

Hayward Alker, Friendship, and Normative International Theory Now
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I never met Hayward Alker. I knew his work from Renee Marlin-Bennett, who was on my committee; and from my comprehensive examinations, because I was at Johns Hopkins and we can get away with such things there.

Even so, I feel a strong bond of friendship and gratitude to him: through his work, and from what his work helped make possible. I'm going to explain that bond in a moment, but I want to say from the outset that my comments are a mix of the confessional and personal on the one hand – the perspective of one freshly-minted PhD and somewhat bedraggled survivor of the academic job-market 'hunger games' – and the disciplinary and prescriptive. I want to unpack the sense of friendship I feel, and then explain why I think it's important: for both the particular moment in which international theory now finds itself, and for continuing the work that Hayward wanted to do. For my work, at least, this is what is most alive in it.

First, the confessional.

What drew me into HA's work was how *unapologetically hard it was*. If his meaning was at times obscure to me, I didn't mind. I was a grad student with funding; taking time to read puzzling texts was hardly a burden. And anyway, what was so great about our existing academic or policy *lingua franca*? Here was a voice that was hard to read, hard to *know how to read*. It made no apology for this. It wished to evade the capture or limitations of existing conceptual vocabulary. I thought to myself: *right on*.

The problem with hard is that it doesn't always get published, or read. The fear that we will write and not be read is uniquely galvanizing – since the 2008 economic crisis, for a junior academic, it has become almost overwhelming. How do we keep our voice alive in the face of that fear? How do we tend to our professional lives without over-professionalizing?

I honestly don't have an answer to that question. If I had known how hard it would be, I might not have done it. But to the extent that I do have an answer for it, it is that you "get by with a little help from your friends." In my own case, a lot of the friends I got by with are here now. Hayward helped them – either directly, or as with me through the voice of his work. Hayward was a friend to me in that way. The thing about distinctive voices is they give you the courage to find your own.

These reflections mean to be more than the confessions of a recovering graduate student. As I look at the historical moment in which international theory now seems to find itself,

that kind of friendship seems vitally important to me: the most exigent, most vital piece of the Alker project, at least it is for me. Let me explain why.

In an essay from 1946, Hannah Arendt talks of the power of friendship as the basis of for restoring hope for and faith in the world. The substance of her argument in this essay is a commentary on Zionism and the writings of Theodor Herzl – not something which concerns us directly here, though there are connections. The part of the argument that matters here runs roughly like this: the world is a hot, unholy depressing mess. It is so because of the deeds of thoughtless women and thoughtless men. How are we to avoid despairing at that world, recoiling or withdrawing from it, when we reflect on this? Well, we have this potential that comes from shared thinking, speaking and acting – from being between and among others. It is bound up, she suggests, in friendship.¹

If political or international theory is a form of political action – and at some level we all must think it is or we'd be spending our time trying to game out the review process at the *JCR* rather than being here – then this applies here as well. How that works is complicated, though.

I recently finished a book on what I call sustainable critique. The aim is to develop the promise and possibility of knowledge which is practical and reflexive in the same moment; in which we are each our own Foucault, if you like, and our own Keohane.

Following Renee's and Tom's essay in the *festschrift*, that work comprises three different moments: a normative moment, an epistemological one, a methodological one. The normative moment seeks to embrace both an *aufklärer's* faith in practical reason *and* a critical theorist's skepticism of it, militating for care and humility, or what I call *chastened reason*. The epistemological part comes from an understanding of the problematic relationship between mind and world which necessitates such chastening: the ineluctable centrality of reification to conceptual thinking, and the dangerous incompatibility of such thinking with politics. The methods moment aims to translate that chastened normative-epistemological worldview into a series of deeply reflexive research practices.

As I move from arguing for that approach to actually practicing it – from my first book into my second – I find that cannot survive without a certain kind of intellectual-collegial friendship.

IR, you see, remains parochial – as Bierstecker's recent updating reminds us – but in a different way than when Alker and Bierstecker wrote their essay on it. Our parochialism

¹ She writes: "Today reality has become a nightmare...[H]orrible beyond the scope of the human imagination and hopeless beyond the strength of human despair. Only when we come to feel ourselves part and parcel of a world in which we, like everybody else, are engaged in a struggle against great and sometimes overwhelming odds, and yet with a chance of victory, however small, and with allies, however few – only when we recognize the human background against which recent events have taken place, knowing that what was done was done by men and therefore can and must be prevented by men – only then will we be able to rid the world of its nightmarish quality." Hannah Arendt: *The Jew as Pariah*. (Grove, 1978), p. 174.

has taken on a confusingly, disarmingly diverse aspect. Political and economic orders and communities are no longer tied explicitly to territory; our classes, ideological fractions, and interest groups are now fuzzily transnational in shape. Our configurations of race and gender have a plasticity that can seem surprising when viewed across time, even if they remain highly orthodox and repressive in any one particular moment.

Is it any wonder that our provincialisms would also become spread across a plurality of nationalities, gender identities, faith traditions and political communities? That their cosmopolitan aspect would veil their tendentiousness from us, conceal the particular dimensions or angles of their points of ideological closure? That we would be unable, paraphrasing Lukacs, to even *discern* the outlines of the social illusion in which we find ourselves, let alone – as he wished to do – *puncture* it?

In short, our newfangled provincialisms, whatever they are, will not be adequately identified or chastened by “rounding up the usual suspects:” white middle aged men, BP executives, and southern rural sheriffs. We’re going to have to *interrogate ourselves* to get at them, and we’re going to have to do so in quite a searching, demanding way.

In that vein, some of the most interesting work I’ve read over the past year include reconsiderations of the work of Louis Althusser, or Bourdieu’s notion of field by folks like Isaac Kamola, Inanna Hamati Ataya, and Tarek Tantunji. It seems to me they are, *inter alia*, trying to map out the ‘lay’ of these new provincialisms and make sense of them; the particular structure of the ideological *post*-state apparatus into which academic work fits, for good or ill. So that one can find oneself in it, and gain some critical-reflexive leverage.

I think this too is why scholars like Oded Löwenheim, Piki Ish Shalom, Mira Sucharov, Naeem Inayatullah, Andrew Ross, Elizabeth Dauphinee, Roland Bleiker, Patrick Jackson and Janice Bialley Mattern, are becoming interested in emotion, and anthropological and emotional forms of coming to accounts or self-disclosure – the “I in IR” question. And why folks like Brian Schmidt, Nicolas Guilhot, David Long, Cornelia Navari, David McCourt, Jack Gunnell, Ron Robin, David Jenemann and Ido Oren continue to deepen their study of the social, cultural and institutional context in which particular schools of thought become hegemonic in the sociology-of-the-academy mode.

In all these cases, the priority seems to be to map the structures – institutional, financial, ideological, cognitive – that condition how ideas become hegemonic – so that, again, we can gain some critical leverage over them. In another sense, it’s why I engage in aesthetic theory: subjecting my encounters with the world and my data to other faculties. “To break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness,” as Dewey put it.²

² John Dewey: *The Public and its Problems*. In *The Later Works, 1925-53*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois, 1981), v. 2, pp. 349-50.

Some twenty years ago, Hollis and Smith wrote of a hermeneutic circle, in which explanatory and interpretive theory interweave and overlap. What the foregoing observations suggest is that, as reflexive, normative international theorists, the moment in which we find ourselves demands that another dimension, another axis, be added to this circle: it must, in effect become a *sphere*. One that comprises not just the “noumenal” interaction of different moments of thought, but the contingent historical horizon of the theorist: a sense of what sort of thoughts are ‘thinkable’ in a given context.

Here’s the problem with that sort of analysis. *It’s really hard to do.*

Emotionally, its hard to do. It’s taxing. It leaves one chasing one’s own tail in a way that leave one quite unsure of what one actually believes. One loses track of oneself.

And it tends to reduce agency – the agency of the scholar – to positional analysis, to structure: our beliefs, our conclusions, become nothing more than the circumstances imposed on us from without: we are reduced, potentially, to passively narrating our fate. And hence it threatens to drain the joy of scholarship from our work: how can we be anything more than the sum total of the structural factors that constitute our beliefs and perspectives? Are we not just mice in a maze?

That way lies despair! From there, the road to deadwoodery is short and straight: why not give ourselves over to gardening or classic cars, let TAs (or the internet) teach our undergrads, write multiple choice exams that we can grade using op-scan sheets? How do we find renewed courage as we bang our little mouse-heads against the walls of our maze?

Alternatively, it places the scholar close to a kind of dangerous delusion: that one sees all and knows all; the free-floating intellectual, with all the potential for Mannheimian puffery this entails. I am deeply, of course, committed to dialectic approaches. But I am also a bit afraid of them: because there is a larger conceptual-moral space into which all dialectical moves and counter-moves are (often passively, or unconsciously) presumed to fit. That this is the *true* world – the world, following Rob Walker, that’s after the globe. I’m a bit worried about the sense of *élan* or brio that we are liable to feel if we think we have come into unmediated contact with it: it might give us the belief, like Zarathustra, that we have become supermen, that we have seen the face of God.

This is the reason that I try to think in terms of a *negative dialectics* – a *chastening* dialectic, one that rigorously rips apart the structures of knowledge it seeks to create, in the moment of their creation. But others have been good enough to remind me that this approach too has risks: a certain fetishized, preachy heaviness, a practiced form of despair which falsely equates heaviness with intellectual depth.

What is the answer to these potential dead-ends? How do we keep ourselves clear of them? The answer lies in friendship. The gentle, and sometimes less gentle, challenges from our colleagues that check our potential for puffery and self-congratulation – mine, anyway, are legion. Our power to nourish each other intellectually. And crucially –

crucially – to forgive one another. Because we're going to fail a lot; we're going to fall in despair a lot; we're going to not get read a lot; we're going to write a lot of rubbish before we write anything good; we are going to feel resentment at texts, arguments and events that fail to conform to our expectations or disclose themselves easily to our understanding – and we dare not let those failures come to appear to as proof of our mediocrity, our fecklessness, our intellectual impostership. Friendship cultivates generosity; generosity, the space to fail, to be forgiven, and to recover from failure. And friendship allows the kind of deep ecumenicalism that Patrick just alluded to: my father's house has many rooms – and oh, yeah, by the way, he's not my father.

Hayward's work affirms the enduring importance of the friendship for which Arendt was advocating; it imparts as a body of work a sense of the work that would need to be done to nurture and sustain it. Certainly the agonistic encounters I've had with many of the people in this room confirm the possibility of forgiveness within that mode.
