

Piotr Walewicz*

ORCID: 0000-0001-6878-4380

HOW INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SCHOLARS EXPLAIN THE WORLD: A WORLD-ECOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

ABSTRACT

The article is an operationalization of a new theoretical-methodological approach to analyzing International Relations discourse. The approach is based on the Critical Theory of International Relations and the concept of world-ecology. It re-conceptualizes the critique of mainstream International Relations theories and paradigms in a way which foregoes the Cartesian dualism of Society and Nature in order to analyze the subject through the dialectical power-capital-nature relation. The article analyzes two contemporary texts from “Foreign Affairs” which defend the realist and liberal theories. It shows that both discourses only stabilize the existing order without challenging it in any way or proposing radical ways of dealing with the ecological crisis. They either ignore environmental issues or treat them as solvable under the current political-economic status quo.

Keywords: theory of international relations; realism; liberalism; climate change; world-ecology; critical theory

1. INTRODUCTION

This research article is an operationalization and practical application of the theoretical-methodological approach proposed recently by Walewicz (2018). The approach combines the Critical Theory of International Relations with the concept of world-ecology by Jason W. Moore in order to create a framework for analyzing modern International Relations discourse in its relation to the global capitalist economy, global power relations and the environment. It comes as a response to the issue that traditional points of analysis in International Relations are most probably no longer able to explain or predict the future of the international system.

* Kazimierz Wielki University, Bydgoszcz, e-mail: piotr@walewicz.com

This is because the basis of conflicts and tensions has been shifting from purely economic or purely political to ecological.

Security experts warn about new challenges, which include conflicts and tensions that arise from the anthropogenic changes in the global ecosystem, including climate change and environmental degradation (Goering, 2019). Some had claimed that climate change would be the main driver of violence in the world in the near future (Welzer, 2008), while the latest expert elicitation research shows that climate change has already increased the risk of armed conflict (Mach *et al.*, 2019). The matter complicates even more when one realizes that climate change is only one of nine interconnected planetary boundaries, that are threatened by humanity's actions, and when crossed might lead to irreversible changes (Steffen *et al.*, 2015). This is why political scientists are encouraged to help find new ways to construct a common political discourse on environmental issues, including climate change (Keohane, 2015).

However, as Chakrabarty (2018) writes, political thought has so far been human-centric and treating the world outside of inter-human relations as a constant that is none of our concern apart from the sporadic natural disasters that come into human history as intrusions from an "outside". Only recently the importance of climate change and the rising impact of the Earth system science on social sciences have started reshaping and reorienting our everyday thoughts and rethinking what it means to be political (Chakrabarty, 2018). Incorporating the relations of human activity to the Earth's ecosystem allowed for uncovering and analyzing the close ties of different systems of values to human propensity for radical environmental transformation. It is now possible to constructively critique the dominant socio-centric paradigms in their relation to the ecological crisis (Connolly & MacDonald, 2015). The article will show however that not all humanists today follow this trend and a big part of social science – in this case the subdiscipline of International Relations – still does not sufficiently acknowledge the interdependent relation between power-capital-nature nor does it treat environmental concerns with the respect they require.

In 2018 *Foreign Affairs* published a series of articles about the current state of the world order and the validity of different theoretical approaches in explaining it. The authors set out to prove why their paradigm is the one that best describes, explains and predicts the world. The presented schools of thought were: liberalism, realism, Marxism, tribalism, a focus on technology and an explanation based on climate change. Because *Foreign Affairs* has always been a respected and popular source of opinions about international relations, it seems justified to analyze how those articles deal with environmental issues and what advice they have for policy-makers. This analysis will be done through the lens of the Critical Theory of International Relations and the concept of world-ecology. It will cover the two articles most important to the discipline, because they represent the two traditional and mainstream schools of thought: *Realist World. The Players Change, but the Game Remains* by Stephen Kotkin (2018) and *Liberal World. The Resilient Order* by Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry (2018).

2. METHODOLOGY

The article is a critical analysis of how contemporary scholars popularize the scientific discourses on international relations. The critical nature comes from being inspired by Robert W. Cox's Critical Theory of International Relations, extended onto environmental issues by

the concept of world-ecology by Jason W. Moore. The idea of linking together these two approaches from different disciplines is new, but seems both promising and necessary when faced with current global challenges that may morph into existential threats. Below is an outline of this new theoretical-methodological approach proposed by Walewicz (2018) and used within this article.

As mentioned, the analysis is based first on the Critical Theory of International Relations, whose main point is that the traditional theories and paradigms contribute to the processes of stabilizing the existing structures of world order. It presumes that the hegemonic realist and liberal discourses are built on the lack of consciousness about the way in which power and capital interests precede and shape their own formation (Cox, 1981). This presumption can be extended onto environmental issues, so it now also states that these theories and paradigms have been strengthening the hegemonic discourses that actually led to climate change in the first place. This is underlined by the famous statements of critical theorists that the theories of International Relations are not only about politics, but they are political themselves (Hutchings, 1999), and that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox, 1981). This of course is also true of the Critical Theory itself, but its stated purpose is to challenge and dismantle the traditional forms of theorizing, combined with the emancipation and dismantling of the entrenched forms of social life that constrain human freedom (Devetak, 2005). The assumption of this article is that all of these key concepts can be extrapolated onto the popular scientific discourse on international relations presented on the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, because the articles published there are usually solidly grounded in one of the mainstream paradigms of International Relations.

The main focus here will be the natural environment, which is the foundation of society as a dynamic and hierarchical structure (Klementewicz, 2010). The necessity for the discipline of International Relations to tackle environmental problems, analyzing the impact of capitalism on the biosphere and stating the need for sustainable development have already been pointed out (Falk, 2016). As Cox (2002) wrote in one of his major works, in times when the world is at a turning point, the assumptions upon which prevailing forms of knowledge were based are challenged and attempts are made to understand the nature of historical processes and how they made way for what is now. The globalized world order is a multilevel structure and environmental degradation was mentioned by Cox (2002) as one of the processes parallel to social restructuring caused by economic globalization. He noticed humanity’s new dilemma that concerns rethinking its place as part of nature rather than as dominant over it and pointed out the fundamental contradictions in economic globalization and democratization that involved consumerism and treating nature with a market mentality.

In order to further connect the dominant discourses in International Relations with nature, the concept of world-ecology will be used. Its author, Jason W. Moore (2015), claims that it is not only intellectually, but also politically important, if we are to face the new challenges of the 21st century. His opinion is that if we do not change the fundamental rules that underlie the current global capitalist economy, we will not be able to solve its crises, with climate change being the most threatening. Moore opposes the argument that *Anthropos* as a whole is to blame for the degradation of the environment, because it is too simplistic and gives an overly monolithic picture of humanity’s development. He claims that the narrative on the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) is only another symptom of global inequality (Moore, 2017a, p. 195). This bold statement goes in line with Moore’s Marxist

inspirations, but also places him alongside the critical theorists of International Relations in the observation that global inequality and injustice have both social and ecological basis and consequences. In order to point out the systemic nature of the ecological crisis, Moore (2016) writes about capitalism's "audacious strategies of global conquest, endless commodification, and relentless rationalization" and how it has fundamentally transformed the relations of power, knowledge and capital that have made the modern world.

According to Moore (2017b), capitalism is a system that doesn't develop itself parallel to nature, but through nature – it is a system of organizing nature. He also states that only by abandoning the Cartesian dualism of Society + Nature and embracing new dialectical categories, like Humanity-in-Nature and Nature-in-Humanity, we can truly understand the ongoing process of multilayered transformation of nature in order to create power and capital (Moore, 2015). Thus, both the globalized capitalist economy and the system of states that maintains it should be treated in the dialectical relation of power-capital-nature (Moore, 2017c). This extends the power-capital relation that was the main focal point of the Critical Theory of International Relations onto nature, as Moore (2017a) writes that no human organization can be fully understood when abstracted from the web of life. For research purposes this radical perspective may serve as a good tool for pointing out very obvious and fundamental flaws in the Western-centric discourses on international relations and climate change.

Concluding, the critical stance presented in this article comes from combining the Critical Theory of International Relations with the concept of world-ecology in order to show how the mainstream paradigms fit into the dominant discourses that stabilize the current world order. The article's aim is not to completely disprove the major schools of International Relations, but to point out the lack of fundamental questions about the core rules of the unjust and unequal world order, as well as the lack of a deeper reflection on the connection between the world system and nature. It will also try to show how the state-centric geopolitical discourses reproduce the institutionalized forms of domination over peoples, states, nature etc. (Shapiro, 1991).

3. REALISM

The first article in the July/August 2018 issue of *Foreign Affairs* was written by a realist. Stephen Kotkin (2018) argues, that it is geopolitics that explains the world – a geopolitics that never went away, despite the liberal optimism of the last three decades. He writes that the power relations between states have always shaped the world and will continue to do so, with a special focus on great-power politics. According to Kotkin, the rivalry between the United States and China will determine our future.

China's power, as Kotkin writes, will only continue to grow, without the need for democratization. However, the country could not have grown without the American provisions of security and open markets. Kotkin claims that the economic growth and democratization of India, Brazil and South Africa also could not have happened without the Western push for the free trade and global integration. He admits that the United States advocated for voluntary alliances, multilateral institutions and free trade in their own self-interest, and backed up their advances by global military domination. The "liberal international order" is thus only a mechanism for organizing and extending the hegemon's sphere of influence. At the same time, China and Russia remain illiberal and undemocratic powers, although Kotkin praises

their macroeconomic policies. China's wealth allows it to penetrate other regions with its soft-power, just like the United States did in the previous decades. He believes however that the growth of Europe, Japan, India, Brazil and others, allowed and facilitated by the United States, will make a fully bilateral order impossible. Concluding, he believes that the balance of power, which will be the most important global issue in the upcoming decades, can be sustained.

Kotkin acknowledges the negative economic and social effects that globalization brought to the societies of the advanced democracies. He points out the unjust measures implemented to save the economic system after the 2008 crisis, which ignored ordinary people and opened the field for antiestablishment movements. Kotkin blames globalization for enticing investment abroad rather than at home, which created a feeling of political betrayal among Western societies. However, while he mentions the lowering of global inequality between states, he omits the fact of wealth concentration or the exploitation of Global South societies. He also describes China as almost an antithesis of the western model of development, while there have already been strong claims about it being only a different iteration of neoliberalism (Chołaj, 2014; Sims, 2015).

In summary, Kotkin's discourse is obviously state-centric, and by extension social-centric and anthropocentric. It focuses mostly on power relations, thus covering only a part of the dialectical relation of power-capital-nature proposed by Moore (2017c). However, Kotkin is only interested in the politics of great world powers, thus reproducing the discourse that shaped the unequal relations between the Global North and Global South (Solarz, 2009) or the core-periphery division proposed by Wallerstein (1974). For him, as for other realists, the system of states is the best way to achieve global balance, although Cox (1981) has shown that it mostly served to strengthen and stabilize the existing relations of domination and inequalities. Importantly, Kotkin abstracts the system of states from capitalism, despite strong claims that it is in fact now a part of it, as capitalism is not only economical in nature, but political-economical (Wallerstein, 1984). It seems that realism still ignores the fact that the territorial aspect of national interests and international politics are derivative from the self-reproducing capitalistic expansionism (van Apeldoorn, 2016).

Moreover, other than pointing out the fact that it was the elites that have been reaping the majority of profits from globalization, he does not actually challenge the neoliberal global economy and its inequality-producing mechanisms. Thus, his realist discourse serves to stabilize the current shape of the capitalist world-ecology and its relations of dominance and exploitation of societies and nature. This is because there is no social justice without environmental justice, and the economic inequalities should be dialectically connected to environmental problems, as Moore (2015) suggests.

Most importantly, Kotkin completely disregards environmental issues. He only brings up 3D printing, artificial intelligence or genetics revolutions as factors that may destabilize the world in the near future, as if the climate crisis was not even happening. There is no mention of how the changing global ecosystem will affect the geopolitical game that is at the center of his attention nor how it will affect the trend of raising inequality. Such omission seems unwarranted in the reality of the end of the second decade of the 21st century and all the more worrisome when taking into account the latest experts' opinions published by *Nature* (Mach *et al.*, 2019). The experts agreed that climate change has already affected organized armed conflict within countries and will most probably increase future risks of conflict. And

it is predicting and avoiding conflicts that realism should provide us with most effectively. However, the normative aspect of Kotkin's article maintains the current way of looking at and solving global political and economic issues with no regard to the fragility of the Earth's biosphere.

4. LIBERALISM

The validity and efficacy of liberalism was defended in the July/August 2018 issue of *Foreign Affairs* by one of the journal's leading authors, G. John Ikenberry joined by Daniel Deudney. Deudney and Ikenberry (2018) try to show that the liberal world order is far from collapsing, despite very strong signs of its weakening. Moreover, they claim that the liberal theory of International Relations is far from becoming obsolete, despite the current revisionist policies of China and Russia or the global raise of nationalism and opposition to international institutions.

Like Kotkin, they see the United States as the builder of the modern world order, which is strong enough to survive its leader's waning power. They emphasize the value of interconnectivity which will be key in solving any future global issues. They point out that the relentlessly rising interdependence will still require cooperation through established institutions, because even illiberal states will do this for their own pragmatic self-interest. As they write, the liberal international order does not depend on all of its members being liberal.

Deudney and Ikenberry try to defend liberalism as a school of thought by showing that it is no longer utopian in its visions, recognizing tragic tradeoffs, but still believing in the saving power of technology. They see the capitalist democracy as the best possible outcome for any state because they believe that it is best suited to realizing human interests in the modern world. Like Kotkin, they recognize the growth of inequality and the disproportionate distribution of profits from globalization towards elites. However, they blame these problems on society's abandonment of core liberal values or on not implementing them strongly enough. They do not put the blame on the inherent mechanisms of capitalism itself.

Unlike the realist Kotkin, the liberalism apologists recognize the existence of environmental problems which are now present on a global scale. They blame the cumulative effect of human activities on the global ecosystem and use the term "Anthropocene". However, Deudney and Ikenberry do not see any role of the current political and economic system in this process, making humanity as a whole responsible. Moreover, they do not think that the current global capitalist economy and the state system require any reform in order to tackle the environmental problems. Instead, they place their faith in the existing global institutions and institutional innovations rather than large-scale institutional change. They believe that recent outcomes like the Paris climate agreement show the strength of the current order and will be enough to safeguard against environmental destruction. Their narrative on environmental problems does not also show their real scale or urgency, as they are enumerated along other challenges: artificial intelligence, cyberwarfare and genetic engineering.

In conclusion, Deudney's and Ikenberry's discourse is state-centric, just as Kotkin's was. The difference is that they believe that the international institutions will survive any revisionist or nationalist surges within the system and will still be providing everybody with a base for cooperation in solving global issues. By working within the system rather than against it, they preserve the existing global structure of social and political relations and their accompanying

inequalities of power and wealth (Cox, 1981). While they are right that the institutionalized liberal world order is very resilient, as no major international organization or agreement has been significantly challenged or weakened in recent history, they most likely are wrong that this liberal world order has done enough to prevent global crises – with the climate crisis being the most important one. They also believe that it was liberalism that rid humanity from most of its faults, like imperialism, slavery and racism. Such beliefs have obviously been challenged, mostly because of liberalism's integral connection to capitalism. As numerous critical thinkers have pointed out neither imperialism, nor slavery, nor racism are gone from the world (Agnew, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Veltmeyer & Petras, 2005; Moniz Bandeira 2019). Deudney and Ikenberry claim that liberalism is to be credited for a historical trend towards justice, even though Patel and Moore (2017) have shown that it is multilayered and multifaceted injustice towards peoples and nature that was being reproduced by capitalism. Deudney and Ikenberry blame much of the historical wrongdoings on human nature to seek power, rather than capital's nature to seek new means of reproduction. Likewise, they see environmental problems as threats from the outside or caused by *Anthropos* as a whole, not by the capitalist relations and exploitation. This goes in line with Moore's (2017a) argument against "Anthropocene" as an obscuring term that hides the real power-capital-nature relations that cause the ecological crisis. It also proves the human-centric character of mainstream political theories, mentioned by Chakrabarty (2018).

5. CONCLUSION

The two analyzed articles seem to prove that knowledge is always constituted in reflection of interests (Ashley, 1981). They also are very clearly normative, which shows that not much has changed in the study of International Relations since the findings of Neufeld (1995). In accordance with the past findings of Cox (1981), both realist and liberal theories of International Relations serve to strengthen and stabilize the power and capital relations. Both discourses also marginalize certain regions in the global configuration, which is in line with the findings of Saraswat and Meena (2017) and the modern treatment of the North-South divide described by Solarz (2009) in which most of the Global South is ignored in the Northern discourse. They function within the synergy of capitalist logic and territorial logic pointed out by Harvey (2003). The capitalist logic, which emerges from finding and capitalizing new resources and opening new markets, is realized through the liberal discourse of Deudney and Ikenberry, while the territorial logic, which encompasses military or diplomatic rivalries and strategies, is realized through the geopolitical, realist discourse of Kotkin. Both articles try to make sense of the globalized world, but they do not raise questions about how capitalist economic imperatives and international relations shape each other, what is the geography of capitalism and how economy remakes territory and nature. This lack of a dialectical approach (Sparke, 2018) is one of their biggest weaknesses.

When it comes to environmental issues and the climate crisis, both discourses prove that the urgency of "greening" the mainstream political theories still has not been embraced (Saward *et al.*, 2009). The realist discourse in Kotkin's article completely omits the issues of degradation and climate crisis, which is not surprising given the findings of Green and Hale (2017) about their unpopularity among political scientists. The liberal discourse of Deudney and Ikenberry does tackle the problem, but does not provide any radical ways of changing

the relation of society and nature, and is still working within the system, not questioning the system itself. With no vision of abandoning the prevalent neo-extractivism (Cupples, 2013; Rousselin, 2018) or the unending search for new ways for capital to reproduce itself by cheap work or cheap resources (Moore, 2015), both paradigms do not do much for constructing a consensual political discourse for dealing with the ecological crisis. It seems that the traditional paradigms really are unable or unwilling to face the great ecological threat. They only try to give provisional explanations for why the world politics swing one way or the other. Moreover, rather than encompassing the whole power-capital-nature relation, they remain in the Society + Nature dualism, treating nature as something that is outside, is a given constant and can be fixed with band-aid solutions. Both articles prove that there is no deeper reflection on the role of the current world political-economic order in creating and sustaining the dangerous power-capital-nature relations. And because it is matters of global importance that best test any theories and paradigms that aspire to explain the world, the ongoing ecological crisis and climate change will soon ultimately test the realist and liberal schools of thought in International Relations. Time will tell if future popularization of these scientific discourses will be any different than today and will make encompass the whole world-ecology with its numerous power-capital-nature relations.

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