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After the Globe, before the World


The transition from a politics of the international to a world politics – the reconciliation “of citizenship and humanity” (p. 86) – is by no means a novel concept within the disciplines of International Relations and Political Science. Walker’s ambition here, by his own admission, is not necessarily to revolutionise scholarly thought but rather to avoid theoretical clichés and approach the topic from another angle, namely one with more emphasis on borders, boundaries and limits. He attempts to move away from many current theories and treatments of the topic, which he claims to “remain preoccupied either with sovereign states that are presumed to be isolated from other states or with modern individual subjects caught between desires for autonomy and desires for collectivity” (p. 10), preferring instead to:

understand, in order to resist, some of the practices through which narratives about the need to move from a politics of the international to a politics of the world have come to have such widespread resonance, even though they are so fundamentally at odds with our received understandings of a form of political life constituted through relations and antagonisms between claims to particularity/plurality and claims to commonality/universality (p. 5).

Walker begins essentially where he left off with Inside/Outside (1993), continuing his discussion of sovereignty, the sovereign state and the sovereign system of states. The first three chapters of After the Globe, Before the World are dedicated to the analysis of these topics, as Walker attempts to account for the modern political imagination as 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 and conceptual prison, which is so entrenched within the minds of those incarcerated within that nearly all attempts to escape are doomed to failure. It has become, according to Walker, 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, despite their apparent flaws. 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 international relations. In doing so, Walker charts the conceptual development of sovereignty from its classical beginnings in pre-Hellenic Greece, through Hobbesian and Schmittean modifications, to Kantian universality and the post-Cold War era. He then proceeds to offer a critique of sovereignty, the sovereign state and the system of sovereign states, with the objective of re-emphasising the individual human amongst the jungle of statist political structures, before concluding with a series of potential ways that sovereignty can be analysed.

It rapidly becomes clear from Walker’s prose that the task in hand is extremely complex. While the current political system, revolving around states and the sovereign system of states, may appear on the surface to be fairly neat and straightforward, in reality there are a number of global issues and challenges which are stretching the contemporary system beyond its limit (p. 22). This complexity, coupled with the aforementioned intellectual prison that is contemporary political life, go some way to justifying the substantial effort required on the behalf of the reader to engage with the book and the arguments within. Walker is unapologetic about this, stating from early on that “I… try hard in this book not to offer easy answers” (p. 17). On the one hand, Walker’s reluctance to avoid complexity is commendable, yet on the other it is slightly disappointing that the complexity sometimes obscures the analysis.
The focus of the book is, for the large part, on Anglo-American conceptualisations of political thought, theory and organisation, alongside some European authors. While Walker’s analysis of these is critical and, at times, unforgiving, there is a noticeable absence of other understandings of sovereignty and political thought. The emphasis on Anglo-American political thought is understandable, for it adds focus to the book, yet at the same time one cannot help wondering whether a brief discussion of how the topic is perceived in other linguistic, religious and cultural regions might have provided an opportunity for comparison and further reflection on alternatives to the contemporary political system. As has been briefly noted, a limited number of continental European authors are considered in the analysis, yet for the large part the selection is restricted to those authors one might commonly associate with having informed Anglo-American political theory; Schmitt, Kant, Foucault and Machiavelli.

While the overarching topic of the book may appeal to a wide selection of academic and non-academic readers, the complexity of the writing and of some of the themes raised might discourage some who are unfamiliar with the various literatures discussed. Furthermore, despite the lengthy analysis of the various literatures on display, the lack of a clear conclusion about the transition to a world politics, which, it must be noted, is never promised by the author, might concern some. Nevertheless, Walker’s desire to depart from what he perceives to be a trend of statist takes on the transition from a politics of the international to a politics of the world provides an intriguing alternative to other literatures dealing with similar issues and those who do engage with his arguments and opinions will be richly rewarded.

Bibliography