

Tanya Domi:

Hello, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the CUNY Graduate Center. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating groundbreaking research, assisting New Yorkers and informing the world.

Tanya Domi:

Thomas Weiss is a presidential professor of Political science and Director Emeritus of the Ralph Bunch Institute for International Affairs at the CUNY Graduate Center. A scholar and analyst with extensive overseas and domestic experience in management, fundraising, applied research and teaching, as well as in policy, project development and implementation in international relations and organizations. Among his significant affiliations includes the International Studies Association, awarding him the 2016 Distinguished International Organization Scholar, the 2016 Carnegie Fellow, June 2019 to present and Distinguished Fellow for global governance at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Professor Weiss is retiring after 25 years at the CUNY Graduate Center. Welcome to the Thought Project, Professor Weiss.

Thomas Weiss:

Nice to be here, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

You have been a scholar on the United Nations throughout your career that also included working there. How do you see the United Nations at this moment in history that includes a P5 member in the UN Security Council whose leader has been indicted for genocide in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia?

Thomas Weiss:

Well, Tanya, shall we say, this is not a high point of the UN 77 year history, but we've seen lots of such nadirs in the past, and I'd like to just say that this too shall pass. If we go back in time and think about the mid-1950s when, in fact, the United States and the Soviet Union were on the same side in the Congo against the Brits and the French. That was supposed to be the end after an earlier end, which was in Korea when the Soviet Union walked out and while they were pouting the UN under US auspices reacted in Korea and we could go forward on numerous occasions and whether or not it's the Soviet Union not paying after the Congo operation and then the US saying at that point, well guess what? That's the precedent when we don't want to pay, it's going to be the same thing.

Or we can fast-forward to UNESCO and the US pulling out or the ILO where the US has pulled out and gone back in twice. We've seen all of this before. I'd like to leave your listeners with a couple of thoughts here. The first is that if you are telling Gutierrez what to do, I mean he's got lots of people telling him what to do. I'm not sure to whom he listens these days, but I would say it's important to go back to the World War II origins of this beast. I'm a bit of a broken record here, but most people who think about the organization, look at the organization, somehow think about San Francisco and what happened thereafter as the creation. And they forget about the fact that the actual declaration by United Nations was signed in Washington and the 1st of January in 1942.

And at that meeting where 26, it actually would later be 44 allies who decided that the best way to proceed to crush rashes was to, in fact, cooperate. And obviously in that cooperation, big and important countries have more to say than little and unimportant countries and that's not new either. But that particular coming together of the Allied Coalition called the United Nations was also supposed to be the

operating style after the war. And so what we saw then and what we see today is when the member states, the governments decide to use the organizations they work. And the other thing that I always start an initial course that you went by saying is that in addition to when government society is viewed and it works, the UN's founders suggest that our current shrivel imaginations result in thinking about a contemporary form of international organizational global governance.

That is the second best surrogate for actually what was more robust in the period from 1942 to 1945. Recently in the same vein, in fact, actually today a report was published by a group of high level, they're always high level, they're never low level or mid-level advisors, but an advisory group to the Secretary General on what was called effective multilateralism. And one of the important parts of that report, and I say important parts for the future of the institution, is the role of non-state actors, be that business or civil society. In a book I wrote actually with a former student of mine, Tatiana Karayiannis, we talk about the third UN, and I think almost everyone emphasizes the member states, but in his club a long time ago called the First UN and the Second UN, which are the people who work there, the Secretary General on down.

But much of what comes in to change the organization comes from outside. That is from civil society, NGOs, the business, actually the media. And that's the part of the UN that's always been awkwardly, on the outsider, inside outsiders. And this report proposes that they ought to become more central. Now how the exactly that happens, we'll find out next year.

Tanya Domi:

Sure, sure.

Thomas Weiss:

But that advice has actually been given to [inaudible 00:06:41].

Tanya Domi:

The CSW is engaged on women's issues right now. And as you say, these are part of the inside, outside of the UN. I've been to those meetings and been outside meetings for the General Assembly. It's important to a lot of people and a lot of important work gets done there that we begin to see out around the world. And if this UN is not functioning properly, there are consequences. Indeed, at one time, South Africa's membership in the UN was suspended because of its apartheid policies. Now I just want to ask you, given all that you know, and it's quite a bit, why hasn't the UN taken more drastic measures against Russia besides removing them from the Human Rights Council? I mean, I've read some of your previous interviews where you said there just isn't support to suspend Russia. Of course, this would be a, historical, because that's never happened before I believe for a P5 Member, what are your thoughts on those?

Thomas Weiss:

Simple answer is that there's this thing called a security council, and there are five members who have vetoes and in order to toss South Africa out, the five agreed in order to toss Russia out-

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Thomas Weiss:

Russia would've to agree. And that's, shall we say, slightly unlikely.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Thomas Weiss:

I think that to the extent possible, there has been a condemnation, well actually been six condemnations in the General Assembly about the Russian actions, and there has recently been an indictment of Putin and his Secretary of Children or whatever she's called for the war crimes of getting rid of these kids. I think that this is actually more important than many people think. And the Russians spend a huge amount of time trying to influence the vote in the general assembly and trying to get more abstentions and fewer condemnations, but there were still 140 of the condemnations, and so if this were totally irrelevant, they wouldn't have spent so much energy doing it. They don't like this.

And I think the ICC decision in particular, because it's only concerned one of the several war crimes that are undoubtedly going to be on his docket someday. Putin doesn't like this and it's going to influence his decisions about where he pops up in the future because, well, it's not the United States, obviously. The 123 or four countries that have signed onto the ICC are supposed to extradite anybody who's been indicted, and that includes Vladimir Putin.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, yes. That is something that is going to hang over his head as you have suggested. And of course, there's a lot of calculations in arresting the President of Russia. There would be a lot of political calculations and-

Thomas Weiss:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Obviously

Thomas Weiss:

Indeed.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Given all that is going on, I have such great respect for some of the work that you've done with regard to your scholarship on the protection of world heritage in accordance with the laws of humanitarian laws of war. And this is connected to the UN in different ways because of the instruments and how they are reviewed annually in the Human Rights Council. But what's interesting to me about the history of prosecuting crimes of heritage, destruction of heritage is that the Nuremberg Tribunal brought the first cases on the destruction of Jewish heritage, including synagogues and books and Haggadah and paintings.

But the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia tried a number of cases that included the attack on Dubrovnik, Croatia. And as you've noted, the destruction of Stari Most, the Ottoman Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia, Herzegovina. Indeed more than a thousand mosques were destroyed in Bosnia during

its 1992 to 1995 war. What does your research tell you about these advancements in case law, on world heritage, especially as Russia now has sought and continues to destroy so much of Ukrainian heritage in making their claim that Ukraine is Russia and is not a distinct country from Russia?

Thomas Weiss:

Indeed, the argument is even worse than they call it, Little Russia, a sort of an extension of the Mother Russia. As you know, I've spent some time over the last four or five years working on a big volume for the J. Paul Getty trust on called Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities and linking the two. What comes everyone's mind, of course, is Kristallnacht 38, mixing together getting rid of people and books and all kinds of other things.

Tanya Domi:

Of course.

Thomas Weiss:

So this story is not new. This really is not new. On the other hand, what is new I think is the fact that lawyers think there's quite enough case law. What we need to do is politically do something more about murdering history as a way of murdering people. And so the next steps, I hope, moved toward doing something about the substantial amount of international humanitarian law, which forbids this stuff.

As I say, the chief prosecutor is looking into more crimes involving the destruction of heritage by Russia in the Ukraine, and I suspect that this is going to be an issue that assumes greater and greater importance. We've had our own ugly history in this recently, which for me was our dear ex-president Trump basically rattling sabers and saying that, "Well, Iran was threatening the United States for having assassinated one of the head of the Palace guards, and that what we should do is destroy one cultural site for all of the people who were taking it as hostages by Iran 40 years ago." Actually, what was interesting for me was the extent to which not just the State Department, but the Department of Defense said, "Whoa, my friend, that's not what we do." And so it seems that this issue, which before the Cold War, there was sort of a lapse of interest after World War II and Nuremberg, et cetera.

It's now come back with everything from, as you mentioned, the Mostar Bridge and the mosques throughout the former Yugoslavia. But for me, it really came on as a day-to-day issue in this century with the destruction basically on prime time of the Obama on Buddhas. We've seen the mosques and libraries in Timbuktu in the first decision by the International Criminal Court to prosecute somebody who admitted doing such things. So this issue is going to be yet another large stone around Mr. Putin's neck. And it is yet another illustration of the importance of international condemnation, which obviously until it's enforced, is inadequate.

Tanya Domi:

Points well made, and you're right about making political arguments about this destruction. It's just the nihilism by the Russians in Ukraine is very classic. They do the same thing in Syria as well. This is-

Thomas Weiss:

One thing we didn't mention earlier, I should have mentioned earlier-

Tanya Domi:

Please, please.

Thomas Weiss:

The extent to which throwing Russia off of the Human Rights Commission, I think, was a step also obviously in the right direction, but it also is a precedent of sorts. The only other country that's been bounced off the Human Rights Commission was Libya after the 2011 events there. And so I think this is a kind of precedent that could be built upon. It hasn't happened very widely. A few countries have resigned as we mentioned earlier, but throwing a country out whose behavior is so egregious is a precedent that I think actually could be built upon in the future. I suspect that Washington is not going to be any happier with this precedent over time either, depending on what our behavior is like. One of the reasons that the United States, of course, has not approved the Rome Treaty on ICC reflects the fact that there's a reticence in case someone like, oh, I don't know, Henry Kissinger might be dragged before them for authorizing certain kinds of actions or President Bush or Lord knows any other future presidents. And so this is a interesting slippery slope.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, it is indeed. And as a matter of fact, I had a very good friend at the negotiations on the Rome treaty and the Pentagon was a major obstacle and blocked President Clinton on this at the time because they did not want any soldiers that potentially committed war crimes to have to be brought in front of an international court. And that was one of the things that was definitely a problem for the United States. And this also bleeds over into the convention on the rights of the child because we have not ratified that convention either based upon minors serving in the US military, because with a guardian or parental signature, you can serve at the age of 17, but the convention says no one under the age of 18 should serve in the military. So the Pentagon plays a role on the Rome Treaty and on that convention as well.

Thomas Weiss:

I mean, I think the important thing to keep in mind of course, is that the Roman Treaty only goes into effect if the country concerned is doing nothing about the people who have been accused of war crimes.

Tanya Domi:

Sure, sure.

Thomas Weiss:

So that actually is an important incentive for countries to behave. So if we aren't so proud of Abu Ghraib, for example, and one drags some soldiers in front of a domestic court, the International Criminal Court would not be in powered act. So it seems to me that the United States has every interest in signing onto the Rome Treaty.

Tanya Domi:

I share your sentiments. Going on to the next topic, you co-authored a book in 2019, "Rethinking Global Governance," and you have been a distinguished fellow on global governments at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs since 2019. How does your work and research inform you on managing such a dangerous multipolar world now, and what are the challenges that are presented to global governance in this multipolar world? Because we have a numerous international organizations that many thousands of people have come to rely on and they play brilliant, important roles in the civic life of many countries and societies around the world. What are your thoughts? This is really a big moment, I think.

Thomas Weiss:

It is going back to what we said a little earlier. There are lots of big moments. We are always on this rollercoaster ride. But for me, the main lessons about thinking about global governance is that we think about formal as well as informal norms, principled standards in institutions, so that in thinking about what's the best way to approach issues, security issues, human rights issues, humanitarian issues, sustainable development issues, is to think about what is the entire gamut of resources available to those of us who think that global problems require global solutions. And for me, the real mistake that's always made in circles thinking about UN reform for example, is to emphasize the security council. Your first question revolved around the security council and the dynamics. And I dare say that 95% of the energy goes into thinking about how are we going to reform the security council?

And I have argued for the last 50 years that the security council is not going to change during my lifetime. I've been right to date. I hope I'm going to be right for a little longer anyway, as I'm above ground. But there are lots of other more doable things that don't relate to the security council and the UN system. For me, the business of the UN these days, frankly, is picking up the pieces, the operational pieces in war zones, so that humanitarian protection and humanitarian assistance are the name of the major portion of what goes on operationally. And there, I would look at consolidation that hard C is not something we like cooperation and collaboration, but we do not like consolidation. And that applies to the UN system, humanitarian agencies and development agencies as it applies to non-governmental ones as well. There are more and more institutions, all vying for the same monies and the same access.

And it seems to me that this bevy of institutions that flocks to every disaster needs to be, as I say, reduced, consolidated. And that in and of itself would not only make limited resources go farther, I think that would improve the effectiveness on the ground. So that's the kind of institutional change that is at least more feasible than reforming the security council, and I think would have a huge impact on people in the ground. The other part of the UN, if I think there are two big outputs or one of those is these operations that could be peace operations, humanitarian operations, training and development programs. But the other part of what goes on happens to be the agreement on norms, principles and standards, the big ideas that circulate in the system.

And those are a huge contribution. The one that's not really thought about that much, it doesn't jump to people's minds, but that's where, I think, the real payoff is. A project at the graduate center over 10 years, which was called the Intellectual History of the United Nations that I ran with Sir Richard Jolly and Louis Emery over the years argues that that's the main leverage the system has because once an agreement comes together, it's picked up by individuals, it's picked up by governments, it's picked up by non-governmental organizations.

You mentioned women's issues, but whether it's environmental issues and various layers of human rights or even the size of particular nuts and bolts being shipped around, it's these norms, principles and standards that actually are the reason behind a universal institution. And there it seems to me that getting world-class intellectuals, I mean this sounds like an argument for academics, but getting world-class minds associated with the organization for short periods of time would be another doable reform that would have big results.

Tanya Domi:

I've been on the margins of the UN over the years and right now there's a significant effort underway, which I find to be really interesting is taking the WPS agenda and architecture and expanding it to include LGBTQ persons in particular during armed conflict. And this was actually triggered, excuse the word, in Ukraine because apparently there was a letter that the US intelligence shared with people on the ground there that on the target list, the Russian target list for kills did indeed include LGBTQ

persons. And now this is showing up where their vulnerable populations all over the world. And this kind of dovetails in one way with my next comment and question is that we do have this major war in Ukraine and Europe at this time and in additional 55 countries where armed conflict is actually taking place in this moment.

So adjusting architectures on how to protect people could not be more important than it seems than right now, given your breadth and understanding of the UN. This is just a terrible situation. What can be done, consolidation perhaps is one of the ideas that you've already mentioned, but we're talking about a world that seems really in big trouble.

Thomas Weiss:

I'm not going to disagree with you there. In fact, peace would seem to be the anomaly, not war these days.

Tanya Domi:

Indeed.

Thomas Weiss:

And in fact, the war in Ukraine is a kind of old-fashioned conflict in which one big country tries to swallow up another and goes across an international border. The kind of conflict that's actually the easiest to define. And in this case, it's certainly not the easiest to do anything about, but in some ways it's easier than confronting what's going on this week in the Sudan where we've seen. One kind of conflict in the old Sudan before it broke into a north and south. And we've had genocide in the western part of the country. And if you move a little farther down into the Congo on the Eastern Congo, you've got, depending how you're counting 20 or 30 armed militias, another former student did a dissertation on armed conflicts. Basically I've had an interview with someone who said, well, what it takes to start a militia these days is \$10,000 in a cell phone that's a rather low barrier to entry to raise hell in countries.

And it seems to me that most central governments in many of these conflicts are ill places to do anything about it. And certainly the United States has learned, on numerous occasions, that outside intervention has serious problems, and the UN is actually not any better than the United States. It could be better in keeping parties apart and providing the space for negotiations, but boy, there are no magic wands when you have 50 or so civil wars at this moment in time.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Thomas Weiss:

So I really wish I could be a little more encouraging there, but having been in this business for a very long time and watched international conflicts turn into intra or civil wars, it really some days besides myself, I'd have to say.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, I totally understand that sentiment. The past few years in the United States, we've seen policies turn upside down, Trump policies at the UN and his engagement at the UN, I'm not sure, how serious it was. You've made some comments about some of the things that he actually accomplished from a

positive standpoint, but just reflecting on the last two administrations, how would you compare Trump policies at the UN with the current Biden administration's policies? Is there a big difference?

Thomas Weiss:

There's a huge difference. I mean, where they both seem to meet is on the animosity toward China, and had the Ukraine War started under Trump, I suspect he would not have been embracing Vladimir the way he has. But the differences, of course, are that the Trump administration, he personally never met an ally whom we liked, that in fact, everything was so transactional that any kind of longer term, either the history of collaboration or looking toward the future, that was just something that didn't jump into his mind so irritating, whether was Canada or Europe, that residue is still very much there. And so I'd have to say that sort of make America great again is pretty similar to make Russia great again or make China great again or make Mexico great again or make Hungary great again or whatever it is. This disease has spread far beyond Trump and the Trump administration.

And so I think the real challenge facing people who believe that there are at least some problems that require now, whether that's a pandemic, whether that's weapons or past destruction, that there are some problems or climate, God help us that require collaboration across borders. We don't need walls because they don't work. We need collaboration across borders. I think the real danger is looking at the politics in the United States is, will the next administration look like the last administration or the current administration, which actually believes that funding the WHO, not pulling out of the WHO but funding it in the midst a pandemic or thinking about the population fund and access to women's health and reproductive health. These are issues that are important. And so for the time being, I think not just Europeans, but Africans, Asians, Latin Americans have most have, heaved a bit of a sigh of relief, but you still have to hold your breath until November of 2024 because we may see again what we saw for the four years between 2016 and 2021.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, your point about if the next administration will look like the last administration is really an open question. And the politics of the United States right now is just about as polarized as I've ever seen in my life.

Thomas Weiss:

We don't oftentimes think of necessarily at first the agenda may not be international cooperation, but it is one of the first victims in addition to the own state of democracy in this country, what happens globally. And that actually is, for me, anyway, very critical.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. And I do agree, you're getting ready to retire from the Graduate Center after a really long and accomplished career. And I know that you have continuing projects, and I'm interested, what are you looking to continue to pursue in your post-retirement and what are your plans? I'm sure a lot of organizations would want to hire you as a consultant without a doubt, given your scope of knowledge about global affairs and the UN itself, what kinds of things are you working on right now?

Thomas Weiss:

Well, my grandchildren actually occupy some space, including the one who's in Chicago. But in terms of what I'm hoping to continue to research on, it's really this intersection between attacking people's



heritage, both tangible and intangible and mass atrocities. In fact, I'm actually doing some work at present with Chase Robinson, who was the former president at the Graduate Center, you know that others may not, who's now head of the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, which covers much of the territory that where the most destruction has occurred. The Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and I'm working on a project there looking at how we can map the institutions, what I call the Balthus Institutions that flocks to every one of these and how one can pull together at least all of those moving parts in the United States.

So this is something that cultural heritage is new for me in the last five years anyway, helping protect the lives and the welfare of human beings is something I've been working on for a very long time. And the two come together fairly nicely. So I suspect that that's what I'm going to be doing with some of my energies, anyway.

Tanya Domi:

That seems like a very worthy project. As we approach the end of this conversation, do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share about your time at the Graduate Center and your experience of living in New York City? You're currently not living here, you're living in Chicago, but you lived here for a long time within a cab right away to the United Nations. That must have been thrilling for you.

Thomas Weiss:

Well, it was one of the reasons that I moved to the Graduate Center. That is my entire educational training, both from a parochial grade school in high school to private college and private graduate school. And then after I'd left the UN working at Brown University before I came to the graduate center, there was of course the excitement energy of New York City and the proximity to the UN and proximity to lots of friends who were in the city. But it was also coming to the graduate center, which is public institution, trying to provide the public good of accessible, reasonably priced education and trying to level various kinds of playing field. And that was the reputation. And most of that reputation I found actually justified by reality despite the pressures, the finances on students, despite the craziness of Albany and the interactions which kept intervening. I actually enjoyed the last 25 years. I found it intellectually stimulating and had lots of good students who are now friends and colleagues, and so it's been a fun, quarter century.

Tanya Domi:

Well, we thank you so much for your time today and all that you have done for the Graduate Center.

Thomas Weiss:

Well, thank you, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Presidential Professor Thomas Weiss of the CUNY Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by audio engineer Kevin Wolf and CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.