

# Peter Singer and the Bover Boys

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Peter Singer

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AUSTRALIA HAS BECOME INSULAR, almost snarlingly narcissistic, in the face of contemporary global debates. This shrinking inwards is happening while globalisation profoundly redefines the world. It is as if the country is curling up inside some 1950s nostalgia and hoping that huge issues — such as forging a respected role for itself in the world — will be resolved without any input from the very people who will be the inheritors of the Howard government's arrogant disdain for criticism of its foreign policies (including from those who may be victims of Australian participation in a US-led war against Iraq). Foreign policy debates and the philosophical contexts in which they arise have been shutting down in Australia. Here is another casualty in the stupidly self-defeating cultural wars that are being waged by certain born-again 'conservatives' who are trying to take over the ideological orientation of the federal government. Under Howard, this ratbagery has gained considerable influence.

That the world may be changing in ways that will sideline the prevailing orthodoxy in Australia was demonstrated in perhaps the finest foreign policy book to come out of Australia in 2001: Alan Dupont's *East Asia Imperilled: Transnational Challenges to Security*. That book persuasively documents how things such as population growth, deforestation, pollution, climate change, food scarcities, unregulated movements of (sometimes desperate) peoples, transnational crime (including drugs trafficking) and the spread of diseases such as AIDS will all be far greater contributors to conflict in the East and South-East Asian region than modern sovereign states conducting conventional diplomacy. Moreover, these matters — daunting in their dimensions and significance — will all require massive new levels of regional and global cooperation simply to hold their invidious consequences at current levels, much less resolve them. But Dupont's warnings seem not to be understood by the ratbag chatterers and their cronies.

So what, to date, has been the response from the current orthodoxy among Australia's foreign policy commentators to

philosopher Peter Singer's first book since he moved from Monash University to the Ivy League world of Princeton University? Note here that not only has Professor Singer quit Australia, but he has won a plum academic posting in the USA, suggesting that he is more valued outside than inside his native country. There is no better way of getting up the noses of the populists back home than succeeding overseas. Astute prophets are indeed without honour in their own land, particularly Australia. We can expect Singer to be punished whenever possible for so palpably letting his light shine forth rather than hiding it under a bushel of increasingly unread right-wing publications.

Sure enough, Greg Sheridan, arch-conservative foreign affairs editor for *The Australian*, weighed into the new Singer book in an orgulous display of vitriol that is as extraordinary for its nastiness to Singer as it is for its hostility towards universities and their scholars. Paul Sheehan followed Sheridan with a predictably populist attack on the book for daring to question the viability of a states-based international political system and Australia's craven adherence to the US alliance.

Ever since the badly titled 'Peace of Westphalia' (1648), there has been a gentlemen's agreement that states will not intervene in each other's internal (sovereign) affairs. This has been the dominant paradigm in foreign policy analysis. Singer challenges this paradigm comprehensively, and with immense intellectual courage. Many of the world's foreign policy experts — but not the Aussie bover boys — are now seriously considering, and acting on, exactly what Singer is imploring us to think about in ethical terms. The December 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and States Sovereignty has persuasively demonstrated that there are profound humanitarian, human rights and global security grounds for state sovereignty to be limited. (Even John Howard seems to be in broad agreement with this proposal, given his desire to limit Saddam Hussein's sovereign rights as head of state.) But it is this issue of state sovereignty that is the major sticking point in Singer's highly readable book. Far from decrying his questioning of state sovereignty, we should be applauding him for it. States have never been what they pretend to be, and it is time to question their usefulness in a globalising future.

Let us briefly list some of the elements implicit in Singer's case. First, the historical sociology of the modern state is overwhelmingly one of ruling élite and class domination of the many by the few. This is even true in the so-called 'advanced democracies', which are more accurately identifiable as liberal capitalist configurations, rather than as constitutional and representational structures nurturing equality, participation and community (e.g. even in all the 'advanced

democracies', where the majority of citizens are female, the parliamentary systems are still dominated by men).

Second, the 'national interests' that allegedly define states' interactions in the international system usually reflect the narrow interests of those dominant élites or classes (or a particular party or dictator), even where this means widespread suffering among the masses (e.g. Mao's Great Leap Forward, Stalin's purges, the Kurds in Saddam Hussein's Iraq).

Third, the convention that states' sovereignty is inviolable is more often breached than respected, pointing to the fact that big states always defy international law (be it Westphalia or its successors) to promote their national interests. States matter in the international system only when they are capable of being convincingly minatory or belligerent.

Fourth, it is arguable that the post-Westphalian system has caused some of the worst warfare known to humankind — for example, two world wars in the twentieth century. Indeed, the main impetus for the European Union, which requires significant dilution of the sovereignties of member states, comes precisely from war-generating fault lines (state boundaries) established by the post-Westphalian state system in Europe.

Fifth, the modern state system may be viewed as the prime cause of the huge inequalities that characterise the contemporary globe and threaten its security — for example, through distributional failures caused by exclusive MFN trade agreements, tariffs, subsidies to uncompetitive producers (especially in agriculture) and strategic global alliances that exclude needy peoples.

Sixth, many 'new' (post-colonial) states in Asia and Africa reflect these limitations (sometimes more intensely than in more established or stable states), but they are also struggling to maintain state boundaries bequeathed to them by former colonial administrations. These boundaries frequently encompass ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic and regional pluralities that undermine 'national unity'. The result can be so-called 'broken-backed' states (e.g. when Bangladesh separated from Pakistan), or 'weak' states where incompetence and corruption flourish (e.g. contemporary Indonesia).

Singer also takes the US superpower to task for being the most selfish, wanton, extravagant, threatening and polluting state on earth. The ethical ramifications of this shocking reality need to be judged alongside any claims that the 'Pax Americana' is good for the world. When we do so, the USA comes out of it looking very ugly indeed.

Singer's lucid ethical enquiry demands that we focus intelligently and independently on selfish states and rogue-like super-states. Maybe we Australians, with our wealth of multicultural experience, have something to say to a globalising world about such matters. But we need to pay more attention to books like this one, rather than to ranting ideological curmudgeons of the Revivalist Right, if our country is going to be heard — and respected — in the great debates about globalisation.