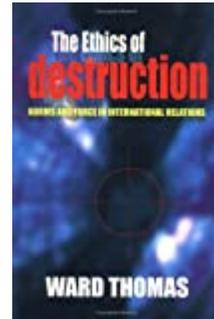Ward Thomas. *The Ethics of Destruction.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. x + 222 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-8741-5.

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Constructing Death: Norms, War, and Civilian Casualties

Constructing Death: Norms, War, and Casualties

Ward Thomas has produced an important and refreshingly clear account of the complex way in which international norms influence state behavior. Further, Thomas's *Ethics of Destruction* makes the case that norms "matter" in the context most traditionally friendly to materialist and rationalist approaches; that of interstate war. Thomas's account adeptly integrates the importance of norms to IR theory with novel and systematic empirical case studies pertaining to assassination and aerial bombing of civilian targets in pre-1945 and post-1945 case studies.

Traditional structural accounts of IR generally take one of two positions on the subject of international norms. While all structural realists agree that norms have little or no causal significance, some ignore them altogether while others acknowledge their existence but insist that norms are epiphenomena, trivial matter that only obscure the underlying bases of international order, which are predicated on material power and anarchy. Thomas convincingly refutes this position by demon-strating that "the use of force in international relations is regularly affected by common understandings about what is ethically acceptable and unacceptable" (p. 22). That is to say, if war is really a "hell" where anything goes, then why are norms regarding the use of weapons of mass destruction and the treatment of noncombatants, prisoners, and diplomats even considered? The reason is that there are in point of fact regulative norms that causally influence the behavior of states in ways that are not guided by either material power or strategic interest. Adopting this position suggests a view of international relations more in keeping with the English School notion of an international society than with the traditional structural conception of the international system. Whereas the former can accommodate the latter, the reverse is not true. That is, international society, like domestic as commonly understood in basic sociology, is comprised of both social structures (classes, divisions, economic differentiation, etc.) and norms (walking on the right, waiting on line, etc.). The traditional structural approach to IR of Waltz and his adherents denies the possibility of the latter, at least in theory.

By adopting an international society perspective toward world politics, a number of interesting problems and new avenues of investigation are made possible. Firstly, how are norms defined, and what is their relationship to ethics and morality? Secondly, how can we conceive of a model of causality involving states, system, and norms in world politics? Thirdly, when and to what extent will norms "matter" in interstate conduct? Thomas borrows Jeffrey Legro's definition of ethical norms as "collective understandings of the proper behavior of actors" (p. 7). But from where do these collective understandings derive? At base, all norms are grounded on moral principles, which are abstract notions of good/bad and justice/injustice. Moral principles, however, do not instruct any given actor as to how to behave in any given context. Thus, the moral principle "human life has value" does not give specific instruction as to what actions should or should be undertaken to preserve human life in any given situation. Ethical norms, in contrast, provide such explicit guidance. This helps to reveal a crucial distinction between moral principles and ethical norms: whereas the former may be held by any number of actors, large or small, adherence to the latter must by definition be widespread.

Having defined norms and their relationship to morality, the question remains as to the causal mechanisms at play in the analysis of international norms. On this matter, Thomas takes a nuanced and careful position, which is that "Norms can be both dependent and independent variables, and to fully understand their impact in international politics it is necessary to take account of both sides of the equation" (p. 13). It is thus inaccurate to contend that norms are either epiphenomena or primary underlying structures in IR. Rather, they are formed by the practices and shared understandings of states and the individuals that run them. Once formed and shared in common, they are very much real, and they may constrain the behavior of states in a number of ways. Further, Thomas argues that it is simplistic to set norms and strategic interest in binary opposition to each other. That is, norms and self-interested behavior may often, though not always, be mutually reinforcing. Rationalist approaches to IR, Thomas argues, pit egoism in opposition to its inverse, altruism. But some actions may be taken *both* for the benefit of the actor and the common good simultaneously. Thomas thus agrees with David Clinton's conception of an international society in which states can and do divert resources in order to maintain a system in which they can enjoy a measure of freedom to pursue their interests (p. 22).

Precisely when and to what extent do international norms affect state behavior in world politics? In response to this question, Thomas posits two types of international norms. Convention-dependent norms are those that rely on conventional practice for their continued existence. Power-maintenance norms in contrast serve to reinforce the position of strong states in the international society. The former are the weaker of the two in that continued practice and reciprocity is required for their preservation. Power-maintenance norms, in contrast, are more durable and are typically internalized in subtle but powerful ways. Rather than serving as intervening variables between the means and ends of state actors, power-maintenance norms are often embedded such that certain options are never seriously considered by state actors in the first place (p. 40). In order to see how these various types of norms function, Thomas looks are three case studies: international assassination, aerial bombing of civilians prior to 1945 and following 1945.

The strength of Thomas's analysis of international assassination is revealed in his opening anecdote. During the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War, President Bush Sr. raised the possibility of assassinating Saddam Hussein but rather quickly decided against doing so. Clearly, the decision was based neither on strategic calculation, insofar as many military experts felt that removal of Saddam would vastly improve the war effort as well as long term American interests in the broader Gulf region. Nor was the decision altruistically moral; as the President himself publicly remarked, "No one will weep for him when he's gone" (p. 48). Thus, why did the U.S. take a decision that went against both its egoist and altruist inclinations? The answer lies in the long-standing and deeply embedded norm against assassination of foreign leaders, which Thomas historically traces. The stigma against assassination of foreign leaders developed into a power-maintenance norm during the early modern period in Europe, firstly, because of the moral principle that political assassination leads to chaos thus greatly harming the common good. But as the authority of the state was increasingly vested in powerful individual monarchs, the norm additionally served the function of preserving monarchical power. Today, the norm against assassinating foreign leaders is sufficiently embedded that it is rarely seriously considered in the course of day-to-day foreign policy.

In contrast to the norm against assassination of foreign leaders, the norm against aerial bombardment of civilians broke down early in World War II because it was a weaker, convention-dependent norm. That is, the norm

held so long as it was not seriously challenged in practice. Once broken however, the norm quickly came undone. One reason for the norm's weakness lay in the matter of practical application: "while noncombatant immunity directly embodies a priori moral judgments, it nevertheless contains ambiguities that make its application to aerial warfare problematic" (p. 91). Nonetheless, "There was, notably, a core of consensus that the bombing of civilians was wrong," (p. 122) but that consensus was overcome by the dramatic change in convention brought about during the course of the Second World War. Despite the breakdown that occurred during the war, the norm against civilian bombing re-emerged and gained increasing strength during the Cold War and especially since. Thus, American military planning in both the Gulf War and in Kosovo was heavily influenced by the need to minimize the possibility of civilian casualties during the bombardment of urban areas. Following the accidental killing of several hundred Iraqis in Al Firdos during the Gulf War, for instance, the American military leadership altered its bombing strategy and publicly noted the importance of avoiding a political backlash from such incidents. While Thomas argues that the aerial bombing norm has indeed re-emerged in a profound way, he leaves open the question of how a change in conventional circumstances might serve to weaken the norm in the future.

Thomas's argument that norms function in a reciprocal fashion with both structure and agents in IR is refreshing and is well supported by the evidence provided in his cases. At a minimum, it is very difficult to support the structural realist response that norms are "epiphenomenal" or merely trivial luxuries of the powerful. However, in straddling the middle ground between traditional and post-positivist approaches to IR, Thomas runs the risk of pleasing neither camp. That is, norms may explain why Saddam Hussein refrained from using chemical weapons in the Gulf War, but they say little about either why he invaded Kuwait in the first instance or why the U.S. committed immense resources to reverse the Iraqi invasion. To answer those questions, a more traditional approach focusing on power and interest might be of more use.

Approaching norms from a different perspective, post-positivists might question the historical basis Thomas provides for international norms. Thomas contends that "While my approach requires some measure of interpretation concerning the manner in which norms may diverge from underlying moral principles, the focus of the study is nevertheless fundamentally empirical and historical both in substance and tone" (p. 43).

But this merely wishes away the basic problem: might a different investigator looking at the historical basis for norms that Thomas examined have walked away with a very divergent interpretation? Alternatively, what if Thomas had consulted a different set of historical sources or even done some archival research into the matter? This might dramatically alter the historical claims that Thomas makes, or it might not, but without a fuller discussion of this interpretive problem, we cannot know for certain. Indeed, this is likely more of problem than meets the eye when taking account of the fact that many, though not all, of Thomas's sources are drawn from IR and international law interpretations based in turn on secondary historical works (see especially pp. 51-57). Insofar as these are really tertiary sources–interpretations of secondary texts based on primary sources–there is a lot unspoken interpretation going on; some might argue too much. One way around this problem is to do a less selective and more complex scouring of the secondary literature on the cases. Another is to do archival work. But in either case, it is not sufficient to simply say "everyone interprets" and leave it at that as solid evidence for the basis of an international norm.

A related problem that runs throughout the text is that it is heavily Eurocentric. All of the sources and cases deal with European and North American states. All of the moral principles under examination derive from the experience and historical memory of Western civilization. Thomas himself alludes to this towards the end of the book where he admits that Soviet practices in Afghanistan and Russian bombing in Chechniya provide possible counter-evidence regarding the re-emergence of the aerial bombing norm (pp. 176-178). But again, admission of an unexplained anomaly is insufficient. Thomas has very little to say regarding the possibility that norms regarding assassination and aerial bombing are more likely Western norms than international norms. Or perhaps we could say "Western international norms" but not global norms. In either case, there is no compelling evidence that these norms hold fast much less have intersubjective meaning in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. Even to the extent that these norms do hold some sway at the start of the 21st century, it would be quite unimaginable to suggest that Western ethical norms simultaneously emerged and developed in the Non-Western world during the past several hundred years. In this sense, it is difficult to make the claim that the study of norms is truly an exploration into the "international".

Despite these issues, which are by no means unique to Thomas's study, *The Ethics of Destruction* represents

an interesting and novel contribution to the extant literature on norms and IR in league with other widely discussed constructivist works, such as Martha Finnemore's *National Interests in International Society*. Thomas makes the case that structural approaches fail to capture crucial aspects of world politics, and he does so in a theoretically cogent fashion. In particular, Thomas's conceptualization of international society as an alternative to international system suggests that much North American scholarship of the past two decades would have been better served to begin with Bull rather than Waltz as a basic point of departure. Thomas's empirical discussion regarding the emergence and power of norms on assassina-

tion and aerial bombing is persuasive and especially hard to dismiss insofar as it shows that norms affect the area thought to be most heavily guided by self-help, namely the practice of interstate war. Toward that effect, *The Ethics of Destruction* is a essential reading for all contemporary students and scholars of IR.

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