**Theory Talk #75: Tarak Barkawi**

Tuesday, July 6, 2021

***Theory Talk* #75: Tarak Barkawi on IR after the West, and why the best work in IR is often found at its margins**

**[Obsah obrázku osoba, budova, muž, exteriér

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**In this *Talk,*Tarak Barkawi discusses the importance of the archive and real-world experiences, at a time of growing institutional constraints. He reflects on the growing rationalization and “schoolification” of the academy, a disciplinary and epistemological politics institutionalized within a university audit culture, and the future of IR in a post-COVID world. He also discusses IR’s contorted relationship to the archive, and explore future sites of critical innovation and inquiry, including the value of knowledge production outside of the academy.**

[**PDF version of this *Talk***](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/www.dropbox.com/s/2ept9yaqu7tkamr/Theory%20Talk75_Barkawi.pdf?dl=0)

**So what is, or should be, according to you, the biggest challenge, or principal debate in critical social sciences and history?**

Right now, despite thinking about it, I don’t have an answer to that question. Had you asked me five years ago, I would have said, without hesitation, Eurocentrism. There's a line in Chakrabarty's [*Provincializing Europe*](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691130019/provincializing-europe) where he remarks that Europe has already been provincialized by history, but we still needed to provincialize it intellectually in the social sciences. Both sides of this equation have intensified in recent years. Amid a pandemic, in the wreckage of neoliberalism, in the wake of financial crisis, the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan, the events of the Trump Presidency, and the return of the far right, the West feels fundamentally reduced in stature. The academy, meanwhile, has moved on from the postcolonial to the decolonial with its focus on alternative epistemologies, about which I am more ambivalent intellectually and politically.

Western states and societies are powerful and rich, their freedoms attractive, and most of them will rebound. But what does it mean for the social sciences and other Western intellectual traditions which trace their heritage to the European Enlightenments that the West may no longer be ‘the West’, no longer the metropole of a global order more or less controlled by its leading states? What kind of implications does the disassembling of the West in world history have for social and political inquiry? I don’t have an answer to that.

Speaking more specifically about IR, we are dealing now with conservative appropriations of Eurocentrism, with the rise of other civilizational IRs (Chinese, European, Indian). These kinds of moves, like the decolonial one, foreground ultimately incommensurable systems of knowing and valuing, at best, and at worst are Eurocentrism with the signs reversed, usually to China. I do not think what we should be doing right now in the academy is having Chinese social sciences, Islamic social sciences, Indian social sciences, and so on. But that’s definitely one way in which the collapse of the West is playing out intellectually.

**How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about International Relations?**

By the time you get to my age you have a lot of debt, mostly to students, to old teachers and supervisors, and to colleagues and friends. University scholars tend not to have very exciting lives, so I don’t have much to offer in the way of events. But I can give you an experience that I do keep revisiting when I reflect on the directions I’ve taken and the things I’ve been interested in.

When I was in high school, I took a university course taught by [Daniel Ellsberg](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Ellsberg), of the Pentagon Papers. As many will know, before he became involved in the Vietnam War, and later in opposing it, he worked on game theory and nuclear strategy. I grew up in Southern California, in Orange County, and there was a program that let you take courses at the University of California, Irvine. I took one on the history of the Roman Empire and then a pair of courses on nuclear weapons that culminated with one taught by Ellsberg himself.

I actually had no idea who he was but the topic interested me. Nuclear war was in the air in the early 1980s. Activist graduate students taught the preparatory course. They were good teachers and I learned all about the history and politics of nuclear weapons. But I also came to realize that these teachers were trying to shape (what I would now call) my political subjectivity. Sometimes they were ham handed, like the old ball bearings in the tin can trick: turn the lights out in the room, and put one ball bearing in the can for each nuclear warhead in the world, in 1945 this many; in 1955 this many; and so on. In retrospect, that’s where I got hooked on the idea of graduate school.

I was aware that Ellsberg was regarded as an important personage. He taught in a large lecture hall. At every session, a kind of loyal corps of new and old activists turned out, many in some version of ‘60s attire. The father of a high school friend was desperate to get Ellsberg’s autograph, and sent his son along with me to the lecture one night to get it. It was political instruction of the first order to figure out that this suburban dad had been a physics PhD at Berkley in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, demonstrating against the Vietnam War. But now he worked for a major aerospace defense contractor. He had a hot tub in his backyard. Meanwhile, Ellsberg cancelled class one week because he’d been arrested demonstrating at a major arms fair in Los Angeles. “We stopped the arms race for a few hours,” he told the class after. I schooled myself on who Ellsberg was and Vietnam, the Cold War, and much else came into view. Meanwhile, he gave a master class in nuclear weapons and foreign policy, cheekily naming his course after Kissinger’s book, I later came to appreciate. I learned about RAND, the utility of madness for making nuclear threats, and how close we’d come to nuclear war since 1945.

My high school had actually been built to double as a fallout shelter, at a time when civil defense was taken seriously as an aspect of a credible threat of second strike. It was low slung, stoutly built, with high iron fences that could be closed to create a cantonment. We were not far from Seal Beach Naval Weapons Station and a range of other likely targets. All of this sank in as I progressed in these courses. Then one day at a strip mall bookstore, I discovered Noam Chomsky’s US foreign policy books and never looked back.

At Cambridge, I caught the tail end of the old Centre of International Studies, originally started by an intelligence historian and explicitly multi-disciplinary. It had, in my time, historians, lawyers, area studies, development studies, political theory and history of thought, and IR scholars and political scientists. Boundaries certainly existed out there in the disciplines. But there weren’t substantial institutional obstacles to thinking across them, while interdisciplinary environments gave you lots of local resources (i.e. colleagues and students) for thinking and reading creatively.

**What would a student need to become a kind of specialist in your kind of area or field or to understand the world in a global way?**

Lots of history, especially other peoples’ histories; to experience what it’s like to see the world from a different place than where you grew up, so that the foreign is not an abstraction to you. I think another route that can create very interesting scholars is to have a practitioner career first, in development, the military, a diplomatic corps, NGOs, whatever. Even only five years doing something like that not only teaches people how the world works, it is intellectually fecund, creative. People just out of operational posts are often full of ideas, and can access interesting resources for research, like professional networks.

**How, in your view, should IR responding to the shifting geopolitical landscape?**

The fate I think we want to avoid is carrying on with what [Stanley Hoffmann](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Hoffmann) called the “American social science”: the IR invented out of imperial crisis and world war by Anglo-American officials, foundations and thinkers. Very broadly speaking, and with variations, this was a new world combination of realism and positivism. This discipline was intended as the intellectual counterpart to the American-centered world order, designed, among other things, to disappear the question of race in the century of the global color line. The way it conceived the national/international world obscured how US world power worked in practice. That power operated in and through formally sovereign, independent states—an empire by invitation, in the somewhat rosy view of [Geir Lundestad](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geir_Lundestad)—trialed in Latin America and well suited to a decolonizing world. It was an anti-colonial imperium. Political science divided up this world between IR and comparative politics. This kind of IR is cortically connected to the American-centered world fading away before our eyes. It is a kind of zombie discipline where we teach students about world politics as if we were still sitting with the great power peacemakers of 1919 and 1944-45. It is still studying how to make states cooperate under a hegemon or how to make credible deterrence threats in various circumstances.

Interestingly, I think one of the ways the collapse of US power is shaping the discipline was identified by Walt and Mearsheimer in their 2013 article on the decline of theory in IR. In the US especially but not only, IR is increasingly indistinguishable from political science as a universal positivist enterprise mostly interested in applying highly evolved, quantitative or experimental approaches to more or less minor questions. Go too far down this road and IR disappears as a distinct disciplinary space, it becomes just a subject matter, a site of empiricist inquiry.

Instead, the best work in IR mostly occurs on the edges of the discipline. IR often serves as cover for diverse and interdisciplinary work on transboundary relations. Those relations fall outside the core objects of analysis of the main social science and humanities disciplines but are IR’s distinctive focus. The mainstream, inter-paradigm discipline, for me, has never been a convincing social science of the international and is not something I teach or think much about these days. But the classical inheritances of the discipline help IR retain significant historical, philosophical and normative dimensions. Add in a pluralist disposition towards methodology, and IR can be a unique intellectual space capable of producing scholars and scholarship that operate across disciplines. The new materialism, or political ecology, is one area in which this is really happening right now. IR is also a receptive home for debating the questions thrown up by the decolonial turn. These are two big themes in contemporary intellectual life, in and beyond the academy. IR potentially offers distinct perspectives on them which can push debates forward in unexpected ways, in part because we retain a focus on the political and the state, which too easily drop out of sight in global turns in other disciplines. In exchange, topics like the new materialism and the decolonial offer IR the chance to connect with world politics in these new times, after the American century.

In my view, and it is not one that I think is widely shared, IR should become the “studies” discipline that centers on the transboundary. How do we re-imagine IR as the interdisciplinary site for the study of transboundary relations as a distinct social and political space? That’s a question of general interest in a global world, but one which few traditions of thought are as well-equipped to reflect on and push forward as we are.

**That's an interesting and forceful critique which also brings us back to a common thread throughout your work: questions of power and knowledge and specifically the relation between power and knowledge in IR and social science. I'm interested in exploring this point further, because so much of your critique has been centered on how profoundly Eurocentric IR is and as a product of Western power.**

Well, IR’s development as a discipline has been closely tied to Western state power. It would seem that it has to change, given the shifts underway in the world. It’s like Wile E. Coyote in the Road Runner cartoons - he’s run off the cliff. His legs are still moving, but he hasn’t dropped, yet. That said, there’s no singularly determinate relation between power and the historical development of intellectual traditions. Who knows what kind of new ideas and re-imagining of IR’s concepts we might see? As I say, I think one reflection of these changes is that we’re already seeing North American IR start to fade into universal quantitative social science. As Hoffmann observed, part of IR’s appeal was that the Americans were running the world, that’s why you started a social science concerned with things like bipolarity and deterrence, and with analyzing the foreign policy of a great power and its interests and conflicts around the world. Nowadays the Americans are at a late Roman stage of imperial decline. Thinking from the command posts of US foreign policy doesn’t look so attractive or convincing when Emperor Nero is running the show, or something altogether darker is waiting in the wings.

IR is supposed to be in command of world politics, analyzing them from on high. But what I’ve seen over the course of my education and career is the way world politics commands IR. The end of the Cold War torpedoed many careers and projects; the 1990s created corps of scholars concerned with development, civil war and humanitarian intervention; in the 2000s, we produced terrorism experts (and critical terrorism studies) and counterinsurgency specialists and critics, along with many scholars concerned in one way or another with Islam.

What I have always found fascinating, and deeply indicative, about IR is the relative absence until relatively recently of serious inquiry into power/knowledge relations or the sociology of knowledge. In 1998 when Ole Waever goes to look at some of these questions, he notes how little there was to work from then, before Oren, Vitalis, Guilhot and others published. It’s an astounding observation. In area studies, in anthropology, in the history of science, in development studies, in all of these areas of inquiry so closely entangled with imperial and state power, there are long-running, well developed traditions of inquiry into power/knowledge relations. It’s a well-recognized area of inquiry, not some fringe activity, and it’s heavily empirical, primary sourced based, as well as interesting conceptually. In recent decades you’ve seen really significant work come out about the role of the Second World War in the development of game theory, and its continuing entwinement with the nuclear contest of the Cold War. I’m thinking here of S.M. Amadae, Paul Erickson, and Philip Mirowski among others. The knowledge forms the American social science used to study world politics were part and parcel of world politics, they were internal to histories of geopolitics rather than in command of them.

Of course, for a social science that models itself on natural science, with methodologies that produce so-called objective knowledge, the idea that scientific knowledge itself is historical and power-ridden, well, you can’t really make sense of that. You’d be put in the incoherent position of studying it objectively, as it were, with the same tools. IR arises from the terminal crisis of the British Empire; its political presuppositions and much else were fundamentally shaped by the worldwide anti-communist project of the US Cold War state; and it removed race as a term of inquiry into world politics during the century of the global color line. All this, and but for Hoffmann’s essay, IR has no tradition of power/knowledge inquiry into its own house until recently? It’s not credible intellectually. Anthropologists should be brought in to teach us how to do this kind of thing.

**You've been at the forefront of the notion of historical IR, and in investigating the relationship between history and theory – why is history important for IR?**

Well, I think I’d start with the question of what do we mean when we say history? For mainstream social science, it means facts in the past against which to test theories and explanations. For critical IR scholars, it usually means historicism, as that term is understood in social theory: social phenomena are historical, shaped by time and place. Class, state, race, nation, empire, war, these are all different in different contexts. While I think this is a very significant insight and one that I agree with, on its own it tends to imply that historical knowledge is available, that it can be found by reading historians. In fact, for both empiricism and historicism there is a presumption that you can pretty reliably find out what happened in the past.

For me, this ignores a second kind of historicism, the historicism of history writing itself, the historiographical. The questions historians ask, how they inquire into them, the particular archives they use, the ways in which they construct meaning and significance in their narratives, the questions they don’t ask, that about which they are silent, all of these, shape history writing, the history that we know about. The upshot is that the past is not stable; it keeps changing as these two meanings of historicism intertwine. We understand the Haitian revolution now, or the indigenous peoples of the Americas, entirely differently than we did just a few decades ago.

That raises another twist to this problem. Many IR scholars access history through reading historians or through synthetic accounts; they encounter history by and large through secondary sources. One consequence is that they are often a generation or more behind university historians. Think of how Gaddis, for instance, remains a go to authority on the history of the Cold War in IR. In other disciplines, from the 1980s on, there was a historical turn that took scholars into the archives. Anthropologists and literary scholars used historians’ tools to answers their own questions. The result was not just a bunch of history books, but entirely new readings of core questions.

The classic example is the historical Shakespeare that Stephen Greenblatt found in the archives, rather than the one whose texts had been read by generations of students in English departments. My point here is that working in archives was conceptually, theoretically significant for these disciplines and the subjects they studied. For example, historical anthropology has given us new perspectives on imperialism. While there is some archival work in IR of course, especially in disciplinary history, it is not central to disciplinary debates and the purpose is usually theory testing in which the past appears as merely a bag of facts.

In sum, when I say history and theory, I don’t just mean thinking historically. I mean actually doing history, being an historian—which means archives—and in so doing becoming a better theorist.

**Could you expand on these points by telling us about your recent work on military history?**

I think that military history is particularly interesting because it is a site where war is reproduced and shaped. Military history participates in that which it purports only to study. Popular military histories shape the identities of publics. Staff college versions are about learning lessons and fighting war better the next time. People who grow up wanting to be soldiers often read about them in history books. So our historical knowledge of war, and war as a social and historical process, are wrapped up together. I hope some sense of the promise of power/knowledge studies for larger questions comes through here. I’m saying that part of what war is as a social phenomenon is history writing about it.

It’s in this kind of context that the fact that a great deal of military history is actually written by veterans, often of the very campaigns of which they write, becomes interesting. Battle produces its own historians. This is a tradition that goes back to European antiquity, soldiers and commanders returning to write histories, the histories, of the wars they fought in. So this question of veterans’ history writing is in constitutive relations with warfare, and with the West and its nations and armies.

My shorthand for the particular area of this I want to look into is what I call “White men’s military histories". That is, Western military history in the modern era is racialized, not just about enemies but about the White identities constructed in and through it. And I want to look at the way this is done in campaigns against racialized others, particularly situations where defeats and reverses were inflicted on the Westerners. How were such events and experiences made sense of historically? How were they mediated in and through military history? I think defeats are particularly productive, incitements to discourse and sense making.

To think about these questions, I want to look at the place of veterans in the production of military histories, as authors, sources, communities of interpretation. My sandbox is the tumultuous first year of the Korean War, where US forces suffered publically-evident reverses and risked being pushed into the sea. In a variety of ways, veterans shape military history, through their questions, their grievances, their struggles over reputation, their memories. This happens at many different sites and scales, including official and popular histories, and the networks of veterans behind them as well as other, independently published works. Over the course of veterans’ lives, their war throws up questions and issues that become the subject of sometimes dueling and contradictory accounts. Through their history writing, they connect their war experience to Western traditions of battle historiography. They make their war speak to other wars. This is what military history is, and how it can come to produce and reproduce practices of war-making, at least in Anglo-American context.

Of course, much of this history writing, like narrations of experience generally, reflects dominant ideologies, in this case discourses of the US Cold War in Asia. But counter-historians are also to be found among soldiers. The shocks and tragic absurdities of any given war produce research questions of their own. At risk of mixing metaphors, the veterans know where the skeletons are buried. They bear resentments and grievances about how their war was conducted that become research topics, and they often have the networks and wherewithal to produce informed and systematic accounts. So as well as reproducing hegemonic discourses, soldier historians are also interesting as a new critical resource for understanding war.

This shouldn’t be that surprising. In other areas of inquiry, amateur and practitioner scholars have often been a source of critical innovation. LGBTQ history starts outside the academy, among activists who turned their apartments into archives. Much of what we now call postcolonial scholarship also began outside the academy, among colonized intellectuals involved in anti-imperial struggles.

Let me close this off by going back to the archive. There are really rich sources for this kind of project. Military historians of all kinds leave behind papers full of their research materials and correspondence. The commanders and others they wrote about often waged extended epistolary campaigns concerned with correcting and shaping the historical record. But more than this, by situating archival sources alongside what later became researched and published histories, what drops out and what goes in to military history comes into view. What is silenced, and what is given voice? We can then see how the violent and forlorn episodes of war are turned into narrated events with military meaning. What is the process by which war experience becomes military history?

**Given the interdisciplinary nature of your work, what field you place yourself in? And are there any problems have you encountered when writing and thinking across scholarly boundaries?**

In my head I live in a kind of idealized interdisciplinary war studies, and my field is the intersection of war and empire. Sort of [Michael Howard](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Howard) meets Critical Theory and [Frantz Fanon](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frantz_Fanon). This has given me a particular voice in critical IR broadly conceived, and a distinctive place from which to engage the discipline. The mostly UK departments I’ve been in have been broadly hospitable places in practice for interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, so long as you published rather than perished.

Of course, interdisciplinary is a complicated word. It is one thing to be multi-disciplinary, to publish in the core journals of more than one discipline and to be recognized and read by scholars in more than one discipline. But work that falls between disciplinary centers, which takes up questions and offers answers recognized centrally by no discipline, that’s something harder to deal with. I thought after [*Soldiers of Empire*](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/www.cambridge.org/core/books/soldiers-of-empire/76D9A50C51276F28C5927431E0E0980F) won prizes in two disciplines that I’d have an easier time getting funding for the project I described earlier in the interview. But I’ve gotten nowhere, despite years of applications to a variety of US, UK, and European funders. Of course, this may be because it is a bad project! My point, though, is that disciplines necessarily, and even rightly, privilege work that speaks to central questions; that’s the work that naturally takes on significance in disciplinary contexts, as in many grant or scholarship panels. I think another point here is the nature of the times. Understandably, no one is particularly interested right now in White men’s military histories.

What I think has really empowered disciplines during my time in the UK academy has been the intersection with audit culture and university management. Repeated waves of rationalization have washed over the UK academy, which have emphasized discipline as a unit of measurement and management even as departments themselves were often “schoolified” into more or less odd combinations of disciplines. Schoolification helped to break down old solidarities and identities, while audit culture needed something on which to base its measures. The great victory of neoliberalism over the academy is evident in the way it is just accepted now that performance has to be assessed by various public criteria. This is where top disciplinary journals enter the picture, as unquestionable (and quantifiable) indicators of excellence. Interdisciplinary journals don’t have the same recognition, constituency, or obvious significance. To put it in IR terms, Environment and Planning D or Comparative Studies in Society and History, to take two top journals that interdisciplinary IR types publish in, will never have the same weight as, say, ISQ or APSR. That that seems natural is an indicator of change—when I started, RIS—traditionally welcoming of interdisciplinary scholarship—was seen as just as good a place to publish as any US journal. Now RIS is perceived as merely a “national” journal while ISQ and APSR are “international” or world-class.

This kind of thing has consequences for careers and the make-up of departments. What I’m drawing attention to is not so much an intellectual or academic debate; scholars always disagree on what good scholarship is, which is how it is supposed to be. It is rather the combination of discipline with the suffocating culture of petty management that pervades so much of British life. Get your disciplinary and epistemological politics institutionalized in an audit culture environment, and you can really expand. For example, the professionalization of methods training in the UK has worked as a kind of Trojan Horse for quantitative and positivist approaches within disciplines. In IR, in the potted geographic lingo we use, that has meant more US style work. Disappearing is the idea of IR as an “inter-discipline,” where departments have multi-disciplinary identities like I described above. The US idea that IR is part of political science is much more the common sense now than it was in the UK. Another dimension of the eclipse of interdisciplinary IR has been the rise of quantitative European political science, boosted by large, multiyear grants from the ERC and national research councils.

It’s pretty crazy, strategically speaking, for the UK to establish a civilizational scale where you’re always behind the US or its European counterparts. You’ll never do North American IR as well as the North Americans do, especially given the disparity in resources. You’ll always be trending second or third tier. The British do like to beat themselves up. Meanwhile, making US political science journals the practical standard for “international excellence” threatens to make the environment toxic for the very scholarship that has made British IR distinctive and attractive globally. The upshot of that will be another wave of émigré scholars, which the British academy’s crises and reform initiatives produce from time to time. Think of the generation of UK IR scholars who decamped to Australia, an academy poised to prosper in the post-covid world (if the government there can get its vaccination program on track) and a major site right now of really innovative IR scholarship.

**To return to what you mentioned earlier regarding the hesitancy to go to the archives, this is also mirrored in a hesitancy to do serious ethnography, I think as well. Or there's this “doing ethnography” that involves a three-day field trip. This kind of sweet-shop ‘pick and mix’ has come to characterize some methodologies, because of these constraints that you highlight…**

A lot of what I’m talking about has happened within universities, it’s not externally imposed or a direct consequence of the various government-run assessment exercises. Academics, eagerly assisted by university managers, have done a lot of this to themselves and their students. The implications can be far reaching for the kind of scholarship that departments foster, from PhDs on up. More and more of the UK PhD is taken up with research methods courses, largely oriented around positivism even if they have critical components. Already this gives a directionality to ideas. The advantage of the traditional UK PhD—working on your own with a supervisor to produce a piece of research—has been intellectual freedom, even when the supervisor wasn’t doing their job properly. It’s not great, but the possibility for creative, innovative, even field changing scholarship was retained. PhD students weren’t disciplined, so to speak. What happens now is that PhD students are subject to a very strict four year deadline, often only partially funded, their universities caring mainly about timely completion not placement and preparation for a scholarly career, a classic case of the measurement displacing the substantive value. The formal coursework they get is methods driven. You can supervise interdisciplinary PhD research in this kind of environment, but it’s not easy and poses real risks and creates myriad obstacles for the student.

A strange consequence of this, as many of my master’s students will tell you, is that I often advise them to consider US PhDs, just in other disciplines. That way, they get the benefit of rigorous PhD level coursework beyond methods. They can do so in disciplines like history or anthropology that are currently receptive both to the critical and the transnational/transboundary. That is not a great outcome for UK IR, even if it may be for critically-minded students. Outside of a very few institutions and scattered individuals, US political science, of course, has largely cleansed itself of the critical and alternative approaches that had started to flower in the glasnost era of the 1990s. That is not something we should be seeking to emulate in the UK.

So yes, there’s much to say here, about how the four year PhD has materially shaped scholarship in the UK. There is generally very little funding for field work. Universities worried about liability have put all kinds of obstacles in the way of students trying to get to field work sites. Requirements like insisting that students be in residence for their fourth year in order to write up and submit on time further limit the possibilities for field work. The upshot is to make the PhD dissertation more a library exercise or to favor the kind of quantitative, data science work that fits more easily into these time constraints and structures. Again, quite obviously, power sculpts knowledge.

It becomes simply impossible, within the PhD, to do the kinds of things associated with serious qualitative scholarship, like learn languages, spend long time periods in field sites and to visit them more than once, to develop real networks there. Over time this shapes the academy, often in unintended ways. I think this is one of the reasons that IR in the UK has been so theoretic in character—what else can people do but read books, think and write in this kind of environment? As I say, the other kind of thing they can do is quantitative work, which takes us right back to the fate Walt and Mearsheimer sensed befalling IR as political science. Watch for IR and Data Science joint degrees as the next step in this evolution. Political Science in the US starts teaching methods at the freshman level. They get them young.

**We have discussed the rather grim state of affairs for the future of critical social science scholarship, at least in the UK and US. To conclude – what prospects for hope in the future are there?**

Well, if I had a public relations consultant pack, this is the point at which it would advise talking about children and the power of science to save us.

I think the environment for universities, political, financial, and otherwise may get considerably more difficult. Little is untouchable in Western public life right now, it is only a question of when and in what ways they will come for us. The nationalist and far-right turns in Western politics feed off transgressing boundaries. There’s no reason to suspect universities will be immune from this, and they haven’t been.

In the UK, as a consequence of Brexit, we are having to nationalise, and de-European-ise our scholarships and admissions processes. We are administratively enacting the surrender of cosmopolitan achievements in world politics and in academic life. This is not a plot but in no small measure the outcome of democratic will, registered in the large majority Boris Johnson’s Conservatives won at the last general election. It will have far reaching consequences for UK university life. This is all pretty scary if you think, as I do, that we are nearer the beginning then the end of the rise of the right.

Covid will supercharge some of these processes of de-globalization. I can already see an unholy alliance forming of university managers and introvert academics who will want to keep in place various dimensions of the online academic life that has taken shape since spring 2020. Often this will be justified by reference to environmental concerns and by the increased, if degraded, access that online events make possible. We are going to have a serious fight on our hands to retain our travel budgets at anywhere near pre-pandemic levels. I’m hoping that this generation of students, subjected to online education, will become warriors for in-person teaching.

All of this said, it’s hard to imagine a more interesting time to be teaching, thinking and writing about world politics. Politics quite evidently retains its capacity to turn the world upside down. Had you told US citizens where they would be on January 6th, 2021 in 2016, they would have called you alarmist if not outlandish. I think we’re in for more moments like that.

**Tarak Barkawi is a professor of International Relations at LSE. He uses interdisciplinary approaches to imperial and military archives to re-imagine relations between war, armed forces and society in modern times. He has written on the pivotal place of armed force in globalization, imperialism, and modernization, and on the neglected significance of war in social and political theory and in histories of empire. His most recent book,**[**Soldiers of Empire**](https://web.archive.org/web/20211116152202/https:/www.cambridge.org/core/books/soldiers-of-empire/76D9A50C51276F28C5927431E0E0980F)**, examined the multicultural armies of British Asia in the Second World War, reconceiving Indian and British soldiers in cosmopolitan rather than national terms. Currently, he is working on the Korean War and the American experience of military defeat at the hands of those regarded as racially inferior. This new project explores soldiers’ history writing as a site for war’s constitutive presence in society and politics.**