

Interview – Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme

Written by E-International Relations

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Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. is a tenured International Relations scholar focusing on human rights, United States foreign policy, global governance, and foreign aid. He holds a permanent Lectureship at the International Studies and History section of the Institute of History at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands. He coordinates the Pre-Master European Union Studies Program and serves as the Chair of the Board of Examiners of the MA in International Relations Program. He is the co-editor of *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers* (Routledge, 2017) and the author of peer-reviewed articles in *International Studies Perspectives*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Geoforum*, *International Political Science Review*, and *Human Rights Review*, among many others. Previously, he worked as a Käte Hamburger Fellow on global cooperation based in Germany, as a Fox International Fellow at the MacMillan Center for Area and International Studies at Yale University, and he briefly held a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor within the Department of Political Science at Northern Illinois University, USA. He was also a visiting researcher at the Comparative Constitutionalism Group of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. He holds a joint PhD in Political Science and North American Studies from the Freie Universität Berlin and also previously studied at Yale, Osnabrück, Göttingen, Heidelberg, and De La Salle Manila. His forthcoming book is tentatively titled *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia*. Twitter: @santinoregilme

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

International Relations (IR) scholars should focus more on understanding how human suffering could be alleviated through the intensification of transnational cooperation, amongst a wide variety of actors — ranging from states, international organizations, and local community actors, amongst many others. As IR scholars, we should regularly interrogate how and under which conditions the outcomes of our engagement (teaching, research, and community outreach) contribute to the improvement of the human condition. Considering my own research interests and reflections on the future of the field, I do think that there are three key themes that I find very exciting. First, as a human rights scholar, I am very curious how morally resonant concepts — human dignity, rights, peace, democracy, and security etc. — are being instrumentalized by competing actors in ways that do not appear to be supportive of the substantive normative principles that underpin such concepts. For example, as I wrote in a very recent publication in the *Journal of Global Security Studies*, some state leaders have strategically invoked the notion of *peace* in order to justify intensified state violence particularly in the context of the global ‘war on drugs’. It appears to me as problematic and ironic to use ‘peace’ as a justification for state violence. Second, IR research on global public health will most likely gain traction in the next few years. There’s a lot that we need to learn on how effective global cooperation on public health could have probably saved more lives especially during a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, another area of research that should interest IR scholars pertains to how extremely affluent individuals — the likes of Jack Ma, Bill and Melinda Gates, Jeff Bezos, the Koch Brothers etc. — facilitate transformative outcomes in the global system, particularly in the areas of democratic governance, human rights, and violent conflict. Some of my preliminary remarks on this new research frontier appeared last year in a peer-reviewed article in *Law, Culture and the Humanities*.

Defining a research topic as exciting requires us to interrogate our position in the debate — particularly our own phenomenological standpoint. When I first arrived in Leiden, it was interesting to note that nearly half of the students in my MA core introductory course in IR submitted a final research proposal that defended military intervention in the

Interview – Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme

Written by E-International Relations

Global South (and justified such intervention through what politicians and scholars call the ‘responsibility to protect’). I interrogated my students on who exactly has that responsibility. I asked whether we find it easy to advocate for militaristic interventions in far-flung places abroad when we are sitting comfortably here in northern Europe. I requested my students to imagine themselves being born and raised in a part of the world that continues to struggle from neocolonial invasions and new forms of economic exploitation. After that, my students became more reflective about how they frame their research topics and have been more aware that research has political consequences.

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

My analytically eclectic approach in my scholarship stems from my exposure to several distinctive academic disciplines, before starting an academic career in International Relations. There were several critical junctures in my intellectual understanding of the world. The first shift pertains to my encounter with the philosophical discipline, which allowed me to formulate big, abstract, conceptual —and perhaps too many, out-of-this-world— questions and reflections about the human condition. Particularly, my interest in human rights started during my time as a BA philosophy major. I wrote my BA thesis on the universality vs. East Asian human rights debate. To me, philosophy allowed me to reimagine different sorts of life-worlds, utopias, and lines of reasoning that we normally do not consider in our day-to-day living.

The second conjuncture pertains to my practical working experiences in the non-academic world. As a fresh 18-year old university graduate at that time, I started working as a junior executive for the Manila-based operations of the world’s largest financial conglomerate (at that time, before the 2007 financial crisis) and, eventually as a corporate risk executive for its rival financial conglomerate based in Manila. After realizing that the financial services sector was not something that I enjoyed (although my supervisors offered career promotion), I decided to take a civilian research position for one of the top military intelligence services of the Philippine government. My experiences in the financial services industry exposed me to what Robert Keohane would call as ‘complex interdependence’, and they highlighted how the fates of many individuals depend on ‘abstract products’ that the global financial sector has produced (and profited from). My work experience in the public sector made me realize how the political survival of state leaders in ‘core states’ of the international system mutually constitute the fate of those in the so-called ‘peripheral states’.

The third conjuncture refers to my formal shift to political science, which happened when I moved in 2009 from Asia to Germany to complete a German language certificate and a MA in Political Science at the Universität Osnabrück. It was an intellectually exciting period as I was exposed to a lot of statist literature and theories. I learned a lot from Roland Czada, my thesis mentor, and at that time, one of the leading political scientists focusing on German politics and corporatism. It was extremely challenging because I had to take several political theory courses (focusing on state theory), which were all taught in German. During my first encounter with the political science literature on the European Union, I realized that Europeans love to universalize their experiences as if the rest of the world revolves around them. There’s a lot of Eurocentric sentiment in mainstream European Union studies literature and, as a Southeast Asian student at that time, I found that project of regional integration quite suspicious if coercively applied in other contexts beyond Europe. My PhD training in North American studies and Political Science at Freie Universität Berlin and Yale facilitated new learning opportunities. My PhD dissertation chair, Lora Anne Viola is a role model for unabashed intellectualism and analytic rigor. As my former dissertation committee member, Susan D. Hyde (at that time, at Yale and now at UC Berkeley) supported my research and provided constructive feedback, even though perhaps she may disagree with my methods and approach. Both Lora and Susan are generous scholars, to whom I owe a lot, and I can only work hard to pay it forward to relatively more junior scholars. Before starting my PhD, I had to decline a scholarship offer to study Sociology at Cambridge University. I had several reasons that pushed me to choose Berlin, including the city’s apparently progressive intellectual atmosphere and the opportunity to learn from Thomas Risse, who was a member of my dissertation committee. At Yale, I’ve been exposed to a wide variety of exciting research topics and rigorously designed research projects, all of which intensified my sense of intellectual curiosity.

During a fellowship at the Center for Global Cooperation Research in Duisburg, I am grateful for the privilege to have

Interview – Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme

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met friends and colleagues whom I also learnt a lot about intersectional inequalities and oppression. I shared an office with Olivia Rutazibwa whose thoughts and insightful perspectives on race and IR, influenced me to understand world politics in a way that I was not exposed to beforehand. I also learned a lot from Shirin Saeidi and Katja Freistein, amongst many others, in terms of their theoretical insights on gender, citizenship, and theories of international organizations. My research collaboration with my friend and co-author James Parisot provided me valuable opportunities to reflect on how racism, gender, and imperialism have coalesced so as to generate the founding elements of American capitalism (I highly recommend James' book *How America Became Capitalist*, Pluto, 2019). In sum, this exposure to a diverse range of theoretical traditions, analytic approaches, and methodological preferences perhaps has made me more analytically eclectic. Perhaps this sort of eclecticism is reflected by the relatively wide range of research topics and approaches that I used in my scholarly works thus far.

How is COVID-19 impacting US foreign policy?

There are several ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated some notable developments in US foreign policy. The pandemic highlights, in very sharp ways, the retrenchment of the US from its commitment to providing global and domestic public goods. From within the US, federal and state governments have horribly failed in providing equitable and accessible health care to all individuals. At the transnational level, the US failed to foster global cooperation amongst its allies in ways that could share public health expertise and resources that are needed to curb the pandemic.

I am disappointed that the Trump administration has persistently undermined long-standing US leadership in global health governance, particularly by formally withdrawing US membership from the World Health Organization. This is an unfortunate foreign policy decision, especially during a global pandemic, when scientific expertise is an extremely important global public good. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the rivalry between the US and China, to the extent that Donald Trump and his minions have expressed blatantly racist discourses against China and other Asians, while the White House issued the suggestion to ban all members of China's Communist Party from entering the US. While the rest of Asia is busy managing the detrimental effects of the pandemic, Beijing has been preoccupied with intensifying its military activities in the disputed South China Sea region. We can probably expect to see a dramatic shift in US foreign policy if and when Joe Biden is elected the next US President (but then, there's a question if Trump would accept defeat and the likelihood that he will insist on staying in power beyond his constitutional mandate!).

How has US humanitarian and foreign aid changed under the Trump administration?

Thus far, President Trump's record on foreign aid suggests several key insights. First, the Trump administration has not clearly articulated a comprehensive strategy for revamping the US foreign aid security apparatus despite the rapidly evolving official finance programs of China, America's most credible rival. Second, whereas Beijing's One Belt One Road initiative and other official finance programs have yet to offer a compelling vision for international development, Trump abandoned his predecessors' reliance on the legitimating discourses of democracy and human rights promotion. This abandonment of American foreign aid's discourses coupled with an ambivalence towards multilateralism potentially undermines the reliability of US security alliances with other states. Third, despite Trump's radical departure from his predecessor's foreign policy discourses, his administration remained substantially constrained in building long-term institutional policies that could embody his nativist and right-wing anti-globalization ideology. The US Congress' eventual rejection of Trump's budget cuts in foreign aid demonstrates Trump's failure to successfully resist strong bipartisan opposition from Congress. Congressional opposition to drastic foreign aid cuts resonates with domestic and international pressure to continue the US commitment to multilateral cooperation, for now at least.

What is the US's long-term strategy for a more multilateral world? Is there an emerging bilateral relation we should watch?

I co-edited (with James Parisot) *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers*. In our introduction to that volume, we wrote that the election of President Donald Trump in the US, in an attempt to 'make America great

Interview – Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme

Written by E-International Relations

again', has created the potential to reverse decades of economic globalization as the US may shift away from neoliberalism inwards, driven by an exclusivist and xenophobic political agenda. While today the US pushes back against global interdependence and multilateralism towards Trumpism, China continues to promote the continuation of globalization and international economic integration, including supporting the Trans-Pacific Partnership, from which Trump has removed the US. Hence, while the US initiated and anchored neoliberalism, it appears, in the long run, China's rise to the top may be its ultimate outcome. The election of Donald Trump and emergence of far-right and illiberal political movements within and beyond the Global North, and the bleak future of European integration all signal widespread perceptions of uncertainty on the future of Euro-American-led global governance. We also hypothesized that there is a dramatic transformation of achieving or sustaining US hegemony under Trump: whereas previous presidential administrations relatively relied more on global engagement, human rights, and democratic values as moralistic justifications, it appears that current American power is now being enforced through nationalist rhetoric, amoral policy justifications, and transaction-oriented bargaining.

Yet, the Trump administration does not have a coherent long-term strategy in ways that are easily comparable to his predecessors. It appears to me, however, that Trump's mobilization of and support for white supremacist forces within the US —and perhaps in Europe—could be interpreted as a way of resurrecting (in Trump's view) American power from perceived decline, considering that the balance of power is shifting to the Pacific. To the extent that white supremacy has emerged as one of the founding political logics of the international political order, Trump and his supporters perhaps realize that such an exploitative normative order is losing traction, and perhaps the rise of Trump represents the attempt to steer the future to maintaining that oppressive order.

The relationship between Beijing and Washington DC is something that we should really watch. I am skeptical of the argument that China will eventually be absorbed by the US-led liberal international order. That order is falling into pieces, and the core of that order is in chaos (look at Trump and his lack of leadership!). Even the management core of that liberal order has already abandoned the normative principles (human rights, democracy, and rule of law) that have sought to legitimize and to hold the varying competing elements of that order together. China has a lot of opportunities to remake that order, and it is indeed doing its best to do just that — ranging from its expansionist military activities in the South China Sea (and its refusal to recognize the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration), the One Belt One Road Initiative, its unwavering support for illiberal and authoritarian modes of governance in small countries in the Global South, and its refusal to uphold the human rights demands of minorities within its claimed territories.

What would a Biden administration mean for the future of US foreign policy?

It is too early to ascertain if a Biden administration could emerge next year. In fact, during a recent interview of Donald Trump by Fox News' Chris Wallace, Trump confessed that he is unsure if he will step down from power in case Joe Biden wins the November 2020 elections. Trump said: "Look... I have to see". This is a remarkable statement. Progressive movements in the US need to prepare for the possibility that Trump will not step down even if in case the electoral outcome dictates him to vacate the presidency.

Thus, any attempt to imagine a Biden presidency should be met with a word of caution. If Biden succeeds in replacing Trump, it is likely that his foreign policy agenda would include the following. First, Biden is likely to bring back democracy promotion abroad as one of the core elements of his foreign policy. Moreover, Biden is expected to strengthen NATO and US security ties with its allies in Europe and Asia. Third, I expect that a Biden presidency could dramatically strengthen the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific region as a way of curbing China's expansionist activities therein, especially in the disputed South China Sea maritime region. Biden pledges to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that could mean the reduction in the US military footprint in the Middle East. Another focal point is climate change, and it is likely that Biden will be a more ardent supporter of emissions reductions and other environmentally-friendly policies compared to Trump. Of course, even if Trump loses the election and Biden eventually becomes the next US president, Biden's foreign policy pledges during the campaign still have to be negotiated and contested amongst competing interest groups within and beyond Washington DC.

How are human rights in distress and do you see this trend continuing?

Interview – Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme

Written by E-International Relations

Human rights are in distress, and we can see this both in terms of the normative justifications (and contestations) that underpin the international system as well as the actual practices of state leaders. As I argued in my 2019 piece in *Geoforum*, I maintain that there are several key manifestations of this global erosion of human rights as the normative foundation of the international system. First, authoritarian politicians and social movements that explicitly and consistently uphold racist, sexist, and discriminatory political discourses and policy strategies have gained traction both in the public sphere and also in the corridors of power. Second, American power has consistently failed to uphold the moral principles of material equality and global justice (even before Trump). American foreign policy —through its wide range of aid programs and vigorous public diplomacy— has championed the role of the state as a guarantor of free markets, property rights, and capital accumulation, which paved the way for other states worldwide to entrench further inequality while emboldening the political power of economic elites. In many Global South countries, a robust welfare state tradition did not exist as US global dominance emerged in the era of decolonization and did not champion the principles of material justice to the extent of advocating for equitable material distribution within and across newly formed national constitutional orders. If we accept the empirical diagnosis that human rights are in crisis, then one must understand that a crisis does not only mean destruction but could also mean reform. We can only hope and work harder in ensuring that progressive social movements in many parts of the world succeed in curbing the rise of politicians who are guided by exploitative political logics such as racism, sexism, dehumanization of minorities, and unfettered wealth accumulation.

How does foreign aid impact human rights?

My forthcoming book tentatively titled, *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia*, provides a conceptual framework on how and under which conditions United States foreign aid impacts domestic state repression and physical integrity rights outcomes in recipient countries. My previously published articles on post-9/11 US aid to Colombia and Thailand, in the context of the war on drugs, show that understanding the impact of aid requires us to also look into the converging discourses and policy preferences of donor and recipient governments. Challenging mainstream scholarship that focus only on foreign aid as *amaterial resource*, I argue that aid amplifies the policy preferences and domestic conditions in recipient countries, as *shared discourses about aid* condition the patterns of usage of such external resources on the ground. Thus, foreign aid's impact on physical integrity rights — or the freedom of the human person from abuses of bodily integrity including torture, political imprisonment, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, among many other — does not fully depend on its amount; rather, shared discourses and interests about aid shape the social structures that facilitate how and for which purpose that aid would be used.

Why is it important to look at multi-causal explanations for human rights crises in the Global South?

Human rights crises, like any other types of social phenomena, usually emerge from complex interactions amongst varying political actors and institutions from different geographic scales. As I argued in my 2014 piece in *Third World Quarterly*, political science research on human rights tends to be divided between sub-fields: comparativists (those studying comparative politics) usually focus on intra-national factors that impact human rights, whereas IR scholars underscore the transnational dimensions of human rights crises. Imagine, for instance, the complex connections between modern-day slavery, chocolate production in the Global South, poverty, and excessive chocolate consumption in the Global North. Many children are forced to work in cocoa plantations in the poor countries in the Global South, while many people in Europe and North America complain how child slavery and poverty in West Africa (which produces nearly 70% of the world's cocoa) are solely caused by poor domestic governance and policies alone. It is ridiculous for Europeans, Americans, and the rest of the world that we forget our own individual complicity in various human rights crises while exporting that blame elsewhere. Those injustices emerged from the complex systems of global economic governance that have been structurally designed to put economic efficiency and welfare of wealthy people first, while sidelining the value of human labour and the right to life of many people at the bottom of the global production chains.

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

I still consider myself as a young scholar despite being granted a permanent academic position at the Leiden Institute

Interview – Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme

Written by E-International Relations

for History (as perhaps the first scholar from the Global South to do so in that context). I am committed to continuous learning with and from colleagues and students and the advice I can give come from my own life experiences and reflections. Perhaps the most important advice is to always take any advice from others with a grain of salt. That also means listening and carefully reflecting about your own values, sources of personal happiness and fulfillment, and your own sense of intellectual curiosity. One trusted mentor strongly advised me to stop publishing while finishing my PhD, because an excellent dissertation (and academic pedigree), accordingly, is the only passport to an academic career. Obviously, I defied that well-intentioned advice because I assessed that suggestion against other pieces of information, which included the trend that most academic positions nowadays require at least one or a handful of peer-reviewed publications for a newly-minted PhD. Moreover, several trusted colleagues strongly advised me to not leave a tenure-track position at an R-1 political science department in the US. The decision to leave that position emerged from an ongoing visa application snafu at that time and my own assessment that Trump was likely to win the 2016 US elections, and that could mean a lot of uncertainty for my personal safety as a non-US citizen. While trusted academic colleagues may have only looked into the appealing prospect of landing a tenure track position in the US, I seriously considered other aspects such as quality of life and other personal reasons that may be difficult to recognize for another person.

Another piece of advice that I'd like to share came from Susan D. Hyde — namely, that an academic career is a marathon and not a sprint. I have been learning how to slow down, to take a deep breath, and to work at my own pace in ways that I think are productive and personally fulfilling. Everyone has their own distinctive life trajectories, and perhaps the only competition that matters is improving one's self based on one's own standards, values, and sense of fulfillment. Besides, there is so much life beyond academia, and it is important that we continue to build lasting and meaningful relationships with family, friends, and the communities that we intend to reach out. In fact, a health crisis during the first few months of my PhD a decade ago forced me to prioritize my health and well-being over the constant storm of deadlines in this profession (that also means that I have been committed to at least 8 hours of sleep every day and freeing my weekend from any work commitments).