

# World Politics

PROGRESS AND ITS LIMITS



JAMES MAYALL

# World Politics

PROGRESS AND ITS LIMITS



JAMES MAYALL

## THEMES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

### **Titles in this series**

Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*

Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*

Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*

Alex Callinicos, *Equality*

Diane Coyle, *Governing the World Economy*

Andrew Gamble, *Politics and Fate*

James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and its Limits*

Ray Pahl, *On Friendship*

# ***World Politics***

Progress and its Limits

JAMES MAYALL

Polity

Copyright © James Mayall 2000

The right of James Mayall to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2000 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd

Reprinted 2005, 2007

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Maiden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN: 978-0-7456-2589-8

ISBN: 978-0-7456-2590-4(pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-7456-6777-5(eBook)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Plantin

by SetSystems, Saffron Walden, Essex

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.polity.co.uk](http://www.polity.co.uk)

For my grandchildren

# ***Contents***

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

Prologue

## *Part I: International Society*

- 1 Origins and Structure
- 2 The Modernization of International Society
- 3 A New Solidarism?

## *Part II: Sovereignty*

- 4 Nationalism
- 5 Self-determination
- 6 Reappraisal

## *Part III: Democracy*

- 7 Historical Antecedents and Cultural Preconditions
- 8 International Law and the Instruments of Foreign Policy
- 9 Pluralism and Solidarism Revisited

## *Part IV: Intervention*

- 10 Intervention in Liberal International Theory
- 11 Humanitarian Intervention in the 1990s

Epilogue

Notes

Index

# ***Acknowledgements***

In writing even so short a book as this I have accumulated more debts than I can acknowledge here. Work on the book was begun while I was a member of the International Relations Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where successive generations of graduate students helped me to work out my approach to its subject matter. I am also particularly indebted to three LSE friends, Michael Donelan, Roger Holmes and the late Philip Windsor, with whom I have argued about the state of the world and its discontents for over thirty years. The book was finished at the Centre of International Studies in the University of Cambridge. There too my colleagues and students have been a constant source of stimulation and encouragement.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 9 are developed from an earlier version which appeared as 'Sovereignty, Nationalism and Self-determination' in *Political Studies*, 47/3 (special issue, 1999) © Political Studies Association. Earlier versions of chapters 7 and 8 appeared as 'Democracy and International Society' in *International Affairs*, 76/1 (January 2000), and of Chapters 10 and 11 as 'The Concept of Humanitarian Intervention Re-visited', in Albrecht Schnabel and Ramesh Thakur (eds), *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention: Selective Indignation, Collective Action and International Citizenship* (Tokyo, United Nations University Press, 2000). I am grateful to the publishers for allowing me to reproduce passages from these essays.

Finally, I should like to thank Sidney Sussex College for welcoming me into the Fellowship in 1998, Albertina Cozzi for providing me with a refuge in Legnano, without which



the final editing would never have been completed, and my wife, Avril, for providing me with constant support while refusing to take me too seriously. The defects of the book are mine alone.

# ***Abbreviations***

CMAG	Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EPLF	Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
IRA	Irish Republican Army
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
MFN	Most Favoured Nation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RPF	Rwandan Patriotic Front
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNITAF	United Nations International Task Force
UNO	United Nations Organization
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

# *Prologue*

It is fashionable to be sceptical about the significance of the new Millennium. The computer technicians, who now rule so many aspects of our lives, did their work with exemplary efficiency. Those who holed themselves up against the apocalypse need not have bothered. When the debris was cleared away after the celebrations - 20 tons of empty champagne bottles from the streets of London alone - the world looked much the same as it had the night before. Both the problems facing humanity, and its prospects, remained unchanged.

Yet the Millennium is as good a point as any from which to try to take stock of the state of world affairs. We could not give any intelligible account of either human problems or prospects, without reference to a calendar. In most cultures, people punctuate the year with celebrations at set times. In most cultures also, those who can manipulate the calendar, with the aid of the stars or a theory of numbers, command a huge following, presumably because we all secretly yearn for an insight into our destiny. Rulers, from Julius Caesar to Indira Gandhi and Ronald Reagan, have been as prone as the rest of us to employ soothsayers. But we also need the calendar for mundane reasons. We could no more organize our social and personal lives without it than we could do without roads to move about on or houses to live in. There is no need to apologize, therefore, for using the onset of the Millennium as a vantage point from which to look at the development of international society and its present aspirations and discontents.

Still, let us admit it, there is a problem with this vantage point. The idea of the Millennium is a profoundly ambiguous

emblem for the modern world. On the one hand – in Western thought – it is associated with the politics of enthusiasm, the paradisaical longings of people for a world born again, remade on principles of justice that have somehow got lost or been betrayed. On the other hand, the millennium is a trade mark of Western universalism, or hubris, depending on how one tells the story. It is true that, with the possible exception of Buddhism, all the major world religions have given rise to millenarian-like movements, that are inspired by the expectation of an ideal society. The same goes for Marxism, which until its demise many saw as a secular equivalent to a world religion. But the world itself is part of the Christian story. For all practical purposes the world is now organized – bound into a single world community even – by the Christian calendar.

The problem that the Millennium poses for the student of international relations is thus roughly as follows. If these relations are viewed from the perspective of comparative sociology, it is possible to discern patterns of behaviour that cut across social and religious divisions. An analysis of these patterns will no doubt throw light on our common predicament, but at the price of draining life of its passion and drama. For that, there is no substitute for narrative. However, if our concern is with the story framed by the past two thousand years, then we must recognize that it is not of deep spiritual relevance to many of the world's peoples, and its longevity therefore cannot be expected to resonate everywhere. Indeed, one aspect of the story – the fact that it can be told so as to demonstrate the superiority of Western civilization and values – seems likely to fuel anti-Western millenarian-type movements. One does not have to accept Professor Huntington's thesis, that the Cold War will be followed by a clash of civilizations, to predict that the energies of these movements are likely to be directed at challenging the structures and institutions of international

society that were developed during the era of Western expansion.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, they are already doing so.

The politics of enthusiasm have their intellectual as well as their grass-roots variants. The Millennium will also, no doubt, be treated as a suitable case for deconstruction within the academic community. The discovery that the West and the world are not synonymous has already had widespread intellectual as well as political consequences. When the world was being integrated into a single economic and political system between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, those who were responsible – the philosophers, scientists and empire builders – were seldom worried about the problems of cultural or any other kind of relativism. At the start, they operated with an uncomplicated Mercantilist view of the world, in which there were always winners and losers. On this view, the difference between trade and warfare was one of degree only. Later, they advanced the view of a common human rationality. In economics the rationalists sought to demonstrate that vice could be transformed into virtue through the combination of the profit motive and open competition. In politics, they discovered that there were certain human rights, which all persons possessed by virtue of their humanity, and that these could be sharply differentiated from mere privileges.

These discoveries involved the substitution of a rationalist positive-sum world view, in place of the realist zerosum form of universalism that had preceded it. Where it had once been accepted that one person's, or state's, gain was another's loss, according to the new doctrines, it was not necessary for both parties to gain equally for both to be better off. This view of the world offered an explanation of co-operation and laid the foundations for a secular ideology of social progress. It also created a conundrum. In a world made up of sovereign and equal human beings, endowed with the same fundamental rights, including the rights of

individual and collective self-determination, how could one explain, let alone justify, the fact that a few powerful states had effectively enclosed the world and partitioned it amongst themselves. The fact that the two countries - Britain and France - whose competition sparked off the final act of enclosure, were the birthplaces of the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment respectively, and hence the progenitors of rationalist universalism rendered the conundrum even more complex.

It has never been resolved. Eventually, the recognition that the conundrum was insoluble played a part in the withdrawal of European imperial power after the two world wars. But, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evolutionary theory came to the aid of those who wished to defend Western dominion in terms of a doctrine of progress. In their view, European imperialism was the avatar of a future world civilization. Social Darwinism could not survive the obscene atrocities of the Second World War, at least as a respectable defence of cultural domination. But the almost immediate onset of the Cold War pushed the issue of alternative value systems, and the cultural relativism that their existence seemed to imply, to the margins of international political debate. It is only since 1989 that the lack of confidence in the cognitive foundations of our present economic, social and political arrangements has had a significant impact on the study of world politics.

Anti-foundationalism - the view that there is no solid basis of fact or truth underpinning our knowledge of the world - had invaded most of the human sciences much earlier, but, in this respect, as in others, the study of international politics was in a time warp, insulated from many intellectual currents by the dangers inherent in the nuclear stand-off. Nonetheless, its belated extension to the study of world politics seems peculiarly inappropriate, if only

because the role of contingency in international politics has always ensured that, whatever convictions individual statesmen have held, they could not in practice assume that they were shared universally. Such foundations as were laid down in international relations were provisional, the result of laborious negotiation and always subject to revision. The basic principle of international law - *pacta sunt servanda* (treaties are binding) - was qualified by the codicil - *rebus sic stantibus* (conditions remaining the same).

These observations may suggest that international relations is a field wide open to postmodernist methods of analysis. The story can be told from so many different points of view that none can establish its unambiguous authority. Not only will it be claimed that these stories are of equal validity but there is no meta-narrative such as Christianity or Islam once provided. In other words, there is no general scheme, which can be relied on to impose a measure of coherence and unity on the diversity of human experience.

The argument of this book is that to follow this line of reasoning is both unduly perilous and unnecessary. Millennial enthusiasm is dangerous in politics because it can easily translate into intolerant exclusivity and/or aggressive xenophobia. Its intellectual equivalent - anything goes relativism - is dangerous for similar reasons: on the one hand, it separates a small band of *cognoscenti* from the rest of us; on the other, since what they know is that there is nothing worth knowing beyond subjective experience, they are potentially at the call of any political paymaster.

The idea that deconstructing the old world will necessarily lead to an improvement in the human condition is absurd. Why should it? If the answer is that it will only be possible to recreate a just world order once we have exposed the corruption of the economic and political system, this solution is hardly new. Many liberal and Marxist thinkers reached the same conclusion long ago. We are

entitled to ask postmodernists (as much as liberals and socialists) about the principles on which the new order is to be constructed. To regard these as self-evident is to engage in the academic equivalent of the millennial fallacy. If, on the other hand, the answer is that there are neither principles nor identities, nor any rational ways of deciding between rival moral claims, that nothing is fixed and everything is in flux, how do we enter the argument at all? Indeed, what would be the point in doing so?

Postmodern relativism is unnecessary because it appears to assume that human institutions cannot survive - or at least lose their authority - once their cultural foundations have been exposed. It is no doubt true that their origins help to shape their subsequent history, but it does not follow that they will be subsequently proofed against modification by outside influences. Deep down all cultures are synthetic hybrids. The re-emergence in many countries of religious fundamentalism does not prove that trans-cultural debate, and mutual accommodation, is impossible, or that knowledge cannot be applied outside the specific milieu in which it was developed. Nor does the willingness of some believers to employ force, without regard to the precepts of international law, establish that the law merely applies within Western cultures. If cultures were hermetically sealed, the modern state could not have evolved, let alone the law.

'True on one side of the Pyrenees, false on the other': Pascal correctly identified the problem, not the solution. Since 1989 the problem of cultural and political diversity has re-surfaced in international life. It manifests itself in three closely related, and over-lapping, debates, which form the main focus of this book. These debates are about sovereignty, democracy and intervention. To be more precise, they are about the meaning and relevance of sovereignty - and its relationship to national identity and



the principle of self-determination; about the claim that democracy should form the basis of the world order - with its corollary that democratization should be both the objective and the primary instrument of conflict resolution; and about the possibility of using outside force, not merely to deter aggression but to resolve civil conflicts - with the allied assumption that the justification for intervention should be humanitarian. Before turning to these themes, it may be helpful to revisit three questions that were addressed, either directly or by implication, in the writings of international society theorists, and which still provide the context within which they are conducted. First, what is international society? Second, who are its members? Third, what are its boundaries? In sketching an answer to these questions, I shall begin in each case by considering the traditional understanding before turning to such modifications as have been introduced, largely as a result of twentieth-century developments, and the new challenges that have emerged since the end of the Cold War.