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## Book Review: Theory and History in International Relations by Donald J. Puchala

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Donald J. Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2003). 271 pp.

While researching a textbook on the social sciences several years ago, this author found that political science was more at war with itself than its academic cousins. Professor Puchala's impressive book, *Theory and History in International Relations*, does much to explain ongoing controversies in one of the fields of political science by examining contending approaches to international relations. His emphasis on the continuing viability of traditional international relations theory and of the lessons of history is most timely considering America's multitudinous engagements; indeed, as Machiavelli recommends, the study of what has gone before should be the first requirement of both leaders and scholars. After reviewing how the discipline of international relations has evolved, Puchala makes an exhaustively documented case that theoretical explanations of history are relevant for current international relations. His book indicates a lifetime of reflection about these questions, and so it effectively reviews a copious amount of scholarship in a marvelously compact work.

Chapters two and three set the stage for the rest of the study by explaining the evolution of political science and its controversies, starting with a discussion of whether the field should even be called political science or government, the older term. In Puchala's view, efforts to find basic laws through empirically testing propositions in international relations have been a "twenty year detour," a viewpoint that will no doubt occasion rejoinders from other scholars (16). Yet his insistence that the field needs to embrace, in the words of Hedley Bull, "the value

premises of international conduct," seems to this reviewer sound and re-energizing for this area of scholarship (18). This emphasis on normative and enlightening theory is essential now that the country has tremendous global commitments; policymakers and informed citizens need this sort of humanistic approach, even though it appears to be based on less empirically comforting information. The author states that Americans often do not study the historical evolution of societies in a sustained way, for perhaps America remains a product of the Enlightenment, a city on a hill independent of corrupt antecedents.

Puchala explains that the latest iteration of an ongoing fight in international relations involves the nature of knowledge itself, and he therefore brings in the contributions of the postmodernists to indicate that while positivists feel they are much closer to provable truth, their assumptions may be as questionable as any other approach. Since no one method brings certainty, he feels that one measure of meaningful study is utility—and various forms of non-scientific analysis helps to "facilitate the interpretation of history" (31); in short theory helps to form the right sort of questions to ask about international dilemmas. Throughout these chapters the author reveals a vast knowledge of the scholars in the discipline and significantly, many related thinkers, from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. His use of effective quotations from these thinkers is masterful, for instance William James's elaboration on theory's utility, stating that, "What meaning indeed can an idea's truth have save its power of adapting us either mentally or physically to a reality?" (48). After reviewing the methodological record, he makes a convincing case that many of these arguments are not new, and that previous answers to them can enrich present discussions.

After asserting that the great theorists of international relations have always used history as a guide to their views, Puchala attempts to solve a controversy between historians and those

who would use history to construct current theories based on previous cultures and their relation to each other. The former often accuse the latter of "historicism," of inappropriately using the past to support a current thesis, of misunderstanding the complexities of individual situations for oversimplified trends or theories. The answer to this challenge is another major theme of the book: that there are multiple types of analysis and ways of thinking, utilizing informed intuition for example, as useful knowledge often involves something beyond the aggregation of data. Weber's idea that different approaches to social science can complement rather than overwhelm one another is one valuable answer to many of these controversies, although his advice, Puchala notes, was not heeded then or today.

In subsequent chapters, Puchala conducts a remarkable exploration of relationships between major civilizations and reflects upon the meaning of often centuries-long events. He reviews for example the scholarship on the cyclical nature of powerful societies and points out that the useful historical record is much longer and therefore more instructive than the usual post-Westphalian discussion, particularly his emphasis on the importance of the interplay of world cultures rather than nation-states. Like the once impressive Byzantine civilization, and for some similar reasons, Western culture and influence are already diminishing and being challenged by others like China and India. While one cannot predict which civilization will be most prominent in this century, the record indicates for Puchala that some sort of harmonious global order is historically unprecedented. Those like Thomas Friedman who believe in the inevitable power of globalization (which often means accepting Western norms and procedures) need to be aware that alternative ways of managing economics or attitudes on freedom may eventually succeed those of the West.

Of particular interest is the author's stress on looking for perspectives outside the traditions of political science, among the humanities for example. This point is well taken, as the distinction between art and science has often been overemphasized in Western scholarship, and is actually a relatively recent viewpoint even in this culture. Picasso's *Guernica*, which Puchala highlights in the first sentence of "The Tragedy of War and the Search for Meaning in International History," can convey a great deal about the casual ease of killing millions in the total wars of the twentieth century. Especially for discussions of conflict, often at the core of international relations studies, such renditions can give meaning beyond any technical explanation of such tragedy, one that will reach the observer in unique ways. Other emotive passages by gifted historians are quoted as well, such as a tragic account from the Thirty Years War. Perhaps only humanistic portrayals and explanations can illustrate, as the author notes, the meaninglessness of conflict in the sense they reveal that almost nothing is worth such horrors. Such interpretations of terrible events, combined with the historical record of the uselessness of wars like the Great War or Vietnam, can illustrate "human nature and human affairs" (93). President Kennedy's reading of Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* helped him resist later calls for massive intervention in the Cuban Missile Crisis, so such accounts can have a practical impact.

While the United States sees itself as the rightful winner of the Cold War, and perhaps now as some sort of world police force, the chapter entitled "The Dancing Dinosaurs of the Cold War," would call into question such optimistic scenarios. What Puchala demonstrates here is that like previous empires, both superpowers saw themselves as the victim, and any sort of challenge to their rule the machinations of the other. Whether it was the resistance of the Vietcong or the freedom fighters of Afghanistan, not only was the aforementioned interpretation of

these conflicts wrong, such wars greatly weakened both powers, though the Soviets were more quickly damaged by such policies. The United States in particular could not and still fails to understand that its power has peaked but may spend billions accelerating its own downfall, much as Great Britain did after World War One. While the American empire will probably not parallel the sudden destruction of the U.S.S.R, the matter remains what sort of downward spiral it will follow; Puchala is not optimistic that any post-Cold War administration understands this point in world history. Related to this point is that America is not a conservative empire, as for instance the Austro-Hungarian, since it wishes to change the world in its image. Yet Chapters Seven and Eight illustrate that this mission is unlikely to be successful, as civilizations are unable to subjugate equally developed ones; in the author's words, "Advanced Civilizations are Culturally Resilient." Once repressed cultures, moreover, will re-emerge, as for example the Islamic variant is currently doing, again making peaceful globalization unlikely. The example of diverse civilizations, such as the ancient Greek incursions into Asia Minor, can give insight into this phenomenon.

After casting doubt on the optimistic scenarios of both Pax Americana and globalization, Puchala's final chapters offer some solace to those who envision a better world. In Western universalism, Confucianism and Hinduism, he finds substantial unity on how humankind should relate to each other. Western essentialism certainly supports these ideas from completely different premises than does say Hinduism, yet all three "mythic systems" agree that the main imperatives are to help others and to internalize a common humanity. He therefore feels that at their core, major civilizations do have much in common and need not destroy others to demonstrate their authenticity. The problem is that other, more superficial myths like nationalism have substantial power as well, and therefore scholars must investigate the

historical circumstances that maximize the unifying, basic myths. Similarly, the author notes that democratic peace proponents have proved that countries based on a contract with their citizens rarely fight each other, but with the caveat that it is too soon to predict that democracy is a growing trend that will somehow end history. He does explore how more democracies might be the eventual result of modernization, or that global institutions might produce more peaceful relations, but he asserts that scholars cannot demonstrate the existence of irreversible trends for a more pacific world.

In his concluding pages, the author again calls for the acceptance of diverse interpretations of international relations, of exploring the contributions of sources as different as Tennyson or Goya. By attempting to understand and explain such portrayals, as well as investigating the vast interplay of civilizations in history, international relations as a discipline can demonstrate that scientific inquiry can only partially answer major questions. True, all scholars construct their own reality, but they can still reasonably expect to create useful analytical tools. The goal of these different approaches is to prepare for, as Puchala states, "as few surprises as possible" in international affairs (49).

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John A. Clark and Charles S. Prysby (eds.), *Southern Political Party Activists: Patterns of Conflict and Change, 1991-2001*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004). 264 pp.

The study of southern politics continues to be a growth industry, as reflected in *Southern Political Party Activists* which builds on an earlier work edited by Charles Hadley and Lewis