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Man at work outside the box – Bertrand Badie

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This essay is a strong wake-up call for a new type of diplomacy from those western countries that wish to continue to govern the world despite the passage of time. Review.



Statue of Ferdowsi in Tus. Sculptor: Abolhassan Sadighi. Wikicommons/Mohammad Hossein Taghi. Some rights reserved.

Dürrenmatt's famous play *The Physicists* (1962) relies on a key thesis: "Within the paradoxical appears reality". This applies perfectly to Bertrand Badie's [must-read essay](#), *New perspectives on the international order: no longer alone in this world*, (2018) which constantly plays with multiple paradoxes in order to expose the reader to reality. The author humbly promises only "considerations full of common sense and aimed at re-examining our old political science".

But this atypical book delivers much more: a strong wake-up call, an appeal to acknowledge that history has not come to an end and that the world has changed, so stop blocking out reality:

“the more we see the present through the lens of the past, the less we understand what we are living and the more we take perilous refuge in a finite world.”

Badie’s persuasive arguments and rhetoric put a nail in the coffin of outdated approaches such as the Westphalian, the bipolar and unipolar narratives (discussed respectively in Chapter One and Two). Based on three key norms – sovereignty, territoriality and international negotiations – Westphalian ‘software’ still shapes today’s political science of international relations. The following paradoxes remain ignored: in spite of the sovereignty paradigm, the “temptation of empire” remains vivid as is best illustrated by the colonialism that “never totally left the European stage”; while the Westphalian order is supposed to mitigate interstate relations (balance of power), a fetishized sovereignty principle accentuates competition and power games following the motto “sharing when you must, but excluding when you think you can!”

The non-aligned movement

Nevertheless, in the shadow of the western powers, a “second rank” in the international system has emerged: the Pan-Asian and Pan-Islamic conferences were both organised in 1926, followed in 1928 by the Anti-Imperialist Congress – which paved the way for the first largescale Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (1955) and to the still existing power bloc of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) established in Belgrade (1961). Taken together, they signal three major – at that time unnoticed – shifts: first, the club of five is no longer alone in the world; second, East-West relations leave room for North-South relationships; and, third, the balance of power between the first and second ranks may one day simply reverse.

Considering more closely the non-alignment movement, the author highlights three paradoxes. First, various NAM protagonists (notably Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Ceylon – the future Sri Lanka), while proclaiming themselves neither East nor West, were nevertheless following a logic of clientelization with respect to the two superpowers. Second, “while demanding full acknowledgment of their sovereignty from their former colonial master, they were appealing to the North to support them in their effort at development”. And, third paradox: peripheral conflicts developed in the South in spite of the vassalization and clientelization strategies of the North with the result that “the more such conflicts developed, the more the Northern countries’ capacities to control them declined.”

Discussing further the contentious legacy of non-alignment, Badie draws a conclusion in the form of a further paradox: “Admittedly, the non-aligned movement never led to an institutionalized political order, but its heirs had a great deal of influence in the world by participating more and more in defining the international agenda. It is in their territories that the main conflicts are developing in the world today, involving their key issues and the social deficits burdening them.”

Afro-Asian actors such as these were, on the one hand, outside the Westphalian order, “seeking an order that would not stem merely from the universalisation of the Western statist model but would introduce something quite different.” On the other hand, they were busy overcoming the bipolar gap, and realising that “weakness creates a realm of perilous freedom that is still underestimated to this day: too great a gap in power kills power.” With the emergence of social and local dimensions discussed in Chapter Three, weakness can win out “over power through its aptitude for defining the new relationships governing the world stage.” Badie’s examples are Osama bin Laden and Abou Bakr al-Baghdadi, both of whom have determined the international agenda over the past fifteen years.

Weakness triumphant

Viewing politics from the South, Badie here introduces the reader to a more subtle and complex approach. We recognise the motifs of Badie’s next volume that targets the North-South divide: *Quand le Sud réinvente le monde* (2018).

Two key paradoxes are here at work: first, power isn't any more an essential determinant of success or failure, weakness becoming a strength, and inequality not so much a problem as an advantage; and, second, globalisation isn't the negation of the local nor does it eliminate particularisms, it "rather fuels the revenge of the social versus the political."

This new software also nurtures "new conflicts that are no longer an expression of power, but the exact opposite. For the first time, war is no longer the result of competing powers but proceeds entirely from weakness, breakdown, and defects." Against this background, considering the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Libya, Central African Republic and Mali, western powers are not in control of this new conflictual world "where power has become powerless, while weakness has given rise to power to the point of destabilising the agenda of the strongest."

The 'tectonics of societies'

"A cannon can destroy a cannon, but has no hold over societies, and even less over tatters." While the entire Westphalian logic is hereby questioned, a new syntax emerges as "the socialization of global issues has completely shaken up the familiar categories of international relations" Badie systematically prioritises the social dimension: social actors, their behaviour, culture and expectations matter. New perspectives on international relations are therefore driven less by state initiatives and more by social dynamics: "International relations must no longer be merely an analysis of the configurations of power, it must also establish itself as the science of the 'tectonics of societies'."

Exploring the new world (Chapter Four), Badie focuses on the main characteristics of the twenty-first century: on the one hand, depolarisation – the end of bipolarity augmented the weakening narrative of protection and alliance linked to various polarity models of the past (essentially bipolarity) – and, on the other hand, significant devaluation of power and sovereignty.

A twofold rush characterises the new international relations: first, "a rush toward self-rule", thus toward autonomy, and, second, to compete – not for power, but – for acquiring or regaining status and recognition. This applies to Kosovo as well as, albeit at another level, to the frustrated Russian empire.

Chapter Five emphasises how the world today is hostage to failed decolonisation in Africa as well as in the Middle East – even if most of the countries of the Middle East did not have the official status of colonies, they were nevertheless victims of an oppressive system of trusteeship. The Westphalian order was unable either to welcome the new incomers in a suitable way, or to understand their own specific histories – that would not follow down the Western path of nation-building. Hence, the flaw in nation-building, the great weakness of development policies, and, last but not least, the failure of imported states "done in the name of universalism, exalting a bit too quickly the Western model of statehood as its most consummate expression in the history of humanity."

Badie reprises here the main theses first exposed in his 1992 publication, *The imported State*: "In order to truly support independence without falling back into neo-colonialism and clientelization, it would have required accepting that automatically importing the Western model of statehood could not be a substitute for designing a new state. For political institutions to be legitimate and functional, they must fit in with local historical trajectories to the greatest possible extent, and they must be designed as much as possible with the people's involvement."

Alas, recent interventions, notably by France in the Ivory Coast, in Mali and in the Central African Republic, are only "preserving the neo-colonial framework and contributed to atrophying the political development of these societies." As Badie notices, while neo-colonial trusteeship policies die hard and nurture the seeds of more conflicts, China, Russia and Brazil (basically the BRICS countries) interestingly follow other strategies and propose a diversification of the protection and cooperation on offer. We may ask here if this doesn't also

apply to the current Europeanisation process of the Balkans?

Moving beyond state-centricity

Badie's book highlights sharp breaks with the history of international relations, all of which mark a significant shift away from the Westphalian world order: the double defeat of hegemony and of colonization amounts to the checkmating on the one hand of power and sovereignty, and, on the other hand, of territoriality.

Indeed, a hypertext or multiplex world order made up of "more complex and more fluid political finalities" moves beyond a state-centered understanding of power and territory in order to include multi-actor, multi-level and multi-scalar processes.

Rethinking, updating, or lazily formulating "a few paltry new ideas" (such as multipolarity, superpower, rogue states, new turmoil etc.) will not deliver new perspectives on the international order. New thinking – in the author's words a "conceptual tsunami" – is here required. The way out of the labyrinth requests a new compass focusing on changes, rifts and key issues:

"I am convinced that we can see clearly to describing the current international system, if we can place it in a historical context instead of fossilizing it there, describe the rifts rather than deny them, understand the real issues by looking beyond appearances."

This is what the book delivers, insisting on a world that has changed and, consequently, on concepts such as "territory", "border", "sovereignty", "national security" that "have lost their meaning dating back several centuries."

Diplomacy

In the concluding section, the essay becomes a manifesto. Opposing economic liberalism, Badie suggests a politics of alterity, notably by rebranding diplomacy. Against the background of globalization, diplomacy must first articulate "the equality of human destinies, an equal right for all to participate in world governance." Second, it must reform a world social order that suffers from socioeconomic discrepancies." And third, target common economic, social and environmental resources which the survival of the planet is dependent on."

Badie's politics of alterity is further based on a redefined and regenerated sovereignty, on the prohibition of unilateral intervention, and on the action of local actors and proximity networks. A manifesto that ends surprisingly on a philosophical note, quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Our relationship to truth is through others. Either we move toward the truth with them, or else we're not moving toward the truth." (from Merleau-Ponty's inaugural lecture "In praise of philosophy" at the Collège de France on January 15, 1953)

While Badie often suggests reloading the great founders of social sciences including Durkheim, Weber, Marx and Tönnies (see for example, p. 10 and p. 50), the tunes he plays in this essay have some acquaintance with Axel Honneth's critical theory, notably his recurrent studies on the critique of power (1993), recognition (1996 and 2012) and disrespect (2007). This is perhaps not so surprising for an author thinking outside the box, one who loves to quote the Persian poet Hakīm Abol-Ghāsem Ferdowsī (935-1020): "I will never die and I will live forever because I sowed the seeds of speech."



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