

Review of 'a Calculus of Power'

by Peter Gowan

A Calculus of Power is a posthumous collection of articles and reviews drawn from Peter Gowan's contributions to *New Left Review*. The first section primarily highlights the historical actions of the United States in dominating or subverting various international institutions. Both middle sections take aim at the theoretical and ideological edifice which accompanies US foreign policy, while the last section is concerned with the decline of the US and the outcomes of the economic crisis of 2008.

His critique of 'new liberal cosmopolitanism' relies on exposing contradictions between the professed aims of capitalist globalisation and the power politics of US grand strategy. He's able to draw up no shortage of arguments for this: the continuation of cold-war security pacts and consistently high US military spending,¹ economic protectionism in sectors of "critical importance" such as agriculture,² and the dismissal of human rights issues in states which are "pivotal to American strategic interests" such as Saudi Arabia or Indonesia.³

The argument about US hypocrisy is well worn among left/anti-imperialist currents, but here it is useful because it highlights Gowan's view of the USA as the 'capitalist heartland'.⁴ Unlike his New Left contemporaries, he doesn't talk about transnational capital as an independent actor, focusing instead on its direction by the USA as the 'dominant capitalist state'.⁶ In doing so he rejects a main tenet of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, namely the significance of non-state actors, and this brings him in line with the realist perspective.

The second part of his critique of neoliberal cosmopolitanism comes in the chapter on the origins of Atlantic liberalism. He reviews Richard Tuck's book *Rights of War*, which shows how the growth of liberal thought was influenced by the experiences of the Dutch and British empires of the 18/19th Centuries. Gowan's conclusion from this is that "militarism and imperialism were inseparable from the most advanced proto-liberalism of the time"(92), but he stops short of endorsing Tuck's own conclusion that the anarchic relations between states acted as a model for relations between individuals. This is because, while Gowan does see states as a primary actor, he is also careful to emphasise the internal structure of those states, the societies they exist in, and their geographical context; these factors complicate the comparison between human nature and *raison d'etat*.

1 Peter Gowan, *A Calculus of Power* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 5.

2 Gowan, p. 11.

3 Gowan, p. 7.

4 Gowan, p. 173.

5 Reference to a capitalist heartland is also made in Ashok Kumar and Alex Gawenda, 'Made In Post-China™: On the Path to a Service Economy', *Counterpunch* <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/06/14/made-in-post-china> as well as by James Butler.

6 Spyros Sakellariopoulos and Panagiotis Sotiris, 'Peter Gowan's Theorization of the Forms and Contradictions of US Supremacy: A Critical Assessment' (*Cultural Logic*, 2008), pp. 1–2.

Nevertheless, Tuck's comparison cuts far deeper than Gowan gives it time for; because an analysis of human nature is a basic element of political philosophy. It takes an extraordinary leap to show that what is true of individuals is not true of states, and it brings up fundamental questions, such as whether it's possible for states to have authentically friendly relations in the absence of oversight by a higher authority. To put it another way, if Gowan thinks humans are natural socialists, why not states?

In the chapter on the Balkan Tragedy, he turns to another feature of neoliberal cosmopolitanism: the suspension of state sovereignty by the international community in cases of deviant behaviour. His prime example here is the NATO war on Yugoslavia as a model humanitarian intervention which acts as a precedent for the later interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. However, he takes the argument further than others⁷ by explaining how the war allowed NATO to be reconstructed from a defensive anti-communist alliance into an offensive coalition of the West in the global war on terror. A discussion of the Gulf War might have been more appropriate, but it lacked the lesson of NATO.

Alongside his view of NATO as a US-dominated institution, he also discusses in detail how the US came to establish and then manipulate the United Nations, and the World Trade Organisation.⁸ What he fails to explain is why these institutions were nevertheless respected by non-allies of the US, particularly by the newly-independent countries who participated enthusiastically in the UN General Assembly during the heyday of the Non-Aligned Movement. Perhaps the UN was based on US principles, but it has long since grown beyond them.

During his analysis of Mearscheimer, Gowan grapples with the idea that the USA might not be bound by the conventional rules of realism due to its unique geographical position: surrounded by a vast sea with friendly states covering its immediate north and south. However, this overlooks his other more complex points: that the USA is unique due to the social structure of its capitalist class,⁹ its exploitation of the most advanced capitalist markets,¹⁰ and its ability to command native forces to fight wars on its behalf.¹¹ The prominence Gowan awards the US gives his perspective focus and clarity, but it's also a weakness because it risks discounting the role of local forces in the rest of the world.

If there's one area where he departs from his Americanism, it's his belief in the ability of Europe to counter-balance the USA,¹² claiming that America is fearful of moves towards Franco-German unity.¹³ This at least shows some nuance to his position, but in turn it goes against the tradition of left-Euroscepticism among his contemporaries. Furthermore, if we were to talk of regional challengers to the US, he barely mentions Latin America, despite the success of anti-hegemonic movements there.

7 'The imperialist aggression of NATO in 1999 became the precedent for all later aggressions of NATO in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe today.' Stavros Tassos, 'Speech at the Re-Launch of the British Peace Assembly', *Communist Review*, 2015, 15–17 (p. 16).

8 Gowan, p. 9.

9 Gowan, p. 150.

10 Gowan, p. 128.

11 Gowan, p. 157.

12 Gowan, pp. 166–167.

13 Gowan, p. 212.

Throughout the book he attempts to combine realism and socialism, the most compelling area in this regard is his assessment of radical realism. It's true that neo-realists fell into fashion during periods of US retreat, first in Vietnam, then in Afghanistan and Iraq, and they have been relatively dovish compared to their liberal counterparts.¹⁴ It's even more convincing from the other side, considering that left critiques of American power often rely on neo-realist narratives, such as the condemnation of the war on Iraq as a 'war for oil'.

In conclusion, there is nothing remarkable about his criticism of US grand strategy, or the US more generally, however there's much to learn from his relationship with realism. Unfortunately his ultra-leftism undermines his more positivist tendencies, and the result is a slightly syncretic analysis which appears to contradict itself in parts. To some extent this is understandable given the book was written across several different time periods and covers a broad variety of subjects.

¹⁴ Gowan, p. 153.