Interview - Tristen Naylor

Tristen Naylor is a Fellow in International Relations at the London School of Economics. He was previously a Lecturer in Diplomatic Studies at the University of Oxford, where he was named 'Most Acclaimed Lecturer' in the Social Sciences. Prior to his academic career, Dr Naylor worked in foreign policy for the Government of Canada. He is a recipient of the Canadian Public Service Award of Excellence.

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

The research being done on/in historical IR is where the most exciting action is at the moment. Of particular interest to me is work being done on the production of contemporary international order, particularly those that push back on extant accounts, which are still largely Western-centric (if not Western-triumphalist). And I think the ways in which this work links up with theoretical discussions about hierarchies in IR makes it all the more powerful, particularly those that confront gender and racial hierarchies. For me, what makes this work not just exciting, but vitally important, is that it helps to undo the epistemic, ontological, and methodological violence that typifies what has become mainstream IR (and which remains not just dominant, but largely unquestioned).

Jason Sharman's *Empires of the Weak* and Daniel Immerwahr's *How To Hide An Empire* both just came out and are excellent examples of this sort of scholarship. I devoured both of these books over the course of a couple days – I couldn't put them down! Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents* is also a recent favourite; as is Ayse Zarakol's *After Defeat*, which played a huge role in shaping my thinking when I was doing my doctorate. Hand-in-hand with this empirical research is that which looks critically at the historical development of the discipline itself. Robert Vitalis' *White World Order, Black Power Politics* is a notable example. I see Patricia Owens' current project on *Women and the History of International Thought* engaging in the same sort of critical recovery work – I couldn't be more excited to see what emerges from that project.

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

The way I think about the world is dramatically different from how I thought about it when I first started out. The biggest change was wrestling myself free from ahistorical, state- and Western-centric thinking. Before becoming an academic I worked in foreign policy, and I very much took for granted the state-system and the dominance of particular actors and institutions within it, all while subscribing to the fiction of sovereign equality in an anarchic system. Critically examining the foundations of international order isn't exactly what you're meant to do when your job is to write policy memos for a minister, indeed, you're thoroughly disciplined into not doing so.

Those scales dropped over time. Reading Robert Cox' *Social Forces* as an undergrad was the first big 'ah-ha!' moment for me, soon followed by the first time I picked up Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*. But it's the professors and colleagues who've helped me over the years who've shaped my thinking the most. Most notably, Mark Salter turned me into a poststructuralist and Eddie Keene taught me how to be a historical sociologist. They're the ones who are most to blame/thank for me now thinking about the world in the way that I do.

As an English School scholar, how do you think this research agenda has evolved in recent years?

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Well, I'm not sure I'm strictly an English School scholar. While the School is a primary audience for my work and I use the School's concepts centrally, I think – I hope – my work resonates more broadly. That said, I think the most important English School work in recent years has been that which has responded to Hedley Bull's work, particularly his conceptualisation of international society in *The Anarchical Society,* as well as his and Adam Watson's landmark text, *The Expansion of International Society*. Both are profoundly important pieces of scholarship, but are nonetheless riddled with problems.

Most recently, Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit's *The Globalization of International Society* is an important volume for moving us beyond conceptualising things in the same ways as earlier generations of English School scholars. Ann Towns' *Women and States,* Shogo Suzuki's *Civilization and Empire*, Edward Keene's *Beyond the Anarchical Society*, and Tomoko Okagaki's *The Logic of Conformity* – to name but a few – also spring to mind, revising a lot of the problematic legacies left by earlier scholars, both empirically and conceptually.

To be critical of the School, though, I'm worried that – in the grand scheme of things – its agenda hasn't actually evolved all that much. The School is still predominantly talking about (and using) the ideas of Martin Wight, Charles Manning, Herbert Butterfield, Hedley Bull, and Adam Watson. It's not only really old stuff, it's also really male, really white, and really Western. If the School is wondering why its numbers aren't growing – let alone questioning whether its agenda is substantively evolving – thinking critically about this might be a good way to start. The School has a lot to offer the discipline, which is why I engage with it, but I do worry that some of the ways in which its stagnated means that the School as a whole is provincialising itself.

Your recently published book, *Social Closure and International Society: Status Groups from the Family of Civilised Nations to the G20,* develops a theory of "international social closure". How does this theory help us explain and understand contemporary international relations?

The book is about how international social order is reproduced. It asks how stratified, international hierarchies get perpetuated through the competition of actors for seats at the top tables of international society, be that membership in the European Great Powers' club in the 19th century or in the G20 today. One of the things the book is doing is helping us better understand status in IR. At the most general level I'm asking questions about how status is sought, denied, and granted by way of membership in these sorts of clubs, which I think we need to understand as status groups.

I'm making two moves here to look at things differently from how we typically understand them in IR. First, I'm not concerned with how the G20 governs the global economy or how the Great Powers achieve a balance of power; rather, I'm interested in them as social groupings within the international domain. Second, I think the way we think about status in IR is really quite impoverished. To assess whether a state counts as a Great Power, we typically look solely at the attributes and behaviours of that actor- we count missiles, calculate gross domestic products, and ask whether it is 'behaving' like a great power. And while these things matter, solely looking at them causes us to miss the fact that status is inherently *relational* and *social*. Status isn't just about what you have or how you act, but about who you hang out with. That's why I think we have to understand these clubs as status groups.

We can think of international society as being like an American high school, where you've got different groups each with different degrees of social power (the cool kids, the jocks, the library nerds, etc.) and where an individual's status is dependent upon which group(s) they're a part of; not just, or even mostly, what stuff they have. So, in the book I'm suggesting that we ask the same sort of questions about status groups in international politics as we would about status groups in a high school. Instead of asking, 'how do you get to be one of the cool kids?' (Is it the clothes you wear? The music you listen to?), I'm asking 'how did a polity get into Western European international society?' and 'how does a state get into the G20?' (Is it the norms you adhere to? The institutions you participate in?)

And I'm obviously looking at things across a relatively broad history so as to discern if things have changed over time, and, if they have, to see what this tells us about international society. Is the status game played the same way today as it was in the past? Is international society today more fair/equal than it was during its relatively violent, racist, imperialist, colonialist past? The short answer is no, it isn't (or, at least, not nearly as much as we think it is).

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In your book, you argue that historic dynamics of exclusion and discrimination in international politics have been (re)produced in the G7 and G20 summits. How have these dynamics evolved across the *longue durée*, since they emerged with the "Family of Civilised Nations"? Are there similar dynamics present in other forms of Global Governance?

This is what's at the centre of the book's theoretical dimension. I argue that even though contemporary international order appears more open/participatory/inclusive, it substantively isn't. What I call 'international social closure' – a reformulation of a neo-Weberian sociological theory made suitable for IR – endures as a means by which international social order is reproduced. Even though the contemporary governance landscape appears less hierarchical than international society in the past, closure continues to stratify.

In terms of change, processes of closure have become more hidden today, which allows the contemporary landscape to appear more open/fair than than it actually is. One consequence of this is that it allows superiorly positioned actors to guard their status positions by less overt and direct means, they can instead rely on norms and practices that in part constitute international society's primary institutions to maintain the status quo. So, today you don't need to defeat an aspirant great power in war to keep them out of the top-tier club, instead you can more subtly rely on diplomatic norms like precedence and pragmatism to keep them out of the ranking status group.

As to whether these dynamics are present in other global governance clubs, my hypothesis is that they are. They might be slightly different in terms of the exact mechanisms at play, but the general process of social closure is nonetheless there. I'd be delighted if others would pick up the theory that I produce in the book and test it empirically with further cases.

You carried out participant observation at G20 and G7 summits for more than five years. What insights did you gain from this? What challenges did you face?

For starters, I was able to observe things that I never otherwise would have. It made for a far richer empirical basis upon which to ground my theoretical claims. For example, I could capture first-hand the subtle, 'micro-political' ways that diplomats deny standing to non-state actors. And I was able to get an intuitive feel for the summits, how they work. Summits really are ripe for ethnographic analysis – they have their own cultures, languages, and traditions. Not only are they worth of study in their own right, but it takes a while for them to become intelligible – it really was only after my first few summits that I really got value out of this anthropological dimension of my research.

I also gained a lot of practical knowledge about conducting this type of work. When we teach methods in IR, we tend to overlook the practical dimensions of actually carrying out fieldwork, which can throw up the biggest challenges. Not only can this stuff actually end up taking the bulk of your time, if not handled well, it can easily derail your entire project. So you've got to learn things like how to deal with embassies that are reluctant to grant you visas, figure out how much extra time to build in for unexpected travel hiccups, how to talk your way into rooms you're not strictly meant to be in, and so on.

Why do you think that the discipline of IR has been so reluctant to engage ethnographically with its objects of study? Are there any lessons you could share from your own fieldwork, particularly on how to interview and observe international elites?

It's more than mere reluctance, it's opposition! It almost certainly comes from the behavouralist positivism that became dominant in the discipline. Ethnography was delegitimised as a method, deemed unscientific. This sort of work is finally getting a fair hearing in some corners of the discipline, but even still, it's marginal. Positivism, and especially quantitative positivism, still looms large. As for lessons, the most important thing I picked up was discovering how to keep things moving in the right directly when– almost inevitably – your weeks of meticulous planning are thrown off course by something unexpected. Just as no battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy, no research plan survives your first day in the field. The other thing I learned was sort of the inverse – discovering how to capitalise on unexpected opportunities. I can't count the number of times I had impromptu meetings with heads of government or unexpected run-ins with individuals whom I never expected to get access to.

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You can't prepare for the unexpected, but you can be ready to make the most of it when it comes your way.

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

Remember that whatever you're doing, it's probably the first time you're doing it. Whether it's a dissertation, or a conference presentation, or an article, or even a book, it's your first kick at the can – it's not going to be perfect and it's not going to be your best work. And that's okay. Don't let striving for an impossible perfection get in the way of getting it done. Just finish it and move on. While we tend to fetishise the idea of the intellectual prodigy, scholarship really doesn't work that way – mastery of the craft comes over time and through repetition. Second, and closely related, ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness, it's a mark of maturity.