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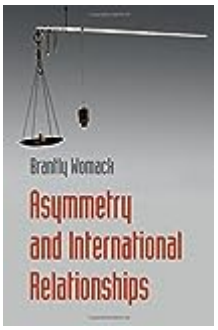


**Brantly Womack.** *Asymmetry and International Relationships.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 220 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-13289-4.

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## Asymmetric Relations among Nations

The study of international relations was traditionally focused on the so-called great powers and their interactions. Not only was the focus on great power politics, it was (mostly) on Western great power politics. The United States and Europe were the principal âplayersâ in the âgameâ of international politics. Brantly Womackâs book *Asymmetry and International Relations* âintroduces a new paradigm for understanding international relationshipsâ (p. xvi). âHere,â the author maintains, âattention is focused first on those unexciting international relationships in which the smaller side cannot threaten the larger, and yet the larger cannot force its preferences on the smaller at a cost acceptable to itselfâasymmetric international relationshipsâ(p. 1).

The book proposes a general theory of asymmetric international relations, while noting that âmost international relationships are asymmetricâ (p. 1). There are two main building blocks for this general theory. First is the authorâs expertise as an area specialist with a particular interest in China and Vietnam. Thus, he brings insights from an in-depth study of a particular asymmetric relationship. The second building block is a theoretical insight offered by Albert O. Hirschman in the preface to the expanded edition of his *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*, originally published in 1945 and reissued in 1980. In 1945, Hirschman had argued that unequal gains from international trade create a situation in which the country with the biggest gain also has the most to lose and thereby becomes dependent on the country for which the gains are less important.[1] Writing thirty-five years later, Hirschman noted an asymmetry that might offset the dependency created by unequal gains from trade. Since the relationship between a small country and a big country is likely to be more important to the small country, there is likely to be an asymmetry of attention devoted to relations between the two countries. For example, trade with Guatemala may be of little importance to the United States, while trade with the United States may be of immense importance to Guatemala. Womack expands this insight to asymmetric international relations in general.

There are many strong points in this book. First,

and foremost, is the presentation of an alternative perspective on international politics. No matter how useful one thinks it is to focus on great powers, it is difficult to deny the value of a different perspective. For Womack, âan asymmetric relationship is one in which the smaller side is significantly more exposed to interactions than the larger side because of the disparity of capabilities, and yet the larger is not able to dictate unilaterally the terms of the relationshipâ (p. 10). Whereas some argue that the number of consequential states is small, Womackâs theory âcounters that asymmetric relationships remain problematic for the stronger side and that sustainable leadership, even by a great power, is not simply a question of maintaining relative powerâ (p. 23). And whereas the Melian dialogue asserts that the strong do what they can, while the weak suffer what they must, this book suggests that the strong do what is feasible (or cost-effective), while the weak do what they can.

A second strong point is the ambitious scope of the undertaking. One might think that constructing a general theory of international politics with discussions of power, capability, soft power, ethics, misperception, hegemonic cycles, and so on, would suffice for one book. But the author does not stop there; he adds a discussion of policy implications and policy recommendations. Although the author portrays himself as a newcomer to international relations theory, he does an admirable job of integrating area studies with ideas drawn from a wide array of international relations theorists, including David Lake, Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, Thomas Schelling, Robert Jervis, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Powell, Peter Katzenstein, Robert Axelrod, Robert Gilpin, and others.

A third strong point is the emphasis on the role of costs in relations among nations. Why donât the strong crush the weak? Not because they lack the capability, but because the costs would outweigh the gains. This is not only true today, but in the past as well. Womack observes, âif the defeat of the small were easy in the good old days of barbarians and empires, so many small states would not have survivedâ (p. 80).

In a project of such ambitious scope, it is not surprising that some points may not be as clear as one might wish or that other points call for elaboration. The most important concepts in need of clarification are power and capability. The concept of power raises the question, power to do what? And the concept of capability raises the question, capability to do what? Both power and capability are relational terms, meaning that they refer not to properties of one actor but rather to a relationship or potential relationship between two or more actors. Womack says that âthe capabilities of a country are its resources for sustaining, furthering, and protecting its interestsâ (p. 43). But this does not suffice as a definition of *political* capabilities. Robinson Crusoe has the capability to sustain, further, and protect his interests; but he can have no *political* capability until the arrival of Friday. Political capability has little or no meaning until one specifies what an actor is capable of getting other actors to do. Womack uses the relationship between David and Goliath as an example of asymmetry and points out the outcome was exceptional. This illustrates the importance of explicit or implicit clarity about who is trying to get whom to do what. Suppose David and Goliath were pitted against each other in a spelling bee, a computer game, a game of chess, bridge, or poker rather than a duel to the death. The outcome might have been much different. Power resources vary from one situation to another.

Womack notes that âthere have been considerable advances in conceptualizing power in international relations since Robert Dahlâs classic behavioral definition, âA has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that he would not otherwise doââ (p. 28). Womack does not provide much detail about these âadvancesâ in conceptualizing power, nor does he provide a definition of his own. His definitions are also muddled because neither power nor capability appears in the index, which might have made his point clearer to potential readers.

The analogy with Hirschmanâs insight could also use some further elaboration. One explanationâperhaps the most common oneâfor the outcome of Americaâs war with Vietnam follows the Hirschman argument of attention asymmetry. America could have won the war, but the war was more important to the Vietnamese than to the Americans. America fought with one arm tied, did not drop enough bombs, did not devote enough attention to winning, and so on. In Hirschmanâs case, however, the asymmetry in gains from trade is real, while the asymmetry in capabilities in Vietnam is problematic. The capabilities that mattered in Vietnam were those relevant to winning that kind of war, against that adversary, in that place. Battleships, submarines, nuclear weapons, and intercontinental missiles were less useful than soldiers who looked like the Vietnamese, spoke the Vietnamese language, and who were familiar with Vietnamese culture, climate, and terrain. It is true that America had the capability to destroy the world as we know it and Vietnam did not; it is also clear that America could

have destroyed Vietnam; but it is not clear that America had the capability to accomplish its political goals in that war in that place against that adversary.

The distinction between undertakings and outcomes is not always as clear as one might wish. This corresponds to the difference between foreign policy analysis (explaining undertakings) and capability analysis (explaining outcomes). As Harold and Margaret Sprout noted in their landmark study, *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs* (1965), these are fundamentally different kinds of intellectual operations. Womack observes that âthe perspective of each state is situated within horizons set by its capabilities and locationâ (p. 1). Later, he notes that âasymmetry theory holds that to the extent that A is greater than B, there will be structural differences of interest and perspective between the twoâ (p. 14). An actorâs âperspective,â however, is a matter of cognition; and misperception is likely to play a role. Someone undertakes to walk through a dark alley on the basis of âperspective.â The open ditch plays a role in the decision-making process *only insofar as it is perceived.* If the open ditch escapes the attention of the walker, however, it still plays a role in determining the outcome of the stroll through the alley. How one perceives the âlocationâ of a country depends on whether one is looking at a globe or a Mercator projection map. It is worth reminding ourselves that Columbus was sailing to India when he came across the ânew world.â The Sproutsâ *Toward a Politics of the Planet Earth* (1971) provides many examples of geopolitically significant misperceptions of âlocation.â A stateâs foreign policy is based on its (mis)perception of many things, including its capabilities and location; but its ability to accomplish its foreign policy goals is determined by its *actual* capabilities and location.

A final problem worthy of further reflection is the authorâs dismissal of large-N analysis. âBecause the study of asymmetry focuses on relationships rather than on events, the relevance of large-N correlationsâthousands of data points over hundreds of years is doubtful.... As a plane of analysis of asymmetric relationships, large-N is too abstractâ (p. 32). Although such an approach requires skills far beyond my own, I have a hunch that some imaginative graduate student will someday challenge Womackâs pessimism.

The author does not portray his theory as a finished product, but rather as a work in progress. He humbly confesses âthat due to my personal limitations there are many theoretical and empirical issues relating to asymmetry that I am unable to address or to resolve in this book. I look forward to the issues and challenges that will be raised by other scholarsâ (p. 33). Some books tell you all you want to know about a subject; some tell you more than you want to know; some donât tell you much at all; but some raise questions in your mind, provoke new thoughts, and lay the groundwork for further research. To his credit, Brantly Womackâs *Asymmetry and International Relationships* is that last kind of book.

Note

[1]. This line of argument was at odds with later dependency theorists who argued that dependency arose because trade did *not* benefit the poor countries; whereas Hirschman maintained that is was precisely the gains from trade that created the dependency. See David Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).



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