Emilian Kavalski (ed.), *Encounters with World Affairs: An Introduction to International Relations*


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The volume is written for an undergraduate readership – complete with chapter summaries, key words, and review questions. As with other anthologies, however, it lacks an integrated conceptualisation of the International Relations (IR) field that usually is common with single- or dual-authored texts. The cacophony of voices may be confusing to undergraduates new to IR, however refreshing they might be to those intimately familiar with the field.

The editor and his contributing colleagues undertake an ambitious project that addresses both theoretical and policy-relevant aspects of IR – a three-part coverage of international relations theory, state and non-state actors, and issues of global import.

Realism, liberalism, and constructivism are prominent in most theoretical chapters with feminism and critical theory introduced here and there. Marxism makes an appearance in Chapter 8 on Nature as an ‘actor’ in IR and again in Chapter 11 on inequality, but it is not developed in either chapter or elsewhere as an image of international relations. The English School is also given short shrift, as is post-modernism.

**Nature as an Actor in IR**

A novel thought developed in Chapter 8 in the second part of the volume is ‘Nature’ as an independent actor in IR alongside other state and non-state actors. On the other hand, environmental considerations really belong in the third part that takes up diverse ‘topics and issues.’

Yes, human beings are part of Nature. They also affect and are affected by nature – global climate change is a case in point, but it is quite another thing to see Nature as an independent actor akin to a feminised Mother Nature in popular parlance. Moreover, the treatment of nature in Chapter 8 becomes somewhat determinist – the voluntarist dimension of human volition is substantially downgraded. To give human or organic-like qualities to Nature is to engage in reification. It just is not so, however colourful and engaging the imagery might be!


On Machiavelli and the Ethics of Responsibility

Poor Machiavelli! Again he is the victim of mistranslation and misinterpretation. That princes do harm (male in the original Italian) in pursuit of security interests of the state is clear. US presidents certainly do so when they put troops in harm’s way for national security purposes. As such, Machiavelli is not an advocate of evil. Nowhere does he state in the original Italian that the prince “must be prepared to act immorally,” as alleged in Chapter 3 (p. 67).

The issue is more complex than a simple choice between the moral and the immoral. The German political sociologist, Max Weber, was much closer to the mark in his interpretation. He understood that the prince has particular responsibilities for security that the average citizen does not. The prince, then, is guided by the ‘ethics of responsibility that may lead him to bring harm to adversaries in the interest of national security. By contrast, the citizen has no such responsibility (or right derived therefrom) to bring harm to anyone. Instead, we are driven by the ethics of ‘ultimate ends,’ the accountability for our conduct and any unnecessary harm we cause.

Undergraduate readers are better served by this more complex understanding of moral choice. Leaders face difficult foreign policy and national security decisions. As Machiavelli had it, the prince avoids doing harm unless absolutely necessary – a security-related duty by virtue of the responsible position the prince holds.

Structural Realism and the End of the Cold War

In Chapter 2 (p. 55), the authors repeat the common claim that neorealist (structural realist) theory did not predict the end of the Cold War. On closer examination, however, we discover that the West was unaware of the full extent of Soviet spending on defence that ultimately led to economic collapse.

At the time it was thought that US outlays for defence were of the order of six to seven percent of GDP, Soviet about 13 percent (the high estimate). In fact, post-Cold War findings on Soviet military spending were of the order of 35 percent for the Soviet Union as a whole, 50 percent for the Ukraine alone! Given the magnitude of these outlays, it is no wonder that the Soviet economy collapsed.

In structural-realist terms, a dramatic change in relative capabilities between the superpowers was underway. As such, General Secretary Gorbachev’s actions and the abortive military coup that followed were merely precipitating events leading to the breakup of the Soviet Union, effective on January 1, 1992.

Had the facts been known on the asymmetry between the US and the Soviet Union on military spending (not to mention the degree to which the latter diverted resources from other economic sectors to outlays for national defence), neorealists would have been in a better position to predict the erosion of Soviet economic capabilities, the change in system structure, and the consequent end of the Cold War.

To neorealists, failure to make such predictions was an empirical (or measurement) problem, not a theoretical one. Indeed, from their perspective, the underlying cause of the end of the Cold War was the end of US-Soviet bipolarity that resulted from Soviet economic collapse – an extraordinary change in the distribution of power, in this case economic capabilities. This systemic change also marked the end of the Cold War and, as such, was fully in accordance with structural-realistic theory.
Women’s Rights and Feminism

Colonialism adversely impacted many parts of the world, effects that cast a long shadow over many societies in the present post-colonial period. Essentially western ideas were imposed on peoples in more traditional societies.

Particularly troublesome, however, is the dismissal in Chapter 2 of ‘western’ concerns with the rights of women. Casting these concerns in post-colonial terms, the authors object to ‘liberal calls for women’s right and equality’ as if they were a hegemonic, western imposition on peoples in low-income, capital-poor countries. Alleged cultural acceptance by women in these societies of the status quo is challenged, as the authors see it, by western liberals who “colonize the realities of subaltern feminist realities.” (p. 57)

But it is precisely these ‘realities’ that human rights advocates address. It is not as if ‘cultures’ were in an authoritative position to define human rights for women, children, gays or anyone else. This kind of cultural relativism is dangerous. It allows the politically weak further to be subordinated, exploited for their labour, and trafficked for sexual or other purposes.

Worse, this cultural relativism is repeated in Chapter 3 that identifies without substantive challenge ‘pluralists’ who do not “subscribe to the existence of universal values that apply to human beings everywhere.” (p. 65) Sensitivity to cultural differences is one thing. Denial of the moral universality of human rights is quite another.

Global Issues

Important issues of global import are raised in Part Three – the international economy, nuclear terrorism, failed states and other security challenges, global inequality, shifts in global power to include the rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia – really a resurrection, India, and China), identity and cultural divides, humanitarian interventions, borders to include migrations of peoples across them, the impact of communications media, and the impact of religion on domestic and world affairs.

Nowhere in this list are climate change, human rights to include human trafficking, global crime and, only indirectly, security challenges to authorities posed by insurgencies in and across country boundaries.

Moreover, a ‘laundry list’ of important issues needs an integrating framework. In any revised edition, the editor could aggregate these matters under a global governance framework that identifies the challenges facing authorities both domestically and globally. Indeed, Chapter 17 on global governance could be the common ground that gives authoritative meaning to these diverse issues, perhaps developing a coherent taxonomy rather than merely a grab-bag of issues on national and global agendas.

Concluding Observations

Although as reviewer I have been critical on a number of points, I do find value in an effort that tries to combine IR theory with a practical, policy-related focus on actors and issues. Any future edition would benefit from a more comprehensive development
of theoretical images of IR (realism, liberalism, Marxist and non-Marxist economic structuralism, and the English School) as well as perspectives or lenses through which many theorists view IR (feminism, constructivism, post-modernism and critical theory). A comprehensive framework that provides a coherent treatment of actors in relation to global governance issues would make a substantial contribution not just as an undergraduate text book, but equally to the IR field as a whole.