

## Globalisation, Neopluralism and Multinodal Politics (Review Essay)

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Review of: Rethinking world politics. A theory of transnational neopluralism, by Philip G. Cerny. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, 336pp.

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The publication in 2008 of Benjamin J. Cohen's *International Political Economy: An Intellectual History* caused quite a stir in International Relations circles and beyond (Cohen 2008). The book is the first systematic attempt to tell the story of International Political Economy (IPE) from its origins in the 1970s until today. What provoked a lively and at times heated debate among IPE scholars was Cohen's assertion that the IPE community has been drifting apart into two increasingly incommensurate intellectual camps: an 'American school', pioneered by scholars such as Robert Keohane, Robert Gilpin and Stephen Krasner, which sees IPE as a sub-discipline of International Relations, shares the latter's state-centric orientation, and is deeply committed to the positivist and empiricist roots of American political science; and a 'British school', exemplified by scholars such as Susan Strange and Robert Cox, which nurtures a stronger sense of pluralism in theoretical and methodological terms and is prepared to ask big normative questions. While the American school seeks to solidify IPE as a 'normal' social science in a Kuhnian sense, the British school is keen to preserve its multi-disciplinary tradition and theoretical diversity.

Scholars on both sides of the transatlantic divide have argued passionately about the usefulness and appropriateness of this distinction, and whether anything can be done to reduce the gap<sup>1</sup>. The sense that there is a fundamental divide in the discipline is widely shared, but intense debate continues on how to define and delineate the different camps and whether a dialogue, or even convergence, between them is possible. Some have questioned the very idea of an ‘American’ or ‘British’ school, highlighting the intellectual diversity that exists on both sides of the Atlantic (Blyth 2009). Of course, as Cohen himself points out, the transatlantic divide is ‘as much intellectual as territorial’ (2008, p. 59). Some American and Canadian scholars belong to the British School or seek to bridge the divide, while a good number of British and Continental European scholars subscribe to the American school’s scientific model.

Philip Cerny, the author of the book under review, is an interesting case in point. Born in New York City, Cerny is now Professor in Global Political Economy in the political science department at Rutgers University, New Jersey. He was educated in the US, France and the UK and first taught at the Universities of Manchester, Leeds and York in the UK before returning to the US. Cerny has held offices in academic associations on both sides of the Atlantic, as the former chair of the International Political Economy Section of the US-based International Studies Association and as a member of the executive committees of the British International Studies Association and the Political Studies Association of the UK. Although firmly established as a leading voice in IPE in America, few would disagree with Cohen’s description (2008, p. 170) of Cerny as a representative of the second generation of the *British*, not American, school of IPE.

Cerny's new book, *Rethinking world politics: a theory of transnational neopluralism*, confirms that the author bridges the transatlantic divide more in a territorial than intellectual sense. The book puts forward an eloquent and wide-ranging interpretation of recent changes in the global political economy and seeks to advance a neopluralist interpretation. It represents the sum of Cerny's intellectual efforts over the last two decades to come to terms with globalisation's transformational effect on world politics. Yet, despite addressing concerns that are central to both American and British IPE, Cerny writes with a distinctly 'British accent' (in Cohen's sense). Instead of mining a narrowly defined empirical field with the help of sophisticated and predominantly quantitative methodologies, he delivers a sweeping Big Picture survey of global changes in areas as diverse as global finance, democracy and security. Rather than working within a sharply delineated theoretical context, he offers a creative engagement with diverse theoretical traditions and authors, from Charles Lindblom to Nicos Poulantzas and Michel Foucault. And, instead of systematically constructing a theoretical model from the ground up, he creatively remoulds existing concepts from diverse backgrounds to make them relevant for a rapidly changing global order. We find imaginative theorising on a grand scale but only scant attention to the epistemological concerns of the rationalist and empiricist tradition of American IPE. In other words, the book belongs to Strange's vision of IPE as an open field that nurtures, as Robert Wade put it, 'a fecund and peaty diversity' in scholarship (Wade 2009).

*Rethinking world politics* shows many of the strengths of the British School: a concern with ambitious themes such as large-scale transformational change and an engagement with a wide and eclectic range of intellectual sources. But viewed through the prism of the American school, it also reveals some of the weaknesses of

British-style IPE, such as a lack of theoretical parsimony and methodological rigour. Does the book reinforce the widespread perception that the transatlantic divide is ultimately unbridgeable? I shall return to this question towards the end, after examining the key themes and arguments of this book.

*Identifying change: the persistence of globalisation*

*Rethinking world politics* comprises 14 chapters that are grouped into three parts: on identifying global change, on the dynamics of change, and on the implications of change for world politics.

The first part traces the evolution of the scholarly debate on globalisation and introduces Cerny's main contribution to this debate, the theory of transnational neopluralism. The author highlights the contrasting and often conflicting perspectives on globalisation that IPE has produced in the last two decades (chapter 2). He acknowledges that globalisation is an 'essentially contested concept' (p. 27), but insists that it offers a key vantage point from which to explain a wide range of interconnected phenomena. Indeed, although the intellectual centrality of globalisation has come under attack in post-9/11 International Relations research, Cerny believes that the concept's 'paradigmatic status' ensures that it 'is increasingly shaping the terms of the debate about the future of world politics' (p. 28).

Chapter 3 continues this narrative by considering the implications of globalisation for the bordering of the political and social realms, in vertical and horizontal forms. Drawing on a deep historical perspective that goes back to the creation of the modern nation-state and beyond, Cerny rejects the simplistic 'state in decline' argument in favour of a more nuanced understanding of the state's changing embeddedness in larger social and economic realities. While globalisation renders

existing political, economic and sociocultural borders in a state of flux and deconstruction, new reconstruction processes are currently underway that involve a broad range of actors, both state and nonstate.

This emphasis on the increased fluidity of the global political process is a key insight of Cerny's distinctive neopluralist reading of globalisation. Rather than being controlled by hegemonic states (à la neo-realism) or capitalist forces (à la neo-Marxism), globalisation in fact enlarges opportunities for transnational political interactions without them being pre-determined by larger structural forces. 'Political processes are becoming more open, not more closed' (p. 5), Cerny proclaims unambiguously. Indeed, 'globalization, flexibilization, and neoliberalism actually open up more *spaces* for transnational political actors to conflict, compete, cooperate, and build coalitions' (p. 59; emphasis in original). The key insight of domestic (neo)pluralist analysis, that the fluidity in political structures and processes ensures a substantial degree of open-ended competition and coalition-building, is thus transposed into the international realm with globalisation acting as the main intellectual bridge. By promoting the rapid growth of transnational linkages between different sub- and trans-national groups and the creation of transnational webs of power, globalisation in effect transforms international relations into world politics. States continue to play an important role, even if their ability to control political processes – whether in the domestic or international realm – is no longer guaranteed. They 'are no longer containers of politics, economics, and society, but "strainers," through which each issue-area is sifted into the complex politics of a globalizing world.' (p. 63)

This reading of the globalisation process has important consequences for our understanding of power, as chapter 4 illustrates. The world is approaching a tipping

point, Cerny argues. After this, power in world politics will no longer be concentrated in the hands of states but spread among transnationally and translocally organised actors, whether they belong to global civil society, global business, world cities or ethnic communities (p. 66). New webs of power are already being created, within, below and across borders. New forms of institutionalisation emerge and new transnational values and norms arise in world politics. Much of this will be familiar territory to students of globalisation. In fact, it was Cerny's earlier work – especially his 1990 book *The changing architecture of politics* and a 1995 article titled 'Globalization and the changing logic of collective action' – that helped popularise the notion that new forms of private or hybrid authority had come into existence that could, in their own domains, become 'more sovereign than the state' (Cerny 1990, p. 618; see also Cerny 1995)<sup>2</sup>.

*Dynamics of change: who's driving globalisation?*

Having laid out the history and dimensions of globalization, Cerny then turns to the drivers of global change. Part 2 contains five chapters that form the analytical core of the book. The first, chapter 5, returns to the concept of neopluralism which is at the heart of Cerny's argument. With the power structure of a globalizing world becoming ever more complex and diffuse, world politics is being transformed 'into a polycentric or multinucleated global political system' (p. 98). One of the key consequences of this transformation is the growing 'quasi privatization of the public sphere'. While public goods are increasingly being produced by private actors, state policy itself is forced to reorient itself to the concerns of what Cerny had earlier labeled the 'Competition State' (Cerny 1997): a shift from macroeconomic to microeconomic interventionism; greater concentration on securing a dynamic competitive advantage; the rise of

neoliberal financial orthodoxy; and the promotion of enterprise, innovation and private profitability (p. 102).

But does this structurally enforced shift towards the Competition State not undermine the book's underlying pluralist message of a more fluid and open-ended political process? Does the rise of a neoliberal consensus (elaborated in chapter 7) not suggest that politics is hemmed in by structural straightjackets such as the 'new hegemony of financial markets', which Cerny himself had written about in the 1990s (Cerny 1994)? This is the core dilemma that faces any attempt to articulate an agency-based perspective within an IPE tradition heavily infused with structuralist sentiments. Cerny's solution, and in my view the key achievement of this book, is to resurrect the neopluralist synthesis that Lindblom and Dahl arrived at in the 1970s within the then ideological battles of American political science and to apply it to the globalizing context of world politics.

Neopluralism retains the pluralist belief in the indeterminate and ultimately open-ended nature of political processes but accepts that structural conditions may give rise to privileged power positions. This is particularly so with regard to economic actors who benefit from the global integration of markets, but can also extend to other transnationally organized interests. As Cerny points out, 'some actors and groups are, over time, more able to marshal resources, make and interpret rules, and embed practices in ways that privilege their own interests over others' (p. 105). These privileged actors, however, do not create system-wide dominance over others. What matters, instead, is an understanding of the varying power dynamics within specific issue-areas. Just as oligopolistic market conditions can lead to the creation of iron triangles in domestic politics, so does economic globalization empower multinational corporations and financial market actors. But globalization has also shaken up

existing market structures and has led to greater competition and the entry of new actors in many sectors. Furthermore, social groups have found it relatively easy to organize transnationally, giving rise to what Kenneth Galbraith has called 'countervailing forces'. The net result of all this is a 'dialectic of fractionalization and reorganization', with domestically constructed power constellations being challenged by 'diverse, more fluid coalitions at different levels of aggregation and organization' (p. 108).

Cerny does not believe that this transformation will be smooth and self-regulating. Far from it, new inequalities and conflicts will interact with old ones, and efforts to create global governance and convergence will come up against a maelstrom of discontent and transnational strife. Transnationally organized and empowered groups are likely to gain the upper hand over other such groups (chapter 6), and the nation-state will need to move existing conceptions of governmentality towards a new '*raison du monde*' (chapter 8). The challenge for world politics is thus to conceive of global governance not as the approximation of a global state but as the multi-layered and flexible development of political practices that promote the art of 'governmentality', a process that Cerny calls 'governmentalization' (p. 186). This is an eminently political process, and political agency will be critical to its success, while the context and form of this process remain in flux. As Cerny puts it, 'the expansion of transnational neopluralism will create a more horizontally pluralistic world through ongoing, experimental institutional bricolage and multimodal politicking' (p. 192). Rather than progress towards a hierarchical structure of global governance within a global democratic setting, we should expect transnational politics to evolve into a system of 'pluralistic quasi democracy by proxy', consisting of niche areas of issue-specific competition between an ever larger set of transnational

interests, from corporations to consumer groups, labour unions and environmental campaigners.

### *Consequences of global change*

Part III of *Rethinking world politics*, consisting of four substantive chapters and a conclusion, engages with some of the implications that globalization has for world politics. Chapter 10 picks up an important question from the preceding chapter, namely whether the uneven pluralization of global politics can lead to its democratization. Cerny remains skeptical about this. A brief historical review of democratization highlights the failures of deliberate efforts to spread democracy as well as the potentially counterproductive effects of pluralization.

Chapter 11 goes off in a different direction, focusing on the transformation in international security structures and policies. Again, Cerny seeks to elicit the consequences for state-centric approaches, from the growing disaggregation of state actors to the proliferation of nonstate actors. He proposes a 'New Security Dilemma', which is about how these diverse actors 'interact, compete, haggle, fight, police themselves and each other, and attempt to build coalitions around particular issue-areas' (p. 218). This concept leads to some interesting reflections on the interaction between economic and social globalization and security relations. However, the chapter seems oddly out of place in a book predominantly concerned with the political-economic dimensions of global change. Its conclusion, that the main source of security in the twenty-first century will come not from states or intergovernmental organizations but from a certain form of interaction between transnational actors in a neopluralist setting, is as bold as it is unconvincing.

Cerny is on firmer ground again in chapter 12 where he reviews trends in global finance, a research agenda he has helped to shape considerably in the past. The profound impact that the financial crisis has had on the global financial system is well captured in this chapter. However, writing so soon after the near-collapse of the Western banking system has meant that the broader theoretical implications of this once-in-a-generation crisis remain uncertain.

*Bridging the transatlantic divide?*

*Rethinking world politics* starts and finishes with the question of global change. ‘What is globalisation?’ and ‘can we shape globalisation?’ are concerns that have motivated a great deal of political-economic scholarship in recent decades. Cerny’s answer, as the title of the concluding chapter suggests (‘globalization is what actors make of it’), is seemingly straightforward yet subtle at the same time. Set against the background of the structure-agency problematique, Cerny maps out the middle ground in the debate on how institutional pathways and political-economic structures shape history-making choices by individuals and groups. Neither Marxism’s economic determinism (which he rejects in chapter 13) nor pluralism’s free interplay of unencumbered groups can adequately explain the new balance of power that is emerging in world politics – a balance not among states but among transnational groups that pursue their objectives ‘across unevenly globalizing playing fields’ (p. 292). Seen through the prism of transnational neopluralism, Cerny postulates that globalisation creates the conditions in which ‘a fairly diverse range of key actors, in the process of competing, politicking, and coalition building, are able to make significant choices that [...] may make it possible to effectively bring about fundamental structural change in world

politics' (p. 289). Structured agency thus becomes the key variable in explaining global change.

Cerny makes a strong case for a neopluralist reading of global economic and political change, the core theoretical innovation that this book performs. This in itself makes this book a must read for anybody interested in understanding the ongoing transformation of world politics. But will the analysis resonate with those who have been trained in the American school of IPE? I fear the answer is no, for the book is unashamedly 'British' in style. It paints on a vast canvas and is eclectic in its theoretical framing and conceptual language. The chapters circle around the core themes of globalisation and transnational neopluralism rather than develop an analytical model, within a narrowly defined theoretical context, which is then put to a rigorous empirical test. The construction of the book out of a series of more or less self-contained essays reflects the fact that many of the chapters are derived from previous publications. That they still add up to a compelling read speaks for the consistency and coherence of the author's research agenda of the last two decades.

Even those sympathetic to British IPE may have wished for a more systematic exposition of transnational neopluralism. Strangely for a concept so central to the author's notion of world politics, neopluralism as such is discussed only briefly. After introducing it at the beginning of the book, Cerny only returns to neopluralism as a political science theory at the end of chapter 5 and again in the conclusions. The underlying theme of a neopluralist-style reordering of world politics is, of course, present throughout the book and is fleshed out with some detail in discussions of multimodal politics (chapter 5) and the changing global policy process (chapter 6). But neopluralism's theoretical origins in political science and its transposition into the theoretical canon of IPE and International Relations are largely left in the dark. Cerny

briefly hints at the pluralist tradition in American political science and subsequent structuralist critiques, but barely sketches the neopluralist synthesis that Lindblom and Dahl have produced<sup>3</sup>. Readers who expect to find a fully-fledged *Theory of transnational neopluralism*, as the book's subtitle suggests, may thus be somewhat disappointed.

Still, anybody interested in the larger transformative forces that are reshaping international relations will find this a stimulating and often provocative read. Of course, not all readers will be convinced by the author's vision of globalisation pushing the world into a new era of multinodal politics. But by the time they reach the concluding chapter, they will have been exposed to a wide-ranging and erudite analysis that will force them to reconsider some of the core concepts of IPE. The book deserves a wide readership on both sides of the transatlantic divide.

## **Endnotes**

1 Cohen's thesis of a transatlantic divide in IPE was debated in special issues of the journals *Review of International Political Economy* (volume 16, number 1) and *New Political Economy* (volume 14, number 3), both published in 2009.

2 For an example of the rising interest in private power, see Cutler et al. (1999).

3 For a discussion of pluralism and neopluralism in political science, see McFarland (2004). In my own writing on international environmental politics, I have developed a neopluralist perspective on business power, built around the business conflict model in IPE (see Falkner 2008).

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