Interview – Erik Jones

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/06/interview-erik-jones/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 6 2021

Erik Jones is Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and a Senior Research Associate at the Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) in Milan. From 1 September 2021, Professor Jones will be Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. Professor Jones is author of *The Politics of Economic and Monetary Union* (2002), *Economic Adjustment and Political Transformation in Small States* (2008), *Weary Policeman: American Power in an Age of Austerity* (2012 – with Dana H. Allin), and *The Year the European Crisis Ended* (2014). He is editor or co-editor of a number of books and special issues of journals on topics related to European politics and political economy including reference works like *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union* (2012) and *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics* (2015). Professor Jones is co-editor of *Government and Opposition* and a contributing editor for *Survival*.

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

The field is exploding with exciting lines of research. Many of these are synthetic. We have debated populism for a long time, but now we are seeing an overlap between research on populism, democratic stability, economic performance, and world order. Watching the different communities interact and seeing how they make new connections is exciting both because it tells you something you may not have known about how the world works and because it stimulates you to go back to pieces written long ago and to consider them in fresh light.

I could make a similar point about how we study economic policymaking. This is a great time to be looking at the interaction between fiscal policy, monetary policy, financial stability, and capital markets. We are learning so much about the complex dynamics that bring these different fields together, and about how much we either ignored or have forgotten from the literature that was written decades in the past. Anything that challenges what you think you 'know' and forces you to reflect on your basic assumptions is worth thinking about; that is what makes being in this business so long an endless source of inspiration.

Finally, and most importantly, I think we are learning a huge amount from the experience of those peoples who live in Central and Eastern Europe. We have finally moved beyond the idea that West European countries, policymakers, and scholars, are somehow going to refashion Central and Eastern Europe in their own image. We have even moved beyond evaluations of how well the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have done in their dual transition after communism. The conversation now is more engaging because people are paying close attention to what we can learn from all parts of Europe to add to our understanding of European politics, society, and economic performance.

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

My understanding of the world has changed in the sense that I am constantly revisiting the things I think I know well and discovering how much I need to learn. Most of that questioning is sparked by students and early career scholars. These tend to be the people who ask the most awkward questions and who seem to be less bound by convention. It takes a lot of hard work on the part of the scholarly community to force these younger researchers to conform to the standards of appropriateness and deference for which our profession is famous (or infamous). By working with early

career researchers before they have become fully paid-up members of the club, I find it hard to get too comfortable in my own worldview. That sense of unease or discomfort – the angst of 'imposter syndrome' – is important to how I work and why I enjoy staying in the profession.

That said, early career researchers not only taught me that self-awareness, but they also showed me how to use that same understanding of the informal rules, norms, and conventions of academic life to unpack the things I study as well. Now I spend a lot of time trying to understand the informal institutions that structure politics, economics, and policymaking. I can hardly claim to be a pioneer in this area (or in self-reflexive practice). Most of my mentors followed the same pattern and I suspect I played the role in their lives that many of the early career scholars with whom I have worked have played in my own – or at least I hope I did! My point is only that the way I think about the world and what I think about the world seem to have evolved in the same way, and I have early career researchers to thank for that evolution.

What concrete steps has the European Union taken to mitigate and combat the economic pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic?

This is not really a one-or-two paragraph kind of question. What I think is most interesting in the European response is how quickly policymakers abandoned business as usual. They suspended the rules for market competition and macroeconomic policy coordination; they pushed hard on the use of unconventional monetary policy instruments or instrument settings; they rediscovered the resilience that comes from well-resourced welfare state institutions, and they decided to experiment with some kind of joint European fiscal solution. These things are all important.

What I think is even more important is how well the last crisis prepared European leaders to respond to the economic consequences of the pandemic. I shudder to think of how European institutions might have responded without that painful experience and without all of the experimentation and deliberation that took place over the past decade. They simply had less time to learn on the job this time around. So, I come away with two clear implications: the first is that the EU is capable of learning from its own mistakes, and in a big way; the second is that the Member States recognize the advantages of being part of a larger organization like the European Union. That organization may fail at times, and it may even fail in important ways, but it also gets better at helping European people solve problems that their national governments would not be able to address so effectively on their own. My colleagues Sophie Meunier and Dan Kelemen call that pattern 'failing forward'.

To what extent has the EU been successful in leading the bloc through the pandemic and in navigating the associated problems such as economic relief and vaccinations? Has multinational governance been a help or a hindrance to European responses to COVID-19?

I am a little cautious at giving the European Union 'agency' that is independent of the Member State governments. Did the EU lead the block? The EU is the block; the leadership came from people, some of whom worked in European institutions, some of whom worked in national governments, and many of whom worked outside the policy community. That said, I would highlight the roles played by people like Margrethe Vestager, Philip Lane, and Isabelle Schnabel. I would also underscore the importance of those who pushed back against European projects until a strong consensus could be forged around them, like Mark Rutte or Sanna Marin. There were people who did well and then poorly, like Giuseppe Conte, and others who did poorly and then well. Here I am tempted to put Boris Johnson, but it is hard since his record is so mixed on so many issues – but I think you see what I mean.

How does the European response to the COVID-19 pandemic compare to the handling of previous European crises?

The European response to this crisis was faster for two reasons. First, government policy was the source of the economic shock. When you tell people to stay at home, bad things happen to your economy that are pretty easy to imagine. That was not how the previous crisis unfolded. On the contrary, that crisis was shrouded in uncertainty about what was causing the damage and how that damage would manifest. Second, most of the things European policymakers have done this time around they debated at length during the last crisis. It is easier to make decisions

quickly when you already know all the arguments and when you can guess where everyone stands on the various issues. Of course, there were new wrinkles in the present crisis. It has been more than a century since Europe experienced a pandemic of this magnitude. The response on the disease side of the equation was more halting, confusing, and complicated. In that sense, the two crises were comparable. But I am a political economist and not an epidemiologist or public health scholar. On the political economy side of things, the response was easier to anticipate and to address this time around than it was the last.

How might the economic disparities in relation to the pandemic be dealt with at the EU level?

This is a tough question. We are pushing up against the limits of European solidarity. No national public is eager to transfer funds to another country, no matter how strong the justification. That means we are going to have to be patiently supportive as those countries hardest hit by the crisis pull themselves together again. It also means those countries are likely to struggle with high debt burdens for a long time. I would encourage European policymakers to approach this situation with flexibility and understanding. This is not a time for hard rules or stern admonishments. I doubt, though, that is what we are going to see. Instead, I suspect there will be considerable pressure to return quickly to a rule-based system that places most of the burden of adjustment on those countries that are the weakest.

How do you predict European integration will change and develop in the coming months and years?

The pattern is already evident. We can see some important innovations, but we can also see significant reticence. I suspect the European Union will muddle through in important respects. The Commission will play a more prominent role in policy coordination; the European Central Bank will struggle to find a way to wind down its unconventional monetary policy positions; the European Council will wrestle with a host of hot-button issues related to rule of law and migration as well as economic convergence and divergence, and the Member States will struggle with their own political evolution, not all of which is going to lead to greater stability.

This is a messy picture and so hard to characterize as a coherent project. But Europe is what it is. I do not see the European Union collapsing because of these developments and I do not see it absorbing the Member States in some tight federation either. As a result, future students of European integration will marvel at the complexity of their subject matter just as much as scholars of my generation did in the 1990s and early 2000s, and just as much as our predecessors did in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

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

Ask the simple questions and challenge the answers you get. The things that scare me in life are not the things I do not know. If those things scared me, I would be terrified all the time. There is a lot I do not know. When one of those things becomes important, I can usually figure out roughly what it is and then figure out what to do about it. That is what I am trained to do. Early career researchers today have much better training than I did. They do not need me to encourage them to use those skills.

The things that scare me are the things I know to be true that are wrong. I am not good at questioning my own convictions. If early career researchers do not question those convictions – the things that senior scholars know to be true – then I doubt I will question them either, and neither will my friends and colleagues. If those convictions turn out to be wrong, we are all in trouble. That is why I encourage early career researchers to ask the simple questions and then challenge the answers. It may make for some awkward conversations, but that awkwardness is a good sign, not a bad one.

I encourage those early career researchers to start asking the awkward questions and challenging the answers as soon as possible. Our profession has strong informal rules that underpin conformism and deference to authority. Those rules are seductively easy to internalize. It is hard to resist the temptation – even if we all do eventually.