

Introduction

From international politics to world politics

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Reader's Guide

This book provides a comprehensive overview of world politics in a global era. The term most often used to explain world politics in the contemporary period—'globalization'—is controversial. There is considerable dispute over what it means to talk of 'globalization', whether this implies that the main features of contemporary world politics are different from those of the past, and whether much of the world is experiencing a backlash against 'neoliberal globalization'. The concept can be most simply used to refer to the process of increasing interconnectedness among societies such that events in one part of the world increasingly have effects on peoples and societies far away. On this view, a globalized world is one in which political, economic, cultural, and social events become more and more interconnected, and also one in which they have more impact. For others, 'globalization' is the ideology associated with the current phase of the world economy—neoliberal capitalism—which has most shaped world politics since the late 1970s. In this introduction we explain how we propose to deal with globalization in this book, and we offer some arguments both for and against seeing it as an important new development in world politics.

We will begin by discussing the various terms used to describe world politics and the academic discipline—International Relations (IR)—that has led the way in thinking about world politics. We then look

at the main ways in which global politics has been explained. Our aim is not to put forward one view of how to think about world politics somehow agreed by the editors, let alone by all the contributors to this book. There is no such agreement. Rather, we want to provide a context in which to read the chapters that follow. This means offering a variety of views. For example, the main theoretical accounts of world politics all see globalization differently. Some treat it as a temporary phase in human history; others see it as the latest manifestation of the growth of global **capitalism**; yet others see it as representing a fundamental transformation of world politics that requires new ways of understanding. The different editors and contributors to this book hold no single agreed view; they represent all the views just mentioned. Thus, they would each have a different take, for example, on why powerful **states** cannot agree on how to tackle global climate change, why a majority of British people voted to leave the European Union, the significance of the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis, or the causes and significance of economic, gendered, and racialized inequality in world politics.

There are three main aims of this book:

- to offer an overview of world politics in a global era;
- to summarize the main approaches to understanding contemporary world politics; and
- to provide the material necessary to develop a concrete understanding of the main **structures** and issues defining world politics today.

In Part Two we will examine the very important historical background to the contemporary world, including the rise of the modern international order; the major crises of international order that defined the twentieth century; more recent developments since the end of the cold war; and the significance of the rise of new, non-Western powers in contemporary world politics. Part Three gives a detailed account of each of the main theories of world politics—**liberal internationalism**, **realism**, **Marxism**, **constructivism**, poststructuralism, **postcolonial** and **decolonial** approaches,

and **feminism**—along with a chapter on **normative** approaches that focuses on a series of important ethical questions, such as whether it can ever be morally right to wage war. In Part Four we look at the main structures and processes that do most to shape the central contours of contemporary world politics, such as global political economy, international security, war, gender, and race. Then in Part Five of the book we deal with some of the main policy issues in the globalized world, such as poverty, human rights, refugees, and the environmental crisis.

From international politics to world politics

Why does the main title of this book refer to ‘world politics’ rather than ‘international politics’ or ‘international relations’? These are the traditional terms used to describe the kinds of structures and processes covered in this book, such as the causes of war and peace or the global economy and its inequalities. Indeed, the discipline that studies these issues is nearly always called International Relations. We will say more about this discipline shortly. The point here is that we believe the phrase ‘world politics’ is more inclusive than either of the alternative terms ‘international relations’ or ‘international politics’. It is meant to signal that in this book we are interested in a very wide set of actors and political relations in the world, and not only those among **nation-states** (as implied by ‘international relations’ or ‘international politics’). It is not that relations between states are unimportant; far from it. They are fundamental to contemporary world politics. But we are also interested in relations among institutions and organizations that may or may not be states. For example, this book will introduce you to the significance of **multinational corporations**, **transnational** terrorist groups, social classes, and **non-governmental organizations** (NGOs) such as human rights groups. We also think that relations among transnational corporations, **governments**, or **international organizations** can be as important as what states and other political actors do or don’t do. Hence,

we prefer to use the more expansive term ‘world politics’, with the important proviso that we do not want you to define ‘politics’ too narrowly. You will see this issue arising time and again in the chapters that follow, since many contributors also understand ‘politics’ very broadly.

Consider, for example, the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘economics’. Clearly, a great deal of power accrues to the group that can persuade others that the existing distribution of wealth and resources is ‘simply’ an economic or ‘private’ question rather than a political or ‘public’ issue. Of course, the very distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ has a history and is open to dispute. When, where, and why did this particular distinction between public and private, politics and economy, develop? What role does it play in global political economy today? As you read this book, already 82 per cent of the world’s global wealth is held by 1 per cent of its population; the world’s richest 27 people possess the same wealth as its poorest 50 per cent—3.8 billion people. And the global wealth gap increases every year. The point here is that we want you to think about politics very broadly because many of the chapters in this book will describe as ‘political’ features of the contemporary world that you may not have previously thought of as such. Our focus is on the political and **power** relations, broadly defined, that characterize the contemporary world. Many will be between states, but many—and perhaps most—will not.

The study of International Relations

As you will discover reading this book, International Relations (IR) is an incredibly exciting and diverse field of study. It is exciting because it addresses the most

pressing problems shaping the lives of everyone on the planet: matters of war and peace, the organization of the global economy, the causes and consequences of

global inequality, the pending global environmental catastrophe, to name just a few of the most obvious. The key concepts that organize debate in the field are also some of the most contentious: power, violence, **sovereignty**, states, **empire**, genocide, intervention, inequality, justice, and democracy, again to name just a few.

The field is highly diverse, organized into various subfields and specialisms, including international history, international security, international political economy, international law, and international organizations. Scholars of International Relations also often work with regional specialisms, focusing on Latin America, East Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, or North America.

International Relations is also highly interdisciplinary, drawing on theoretical and methodological traditions from fields as diverse as History, Law, Political Science, Geography, Sociology, and increasingly Anthropology, Gender Studies, and Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies. In Britain, historians were most influential in the earliest decades of the organized study of international relations (Hall 2012). In more recent decades, especially after the end of the Second World War, and especially in the United States, Political Science has tended to have the greatest influence on the discipline of International Relations. This tended to narrow the range of acceptable approaches to the study of IR and also led to an excessive focus on US foreign policy, to the detriment of non-Western history and theories of world politics. However, very recently, both inside and outside the United States, scholars have started to pay much more attention to how and why IR has neglected non-Western histories and experiences, and have begun to rectify this (Tickner and Wæver 2009). In doing so, they have increasingly moved the field away from Eurocentric approaches to world politics and begun to take seriously the project of developing a Global IR (Acharya 2014b).



Watch a video of Sir Steve Smith discussing the move away from a Eurocentric approach to world politics www.oup.com/he/baylis8e

People have tried to make sense of world politics for centuries. However, the formation of the academic discipline of International Relations is relatively recent. This history also partly accounts for some of the issues just described. Consider how the history of the discipline of IR is itself contested. One of the most influential accounts of its history is that the academic discipline was formed in 1919 when the Department of

International Politics was established at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (now Aberystwyth University). The emphasis in this version of the story is that the Department of International Politics was founded after the horrors of the First World War to help prevent a future war. If scholars could find the causes of war, then they could put forward solutions to help politicians prevent them from breaking out. According to this view, the discipline of IR was—or should be—marked by such a commitment to change the world; the task of academic study should be one of making the world a better place.

Others have challenged this story as a foundation myth for a field with a much darker history, situating the emergence of IR somewhat earlier in the history of colonial administration and the study of imperialism (Long and Schmidt 2005; Vitalis 2015). For example, the first journal in the field was called *Journal of Race Development*, first published in 1910, and which is now the influential US-based publication known as *Foreign Affairs*. The beginning of the twentieth century was not only a period of world war, but also one of empire, theft of land, and belief in racial supremacy—that is, maintaining and justifying white supremacy in world politics. In the United States, African-American scholars interested in studying race and world politics were systematically marginalized from the emerging discipline of IR (Vitalis 2015). However, situating the history of the field in this context gives a very different gloss to the role of academic International Relations today, which exists in a context of **international hierarchy** and the continuing significance of race and racism in world politics, as discussed later in this book.

The point to note here is that there are important debates about how academic knowledge is produced, the contexts in which academic disciplines are formed, and some of the enduring legacies of this history. Another example is how histories of international thought and the discipline of International Relations almost entirely exclude women thinkers and founders of the discipline (for an exception, see Ashworth 2014). Yet, women in the past thought and wrote a great deal about international politics (Sluga and James 2016; Owens 2018). Their work has yet to be fully recovered and analysed. Knowledge about world politics—and the academic subjects that you study at university—also has a history and a politics. This history is relevant for the identity of the academic field of International Relations and for how we should think about world politics today. Indeed, you should keep in

mind that the main theories of world politics did not arise from nowhere. They were developed by intellectuals and practitioners in specific circumstances for

very concrete and political reasons. International theories have histories too (Knutsen 1997; Keene 2005; Ashworth 2014).

Theories of world politics

The basic problem facing anyone who tries to understand contemporary world politics is that there is so much material to look at that it is difficult to know which things matter and which do not. Where on earth would you start if you wanted to explain the most important political processes? How, for example, would you explain the failures of climate change negotiations, 'Brexit' from the EU, the 9/11 attacks, or the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS, otherwise known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) after the United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq? Why was the apparent economic boom in much of the capitalist world followed by a near devastating collapse of the global financial system? Why are thousands of migrants from North Africa seeking to make the extremely dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean Sea to the European Union? Why does the United States support Israel in its conflict with Palestinians in the occupied territories? As you will learn, there are very different responses to these questions, and there seems no easy way of arriving at definitive answers to them.

Whether you are aware of it or not, whenever you are faced with questions like these you have to turn, not only to the study of history, though that is absolutely essential, but also to theories. Theory is a kind of simplifying device that allows you to decide which historical or contemporary facts matter more than others when trying to develop an understanding of the world. A good analogy is using sunglasses with different-coloured lenses: put on the red pair and the world looks red; put on the yellow pair and it looks yellow. The world is not any different; it just looks different. So it is with theories. Shortly, we will summarize the main theoretical views that have dominated the study of world politics so that you will get an idea of which 'colours' they paint world politics. But before we do, please note that we do not think that theory is an option. It is not as if you can say you do not want to bother with theory; all you want to do is to look at the 'facts'. We believe that this is impossible, since the only way you can decide which of the millions of possible facts to look at is by adhering to some simplifying device that tells you which ones matter the most. Theory is such a simplifying device. Note

also that you may well not be aware of your theory. It may just be the view of or even ideology about the world that you inherited from your family, social class, peer groups, or the media. It may just seem common sense to you and not at all complicated. But we fervently believe that in such a case your theoretical assumptions are just implicit rather than explicit. We prefer to try to be as explicit as possible when it comes to thinking about world politics.

Of course, many proponents of particular theories also claim to see the world the way it 'really is'. Consider the International Relations theory known as 'realism'. The 'real' world as seen by realists is not a very pleasant place. According to their view, human beings are at best selfish and domineering, and probably much worse. Liberal notions about the perfectibility of human beings and the possibility of a fundamental transformation of world politics away from conflict and hierarchy are very far-fetched from a realist perspective. Indeed, realists have often had the upper hand in debates about the nature of world politics because their views *seem* to accord more with common sense, especially when the media daily show us images of how awful human beings can be to one another. Again, we will say more about realism in a moment. The point here is to question whether such a realist view is as neutral as it seems commonsensical. After all, if we teach world politics to generations of students and tell them that people are selfish, then does this not become common sense? And when they go to work in the media, for government departments, or for the military, don't they simply repeat what they have been taught and act accordingly? Might realism simply be the ideology of powerful states, interested in protecting the status quo? What is the history of realism and what does this history tell us about its claims about how the world 'really is'? For now, we would like to keep the issue open and simply point out that we are not convinced that realism is as objective, as timeless, or as non-normative as it is often portrayed.

What is certainly true is that realism has been one of the dominant ways in the West of explaining world politics over the last 150 years. But it is not the only