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Review article: International Political Theory today

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Review Article: International Political Theory Today

Abstract: Books under review:

Jack L. Amoureux *A Practice of Ethics for Global Politics: Ethical Reflexivity* (London: Routledge, 2016, 268pp. £90).

Michael W. Doyle *The Question of Intervention: John Stuart Mill & the Responsibility to Protect* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2015, 272pp, £58.99).

Renée Jeffery *Reason and Emotion in International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 252pp. £69.99).

Michael Walzer *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2015, 172pp. £16.99).

The founders of the academic study of International Relations in the early 20th century understood what they were doing as involving explanatory, interpretative, normative and prescriptive dimensions, and this multi-layered account of the discipline remained current through the upheavals of the 1930s and during the dominance of 'realism' in the post-1945 era. Gradually, however, from the 1960s onwards, explanatory theory came to be privileged by the mainstream of the discipline at the expense of the other three aforementioned dimensions – neopositivist IR became the norm. But questions of interpretation, normative issues and the desire to prescribe did not thereby disappear; instead, in the late 1970s and 1980s, a new discourse emerged that applied insights from classical and modern political theory to the kind of questions that neopositivists no longer asked – and thus was born the field sometimes described as International Ethics, but better described, I think, as International Political Theory (IPT). In the last thirty years or so IPT has covered a lot of ground, with studies ranging from theoretical explorations of cosmopolitan, communitarian, post-structuralist and feminist thought, through studies of sovereignty, human rights, global justice and humanitarian intervention to practice theory and post-colonialism – a collection of themes and topics with little actually in common save a resistance to the idea that social science can be reduced to one set of scientific procedures. Given this eclecticism, it might be questioned whether IPT does actually still have a distinctive identity, and this is one of the questions that this review essay is designed to explore if not answer.

The four books under review offer very different takes on the nature of IPT, but still display certain, cross cutting, similarities. Two, Michael Doyle's *The Question of Intervention: John Stuart Mill & the Responsibility to Protect* (hereafter *The Question of Intervention*) and Michael Walzer's *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (hereafter *The Paradox of Liberation*) are by scholars who were present at the creation of the modern discourse, indeed were creators thereof, while Jack Amoureux's *A Practice of Ethics for Global Politics: Ethical Reflexivity* (hereafter *A Practice of Ethics*) and Renée Jeffery's *Reason and Emotion in International Ethics* (hereafter *Reason and Emotion*) are by scholars of a more recent vintage – but in terms of the topics under consideration non-generational similarities are equally germane. Doyle, Jeffrey and Amoureux are all addressing and critiquing a particular kind of rationalist cosmopolitanism, albeit from very different directions, with the latter two authors wishing to produce a different kind of cosmopolitanism while Doyle remains committed to anti-cosmopolitan positions, as does Walzer whose book is directed to exploring the religious opponents of his variety of liberal nationalism. Of course, final preliminary, it would be foolish to suggest that these four books – or indeed any four books – can actually stand in for the field as a whole, but it is to be hoped that some sense of the current state of play can be gleaned from them; in any event, they are all fine works of scholarship.

Michael Doyle is the author of many important books, but his status as a founding father of IPT rests in particular on a two-part article published in 1983, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs', which has some claim to have originated the so-called 'democratic peace' hypothesis.¹ Doyle's account of Kant was problematic – Kant was not in any meaningful sense a liberal, and his 'republics' are certainly not democracies – but it was important nonetheless in establishing that *Perpetual Peace* was not simply a utopian peace project but a serious contribution to international thought, and one that had resonance for the present day. Now, in his latest book, *The Question of Intervention*, Doyle has moved on to someone who was most certainly a liberal, John Stuart Mill, and uses the latter's essay *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* to interrogate the modern notion of a Responsibility to Protect (RtoP or R2P).²

Mill's essay is a defence of the principle of non-intervention on liberal grounds, contradicting those contemporary liberals who believed in the legitimacy of interventions designed to undermine autocracy and promote freedom and self-government. He argues that a people cannot be given freedom by outsiders, but must take it for themselves if it is to last; self-government imposed on a people from outside will soon collapse. The most important exception to this general principle, Mill believed, concerned those peoples who were not yet capable of self-government under any circumstances – thus, somewhat paradoxically, *A Few Words on Non-Intervention* is both a defence of non-intervention, and a defence of imperialism. Doyle acknowledges and rejects the defence of imperialism, but takes on board the wider principle and relates it to current circumstances where humanitarian action appears to be called for. His general position in Chapter 1 is supportive of the norm of non-intervention and the importance of sovereignty, although in Chapters 2 and 3 he sets out very clearly the exceptions that require us to override or disregard the general principle of non-intervention. The norm may, only may, be overridden in self-defence, in the case of protracted civil wars, in order to prevent massacres and, possibly for post-war peacebuilding. Further the norm of non-intervention may, again only may, be disregarded in cases where what is involved is support for a secessionist movement which has demonstrated its roots in a genuine popular desire for national self-government, or as a counter intervention. *Pace* these exceptions, Doyle's position is, taken in the round, very supportive of the sovereignty norm and the importance of non-intervention.

At this point, those familiar with the literature on intervention and non-intervention may well be asking 'what's new'? These positions seem very similar to those espoused by English School pluralists such as Robert Jackson and, more to the point because he is heavily referenced in the text, Michael Walzer.³ Doyle's argument is elegantly presented but hardly original. What saves the day is first, that Doyle sets these standard arguments against the new version of humanitarian intervention, the Responsibility to Protect, second, that he examines in more detail than is usual the issues involved in postbellum peacebuilding, and third, here working with Camille Strauss-Kahn, that he makes an heroic attempt to list all the interventions that took place between 1815 and 2003, and to give a ball park assessment of the nature of the intervention and its success or failure.⁴ His sceptical but sensitive discussion of RtoP as a new 'moral minimum' and his analysis of the Libyan

imbroglio are both excellent, and his list of interventions will be very useful for future students of the subject. In summary, there are no major theoretical innovations here, but this is a book that will be enormously valuable for students of humanitarian intervention and RtoP.

One of the aims of Doyle's book is to contest the kind of cosmopolitanism that lies behind some of the more ambitious claims made on behalf of the Responsibility to Protect, which provides a link to Renée Jeffery's *Reason and Emotion* which is also designed to attack the same target, but this time from the perspective of a different kind of cosmopolitanism, which she calls a 'sentimentalist' cosmopolitanism – sentiment, in this context, referencing the notion of moral sentiments generated in the Scottish Enlightenment by thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith.⁵ Jeffery begins by exploring the alternative, 'rationalist', version of cosmopolitanism, focusing on Peter Singer's approach to world poverty, highlighting the continuity between his first, path-breaking, article on the subject 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' of 1972, and later contributions such as *The Life You Can Save* of 2009.⁶ Her point is that the apparently compelling rationalist arguments presented in 1972 did not actually change behaviour, which is why Singer is obliged to repeat them 37 years later – a key problem with his approach is that it neglects the emotions; the change that he wants to bring about will only occur as the result of a sentimental education and not simply on the basis of rational argumentation. In the next two chapters Jeffery sets out the eighteenth century theory of MORAL sentiments which was based on the Humean principle that reason will always be the slave of the passions, and traces the way in which Kantian and utilitarian approaches to ethics led to the demise of this perspective, which she now wishes to revive.

The notion that ethics rests on a sentimental education is common to a number of recent writers, including figures as different as Richard Rorty and Amartya Sen, while the Aristotelian roots of moral sentiment theory have been important in the work of virtue ethicists such as Philippa Foot and Martha Nussbaum.⁷ What is distinctive about Jeffery's take on the issue is her deployment of theories of the emotions drawn from psychology and neuroscience – in the latter case, based on studies of decision-making employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and studies of the relationship between reason and

emotion in patients with lesions of the ventro-medial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC). This work is deployed in a skilful and nuanced way – there will be those who resist the idea of drawing ethical conclusions from this kind of work, just as there are critics of evolutionary psychology, but I share what I take to be Jeffery’s belief that the social sciences need to be aware of and take on board the findings of the natural sciences. The techniques of neuroscience offer the opportunity to study age-old questions about the emotions in a new and compelling way and Jeffery does us a great service by summarising the results so far achieved. Two caveats: first, ‘so far’ in the previous sentence needs to be glossed; neuroscience is still a comparatively new field of study and it is by no means clear where it eventually will take us – no reason not to attempt the kind of summary offered here, but every reason to stress its provisional nature. Second, will the findings of neuroscience necessarily offer support to the take on the emotions of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers Jeffery finds inspiring? One of her main sources, Antonio Damasio, a firm critic of Cartesian rationalism, has expressed at length his admiration for the work of Baruch Spinoza, the central figure of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’, and a different kind of rationalist.⁸ In any event, these are more in the nature of observations than criticism, and are not intended to undermine Jeffery’s achievement. In the final chapters she brings the argument back to where it started, with a rereading of Singer, identifying his rationalism as central to the problems with his work, and making a strong case for a sentimentalist version of cosmopolitan ethics as against the still-dominant rationalism of post-Rawlsian, analytical cosmopolitanism. This is a book that demands to be read.

One of the tropes that Jeffery takes from Adam Smith – in this respect following Amartya Sen – is the notion of an ‘impartial spectator’, an imagined figure who tells us how our actions look viewed disinterestedly. Another way of making the same, or at least a very similar, point, is to focus on reflexivity, and this is the central organising notion of Jack Amoureux’s *A Practice of Ethics*. Like Jeffery, Amoureux rejects an ethics based on rule-following, but whereas she looks to the emotions, the Scottish Enlightenment and modern neuroscience for an alternative, he turns to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, and to reflexivity as demonstrated (in very different ways) by Anthony Giddens, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Issues of agency (again, manifesting in very different ways) are central to this work and perhaps the most theoretically interesting chapter is devoted to the notion

of a global *phronimos*. *Phronimos* is an Aristotelian term designating a competent practitioner of *phronesis*, practical wisdom or prudence, as the term is usually translated, and Amoureux takes this idea, along with Foucauldian and Arendtian considerations on reflexive agency to produce a series of ideal-typical global agents – leaders, interrogators, dissidents, whistle-blowers and hecklers. In the final three chapters of the book he applies his notion of ethical reflexivity to three modern ethical ‘hard cases’ – the Rwandan Genocide, ‘enhanced interrogation’ and the US War on Terror and drone warfare, in each case telling the story from a number of perspectives.

These three chapters represent the kind of close, micro-political, analysis that prevents the more theoretically high-flying earlier chapters from losing touch with reality and they represent a strength of the volume. Still, a couple of caveats may be in order. First, Amoureux’s approach involves interrogating various individuals who can be taken to represent the different types of *phronimos* identified above, which is fine, but why *these* individuals and not others? Given that the essence of the approach is that each individual global *phronimos* is the product of a critical ontology of the self and will have a different story to tell, why privilege these stories rather than others? For example, is Imran Khan’s hostility to drone warfare, narrated on p.207 ff., of interest because there is something about Khan that makes him an appropriate *phronimos*, and if so what? Khan is the leader of a strongly anti-American political party in Pakistan and is alleged to have links with the Pakistan Taliban, which might explain why he is a strong opponent of drone warfare, but it doesn’t explain why his voice is privileged here. Amoureux suggest, probably correctly, that his views on this issue at least are strongly supported in Pakistan but if that is the basis for his presence here then the theoretical framework of the book goes by the board. Second, one might have hoped that the method employed here would produce new insights into the ethical issues involved in ‘enhanced interrogation’ and drone warfare, but actually what comes through offers little more than the standard critiques of these practices. The voices heard in the Rwandan chapter point to a more nuanced version of events than the standard version, but again this is commonplace nowadays – for example, compare Gerard Prunier’s reading of the genocide in his early, authoritative, study with his more recent work.⁹ But this is not to take away from the overall quality of this work – it will be interesting to see if IN

future studies by, or inspired by, Amoureux the notion of a global *phronimos* is developed further and in different contexts..

While both Renée Jeffery and Jack Amoureux could be seen as attempting to breathe new life into cosmopolitan conceptions of IPT, Michael Walzer's *The Paradox of Liberation* can be understood as a meditation on the limitations of the liberal communitarian perspective that his work, from *Just and Unjust Wars* onwards, has done so much to develop and stimulate. The subject matter of this study is well conveyed by its subtitle, *Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*. Walzer examines the fate of three liberation movements, the Indian National Congress, Labour Zionism in Israel and the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN with the French spelling); each movement aimed to create a modern, secular, socialist and, in the first two cases at least, democratic state, but the result in each case has been the emergence of a non-secular politics based on religious identities. In Israel the secular left which dominated the state for a quarter century after independence has been marginalised, in India the Congress Party has faced successful religious opponents and itself has been forced to move away from its original secularism, while in Algeria the FLN in order to fight a radical and extreme Islamist movement has itself been obliged to become increasingly Islamic in orientation, especially with regard to the role of women in society. For Walzer this is all very personal – his own political position is now, and has always been, secular, socialist and democratic, and therefore the way in which these movements have succumbed to a religious counterrevolution is for him both disturbing and challenging.

The *Paradox of Liberation* covers a great deal of ground for what is in fact a very short book – the shortest by far of those under review here. WHILE Walzer offers detailed discussions of the fate of each of his three movements, with a depth of insight that might have been predictable in the Israeli case but is equally in evidence for India and Algeria, HE also addresses the wider issues with great skill. Chapter Three 'The Paradox Denied: Marxist Perspectives' is crucial here. In this chapter he explores the possibility that the very idea of national liberation is crucially flawed, examining the classical Marxist proposition that liberation can only be universal, that both religion and nationalism are parochial notions based on false consciousness, and therefore the shift from one to the other does not constitute the kind of counter-revolution that disturbs Walzer. Walzer finds the Marxist

notion of a liberation based on universal principles an attractive vision, but just that, a vision and not something that has ever been realised. However much some of their supporters might wish to deny it, actual-existing Marxist revolutions have always been based on the national principle. Universalist, cosmopolitan principles form the basis for an important moral critique of the way the world is, but they haven't provided the basis for actually changing it. Still, Walzer finds the Marxist critique more congenial than the post-colonial notion that both nationalism and religion are a by-product of imperial domination – even though he has some sympathy for the post-colonial view that the religion espoused by, for example, the Hindutva movement bears little resemblance to traditional Hinduism (if indeed there is such a thing, the very term Hindu being a colonial coinage).

Walzer thus rejects the view that secular nationalism was doomed from the outset. Instead he suggests that no one single explanation for the religious counterrevolution can make sense of the phenomenon; instead a more complicated story, different in each case, needs to be told. But there is one general point that he argues applies in all three cases, and that is that these secular socialist revolutions triumphed before the majority of the relevant populations were either secular or socialist. The Indian National Congress in 1947 came to power in a country with a rural population much of which was untouched by the ideas espoused by Nehru and his fellow democratic socialists, and the FLN in 1962 inherited from the French a country whose population was more committed to Islam than secularism. The Israeli case is in some respects the most interesting here. The socialist Zionists and the Kibbutz movement self-consciously looked to create a new definition of what it meant to be a Jew and looked to base their polity on this new definition, but the post-Shoah influx of the remains of the Jewish communities of Europe and the Arab world in the 1940s and 50s produced a population that adhered to older conceptions of Judaism, conceptions that had served the community well over the centuries of exile but were incompatible with many aspects of the socialist Zionist programme and the requirements of a democratic secular state. A second general point, again applicable in all three countries, is the inability of the secular nationalist movements to provide the kind of life-cycle ceremonies – marking e.g. birth, coming of age, death – that traditional religions offer. Anyone who has attended a 'humanist' funeral will understand what he means; no invented ceremony can have the emotional impact of the rituals sanctified by religious tradition.

The Paradox of Liberation ends with a fascinating postscript relating these issues to the American experience, noting that here, as elsewhere, liberation is an ongoing project. He notes the secularism of the American revolution, so insistent that proposals, made during the Great Christian Awakening of the early eighteenth century, to end mail delivery on Sundays, were opposed as undermining the separation of church and state – but he also notes that early American secularism did not involve gender equality, a matter of some significance since pushing back against such equality has been a major theme of the counterrevolution in the countries he has studied. This is a stunningly good book, which packs more into a short compass than anything else I have read recently.

What, if anything, do these books, taken together, tell us about the state of IPT today? At the risk of channelling the satirical US TV programme *Veep*, the words ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ come to mind.¹⁰ Continuity is exhibited by the fact that the debates of thirty years ago are obviously still current – Doyle is defending a conception of sovereignty that has changed very little over the decades, Jeffery and Amoureux are grappling with the task of producing an account of cosmopolitanism that can be defended from the kinds of criticisms that were already being levelled in the 1980s, and Walzer is still following through the implications of, and challenges to, the position he elaborated at length in the first part of *Just and Unjust Wars* in 1977. If continuity were to be the defining characteristic of contemporary IPT the discourse would be in trouble because this would indicate a degree of stagnation. But, for each writer, change is as apparent as continuity. Doyle has to defend his position in the context of a new reading of an old issue, with the language of Responsibility to Protect ostensibly replacing that of humanitarian intervention. Jeffery and Amoureux are using new resources – basic emotion theory, neuroscience, ethical reflexivity – to revivify a discourse of cosmopolitanism that has run into the ground, its assumption of the potential power of rational discourse increasingly challenged. For Walzer it is the unpredicted rising appeal of fundamentalist religion that poses the greatest challenge to his conception of a democratic, secular and socialist communitarianism. On the basis of this fruitful mixture of continuity and change I conclude that the discourse of International Political Theory is in good shape, still producing compelling and relevant scholarship.

¹ *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1983, vol. 12, (1) & (2) 205-35, 323-53.

² Helpfully, Mill's essay is reprinted in *The Question of Intervention* Appendix 1, pp.205 – 226. Extracts can also be found in Chris Brown, Terry Nardin and N.J. Rengger, (eds.) *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts from the Ancient Greeks to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.486-493).

³ See Robert Jackson *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Michael Walzer *Just and Unjust Wars* 5th Ed. (NY: Basic Books, 2015) – see also Walzer 'The Politics of Rescue' (1995) anthologised in Walzer *Arguing About War* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁴ See Appendix 2: List of Interventions, 1815 -2003 pp 227 – 259.

⁵ See, e.g., David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Adam Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984).

⁶ Peter Singer 'Famine, Affluence and Morality' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1972, vol.1 (1) pp. 229-43; Singer *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2009)

⁷ Richard Rorty 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality' in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (eds.) *On Human Rights* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Amartya Sen *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Philippa Foot *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Martha C. Nussbaum *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸ Antonio Damasio *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 2003); Jonathan Israel *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁹ Gerard Prunier *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) and *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwanda Genocide and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ 'Continuity and change' is the meaningless slogan chosen by the show's fictional presidential candidate Selina Meyer, and by the (real) Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull. *Guardian* 23 March 2016 <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/mar/23/malcolm-turnbulls-continuity-and-change-slogan-straight-out-of-veep> .