

8-1991

## Book Review: Turbulence in World Politics, James N. Rosenau

Harvey Starr

University of South Carolina, starr-harvey@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/poli\\_facpub](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/poli_facpub)



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Publication Info

Published in *Journal of Politics*, ed. Jan E. Leighley, William Mishler, Volume 53, Issue 3, 1991, pages 924-926.

Starr, H. (1991). [Review of the book *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* by J. N. Rosenau]. *Journal of Politics*, 53(3), 924-926.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2131602>

© Journal of Politics, 1991, Cambridge University Press

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=JOP>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Political Science, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

the publication of his book. Moreover, he has offered up the beginning point for what may prove to be a reinvigoration and reevaluation of the comparative analysis of the moral economy of the countryside.

Victor Magagna, *University of California, San Diego*

*Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity.* By James N. Rosenau. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pp. 480. \$55.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

While not quite the "full-scale reconceptualization of international relations" proclaimed on the book jacket, James Rosenau has, in 16 chapters and 461 pages of text, presented us with a bold and important statement about the dynamics of change in the international system and how we are to think about that change.

Rosenau provides five reasons why this book is so long. In addition to "encompass(ing) all of world politics . . . it seeks to tease coherent meaning out of the chaos and the turbulence that underlie the current course of events . . . it focuses on the ways in which world politics may be undergoing profound and enduring change . . . it attempts to break with habitual modes of analysis and to approach politics and change on a global scale with fresh conceptual equipment . . .," and finally, it seeks to support all of this with a wide range of evidentiary examples (xiii). Rosenau is correct that all five concerns need to be addressed. (He is also correct that the book is *long*—the reader will indeed encounter redundancy along with the introduction of neologisms and typologies of only marginal utility.)

Those familiar with a substantial body of Rosenau's work which began to appear in the mid-1980s (starting with the 1984 *International Studies Quarterly* article, "A Pre-Theory Revisited") will already have recognized that the book under review addresses change through the concepts of postinternational politics, turbulence, cascading interdependence, the microelectronic revolution, sub-groupism, the micro-macro relationship, and the interaction of two contemporaneous worlds: the state-centric and the multicentric. These concepts are also used to address a number of contemporary anomalies, most particularly the juxtaposition of increasing interdependence in the world system along with the increasing fragmentation of states. All these concepts, developed over the past decade, are substantially expanded and elaborated in this book.

In addition, Rosenau draws extensively on his own earlier approaches to the scientific study of international relations and foreign policy. In the true spirit of "thinking theory thoroughly" and "puzzlement" (see especially chapter nine) Rosenau raises questions about change, how it has produced "anomalies" that *cannot* be handled by Realist or state-centric theory, and how our thinking has been challenged to deal with them. Going back to a

term he first presented in discussing the scientific-traditional “debate,” he argues that we can meet this challenge only by breaking out of conceptual jails (chapter two is about “justifying jailbreaks”); this, he maintains, requires thinking about the “dramas” of politics. One should note also that “adaptation” is central to discussions in chapter 10, while Rosenau returns to the relationship between role and idiosyncratic factors from a very new perspective in chapter nine.

I see the central thrust of this multifaceted work as being an important statement of our need to move considerably further away, with much greater speed, from state-oriented (mostly Realist) models of world politics. Thus, this book, while going beyond transnational relations and complex interdependence approaches with its model of postinternational politics, clearly emerges from the transnational relations (and integration studies) tradition, with all of its challenges to the Realist paradigm (e.g., see 40–42 for a debate over *power* within interdependent systems). In his many examples, Rosenau portrays a world where transnational/crossnational phenomena run wild; where “sovereignty-bound” actors are constrained and limited in ways not applicable to “sovereignty-free” actors. Rosenau’s two-world conception begins where transnational relations leaves off. An important difference here is that Rosenau argues the concurrent operation of two worlds or two different sets of structures, which coexist and even interact, while previous challenges to the state-centric system saw that system as in the process of evolving into something else. Similarly, Rosenau’s view of change as turbulence, essentially a form of interdependence, allows him to take change and interdependence further than previous discussions with a measured and useful application of chaos theory—e.g., looking at organizations within a turbulent environment.

In a number of ways Rosenau addresses themes that I have found to be central to our thinking about international politics. In part one he raises the issue of the need for greater subtlety of theory and research design to understand a highly complex world; (a central concern of Most and Starr, *Inquiry, Logic and International Politics*, 1989). His discussion of turbulence/chaos raises the Most and Starr issues of nice laws and substitutability from a different, but compelling perspective. Similarly, his presentation of the micro-macro relationship would be consistent and complementary to the Sprouts’ ecological triad that forms the basis of my own opportunity and willingness framework. His discussion of the ways in which the microelectronic revolution has raised the analytic and cathectic capabilities of individuals, both within the mass and the elite (chapter 13), mirrors the discussion of the psychological component of interdependence in Russett and Starr, *World Politics: The Menu for Choice*, 1989 (491)—“that people are aware not only that activities are taking place elsewhere but that they are aware that they are aware!”

Ultimately, the book appeals to my own predilection for synthesis and

pretheoretical conceptualization (as in the opportunity/willingness framework). Rosenau's concepts are not yet explanatory, but they do impose a useful coherence on a broad range of real world phenomena and the theories used to study them. They make sense of, and find patterns within, a seemingly unpatterned flow of events. One stands impressed by the sheer richness of a book that provides an exhaustive set of examples and which draws so well and deeply from a wide range of disciplines for assistance in developing and employing its core concepts. The arguments presented by Rosenau should be part of the theoretical kit of any serious scholar of world politics.

Harvey Starr, *University of South Carolina*

*American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission.* By Stephen Gill. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. 304.)

When Robert Cox published his self-confessedly eclectic book, *Production, Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* in 1987, it was generally well received among scholars from a variety of approaches in the area of international political economy, primarily because of its great heuristic value. It is the type of work that scholars can "dip into" in order to gain rich insights into a variety of questions. One outstanding issue, however, has so far remained unanswered. This concerns the utility of Cox's adaptation of Antonio Gramsci's ideas in forming the basis of a research agenda. Now we can begin to evaluate that question, in view of Stephen Gill's acknowledgment of the central importance of Robert Cox's work in the conceptualization of Gill's book, *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission* (xii).

The result of Gill's efforts is an interesting, provocative, and deeply-flawed book, that I nevertheless have no hesitation in recommending as mandatory reading for those scholars interested in the debate concerning America's hegemonic decline.

The core of Gill's thesis is a claim consistent with both the (heavily criticized) analysis of Susan Strange (see "The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony," *International Organization*, 41:551-74) and the recent work of Henry Nau (*The Myth of American Decline*)—that the United States is not in a process of hegemonic decline. But unlike Strange and Nau, Gill's assessment relies on a Gramscian interpretation that rejects a structural conception of power. Rather, Gill's analysis stresses the importance of linking conscious, consensual ideas among international elites to their economic interests. According to Gill, America's sustained hegemony is explained by global capitalism's present transition from a national to a transnational form. The result of this process is the formation of a new transnational, trilateral