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Thierry de Montbrial. *Action and Reaction in the World System: the Dynamics of Economic and Political Power*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780774824729 (hardcover, \$95.00); 9780774824736 (paperback, \$34.95).

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Our Heterogeneous, Unstable, and Fragile World: A Cri de Coeur from Paris

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world has become complex, heterogeneous, and unstable. States do not accept a higher authority above themselves. The United Nations Security Council has hardly ever functioned with one voice and is currently immobile because of the blocking power of Russia and China. Third World countries generally do not accept the recently-promoted 'responsibility to protect,' as advocated by the Western powers. The unmanageable conflict in Syria, the nuclear-tinged threats of Kim Jong Un, and the explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon on Patriots' Day, are testimony to just how unstable and fragile the peace has become.

"At the turn of the century, the international society has no institutions at its disposal that will enable it to impose peace through law" (259) This is a central preoccupation of Thierry de Montbrial, the President of the leading French think-tank, the *Institut*

Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), in his *Action and Reaction in the World System: the Dynamics of Economic and Political Power*.

De Montbrial has not escaped his countrymen's proclivity, as heirs to the system of logic of René Descartes (1596-1650), to develop an overall theory to explain the nature of the world order (or disorder). The most prominent twentieth-Century incarnation of this tradition was Raymond Aron's *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (*War and Peace Among Nations*).¹ In essence, what de Montbrial has done is to put together an entirely coherent typology of the world system.

But this is larger than in a strictly French context. As Professor Michael Sandel remarked to the *Financial Times* (6-7 April 2013), "There is an enormous hunger to engage in big questions that matter. I find this in all these places I've been travelling...there is a frustration with the terms of public discourse, with a kind of absence of discussion of questions of justice and ethics and values. My hunch is that part of what this is tapping into...is that people don't find their political parties are really addressing these questions."²

De Montbrial brings considerable attributes to his aim of creating a holistic theory of international relations: his long experience in international relations as President of IFRI; an encyclopedic knowledge of history and political science as displayed in this book (and as is evidenced in part by extensive endnotes and an excellent index); and his background in the natural sciences which is not all that common for a French public intellectual. He is a graduate of the one French *grande école* that is oriented toward science: the *Ecole Polytechnique*, known for short as "X". Also, from the University of California at Berkeley, he has a Ph.D. in economics, which is indeed a dismal science in France, as de Montbrial himself acknowledges (220): "With few exceptions, [French elites] have ignored or disdained economics, which they consider to be "ideology" rather than "science" (220).

De Montbrial's *magnum opus* was first published in French in 2002. Although it has already appeared in six languages, only now has it had the benefit of a version in English, extensively updated. The translation is excellent: the meaning in English is always clear, with only occasional glitches, such as the author's tendency here and there to feminize the first person singular, and his use of terms which, though correct in English, rarely appear in our language, viz. "direction" to indicate a governing body or leadership. The author does, however, explain this usage:

¹ Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (*War and Peace Among Nations*) Paris: Calmann-Lévy 1984.

² Edward Luce, "Lunch with the FT: Michael Sandel," *Financial Times* (5 April 2013), <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/bd50912-9c55-11e2-9a4b-00144feabdco.html#axzz2WcOlk6gc>.

... the word “direction has two complementary meanings: the Direction is the decisional or command structure of the Organization... the direction is [also] the way in which this structure imposes some movement at every moment. (28)

More fundamentally, the Anglophone reader must adapt himself to the French penchant for abstraction, which de Montbrial fortunately buttresses with example after example to make his point and often adds a telling insight by way of elaboration, for example:

... any actor’s motives will also contain a so-called dark side, which is often indispensable to the ambition required for a strategic undertaking... the heroes of History... are often – if not always – motivated by their ego as much as by larger interests. Hence the importance of “glory” as a factor that singularly complicates the art of forecasting. (83)

The most interesting parts of this work are those concerning what the French call *la haute politique*. In de Montbrial’s worldview, the world is made up of what he calls “active units,” whether they be states or other entities such as corporations or non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), and which are bound together by common cultural and organizational ties. When an “active unit” happens to be a state, it is also called a “political unit.” Sometimes the “active unit” may be strong culturally and weak organizationally, or in other such units the reverse may be true. Switzerland is in the former category and most empires in the latter. (3-26)

As the book’s title suggests, de Montbrial is interested in *action* as it operates in the world system. He relates *action* to the Aristotelian *praxis* and to the study of action called praxeology. As he explains at the beginning of his introduction:

This book considers praxeology and its effect on our world. Praxeology is defined as the science of organized human activities, studied from the angle of the use of power. Parties that exercise praxeology vary, but they are called “active units” in this book. (3)

In the articulation of his theory of action, or power, de Montbrial presents four desiderata. They can also be called stages. “An active unit, through its Organization, must first mobilize its...*resources*, which are defined in the broadest sense of human, moral and material resources (27). Second, “action requires both resources and *power* (italics mine). The notion of power has a dual aspect: the capacity to activate – for a pilot, for example, the ability to take off, fly, and land an airplane – and the capacity to direct (27). Third, an active unit’s *potential* must be constantly reassessed from the point of view of which of its “portfolio” of resources are feasible, given the changing material and moral constraints with which it is confronted. Fourth, there is the notion of *potency*, described as the combination of potential and the ability to act – what the author calls “acting out.” The latter is defined as “primarily an act of will on the part of the Direction of an active unit” (37). A simplification of his theory is provided by the author, as follows (87):

... the “power” of an active unit rests in its capacity to mobilize its “resources” (quotations mine) in order to achieve an objective; its “potential” is the virtual set of objectives that the leader or leaders – the Direction – considers achievable; its “potency” is the combination of this potential and acting out.

In the theoretical part of the book (Theory – Part One),³ the author devotes a chapter to strategy, “which can be thought of as both a science and an art, depending on whether a strategist emphasizes knowledge and method or experience. Its purpose is to give ‘a conscious and calculated character to decisions that are intended to ensure that a policy prevails.’ Strategy is at the core of praxeology” (81).⁴

De Montbrial writes: “Conflicts between active units can be decided according to four basic modes: arbitration, negotiation, judicial settlement, and confrontation. At its most extreme (in international relations), confrontation can mean war” (60). According to Carl von Clausewitz (to whom de Montbrial acknowledges his deep indebtedness), wars or conflicts at a certain moment come to a “culminating point” (70). It may not mean the end of a war, but it is at a “culminating point” that one party gives in to the will of the other, “such as the Kremlin’s recalling its ships during the Cuban missile crisis or the “cowardly relief” of Neville Chamberlain in 1938 after the Munich Conference” (70).

In the world system of the twenty-first century, de Montbrial foresees the presence of three groups: the United States; the U.K., Germany and France; and the rest. He distinguishes between the United States and the leading European powers: “If the notion of a strictly European culture is problematic, a Euro-American culture is even more complex and undefined” (211). This distinction between the United States and Europe appears in the author’s view to be bound up with the persistence of anti-Americanism, which is “always fanned by the United States’s tendency to use its predominance to impose its ideology in all kinds of ways. More generally it feeds on the inability of Americans to listen” (230).⁵

Yet despite these distinctions and tensions, the author admits to a certain commonality bridging the Atlantic:

³ Part Two is called “Aspects of Praxeology.”

⁴ The citation is from General André Beaufre, *Introduction à la stratégie* (Paris: Hachette, 1998).

⁵ I have a quibble, with a phrase in the book that asserts what has become a sort of conventional wisdom: “...that the...rise of one of the CIA’s protégés, Osama bin Laden provides another example of the unintended consequences of war, and the way the action-reaction mechanism can work in the world system” (77). To my knowledge, no CIA officer ever met bin Laden, and the myth that a meeting took place at bin Laden’s sickbed in Abu Dhabi is just that.

Europe and North America constitute the area of Western civilization built on a Judeo-Christian-Greek-Latin bedrock, along with its references to humanism, rationalism, science and liberty. This area continues to exert considerable power on, and appeal for, the rest of the world, in spite of the stench of neoimperialism that emanates from it (212).

It is here (Chapter 3) that de Montbrial seems to iterate his central preoccupation:

What distinguishes international relations... is the insufficiency, but not the total absence, of an external framework. The existing system of legal and cultural constraints that is meant to incite the parties involved to moderate their confrontational impulses is still insufficient... This brings us back to the weakness of international law and its power of enforcement, and the resulting frequency of war and its excesses (73).

The problem for the future, as summed up by de Montbrial is

the extreme complexity and fragility of the international system” (264). The seriousness of this condition cannot be ignored: As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is no problem more important than determining how to enforce the structural stability of our increasingly complex international system... good governance should allow the structure of the international system to evolve smoothly in desirable directions while avoiding potentially catastrophic bifurcations. How can this be achieved through a combination of collective security mechanisms and global as well as regional balances of power?...The current world is highly heterogeneous – that is, culturally diverse, volatile, and fragile (xiii-xiv).

In sum, de Montbrial’s book is a valuable contribution towards a conceptualization of the world system and in so doing assist our thinking as to how it can be better managed and brought under some form of control.

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was awarded in November 2006 the Prix Ernest Lémonon of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences of the Institut de France. In 2007, he was made an officer in the Légion d'Honneur.

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