

Interview – Robert Falkner

Written by E-International Relations

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Robert Falkner is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and a Distinguished Fellow at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. At LSE, he serves as the Research Director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and the Academic Director of the TRIUM Global Executive MBA programme, an alliance between LSE, NYU Stern School of Business and HEC Paris. Robert holds degrees in politics and economics from Munich University and a doctorate in international relations from the University of Oxford. In 2006-07 he was a visiting scholar at Harvard University. He has published widely on global environmental politics and international political economy, including *Environmentalism and Global International Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), *The Handbook of Global Climate and Environment Policy* (Wiley, 2016) and *Business Power and Conflict in International Environmental Politics* (Palgrave, 2008). His next book, *Great Powers, Climate Change and Global Environmental Responsibilities* (co-edited with Barry Buzan), will be published by Oxford University Press in January 2022. He is currently working on a new book project that traces the fluctuating fortunes of the market norm in international relations. You can follow him on Twitter: @robert_falkner.

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

My research straddles several subfields of International Relations – global environmental politics, international political economy, and now English School theory – so it is not easy to identify one or two major debates that I would consider to be of critical importance in all these fields. The proliferation of sub-disciplines and fragmentation of IR into ever-smaller thematic niches makes it difficult to maintain a discipline-wide debate about big and important topics.

However, if there is one debate that has the potential to reshape the way we think about international relations and international political economy then it is the emerging discourse on the Anthropocene. The term has only been in wider use since the early 2000s, when the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen popularised it to describe the new reality of a planet that is profoundly shaped by human activity, a new geological era where humans exert a dominant influence on global ecology. The realisation that we have amassed the power to fundamentally alter and disrupt global eco-systems is starting to be picked up by some perceptive IR and IPE scholars who are starting to think through the consequences of this profound shift in the humanity-ecology relationship and how it affects the material and ideational bases of international relations.

For example, should the world end up with catastrophic climate change, say a +3C or +4C hothouse climate by the second half of the 21st century, with rising sea levels and shifting weather patterns putting the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people at risk, then existing understandings of sovereignty and territoriality, or the balance of power and international order, will need to be revised. Working out how global international society can respond to this challenge, and how it will change in response to the climate crisis, strikes me as one of the most exciting and important debates going on right now.

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

When I started out as a young researcher working on global environmental politics (GEP), I thought of each and

Interview – Robert Falkner

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every global environmental issue as having its own distinctive problem structure. My PhD research was on the international effort to combat ozone layer depletion, and specifically the role that business actors played in this area. After that, I worked on the international conflict over genetically modified food, the difficulties of getting risk regulation agreed for emerging technologies (e.g., nanotechnology), and the international politics of climate change. In each of these cases, I sought to identify the peculiar problem structure that needs to be addressed, in terms of scientific complexity, underlying conflicts of interest, the availability of technological solutions, and the level of social mobilisation. So, in this sense, I tended to view GEP as the sum of lots of discrete individual policy areas and institutional contexts.

It was only later on that I began to focus on broader questions of how environmental change and the long-term development of international society are interconnected. By engaging with social theories of IR, especially English School (ES) theory, I was able to step back from the bewildering array of environmental treaties and organisations that make up GEP and look at the bigger picture. Barry Buzan's reworking of the ES as social structural theory made me realise how ES thinking can be employed to investigate the causes and consequences of long-term normative change, and how the interaction between international society and world society can produce new social purposes in international relations, such as environmental sustainability. My research has increasingly gravitated towards this kind of 'big picture' IR, resulting in my latest book on environmental stewardship as an international norm and a new book project on the market norm in international society.

Your recently published book *Environmentalism and Global International Society* traces the evolution of environmentalism into a fundamental global norm. How do you think this norm will evolve in the coming decades?

The environmental norm changes that I trace in my new book have deep historical roots, going back to the 19th century when the first modern environmental ideas emerged and were picked up by campaigners in Europe and North America. The first international environmental body was created as early as 1913 but it took until the 1970s before international society came to accept a collective responsibility for the global environment, and another two decades before this responsibility was universally recognised. As I show in the book, we are talking about a fairly slow process of normative change that has played out over many decades. What's more, this has also been a shallow process or norm change. States feel obliged to participate in multilateral environmental policy-making, less so to also implement international agreements. Environmental multilateralism is still more a procedural than substantive norm in international relations. The argument in my book, that environmental stewardship has successfully emerged as a primary institution, is therefore heavily qualified by the realisation that states continue to breach international environmental obligations without facing serious sanctions. Failure to live up to the substantive expectations of environmental stewardship provokes international opprobrium but does not yet call into question a state's rightful membership of international society.

We can therefore expect international environmental norm change to be a slow-moving process in future years. Despite some notable successes (e.g., ozone layer depletion), international society has so far failed to tackle some of the worst forms of environmental degradation. But as the 'Great Acceleration' of natural resource depletion, greenhouse gas emissions and population growth continues, international society will come under greater pressure to come up with faster and more effective solutions to global environmental problems. In one scenario, escalating climate change could force humanity to recognise the shared nature of the ecological threat and the need for a collective response ('Spaceship Earth'). This could drive international society to the realisation that only a solidarist response can secure humanity's future on a warming planet, leading to an acceleration of the greening of international relations. But such an outcome cannot be taken for granted. A rapidly worsening ecological situation could also put international environmental governance under greater strain. Catastrophic global warming would have differential effects around the world, creating distributional conflicts as competition for scarce natural resources intensifies. This would force a zero-sum logic upon states, strengthening pluralist rather than solidarist elements of global international society. Such a pluralist future needn't be a calamitous outcome, as long as leading states see it in their interest to act on behalf of international society, reflecting an ecological *raison de système*.

How have you observed the link between climate change and global business changing in academia and

Interview – Robert Falkner

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policy?

Climate change is now widely recognised as one of humanity's biggest and most urgent threats. This is the case for international society, which has accepted the need to drive down global greenhouse gas emissions to 'net zero' by ca. 2050, and it also applies to global business. In recent years, one multinational corporation after another has come forward to commit to the net zero vision, and that increasingly includes the producers of fossil fuels. Some of the most powerful drivers of change in the business world can be found in the financial sector, especially the insurance industry and institutional investors, who are rightly concerned about the future costs of global warming and the risk of so-called 'stranded assets', that is investments in high-carbon economic assets (e.g. oil and coal reserves) that will lose their value in a future net zero global economy. The change that we have been able to observe in corporate attitudes is thus quite remarkable, at least at the rhetorical level. Whether global companies that are committed to a net zero future can deliver on this promise is another question. But it is clear that the global business community can no longer dismiss concerns around climate change as a temporary nuisance, many business leaders now see them as an essential threat to their business models.

How much of an influence do you think technological advancements will have in mitigating the effects of climate change?

Technological innovation will be critical to the success of any climate strategy, whether it is about bringing greenhouse gas emissions down or protecting communities against rising sea levels and extreme weather events. Besides, if we fail to reduce emissions enough to avert runaway global warming, we will have no choice but to invest in new technologies that can take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, so-called geo-engineering. So technological advancements are essential, they are integral to the net zero transition that all major emitters, from the US to the EU and China, have committed to.

There is just one important caveat to this story. Relying on future tech innovation won't be enough. We cannot delay urgent action on climate change now in the hope that society will come up with a 'technology fix' at some point in the future. Politicians who speak of future technological breakthroughs that will do the job for us are deluding themselves and their constituents. John Kerry, President Biden's special presidential envoy on climate change, recently said that "you don't have to give up quality of life to achieve some of the things we want to achieve. I'm told by scientists that 50% of the reductions we have to make (to get to near zero emissions) by 2050 or 2045 are going to come from technologies we don't yet have." Kerry was rightly ridiculed for saying this. Unless we change our energy-intensive infrastructure now, we're going to store up ever more problems for the future. We will need climate action and behavioural change at every level, from international society and global corporations down to the national and individual level.

As the Research Director of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, what are the Institute's most exciting current projects and how will they impact our understanding of environmental politics?

The LSE's Grantham Research Institute has grown enormously in recent years, and we're making contributions to a wide range of global climate and environmental policy objectives. Our research ranges from the net zero transition in the UK and globally to international climate politics, climate adaptation and resilience, biodiversity and natural resources, and sustainable finance. Let me highlight just a few exciting new research projects that we're working on. Our climate governance team is currently expanding the coverage of Climate Laws of the World, the world's most comprehensive database of climate laws and regulations, and the team has just gained new funding for research on the strategic role that climate litigation plays in driving the net zero transition. Our sustainable finance group is helping central banks and finance ministries around the world to meet the targets agreed in the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals. It has also created a unique analytics tool, the Transition Pathway Initiative, that produces open-access data showing whether the world's largest high-emitting companies are adapting their strategies to align with international climate goals. And the sustainable development group has just launched a new project to support forest conservation in Africa. So we're working on quite a wide range of topics, combining the insights and skills of multiple disciplines, from economics and environmental sciences to political science,

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international relations and law.

What do you think is the main barrier to a more effective global climate policy?

That's still one of the most hotly contested issues in the climate policy debate. Some point to the anarchic nature of the international system and the inevitable weakness of international institutions; others identify global capitalism, its inherent growth imperative and our continued dependence of fossil fuels as key barriers; yet others blame critically important actors that resist the transition to a low carbon economy, be it major powers (e.g., the US or China, depending on who you ask) or global corporations. One can also find major barriers at the societal and individual level, e.g., psychological dispositions that prevent behavioural change. I don't think we can resolve this debate by trying to work out which of these factors is the main barrier to more effective climate policy. What is needed is a multi-level and multi-actor approach to making the net zero transition happen. This involves behavioural as much as systemic change at all levels. Every society will need to do their bit to make this happen. International cooperation among states will be important, and in this sense it matters how international environmental governance is set up, but the climate challenge clearly exceeds the problem-solving capacity of any inter-governmental structure.

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

Follow your passion and ask big questions. Of course, you'll need to find your niche in the discipline, in terms of your theoretical and/or empirical focus, after all the route to a successful career in IR still leads through gaining a 'comparative advantage' in one of the discipline's sub-fields. But don't forget to keep an eye on the bigger debates and questions that animate some of the best IR scholarship: the shifting sources of international power, the precarious nature of the international order, and the enduring quest for global justice. I would add to this list the increasingly urgent question of environmental sustainability, of how to prevent runaway global warming and secure a biodiverse future on this planet.