Interview - William Brown

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William Brown is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at The Open University. He has published in the field of International Relations with a particular focus on Africa, and on the international politics of development aid. He was a founder of the British International Studies Association (BISA) Working Group on Africa and International Studies. Dr Brown's current research explores the international relations of African development including the history of Britain's Africa policy, the UK Labour Party's international development policy and work on Frederick Cooper's concept of 'gatekeeper states', as well as a forthcoming book on Africa, international relations and development, to be published by Routledge. Other recent work has focused on the issue of sovereignty in aid relations and African agency in international politics. Previous research included theoretical work on IR theory and Africa and the EU's development cooperation policies towards Africa. Dr Brown has contributed over many years to the OU's teaching in Politics and International Studies including the award winning module *International Relations: continuity and change in global politics.*

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

If we're talking about Africa and IR there's really such a range of work going on from a wide variety of standpoints from work on foreign and security policies and strategies to work on the impact of 'new powers' and work on new actors. I think that variety is by itself refreshing and perhaps suggests we're moving away from a time when African states/IR would always be treated as a 'special case' in some way. It may also reflect the changing substantive content of international relations in Africa. You've had the burgeoning of relations between African and non-western states – China, India, Japan, Turkey, Brazil and so on – which maybe signals greater variety in the 'content' of their foreign and development policies. Relations with western donors are perhaps less dominant as the main focus of the continent's external relations. It's good to see ideas about agency being picked up as well, including by PhD students in their research.

In IR more generally, I'm particularly interested in work with a historical sociology angle to it, especially how interactions between 'west and the rest' have constructed the world today – and that feeds into an interest in some postcolonial/decolonial work. Though I don't always agree with those interpretations, they are challenging in an interesting way, as we think about what an IR fit for the current century should look like. Theoretically, I've been following the development of ideas around uneven and combined development, especially in the work of Justin Rosenberg and others.

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

Originally – as an undergraduate – I was more interested in Latin America but doing a masters and PhD at Leeds really brought my focus onto Africa, due in large part to the influence of people at Leeds: Lionel Cliffe, Morris Szeftel and Ray Bush in particular. And that area interest seems to have stuck! Back then I suppose I had more of a conventional IPE type of approach, but I became increasingly aware of the importance of states and their sovereignty in shaping the world. To put it rather crudely, whereas much work addressed the question of how capitalist development affected international relations, there's a need to understand how the international – the fact that the world is politically multiple – is integral to the unfolding story of development. That's what Rosenberg's interpretation

of uneven and combined development seems to help us focus on.

One of your main areas of academic focus has been international aid and relations between the EU and Africa. In your opinion, what are the latest and most critical developments in this area?

I've not done a great deal of work on the EU in recent years, though I keep an eye on it through the work of people like Stephen Hurt, Tony Heron, Sophia Price and others. The key issues facing the EU-Africa relationship will be what is the shape of any post-Cotonou architecture. There's a lot of unfinished business on the trade front from Cotonou. That agreement was signed nearly 20 years ago yet the whole programme of creating EPAs has been littered with delays and rejections – not least because many African governments pushed back against the EU's proposals, as has been documented by Murray-Evans and others. There's then a question, from the point of view of African states, as to how that relationship with the EU now sits in relation to say, the dialogue with China and relations with other 'new' powers. There's such a range of patterns of trade and varying degrees of dependence on EU aid among African states, that discerning what the African negotiating position will be as we approach the renewal of Cotonou will be interesting (the same applies, post-Brexit, to Africa-UK relations).

The other interesting aspect will be how intra-EU politics plays out. While France, particularly under Macron, seems to be renewing its long-term, close association with some African states, you also have a revitalised German interest in Africa while at the same time some of the central and eastern members of the EU are much more skeptical about development cooperation and particularly some of the more liberal elements of that. Add to that the absence of the UK, and there's a fluid situation within Europe on development cooperation.

At the G20 summit last year, Germany used its presidency to promote what it calls a Marshall Plan with Africa. What are your thoughts on this programme?

It's interesting how some phrases keep coming back! This isn't the first time this has been called for – Gordon Brown made the same call around the time of the Blair government's Commission for Africa in 2005 and there were earlier uses of the idea of a 'new Marshall Plan' as well. There's also a lot in the programme that has been part of the politics of development cooperation for some time – the EU sought a 'new kind of relationship' back when it was preparing for the Cotonou Agreement in 2000, the emphasis on good governance and human rights has been around for years, and the idea of Africa as a 'a continent of opportunity' harks back to an altogether earlier period.

The framing of it though, is interesting – it's a Marshall Plan*with* Africa, not *for* Africa and it seeks to take the AU's *Agenda 2063* as a starting point, so I guess that shows some willingness to rethink how development cooperation is done. It's clearly going to shape the EU's approach to the post-Cotonou arrangements and also demonstrates a German assertiveness in this area, which is interesting in itself. There are some commentators who have noticed the need for European countries to 'up their game' in a context where non-western development partners are making much of the running, a point that the UK needs to acknowledge as well if it wants to maintain presence and influence in Africa.

Germany's documents on the Marshall Plan with Africa talk of a need to change the "donor-recipient relationship", with a concerted move towards a focus on investment and economic growth. To what extent do you feel this framing of aid as 'help' has hindered success in the past?

The shift in focus there is something of an acknowledgement that the sources of development finance are now much more diverse in Africa. It probably also takes note of the controversies over aid, and some of the domestic political costs that come with it, that we've seen in the UK in recent years. But it's also worth noting that the original Marshall Plan was *public* aid so the analogy doesn't really hold if part of the purpose of the German plan is to shift from public to private finance (indeed, Marshall Plan aid was criticised by some within America at the time, because of the commitment of public funds).

But it's certainly right that in many respects the aid relationship has suffered from the 'us' helping 'them' framing. It damages the case for such cooperation within western countries and it's resented by African political actors and

governments – as leaders like Paul Kagame have made plain on many occasions. It also denies African agency in the development process, something the NGO campaigns are sometimes guilty of as well in their narrative of 'we' needing to help 'them'. And that gets carried through to the actual development projects and programmes as well, sometimes, where they seem, or are, imposed from without.

I'm currently doing some work on the UK Labour Party's international development policies and it's interesting to note in this context that discussions there have also sought to move away from an us and them approach, though the Labour team is focusing much more strongly on the SDGs as the framework within to build a 'partnership' with developing countries.

According to the UN, Africa's population is set to reach 2.4 billion by the year 2050. Is a focus on economic growth and job creation sustainable in a world increasingly shaped by climate change?

An old question but no easier to answer than it ever was! It's difficult to see what alternative there is to job creation if living standards are to rise and given the antipathy towards migration from Africa that is so current in Europe today. There either needs to be more opportunity and rising living standards in Africa or African's will seek those outside the continent, as Europeans did in the 19th and 20th centuries. And it's hard to see how you get job creation on the scale needed without economic transformation. There's some talk –within Africa as well as from the likes of President Obama – of Africa needing 'green' industrialisation that can avoid the carbon-heavy paths taken by the West, Japan and China. Obama even talked about Africa 'leapfrogging' stages of development (probably not realising he was rehearsing an idea first developed by Trotsky!) and adopting renewables and the like from the off. As energy and communication technologies develop there is certainly the potential to reduce the link between industrialisation and climate change, though it isn't easy to achieve (I realise this is a pretty inadequate answer!).

To what extent does the legacy of colonialism impact upon Africa, and indeed aid relations, today?

Another massive question! It still matters to a tremendous extent and that is why the attempts to develop new partnerships – as the German government claims – are so important, but also why they are so difficult to achieve. I'm not particularly fond of the work of Samuel Huntington but he had a phrase to the effect that the West often forgets that it acquired its power and wealth by using armed force, while the rest of the world never forgets. Part of what's interesting in postcolonial work is the challenge to recognise that history within the West, though it's less clear (to me) what direction that takes us in more practical political terms.

Having said that, it's also a mistake, in my view, to think that everything in Africa and everything that is wrong in the aid relationship, is determined by colonialism or by the West. The work I did with Sophie Harman on African agency in international politics was in some respects pushing back against that idea. I recently did a piece reviewing the work of Frederick Cooper's work on African 'gatekeeper' states and he had this argument that 'Africa's economic present is a co-creation, emerging out of long-term interactions among non-equivalent political and economic structures'. He was also critical of scholars who 'like their colonialism to be very colonial' – to tell simplified stories of complete domination that rather obscure the more complex character of interactions between Africa and the West. I think they are good pointers and suggest an interesting way to explore agencies on both sides of the relationship in creating – and moving beyond – colonialism.

How relevant is the discipline of IR to African studies?

I think it's very relevant, indeed, indispensable. There have been longstanding critiques of IR from Africanists as well as in a broader sense from some postcolonial scholars that IR is irrelevant because its western origins can't deal with African 'realities'. I'm rather critical of that idea both as a general proposition – why *would* IR be irrelevant to Africa, specifically? – and because it doesn't seem to be borne out 'on the ground'. I wrote a piece some time ago setting out this argument and a more recent survey that Sophie Harman and I did suggested that IR of Africa was thriving. Like any area of IR, it's not without its problems, challenges, absences. And there are tremendous structural problems to do with knowledge production – the lack of investment in higher education in African countries for example – that inhibit the development of more IR that is 'from' Africa. But so long as the world, including Africa, is 'international' –

composed of multiple societies – then we need IR!

In this regard, I've also argued – contrary to some of the criticisms – that sovereignty remains central to understanding Africa's place in the world. Along with IR, sovereignty is something that seems to be continually 'on the way out', until it isn't! It's a bit of a hardy perennial that comes round every so often – in the 1970s it was economic interdependence that would eclipse states and sovereignty, in the 1990s and 2000s it was globalization, technology or finance. Yet state sovereignty seems remarkably resilient and a constituent part of the international system, Africa included.

How has Britain's policy on Africa changed? Do you think the withdrawal of the UK from the EU will have consequences on the future policies of the EU or the UK towards Africa?

UK Africa policy is in a place of some uncertainty right now. Some aspects of policy – the focus on liberal values, governance and aid – have continued from the Blair era through into the coalition government and beyond. But the policy has shifted, particularly since 2015, towards a much greater emphasis on British national interests, commercial opportunities (for Britain) and in favour of private sector actors. Africa policy has also become tied up with a whole series of issues around aid in general with diversion of aid to defence and foreign office budgets and an emphasis on UK security in relation to terrorism and migration. Danielle Beswick and colleagues have done some great work on this period. Interestingly, Labour policy on development is also in a process of change with much greater acknowledgement of the structural problems in the global economy, and on inequality, than has been the case in UK policy recently, so that may also have an impact on relations with Africa should they get into office.

The absence of the UK from EU development policy debates will be keenly felt. The EU was a major avenue through which the UK could achieve policy reach beyond its usual international relationships and UK expertise was central to the drafting of the whole European approach to development. So it will be a loss to the UK's international standing and it will be a loss to the expertise within Europe. Maybe that is why Germany sees a chance to move more centre stage – I'm not sure. It also leaves a huge knot of problems for the UK to untangle on leaving – what happens to UK aid money that currently goes to the EU development funds? What kind of trading relationship will the UK have with African countries if outside the EU single market or customs union? Should the UK seek to rebuild its influence in Africa, if so with which states?

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The innovative work I've come across from younger scholars, suggests that they probably don't need much advice! But I guess the one area I'd mention here would be to remain open to learning from a variety of approaches within the discipline, even those you don't particularly like. IR today is characterised by a wide variety of theoretical approaches. That's healthy in terms of diversity but there's also a tendency to identify with one approach and then operate within its boundaries. There's also a tendency in teaching to teach those approaches you don't identify with solely from a point of critique. When we were making the Open University module on international relations (DD313 International Relations) we sometimes used a mis-quote of Bob Dylan: 'you can't criticise what you don't understand' (Dylan had sung 'don't criticise what you can't understand). That is, you need to have grappled with a theory on its own terms before you start taking it apart. Here endeth the lesson!