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Review - After the Globe, Before the World

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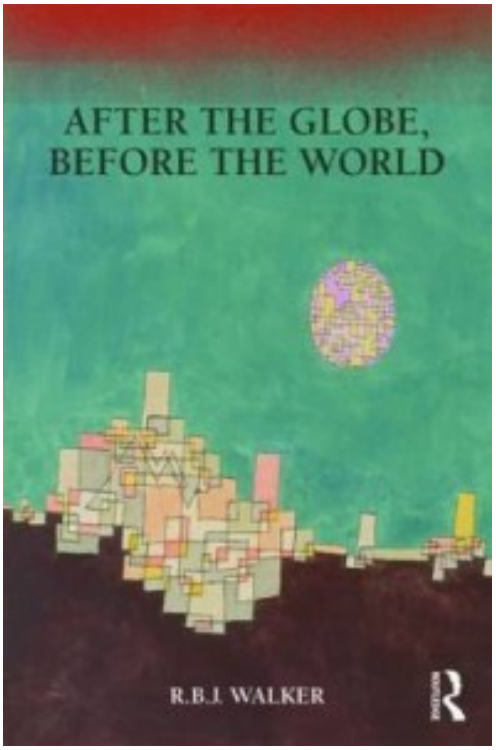
ALASDAIR MCKAY, MAR 3 2012

After the Globe, Before the World
by R.B.J. Walker
Routledge (2010)



R.B.J. Walker's body of work as a whole has always been inherently troublesome to characterise and intellectually digest. Due to the complex nature of his writing, it is often difficult to discern precisely what his arguments are without simultaneously feeling that one may have grossly misunderstood his work. His reasoning can sometimes appear ambiguous, and his conclusions could be construed as somewhat vague. This feeling is not aided by the consideration that Walker himself is something of an outcast in the field of International Relations (IR henceforth). This perception of Walker as an exile partially contributes to his work being habitually placed within the post-structuralist school of thought within IR, a school which is certainly considered less "mainstream" than other approaches. However, an air of caution must be entertained when applying this label to Walker's work. Undoubtedly, Walker would reject such pigeon-holing and, rather than position himself with a precise discipline, Walker would perhaps consider himself to be trans-disciplinary as the nature of his work seeks to problematize the theoretical assumptions animating the study of IR.

Subsequently, Walker's works are not so much theoretical analyses as they are meta-theoretical analyses of the study of IR. For Walker, IR theory does not help us to understand politics. Rather, it is an expression "of the limits of

the contemporary political imagination when confronted with persistent claims about and evidence of fundamental historical and structural transformation" (Walker, 1993: 5).

In general, Walker's analyses of the limits of our intellectual imagination target the principle of state sovereignty. This principle is seen as "the primary constitutive principle of modern political life" providing answers to questions about political community (Walker 1990: 160). To Walker, these questions have been forgotten and the answer has come to seem natural; and so state sovereignty has become "an essentially uncontested concept" (ibid: 159). But Walker stresses that this is one answer and that it has not always been as convincing; rather, "it was once bizarre and radical, even nonsense" (1993: 167). Therefore, state sovereignty is seen as an answer we need to question (ibid: 64).

In many ways, Walker's work *After the Globe, Before the World* (2010) follows on from such observed problems in IR, and Walker begins essentially where he left off in his text *Inside/Outside* (1993), continuing his discussion of sovereignty, the sovereign state and the system of states. Indeed, Walker's ambition with this text is to "draw attention to the contradictory, antagonistic, aporetic or radically undeicable character of the most consequential principles enabling modern political life, especially in relation to prevailing accounts of state sovereignty and its limits" (p16).

The book is structured into six chapters and, somewhat impressively in terms of scholarly meticulousness, sixty six pages of the book are dedicated to in-depth and lengthily footnotes. These addendums provide extremely intriguing discussions and expansions of Walker's musings on subjects, such as modernity and the ambiguity of the writing of key thinkers in political theory.

The first three chapters of the book analyse the aforementioned topics as Walker attempts to account for the modern political imagination being firmly located within the boundaries of the state and the state system. His depiction of the current political system evokes images of an intellectual cage, which is so entrenched within the minds of those incarcerated within that nearly all attempts to escape are doomed to failure. According to Walker, it is extremely difficult to imagine a completely new form of political life, even for those recommending this course of action (p. 84), as there is an almost natural tendency to revert to the historically rooted concepts or foundations employed by the current political system. It is for this reason that he suggests the move towards an analysis of "boundaries, borders and limits as complex sites, moments and practices of political engagement" (p. 11), rather than simply the separation of political entities.

The second half of the book applies the writings of various political theorists to the modern political system and the discipline of IR. In doing so, Walker charts the conceptual development of sovereignty from its classical beginnings in pre-Hellenic Greece, through to the insights of Hobbes, Kant and Schmitt, to the intellectual modifications made in the post-Cold War era. He then proceeds to offer a critique of the "uncontested subject" of sovereignty, the sovereign state and the system of sovereign states. The objective of this analysis is to re-emphasise the individual human amongst the maze of statist political structures, before concluding with a series of potential ways that sovereignty can be analysed.

By Walker's own admission, this examination does not provide clear answers as to exactly what this future would look like, but rather just outlines what things this future conception would have to deal with, what a rough structure of it would look like, and how it should break away from the current dominant paradigm. Walker argues that, contrary to the current belief that disagreements in the modern political realm hinge on the debate between prioritization of citizens first or humans first, the debate should instead be rephrased.

According to Walker, our way out of these intellectual prisons must be through a breakaway from traditional conceptions of IR, defined by demarcation between the national and the international, based on the purely spatial territorial borders of the nation state. Walker argues that we must instead look at the boundary between the claims of sovereign states to domestic jurisdiction, on the one hand, and the claims of the sovereign system of states to a collective order, on the other, in a more abstract manner. This, for Walker, is where the future of modern politics lies; in reframing modern politics in a new light that avoids this paradoxical conflict between the national and the

international, by redefining the concepts that we use to explore the nature of political relations. It is on this forward looking yet open ended note that Walker concludes his study.

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This book represents an important contribution to IR theory and certainly something of a departure from a plethora of conventional studies. As a graduate text in international relations, this book is useful as its original critique of the status quo will be helpful for students looking for opposing viewpoints of the dominant paradigms that define IR theory today.

Yet as many would have expected, this is not an easy text for the reader, the depth and allusions within it require substantial knowledge of IR and political theory. But even for those with a familiarity with the many nuances of the field, this is a difficult text to decipher. Walker himself could have made this book more readily accessible. For example, tighter, and perhaps more parsimonious conclusions would have reduced the need for copious amounts of parentheses, making the text much more accessible to readers. Like so many of the sections in his previous work, *Inside/Outside,* the majority of the chapters in this text do not appear to provide much to the previous ones. Instead, they just rephrase the arguments using different examples.

This criticism is not purely a stylistic disgruntlement as Walker hides far too much behind language in this text, and it may also be pertinent to entertain the possibility that there is a resounding purposefulness to the parisological character of Walker's writing. The repetition and verbosity, which occurs page after page within the text, may be a means to paper over arguments that are not as complex as Walker makes them out to be. Of course, over simplification can often be an irritating habit in certain IR scholars and Walker's willingness to meet complex ideas head on is, to an extent, commendable. Yet it is slightly disappointing that the over-complexity sometimes obscures the analysis.

Further, in spite of putting a great deal of effort into essentially problematizing the asserted failures of imagination of IR scholars and attacking the assumptions and foundations of IR theory, Walker does seem to fall into the similar traps which he accuses others of flirting with. In elaboration, Walker's analysis demonstrates something of a failure of imagination on his part because the book examines mainly Anglo-American conceptualisations of political thought, theory and organisation, alongside some important European authors. Although Walker's analysis of these texts is critical and thorough, there is a noticeable absence of other understandings of sovereignty and political thought besides Anglo-American and European interpretations. A problematic consequence of this focus on Anglo-American and European thinkers by Walker, which may not have been his initial intent, is that there seems to be a non-reflective depiction of Western intellectual thought in this book. Discussions of how the topic is perceived in and more importantly influenced by other linguistic, religious and cultural regions, such as Eastern and Islamic philosophy and history, might have provided an opportunity for comparison and further reflection on alternatives to the contemporary political system. Yet such explorations are not made in Walker's work and would have been welcomed.

When trying to get an overall assessment of this piece of work, it would perhaps be important to consider Hedley Bull's (1977:8) poignant remark that "thinking is also research". With this in mind, it may be pertinent to suggest that a great deal of research has gone into this work. The text certainly also achieves the provocation of thought from the reader. Indeed, this book will certainly instil a lingering tendency to ponder the issues raised in the text for some time to follow. The text may be also a catalyst for further research, perhaps through the new ways envisioned by Walker, on the subjects of sovereignty and state sovereignty in the field of IR.

This book should be essential reading for those with an interest in the intertwined disciplines of international relations and political theory, particularly 'alternative' approaches such as post-structuralism, critical theory, historical sociology and constructivism. That said, there should be the fore warning that this is not a text that can be easily flicked through, and careful readings will be necessary if the reader is to begin to grasp the work.

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