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<Book Review>

Contesting Westphalia or “Westfailure?”

Chris Brown, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice:
International Political Theory Today*

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002, 276pp,
GBP16,99- (pbk), ISBN 0-7456-2303-4 (pbk)

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The study of International Relations (IR) is now at a crossroads. Increasingly, IR scholars are seeking the “identity” of this academic subject. For instance, Barry Buzan and Richard Little, famous scholars of the English School, posed the question as to “why IR has failed as an intellectual project and what to do about it.”¹⁾ Here, they say that despite IR theory has imported various ideas from other academic disciplines, it has not produced something from which others would learn. They instead propose “to marry IR and World History” to reverse this failure so that it can provide a grand view for international system. On the other, another scholars try to “re-discipline” the subject. One is Chris Brown, a professor of the London School of Economics. And his latest book, *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice*, is another manifesto for redefining the IR scholarship.

What makes the book especially unique is, as its subtitle shows, Brown proposes “international political theory (IPT).” But what is IPT? According to the author, IPT is an approach dealing with the questions of rights and justice. In other words, they are the issues of political obligation, why and how states should respond to human

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1) Barry Buzan and Richard Little, “Why International Relations has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to do About it,” *Millennium*, 30-1, 2001, pp. 19-39.

sufferings. Here, IPT is differentiated from other related theories in three ways. First, although IPT shares the concerns of rights and justice with domestic political theory, it makes no distinction whether they belong to domestic matters or are international concerns. Second, IPT is also different from IR theory since the latter concentrates on the analysis of the relationship among states, not on the obligations towards human ills. Finally, IPT is separated from similar approaches such as normative theory or international ethics, because these theories are required as long as they offer suitable reasons and purposes for “positive theorising” of conventional IR approaches, which are the explanations of the world in order to predict what will happen in the future and to mitigate negative consequences. IPT does not stand on such positivistic view. It is an alternative project with fundamentally different ontology and epistemology.

Brown introduces three key terms in this book: sovereignty, rights, and justice. The first term sovereignty is linked with the fact that there is a world of political units, states, where each claims they are autonomous. Such politics of claiming autonomy is unique to the sovereign state system where no central authority exists. Brown differentiates this from other worlds with such authority like empires and federal systems. Regarding rights, Brown points out that there is also a difference between the politics of rights within states and those in international arena. For instance, while the rights of minorities are settled by constitutional (legal) process within the states, only a few such means exist in international relations. Rather, political influence without foreign interference is more significant than legal measures. The third term, justice, is to explain why states respond to distant human sufferings. Brown suggests that there is a shift in the meaning of justice in the system of sovereign states, from “procedural,” which means as respecting rights of sovereigns, to “distributive,” the redistribution between the rich and the poor. Brown nevertheless doubts whether this procedural / distributive distinction is still working in the era of global interdependence as the current situation “does not necessary create the sense of community” which will make redistribution work.

The rest of chapters are to give substance to his International Political Theory. From Chapters two to four Brown gives the historical background of the Westphalian world system and of the academic discourse of International Relations. Chapter two presents the development of the Westphalian world order, and the Enlightenment Thought based on the society of states is explained in the next chapter three, together with its critics.

Chapter four is dedicated to reviewing the academic history of IR: Realism, Liberal Internationalism, and its contemporary approaches. Here, the author poses an acute question whether making a disciplined subject of IR is a fundamental mistake. He says though it is "not sensible" to regard as a mistake, "it may be doubted whether the disciplined study of IR is possible." From Chapters five to ten, six contemporary problems are examined: Self-determination and Non-intervention (chapter five), Force and Violence including Just war thinking (six), International Human Rights Regime (seven), Humanitarianism and Humanitarian Intervention (eight), Global Inequality (nine), and Cultural Diversity (ten). They are all matters that have been argued among conventional IR approaches, but one thing that distinguishes IPT from traditional theories is the arguments presented in this book are post-positivistic. In the last two chapters the author discusses the issues of Westphalian world order, which are put into question in an age of globalization. In Chapter 11, Brown focuses on recent changes in international and global community from two aspects: the status of the individual in international human rights regimes, and the possibility of a Post-Westphalian international theory. In the final chapter, 12, the author investigates the critics of globalization by starting with the late Susan Strange's posthumous article, "the Westfailure System,"²⁾ which recognises the current Westphalian system as an "abject failure." Brown points out much of the literature and thinking of anti-globalization are "backward-looking," which aims to re-introduce past lifestyle in contemporary world. Rather, what is required is forward-looking criticism of globalization. And finally, he concludes that Westphalian thinking still has got the relevance to the issues and questions related to sovereignty, rights, and justice, even in an era of globalization.

Overall, this is a thought-stimulating book. Especially providing a new framework of IPT is one of its major contribution to the scholarship on IR. Brown's approach is indeed attractive in three points. First, IPT recalls IR scholars that there are much more to say in this world, not only from in economic and positivistic way but in political and philosophical way. Second, IPT tackles one of the most important and frequently asked questions in contemporary world affairs, why states (and the people especially living in developed countries) have certain obligations to respond to human sufferings that happen in a distant land. Third, IPT framework provides a room for discussions on

2) Susan Strange, "The Westfailure System," *Review of International Studies*, 25, 1999, 345-54.

political obligation without being trapped in a question, whether the issues are domestic or international. However, because the realm is so broad, IPT still remains a patchwork of various social and political theories.

Another problem is about his defence of neo-liberalism, and prescription of building “strong state.” In the final chapter of the book, Brown says the basic assumptions of neo-liberalism are correct. Then he points out the difficulty of neo-liberalism is mainly on the “weakness” of states. Thus, he stresses the significance of strengthening states and its authorities, so that they can form “the economic basis for a just society.” “Strong state” has political stability to attract investments, as well as educational and technical skills. It is not a synonym for sovereign state nor is it always a threat to the individuals. However, his prescription of “making states stronger” often means to catch up with current international economy. And it is apparently difficult to apply his idea to the majority of states that are now developing, and especially where once “failed.” More to the point, the essence of Strange’s “westfailure” argument is the excessive expansion of global capitalism over which the state system loses its control. Although this reviewer agrees with Brown’s argument that today’s anti-globalization waves are relatively “backward-looking,” such protests still can not be underestimated.

These points should be matters of controversy, but do not impair the quality of the book. Providing comprehensive and rich arguments in a fresh, non-conventional framework, Brown’s *Sovereignty, Rights and Justice* can be an invaluable reading for all those who are interested in IPT and the future direction of IR.