

Review - Challenging Boundaries: Great Flows and Territorial Identities

Written by Martina Petkova

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MARTINA PETKOVA, FEB 12 2015

Challenging Boundaries: Great Flows and Territorial Identities

Edited By: Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows and Territorial Identities edited by Shapiro and Alker is part of book series, providing great variety of re-visioning reflections on global dynamics and interpretational views on international relations. The main focus lies on the impact of the world of political theory and philosophical reality, influenced by antithetical forces. This essay collection throws light on comparative overviews of the unorthodox perspectives on universally accepted theoretical discourses. The authors, as well as the editors provide an on-going framing of the global hegemonic notions, their poststructuralist implications and idealistic realms. The framing introduced for providing such insights includes fitting of realism, culture, warfare, minorities, moral boundaries and anarchy in opposition to conventional perceptions. The following book review will articulate in the context of the trans-disciplinary method of Derridean – inspired, deconstructionist approach used by Michael Shapiro (Crilly, R. 2012), enabling more in-depth exploration on critical, aesthetical and psychoanalytical levels.

Core ideas and theoretical approaches

The analytical approach used in this edited volume is critically – ideational rather than purely factual. It omits generalizations and organizes the multiple debates into argumentative topics, often illustrating the political-societal boundaries of sovereignty and hegemony. The embodiment of theories presented form very incomparable space for interpretations, seen in both poststructuralist and postmodernist theoretical attitudes. They also take into consideration the psychological and cultural dynamics which predetermine specific behaviouristic and aesthetical propels. This all serves as background for the flowing analysis and parallels made in interlinking the multispectral arguments of societal studies, different kinds of realities and practical theories together. Thus, arguing in favour of Derrida and Lyotard in the context of this book, one can deduct that it was the strive for more independent interpretations within the attempt for analysing any societal or political factor, that lays the foundations of these engaging subjects and enables them to evolve fully.

The essayists are discussing the reformulation of international relations and politics per se. In this, they uncover the basis of conceptual expressions beyond the predetermined, ecumenical boundaries. Part I reflects on essential aspects relating to the world of politics as discussed by Campbell. He enlists the manifold of underlining geo-political forces, provoking the reconsideration of structural boundaries of postmodern realism and its incapability to restrict itself within only one shaping factor. The post-Cold War quest for stability and certainty moderates the broader critical social theory recapped by Jim George in an attempt to discuss the “illusory reality” (George, J. (1996) pp. 69-70) – as it is, and not as it is seen synonymously to realism. Furthermore, other views on realism suggested by Lindahl support to an extend the acceptance of the fact that any attempt to put theories in order would eventually result in an abstract comprehension, due to the fact that political identities in realism are composed from many factors, which should be interpreted as a whole, rather than partitioned.

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Strengths and Weaknesses

Critical, aesthetical and psychoanalytical views

Overall, the relations showed have been explored through challenging different theories in an attempt to re-discover them. Undoubtedly, many perceptions of the world presented in this book were subject of criticism – at times even too idealistic. This all contributes to the fluctuating nature namely of the topically – territorial overflow of diasporas, nationalism, sovereignty and history. And also implied, functioning beyond the grasp of any hypothetical or conventional apprehension.

The strengths of this book lie in the deconstructive way of uncovering important borderline currents. From territorial perspectives on Cuba, Asia and the West, through the Cold war, to the Aztec tribes, the writings provide aesthetical insights on how realities of moral struggle seem to serve and function far before or after exposing them to extrinsic influences. These influences become then gradually dissected. Part III revises territorial disputes, aesthetics of foreign policies, seen in the emergence of a tool for theoretical expression – the borderline. To illustrate more vividly, the debate formed by Ferguson (1996) on multiculturalism and trans-border relations unfolds more factors – dynamic nature of morals, role of culture and globalization, the system seen as self-sufficient and re-visioning the philosophical abolition of the ultimate, one-sided truth. Another problematic topic exemplifies the dispute of minority groups and their resonance in societies bothering Pettman (1996) in Part V and the respective view on flows of theories and practices. The next chapter focuses on Cuban homosexuality and gay diaspora – also looking at the difference in the historical stereotyping of the same sex, the fear of HIV and endeavours to protect nations.

I consider that the weaknesses, to a certain extent, of this essay collection appear not so much in the theorization of abstractness, rather the ostensible presence of subjectivity and idealism, though not at all times. One critical example dives in and deepens with the term of “magical realism” which lives between the past and the present, as reported by Bosteels, Mirella and Schilling (1996) – too subjective and lacking on descriptive contextualization. Finally, Shapiro’s view on militarism, Hegelian idealism and identity reformulate some theories in the context of Pearl Harbour and Arizona Memorial opposed to tribal wars of the Aztecs – contending variety of purposes the warfare possesses, which in the end appear, culturally uneven for the purpose of such analysis.

Conclusions

On one hand the book was considerably intellectually provocative in its nature. Despite the fact that any abnegation of traditional theories is capable of exposing to a great risk the core of the theory itself, especially within the global political environment, it proved successful. On the other hand, it managed to provide quite a different form, contrary to any mainstream view, the one of the post idealist and abstractionist in the narrative of philosophical literature. As a result we gain really interesting perspectives on the nature of theories and missing links between classical, critical and postmodernist views. The book is suitable for gaining extensive knowledge on many essential topics, frequently unpopular among students or practitioners, due to their complexity. It is neither too radical, nor too simplifying. In this respect, the essay collection would certainly inspire further unravelling research within political and social studies.

Notes

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Martina Petkova has an MA in International Relations from the University of Birmingham and a Bachelor's from the Hague University of Applied Sciences. Her academic research falls within the spheres of terrorism analysis and underdevelopment and her interest in the book was sparked during the MA programme's course on Contemporary IR Theory Debates. Currently, Petkova works as a voluntary researcher/contributor for the Arab-Jewish Forum in London.