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## **BOOK REVIEW**

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### **International Political Economy: An Intellectual History**

**Benjamin J. Cohen**

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008

*Reviewed by Bill Dunn*

Benjamin Cohen has written a marvellous brief introduction to the development of International Political Economy (IPE) as an academic discipline. He organises the narrative around a 'Magnificent Seven' leading 'intellectual entrepreneurs', and tells it with panache, an insider's knowledge both of the theories and the theorists, with telling personal anecdotes and some appropriately bad jokes.

As it is understood here, IPE developed out of a growing dissatisfaction in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the disciplinary separation of economics and politics. However, the basis for any effective synthesis remained contested and IPE took two distinct forms in the construction of rival American and British schools. The geographical typology is recognised as imperfect, with Canadians and Australians, amongst others including some US citizens, becoming honorary Brits. Nevertheless, as an earlier article (Cohen 2007) makes clear, the emergence of this 'transatlantic divide' is really Cohen's central thesis with the ambition being to build bridges between the different camps.

The American tradition, personified by five of Cohen's leading scholars; Charles Kindleberger, Robert Keohane, Robert Gilpin, Steven Krasner and Peter Katzenstein, adopts the narrower focus on the intersection of international politics and economics. Of these, Gilpin and Krasner are most readily associated with the tradition of state-centred realism but Cohen makes clear that, even for the 'liberal institutionalists' Keohane and his early co-author Joseph Nye, the intention was to supplement not displace realism. Their influential notion of 'complex interdependence' diminished the role of military force in international relations to incorporate a wider range of issues and channels of communication but their objective remained that of understanding inter-state relations.

Similarly, although Katzenstein and others effectively opened the 'black box' of the nation state to admit domestic actors into policy formation, the consequent state behaviour remained the principal concern. Strong presumptions of 'methodological nationalism' thus continued to underpin American school scholarship.

Spurned by the economics profession, IPE became the adopted child of political science departments. However, Cohen notes the irony that, in its American incarnation, its methodology came to resemble that of neoclassical economics. Positivism and empiricism dominate and the attempts to address the 'really big questions' that brought IPE into being are effectively excluded. One could add, with Stefano Guzzini (1998, 1999), that once the methods of neoclassical economics are applied to states this imposes just the sort of super-ordinate authority over the economy that economists' assumptions of individual rationality so carefully deny. The methodological underpinnings are shot to pieces.

By contrast, the British school (represented here by Susan Strange and Robert Cox) adopted a broader interpretation of IPE. It is economics, politics and perhaps other social sciences that should be seen as the sub-disciplines. This approach retained a willingness to engage with the big questions, a greater disdain for the methods of orthodox economics and was less likely to privilege the nation state. This led, amongst other things, to a greater propensity to embrace notions of globalisation, which Cohen welcomes, but at considerable intellectual cost. There was a loss of theoretical rigour and both the methods and the object of study became indeterminate. '[T]he cast of characters is potentially endless, all crowding alongside the state and clamouring for attention' (p141).

Against this, Cohen finally affirms his identification with the American school interpretation in an assertion towards the end of the book that 'no one can deny the benefits of a creeping economism, which brings both rigor and replicability to analysis' (p171). This, of course, is precisely what the British school, as he describes it, would deny. If bridges are being built, it would appear to be to enable traffic to move across them in a westerly direction.

The American - British distinction is itself problematic and has already proved controversial with critics insisting in particular that the American

tradition is more diverse than the typology allows (Higgott and Watson 2008, Ravenhill 2008). Amongst other things, the work of Kindleberger, one of the American greats, and indeed Cohen's own writing on money (1977, 1998), seem broader in their historical sweep and richer in their social contextualisation than much of the tradition with which they are identified.

However, the problem with the divide may be more conceptual than geographical. Positing the choice as one between the methods of neo-classical economics on the one side and a woolly disdain for theory on the other sets up too simple an antimony and too easy a target for Cohen's criticisms. Some scholars do indeed advocate descriptive or even openly eclectic approaches to political economy (Strange 1989, Anderson 2004). There is a fashion, in particular, for denouncing grand theory and any hint of materialist structuralism. However, these are not the only bases for a putatively critical IPE and the counterpoint relies of a very selective reading. To offer just one example, Cohen cites an article by Peter Burnham (1994) in which the latter names Gilpin and criticises leading American scholars' failure to engage with an older tradition of political economy. However, a parenthetical '[The Americans]' inserted before a criticism of the 'fail[ure] to grasp the complex organic set of social relations which is the global political economy' (p62) suggests a more general defence of the 'British' school than I believe the original author intended. The omitted first half of the sentence actually complains of '[t]he endless tautological accounts of "state" and "market", of "interdependence", "interaction", "influences" and "autonomies"' (Burnham 1994, 222). This is part of an argument for a particular interpretation of Marxism and for the centrality of class relations, which might be directed as much against many of Burnham's compatriots as against their North American counterparts; against postmodern criticism and descriptive sociology as much as rational choice. There may, in short, be more satisfactory critiques of neo-classical orthodoxy and more satisfactory typologies of International Political Economy than those suggested here.

For all its lightness of tone, Cohen has written a serious book. It not only maps the development of a discourse but implicitly charts how IPE

should be understood in the future. It will be read widely but needs, and deserves, to be read critically.

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