Review Essay

Governing Uncertainty in Turbulent Times

Boardman, Robert

Tellis, Ashley J., Andrew Marble & Travis Tanner (eds.)

Laruelle, Marlene (ed.)

Creed, Pamela, 2013

And so he [the student of world politics] embarks on a search for certainty, only to find that it lies in such phrases as ‘apparently’, ‘presumably’, and ‘it would seem as if’.

James N. Rosenau (1960:21)

Introduction

‘Apparently’, to use James Rosenau’s suggestion in the epigraph, uncertainty has always been a defining feature of world affairs. So why then are policy-makers,
International Relations (IR) scholars, and we – the news-thirsty publics – so surprised when the world turns out to be unpredictable? After all, depending on how far back one is willing to look, the discipline (at least in its ‘mainstream Anglo-Saxon’ form) has gone a long way since the first department of international politics opened its doors at Aberystwyth or since Thucydides scripted his account of the Peloponnesian wars. In either case, the veritable age of IR should have ‘presumably’ provided it with enough knowledge and tools to expect – if not necessarily be prepared for – the unexpected. Yet, as Rosenau (1980) reminds us, IR is anything but prepared for uncertainty (and has been so for a while), owing to its preoccupation with generalisation, regularities, and predictability. In such a framework, uncertainty takes the place of the so-called ‘outlier’ in IR. According to Rosenau, ‘it would seem as if’ the IR mainstream has lost its ‘playfulness’. Thus, instead of allowing ‘one’s mind to run freely, to be playful, to toy around with what might seem absurd, to posit seemingly unrealistic circumstances and speculate what would follow if they ever were to come to pass’, the IR mainstream has sidelined its mischievous nature in favour of stiff parsimonious models simplifying the contingent nature of most that passes in world affairs. For Rosenau therefore it is no wonder that IR has consistently failed to ‘imagine the unimaginable’ (Rosenau 1980:19–31).

The suggestion therefore is that the disciplinary inquiry has purposefully excluded ambiguity from its investigations in its intellectual strife for explanation, predictability, and control. The expulsion of uncertainty from the IR vocabulary has been backstopped by the preoccupation with the ‘scientific’ credentials of the discipline (especially, during the second half of the twentieth century) (Smith 2002). In this way, the IR mainstream has tended to proliferate causal explanations profoundly marked by the positivist conviction that international life is a closed system external to our understanding of it, which can be elicited through discrete assessments of dependent and independent variables. Such international life can thus be tested and evaluated against any neutral or objective procedures of quantification, whereby ‘value-free’ knowledge can be accumulated in a gradual manner and following linear trajectories. What IR intends to produce in this way is a nearly mechanistic model of global politics that is perceived to be as rigorous and robust as the one of the natural sciences. In so doing, the IR mainstream has strived for a ‘modern’ social science par excellence, mimicking the perceived objectivity of research methods employed by the natural sciences. Interestingly, while the ‘hard’ sciences have become increasingly ‘soft’ as a result of their acceptance of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle in the second half of the twentieth century, at the very same time IR has ‘hardened’ as a result of its suppression of ambiguity,