

Book Review: Rethinking the New World Order by Georg Sørensen

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2017/06/06/book-review-rethinking-the-new-world-order-by-georg-sorensen/

2017-6-6

In Rethinking the New World Order, Georg Sørensen explores timely questions regarding the nature of the 'old' and 'new' world order in the light of recent global uncertainty and widespread state fragility. Mehmet Kerem Coban welcomes Sørensen's attempt to present a middle ground between realist and liberal approaches to IR, while calling for even greater theoretical pluralism when it comes to understanding the current state of the world order.

Rethinking the New World Order. Georg Sørensen. Palgrave Macmillan. 2016.

Find this book: 

We are entering a new phase of globalisation. The future of the liberal world order established by the transatlantic powers has become more debatable. The presidential elections in the United States, the so-called 'Brexit' referendum, current and upcoming elections in continental Europe and the emergence of nationalist rhetoric are all leading us to ask significant questions about liberal politics across the world. In light of this uncertainty, Georg Sørensen's book's great achievement is posing timely and difficult questions about the 'old' and 'new' world order.

To begin this review, it is useful to be clear with the meaning of 'world order'. Sørensen defines this not just as relations between states, but also as a reflection of what is happening within states (31). In *Rethinking the New World Order*, Sørensen provides a new analytical framework consisted of three pillars: domestic conditions, international conditions and the global distribution of power. Hence, this framework calls our attention to a more complicated analysis of 'world order', which aims to bring the domestic and international together with an understanding of global power distribution.

In the first chapter, Sørensen presents the book's analytical framework, while reviewing the main theoretical traditions in international relations theory. The second chapter discusses how all states, regardless of income, economic and political development, are fragile. The sources of 'state fragility' change if one travels from an advanced economy to a postcolonial state. However, one commonality regarding 'state fragility' is that all states have to cope with social and economic uncertainties that are causing rising income inequality, declining trust in societies and persistent intra-state conflicts. The third chapter demonstrates that interstate war is no longer the top threat to world order as the political, social, and economic costs of such conflicts have risen tremendously in an interdependent world.

In the fourth chapter, Sørensen argues that power neither guarantees the formation nor the subsequent maintenance of a particular kind of world order. A powerful nation should also possess the capacity – and, probably more importantly, the will – to lead that order. For Sørensen, we can expect different types of world order. The first is Amitav Acharya's (2010) 'multiplex' order, referring to a 'world order' that is neither unipolar nor multipolar but rather involves multiple stakeholders and alliances, and is politically and culturally pluralistic. The second is a heavily regionalised order.

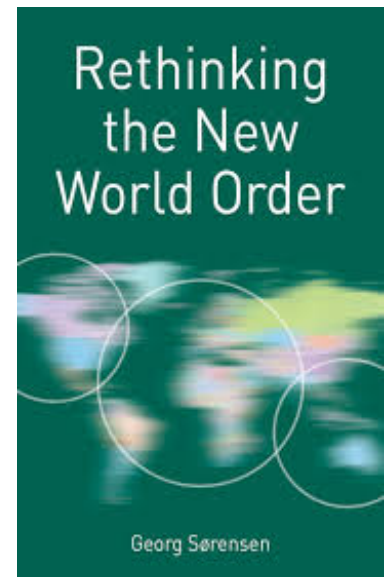




Image Credit: (Sam Howzit CC BY 2.0)

The fifth chapter discusses intervention in fragile or conflict-ridden states, order and legitimacy. Sørensen puts forward the argument that interventions in fragile states may involve both peace-keeping and state-building. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the Western-led order has declined in recent years. The formation of the 'new world order' can be challenging because it requires the crafting of an order that is perceived as legitimate. With more stakeholders in world politics claiming greater space, this will not be an easy task as there may be too much 'noise' when moving from one order to another. This means that until the 'new order' is fully established, we may expect to observe 'regional security complexes' as 'second-best institutions' (123).

The sixth chapter claims that conceiving 'convergence' between advanced nations and developing nations can be a 'rosy picture'. Globalisation has contributed to a world that is marked by both extreme wealth and poverty. Sørensen highlights that the current order operates according to the logic of the neoliberal economic model. He questions if this can contribute to stability, especially when expectations of improved economic conditions are forcing developing countries to seek higher growth rates. Furthermore, while advanced nations are struggling with sluggish growth and maintaining their advantage in the international trading system, some developing nations are getting more and more competitive in similar international markets.

In the eighth chapter, Sørensen maintains that today's liberal order has been shaken by internal conflict driven by clashes between independence and interdependence. The liberal world order has been established on the basis of interdependence. However, the recent backlash around the world signifies that independence is emerging on individual and national agendas (205). What this trend will bring about cannot be predicted; however, Sørensen draws attention to the constant clash between the two, which may produce some unpleasant consequences such as the rise of populist right-wing political parties.

Sørensen nonetheless underlines that despite many challenges, global governance may not be experiencing a 'gridlock'. The way we are currently making attempts to resolve our global problems may not lift living standards upwards, for instance, in the case of enforcement of climate change agreements; however, we can cut carbon emissions and slow global warming. 'Good-enough governance', for Sørensen, therefore means we can still address our common challenges, albeit often through second-best arrangements.

The above paragraphs give a glimpse into Sørensen's book by presenting the main debates. Although its title refers to the 'new world order', the main mission of Sørensen is not limited to what this means or how we can make sense of it. Rather, the book speaks to a larger theoretical debate, which is the realist and liberal divide in international relations theory.

Throughout the text, the reader is always reminded of this grand debate. Yet, instead of attempting to assess which theoretical account prevails over the other in an analysis of the 'new world order', the book presents a middle ground. Sørensen argues that realists should put aside the dominant thinking about the world order, based around the assumption of security dilemmas, persistent conflict and inter-state competition that always results in warfare. Liberals, on the other hand, should not expect a linear trend of modernisation or assume that their way of thinking is the only model applicable in any jurisdiction.

Sørensen therefore opts for a balanced view in calling for theoretical pluralism in international relations theory. Such an approach necessitates us to deeply engage with 'reality', and therefore tailor our analyses. This would, for instance, require a realist not to begin an analysis with the expectation that conflicts are persistent. Co-existence may not be peaceful, yet wars are not inevitable, particularly in today's world order which is defined by greater interdependence not only in terms of economic exchange, but more importantly through political and social interactions between societies.

To end this review with a suggestion for future research, other theoretical traditions in international relations theory deserve equal treatment as part of our theoretical toolkit. Focusing solely on the divide between 'optimist liberals' and 'pessimist realists', as Sørensen terms them, can be somewhat reductionist. We need to incorporate other traditions into the debate. This is because we should not underestimate how individuals gather data, learn how to process it and act according to what is produced. The 'social construction of reality', as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann put forward decades ago, refers to ideas being diffused across individuals and societies. How we perceive the world around us and how this shapes our expectations about the future are as significant as the distribution of power and the linkages between domestic and international forces. Therefore, a more constructivist account of the 'new world order' could be very valuable to make sense of the meanings of various forces leading this, how these meanings are perceived particularly by policymakers and how these in turn affect the 'new world order' that shapes our economic, social, cultural and political interactions across societies.

Mehmet Kerem Coban is a PhD Candidate at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. His PhD thesis focuses on the political economy of banking regulation in Turkey (financial consumer protection, macroprudential regulatory governance and the adoption of Basel III). He obtained his Master's Degree in Development Studies at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. His main research interests are international political economy, the political economy of development, regulation, financial liberalization and financial regulation. Email: m.keremcoban[at]u.nus.edu. [Read more by Mehmet Kerem Coban](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books