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Bear F. Braumoeller. *The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective.* Cambridge Studies in International Relations Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xviii + 276 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-00541-9; $29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-65918-6.

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Bridging the Gap between Agents and Structures

In *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology*, Colin Wight argues, âThere is a way of thinking about International Relations (IR) that seems to saturate all theoretical discussion within the discipline. Although it can take different forms, the underlying logic of this mode of thought is simple to articulate: IR theory, so the argument goes, is structured by a set of deep epistemological (sometimes methodological) divisions that prevent the attainment of anything approaching an integrated body of knowledge.â[1] Chief among these divisions is the agent-structure problem. As Alexander Wendt makes clear, all international theories attempt to solve the agent-structure dilemma.[2] At the heart of that dilemma is the debate over the primacy of agency or structure in shaping behavior. Simply put, agency is the ability of individuals or states to act independently and make their own choices, while structure is the recurrent patterned arrangements in the system that influence or limit the choices and opportunities available to states and individuals. Despite numerous attempts by scholars to bridge this divide, international relations theory has, until this point, failed to move beyond the debate itself.

Bear F. Braumoellerâs *The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective* accomplishes what no other scholarly work has effectively done by bridging the agent-structure gap and arguing for a truly systemic theory of international relations. Braumoeller, who is associate professor and director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Political Science at the Ohio State University, begins this seminal work by addressing whether great leaders make history or are constrained by the circumstances under which they operate. He argues that âthe combination of these two ideas–that environments have an impact on peopleâs behavior and that people act to alter their environment–is the essence of systemic thinkingâ (p. xiii). Braumoeller constructs a systemic theory of international politics, examining the international system as a whole. He does this by integrating agent-level and structural-level approaches to our understanding of state behavior, creating a single, unified, holistic theory, rather than a theory

that only identifies one aspect of the international system as the basis for state behavior. To examine his theory, Braumoeller bridges a second divide within political science–the divide between quantitative and qualitative methodology. Offering an approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, the book produces a strong, effective argument that is certain to alter the agent-structure debate in international relations.

According to the introduction, the idea âthat Great Powers are free to act, unhindered by external constraints; and that even the actions of Great Powers are dictated largely by circumstance ... divides our understanding of international relationsâ (p. 1). Arguing that there should be no winner in the agent-structure debate, Braumoeller constructs a theory that combines the characteristics of the states in the system with the nature of the system itself. At the center of the explanation are four interrelated points. First, citizensâ understanding of the world determines their wants in the international system. Second, the state channels these desires and conveys them to the leaders. Third, the ability of a leader to carry out citizensâ desires is limited by the capabilities of the state. And, finally, the relations of states in the system with diverse capabilities and interests determine the nature of great power politics in the international system and the distribution of power. Braumoeller describes his theory as a nested politics approach in which sovereignty is ânested within hierarchy nested within anarchyâ (p. 16).

The book proceeds by testing multiple hypotheses associated with his theory, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Braumoeller examines the hypotheses using three distinct yet historically significant cases: the post-Napoleonic European system, the period between the two World Wars, and the Cold War. More specifically, Braumoeller examines the polarization that occurred between 1815 and 1834, the end of American isolationism in 1940, and the end of the Cold War from 1985 to 1990. While the quantitative analysis presented in the book is sophisticated and quite convincing, the argument gathers strength through its qualitative case study analysis.

In the quantitative analysis, Braumoeller applies a complex formulaic model, which not only demonstrates that agents and structure interact, but also undermines mainstream balance of power arguments. The model shows that the international system both shapes and is shaped by the security policies of states within the system. Moreover, he illustrates that a balance of political ideology, rather than a balance of power is more important to the system. While the model is highly sophisticated, Braumoellerâs explanation of the model is succinct and clear, and those wanting more information about his methodological approach will be pleased to see that Braumoeller includes two appendices that provide the theoretical and empirical details of the model. Both appendices will prove particularly useful to those wishing to replicate the modelâs results, or apply the model to new cases. In addition, they provide excellent material for analysis in a graduate-level course on methodology.

The book next examines the cases by using a qualitative case study method of analysis. Unlike the quantitative analysis chapter presented in the book, the case study chapter provides a deep explanation of each case. The analysis of the post-Napoleonic system is the least interesting of the cases, but Braumoeller effectively argues that British liberalization preceded a conservative reaction within the international system, offering an alternative to many other analyses. More interesting are the cases on the ending of American isolation and the end of the Cold War. The author demonstrates that the perception of American inaction against Nazi aggression during the interwar period is false; furthermore, he shows that the United States reacted to tangible changes in the status quo of the international system throughout the interwar period but especially in 1940. Braumoeller admits that his final case, the end of the Cold War, is the most complicated, but in the end it is also the most compelling. He explains how Soviet premiere Mikhail Gorbachevâs policies aimed to transform the international system, but Braumoeller also illustrates how the United States failed to act until the transformation was clear. I am particularly compelled by this case, since my dissertation work focused on George H. W. Bushâs worldviews and perceptions of Gorbachev and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. As someone who has studied Bushâs foreign policy extensively, I am concerned that Braumoeller gives less attention Bushâs preconceived worldview, which had important implications for American policy. This discussion would have strengthened Braumoellerâs argument about the reactive nature of American diplomacy.

In general, however, the book not only makes a strong and convincing argument, but also anticipates and deals with the various criticisms that one might raise about the argument. For example, one criticism that might be leveled at the book is that the nature of war and sovereignty in the contemporary world has changed and great power conflicts are less significant to the system than they once were. Braumoeller addresses this issue in

the bookâs conclusion. While the author acknowledges that the âUnited States may therefore continue to pursue more direct means of countering terrorism ... than via the strengthening of the sovereign state,â the problem remains that the premises of the theory are based on symmetrical rather than asymmetrical conflict (p. 198). Yet asymmetrical conflict may be more important to our future. Thus, a fuller explanation of the impact of the war on terror is warranted, but this may require some distance from the current period.

A second issue arises when one considers the role of citizens within great powers, particularly with regard to the nature of citizensâ knowledge. The two modern cases deal with a democratic great power, the United States. While Braumoeller addresses the rise of China in the bookâs conclusion and discusses the Soviet Union in the case focusing on the end of the Cold War, he does not sufficiently address how citizensâ worldview is channeled through the state to the leadership in a nondemocratic great power. Moreover, even in the United States the idea that citizensâ views are clearly articulated and channeled to the leadership is problematic. As Stephen Earl Bennett and others have shown, citizens learn about foreign affairs through opportunity, social status, and their motivation.[3] Furthermore, it is a well-documented finding that citizens know little about current events in general and even less about overseas events. Thus, further exploration of the role of citizensâ knowledge in the articulation of worldviews, as well as an understanding of which citizensâ worldviews have an impact on state policy, is warranted. While citizens may be important to an understanding of great power politics, it appears that an elite group of citizens matter more than the rest of the citizens. Much of Braumoellerâs argument depends on informed citizenship; what happens when citizen demands are ill-advised, unwarranted, manipulated, or simply misinformed? A more interesting issue for further research is an analysis of the role of nested politics within the state. Braumoeller has effectively demonstrated that citizensâ worldviews can shape state behavior, but how does state behavior shape the views of citizens? In the case study on the end of the Cold War, Braumoeller begins to explore this with his analysis of the shift in the Soviet Union and the role of Gorbachev, but this is an area for further research.

Another issue for further analysis involves the role of allies and alliances in systemic theory. The bookâs focus on great powers excludes the impact that their allies can have on shaping their behavior. For example, during the end of the Cold War, it is difficult to deny the impact that Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of the United Kingdom, had on American policy. Moreover, allies had a particularly important role in German reunification. Do allies and alliances offer another form of nested politics within systemic theory?

Finally, Braumoellerâs book is deep and complex. While not a criticism, it does mean that the book may not be accessible to all individuals. It is particularly suited for graduate students and scholars, and offers little utility for undergraduate courses or laypeople. Despite these minor issues, Braumoeller has established himself as one of the great international theorists of our age and should be commended for his highly sophisticated and intellectually articulated treatise. At the same time, it is a book that is sure to become an instant classic in the field of international relations.

Notes

[1]. Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

[2]. Alexander Wendt, âThe AgentâStructure Problem in International Relations Theory,â *International Organization* 41, no. 3 (1987): 335-370.

[3]. Stephen Earl Bennett, Richard S. Flickinger, John R. Baker, Staci L. Rhine, and Linda L. M. Bennett, âCitizensâ Knowledge of Foreign Affairs,â *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 1, no. 2 (March 1996): 10-29.