Nafeez Ahmed

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Zoe Varenne 02:33
I am. So I do primarily research and sort of sorting out admin on the podcast.

Tom Pegram 02:39
Great. So Nafeez systems thinking, drawing on complexity, science has definitely been on my radar recently in light of the COVID crisis. However, as you'll know, it's still often overlooked or perhaps misunderstood by many International Relations scholars, and rarely features on our core syllabuses. Perhaps we can begin there. So why in 2020, is it so important when trying to understand global politics to think in terms of systems? Why does so many disaster risk experts now believe that this is an absolute imperative? And I'm also curious as to why it has proven such a challenge to think in systems terms, outside the somewhat boutique silos, if you will, of disaster risk, ecosystem management and military strategy.

Nafeez Ahmed 03:34
Thanks, Tom. Well, pleasure to join you on the show. And it's a big question that you've asked actually it's quite a big question. And I think it's something that, coming from an IR background, it's something I've grappled with from the beginning. And I guess I felt a sense of, you know, I felt a sense of frustration, you know, as an IR student. And it also, you know, when I was doing my research, and even after that, when I was teaching, I felt frustration at the lack of systems awareness within some of the main kind of disciplines of IR. And I think that's still like a quite serious deficit. I think there's lots of different explanations for it. But I think one thing is clear from, we start from 2020, as you said, you know, how is it that 2020 gives us that big realisation and wakeup call that actually we really do need to grapple with systems thinking, I think, we can really see this year, the way in which so many things have kicked off at the same time. You know, we've had obviously the big pandemic. And the pandemic has acted as a kind of an amplifier, for stresses and tensions that have existed for many years, maybe even decades. And in a way we can really see how the pandemic because of the way it's impacted the nature of our global system and the systems within it. It's really highlighted those interconnections and the deep seated structural fragilities that you know have existed for some time. But how, you know, a major crisis like this kind of emerges from those structural fragilities, and then further amplifies them, you know, so we know that the pandemic is a, kind of a symptom of some of the core processes of industrial civilization, I think this is something that is now being discussed a bit more, it's still not really entered mainstream consciousness. I mean, there's still this sense of "well this thing came out of the blue," and you know, now we just have a public health crisis, and let's just get a vaccine, and everything will be fine. But obviously, what we're really seeing is that what this happened, because of the way in which our societies are expanding, and encroaching into, you know, natural ecosystems, into wildlife, and obviously, the tightly coupled nature of our global transport systems, all that kind of stuff, which has played a massive role in increasing our vulnerability, which is why people have been warning about the inevitability of a pandemic, this, you know, either in the 20th century, or 21st century, I think, many people were saying, "Look, it's going to happen, it's just a matter of when," and this is why. So on the one hand, we know that it's because of a pre-existing system, which perhaps, you know, some of us are looking at it, and trying to understand it, but perhaps overall, you know, in terms of decision making, and in terms of really kind of people who have that responsibility to drive decisions in our societies, that lack of awareness of these systems and how they're working isn't, has created this vulnerability. And then further, we've seen so many things happen this year, in terms of the continued

that lens, and see how those theoretical tools can be used and applied in relation to other theoretical tools and to build up a wider systemic framework to see how it all fits together. So that's, I guess, what I'm trying to do, to some extent, with my academic and journalistic work is, is to move outside of the kind of very polarised ideological divisions that sometimes develop around these things and to say, we know we can still have those positions. And we can have our biases and our worldviews and our sense of what we think really works as an explanatory framework. But we still have to be able to navigate beyond those things and see how things fit together.

Tom Pegram 12:03
Yeah, thank you, Nafeez. That was a fantastic sort of crash course in what systems thinking might bring to this conversation. And I know you've probably read Robert Jervis's classic book 'Systems Effect' it came out in 1997. I read it recently, I wonder a little bit why that didn't revolutionise the field. But perhaps it's time to pick it up again. So I mean, to ground that a little more, of course, systems thinking also brings into play the issue of causation, particularly causation in the context of nonlinear change. And as Robert Jervis makes very clear, it's not so much that systems are more than the sum of their parts, it's that systems are actually different to the sum of their parts. And if we sort of make that abstract observation concrete in the light of COVID, you said yourself

are a really good example of that, in the sense that, yes, so because they deal with security, and they

without showing, without acknowledging that there are, it's just a theory and it might be wrong, is not going to be allowed. So this weird radicalization of our education system that's going on. That is saying

System kind of went into a paralysis is because of these cross cutting institutional relationships that existed and also personal relationships as well, you know, to do with, there's some of the Bush family, and all that kind of stuff, you know, their relationships with the Saudi kingdom, and even members of the Bin Laden family. So all that context was, had this dampening effect on the ability of the national security system to respond. I remember one of the things I used to talk a lot about was this link between our intelligence agencies had this historic link and their use of Islamist groups, for geopolitical purposes, of course, something well known during the Cold War with, you know, the war in Afghanistan, for example, and the funding of the Mujahideen in order to counter Russian power, but also this was something that actually continued after the Cold War, for very much the same kinds of reasons. And it was something that again, you know, as you can imagine, it's not politically correct to talk about these things. It's, it's seen as, are you offering a conspiracy theory, so I didn't want to offer conspiracy. I didn't want to undermine the fact that Islamist extremism is real. But I wanted to draw attention to these wider processes. What I found is that having banged on and on about those kinds of issues. So I was gratified to find that, I mean, this work, you know, influenced, official inquiries. I mean, my book was read by 9/11 commissioners, it became part of you know, that 900 families had actually, one of my books on the first day, I think it was the first they had read, and they'd used it to inform the lines of inquiries, they were asking the US government. So on the one hand, it was gratifying to see all of this impact. But on the other hand, what I found was that people then began taking those I mean, conspiracy theorists were taking my work right from the beginning, and saying, you know, yeah, 9/11 is an inside job, Nafeez has used the word complicity, so that means that the US government is, has perpetrated 9/11 and that kind of thing, and it just turned into this slippery slope. And I watched as these ideas then kind of just become this, this meme of the idea of "Oh, the CIA funds Islam as the CIA funds Islamists," but it just became this really toxic discourse, to the point where, you know, fast forward to a crisis in Syria. And then I found that people were taking these same sorts of ideas. And of course, you know, there was all sorts of, you know, I've done a lot of reporting on the Syria crisis.

Nafeez Ahmed 39:08
But what happened is that people then began denying us Assadist crimes against people in Syria by saying that, well, there's funding of jihadist groups in Syria by, you know, the US government and so on and so forth. You know, Saudi is putting money into- and of course, Saudi was and is, has been putting money into rebel groups. And there have been Islamist groups and all sorts of totally legitimate, but then that led, that turned into war crimes denialism, and saying that, well, Assad's not actually, you know, that's all fabricated. It just turned into this really strange toxic discourse and very polarised and as and that's an example of what happens when you kind of narrow down on something and take it out of context and you, you know you don't think systemically about these issues. And that, that was for me, a real kind of you know, I had to take, I felt that I even as a journalist was contributing to some of the toxic discourses in Syria as a reporter, and I ended up doing a massive report for the state crime initiative out of Queen Mary's looking at the way in which these narratives had developed and just investigating them, and just really digging deep. And I think that's what I, what I learned from that is that investigative journalism is really important in15()10(28(m(828(m(828(mt)11(h(80(3(h8k)16(20(t)11b(40(t)11()3(v)16e(40(n(B(d8()1

impossible to control where your information goes after it's been shared and who uses it and to what advantage? So what are the steps that you would take I suppose to speak truth to power in a way that is non biased and allows you to maintain your own integrity?

Nafeez Ahmed 45:22
Yeah, it's a tough one. I mean, I think I think you have to be really specific and intentional about the reporting that you're doing. And sometimes that means making really clear, you know, things that you're not going to stand by, or things that you're not saying. But it's not easy. You mean, you can't take responsibility for you know, crazy people doing crazy things with your work, it's not necessarily your fault. But when you do, if you do see that happening, you know, you, you can try to dampen it down. So I think it's about writing well, or reporting well, or making your videos well, you know, and, again, taking really taking a systems approach. And when I talk about systems journalism, I mean my approach is grounded in I guess, the academic work that I've done, and I've always been in, kind of tried to look at, if I'm taking a systems theory background approach, then when I come to understand what's going on in a climate issue, or what's going on, in the food system, or looking at, for example, particular conflict, I will try to apply that systems lens to understand what's really going on there. So I think to some extent, it is about saying, if I, if I'm able to see what's going on, the issue that's going on here, it's not just about evil groups of people or evil entities, it's also about the systems that incubate them, and the processes and decisions that incubate them. And sometimes, it's about drawing that attention. So that's, that's the lesson I want to take away. So for instance, you know, we were talking about the Uighur earlier on. One of the things that I've done, one of the stories I did was about how Huawei, the you know, the big telecoms company in China, that people have spoken about is, you know, having a relationship with various Western companies and all the rest of it. Well, Huawei was essentially built by companies like IBM, and IBM, and other companies like Microsoft and others, played a big role actually, in nurturing the kind of surveillance oriented policies of that company. And even when it became securitized, and it became used by Chinese police and military institutions, that was still going on. In fact, IBM still has this relationship with Huawei, where they give them, I can't remember the exact number, but they give them a quite hefty fee every year. And it's a consultancy fee, and IBM will go and advise them and so on and so forth. And Huawei is known, documented to be directly involved, its technologies directly involved in policing, the Uighur people in this Xinjiang region, and involved in those kind of detention camps, and so on and so forth. So that, when you take that step back, and then you can see, well, how did Huawei actually come into existence and go down this line? And who was advising it? And what were those interests? And how did those interests feed back into kind of the capitalist Western infrastructure, that's, then makes you systemic questions about what's going on. And then you can see that it's not, it isn't just about China and China doing terrible things, and because China's bad, but it's about this wider system, and how we have actually, all of us together, including China, have helped to usher in this system that has taken this very, very toxic, dangerous form in China, which of course, the Chinese state is, you know, fundamentally responsible for. But that doesn't absolve Western institutions of their own responsibility either. And then it allows you to look and say, well, when we have you know the Trump administration railing against China and jumping up and down, and suddenly Trump cares about

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and so again I think it's about that ethos, and you have to kind of take that ethos really intentionally and use that to understand what's going on, and then to follow those conclusions and hopefully you can produce stories which are, which are hard hitting and powerful and eye opening, but still very balanced and also give people a sense of what comes next. What are the changes? What are the systems that need to change? What are the things which are actually wrong with our surveillance society, in our culture and our technology? And what can we think about doing differently?

Tom Pegram 50:21

your own context. And I think the first step is, I think what we're looking at when we're looking at these kinds of, the system change that we need is we're looking at a process where individuals are scaling the ability to, to see and think holistically, enacting that in their contexts. Using that in, for example, where you work where you study, where you play, your family, your friends, networks, that's your arena of immediate action and change. And when you can begin to scale that systems awareness within that context. And your task in that sense, is to simply act as like a domino effect. So that other people then around you can take on the same, begin to take on the same kind of holistic thinking, and, again, keep spreading it. And eventually, at some point, as students, you'll find that your arena of action will be different, you know, you'll be able to do a lot more activism, you'll be able to engage in different societies, you'll be able to do different kinds of campaigns, and you want to bring that sense of whole systems approach into the way you do those things. But then you're paving the way to get yourself into a position where, you know, hopefully, you will be you know, you have secure livelihood, or secure kind of pathway. And wherever you're going in that direction, you want to be able to take that capacity to now think systemically and act systemically into your organisation into where you're going to go. And again, to keep scaling that. And I think that's the key, I think the big insight that I had was realising that it's, of course, you know, we want to keep engaging with government, we want to keep doing our political campaigning, we want to keep being in the room with these people, and doing all that kind of stuff. And also being on the outside and being on the streets. And, you know, doing Extinction Rebellion, and that kind of protest, you need all of that kind of stuff. But really fundamentally, what's going to shift this is more and more people in these different institutions themselves, being able to actually see what's going on and be able to realise, "Well, now that I can see the system, this is the kind of action that I can change, whether I'm a politician, whether I'm head of an energy company, whether I'm a banker, whether I'm working in policy," to be able to see systemically, and then take that action in that context. And I think that's the key is, is being able to scale that process of systemic change. So when you realise that actually you have a huge amount of power in that sense, as an individual, to focus on upgrading yourself, as someone who's able to see and think in systems and, and then scale that process around you, where the most immediate forms of action are available to you. That's really, really critical. And that's how we're going to create change. And that's how I think we're going to be able to do this.

Tom Pegram 1:09:31
I suppose we as academics can play our part by ensuring that it's on the syllabus systems thinking. Well, thank you so much Nafeez. It's been really great. You know, we wish you the very best in your work. We'll be following it and hopefully post COVID we might be able to get you into UCL for an event at some point.

Nafeez Ahmed 1:09:50
I'd love that thanks so much guys.

Tom Pegram 1:09:52
Thank you.

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