

Review - Splinterlands

Written by Richard W. Coughlin

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, JAN 21 2017

Splinterlands

By John Feffer

Haymarket Books, 2016

I used to be able to talk with my students about liberal internationalism with a fair amount of assurance. The substrate of IR, I would say, is not anarchy but different forms of interdependence, which states must manage. This makes them stakeholders in the international system and it lends the system stability (Ikenberry, 2014). But current events—among them Brexit and the election of Donald Trump—pose vexing questions. What if states lack the willingness and capacity to manage interdependence? What if the challenges of interdependence rise while the capacity and/or willingness of states to manage it declines?

These are questions about change rather than stability. They are also questions about the developmental possibilities that inhere within the present, even if these possibilities seem to be mostly entropic in character. What happens when forms of global integration disintegrate? What pathways might these processes of the disintegration follow? John Feffer's novel, *Splinterlands*, chronicles this passage from integration and fragmentation through the perspective of its narrator, Julian West, an historian—or, as he refers to himself, a geo-paleontologist—who wrote the *Splinterlands* to great critical acclaim in 2020.

Looking back on the world from 2050, West comments that prior to the publication of *Splinterlands*, most observers held a progressive vision of history in which the world was becoming more integrated, economically, politically and culturally. "Pundits," he remarks, "had already proclaimed the advent of a flat world, a borderless world, a McWorld" (13). But by 2050, all of this would become a forgotten world. "Now that everyone has become accustomed to the world as it is," avers West (in the year 2050), "they are less interested in how it came to be" (14).

But Feffer's readers are still connected to the world that globalization wrought. We still care, presumably, about the fate of our globalized world. *Splinterlands* offers us an analytically plausible account of the systemic change. Other speculative histories, such as Warren Wagar's *A Short History of the Future* (1989) or the science fiction genre of cyberpunk (Rosenthal, 1991) conceive of the future by means of extrapolating the trends of the present – more concentrated corporate power, more inequality, more environmental disruption, more virtual reality so that the future winds up being a harsher, seedier and more surreal version of the present.[1] By contrast, *Splinterlands* focuses on the demise of the nation state as the lynchpin of the contemporary global order.

The novel can be read as the elaboration of Ellen Meiskin Wood's observation that "...in this globalized world where the nation state is supposed to be dying, the irony is that, because the new imperialism depends more than ever on a system of multiple states to maintain global order, it matters more than ever who governs them and how" (2003: 155). The nation state, in other words, serves as a foundation of globalization. *Splinterlands* envisions what happens when this foundation is shaken to pieces.

Nation states were torn asunder, explains the Julian West of 2050, by forces from above and below. Contrary to Eric Hobsbawm's post-cold war assessment (1990), nationalism remains a crucially important vector of historical development. Reflecting on events of the late 20th century, West sees the breakup of the Soviet Union the civil war

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that tore apart Yugoslavia as “...the first hints of the new spirit of nationalism that would dominate our future” (15-16). In both of these states, communist modernization integrated different ethnic groups – many of whom had conceived of themselves as nations – into nation states that transformed, at least for a time, the many into the one. As we know, these political communities splintered under the pressure of globalization from above and nationalism from below.[2] In the *Splinterlands*, this process repeats itself over and over.

The plot of the novel couples the political fragmentation of the world with the dissolution of West’s family. West’s children leave home and pursue callings in different parts of the world. His daughter becomes a European sociologist, his eldest son an Asian financier, his youngest son, an anti-Jihadist fighter. After hurricane Donald destroys West’s home in Washington, West’s wife, Rachel, leaves her academic post and retires to a fortified and armed commune in Vermont. West becomes estranged from his family, the result of family quarrels that reflect the deeper social divisions of the *Splinterlands*.

West takes us on a virtual tour of this new world. In the year 2050, he is dying from a new infectious disease that is ravaging the world. West is contacted by the CRISPR Corporation, a biotech firm that is producing a new tissue regenerating drug that can extend life of its recipient by 10 to 20 years. CRISPR commissions West to write a report on his famous earlier publication, *Splinterlands*. West thinks that his report might spur interest in reversing the changes that led to the formation of the *Splinterlands*, but he is the only character in the novel who entertains such hopes.[3] For everyone else, there is no going back.

To write his report, West conducts four field visits with the members of his family, which turn out to be four points of access to the world of the *Splinterlands*. Using technology provided to him by CRISPR, West travels virtually to Brussels, Ningxia (formerly part of China), Botswana and Vermont. In Brussels, West’s avatar blunders into a fire fight between rival Flemish and Walloon factions, struggling for control of the city. European unity has been replaced by virulent forms of nationalism activated by a volatile conjuncture of political, economic and ecological change. The fragmentation of the European Union, reports West, was driven by nationalist reaction to the EU’s bureaucratic rule, antipathy to immigrants and hostility to Muslims, all of this leavened by a steady stream of terrorist attacks and never ending the fiscal austerity.

In other regions of the world, the crucial catalyst of nationalist reaction was great financial crisis of 2023. Julian West likens the financial crisis to “...a huge comet crashing into the earth” (73). It wiped out the savings of the middle class globally, leaving in its wake, a world of extremes: a surviving corporate and financial plutocracy, an entrepreneurial precariat, running what remains of the service economy and the poor, poised on the edge of starvation. The financial crisis had dire consequences for states as well. For the United States, it finally destroyed the capacity of the dollar to function as an international reserve currency (113). The United States lost much of its capacity to engage in global power projection. In the absence of this centripetal force, the post-colonial world fractured along ethnic lines (91). In Russia, the economic depression that the financial crisis provoked led to a similar process of ethnic fragmentation. In China, the post-crash depression eradicated economic growth, diminished the capacity of the Chinese state to withstand the demands of its geographic peripheries, both East and West, for political autonomy, and instigated what West refers to as the great Han uprising (of 2029) against the Communist Party (66).

In the *Splinterlands*, the old centers of political and economic power have collapsed and select peripheries have emerged as weaker centers of power within a far more divided world. These are places that were well situated in terms of the dynamics of climate change and implosion of nation states. They remain connected to the global economy. Botswana is a center of financial services for the global South (89). The financial wealth of the Gulf States migrated to Ningxia, transforming Yinchuan City, the region’s capital, into a hotbed of economic growth. There are other places in the world, such as the Bavaria, Corsica, Bretton, and Arcadia, among them, that have engaged in creative forms of self-determination.

When the world changes, people change with it and the expectations attached to the past fade from the world. West is the exception in this regard. He hoped that the great unraveling of the 21st century could be reversed. These expectations converge poignantly with the idea of a shared humanity. West: “The glue that once held us together, namely solidarity across religion, ethnicity and class – has lost its binding....But perhaps we can create these bounds

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again, family by family, commune by commune...in the few green pockets left on earth" (141). West's wife Rachel, offers a resigned counterpoint to this aspiration. "I just don't have much faith in the future," she says (123).[4]

The future in question here is our common future – as in the title of the 1989 Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (1987). *Splinterlands* is a compelling account of what may happen to our world if there is no common future. At 150 pages, the novel is short and readable. I think it would be an excellent supplemental text for both introductory and advanced courses in International Relations, which can provoke discussion, thought and no doubt consternation in students about the world that they are about to inherit.

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[1] Wagar introduces the deus ex machina of a nuclear war in order to put a violent end to what he terms the last age of capital and explore other developmental possibilities that emerge in the wake of its demise.

[2] One especially noteworthy account of this process of political fragmentation is Mary Kaldor's *New and Old Wars* (2012). *Splinterlands* can be read as the further extension of Kaldor's conception of new wars to the core regions of global capitalism.

[3] In fact, CRISPR is not interested in West's historical studies at all, but rather in using West as a way to apprehend his son Benjamin.

[4] As a supplement to *Splinterlands*, Feffer has recently published Rachel's account of the great fragmentation, focusing on the decisive impact of the Donald Trump presidency on the world's future (Feffer, 2016b).

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