

10th Anniversary Interview - Stephen Hopgood

Written by E-International Relations

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E-International Relations (E-IR) was founded 10 years ago this week. During that time we have interviewed over 150 academics, policy-makers and journalists. To celebrate E-IR's 10th anniversary we asked some of our existing interviewees two further questions reflecting on the last decade in International Relations.

Stephen Hopgood is Professor of International Relations and co-Director of the Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice (CCRJ) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is also the Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences. From 2009-2012, he held a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, which culminated in the book *The Endtimes of Human Rights*. This follows on from his ethnography of Amnesty International, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*, which won the American Political Science Association Best Book in Human Rights Award in 2007. He is also the author of 'Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred,' and more recently of 'The Last Rites for Humanitarian Intervention: Darfur, Sri Lanka and R2P.' Professor Hopgood discussed the "dissolution of the West", the dilemmas of human rights activism, and the obstacles to achieving humanitarian aims via the ICC and R2P in an interview with E-IR in 2015.

What changes have you seen in International Relations or your field over the last 10 years?

My sense, and that is all it can be, is that there is a growing divergence between what we teach theoretically and what is actually happening in the world. The beginnings of the collapse of the Western liberal model are also, I suggest, reintroducing some pretty unreconstructed geopolitics into the international system. There cannot be research without theory, of course. And too much mainstream IR theory is just about how to deploy power more effectively so it marginalises most normative questions in the pursuit of stability, order and self-interest. Think obviously of those who define 'terrorism' (as, e.g., non-state violence against civilians for a political or religious cause) and how inadequate that definition is when the state is so busy using it to crush its opponents. But there can be an element of fiddling while Rome burns about some of our more ambitious and deconstructive theoretical imaginings.

We might say that when the fight left the streets in the 1970s it entered the university – a safer space but also an often more politically abstract and disconnected space. Now it needs to be back on the streets again but the internal politics of social and political movements are not complex (they are complex to *resolve*, of course) and today's young people are very different from those whose formative experiences were during the Cold War and decolonisation. In the end whatever we might say about the identities of LGBTQ people, women, people of colour, ethnic and religious minorities, working class communities and so forth, the essential equation is simple – organise together, elect representatives who will support your interests, and campaign for them. Think of the deep nuance in work on transgender and transsexual issues, or on race and class, and then remind yourself that social change will require that despite these divergences these movements must cohere as a social force.

Furthermore, the prospect of war involving nuclear weapons is no longer negligible – what is it now, let's say 10%, 15%? That's a one in six or so risk of a nuclear exchange involving North Korea, South Korea and Japan. That's a HUGE risk. However much we might understand this issue through constructivism, we need political leadership that

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will prevent this from occurring. In other words, how valuable is a lot of the IR we do in terms of its impact on the world? Not much. I think this relative lack of 'productivity' is one of the things that has undermined the public estimation of the value of a university education in parts of the Western world, especially in the UK.

What books, or other media, published in the last 10 years has made an impact on you and/or the discipline?

For me the answer to this question is simple. Social media is revolutionising the exchange of knowledge and we don't yet fully appreciate how much things are going to have to change. Think of how long it takes to get an academic article in print, or a book? 2-3 years. Fewer and fewer people will wait. For those with something new and original to say, why should we wait for so long? So online shorter pieces, comment pieces, works in progress – all of this has to be part of an academic's daily round. The question then becomes how authoritative knowledge becomes authoritative, where is the distinction between opinion, argument and knowledge? Is there one? Does it make any sense to hold to a gatekeeper model of what is true, reliable, trustworthy? Isn't this just rent-seeking by professors?

Obviously in a post-truth world we need somewhere to go where we trust what's being said. But we are whistling in the wind if we think much work in IR or academia generally is having an impact on those debates. Think of the years of argument and mountains of research on the sexual mistreatment of women and how the Harvey Weinstein case has, hopefully, revolutionised the treatment of women by pushing us past the tipping point overnight. Yes the ground needed to be prepared. But crusading investigative journalism might well be a better place to change the world than a professor's office (we need both, I know). But if your aim is to change the world, why would you become an academic today? Not just research but teaching will be overhauled.

The elitist model is just that, expensive face-to-face contact, but think how many hundreds of millions can be reached with better online programs that connect students in more engaging and participatory ways. It's hard, for me at least, to see how the traditional university can survive except as an elite club (which, we might argue, is what it has always been). The democratising potential of online education is vast and exciting but it doesn't do much for the idea that we will have any sources of trusted authority going forward. What that world looks like, Nietzsche's world, not Kant's or Plato's, is anyone's guess.