

Book Reviews

Political Theory

Constructing the International Economy by **Rawi Abdelal, Mark Blyth and Craig Parsons (eds)**. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2010. 294pp., £15.50, ISBN 978 0 8014 7588 7

Constructivism has become a major approach on a par with rationalism in IR. Nevertheless, constructivism has not gained such currency in the field of international political economy (IPE). Rationalists (particularly in North America) have reached a ‘consensus on theories, methods, [and] analytical frameworks’ (p. 3) and tend to believe that IPE can be best explained by materially derived egoistic interests. Rawi Abdelal *et al.* challenge this prevailing orthodoxy within IPE by laying out four constructivist approaches and shedding light on empirical anomalies that are inexplicable in purely material terms.

These are the paths of meaning, cognition, uncertainty and subjectivity. Each approach is followed by theoretically informed and empirically grounded research. First, the path of meaning shows that human action is not dictated by means–ends calculation and that actors assign identity-derived social meanings to material facts and subsequently make certain choices preferable. Second, the path of cognition demonstrates that individuals reply upon short cuts and heuristics to guide their courses of action. While this approach is informed by cognitive psychology, Francesco Duina (pp. 93–113) and Yoshiko Herrera (pp. 114–33) foreground intersubjective elements that underpin constructivism. In their formulation, cognitive constructs have real social effects when these constructs become shared premises or are taken for granted. Their approach therefore should not be reduced to the cognitive psychology of choice. Third, the path of uncertainty can be categorised into two types. The first one shows that actors did not know what to do

until ‘they invented or were provided with social constructs to resolve uncertainty into a new framework for action’ (p. 135). The second model ‘is to observe counterfactually that in the terms of non-constructivist theories, actors *should have been* uncertain about what to do but were not – and then to highlight the social constructs that reduced their uncertainty’ (p. 135, emphasis in original). Last but not least, the path of subjectivity is inspired by French postmodernist and post-structuralist critical theory.

This approach underlines that discourse frames the way in which the world can be meaningfully thought about or talked about. For critical constructivists, power and knowledge presuppose one another. Charlotte Epstein’s research on the anti-whaling discourse is both enlightening and convincing. This volume seeks not only to facilitate dialogue among rationalists and constructivists but also to encourage exchange among thin and thick constructivists. In addition, it compellingly removes doubt about the usefulness of constructivism in IPE.

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Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies by **Kevin B. Anderson**. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 319pp., £14.50, ISBN 978 0 226 01983 3

Kevin Anderson’s book is a valuable contribution to a rather neglected area of study in Marx’s corpus: his views on pre-capitalist and non-Western societies that are peripheral to capitalist modernity. A most welcome aspect of this book, which is of interest not only to political theorists but sociologists and anthropologists as well, is Anderson’s careful exploration of little-known writings of Marx. These include his journalism in the *New York Tribune* from 1851 to 1861, his mostly

unpublished notebooks from 1879 to 1882 and the revised theory of history and social development in the *Grundrisse* (1857–8) and the French edition of *Capital* (1872–5).

Two main topics occupy Anderson in this insufficiently charted territory. The first is the evolution of Marx's thinking on pre-capitalist and non-Western societies from the unilinear and at times ethnocentric perspective of the 1840s displayed in *The Communist Manifesto* and the early 1850s *Tribune* articles on the benefits of colonialism for the Indian society, towards a multilinear and dialectical conception of history and social development in later writings on India, China, Algeria, Russia and Latin America. The other is the transformation of Marx's views on national liberation movements and racism from the 1860s onwards. Analysing Marx's evolving support for the Polish and Irish national liberation struggles and the anti-slavery cause in the American Civil War, Anderson argues that Marx conceived working-class solidarity in capitalist countries with progressive nationalist movements and anti-racism to be an important condition of a proletariat revolution in Western Europe itself.

In offering an empirically grounded picture of Marx as a 'global thinker', alert to the political import of nationalism, race and ethnicity, this book forcefully challenges deterministic and Eurocentric representations of Marx and Marxist class analysis. However, not all of Anderson's claims on Marx's implicit recognition of difference and multidimensional paths to socio-political emancipation are as powerful. At times, especially regarding the transformations in Marx's understanding of colonialism and 'Oriental' social formations, Anderson rather wills Marx as an acute 'global theorist' of different societies and political traditions than actually shows it.

What is most striking about this book is its politically pertinent practical value. Exploring late Marx's restriction to Western Europe of the historical inevitability of primitive accumulation in the procession to and the overcoming of capitalist social structures, Anderson furnishes Marxism with renewed relevance in the study of contemporary globalism and alternative ways of resistance to capitalism.

Pinar Kemerli
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Utilitarianism: A Guide for the Perplexed by **Kristen Bykvist**. London: Continuum, 2010. 176pp., £14.99, ISBN 978 0 8264 9809 0

Utilitarianism is a new volume in Continuum's series 'Guides for the Perplexed', many of which offer introductions to a particular thinker or a school of thought. Kristen Bykvist sets out to treat the historical roots of utilitarianism and its arguments, although he does not describe in any detail the work of Jeremy Bentham, James and John Stuart Mill or Henry Sidgwick, or their historical context. Instead, this book is concerned with utilitarian theories as we know them today and it focuses on classical utilitarianism. Bykvist captures the relevant concepts through two equations (p. 19):

'Utilitarianism = Consequentialism (nothing but the values of outcomes matter for the rightness of actions) + Welfarism (nothing but well-being matters for the value of outcomes)'

'Classical utilitarianism = Maximizing act-consequentialism + Sum-ranking + Subjective conception of well-being'

The problems and merits of these different elements are discussed in the book. Bykvist shows his personal motivation when he states: 'It may be possible to make revisions within the limits of utilitarianism, since by refuting one version of utilitarianism we have not automatically refuted utilitarianism as such' (p. 2). He evaluates the theory in comparison with virtue ethics, deontological ethics and Kantianism and quickly gives away his belief that many of utilitarianism's shortcomings 'are problems for all plausible moral theories' (p. 3).

Utilitarianism includes a clear introduction, some notes on method (how to assess a moral theory), a good summary, a bibliography and an index. One of the chapters deals with the conception of well-being, another with that of sum-ranking. At the core there are chapters in which normative aspects of utilitarianism (and the other theories) are discussed. Overall it offers easy but fascinating reading.

I agree with Bykvist that a moral theory provides a criterion of rightness; it is not a decision method. Because utilitarianism is at the same time too demanding and too permissive, it cannot be followed