

Chatting with Pierre Thielbörger

Spyridoula Katsoni, Pierre Thielbörger

2024-05-10T08:00:42

Welcome to the latest interview of the Völkerrechtsblog's symposium 'The Person behind the Academic'! With us we have Prof. Pierre Thielbörger, and through the following questions, we will try to get a glimpse of his interests, sources of inspiration and habits.

Welcome Prof. Thielbörger and thank you very much for accepting our invitation!

May I first ask, what it was that brought you to academia and what made you stay?

When I was younger, I also received an education as a journalist. I realized soon the difference in terms of depth with which academics and journalists can look into topics. Eventually, I was more attracted to the 'deep dive' than the 'snorkelling'. Besides, I wrote my PhD at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. This place is one of the most prominent birthplaces for future academics, and showcases the best of academia: free thinking, interdisciplinarity, international exchange. And all of that on an idyllic hill in beautiful Tuscany. Who could resist the temptation to follow a career in academia if the first steps on the path are like this?

If you were not an academic, what would you be?

Like many academics, I sometimes worry not to have enough 'practical impact' with my work. To write about human rights is good and important, but what about implementation in practice? So I have always strived to combine my own theoretical work with policy advice, e.g. to governments or IOs, or to work together with institutions that advocate for human rights and IHL (e.g. the German Institute on human rights or the Red Cross, to name just two). If I had ended up outside of academia, I would likely still work on the same topics, just more from the practical side, e.g. as a politician or at an international organization or NGO. And, of course, when I was much younger, I wanted to be an actor – but that has remained a hobby. I guess I wasn't courageous enough to go for that.

Which are three texts that you would wish all academics working on international law would read?

Instead of recommending three specific books, I would generally recommend us all to read texts by younger scholars. They often bring new ideas and unconventional perspectives. I would recommend, for instance, the new textbook "International Law: A multi-disciplinary perspective" by Sué Hauck, Isabel Lischewski and Max Milas (Routledge), "Rechtsnormen und Legitimität in der Friedensmediation" by Felix Würkert (Nomos), or "The effects of armed conflicts on investment treaties" by Tobias Ackermann (Cambridge UP). I have almost 20 PhD students and often serve

in PhD award committees. I think we all should generally give more regard to these works by younger aspiring scholars.

What is your favourite place to read and write? What is always near you when you read and write?

Who doesn't fantasize about writing in beautiful places with excellent weather? If only at the beach, the article would write itself, etc. The truth, however, is that these circumstances tend to distract me. So while my "favourite" place to read and write might still be a beach bar with cocktail in hand etc., the "best" place is probably the opposite: a barren desk in a boring library or office.

What is an energy and inspiration booster, at times when you have none?

I think all parents would answer this question the same: my kids. While they often drive us crazy, they also give us incredibly much energy, at times. When thinking about our own kids, it becomes clear why we strive for a better world, in what ever capacity we do that.

Have you ever drawn influence from any form of art in your work? Is there anything artistic about teaching or writing academic texts?

If you enter the main library at Ruhr University Bochum, you will be greeted by a massive replica of Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" painting. As most readers will know, Guernica is one of Picasso's best-known works, exhibited in the Reina Sofia in Madrid. Many say it is the most expressive and powerful anti-war painting in history. Picasso created it in the 1930s to convey the negative effects of war by recreating a real event: the bombing of the Basque town Guernica by the Nazis during the Spanish Civil War. Although it yielded almost no military advantage, it was carried out with incredible disregard for human suffering.

Why has this influenced my work or my thinking? First, in Bochum, I am the director of an Institute that specializes in the international law of peace and armed conflict. We do research about the rules that apply during armed conflicts. This painting reminds us every day of the horrors of war, and emphasizes the importance of the principles of IHL (e.g. the principles of distinction or humanity, or the prohibition of unnecessary suffering.)

Second, the replica was actually drawn up by students many years ago. I am until today impressed that the students of that time selected this specific picture when choosing between hundreds of possible images. It makes me proud of how well the students of my university understood the link between university education and the promotion of peace.

As a side remark, I have a huge painting of the young Paul Mc Cartney in my own office. But that has less to do with my work, and more my own music and art taste.

If you could, which advice would you give to yourself at the early stages of your career?

Maybe some readers might know that I am a very passionate Jessuper. I have been a coach for many years, and now I am a judge. As a student, I didn't participate, and I really regret this. However, it wasn't so much that I decided against it. I was rather not aware of the Jessup existing at my university at the time. So my advice would be to get better informed about your own possibilities – often there is more available to us than we know.

Another advice to younger researchers would be to do what they really care about at university. Many choose strategically a field of study in which they see best career prospects. For me, however, university is more than a place that prepares us for our later work. I would encourage law students and early career researchers to not be shy to choose a specialisation they are interested in – as exotic as the topic might appear. Later in life, we all have to make enough compromises. University time should remain a time in which we allow ourselves the luxury to follow our interests.

There is, however, a third advice, and that might be sometimes in contradiction to the second one. While it is important to follow your passion, it is equally important to work on something for which you have talent. Think about a professional singer or athlete: you need vocal or physical talent for the craft you do. Being “good at your job” is an often underrated component of professional well-being and advancement.

Having said that, I am not sure whether the advice would have made much of a difference: after all, the younger version of myself was not very receptive to advice...

Have you experienced or witnessed discrimination in academic circles? How have you reacted to these instances?

As in all areas of professional life, there is discrimination in academia, of course. In legal academia, women are particularly under-represented. There is a growing awareness of that. We should, however, not forget other groups that are also severely under-represented and regularly discriminated against. These include people of colour, the LGBTTIQ* community, and people from families without any academic background. I am particularly proud, for example, that my university has a high number of students who are the first in their families to pursue a university education, and we all need to think even harder about how to make sure that they have equal opportunities.

Ideally, whom would you want to find waiting for a meeting with you outside your office next Monday?

Good question. Maybe my kids. They really idealize my office: they don't understand this 'mystical place' their father so often goes to, which they are not usually allowed to accompany him to. (It might also have to do with the fact that my secretary always has chocolate in her desk). When they are a bit older, surprise visits would be very nice, but I fear the chocolate will be less appealing then.

What are you working on currently? What may we anticipate in the near future?

I am currently working on the next edition of the textbook on humanitarian action that I am co-editing with my colleague Professor Heintze. I am also working on different projects in the field of business and human rights for which I recently won some funding. So we are currently preparing a global conference to be held in South Africa. And ever since my PhD, the right to water has remained, and will remain, a constant companion in my academic life.

Thank you very much, Prof. Thielbörger, for participating in our symposium and for having taken the time to respond to our questions!

