

Review – The Invention of International Order

Written by Christopher David LaRoche

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CHRISTOPHER DAVID LAROCHE, AUG 28 2023

The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe After Napoleon

By Glenda Sluga

Princeton University Press, 2021

The Concert of Europe and the continental peace it produced remains one of the touchstones – and battlegrounds – of international relations. Was the peace based on a “material” balance of power? The ideas and ideologies of the diplomats and the regimes they represented? Or a new way of doing international politics? Drawing on the work of the late historian Paul Schroeder (1994) but forging their own mettle, international relations scholars have recently argued that elite-led innovations in great power politics secured the era’s continental peace (Rendall 2000; Mitzen 2013; Raymond 2019; Lascurettes 2020).

Glenda Sluga’s *The Invention of International Order* enters the fray not as a new theoretical explanation of the Concert but as a work of international history informed by a theoretical sensibility. If the focus of most IR treatments of the Concert is the “what” – the balance of power and great power management – Sluga focuses on the “who”: “who got to ‘do politics’ and to ‘be political’” (p.9). Rather than examine the structural features of the order, Sluga focuses our attention on the order’s ground level (or *bel étage*): the “social, economic, and political dimensions of the new international order” (p.1). As she puts it in her introduction, the book examines the post-Napoleonic moment

... as a moment that breathes life into new ways of doing politics between states, when women as well as men, bourgeois as well as aristocratic, non-state as well as state “actors” engaged new political possibilities in unprecedented ways, to diverse ends (p.3).

Sluga takes up this task by “adding” several classes of “non-state actors” to our story of the Concert – aristocratic *salonnières* and bourgeois *banquiers*, for example. Here, Sluga shows us in detail how the modernization of diplomacy was no linear path of progress. Instead, it empowered some actors while excluding others, particularly those that operated in the informal diplomatic structures of the immediate post-Napoleonic era. The Congress of Vienna, the major conference that began the Concert period, blurred the “lines between masculine methods of diplomacy and the feminine work of sociability” (p.148). But the modernization of diplomacy that followed the Congress “position[ed] the workings of the feminine salon as the antithesis of the operations of the masculine state” (p.42). More than deepening our picture of just the Concert, *The Invention of International Order* contributes to our overall understanding of how the state, diplomacy, and the modern international system dependent on them came into being.

The book is divided into sixteen chapters that operate as slices or vignettes of the book’s themes. The chapters proceed roughly chronologically: we begin in the salons of private palaces as the Sixth Coalition against Napoleon assembles, and we finish in France’s imposing Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the congress that settles the Crimean War. Sluga’s topics reflect those of the period, and are wide-ranging: relations between salons and more formal sites of diplomacy (a focus of the first few chapters); the “Eastern Question” (a focus of chapters eleven and fifteen); the various innovative committees or commissions on subjects ranging from statistic to river navigation to slavery (highlighted in chapter eight); Jewish and religious rights (spotlighted in chapter nine); the Concert’s interventions in Greece and against Barbary pirates (chapter fourteen); and the complex system of banking set up to finance both the

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parties of the Congress and the postwar settlement its attendees created (chapters ten and thirteen).

Throughout, Sluga makes us rethink the received story of the Concert, with its exclusive focus on the actions of the Five Powers. Some of Sluga's main figures are familiar to international relations scholars: Metternich, Talleyrand, Castlereagh, Alexander I, the Humboldts, the quippy Prince de Ligne. While these men enter and leave her scenes, Sluga focuses our attention on a less familiar cast: Rahel Levin, Fanny von Arnstein, Princess Catharine Bagration, Baroness von Krüdener, Dorothea Lieven, Robert Owen, Jean-Gabriel Eynard, the Duchess of Sagan, and the *salonnière fixe* of the work, the protean Madame Germaine de Staël – to name a few. Some of these figures appeared in Sluga's (2014) earlier work on women in the Congress of Vienna; here, Sluga uses the generosity of detail afforded in a book-length treatment to deepen and widen her analysis, nesting her subjects in the vast web of social and political interconnections among Europe's cosmopolitan political elite. The details of these interconnections can bewilder (take, for example the description of Baroness von Krüdener, a focus of chapter twelve, on page 196). But their inclusion demonstrates the truly interconnected, cosmopolitan character of Europe's ruling classes, a form of networked complex interdependence *avant la lettre*.

The Invention of International Order shines when it focuses on these interconnections. Sluga shows how the salon brought diplomats together, pushing them to cooperate and compromise when they might not have otherwise. Figures like Staël played an important but usually overlooked role in proceedings by contriving the statesmen's proximity and helping shape – and shove – the terms of their debate. Sluga's account also reminds us that this period of privilege, antiquated to our eyes, was perhaps more intellectually rich and daring than ours now. Monarchist, republican, secular, Christian, cosmopolitan, nationalist, and liberal visions of order all competed for adherents. We can also wonder if our corridors are truly less elitist than theirs.

If a criticism could be made here, it is that the general contours of the book are sometimes overwhelmed by its particulars. The work is structured chronologically, using the conferences and treaties around Vienna, such as Chaumont and Verona, as signposts. Readers unfamiliar with this history may feel lost, however, given all the detail that surrounds them. The presentation of some important figures in the narrative, such as Metternich, are engaging but likely too partial for readers without prior knowledge of the Concert statesmen. Sluga's book is therefore perhaps better suited for readers who have a basic grasp of the period, rather than those seeking either an introductory or general overview of the Concert.

International relations scholars in particular may yearn for more theoretical discussion or development. Sluga uses "influence politics" and "soft power diplomacy" (p.148) to describe the importance of her foci. She also suggests that the complexity of individuals can complicate our understanding of the past (p.228). Many of her examples show individuals using their power – and creativity – to shape, open, or foreclose choices, subtly guiding the international relations to come. Although informed by these and other theoretical sensibilities, *The Invention of International Order* mounts no formal framework or theory for understanding the Congress, the Concert, or the role of nonstate actors therein. Apart from a brief discussion of the role of historians and international relations theorists (p.10), the work does not substantially engage with international relations' theoretical debates about the Concert or diplomacy.

But Sluga has written what is explicitly a work of international history, not international theory. The "past is a complex place" (p.176). The book's strength lies in allowing its figures and their contradictions to speak for themselves. To be sure, the Concert's textures are illuminated by intellectual concerns, particularly with actors left on the margins. But the presentation is not totally dominated by them. A more theoretical approach might have stifled the Concert's multiplicity – its curious combination of grandeur and measure, caution and radicalism.

The Invention of International Order thus suggests further investigation for the international relations theorist: into the network power of informal spaces and the creative role of individuals, for example. Sluga's focus on the power of individuals runs against the grain of trends in international relations theory and social sciences. Following the critique of Kenneth Waltz (1959), international relations theory has focused on structural or "third image" explanations of world politics at the expense of individuals (the "first image"). Individuals and their personalities play only bit roles in world politics: it's the structure (cultural, material, etc.) that ultimately matters, shaping and shoving actors toward outcomes. Pushing back against this critique, some scholars have turned their attention to international relations'

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“micro-foundations” to argue that individuals matter in many contexts (e.g. Saunders 2017). Sluga’s presentation goes even further by suggesting that individuals can shape and shove structure, not the other way around.

Other elements of Sluga’s book – on networks and on historiography – also dovetail with recent trends in international relations research. To our field, *The Invention of International Order* serendipitously says: here are individuals, using their networks to shape the history of international relations. Sluga’s achievement for international relations thus lies in showing us that there is still much to be discovered in this crucial period.

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