

# *Theory Talks*

*Presents*

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## THEORY TALK #22

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### KEVIN DUNN ON IDENTITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, THE AFRICAN CHALLENGE TO IR THEORY, AND THE WHITE-MALE BIAS OF THE FIELD

#### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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## KEVIN DUNN ON IDENTITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, THE AFRICAN CHALLENGE TO IR THEORY AND THE WHITE- MALE BIAS OF THE FIELD



International Relations is traditionally all about the power relations between independent, mostly strong and occidental states. According to Kevin C. Dunn, the classical approach to IR is a straw-man that makes us think about the field in ways that do not correspond to the reality of our living-world. In this comprehensive Talk, Dunn, amongst others, explains how we are active participants in the construction of international politics, how images of countries (such as the Congo) are often tricky social constructions, and how the field is disturbingly biased in accordance with where its most prominent scholars come from.

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge or principal debate in current IR? And what is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

For me, the biggest challenge is making my work relevant to the general population. For many people, world politics has an alienating effect, appearing as a product of distant, uncontrolled, and alien forces. The world of IR seems to be a disconnected realm inhabited by detached foreign policy professionals and obtuse intellectuals with little connection to the everyday life of people's work, family, and leisure. While it is often painfully clear to people how world politics can impact their lives - from rising fuel and food prices to the human cost of warfare - there is a strong impulse to feel that one is a passive victim of these global forces, rather than an active participant in the construction of the world around us. I fear that most IR scholarship reinforces this sense of alienation: employing turgid prose to discuss theoretical approaches and historical examples that have little relevance to the average reader.

Back in 1977, Stanley Hoffman wrote in his infamous Daedalus article *An American Social Science: International Relations* that, among other things, American IR scholars were not only in the corridors but also in the "kitchens" of power. I think this still holds true, at least to the extent that most American IR scholarship, both in terms of style and content, is written largely for and about policy makers and power holders. Many of my colleagues are fine with that (as is evidenced by many of the previous interviews in *Theory Talks*). A problem arises when this becomes the standard practice within the discipline, which I find it is. This makes us part of the problem

rather than the solution. And as the band the Clash put it, "We will teach our twisted speech to the young believers." That is, graduate students are trained to be forces of alienation rather instruments of disalienation.

I am not suggesting that the scholarship that I have produced to date isn't as alienating and esoteric as anybody else's. Far from it. I am, after all, a product of the system that I find now so troubling. But I remain haunted by something Robert Art once said to me: always write about issues that are relevant to your readers, and do so in a way that is simple enough, without being simplistic, so that most average readers understand what you are saying. I think these may be the most import words I ever heard as a graduate student, and they have been my guide ever since. But I find that I could do a much better job both in terms of relevance and accessibility, and I find myself increasingly breaking with traditional IR in both what I am talking about, who I am talking to, and how I talk to them.

### **How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

My thinking about world politics has been shaped by a wildly diverse range of influences. When I was a MA student at Dalhousie University, [Timothy Shaw](#) was a tremendous influence on how I thought about African politics. Tim is extremely generous and dedicated to his graduate students, and once you are part of his constellation you never quite leave it. But funnily enough it was [Jane Parpart](#) who may have had the larger influence on my thinking even though I never took a single course with her. We struck up a conversation in the library stacks and she starting talking to me about post-modernism and feminist theory. It was one of those 'Road to Damascus' moments that started me down the path of both post-modernism and feminism.

During my years as a PhD student, I was fortunate to be able to take courses with multiple professors from a number of schools. Over the course of one semester, Robert Art taught me more about the fundamentals of IR theory, the importance of concise writing and nuanced analysis than perhaps anyone else. I also drove several hours each week to take courses from [James Der Derian](#), whose influence on my thinking runs deep. But perhaps the single most important thing James did was hand me a copy of Roxanne Doty's [Imperial Encounters](#) and told me to read it. Without a doubt that was the most important book I read in graduate school and continues to influence my thinking on a wide range of issues, from the power of representations to state-making practices. I remember going to my first International Studies Association ([ISA](#)) conference as a graduate student and seeing Doty speak. On the same panel was [Cindy Weber](#), who has also become a major influence on how I think about international relations (both as a subject and as a discipline). I recall Cindy dragging me to a reception for the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies section, which - along with the Global Development section - has become an extremely engaging intellectual support system.

### **What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?**

I think the other people you have interviewed here at *Theory Talks* have provided really insightful answers. If I were to give advice to graduate students in IR, I would probably tell them two

things. First, reading broadly in the field will give them an appreciation of the disparate conversations taking part in the field. Moreover, it will also help them avoid the ridiculous straw-man representations that get generated within our disciplinary disputes. And though they might not realize it now, being a graduate student is probably the only time in their careers when they will have the luxury of reading as broadly as possible and the ability to stay abreast of new scholarship. Second, I would encourage students to read primary sources as much as possible. I am always struck by the caricatures drawn of other scholars' work, be it Morgenthau, Kant, Waltz or [Wendt](#), and I think that comes from scholars relying on summaries from secondary sources, rather than building a familiarity with the primary source itself.

**A lot of IR scholars do not consider themselves political actors. Do you?**

You are asking the person who, with [Simona Sharoni](#), organized anti-war protests at the 2003 ISA conference. So, the answer is yes. But let me refocus the question to a discussion of how we are all political actors. The fact that many IR scholars don't consider themselves political actors gets back to the problems I mentioned at the outset. I find it puzzling that scholars still posit that they and their theories are somehow outside the world that they study. Critical Theorists have taught us that we are intimately complicit in the state of the world around us. Steve Smith discussed this in his 2003 ISA Presidential Address: how IR scholars have helped construct the world we now find ourselves in. To deny that is, in my mind, not only mistaken but also dangerous. So, short answer: yes, I am a political actor in all that I do. We all are, to varying degrees.

**A common assumption is that identity is private, far away from politics. Is that true?**

No. Even if it were true, isn't the private political?

**In 2001, you co-edited a book entitled *The African Challenge to IR Theory*. What is or are the challenge(s) Africa poses to IR theory?**

The majority of "authoritative" IR theory has largely been produced by white males from North America and Western Europe who have written about world politics from their own unexamined subject positions. Western-centric IR theory has created a system of dispositions that posits their historical experiences and cultural values are the norm for the international community. Their assumptions and experiences are passed off as "normal" and have enabled definitions and concepts that privileged this narrow segment of the world's population to become accepted as the norm within IR theory. Because most IR theory begins with ingrained assumptions about world politics based on Western experiences, thoughts, and desires, non-Western examples appear to be abnormal or aberrant and in need of explaining and, more often, fixing. For example, [one scholar](#) interviewed here at *Theory Talks* made the claim: "African IR is just one or two steps behind Europe, but will eventually get there just like everyone else." This statement is problematic on so many levels.

The goal of *Africa's Challenge to IR Theory* was to place Africa and African experiences as our starting point for analysis and theorizing. We wanted to offer a corrective to much of IR that either develops theories devoid of reality or uncritically generalizes out from Western historical experiences and cultural practices. Specifically, I wrote about the African state in relationship to the vast scholarly literature on "state failure." Taking an idealized North American/Western European state as the norm, many scholars engage in fanciful conversations about how and why many non-white experiences with the state are aberrant. Rarely does this literature engage in critical self-reflection, exploring how the assumed norm is the product of subjective experiences, values, and imaginations. As I wrote in that volume, the African state is not "failing" as much as is our understanding of the state.

More recently, I contributed a chapter on white male privilege to *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender and Violence in IR*, edited by Jane Parpart and Marysia Zalewski. In it I tried to raise various concerns about the ways in which the discipline refuses to recognize its gender and racial biases (anyone else notice that, like myself, everyone interviewed so far here at Theory Talks has been white and male?). We never speak of it as "the white male North American/Western European field of International Relations." Rather, it is cast simply as "IR" and those scholars writing from outside those positions of privilege frequently have their work labeled in ways that mark it as outside the norm: feminist, post-colonial, non-Western and so on. The "normal" is the product of discursive practices, and the discourses that define "normal" in world politics privilege the white male subject position as the human one. Feminist IR theorists have worked to expose the privileged yet "hidden" male subject positions in traditional IR texts. For example, J. Ann Tickner's engagement with Hans J. Morgenthau's "Six Principles of Political Realism" is an excellent study in how one IR theorist wrote from within a specific narrow structural/linguistic frame of masculinity, while claiming to generalize out to all 'people' and 'humanity.' In many ways, *Africa's Challenge to IR Theory* attempted to do the same thing, troubling our assumptions about world politics by placing African experiences at the forefront, rather than as aberrant footnotes to the discipline's theories.

**Alexander Wendt in [Theory Talk #3](#) expresses skepticism about 'using the real world as data against which to test theory'. Do you agree with him?**

No, I don't agree with him at all. I understand his position intellectually. But I believe he and I don't share the same views about theory construction or its place in the production of knowledge. He is far more of a Positivist than I am.

But let me say that even though I disagree with Wendt on a wide range of issues, I don't have much interest in attacking him. He has done a great deal of really important work, which has placed him in a position to become a punching bag for a whole generation of graduate students, to say nothing of his intellectual adversaries. He has dealt with that critique fairly well, so my hat is off to him, regardless of our differences.

**Your approach to international relations focuses, amongst others, on identity; you've co-**

**edited a book on the subject, called *Identity and Global Politics*. Can you sketch some of the ways (perhaps with an example) in which 'identity politics' is currently influential in IR?**

Can we not all agree that American and Western European responses to the conflict in Georgia have had as much, if not more, to do with their representations of Russian identity than with actual events on the ground?

Let me give you another example, in order to plug the work of [Séverine Autesserre](#) (who is working on a book manuscript on this subject). In the Dem. Republic of Congo, UN policymakers and peacekeepers' analysis of the situation is heavily framed by the identity they have constructed of the Congolese (to say nothing about their own self-representation). As Autesserre has argued, from 2003 onward, they defined the Congolese context as a "post-conflict" environment. As a result, they identified national and regional tensions as the causes of the continued fighting and massacres in the eastern provinces. They were unable to deal with violence that they could not relate to any national or regional antagonism. Therefore, local conflicts were considered private and criminal, and decentralized violence was a humanitarian problem, not a political one. Furthermore, because the image of the Congolese "inherent savagery" had persisted since the Belgian colonizers constructed it a century ago, foreign actors saw local violence as a normal feature of life in the Congo. This is but one example of how identity politics are currently influential in IR. Another would be the troubling trend of autochthonous violence, which I have recently written on.

**To what extent is identity a 'social construct'? What are the (political) implications thereof?**

In our work *Identity and Global Politics*, Patti Goff and I argued that it was important to recognize that identities were socially constructed, relational, fluid and multiple. All identities are socially constructed, but the real questions then become: Which actors, practices, mechanisms, institutions, and so forth are implicated in the social construction of a given identity, at a given historical moment? Can we isolate a range of constitutive practices and agents? How does one engage in an empirical investigation of the discursive construction of identities? That is, what types and forms of discourses "count" and which ones do not? How much weight should be put on specific discourses and narratives? How can we understand the discursive commonalities and disjunctures in identity construction? How are material practices and forces related to these discursive constructions? How does one grapple with social contestation and intentional agency? These are important questions that I think need to direct our investigations about identity.

**While the recent 'constructivist turn' has brought identity into the picture as a legitimate subject in IR, very few mainstream authors seem actually engaged in research related to the subject. Why is that so?**

Is that true? I don't think I have found that to be necessarily so, but I could be living in a bubble. When Patti Goff and I decided to put together the volume *Identity and Global Politics*, we were

concerned that the theorizing on identity by IR scholars was both troublingly vague and disconnected to empirical case studies. So that volume brought together numerous works that were grounded in historical case studies: from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia and South America. It is my assumption that there continue to be important investigations on identity that are empirically informed, but maybe I'm wrong. That is a good question, Peer. I'd be curious to hear how the readers on this site respond.

**You state about the Congo that its identity has been authored 'largely by outside actors to the overall detriment of the people on the ground'. How do powerful external actors shape African identity and what are the (political) implications thereof?**

The identity of the Congo, like other social identities, has been formed by being located within the narratives that we use to know, understand, and make sense of the social world. Narratives of national identities are formed by a gradual layering on and connecting of events and meanings, usually through three steps: the selection of events themselves, the linking of these events to each other in causal and associational ways (plotting), and interpreting what the events and plots signify. The example of the Congo is illuminating because it shows how these identity-constructing narratives are rarely the exclusive product of a state's policy makers. External forces are constantly at play, seeking to select, plot and interpret the events and meanings by which identities are narrated. My work *Imagining the Congo* investigates the narratives produced by external actors over the past century and the direct ramifications they have had on the situation in the Congo today.

I've found that a useful way of understanding the historic contestation over identity narratives is in the "long conversation" concept of historical anthropologists Jean and [John Comaroff](#). In their work on the colonial contact between the Tswana peoples of South Africa and British Christian missionaries, they argue that there were two faces of the conversation: what was talked about and the struggle to gain mastery over the terms of the encounter. Identities of states are historically produced within similar "long conversations," where multiple actors have come together to contest the meanings of those identities and the terms in which they are expressed. I have found that equally important is the struggle to find and create a space within the conversation, or "discursive space." Delineating and policing discursive space has been an important element in identity construction in international relations, especially for disadvantaged Third World states like the Congo. At times, international discursive space has been actively closed off to competing and counter-hegemonic discourses. For example, during the 1960s, Western governments not only intervened directly to deny the seating of Patrice Lumumba's United Nations delegation, but also his access to the radio station in his country's capital. Both of these actions effectively limited his ability to articulate and circulate his narratives of Congolese identity.

Of course, narratives of a state's identity have political dynamics. In the case of the Congo, representations enabled external actors to "know" the Congo and to act upon what they "knew." Certain paths of action become possible within distinct discourses, while other paths become "unthinkable." Over a century ago, Western representations of an "inherently savage" Congo enabled brutal conquest and colonization. Today, Western representations of an "inherently

savage” Congo fuel apathy and inaction in one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, a crisis that the West has been complicit in creating for the last hundred years.

Hopefully that brief synopsis makes sense. If not, you’ll just have to read the book!

### **How do we, as common civilians, shape the political configuration of the world?**

How we live our daily lives, from being economic consumers to interacting with other social beings, helps shape the political configuration of the world. I think an important move is to be critically self-reflective about the myriad ways in which our choices have an impact on the physical and social worlds. Yes, agency is relational, contextual, and structurally-constrained. But what we struggle for may be less important than the act of struggling itself. As [Zach de la Rocha](#) once said, “The frontline is everywhere.”

**Kevin C. Dunn is Chair for the global development section of the International Studies Association and is a visiting professor at Mbarara University in Uganda. His other professional affiliations include: the African Studies Association; the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars; the International Studies Association; the Association of Third World Studies; the Society for Women in International Political Economy; and the American Political Science Association. Dunn's published works include *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity*, and *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* (co-edited with Timothy Shaw). He has also been published in the journals *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, *Geopolitics*, *Journal Of Third World Studies*, *Africana Bulletin*, *African Studies Review* and *International Insights*.**

#### *Related links*

- [Dunn's faculty profile at Hobart and William Smith Colleges](#)
- Read the introduction from Shaw & Dunn's *The African Challenge to International Relations Theory* (2001) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the introduction from Bøås & Dunn's *African Guerrilla's: Raging Against the Machine* (2007) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Dunn's Reflecting on five years of war in Iraq (Daily Messenger, 2008) [here](#)