

Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk, *World in Transition: Evolving Governance across a Stressed Planet* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009)

Emilian Kavalski
University of Western Sydney

The need to develop sustainable and resilient governance mechanisms has plagued scholars, policy-makers and publics for several decades. Traditionally, such frameworks for coordinated decision-making have been associated with the problem of war. Yet in recent years both the recognition of and the proliferation of complex challenges emerging from the interconnectedness between local and transnational realities, between markets, migration, trafficking, and social movements, and between pandemics, a looming energy crisis, and climate change have tested the ability to comprehend and address convincingly their turbulence. Such risks have disturbed not only the assumption of a predictable model of world politics, but equally importantly they have also unsettled the accepted ways in which international affairs have been explained and understood. In this respect, the study of global governance seems to have been undergoing an intense and oftentimes troubled reflection on the validity and relevance of its theories, methods, and propositions. At the same time, the proliferation of a diverse set of new (or previously overlooked) issues on the political stage has urged such reconsiderations of the study of politics to promptly produce explanatory frameworks that can offer germane responses to the emerging challenges.

The complex reality of global life reveals sharp discontinuities to which modern, large-scale international actors (such as states and international organizations) are increasingly vulnerable. What appears to confound the imagination is the increase in uncertainty and randomness, which staggers decision-making rationality; in other words, it is “perennially vulnerable to failure” (p. 531). This is the context in which Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk want to make an intervention. Their book proffers an original reconsideration of established governance models and practices, by pioneering an evolutionary approach to governance, prioritizing the enhancement of adaptive and reflexive modes of decentralized policy-making. Premised on the nexus between biological and cultural development of human societies, Camilleri and Falk emphasize the increasing “complexification” of global life. This process draws attention to a series of phase-transitions that animate the evolutionary process. According to the book’s analysis, the underlying characteristic of these different stages is the ever deepening “psychological reflexivity,” whose contextual interactions “give shape and content to the sociality and governance in each of the main phases that have thus far characterized the human trajectory” (p. 65).

A central task of Camilleri and Falk’s endeavor is the development of resilient strategies that are able “to provide governance advice in the face of uncertainty” (p.

297). Such an effort reveals a marked departure from the traditional literature on global governance which tends to simplify the turbulence of global life for decision-making tractability. The contention is that more often than not mainstream approaches distort the reality of complex challenges in order to suggest predictable and controllable models for their solution. By offering an alternative reading of the global governance problematic, Camillieri and Falk demonstrate that the simplifying discourses on global governance remain analytically frozen, while the dynamics of global life are not. Their claim is that during the twentieth century – and in particular in the wake of World War II – a whole range of economic, political, social, and cultural processes were unleashed which gradually contributed to the erosion of the institutional efficacy of states. This does not mean that states are no longer important actors on the world stage, but their centrality was no longer accepted as a given.

Consequently, multilateral governance arrangements were consistently challenged by “the powerful pressures exerted by the market, and increasingly by civil society” (p. 144), which has led to the proliferation of ad-hoc arrangements, bottom-up approaches, and non-governmental agency in global life. The erudite account of Camillieri and Falk tackles directly this ever increasing complexity of global life. Thus, by developing an evolutionary perspective, their investigation is able to offer a meaningful engagement with the cognitive and policy multiplicity of global governance and its contexts. Their approach intimates governance mechanisms defined by the ability to cope with vulnerabilities, defy adversity, and construct new proficiency in response to the uncertainty, cognitive challenges, and complex risks emerging from the unpredictable alterations in global life. Moreover, Camillieri and Falk argue that the turbulence of current international patterns suggests the emergence of a “holoreflexive epoch” in human evolution. According to them, this new epoch reflects “a stage in human evolution that is for the first time distinctly possible, though by no means certain... [and which] characterizes and sustains several of the most significant normative, legal, and institutional shifts to have emerged during this period of transition” (p. 530).

The breadth and scope of the Camillieri and Falk’s exploration makes it a valuable reference resource for anyone interested in the study of governance under the conditions of an uncertain global life. As the authors indicate the question of “how to devise a pathway for continuing human adaptation” has, is, and will always remain the central concern of societies and communities around the world. Yet, the response will vary from one place and time to another owing to different circumstances and challenges. In this respect, Camillieri and Falk’s endeavor offers a valuable indication of the ways in which current generations can engage meaningfully in designing resilient and sustainable governance mechanisms. In this respect, their book is likely to enrich the endeavors of both students and scholars of political science, history, philosophy, and governance studies.