Ice and fire: what Game of Thrones can teach us about power politics

Panelists at Washington's Cato Institute discussed what real-world lessons could be drawn from the complexities and ambiguities of the show's political feuds

Paul Owen

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As the latest season of Game of Thrones comes to an end, it's clear that the HBO juggernaut – which tells the story of feuding families in a fictionalised medieval Europe – has gone the way of The Wire before it and moved off the screen and into weightier arenas.

A two-day academic conference about the fantasy epic will be held at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK next month, following on the heels of a similar Ohio State University event a couple of years ago. And on Monday night, the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington drew together panelists from thinktanks and the media to delve into the complexities and ambiguities of the show's politics.

The panelists eased themselves in by giving their verdicts on the latest season, which, despite record viewing figures, was criticised for its breakneck pacing.

"It's been much faster, much more plot-driven and much more cinematic," said Peter Suderman of the libertarian Reason magazine. "At the same time I think it lacks some of the nuanced, methodical character-driven pacing of previous seasons."

Pop culture writer Alyssa Rosenberg of the Washington Post, a keen reader of the sprawling novels by George RR Martin the show is based on, said: "It made me feel foolish for having taken the texts seriously – most importantly for having taken seriously the idea that there was an underlying magical set of rules and structures that was supposed to be emerging over the course of the novels that would perhaps be surprising but would make the world of the show make sense."

But the panel wasn't there for TV criticism, and moderator Caleb Watney of the free-market R Street Institute quickly steered them on to the thorny question of why Westeros, the imaginary continent where the show takes place, has seemingly endured 8,000 years of economic stagnation.

"The last major economic development that we're aware of us is the invention of steel when the Andals invaded about 6,000 years ago," he said. "In the meantime [in the real world] we've invented driverless cars, 2,000 years after the invention of steel."

Why?

"Westeros does have several factors that economic theorists and historians point to as slowing down growth," said Ilya Somin of the Cato Institute. "One is actually longstanding political unity. For hundreds or thousands of years the Targaryens dominated Westeros with a single unified state, and historically, competition between states, like in early modern Europe, for example, has been important to economic development."

Referring to the cadre of stuffy, aged scholars in the show, he added: "The institution of the maesters probably is a problem. They monopolise intellectual development and scientific thought."

But Matt Yglesias of Vox felt the answer could be found in one of Martin's most distinctive and memorable images – the unpredictable seasons that can last many years and inspire the fatalistic warning of the first episode: "Winter is coming."

"Probably a huge amount of the savings and planning that exists is very narrowly focused on trying to preserve food for the winters," said Yglesias. "It's hard to develop the kind of agricultural surpluses that would let you have cities and specialisation of labour when you not only need to grow enough food to feed people but you need to grow enough food to feed people through an unknown, no-harvest, three, four, six, I mean we don't even know how long these winters last. You can imagine that would be really devastating to urban life."

Somin did point out that not every aspect of Westerosi life had stagnated. Recounting some of the most-mocked plot points in the recent episodes, he said there had been "an unanticipated burst of technological development, such as ravens that fly at the speed of light, or Euron mass-producing a thousand ships within a few months, or armies moving at the speed of world war two Panzer divisions".

The second world war came up again when Watney asked whether Daenerys Targaryen, the "dragon queen" who has spent most of the series plotting to reclaim her crown, should have used her fearsome beasts to destroy the capital King's Landing and instantly end the war, a potential strategy Watney likened to the US's use of nuclear bombs against Japan.

Suderman said he was leaning towards no. "So much of the show is not just concerned with the taking of power but with establishing that it is legitimate," he said. "Part of the reason why she hesitates, a big part, is because she wants to establish herself as a legitimate ruler who is accepted by the people of this world, and if you go and use dragon-fire to destroy even a small part of King's Landing that's something that people are going to remember and it's going to make it much harder to rule in the aftermath."

Somin disagreed, noting that the dragons gave Daenerys an enormous advantage over her enemies and could in fact be used with some precision.

"This is a sufficiently obvious strategy that a competent military or political strategist should have just suggested it to Daenerys and she should have readily agreed," he said. "The only

reason why they adopt Tyrion's over-complicated plan [instead] is that that's one of the only ways to make this part of the plot interesting."

But, he mused, perhaps there was a "hidden feminist message" here. Daenerys had been forced to leave behind her lover and "best military strategist", Daario. "He said, 'Why are you leaving me behind? A king would have no problem bringing a mistress with him, so why shouldn't a queen have the same rights?' She's like, 'No, I can't afford to do this. The nobility of Westeros wouldn't like it. I have to leave open the possibility of a political marriage.'

"So because there's this sexist double-standard that Daenerys has to accommodate herself to, many, many lives are lost."

During the 75-minute debate, the panelists seemed to coalesce around the idea that the real problem in Westeros was that there was too much focus on personalities, and not enough on political institutions.

"There's a lot of talk about breaking the wheel but there's really little analysis of what the wheel is made of, what it would take to break it, and what you build in its place," said Rosenberg.

Somin agreed. "It seems like Daenerys's thinking about what that system will be like hasn't progressed beyond: 'I will be on the throne and I will not be a bad person like my father was, like Cersei is, like these other people are.'"

But he felt that our own world was not immune to that sort of thinking. "You can see it even today in liberal-democratic societies where candidates promise us things like 'I will bring change you can believe in,' or 'You give me power, I only can do it, I'll solve your problems.' That's a better and easier campaign strategy than 'I will build some good institutions' ... That doesn't fit into your 30-second ad very well."

Nevertheless, the show has long led viewers to expect a conclusion where one of the lead characters ends up sitting on the Iron Throne, the royal seat of power forged from melted swords. So who most deserved to sit on that uncomfortable-looking chair?

Yglesias made the case for the Night King, the show's icy arch-villain, the leader of an implacable army of zombies that some have claimed is a metaphor for climate change.

"It's possible that the Night King is going to come down to King's Landing, he's going to raise a lot of the points that we have here," said Yglesias.

"'You know, you guys need to really think about the structure of your society.' He seems to have things pretty well together, as far as we can tell, up north."