

Review – World Ordering

Written by Marcos Engelken-Jorge

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MARCOS ENGELKEN-JORGE, JUN 17 2023

World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution

By Emanuel Adler

Cambridge University Press, 2019

World Ordering is the latest book by renowned political scientist Emanuel Adler—a book that reflects the author's long academic career, not least in the vast array of studies, disciplines and intellectual debates on which Adler draws and to which he contributes. Indeed, the author surveys much of the relevant empirical and theoretical literature in International Relations, and he borrows extensively from social and political philosophy, social theory, epistemology, evolution theory and complexity theory to explain change and stability in international social orders, in particular, and in social order *tout court*. The topic is mainly addressed from a social theory perspective, although the text is also rich in empirical illustrations, with references to 'Europe's post-World War II social order', the 'cyberspace social order', and the 'corporate social order', among other examples. Given the theoretical focus and the wealth of intellectual traditions on which it rests, which results in the proliferation of specialized concepts, the book targets an academic readership.

While some details remain obscure, the overall theory of world ordering is clear. In a nutshell, Adler's argument is that 'social orders originate, derive from, and are constituted constantly by practices, the background knowledge bound with them, and the communities of practice that serve as their vehicles' (p.2). The author thus proposes a cognitive evolutionary approach to social orders, conceived as dynamic 'configuration[s] of constitutive practices coupled with constitutive rules' (p.144) that 'cut across domestic, international, transnational, and supranational boundaries' (p.1). They are the ongoing result of cognitive evolutionary processes—that is, of interrelated processes of creative variation and selective retention—that Adler conceives as forms of 'collective-learning' (p.165). What warrants this conceptualization of *evolution* as the upshot of *learning* processes is the view that individuals are 'purposeful actors' who approach the world with expectations (p.83), which implies that they are motivated to reflect on their practice, and thus to learn, when their practical expectations are unmet or challenged. Learning thus defined provides no normative—or, in Adler's parlance, 'ethical'—guideline to assess cognitive evolution. For learning, in this context, only means that actors revise their practices or improve on them—especially when stimulated by the environment or by other actors—in connection to some goals they happen to pursue. Accordingly, revised practices can lead to such things as the enhanced promotion of human rights or, in contrast, the strengthening of autocratic rule. Collective learning processes can undergird the 'liberal democratic international social order' (p.141), as well as the 'nationalist and perhaps authoritarian social international order' (p.154).

Cognitive evolution's basic units are practices—i.e. 'socially meaningful patterned actions' (p.19)—and their background knowledge, that is, 'expectations, dispositions, skills, techniques, and rituals' (p.20). While background knowledge enables practice, the opposite also holds, namely, practices encode and convey background knowledge. This justifies the dictum that 'practice rules' (p.144); that is, practices and their background knowledge are the basic units of both social orders and cognitive evolution, without reducing practices to by-products of allegedly more fundamental phenomena. Adler takes great care to render this pragmatist argument plausible, which draws attention to human fallibilism and, accordingly, to experimentation, creativity and iteration as drivers of collective learning processes.

Review – World Ordering

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Practices—the author emphasizes—are not learnt and developed in isolation but collectively within and between communities of practice. This concept refers to both people bound together by a sense of joint enterprise and a shared practice that embodies the knowledge of the community. Importantly, said communities provide the “backstage”, or what lies behind the wheeling and dealing of political practitioners, between states, and in and between international and transnational organizations’ (p.296). By focusing on them, Adler adheres to a distributed cognition approach, explaining how interaction within, as well as between, communities of practice result in ‘endogenous learning processes’ (p.181).

Cognitive evolution is driven not just by learning and, more generally, creative variation, but also by the selective retention of practices within communities and by the preferential establishment of some communities over others. Practices prevail and diffuse depending on aspects such as the material, social and symbolic resources of practitioners, in particular, their authority to establish rights, duties, requirements, and so forth, and their capacity to offer convincing performances to relevant audiences and stakeholders, which is linked to practitioners’ ability to form supporting coalitions. Adler also makes room for contingency, both in the form of unexpected outcomes and contingent events eroding the authority of some practitioners.

The rhetoric of learning and reflexivity suggests that the *intrinsic* practical value of practices—that is, their capacity to enable engagement with the world in a way that practices’ associated expectations are met—matters for their change and retention. In short, ‘thoughts survive if they work’ (Thrift cited on p.13). The idiom of power, in contrast, indicates that what is key is practices’ *instrumental* value in gathering helpful resources for the struggle between practitioners. Admittedly, this opposition between the intrinsic and the instrumental value of practices is misleading from the point of view of an external observer, for ‘power permeates individual and collective learning’ (p.173). From the internal perspective of social actors, however, questions of validity are often seen as unconditional—hence, at odds with the selection of practices due to contingency and power relations. Adler avoids the latter counterfactual position and adopts the point of view of an external observer, which provides a sound foundation for a *social* theory of social orders. However, this has implications for a *critical* theory that is also ‘about the conditions of possibility of *better* social orders’ (p.300; emphasis added).

Indeed, the author’s goal is not just to develop a framework capable of explaining the formation, maintenance and change of social orders, but also to assess them normatively. Given Adler’s external-observer-perspective, he forecloses the possibility of *deriving* the normative standards of critique *from* the theorization of cognitive evolution or social orders. In other words, Adler cannot engage in practice-based forms of immanent critique that locate the norms employed by the critique in rules that are constitutive of social practices, which in this case would have required the analytical distinction between pathological and non-pathological, distorted and undistorted forms of cognitive evolution or social orders—hence, the drawing of sharper (albeit counterfactual) boundaries between learning and power. In this way, Adler departs from the influential methodological approach of Frankfurt School Critical Theory to the assessment of collective learning and, more generally, to cognitive evolution.

Instead, the author introduces new elements into his theory to distinguish between ‘better’ and worse practices. More specifically, Adler claims that practices embodying and contributing to ‘common humanity’ values are ‘better’ or ‘ethical’. Said common humanity values denote the recognition of all human beings as part of the same community, which essentially implies a commitment to reducing other people’s suffering. In this view, less domination, less poverty, and less violence count as progress. Adler sees common humanity practices as contingent, but they follow—he claims—‘the globalizing nature of practices over the last past two centuries’ (p.278). Hence, they are contingent but can, and should, become ‘universal’ or ‘transcendental’.

Although most readers will agree that common humanity values thus conceived are desirable, the argument has some shortcomings. For one thing, it fails to answer questions such as: Why ought we to continue, rather than resist, this long-term historical trend towards globalization? What counts as universalization? For example, would the universal imposition of some values in a coercive way make them ‘transcendental’? More importantly, it is unclear why ethical standards should be limited to humanity instead of seeing cognitive evolution as, for instance, a process that has resulted in a growing moral community of sentient beings, including animals. Finally, Adler’s argument provides little guidance as to how the ethical criterion he suggests should be applied, especially to difficult cases.

Review – World Ordering

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That is, what counts as less suffering, especially when there are trade-offs between different groups or different forms of suffering? And more importantly, who (and how) ought to answer this question and decide accordingly what practices are 'better'?

That the book has some shortcomings as a *critical* theory should not make us overlook, however, that it is a remarkable accomplishment as a *social* theory of world ordering; not least for the extent of insights from different disciplines and intellectual debates that it successfully brings together. Importantly, the reframing of cognitive evolution and collective learning as practice-driven processes, rather than ideational ones, contributes to opening up promising avenues of research that, to my knowledge, have remained underexplored in the social sciences. Unsurprisingly, given the ambitious goal of the book, Adler fails to exhaust the subject of why, and how, social orders emerge, persist and change, but he does provide a solid and original theoretical basis for future research on this matter.

About the author:

Dr Marcos Engelken-Jorge is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of the Basque Country. He was previously a Marie Curie Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences at Humboldt-University of Berlin. His current research interests are in deliberative politics, the sociology of the public sphere, and collective learning.