

Stephen Benedict Dyson. *Otherworldly Politics: The International Relations of Star Trek, Game of Thrones, and Battlestar Galactica*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 176 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4214-1716-5.



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In *Otherworldly Politics: The International Relations of Star Trek, Game of Thrones, and Battlestar Galactica*, Stephen Benedict Dyson tackles a fundamental question: how do we make sense of international relations (IR)? Presented with the unpredictability of human and state behavior on the one hand, and a myriad of imperfect theoretical constructs to explain them on the other, students and scholars of diplomatic history, political science, and international relations have struggled to identify clear patterns in what drives relations between states. Dyson's work seeks that clarity through a lively and thoroughly entertaining exploration of the history of IR thought and practice viewed through late twentieth-century science fiction and fantasy. In this effort, Dyson provides an illuminating overview of the field while raising questions about how IR as an academic discipline should interact with the wider world.

Otherworldly Politics joins a growing body of scholarship that seeks to enliven academic debates through use of pop culture. Books by Nicholas J. Kiersey, Iver B. Neumann, and Daniel

H. Nexon investigating the IR dimensions of *Battlestar Galactica* and the Harry Potter books have blazed the trail for Dyson's work.[1] So, too, have such edited collections as Joseph J. Foy's *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington: American Politics through Popular Culture* (2008) ruminated over problems in economics, government, and philosophy as portrayed through the medium of televised fiction. Collectively, these works have demonstrated how pop culture can provide a useful lens through which to analyze complex social science phenomena. Dyson's monograph continues this work by providing fresh material and by giving a deeper theoretical justification for why such an analytical approach is worthwhile.

Dyson identifies five advantages that sci-fi and fantasy bring to the study of international relations: to "vivify IR theory" (p. 5); to provide "more evidence" (p. 6); to provide "better evidence" (p. 7); to possess "less baggage" (p. 8); and to "clarify causal reasoning" (p. 9). Whether or not one agrees with these premises (the claims of more/better evidence are debatable, given the fic-

tive nature of the evidence in question), Dyson sets out the parameters of his analysis clearly at the outset and proceeds confidently. He invites the reader to notice the similarities between IR theory as a world-building exercise and the world building of sci-fi and fantasy. IR, Dyson points out, “is, by necessity, as speculative and imaginative as a lot of sci-fi” (p. 3). However, the investigations in this book are anything but speculative. Drawing prodigiously on IR theory—from Woodrow Wilson to Kenneth Waltz to Francis Fukuyama—as well as scripts, interviews, series bibles, and biographies of the producers and casts of the various television series he utilizes as examples, Dyson’s analysis is firmly grounded in the relevant source materials. “The goal” of this methodological intermingling, Dyson explains, “is for each corner of this triangle of theory, history, and other worlds to be connected” (p. 10).

With its premise established in the introduction, *Otherworldly Politics* turns to the main task of elucidating international relations through genre fiction. In this vein, the subsequent chapters recount the history of IR thought and its evolution over the past century. Establishing a blueprint followed by most of the rest of the book, chapter 2 introduces a central concept—the debate between liberalism and realism—with a microcosmic case study, and then elaborates on it with examples drawn from history, IR theory, and sci-fi/fantasy. In this case, Dyson uses the critically acclaimed original series episode of *Star Trek* titled “City on the Edge of Forever” as a jumping off point to tackle “the question that drove the emergence of the discipline of International Relations: Do good people, acting ethically, guarantee good outcomes?” (p. 13). Dyson compares the utopian optimism and tragic demise of the characters of Edith Keeler in “City on the Edge of Forever,” and, later, of Eddard Stark in *Game of Thrones* with the ideals espoused by Norman Angell and Woodrow Wilson around World War I that formed the core of liberalist thinking. Dyson then pivots to the discrediting of liberalism and the

emergence of realism in the interwar period, specifically looking at the writings of Edward Hallet Carr, illuminated by a lengthy case study of the various members of the Lannister family from *Game of Thrones*, who according to Dyson represent “a variety of realist strategies and levels of competence” (p. 30). Like the rest of the book, Dyson’s first substantive chapter does not attempt to give a comprehensive account of the epistemology of a given IR theory or theories, nor a definitive history of the events in question. Rather, Dyson stays true to his stated objective of attempting to vivify IR theory using examples drawn from genre fiction that are more emotionally resonant and, therefore, more easily grasped than longer and ostensibly more definitive accounts.

Moving into the postwar world, Dyson recounts the arrival of rational choice theory to IR debates and its application during the Cold War to the nuclear arms race and US involvement in Vietnam. Here Dyson’s analysis is at its sharpest, aided in large part by the impeccable allegory for rationality provided by the character of Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*. Drawing deeply on Spock’s character biography and selected case studies from specific *Star Trek* episodes and films, Dyson explores “the potential of rational choices to solve problems, and ... the uncomfortable conclusions that can be dictated by logic” (p. 37). Much of Dyson’s analysis focuses on the careers of Thomas Schelling and Kenneth Waltz, whom Dyson calls “the two most prominent world builders of the rationalist school of international analysis” (p. 54). This biographical turn demonstrates a continuation of the methodological perspicacity underlying Dyson’s book, providing at times a riveting account of how these theorists, and the theoretical models they spent their lives promulgating, confronted the vicissitudes of Cold War-era policy-making.

The end of the Cold War compelled a reevaluation of rational choice theory and IR as a whole, a shift that Dyson sees reflected in the new types

of stories told by science fiction and fantasy series during the 1990s and afterward. In a chapter devoted to explaining the emergence of constructivism as an IR theory, Dyson explains the concepts of norms, identities, and the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) through an extended exegesis of the world of Westeros in *Game of Thrones*. Nonspecialists of *Game of Thrones* may find this analysis difficult to follow; Dyson's detailed knowledge of the series—its politics, geography, and history—is at times intimidating. However, the utility of the example is unquestionable, as Dyson draws clear parallels to explicate the reasoning behind Tony Blair's 1998 call for intervention in Kosovo. Dyson also links this observation to broader debates about the implications of R2P on an ostensibly Westphalian international system, as well as the unintended consequences of humanitarian intervention by one state into another.

Continuing his analysis of the changes in IR theory wrought by the end of the Cold War, Dyson identifies the emergence of a debate over homogenization and difference as a consequence of globalization—a shift mirrored in the *Star Trek* franchise by a move toward storytelling that began to embrace more shades of grey. Following the twin tracks of the “sameness” theories of Francis Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman and the “difference” theorizing of Samuel Huntington, Dyson provides an overview of how IR theorists responded to the post-Cold War order (pp. 87, 96). Dyson's explanation of these theories is somewhat shorter than in previous chapters and the contributions of sci-fi to the discussion about IR are limited to showing how *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and later spinoff *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* mimicked the sameness/difference split, rather than how examples from within those shows illustrated specific aspects of those theories, as in previous chapters. However, Dyson does offer some intriguing observations, such as in the case of “the Dark Side of Homogenization” illustrated by the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* allegory for con-

sumerism and conformity provided by the Borg (p. 93).

Chapter 6, “International Crises in Our World and Other Worlds,” offers a brief meditation on the concept of decision makers as critical components of IR theory. Focusing almost entirely on a comparison between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the *Battlestar Galactica* episode “33,” Dyson demonstrates, briefly and somewhat belatedly, one of the key advantages of using sci-fi to study IR identified at the beginning of the book: to clarify causal reasoning. Both situations, Dyson argues, show the need for “empathy for the real lived experience of crisis” when assessing decision makers and their actions (p. 114).

Dyson's final chapter departs somewhat from the epistemological approach of the rest of the book. Turning his attention toward the future of international relations and the potential impact of the digital revolution upon it, Dyson reflects on the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by the development of artificial intelligence and drone warfare. As with the preceding chapter, this discussion is shorter and more meditative than pedagogical. Dyson also departs from the specification of his title by incorporating a wide array of science fiction authors, from Philip K. Dick to Isaac Asimov, to illustrate the dilemmas and quandaries he foresees for twenty-first-century IR. Dyson wisely offers no predictions, but ominously observes how “the sci-fi futures of artificial realities, the surrendering of privacy to electronic surveillance, robots that increasingly look and act like people, and state functions such as war making being fulfilled by drones seem to be close at hand” (p. 130).

Though it closes on a darker note, *Otherworldly Politics* is undeniably one of the most lively and ebullient books on IR theory on the market today. Its premise—that televised genre fiction can reveal truths about international relations just as easily as it does about character and plot—is well founded and expertly elaborated by

Dyson's spritely prose. As a tool for scholars, its strengths lie mostly in its use as a pedagogical tool for new students struggling to grasp the counter-intuitive abstractions and leaden jargon of so much IR writing. However, experts will also find this book a worthwhile read. By changing the framework in which state behavior and human action are analyzed, Dyson participates in the most fundamental of his discipline's enterprises: to try to make sense of international relations.

Note

[1]. Nicholas J. Kiersey and Iver B. Neumann, eds., *"Battlestar Galactica" and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). Dyson cites both these works in his bibliography.

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