



A world map with red dots indicating the locations of various universities. Labels include: University of Oxford, GIGA, University of Hamburg, St. Petersburg State University, Middle East Technical University, University of Lisbon, Fudan University, and Nehru University.

ON ACADEMIA, MOBILITY AND THE INTERNATIONAL LIBERAL ORDER: AN INTERVIEW WITH PRIMO PhD FELLOWS

BY F. ALBUQUERQUE, D. GIESE, E. TAFURO AMBROSETTI & M. VALERIANI

PRIMO (Power and Region In a Multipolar Order) is a global PhD programme that started in 2013. Like the GEM and GEM-STONES programmes, PRIMO was created under the umbrella of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Fellowship. Similar to the GEM projects, PRIMO seeks to understand a world in which complexities and interdependence of political, economic, social and environmental actions are multiplying day by day. With a focus on emerging powers centred on the BRICS (Brasil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), PRIMO merges a plethora of academic and private partners to provide its 13 PhD and 2 Post-Doctoral Researchers with the best tools to fulfil their objectives.

On the 6th of September, the PRIMO Final Conference titled “BRICS and the Crisis of Liberal Order” took place at Autoworld Brussels. The PRIMO fellows’ presentations on topics as diverse as climate politics, foreign policy of regional powers, economic governance and south-south cooperation, and the status of the EU in relation to rising powers, was followed by an outreach panel that critically reflected on the question of the end of a ‘liberal order’. Partaking in this event, several GEM STONES fellows could listen to the insights and findings of the now experienced PRIMO researchers.

In what follows, [Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti](#), hosted by the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, and [Felipe Albuquerque](#), hosted by the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, Portugal, will kindly share some of their experiences. The questions have been prepared by GEM-STONES fellows [Dominik Giese](#) (UHAM-UoW) and [Manfredi Valeriani](#) (UHAM-LUISS).



PRIMO Final Conference, Brussels 2017

Beyond the “official” description, what does PRIMO signify for you?

Felipe: PRIMO was an utterly great opportunity, one that made me leave two jobs, family and friends in Brazil, and move to sunny and thriving Lisbon. We had three very challenging years in which we could test and improve our knowledge on several topics on international relations, and travel within and outside the PRIMO network for workshops, field research, and conferences. It was a unique and life-changing experience that will certainly resonate throughout my life with the experience acquired and the contacts – and friends – made.

Eleonora: At a personal level, PRIMO constituted a life-changing experience, throughout which I grew both personally and professionally. But looking at the broader picture, PRIMO also constitutes a thrilling and necessary attempt to go beyond Western-Centrism and practice global IR. Despite the huge challenges stemming from dealing with both EU and local regulations, the project successfully put together junior and senior scholars coming from and/or working in countries as diverse as UK, Nepal, China, Brazil, South Africa, and Germany (just to name a few). This, in itself, constitutes a great achievement.

What can you tell us about ‘the liberal order in crisis’?

Felipe: The curious aspect of the “liberal order in crisis” is that this crisis seems to come from the turbulences occurring at the core of the Western,

American-led world order, for instance, in a United States under the Trump administration, and in some European countries, United Kingdom being a good example. It follows an inside-outside dynamic, in which the values, norms, and principles established after the Second World War are now being questioned by (but not only) countries that once were the builders, keepers, and supporters of such global arrangement. Challenges are visible in the realms of climate change, trade, and human rights, just to mention three. Other countries such as the members of the BRICS – mostly China and India – are stepping in and partnerships are currently volatile and not evolving in an organized way. With that in mind, I try not to overstate this supposed challenge to the current liberal order and the degree of disarray we face today. I tend to agree with some liberal institutionalist authors that the decline of the U.S. may not necessarily lead to chaos. The role of non-state actors (i.e. civil societies, subnational states and NGOs), states, and multilateral institutions provide some resilience to the existing order, limiting the possibilities of greater change. In a nutshell, international relations research is more and more needed.

more than others) contest today, is essentially the way in which liberal values are used to sustain an order that they see as unjust and exclusive.



PRIMO Final Conference, Brussels 2017

How has your experience as an international researcher impacted your professional and personal lives?

Eleonora: I left Italy, my country of origin, roughly eleven years ago. That means I have developed the whole of my career abroad -- mainly in Turkey, Spain and Belgium. This has had a profound impact on the way I work and do research; being exposed to different cultures and approaches to research has been a definitive advantage for me both at a professional and personal level. Professionally, it provided me with the analytical and linguistic tools to engage confidently with the international research community. Personally, it made my life much more exciting. Since I was a kid, I've always wanted to travel and 'see the world'. Being an international researcher certainly contributed to the realisation of this objective! There are some setbacks, too. For instance, I feel there is a risk – at least in my experience – of losing touch with your roots. Unfortunately, especially over the past three years I haven't been able to visit Italy as often as I – and my family – would have wanted. Also, I don't feel confident using my mother tongue when discussing work-related matters; if I had to write a paper in Italian I would probably struggle a bit! In the end, however, these challenges are manageable. I believe that it's just a matter of redefining the concept of 'home' living as an expat in a globalised world.

Felipe: Being an international researcher is clearly an advantage. You can deal with unexpected situations more easily and interact with people from different countries and with distinct political opinions. Professionally, it gave me confidence to speak in public, and to present my work in conferences (not



First PRIMO Conference, Hamburg

Eleonora: It might sound a bit redundant, but in order to talk about a crisis of the liberal order, we really need to define what this liberal order is in the first place. I don't want to start looking for academic definitions here, but just try to determine what the real deal is about. Is the liberal order about values (liberal democracy, human rights, market economy) or is it about hierarchies and inclusiveness? As it is usually the case, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. It is definitely a matter of order, essentially power and its distribution in global governance structures. But this order has a liberal component, that is, it is based on values that can be ascribed to what is commonly defined as the 'Western civilization'. I think that what rising powers (some

always to friendly audiences). Doing internships, secondments, and travelling with and within PRIMO required a lot of dynamism from myself and this is something that will remain with me throughout my personal and professional life.

What are some of the severest challenges you experienced during your time with PRIMO? And in contrast, what can you recall as your best memories?

Eleonora: My first two years in Turkey were challenging on different levels. Before moving to Ankara, life in Brussels was comfortable, professionally and in terms of my personal circumstances. Taking the decision to leave that life behind was difficult, and adapting to life in Ankara during my first year was indeed a struggle. Even though I am used to living abroad, establishing myself in Turkey was a demanding task, due to personal issues, language and cultural barriers. On the other hand, political turmoil and safety concerns marked my second year in Turkey. During the summer 2016, I've even witnessed a military coup attempt! However, not only was I able to cope with these challenges and remain outcome-oriented, but I have even come to thrive in this environment. This is a key personal achievement for me, and it makes me very proud. My best memories relate to the great people I've met along this journey, both in Turkey and among my PRIMO colleagues.

Felipe: Time management was always a challenge, as I had to combine secondments in South Africa and Germany with field research in different places, not to mention classes and seminars in Portugal. It was also very challenging to interview officials of multilateral organizations such as the UNFCCC and the FAO and diplomats and officials of the Brazilian government. As we know, doing elite interviews is time consuming and their agendas are busy. Luckily – and coming to your second question – I could manage to deliver. During the process, I learned a lot about how to conduct research – paper writing, publishing, doing conference presentations, etc. The two secondments were very important, as my academic routine here in Lisbon. Of course, apart from this practical side, being part of PRIMO was great as I could travel to different places, meet incredible people with so diverse backgrounds, and discuss pressing issues.



PRIMO meeting at University of Hamburg

What are some of the key lessons/insights from your research that you deem essential to share? What are your next steps?

Felipe: My research is a comparative analysis of Brazil's foreign policy in multilateral regimes, namely, in the areas of climate change, peace and security, and food security. I see how the country forwarded proposals – concepts, ideas – in these institutional setups and how they interacted with mainstream principles and norms. I do an encompassing discussion on the role of developing powers in my theoretical chapter, in which I argue that they cannot and do not want – to the present moment – alter the foundations of the order we have come to know. I give some reasons for that and now I am preparing a paper summarizing the discussion. Also, my thesis provides a theoretical contribution as it critically relates theories on multilateral regimes with foreign policy analysis. Methodologically speaking, I combine process-tracing and the comparative method, which is not commonly seen in our discipline. My case studies made me combine domestic dynamics of foreign policy formulation and decision-making processes with negotiations at the multilateral level, which demanded a framework of analysis applicable to all cases. My next steps are to finish writing the thesis and to publish some of my findings in journals and book chapters.

Eleonora: In my research, I explore how Turkey and Russia understand, re-elaborate and apply soft power in their neighbourhoods. These two states, which I describe as «illiberal democracies» following the definition of Fareed Zakaria, are commonly seen as having very limited soft power or relying on hard power. I want to prove these claims wrong. Through a different conceptual and methodological approach

to the study of soft power, I argue that Turkey and Russia do have soft power, even if it is often different from – and sometimes plainly opposing – Western-backed liberal democratic values. Although I am open to other professional options apart from academic career, my main objective after PRIMO is to finish my dissertation. Finding a job that matches PRIMO's financial and general work conditions will be hard, but I'm optimistic!

What advice can you give to the GEM STONES fellows, who have only but commenced their research?

Felipe: First of all, enjoy as much as you can the network of early stage researchers, researchers, universities, and non-academic partners part of the GEM STONES project, not to mention its associated projects as happens with the PRIMO. I know time is crucial when we intend to complete a Ph.D. thesis, but try your best to manage all your tasks – with the GEM STONES, with your home university, and/or when doing an internship. This will matter in the future. Furthermore, your peers at GEM STONES will be your colleagues, should you pursue an academic career. Otherwise, they can be great professional contacts – if not friends, I hope – outside academia. Thirdly, I strongly advice that all the papers you prepare for conferences (and virtually to anything during your time at the GEM STONES) to be related to your thesis topic. Again, time is crucial. Also, collaborate with your fellow GEMs, publish – or at the very least exchange ideas – together. It improves your research and outputs. Lastly, leave your comfort zone and ponder all the opportunities that may appear during your GEM STONES experience.

Eleonora: Start with acknowledging that, despite the challenges that you may face throughout your PhDs, you are extremely lucky to be part of such a prestigious international network. Try to make the most out of it! Enjoy fully the possibilities that you're granted, especially in terms of travel funds. For instance, my secondments in St Petersburg and London were as amazing experiences, while the international conferences that I have attended allowed me to build solid professional networks that, in turn, enabled me to pursue further cooperation opportunities. At the same time, try to accomplish as much as you can in terms of your theses during these three years. It is certainly true that most of us haven't finished our theses yet (in some universities, such as METU, the PhD programmes might even last for four years); yet, being 'almost done' with your thesis at the end of the project is crucial because thesis completion scholarships are not always easy to get; plus, after the project you also need to start looking for a job, which is a time-consuming (and often frustrating) task. If combining all the travels, training activities and conferences with writing a PhD thesis sounds difficult, it's because it is difficult! But you can achieve it with hard work and dedication. We PRIMOs believe in you :)



PRIMO Fellows

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F. Albuquerque/E. Tafuro Ambrosetti