

# Political Science & International Relations



*We are dedicating this edition of the newsletter to the PSIR class of 2020, in lieu of all those events and celebrations that we would have had in person. In these pages, you will find some profiles of our graduating seniors, and a couple of essays from our faculty reflecting on the current state of affairs in the US and larger world. We invited retiring SUNY Distinguished Professor Jerry Benjamin to write a commencement speech and reflect on his last "season" with us. Additionally we commemorate the special accomplishments of our Outstanding PSIR Graduates of 2020. To all of our graduating seniors, we wish you the very best in the months and years ahead. We hope to see the rest of you, in person, in the Fall.*

**Kathleen Dowley, Associate Professor and Chair, PSIR**

## Some Musings on Graduating from the Department of PSIR in 2020

*SUNY Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Gerald Benjamin*



In a curious way, college professors are like major league starting pitchers. Our work is discontinuous. Over and over

we start anew, each time with a chance of achieving perfection. Pitchers do this about thirty times a season. We do it six or so an academic year. As I think about it, the same goes for college students; ten starts a year, ten chances to excel. Of course, there are few perfect games. But for a professor, in the first minute of the first meeting, even in an often taught course, everything is new again.

I joined the New Paltz political science faculty more than a half century ago and will retire this summer. I've done a lot of jobs at the college over the decades, but always tried to teach each year. My offering this spring has been in state government, a course I initiated in our department. It was to be the

last of my career. One final shot at perfection. I geared up.

I distributed my syllabus in advance, by e-mail. It set out high expectations.

Political Science and International Relations at New Paltz has long been known to be a demanding department, staffed by fine teacher/scholars with a serious priority commitment to student success. We take great pride in that, as do many of our student majors. It makes doing well in our department mean something, and nurtures treasured life-long relationships between students and teachers.

The room was full for the first class. Some students fell away. I fumbled a bit with the technology – as usual – in the early weeks, and complained to the chair about the size and shape of the room before settling in. The students and I met in my office on term paper topics, and we began to get to know each other. I was pleased. There were lots of good, interested people in the room, some very smart. The midterm result was generally quite fine.

Then, as the old Yiddish proverb goes, "Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht" – Man Plans and God Laughs. Campus closed briefly because the village's drinking water was polluted. We adjusted. Then the pandemic hit. We left campus for sequestration at home, prolonged the spring break, did some

crash training, and went over to on-line teaching and learning. I didn't love it. But it turns out that you can teach an old dog new tricks.

We're in the home stretch. I've seen some results in posts and papers; there's been some serious learning, we've had some fun and relationships have begun to sprout and grow.

I've long thought we must embrace life's celebratory moments. That's why I've so valued graduation day at New Paltz, seniors and families gathered on our great lawn, the processional, the caps let fly, meeting and talking with families of our majors. There are too few of these times and far too many of the sadder kind, as we are so painfully aware in this year. We are denied that very special gathering this May. Out of the same commitment to each other that makes our classrooms so vital, we must celebrate together while apart to make sure we all remain healthy and safe.

So graduation will be virtual. A bit disappointing? Yes. Yet I still look forward to it. However unanticipated, unplanned, and unwelcome, I suspect that our pandemic year "graduation" from our college will be forever memorable for me and for all our majors in the class of 2020.

**Congratulations! And remember: Do Good Work.**

## Presenting The 2020 PSIR Outstanding Graduates!

The Department would like to congratulate this year's winners, for their consistently excellent work throughout their careers at New Paltz. In their own words:



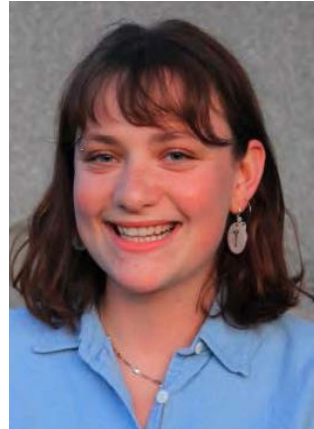
**Konrad Dalland**  
*International Relations*

"I am honored to have been recognized as one of the outstanding graduates for the Political Science and International Relations department. It has been my utmost pleasure to be a part of this incredibly rigorous and challenging major. I have grown so much in my time at New Paltz under both the tutelage of my professors and my interactions with my classmates. These four years have left me a better person and I would do it all over again if I could. Thank you to everyone who has helped me along this path. I am incredibly excited to see what the future holds."



**Kathleen Courtney**  
*Political Science*

"I began my college education in the Fall of 2017, at 25 years old. After completing an Associate's Degree by taking classes at night, while working 50 hours a week, I transferred to SUNY New Paltz in the Spring of 2019. For a nontraditional student like myself this accomplishment feels especially sweet. After taking this next year off from school I hope to attend law school and pursue a JD. Congratulations to my fellow graduates of the Class of 2020."



**River Wasserman**  
*International Relations*

"I transferred from SUNY Geneseo to New Paltz after my freshman year of college when the 2016 election made me realize I wanted to live in a dynamic political environment. At New Paltz, I majored in Political Science and Spanish, with a minor in Latin American Studies. Since my sophomore year, I have organized around social justice with NYPIRG as the President of the chapter for two years and as a member of the Executive Committee of the state-wide Board of Directors for the student-directed non-profit. I was also fortunate enough to study abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina during the Fall of my senior year. After graduation, I look forward to pursuing a career that fights for racial, economic, and social justice."



**Madeleine Ross**  
*Political Science*

"Growing up in the area, I swore to myself I would go far, far away to college, but I took the more affordable SUNY option after 2 years at Dutchess. I specifically chose this school because of its proximity to the Gunks, some of the country's most famous rock climbing. Here I discovered a community that I didn't know I could be a part of. While my best experiences attending SUNY NP didn't really have anything to do with school, the best experiences I had were made possible because I was here."

**Special Shoutout to our December 2019 Outstanding Graduate, Jeremy Luna, who was awarded the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Student Excellence this spring. Congrats Jeremy, from all of us in PSIR.**



## United Nations Semester Class: Before and after COVID 19

Professor S. İlgü Özler



This year the UN Semester class started with weekly Friday visits to the United Nations, as we do every spring. We visited the Mission of Fiji to the UN (*left*) as well as UNDP Latin American and Caribbean Office (*right*).

Fijian ambassador H.E. Dr. Satyendra Prasad asked the students to deeply care about climate change and told them that the survival of his country is in their hands. The UN Semester class also hosted a public workshop attended by nearly 100 people from the campus and community, where the students led round tables discussions on connection between the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and our community. While the village water crisis and the global pandemic disrupted our class briefly, we were able to complete the semester by inviting the UN into our homes. We had briefings with several UN officers and NGOs virtually.

Overall, the students were able to hear from 27 different people at or around the UN by the end of the semester. Among these were three alumni of past UN Semester classes. **Masooma Rahmaty** (class of 2016), a Program Administrator working on the SDGs at the International Peace Institute, discussed the connection between peace and sustainable development. **Ahmad Shama** (class of 2009) Foreign Service Officer at the United States Mission to the UN gave insights to his work at the Security Council. And, lastly, **Monica Farrell** (class of 2015), Senior Operations Manager at the International Rescue Committee, organized two panels of 6 people to discuss the work of IRC on refugees around the world and their intersection with the UN. We finished the term remotely, but with smiles on our faces.



It was 1:00 AM in Japan, 5 PM in France, and 11:00 AM in NY when we finished our Zoom session!

## The Professor is In: COVID-19, China, and US

Professor Jonathan Schwartz



I have been researching pandemics in East Asia for fifteen years. As a result, this has been a busy time for me as I seek to understand why some countries more effectively respond to COVID-19 than others.

Like many others, I have been particularly interested in China's response – is it as effective as the Chinese government would have us believe? Or is China struggling with a poor response that the government is effectively hiding with propaganda blasts and “cooked” figures?

I recommend thinking about China's response in terms of legitimacy. Like any government, the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP (which I equate with the government) seeks to be viewed as legitimately ruling the country. In democracies, legitimacy derives from the nature of the system – including

the vote. We may be unhappy when the person we voted for fails to win an election, but we recognize that the winner is legitimately in power. For the CCP, legitimacy derives from other sources: the promise of prosperity coupled with a sense of national pride. Xi Jinping – the General Secretary of the Party – epitomizes the Party and consistently asserts that without the Party (and by extension, his leadership), China could not enjoy the tremendous success it has experienced over the past 40 years. The Party is the reason people are increasingly prosperous and can be proud of China's rising international stature. How does COVID-19 impact this narrative?

Consider, China's economy is struggling – it has slowed significantly and will struggle to turn around until the rest of the world starts buying Chinese goods again. Preliminary growth data for the first quarter of 2020 show China's economy has shrunk by 10% - the first time this has happened since 1992! Clearly, the promise of prosperity is under threat. In terms of national pride, even despite dramatic crackdowns on domestic critics coupled with glorification of the Party's successes, there remains considerable domestic dissatisfaction with the Party's response. Does this constitute a challenge to CCP and Xi Jinping leadership?

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Party's response has included trumpeting China's approach to COVID-19 as a model for the world. The Party has also increased its activities in disputed regions around China, including the South China Sea, Taiwan and Japan. These actions serve to remind China's populace of the Party's crucial role in protecting China's global interests and national pride.

Over the coming months, it is worthwhile to think about China and the CCP from the perspective of legitimacy. Since Party legitimacy to rule depends on the promise of prosperity and national pride, we should expect to see additional manifestations of nationalism and crackdowns on dissent.

One recent example of nationalism and redirecting blame – recently posted signs in a Wuhan market requiring visitors to don face masks to stop the spread of “American flu”. This represents an effort to direct blame for COVID-19 to the US (much as US officials do by describing the virus as the Wuhan or China Flu). These behaviors are reflective of growing tensions between the world's two largest powers, a tension exacerbated by the current outbreak, that only serves to undermine future global prosperity and stability.

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## Professor Jeff Miller on All Those *Leviathan* Analogies:

Writing recently in Politico, Christian Oliver takes note of a series of articles in conservative outlets which use Early Modern political theorist Thomas Hobbes' influential work, *Leviathan* (1651), to warn about dangers of expanding governmental power during the COVID 19 pandemic. These writers see Hobbes' description of the state as an object-lesson in the dangers

of big government. Kevin Williamson, for example, writing in the *National Review*, uses the term “leviathan” as a simple synonym for “big government.” Or consider James Pinkerton, writing in *The American Conservative*, who uses Hobbes to make the rather pedestrian point that civil liberties surrendered in the face of emergency often accrue permanently to the state; governments tend to grow more powerful and larger over time, not shrink. Arguments like these represent a libertarian-style approach to the size and scope of the state, emphasizing the importance of

civil liberties and small governments. Oliver rightly takes these writers to task for misreading Hobbes and wrenching him out of his 17th century context.

The problem with using Hobbes to illustrate the dangers of an expanding state - as Oliver points out - is that Hobbes was not an advocate of “big government” in the sense that we understand it in contemporary politics. Oliver rightly notes that the “leviathan” Hobbes imagined left a large amount of space within which individuals could act freely. Hobbes argued that rulers





have good, pragmatic reasons to refrain from regulating too many aspects of their subjects' lives: people resent governmental interference, and, taken to an extreme, excessive regulations or misrule lead to civil discontent.

From our current perspective, we can also add that Hobbes could not have imagined the amount of power modern technology concentrates in the hands of the government. For sheer practical reasons, the 17th century state was comparatively limited in both its size and its ability to regulate daily life. While Oliver gets much right in his critique, he misses significant dangers in Hobbes' approach. The problem is not that Hobbes imagines a powerful government; he does, relative to his time. The problem, rather, lies in the lack of constraints on sovereign power in Hobbes' account, his attempt to isolate politics from ethical concerns, and his reduction of human beings to rational egoists.

Those of you who remember reading *Leviathan* know that Hobbes pioneers the "Social Contract" method to legitimate state power. In his version of the contract, individuals agree to permanently alienate all their rights to one person or group of persons, the "sovereign." Because the sovereign holds these rights and acts as their representative, there are no theoretical barriers to state action. The sovereign can intervene when, where, and to what extent it desires. In addition, because

the Hobbesian sovereign is not a party to the contract of government, citizens cannot legitimately hold it accountable. People would agree to this sort of contract, Hobbes argues, because the alternative – where life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" – would be worse. To preserve ourselves, we subject ourselves to the sovereign.

More disturbing still, Hobbes attempts to eliminate external sources of authority with which sovereign power could be challenged. Early in the *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that human beings, whom he understands as being primarily concerned with self-preservation and fulfilling desires, label that which they like as "good" and that which they dislike as "bad" or "evil." We may make moral claims, Hobbes argues in his version of ethical relativism, but we're really expressing only individual preferences. Extending this, Hobbes argues that there are no natural laws, no binding ethical principles to which one can appeal to resolve differences. Ethics, morals, religion all come into existence only with the establishment of the sovereign, who authoritatively articulates their principles. Political theorists refer to the Hobbesian sovereign as having epistemic power: only the sovereign can say what counts as knowledge.

By contrast, consider John Locke's argument in the *Second Treatise*, where a limited number of rights are

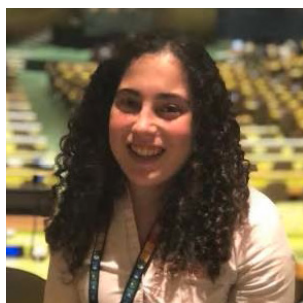
contingently delegated to the state. Citizens reserve the agency to reclaim their rights – even violently – in the event the state contravenes God's natural laws or their natural rights. And the area in which the state can act legitimately is limited to the original rights lent it by citizens.

For Hobbes, on the other hand, external points of appeal – natural laws, natural rights, divine justice – are not available to subjects, since they find their definition and scope only in the declaration of the sovereign. Hence we can see that it's not the size of the state that's significant, but rather its unbounded nature and unaccountability. So while Oliver is right to note that Hobbes thinks the sovereign will rule fairly and reasonably, the subject of the Leviathan has no recourse should the ruler choose not to do so. This represents the true power – and danger – of Hobbes' conception of government.

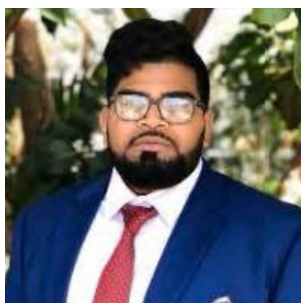
In some ways, we can think of Hobbes here as extending Machiavelli's earlier instrumentalizing of politics, his sundering ethics from politics, which had such disastrous effects in subsequent centuries. But Hobbes also placed rational egoism at the root of his political thought. Human beings are imagined stripped of any higher understanding of self than self-interest. We are not part of a community, but rather isolated, atomistic selves. In its rawest form self-interest is the simple desire to stay alive in competition with others. Beyond that, Hobbes points at most to "commodious living," thus indicating the way toward the spiritual emptiness of modern consumer society.

With that, let us set aside the methods for pressing a four-hundred-year old text into service on the question of the COVID 19 pandemic. For questions of biopolitics, we'd be better advised to turn to contemporary thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, or Giorgio Agamben on this question.

## Celebrating some of our graduating seniors!



**Lindsey Mayer**



**Zaheer Ahmad**



**Shahnoor Khan**



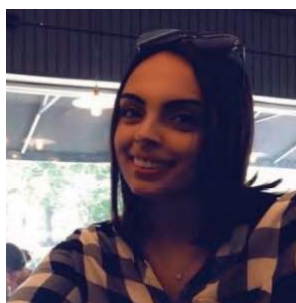
**Jessica Reich**



**Alex Tacopina**



**Esther Joseph**



**Nicole Vanderveer**



**Jacob Salzmänn**



**Rachael Brown**



**Seina Matsushima**



**Alix Greenblatt**

## 20 Students will be inducted into Pi Sigma Alpha National Honor Society this year

James R. Carrubba  
Nicole Castillo Guiracocha  
Kathleen Courtney  
Konrad Cook Dalland  
Mary A. Gasparian

Kiana Graham  
Abbey Haas  
Kirsten Heiss  
Serina Kaasick  
Johnathan Kolb

Rachel Lijoi  
Andrew T. Lopez  
Graham Polhill  
Odessa Quinonez  
Zippora Zenika Rutty

Jacob Salzmänn  
John Spiller  
Thomas Tapia  
Katherine Tardo  
River Wasserman



## Recognizing the Contributions of our International Students

Profile, **Mari Kobayashi**: From Kagawa, Japan to New York

“As an international student, I was so privileged to be able to attend SUNY New Paltz. I never felt isolated, but rather, warmly welcomed by everyone. With other international students, we’ve shared culture and tradition, enjoyed several trips together, and helped each other in school. The Center for International Programs has always been there for us to support us during hardships. I am very glad to have studied in the U.S. because students actively engaged in discussions and freely share their opinions. But they are open to different perspectives, too. Through my interactions with people from different backgrounds, I think I am closer now to a real global citizen. While it is regrettable that I wasn’t able to spend the last half semester with everyone, professors have been so supportive that I did not have any problem finishing classes online. I had a valuable experience amid the coronavirus pandemic as I watched the federal government’s reactions to this emergency, and people’s responses following the lockdown. I’ve had so many unique experiences in the U.S., and these treasures will surely develop further in me over time.”



### Where Are they Now?

Checking in with our Alumni:

**Caroline Tenesaca**, class of 2016



“After graduation, I landed a part-time retail job in Queens and kept going on interviews to see where I might be able to use my BA. I was

not at all sure what I wanted to do, and it showed in the way I held myself during this time. But, by the end of 2016 I knew I wanted to go to law school. I had law school on my mind since my junior year of college, when I started going to more PSIR events where we could hear alumni talk about their experiences in the legal field, but I was still doubtful. But the political climate since the 2016 elections, and

the heavier bigotry shown towards the immigrant and working class communities- communities I cared about, influenced my choice. I went on a few interviews to work with immigrant communities, but by the end of 2017, I felt that having a law degree would help me be of more service to the Latinx community.

In 2018, I got accepted into CUNY School of Law, a public interest law school, and I fortunately found myself surrounded by peers who have similar interests in helping serve our communities. Law school has been a challenging learning experience, but I learned to eventually roll with the punches.

During the summer of 2019, I served as a legal intern at the Housing Conservation Coordinators, a not-for-profit organization that serves tenants and engages in community organizing. In the fall of 2019, I became part of the executive board for the Latin American Law Student Association

(LALSA), and spear-headed with the other Social Action Co-Chair, LALSA’s Series: Uprisings in South America. For Spring 2020, I enrolled in the Economic Justice Project, which is both a legal internship and a seminar at school where I learned about public benefits law, worked on a group project for a not-for-profit organization, and had some exposure to individual client work. I will soon be a 3rd year student, looking for internships in housing law or immigration, and in about a year’s worth of time, I will hopefully be taking the NYS Bar Exam.

I want to thank SUNY New Paltz, especially the PSIR Department, for giving me some of the tools I needed to be on this path. It was through the events that our teachers encouraged us to attend at New Paltz where I even started to consider the idea of law school. Class of 2016!!! Don’t be afraid to reconnect with your classmates and the professors you had at New Paltz!!”

**TAG, You’re It, Fellow PSIR Alums!**

**Write and tell me what you are up to, at [dowleyk@newpaltz.edu](mailto:dowleyk@newpaltz.edu)**

## The Closer: Parting Thoughts from Professor Nancy Kassop



*Nancy Kassop started this academic year as the 2019 Convocation Speaker and Mace Bearer.*

Your college years have been bookended by the prospect of impending, consequential presidential elections. You entered as college freshmen in Fall 2016 during a tumultuous and raucous presidential campaign season. The presidential election that year resulted in an unexpected outcome: I suspect that, among you, there were some who cheered that result and others who shuddered at it in disbelief. You are now completing your college years under the most surreal and tragic circumstances while, at the same time, confronting yet another presidential election that is being billed as every bit as “consequential” as the prior one.

As budding political scientists who have been trained to analyze governing institutions, what have you (we) learned in those intervening three and a half years about government, and how can any current observations guide you, as you plot your next moves during an extraordinarily uncertain environment? I offer some thoughts for your consideration:

First, if you were pleased at the election of Donald Trump, you got your judges (who will rule for decades) and the anti-regulatory agenda for which political conservatives had been clamoring since the 1980s.

If, on the other hand, you happen to treasure the Madisonian system of a government of checks and balances, you have witnessed the fragility of that system and the ease and speed with which it can be undermined and dismantled.

If there is any silver lining that has emerged over the last (almost) four years, it is the deepened respect for the career workforce at both state and federal levels. This workforce is composed of non-political, civil servants in executive departments and agencies (e.g., State Department, Department of Justice, and Environmental Protection Agency), who work in non-partisan ways by following routine processes and bringing their professional expertise to bear on carrying out their prescribed duties.

Graduating in May 2020 is an especially fraught time for many of you, as you contemplate your “next steps.” For some, it will include navigating the graduate or professional school route; for others, it will be to find work in paying jobs or internships, yet both may be scarce at this time. For those who are unclear about what to do after graduation, I would ask you to consider using the next year to work in some public service capacity, at a time when, more than ever, government needs smart, motivated and well-

trained people to perform vital tasks for society. One possible avenue is to join a program to train and work as a contact tracer to help in efforts to combat the coronavirus. There are a number of cities, states and non-profit organizations that are in the process of establishing such programs, and there are likely to be additional efforts that will arise in the near future. There is a critical need for people to perform this function, and it seems a ripe opportunity for recent college graduates who might be looking for a productive way to spend a “gap year.”\*

So, this is not your typical “congratulations on your graduation” message. But this is not a “typical” time. My intention here was to prompt you to consider one possible way to direct your energies and skills that can be socially useful while, at the same time, contribute to your personal and professional growth. But.... I also do want to extend my warmest congratulations to all of you who have worked so hard to reach this point in your education. Although I was not on campus this semester, I will keep fond memories of those of you who have been my students over the last four years, and I wish all of the 2020 graduates in Political Science and International Relations the very best of luck and success as you venture out beyond SUNY New Paltz. Please stay in touch with us, and let us know how you are doing. We celebrate all of you – and we will look forward to hearing about your accomplishments, as you make your way into the world. We are immensely proud of you. **Now, go forth and do good work!**

**\*Here are some resources to get you started:**

--<https://www.vox.com/2020/5/4/21242825/coronavirus-covid-19-contact-tracing-jobs-apps>

--<https://1w20ju1nsz1k2xqrjx3ccsd1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/76/2020/04/CT-I.pdf>

--<https://www.indeed.com/viewjob?jk=29989c3a6b3f3988>

--<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/takes-covid-19-contact-tracer-nyc/story?id=70391242>

*(this article discusses various contact tracing programs, including a NYC one and the NYS/Bloomberg one)*



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