Interview - Andrew Hom

Andrew Hom is a Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests include timing and time, international theory, security, victory in modern war, and the philosophy and practice of IR. Previously, he worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Glasgow and taught at St Andrews University and Vanderbilt University after earning a PhD from Aberystwyth University and sundry degrees from the University of Kansas. He has published the co-edited (with Cian O'Driscoll and Kurt Mills) volume *Moral Victories: The Ethics of Winning Wars,* and recent papers in *International Studies Quarterly, Millennium*, *Security Dialogue,* the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, the *Oxford Handbook of Time and Politics*, and the *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations*.

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

There are so many exciting discussions that fascinate and give me periodic bouts of imposter syndrome! They're quite diverse but in one way or another they all treat global politics as more complex, strange, or wild than we previously imagined. Feminist and critical scholars continue to pioneer a range of methods, substantive foci, and large dialogues, bringing art and satire to bear on nuclear proliferation and proposing joy as an alternative method. There is also a lot of new research on what would previously have been considered 'non-IR' topics: tourism and sex tourism, cosmology and the politics of the anthropocene ; and everyday or 'micropolitical' contexts.

In terms of rendering IR strange, I also think a lot about the growing body of work that combines theory with intellectual history, which recovers multifaceted thought where the field had passed down partial or paradigmatic (or simply inaccurate) traditions. These works are excavating IR's deeply political foundations: its racialized and indeed racist heritage; its complicity in the invention of 'terrorism' and a normative hierarchy of organized violence; the creation of 'humanitarianism' in the context of international leftist revolutions turned sour; the multifaceted weirdness of political realism and social science more generally; the political and ethical problem of victory running unseen right through the heart of just war thinking; the long and conspicuous correlation between American political scientific concepts and US foreign relations; the theological foundations of cosmopolitanism; and the surprisingly recent provenance of 'foreign policy', just to name a handful.

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

In global politics, the renaissance of nuclear politics, the rise of artificial intelligence, increasingly automated systems, and information warfare. Nukes used to be difficult to teach prior to 2016 or so. I remember nuclear anxieties growing up at the end of the Cold War, but only partially. In the past, my students mostly thought of the bomb as a curious coda to semi-ancient history. That's no longer the case. Trump and Kim, India-Pakistan, and the pending death of the INF and maybe START have made nukes all too real all over again. In IR, it's often bad when big and important topics get easier to teach! I wish I still needed literary and historical accounts to get across the Cold War sense of constant dread punctuated by crisis. The latter cluster of AI, automation, and IT seems to me to condense or distill some of the worst habits of modern logics and technological innovation, with significant consequences for strategy, ethics, and the future of warfare. There is exciting work on this cluster that tackles new and highly technical topics from a blend of normative, theoretical, and empirical perspectives. While I can't pinpoint how my thinking is changing

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as a result of these issues, it's clear that the views I developed in graduate school and my very early career did not take seriously enough the possibility of nuclear exchanges and things like slaughterbots. This oversight is compounded by the fact that there is a fairly steep technical curve in both of these fascinating but troubling areas. Together, they make the old chestnut, 'may you live in interesting times', sound more like a threat or curse.

In academia, the replication and retraction crisis sweeping multiple fields, from political science's Lacour scandal on up the food chain to more venerable sciences, changed my thinking about pluralism, positivism, and the vocation of political science and IR. Previously, I self-identified with a 'dissident' or 'marginalized' brand of critical theorizing, which tacitly and unintentionally reproduced mainstream assertions about what 'counts' as scientific knowledge and sound theory development. We haven't heard buzz about an 'empirical law' in IR since the democratic peace, which fell apart fairly quickly and may have taken the early twenty-first century along with it. But it turns out that most human and some 'hard' sciences – from which political scientists take their epistemological and methodological cues – struggle to meet their own standards and that those standards were always more aesthetic and aspirational than descriptive. When viewed together with the replication and retraction crisis, I now think that critical, dissident, and postpositivist approaches are even more worthwhile but also that they tend to undersell themselves. Somewhat contrary to received wisdom in IR, these approaches represent a *more* robust, *more* progressive, and in many cases a *more* empirical stream of IR, and one that can actually live up to its own epistemological standards – if only critical scholars could learn to love the high ground. I make the case for this inversion in a forthcoming project, detailed below.

Is a temporal turn currently underway in IR and, if so, why has it taken the disciple so long to move in this direction?

Yes! 'Turns' can sound faddish but it symbolizes a significant increase in the quantity and quality of research on time in IR. It's happened largely in the critical wing, from Rob Walker's and Kim Hutchings' inspirational provocations, to key interventions on gender, threat construction and terrorism, trauma and historical events, mainstream IR, subjectivity and affect, the city, and cybersecurity. *Millennium* recently did a great conference and special issue on time, more and more edited volumes are covering this topic, and Oxford University Press is developing a handbook on time and politics. My own work finds temporal dynamics driving a range of international political practice and theory, from late-modern warfare and the rise of the sovereign and anarchic state system to classical realism, security studies, critical interventions, and what it means to 'do' IR according to various theoretical and methodological commitments.

But time isn't just a topic for critical discourse. The recent North Korean nuclear crisis and the even more recent Brexit negotiations in Parliament were both shot through with temporal rhetoric and symbols. In IR more generally, there's a push in historical institutionalism to think about time more directly and carefully, and quantitative IR has set things in motion, so to speak, by engaging Bayesian approaches to inference. Alongside these, a host of other works across IR and political theory have pushed time to the foreground of empirical and theoretical analyses of the modern age, great power politics and strategy, economics, immigration, parliamentary politics, and sovereignty and democratic deliberation. Time is everywhere these days, it seems.

Why did it take so long? For at least three reasons. As just noted, time is everywhere, which can make it seem so familiar and intuitive as to not require direct analytical attention. Second, this familiarity also makes it harder to unpack and conceptualize in rigorous, systematic terms – as evidenced by the sheer breadth of approaches to temporal aspects of global politics. Finally, at its limit, time poses a significant challenge to many ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments in IR and social science –scratching the time itch can open up deeper and thornier issues. It's not necessarily that IR has ever been truly 'timeless' or static, but rather that crucial temporal assumptions enable and drive our modes of discourse in deep-seated ways that are impossible to excavate without calling a host of other assumptions, concepts, and conventions into question.

How is time political?

There are two arguments for time's political element. The weaker one is that since time is fundamental to all social

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life and a basic existential dimension, how could it *not* be political? Politics occurs in and through time, so time possesses a political dimension. The stronger argument is that time is political because temporal assumptions and symbols directly shape and shove political processes in discernible ways. That is, temporal logics and timing practices help constitute political life as we know it. One example is the way that everything in the early modern era from city life, to exploration and imperialism, to rail travel and telegraphy, to warfare and the idea of territorial sovereign states all depended on innovations in time reckoning. There's another long-running example of this, but I need it to answer your next question.

Why is time seen as "a problem to be overcome" and "a malevolent force" by humans? Has it always been viewed this way?

As I discuss in my forthcoming book for Oxford University Press, *International Relations and the Problem of Time*, the view of time as a natural or intrinsic threat confronting human existence has had a very very long run – back before classical Greece to the rise of complex symbolic systems. I call this the *problem of time*, and it's been with us since ancient near-Eastern cosmologies described a cosmic estrangement in which unitary time gods – who encompassed all temporal elements from change to eternity – split into a heavenly, eternal god and a sub-lunar, earthly, or *temporal* god of change, dissolution, and death. Its prominence waxes and wanes through the centuries, but it never really goes out of style. One of the early temporal gods was named 'Time the Destroyer', and we can still find frequent references to time 'devouring' us, to time as the bringer of death, to temporal flux as an obvious threat to political stability and progress, and to 'temporal' life as intrinsically suboptimal and imperfect. I think the reasons we do are 1) the tradition is deeply embedded in our symbolic toolkit, and 2) when we grapple with the contingency and the complexity of politics, it helps to highlight a suitably big and abstract factor driving otherwise unwieldy and intractable events.

You've described "Western Standard Time" as the "hegemonic metronome". How and why did this way of understanding time attain its dominance?

Western Standard Time is IR's most sneaky hegemon, and one of modernity's greatest political and technological success stories (not in a normative sense but as a difficult and improbable achievement in which politics played a key role). The modern clock achieved this dominance through a unique combination of political support (France, Great Britain, and other European powers sponsored national entries in international timing contests to see who could develop the most accurate and reliable chronometer); popular usage (early factory workers pooled money to buy their own clock by which to check the working time set by the foreman); and technological necessity (intercontinental exploration requires reading the longitude, which in turns depends on time reckoning rather than celestial navigation; the speed of rail travel necessitated common time zones).

Why are the popular ways in which time is understood so problematic?

Alongside the problem of time, we easily treat time as identical to the motion of the clock, the solar or lunar calendar, and linear or circular shapes. The familiarity of these terms is a source of power and meaning making *and* a problem for understanding them systematically. 'Linear time' in particular has been loaded up with so many common sense but distinct and often contradictory meanings as to collapse under its own weight. The process sociologist Norbert Elias argued that symbolic references to time work by quickly and seamlessly transmitting learned knowledge about how to constitute and arrange social relations, and that it is this very capacity that obscures their underlying assumptions and deeper meanings. This helps explain why IR's temporal turn has so far *not* involved a systematic effort to sort out just what we are all talking about when we utter 'time' and 'temporality', whether we are talking about the same thing in different ways or very different things in highly similar ways, and how IR's many visions of time relate to one another.

Are there alternative ways of understanding time that might attend to these problems?

Yes, we can turn to timing theory. I developed this alternative from Elias' basic wager that to unpack time's intimate relationship with international politics, we should begin with social *timing* practices rather than concepts of time. Here

timing refers not to coincidence or a sense of occasion, but instead to a holistic vision of what change processes and social agents matter, how they can be combined or synthesized, and how the resultant series should unfold in order to realize various purposes. Timing involves priorities and hard choices, establishes dynamic relations in one way instead of other possible ways, and requires the acquiescence of a social group to its master organizing standard, all of which is to say that timing is intrinsically particular, positional, and political. When we talk about timing efforts, the peculiarities of symbolic language make it easier to reduce these dynamic practical activities (verbs) to reified entities with attributes (nouns). Thus timing begets 'time', and all 'time' utterances describe some underlying timing activity, from individual actions to globally dispersed coordination regimes. So if we want to really understand 'time' and temporal symbols in a given domain, whether it be political practice or IR theory, we should look for the underlying timing standards, interests, and activities that engender such references.

My book project extends timing theory much further by drawing on narrative scholarship to develop a novel means of explaining and understanding both explicit and hidden temporal dynamics in IR. This allows me to re-read IR in the round, as a collection of theories, explanations, and interpretations that also mark a collective practical effort *to time* international politics quite literally – that is, to specify how political processes and events hang together and to help them unfold in specific ways consistent with our vocational and political commitments. This facilitates counterintuitive analyses of key theoretical and philosophical debates cutting across mainstream, quantitative, institutionalist, and critical literatures along with central episodes of disciplinary development. Treating methodology and theory as matters of timing shows us temporal pathologies running through the heart of the field and helps us formulate a very different view of IR's identity, its intellectual commitments, and the academic hierarchies in which it sits.

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

I still feel like I'm just starting my career! So I'll pass on some of the best advice I got along the way, some of it explicit, some by example.

From Kim Hutchings and Harry Gould: bracing criticism is a compliment to your work.

From Hidemi Suganami, who got it from Hedley Bull, who got it, appropriately enough, from the book,*Space, Time, and Deity*: thinking is also research.

From Brent Steele: write early and often, push the ideas till you think they'll break (or you'll break), and worry less about pedigree and status and more about how colleagues treat each other.

From Cian O'Driscoll: everyday work matters, often as much or more than grand strategic visions – show up, keep commitments, hit deadlines (or at least the backup deadlines), think about how your decisions and actions will impact others (especially junior and precarious colleagues).

From Julie Kaarbo: take the research seriously, yourself not too seriously.

From my other excellent colleagues at Edinburgh: balance work and life – research and teaching can be a vocation, it can be a form of activism, or it can be a job, and there is no necessary correlation between these different approaches and professional outcomes. Find an approach that works for you, and resist paperwork wherever possible!