

GRENPEC Book Reviews:

The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at its Centenary

Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan
Cambridge University Press (2019)

*Reviewed by Scott Robert Patterson**

The history of International Relations is rife with contention. From the founding “myth” of 1919 to the great debates, there are many devices used to capture the discipline’s unfolding over time. While many of these accounts acknowledge the enduring problem of Western-centrism, Acharya and Buzan’s “The Making of Global International Relations” provides a compelling disciplinary history that takes this legacy head on.

Acharya and Buzan state three goals at the onset. First, they aim to challenge the centenary myth of IR’s origin and offer an alternative narrative of layered development. Second, they reinforce this narrative with rich historical and geographic context that emphasizes the discipline’s relationship to practice. Third, they advance a *global* account of the history of IR that desegregates non-Western contributions from the discipline’s etiology.

The book proceeds through a series of coupled chapters that use Buzan and Schouenborg’s (2018) concept of Global International Society (GIS) to set the institutional development of IR within the context of international politics over the last two centuries. The authors systematically highlight the geographic dispersion of IR’s intellectual debts by giving even footing to scholarship in “core” and “peripheral” regions, a distinction that diminishes as the years progress. To do so, the authors take seriously the work of political leaders and public intellectuals, whose contributions – though made outside of the academy - “shaped subsequent academic developments in both core and periphery” (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 6).

Navigating the selection of secondary literature was no small feat, given the global and historical breadth of the work. However, contextual devotion is requisite for the scholar who endeavors to challenge the many heads of Western-centrism. After diagnosing the contemporary status of international order, the authors conclude with a guide for how to make IR more global. Acharya

and Buzan preach what they practice, as the guide reads like a replication manual for their own work.

The Making of Global International Relations succeeds in its stated goals, and in doing so, it makes two interrelated contributions to our understandings of peaceful change. First, the authors provide a compelling history of the discipline that challenges lingering parochialism and that builds on previous disciplinary histories without reifying their myths. The authors use GIS as a lens to segment the last two centuries into three constituent chunks: Western-Colonial (GIS 1.0), Western-Dominant (GIS 1.1), and Deep Pluralism (GIS 1.2). Movement through these stages highlights instances of meaningful change in unique ways. For example, by stretching GIS 1.0 from the long 19th century through the end of the second world war, the authors illustrate the continuities of international order – namely in the endurance of colonial systems – through the interwar period. The disruption to colonial apparatus at the end of the second world war marked the most meaningful instance of change in the international order to date, and thus indicated a rupture in international order.

GIS is a model meant to meet a high watermark for historical rigor – a standard that is “authentically grounded in world history, rather than in Western history, and in the ideas, institutions, intellectual perspectives and practices of both Western and Non-Western societies” (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 302). The authors spend little time relaying the specifics of GIS at the onset, a detail that leaves them open to criticism. However, since the model was developed more fully in a prior volume, criticism of the historical underpinnings should be addressed elsewhere.

Second, and more importantly, the authors provide a positive outline for how scholars can promote peaceful change by “doing” Global IR. The authors characterize the present day as a moment of profound change marked by a declining West, the rise of new centers of power and legitimacy, an elevated significance of non-state actors, and the growing salience of shared-fate issues, including pandemics and climate change. States will adapt differently to Deep Pluralism, and the way that they adapt will influence the likelihood of violence. The more states contribute to operational areas of global cooperation, the more likely the contemporary GIS can manage peaceful change. The alternative, where “great powers neglect the fact that they are locked into a

highly globalized context of interdependence and shared fates” is likely to precede the under-management of shared fates and conflict (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 282).

The concluding chapter calls for a “refounding” of IR to reflect the realities of the “globalized, deeply pluralist, post-Western world” (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 285). This refounding should openly enfranchise the voices excluded by Western dominance of the discipline’s theoretical agenda (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 298). Global IR builds upon the standing knowledge base while setting it more appropriately in context.

Throughout the book, the authors illustrate a dialectic between IR and current events. Reforming the discipline to reflect the realities of Deep Pluralism demonstrates how IR should be responsive to happenings in the world. At the same time, scholars can exert a reciprocal influence, given that IR “prioritises some things over others, and adds labels and concepts [...] that in turn influence how people understand the world they are in and therefore shapes how they act” (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 7). If the discipline embraces Acharya and Buzan’s call to Global IR, it makes the transition to Deep Pluralism more likely to be peaceful. Failure to do so may mark the discipline’s descent into parochial irrelevance.

Locating the present day within historical context is always risky and it remains to be seen how these predictions will bear out. However, one component that is unlikely to age well is the characterization of great power behavior under GIS 1.2 as “autistic” (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 270). While great powers may behave as the authors describe, to associate problematic state behavior with the autism spectrum is likely to alienate potential readers who are affected by autism. As a heuristic, it may be useful to consider if a classroom of university students would feel comfortable adopting this terminology in their own research.

Acharya and Buzan have devoted much of their careers to combating conventional wisdom in International Relations. This work is invaluable not only as a disciplinary history, but also for its relevant diagnoses of the present international order. Despite certain terminology used to describe contemporary great power behavior, this book should top the reading list for new

scholars entering the field and for those seeking to understand how to grapple with historical and geographic context.

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