BOOK REVIEW

# The Unavoidable Instability of Politics

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(SNYDER, Jack. *Power and Progress: International Politics in Transition.* New York: Routledge, 2012)

Nothing can be taken for granted, says a popular dictum phrased in different languages and manners. Such obvious statement, however, seems to have been forgotten by both professionals and researchers of politics. Whereas professionals have been surprised by social upheavals in societies where recent material progress seemed to have had successfully accommodated contentious political grievances—as in Brazil and Turkey—, researchers are have been caught by a wave that prioritizes hypothesis-testing over concept- and theory-building. Yet if nobody can avoid the political and the inherent conflictive nature of social life, how can any politician or bureaucrat feel safe in the iron-cage of institutions? In such a context, should political and other social scientists not re-visit traditional concepts before putting forward large-N observational and experimental research designs?

In *Power and Progress: International Politics in* Transition, Jack Snyder reminds us of those sins as he flags out the very unstable nature of politics in both domestic and international levels. In turn, that nature posits a serious challenge to strictly institutionalist standpoints and approaches in Comparative Politics and International Relations, as well as their methodological correlates. Within 12 chapters—most of them already published as articles in the last two decades and co-authored with names such as Robert Jervis and Edward Mansfield—, Snyder defies in theoretical and empirical terms the validity of a type of research that seek of unfold the "effects of causes" without paying much attention to the "causes of effects", to use a conceptual distinction recently advanced by two renowned methodologists, Gary Goertz and James Mahoney (2012). Also, Snyder and his co-authors master the difficult yet very much needed task to bridge the gap between the literature in Comparative Politics and International Relations—a crucial step for political scientists

and policy-makers in a more and more interdependent and unstable world that witnesses a power transition from the West to the East, and an expansion of the standards of living in most of the old Third World. The final result consists of a book that is useful for both research and teaching purposes given the clarity of argumentation and the level of conceptual precision. Yet Snyder incurs in a crucial pitfall: the defense—not always explicit—of a normative agenda that may not result in stable world as it is often argued, but certainly meet American and Western interests in general, and in part limits his own conclusions.

As Snyder himself writes in the introduction, "...the logic of power in anarchy and the logic of progress through modernization are deeply intertwined. Together they have shaped the main patterns of international relations from the early modern period to the present day. The chapters selected for this collection address each of these logics and how they interact" (pp. 4). In *Myths of Empire*, published in 1991, he had already discussed that interaction, yet with focus on the domestic and international trajectories of great powers only. Now Snyder expands his theoretical contributions through the analysis of diverse cases in which there where domestic changes that eventually impacted international affairs in various regions of the world and in the international system as a whole. To accomplish such a task, he deploys an arsenal of both quantitative and qualitative tools, combining them without losing the focus. Nonetheless, the author and his colleagues proceed through a manner in which the methods do not become more important than the questions that are asked. Nor concepts are left aside for the sake of attaining the oversold excuse of parsimony. Complex phenomena, such as interactions between domestic and international levels in times of transition, cannot be simplified as there is the risk of resulting in pedestrian analysis, although, as *Power and Progress* shows, it is certainly feasible to clarify them without oversimplification.

The book is organized in three parts, each of them containing four chapters. In the first, "Anarchy and its Effects", the focus lies on the impacts of international factors on domestic politics. Deserves attention the chapter 2, co-authored with Thomas J. Christensen as an article published at *International Organization* in 1990. Snyder and Christensen combine the structural realist literature with the concept of security dilemma to demonstrate that both World Wars were shaped by states' misperceptions of their own security within contexts of rising multipolarity. Such mistake resonates as an alert in a time when even close democratic allies, such as the US and the EU, still engage themselves in mutual surveillance through intelligence notwithstanding the high level of political-economic cooperation. Chapter 5 also must be praised, as it employs insights from anthropology to provide a more accurate explanation of the causes of war than models that focuses parsimonious explanations based on either material or cultural considerations.

The second part, "The Challenges of Democratic Transition", unfolds the dynamics between democratizing processes and the complicated task of state-building. Originally a book chapter co-authored with Mansfield and published in 2007, chapter 6 concludes—based on an insightful combination of statistical and qualitative analysis—that in states without "… institutional infrastructure needed to manage democratization…" (pp. 126) there is the risk that nationalist- and ethnic-based discourses trigger either international or domestic conflict. In chapter 8—the only one written specially for the book—Snyder and Mansfield elaborate more on the argument that social fragmentation tends to result in conflict if a country has yet to consolidate its institutions. Nonetheless, the mechanism they propose for constraining instability in democratizing polities is controversial: the authors argue for the control or even the temporary suspension of certain civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech and open elections, in order to constrain the rise of nationalist-populist groups, which often rely on hate for building-up a common identity, having then the potential to trigger wars.

The final section, "Empire and the Promotion of a Liberal Order", makes explicit the US-based agenda that permeates most of the previous chapters and has the potential to weaken Snyder's mastery of the craft of researching and theorizing. To be fair, he criticizes the Bush Doctrine foreign policy that prioritizes democracy-promotion at any cost—even at the expanse of the strength of the empire. Therefore, Snyder argues, even a superpower faces limits. In fact, the book attempts to provide formulas to build what Snyder calls the right sequence of democratization, and, then, reassure the supremacy of the liberal order put forward by the Anglo-Saxon world. In normative terms, such claim is too pretentious, not to say dangerous. Politics as practice has so many uncertainties—as the plethora of examples offered in the book prove—that generalizable formulas for policymakers may contribute to generate misperceptions as much limitative as the ones Snyder targets in his analysis.

Moreover, Snyder posits but does not address in full the most exciting questions that surround the current state of affairs in the global field of power. In the introduction, he asks how rising powers, mostly notably China, will fit in an international order dominated by liberal democracies, as well as how the latter, led by the US, will react to what appears to be an emerging multipolar order. Furthermore, the author wonders whether the demand for mass political participation in the periphery will actually result in solid political institutions. The response for these puzzles remains incomplete as the authors' bias in favor of an American-led order eventually prevail over undisputable facts, such as the current lack of a revisionist impetus from the emerging world.

In framing much of what is addressed in the book in terms of the opposition between realists and neoliberals in International Relations, Snyder also misses the chance to make

very explicitly what could help scholars to put forward more complex analysis without sacrificing precision for the illusion of parsimony. In its more accurate versions, constructivism, mainly neglected in the book, provides incipient tools to capture the unavoidable instability of politics. To recast the introductory paragraph, nothing can be taken for granted. Nonetheless, in the task of doing and building science, one certainly has to rely on a minimum set of procedures and concepts to conduct any kind of systematic investigation of observable phenomena. The challenge then consists of being aware that in different cases a given concept may mean different outcomes, as well as that all correlations depend on causal linkages that are potentially *ad-hoc*. That is, one has to investigate, prior to testing effects of causes, which are the most likely causes of effects. In other words, the rationalist quest for *explanation* does not hold without more work than that necessary to reach the constructivist goal of *understanding*. One complements the other as neither rationalism nor constructivism is a substantive theory (Fearon and Wendt 2002).

International and domestic processes show that politics as a practice is indeed unstable. So does politics as a science that, as Snyder's work suggest, might not be anything more than the defense of a normative agenda, which, of course, does not annihilate the strengths of coherent theory and good research as present in most of *Power and Progress*.

## References

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