

Ethics and Empirics: The Influence of Hayward R. Alker on Global Studies

Written by Renee Marlin-Bennett

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RENEE MARLIN-BENNETT, SEP 17 2012

Hayward R. Alker (1937–2007), an American scholar of deep humanitarian devotion, demonstrated the importance and the practicality of ethically grounded, empirically rigorous studies of global relations. His lasting contribution to what we anachronistically refer to as “*international relations*” (IR) is seen in his corpus of publications [1] but also in the sensibility and ontological and epistemological commitments of his students, those he mentored, and a growing number of scholars around the world.[2] That he and his work were held in high esteem by his colleagues in the United States and abroad is evidenced by the fact that he was elected to the prestigious position of president of the International Studies Association (1992-1993), the predominantly North American scholarly association for the field. Yet his work since the mid 1970s was well out of the mainstream of American International Relations, and it is fair to say that he has been more appreciated and widely cited outside the United States than within [3]. Recently, there seems to be an upsurge of interest in his work, perhaps because of the notice occasioned by his untimely death, but also because his work is uniquely suited for helping us deal with the complex, multidimensional problems facing us in today’s world.

In reviewing the arc of Alker’s scholarly contributions over time, a discontinuity is obvious; a continuity is more subtle, but also critically important. The discontinuity is between his initial work in what might be called normal science and his later research that is truly inter-disciplinary and inter-methodological. As an accomplished mathematician (he had earned an undergraduate degree in math at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before continuing in political science for the doctoral degree), Alker first made a mark on the field early in his career with mathematically sophisticated approaches to politics. Examples include a factor analysis based article in the *American Political Science Review* entitled “Dimensions of Conflict in the General Assembly” [4] and his first sole-authored book, *Mathematics and Politics* [5]. Writing in this genre, he was at the cutting edge of making political science more science-like, and his approach fit with the dominant behavioral, positivist agenda of American International Relations. In the mid-1970s, however, he became dissatisfied with mainstream approaches to the use of mathematics in political analysis – and particularly dissatisfied with the use of inferential statistics in ways that were, in his view, inappropriate given the limitations of the evidence [6].

Alker further raised intellectual questions about the foundations of rational choice approaches as a basis for political analysis. To him, finding the formal logical solution to a game was insufficient for understanding the politics. Alker admonished researchers that people are complex and the only ontologically and epistemologically sound response is to avoid stripping away that complexity. All actors have “multiple identities and interests.” Consequently they should not be treated as “unitary, voluntaristic utility maximizers”[7]. The simple intervention of conducting experiments and asking people what they were thinking as they engaged in making strategic choices was a more appropriate way to understand the practical judgments that people actually make, rather than the idealized “rational” choices assumed by mainstream scholars[8].

Alker’s turn to inter-disciplinary and inter-methodological research led him to seek ways of integrating social science and humanistic approaches to understanding global politics. He did not shy away from using computational methods [9] or formal logical tools [10], but he also drew upon textual interpretation [11]. His work teaches us that we must use all of the appropriate knowledge-making tools that we have from the social sciences but also (and perhaps even

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more importantly) from the humanities, in order to uncover the complex, contested narratives of life on this planet. In short, Alker makes us ask: What knowledge – what kind of evidence, what kind of data — do we need to make the world a better – a more peaceful, more just, more personally, socially, and ecologically healthier – place?

For Alker, “data making” was one crucial step in this process. He was not particularly interested in quantified data – GDP, or the number of battle deaths. He was interested in the historical narratives that communities use to tell and retell what has transpired. Furthermore, he was particularly interested in how different communities understand and attach meaning and facticity to narratives in conflicting and overlapping ways. Thus, in building compilations of evidence and in conducting analyses, Alker’s approach requires the researcher to have a truly “realistic” view of the world we are trying to explain, understand or even predict, and that a realistic view requires multiple points of view, an expanded notion of what the study of IR is about, and a willingness to understand the contingent and tentative nature of what we do.

The subtle continuity in his research can be seen in his ethical commitment to peace and justice, which can be found in all of his research. Every project he undertook, from studies of the General Assembly in the 1960s [12] in his social scientific period to the analysis of fairy tales in his latter period [13], was chosen with the aim of understanding how to make the world more peaceful and more just. In his later work, he became more explicit about the role of normativity in global studies scholarship. We live, Alker asserted, in a world in which people are “willing to kill, to die, or to be killed” because of “the economic, cultural and political historicities... [that] give meaning to their collective experiences.” Our task as scholars is only meaningful if we seek to address this heart-wrenching fact through our rigorously pursued scholarship. He called for an “emancipatory empiricism,” a “research orientation” for peace research (and, by implication, for global studies more generally) that would “make us free — from past falsehoods, the possibility-distorting representations, continuing oppressions, even war itself” [14]. He focused on language and narratives for this purpose, and he envisioned an intentionally incomplete, revisable compilation of knowledge about the world from which one could seek means of resolving conflicts and finding peaceful solutions. Referring to Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*, Alker noted “the constitutive role of substantively persuasive speech acts, precedential-normative-historical story telling, and identity transformations in the possible development of pluralistically, sociologically integrated, i.e. peaceful, international relations” [15].

The lessons of an Alkerian approach to global studies and the reason that Alker’s scholarship resonates so well now is that we as scholars and as humans must find ways to organize and analyze the multitude of voices and the many forms of violence in the world in order to find paths toward just resolution of conflict. Though much of US scholarship remains overly committed to positivistic, rationalist ideals that are ultimately unrealistic, some scholars in the US and many in the rest of the world are much more open to humanistic as well as social science methods, to normatively driven inquiry, and to complexity and multiple truths. Alkerian sensibilities mesh well with the attention to language seen in critical security studies [16], with the historical groundedness of the English School [17], with the emancipatory emphasis of post-colonial approaches [18], and with the decentering of the West by scholars in the “worlding” approach [19], as well as other eclectic approaches to understanding global politics in the broadest, most inclusive sense. For these perspectives and similarly critical ones, Alker’s emphasis on discovering “discursive validation – reasoned, critical, and constructive appeals to truth” – provides an important theoretical key. It is now our obligation to open doors.

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- [1] Examples include the following: Hayward R. Alker, "Dimensions of Conflict in the General Assembly," *The American Political Science Review* 58, no. 3 (1964); Hayward R. Alker, "Dialectical Foundations of Global Disparities," *International Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1981): 69-98; Hayward R. Alker and Thomas J. Biersteker, "The Dialectics of World Order: Notes for a Future Archeologist of International Savoir Faire," *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Jun., 1984): 121-142; Hayward R. Alker, "The Humanistic Moment in International Studies: Reflections on Machiavelli and Las Casas," *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (1992): 347-347; Hayward R. Alker, *Rediscoveries and Reformulations: Humanistic Methodologies for International Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Hayward R. Alker and others, "Twelve World Order Debates Which Have Made Our Days" paper presented at the Annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois (2001).
- [2] An edited volume, Renée Marlin-Bennett, *Alker and IR : Global Studies in an Interconnected World* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2012) provides some examples of how Alker's approach has influenced the work of other scholars.
- [3] Renée Marlin-Bennett and Thomas J. Biersteker, "Introduction," in *Alker and IR: Global Studies in an Interconnected World*, ed. Renée Marlin-Bennett (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-10.
- [4] Alker, *Dimensions of Conflict in the General Assembly*, 642-657.
- [5] Hayward R. Alker, *Mathematics and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
- [6] Eric Blanchard, "How to Read Alker," Unpublished paper (2009).
- [7] Hayward R. Alker, "A Methodology for Design Research on Interdependence Alternatives," *International Organization* 31, no. 01 (1977): 29-63.
- [8] Hayward R. Alker and Roger Hurwitz, *Teaching Manual for Resolving Prisoners' Dilemmas* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, MIT, [1980]).
- [9] Hayward R. Alker, "Ontological Reflections on Peace and War," paper presented at the Santa Fe Institute, Santa Fe, NM (1999), abstract available <http://www.santafe.edu/research/publications/wpabstract/199902011> (accessed May 22, 2008).
- [10] Hayward R. Alker, "The Dialectical Logic of Thucydides' Melian Dialogue," *The American Political Science Review* 82, no. 3 (1988): 805-820.
- [11] Alker, *The Humanistic Moment in International Studies: Reflections on Machiavelli and Las Casas*, 347-347.
- [12] Alker, *Dimensions of Conflict in the General Assembly*, 642-657; Hayward R. Alker and Bruce M. Russett, *World Politics in the General Assembly*, Vol. 15 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).
- [13] Hayward R. Alker, "Beneath Tit-for-Tat: The Contest of Political Economy Fairy Tales within SPD Protocols," in *Rediscoveries and Reformulations: Humanistic Methodologies for International Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- [14] Hayward R. Alker, "Emancipatory Empiricism: Toward the Renewal of Empirical Peace Research," in *Rediscoveries and Reformulations :Humanistic Methodologies for International Studies* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 332-354.
- [15] Hayward R. Alker, "Designing Information Resources for Transboundary Conflict Early Warning Networks," in *Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm*, eds. Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 367.

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[16] L. Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School," *Millennium* 29, no. 2 (2000): 285-306; Ken Booth, *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

[17] Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School," *International Organization* 47, no. 03 (1993): 327-352; R. Little, "The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 3 (2000): 395-422.

[18] S. N. Grovogui, "Regimes of Sovereignty: International Morality and the African Condition," *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 3 (2002): 315-338+437.

[19] Anna M. Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling, *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds* (London; New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2009).

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