

## ***Big Questions in the Study of World Politics***

Robert O. Keohane, June 2007<sup>1</sup>

We do not study international relations for aesthetic reasons, since world politics is not beautiful. If we sought scientific rigor we would have pursued careers in experimental disciplines. Instead we are motivated by normative questions, often asked urgently in the wake of disasters, from the Sicilian Expedition (416 B.C.E.) chronicled by Thucydides to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq (2003 C.E.). Recurring failures lead us to try to understand the conditions under which states and other actors can achieve their collective purposes rather than engage in destructive, and often self-destructive, behavior.<sup>2</sup> Our normative purposes infuse our positive analysis. Political economy came alive as a field in the wake of the economic crises of the 1970s, which recalled the Great Depression of the 1930s. Security studies became a site of creativity after World War II and during the height of the Cold War. Work on the sources of internal war expanded in the wake of post-Cold War internal conflicts. And it is predictable that there will be a new wave of work on the problem of terrorism, in the wake of the attacks of 9/11/01.

Students of world politics have an obligation to democratic publics to help them understand the most pressing problems of the current day. Yet this moral obligation does not imply that we should focus on topical issues or be “policy-relevant” in a narrow sense by speaking to governments in terms that are acceptable to them. Our task is to probe the

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<sup>2</sup> I use the phrase “world politics” rather than “international relations” since the language of “international relations” leads us to think only about states, which are not central to all interesting questions of world politics.

deeper sources of action in world politics, and to speak truth to power – insofar as we can discern what the truth is.

The study of world politics begins with the study of war. *Why is war a perennial institution of international society and what variable factors affect its incidence?* In understanding this problem, as well as other issues in world politics, Realist theory, which identifies power and interests as the central forces in the behavior of rational states, has played a central role (Morgenthau 1946/1967), although it remained unclear for years why, if states behaved rationally, they could engage in mutually destructive warfare. Scholars have recently made substantial progress on this problem, notably by following the lead of Thomas Schelling (1960) in focusing on the role played by information and credibility (Fearon 1995), and by linking the study of institutions to that of war (Fortna 2004).

The analysis of warfare relates directly to broader issues of discord and cooperation. Work on these issues over the last quarter-century has emphasized that cooperation arises more from discord than from harmony, and that when complementary interests exist, multilateral institutions can facilitate cooperation (Keohane 1984). A productive line of work has stressed the role of reciprocity in creating incentives for cooperative behavior (Axelrod 1984). These theoretical contributions are beginning to be linked to the literature on the democratic peace, which I do not have space to discuss here.

An important contemporary as well as historical puzzle is how to think about the role of sovereignty. Under what conditions does it promote cooperation by limiting intervention and clarifying the actors in world politics, and under what conditions does it

generate civil conflict by providing a shield behind which states can abuse groups within their societies? Recent work on sovereignty (Krasner 1999) has clarified various meanings of this concept, which has regained analytical significance with the increased attention to issues of civil war and intervention.

Behind all these issues lurks the concept of power. Material resources are significant not just for war and threat, but also for the politics of economic relationships. The study of political economy can be viewed as “the reciprocal and dynamic interaction in international relations of the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of power” (Gilpin 1975: 43). But we need to question the equation of power resources with material resources. Joseph Nye (2004) has emphasized the role of “soft power”—attractiveness that inspires emulation and facilitates persuasion – in world politics. Soft power depends on the beliefs that human beings have and how they process information; hence its systematic study will require engagement with cognitive and social psychology, where recent progress has been rapid. Efforts to understand the sources of beliefs are likely to become more urgent for students of world politics as social mobilization and the ability of people to communicate directly with one another, unmediated by large institutions, continues to grow.

Questions about war and cooperation, and concepts such as power and interest, remain central to world politics. The field has recently become more aware, however, of the inferential biases to which students of international relations are subject. Wars and crises are rare events. Quite naturally, scholars seeking to understand them focus much more on these events than on the situations of peace, especially situations lacking crises at all. Insofar as our purposes are descriptive, this emphasis is unproblematic. However,

when we seek to put forward explanatory propositions, we are in danger of selecting our cases on the dependent variable, which will bias our inferences (Achen and Snidal 1989; King, Keohane, Verba 1994). We need continually to be aware of the uncertainty of our inferences – since our data is not generated by experiments and often the class of relevant events is small and not independent of one another – and to try to account for sources of bias.

Students of world politics have made theoretical progress in recent decades on issues of war, cooperation, and the role of multilateral institutions; and conceptual progress on issues of sovereignty. Impressive empirical work, guided by improved technical and methodological sophistication, has been carried out on a variety of problems, including warfare. However, most of this progress has focused on seeking to establish static conditional generalizations. Although we are living in a period of unprecedented change, our understanding of change is much inferior to our understanding of fundamental long-term regularities.

### **Six big questions about change over time**

Compared to the history of civilization, much less of the human race, the known history of world politics is very short indeed, and the period for which reasonably reliable data exists is less than 200 years. Human nature has not changed during that time, nor has the fact that no world government exists. When students of world politics seek to make generalizations based on state behavior during the last two centuries, they implicitly assume that the actors and processes of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century are essentially the same as those operating now. Much, however, has occurred in those 200 years to change some basic factors at work, including the nature of force and the structure of economic

life. Furthermore, change seems to be accelerating, generating several new or newly urgent questions.

*1) How has politics been affected by the expansion of force, through technological change, and its dispersion?* Scholars have explored in depth the effects of changes in the technology of force on international relations in the West over periods of centuries and the impact of nuclear weapons. Recent changes in warfare, relying on GPS systems and electronic technology of all kinds, have created huge gaps between the military power of the United States and that of other countries. Some of those who celebrated American military power, however, may have forgotten that ingenious adversaries can create effective “weapons of the weak,” such as terrorism, and that possessing a superior resource may lead states to overuse it, or to attempt to use it for purposes for which it is not well-suited.

*2) How has world politics been affected by changes in capitalism?* Karl Marx and Joseph Schumpeter are the two most famous theorists who have seen world politics as fundamentally affected by the nature of capitalist development. Marx, Lenin, and their followers viewed war as the result of capitalism, with its limitless demand for markets and investment opportunities. Schumpeter, by contrast, thought that capitalism had peace-inducing effects, limiting imperialism by emphasizing profit over glory and conquest. But he also viewed capitalism as a relentless process of “creative destruction,” implying socially disruptive change. Both Marx and

Schumpeter thought that change was the essence of capitalism, which implies that how economic structures affect global conflict and cooperation must change over time. Neither would have accepted the static formulations of how world politics operate implicit in much of the statistical work now appearing in the field.

3) *Is there any plausible sense in which progress has taken place in international relations, and if so, is this progress due to intellectual or moral advances in human thinking?* Since the Enlightenment, many thinkers in the West have observed fundamental changes in human practices and have concluded, or at least dared to hope, that moral as well as scientific and technical progress was occurring. These hopes peaked in the years before the First World War, when both publicists and practical men of affairs expected economic interdependence to dampen or even prevent wars and sought arbitration and arms limitation treaties to facilitate and institutionalize benign changes. World Wars and the Holocaust generated great disillusionment, but in the 1980s and 1990s hopes for progress, through learning or changes in principled ideas, were revived. The effects of changes in the ideas in which people believe are by no means necessarily benign, as illustrated by nuclear weapons and the recent militancy of Islamic fundamentalism. We should expect no simple answer to questions about progress, but they are nevertheless important questions to ask.

4) *What is the impact on world politics of the increasing diversity and complexity of social structures in the most powerful societies of the world?* It is a platitude that contemporary democratic-capitalist societies are increasingly complex, a complexity that is magnified by the increasing blurring of lines between societies as transnational relations become more dense. Governments themselves are becoming diversified, along with civil society, which has experienced a vast increase at the transnational level of non-governmental organizations and social movements (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Traditional gender roles have been changing in western societies, with potential impacts on decision-making and leadership behavior. Anne-Marie Slaughter has recently put forward the vision of a “disaggregated world order,” in which, as a result largely of social complexity, hierarchies have weakened and networks have become the dominant form of connection among individuals and groups in society (Slaughter 2004). There is considerable evidence for Slaughter’s argument – from peaceful activities such as accounting and securities regulation and violent ones such as terrorism -- but it is largely anecdotal. We need to understand these changes more systematically.

5) *What are the implications of electronic technologies, especially of the internet, for world politics?* To exercise influence, sets of individuals with common values or interests need to be able to communicate with each other, to form groups and to act collectively. Historically, such communication has been very difficult except through formal organizations, including the state; and all but impossible across state boundaries except with the aid of states.

This formerly constant reality has been changing with incredible speed during the last two decades, and we have hardly begun to understand the implications of this momentous fact. One implication may be that collective action on a transnational or even global scale, for good or ill, is easier than it has ever been before.

- 6) *What modes of action can effectively cope with the unprecedented stress that human beings are imposing on the global environment?* The reality of human-induced climate change has become undeniable, although many uncertainties surround the pace and severity of change and the prospects for relevant technological innovation. The political uncertainties may be even greater, both with respect to the willingness of publics and governments around the world to pay significant costs to mitigate climate change and adapt to it, and with respect to the capacity of existing or feasible institutions to implement measures involving global taxes or tradeable permit schemes (Aldy and Stavins 2007).

### **Issues of Institutional Design**

I began this essay with the argument that the study of world politics is driven heavily by normative concerns, although in our positive research we have an obligation to follow the canons of scientific inference. If we are serious about these normative concerns, we cannot merely pontificate: we need to think deeply about these issues so that we can articulate coherent normative points of view, and then connect these normative issues with practical problems. For me, as a student of institutions, the most pressing practical problems involve institutional design.

The fundamental normative question can be posed as follows: *What is the extent and depth of human obligations to other human beings, extending across political and cultural boundaries?* Do people in Europe and North America have obligations to people in Africa, simply as a result of our common humanity? To what extent are moral obligations limited by shared bonds of historical experience and community? Moral philosophers have reflected profoundly on these issues. Our answers to this question will condition our answers to a related but derivative question: *How should we think about tradeoffs among values, such as democracy, liberty, equality (including gender equality) and economic welfare?* It is not obvious that the tradeoffs made in wealthy democracies fully apply to developing countries, or societies with different cultural practices; yet for liberal cosmopolitans, there is an irreducible core of human rights that must be respected (Okin 1999). What should these rights be considered to be?

The way we think about practical issues such as institutional design will necessarily be shaped by our answers to these fundamental normative questions. I am a cosmopolitan liberal democrat: a cosmopolitan, since I think that basic human rights are universal and not dependent on membership in a particular community; a liberal, because I give priority to liberty as a crucial value for a good society; a democrat, because I believe that elites should not only serve the public good but should be accountable to deliberative public views through institutions that give publics power over leaders. The two basic issues of institutional design that I raise reflect these values.

My first issue of institutional design involves effectiveness. *How can institutions in world politics be designed, or modified, in ways that would make them more effective in attaining collective purposes, from restoring peace in war-torn societies to facilitating*

*nondiscriminatory trade, protecting human rights, and preventing damage to the global environment?* Theoretical and empirical work on institutional design over the last two decades has pointed to the importance of incentives for reaching and complying with international agreements (Koremenos et al. 2001). Since institutions vary in the incentives they help to generate, a worthwhile normative project would be to figure out systematically how to get the incentives right in constructing institutions, and what scope global institutions should have in light of the incentives of potential member states and the capacity of domestic and multilateral institutions in a variety of issue-areas.

To be worthwhile for a democrat, institutions have to be accountable as well as effective. So my second question can be posed as follows: *How can multilateral institutions be designed, without global government, so that qualified and dedicated leaders are more likely to be chosen, and those leaders who are selected are held accountable to the people whose actions they affect?* Accountability is a basic principle of democracy. Multilateral institutions cannot be fully democratic since they remain dependent on states. Many states are not democratic and the connections between multilateral institutions and publics even in democratic states are weak. Yet mechanisms have been devised to make multilateral institutions accountable and they could be strengthened.

The questions that I have emphasized are necessarily selective. Some issues have been omitted simply for lack of space. But I have deliberately omitted discussion of the alleged incompatibility of broad approaches to the study of international relations such as realism, institutionalism, and constructivism, since I regard these approaches as complementary rather than alternatives. The relevant question is to figure out how they

can be combined to address theoretically or practically relevant problems. Nor have I emphasized analytical or statistical tools that are playing an increasing role in scholarship, even though these tools have been valuable both theoretically and empirically. To my taste, there has been an overemphasis recently on tools at the expense of reflection about which questions are most important for the human race and for the ecosystem. Focusing on major problems can help us to figure out which insights from the broad approaches to the field are valuable, and which analytical tools yield genuine insights or evidence. If we then focus on developing testable theories, we can investigate their implications empirically. But if we fail to ask the right questions, there is no hope of getting the answers we need.

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