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Compte rendu de 'La Guerre et la Paix. Approches et Enjeux de la Sécurité et de la Stratégie'

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Charles-Philippe David, Olivier Schmitt, *La Guerre et la Paix. Approches et Enjeux de la Sécurité et de la Stratégie* (4e édition), Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2020, pp. 568, ISBN : 9782724625158

French war studies are on the rise. Under the impulsion of the State, as well the defence industry, many research centres and projects have been created or funded in an effort to induce a “great recomposition” and produce a French school of “war studies”. Publications have multiplied, and scholars as well as civil servants are working toward a “demarginalization” of war studies in universities.¹ In this context, the latest edition of Charles Phillippe David and Olivier Schmitt’s exhaustive handbook, *La guerre et la paix, approches et enjeux de la sécurité et de la stratégie*, is opportune.

It is the fourth edition of the volume, the previous one being issued in 2012, and the first in 2000. The world has changed, quite spectacularly, in twenty years, but so did *La guerre et la paix*. Completely updated, this handbook offers its readers a large array of developments on war and security, as well as reflections on current trends in world politics. Quite classical in their approach, the authors have the merit to present a large variety of perspectives, and to provide a wealth of references. Although principally addressed at students interested in international relations, it remains quite accessible to the general public, and even specialists will probably find interest in the 120 pages long bibliography.

While the previous editions were the sole work of Charles Phillippe David, this one has been established with the help of Olivier Schmitt. It is not the only change, as the structure of book has been largely transformed as well. The book’s organization by themes makes it easy to leaf through, each part – and even each chapter – being largely independent from each other, although they are woven together by a common problematic. On this point, and while it used to focus on terrorism and preventive war as the two main expressions of the “permanent state of insecurity”,² times have changed.

The authors now identify three overarching tendencies in international affairs: the return of great power competition, the mutation of the character of war, and the long-term transformation of the relation between societies and their environment.³ The first is exemplified by the peculiar problem posed by the newly aggressive behaviour of Russia since 2014, and the “profound disruption linked to the Chinese emergence”. Even though “conflict is not inevitable”, it remains nevertheless possible and “the evolution of the international

1 Boncourt *et al.*, “Que Faire?”, 2020.

2 David, 2012, *La guerre et la paix*. p. 13.

3 David & Schmitt, *La Guerre et la Paix*, 2020, p. 21.

system will necessitate a renewed diplomatic talent from leaders” to maintain peace and stability through a “subtle dose of accommodation, deterrence and coercion”.⁴ Military intervention, debated since the end of the Cold war, will probably not disappear, since “it is probable that the next years will see more and more frequent cases of military interventions led by non-western powers”, although different in their “intensity, modalities and actors”.⁵ All these trends, according to the authors, are happening in a more general context of social transformation defined by the mutation of modes of production of global capitalism, the uncertain future of democracy, and the very certain prospect of climate change.⁶ It is under these dark clouds that strategy and security must be thought of in the contemporary world.

But to do so, we need the right tools. For political scientists, tools are definitions, concepts, and theories, to which the first part of the book is dedicated. The first chapter – unfortunately opening with an apocryphal quotation of Trotsky – lays bare the key definitions for the book. The second chapter pursues this task with the presentation of the theoretical schools of international relations related to security. Although realism tends to claim the lion’s share in this chapter, the discussion of idealism is welcomed, as its contribution to IR is frequently dismissed as naïve or presented through the prism of the realists’ critics. The following chapter, dedicated to the key concepts of security, discusses concepts such as the security dilemma, deterrence, or coercion as well as securitization. Classic in its references and objects, it is good reading for students of war and security in search for definitional clarity, and who seek to catch up with the literature’s most recent debates.

The book’s second part is dedicated to the “character of war”. Starting with a new chapter on the causes of war, they take very literally Waltz’s triad on (hu)man, state, and the international system. Drawing from the booming field of evolutionary psychology – and not evolutionary biology, as they write – they cautiously note that these approaches are “useful to decrypt our specie’s profound predisposition to conflict and cooperation” although they “have obviously nothing to say about the political and social context” which permits their expressions. They also show how recent work in political psychology and behavioural economics have shed crucial light on the limits of human rationality.⁷ Here Schmitt and David make a welcome critique about the lack of interest

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–29.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–41.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 172–176.

from social scientists for psychology. However, they perhaps are too hasty in their embrace of these findings. For example, when they affirm that “meeting someone for the first time while holding a fresh drink generally lead to finding this person cold and distant” proving “a clear relationship between tactile feeling and emotional response”,⁸ they forgot that these particular results have been proven non-replicable since.⁹

The rest of the chapter presents the classic interpretation of the domestic causes of war (or peace), such as the weight of the political regimes, and systemic theories of polarity. On the latter, the authors develop an important reading of the main systemic theories on the causes of war (power transition, neorealism, the bargaining model of war, and defensive realism) and show how each lack explanatory power when confronted with the nuclear question, hence remaining fundamentally *pre-nuclear*.¹⁰ To overcome these issues, the authors, deeply influenced by Raymond Aron,¹¹ recommend to “combine the [three] level of analysis”, hierarchizing them depending on the conflict and the moment, by focusing on two logics, deterrence and the spiral of conflict, as the key explanatory factors of war.¹²

Another great debate is the “obsolescence of war” thesis. In a well-written chapter, the authors draw the portrait of an animated and uncertain debate, between the optimists (Pinker, Mueller), the cautious, (Kagan, Cohen) and the pessimists (Braumoeller, Mann). Although they give a precise idea of the strength and weaknesses of the different perspectives, we can regret that they do not make a final decision on the issue. Some issues can however be certain: civil wars are evolving rapidly, and so is the modern battlefield. For Western states, now confronted with the necessity of fighting war “by substitution” and to operate in a “multidomain” battlefield, many challenges have arisen: how to adapt the political objective, as well as the armies to the evolving means of war?¹³ Using American strategy as their example, the authors show how the US armies are now refocusing from counterinsurgency to high intensity fighting against state adversaries creating the risk that they “once again” come to fight a war they have sworn to avoid.¹⁴ The chapter includes, as well as a discussion

8 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

9 Chabris *et al.*, “No Evidence”, 2019.

10 David & Schmitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 184–186.

11 This does not come as a surprise, as Olivier Schmitt recently edited a reader on Raymond Aron and International relations (2018). See also Jean-Yves Haine’s review article of Schmitt’s reader in ERIS Volume 6 Issue 1 <https://doi.org/10.3224/eris.v6i1.03>.

12 David & Schmitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 184–186.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 213–224.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

on cyber and intelligence capabilities, a discussion on the issue of innovation, insisting on the rejection of technological determinism, preferring instead to the importance of the “theories of victory” and the larger institutional context in the inclusion of technological innovation into military practices.¹⁵

Although quite different, the third and fourth part of the book tackle a similar problem: the governance and avoidance of war and violence. They first tackle the theory and practice of alliance. Writing that NATO “still represents the best institutional and multilateral guarantee of formulation and implementation of common and cooperative security in Europe”,¹⁶ the authors counter the “braindead” discourse. They add that if alliances can be considered an ancient form of security regulation, the rise of “global governance” gave a new sense to security regulations on the international stage, even though the return of great power competition is threatening the mechanisms of collective security, multilateralism and the normative economy on which this governance regime is built. After a chapter devoted to the importance of (conventional) arms control, they come to discuss the impact of nuclear weapons on the international system. That only sixteen pages out of more than 400 are devoted to such a crucial issue comes as a bit of a disappointment. In a field dominated by a sense of confidence and prone to self-censorship,¹⁷ rare are the authors accounting for the full variety of the field’s perspective; however, Schmitt and David do. Starting with the debates of the nuclear revolution and its critics, they lay out the various schools of thought regarding deterrence, including those coming from the frequently overlooked field of gender studies. More importantly, they cast a very lucid look at the state of the nuclear world, noting that the “third nuclear age” – whose definition could have been discussed in further details, since it is difficult to understand how the defining factors differ from the first two – is certainly not safer. For example, recent war games played by US Marines revealed that, in case of war between great powers, the nuclear threshold will quickly be crossed.¹⁸ Some critiques can however be made, for example when they write that “nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945”.¹⁹ They certainly have not been detonated in warfare, but they most certainly have been used “in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone (...) whether or not the trigger is pulled”.²⁰ Plus,

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 250–252.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 274.

17 Pelopidas, “Nuclear Weapons Scholarship”, 2016.

18 David & Schmitt, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

20 Ellsberg, *The doomsday machine*, 2017, pp. 13, 309–334; Atkinson, “Using Nuclear Weapons”, 2010.

more than 2000 nuclear weapons have been used in nuclear tests since 1945, producing long-lasting political and health effects.²¹

The last section is devoted to peace. Few variations from the previous editions are to be found in the first two chapters. The authors notably engage in a nuanced discussion of the peacekeeper's role, noting their relative powerlessness, and formulating a set of recommendation to "rethink" peacekeeping.²² The very last chapter tackles the difficult question of post-conflict reconstruction and transitional justice. Absent from the previous editions, issues of reconstruction and transitional justice go beyond a "violence-centric" perspective by highlighting the role of civil society and peaceful action. This interest for the "strategic utility" of peaceful action,²³ already discussed earlier in the book, is one of the merits of this handbook.

It closes on the authors' "keys" to understand strategy and security, emphasizing the importance of "the contingencies of fear" in international relations. Encouraging the reader not to engage in prediction, but rather to "imagine potential futures to develop strategies permitting to result in a desirable future",²⁴ it also underlines the dangerous uncertainty of our futures, caught between arms races, terrorism, great power relations, and the ever-present threat of nuclear weapons. This intention, to be more than just a handbook and to give insights into current developments in world politics, is one of the book's greatest strengths. The authors' opinions on the state of the world may be open for debate, they are solidly backed, and the authors seem to have weighed their words with care.

For sure, it is not without some faults. More generally, one can regret that the three trends exposed by the authors in the introduction (the evolution of capitalism, democratic recoil and looming ecological disaster) are almost absent in the rest of the book. References to climate change, for example, are quite rare, and one could have expected more on these questions. Here, it reproduces a common shortcoming of IR literature.²⁵ Similarly, the issue of democratic recoil is treated with a certain bias. Blaming it on populism and "nativism", it states that democratic regimes are facing "a systematic distrust and hyper-democratic urges" leading to social anomy. While gratuitous to engage here in a debate about the causes of democratic decline, the limited blame put on leaders and elites is debatable. For example, the rise of "authoritarian

21 Higuchi, *Political fallout*, 2020; Masco, "Terraforming Planet Earth", 2016.

22 David & Schmitt, *op. cit.*, p. 398.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 283–284.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 418.

25 Katzenstein, "Protean power", 2020, p. 15.

capitalism”, or the anti-democratic tendencies of neo-liberalism certainly have to do with democratic decline. If we take, for example, Oreskes and Conway’s *Merchants of doubts*, we see how the “systematic doubt” which is said to characterizes today’s populism, is also born from important companies concerned with ensuring the continuity of the modes of production of global capitalism – especially, ensuring the perpetuation of the reliance on carbon energy – at the expense of both democratic practices and climate.²⁶ Similarly, Bruno Latour’s discussion of the “obscurantist elites” shows that climate change, as well as the evolution of global capitalism, are not foreign to this democratic recoil.²⁷

Inevitably, considering the scope of the book’s topic, one will always lament on the absence of a certain topic. In this case, three absences can be remarked. The first one is the relatively small number of pages dedicated to nuclear security issues. Considering the rarity of publications by French scholars, deeper attention to these questions would have been a welcomed addition. Missing as well are the mention of genocide and mass violence studies. These are, in France, a topic mostly left to historians. The study of those practices of violence remains a pressing issue for war and security studies and is worthy of attention. Ultimately, the book embraces a global approach to security and war but remains centred on western approaches. Beyond the question of human security, non-western thinkers are rarely presented, in line with the “strategic ethnocentrism” once described by Ken Booth.²⁸ It is probably the destiny of a handbook to be criticized for what is missing, and the role of the reader to dress his “wish-list” of questions he now wants to know more about. A handbook leaving its audience without further curiosity would probably have failed in his task. For this, *La guerre et la paix* certainly is goldmine for those in search for answers, and new questions.

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26 Oreskes et al., *Merchants of doubt*, 2011.

27 Latour, *Où atterrir?* 2017.

28 Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, 1979.

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