

Review – The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth

Written by Luke Cooper

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LUKE COOPER, JUL 4 2019

The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth
By Michael Mandelbaum
Oxford University Press, 2019

The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth is the latest contribution in the output of realist scholar Michael Mandelbaum. The book warns the era of security cooperation between the world's major powers, which opened with the end of the Cold War, has drawn to a close. In its place, a new period of geopolitical competition and instability has begun. Mandelbaum is very much a figure of the American establishment's academic arm – albeit someone who has been prepared to take unconventional positions that can put him at odds with the broader foreign policy community (across both the Democrat and Republican parties). He was, for example, critical of both the project for a new American century and the earlier Clinton and Bush Senior eras. He famously, or perhaps *infamously*, derided Clinton-era interventionism as a 'social work' approach to foreign policy – in terms that would be familiar to the assumptions of political realism in IR. But he is also a long-standing opponent of NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, seeing it as an unnecessary provocation of Russia that was not in the interests of the US. The latter is a position he outlines again in *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth* (pp.11-13).

From realism to American liberal nationalism

The strength of realism as a theory lies in how it is grounded within a conception of "the international" – even if this is defined narrowly as the existence of multiple competing states. Mandelbaum's opposition to NATO expansion and the "liberal crusade" makes sense in realist terms. Imperfect worlds throw up political problems that cannot always be solved. Realism tells us to be sceptical of the claims of states to be acting in the name of universal interests, because this can disguise the interests that really motivate the policy. Good international governance therefore means balancing a world of competing interests and norms. Realism's weaknesses, however, are equally in evidence across Mandelbaum's work. Recognising national interests can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, essentially mandating states to pursue their interests come what may, regardless of the ethical issues at stake. Mandelbaum's realism, in particular, provides a theoretical armoury that justifies a decidedly *particularist* view of the world, i.e. one that is based upon a specific national perspective even if it claims to be based on universal norms. Implicitly this comes down to political nationalism – as the basic mobilising device for elites in a fragmented world of competing nation-states. In 2005, these American nationalist mores even led him to write the seemingly highly "un-realist" book, *The Case for Goliath*, in which he claimed the United States had many of the functions of a *de facto* world government – something the rest of the world, he suggested, should really be quite pleased about as it was a force for stability and liberalism.

The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth is a similarly unconventional piece of realist scholarship. For Mandelbaum sees the end of the Cold War as bringing about a Kantian-style peace based on the spread of democracy and greater economic interdependence, even positively citing Kant in this regard (p.144). He advances a version of the democratic peace theory which holds that liberal democracies will not go to war with one another (pp.6-7). Mandelbaum puts the blame for the destruction of these stable international relations firmly on the shoulders of foreign powers – principally, Russia, China and Iran. If these states were to become liberal democracies the possibility of a Kantian-style peace would again, he argues, resurface (p.144). This, however, conveniently

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disregards, the reluctance of the United States to accept a multilateral approach to global governance. From the Kyoto and Paris climate change accords, to the creation of the International Criminal Court and the Iraq War, the United States has been an, at best, *questionable* ally of a rules-based international order. American unilateralism has been its consistent foreign policy thread.

Mandelbaum and the imperial prerogative

As this suggests, Mandelbaum actually mixes liberalism and realism, but always in a form that identifies the liberal framework completely with the geopolitical interests of the United States. *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth* is consistent with Mandelbaum's wider work in this important respect: he is writing as a theorist of American national interests (and therefore, ultimately, I would argue, American nationalism). Reading the book, I was reminded of Partha Chatterjee's incisive formulation on what constitutes an imperial prerogative in a world without formal empires: the power to declare the exception vis-à-vis the universal norms demanded of others (Chatterjee 2012). Mandelbaum's realism, or, to put it more pointedly, American *political nationalism*, leads him to *define* liberal values and democracy with US global leadership. Illiberal behaviour by the United States can only ever be a temporary derogation from its more fundamental norms, he implies.

For Chatterjee, the geopolitics of nuclear non-proliferation is the classic illustration of the imperial prerogative. Having the power to legitimately hold nuclear weapons and deny this power to others demonstrates the unequal application of liberal norms in world politics. Mandelbaum perfectly encapsulates Chatterjee's analysis. In the book, he laments how the Obama-led nuclear accord with Iran "departed from the norm in which the strong prevailed over the weak" (p.118). Quite shockingly, he even criticises Obama for "warning Israel against attacking Iran, thereby weakening his own side's negotiating position" for fear of igniting a "wider war in which the United States would become involved" (p.119). Elsewhere he has insisted the credible threat of military force by the United States is the main mechanism, rather than international diplomacy, law, and economic incentives to deter the creation of an Iranian bomb (Mandelbaum 2015). In light of such remarks, one would be forgiven for thinking that, if the "era of peace on earth" is indeed coming to an end, then it might have something to do with the sabre-rattling of academic scholars who should really know better.

Authoritarian nationalists in the liberal West

The remarks on Iran are also indicative of a general approach taken throughout the book that focuses on dangers to peace emanating from America's geopolitical opponents – and rarely (with the notable exception of Mandelbaum's criticism of NATO expansion) on the US state itself. Mandelbaum is a classical, rather than neo-realist, in this sense. He sees the domestic character of a political regime as being the main criterion for whether it represents a security threat to the liberal West. Nationalism and authoritarianism are, he argues, an affliction of the states that have produced the new era of global "war". Apart from Iran's clerical theocracy, he identifies China, including its military investment and creation of new islands in international waters, and Russia, particularly the war in Ukraine, as the main sources of threat leading to "war on earth".

These regimes are undoubtedly repressive, undemocratic and harbour dangerously imperial ambitions for their respective regions. Unlike liberal democratic states, they are not subject to the disciplining force of their domestic populations when it comes to their international relations. But Mandelbaum's realist-liberalism misses – wilfully, one could reasonably assume – a key dimension of contemporary authoritarian nationalism: the rise of chauvinist parties and leaders within democratic states that promote ethnic nationalism, undermine the rule of law and erode democracy. A book on the end of "peace on earth" that does not mention the dangerous rise of nationalism within liberal democratic states will misdiagnose the threats and maladies facing liberal democratic systems. From Donald Trump, a figure hardly mentioned in the book at all, to Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, and Narendra Modi, authoritarian nationalism is occurring within the liberal democratic order.

An analytically flawed book

As a work of political science, the book also has some troubling weaknesses. There is a strong tendency to make

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arguments in passing, which raise questions that have been subject to significant debate in IR, without recognising the controversies they are attached to, or offering sufficient argumentation for Mandelbaum's position. For example, the resource-curse theory of authoritarianism is accepted in passing with readers told the roots of Russia's authoritarianism "lie in geology rather than politics" (p.19). Successive US governments are criticised for *allowing* China to become economically prosperous in the globalisation era without taking steps to "arrest" its rise (p.52). Yet, at the same time, Mandelbaum claims economic interdependence is one of the "two pillars of peace" (p.10). Even though democracy is identified as the other pillar, this still seems like a significant analytical contradiction, which sees Mandelbaum essentially advise states, in particular the American state, to both pursue *and* oppose economic interdependence with other powers.

There are other similarly contradictory statements. For example, readers are told that the post-Cold War era gave rise to a world order where states "ceased to feel the need to prepare for war, to plan for war, to gear their foreign policies to the possibility of war" (p.135). But without recognising the contradiction, Mandelbaum also observes how, in 1996, the United States sent two aircraft carriers to the Taiwan straits to protect Taiwan's first ever democratic elections (p.62).

The biggest conceptual issue with the book, however, lies in how warfare itself is defined. Although he repeatedly makes reference to the new age of "war" throughout the book, what Mandelbaum actually means by this is defined early on as *the state of war* (p.2). Unlike hot war, this is a situation similar to the Cold War where both the US and Soviet Union made continuous, active preparations for full scale war, but never, thankfully, activated these plans. This definition allows Mandelbaum to ignore the bouts of collective and state violence during his "age of peace". The wars of the former Yugoslavia, those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the American-led wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, the civil war and genocide in Rwanda, to name but a few, all occurred during Mandelbaum's era of Kantian peace. While there has been a recent intensification of geopolitical and military competition between the powers Mandelbaum focuses on (the US, Russia, China, and Iran), it seems dubious to draw such a stark distinction between the post-Cold War period and today. Relatedly, his definition of war as great power conflict seems both highly Western-centric and archaic; it is unable to account for the ways that warfare is changing with the emergence of new or "non-linear" wars, which do not observe conventional norms concerning the role of states and non-state actors (Kaldor 2012).

These conceptual issues aside, the biggest problem lies in the particularist, American nationalistic motivations that animate virtually every page of this dangerous book. Scholars in both the United States and Western Europe must learn to be more self-reflective when it comes to the new authoritarian nationalism. In a period where Trump, Farage, Salvini, and Le Pen, threaten democratic systems across the West, we have much to learn from the rest of the world – and very little scope to lecture – when it comes to resisting this new reactionary authoritarianism.

References

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