

COMPTE-RENDU

The last session of the Seminar Series 'Political Theory & IR' addressed the question of conservatism's relevance to the study of international relations. As Jennifer Welsh stressed, this influence is not only theoretical but also political. Conservatism has become a prominent topic in IR at the turn of the new century. Two empirical processes are to be taken into account if we want to understand this shift, the first one being the more recent successes of conservative parties in Europe, the second one being the anti-internationalist policy and the global crusade against terrorism of the first Bush administration.

Jennifer Welsh said her objective was 'to bring the politics back into the study of international relations'. For that, she focused on three main points - defining conservatism; demonstrating how conservative values underpin various schools of thought in International Relations theory; and identifying two key tensions in conservatism.

Concerning the definition of conservatism she acknowledged the criticism based on its 'chameleonic' nature as an ideology, but she emphasised that it is also based on a configuration of philosophical concepts about human nature, the state, and international relations. Conservatism pivots on three main concepts: order, scepticism, and tradition. Conservative theorists assume the existence of a certain order. This is why they focus on how the international order can be managed and preserved, and not on why this order appeared or should be maintained. Obligation to preserve order is either conceived as a natural duty to conserve whatever order there is, or as an instrumental value (order is good for justice), or as an instrument to preserve national order.

Scepticism is the final conservative answer to the problem of change. Basically, the idea is that the actual order should be maintained because of the danger of implementing a change. The sources of conservative scepticism are the belief in the imperfectability, either moral or epistemological, of human beings; the limitations imposed by such a huge structural reality as international relations, and the difficulties in reaching a consensus on the way the world should be transformed; and finally, the incompatibilities between human goals and desires. These are the reasons that explain why a conservative approach to politics is mainly prudential. This does not imply that conservative thinkers reject all kind of change, but changes for them should be gradual in order not to weaken or destabilise society.

Concerning *tradition* - the third core element in the definition of conservatism - Jennifer Welsh emphasised that, 'far from being invented it arises through repeated exercise and becomes embodied in customs and law'. She mentioned several examples of traditions in international relations, such as the role of the sovereign nation-state as a key feature, or the tendency to privilege the great powers in the management of the international system (i.e. the Security Council's role in Kosovo crisis).

The second theme of the presentation was how conservative values underpin various schools of thought in International Relations theory. In order to address this question, Welsh differentiated three approaches to the study of International Relations - a realist conservatism, a pluralist conservatism, and a crusading conservatism, which she did not have time to present. As to *realist conservatism*, she highlighted a certain *air de famille* between Realism and Conservatism. In fact, just as conservatives in the domestic sphere, classical realists are pessimistic about the possibility of bringing about a more just or peaceful order; and neo-realists focus on the unavailability of the security dilemma, the reduced scope for institutionalisation, and the role of political power in sustaining order. To quote Jennifer Welsh, 'all Realist ultimately draw upon a conservative orientation, despite their differing perspectives on human nature and rationality'.

Pluralist conservatism in IR is closely linked to the works of the 'International Society School'. This theoretical strand emphasises that nation-states exist in a society of states bounded by a set of rules and the sharing of common interests and values. For Welsh, it is important to distinguish between two approaches in this School of international thought: the Solidarist and the Pluralist. The main difference between these two threads can be understood when the two main ambiguities in the International Society school are addressed. These ambiguities refer to the compatibility between order and justice, and to the lack of specificity about the causes for states to abide by common rules. For the Solidarists, it is possible that the society of states converge on a common

conception of 'right and wrong' and enforce it even using the military force if needed; while for the Pluralists this 'thick' conception is highly doubtful. Thus, for them the set of values shared by the society of states would not be different from those values strictly required to maintain a stable coexistence.

The last aspect of the presentation was 'a more practical discussion of the implications of conservatism for international relations today'. There are two tensions within conservatism. The first one is the accounting for change. Due to the realist conceptions of human nature and international order as a realm of recurrence, change implies a highly unlikely revolution to happen in IR categories. The Pluralists' view supposes that change occurs via the *incorporation* of new norms and new members to international society, conceived in a state-centred manner.

The second tension relates to conceptualising the nation. For the Realists the nation-state is the main actor in international relations and its survival is the 'driver of all action'. For the Pluralists, having in mind the importance they give to shared norms, values and international institutions, the existence of nationalist approaches to foreign policy constitutes a challenge. The national allegiance can therefore become a problem when it turns out to be exclusionary and destructive.

To conclude her presentation, Jennifer Welsh emphasised the need of a new understanding of the role of conservative thought in international relations theory and practice. In her opinion, the universalism-particularism debate will continue to be central and its resolution will lie in a deeper philosophical exchange among conservatives, liberals, and radicals.

In his reply, Luc Foisneau raised a series of questions on the definition of conservative thinking. Why should we give priority to order, scepticism and tradition, and not to the traditional concepts of Roman origin, authority, religion, and tradition? Is not authority to be preferred to order, as it is the key characteristic of a traditional order that it relies on the sacred origins of the state, which authority (e.g. the Roman senate) is supposed to represent and to increase? Jennifer Welsh argued that, in international relations, order is more central than authority, because international relations are confronted to an anarchic structure, in which there is no common authority. Moreover, some of the settled forms of authority - such as the Security Council - are not fully politically justified. As to the role of religion, J.W. agreed, with Huntington, that it is very difficult to define domestic conservatism without referring to it, but considered that the argument was not valid at the international level. Luc Foisneau also engaged on a reflection on the third variety of conservatism, suggesting a distinction between the two first brands (realism and pluralism) and crusading conservatism. The two former brands would be liable of a definition in terms of order and scepticism, and the latter one of a definition in terms of authority and religion. Jennifer Welsh, in her answer, developed her understanding of the crusading conservatism, emphasising that the Bush's crusade was based on a democratising agenda, and not on any (apparent) religious motives.

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