Book Review

Bear F. Braumoeller
The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

The pedigree of the modern social sciences is more than a century old with origins in the work of people such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber and with ancestors going back at least to Hobbes, and ultimately to Aristotle. Though no one fashion dominates the current array of approaches in academic disciplines such as anthropology, economics, political science, sociology and any number of related areas of scholarship (e.g., geography and history) and sub-disciplines (e.g., public administration, postcolonial studies), important segments of the current enterprise have sought to mimic the natural sciences, provide operational definitions, identify dependent and independent variables, test null hypotheses, deploy ever more sophisticated statistical techniques, generate explanatory theories and, in the process, appropriate some of the status and research funds previously won by their kin in astronomy, biology, chemistry and physics. The venture hasn't always worked out well.

One of the several problems with running human studies as a scientific project is the nature of the human beast. Inanimate objects respond to physical forces, people react to perceived differences. Billiard balls, for example, are normally altered in their position by the exchange of kinetic energy. A billiards player strikes one ball with another and, if sufficient information is gathered about the mass of the balls, the velocity and angle of impact, the condition of the felt table top and other pertinent physical variables, then it's possible to predict with some precision where the impacted ball will come to rest. People are different.

We are information-processing food tubes which do react to physical impacts when, for instance, we are punched in the nose; but, we also respond to more complex stimuli. Sometimes, we even respond to the absence of stimuli, as when we are *not* invited to a party or when someone *doesn't* send us a birthday greeting. Moreover, the complicated processes of personality, perception and memory make it all but impossible to anticipate what any particular human being will do in any specific circumstance on any given day.

The scientific approach to human studies, of course, is assisted if researchers can point to something to count. Economists have an advantage here, for it is possible to identify uncontested objects to quantify—tons of codfish or pig iron, numbers of people employed in specific industries and import-export ratios expressed in amounts of money. Psychology, especially insofar as it has been associated with the science of medicine, also obtains a certain scientific caché. Moreover, both psychologists and "behavioral economists" have managed to concoct actual laboratory-like experiments in which subjects can be induced to act badly or, in the alternative, to display empathy. Stanley Milgram (1974) was especially good at the former. Nonetheless, most of our efforts to generate instruments that reliably predict human behaviour fall short of the confidence which laboratory technicians have when they mix chemical "A" with chemical "B". Absent divine intervention, performing the same experiment under the same conditions yields the same results time after time. People are more complicated.

Accordingly, some social sciences have lagged behind in the push for scientific standing. Anthropology, except for the subdiscipline of physical anthropology which encourages the measurement of skulls, the assessment of bipedalism and so on, is largely engaged in the job of description and classification. Like geology, paleontology and early stages of biology, it is rather difficult to set up an experiment in evolutionary processes that have long since been completed (though genetics is helping out dramatically in some fields where steps can be taken backward toward, for example, the Mitochondrial Eve. Nonetheless, taxonomy remains therefore a principal challenge. Coming to an agreement about whether a particular fossil belongs to one or another species of *Homo* can preoccupy serious investigators for decades.

> Only when political science can diagnose tyranny and injustice with the same level of confidence that medicine can diagnose and understand cancer as a pathology will it merit the name of science. – Leo Strauss

Political scientists represent an especially interesting case. From the time the term was coined, the discipline was an untidy mixture of political philosophy, constitutional law, public policy and what might be called "statecraft." It has been involved with the study of international relations, national governance, group and individual behaviour. Alliances have been formed with certain sorts of psychology and sociology, and there is even a branch of anthropology which deals with the origin and organized decision making and the slow development of the state.

As a distinctly modern discipline, political science can be said to have been born at the beginning of the twentieth century with the founding of the American Political Science Association in 1903, but it was not until mid-century that its scientific standing became an all-consuming controversy. Those who are old enough to remember the internal debates will recall the sharp disputes between "traditional" political scientists (who were described unflatteringly as fuzzy-headed metaphysicians and moralists whose speculations were disconnected from anything approaching the real world) and genuinely scientific researchers (who were dismissed in equally condescending terms as entrepreneurial data grubbers whose studies failed to bring the promised empirical results or were trivial penetrations into the intuitively obvious).

The scientific turn, however, was taken and a revolution in the discipline was said to have been successful by the 1960s. It was manifested in two ways. On the one hand, political scientists found something specific to count: instances of global conflict, large-scale

public opinion and voting statistics and individual attitudes and political actions discerned through personal interviews. Political scientists generally found that people are more predictable in large numbers. So, they did some of their best work with aggregate data. They have devised survey research techniques to discern what the "average" person thought about this or that and they were sometimes able to connect those beliefs to observable behaviour. Thus, they learned that people with authoritarian attitudes generally vote for "right-wing" political candidates. Like sociologists, they came to know that poverty is correlated with crime and that successful completion of postsecondary education is tied to higher socio-economic status and they took these findings as the basis for public policy analysis. They wove demographic, financial, consumer and medical data into lovely webs that purport to describe relationships among people and to specify and even quantify public demands and institutional responses as interest groups

and political parties began to demand government action with regard to demonstrable social needs.

In attempting to link information about the past to actions in the present and predictions about the future, social scientists have further shown that racists and misogynists are more likely to discriminate against ethnic groups and women than are people who do not hold such bigoted opinions. When especially ambitious, political scientists applied their skills to relations among nations. Not just domestic governance but cooperation, competition and conflict among sovereign countries became rich sources of data and analysis. It became known that states which share common languages and religions, trade extensively with each other, have families with members on both sides of common borders and enjoy relatively similar standards of living are somewhat less likely to go to war with each other. Who knew?

> "I shall not sit with statisticians
> Nor commit a social science"
>
> - W. H. Auden

I do not mean to disparage such results. They can be useful in formulating marketing plans for commercial products, coming up with thoughtful public policy recommendations, resolving conflicts among citizens through well-planned interventions and negotiating immigration policies and cross-border banking agreements. At the same time, much social science research has been properly criticized for its superficiality and its penchant for tautology. It has been confirmed that most poor people do not buy luxury goods, occasionally resent those who do and express this resentment by occasionally supporting left-wing political parties that recommend graduated income taxes and relief for the poor. Who'd have imagined?

Such skepticism is regularly displayed by anti-intellectual politicians and comedians, but it is present among some people trained in the social sciences. Intramural disputes over methodology and theory are common in political science, with instances of mutual disparagement providing a great deal of interest and sometimes amusement as academics quarrel wittily over which approach to their subject matter is more empirically valid and normatively correct. As a result, it is fair to say that political and other social sciences are fragmented and in some disorder with, for instance, some practitioners of the empirical arts being dedicated to rigorous scientific investigations and others insisting that the social sciences should be dedicated to promoting social reform in their communities.

Postsecondary Women's Studies and Labour Studies programs normally consider a contribution to the liberation of women and the emancipation of labour to be essential to their academic mandate. Meanwhile, inheritors of the traditions of objective research and scientific disinterest disdain value-laden, subjective and qualitative research insisting upon dealing exclusively with the "facts."
Currently, many young, idealistic scholars have turned away from logical positivism, scientism and almost any form of formal empiricism in order to opt for tools such as the "thick description" popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). The preference of many researchers with a passion for social justice has been to abandon explanatory devices based on the so-called "scientific method" so dear to the hearts of physical and biological scientists and

choose to strive instead for refried ethnomethological updates, phenomenological investigations, hermeneutic interpretations, emic understandings and what such pioneering German scholars as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) called *Verstehen*. The academic consequences have been erratic and the practical results have been uncertain. Very often the practitioners of subjective and qualitative research have found themselves in academic ghettoes, clinging to the margins of the academy in areas such as Women's, Aboriginal or Subaltern studies, where they are tolerated— perhaps mainly as exhibits of contrariness and evidence of the persistence of academic freedom. Postmodern theories of one sort or another retain popularity among the usual suspects, but rarely win lucrative research grants.

> "This is not a time to commit sociology …" – Stephen Harper

For what remains mainstream political science, however, the scientific method remains ideal (so to speak) and the preferred metaphor-cum-model is the "political system." For well over half a century, the language of "systems analysis" has been deployed among social scientists and such corporate customers as want to glimpse "the big picture." If anything, the logic and rhetoric of systems thinking has gained greater currency, thanks in part to the rise of ecological thinking and the popularity of environmental studies and the spill-over effect holistic theories have had in social studies.

One of the starting points for the discussion of systems thinking in political science was the publication of David Easton's influential tome, *The Political System* (1953). A transplanted Canadian who was influenced by a critical mass of impressive scholars at the University of Chicago and who soon challenged them in an unprecedented challenge to reform the profession, Easton presented a sustained critique of traditional political science and strongly advocated a rigorously scientific approach to practical politics that would depend on the development of "a conceptual framework for the whole field"

> (1953: 64-65). His contribution included *the* popularization and the misapplication of words such as "input," "output" and "feedback" to matters of politics, governance and

> public policy. These terms have been cheerfully bandied about for decades, with almost no one appreciating how inapt they are. There was, of course, more to it than that.

As John Gunnell (2013, p. 204) explains in his excellent summary of Easton's *oeuvre*, the essential argument was "that it was necessary to move consciously and explicitly to produce systemic empirical theory that would recapture the attempt of 'great theories' of the past to 'embrace' the whole of political life' [and to recognize that] although it was possible, and necessary, to distinguish among factual, evaluative, theoretical, and applied propositions, these were not divisible in practice." In other words, Easton attempted to rival Plato in an up-to-date rendition of *The Republic*. He was nothing if not ambitious.

> Easton's *Political System* was in effect the autobiography of his generation of political scientists, and the encounter with his work became the autobiography of the next generation. – Heinz Eulau

For Easton and others, political science was to be an *applied* science. It was to be grounded in the kind of systems theory that would describe, analyze, explain and predict the "authoritative allocation of values" in a way that would include explicit consideration of situational conditions, practical demands and moral beliefs. Systems thinking was therefore to be used to account for everything from popular demands for social change to executive, legislative and judicial efforts to contain it. Systems theory, behavioural research and the remnants of logical positivism would combine not only to produce a comprehensive remaking of political science, but would also raise important theoretical questions for all the social sciences, some of which had the unmistakable aroma of philosophy. Making advances over traditional, prescientific scholars and regarding ideological youngsters as a bearable annoyance, the science of political systems has flourished for over half a century.

Of particular importance in the volume under review is a problem that has been called many things, but which can adequately be called the agency-structure dilemma. It boils down to this question: are decisions (and especially decisions having to do with innovation) a matter of will or circumstance (Glor, 2002)? Do people (especially "great men") alter reality or are they created by their conditions and situations? The dilemma is critical, for in the absence of its resolution, it is difficult for social scientists to know precisely what they are doing. Should they focus on rational decision-making models and the exploration of individual wills, or should they concern themselves with aggregate patterns of behaviour and structural conditions.

> The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else.
>
> – John Maynard Keynes

Put simply and perhaps simplistically, they grapple with questions such as these. If Beethoven had perished *in utero*, would we still have had great romantic symphonies? If Churchill had been killed in the Boer War, would Britain still have won its greatest battle? If, as a child, Hitler had been stomped to death by a run-away horse in downtown Vienna, would there even have been a Nazi Germany to participate in the Battle of Britain in the first place? If whoever shot President Kennedy had missed, would the Vietnam conflict have escalated as much or at all? And, of course, absent David Easton, would political scientists have defined politics as the "authoritative allocation of values" or happened upon a comparable theory of political systems?

> It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but their social being that determines their consciousness. – Karl Marx

The quickest and safest answer to such historical hypotheticals is that they are pretty much meaningless and almost certainly inconsequential. They are curious examples of a violation of Russell's Rule of Logical Types. Statements about surrounding circumstances are of a different class than statements about individual actions. One deals with context and the other deals with agency. They may be connected in a loose application of the marginally Marxist concept of *praxis*, but they are, as Gregory Bateson (1972: 183-198) liked to point out, category mistakes. Very much like schizophrenia, religion and jokes, they seek inappropriate answers to a different kind of question. Pushed to certain limits, they confuse and conflate free will and determinism,

idealism and. materialism and any number of other sophomoric dichotomies into a tangle of deceptions and delusions. They quickly become hopelessly muddled.

There have been, of course, many thoughtful discussions of such matters. As Wendt (1987, 339) puts it, "the agent-structure problem is really two interrelated problems, one ontological and the other epistemological." The first concerns the issue of which is more fundamental. Is the individual actor or the structural context "ontologically primitive"? The second addresses the methodological question of how best to gain knowledge once either the individual or the structure has been deemed primary. Wendt himself invents a method that gives equal status to both agents and structures in what he assures us is not just "a mindless synthesis of the 'best of both worlds.'" Whether he fully succeeds is not at issue here; it is enough to point out that Braumoeller is certainly not the first to tackle the problem of the agent-structure dilemma in the systems approach to international relations and that very thoughtful people have made significant contributions to the conversation.

Bear F. Braumoeller does make a hearty effort to sort it all out. According to Michael Cairo of Transylvania University (2013), Braumoeller succeeds brilliantly. Cairo writes:

> Bear F. Braumoeller *The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective* accomplishes what no other
>
> scholarly work has effectively done by bridging the agent-structure gap and arguing for a truly systemic theory of international relations.

The evidence for such as extravagant claim is not entirely insubstantial, though a host of international systems experts like Immanuel Wallerstein might be justifiably taken aback to see themselves left so pitiably behind and to learn that Cairo thinks that Braumoeller's is the "seminal" work and the first to come up with a "single, unified, holistic theory" which integrates agent-level and structure-level approaches thereby bridging the divide between qualitative and quantitative methods. Quite a claim.

Such enthusiasm aside, Braumoeller has produced a formidable work. He deals with three specific sets of events: the post-Napoleonic period from 1815 to 1834, the approach to World War II and the decline of American isolationism and the closing years of the Cold War from 1985 to 1990.

> During the last half of the twentieth century, the concept of system was arguably the most important concept in the theoretical repertoire of American political science. – John G. Gunnell

I admit that I am a little suspicious from the outset. The choices of examples display a concern with transformations rather than periods of stability, as though the best indicators of system maintenance were instances of system disruption. These are, in effect, case studies of change which seem a trifle counter-intuitive when the essence of systemic analysis would seem to be a matter of demonstrating adjustments rather than reconstruction.

That aside, Braumoeller's expressed purpose is to serve as a unifying force, bringing the disparate strands and enduring squabbles in systems analysis into a coherent whole. He writes that students of international systems are divided between those who believe "that Great Powers are free to act, unhindered by external constraints" and those who think that "even the actions of Great Powers are dictated largely by circumstance." To resolve the dilemma, he advances his own theory of international relations.

Braumoeller seems to echo Easton in thinking that demands upon the system arise from the general public, the so-called "input" sector composed of citizens who have a certain level of knowledge and understanding and who make their wishes about foreign policy known. In this view, the task of the state is to aggregate and prioritize those interests making them into manageable policy recommendations that are passed along to political leaders who, depending on their resources and the obstacles they face, attempt to fulfill the wishes of the people. Finally, when the leaders take their wishes to the international community (bilateral, regional or global), they do what they can to promote their country's interests within the constraints established by other powers.

There are a number of problems with this scenario. The first is that public demands for specific foreign policy outcomes rarely arise from ordinary citizens, but from powerful and well-established domestic interests. The overthrow of Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 probably had little to do with the wishes of a farmer in Nebraska or a factory worker in Pittsburgh than with the interests of private petroleum companies and the ouster of Guatemala's democratically elected Jacob Arbenz in 1954 surely had more to do with the United Fruit Company and Coca-Cola than with a soda jerk in Los Angeles or a real estate agent in New Jersey. To be fair, Braumoeller confines his enthusiasm to "those citizens capable, by virtue of the state's institutional structure, of exerting selection pressure on the leadership, whether that state is democratic or autocratic." Nonetheless, some pertinent assessment of existing asymmetries of citizen power is required. Which citizens have such influence? And does it make sense to speak of them as individual political actors when the more likely repository of power are in major institutions, both private (major national and multinational enterprises) and public (senior bureaucrats in at least nominal charge of determining public policy or, at least, presenting their putative political masters with a range of more-or-less plausible policy choices.

> Although the systems concept has significantly receded in the discourse of American political science, it has left a fundamental imprint on the theory and practice of the field. – John G. Gunnell

The myth of American pluralism goes far beyond the recognition that what C. Wright Mills described as *The Power Elite* (1956) has long since signaled *The Decline of American Pluralism* (Kariel, 1961). The history of international conflict and what Gore Vidal called the state of "permanent war" makes clear that American national interests are defined by corporate and state interests and only subsequently sold to the electorate in either high-minded tones of spreading freedom and democracy or in survivalist rhetoric in which the people are urged to fret about the "communist menace" or the existential threat of *Jihadism* and national security.

As for foreign policy decisions themselves, the capacity of even the most powerful nation, the "indispensable" United States to anticipate major international events and trends is so limited that even its most vigorous and earnest agencies, its intelligence services, have serially botched the job. Who saw the collapse of the Soviet Union coming? Who had made planned adjustments to weather the storms of the Arab Spring? Who even noticed that the global economy had shifted mightily toward the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) until Beijing started having automobile-induced pollution problems and Walmart outsourced production and the service economy routed customer complaints to help desks in Mumbai? So, if the greatest and certainly most expensive, intrusive and technologically enhanced collection of spies, covert operatives and electronic surveillance devices can't figure out what's going on in Syria, much less Pakistan, how are ill-informed secretaries and sales representatives in Poughkeepsie or Peoria expected to handle the burden?

Braumoeller also seems to go awry when he awards a greater role to ideology than to political and economic power. While it is true that ideology plays a tremendous role in

whipping up popular support for military adventures by labelling various countries as hostile to freedom and democracy (Cuba, the so-called "axis of evil" and, today, anyone who supports terrorism), the fact remains that alliances (shifting and tentative as they may be) seem to be built with a calculated indifference to political beliefs and behaviour. If the beginning of the Cold War is indicative of anything, then surely it must be that allies are interchangeable and coalitions rest on rather short-term views of military security and economic advantage. So, the United States maintains (so far) close relationships with theocratic Saudi Arabia and with China, which does not find political freedoms much more congenial than in the pre-Nixon years when it was still considered the prime example of the racist "Yellow Peril," but is treated much more kindly and respectfully since having bought up a significant portion of America's national debt.

The Great Powers and the International System, it must be acknowledged presents impressive empirical models. For instance, Braumoeller comes up with a numerical value for "the demand for activity on the part of the leadership [by multiplying] the weights by the distance between ideal points and the current status of the structure of the system and sum across dimensions." To pull this off, he provides a formula that would do a particle physicist proud. Rather than copy the calculations and frighten the mathematically challenged, however, I shall simply refer the reader to pages 39 to 46 of the text and carry on to highlight the model's features in standard prose. Braumoeller hypothesizes that:

- International structure prompts state security activity in proportion to the product of salience and dissatisfaction with the status quo;
- State security activity alters international structure in proportion to the product of state security activity, state latent capabilities, salience, and dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Elsewhere, he supplies a model of the international system in which the structure of the international system has an impact on the security policies of states *and* those policies simultaneously shape the structure of the system …" In the end, he demonstrates that "in the context of such a model, the balance of power cannot be given pride of place: the balance of ideology both shapes and is shaped by the security policies of the Great Powers." Elsewhere, such insights might be called dialectics.

If I seem a trifle churlish, I might be influenced by a comment made by my former teacher, Neal Wood. Presented with evidence from Karl Deutsch's masterful work, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (1953), which sought to demonstrate that cross-border mail delivery was an indicator of peaceful bilateral relations, he responded that it might be the case … until a specific document arrived——a declaration of war.

I also do not want to make too much of the ease with which dazzling displays of statistical prowess can overpower the uninitiated. Much can also be made of Braumoeller's buttressing of empirical methods with qualitative research. Delving into the perceptions, motives and tactics of Great Power leaders (notably Mikhail Gorbachev and George H. W. Bush toward the conclusion of his third case study), Braumoeller puts human flesh on the bones of his disembodied model. So, although it takes a minimum of postgraduate, if not doctoral level statistical skills to appreciate and to criticize the analysis, even modestly intelligent amateurs will find something useful to take away from the experience of reading Braumoeller's masterwork.

Voted the very best book of 2014 by the International Studies Association, Braumoeller is especially praised for his creation of the "nested politics" model that presents international relations as an organic whole in which international systems contain nations which contain governments which contain organizations and individuals that articulate specific interests and so on. He is praised for having "novel ideas, impressive erudition, multiplicity of methodologies and sophisticated empirical analysis." Still, he has his critics.

> My goal was to try to control for the opportunity of states to fight one another so that we could get a clear picture of their willingness to fight and see if this willingness has increased or decreased. – Bear Braumoeller

Evolutionary psychologist Stephen Pinker (2011), for example, takes issue with him on the matter of frequency and intensity of international conflict. Pinker has the view that international conflict is on the decline. He points to the "long peace" that has continued with no major wars involving more than one Great Power. Chatting with the folks at *Popular* (Atherton, 2013), Braumoeller said that he has "found that the willingness of states to fight one another really doesn't change very much at all … We see warlike periods but there is no clear trend in one direction or another." Moreover, talking to the people at *National Geographic* (Kordunsky, 2013), Braumoeller opined that the critics who think that, "after 70 years of peace, we don't have to worry about war anymore" may be too optimistic. "We don't really have enough evidence yet to claim that."

Seventy years of peace? Tell that to the Israelis, Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians, Iraqis and Iranians, Indians and Pakistanis, Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, Koreans, "former" Yugoslavians and the millions of corpses spread throughout Africa and Latin America and any number of others. But, of course, I forgot, the only countries that matter are the Great Powers, and now we only have one of them.

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