

New Book – Understanding Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

New Book – Understanding Global Politics

<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/13/new-book-understanding-global-politics/>

KEVIN BLOOR, MAY 13 2022

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Global Politics* by Kevin Bloor. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The structure of this book is based on a popular A-Level Politics course, taken by students typically aged 16–18 in the United Kingdom's national curriculum system. While it serves as a guide for students and instructors, it also seeks to go beyond the basic requirements of preparing for the examination by discussing theoretical perspectives that lie largely outside the restrictions of the syllabus and exploring case studies that cast light on the forces that shape the politics of our world. In that sense, this book is both a guide to an A-Level student and/or a starting point for any reader looking to get to grips with the fundamentals of how the world works – including as preparation for embarking on an International Relations degree at university. The book seeks to offer a comprehensive guide for all those with an interest in a constantly evolving subject matter

Tour of the book

- Each chapter is split into headed sections that allow you to break up the information and gradually see how the content fits together as you read it through.
- To help you use the book effectively, and to lock in the information for revision purposes, each chapter ends with a 'Key Terms' box and 'Key Points' box.
- There is an extensive glossary and a list of commonly used abbreviations towards the back of the book that you may wish to consult as you read through each chapter.
- A set of resources specially made to accompany this book is available from kevinbloor.com

About the Chapters

The opening chapter offers an exploration of the two dominant paradigms within the academic discipline of International Relations – realism and liberalism – and how they debate elements such as human nature. It is via these notions that the subject matter can be better understood. The two main

theoretical perspectives will be subject to a critique, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. It should be noted that there are various concepts covered in the opening chapter unique to these two theoretical approaches alone. It will also consider several prominent divisions within the debate. The two dominant theories in the context of global politics are then applied to events since the turn of the century. The opening section ends with a discussion of alternatives from outside of the realism/liberalism dichotomy. These include constructivism, critical theory, feminism, postcolonialism and world systems theory. Each of these perspectives lights a candle upon our theoretical understanding of global politics and shines a light on the flaws inherent within the mainstream accounts.

Chapter two considers the relationship between the state and globalisation. The primary focus throughout is the role of the state and the broader significance of globalisation. It also identifies the characteristics that define the nation-state, national sovereignty and the concept of interdependence. There will be an evaluation of globalisation alongside its implications. Most notably, globalisation may have potentially altered how we might contextualise the state. It could even spell the death-knell of the nation-state, although it has also been claimed that globalisation has

New Book – Understanding Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

contributed towards a resurgence in the state. The chapter ends with an examination of the ways and extent to which globalisation seeks to resolve issues such as conflict prevention.

The book next considers how global governance shapes global politics. The establishment of international institutions that resemble a quasi-legislature, executive and judiciary provides a workable basis for the practice of global governance. Chapter three begins with an outline of the development of the United Nations (UN). It then moves to an assessment of the significance, and the changing role, of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The institutions that lie at the very heart of the 'Washington Consensus' are examined before we move onto how the institutions of global governance such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the G7 (formerly the G8) and the G20 operate. This lays the groundwork for an application towards transnational issues and problems.

Chapter four then applies the concept of global governance towards the protection of human rights and the environment. The chapter begins with an examination of attempts to uphold the universality of human rights. Humanitarian intervention is placed within a broader context of international law, judicial institutions and the continued significance of national sovereignty. This inevitably opens up a discussion of selective intervention, Western hypocrisy and other recent developments. We then examine the role, significance and impact of those measures implemented to address climate change. The manner in which the institutions of global governance deal with this existential threat is of vital importance towards contemporary international relations. The chapter concludes with an examination of the extent to which institutions of global governance address and resolve pressing global issues.

The focus of the book then shifts towards a consideration of power and developments. It begins with a detailed analysis of power and its importance. The aim of Chapter five is to place contemporary developments within the context of power and polarity. This requires a consideration of concepts such as unilateralism, hegemony and mutually assured destruction. The various systems of government are outlined and identified. In theoretical terms, there is a detailed evaluation of the liberal prescription for a better world and an application of the changing nature of power towards the Middle East.

Chapter six, the final chapter in the book, examines the magnitude of regionalism as a force that shapes global politics. This chapter analyses the reasons for regional integration, evaluates the relationship with globalisation and outlines the development of regional organisations. The chapter's primary focus will centre on the EU and consider the organisation's significance as an actor on the global stage, before concluding with the ways and extent to which regionalism attempts to resolve contemporary issues.

Getting started with Global Politics

If there is one quote that encapsulates politics, we need to look no further than a remark by Ernest Benn (1875–1954) – 'politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies'. Politicians have an uncanny ability to find trouble, misunderstand the problem and apply an incorrect response. One of the repeated political failures is a reluctance to interpret a situation from an alternative perspective. Many conflicts could have been prevented by adopting this mindset. If there is one theme that occurs time and time again throughout this book, it is surely found in that wise observation from Benn.

My interest in global politics was forged during the turbulence of the Cold War. The battle of ideologies marked an epic struggle for the future of mankind. Like others of my generation, I had a ring-side seat to a seemingly new chapter of history. That which had been such a dominant feature of my formative years (such as the prospect of nuclear annihilation) changed overnight. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 felt like the end of the ideological contest between Capitalism and Soviet Communism. The social experiment of creating a new utopia appeared to have failed its people, or at least that

was the dominant narrative I was presented with. It was a time in which the news presented in 'The West' was coloured by a heady sense of optimism. The war was over, capitalism was in the ascendancy and democracy was spreading its reach throughout the world. In the words of an often cited and heavily contested theorist of the time, we

New Book – Understanding Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

had reached 'The end of history' (Fukuyama 1992). Liberal democracy emerged victorious, and the future seemed to be tinged with freedom and happiness. By the time the liberal 'democratic peace thesis' was presented to me during an undergraduate lecture, the correlation between the spread of liberal democracy and peace made perfect sense. How times have changed. That optimism has since been decimated by populism, pandemics and protectionism – and that is without leaving the letter 'p'. The world seems to be a much darker place now, and it is to that reality we must all now face.

The unmistakable drift away from liberal democracy is a prescient reminder that there are no final victories in politics. The liberal optimism that characterised the early 1990s has been buried under the weight of history. There are several developments within international relations that have overturned the optimism of that time. The rise of the self-styled 'strong man', the existential threat posed by Covid-19, the poisonous character of tribal politics and the prospect of a trade war now shape the contours of the debate. The concepts and theories that captured the zeitgeist of a previous era must be reassessed for the modern world.

Such a dramatic turnaround reminds us that there is always the potential for events to overturn cosy assumptions. Equally, there are no final defeats in politics. For instance, the rise of populist politicians has witnessed a revival in nationalist (and even quasi-fascist) sentiment. The contest of ideas is an ever-present feature of the political arena, and this clash of ideas has the capacity to reinvent itself from one era to the next. Borrowing language from Economics, there is an inherent competition between international actors over scarce resources. Inevitably, this will shape the behaviour of states and non-state actors. Equally, the dynamics of a 'glocal' (a portmanteau of 'global' and 'local') commons often generate some level of cooperation and coexistence. Frankly, nothing is deterministic in the political realm.

In seeking to identify which theories and concepts are appropriate to an explanation of the world today, there have at least been some welcome developments. We have for instance seen a sustained challenge to the Eurocentric worldview that captured the zeitgeist at the end of the Cold War. A number of theoretical perspectives have exposed the limitations of this approach. Schools of thought within International Relations and the wider Social Sciences such as constructivism, critical theory and postcolonialism all offer valuable insights into the unconscious bias that can overshadow our understanding, alongside offering a different means of interpretation. The greater the number of perspectives available for application, the more likely we can escape the confines of a dominant mindset.

Another valuable lesson concerns the changes within the hierarchy of states. There is no permanent power status within international relations; nor is there a permanency of 'polarity' (the distribution of power). At any given time, a number of states are in ascendancy, whilst others are invariably in decline. The so-called 'unipolar moment', where the United States (US) was the only global superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, has changed dramatically.

A further misconception that has been exposed with the passage of time is the actual importance of states. Global politics was (and to some degree still is) presented as a contest between states, and to understand global politics demands a state-centric perspective. With the benefit of hindsight, who could have predicted that multinational corporations such as Apple or Alphabet (the parent company of Google) would take annual revenues greater than the gross domestic product (GDP) of nation-states? Part of the reason is that most of us carry around with us a realist mind map from our initial awareness of history (see Chapter one). With the passage of time, this has been shown to be a misconception, one of several within the field and an issue I feel needs addressing.

In order to properly comprehend the subject, there are a number of misconceptions that need highlighting before we can fully explore what makes up global politics. Firstly, the academic discipline of International Relations offers far more than just a Western-centric (or sometimes called 'Eurocentric') account of history (see McGlinchey 2022). There is a surprisingly rich variety of perspectives to consider when seeking the means to interpret global politics. For instance, there is an on-going debate between realists and liberals in terms of understanding how the global system operates. Having said this, it is difficult to entirely escape Western-centric assumptions. It should also be acknowledged that Western-centric assumptions undoubtedly casts valuable light on the practice of humanitarian intervention and what constitutes a rogue state.

New Book – Understanding Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

Secondly, the subject could never be fully understood through one particular prism. In reality, there are various contesting perspectives and each one offers something unique. Each of the major theoretical narratives (notably realism and liberalism) offers a cogent and at times convincing account of International Relations. Realism is often depicted as reflecting three Ss – statism, survival and self-help (Dunne and Schmidt, 2020) – and provides a conventional framework for interpreting global politics. In contrast, liberalism offers a very different set of assumptions and prescriptions. The two main paradigms have been updated in recent years to reflect recent developments, and whilst this has stimulated greater interest in the two main paradigms, there are other more developed theories that demand consideration. This will be expanded upon in Chapter one with reference to constructivism, critical theory, feminism, postcolonialism and world systems theory. Each of these perspectives takes us further away from the Western-centric prism that still casts a degree of influence over the subject matter.

Another notable misconception within the field is that of ‘American exceptionalism’ (Chomsky 1991). This is an entirely unconvincing social construct and an extremely unhelpful one. Although the importance of the United States in global politics is undeniable, the notion that one country is somehow exceptional does not survive close scrutiny. American exceptionalism is however of some importance in terms of explaining America’s role as a ‘hegemon’ (a dominant state within international relations), which at times can also result in the US adopting the role of a so-called ‘world policeman’. There also seems to be a mindset amongst policymakers in the US that other countries must simply follow the American normative prescription of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It should also be noted that any argument which matches the worldview of American policymakers (such as Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ thesis) is adopted more quickly than those that appear to challenge it.

Another intellectually fashionable comment that may have outlived its usefulness is that all ‘truth’ is relative. This is a key element within the postmodernist perspective. It is based on the notion that there are several versions of ‘truth’, and all have a certain degree of validity. Politics therefore consists of comparing different versions of the ‘truth’. However, there are some truths relevant to the subject matter that can be said to be absolute and undeniable. Without these, it would surely be impossible to construct any understanding of the subject matter. We need some fixed points in order to navigate the stormy seas of global politics and see through instances of ‘fake/ false news’.

There are of course other misconceptions that do little to advance our understanding. For instance, the argument that ‘Americans are from Mars, and Europeans are from Venus’ is overly simplistic and now somewhat dated (Kagan 2004). In reality, the United States is a bastion of both hard power and soft power (see Chapter five). In contrast, the European Union (EU) has expanded its military capacity in recent years. The description of the latter as a civilian actor has been overtaken by events. Once again, we are reminded how events can overturn long-held assumptions.

This book is aimed at those with an interest in cultivating a clearer understanding of global politics. It will hopefully bring together those who are interested in the changing dynamics of the international system with those who seek to comprehend the often-bewildering pace of change in the world around them. Above all, it is aimed at those who recognise that in global politics the last page is never truly written. We therefore need a theoretical and conceptual framework in order to ground us in stormy waters. It is only through a better awareness that we can hope to offer any lasting improvement to the world we inhabit. The significance of global politics is, and will surely always remain, a constant feature of our lives.

Anyone with the slightest curiosity about the forces that shape the world around them will hopefully take away something valuable from these pages. There is always much to be gained from the study of global issues, human rights, protection of the environment, humanitarian intervention, international cooperation and conflict prevention – and as far as the will to understand global politics goes, there will never be a better time than the present.

Finally, regarding the use of the core term ‘International Relations’ in this book: It is capitalised when referring to the named discipline that is taught and studied at universities. However, the same term is often used in the lowercase ‘international relations’ when referring to the non-academic everyday interactions of people (for economic, political or other reasons) on the global political stage. The term ‘global politics’ is therefore interchangeable with lowercase ‘international relations’ and is also used in this book as a reference to a section of the A-Level course (Global Politics) on which this book is primarily designed to accompany.

New Book – Understanding Global Politics

Written by Kevin Bloor

About the author:

Kevin Bloor is an author, Principal Examiner and teacher. He has over twenty years of experience in the social sciences and is the author of several texts and educational resources such as *Understanding Global Politics*, *The Definitive Guide to Political Ideologies*, *Understanding Political Theory* and *Sociology: Theories, Theorists and Concepts*. He holds a BA in Politics and International Relations and an MA in International Relations, both from Staffordshire University, and an MPhil in Government from Manchester University.