

Hubert Zglinicki

Nicolaus Copernicus University (Poland)

Book review: J. Samuel Barkin, Laura Sjoberg, *International Relations' Last Synthesis? Decoupling Constructivist and Critical Approaches*, New York 2019, pp. 224

The scientific discipline of International Relations (IR) is to a great extent based on the study of phenomena occurring in a multidimensional, interdisciplinary and highly dynamic environment. Attempts to analyze and explain existing mechanisms and events in global politics entail the need to understand and at the same time to adopt a specific research approach, enabling the decryption of it. This entails the necessity to take into account changes that take place simultaneously in all disciplines from which the IR domain is derived.

The Great Debates in IR, taking place in the 1980s, which served as an attempt to develop one systematic theoretical explanation of the studied processes, ended with the synthesis of two major research trends at the time: neo-realism and neo-liberalism, creating a *neo-neo synthesis*, that left other trends outside of its borders, including constructivism and critical theories. These two are today, by many researchers (including Max Weber), often treated as a complex set, artificially combined like neo-liberalism and neo-realism. In newly published book, *International Relations' Last Synthesis? Decoupling Constructivist and Critical Approaches*, J. Samuel Barkin and Laura Sjoberg, refer to this burning problem, trying to convince the reader to distinguish between these two trends, as well as to start a new debate aimed at breaking the stasis in the field of IR theory, where the appearance of which is influenced, i.a., by the new *constructivist-critical synthesis*.

The above-described synthesis is at the foremost point of interest of the authors who in each of the following chapters refer to it in such a way as to explain to the reader the negative results of this phenomenon. They explain in an exhaustive way, among others, that two antagonistic research trends should not be artificially connected with each other (p. 8), because in effect they lead to removing them from their individual characteristics, blurring their sharpness and eventually their disappearance (p. 64). On the other hand, there is a multitude of explanations on what issues these trends can complement and thus coexist, creating useful mechanisms in this particular combination (p. 167). The multiplicity of arguments presented to encourage further debate in the IR environment is supported by a precise distinction between research assumptions, both constructivism and critical theory

approaches, which were devoted to two separate chapters for each of the trends (respectively 3 and 4 for constructivism, 5 and 6 on critical theory approaches). It is also worth emphasizing the statement, made by the authors, that the current synthesis limits the intellectual possibilities resulting from the use of such mismatched trends in many aspects (p. 13).

The structure of the text has been organized in a logical and transparent manner, which should be welcomed with the approval, when such difficult issues are discussed. A division into 8 chapters was used, seamlessly connected with each other. As we read the following paragraphs, the continuity of the issues discussed is noticeable, so that there is no need to return to the previous parts of the text in order to understand the content presented. In addition, the language used can be described as highly specialized, but at the same time understandable, while the reading itself is not unnecessarily extended and artificially stretched. It can be concluded that the whole is described in a concise and concrete way.

The basic and the only vastly important problem with the publication, which the authors themselves notice at the very beginning is that at the moment the idea for this book appears it will already be a decade old at the time that the book sees print. It is impossible to disagree with such a statement when discussing issues in the field of such a highly dynamic field. Nevertheless, the intellectual value of the content can not be diminished because it still encourages the reader to take on the burden of individual analysis of the problematic issue and can still lead to the discourse that the authors so strongly strive for.

The general feelings that arise after reading the presented text are positive. In spite of taking such complicated matter by the authors, the whole was described in an accessible and understandable way, and at the same time in-depth, while maintaining a professional form, despite the use of specialized language, typical for the field of Political Sciences. This book can be worth recommending to all persons whose interests focus on the subject of the Theory of International Relations, but also the fields of the theory of other social sciences, given the values describing research ethics contained therein.

Author

Hubert Zglinicki

zglinicki.h@gmail.com – Nicolaus Copernicus University (Poland)