

**H-Diplo: Paul W. Schroeder and the Nineteenth-Century  
International System, or Viewing the World from the  
Windows of the Ballhausplatz.**

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I cannot pretend to have known Paul Schroeder, who died at the end of last year.<sup>1</sup> His work, of course, has long been familiar to me, as it must be familiar to any international historian. We met only once, at a conference in the mid-2000s. Its ostensible purpose was to examine the uses of the Schroederian systemic approach to the study of nineteenth-century international history. I struck a somewhat discordant, for sceptical, note - much to the horror of the conference organizers and some of the attendees. The object of my gentle barbs took my feeble attempt at iconoclasm in good humour: 'Most of my British friends think that it doesn't work.'

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My scepticism, in whatever soil it may be rooted, does not diminish my respect for the brilliance of Paul Schroeder's scholarship. Few knew old Europe as intimately as he did, few in North America and scarcely more in Europe. His work on the Metternichian period and the origins of the Crimean War established a new standard for

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<sup>1</sup> 'Obituary: Paul Schroeder', [Champaign] News Gazette, 11 Dec. 2020, [https://www.news-gazette.com/obituaries/paul-w-schroeder/article\\_37b3674a-3b45-11eb-ae70-5cb9017b8d9f.html](https://www.news-gazette.com/obituaries/paul-w-schroeder/article_37b3674a-3b45-11eb-ae70-5cb9017b8d9f.html) . This seems to be the only obituary published so far.

studying Habsburg and European affairs in the first half of the long nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> His later *magnum opus* on great power politics between the end of the Seven Years' War and the great European revolutions of 1848 became an instant classic, on a par with A.J.P. Taylor's *Struggle for Mastery*, which covered the period after 1848, though it preceded Schroeder's study by four decades.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor wrote from a radical liberal, nonconformist perspective, that reflected his own North Country background and upbringing. For all his mastery of the intricacies of European diplomacy, he looked askance at this Hobbesian theatre of egotistical (and ultimately foolish) struggles between states. Paul Schroeder's perspective was quite different, altogether more conservative and focused on order and stability.<sup>4</sup> He emphasized the ability of governments to learn practical lessons from the destruction wrought by Napoleon's wars and to embrace the need for a new regime of collective security. Taylor saw in Metternich a shallow cynic and a hypocrite, who '[i]n the usual way of statesmen who rule over a decaying empire, ... urged others to preserve the Austrian monarchy for their own good. He invented an

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<sup>2</sup> P.W. Schroeder, *Metternich's Diplomacy at Its Zenith* (Austin, TX, 1962); and *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War: The Destruction of the European Concert* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> P.W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford, 1994); see also A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery of Europe, 1848-1918* (Oxford, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> More trenchantly in some of his later essays, e.g. 'The Risks of Victory: An Historian's Provocation', *The National Interest* no. 66 (Winter 2001/2), 22-36, and 'International Order and Its Current Enemies', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* xxiv, 2 (2004), 193-201.

"Austrian mission".<sup>5</sup> Schroeder, by contrast, and perhaps oddly for a devout Lutheran, took that 'Austrian mission' more seriously; he approved of the Austrian chancellor's efforts to preserve order and peace.<sup>6</sup>

What sets Schroeder's work apart from that of other historians of his and earlier generations was his openness to approaches and concepts developed in the cognate discipline of International Relations.<sup>7</sup> Until then, all too often, it was - and sometimes still is - the much cherished belief of historians that, in Political Science, facts serve principally ornamental purposes; that they are selected with eye to a predetermined design or theoretical construct; and that they are not allowed to speak for themselves. This is not the place to serve up another helping of that old epistemological chestnut about nomothetic PolSci methods versus the ideographic inclinations of historians. Suffice it to say that Schroeder's interest in theoretical approaches and perspectives turned him into an exotic bird amongst his historical colleagues who tend, for the most part, to sport less colourful conceptual plumage.

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<sup>5</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, 'Metternich', id., *Europe: Grandeur and Decline* (Harmondsworth, Mdx., repr. 1967), 23-4. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Taylor had contemporary British leaders, like Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, in mind when he made the comment.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfram Siemann, Metternich's most recent biographer, follows Schroeder's more positive assessment, id., *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Exemplary, P.W. Schroeder, 'History and International Relations Theory: Not Use or Abuse, but Fit or Misfit', *International Security* xxii, 1 (1997), 67-74.

According to Schroeder it is crucial to consider international history in a systemic context that includes the system's internal dynamics as much as the manner in which individual states operated within the system. He directed the attention of his fellow-toilers in the field to the dominant ethos of the system. Central to his analysis is the insight that, in order to pursue diplomatic objectives without major conflict, there needs to be mutual awareness and restraint between states and within the international system. Such sense of restraint, he claimed, was not fully developed in the eighteenth century. Contemporary balance of power ideas served principally to diminish lesser powers by fostering the notion of equivalence in any gains for the stronger ones. During the eighteenth century powers rose or declined with bewildering speed. Established great powers - Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands - ceased to be great, and one of the largest entities of the period, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, ceased to exist altogether. Their places were taken by hitherto negligible Brandenburg-Prussia and far-distant Russia.

The experiences of the French revolution and Napoleon's near-hegemony of Europe changed attitudes. In Schroeder's reading, the Congress of Vienna ushered in a better world, only to be undermined, at least in parts, by the middle of the nineteenth century. At Vienna, the eighteenth-century 'conflict and competition balance of power' gave way to equilibrist thinking. According to Schroeder, this change in international relations

was more profound than any changes wrought by the Atlantic, French or Industrial Revolutions. In a sense this was a real 'revolution', though Schroeder himself avoided use of that word, weighed down as it is by either intellectual sloppiness (especially in the English-speaking world where any change is in danger of being labelled a 'revolution') or by ideological baggage. This is the hard core of Schroeder's argument, uncompromising and unyielding. Once the full implications are understood, its truly 'revolutionary' meaning stands revealed: historical scholarship must restore the study of past international relations to the central place they once held in European history.

The external relations of states were not dependent on other systems. They were not functions of societal processes or side-products of economic developments. The French Revolution after 1792 serves as a useful case study here, for the course of events in France and the dynamics within the revolutionary regimes were affected, indeed determined, by international events.<sup>8</sup> Post-Napoleonic international politics became more stable, stability itself now being seen as a key strategic objective. International morality also improved. Interstate robberies, so common in the eighteenth century, were now frowned upon. Here, incidentally, Schroeder's arguments are problematic, and underline the extent

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<sup>8</sup> Implicit already in S.S. Biro, *The German Policy of Revolutionary France: A Study in French Diplomacy during the War of the First Coalition, 1792-1797* (2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1957).

to which his own reading of the Vienna settlement forms a sort of Procrustean bed for earlier periods. Certainly, as Ragnhild Hatton and others have sought to demonstrate, notions of a 'Society of Europe', underpinned by understandings of what would later be called collective security, were highly developed before 1815.<sup>9</sup>

If Schroeder was conversant with International Relations theories, he nevertheless had his own quite distinct definition of an international system. It was filtered, it seems, through Michael Oakeshott's ideas about constituent practices of politics.<sup>10</sup> In this manner, Schroeder developed the idea of 'shared rules' and 'collective understandings' about the conduct of international politics as the determinants of a 'system'.<sup>11</sup> This is the key to the Schroederian 'systemic approach', which makes it simultaneously less rigid and yet more resilient than, perhaps, many standard IR concepts; and in this it may well prove to be more fruitful for historians and political scientists alike. In essence, it is people who make any system work; and 'the international system changes when enough persons change their minds about it.'<sup>12</sup>

So far, so good. The necessity of 'systemic analysis' is easy to stipulate. Its practical application is more difficult to accomplish. It is worth noting that Schroeder himself was less

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<sup>9</sup> See R. Hatton, *War and Peace, 1680-1720: An Inaugural Lecture delivered on 1 May, 1969* (London, 1969); also M.S. Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, 1450-1919* (London, 1993), 219-35 et passim.

<sup>10</sup> M. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> P.W. Schroeder, "'System' and Systemic Thinking in International History', *International History Review* xv, 1 (1993), here esp. 133-34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 134.

interested in examining how change came about, and, even more so, that he was by no means consistent in his analytical approach even within the same work. Thus, in the introduction to *Transformation of European Politics*, he defined his version of systemic analysis as

simply a consistent attempt to determine not only how the game of international politics turned out and how the decisions, policies, and actions of individual states led to that outcome, but also how these individual policies and actions were shaped and limited by the shared rules and understandings, and how these collective understandings were in turn challenged and altered ... by violations or different versions of the rules.

Only consideration of this kind of systemic analysis, Schroeder contended, could reveal 'the restraints and possibilities which ... the prevailing "system" imposes.'<sup>13</sup> If this more supple understanding implied that historical scholarship consisted of some sort of parsing of the grammar of past international politics, Schroeder himself did not consistently adhere to it. When discussing the effects of the Peace of Paris of 30 May 1814 and the gradual emergence of a post-Napoleonic international constellation, for instance, he referred to the 'system's *members* ... consist[ing] of two world powers, more invulnerable than ever; three major Continental powers, distinctly weaker and more vulnerable; and a host of smaller intermediary bodies.'<sup>14</sup> This appears no longer to be a system defined as a category of thought and action, but rather a real-world phenomenon.

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<sup>13</sup> Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, xii-xiii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 515-16 (my emphasis).

By the same token, his important theory of 'buffer-states' as a form of shock-absorbers between the great powers implies that the system itself was real and material.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Schroeder frequently could not resist the urge to chide some governments - more often than not British ones - for pursuing a course of action that did not conform with the system.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary diplomatists, such as Friedrich von Gentz, Metternich's *amanuensis*, regarded Britain as '*le pivot de la fédération Européenne*', as constituted after the fall of Napoleon.<sup>17</sup> Not so Paul Schroeder, for whom she occupied a 'special, eccentric position in the European states system', and that circumstance continually caused him problems.<sup>18</sup> It was almost as if he viewed the nineteenth-century international landscape from the windows of the Ballhausplatz.

This implicit neo-Metternichian perspective relates to another, at least to this writer's mind, problematic aspect of Schroeder's systemic approach. His emphasis on prudence and his praise for restraint against aggression are implicit value judgments. However laudable these virtues might be (and who could disagree that they are laudable?), they allow moral categories to slip into scholarly analysis by the backdoor. Any account that

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<sup>15</sup> Id., 'The Lost Intermediaries: The Impact of 1870 on the European System', *International History Review* vi, 1 (1984), 1-27.

<sup>16</sup> See his vituperation of George Canning's policy, *Transformation of European Politics*, 644, and idem, 'A Mild Rejoinder', *American Historical Review* xcvi, 3 (1992), 733.

<sup>17</sup> Memo. Gentz, 'Considerations sur le système politique actuellement établi en Europe [1818]', in A. Prokesch-Osten (ed.), *Dépêches Inédites de Chevalier de Gentz aux Hospodar de Valachie pour servir à l'histoire de la politique Européenne (1813 à 1828)* (3 vols., Paris, 1877)i, 364.

<sup>18</sup> P.W. Schroeder, 'Old Wine in Old Bottles: Recent Contributions to British Foreign Policy and European International Politics, 1789-1848', *Journal of British Studies* xxvi, 1 (1987), 9.



rests on a dichotomy of aggression and moderation invites the treatment of history as a morality tale because politics and morality are not differentiated. In this manner, restraint becomes simultaneously an analytical device and a moral category of judgment. Like Gibbon, but not as explicitly as he, Schroeder focuses on the 'political virtues of prudence and courage'.<sup>19</sup> It reinforces the often moral tone of his assessments. It lends them a special power. But it also encourages his tendency towards vituperation whenever individual powers are seen to have deviated from the correct, for system-conforming, course of action.

There is also a degree of inconsistency in the treatment of the balance of power. At one level Schroeder baulks at the often unthinking and uncomprehending use of the term by historians. Yet the term had a very precise meaning for a whole generation of diplomats and statesmen, for whom it stood for the territorial balance arrived at in 1815. Indeed, Schroeder himself is compelled by the force of his own analysis repeatedly to return to the notion of a balance.<sup>20</sup> His concern with the workings of the system also makes him treat states as if they were single entities, rather like 'black boxes'<sup>21</sup>, hermetically sealed against their

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (7 vols., Cambridge, 1896-1902) iv, 160-1.

<sup>20</sup> Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, 578-9.

<sup>21</sup> See Zara Steiner's perceptive comments (though not addressed at Paul Schroeder), *id.*, 'On Writing International History: Chaps, Maps and Much More', *International Affairs* lxxiii, 3 (1997), 536. This habit is also very marked in other essays by Paul Schroeder, e.g., 'World War One as Galloping Gertie: A Reply to Joachim Remak', *Journal of Modern History* xlv, 3 (1972),

surroundings but somehow interacting with them by some mysterious process. What is needed is 'a language and terminology which reflects more accurately the realities of power, influence and responsibility'<sup>22</sup> inside these black boxes; and of this language Schroeder had an insufficient command. Political history, and international history more especially, is saturated with human agency. To develop the techniques needed would, ironically, equip the historian also to appreciate the 'political virtues of prudence and courage' without turning the writing of history into a morality tale.

In so far as Schroeder's systemic approach is feasible, it is so principally because it is circumscribed by the geographical limitations of Europe. The truly European range of his work is one of its undoubted strengths, even though, in practice, Central European developments tend to be prioritized, unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the regional focus of Schroeder's own research interests.<sup>23</sup>

There is an unspoken assumption at work in his work that the 'shared rules and understandings' that underpinned the European system had global application. That assumption is never really tested, however. Nor did Schroeder probe its implications for the

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319-45, and 'Munich and the British Tradition', *Historical Journal* xix, 1 (1976), 223-43.

<sup>22</sup> D.C. Watt, 'Personalities', unpublished paper, Conference in Honour of D.C. Watt, London School of Economics, 28-30 June 1993, fol. 3.

<sup>23</sup> P.W. Schroeder, "The 19<sup>th</sup>-century International System: Changes in the Structure", *World Politics* xxxix, 1 (1986), 1-26. For an important critique stressing *inter alia* the importance of temporal categories for systems, see J. Black and H. Kleinschmidt, 'Schroeder Reconsidered or the Limitations of the Systems Approach', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* xi, 1 (2000), 257-70.

viability of his thesis of a dual Anglo-Russian hegemony that supported the Vienna equilibrium. His assertion that the two powers 'left each other alone in their respective spheres' is an elegant way of skirting over some awkward analytical problems. Anglo-Russian relations outside Europe were far from passive. They were characterized by their own dynamic of containment and expansion, focused on two key geostrategic points, the Turkish Straits and their terrestrial equivalent, the Khyber Pass in Central Asia. It did not preclude intermittent cooperation if the stability of Europe was at stake, for instance at the turn of 1825-6 in connection with the Greek question. But neither then, nor during the later Mehmed Ali and Rhine crises was it a case of two hegemonic powers colluding to maintain leadership in their respective spheres.<sup>24</sup> The logical corollary to this would have been a general understanding on Central Asian affairs, as proposed by the Russian foreign minister, Count Nesselrode.<sup>25</sup> This never happened.

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Lest I be accused of having indulged in Beckmesser-like pedantry, the above is intended to acknowledge the ambitious intellectual scope of Paul Schroeder's conceptualization of international

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<sup>24</sup>.Schroeder, *Transformation*, 740.

<sup>25</sup>.For Nesselrode's 'théorie des tampons', see J. Hurewitz (ed.), *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: A Documentary Record* (2 vols., New York, 2nd ed. 1975-79) i, 281; H.N. Ingle, *Nesselrode and the Russian Rapprochement with Britain, 1836-1844* (Berkeley, CA, 1976). For Schroeder's critique of British policy in Central Asia see *Transformation*, esp. 761-62.

history, and the profundity of thought and reflection that underpins it. Moreover, his cogent argument concerning the centrality of international relations is one which historians of all stripes ignore at their peril. In both its achievements and its limitations his 'systemic approach' is productive of great insights. Whether one agrees with it or not, whether *in toto* or in part only, grappling with it can only stimulate further insight and understanding. If nothing else, Paul Schroeder has made 'as good a case as has been made in recent years for treating international history as an important discipline in its own right.'<sup>26</sup> And that is no small achievement - far from it.

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<sup>26</sup> M. Chamberlain, 'Concert of Vienna', *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4776 (14 Oct. 1994), 5.