

International Political Theory 2020: The Worst of Times, the Best of Times

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Cosmopolitan Dystopia: International Intervention and the Failure of the West, Philip Cunliffe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 240 pp., cloth \$120, paperback \$24.95, eBook \$26.95.

Critical International Theory: An Intellectual History, Richard Devetak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 272 pp., cloth \$42.95, eBook \$41.99.

Restraint in International Politics, Brent J. Steele (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 316 pp., cloth \$99.99, eBook \$80.

War and the Politics of Ethics, Maja Zehfuss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 248 pp., cloth \$90, eBook \$89.99.

There has been plenty to complain about in 2020. It has been a trying time in so many ways. Capturing the full scope of what has come to pass would, however, be a fool's errand. The shocking mortality rate of the pandemic, the intensification of class and racial hierarchies, the derailment of everyday rituals and life, social isolation, and the anticipation of global recession; there is simply too much to take in, and we are still too close to it. But we can start to reflect on how these phenomena have affected the things we care about in our particular corners of the world. Like many other international relations (IR) scholars, I am sure, I have felt the loss of classroom interaction quite acutely. Remote platforms like Zoom are a poor substitute for the extemporaneous conversations one has with each new group of students as they encounter for the very first time the writings of E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Susan Strange, Hedley Bull, Cynthia

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Enloe, Michael Walzer, and Alex Wendt, among others. The pity of these lost conversations is all the greater as the present period has been an unusually fertile time for IR scholarship. This is especially the case when it comes to work bearing on the nexus between what we might call international political theory and international ethics. The past two years have seen the publication of several outstanding texts—texts that, were it not for COVID-19, would surely have generated a far livelier response than they have so far elicited. I want to write about four of, in my humble opinion, the most interesting of these works. The reason these books are so worthwhile, I want to suggest, is because the way they approach the domain of ethical inquiry discloses fresh ways of thinking about what (IR) scholarship can and should be about. These books trade not in niche or esoteric topics but in big and ambitious ideas that challenge us to reflect anew on our responsibilities as IR scholars.

THE POLITICS OF ETHICS

The first book under consideration is Maja Zehfuss's superb 2018 work, *War and the Politics of Ethics*. The book addresses several issues, but its central theme is a critique of the generative role that just war thinking has played in what others have called the current era of endless war. Critiquing the project of just war thinking is something of a (very welcome) cottage industry these days. Ronan O'Callaghan, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, Elke Schwarz, and Ned Dobos have all recently published stellar works on this topic.¹ I have chosen to focus on Zehfuss's book because it raises issues pertaining to the relation between ethical inquiry and IR scholarship that speak to broader trends in the field.²

Her book opens with an invitation to the reader to consider both the promise and the peril of the idea that war can ever be a noble or worthy enterprise. She ultimately argues that the peril far exceeds the promise. But how she gets there is fascinating. Zehfuss's point of departure is the concept of "ethical war." She uses this term to denote the belief that war can be an instrument for affecting positive change in the world. Ethical war, she writes, "stands for the contention that the use of force, if harnessed to ethical purposes, such as spreading democracy and human rights and defending the defenceless, can make the world a better place to live" (p. 179). While it is tempting to dismiss this kind of thinking as utopian nonsense—far removed from having any kind of application in the real world—Zehfuss cautions us against complacency of this kind. Would that it were so,

she laments. In actual fact, the concept of ethical war has been widely embraced by Western states and militaries to the degree that it can influence and shape their conduct. It results in wrongheaded wars, misguided interventionism, and what she sees as the kind of liberal naivety exemplified by the responsibility to protect (RtoP) agenda. The problem, for Zehfuss, is that the idea of ethical war is as self-defeating as it is seductive. It jeopardizes the populations it purports to defend; it kills in order to protect; it destroys villages to save them; it bombs for peace.

It is at this point that Zehfuss's argument picks up serious momentum. Contra scholars such as Michael Walzer and James Turner Johnson, she submits that the problem she describes cannot be attributed simply to the misinterpretation or misapplication of just war theory. Rather, the problem lies with the logic of just war theory itself. Specifically, it stems from the fact that just war theorizing is predicated upon the mistaken belief that war is a purely ethical problem and not also a political one. The result of this move, she concludes, is a shallow discourse that perpetuates the very issues it purports to resolve. Zehfuss's own response to this is not to issue a call for a move beyond ethics or to bring politics back into the conversation; rather, it is a call to approach just war theorizing in light of the realization that each always already implies the other. The manner by which she draws upon the writings of Jacques Derrida to elaborate this position is both original and intriguing. It is original insofar as it generates new questions and ways of thinking about just war theory, not least pertaining to its limitations. It is intriguing on account of the division it challenges (but also assumes) between ethics and politics. This sounds more complicated than it actually is. Essentially, to the degree that *War and the Politics of Ethics* challenges us to reconsider the relation between ethics and politics, it also highlights Zehfuss's narrow construal of ethics as a Kantian concern with "ideal principles" (p. 51) and imperatives that reside in their own sphere set apart from the everyday experience of political life. This is certainly how many scholars of international relations think about ethics. But is it the only game in town?

OUT OF ORDER

Philip Cunliffe has published not just one but two books in the current period: *The New Twenty Years' Crisis: A Critique of International Relations, 1999–2019* and *Cosmopolitan Dystopia: International Intervention and the Failure of the West*. It is the second of these books that I wish to concentrate upon here. As

well as being an excellent piece of work in its own right, written with all of Cunliffe's customary brio, it is also an interesting companion piece to the arguments developed by Zehfuss. While Cunliffe's style of argument is very different than Zehfuss's, he comes to strikingly similar conclusions as she does.³

Cunliffe is a long-time critic of interventionism and a pugilistic opponent of the aforementioned RtoP agenda. And it is in this light that he frames the purpose of *Cosmopolitan Dystopia*: "This is a book about the character of the liberal international order over the last thirty years of the post-Cold War era and how it came to be characterised by repetitive military interventions that effectively collapsed into an era of permanent war" (p. vii). The book, in other words, is about how the RtoP project has not only run aground but undermined international order in so doing. The "how" in this formulation requires elaboration. Cunliffe's intention is not merely to trace the causes and effects of particular liberal wars but to discern the mysterious mechanisms by which the notion of liberal war itself has come to be regarded as a legitimate instrument of the very order that it (in his view) undermines. Cunliffe encapsulates this challenge in an incisive question: What is it about liberal interventionism that leads us, in the face of all the troubles it has led to (in Iraq, Libya, and so forth), to assume that it is still the answer to our problems? Powerfully put, I am sure we can all agree.

The argument Cunliffe marshals in response to this question speaks to the relation between politics and ethics. He dismisses the orthodox wisdom that insofar as interventions lead to trouble, it is only because their ethical, humanitarian purpose has been undermined by some failure of vision or rearing up of ulterior political motives. The problem with these accounts, Cunliffe claims, is "not that they are too critical, but that they are not critical enough; not that they are too political, but that they are ultimately apolitical" (p. 183). On these accounts, it is politics that is always the problem; and it is a problem precisely because it impedes the realization of our ethical vision—an ethical vision that is predicated upon the ideal of universal human rights. Cunliffe, however, would have us flip this equation right around. He does not subscribe to "a tale of ethics being undermined by politics" (p. 183), but of politics led astray by ethical commitments. So far, then, as there is fault to be found, it lies in our insistence on treating issues that are essentially and deeply political not on their own terms, but as a function of or proxy for human rights. What makes this possible, Cunliffe concludes, is the ideology of human rights itself. There is, he states, no longer any hiding from the fact that "human rights are the ideology of state paternalism and permanent

war” (p. 184). If, then, we are serious about tackling the problems of global order, it is time to dispense with the charade of human rights. Until we disavow them and acknowledge political problems for what they are—that is, *political* problems—we are doomed to fiddle while Rome burns.

Put concisely, Cunliffe’s argument amounts to three key claims. The first is that the sheer weight of evidence mounted against cosmopolitan approaches to international politics (Iraq, Libya, and so forth) has laid bare its dystopic effects. The second is that these dystopic effects are an inevitable by-product of the creeping exceptionalism that Cunliffe identifies at the heart of human rights discourse and the RtoP agenda that goes with it. The third and final claim is that these developments combine to frustrate rather than advance our understanding of what responsible statecraft entails.

Trading in big ideas and compellingly argued, *Cosmopolitan Dystopia* presents an incisive analysis of contemporary international relations and the fault lines that structure it. Viewed in its totality, what Cunliffe’s book offers us, in his own words, is a razor-sharp set of reflections on the stories we tell ourselves about the international order. And while his starting point is different from Zehfuss’s, he nevertheless arrives at a similar destination, one where ethics tends toward moralism and is thereby seen as corruptive of political judgment. The ghost of Bernard Williams is, then, in a curious way, never far away in either case. This, to be clear, is not a bad thing at all.

(NO) HOLDING BACK

Brent J. Steele’s *Restraint in International Politics* is a very different kettle of fish. That is to say, it tells a very different story, and one of the reasons it does so is because it assumes a very different account of what constitutes ethics. But before we go into that, it is necessary to introduce the book and what it is all about.

A genuinely world-revealing study, *Restraint in International Politics* is a big book in almost every sense of the word. Stacked with ideas, theories, and cases that reach into a wide variety of domains, it presents an ambitious intellectual project that has the potential to be transformative of how we think about and theorize international relations. Where most conventional studies take the actions of states and other agents as the key to whatever stories they wish to tell about world politics, Steele inverts this approach. He proposes that we can learn new and interesting things about how international politics works by looking at and analyzing

those cases wherein states and/or other agents did not take any action, but rather forestalled themselves from doing so. Restraint, on this account, connotes holding back, and thus involves the exercise of moderated, channeled, conditioned conduct. This is international relations as seen through the lens of (with apologies for the mixed metaphor) the dog that does not bark. A simple enough idea to understand, it is nevertheless a difficult one to execute. Steele draws on a wide array of theoretical resources from across international relations and social theory to assist in this task. Everyone from Norbert Elias to Kenneth Waltz to Carl Jung to Reinhold Niebuhr is pressed into service. Steele's engagement with these sources is characteristically enthusiastic and purposive. He builds on them to reveal the role that "restraint complexes" play in ordering social and political life at all levels, to uncover both the structural and agential dimensions of these complexes, and to trace the systems of power and normative orders that they subtend (p. 90).

Anyone who has read Steele's work to date will appreciate what I mean when I say that this is a book that only he could write. A genuinely creative and open-textured reenvisioning of how to think about international politics, the range of ideas it canvasses is also occasionally dizzying. The structure and course of its argument require careful reading, but also reward it. Brimming with possibility, it is the kind of book that spills over its own edges. As such, it precipitates several further questions that demand attention. What, for instance, is the relationship between restraint as characterized here and the practice of prudence? What are the performative dimensions of restraint? How, and in what cases, is the practice of restraint likely to engender the kinds of disposition (for example, callousness, detachment, indifference) that facilitate apathetic behavior and acts of violent transgression? And finally, how might "restraintism" be understood as itself a form of "actionism"? Steele's own analysis brings these questions to the surface and shows us how we might begin to address them, but more work remains to be done.

Restraint in International Politics also suggests a different way of thinking about ethics (and its relation to international relations) than that essayed in the books by Zehfuss and Cunliffe, discussed above. While they acknowledge the interpenetration of politics and ethics, Zehfuss and Cunliffe appear to retain a narrow view of what ethics itself comprises. Steele's account of ethics is more complex. He treats ethics as neither a brake on nor a distraction from politics, but as one of its key battlegrounds—that is to say, as both one of its sources and one of its sites.

This orientation is central to Steele's analysis and the key to its richness. Proof of this arrives in two summary statements toward the end of the book. The first is a claim to discovery. "The struggles over restraint are everywhere," writes Steele, "and these struggles matter for the world we study and continue to grapple with as scholars, teachers, and citizens" (p. 248). The second, a quote from George Orwell, is both a situating remark and a certain type of call to arms: "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle" (p. 264). It will be fascinating to see how and with whom Steele develops these ideas in the future. One thing is clear, though, and that is that the future this book charts for IR scholarship is an exciting one.

CRITICAL THEORY IN A HISTORICAL MODE

The final book under discussion is Richard Devetak's *Critical International Theory: An Intellectual History*. This is a book that any subscriber to this journal who has ever asked themselves what it means to be an international political theorist must read. Andrew Linklater's blurb on the dust jacket frames its significance succinctly: "Richard Devetak provides the definitive analysis of critical theory in International Relations in an outstanding scholarly work which, also looking to the future, argues for a new image of 'critical theory in a historical mode.'" I wish here to endorse these comments and to tease out their full meaning by situating the publication of *Critical International Theory* in relation to two recent events that most IR theorists will recall.

The first of these events was the passing in late 2018 of Robert W. Cox. Among other things, Cox was, of course, the progenitor of the idea that IR theorizing can be divided into two general modes, which he called critical theory and the problem-solving theory. Arguably, Cox's principal contribution was to establish the basic terms and purposes of critical theory applied to IR. This is worth mentioning because what Devetak effectively does in *Critical International Theory* is channel Cox (and indeed his forebears) in order to provide a critical theoretical account of the development of international political theory. This comprises two elements. In the first instance, it identifies the main historical sources of international political theory and traces their emergence and reception over time. Steeped in the contextualist approach of the Cambridge School, and influenced by the work of Ian Hunter, Devetak's approach to this is as sophisticated as it is pleasing. Giambattista Vico even makes a rare but welcome appearance.

Second, and building on this, Devetak seeks to plot out a critical approach to international political theory that is attached to a historicizing mode of analysis rather than to a particular philosophical or metaethical position (p. 159). The benefits of this approach are advertised clearly by Devetak. It provides the intellectual tools that enable us to “historicise our conceptions of theory, the international, and the critical,” while also granting that “none of these terms can be assumed to bear transcendental meaning; all are the contingent product of ongoing, unfinished battles to impose meaning and value” (p. 202). The measure of success for this approach, Devetak (quoting Pierre Hadot) argues, lies in the degree to which it furnishes its practitioners with the means “to live and to look at the world in a new way” (p. 3).

The applications of this approach are obvious. Those of us who have an interest in the historical evolution of the just war tradition, for instance, will find Devetak’s approach deeply edifying, as will scholars interested in colonialism, human rights, inequality, and so forth. The value of this approach can be more simply illuminated, however, by reference to the second event alluded to above. This is the fractious debate within the IR scholarly community about whether or not securitization theory is mired in racist thought. This dispute was sparked by the publication of an essay by Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit in *Security Dialogue* that leveled the charge that securitization theory is “structured not only by Eurocentrism, but also by civilizationism, methodological whiteness, and antiblack racism.”⁴ The response this critique elicited from the architects of securitization theory, Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, was equally forceful.⁵ The broader exchange this provoked on Twitter and other social media platforms was polarized and messy, pitting proponents of critical race theory against what we might call the establishment IR community.⁶ I will not say anything about the substance of this dispute, but I will note that insofar as it sensitizes us to questions of positionality and personae, Devetak’s approach provides us with a means of understanding the forces that combined to produce this debate and the tools to chart a course through it. It will not help us reconcile the parties to this particular debate, perhaps, but it will help us to both contextualize and learn from it.

Mention of the securitization theory debate also draws attention to some of the roads that Devetak did not travel in this book. It would, for instance, be interesting to extend his analysis to account for recent developments in the field of critical security studies and, more specifically, securitization theory. Indeed, there is interesting work to be done on many of the subfields that feed like tributaries into the

mainstream of IR, including critical race studies, postcolonial thought, and black radical thought. If it is right—which I think it is—that Devetak’s approach entrains scholars to “reflect on and problematize dominant conceptions of theory, the international, and indeed the critical” (p. 16), *Critical International Theory* will be a most valuable resource in the years to come as IR grapples with its relation to empire, race, and Eurocentrism.

Returning to the general theme of this essay, Devetak’s approach intimates an interesting set of thoughts on both the relation between politics and ethics and on what constitutes ethics itself. Ethics, for Devetak, is neither an external impediment to politics nor simply a site where politics plays out. Rather, it is intrinsic to the impulse toward, and the process of, politics. It is baked into the stances we assume, the personae we cultivate, and the systems of thought that define what we do and make us who we are. It is, in other words, endogenous to, generative of, and even symbiotic with politics, such that any attempt to characterize it as ever having any kind of independent existence apart from politics simply does not make sense. To think ethically is therefore to think politically; while to think politically is also to think ethically. The beauty of Devetak’s *Critical International Theory* is the clarity with which it demonstrates that the ways in which we think about international relations both are implicated in and contribute to these practices.

CONCLUSION

The four texts considered here trade in big ideas. In so doing, they reveal that, far from being an addendum to the primary concerns of international relations, the study of ethics is constitutive of them. Sweeping in scope and daring in their analysis, these books challenge us to reflect anew upon not only the relationship between politics and ethics but also how we as IR scholars navigate this relationship in our own research and writings. Happily, this does not look set to be a flash in the pan. Recent and forthcoming works by scholars such as Andy Hom, Liane Hartnett, John Emery, Neil Renic, Eglantine Staunton, and Thomas E. Doyle II suggest that the future for international political theory appears very bright indeed.

NOTES

- ¹ Ronan O’Callaghan, *Walzer, Just War and Iraq: Ethics as Response* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2015); Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2019); Elke Schwarz, *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent Technologies* (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 2018); and Ned Dobos, *Ethics, Security, & the War-Machine: The True Cost of the Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

- ² I expand upon these ideas elsewhere: Cian O’Driscoll, “How I Learned to *Start* Worrying and Love the Just War Tradition,” in “The Promise and Paradox of Ethical War: A Special Issue on Maja Zehfuss’s War and the Politics of Ethics,” special issue, *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 3 (2019), pp. 182–90.
- ³ I am grateful to the editors of this journal for their advice on this point.
- ⁴ Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, “Is Securitization Theory Racist? Civilizationism, Methodological Whiteness, and Antiblack Thought in the Copenhagen School,” *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 1 (February 2020), pp. 3–22, at p. 3.
- ⁵ Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, “Racism and Responsibility—The Critical Limits of Deepfake Methodology in Security Studies: A Reply to Howell and Richter-Montpetit,” *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 4 (August 2020), pp. 386–94.
- ⁶ This controversy is discussed in detail in episode 9 of the *Whiskey & International Relations Theory* podcast entitled “Race and Securitization Theory” (podomatic audio, 1:47), www.podomatic.com/podcasts/whiskeyindiaromeo/episodes/2020-05-21T14_58_46-07_00.

Abstract: The year 2020 has been a very trying one for many people, and universities have not been exempted from the challenges it has posed. There are real concerns that the effects of COVID-19 could lead to a lost generation of academic researchers. At the same time, this has been an unusually fecund period for the field of ethics and international affairs. New ideas regarding the relationship between politics and ethics have come to light, with implications for how we think about what ethics actually comprises. This essay seeks to take stock of this moment by considering the contributions to the field made by four recently published books. It concludes that we are observing a trend toward a more expansive way of thinking about ethics, one that has significant implications for how we approach the task of international relations scholarship.

Keywords: ethics, restraint, just war, critical theory, intervention, political theory