

Review – Within, Against, and Beyond Liberalism

Written by Randall Germain

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RANDALL GERMAIN, DEC 19 2021

Within, Against, and Beyond Liberalism: A Critique of Liberal IPE and Global Capitalism
By David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah
Rowman & Littlefield, 2021

Within, Against, and Beyond Liberalism is the latest in a string of works by two of IPE's most careful and thoughtful scholars. David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah bring to their task a formidable training in classical political economy that has endowed them with an acute set of analytical and interpretive skills. Within the space of only a few chapters, we encounter not only much of the canon (Smith, Hume, Steuart, Ricardo, Marx, Marshall, Keynes, Polanyi, Hayak and Schumpeter) and its modern interlocutors (Cox, Gilpin, Keohane, Krasner, and Wallerstein), but also a host of critics whose work calls into question many of the assumptions made by what is often called mainstream IPE — Abu Lughod, Chakrabarty, Escobar, Nandy, Rodney, Todorov and Wolf. This rich menu of engagement provides much food for thought, and the result is a highly productive encounter with the tradition of (international) political economy.

A Tour de Force

What animates this book? In a phrase, it is to consider how far, and in what ways, our understanding of IPE displaces the amount of violence involved in establishing, consolidating and sustaining the global capitalist order. For Blaney and Inayatullah, the fount and matrix of mainstream IPE is the liberal canon, both in theory and practice. This canon seeks to understand capitalism, where poverty and inequality are inextricably conjoined to wealth and its attendant division of labor. And when combined with the state, capitalism's progeny — colonialism and imperialism — have provided the social, economic and political contours of the global order since at least the advent of modernity. Capitalism, in this sense, is necessarily liberal in character. Its intellectual edifice is replete with veils of ignorance about the violence required to keep some people poor and marginalised, and we need to engage this edifice if we are to acquire the intellectual tools to move beyond it. Not all of the nooks and crannies of this edifice are devoid of aids to this endeavour, of course, and new tools of intellectual engagement provide further opportunities to puncture the grip of liberalism on our imagination. Working within and between these nuances constitutes a good part of their effort. But there is no way around the fact that this work of intellectual history and engagement demands that we account for our enduring commitment to liberalism as the keystone of our acceptance of capitalist relations.

For me, the most engaging part of this *tour de force* concerns how Blaney and Inayatullah unpack a multi-perspectival reading of IPE's intellectual history. This unpacking builds on previous book-length efforts to contextualise what is effectively a political theory of political economy (see Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Blaney and Inayatullah 2010). The hallmark of their work is a careful and thorough reading of complex theorists who have often become either reduced to a caricature of their most important insights, or accepted without a full costing of certain hidden assumptions in their work. Here, for example, Adam Smith becomes much more than an advocate of the 'invisible hand', while Alfred Marshall is revealed as complicit in the colonial impulse of late nineteenth century capitalism. This feature of their book alone constitutes a worthy addition to broader IPE debates.

Time and Eurocentrism

Among the many discussions they engage in, I found their consideration of time to be the most intriguing. In many

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places they note that much liberal thought, and therefore much mainstream IPE, rests upon a static conception of time, perhaps better referred to as a conception of timelessness. This informs much of the work in economics, for example, especially where economists try to build models that might account for certain types of behaviour. Blaney and Inayatullah prefer a dynamic — or what they also sometimes call a flow — conception of time, and at one point emphasise their agreement with those who use a much more multi-layered conception of time, of the type pioneered by Fernand Braudel (1958/1980). It is certainly the case that far too much IPE scholarship either fails to consider time (or its close analogue, history) at all, or it considers time in a very narrow, chronological manner, as a flat linear slope: $t + 1$. Paul Pierson (2004) introduced us to this way of incorporating time into analyses of political economy, and many otherwise critical IPE scholars have taken up this version (e.g. Widmaier 2016). However, I do not find this formulation helpful, since it lacks the analytical depth and conceptual richness of Braudel's distinction between short term continuous time that is overlain by undulating cyclical modulations, which are in turn contextualised by long, slow-moving currents of self-contained and socially coherent experiential frameworks (in his terms, the time of the event, the conjuncture and the *longue durée*). To the extent that IPE scholarship fails to engage with a more nuanced and meaningful conception of time (and history), it will remain impoverished and unable to move beyond a narrow account of social change.

While it is therefore important to be critical of prevailing conceptions of time, I think this book would have been strengthened had Blaney and Inayatullah pursued a deeper discussion of time as a differential and layered experience, which can make a significant contribution to how collective mental frameworks are used by agents when they undertake collective social action. (Full disclosure: this is my own intellectual hobby-horse — I have pursued the question of incorporating a Braudelian-inspired conception throughout my career, and am currently completing a manuscript on the problem of history in IPE (e.g. Germain 1996; 2019)) On the question of capitalism and violence, for example, an extended consideration of how initial encounters between European capitalists, explorers and conquerors morphed over time into world-spanning networks of oppression could illuminate more of the subaltern agency which Blaney and Inayatullah are rightly concerned to honour and understand. But there is little in this book that hints at how capitalism has changed and developed over time, much less how it continues to do so. I think that placing a developmental conception of time at the centre of this understanding is necessary to see not only how violence in the modern world has transformed in its effects over time, but also how it has generated resistance to the worst aspects of capitalism. In other words, time needs to be baked into every conceptual tool at our disposal. Blaney and Inayatullah recognise this need, but on my reading do not quite take us to where we need to go. It must, however, be acknowledged that in earlier work, they did explore in more detail some of the ways time has factored into liberal accounts of political economy. I guess my wish here is that they had reprised some of that earlier discussion (see Blaney and Inayatullah 2010, ch. 7).

Perhaps one reason for this is their extended engagement with Eurocentrism in IPE, which they agree is an intellectual blight on our collective imagination. They are not alone in this, and can point to the growing effort to make the weight of non-European features of the global capitalist order more visible, both in contemporary as well as in historical terms. This is a long overdue contribution to IPE scholarship that will certainly pay many dividends in years to come. But should Eurocentrism *tout court* be quite such a central concern for the overall health of the broader field of IPE? Reading Blaney and Inayatullah alongside recent contributions from John Hobson (2021), Gurminder Bhambra (2007) and Robbie Shilliam (2015), for example, certainly suggests that Eurocentrism has blinded IPE — mainstream as well as critical — to how the world really works. This is without question a necessary and worthwhile dialogue to promote.

For me, however, the concern that is left off the table, or squeezed out of this discussion, is about the extent and validity of the theoretical and conceptual (as against the empirical) claims being made. I agree that it is essential to correct a misconceived historical account of the origins of capitalism and its entanglement with states; this is one way to clarify and account for exactly how much of this phenomenon is generated by peoples and developments which scholarship has, for too long, over-looked or rendered invisible; the 'people without history', as Eric Wolf (1982) memorably phrased this problem. John Hobson's (2021) recent book, for example, is exceptionally thorough in this respect. But ironically, the theoretical and conceptual elements of Hobson's account, like Wolf and many others' efforts to correct the existing historical record, remain fundamentally rooted in concepts and theoretical frameworks anchored in the tradition of political economy, which comes to us almost entirely from debates that arose and were

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developed most fully in Europe. These have been staples of debate for centuries, and for good reason. Much better, in my view, to adapt and stretch these conceptual keys — and to augment them where useful with other concepts and analytical tools, wherever they may come from — to make clear what should have been seen some time ago. Debunking a Eurocentric reading of history seems entirely appropriate and necessary to provide an authentic account of the contemporary world; but I am not yet convinced that such a debunking can extend as fully to the concepts we use to apprehend that world. Modification, adaptation and augmentation, rather than wholesale debunking, seem to me much the better way forward.

And Now What?

And indeed, this is (rather ironically) where Blaney and Inayatullah leave us at the end of this phase of their intellectual journey. The last paragraph of their book reiterates that to live in a liberal world is also to live beyond it, and they close off by suggesting that their future work will begin with Marx and the Marxist tradition. I think that is great, and I look forward to seeing how they unpack that tradition in the same careful and nuanced way that they have unpacked the liberal tradition. As with liberalism, there is still much to learn from Marx (who is as replete with caricatures as Smith) and the broader Marxist tradition, not the least of which is to examine closely its own very Eurocentric foundations; this is how the conceptual apparatus we associate with Marx and the Marxist tradition has been, and will continue to be, modified and adapted to a much wider and more variegated world. Thus political economy has, as a field of inquiry, sustained and renewed itself over the centuries, and I am certain that David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah will continue in that hallowed and honourable tradition.

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