Interview - Gustav Meibauer

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, APR 23 2019

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.

Gustav Meibauer is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of International Relations of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Gustav's research interests include foreign policy, coercive diplomacy and military intervention. He also works on the theoretical contributions of neoclassical realism to foreign policy analysis and international relations theory. Gustav has written for RUSI whilst his published work includes journal articles on*The Futility of Buffer Zones in International Politics* and *Gender and bias in the International Relations curriculum: Insights from reading lists*.

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

I think that would have been the 2011 intervention into Libya. I was an MA student in Switzerland at the time and struck by how reports of genocidal intent on the part of the Ghaddafi regime didn't seem to fit at all with the suggested solution(s) on behalf of Western governments. If Ghaddafi threatened to slaughter innocent civilians, what good was a no-fly zone going to do? Indeed, we know now that Obama asked then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Michael Mullen precisely that question in March 2011: "Mike, is a no-fly zone going to stop anything we just heard from happening [Obama was given reports about Ghaddafi's threats to Benghazi]?" Mullen shook his head; "No sir". Obama snapped: "Well, then what are we discussing here? […] If you're telling me that this guy is tearing through his country, about to overrun this city of seven hundred thousand people, and potentially kill thousands of people – why is the option I'm looking at one that will do nothing to stop that scenario?" Perhaps even more fascinatingly, Obama realized this problem and yet ended up endorsing a no-fly zone anyway. I have tried to get at the decisional dynamics that are evident in this case of intervention and others ever since.

I have dug through archival materials, reports, video, secondary sources (including the book by David Sanger from which I borrow the above anecdote) and relevant other literature to investigate how decision-makers in the White House and elsewhere think, talk and write about interests, ideas, strategy and the use of force. Neoclassical realism presented me with one (I think useful) way to capture these dynamics in a relatively simple causal framework – causally independent interests translated through decision-maker's beliefs, ideas and internal disagreements into muddled, middle-ground outcomes. Of course, retrospectively talking about this process almost always makes it sound more straightforward than it is – I had a great supervisor who encouraged and pushed me along the way, and a fantastic cohort at LSE who were both supportive and willing to challenge my thinking.

Do you think a neoclassical realist approach can be developed into a coherent theory of international politics or is it best applied to foreign policy analysis? Given the theoretical divide between American and European IR, is there space for the paradigm to flourish in Europe?

Neoclassical realism (NCR) has already shown it has a lot of potential when it comes to analyzing and explaining state behavior. In my own research I have mostly looked at quite specific decision-making processes across different cases, but there is no inherent reason why it shouldn't similarly be applicable to grand strategic adjustment or even more macro-explanations of systemic outcomes. Formulating a neoclassical realist theory of international politics comes with its own challenges: For example, if individual state behaviors account for systemic outcomes, and systemic stimuli cause state behavior, are we looking at an iterative circle of causal relationships over time? This would be exciting because it would allow a clearer look at change, but it strikes me as reminiscent of constructivist theorizing on structure, agency and learning rather than neorealism's law-like regularities.

This isn't per se a problem. I think in part NCR is an attractive framework for many scholars because it is not paradigmatically "set". Yes, its supposed eclecticism (i.e. wide range of variables) at times underspecified causal mechanisms, occasional unclear scoping and so forth, have already led to charges of "degenerative" or "regressive" theorizing. This outside policing over who is a "true" realist comes down to semantics and often arbitrary boundaries. It has had a positive effect in that it has pushed neoclassical realists to clarify their theoretical contribution, including at the level of ontology, epistemology, methodology and core concepts. And yet, I am not sure whether complete "coherence" is achievable (or desirable) for neoclassical realism or any paradigm for that matter. Knowledge production thrives on difference and diversity.

This is also why "European" NCR has a lot to offer. I wouldn't want to overstate the differences here, but many of my European colleagues are perhaps more grounded in political theory rather than American-style social science. They may therefore be, by trend, more interpretivist, reflexively oriented and perhaps more willing to return to supposedly "a-scientific" insights from classical realist texts. I think these differences incentivize a very fruitful dialogue and allow us (together with our North American colleagues) to test and renegotiate paradigmatic boundaries of the approach. This relates to its differences from as well as overlaps with neorealism, liberalism and constructivism, on which much has been written – but also postcolonial and critical approaches, and non-Western IR. Finally, I hope that just as the rest of the discipline, NCR as a research program can engage junior scholars, as well as those from non-American and non-European universities. On that note, I am trying my best to keep track of all the exciting NCR-inspired work that is being done out there, so please do get in touch. In my experience, the NCR community is a friendly bunch, and we are always interested to get to know other scholars working on, with and about the framework.

What are 'hybrid tools' of foreign policy? How effective are they?

What I'm trying to get at with the term 'hybrid tools' is what characterizes a whole set of foreign policy instruments, such as no-fly zones, buffer zones, safe areas, naval blockades, maybe even Special Operations or drones. I think from a decision-maker's perspective, these tools bridge the gap between economic sanctions and outright military force on a ladder of escalation. If you want to coerce another country and slowly tighten the screws, you might find there's quite a leap between economic sanctions and whatever comes next. These tools offer a cheap way out – they are tightly rule-bound and may even seem reactive rather than aggressive. No-fly zones, for example, don't cost much, certainly when compared to full air campaigns or ground forces. At the same time, things will explode; an enforced no-fly zone will most likely start with cruise missile or air strikes against ground installations, radar systems, and so forth to guarantee air superiority. This also means such tools can, in theory, be scaled up and down. For example, since airplanes are already flying around, you could use them to actively bomb rather than passively patrol should you so desire.

From a decision-maker's perspective, this can be very attractive – you could use these tools to score political points domestically. For Turkey, suggesting a "buffer zone" for northern Syria sounded much better than trying to get international support for an invasion. In that sense, these tools may well be very effective. What about actual conflict management or protection of civilians? There are some serious scholars and analysts who argue these tools can be, but (just as Obama seemed to have in the above anecdote) I have my doubts.

Do you believe that representation within academic IR is as diverse as it should be, or do we still have a long way to go until we achieve a truly diverse and gender balanced discipline?

We still have some way to go. E-IR has very recently posted an excellent set of interviews focusing on gender equality in IR and elsewhere in academia which outlined this matter much better than I ever could – definitely worth a read! Obviously, diversity also touches on matters of ethnic and economic inclusivity, and on diversity of scholarly perspectives. Interrogating and changing modes of knowledge production and organization is a complex (and to a considerable degree structural) matter. In addition, it is interwoven with wider societal norms and practices. Therefore, working towards meaningful change will be difficult and takes a long time.

At the same time, that doesn't mean there aren't things we can all do (and should be doing) to push things into a better direction. Faculty and class teachers can reconsider their reading lists and teaching methods. Students can demand they do so and actively support this process. In my experience, many academic and professional staff are working hard to make university communities more inclusive, including through rethinking admissions, hiring, and promotion processes. University leadership should be held accountable, of course; "diversity" must not just become a new marketing slogan. Editors and publishers are increasingly aware of citation and publication gaps. I hope that these steps and others, including within the discipline (e.g. the push for a more global IR) slowly accumulate to meaningful change.

What innovations in teaching methods would you like to see more of in the teaching of IR?

I do think it's worthwhile to continuously think about innovation in teaching methods. Some fantastic work is published all the time in International Studies Perspectives or the Journal of Political Science Education – on active learning, games, evaluation methods, classroom activities, and critical pedagogy. I have been and continue to be particularly interested in simulations – all the way from the simple, path-based ones I designed together with my co-author Andreas Aagard Nohr to the large-scale, week-long exercises colleagues use in their teaching. I think such simulations are a great way to exemplify some of the dynamics of strategy, decision-making, negotiation, international organizations, law, and many more both live in the classroom as well as (increasingly) online.

Of course, at the end of the day good teaching does not need to rely on games and gadgets – the teaching of IR everywhere is good where it is well-considered, appropriately critical, and empowering students to challenge and produce knowledge (rather than just receive it). To that end, I think teachers everywhere should be willing to constantly re-think and reconsider their teaching practices, materials and contents. Good teaching is as crucial to the discipline as good research. This should be reflected both in how we as teachers think about and practice it, as well as in how it is incentivized and rewarded.

What are you currently working on?

I'm mostly working on turning my PhD on US foreign policy, intervention, and no-fly zones into a book. The PhD (at least mine, anyway) entails a very different style of writing. You'd walk through massive amounts of literature, hedge your argument a lot, very carefully place it within theoretical and empirical spaces – book readers appreciate some of that, but they aren't usually all that interested in, say, the details of case methodology (unless that's what your PhD is about…). The book will be on ways in which foreign policy elites grapple with ambiguous interests, diverse ideas, and limited means in the conduct of US foreign policy. Concomitantly, I'm investigating how decision-makers sell their proposals and decisions to wider domestic audiences – I think the interaction of foreign policy, rhetoric and electoral dynamics in the US (and elsewhere) is very interesting, especially given the 2020 elections are around the corner.

Other than that, I'm working towards a forum (hopefully forthcoming soon!) that includes colleagues from Europe and the US and explores some of the exciting theoretical work that's being done on neoclassical realism. My collaboration with Kiran Phull and Gokhan Ciflikli on gender, diversity and disciplinary modes of knowledge production also continues – we have a wealth of new data to analyze, but also continue to be very interested in concrete ways to improve reading lists, curricula and teaching methods in IR. Finally, in working on simulations and pedagogy (and watching Game of Thrones), I have become very interested in the creation of fictional worlds. Together with a colleague at LSE, I write about fictionality in IR – we might even run an experiment soon to test some of our intuitions (which would be a first for me).

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

I don't think I'm particularly well placed to offer much advice, what with still trying to figure out this whole research business myself. As I said above, I had the luxury and pleasure of entering the PhD together with a fantastic cohort of other scholars, had a great and supportive supervisor, and worked within a rich intellectual environment at LSE and elsewhere. I realize this is not everyone's experience by far. And even then, research can feel like a lonely and isolating process. I don't think it should be that way. As teachers, we encourage students to take active part in the university community. I have learned that, like such a community, the wider "scholarly community" also has its clubs, events, socials and so forth. Unlike the university community, it might be more difficult to take part (rarely are there leaflets handed out). This difficulty negatively affects especially already underprivileged scholars.

I realize this pushes the burden on the young scholar, but I think one way to counter-balance this is to very actively reach out. Send emails to people who you would like to get to know. Book their office hours, go to their public lectures, invite them for coffee, ask questions. Even very senior scholars are (in my limited experience) happy to engage, support, even mentor. Obviously, this also goes for peers – they're going through the same stuff. Indeed, we may sometimes forget it in the heat of the moment and when we emphasize disagreement, gaps in the literature, "rigor" and such things: at the end of the day, we're all in it together. Reaching out is then not about instrumental "networking" per se. Rather, it's a good idea to create and participate in groups and communities, including across universities, disciplines and continents for the collaboration and support they offer.