Interview - Charlotte Epstein

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Where do you see the most exciting research or debate happening in the field of post-structural approaches to IR?

Actually I'm more intrigued by one thing that has *not* happened in the discipline at large over the last decade and a half. There was a really important moment in the early 1990s, where, against a backdrop of great uncertainty in the international system, IR finally opened up to concepts and other ways of problematizing the political from other disciplines; and was all the richer for it. What has surprised me is that, instead of staying with that moment, and really mining it to the full, people have rushed on to other things – practices, the material, the quantic, assemblages, you name it….

The key resource that was brought to the discipline at that juncture was language; and the connection that hasn't really taken as much as it should have – and really ought to be explored some more: a word to the wise young scholars out there – is that between understanding that the social world is not 'given' but indeed socially constructed, and realizing that discourses are a privileged site for apprehend these processes of social construction. You learn a lot from a culture or a society by examining how they talk about, say, whales (but, replace whales with taxes, the state, austerity, China: the prevalent signifier of the times), which in turn determines what they do with whales (or taxes or China etc.). Or, to rephrase that in more theoretical terms, discourses are modes of social organization, and they stake out the possibilities for behaving in some ways, and not in others, because they establish which behaviours are considered 'normal' or acceptable and which are not.

Not that I have anything against the material; indeed, my current work is on surveillance and the body. But it strikes me that the field is being swept away in what I can't help seeing as a huge nostalgia for the concrete and the tangible, at a time where all is increasingly dissolving into the digital; at a time were we are all becoming our data doubles or indeed 'data subjects', to use the term at the heart of the new EU data protection law. It's not specific to IR, it's a tidal wave that coursing through the humanities and social sciences at large, and it's definitely a sign of our times. But in IR, it has had that that effect I've just described. Moreover in IR it's often based on a poor theorisation of a divide between the material and the ideational, which has well and truly passed it's use by date and which is artificially kept up in this way. In the history of thought, this was a divide cooked up by the materialists to critique 'the other camp'. This began with Marx's (misplaced) critique of Hegel. An example of this misunderstanding at work: discourses were always already practices….so why the need to move on to a new concept?

It's funny, because IR likes to claim it's Hobbesian lineage; but Hobbes did emphasise the centrality of language from

the onset. The state of nature is a state of war because individuals don't have a common language and cannot understand each other – let alone cooperate. I've developed that point in my *International Organization* piece.

Anyways, to come back to your question, one area I find promising at the moment is the nexus between post-structuralism and postcolonial IR. There's a profound and healthy desire at work today to move IR beyond the West, to find ways of thinking about international politics that does not always already reproduce the US-and Eurocentric schemes that lie in the discipline's foundation. Indeed, IR belongs – or should belong – to the whole world! It's a deep and enduring undercurrent, and it will be interesting to see what it yields. It's certainly one of the reasons I moved to Australia – although it turns out it's not easy for Australia to come to terms with its own post(neo?)coloniality and to position itself in the non-West, but that's another story. Another is the impulse to move beyond reason and 'rationalism' in all of its guises. I have in mind the work around the non-rational, although I do have my reservations about the category (not the thing) 'emotions', insofar as, conceptually, it's the binary opposite of 'reason'. Hence there's a danger that the concept itself rehearses the binary and with it, ends up holding the primacy of reason. But the turn to the psychoanalytic – to which I've contributed – is especially promising; and to the narrative and the interpretive in all its forms; as are the journals that encourage these explorations –*Security Dialogue* or the new *Journal of Narrative Politics*.

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

I owe a lot to my training in the classics and the humanities, I must say. In Paris, I went through the famously gruelling *classes préparatoires à l'Ecole Normale Superieure*, also known as 'hypokhâgne et khâgne'. They are the ones all the French authors you can think of went through (Foucault, Bourdieu, de Beavoir, Sartre, Derrida, Bataille, you name them; but not Lacan, he was trained as a doctor). When I remember those days; the ruthlessness, the rigour, the discipline and sheer amount of work demanded of us, I'm reminded how students nowadays have no idea what studying hard means. What's for sure is that it has left me with a solid basis of general knowledge for understanding what is specific to each discipline (we left those classes with minors in seven disciplines), and how thought doesn't take just shape out of the blue but is inscribed in a particular historical context – that Aristotle was responding to Plato, Spinoza to Descartes and Hobbes, Hegel to Kant, and Marx to Hegel; Foucault and Derrida both to Levi-Strauss and Sartre….. What it has left me with, especially, is a strong structure for learning how to learn; which I guess is the purpose of education. A few pillars stand out more than others in that structure, a few favourites that I'm regularly drawn back to: Hegel and Spinoza, and Nietzsche, but that's probably a bit more predictable for me.

Discovering Foucault, which I did on my own, caused a real earthquake. I still think he can cause nothing less to anyone who really begins to get their head around what he is saying – I see this happen with my students who get serious about him. Indeed, it's a very lonely moment, when you start to realise just how true it is; how we are played by power relations, just how much we take on discourses we don't own, and abide by norms we've had no role in shaping and haven't questioned…. And yet he is unavoidable, for any one who is interested in power – and surely the whole of IR is?

Foucault's mode of thought, genealogy, was also important to my way of seeing the world. It is a way of mobilising history to account for the way we got to where we are, which also enables you to step out of this present – which is the whole purchase of critical thinking. It's a profoundly robust and alive form of thought that breaks down disciplinary blinkers, makes the past relevant to the present, and *does* something, because it brings into view the paths that were not taken in the making of the present, and the particular modes of domination underwriting this present.

But, in addition to this substance of his thought and his method, Foucault was important to me for firming up what had been but a rough hunch and yet had motivated my choice to leave philosophy for IR, which is that philosophy is no longer where thought is happening today. Or, to put in Hegelian terms, 'Geist' has left philosophy. Foucault actually articulated this (but not in these Hegelien terms) in an interview I discovered quite late, and that rang very true for me.

Someone else who exemplifies this point, and who was also a decisive influence on me, on many levels, was Judith

Butler – who is not in a philosophy department. Butler provided, amongst other things, an important bridge for me, showing me how 'French' thought could be very effectively mustered in English. Being in England at the time – and in Cambridge at that –, this was a space I hadn't yet found and didn't know how to navigate. She was also a bridge between two of my key interests, power – the social level – and psychoanalysis – the individual level. And there, Jacques Lacan, whom I also discovered on my own *and* through the practice of psychoanalysis, was decisive. More recently, there's been, first, Sartre, whose importance I had underestimated as a philosophy (even if his understanding of psychoanalysis was terrible). I'm especially interested at the moment in the phenomenological lineage from Hegel to Sartre. And second, Bataille. He is an old love – he was one of the main authors I used in my masters thesis in philosophy. But I've recently become interested in his work on the economy.

Another event that was important to my way of seeing the discipline was 'ex-centering' myself from IR's cores – the US and the EU – by moving to Australia. But what that did to me was re-awaken an ex-centering I had already experienced in my childhood: I was born and grew up in Kenya. And the 're-centering' of my subjectivity that my parents attempted to achieve by moving to Paris had always been a strain. This is what underwrites my interest in the postcolonial. So it was a shift that re-awakened an old experience.

So I guess I'm not answering your question on a linear mode, in terms of a progression. But I think that's accurate: I think the way inspiration – for want of a better word — works, for me, is that there are developments in the world that catch my attention, such as, at the moment, the exponential rise of surveillance; and they re-awaken some of the seeds that were planted along the way. For surveillance, that is all at once Foucault, Lacan and Butler, actually. But of course, I may have noticed that particular aspect of our world because the seed was planted initially….

Despite the relatively young age of IR its history has been marked by numerous debates about whether IR is a social science or something else. Given the diverse approaches in the field, do you feel it is important for IR to categorize itself?

What I like about IR is just how confused it is about itself! And I really mean that: though it can be frustrating some times, and I've expressed some of my own frustrations, all in all, it also makes it for a much richer theoretical space then some of the political science sub-fields – to use the US categorisation for a second – where you see the same signifiers or obsessions repeating themselves over and over (e.g. 'democracy).

Your most pronounced contribution to IR theory has been your insight into Constructivism's failure to account for the role of language in power relations. Outside of the arena of environmental politics, what other arenas would stand to benefit from an analysis of language and discourse?

Are environmental politics the only arena of IR were power relations are at play? They happen to have offered a first area which showed the connection you underline, between language and power relations but that was accidental. It is, rather, the other way around: wherever there are power relations, which, in IR (as in politics at large actually) is everywhere, there are discourses through which they are exercised, and challenged.

So it is not really a matter of deciding *a priori* which area is relevant, but rather of seeking to identify, in any given policy area, the play between a dominant and dominated discourse, which is generally an alternative way of framing the same issues that have been actively excluded. Here's an example, since you ask for one: just after George W. Bush proclaimed the 'War on Terror', the French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin responded by saying that 'this is not a war'. That attempt to challenge the dominant framing was obviously flushed out, the 'war on terror' discourse readily established itself as the dominant and still unchallenged discourse ever since. And that kind of analysis can be undertaken in any arena where power relations are at play – which is to say, all of them.

But behind your question, I think there's a distinction at work, between the big theoretical questions around the use of *language* to study politics, which is a field in its own right, and the more hands-on analyses of the specific *discourses* that regulate issue-areas – and they are ordered by specific discourse. It's the classic distinction between discourse (or language) as theory and as method. David Howarth's book is very good on that.

A wide body of your research also deals very heavily with the intersection of politics, discourses, and the human body. As IR theory tends to prioritize the analysis of systems and groups, is the individual, as both human and subject, an underrepresented agent of analysis in IR?

I don't think the individual is underrepresented. It has always been a central unit of analysis for IR from the onset, whether explicitly or implicitly. Take, for example, what we might call the most classic or oldest approaches to IR, the rationalist approaches. They're highly individualistic! The 'interest maximiser' is an individual – 'preferences' are held by individuals, who then (in that logic) make up a group or a country. Or, to rephrase that differently, the individual is the implicit figure at the heart of these rationalist approaches, but also, and here's the rub, in mainstream constructivist approaches as well. What I show in my piece 'Theorising Agency' is that the problem with mainstream constructivism is that it has never managed to move away from this methodological individualism and thus really embrace the 'social construction of'. If only they'd turned seriously to language…

Another way of showing this, from a different quarter of the discipline, is with what the English School has called the 'domestic analogy', a term it coined to capture the pervasive, albeit un-theorised assumption that states are likes individuals; hence that what works for individuals works for states as well.

So I think what's at stake is actually coming to terms with what has always been there in the discipline. IR has always had levels-of-analysis, that's in fact an old – rationalist – expression, which remains helpful for coming to terms with the fact that IR's object, what makes it different from other disciplines that also study the political, is the international system – another classic expression. What's interesting to me is to find pertinent ways of travelling up and down these, and of course, to break out of the limited ways in which these have been travelled so far.

And I do think a major shortcoming in IR thinking has been around the nexus between the individual and *reason* that has been locked into IR, and that it has inherited from political science – and for very concrete institutional reasons, given that IR is a sub-field of political science in the US, and given the US's prevalence in the discipline's history. But this reductive focus on rationality leaves out everything that exceeds, precedes or supersedes reason: the irrational, the unconscious, the corporeal. And yes, I'm interested in theorising these for IR.

So, as you can see, for me, it's a process of sorting: what can be recovered from the discipline's classic history, and what needs to be shaken up, to better study the international.

What, in your estimation, is the largest contribution offered by the study of discourses and language in IR?

In a way I've been answering that question all along, but there is one more key point to add. Discourses offer profound insights into the extent to which political identities are so fragile and unstable, yet so potent, in terms of determining courses of action. I think that's what makes discourse, as a form of political analysis, so 'scary'. It's profoundly unsettling to come to grips with the fragility of identities, both collective and personal…. Yet one look at the world right now is enough to drive home just how real that fragility is.

To be a little more specific, discourses draw out how identities are constituted by a process of boundary-drawing around the 'self' in opposition to an 'other'. And yet this boundary-drawing is never achieved once and for all, it's a performance that constantly requires being reiterated. It is one of the crucial political functions of foreign policy, as our critical security scholars have shown. And, crucially, the 'other' – who gets to be the other, or who is unlucky enough to be the other –, and correspondingly, the 'self', changes at key moments.

So, discourse matters because it gives us crucial insights into how identities motivate action, how it leads to particular courses of action and not others. But also and more broadly, they help us understand how the fields of action themselves are staked out: what courses of action are considered acceptable, and which are not. I showed that with whaling – where the 'acceptable' course of action was dramatically inverted in the second half of the 20th century, but whaling was an exemplar, you could show this with most things.

In a 2011 lecture you discussed the impact biometric technologies have had on one-way surveillance, but encryption technologies, amongst others, are allowing increasingly to defend against such surveillance. What effect is this having on the politics of surveillance and *Panopticism*?

The idea that some technologies are the problem, while others are going to bring the solution is too simplistic – and indeed already troubled by the fact that biometrics too, along with encryption, are also now used to secure personal electronic devices; while they *also* continue to be used to track people's movements and to gather their private information. In India, the world's second largest population is being registered into a massive biometrics database, which will ultimately enable the crossing of every citizen's personal data. Needless to say, the potential for privacy intrusions and indeed abuses is mindboggling. But this is music to the biometrics industry's ear, insofar as their fantasy, or their aim – you choose –; at any rate, that which would enable the technology's most optimal functioning is a database in which every single human being – alive *and* dead, since a dead body's fingerprints are very usable – is registered.

What I discussed in that keynote you refer to, then, and in the 2016 article that ensued from it in *Body and Society* (and builds on my 2007 article in *International Political Sociology),* and the one I still think we need to continue to get our heads around, is the broader phenomenon of surveillance itself. We've only just started scrapping the tip of that iceberg. And a huge part of it is not the surveillance by states – although that has been the main focus of my work so far –; not just vertical surveillance, but horizontal surveillance. That's the massive undertaking in which technology firms have thrown itself to monitor each of our every moves, and our famous 'preferences', and for which they are increasingly enlisting own complicity, our surveillance of each other via social media that are offering us, for free, tools of mass data collection. (They are not free, of course: the data we 'produce' is what we are 'charged'). 'Surveillance capitalism', as Shoshana Zuboff has called it, is the new frontier in this panoptic dynamics you refer to – although I'd like to point out that it was well and truly prepared for by Foucault's theorization of 'governmentality'. I agree with Zuboff that we are the cusp of a new form of capitalism, where data is the new 'black gold, the form of capital, and for which consumption itself has become a mode of production – but the profits are reaped, not by the consumers…

So, when you're pitting encryption against biometrics, you're already 'buying' Apple Inc.'s line; the one that has recently enabled it to gain one up over its fiercest rivals, Google and Facebook. Apple initially threw itself into the data race along with every one else (and it still does that: for those of you who have an iPhone or an iPad, check your privacy settings: you'll find that it was sold to you with 'unlimited ad tracking'. I recommend de-activating it). But it quickly realized that its advantage lay in that it makes the hardware. Google, meanwhile, has taken a clear lead in the data (and, now, artificial intelligence) wars; the company's recent restructuring is a way of making its omnipresence less visible and is something to keep an eye on. So now Apple has now become the champion of privacy. And of course, it's not untrue – Apple does use encryption; but it's also a great PR strategy. Facebook, for it's part, is somewhere in the middle: it's desperately trying to keep up with the data collection frenzy –c.f. the new buttons increasingly inviting you to, not just 'like' stuff, but express your 'moods' and thus yield more data – with one hand, but also playing into the encryption game, what with the purchase of the WhatsApp (the encrypted messaging system).

To answer your question, then: none at all! Those are superficial ripples. Appraising the politics that are playing out require taking a step outside – and that's what concepts are for.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations and politics?

To stay focused on what you have say; to equip yourselves with the means to do so, and to ignore fads. Above all, to remember to stay critical, always. And to never get too comfortable in whatever 'approach' you end up choosing. But those two things go together, of course.

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This interview was conducted by Javier Alonso. Javier is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.