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The global transformation: history, modernity and the making of international relations

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Introduction

The Global Transformation and IR

During the 19th century, a ‘global transformation’ remade the basic structure of international order. This transformation was profound, involving a complex configuration of industrialization, rational state-building and ideologies of progress.¹ Because this transformation happened unevenly, it changed the distribution of power by generating a shift from a ‘polycentric world with no dominant centre’ to a ‘core-periphery’ order in which the centre of gravity resided in the West (Pomeranz, 2000: 4). Acquiring the new configuration meant undergoing wide-ranging political, economic and cultural transformations, and polities that underwent those transformations held enormous advantages over those that did not. Although oscillations of power are nothing new in human history (Morris, 2010), the global transformation opened up a vastly expanded pool of resources, making the power gap both much bigger and much more difficult to emulate. In this sense, as well as marking a shift in the distribution of power, the global transformation also changed the basic sources, or *mode of power*,² stimulating the emergence of global modernity.³

¹ By configuration, we mean a set of interlinked events and processes that concatenate in historically specific form. The basic assumption of this approach is that big events do not require big causes. Rather, social transformations arise from the conjunctural intersection of sequences of events and processes that are causally, but contingently, interrelated. On this issue, see Lebow (2010).

² By ‘mode of power’, we mean the material and ideational relations that are generative of both actors and the ways in which power is exercised. As we note above, during the global transformation, three dynamics (industrialization, rational statehood and ‘ideologies of progress’) combined to generate a new basis for how power was constituted, organized and expressed – we refer to this as a shift in the ‘mode of power’. *Contra* most IR approaches, changes in the mode of power are more significant than changes in the distribution of power, effecting not just outcomes, but the basis for how interactions take place and are understood. We consider the consequences of thinking about power in this way in chapter 10.

³ We outline what we mean by ‘global modernity’ later in this chapter. For now, it is worth noting that, for many social scientific disciplines, modernity serves as the basic foundation of their enquiry. In broadly Durkheimian terms, this transformation can be understood as a shift from social orders defined by stratificatory social differentiation to those dominated by functional differentiation. Stratification is about hierarchies of rank and class – it is characteristic of social orders defined by dynasticism and caste. Functional differentiation is about the coherence and interdependence of specialised types of activity, the creation of a complex division of labour, and the rise of legal, political, military, economic, scientific, religious, and other specialised roles. From this perspective, functional differentiation is the central characteristic of modernity

Global modernity pulled the world into a single system, within which the consequences of the changes in the mode and distribution of power were widely and deeply felt. The world had been an *economic international system* since the European voyages of discovery during the 15th and 16th centuries opened up sea-lanes around Africa, and across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (Buzan and Little, 2000: 96). Eurasia had been an economic system for two millennia. But the global ties binding such systems were thin, slow and limited in scope. Not until the 19th century did the world become a global system in which core states could quickly and decisively project the new mode of power around the world. In this way, multiple regional international systems were engulfed in a *full international system* in which all parts of the world were closely connected not just economically and culturally, but also in military-political terms (Buzan and Little, 2000; Osterhammel, 2014: 392-402).⁴

If the first effect of the global transformation was to foster the emergence of a full international system, the second effect was to generate a host of new actors: rational nation-states, transnational corporations, and standing intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations became leading participants in international affairs. Taken together, these changes in global structure and international actors meant that 'the nineteenth century saw the birth of international relations as we know it today' (Osterhammel, 2014: 393). Yet the discipline of IR pays surprisingly little attention to such changes. This book examines the reasons for IR's failure to grasp the full significance of the global transformation and argues that this shortcoming creates major problems for how the discipline understands both itself and its subject matter.

Our argument is that the global transformation generated four basic, but linked, types of change in international relations.

(see Buzan and Albert, 2010; Albert and Buzan, 2011; Albert, Buzan and Zürn, 2013).

⁴ This prompts a supplementary question about what 'international' means. Sociologists tend to avoid this question by thinking of society as a unitary construction, while world historians usually have little sense of 'the international' as a distinct realm. In IR, thinking about 'the international' tends to start, even if it does not finish, with the issue of political multiplicity, whether this is understood as the 'logic of anarchy', the 'problem of difference', or variants thereof. Our view, following Rosenberg (2006: 308), is that the international is 'that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the co-existence within it of more than one society'. Such a definition accepts the 'fact' of political multiplicity, but also stresses the importance of interactions between societies, whether these consist of the spread of ideas, the transfer of technologies, trading networks, security alliances, or practices of subjugation and emulation. The simultaneous existence of multiplicity *and* interactivity engenders a distinct field of enquiry – international relations.

1. Industrialization and the extension of the market to a global scale produced major increases in *interaction capacity*, bringing all parts of the international system into closer contact with each other.⁵ At the same time, the new mode of power associated with industrialization and marketization produced major inequalities between societies. The result was a system that was simultaneously both intensely connected and deeply divided.
2. The reconstitution of power associated with the emergence of modernity was sustained by processes of rational state-formation, in which capacities were both caged within nation-states and extended outwards into 'alien spaces'. Nation building went hand-in-hand with imperialism. The result was a bifurcated international system in which rule-based order was reserved for 'civilized' peoples, and territorial annexation rendered for 'barbarians' and 'savages'. This core-periphery structure took global form, sustained by a large and durable power gap between those most enabled by the configuration of global modernity and those most disadvantaged by it.
3. The new ideologies that rose to prominence during the 19th century, most notably liberalism, nationalism, socialism and 'scientific' racism, generated new entities, actors and institutions (e.g. settlers, civil society, limited companies) and either reconstituted old ones (e.g. the state), or undermined them (e.g. dynasticism). These ideologies, closely bound up with notions of progress, provided new legitimating strategies for how international relations was practiced.
4. The tripartite configuration that lay behind the global transformation (industrialization, rational state-building and ideologies of progress) not only generated a core-periphery global order, but also destabilized great power relations by exposing the balance of power to the pressures of rapid technological and social change, with the consequence of making balancing dynamics much more volatile. Concerns about the rise and fall of those powers that harnessed – or failed to harness – modernity began in the 19th century. This dynamic remains a major feature of great power relations in the contemporary world.

⁵ Interaction capacity is defined as the physical and organizational capability of a system to move ideas, goods, people, money and armed force across the system (Buzan and Little, 2000: 80-84). This issue is discussed in depth in chapter 3.

These changes need to be understood in relation both to what came before the global transformation and what came after. In terms of what came before, our argument is that the scale and depth of these changes amounted to a material and ideational transformation of the international system. The main changes that distinguish global modernity from previous periods in world history include the following:

- Agrarian political economies based on land as wealth, and with cycles of prosperity and famine based on harvests, were superseded by industrial political economies based on capitalist accumulation, and featuring boom and bust trade cycles. At the same time, rapid and frequent technological transformations replaced slow and intermittent technological changes.⁶
- Expectations of historical progress underpinned the emergence of industrial societies. New ideologies challenged personalized, composite polities and reshaped the territorial sovereign state by vesting sovereignty in the people and linking territory to the nation.
- Rational states legitimized by these ideologies replaced absolutist polities, developing new bureaucratic structures that increased infrastructural capacities and provided the means for extending state power both at home and internationally.
- The configuration of industrialization, rational state-building and ideologies of progress became the criteria by which great powers were defined.
- As a result of this new configuration, a relatively even distribution of global power was replaced by a radically uneven distribution of power in favour of the West.

The 19th century is thus close kin to the 20th and 21st centuries, and quite distinct from previous periods of world history.

The marginalization of the global transformation in IR sets the discipline on tenuous foundations. Indeed, it can be argued that the current benchmark dates around which IR is organized omit the principal dynamics that established the modern international order (Buzan and Lawson, 2014a). These benchmarks usually include: the opening of the

⁶ As graphically shown by Diamond (1998), there were enormous differences of technology both within and across the agrarian era. This period witnessed major technological developments from iron and guns to clocks and windmills, and it was also a time of major ideational developments, most notably the advent of the Axial Age religions. But while the agrarian era was far from 'static', its pace of change was both slower and less compressed than the rapid, incessant change that has marked the period since the 19th century. The revolutions of modernity accelerated historical development.

sea lanes from Europe to the Americas and the Indian Ocean in the late 15th century (Buzan and Little, 2000: 401-2); the emergence of modern notions of sovereignty codified in the Treaty of Augsburg and, it is often argued, reaffirmed in the Peace of Westphalia (Spruyt, 1994; Ikenberry, 2001; Philpott, 2001); the two World Wars and the Cold War as major contestations over world power during the 20th century (Lundestad, 2005; Mayer, 2010); and the shake-up to dynamics of polarity initiated by the end of the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 1990; Waltz, 2000; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008). These commonly held 'turning points' are not so much wrong as incomplete, under-theorized and cumulatively misleading (Buzan and Lawson, 2014a). They emphasize the distribution of power without focusing on the underlying mode of power. They pay little or no attention to changes in the density and connectedness of the international system. They focus on the impact of wars without examining the social developments that gave rise to them. And they omit the range of 19th century political, economic and ideological transformations that set in place core features of modern international relations. Once the magnitude of the changes initiated during the 19th century is recognized, it becomes clear that we are not living in a world where the principal dynamics are defined by the outcomes of 1500, 1648, 1919, 1945 or 1989. We are living now, and are likely to be living for some time yet, in a world defined predominantly by the downstream consequences of the 19th century global transformation. If IR is to gain a better grasp of its core areas of enquiry, this global transformation needs to become central to its field of vision.

Establishing the Argument: Six Assumptions and Two Claims

There are six main assumptions that underlie our claims. First, our understanding of the 19th century shares affinities to Eric Hobsbawm's (1987: 8) concept of 'the long 19th century', sandwiched between the 'Atlantic Revolutions' that began in America, France and Haiti on the one hand, and the First World War on the other. We include some aspects of modernity that were established during the late 18th century, but which matured principally in the 19th century (such as industrialization), and we also include some dynamics that are more associated with the early decades of the 20th century (such as changes in the organization of violence). As such, we use 'the long 19th century' as an analytical shorthand for a range of transformations that shaped the modern world. We show how much of IR's contemporary agenda stems from these changes and what benefits would accrue to IR from making the global transformation more central to its enquiries.

Second, as noted in the previous section, we understand the global transformation as constituted by three interlinked processes: industrialization, the rational state and ideologies of progress. By industrialization we mean both the commercialization of agriculture and the two-stage industrial revolution,⁷ which together generated an intensely connected global market. The extension of the market brought new opportunities for accumulating power, not least because of the close relationship between industrialization and dispossession. Indeed, industrialization in some states (such as Britain) was deeply interwoven with the forceful de-industrialization of others (such as India). By rational state-building, we mean the process by which administrative and bureaucratic competences were accumulated and ‘caged’ within national territories (Mann, 1988). This process was not pristine. Rather, as we show, processes rational state-building and imperialism were co-implicated. Finally, by ‘ideologies of progress’, we mean systematic schemas of thought, specifically modern liberalism, socialism, nationalism and ‘scientific’ racism, which were rooted in ideals of progress and, in particular, associated with Enlightenment notions of classification, improvement and control. Once again, there was a dark side to these ideologies – the promise of progress was linked closely to a ‘standard of civilization’ which, along with ‘scientific’ racism, served as the legitimating currency for coercive practices against ‘barbarians’ (understood as peoples with an urban ‘high culture’) and ‘savages’ (understood as peoples without an urban ‘high culture’) (Gong, 1984; Keene, 2002; Anghie, 2004; Suzuki, 2009; Hobson, 2012). These three components of the global transformation were mutually reinforcing. For example, European colonialism was legitimized by one or more of the ideologies of progress, and enabled through military superiority, mechanisms of state control and infrastructural developments that had their roots in industrialization.

Third, we emphasize the role played by inter-societal interactions in generating the global transformation. We reject the view that modernity was a uniquely European development arising from endogenous, self-generating civilizational qualities (e.g. Jones, 1981; Landes, 1998; North *et al.*, 2009). We do so primarily on empirical grounds – as later chapters show, these claims do not stand up to scrutiny. At the same time, there seems little point replacing unsatisfactory Eurocentric approaches with equally unsatisfying Sino-centric (e.g. Frank, 1998) or Eurasian-centric (e.g. Morris, 2013) explanations. Instead, we emphasize the ‘entangled histories’ and

⁷ The first stage was defined by iron and steam, the second by steel, electricity, chemicals, and internal combustion engines. Both stages are discussed in chapter 5.

‘multiple vectors’ that combined to vault Western states into a position of pre-eminence (De Vries, 2013: 46). Specifically, we highlight the ways in which the configuration of modernity, constituted by inter-societal processes, cohered in parts of north-western Europe during the long 19th century and thereafter sustained a core-periphery global order. Modernity was a global process both in terms of origins and outcomes, hence our preferred term: *global modernity*. We use global modernity rather than alternatives such as ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt, 2000) for two reasons: first, because the latter retains a sense of Europe as the original, definitive modern experience – it is analytically prior to the regional variations that are compared to it; and second, because the concept of multiple modernities rests on a comparison of internally driven modernities, mediated by cultural differences, rather than deriving from the transnational interconnections that produced the modern mode of power (Bhambra, 2007: 65-72 and 2013: 301-3; see also Blumi, 2012).

Fourth, modernity should be seen as a protracted, uneven process rather than as a singular moment of sharp discontinuity – there is no hard-and-fast distinction to be made between modern and pre-modern eras (Teschke, 2003: 43, 265). It is important to note that capitalism as a term did not attain wide currency until the 1860s, while agriculture, sailing ships and non-carbon based production remained important components of almost every economy deep into the 20th century. Many agrarian social hierarchies proved resilient – the nobility, gentry and landholding classes remained influential throughout the 19th century (Tombs, 2000: 30-1; Bayly, 2004: 451). And empires were not weakened but rebooted by the power differentials ushered in by the global transformation, remaining a central site of political authority up to, and in some cases beyond, the Second World War (Darwin, 2007; Burbank and Cooper, 2010: 20-1; Ballatyne and Burton, 2012: 285-6). In similar vein, we are not arguing that there was a single modern project that was instituted around the world, nor that modernity represents a necessary stage in a linear historical storyline, and still less that the 19th century contained a nascent ‘modernity formula’ that was waiting to be realised (Blumi, 2012: 4, 175). In many respects, our argument is the reverse of these claims – modernity was a contingent concatenation of social forces, a complex jumble of myriad events and processes. Once this concatenation had formed, it constituted a mode of power that contained massive transformative potential. This mode of power had deep roots, some of which went back centuries. But it was only in the 19th century that the whole package coalesced in a small group of polities from where both its effect (a revolutionary configuration in the mode of power) and its challenge (how other societies responded to this

configuration) became the principal dynamic through which international relations was conceived and practiced. As this book shows, these issues still define the basic structure of international relations and many of its principal issue-areas.

Fifth, we argue that the global transformation can be characterized by both the intensification of differential development and heightened interactions between societies. In other words, particular experiences of the configuration we highlight were accentuated by increasingly dense connections between societies. The result was 'differential integration' into global modernity (Halliday, 2002a). Intensified trade, improved transport and communication systems, and practices such as colonialism generated a denser, more integrated international order. As a consequence, levels of interdependence rose, making societies more exposed to developments elsewhere. However, during the 19th century, the development gap between societies opened more widely than ever before. Unevenness has always been a fact of historical development (Rosenberg, 2010), but never was unevenness experienced on this scale, with this intensity, or in a context of such close, inescapable interdependence. Those convinced of their cultural superiority and with access to advanced weapons, industrial production, medicine, and new forms of bureaucratic organization gained a pronounced advantage over those with limited access to these sources of power. After around 1800, these dynamics fostered a substantial power gap between a handful of 'core' polities and a much larger group of 'peripheral' polities. In principle, this power gap could be closed: those with access to the configuration that sustained the global transformation could move from periphery to core. In practice, this move was made exceptionally difficult not only by the depth of the transformative package, but also by practices of imperialism and other forms of coercive interventionism that reinforced the advantages of the core. The result was the formation of a core-periphery international order in which the leading edge was located in the West. This hierarchical international order lasted from the early 19th century until the early years of the 21st century. In the contemporary world, it is being replaced by a more decentred global order in which those states that were once on the receiving end of the global transformation are employing its mode of power to reassert their position in international society.

Finally, we do not use the terms 'core' and 'periphery' along the lines popularized by world systems analysts, i.e. as an 'axial division of labour' premised on unequal exchange between a low profit, high-competition, labour-intensive periphery and a high profit, quasi-monopolistic, capital-intensive core (Wallerstein, 2011a: xiv). First, we see the dividing line between core and periphery as premised on access

to the entire modern configuration of power (industrialization, rational statehood and ideologies of progress) rather than just one aspect of it. Second, Wallerstein's view is too homogenising: there are peripheries in the core and cores in the periphery – the geography of capitalism is lumpier than Wallerstein and his colleagues allow (Galtung, 1971). Third, we do not follow world systems analysts in seeing historical development as a cycle or wave, lasting roughly 50 years, in which capitalist accumulation goes through certain elemental stages: monopoly, competition, falling prices, reduced profits, stagnation, geographical relocation, incorporation of resistance, and the emergence of new monopolies (Wallerstein, 2011a: xiv). This analytic is premised on a reproductive logic (a system of permanently unequal exchange in which surplus value is transferred from the periphery to the core) that has difficulty explaining movement from the periphery to the core, a process that, as we note above, is a central feature of contemporary international relations. Finally, in contrast to world systems theorists, our use of 'core' and 'periphery' is analytical rather than explanatory – we deploy these terms to delineate polities according to their relationship to the modern mode of power. This allows us to capture the central features of the core-periphery international order that emerged during the long 19th century and chart its partial erosion over recent decades.

These six assumptions produce two main claims. First, a set of dynamics established during the 19th century intertwined in a powerful configuration that reshaped the basis of international order in such a way as to define a new era. Second, this order not only transformed international relations during the long 19th century, it also underpins core aspects of contemporary international relations. As such, our contention is that the global transformation is central to understanding both the emergence of modern international relations and the principal features of contemporary international order. If this claim stands up, then IR needs to rethink many of its principal areas of interest and reconsider how it defines much of its contemporary agenda. As we show in the chapters that follow, many central concerns of the discipline, from dynamics of war-making to debates about the changing character of sovereignty, have their roots in the global transformation. Marginalizing modernity means that IR rests on unstable foundations.

Structure

Our argument unfolds in three sections. The first section establishes the foundations for the book as a whole. In chapter 1, we outline the principal features of the global transformation, showing how industrialization, the emergence of rational states and ideologies of

progress transformed the structure of international order during the long 19th century. This chapter also provides the basis for our claim that core aspects of contemporary international relations can be understood as an ongoing working-out of dynamics unleashed during this period. Our aim is not to make a novel theoretical argument regarding the causes of the global transformation – that would require a different book. Rather, we use scholarship in economic history, world history and historical sociology to build a composite picture of the global transformation, focusing on the ways in which its nexus of intertwined dynamics served to drive the development of modern international relations. We do not introduce these literatures as parallel tracks or providers of diverting background material. Rather, we synthesize these fields of enquiry, explicitly linking debates in IR to those in cognate disciplines. The result is a shared conversation about how to conceptualize, historicize and theorize global modernity.

Chapter 2 examines the ways in which IR scholarship currently approaches the 19th century. It is not our claim that *all* IR scholarship ignores the 19th century – it is relatively easy to find work that refers to the Concert of Europe or to the rise of the firm, and which interrogates the thought of 19th century figures such as Clausewitz, Marx and Nietzsche. However, for the most part, the global transformation is treated in one of three ways: as an absence; as a point of data accumulation; or as a fragment in a wider research program. As such, our intervention is motivated by the failure of IR as a *discipline* to understand the 19th century as home to a *systemic* transformation. We examine the reasons for this lacuna and establish why it creates difficulties for effective theorization of both the emergence and institutionalization of modern international relations.

The second section of the book provides the empirical ballast for our theoretical claims. Each chapter looks at a particular meme associated with international relations, in order to: a) show how this issue was transformed by 19th century developments and; b) trace the downstream effects of this transformation to the present day. The aim of these chapters is to highlight principal storylines and key processes that are crucial to how we think about international relations. In other words, we develop an analytical narrative that illustrates the significance of 19th century processes to 20th and 21st century international relations. Such an enterprise necessarily simplifies detail and compresses complexity. We make no attempt to compete with area studies and issue experts, or with those who carry out fine-tuned, granular historical analysis. There are, as there always must be in an exercise of this kind, historical gaps in our account. Our contribution is the overview itself, which we see as

providing stronger foundations for the discipline than any currently provided.

Chapter 3 focuses on the 'shrinking of the planet', which many globalization theorists link to 20th century changes in finance, trade, communication technologies and global governance. We show how these modern forms of interaction capacity not only originated in 19th century developments, but also had dramatic impacts on international relations at the time. We then chart their ongoing impact on the contemporary international order. Chapter 4 examines the emergence of modern ideologies of progress – liberalism, nationalism, socialism and 'scientific' racism – again unpacking their 19th century origins and highlighting their role in the formation of contemporary international order. Chapter 5 explores the ways in which polities were transformed during the global transformation, rooting the development of rational states in the intensification of imperialism, the revolutionary challenge, and the relationship between states and markets. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the emergence, development and partial erosion of a distinctively modern core-periphery international order. Chapter 6 examines the establishment of extreme inequality between core and periphery during the 19th century and explores the ways in which elements of this inequality have been sustained during the 20th and 21st centuries. Chapter 7 looks at how, when and where the gap between core and periphery has narrowed or closed, particularly since 1945. Chapter 8 turns to the specific issue of how the global transformation impacted on great powers and their interrelations, and how this carried through to contemporary international relations by transforming the nature and utility of war.

The final section of the book is made up of two chapters that focus on the implications of our argument. Chapter 9 studies the ways in which our argument both disrupts and adds value to contemporary debates in international relations, including reassessment of the proposed power shift from the Atlantic region to Asia, the competition between varieties of capitalist states, and the possibility of a world without superpowers. Our argument is that the trajectory of the revolutions of modernity has been from a 19th and 20th century world of 'centred globalism' to one of 'decentred globalism'. Contemporary international order is highly globalized. But the power gap that marked international relations over the past two hundred years is beginning to close – international order is becoming increasingly decentred. Decentred globalism provides a foundation for international affairs quite unlike the core-periphery global order of the past two centuries. It also provides a backdrop quite unlike the world before the 19th century, in which there were many centres of

power, but these were only lightly connected with each other. Chapter 9 surveys the main dynamics that sustain a world of decentred globalism.

The book's final chapter outlines the consequences of our argument for IR as a discipline. It notes the ways in which a fuller understanding of the global transformation reshapes the ways that the discipline should think about six issue-areas: power, security, globalization, ideational structure, periodization, and history. It concludes by looking at how a fuller engagement with the global transformation affects IR's self-understanding as a discipline.