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Review Forum

Reading Daniel Deudney's Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village

Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village, Daniel Deudney. Princeton (2008). ISBN: 9780691138305

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Introduction

John Agnew

Daniel Deudney's book *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* seemed like a "natural" for an author meets critics session at the 2011 Seattle AAG Meeting. Not only is it a prize-winning critique of realist International Relations theory from a perspective that Deudney traces back to the ancient Greeks but it also engages centrally with a view of the role of geography in world politics that departs interestingly from both environmental determinism, on the one hand, and representational accounts that discount the direct unmediated effects of the world's physical geography (or "material contexts" in Deudney's terminology), on the other. Although it has been positively reviewed in many outlets and has received two major awards (Co-Winner of the 2010 International Studies Association Book of the Decade Award and Co-Winner of the 2008 American Political Science Association, International History and Politics Section Robert Jervis and Paul Schroeder Award) since its publication in 2008 the book has not attracted much attention from political geographers. Perhaps this reflects either an increased orientation away from engagement with mainstream US political science or increased dismay at the ways in which political scientists engage with "the geographical." It could be both. Whatever the reason, it is probably mistaken to ignore what can be, as in this case, a book that encourages a degree of self-questioning about how the global is articulated theoretically in contemporary political geography and a profoundly erudite account of an alternative to the realist and liberal approaches that completely dominate mainstream US international relations theory today.

Bounding Power presents Republican internationalism based on institutionalized mutual restraint on political practices, as in federal unions, as an alternative project to liberal, realist, and Marxist visions of world order and international security. This normative commitment lies at the heart of the book. The book begins by showing how the broad contours of this perspective predate what now go for realist and liberal perspectives on politics in Western intellectual history. A critique of the currently dominant neo-realist and liberal theories quickly follows. Much of the rest of the book is taken up with a survey of attempts since the seventeenth century (if with prior influences taken into account) to think about the best forms of polity with respect to both material contexts and ideas about socio-political organization. The logic of polis Republicanism that emerges from this survey, with the pre-Civil War US Philadelphian System taken as a prime example of such a logic in practice, is argued to be pre-eminently suitable for managing globally the security dilemmas (above all those associated with possession of nuclear weapons) of the contemporary globalized world.

In this review symposium the four written critiques of the book by the commentators from the Seattle AAG Meeting Session, Alexander Murphy, John Agnew, Mathew Coleman, and François Debrix, are followed by Daniel Deudney's response.

Bridging the IR–geography divide?

Alexander B. Murphy

Like many geographers I have long been bemused by the general lack of interest in geography on the part of mainstream International Relations (IR) theorists. The general dismissal of geography may indicate that most IR scholars assume that geography is mostly about locating phenomena and memorizing place names—a view of the discipline that is relatively common in the United States. Alternatively, IR's disinterest in geography may be attributed to the

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difficulty of capturing geographical circumstances in the formal rational-choice models that have long dominated IR, or to the assumed irrelevance of geography to theoretical debates over the comparative advantages of liberal, realist, and Marxist approaches. Whatever the cause, the consequence of ignoring geography is that most contributions to the IR literature make little or no reference to the characteristics of the material environment or to the nature of the spatial arrangements, ideas, and assumptions that influence the relationships among peoples and places.

Bounding Power stands as a signal challenge to this state of affairs. Daniel Deudney has written a rich, learned, provocative book that, in my view, stands as one of the more exciting scholarly tomes in IR in recent times. His basic project is to examine critically dominant ways of thinking that developed around the study of IR and to argue for a new approach that takes into consideration changing technological and geographical realities. His starting point is the idea that the fear of violence plays a pivotal role in shaping the political order. Deudney argues that most studies of that fear fail to recognize that it does not derive from a single source. Instead, it is rooted in both a fear of external violence (the problem of anarchy) and a fear of internal hierarchy devolving into despotism (the problem of hierarchy). Following Deudney, confronting the "violence interdependence" that results from these intertwined fears is the principal challenge that must be confronted in the creation of a political order.

Deudney contends that the nature and significance of violence interdependence is largely missed by realists, who are focused on external violence, and by proponents of liberalism, who focus on interdependence. We are thus faced with an unproductive theoretical dualism. That dualism can be overcome if we recognize that both traditions have common roots in republican security theory, a somewhat lost body of thought that derives from consideration of the relationship between material contextual factors (geographical and technological) and regime types. To sustain this point, Deudney provides a sweeping intellectual history of republican security theory, starting from its Ancient Greek roots and continuing through its Enlightenment reincarnation. He then shows how a concern with the nature and virtues of republican governance underlie both the modern liberal and realist traditions.

As Deudney sees it, the failure to come to terms with the common intellectual lineage of realism and liberalism means that most mainstream contemporary IR theorists ignore a key tenet of republican thought on security: that the nature of power relations in the international arena changes over time as violence interdependence evolves (for example, when a destructive technology is invented that has a wider geographical reach). The argument is that as technology changes the fear of violence evolves, both externally (in the form of changed threats from other states) and internally (in the form of new possibilities for despotic governmental practices). And this evolution, in turn, produces demands for republican political orders in keeping with the circumstances of the time. Providing security in a world of "bounding power," then, inevitably changes the way power arrangements are understood and institutionalized. It follows that international relations needs to be grounded in a "structural-materialist" theory of security institutions—one that takes into consideration the interplay of technology and geographical context.

The breadth and range of insight in this book is exceptional. Deudney's remarkably original synthesis of realism and liberalism challenges American IR scholars to rethink the conceptual foundations of their field and encourages them to bring a concern with materialism back into discussions of security. This latter element is what gives *Bounding Power* the potential to serve as an effective bridge between IR and the discipline of geography. The material realities that Deudney sees as being of such critical importance are, in important respects, products of geography (e.g., access to resources, location in relation to threats). Since these products of geography change over time in response to technological changes and new patterns of interaction, Deudney's book serves as a bold call for bringing geographical and historical contingency into IR theory.

Deudney's overarching message is, in my view, important and correct. His insistence that political orders are tied to technology and geography challenges some of the most influential fictions that have undergirded much IR analysis: that states are essentially the same thing, that states should be the principal objects of political analysis, and that states are all playing essentially the same game in the international arena. His book encourages us to look behind the ideals that purportedly govern the international system and consider how concrete circumstances and possibilities that bear on violence interdependence constrain and enable the practice of international relations. *Bounding Power* thus represents an opportunity for a new and much needed dialog between IR and geography—and between IR and history, for that matter.

Having made these points, I nonetheless worry that the book may serve to promote an overly narrow sense of the catalysts for international politics and a skewed view of the IR–geography relationship. On the first of these points, treating security from violence as the foundation on which international relations is built is a very constrained way of conceptualizing state functions and inter-state relations. Political orders derive from a variety of influences beyond security—political-economic, cultural, and social. The desire to solidify and promote certain national identities has, by itself, been an incredibly powerful force in the international arena. And what of collective commitments to use power to achieve ends that are widely viewed as positive (e.g., the defeat of Nazism, the promotion of human rights)? These drive international relations as well.

As for the treatment of the IR–geography relationship, readers of this book may well come away with the impression that geography is about the characteristics of particular physical–environmental settings and the comparative advantages of different locations in relation to other powers and to the seas. To be fair, there is also a concern throughout the book with the spatial scope of violence threats accompanying, for example, globalization or changes in the spatial reach of warfare technologies. But when geography is the explicit focus of attention, the reader is invited to consider such matters as Montesquieu's concern with the role of climate, soil fertility, topography, land–sea interactions, and country size in international politics; Ratzel, Semple, and Collidge's arguments about the role of topography in the emergence of the American polity; and the importance of the United States' location relative to other major powers in the development of the international system.

One might argue that contemporary trends in geographic thought have taken the discipline too far away from a focus on such matters, but there is little in the book that conveys what a richer sense of geography might have to offer to international relations. What about elements of the material geographical context that transcend the physical–environmental (settlement structure, population distributions, transportation infrastructure, and the like)? What about spatial considerations that go beyond simply the location of polities in relation to other powers or the seas (e.g., the location of polities in relation to capital flows, the spatial relationship between political and ethnic boundaries, the proximity of countries to areas of instability)? What about the role of geographical ideas, whether right or wrong, in shaping international relations (e.g., the idea of the "Islamic World" as a geopolitical bloc, the notion that Europe is a continent, the concept of a "Third World")? Focusing on such matters could bring a richer sense of geography into the mix and offer a broader platform for a productive IR–geography dialog.