

10th Anniversary Interview – Charlotte Epstein

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.

Charlotte Epstein is an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney in Australia and an Associate Researcher at the Centre d'Etudes et de Relations Internationales (CERI-Science Po) in Paris. She is the author of *The Power of Words in International Relations* and articles published in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Organization* and *International Political Sociology*. Dr Epstein discussed the impact of Foucault on her thinking, why discourse matters in the study of IR, and the politics of surveillance in an interview with E-IR in 2017.

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

The lines shaping the discipline have become less rigid in the last decade or so. This is no doubt a good thing. They are no longer rigid lines of battle, underwritten by very unequal power relations and a completely US-centric structure to the discipline. IR is no longer primarily shaped in and by the US; it has become genuinely multi-polar – Australia's on the map, for one. So it's become a place where a thousand flowers may bloom; with new outlets to nurture this new 'freedom of expression', the *Journal of Narrative Politics* is a case in point. This blossoming is to be celebrated, to be sure.

On the other hand, this also makes it more confusing for people who are setting out on a research path in the discipline today. Clear lines of battle are easier to read. People are off doing their own thing, but I'm not sure that they are still bothering to try and talk to one another. There are a lot of fads – not all the new developments in the discipline are interesting, or even new for that matter, the so-called new materialism or the practice turns being cases in point, as I have written in a piece for *Millennium*, for those who are interested in the critique. Some of this drive for newness, moreover, is driven by some persisting insecurities the discipline seems to have regarding what is its object, and an on-going science-envy – a pining to be like the hard sciences, and perhaps to be taken as seriously as we think they are taken (but, ironically, they don't necessarily think that). The recent interest in the quantific for example.

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

I've written elsewhere – in an interview on this site in fact – that the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, was a moment of decisive intellectual opening, in the discipline and beyond. It was the beginning of this new flourishing, without which I would not have chosen IR as my intellectual home – it's not where I started out. But also think the importance of what was happening there has been lost from sight and that the discipline has become a bit side-tracked. It's as though it discovered the importance of language and discourse in constituting the world we live in – and then it promptly treated it as a fad that it needed to move away from, in its constant (and exhausting) search for newness.

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Hence I have, in the last years, mostly stepped out of the discipline, and have been drawn back to the extraordinary intellectual ferment of the 1970s and 1980s, which contributed to this new opening I've been describing. This was of course the time where decisive new ways of analysing power – as immaterial and discursive – were taking off, pioneered by Foucault, to whom I've been returning, but also Steve Lukes. But I've been interested in the broader intellectual context that made it possible, notably crucial developments in this history of science, which offers us other ways of understanding how we have constructed the world we live in. Some of my recent reads include Ian Hacking's *The Emergence of Probability* or Shapin and Schaffer's *The Leviathan and the Airpump*, or Donna Haraway, who's an old love. At the intersection of political theory and postcolonial IR are the post-colonial re-interpretations of the canons of modern political thought, for example, the flourishing scholarship that has uncovered John Locke's deep complicity in the colonial enterprise. We've engaged with these debates in my recent edited collection, *Against international Relations Norms: Postcolonial Perspective*. Mine is an enduring interest in understanding how we've come to shape the world we live in, and I'm constantly looking for places and tools to pursue it, and for that, we sometimes need to not move so quickly.