

The great global divide

Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien. *Left and Right in Global Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Review by Gerard W. Boychuk

In this fresh and interesting book, Alain Noël and Jean-Philippe Thérien “seek to offer a better and more relevant interpretation of globalization, which connects the domestic and international politics of economic development and social justice.” In so doing, they pose the crisp and engaging hypothesis that “global politics is first and foremost a debate between the left and right.” This argument is premised on three related claims: the world is constructed primarily through debates, politics is global and a stark separation between international and domestic politics “is no longer tenable” and, in these global debates, “the left-right dichotomy occupies a special place, as the most enduring, universal, and encompassing of all political cleavages.” The book makes an important contribution in advancing these arguments, while at the same time succeeding in sparking debate, which the authors openly invite.

Noël and Thérien are cautious to not overstate the predominance of the left-right divide, offering numerous caveats; for example, the left-right divide cannot “fully account for all aspects of global debates,” and the “left-right metaphor does not *explain* everything.” These caveats, however, raise a critical question — what does it mean to explain global politics? Certainly, specific positions in various debates can be *characterized* along a left-right continuum. Doing so offers conceptual

coherence across these debates and may be judged to be valuable in terms of its political impacts: “Most importantly, in our age of global politics, this universal metaphor helps to link people across time and space, and over a broad range of issues. In other words, the left-right opposition makes global politics intelligible.” However, whether these characterizations *explain* various political phenomena or global politics more broadly depends on what it is we want to know and what we fail to understand without them. Noël and Thérien themselves provide a reasonable benchmark when they note that there are many international developments that other approaches explain poorly. It is here that readers might have wished that the authors had developed the central argument more powerfully.

For example, the authors examine emerging global issues such as the politics of identity, the war on terrorism and the global environmental debate through the lens of the left-right divide. While they compellingly argue that competing positions in debates over these issues can be characterized along a left-right continuum, the remaining challenge is to more fully outline the value of doing so. What incisive insights result? What does one fail to understand if one simply follows more conventional approaches to global politics in thinking about these three issues? Does viewing global politics through a left-right lens lead to analysis

in new and interesting directions that would otherwise not occur? Noël and Thérien argue that “without this [left-right] distinction, it would in fact be very difficult to comprehend these contemporary conflicts.” They might have developed more clearly what it is specifically about the rise of identity politics, the war on terrorism or global environmental debates that is difficult to understand without this analysis of the phenomenon as conflicts between the left and right. In so doing, the authors might have sharpened the distinction between the left-right divide as on the one hand a social fact (for example, the fact that in a worldwide survey the respondents’ self-identification on a left-right scale is the most powerful predictor of other attitudes they hold), which they compellingly establish, and the left-right divide as on the other a useful conceptual construction providing explanatory power and insight into global politics. It might be one without being the other, and they could have gone further in establishing the second.

If, as Noël and Thérien suspect, some readers will “see our book as a political essay rather than a work of social science,” it likely would not be because, as the authors imply, the work is value-laden, as is all social science. Rather, it may be so because the book is less systematic than it might be in demonstrating how the empirical evidence it offers confirms its theoretical

approach while disconfirming others' — presumably their intention in offering a "better" interpretation of globalization and global politics than other approaches. For example, one of the competing interpretations the authors challenge is that "the left-right cleavage [is] a fading division, gradually superseded by other oppositions, more relevant for our times." The evidence they present in regard to survey respondents' self-identification on a left-right scale worldwide at a single point in time (2001) does not directly address the issue of change over time, even if these data are suggestive of the salience of the left-right cleavage. Moreover, the ability of survey respondents to self-identify using these classifications (or the power of this self-identification in predicting other values held by respondents) does not empirically challenge the argument that global politics is more likely to be forcefully shaped by cleavages other than those along the left-right axis or, alternatively, by interests rather than ideas, although this may be a prerequisite of such a challenge.

The authors also examine elite discourses on globalization, characterizing these expert reactions to globalization along the left-right divide. Perhaps the chapter slides too easily into characterizing the opposition in elite debates between these camps as the "political dynamic" underpinning global debates. Rehearsing these two visions of globalization in elite discourse with distinct centres of gravity (which Noël and Thérien characterize as right and left) does not empirically establish that they "dominate and structure the public sphere." (It is interesting to note that this examination of elite discourses is described in the liner notes as an analysis of "social discourses," which "demonstrates how

this debate shapes...collective views of public affairs.")

One of the most promising goals of the book, in reconsidering the conceptual distinction between domestic political debates and global political debates, is to develop more fully the linkages between them. Noël and Thérien argue that "debates about the state of the world are conducted concurrently within, across, and above national borders, in processes that remain distinct but that are also interconnected and coherent."

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The interconnections between these processes might be sketched out more systematically and developed more fully. In this regard the book does not move much beyond generalizations, such as the claim that the "world public sphere...provides every debate with a global connection" and "creates a shared background and vocabulary, which helps to bridge local, national, continental, and global deliberations."

Among its many strengths, the book neatly presents a wealth of background material, which will be helpful

for those unfamiliar with the development of the left-right divide or the development of the international system. Four of the book's eight chapters document the historical development of the left-right divide, including the rise of the modern state system, the advent of the "age of universality," the "triumph of market democracy" and, finally, the "twenty-first-century rapprochement" between left and right in which the left-right dichotomy "continued to define the most enduring and fundamental divide of global politics." The earlier of these chapters (and sections in other chapters on the antecedents and genealogy of the left-right divide) are interesting, but less crucial to the central argument regarding the continued relevance of this divide in shaping global politics.

Just as Noël and Thérien expect that their arguments are more likely to challenge views on the right of the political spectrum, their interpretation will also pose a greater challenge to conventional approaches in some fields in the study of global politics. In others, such as global social governance, the conventional interpretation already sees global politics as an ideological war of positions between those on the left and those on the right. Even in these areas, the authors are almost undoubtedly right in predicting that "not all readers will agree with us." There is also, however, no doubt that they have clearly established that the argument that "global politics is shaped and constructed through enduring and consistent ideological debates" is an argument "worth debating." This book does an excellent job in marking the initial terrain of such a debate.

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