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Interview - Gwilym David Blunt

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Dr Gwilym David Blunt is a Lecturer in International Politics at City, University of London. Previous to this he was a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Cambridge. His research addresses global distributive justice, the ethics of resistance, and the politics of philanthropy. His first book *Global Poverty, Injustice, and Resistance* was recently published by Cambridge University Press. He has published articles in prominent academic journals and popular publicans like Aeon and The Conversation. He is co-host of *The City Politics Podcast*.

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

I think the most interesting change in political philosophy has been an increased willingness to engage with 'the real world'. The germ for my book *Global Poverty, Injustice, and Resistance* was laid during my PhD studies. I kept on reading really excellent books on justice that strongly condemned the state of the world and had suggestions about what to change, but were silent on *how* to change it. Instead, the literature was stuck in a feedback loop between philosophers on matters such as whether distributive justice applies only within the state or whether it applies beyond it. It seemed to me that the same debates were occurring then as occurred a decade before and a decade before that. In this I was far from alone, many scholars have emerged in the past decade have been more willing to engage with questions of 'how', not just questions of 'why' or 'what'. I think this turn to 'realism' and 'non-ideal theory' has made political philosophy more relevant to the world in which we live. It also has made it a bit more exciting to research and study.

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

I always expected to become more conservative as I've aged, but the opposite seems to be the case. In the face of climate change, global inequality, and now the coronavirus pandemic, it seems impossible to defend the status quo anywhere in the world. The biggest change in my thinking came from realizing that many of these problems are systemic and many agents are highly invested in injustice. Indifference to climate change, for example, is built into our current version of capitalism and some very powerful actors will resist any attempt to mitigate its worst effects because they reap tremendous profits from the way things are. These are not agents who are open to persuasion. As a younger person, I had a lot more faith in reason and argument. I thought that no one would willingly want to harm another person if there was an alternative, but the sad fact is that those who benefit from injustice rarely, if ever, lay down their privileges simply because it is shown to be unjust. They have to be pressured into doing it. This was true with slavery, it was true with Gilded Age capitalism, and it is true today.

In terms of who has prompted these shifts, I have far too many debts to list them all. I would say that I have been extremely fortunate to be supervised and mentored by people like Onora O'Neill, Cecile Laborde, and Duncan Bell. I would also say that most recently the works of scholars like Charles Mills and James C. Scott have been really important in my intellectual development by forcing me to look at familiar concepts like liberalism, the state, and the powerless with new eyes.

Can global poverty be considered a crime against humanity? What are the implications of this?

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As I argued in my book and elsewhere, global poverty bears striking resemblance to slavery and apartheid, both of which are crimes against humanity. All three are the product of extreme domination that foreseeably and avoidably denies people the content of their basic human rights. Now, I don't expect to see any prosecutions emerging from this argument, but what it does show is that resistance to global poverty is justified. If people disagree, then they would also be committed to saying that slaves should have been happy in their bondage or that Nelson Mandela should have been silent about apartheid.

You have argued in your new book that global poverty and injustice justify the human right to resist. How do you justify this?

Any plausible conception of human rights requires the right to resistance. In order for something to be considered a right, its violation requires a remedy. You have to have a way to ensure that your rights are respected otherwise they are nothing more than rhetoric. If this is the case, the things that we call rights are nothing more than privileges given to us by the powerful. And the problem with privileges is that they can be taken away at a whim. So, when I say global poverty justifies resistance, it is because the current global economic system foreseeably and avoidably produces an excess amount of poverty that violates the basic rights of millions of people (i.e. the right to life). However, there is little prospect of this change in the near future. We know this is a problem, there are solutions to this problem, and our leaders have chosen to do very little to solve it besides throw a few breadcrumbs in the form of aid programs. This is intolerable. If we think that the right to a minimally decent life is a right that all people possess, then resistance to this inhumane and unjust system is warranted.

To what extent is the human right to resist recognised in law? What are the challenges to gaining further recognition?

This is an interesting question. The right to resistance is recognized in several jurisdictions in different times and places. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth maintained the right of the nobility to rebel; the French Constitution of 1793 makes multiple references to the right of resistance; as do the constitutions of several states in the USA; in terms of national constitutions a variety of the right to resistance is found in the constitutions of Germany, Greece, Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

Regarding human rights, the right to resistance is implicit in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is borne out by numerous declarations against colonialism issued by the United Nations that justified resistance to colonialism on the grounds of human rights. However, it has not been explicitly recognised. Whether it ever will be is anyone's guess. The cases where it has been written into positive law are linked to periods of great change and upheaval, such as the American and French Revolutions or the Fall of Communism. I will say that we are not living in a stable age at the moment.

In what ways has the history of resistance influenced Black Lives Matter?

Black Lives Matter seems to draw inspiration from the Civil Rights Movements of the 20th century, but it is pushing things farther. It is not enough to have the same rights on paper as white citizens, if you cannot use them and if they are not respected. The challenge of BLM against systemic racism can be seen as an attempt to realise the content of what was won by previous generations.

Of course, the tradition of black resistance is almost as old as the colonization of America by Europeans. Nicolás de Ovando, the Spanish Viceroy who replaced Christopher Columbus in 1502, brought the first black slaves to the Americas. Among them was the first slave who escaped and lived with the indigenous people who were resisting the encroachment of Europeans. This is a struggle that I fear will never be won until Americans and the people of other colonial states recognize how their homelands have been built on racism and exploitation. It was not an accident of history, but the product of deliberate choices made during the colonial era and that continue to be made to this day. It remains lurking beneath the surface of many liberal democracies.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic shaped acts of resistance?

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It certainly has made it a riskier proposition and made the ethics of resistance more complicated. The central question is balancing the good of protest or resistance with the risk of harming innocent people by spreading a potentially lethal disease. However, at its core this is not an unfamiliar problem. People who have resisted injustice in the past have often caused harm to innocent persons. In choosing to protest against segregation, many civil rights activists made their families targets for white supremacists. COVID-19 presents a similar challenge, but at least here mitigation can be taken in the form of self-isolation, wearing a face mask, and other safety measures. There is an obligation to minimize the harm done to innocent persons by acts of resistance.

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

Keep your eye on the real world. It is terribly easy to get drawn into tremendously interesting abstract debates, but if you go in too deep, you'll find your voice doesn't reach outside of the seminar room.