The New Agenda for International Relations

*From Polarization to Globalization in World Politics?*
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Preface

Students of international relations (IR) differ among themselves on just about every aspect of their subject – from the very name of the discipline to its proper subject matter and scope. But few would deny that there have been significant periods or eras which themselves have shaped not only the structure of world politics but also the way in which it has been studied. The geopolitical and ideological contours of the Cold War period impacted on almost every aspect of world politics for around forty-five years. And it was virtually impossible for IR students working in this period, whether in a theoretical or a policy-oriented vein – or a combination of both – to avoid at least implicit reference to the way in which world politics was structured around Cold War considerations.

If the year 1989 marked the beginning of the end of a long period of certainty in world politics, the same applies to the discipline devoted to its study. What had been the primary point of reference for the discipline of IR for over four decades simply dissolved. But, far from leaving scholars at a loss, the passing of the Cold War seems to have re-energized the discipline and given it not simply a new sense of purpose and direction, but many new directions. Exactly where these may be taking us is another matter altogether, and exploring such questions is an important task for the collection as a whole.

One direction that cannot be denied – for better or for worse – is the extent to which IR scholars have ventured into any number of different areas of inquiry which have not been considered as traditional concerns of the discipline. This means, among other things, that IR has also opened up considerably to a range of insights from other disciplinary perspectives. Indeed, the post-Cold War period to date has seen IR scholars venturing into every other social science discipline, and beyond. The same can of course be said of fields such as comparative politics, political theory, anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and so on. Thus scholars in other social science disciplines or sub-disciplines have increasingly adopted a more ‘international’ or ‘global’ perspective in their work.
The various novel directions of the discipline in the post-Cold War era, in terms of both subject matter and scholarly approaches, together constitute a large part of 'the new agenda' for international relations, and the contributions to this collection reflect the variety of issues and perspectives that have become part and parcel of this agenda in recent years. Beyond the attention to issues and perspectives, however, is the question of structure in contemporary world politics. As suggested above, the Cold War was the major factor shaping both the structure and dynamics of world politics and the way in which international relations scholars generally approached their work over a period of some forty-five years.

If there is a single term which encapsulated the Cold War's geopolitical structure, it is probably 'polarization'. However, polarization should also be understood in terms of ideas and ideologies. So, just as the collapse of the Soviet Union in the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall signalled the end of strategic polarization, for some it also marked the apparent end of a particular form of polarized debate about political, social and economic ideas. This is what clearly inspired the 'end of history' thesis, outbursts of liberal triumphalism, and the heralding of a new world order.

So what, if anything, is filling the structural vacuum left by the Cold War? One obvious candidate is the phenomenon of globalization. This, of course, is one of the most hotly contested concepts of the post-Cold War era and its meaning, utility and application are scarcely settled questions. Moreover, it can be argued that there are new forms of polarization in world politics. The question mark at the end of the subtitle, then, indicates the highly contested nature of the assumptions embodied in it. A question mark could well have been placed after each of the main sections of the book as well. For, although the contributors explore ideas about a new agenda along with a number of new issues and new perspectives, there is also an emphasis on continuities.

The chapters comprising this volume were first presented and discussed at a conference held at the University of East Anglia in September 1999 entitled 'The New Agenda for International Relations: Ten Years after the Wall'. Although not exactly on the date that the Berlin Wall actually fell, the conference was none the less designed to mark the end of the first decade 'after the Fall' – an event that has certainly come to symbolize the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era in world politics.

Sponsorship for the conference was received from two principal sources: the Warwick/ESRC Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation and the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs (New York). It goes without saying that I am very grateful to both these bodies for making the conference possible. In planning and organizing the conference, many people also gave valuable assistance and advice. Of my colleagues at the School of Economic and Social Studies at UEA, I'd especially like to thank Hazel Taylor, Peter Handley and Nino Palumbo. For acting as additional chairs and discussants, and therefore contributing directly to the very lively and
fruitful discussions throughout the conference, I should also thank Nick Rengger, Nigel Dower, Rorden Wilkinson, David Seddon and Mike Bowker. The latter deserves additional thanks for his invaluable support and advice during the entire planning period. Finally a special thanks to my daughter Katharine who volunteered her time to help ensure that the conference desk ran smoothly and efficiently throughout.

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Part I

The New Agenda
Introduction

A New Agenda for International Relations?

Stephanie Lawson

Introduction

There have been several defining moments over the course of the last hundred years that have been described as signalling a new age in world politics as well as stimulating new ways of looking at the phenomena involved. The most recent, and the one that continues to define the present period, was the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, although by then the Cold War that it symbolized had already come to an effective end as a result of the momentous changes that had taken place in Gorbachev’s Soviet Union since the mid-1980s. If the fall of the Wall, together with the events that followed with the unravelling of the Soviet empire, symbolized the end of one era and the beginning of another in world politics, it also prompted some serious rethinking about the nature, purpose, methods, scope and subject matter of the discipline that studies world politics, traditionally known as international relations (IR). With the collapse of polarization between the two superpowers and the threat of all-out nuclear warfare in rapid retreat, other significant concerns for world politics gained prominence. And it was not long before scholars and other observers of world affairs were talking about a ‘new agenda’ for the discipline of IR in a ‘post-Cold War era’.

An early version of the new agenda that was put forward in 1991 identified a number of global policy concerns including the environment, drug trafficking, AIDS, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, migration and human rights. At a broader, systemic level, the phenomenon of globalization, and what seemed to be opposite tendencies towards fragmentation, were identified as being among the most significant ‘macro’ issues. All these, together with the very idea of global policy, have become prominent topics in the study of world politics, along with new conceptions of such crucial concerns as security which has expanded from a narrow military definition to encompass many of these new agenda issues. But these developments raise new problems and challenges for
students of world politics in terms of how we now define our subject areas either within the broad field of IR or within specialist areas such as environmental politics or security studies. With respect to the latter, as Karin Fierke points out in chapter 8, if 'security' can now mean anything and everything, then it effectively means nothing at all.

This raises the question whether the broadening of the agenda to include an almost boundless array of problems and issues constitutes a problem for the integrity of the discipline itself. This is an especially interesting question in an era of globalization which is widely seen as leading to the almost complete ‘unbounding’ of the globe. If IR itself is to become unbounded, and to take on board the study of practically everything, then what, in the end, will constitute the core of the discipline and make it distinct from other disciplines? Or does it matter whether the discipline as such dissolves? Is IR becoming an ‘interdiscipline’ (rather than simply more interdisciplinary in its approach)? And, if so, would it be appropriate simply to abandon the whole idea of IR as a discipline in its own right and reassemble courses of study under something called ‘International Studies’? Breaking down the barriers between disciplines may well be a good thing in many respects. After all, how can one possibly contribute effectively to contemporary debates about, say, the role of culture in world politics without having a good understanding of highly influential anthropological approaches to the concept? On the other hand, where does the ‘unbounding’ of the discipline end, if not in the study of everything?

'Everything', as astronomer John D. Barrow notes, is a very big subject. None the less, he goes on to point out that contemporary trends in the study of the physical sciences also suggest that the quest for a ‘theory of everything’ is more popular than ever, having entered the mainstream of theoretical physics after a period in which it was sought only by a ‘few maverick thinkers and unconstrained speculators’ (including Einstein). The more conservative and parsimonious of IR theorists would join in repudiating the utility of any such undertaking. The idea that one can see or grasp ‘the whole’ and thus be in a position to theorize rationally about it is anathema to conservative social and political thought. And theoretical parsimony has, according to its proponents, been a prime virtue of realist IR thought in both its traditional and its neo-realist forms. Kenneth Walz, for example, defends his version of neo-realism as a theory limited to explaining a certain slice of political activity – not the entire spectrum of social and political concerns – on the grounds that a theory has to be about something, not everything.

These are some of the concerns that have been expressed generally about IR in the last decade or so. But they have not all been raised simply as a result of the end of the Cold War. To assume so would be to underestimate the extent to which the discipline had already been undergoing substantial transformation – or had at least had its foundations severely shaken in the previous decade. Kal Holsti, writing in 1987, argued that international theory was in a 'state of disarray' as a result of challenges over the previous ten years or so which had
broken down a ‘three-centuries-long intellectual consensus’ about international politics. In place of a fundamental consensus on the subjects of inquiry and theorizing, new conceptions and images of the world, and how it works, had arisen, most criticizing the realist, or classical, tradition.\(^6\) This fundamental consensus had evolved around three core assumptions: first, that the proper domain of study comprised the causes of war and the conditions for peace, security and order; second, that the focus of study must be on the essential units of analysis in the international system, namely nation-states, and their diplomatic/military behaviour; and, third, that states operated in a system characterized by anarchy, understood as the absence of any overarching authority in the international sphere.\(^7\)

The Cold War period certainly produced a great deal of theory reflecting this consensus, which also strongly supported realist approaches. But, as is evident from Holsti’s remarks, the consensus was already under challenge well before the events of 1989. Even so, there is no doubt that the end of the Cold War provided a significant impetus for the various directions that IR had started to take, which included a reassessment of existing conceptual and methodological issues and an interest in alternative approaches. For many of the practical issues on the emerging agenda, a theoretical focus concerned almost exclusively with the play of power politics, which had indeed dominated throughout the Cold War period, seemed simply inappropriate or even irrelevant. Alongside more conventional approaches such as realism (and neo-realism) and liberal internationalism, the contemporary period has seen a burgeoning of other perspectives, including constructivism, postmodernism, feminism and critical theory, none of which now resides simply at the margins. Moreover, as Jack Donnelly emphasizes in chapter 11, we can also see much more potential for a dynamic engagement between these newer approaches and realism in its various forms.

At another level both the practical issues on the new agenda, as well as the perspectives and approaches that have been applied to their study (including the move away from realism), have combined to produce a much stronger focus on normative international theory. In an earlier work, Chris Brown notes that this refers to a body of work which addresses directly ‘the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation generated by the discipline’. In its most basic form, he says, ‘it addresses the ethical nature of the relations between communities [and] states’.\(^8\) As we shall see, normative theory underlies virtually all the issues dealt with in this collection. This is especially so with respect to the phenomenon of globalization and its impact on the nature of political community as well as forms of polarization other than those which were conventionally understood to characterize world politics in the Cold War period.

In thinking more generally about a new agenda for the discipline of IR in a new era of world politics – however we might characterize it – it is instructive
to review briefly the development of the discipline along with developments in world politics from the earlier part of the twentieth century. By doing this, we can see both continuities as well as new departures more clearly.

IR in the twentieth century

As mentioned at the beginning, several defining moments over the course of the twentieth century seemed to mark the beginning of a new age in world politics as well as new ways of looking at problems and possibilities. To be more specific, there have been three such moments. The first two followed the end of the World Wars in the first half of the twentieth century, and were therefore born out of an experience of violence on a massive scale. In both cases, the world seemed ready for remaking.

The discipline of IR as a field of study in its own right, separate from law and history, was itself founded as a direct response to the horrific and unprecedented experiences of World War I. This was marked by the establishment in 1919 of the Woodrow Wilson Chair of International Politics at University College Wales, Aberystwyth. The main focus for the new discipline was, not surprisingly, on the causes of war and the conditions for peace. The discipline’s main initial intellectual impetus in the years after World War I drew on idealism; on a belief that the world could – and therefore should – be made a better and safer place for all of humankind. The optimistic idea of inevitable progress in the development of human society as a whole attracted many supporters then. But progress still had to be nudged along with the assistance of purposive human agency. One of the principal ideas of the time was that a new and peaceful world order required an overarching international organization that could mediate relations between the essential components of an anarchical international system – sovereign states – and thereby ensure a viable form of collective security. And so the League of Nations was created.

By the late 1930s, as Europe again descended into mayhem, the idealist approach to world politics with its strong normative basis seemed almost completely discredited. In the wake of this second catastrophic World War, and then with a Cold War between two major powers setting in immediately, a new approach to theory and practice was called for. The discipline therefore took the turn towards realism – a mode of analysis that promised to tell it how it really is. The core assumptions of this school, in its classic form of thought, were a rather pessimistic view of human nature and the inevitability, not of progress towards an ideal or at least better state of existence, but of the unremitting struggle for power.

Realist theories, moreover, gave explicit support to the view that issues of morality can have no place in the international sphere. The premise was that because a structure of sovereign authority is necessary to sustain moral rules
and practices, and because such a structure is present only within states, it follows that there can be no true morality in the anarchical realm of the international sphere which is constituted by the spaces between states. In other words, the international sphere was nothing short of a moral vacuum. In addition, realists have generally supported the view that moral values and beliefs — which give rise to moral rules and practices — can only arise within a community and are more or less specific to that community. Here, the ‘community’ has usually been equated with a ‘nation’ which is in turn conflated with ‘the state’. In short, realist theory has tended towards the position that moral values are relative — and state-bound. In the post-Cold War era, this kind of position on normative issues has also attracted support from communitarian theory in so far as it has been applied to the international sphere.  

For many proponents of realism during the Cold War era, to imagine that an international organization could overcome the essential condition of anarchy and form an international community capable of implementing, collectively, an idealist agenda for world order was regarded as pure folly. None the less, another attempt to achieve a measure of international co-operation in the pursuit of collective security was made with the founding of the United Nations. And a commitment to the highest form of idealism was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly in 1948.

In the meantime, however, the contours of the international order were being moulded around a clear bipolar pattern of superpower rivalry and many IR scholars obviously applied themselves to the analysis of this most dangerous manifestation of confrontation. After Hiroshima, this pattern of world order was held together partly by fear as the nuclear arms race commenced. The development of ever more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction delivered not simply a balance of power but a balance of terror which could, if upset, lead to mutually assured destruction — a scenario appropriately labelled with the acronym MAD.

Other important developments in the post-war period included the formal demise of the colonial empires. With this, the principle of self-determination gained increasing prominence as well as practical expression, although independence for many countries in the Third World periphery was heavily compromised by a number of factors, not least of which were the dynamics of Cold War bipolarity. Moreover, for many people at the periphery, the war was far from ‘cold’. While the core powers refrained from direct physical confrontation with each other, the violence of the Cold War was played out in proxy wars among their clients.

The polarized structure of superpower relations in the Cold War period is often understood simply in military or strategic terms. But of course there was much more to it than that. A principal characteristic of the period was the bipolarity of ideologies — of normative visions of how the world should be — that were represented by each of the power blocs. The states comprising the
Western power bloc championed the ideas and values underpinning capitalism and liberal democracy. The USSR and its ensemble of supporting states, on the other hand, justified their repressive methods of government as necessary for the realization of the common good through the establishment of communist society. So much is fairly commonplace.

It has also been said that as long as the communist bloc held together and sustained its challenge to the democratic West the space was created for authoritarian governments in the Third World to flourish. This may be true as far as it goes, but it is also the case that the US and its allies lent considerable support and encouragement to right-wing authoritarian regimes and movements around the world. In fact most right-wing regimes were – merely by virtue of their anti-communism – embraced as part of the ‘free world’. These included such notorious dictatorships as those of Marcos in the Philippines and Pinochet in Chile. It is little wonder that the messages about what constituted ‘democracy’ and acceptable human rights practices were somewhat mixed. And it is even less remarkable that the US – and many of its allies – have so often been charged with hypocrisy in foreign affairs. This also reinforced the realist notion that moral posturing in the international sphere is, in the final analysis, merely a reflection of specific self-interest masquerading as humanitarianism.

These issues aside, a remarkable feature of the Cold War period is that despite the emphatic left–right bipolarity of ideologies everyone actually agreed, in normative terms, that ‘democracy’ as such was a good thing and that there should be more of it. Moreover, virtually every government in the world claimed to be a democracy and each one certainly claimed to be concerned for the human rights of its citizens. The same generally applies today. As the rhetorical contest gained momentum in the early Cold War period, the philosopher W. B. Gallie put forward his now famous notion that democracy is an ‘essentially contested concept’. By this he meant that because democracy was almost universally regarded as something good and desirable it was something that everyone therefore wanted to claim as their own. But beyond this Gallie also implied that rival uses of the term by people in deeply opposed camps must all be regarded as legitimate – and for this reason Gallie has been understood (rightly or wrongly) as endorsing a relativist or at least sceptical perspective.

The main point to be noted here is that the rival uses of the term ‘democracy’ during the Cold War period revolved largely around ideological questions of how the good life promised by democracy was to be best achieved – through the freedom and political equality of a liberal democratic and capitalist regime, or through the more extensive socio-economic equality and freedom from exploitation promised by communism. Normative arguments about the cultural basis of one version or another, if they were used at all, were usually secondary. As we shall see, however, arguments about the role of culture are now central to a wide range of key normative issues in world politics from
discourses of women's human rights to the politics of paranoia evident in many
of the debates surrounding the relationship between 'Islam' and the 'West'.

The decisive answer to the ideological debate that dominated the Cold War era, for most people, seems to have been delivered in 1989. And this brings me back to my point of departure.

The New World Order at the end of history

As the forces which eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall gathered momentum, a hitherto obscure State Department official in Washington published a now well-known article, 'The End of History'. What Francis Fukuyama meant by the 'end of history' was that with the collapse of communism there remained no other viable models of economics or politics to challenge the dominance of either capitalism as an economic system, or democracy as a form of rule in its specifically liberal form. He argued that no other system could deliver the proverbial goods and that the massive political and economic changes under way in Europe at the time served to prove the point. So the polarization of ideologies and world-views that had been at the heart of the tensions and conflicts of much of the last half-century effectively collapsed. Capitalism and liberal democracy now seemed unchallengeable.

With the end of the Cold War, many no doubt thought the end of serious warfare had been reached as well. And given that most of the violent struggles in the Third World had been attributed to superpower manipulations it would have seemed quite reasonable to assume that a significant cause of violence in the periphery had also been removed. As is quite evident, however, the vacuum left by the collapse of bipolarity both in military and ideological terms has not been filled everywhere by peace and tranquillity. Warfare has continued to flourish in many parts of the Third World as well as the former Second World as civil wars or wars of state formation have continued to claim hundreds of thousands of lives. The twentieth century closed with few signs that violent conflict, as the pursuit of politics by other means, was about to pass into history. Indeed, much of the violence, especially in places like the Balkans, has been perpetrated in the name of history. It is also evident that the phenomenon of globalization has scarcely been effective in ameliorating the range of political ills that seem to have been generated by various forms of particularism and/or other kinds of polarization.

A significant part of the new agenda for IR devoted to studying these conflicts has therefore been very much preoccupied with the original concerns of the discipline – namely, the causes of war and the conditions for peace. But whereas earlier students of IR focused on inter-state wars contemporary warfare has usually been within states and much research has therefore concentrated on so-called 'internal conflicts'. The international dimensions of these conflicts, however, are numerous and it makes no sense – if it ever did – to treat