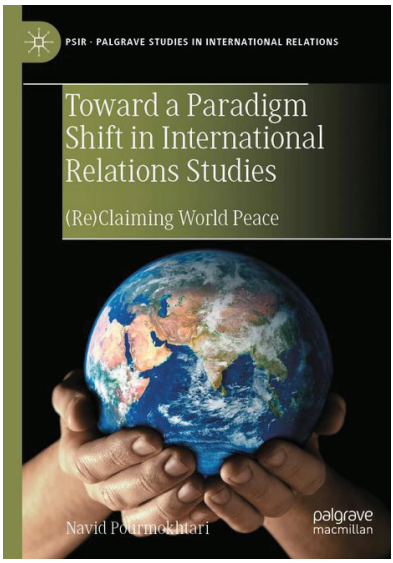


Book Reviews

Toward a Paradigm Shift in International Relations: (Re)Claiming World Peace by Navid Pourmokhtari. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, xii + 125 pages, including index.

ALEX DOUGLAS

The international institutions and norms of the last eighty years are struggling to maintain their efficacy. The discourses surrounding the establishment and growth of these institutions, such as the liberal school of international relations theory (IR), seem increasingly powerless to map an escape from the gravitational pull of conflict. A resolutely altruistic observer, unwilling to embrace a combative nationalism and struggling to find credible alternatives in IR, might hypothesize that IR needs a paradigm shift.

In his book, Navid Pourmokhtari offers a nuanced analysis of IR supporting this very hypothesis. This is an ambitious and valuable goal. While the practice of making foreign policy is often divorced from theorizing IR, a new IR paradigm—or even a willingness to question the current paradigm—could inspire new approaches to policy that lead humanity out of cycles of conflict and realize the promise of a more collaborative future. As the Bahá'í International Community has written, "the needs of the moment call for . . . devising a new conceptual framework, which includes a new set of underlying assumptions" centered on the oneness of humankind (2). Without a new conceptual framework, or paradigm, policy-makers will have trouble envisioning or embracing more promising approaches to foreign affairs.

To make his case that IR needs a paradigm shift, Pourmokhtari examines IR, and highlights its limitations, through the lenses of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Michel Foucault's discourse theory. He describes the "West-centric" foundational assumptions of IR, including the idea that "war and conflict represent a timeless, universal condition" (9). Pourmokhtari argues that IR, informed by these assumptions, "advances a mode of knowledge relations and knowledge practices that tell us everything about war and almost nothing substantive on how to achieve a lasting, global peace" (1); in fact, "the promotion of war . . . is [IR's] primary

object" (102). He details, through a "Foucaldian-inspired discourse analysis" (17), the mechanisms through which the field of IR privileges these views and marginalizes alternative ways of thinking.

Pourmokhtari's application of philosophical analytical tools to IR allows him to step outside of the constraints of the field and examine it critically. He describes not only the conceptual shortcomings of IR, but the mechanisms by which the field constrains theorists, such as academic norms (117) and discourses that "demarcate the limits of what can be perceived as well [as] conceived or imagined" (18). His analysis of the discourse around the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the war on terror is a particularly helpful illustration of the latter mechanism. He describes how influential voices promoted the frameworks of "modern us" versus an immutable "pre-modern them" (24), helping legitimize the war on terror as a "global-cultural clash among entire peoples" (27). He criticizes these frameworks as "ahistorical and non-empirical" (25), and says that they mask the reality of Al Qaeda as a "historically shaped and politically motivated phenomenon" (26). This discourse analysis reveals how these frameworks constitute "knowledge/power-truth relations" (18) that legitimize one way of thinking and preclude others. Pourmokhtari's application of discourse analysis to IR is the book's greatest strength. It not only may help would-be paradigm shifters in IR to see the roadblocks in their path, but is also valuable more generally for those seeking to understand the kinds of dynamics that can hold back intellectual exploration in any discipline.

Some readers will wish for Pourmokhtari to build a more rigorous case against the assumptions of IR theory themselves. He could cite evidence, for example, that human nature is not inexorably conflict-prone, that war is not inevitable, that the state has only occasionally been the fundamental organizing unit of world affairs, or that national interests are increasingly difficult to separate from global interests as humanity faces challenges like climate change, pandemics, and the need to regulate emerging technologies. However, we can reasonably consider these arguments to be outside of the scope of this work, and for all of the reasons Pourmokhtari details they are unlikely to gain purchase within the IR discipline.

Pourmokhtari accompanies his primary focus on the dynamics of theorizing with discussion of the substance or implications of the theories themselves. He offers a particularly insightful characterization of IR in his description of Hobbesian thought as "a manifestation of the logic of [the modern state system]," summarizing it by saying "all humans are theorized as self-interested and conflict-prone" (39). Pourmokhtari's rejection of this thinking as offering "legitimacy and freedom to 'wage war'" (41) is well-founded, and he offers systemic examples of how it manifests in military spending and the structure of the

United Nations, but readers may also desire examples of how such assumptions are woven into policy-making processes at the level of individual actors.

Lest readers imagine that the issues with IR as a whole can be attributed to a single dominant school within the discipline, Pourmokhtari examines liberalism, realism, peace studies, and security studies and highlights the ways in which they all reinforce the dominant paradigm and legitimize war. He describes liberalism and realism as "paradigm maintainer theories" that "[demarcate] the discipline such that alternatives are relegated to the margins where questions of war and military conflict are concerned" (103). However, in his analysis the critical turn in IR is more promising; it "problematize[s] and question[s] the warmongering orientation of the discipline" (79). He adds that "[t]he insights of critical theorists will doubtless prove crucial to achieving a paradigm shift" (121).

Pourmokhtari could draw more connections between IR and Kuhn's model of paradigm shifts, for example by analyzing the evolution of IR scholarship towards, presumably, its current resemblance to "expert puzzle-solv[ing]" (12). Pourmokhtari briefly traces the genealogy of IR within the current paradigm from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia; a broader examination of how humans think and have thought about global affairs, including outside of Western academic contexts, might allow him to identify previous paradigm shifts and more easily characterize the current paradigm. Such a broader perspective might also give Pourmokhtari the opportunity to appreciate any relative advantages of the current paradigm, particularly in the context in which it was first adopted.

Pourmokhtari stops short of proposing a new paradigm or enumerating its requirements. While readers will inevitably yearn for a proposal, Pourmokhtari's restraint leaves us with a more rigorous and tightly argued volume that may appeal to a broader academic audience and serve as an invitation for others to contribute to the development of a new paradigm.

However, for readers eager to imagine a new paradigm, Pourmokhtari does offer several signposts. Above all, he argues that a new paradigm should consider peace a possibility and speak to how it can be obtained. He notes that the contributions of the feminist school are particularly attuned to "the spirit of the age" (121) and highlights the exclusion of women in the conception of the modern state and IR's focus on "masculine power that merely represses and exploits" in contrast to concepts of collective power and "compassion, persuasion, nurturing, and caring" (99). Pourmokhtari speaks eloquently of the oneness of humankind, although he could say more about its implications for IR.

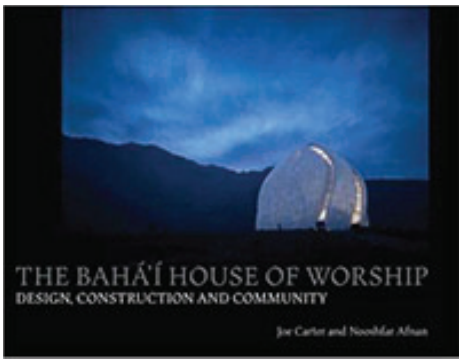
The Bahá'í International Community, in its 2024 statement on "Embracing Interdependence: Foundations for a World in Transition," says, "Rather than continue to hold on

to outworn concepts and unworkable assumptions, leaders, together with the peoples of the world, must arise, and with resolute will, consult together in search of appropriate solutions." Pourmokhtari's monograph is an important contribution to this effort. It documents the unworkable assumptions of IR that humanity must urgently reconsider, making the case for both the avid layperson and the scholar in the field that the time for a paradigm shift has come.

Works Cited

Embracing Interdependence: Foundations for a World in Transition. Bahá'í International Community, 2024.

Pourmokhtari, Navid. *Toward a Paradigm Shift in International Relations: (Re)Claiming World Peace*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.



The Bahá'í House of Worship: Design, Construction and Community by Joe Carter and Nooshfar Afnan. Oxford: George Ronald Publisher, 2022.

viii + 310 including bibliography, notes and references, brief note about the origin of the book, and author bios

ANN BOYLES

Midway through *The Bahá'í House of Worship: Design, Construction and Community*, authors Joe Carter and Nooshfar Afnan pose a question central to the theme of their volume: "The challenge for all the architects of a Bahá'í House of Worship is how to create what may be our most ancient building type in a new way. What is sacred space for our age, one that is open to all the people of the world, to all faiths, or no faith? There are no precedents" (187).

While published in coffee table book format with stunningly beautiful photographs to illustrate what such sacred spaces can look like, Carter and Afnan's work offers more: substantive text that addresses this question.