Interview - Benjamin Habib

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Benjamin Habib is Lecturer in International Relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. Ben is an internationally published scholar with current research interests in the interactions between grassroots sustainability projects, environmental movements and international climate politics. Previously he has researched the political economy of North Korea's nuclear program and East Asian security. Ben's work has been published in journals including Pacific Affairs, Asian Survey, The Pacific Review, Energy Policy, and the Australian Journal of International Affairs. He blogs on his research, teaching, and community engagement work at Ben@Earth, and teaches in the permaculture design course at CERES Community Environment Park in Melbourne.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

There are so many interesting research niches and debates to explore and unpack in international environmental politics at the moment. The interface between human systems and ecological systems is a good place to start. From a theoretical perspective, the application of complex systems thinking shows promise in taking international relations theorizing beyond state centrism and anthropocentrism in incorporating ecosystems into analyses of international affairs as a dynamic force, with which humans are inter-dependent.

If we're looking for a key real-world trend, we see ecological problems, such as climate change and environmental degradation, coalescing with resource constraints and the unraveling of neoliberal capitalism to drive a mutually reinforcing process of systemic transformation toward a post-carbon society. This process is beginning to reconfigure how we organize our economies and the political and social relationships which emerge from that. Right now, new economic, political, and social paradigms rooted in sustainability are evolving and present a window of opportunity to lay the foundation for a new set of social and ecological relations that will help us mitigate environmental harms and adapt to systemic change. There is important work to be done on this sustainability transition in relation to resilience and environmental security, questions about the merits of horizontal versus vertical governance models, about social movements and the salience of grassroots environmental action, and, among other things.

The Paris Agreement in the UNFCCC is the watershed document for the sustainability transition. Most obviously the agreement will continue to be the vehicle through which the international community negotiates and coordinates greenhouse gas mitigation at a global level. However, it can also be viewed as a blueprint for the rollout of the post-carbon economy as it transitions away from fossil fuel energy. A combination of the climate emergency and market behaviors are making fossil fuel energy uneconomic. There is an increasing awareness of the "carbon bubble," investments in projects related to fossil fuels that are becoming stranded assets. Many countries and sub-national jurisdictions are implementing carbon-pricing mechanisms that will eventually coalesce into larger international schemes. Inherent to these developments are debates over the nature of sustainability, different development models, and the political impact of green technologies and post-carbon energy systems.

The debate over the hegemonic transition and the relative decline of the United States has become intertwined with the sustainability transition. China is a world leader in green and alternative energy technologies and is thus well placed to be the dominant player in the post-carbon international economy, at the same time as the Trump administration has doubled down on fossil fuel-based industries and confirmed its intention to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement. The agreement can be viewed through a justice and intersectionality lens, examining issues

such as indigenous rights, gendered dimensions of climate vulnerability and adaptation, and inter-generational justice. Justice considerations are for me integral to the sustainability transition because a resilient society, webbed together by equitable distributions of resources and strong bonds of social capital, is necessarily a just society. The kinds of hate and violence we see in many quarters across the world at the present time are a direct threat to our resilience to environmental shocks.

My current research interests explore the interface between grassroots sustainability initiatives, governments, civil society and international politics, and the contested space of the sustainability transition where these actors interact and intersect. At the moment, I'm working in this space on a social movement analysis of the transnational permaculture movement.

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

Many of my life experiences outside of academia have influenced my intellectual development and in turn shaped how I see the world. A few come to mind as particularly formative.

As a high school student, listening to the lyrics and themes of non-mainstream music such as hip hop (at that time) and grindcore metal I discovered social justice issues like racism and class politics. Looking back with a critical eye, some artists from those musical styles could also be problematic in their misogyny, homophobia and glorification of violence. Nonetheless, that music formed the beginning of my political education and opened my eyes to a world beyond my immediate horizon, well before I started formally studying politics. The "golden age" of hip hop in the late-1980s and early-1990s makes for a good temporal analogy with the emerging multilateral environmentalism of that time, which culminated in the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janiero (the Rio Earth Summit). Just as the golden age of hip hop began to wane in the mid-1990s as the genre became commercialized and diluted through mainstream success, so too did multilateral environmentalism began to flounder as governments realized the scope and scale of systemic change required to address transnational environmental problems, and as entrenched interests in polluting industries stepped up their campaigns in opposition to environmental regulations. So it was through drawing this connection between music and real-world events that my political imagination was born. I also use this analogy as a critical thinking prompt for students in my Global Environmental Politics class.

During my first year as an undergrad student I read the book "Naked Ape to Superspecies" by David Suzuki and Holly Dressell, an account of transnational environmental degradation, which deeply distressed me and awakened my environmental consciousness. It was around this time that the Kyoto Protocol was negotiated at the UNFCCC COP-3 in Japan and I remember being underwhelmed by Australia's recalcitrant position in those negotiations, given what even at that time was pretty clear evidence that climate change was a huge problem.

Spending a semester studying in South Korea in 2002 sparked my interest in Northeast Asia. That year was an auspicious time to be living in South Korea, with the mania surrounding the South Korean football team's extraordinary march to the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup. Being immersed in that experience was intoxicating, however that trip also taught me an understanding of modern Asian history and a new cultural consciousness through immersion in Korean society, which gave me a basis for comparison with my ordinary life back in Australia. From that point on, Korea has been a passion and soon became the focus of my academic work. Of course, my interests in Korea and environmental politics would eventually coalesce with climate vulnerability analyses of North Korea and an exploration of the DPRK's interactions with the UNFCCC.

In 2014 I completed a permaculture design course. Permaculture is a design system that aims to re-create human agricultural, social and economic systems to mimic and harmonize more intimately with ecological systems, such that they become sustainable. It's based on a set of ethics and design principles that draw from ecology and complex systems thinking. While it was developed in the 1970s for agricultural systems, practitioners around the world are now applying permaculture design in all kinds of contexts, including alternative economic models, community organisation, institutional governance, and education, among other things. I was drawn to permaculture in search of a

methodology for putting my environmental politics convictions into practice in a tangible way. I now teach into the permaculture design course at CERES Community Environment Park in Melbourne, where I get to engage with people from many different walks of life who are converging and searching for a method to integrate sustainability into personal and professional lives. Permaculture has also influenced my academic practice, both in terms of my research in environmental politics and in the multifunctional approach to pedagogical design I have been developing over the past three years.

The first months of Donald Trump's presidency have been extraordinary to watch. The Russia scandal aside, his administration's war on the environment is galvanizing countries around the world, and many people within the United States, behind the Paris Agreement and strong climate policy. You could even interpret the Trump administration's environmental recalcitrance as representing a society-level initiatory challenge that we need to overcome in order to transition into a post-carbon society. The coalitions and grassroots networks emerging across the world in response to Trump is the kind of social infrastructure that is more suited to horizontally-organized social systems that seem to be emerging as the great transition progresses. Whatever happens, the Trump presidency will go down as a pivotal moment in the sustainability transition.

We often hear about North Korea's security and missile testing, yet nothing about how it deals with climate change. Part of your research examined how North Korea interacts with the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Could you expand on this?

During my PhD I became intrigued by the impact of environmental shock events in exacerbating the Arduous March famine in North Korea during the mid-1990s. Apart from Meredith Woo-Cumings, few others had done any serious work on the impact of environmental vulnerability on the DPRK's governance challenges at that time.

The North Korean agricultural system remains highly vulnerable to natural disasters, as we've seen with the regular flooding events that have hit North Korea over recent years. During the famine, flooding events damaged harvests and crippled transport infrastructure, decreasing the available food stocks for a country already in food deficit. While the food situation in the DPRK remains dire, the big difference today is the availability of imported foodstuffs from China, which cushions the impact of domestic shortages to an extent and thus the political impact of food scarcities. Nonetheless, North Korea's ability to adapt to repeated natural disaster events remains limited.

My more recent work in this area explored how the DPRK has interacted with the UNFCCC as a signatory to that treaty. It's a popular Facebook meme at the moment to joke that even North Korea has signed up to the Paris Agreement, after Trump's withdrawal announcement. However, behind the joke there are some compelling reasons for North Korea to sign on. The climate vulnerability angle is an obvious motivation for a country with limited climate resilience capabilities. Access to agricultural and energy sector capacity-building assistance is another driver. There are potential benefits for the international community to foster environmental engagement with the DPRK too through the UNFCCC. There is a shared interest in greenhouse gas mitigation and climate adaptation that could be built upon as confidence-building measures, as a circuit breaker to stalled nuclear diplomacy. The UNFCCC reporting requirements also allow the compilation of statistics and information about the DPRK that would not otherwise be available to external parties.

The UNSC sanction regime has been rather unsuccessful in its leverage over North Korea's nuclear testing. What are the key reasons for this? What could this weak leverage mean for climate change?

The sanctions regime has evolved incrementally over time as a fallback response to North Korea's nuclear proliferation. It's a fallback strategy because military options for nuclear disarmament are impractical, for reasons that are well documented. Sanctions don't work because, at their core, there is not any suite of incentives that the international community could offer the Kim regime that could buy their nuclear dismantlement, because the nuclear program is so integral to the Kim regime's perpetuation strategy. The regime is fully committed to nuclearization for strategic, economic, and bureaucratic reasons; they have said so repeatedly in official statements and their actions in testing nuclear devices and missile delivery systems backs this up. What's more, the regime has become very good at finding creative ways to circumvent sanctions measures.

Given that military options are essentially off the table, notwithstanding tough talk from Vice President Pence, and sanctions have proven to be unsuccessful, other creative strategies based upon mutual interests in the environmental realm might be worth investigating. Reforestation projects could be a good starting point. There were South Korean-led reforestation projects underway that were stalled by the Park Geun Hye administration, but these could come up for reconsideration by the new Moon Jae In government under the right circumstances. Environmental capacity-building programs run through UN agencies could be another avenue to explore.

On a related point, it is ironic that as officials in the United States urge China to do more to pressure North Korea and uphold the integrity of the sanctions regime, it has been economic interactions between the DPRK and China that has had the most demonstrable impact on politics in Pyongyang. Sino-DPRK commerce has accelerated the grassroots marketization of the North Korean economy, which has proliferated webs of supplier-client networks and the rise of non-government actors with wealth and resources. These actors, the "donju" or nouveau-riche class of entrepreneurs, have already begun to shape North Korean domestic politics by helping to fund official development ventures. The round of official purges over the past five years, including the murder of Jang Song Taek (Kim Jong Un's uncle and former de facto regent of the DPRK), can be interpreted as the leadership's reaction to the growth of these alternative poles of power.

Rather than continue to emphasise a sanctions regime that is ineffective, policy-makers in regional states could look for leverage points in the political economy of the North Korean state where possibilities exist for dynamic systemic change. Environmental and economic engagements are two areas where leverage points exist for interacting with social change processes in the DPRK.

Do you think that North Korea's "military-first" policy will need to adapt to the impacts of climate change in the future?

North Korea's "military-first" (Songun) political and economic structure privileges the Korean People's Army (KPA) for priority access to resources and labour. Climate change is said to act as a "threat multiplier" for pre-existing vulnerabilities, so climate change impacts are likely to exacerbate food insecurity in the DPRK. Given that the Songun model was originally set up as a way of reducing the exposure of the military to food insecurity during the famine, and provide insulation that ensured the KPA's continued support for Kim Jong Il early in his leadership, it is unlikely that climate change will compromise the model directly. In addition, the KPA already deals with disaster response because, like most militaries, it has latent manpower and is good at logistical organisation.

Do you think 'protectionism' moves by state actors, such as the US seeking tariffs on solar panel imports and pulling out of the Paris Agreement, shift environmental and sustainability projects to the grassroots level?

Because governments and big business have been unable to reach agreement on international climate action until recently, grassroots actors have long taken the running with environmental and sustainability projects.

In the context of the Paris Agreement, there is a large gap between the greenhouse gas emissions reductions and adaptation strategies outlined in the Paris Agreement and what governments around the world have currently pledged as policy. Policymakers are currently grappling with the practicalities of operationalizing the Paris Agreement and making good on the goals outlined in its text. At the same time, constellations of grassroots initiatives are proliferating, within the context of broader environment movements, which are demonstrating a methodology of sustainable and regenerative systems design in agricultural and socio-economic contexts. Such projects represent the leading edge of local-level climate adaptation and mitigation. The environment movements in which these local initiatives spring from are likely to shape the politics surrounding the efforts of national governments to operationalize the Paris Agreement.

I remain quietly optimistic that the Paris Agreement can weather a US withdrawal, because the trajectory for the post-carbon transition is now well underway. This is different from the pre-Paris negotiating period, where the active participation of the United States was essential to the possible success and integrity of any negotiated agreement. As

others and I have argued, China has now explicitly assumed leadership of the global climate mitigation project and galvanizing the international community around the Paris Agreement in the wake of the US withdrawal announcement.

Environmental tariffs are more likely against countries that try to swim against the de-carbonization tide and choose to maintain fossil fuel economies, opting not to be a part of carbon pricing blocs. Given the required urgency for greenhouse gas mitigation, environmental protectionism of this nature would arguably be justified.

In your recent work you argue that climate change would necessitate a re-imagination of the norm of state sovereignty. What role could the state play in a world where climate change's ramifications are transboundary and perturb territorial state lines?

States, for all their real-world manifestations, remain artificial constructs superimposed over larger ecological systems. Political boundaries vastly complicate the task of governance and custodianship of shared bioregions such as river systems and watersheds, oceans, mountain ranges, forests, deserts, and the like. There are some alternative governance models coming to the fore that try to address the mismatch between state boundaries and ecosystems.

From an ecological perspective, it would be more sensible to manage bioregions as individual entities. A bioregion is an area defined by topography and geological features (such as rock and soil type, watersheds, and climate), and biological features (such as shared fauna and flora). When political boundaries cut across bioregions, any environmental harms that are allowed to occur because of the prevailing regulations and practices in one political jurisdiction inevitably go on to impact the entire bioregion. Cooperative management between states of an entire bioregion through the implementation of common regulations is one option for minimizing the impact of state boundaries on the bioregion itself. Like all multilateral agreements, these instruments are limited by what individual parties can agree upon.

Another interesting idea is Maxine Burkett's Nation Ex-Situ proposal, which attempts to reconcile the threat of sea level rise to small island states with the inadequacies of the regimes of international law pertinent to refugees and state sovereignty. Burkett argues that to respond to the phenomenon of landless nation-states, international law could accommodate an entirely new category of international actors, which she labels the Nation Ex-Situ. Ex-situ nationhood is a status that would allow for the continued existence of a sovereign state, afforded all of the rights and benefits of sovereignty amongst the family of states, in perpetuity. In practice this would require the creation of a governance framework, possibly along the lines of a political trusteeship, which could exercise authority over a diffuse people, who likely would be spread as a diaspora across many other countries.

Other proposals revolve around the idea of ecological personhood, of granting political rights to a geographic entity. We saw the People's Agreement of Cochabamba: Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth put forward as a serious alternative to the UNFCCC. It was First Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2009 and was presented to the UN Dialogues on Harmony with Nature in 2011. Ecuador is the first country to recognize ecological personhood in its Constitution. Rather than treating nature as property under the law, ecosystems and their constituent life forms are given the legal right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles. If it seems strange that an ecosystem could be given legal rights of person-hood, we should bear in mind that corporations were given legal rights of personhood in the United States in the late-19th century, a development which laid the foundation for the dominant role of multinational corporations in the global economy today.

There are also old struggles that are gaining renewed impetus today because of the ecological crisis. First nation's peoples continue a struggle against colonialism and dispossession, which is characteristic for first nation's peoples around the world. The core issue of these struggles is sovereignty over land. Central to the sovereignty question is the issue of how the people claiming sovereignty to that land relate to it, how they use it, and care for it. The spread of colonialism over the past five centuries has been accompanied by the enclosure of land for narrow forms of exploitation and private benefit. This is a common theme across the world, whether we are talking about aboriginal

nations and native title in Australia, Standing Rock and Native American struggles in North America, the forest peoples of the Amazon basin, slavery across Africa, and beyond.

The international social movement that coalesced around the Standing Rock Sioux Nation in North Dakota in the United States was a pertinent example.
The Standing Rock struggle became politically significant globally because it rallied support from first nations and non-indigenous allies from around the world in solidarity, in the process forming new political alliances across the global climate movement. Standing Rock is important because this struggle directly highlights issues around colonialism, sovereignty, land custodianship and environmental degradation. As the political landscape has changed with colonialism, so has the ecological landscape with the associated process of industrialization. It's now obvious that this industrial model, powered by fossil fuels, is fundamentally altering the climate through greenhouse gas pollution. Part of the process of moving beyond the destructive industrial model should include settlement of sovereignty questions with first nation's peoples.

Could climate change lead to a de-territorialized international relations system?

There is an ontological dimension to environmental governance that is crucially important. The traditional Westphalian model of state sovereignty evolved with the idea that territory is static, that territory is a thing, a resource bounty available for human exploitation. It's one thing to possess sovereign rights over an inanimate thing, but quite another to claim dominion over something that we recognize as alive, dynamic, and beyond the ability of states to "manage." Our understanding of "territory" is likely to evolve as we come to understand territory not as a resource to be exploited and defended, but as dynamic living systems within which we as humans are inter-dependent components.

While I can't yet conceive of a completely de-territorialized international relations system, there is a clear need to re-imagine the classical Westphalian sovereignty norm in light of transnational environmental problems. There are alternative governance models developing, like those I mentioned, that could shape the contours of a future de-territorialized model. We should also bear in mind that the Westphalian sovereign norm is still a relatively recent global phenomenon, and that there have always been alternative governance structures in existence. Many nations have either challenged this norm or been excluded by it. The state sovereignty norm is a dynamic construct and shouldn't be reified as a static entity.

What is the most important advice you can give to young scholars of international relations, particularly those interested in international climate politics?

In February 2016, I had a well-publicized panic attack on ABC TV in Australia, which prompted me to come to terms with my life-long struggle with anxiety and to seriously evaluate what I wanted to achieve as an academic. I learned from that experience to try to be more comfortable being myself, to cultivate my own style of academic practice and not try to be a clone of the "perfect" academic. Come up with your own model of academic practice that's right for you.

For me, that means trying to avoid the rabbit hole of metric-driven busy-work that plagues academic life, something many of my colleagues interviewed for this column have mentioned in response to this question. It means showing empathy for your students and the increasing difficulties they are facing. It means looking out for your colleagues and not being so insecure that you have to engage in toxic competitiveness. It means staying true to what fascinates you about your work and what you truly care about.

Understanding the gravity of our moment in history, I encourage you to stay true to the prerogatives of the bigger picture. Because we are entering a time of significant systemic change, be careful about being a servant of power. You may find yourself stuck having to defend obsolete paradigms or indefensible "alternative facts." There is important work to be done in the sustainability transition. This is a time where we need scholar-activists, multifunctional academics who integrate research, teaching and community engagement in ways that leave a positive mark.

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This interview was conducted by Evangelina Moisi. Evangelina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.