History’s Fools: The Pursuit of Idealism and the Revenge of Politics

David Martin-Jones | Reviewed by Mark Beeson

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the relationship with the absence of political will to erect corporate guard rails as custodians of democracy, *Active Measures* is largely silent. This leaves an important question hanging if we are to begin the gigantic task of recovering the capacity to restore a semblance of coherence to our sociopolitical fabric in the digital age. Thankfully, other works fill this gap successfully, such as Zuboff’s *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Sadowski’s *Too Smart*, Foer’s *World Without Mind*,\(^4\) and a litany of others. Alongside *Active Measures*, these works make required reading for practitioners, elected officials, industry and citizens interested in arresting the slide of democratic society further into incoherence and, ultimately, into strategic peril.

Realists have never had it so good; or, perhaps that should be, so bad. However we describe the relationship between scholars of a realist bent and the times they inhabit, many of their central arguments and assumptions about the world look alarmingly persuasive, even prescient. By contrast, this is not a good time to be a cosmopolitan or an idealist. Indeed, it may never be so again. The world seems more troubled and disorderly than it has for decades, and this provides the backdrop for David Martin Jones’s timely tome, *History’s Fools*.

Anyone who is familiar with Jones’s work will have a shrewd idea what to expect from a volume that draws, in part, on previously published work. Even if you haven’t read any of his work before, you might want to take a look at this. The volume is by turns polemical, confronting, impressive, infuriating and scholarly — to the point of showing off. This is not an irrelevant or flippant point. Jones is scathingly dismissive of many of his academic peers and is certainly not hesitant to put the intellectual boot in when he judges it efficacious and/or deserved, which turns out to be quite a lot.

Jones makes quite a display of his erudition, which is fair enough — given that he does know a lot about political theory. While you may not like some of his ideas and conclusions about the state and direction of contemporary scholarship, it’s hard to argue that his arguments aren’t well-grounded in the literature. The first chapter on ‘the end of history and the Kantian moment’ is quite the tour de force and would be a useful, if polemical, addition to any political theory course. As the title suggests, Fukuyama gets quite a pounding as he’s emblematic of everything Jones thinks was wrong and misguided about ‘the West’s’ hubris and complacency in the aftermath of the Cold War’s unexpected ending.

Two of the principal targets of Jonesian invective are liberal academic intellectuals and radical Islam. As far as Jones is concerned they are interconnected in potentially fatal ways:

The evolving progressive response to Islamically-sanctioned, catastrophic violence of the al-Qaeda and IS variety thus entailed a far from compelling mix of queasy agnosticism, euphemism, moral equivalence and logical non sequiturs.¹

This has led those with ‘progressive minds’ to underestimate and misconstrue the threat posed by Islamism, Jones argues, because of ‘an official tendency to mistake terrorism’s limited means for limited ends.’² The consequence of such short-sightedness, especially when combined with a misguided belief in the salutary impact of multiculturalism and social inclusivity, has led, Jones suggests, to ineffective policies ‘that treat the homegrown threat as a community relations problem, rather than an ideology that threatens the internal stability and integrity of secular politics.’³

Whatever you think about his claims regarding the extent and nature of the threat posed by Islamism, there is little doubt that even the most ‘progressive’ governments, such

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² Jones, History’s Fools, p 127.
³ Jones, History’s Fools, p 142.
as Sweden’s, have struggled to manage large scale immigration from countries that have different values and belief systems. Although there is some brief discussion of the rise of populism, Brexit and – of course – the problems afflicting the European Union, the migration issue doesn’t feature as prominently as we might expect. In part, this is explained by the fact that Jones is primarily interested in explaining the rise, and what he considers the misguided and unrealisable ambitions of the ‘new liberalism,’ embodied in Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’ in particular and globalisation more generally.

Authors have their own predilections, no doubt, but it is still surprising that many observers, including Jones, fail to consider adequately the material conditions in which some theories and political ideals come to exercise an influence. The classic case in point is the natural environment and its increasingly visible impact on the international system and domestic politics. A fellow realist, Anatol Lieven, has persuasively argued that ‘existing nation states may well eventually collapse due to climate change, but the result will not be world government but universal chaos.’

In this context there may, indeed, be an argument to be made about ‘the West’ being deluded and needing to “de-radicalize” its own progressive thinking,’ but not simply because of the supposed threat posed by other civilisational and/or religious values. On the contrary, as Jones perceptively – and rightly, in my view – points out, ‘the structural implications of the intangible economy increasingly favour what Robert Michels identified as an “iron law of oligarchy: in a twenty-first century networked form.”’ Likewise, Jones’s critique of ASEAN’s failings and the significance of the China challenge may be familiar to some readers, but they are not without merit: ‘China is busily rewriting the rules of international trade, gradually constructing a Sinocentric regional order...[and] finds ASEAN-style norms hugely conducive to promoting its national interest.’

In the face of all these challenges, Jones advocates something he describes as ‘prudential realism,’ which is characterised not by ‘justness or rightness’ but timeliness, necessity and above all prudence. Given some of the epic strategic follies of recent years there are worse

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6 Jones, History’s Fools, p 172.

7 Jones, History’s Fools, p 203.
principles to live by, perhaps. The implication is that:

The search for a grand master strategy is therefore as elusive as the quest for grand utopian schemes of cosmopolitan justice. Unlike normative grand theorizing, however, prudent statecraft adjusts morality and law as circumstances and interest dictate.8

John Mearsheimer has recently developed similar sorts of arguments about the seemingly unachievable goals of liberal internationalism and the folly of idealism.9 Looking around the world today, it’s hard not to concede that the likes of Jones and Mearsheimer have a point, no matter how bleak its implications may be. And yet, some commentators think that climate change will not only eventually compel states to rethink their view of sovereignty and the basis of economic organisation, but also that this may not be a bad thing.10

However, there is nothing more irritating for authors than reviewers telling them what they should have written about rather than considering what they actually did write about, so I shall refrain. One thing that Jones did write about that merits comment, though, is the rather mean-spirited afterword, which is a diatribe about the supposed ‘erosion of academic integrity.’ Numerous scholars are implicated in this process, most of whom have received entirely undeserved recognition, reward and, most galling of all, research funding, Jones claims.

It’s worth pointing out that the Department of Defence doles out large amounts of money to ‘suitable’ projects with much less scrutiny than demanded by the likes of the Australian Research Council; and yet, conservative commentators and politicians aren’t queuing up to criticise security agencies. Consequently, this all sounds a bit like tendentious sour grapes and adds nothing to an otherwise important, albeit provocative, contribution to what is often a surprisingly uncritical, uniform and self-referential debate.

This is a book that will no doubt get mixed reviews, as they say, but it’s none the worse for that. There is much with which I disagree, and the general tone of intellectual condescension can get a bit wearing at times. But we need contrarians and original thinkers, especially in times like these. Cosmopolitans and idealists – of whom there are still some stellar and rather inspiring examples11

8 Jones, History’s Fools, p 241.
– should read *History’s Fools*, if only to sharpen their own arguments. I’ve benefited over the years from reading Jones’s work, even if my blood pressure hasn’t; better that than the pious, politically correct, bland uniformity that passes for much supposedly ‘critical’ scholarship these days. There are worse things than being challenged, surprised and even outraged by authors with whom one may not instinctively agree.

### Civil–Military Relations: Control and Effectiveness Across Regimes

*Thomas C Bruneau and Aurel Croissant (eds)*

Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder CO, 2019

Reviewed by Michael Evans

The field of civil–military relations is an important part of interdisciplinary strategic studies. Yet it is one in which most research is narrowly conceived and often concerned with relations between political systems on one hand and the armed forces on the other. There is far less research conducted on military interaction with civil bureaucracies in producing strategy or with the outcomes of military effectiveness.

During the Cold War era, much of the civil–military relations literature from Samuel Huntington through Morris Janowitz to Amos Perlmutter was concerned with what American scholar, Peter Feaver defined in the mid-1990s as the ‘civil–military