Interview - Giorgio Shani

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E-IR met with Prof. **Giorgio Shani** at the Department of International Politics at Aberystywth University where he was invited to deliver the International Politics Research Seminar. Prof. Shani presented his latest research on *Civilizing Process or Civilizing Mission? Toward a Post-Western Understanding of Human Security*.

Giorgio Shani is Professor of Politics and International Relations at International Christian University (ICU) in Japan and a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Centre of International Studies (CIS) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He is serving as President of the Asia-Pacific Region of the International Studies Association (ISA). His publications include Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age (Routledge, 2008) and Religion, Identity and Human Security (Routledge, 2014). He is currently revisiting his work for a co-authored book on *Sikh Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press). He is co-editor with Prof. Mustapha Pasha of the Rowman and Littlefield International book series Critical Perspectives on Religion in International Politics. He has reconceptualised Human Security along post-secular lines and his publications include influential articles on 'post-western' International Relations Theory.

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

I think that the most exciting debates happening in IR at the moment are those that concern the eclipse of Western hegemony in the field. In particular, there is an emerging conversation within what I term 'post-Western' IR between those scholars who are content with 'provincializing' Eurocentric narratives and attempts at 'reworlding' that seek to 'decolonize' subaltern spaces where different understandings of the international can be articulated. I see both as inherently *normative* rather than analytical projects. Two recent works which have already had an impact upon IR here in the UK are John Hobson's *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Robbie Shilliam's *The Black Pacific* (Bloomsbury, 2015). The former takes a historical sociological approach to argue that IR Theory is based on a Eurocentric conception of World Politics while the latter takes a decolonial approach that attempts to go beyond Eurocentric narratives by privileging alternate sites for a discussion of the international. My earlier work attempted to do something similar with Sikhi(sm) but was caught up in a critique of Eurocentrism in IR. Thanks to Hobson's book (and the work of Inayatullah and Blaney beforehand), we may not need to rehearse the well-worn critique of Western hegemony before discussing alternative, 'non-Western' approaches. This is what I hope to do with alternative discourses of security by bringing in 'religious' traditions. See the conclusion to my Religion, Identity and Human Security (Routledge 2014)

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

My view of the world was formed during my days as an undergraduate at LSE when the sudden collapse of Communism exposed the failure of secular solutions to the problems posed by global capitalism. Communism reified the role of the state within society and greatly strengthened its totalitarian hold upon society. Liberal discourses of Human Rights, by buying into the ontological individualism of global capitalism, were unable to protect the individual from the rapacious and pernicious downside risks of neo-liberal globalization, stimulating the search for ontological security in communitarian discourses of nation and religion.

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As a graduate student at SOAS, I focused on the interplay between religion and nationalism with reference to the Sikh community of South Asia and the diaspora. My choice of case study was dictated by background (my father was a Sikh) but the processes I studied I believed were universal and not merely confined to a particular geographic area of the world. At SOAS, I was exposed to subaltern studies by my supervisor, Sudipta Kaviraj. Subaltern studies sought to take the work of Antonio Gramsci and apply it in a South Asian context, thus revealing the limits of Western Marxism in accounting for the worldview of those marginalized from conventional narratives of History as progress. However, there was a romanticism and implicit Eurocentrism in the application of subaltern studies in a non-Western context. It was only when I started to take my object of study, the Sikhs, more seriously that I realized that there could be alternative conceptions of universality at work.

This appreciation for alternative conceptions of universality in your research on Sikh nationalism has made you a leading figure in 'post-western' IR. Is being an academic author all that one can do to pave the way towards 'post-Western' sensibilities? In particular, have you been able to support 'post-western' IR with strategies beyond academic publications and how important or feasible is this?

I would not suggest for a moment that I am a 'leading figure' in any sort of IR due to my location outside of the Anglo-sphere but I feel that my position at the ISA allows me to bring scholars from the unrepresented areas of the Asia-Pacific together. Almost 451 participants registered from the 2016 ISA Asia-Pacific Region conference at City University of Hong Kong, many of whom were early career researchers who participated in a professional development workshop organized by Asia-Pacific Vice-President Professor Lorraine Elliott (ANU). The region provided travel grants for scholars from less economically 'developed' areas of the Asia-Pacific, most notably South East Asia and South Asia. However, there are limits as to what can be achieved from within ISA given its location in the United States and its North American identity. To this end, I have sought to engage with younger scholars from the Global South and recently taught a short course on Human Security at the invitation of the Government of India at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, the most prestigious Muslim university in India. Given my own research interests, I learned as much from the students, many of whom were junior faculty, as they learned from me and hope to connect them with other groups of early career researchers with whom I have interacted in the UK (especially Aberystwyth and LSE), Japan and China. In my view, 'post-Western IR' is a *project* rather than an intellectual exercise or 'school' within IR and the only way we can avoid reproducing stale critiques of Eurocentrism is to bring early career researchers from outside the West into mainstream debates about the 'discipline'.

The concept of Human Security has given emancipatory potential to the individual against a state-centric mind-set and research-style present in much of IR. Has this deprived us from understanding and exploring sources that guarantee the individual's security and stable sense of belonging to the world?

My main argument is that Human Security, as a 'problem-solving' concept, has failed to provide security because it objectifies the 'human' as an individual to be protected and empowered and, therefore, does not take into account *existential* insecurity which is the focus of psycho-sociological accounts of security. Both concepts are problematic but psycho-sociological accounts of security may allow us to reconceptualize Human Security as an emancipatory project by providing a non-materialistic understanding of security as freedom and dignity.

You seem unconvinced by the turn to the local and local agency in peace-building. How do you perceive the future of a just peace for the post-colonial subject in a world of UN failures, global economic inequalities, failed states, and increasing migration?

The 'local' turn in 'post-liberal' peacebuilding as illustrated by the Berlin Report of the Human Security Studies Group represents an attempt to address the absence of local ownership in peacebuilding processes. Rather like Liberal multiculturalism on a global scale, it seeks to recognize difference in order to strengthen *a priori* liberal assumptions about individual autonomy and the nature of peace and security. The 'post-colonial' approach which I am advocating would be premised on a 'post-secular' or 'post-Western' understanding of security which seeks to account for different conceptions of peace, freedom and dignity in different cultural traditions rather than universalizing 'Western' notions of security and seeking to adapt them to local contexts. This was the central argument of my book Religion, Identity and Human Security (Routledge 2014)

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Would you relate Donald Trump's victory to a feeling of existential insecurity among working class white men in a de-industrialized US?

I think that race (and to a lesser extent gender) was more of a factor in determining support for Trump than class. The majority of white voters of both sexes elected Trump (62% male and 53% female) and he outperformed Clinton on those earning more than $50,000 a year (49% to 47%) while a majority of those earning under $50,000 voted for Clinton (52%), thus qualifying the narrative that it was the white working class who voted for Trump. However, there is no doubt that Trump managed to tap into the existential insecurity and anxiety felt by working class Americans in key rust belt states hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis (which occurred in President Bush's tenure in the White House) and the jobless recovery under Obama. He did so by articulating a non-ideological sense of white, male privilege under siege from successive waves of globalization, feminism, political correctness. The more he was attacked; the more he was able to attract support from those alienated from a political process which was designed to guarantee their interests. The fact that he was able to carry religiously conservative states, despite criticism of his policies and lifestyle from the religious right, also suggests that he was able to tap into a very 'thin' understanding of 'Christian' values stripped down to its bare bones.

In a world that is rapidly and irreversibly changing due to technology and where previous certainties crumble under the rise of the far right in the West, where do you see the future of liberalism? Is post-liberalism more imaginable now after the 2008 financial crisis and Trump's victory ?

I understand Liberalism as a secularized form of Judeo-Christian ethics, particular to a certain spatio-temporal tradition: that of the modern West. The Liberal world order is linked to Western hegemony which is challenged by the rise of China and also India. The turn to populist nationalism in the West is linked not to a repudiation of this ethical code but to a reassertion of naked power based on the lowest common denominator of race.

Do you believe that religion can still play any role in the formation of post-liberalism in the West or is religion of concern only for non-Western societies? For example, is a renewed religious commitment necessary to reject individualism in economics and culture given the failures of liberal capitalism and democratic majoritarian politics that reduce all concepts of value to "market" value?

Given that I understand Liberalism as a secularized form of Judeo-Christian ethics, I would say that religion is still present in a 'thin' form (i.e., a secularized form) in Western societies. Post-liberalism is, therefore, a form of 'post-secularism;' it exposes the Judeo-Christian roots of modernity. A 'renewed religious commitment' is therefore unnecessary as it is already there in the West. What is absent is the input of non-Western "values" in the public sphere, particularly alternative understandings of community and political economy.

You were the Director of the Rotary Peace Center at International Christian University (ICU), Tokyo, Japan. Being both a critical scholar and the Director of this Center, what do you think is the contribution of Rotary and of Rotary Peace Centers to global peace?

I was Director of the Rotary Peace Center at ICU which is the only peace center offering graduate level education in Asia and one of only 7 centers worldwide. Our approach- or at least my approach when I was Director- was to offer a space for practitioners to reflect on their experiences in the 'field' and introduce them to 'critical' literature on peace and conflict studies and IR in general. Many have gone on to have academic careers but some have continued to work for NGOs or used Rotary as a stepping stone to land jobs with international organizations and the specialized agencies of the UN in particular. Time will only tell if they have an impact on policy formulation (or norm setting) on an international level.

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

Study something you are interested in and not what gets you a scholarship or a job.

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This interview was conducted by Alexandros Koutsoukis. *Alexandros is a Commissioning Editor for IR Theory at E-IR.*