

Review - The Breaking of Nations

Written by Filipa Pestana

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FILIPA PESTANA, MAY 27 2013

The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the 21st Century

By: Robert Cooper

London: Atlantic Books, 2004

The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the 21st Century, by Robert Cooper, is a book written for the masses. Its purpose is leading the common reader to a build a better understanding of the geopolitical situation during the Cold War (focused on Europe). This perspective won't bring much benefit to scholars or political analysts (Peterson, 2007:3). Nonetheless it is an essential book, taking into account the controversial interpretation of the world order made by the author.

The book is composed of three different essays, which are interdependent though written on different occasions and with different purposes. The first essay, with the title, "The condition of the world," is in fact an updated version of a work from 1996.[1] It describes the state of the world and of the state one decade after the end of the Cold War. The most important aspects are the fall of empires, American supremacy, globalization and the emergence of new kinds of threats and types of conflicts. The second part, "The conditions of peace: twenty-first century diplomacy" was originally written as a small text for the British Prime Minister to read at Christmas. It begins with a general reflection

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upon diplomacy and ends with an analysis of the necessary conditions of peace. Finally, "Epilogue: Europe and America" first published by *Internationale Politik*[2] is a comment on modern Europe as well as an appeal that it doesn't "leave the world to the US" (Cooper, 2006:13).

This work focuses on Europe and deals with a concern about what role it can play in a world where there are no boundaries to security threats and where the certainties and alliances of the Cold War no longer exist. However, reading *The Breaking of Nations*, or any other work, without taking the author's political agenda into account has no benefit. Reading the cover of the book immediately prepares the reader for what to expect. Robert Cooper is a reputed European diplomat who was Tony Blair's special adviser and mentor of his political decisions. Cooper was also Director of the European Union Council for Foreign Affairs and Common Security, being responsible, together with Javier Solana, for the outline of the Strategy of European Security.[3] John Ikenberry (2003a) offers a very interesting perspective: "The United States has Fukuyama, Huntington, and Kagan as its prophets of the coming world order. Who does Europe have? The answer is Robert Cooper, a former adviser to Tony Blair and an EU diplomat." [4]

The Breaking of Nations relates to Europe the same way "From Paradise and Power", by Robert Kagan, projects the image the United States has of Europeans – a continent with a post-war project to tame the instabilities of power politics and turn into a Kantian democratic zone of peace, which became weak because its member countries could not make use of force to face the threats presented by the rest of the world (Ikenberry, 2003b). Robert Cooper appears not exactly as the prophet of a new world order (whose existence he doubts, at least as it was foreseen in the early 90's), but of a new European order – a security zone in Europe. Outside this zone, apart from very few exceptions, there is only chaos and disorder. For Kagan and a great number of politicians and scholars it is America that controls power over the unstable post-Cold War world, whereas for Cooper Europe can be paradise[5], as far as it is able to make use of its privileged condition. These are two completely opposed pictures of the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century.

Here, Cooper presents his belief, right from the preface, that the 21st century – the century of anarchy and technology, of nationalist, ideologic and religious fanatisms – could become "worse than the worst of times of European history" with regards to interstate conflict (Cooper, 2006: 9). The three essays that compose this book are, therefore, a reflection upon this situation and upon what can be done to solve it.

Many States, Worlds Apart

In the first essay, the author divides the world of states into 3 different categories: pre-modern, modern and postmodern.[6] The pre-modern world is the easiest to identify as it is the chaotic world of "failed states." The modern world is characterised by traditional nation-states which are concerned with and driven by national interests and interests of territorial sovereignty such as China, India, Russia and, of course, the United States, whose reluctance to embrace certain postmodern concepts (for example the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court) doesn't seem to change easily (Skidelsky, 2003). Finally, the postmodern world is made up of states that have decided not to fight with each other but to put individual rights before the rights of nations, states that share government tools and accept that security is no longer based on control of territory or balance-of-power, but instead on transparency and openness. The great stronghold of postmodern times is, for Cooper, the European Union, though he considers other actors that are trying to create structures that clearly demonstrate postmodern aspirations, such as OSCE and the IMF, with their economic surveillance systems; the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), regarding security and arms control; or the Council of Europe and the Court of Strasbourg, when it comes to safeguarding Human Rights (Cooper, 1996: 22-30).

Subsequently, Cooper explores the ways the West deals with violence and chaos, which are pre-modern characteristics. The American approach has been based on hegemony and control of threatening states through *hard power*. On the other hand, Europe has been seeking expansion and the absorption of dangerous neighbouring communities. For the author, neither of the previous approaches are sustainable. The ideal would be a third approach that allows the United States and Europe to face these threats together (Ikenberry, 2003a). This is the point where Cooper's argument becomes really provocative. His appeal to a *new liberal imperialism* compatible with human

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rights and cosmopolitan values is worth of attention.

Cooper states that “we may not be interested in chaos but chaos is interested in us” (Cooper, 2006:87-88). September 11th was the shocking proof of this statement. If leaving fragile states with no external supervision can be as dangerous as being involved in direct conflicts with them, then a new form of imperialism is necessary, a voluntary and therefore legitimate imperialism. It should, obviously, bring order but depend on voluntary [7] principles. This new imperialism may come in two forms: the global economy – inspired by IMF and the World Bank way of acting – or a cooperative empire – for example the European Union, which is probably the domestic political structure that best serves the essence of the postmodern system (Cooper, 2006: 80-84; Cooper, 2002).

Cooper also challenges the postmodern states to get used to the idea of a double standard, that is, to behave cooperatively according to international law when relating to the postmodern world but to follow the “law of the jungle” when operating outside that world (Cooper, 2006: 74)[8]. The underlying cynicism of this biased principle is clear as the definition of “jungle” depends essentially on the interests the postmodern world may have in that so-called “jungle”. In other words, it means “to punish our enemies for their crimes and reward our friends for the same crimes” (Ali, 2001). This double standard approach has actually long been a reality – friendly dictatorships and tyrannical regimes are often viewed as preferable to unfriendly democracies, and therefore, tolerated. Such was the case with Pinochet’s Chile, Suharto’s Indonesia, and so many others. More recently, Libya, where Khadaffi was a friend of the West until the West decided he was not, or Egypt, before the overthrow of Mubarak, were also good examples. Thus, it is a very cynical suggestion.

Cooper’s biased way of thinking can be illustrated with an excerpt from the famous *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll:

When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.

When Cooper proposes the adoption of a double standard and therefore of speech and behaviour based on that double standard, he does it with the intention that his country rules (is to be master) and defines the language of the postmodern world, along with US and, to a certain extent, Germany. Would Cooper produce this kind of speech were he to be the adviser to the leader of some African country or even perhaps Portugal? Most likely not. Thus, this book allows us to better understand the intellectual and ideological path taken by the former British Prime-Minister, whose decision to support the war in Iraq, for example, was extremely unpopular at home but worth of admiration in Washington. We find in Blair and W. Bush’s doctrine the same reference to “the chaos that comes from outside”, that is from states that do not share the same values and principles they have (Reis, 2005).

Cooper’s ideas were received with great dissatisfaction by a big part of the European left wing[9] and originated punch lines such as “Blair aide calls for colonies”[10]. His mistake was, perhaps, having uttered these proposals in the old language of *realpolitik* and of Western power. His presentation of the US and European Union’s superiority in the premodern world and his reference to new forms of colonization were seen as proof of bad taste, even by those who would, at first, agree with his conclusions concerning new mechanisms of international regulation. If his intention was to emphasize the importance of military intervention to prevent human rights abuses as well as the importance of a new imperialism to build trust, ensure democratic principles, and allow the *empowerment* of local populations in pre-modern states, then he failed to demonstrate the emancipatory character of his project. Instead he seems to be trying to justify British and American ambition to go around the United Nations in maintaining international order (Chandler, 2002). His work thus appears as the gospel of neo-colonialism instead.

Of Order, Peace and Carrots

The second essay is about the difficulties in reaching a truly international society. One may get the impression that

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examples of postmodern states are still rather scarce. He establishes five “maxims of interest for diplomacy,” a rather diffuse list of ideas that does not form an argument. Cooper adopts a pragmatic approach, perhaps as a result of his experience as a diplomat. Understanding foreigners and their differences is presented as very important. In illustration, cases of misunderstandings between societies and cultures are analyzed: from the relation between the embassies of the British and the Chinese empires in the 18th century to relations between the US and Vietnam or the Soviet Union. There is also the primacy of domestic interests over external politics to account for; the difficulty in influencing foreign governments (and the three possible ways: words, (money and force); the role of attitudes, relations and morals (and not only of interests) in defining external policy; and finally the necessity to enlarge the context.

It is this last maxim that connects with the argumentation developed in the first essay. Moreover it is here that the author gets closer to what he claims to want his book to be. This is a maxim resulting from the observation made by Jean Monnet, the driving force responsible for the creation of the European Union: if you can't solve a problem, enlarge the context (Cooper, 2006: 145). Cooper defends a redefinition of “us” and an interrogation of what kind of world we want to live in assuming that the broader the answer, the higher the probabilities of living in peace (Cooper, 2006:158).

Us and Them

Finally, the last essay sets out the differences between Europe and the US, in contrast with the “raw and oversimplified” (Cooper, 2006: 162) argumentation of Robert Kagan, mentioned above. He defends the point that in Europe, there is a general aversion to seeing the world in terms of relations of power. The European Union has chosen to understate the policies of power, because it is clearly weaker militarily and also because it was part of its foundation project to avoid conflict and to achieve sustainable peace between its members. Europe has made multilateralism its banner and that is, for Cooper, “more than the refuge of the weak” (Cooper, 2006:172). However, to be effective, this multilateralism must be supported by force, military force included, and in this aspect the EU can and must do much more than what it has done so far. Besides a strong appeal to the European emancipation from the American military dependence as well as to strengthen External policy and Common Security, Robert Cooper presents nothing particularly new.

Taking into account the beginning of a new millennium, *The Breaking of Nations* addresses apropos geopolitical and legal ways of globalization that result from the changed essence of the nation-state. Nonetheless, the questions presented are too general and do not, necessarily, lead to new conclusions (Petersen, 2007:2). Cooper sketches a valuable argument by defending the claim that modern threats (especially terrorism and nuclear weapons) are not limited to failed states. In order to overcome these problems, new forms of cooperation and an international order that transcends hegemony and balance of power are needed. However, besides these postmodern concerns, his vision remains highly schematic (Ikenberry, 2003a). Yet he raises important points pertaining to a possible new international order as well as a controversial description of the hierarchic order and the disciplinary action of world power, all of which justifies reading the book. It is a concise view of the world today that should be taken into account, despite being full of very controversial concepts and political intentions.

Filipa Pestana graduated in International Relations from the University of Coimbra and is currently studying Security and Strategy at Nova University of Lisbon, both in Portugal. She's starting a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies this fall, at the University of Lund, Sweden.

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[1] Cooper, Robert (1996) “The postmodern state and the world order”, DEMOS.

[2] Cooper, Robert (2003) “How shall we answer Robert Kagan?”, German Council on Foreign Relations, *Internationale Politik* (2).

[3] In the first pages of the book, the author warns us that “The ideas in these texts are mine (to the extent one can say that he/she owns an idea) and any similarity to British or European policy is strictly accidental.” (page 8).

[5] Paradise, as in the opposite of chaos, refers to Kagan’s work. Kagan says Europe has emerged into a political paradise much like the stable and orderly world envisioned by Kant (perpetual peace) because the US made it possible for Europe not to need a great deal of military power, or at least to move beyond power somewhat. And the US plays the sheriff outside of that paradise. However, Cooper presents a drastically different view, stating that Europe is a paradise on its own merits and should take advantage of that.

[6] The language of the book always suggests, however, the possibility of progress and recession.

[7] According to Cooper, states should voluntarily adhere to this new liberal imperialism (a sort of hybrid form of imperialism.) and he presents two ways of doing that. “Voluntary principles” is a middle term, between the hard power approach typical of the US and the soft power approach of the EU. He suggests that the west “keeps a firm hand” on the pre-modern world without it actually realizing it.

[8] “when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle” (page 74).

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[9] Tam Dalyell, a labour Member of Parliament, even stated that “Czar in Russia was better advised by Rasputin than Tony Blair by this fool”.

[10] Daily Mirror, March 30th 2002.