Interview - Tamás Peragovics

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

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What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

As is often the case, I have been influenced by a number of people and institutions in the past couple of years. It was at ELTE University's IR graduate program that I was first exposed to the discipline. Courses taught by Pal Dunay and Gergely Romsics on international law and IR theory, respectively, were the most salient experiences that marked the beginning of my own interest in international politics and adjacent fields. Later on, as an exchange student at Sciences Po Paris, I attended Mathieu Duchatel's course on the rise of China, and that proved to be my empirical hook, so to speak. After my return to Budapest, I started studying mandarin Chinese hoping that a firm grasp on the language would translate into a more intricate knowledge of Chinese foreign policy, my focus of study (suffice to say that I am still far from that kind of knowledge, but it is work in progress).

At the Central European University, Xymena Kurowska and Alexander Astrov had been, and still are, important sources of different ways of thinking that constantly shape as well as challenge my own understanding of the discipline. An outstanding milestone in this respect was my exposure to the works of Wittgenstein, early as well as late, which I decided to cover for my graduate thesis in which I explored a language game approach to contemporary Chinese-American relations. It was a very unsettling experience, in a positive sense, and if there was anything like a moment of conversion, although I am not fond of the term due its dogmatic connotations, that was it. I came to see language and debates over meaning as the primary locus of power struggles, and have been trying to focus on it ever since. To be fair, I come into IR with a humanities background, having studied French language and literature for my undergraduate degree, so it was not entirely unexpected that linguistic and analytical discourse approaches would resonate with me. In a more general sense, I have also been drawn to historical and sociological perspectives lately in an effort to broaden my horizon of mainstream IR and experiment with inter-disciplinary approaches.

Your thesis re-interprets the normalization process between the US and China, particularly surrounding the question of Taiwan's status in the early 1970s. What is your re-interpretation and why is a re-interpretation important?

I grew somewhat dissatisfied with the role the mainstream literature attributes to Taiwan's status in the normalization efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. According to this reading, the ambiguity surrounding Taiwan's status was an outcome that served mostly Washington's interests, for it allowed the US not to forsake the Chiang-kai Shek regime

on Taiwan during rapprochement with the People's Republic. There is a commonly held understanding that Beijing agreed to the deal struck in the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué because it was under pressure from external forces, such as the Soviet Union, and this led to a considerable bargaining weakness vis-á-vis the United States, and, by extension, to a less-than-ideal agreement over Taiwan. My challenge is that this interpretation is a bit one-sided because it casts the Chinese communists as passive recipients whose political agency is overlooked. What I am interested in is a re-examination of why and how Beijing's patience was essentially "bought" in the early 1970s, whether the Chinese communists could have been interested in perpetuating the cloud of uncertainty over Taiwan's status, and just what this story tells us about how diplomacy is conducted if there is an apparently irresolvable conflict between the parties concerned.

To give an example, the Taiwan Strait Crises in 1954-55 and 1958 already showed that Beijing was learning to manipulate the triangular relationship between the PRC, the US and Taiwan according to its own interests, and so the Chinese Communists could draw advantages from the country's territorial dividedness. The so-called 'noose strategy', in particular, comes up often in the vocabulary of PRC leaders at the time, referring to the objective of getting the US 'stuck' in the Taiwan Strait. This is just one important instance illustrating that Beijing's ambitions were in no way reducible to the simplistic mantra of "Taiwan's reunification with the mainland." Of course, that was the official position which dominated the communists' rhetoric, but behind this façade the story becomes a lot richer than it seems.

The reason any historical re-interpretation is necessary is that conventional readings of the past inevitably gloss over alternative interpretations, and this kind of silencing produces monolithic readings of historical events that are often treated with a kind of religious deference that no narrative warrants. Keeping history open for diverse readings, rather than packing the lessons it allegedly generates into a limited number of accepted narratives, is something I worked on with Akos Kopper in our EJIR piece. Another reason is that I am interested in exploring and making sense of China as a source of authentic non-Western political agency, to use Ayse Zarakol's expression, and the normalization efforts of the 1970s still seem to me like fertile ground for analysis. Last but not least, the management of the Taiwan dilemma was quite ingenious as a specific type of diplomatic practice. Specifically, its non-resolution, or resolution by delay, is an interesting form of state action, or lack thereof, that deserves further theorization and research. In this sense, Sandra Destradi's 2016 article introducing and discussing the concept of 'reluctance' in international politics is an exciting and welcome development in the field.

How does China's foreign policy and understanding of international relations differ to Western-centric understandings?

I see Chinese foreign policy, a particular practice enacted by the country's diplomatic representatives, as often detached from and not immediately informed by the knowledge produced by Chinese policy analysts and international relations scholars. However, this divide is not always maintained. Wang Huning, who was elevated to the Politburo Standing Committee at the 19th Party Congress last year, gained prominence previously as the author of neo-authoritarianism, a concept rationalizing why the country needs a strong leadership in the current period of rapid modernization. It is no surprise that he is sometimes called China's Kissinger, or the brains behind Xi Jinping and the rest of the leadership. In this example, the two spheres (practitioner/analyst or theorist) do overlap. On the other hand, it is quite clear that the kind of harmony envisaged and preached by Hu Jintao in the mid-2000s, which was meant to carry both domestic and international implications, has yet to arrive to China (news about the re-education campaigns operating in Xinjiang and targeting ethnic and religious minorities are particularly unsettling and revealing).

China's foreign policy is also inevitably colored by the rich cultural and political tradition, which for centuries operated on assumptions that were quite unique to that part of the world. Therefore, the rise of China probably cannot be meaningfully explored with reference to the record of how other great powers have allegedly ascended throughout history. Such structuralist arguments often resort to historical claims as little more than empirical ornamentation, while real historicity and sensitivity to context is missing. At the same time, China does not exist in a vacuum, so the country's non-Western otherness is probably also colored by its interaction with, sometimes challenge to, the so-called established order. The outcome, in my reading, is an interesting mélange that is quite difficult to make sense

of. One analysis that identifies this hybridity very well is a 1995 article by Christopher Hughes. It discusses how liberalism was transplanted into the Chinese context and its meaning transformed in a way that reflected the needs of the country to enter international society, and in so doing shifted away from the concept's original focus on individual rights and liberties.

As for a Chinese understanding of international relations, many Chinese scholars are producing knowledge that engages in important debates. Qin Yaqing's relational theory of world politics or Zhao Tingyang's reconstruction of the Tianxia concept are illustrative examples, even if Zhao himself is considered a philosopher and not an IR scholar. Tianxia was met with some suspicion, with William Callaghan famously claiming that it looks like just another neo-hegemonic project in disguise. Nevertheless, I so far understand Chinese IR not to be simply more of the same, or old wine in a new bottle. Rather, I share Zhang Yongjin's view that while Chinese IR is still understandably far from reaching its real potency, once it does, it may cause nothing short of an epistemological crisis in the whole discipline. Of course, the crisis itself depends on whether or not the Western mainstream is prepared to accommodate such unsettling developments.

What is your understanding of China's current foreign policy ambitions and the potential consequences?

Over the past decades, I think China has clearly drawn advantages from the current setup of the international order, considering that economic prosperity has become the cornerstone of the CCP's legitimacy and that prosperity is directly dependent on access to and stability of foreign markets. Today, Beijing seems to be more interested in maintaining this order, rather than overthrowing it completely. Nonetheless, I agree with Buzan's characterization that China is also a reformist power to the extent that some elements, normative underpinnings, of that order are in need of modification and change, not least because China had no contribution to the conception of that order after the end of World War II.

In more concrete terms, it is fashionable to talk about an assertive China that is throwing its weight around carelessly and bullying its neighbors. Developments in the South China Sea are no doubt unsettling, but I do not see them as part of a grand Chinese design that seeks territorial expansion and serious military conflict with other countries. My article with Akos Kopper discusses why this kind of talk is misleading and dangerous, and why such claims are rather inconsistent with China's historical practice of managing border disputes. Of course, it is still unclear how China is going to wield its increasing power, so frictions and conflicts with other countries will be difficult to avoid in the years to come.

What I find to be a question of global significance is how China is reacting to the gradual retreat of the United States from the international scene. Washington's growing disdain for multilateralism under President Trump and the 'Each Country For Itself' policy, to rephrase Trump's core message in the UN general assembly, may be a call for Beijing to step up and take on more responsibility in the management of the international order. In a bit of a contradiction, it might just be the perceived irresponsibility of the US, the erstwhile and self-proclaimed socializer of China, that becomes the trigger for Beijing to become more invested in the international order. I do not think this is quite happening, but a more fundamental reshuffling of roles and positions appears to be a safe bet at this point.

Do you see the future of IR theory as less Western-centric?

Certainly. I feel very excited by the breaking down of IR's disciplinary borders, which means not only an inclusion of non- or post-Western perspectives but also mutually refreshing dialogues with other disciplines. The works of Amitav Acharya are particularly interesting in this regard, as well as those of Emilian Kavalski and Chengxin Pan, both of whom are calling for a moment of IR soul-searching that does justice to the immensity and complexity of China's rise on the world stage. So I am pretty optimistic when I look at the China studies sub-field.

Ayse Zarakol's *After Defeat* was another important eyeopener for me that not only discussed the insecurities of status and stigma of non-Western states but also pointed to new directions for further broadening this kind of research agenda. However, whether IR theory as such becomes less Western-centric does not solely depend on the carrying out of critical research iself, but on the scholarly community not to marginalize such studies but acknowledge

them and incorporate them in their university curricula. I was lucky enough to have been exposed at CEU to this kind of diverse teaching, and it helped me develop a critical attitude to try and identify dubious and unproblematized assumptions and ways of seeing the world that often underpin Western-centric arguments.

On the other hand, it is also important to consider the potential limits of doing critique, and just what critique means. For instance, critical works revolve around and add footnotes to the very theories and approaches that are the target of criticism, inevitably re-invigorating old debates and breathing new life into the canon. Audrey Alejandro's new book discusses precisely how and why an internationalization of the discipline, such as in the Global South, can still take place despite, and in the context of, the resilience of an allegedly Western-dominated mainstream.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently working with colleagues at ELTE universtiy on a project that aims to break down the mainstream understanding of China's ping-pong diplomacy in the 1970s, and intends to reveal that what is understood in those terms was actually a set of mishaps and accidents. It is only in retrospect, by way of a kind of disciplinary post-rationalization, that a grand narrative was established surrounding ping-pong diplomacy, that Zhou Enlai and his genius was singled out as its author and so forth. Of course, this kind of myth-busting is not unknown in the discipline. Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira and John M. Hobson's 2011 article undermining the 'big bangs' of IR is a great piece demolishing the false gods whose altars are still visited and adored in the discipline often in a ritualistic way. So this is the kind of critical historiographical work that I think gives much impetus moving forward and finding new ways of thinking about international politics.

In addition, I am a member of an early career development group convened by EISA board member Jef Huysmans. We try to design events and projects, preferably on the margins of big conferences, like EISA next year, that help academics at an early stage of their career in terms of publishing strategies and more. We plan to organize networking events for women and ethnic minorities and to raise awareness of some of the challenges that they inevitably encounter in academia. We also have in mind café type discussions of important concepts in the discipline with more senior scholars who are accessible and willing to help and respond to younger colleagues. The event about publishing is less about ways to successfully publishing, but discusses failures and rejections and how to cope with them in the discipline (this is connected to our understanding that stress and mental health issues are rampant in academia, so this would be our two cents to start solving it). So far we call it a demystifying campaign, but that may still change as we develop our ideas.

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

That might just be the most difficult question, not least because I do not have much of a perspective on my own career so it is a bit hard to distil a generic kind of advice worth heeding. What I would say is that I have always tried to strike that precarious work-life balance that allows me to be productive without going nuts, so to speak. Sleep deprivation is something I try to avoid as much as I can. It makes no sense to work so much that it stops being interesting and exciting because that path leads to burnout and exhaustion. I try not to invest my whole identity into work. Of course, there is always a lot to do and read, but I think the tacit acceptance around being overworked in academia makes for an unhealthy academic culture. Tired eyes are worn as some kind of a badge of honor, and being well rested is suspicious. I guess this has to do with the neoliberalization of our discipline. It would be nice to change this kind of culture.