traditional concept of imperialism, but in even more flexible ways. I try to emphasize that conventional conceptions of imperialism are of value. They are powerful for polemically and analytically highlighting and making visible conditions of vulnerability, brutality, exploitation, and degradation because the concept of imperialism has become intertwined with that of illegitimacy (in part because of this spatial conception of imperialism and sovereignty). By dropping their conventional temporality, however, we can actually deploy the frame of imperialism in more situations, to highlight other comparable conditions within and outside of the boundaries of a state. That, after all, is one of the key values of the idea of "internal" colonialism/imperialism developed by radical Chicano/a and Black theorists like Harold Cruse. It sets aside this veil between the sovereign and imperial and allows us to see the processes of constituting sovereign state rule as always-ready imperial.

Why do you think there hasn't been much exploration of the temporal elements of imperialism thus far in the field of IR?

I think that one good reason is simply rooted in the traditional function of the concept of imperialism in IR scholarship and political practice. Despite its limitations, the traditional spatial account of imperialism has definite cash value for criticizing aggressive projections of power abroad and persistent forms of politico-economic domination and exploitation. It is easy to see the appeal of criticizing imperialism as a violation of sovereignty when such important stakes are on the line. This reason likely also combines with a second one, namely that people usually do see sovereignty and imperialism as different in kind because they accept the legitimacy and normalcy of state sovereignty as such. If that is a starting assumption, then the conventional spatial analysis of imperialism follows easily.

In your article, you dismiss the concept that statehood could be a mutually beneficial social contract, and that there are always elements of power imbalance and coercion in the making of even a sovereign state. Can you imagine a situation in which this isn't true?

No. This is in large part, however, an artifact of definitions and political ontology. As I see it, it isn't just that there is power imbalance and coercion "even" in a sovereign state, but rather *especially* in a sovereign state. The sovereign state is the culmination of the same logic contained in imperialism; managing asymmetries of power, economic exploitation, repressive violence, and control of subordinated groups. That logic isn't superseded and transmuted, it simply becomes (at best) mediated and constrained in response to differentiated histories of resistance and institutional integration. That sovereign states (especially liberal democracies) are normalized today and widely perceived to be legitimate is not itself evidence that they are different in kind. This perceived legitimacy and qualitative difference should instead be understood as an artifact of the effectiveness of states' culmination of the imperial logic. It is an effect of various political mechanisms of self-subjection and discipline. We can say that this

perception is a kind of Stockholm Syndrome in relation to the state's monopoly on violence.

Now, I can of course imagine forms of sovereign states wherein people have more successfully resisted exploitation and extortion, where redistributive concessions have been won, and with more resilient forms of economic democratization. I can imagine sovereign states containing more substantially organized popular counter-power that could better resist the tendencies of state institutions to recuperate and enervate social movements. I can imagine sovereign states where the autonomy of elites has been more comprehensively brought to heel for fear of public displeasure. I can imagine sovereign states where there is a closer correlation between popular will and political action, and less mediation between the two. I would much prefer to live under such states instead of more brutal, uncontrollable, and exploitative ones. We could even call these historically rooted struggles for political and economic concessions, institutionalized limitations on state authority, or the enactment of desirable social functions something like "mutually beneficial" – at least in the barest technical sense. Non-elites can often lay claim to *something* more beneficial for themselves than abject degradation and arbitrary violence, while elites may feel compelled to provide some goods to remain in their positions. But, this is hardly compatible with the idea of consent, equity, or a harmony of interests implied in the conventional liberal notion of the social contract.

I think that no sovereign state could abandon its coerciveness and hierarchical power relations and still lay claim to being a sovereign state. To supersede these features by supplanting hierarchical, centralized, compulsory political authority would be to create a qualitatively distinct form of collective organization utterly unlike a state in every way.

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

The most important advice I would give (for the purposes of thinking better, more carefully, and more deeply about the world) is to read as much as possible from outside the formal field of International Relations, as soon as possible. There is certainly much of value there, but like all disciplines it has blind spots and priorities. Some things that count as "problems" in IR can evaporate under scrutiny from alternative disciplinary vantage points, or come out radically reconfigured. Although I have been swimming in the IR world from the beginning of my college education, I am primarily a political theorist by training and so already approached IR with a somewhat different set of interests and predilections. But, I have also had the fortune to be surrounded by historians and historical scholarship more recently, and the tools and perspective that has provided has been wonderful and challenging to many of the "givens" of IR.

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This interview was conducted by Kaela Bamberger. Kaela is a Commissioning Editor at E-IR.