The third relationship discussed in Avicenna’s interpretation of Aristotle is the form–matter relationship. It is the Muslim philosopher’s most original discussion and in which Bloch perceives a materialism that reaches out to Marx, anticipation not found in Aristotle. Traditionally, form is seen as the superior primordial element; matter is passive and subordinate. Bloch designates this line of thinking as “right-wing” Aristotelianism. By contrast, the “left-wing” Aristotelian strand, proposed by Avicenna’s interpretation, conceives of matter as “an active collaborator without which form has no traction” (xvi). In Aristotle’s metaphysics, matter was completely “indeterminate …, unformed…, and completely separate from the acting form” (20). Avicenna perceives matter as active and predisposed depending on the recipient’s active intellect/rational reason and preparedness. For Bloch, this is a major shift from the absolute fixity of “right-wing” interpretation of Aristotle, embraced by Christian Scholastics and Thomas Aquinas, according to whom God or the supernatural has imposed on the world view.

In the midst of worldwide Islamophobia and the coronavirus pandemic, Ernst Bloch and Avicenna’s interpretation of Aristotle offer a glimpse of hope and perhaps utopia. Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left sheds light on the Muslim philosopher-doctor’s contribution to a unified discipline of philosophy and science. This book could not have been published at more auspicious times than the 2020s. Perhaps a combination of both science and philosophy might enlighten our approach to our contemporary geopolitics, cultural politics, and the pandemic.


This very short introduction reconsiders international relations from diverse and multidisciplinary perspectives, critically and analytically. Rather than viewing the subject from within external forces that have been the traditional approach to the discipline, *International Relations* looks at the subject from within “the global organization of political authority, and on the human and environmental consequences of such organization” (1). The book examines questions regarding the origin and organization of political authority, which sometimes guaranteed human well-being, but at other times created hierarchies and exclusions. Given the global historical changes that have shaped the twentieth century, Christian Reus-Smit also reassesses the limits of sovereign authority, human rights, and environmental issues. He opens up the discussion of political authority, in light of post-industrial developments, the demise of traditional Empires, and questions of cultural diversity and environmental biodiversity.
International Relations is in eight chapters, with an abstract preceding each chapter, a feature useful to new students to the discipline. Reus-Smit also provides a glossary, a list of references, a suggested list for further reading, and an index. With over 200 sovereign states worldwide, the author tries to untangle independency and connectivity among states within the global system. From this perspective, the contemporary world includes not only sovereign states, but also world organizations, transnational actors, and non-sovereign entities that challenge political authorities worldwide.

Chapter two is an overview of the ways social and political life has been historically organized via institutions, norms, and practices. In chapter three, Reus-Smit demystifies six political theories vis-à-vis international relations. He clarifies how theory allows us to navigate global, and often shifting, international relations; this is timely since questions of ethnicities, race, and inequality have recently been generating violence across the globe. In addition to the theories of realism, liberalism, constructivism, and the English School, Reus-Smit surveys the contemporary concerns of feminism and post-colonialism. Chapter four deals with how war has impacted international relations profoundly throughout history, and how instrumental war was in bringing about the modern nation-states of Europe. Chapter five tackles economics. Insisting on the mutual interdependency of politics and economics, the author touches on three major issues regarding contemporary global economics in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. These comprise mainly the changes in trade processes; the revolution in communication systems and technological development; and the reversal of economic resources and distributions from the West to the East. He believes that this is a turning point, ushering the “end of the American century and the beginning of the Asian” (64).

Human rights is the focus of chapter six, and chapter seven speaks to the influence of culture on the organization of political authority at large. Here again, Reus-Smit insists that the rise of human rights in the aftermath of World War II is central to how the globalization of political authority has been shaped. Not only have individual struggles helped aid the rehabilitation of Empire to the modern nation-state, but they also have affected the legal and international codification of human rights, a norm that delimits political authority, and sometimes mobilizes resistance to it (84).

What is culture? How do we take into consideration the rise of China, India, and other political authorities in the global South? Chapter seven seeks to answer these questions by suggesting a more expansive definition of culture. Tapping into anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, Reus-Smit opts for the broader ethical underpinnings of the term that takes into account “cultural diversity as the norm” and underscores the “shared ideas, beliefs, norms, and values,” as they are expressed and embodied in multiple forms (103). Given culture’s complexity,
heterogeneity, and contradictory nature, the question remains open-ended as to the ability of the existing political authorities to manage cultural diversity within the old and newly emerging paradigms of contemporary political authorities. 

*International Relations* is an excellent addition to the list of Oxford’s of very short introductions. It would be a good primer for undergraduates and the core curriculum.