

Building a world community

mondial

Canadian Edition

Published by the World Federalist Movement, a non-governmental organization that advocates more just and effective global governance through the application of the principles of democratic federalism to world affairs.

VOL.2, ISSUE 2
DECEMBER 2018

International Relations Theory and World View

by Urs Thomas

From an international relations (IR) perspective, the high and increasing rate of change in diverse fields, whether in science and technology, international politics and commerce, or the related turbulence in the job market, the twenty-first century is striking. However, the traditional way of classifying IR research into particular schools of thought has remained stable: one of the main categorizations divides the field into four approaches: Marxism, Liberalism, Realism, and Populism.

Given this situation, it is significant that the journal *Foreign Affairs* (FA, July-August 2018, Volume 97/4) has produced a succinct anthology exploring the above-mentioned approaches by well-known proponents of each.

Notably, the overviews are not limited to the expected approaches, adding two novel and innovative approaches which are given the same treatment as the traditional ones: 'Tech World,' and 'Warming World.' *Foreign Affairs* elevates these areas to being autonomous IR approaches in their own right. This is a commendable initiative, that demonstrates a recalibration of the IR domain. It promises to exert a positive influence on international cooperation and innovation within both the traditional and newly added areas.

This compact anthology of contemporary IR thinking is also important because of the stature of *Foreign Affairs* -- it has been one of the most important and successful IR publications featuring mostly senior academic researchers, for close to a hundred years.

These two new schools of thought are significant in various ways. The technology focus concentrates on the digital revolution including artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and robotics. This discourse is still emerging, but the research has already made advances in four technology waves that are developed in

parallel:

- Internet: AI is largely built on digitally collected users' data that is labelled and used for marketing purposes;
- Algorithms in fields like banking or medicine detect previously unseen correlations;
- Sensors along with voice or vision recognition systems combine for uses such as quality inspection;
- and so-called autonomous AI integrates these other three waves for purposes such as controlling driverless vehicles.

In the case of AI, the key challenge is the rapidity with which these technological upheavals are taking over important determinants of labor markets.

The other new issue is climate change, which is emerging as the overriding IR issue that forces humanity to come to terms with its intergenerational responsibilities. Climate related refugees, linked to desertification, inundations, wild fires, hurricanes, or sea level rise, need to be considered. IR debates increasingly have to include discussions of the impacts of the technological, infrastructure and energy-related societal choices that have been made. In the case of climate change, the key IR challenge consists in the political and financial dimensions of reconciling the sacrifices of individual countries and global benefits. Unfortunately, so far the willingness of industrialized countries to assume their share of the burden that corresponds to their historical contributions is dim. Even the pragmatic and modest commitments of the Paris Accord are not being met.

In conclusion, these comments are part of a movement calling for a widening of IR debates that have, in the past, tended to concentrate on cleavages between the two general perspectives of nationalism/populism vs internationalism/multilateralism. In this context, World Federalists have long supported the need for institutional reforms and a strengthening of multilateral institutional infrastructure.

Last but not least, the title of this FA anthology "Which World Are We Living In?" recognizes that we are choosing our analytical IR background according to our world view and this broadening of the available choices has in turn expanded the available intellectual frameworks by half.

Urs Thomas is the founder of EcoLomics International