

Geopolitical Trends

Michael Keaney

Kees van der Pijl, *Global Rivalries: From the Cold War to Iraq*, Pluto Press, 2006.

The “Amsterdam School” of international political economy is an established and distinct genre of international relations research, originating in pioneering work conducted at the University of Amsterdam in the 1970s and 80s. With the publication of *The Making of the Atlantic Ruling Class* in 1984, Kees van der Pijl brought the school’s application and adaptation of Marxist concepts to bear on the history of the ascendancy of the United States and its eclipse of Britain as the Western hegemon for the benefit of an English-speaking audience. The result was a groundbreaking and influential treatment of international relations that helped pave the way for subsequent work by Robert Cox, Stephen Gill, and others in the neo-Gramscian mould. Meanwhile Henk Overbeek and Otto Holman, among others, have added to the Amsterdam oeuvre, mainly focusing on European integration. Van der Pijl subsequently published *Transnational Classes and International Relations* in 1998, where he developed in more detail the theory of transnational class formation, drawing on the Amsterdam seminars, centuries of historical evidence, and a rich European (and not merely English-language) literature.

Global Rivalries marks the continued evolution of van der Pijl’s analysis, marking a shift in perspective from that of the hegemon to that of the contender state. Given the origins of the presently dominant form of capitalism in the English-speaking world, and their emergence within what van der Pijl calls a “Lockean heartland” in which the legal and cultural norms reinforcing the practices of possessive individualism are paramount, world history can be viewed as a succession of challenges to this heartland by various states. The challenges posed by these states have ranged from mercantilistic catching-up to the fascism of the first half of the 20th century, the New International Economic Order (NIEO) of the Third World, the state socialism that finally collapsed in 1991, and now the “market socialism” of China. Their common characteristic has been the attempt by various coalitions of class factions that have used state power to assert their interests against the incursions and diktats of the heartland. One very effective method by which the heartland has continually secured its hegemony is by playing contenders off against each other, which van der Pijl conceptualizes as “active balancing,” following the work of Benno Teschke (in *The Myth of 1648*). This sort of policy is most visible today in the manner in which Britain (and the U.S.) tries to exploit divisions within the European Union in order to derail any potentially serious challenges to heartland hegemony.

Van der Pijl begins the book by briefly outlining the central thesis and highlighting various concepts employed throughout the analysis, including those familiar to students of previous Amsterdam School work. Accordingly, the book elaborates on the fundamental incompatibility between capital and the state as the means of organizing social space. This is exploited most successfully by the ruling classes of the heartland because of its members’ pooling of sovereignty, such that a transnational space is reserved for capital (following the work of Ronen Palan), and thereby insulates capital from democratic accountability. Thereafter van der Pijl relates the history of challenges to the Lockean heartland from the

aftermath of the Second World War to the present. Along the way are some superbly rendered passages shedding light on both specific historical episodes and the more general conceptual framework employed. Chapter 5, for example, features an outstanding exposition of the nature and logic of neoliberalism. Additionally, the incorporation of certain strands of literature normally absent from this sort of analysis (not least French, German and Dutch language sources, as well as some very meticulous and revealing use of materials normally reserved to the esoteric field of “parapolitics”) makes the book singularly valuable as both an academic treatise and historical narrative.

If this book possesses a weakness, it is in the complexity of the story being told. It is copiously referenced, and there is extensive use of endnotes. Buried in the endnotes to the first chapter is a reference to the work of Mark Laffey and Kathryn Dean, whose clarification of Louis Althusser’s concept of “overdetermination,” not as multicausality but a process of interaction between internally related and mutually constitutive social practices that tend to drift apart within a contradictory social whole, is adopted by van der Pijl [p. 28n5]. This justifies the wealth of historical detail employed in the analysis presented, but the forensic dissection of multiple and often contradictory threads can be at times almost overwhelming. Such is real life, of course—in the contradiction lies the headache. Those in search of an elegantly simple treatment of global conflict will, therefore, be disappointed. Unfortunately this is likely to include all too many readers in the heartland itself, given anglospheric culture’s preference for the supposed clarities of empiricism and rational choice deductivism. This would be a shame, because this book is far too important to be ignored just because it demands careful study.