

# Fool's gold

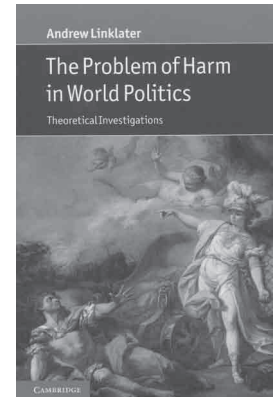
*The ubiquity of violent and non-violent harm*

N.A.J. Taylor

THE PROBLEM OF HARM IN WORLD POLITICS:  
THEORETICAL INVESTIGATIONS

by Andrew Linklater

Cambridge University Press, \$35.95 pb, 320 pp, 9780521179843



Violent and non-violent harm is endured, inflicted, and internalised by all people at different times, and to varying degrees. It was Cicero who is believed to have first posited that the main obligation human beings have is to refrain from harming one another, and that any unnecessary act of doing so renders that person an enemy of the human race.

Violent harm most commonly refers to inter- and intra-state conflict, such as war and terrorism. While the use of force is variously exerted by states, the practice of harm in modern warfare also allows for variable deployments of force through the adherence to domestic and international harm conventions, the targeting of civilians, the use of weapons that cause unnecessary, disproportionate, or inhumane suffering, and even the psychological effects of deploying biological, nuclear, or chemical weapons. The challenges of those conventions are especially acute in modern times, where states are increasingly combating non-state groups, and the weapons of warfare have included commercial planes, robots, and the manipulation of the weather.

Non-violent harm such as industrial pollution has the capacity to injure and damage humans as well as non-human species and the natural environment. What is unique about such harm is its tendency to both injure and damage over time, irrespective of political and social boundaries. Quite often, either the actors involved or their actions result in a localised activity producing transboundary – or even global – effects.

Over the past few decades, human-

ity has increasingly come to see the treacherous consequences of violent and non-violent harm on the natural environment. Writing in 1989, the environmental activist Bill McKibben pithily remarked that, 'What was once considered nature is now merely an artificial approximation, changed forever.' McKibben's observation is most brutally evident in sites of industrial production such as the ancient copper mine located near Huelva in southern Spain, which the indigenes named 'red river' because of its disastrous environmental effects. Originally operated by the Spanish government, the mine had supplied the Phoenicians, ancient Greeks, Carthaginians, and the Roman Empire. Its copper paid for Carthage's numerous wars on Rome and was held by both Scipio and Hannibal. However, believing they could extract yet more from the earth, in 1873 a group of opportunistic foreign investors, equipped with modern techniques and machines that favoured mining aboveground, acquired it from the Spanish government.

What exists there today is a fifty-eight-mile-long river flowing through one of the world's largest deposits of pyrite, or fool's gold. Because of the mine, the river has a pH reading similar to that of automobile battery acid, and contains virtually no oxygen in its lower depths. In the late 1980s, temporary flooding dissolved a power substation, a mandibular crusher, and several hundred yards of transport belts. More recently, the *LA Times* reported that NASA astrobiologists are using the conditions of the river to replicate the conditions of Mars. 'If you remove the

green,' one of them remarked, 'it looks like Mars.' The thinking goes that if something could live in such an acidic river, then there is likely to be life on Mars too. Whether humans relocate to Mars or stay on earth, the grand irony is that future peoples will have to adapt to equally 'natural' environments.

Both violent and non-violent harm are individually and collectively internalised in our political consciousness. For instance, ongoing peaceful 'Occupy' protests on Wall Street and elsewhere, as well as the violent displays of the London riots in 2011, are all manifestations of a broader frustration towards the rampant combination of flows – of people, goods, services, capital, technologies, ideas, news, images, and data – that are having unintended, uncontrollable, and, in many cases, irreversible effects on human and non-human species, as well as the natural environment.

Because violent and non-violent harm, and its internalisation, are so ubiquitous, the avoidance of unnecessary harm and suffering is one of the most realistic and achievable of all cosmopolitan ethical ideals. In *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations*, Andrew Linklater seeks to examine whether, if at all, the practice of harm has become a key moral and political question for humanity, as well as to ask whether Enlightenment ideals have made enough change to justify the claim that the modern states-system reduces harm.

In so doing, Linklater returns to the question of what actors should – and do – have the authority to resolve, as well

as to develop, monitor, and enforce the protocols and procedures necessary for governing the practice of harm in world politics. Indeed, Linklater's abiding interest has been the origins, meaning, and implications of the modern form of political community: the state. In *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, he once again questions that claim and, more specifically, its normative dimensions. He therefore asks what we each may reasonably claim from others. Is it a mere negative duty, for example, to do no harm to others, or is there a more positive obligation to actively assist others subjected to harm? Linklater clearly favours the argument presented in Joel Feinberg's *Harm to Others* (1984), in which it is argued that the obligation to avoid harm extends from proscriptions regarding killing, assault, exploitation, and so on to rescuing others in certain circumstances.

At times, Linklater's moral and legal philosophising demands of the reader a significant degree of abstract theorising. However, Linklater is one of the few

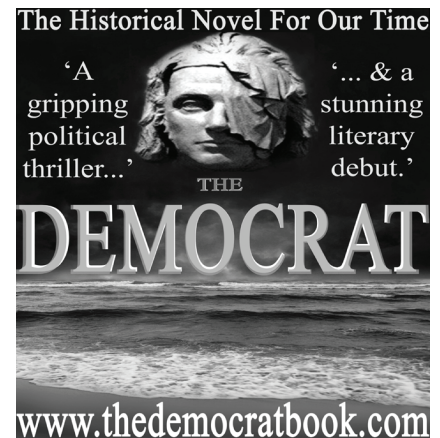
international political theorists noted for contextualising his 'ground clearing' abstractions with the judicious use of case studies and empirical evidence. He is especially noted for his adoption of the 'immanent critique': the locating of his analysis within the orthodoxy, a strategy that results in his routinely engaging with historical accounts of the world. The result is a monograph with considerable relevance for both policy wonks and lay readers, as well as sufficient depth for critical researchers.

This puts Linklater in direct conflict with the dominant schools of thought in International Relations such as neo-liberalism and neo-realism, which in essence both contend that, in the absence of a world government, conflict among and between states is inevitable. This logic of anarchy results in either cooperation in the view of liberals, or perpetual conflict in the view of realists.

Overall, Linklater is evidently at the height of his powers when theorising harm, a fact no doubt driving his decision to pursue a further two volumes in

this study. Sadly for Australia, however, Monash University was unable to retain him in the mid-1990s, and he has since worked in Britain. Thankfully he maintains particularly close links with staff at the Australian National University, the University of Queensland, and Deakin University. ■

**N.A.J. Taylor** is a doctoral researcher at the University of Queensland, writing on the practice of harm in modern warfare. He also blogs for *Al Jazeera*.



HARNESS THE POWER OF  
THE WRITTEN WORD

UNIVERSITY OF  
CANBERRA

AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL UNIVERSITY

Words define our lives. We use them to engage, enchant, encourage, entertain, educate, inform and inspire. Success in every career depends on our ability to think creatively and express our ideas.

The writing program at the University of Canberra is a national leader in teaching writing. The focus is on creative and narrative works, including fiction, poetry, writing for young people, the screen, the web, non-fiction and narrative journalism. The associated Writing Research Cluster conducts both practice-led and conventional research.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

**T** 1800 UNI CAN (864 226)  
**E** [study@canberra.edu.au](mailto:study@canberra.edu.au)  
**www** [canberra.edu.au/faculties/arts-design/creative-writing](http://canberra.edu.au/faculties/arts-design/creative-writing)

UC1010 CRICOS #00212K