

Review - Classics of International Relations

Written by Shannon Brincat

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SHANNON BRINCAT, NOV 29 2014

Classics of International Relations

Edited by: Henrik Bliddal, Casper Sylvest and Peter Wilson

Routledge, 2013

Bliddal, Sylvest and Wilson's *Classics of International Relations* offers a unique collection of papers that introduce and assess some of the canonical and influential (read: 'classic') texts of IR. Bridging 'traditional' classics like Carr, Herz and Morgenthau, along with both 'via media' approaches like Bull and Wendt and 'critical' classics of Cox, Linklater and Walker, the collection deliberately aims to move beyond the realist/liberal core of the discipline. Perhaps the volume's most novel feature is its inclusion of what the editors call 'alternative format classics', most notably everyone's favourite satire *Dr Strangelove*. In this way, a key benefit of the volume is how it is helping to push the discipline into giving equal recognition to communicative mediums other than manuscripts. One could suggest that the inclusion of 'classic articles' would have been welcome addition – though, hopefully, this could be the focus of a follow-up volume. This is a standard reference text or what the editors call a "cross-over" (5), "companion" (8) or "aide memoire" (8) and will be of great help to students and academics across IR.

Each chapter follows a similar format as a succinct engagement with their chosen 'classic' (each chapter averages ten pages). Typically each chapter begins with a discussion of the author, their main ideas and biography, followed by situating the classic in its period: either direct historical events, key debates it was responding to, and/or those problem areas the 'classic' sought to shift the discipline towards. Aside from these introductory concerns, the bulk of each chapter is a summation of the key themes and arguments of the text. Finally, some assessment of the text is made, either regarding its ongoing contribution, its impact at the time, or its potential for the future. Most chapters are more or less conciliatory to their respective text – after all, they are 'classics'. This deferral to the canon is understandable given that each text has been chosen because they are regarded as "exemplary" (2) and "pivotal" (262) but this does reduce the critical content of the volume as a whole.

The volume engages with five types of 'classic' work: the 'undisputed' (such as Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*), 'archetypal' (expression for a school or tradition), 'in the making' (that shows promise of becoming a 'classic'), 'overlooked' (small and intense following), and the 'alternative format' (a cultural reference point) (4-5). This typology seems sufficiently broad enough to include, at least in principle, any work. But how is a 'classic' to be defined and selected? The introduction and conclusion spells out clearly the editors' meaning of what constitutes a 'classic', the reasoning behind their selections, and their process of "secular canon-formation" (1). Phrases like "model for future writers," "seminal or exemplary," "required reading," "stood the test of time," "pivotal" and "intellectual landmark" (262) are used interchangeably to confer classic-status. The editors distinguish between the essentialist and sociological understandings of the 'classic': the former that produces unity and tradition in a way that is timeless, the latter that views a classic as "complex and open-ended" in a way that enables different cultures, generations and societies to find in it "new meaning" (3). Bliddal, Sylvest and Wilson adopt the latter course, thus selecting those texts that are considered "of continuing value and importance" (3).

Of course, Bliddal, Sylvest and Wilson are aware of the "potentially powerful practices of inclusion and exclusion" (1) involved in such a project – as they admit, classicization is not an "innocent business" (7). The pitfall, as they see it, is a constitutive and regulative practice (5) that can lead to "hagiography" (7) or may "have the unintended

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consequence of strengthening this [Anglo-American] dominance" (266) that exists across IR. Their defence is that they intend the volume as a "spur" to further debate on classicization. Nevertheless, the assertion that the twenty-four texts chosen from thirty candidates are those that already hold an "elevated status" (7) merely demonstrates that the volume elevates what has already been determined to be 'classic' as dominant paradigmatic or exemplary text in the field.

Of course, any volume based on a selection process must inevitably be exclusionary: this is not a problem, in-itself. The question is how far do the social circumstances and values of individual researchers affect the production of knowledge in defining the 'classic'? The issue turns problematic when we equate awareness of this problem with reflexivity. For the researcher must not only be aware of this limitation but consciously and openly aim to counter it, that is, attempt to ensure that any distortions, biases and interferences are lessened to the highest degree possible. So what measures were undertaken to prevent such distortions in *Classics of International Relations*? The principal method was to ask the opinions of eight (Western) IR departments on the proposed list and any potential other candidates and formats (9). Yet this was tied to the prior determination of those texts with an "elevated status" (7) on whether such texts were better at "explaining" (10) IR, as opposed to understanding or transformation. This meant the pre-established dominant assumptions of the disciplinary mainstream were privileged from the outset in the selection process – something further reinforced by limiting classics to thematic discussions of "war, peace, power, the state, international law, order justice, diplomacy, anarchy and sovereignty" (263).

This problem was amplified by the fact that the editors did "not want to include 'token works' representing all the traditions and schools in IR" (9). They elaborate on these 'token works' to include: "anarchism, environmentalism, Marxism, critical theory, globalization, systems theory and world order modeling." To this list must be added postcolonial literature that was also completely neglected, and anything on feminism and gender that were *under-represented*. For Bliddal, Sylvest and Wilson, the 'classic' had to "stand on their own" and speak to the concerns at the "heart of the discipline" (9). On these grounds the exclusion of, for example, Lenin's *The Highest Stage of Imperialism* as crucial as it was for the development of IPE, imperialism and war, or Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System* for its engagement with historical sociology, economics and the development of the global economy seem detrimental exclusions. Where are the women? Wolff and Enloe are included, but 2/26 is not a good average. Here, the editor's appeal to the "founding fathers" (2) set up an unnecessary deferment to masculinist readings of the canon. Striking also is the absence of anything post-colonial. Despite the recognized danger of "strengthening" this Anglo-American dominance, the editors have overlooked some key contenders: Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, that tells so much about the dehumanising nature of colonisation, nationalism and imperialism, deals with questions at the heart of the field. One could claim Edward Said's *Orientalism* has offered similar grounds, exposing the epistemological blind spots at the heart of IR.

Consequently, despite the many benefits of *Classics of International Relations* the claim that IR is an "inclusive socio-intellectual space" (266) is somewhat contradicted by the type of exclusions in the volume (class, race, colonialism, and gender). The editors rightly suggest that no-one will be content *tout court* with the selection. Yet this also means that the claim to move beyond the realist/liberal core diminishes in direct accordance with these powerful 'classics' that are conspicuously absent: taken as a whole, some deep tensions are not excluded but ignored or simply forgotten. As such, perhaps the volume's most important contribution – aside from clear stellar chapters contained in the volume – is that it reflects the *lack* of diversity in our field, at least at the level of the 'classics'. It shows – despite claims of the 'end of IR theory' under the dominance of middle approaches – that we are, in fact, still deep in the war of the Inter-Paradigm Debate. The question 'what is a 'classic' of IR?' is merely one skirmish.

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(*Globalizations* 2023) and *From International Relations to World Civilizations: The contributions of Robert W. Cox* and *Dialectics and World Politics* (Routledge 2017).