

Peripheral States and Realism

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Foreign Policy Theory in Menem's Argentina. By Carlos Escudé. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. 166 pp. \$49.95, (ISBN: 0-8130-1493-X).

Despite its title, *Foreign Policy Theory in Menem's Argentina* does not deal with foreign policy theory. Nor does it really deal with Argentina. Carlos Escudé takes as his starting point a number of examples that highlight the differences between the foreign policy of the Menem government and those of previous Argentinean regimes. But readers looking for a specific analysis of these decisions, the motivation behind the changes, or for that matter the insider politicking that surely must have surrounded these shifts will be disappointed. What we find instead is an attempt “to develop an international relations theory that focuses on the predicament of the weak and vulnerable states” (p. 4). The book is therefore part of the much larger debate on international relations theory in general and the inadequacy of the mainstream realist, neorealist, and interdependence approaches in particular.

According to Escudé, mainstream international relations theory falls short when it comes to providing a proper explanation not only for the policy choices but also for the general position of weak states in the global system. Furthermore, it is responsible for deluding the leaders of weak states into thinking that they must acquire power in order to achieve security—an endeavor bound to be futile given that it will bring them into conflict with great powers who will invariably reign in uppity weak states. The resulting cost in human suffering, borne by the people living in the weak state, is sufficient argument for Escudé to dismiss this body of theory in favor of a citizen-centric theory of international relations that he calls “peripheral realism.”

Escudé begins his analysis with a criticism of the anthropomorphic conception of the state in mainstream international relations theory. He rejects the equation of the state with its citizenry and maintains that this linguistic habit—which reflects the old, organicist German notion of *volksgeist*—actually provides a justification for authoritarianism because it assumes the unity of state leaders and citizens irrespective of the nature of the regime. Furthermore, the anthropomorphized state represents a betrayal of liberalism and its idea of citizen control of government.

Escudé's critique of realism and neorealism focuses primarily on the arbitrary separation of power politics from economics and the assumed centrality of anarchy. Both assumptions, he claims, may be appropriate relative to the great powers, but they fail when used to analyze peripheral states. For weak states, economics and politics are closely intertwined because only economic development will create the possibility for developing power in interstate affairs. Similarly, weak states, in contrast to powerful states, face a global system that is hierarchical in nature because of the ability of great powers to utilize economic leverage to punish wayward weak states. Escudé extends this critique to encompass Robert Keohane and

Joseph Nye's (1989) concept of complex interdependence, which he criticizes for being similarly Eurocentric in nature because the relative decrease in the ability of great powers to utilize their power does not represent a corresponding increase in the power of weak states. Many of these points are well taken. They reflect a growing body of work that rejects the narrow focus on the experience of great powers.

Unfortunately, Escudé himself resorts to the realist paradigm as the basis for constructing his alternative framework. The reason is straightforward. Escudé fully accepts "the realist principle that 'the world is the result of forces inherent in human nature, and to improve the world we must act on these forces, not against them'" (p. 82). In a sense, this part of *Foreign Policy Theory in Menem's Argentina* represents Escudé's attempt to rescue Morgenthau from the grip of neorealism, thus restoring Morgenthau's notion of a prudent foreign policy. It is from this perspective that he arrives at the five principles of peripheral realism (pp. 87–89):

1. "A peripheral government should abstain from interstate power politics and devote itself to promoting local economic development instead."
2. "It should abstain from costly idealistic interstate policies."
3. "It should abstain from risky confrontations with great powers when they engage in policies that are detrimental to universal good causes but that do not affect the peripheral government's material interests."
4. "It should abstain from unproductive political confrontations with great powers even when such confrontations have no immediate cost because of great powers' reluctance to make use of image-damaging issue linkages" in the short run.
5. "It should study . . . the possibility of alignment or bandwagoning with a dominant or hegemonic power or power coalition."

Only by pursuing such foreign policies will weak states maximize their ability to foster economic growth, which is the only means available to them to increase their power in global politics.

Although Escudé does produce the outlines of a peripheral theory of international relations, the result remains partial and contains several shortcomings. For example, if one desires to overcome the anthropomorphic conception of the state in international relations theory, no doubt a worthwhile enterprise, one has to provide or develop a theory of the state. This Escudé fails to do. Instead, we are presented with a rather simplistic troika of model states: (1) those with citizen-centric governments that represent the majority of the citizenry, (2) those with benevolent elite governments that pursue economic development even though they are not democratic, and (3) those governments that throw all caution into the wind and risk long-term development prospects for the sake of short-term power aggrandizement (p. 64). Surely any attempt to overcome state-centrism must advance a more sophisticated analysis of the state, its relations with various social forces, and the mechanisms with which these conflictual relations are turned into foreign policy. Readers familiar with the critiques that critical theory (Cox 1986), postmodernism (Ashley 1989; Walker 1993; George 1994), or feminist international relations theory (Tickner 1992; Sylvester 1994) level against mainstream international relations theory will wonder why Escudé dismisses these efforts (p. 36). They represent exactly the kinds of approaches to the global system that overcome the centrality of the state.

Similarly, Escudé uses terms like democracy, liberalism, development, and so on at face value. This is surprising given that he accuses mainstream international relations theory of using terms like state and nation with a similar superficiality. Presumably, we are to accept the "common sense" meaning of these terms. Yet, as

a result, Escudé's analysis falls prey to the same language games that he rejects in his critique of state-centrism. Economic development, for instance, is reduced to notions of comparative advantage and free-market policies with no acknowledgment whatsoever of the evidence showing that the unfettered operation of markets can lead to the type of economic dislocation that characterizes weak states.

Finally, Escudé's description of the global system—as one consisting of states that command, states that obey, and states that rebel—reduces global politics to the same state-centrism and anthropomorphized view of the state that he set out to overcome. Thus, *Foreign Policy in Menem's Argentina* contains no analysis of transnational flows, no reference to social movements, and no attention to recent work on global civil society. Escudé also makes no reference to the work of Mohammed Ayoob (1995), who has conceptualized the dilemmas of security for peripheral states by emphasizing the connections between weak internal structures and powerful external influences. In short, some important insights notwithstanding, *Foreign Policy in Menem's Argentina* does not achieve its goal. In his attempt to adapt realism to the conditions of peripheral states, Escudé ends up asserting many of the points he set out to discredit, leaving the reader with more questions than answers.

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