

Interview – Patrick Cohrs

Written by E-International Relations

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Patrick O. Cohrs is Professor of International History at the University of Florence. He also serves as Director of the Centre for History, Strategy and International Order (CHIOS) at Helmut-Schmidt-University Hamburg, which he co-founded. He was Associate Professor of History and International Relations at Yale University, a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Alistair Horne Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford. He also was a visiting professor at the Sciences Po in Paris, LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome, Helmut-Schmidt-University Hamburg, and the University of Oxford.

Patrick O. Cohrs is the author of *The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics, 1860–1933* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), which won the 2023 Prose Award in World History, and *The Unfinished Peace after World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He is now working on *A World Transformed*, the third and final volume of his trilogy on the transformation of the modern Atlantic and global order, which will reappraise the second half of the long twentieth century (1933–2022). For further information please visit: www.patrickcohrs.com.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I consider the big picture analysis of the global Cold War that Arne Westad and scholars inspired by his work have been pursuing steadfastly as the most exciting in my field. I also think highly of Jürgen Osterhammel and those who, in his wake, have sought to provide a much fuller global interpretation of how the world was transformed in the long 19th century. With a view to younger scholars, I find especially promising Alanna O'Malley's and Haakon Ikononou's work on international organisations within a changing global order, notably the League of Nations and the United Nations, and the biographic and intellectual trajectories of those who shaped them.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

On a biographical level, I think my view of the world has never radically shifted, but it has changed by gaining personal experience of its richness and complexity over time, travelling far and wide and becoming ever more curious about how the world works and “what holds it together at its innermost”. In particular, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and September 11, 2001, undoubtedly pushed me to reevaluate my understanding of the subject.

On a deeper level, I would say that my interest in world history — and in those who wrote about it most profoundly — has had the most defining and, in the end, transformative impact. Some time ago, I concluded that it is impossible to gain a deeper understanding of the world without engaging with the grand arcs of history and trying to fathom how fundamental questions of war and peace, politics, culture and order have developed and been addressed by humankind, from the days of Ancient Greece to our increasingly disorderly 21st-century world.

You have written two books examining the development of the international order during the 20th century. The first one, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I* (2006), was published 16 years before *The New Atlantic Order* (2022). How are these two books connected?

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Both of these books are indeed closely interconnected. *The New Atlantic Order* is a more comprehensive and far-reaching work that builds on the first but offers a significantly expanded reappraisal of core themes of modern international politics. It also puts forward a broader and, I hope, even more substantial conceptual, chronological and spatial framework to that end. Also, both books seek to illuminate anew how far it was conceivable and why it ultimately proved elusive to construct a more durable and legitimate peace after the First World War, which I interpret not as the “original catastrophe” of the “short” but as the crucible of the “long” 20th century. Pursuing these fundamental questions, both books shed new light on the Paris Peace Conference and on long-neglected or misunderstood advances and setbacks in the 1920s, which I see not as a “decade of illusions” but a decade of learning and progress. Both books — though the second more than the first — also advance a new systemic interpretation of the broader origins of that war in the formative decades of globalising “high imperialism” and power politics after 1860.

Moreover, I have also conceived these works as the first two volumes of a trilogy whose final volume, *A World Transformed*, I am currently writing. This trilogy seeks to advance a new comprehensive interpretation of how and why the global order was so fundamentally transformed in what I call the “long” 20th century (1860–2022). This new book aims to illustrate how it eventually became possible to construct what, for all its limitations, became the most sustainable and legitimate modern international order in history — i.e., the order built around the nucleus of a novel Atlantic peace system and America’s alliance system in East Asia in the wake of this century’s second and even more defining global war. It also seeks to show in what ways this order remained unfinished and why it never — not even after 1989 — could be developed further into a truly universal and more widely legitimate global system.

What is your interpretation of the birth of the Trans-Atlantic order? How does this differ from other interpretations?

In *The New Atlantic Order*, I argue that what came to be forged after the First World War was not a new global order but rather essentially a novel Atlantic order, which was shaped around the nucleus of a new transatlantic concert of democratic states and had massive consequences for the entire world. In my interpretation, this order was not created by a messianic “internationalist” US president, Woodrow Wilson, who imposed his progressive design on the world; nor, however, did it come into being by way of the principal Western victors of the war imposing their terms on the vanquished and the rest of the world.

Instead, I aim to elucidate a far more profound long-term transformation that began at the dawn of the “long” 20th century, in the 1860s, then reached a decisive new stage under the impact of the disruptive Great War and finally culminated not only at the Paris Peace Conference but in the “era of London, Locarno and the League of Nations” in the latter 1920s. Through this globally embedded but essentially transatlantic process, the first modern architecture of peace and order gained contours. This was done first by the victors of 1919, then — in a more far-reaching and forward-looking manner — not just by their successors but also by those who represented Weimar Germany and other newly democratic powers.

As I hope to bring out, this set an important global example. It became the essential nucleus around which potentially a wider rule-based global order for the long 20th century could be created. And it thus indeed prefigured the more comprehensive Atlantic peace system and community that was eventually constructed after the Second World War. I am currently writing the third and final volume of my envisaged trilogy on the long 20th century entitled *A World Transformed* about the making of this Pax Atlantica and how the global order came to be reshaped after 1945

In *The New Atlantic Order*, you offer a comprehensive new interpretation of the Paris Peace Conference and its outcomes. What were the main weaknesses of the post-Paris international order?

First of all, it is essential to understand that the peacemaking process of Paris was and remains the most complex process of its kind in history, which posed immense challenges for those who came to make the crucial decisions in 1919, the democratically accountable political leaders of the victorious western powers. Because their aims and approaches remained irreconcilable in crucial respects and because their democratic legitimation requirements

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remained so disparate, they could only manage to strike very strained compromises on the most salient issues of peace and security. They only managed to hammer out a very weakened and frail security architecture based on Anglo-American guarantees and League-based collective security. They could not settle the interdependent problems of reparations and European postwar reconstruction; they could not meet the massive task of reorganising Eastern Europe after the disintegration of the Eastern empires; they had no real prospect of influencing the Russian Civil War or working out a tenable *modus vivendi* with a Bolshevik regime intent on destroying the “Western order”. Also, with British and French imperial interests coming to dominate the agenda, they were far from opening up prospects for ending colonial rule and establishing a global system of self-determined states, setting up instead the League’s neo-imperialist mandate system. Thus, what was gained first was still not a new world order but a new Atlantic order.

Yet what had the most far-reaching long-term repercussions — also for the pre-history of the Second World War and modern peacemaking — was how the victors dealt with the vanquished, particularly Germany, which was then transitioning to the fledgling Weimar Republic. No serious attempt was made to negotiate with Weimar’s representatives and to forge what could have been a more sustainable and mutually legitimate peace of accommodation. The defeated power was not severely punished or diminished; rather, it was initially excluded from the new order and put on probation.

Do some of the weaknesses of the post-Paris order still have an impact on contemporary politics?

The most fundamental problem in Paris was that the principal peacemakers could never really agree on the essential underpinnings and ground rules on which the new Atlantic order they envisaged was to be premised. In the end, a victors’ peace was imposed in a humiliating manner. In the 1920s, remarkable steps were taken to remedy this and integrate Weimar Germany into a reformed international order, the League, and a novel transatlantic concert, primarily through the seminal Locarno Accords of 1925. But the key lesson the post-First World War era holds, and which seems strikingly relevant for today, is probably: beware of how vital it is to act in close concert and to construct a new architecture of order and security that furnishes adequate guarantees, safeguards, rules, mechanisms and underlying norms for all the relevant players, in the hope of gaining not just partial but more global legitimacy.

Do you believe that liberal democracy is currently in crisis?

In my view, liberal democracy is in a state of profound crisis, both from without and from within. The intensifying political struggles within the American republic reveal this crisis’s extent and depth. Both the crisis itself and the effectiveness of political responses to it in Washington and wider US society will undoubtedly have a defining impact on the future of American hegemony. After 1989, the rather facile assumption that alongside ever more unrestrained capitalism, liberal democratic government and political culture could swiftly be globalised came to be disproved on many fronts.

What we witness instead in the increasingly disorderly and polarised world of the 21st century is a new stage in the systemic competition between the broadly speaking social-liberal-democratic visions, as imperfectly represented by the US hegemon and the other members of a strained Euro-Atlantic community, and the authoritarian-“communist”-capitalist counter-vision of Xi Jinping’s China and the highly retrogressive oligarchic authoritarianism of Putin’s Russia.

On another, no less fundamental level, however, the survival of the liberal-democratic order is unquestionably threatened quite severely from within. It is a very demanding form of political order, which essentially depends on the capacity and willingness not just of elites but also of wider citizenries to keep exercising their core responsibilities, keep developing the political judgement required to understand and determine one’s affairs, maintain a commitment to critical debate about how to tackle key challenges both nationally and internationally and agree on effective strategies to respond to them. Here, we confront very obvious problems: not only atrophy of convincing, let alone charismatic leadership in the face of ever more complex tasks in today’s democratic politics, but also the ever more striking inability of democratic societies to engage in deliberative reasoning to make democratically legitimate and effective decisions.

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This is significantly influenced by corporate algorithms and polarising social media in an age of digital counter-enlightenment. My underlying concern is they might thus lose the tools to do what would be imperative not only to preserve a concert of liberal democratic states but also to renew a liberal, rule-based global order. However, there is hope that the accumulation of deep crises and structural challenges might still provide the “wake-up call” to initiate a deeper renewal process. Looking at the bigger picture of the long 20th century, I can only stress that there is much to lose that was only created through immense hardship and sacrifice, yet there is also still much to salvage.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Most of all, I would advise them to study history, especially international and global history, and to gain a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the historical processes that have shaped modern international relations. I would also advise them not to follow prevalent fashions and trends but to focus on developing and honing independent thinking and critical judgment. Put differently; they should do all they can to assess and, if necessary, critique the often very far-reaching yet historically superficial and not seldom utterly misleading claims put forward by the different “schools” of International Relations, from Realists and Neo-Realists to Constructivists.

On that basis, I would encourage them to go for themes and questions that they find interesting and to pursue them with dedication and determination to produce works that stand the test of time. I would strongly encourage them to avoid ephemeral and intellectually tedious inner-IR disputes and seek meaningful exchanges with conceptually-minded international historians. I have often thought that how Paul Schroeder and Robert Jervis used to engage with each other in discussing larger questions and important contributions and limitations of their respective disciplines was exemplary.