

Interview - Rebecca Adler-Nissen

Written by E-International Relations

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Rebecca Adler-Nissen is a Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. Her research focuses on International Relations, diplomacy, European integration and social media as well as fieldwork, participant observation and anthropological methods. She currently directs an ERC-funded project DIPLOFACE, exploring the relationship between confidential negotiations and public display and a project on Digital Disinformation. She is a former Head of Section in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and she has been a visiting research fellow at the Centre for International Security Studies (University of Sydney), the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies (McGill University/Université de Montréal) and the European University Institute in Florence. Her most recent book is the prize-winning *Opting Out of the European Union: Diplomacy, Sovereignty and European Integration*.

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

I'd say that fascinating work is popping up across the field, in international political sociology, international history, queer and feminist work and critical security studies. But for inspiration, I often find myself reading neighbouring disciplines, sociology, anthropology, law, history and literature. Within IR, I'm particularly inspired by and engaged with the practice turn in IR. As you know, practice theory insists that international relations is not a system or an anarchy, it is a socially dense phenomenon where everyday actions are consequential in producing political life. By emphasising situated understanding it becomes possible to study the apparent stability of social systems, including international relations, as contingent yet often hierarchically ordered. There are so many social "traffic rules" in world politics waiting to be discovered. Practice theory, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, reminds us of the banality of international relations.

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

So far, two periods in my life have profoundly shaped my thinking. The first was my graduate studies in Paris at Sciences Po (2002-2003) where I discovered that International Relations doesn't have to be reduced to the battle of 'isms and that its disciplinary boundaries are historical and partly arbitrary. In particular, I remember a wonderful co-taught seminar with a constitutional lawyer and a Jesuit monk on the history of the state in Europe (*Les figures de l'État*). Plunging into political theory and history was a veritable revelation. The second period of great eye-opening moments was during my stint at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2010-2011) where I had the opportunity to work with in a team of dedicated people who in their everyday practices questioned everything that I had learned about 'national interests', 'sovereignty' and 'strategy'. Experiencing how a country actually identifies and defends its interest is a mind-blowing experience.

What are some of the recent challenges to effective international diplomacy?

The rise of social media, coupled with demands for more transparency and democracy in world politics, brings new challenges to international diplomacy. This is the focus of my research project DIPLOFACE. The increased public display of foreign policy events have implications, but we have only just begun to understand how the digital revolution transforms closed-door negotiations. Traditional diplomatic language and behaviour value restraint,

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secrecy and discretion. Arguably, this helps states save face even during conflicts, ensuring a smoother running of international relations. The intensity of 24/7 live media coverage and the ease of information transmission with emails, Facebook, tweets and videos brings new challenges to an old problem: how to achieve international cooperation and popular legitimacy at the same time. It's easy to note how easily judgment may fail, resulting in embarrassment, misunderstandings or even increased conflict. But there is also a productive potential in the digital revolution.

To what extent do you think existing International Relations theory accounts for practical action that takes place in international politics and diplomacy?

Okay, we have, traditionally, not been very good at capturing the everyday practices that make up world politics. Most IR scholars depart from the social phenomenon they want to study, for instance states, international organizations, treaties, companies, women etc. Assuming *a priori* the existence of these phenomena and ascribing certain characteristics to them, they develop *substantialist* theories, as I've tried to demonstrate in a book chapter.

Consequently, diplomacy is reduced to the mechanics of states bumping into each other or a system of reciprocal signalling. We also find this in much constructivist and even poststructuralist work. However, most practitioners know, in an embodied but often unarticulated sense, that world politics is deeply *relational* and emergent. As Goffman put it, ontologically, social interaction turns out to be not only where most of the world's work gets done, but where "the solid buildings of the social world" are in fact constructed. If we accept this claim, international relations refers to a situated and ever-changing social order, not to a relative stable, universal system or society.

What role can stigmatisation play in international relations?

Stigma processes are crucial to the making of international norms and order. States that appear to reject international norms are ontologically intolerable because they expose the fragility of international society and therefore always figure in discussions of normalisation. The reason sanctions and international pressures don't always work is that states that are unable or unwilling to conform to international norms interpret their status as deviants very differently. To understand why, we need to look at the role of national shame, pride or anger, in which continued norm violation makes sense. If states do not share the norms underpinning their stigma, they are more likely to turn the sanctions into an emblem of honour.

Attempts to generate shared norms for state behaviour will become even more difficult in the future. Now that many countries, including China and India, are beginning to play a more prominent role, the West can no longer count on the predominance of its perception of right and wrong. Stigma imposition can still be very effective, but in many cases, it's first and foremost, an expression of the West's need to send a political signal (also to itself) that a global set of values, dominated by the West, still exists.

In a recent article you explored the concept of international misrecognition. Can you explain the concept, its effects and how states have sought to rectify it?

In brief, we argue that sometimes the problem for states is not lack of recognition, but *misrecognition*. Drawing on insights from Lacan, we develop a theory of international misrecognition and show how states cope with misrecognition through humour and public diplomacy. We define international misrecognition as a gap between the dominant narrative of a national Self and the way this national Self is reflected in the 'mirror' of the international Other. International misrecognition is actually a tragic story, as the gap can never be fully closed, yet we continue to try. We show that humour is one of the ways in which states cope with misrecognition: humour is an important social mechanism through which states discursively process and negotiate their identities, helping them to create a sense of release or superiority. In the article, we illustrate how international misrecognition works with the case of Israel. Specifically, we analyse the public diplomacy campaign 'Masbirim Israel', which, through parodying video clips, mobilised ordinary Israeli citizens to engage in peer-to-peer public diplomacy when travelling abroad. Rather than explaining Israel, the campaign not only reinforced a particular version of Israeli identity, but also signalled that there is fundamentally no possibility of an international understanding of Israel's situation.

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To what extent have diplomatic practices within the EU changed?

Diplomacy in the EU is a very particular “late sovereign” practice. The Council of Ministers where the member states negotiate constitutes a social system, a transnational field, which follows its own logic in formal and informal hierarchies as I have also explored in my book. Essentially, over the last 50 years, European states have come to view their nations as anchored so deeply within the institutions of the EU that their diplomats merge the promotion of national interests with those of the Union and states begin to speak with one voice.

How might the UK’s decision to leave the EU alter the perceptions, held by the EU and its member states, of the future of the EU and its diplomatic practices?

Brexit has already profoundly changed perceptions of the UK across the globe, from Japan to Iran. While some, including Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump and Geert Wilders see the referendum as a the victory of “the people” against “the elite”, others, including most policy-making circles and established media perceive Brexit as consolidating the image of British exceptionalism and a move from “Cool Britannia” to “Little Britain”, thereby also reproducing particular national discourses about what it means to be French, German, Polish or Danish *and* European. To a large degree, the EU is already beyond Brexit, working as EU27, focusing on the French-German axis with new strategic alliances being built across the continent. But most diplomats I know see Brexit as deeply worrying, making it even more difficult to defend a rule-based liberal international order in the future.

You have argued that there is the potential for a ‘practice turn’ in EU studies. Could you outline what this would entail, as well as its significance for the study of the EU?

The time is ripe for a practice turn in EU studies. Most approaches within EU studies, whether they are rationalist or constructivist in orientation, often ignore routines and habits that are integral to making the EU what it is. Theoretically, practice theory helps us rethink dualisms and power and at the methodological level, it paves the way for interesting use of unstructured interviews, fieldwork and participant observation. Now, the practice turn doesn’t mean that we have to stop focusing on voting behaviour, institutional turf-wars, Europeanization or democracy, but by zooming in on the people and artifacts that actually produce and perform the EU, it offers alternative accounts for such phenomena – and for what drives European integration more broadly. I’m also convinced that at a time where the EU is more controversial than ever, practice approaches has a particular value: it brings scholars closer to the people who construct, perform and resist the EU on a daily basis.

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

My short response would be: Don’t be afraid to ask for advice and support. My longer answer is that while the academic world is hierarchical and often difficult to navigate, it is also deeply social, and it can be quite friendly. Take the ISA convention, at numerous panels, younger scholars focus on appearing perfect during the Q&A session – perhaps because they are convinced that any show of doubt is a sign of weakness and will damage their career? I would say, of course, you defend your paper, but remember that everyone knows that it is work-in-progress and if they challenge you, use that opportunity to explore the potential to think collectively with your panel and the audience. We are gathered because of our curiosity not because we need to win a battle.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is Features Editor and Director at E-IR.