

Review - The Global Transformation

Written by Lucian M. Ashworth

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LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH, OCT 23 2016

The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations

By Barry Buzan and George Lawson

Cambridge University Press, 2015

In 1961 George Modelski wrote an article in which he claimed that the international orders found in industrial and agrarian societies were different at a fundamental level (Modelski, 1961). Using the distinction developed by F. W. Riggs in his study of the different systems of public administration under 'agraria' and 'industria', Modelski's piece was a flash of lightning that lit up the sky, but sadly started no fires. As Buzan and Lawson show in their initial trawl of the International Relations (IR) literature, IR is a discipline that has tended to ignore both the nineteenth century and the major industrial, political and ideational revolutions that Buzan and Lawson label the global transformation. Rather IR seems to be marked either by a recency bias that ignores the past (including the nineteenth century), or it mines the past for aphorisms from Thucydides, Machiavelli and Kautilya under the assumption that the rules they were operating under in their societies were largely the same as they are today. Buzan and Lawson begin where Modelski left off in 1961 (and where others more recently, like Justin Rosenberg (1994: 162) have pointed): that by brushing over the nineteenth century IR scholars and textbooks have missed an important turning point in the development of IR.

Let me start by saying that this is a rich, well-researched, properly argued, provocative and ground-breaking work. In short, it is a wonderful piece of scholarship. Buzan and Lawson have set the pace for a new scholarly programme that finally takes the nineteenth century transition seriously within IR. They also have two major advantages over Modelski. The first is the comprehensive nature of their work, and the second is that they write at a time when there is a cadre of IR scholars willing to take an iconoclastic view of IR and its disciplinary history. Thus, we can expect this lightning to start fires. This is not to say that the work is perfect – I point out two important lacunae below – but seminal works rarely are, especially when they cover so much material. What this is, though, is the new go-to work on the nineteenth century origins of our global order.

There is much in this book, so a short summary can never do it justice. Suffice it to say that the book takes the whole 'long nineteenth century' as the temporal field on which a great transformation to global modernity occurs. This transformation takes place through industrialization, rational state-building, and ideologies of progress (30). Importantly, these changes are not about a mere shift in the distribution of power, but set in motion a much rarer and more dramatic change in the *mode of power* (307-9). This change of the social sources of power had profound effects on the structure of global order, and it is this epochal shift that is still playing out today. In short, what we know as IR, with all its seemingly timeless truths, is a product of the global transformation of the nineteenth century. One of the major implications of this was the creation of a two tier world composed of a powerful core and a weaker periphery. Much of the book is taken up with exploring how this happened, and then how the gaps between core and periphery are closing as the revolution in the mode of power has played itself out. Taking this approach allows the authors to escape the Eurocentrism of much IR scholarship, and to write what is a truly global history of the transition from agraria to industria. In short, much of what we know of as IR is the playing out of forces released in the nineteenth century. The immediacy of the problems it has created (especially industrialized war) has tended to blind us to the nineteenth century sources of those processes (62).

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IR is not alone in being accused of a recency bias: the idea that the theoretical patterns found in the recent past represent laws of human behaviour for all time. This was the argument of Thomas Piketty when he criticised the Kuznets curve in economics for misunderstanding the nature of inequality under capitalism by using figures from the unusual post-1919 world (Piketty, 13-5, see also 574-5). Basically the modern social sciences, much of them products of the growth of the universities between the 1920s and 1960s, are guilty of assuming that an unusual time of flux was in fact a stable data-rich world that could be extrapolated to the rest of human experience. Like Piketty writing the year before, Buzan and Lawson have taken a *longue durée* approach, and any detailed study that introduces the fourth dimension of time threatens the concept of a cozy equilibrium because over time there is no resting equilibrium. Adding time always undermines cozy concepts of natural and stable orders.

Yet, the book also has gaps (I do not want to call them weaknesses, because these lacunae do not necessarily undermine the central arguments of the book). There are two that stand out for me. The first is the relative paucity of discussions of energy and raw materials in the work, especially how these relate to the development of the first and second industrial revolutions. There has been much recent work on the role of energy sources and human values (for example, Morris, 2015). The important role played by the unlocking of the concentrated 'buried sunshine' in hydrocarbon fossil fuels, especially coal, is a well-known story. Most recently Timothy Mitchell has argued that the concentrated and cheap abundance of coal, and its relative sensitivity to strike action, led to the modern democratic revolution, as well as the imperialism that split the world into core and periphery (2011: ch. 1). Buzan and Lawson do not discuss this energy revolution in any depth, but rather than undermining their argument, the addition of a discussion of the global transformation as the development of a hydrocarbon civilization actually reinforces their position.

The same goes for the other implication for raw materials found in the second industrial revolution. The development of electricity and of the new chemical industries allowed for a rapid development of energy use, electronic communications (starting with the telegraph, which they do cover), new artificial fertilizers, more destructive explosives (also covered), and a chemical revolution that led to a whole new plastics industry. While cheap raw materials do not show up as important when we look at trade figures calculated in gold-linked currencies, the vital importance of raw materials (especially copper, nitrates and new strategic metals) to the industrialized economies that emerged from the late nineteenth century is made all too clear in the economic warfare of the two world wars. Indeed, interwar works on IR, such as Isaiah Bowman's *The New World*, spends much of its time listing pages-worth of crucial raw materials, and discussing how the location and trade in these materials were essential to the study of global order and imperialism (Bowman, 1928). Living in an era of relatively free trade we tend to be unaware of the extent that our political economy is reliant on an abundance of (often cheap) imported raw materials, and how this reliance is a recent phenomenon.

Here, IR could benefit from greater interaction with Science and Technology Studies (STS), where the question of energy and chemical dependence has revealed the extent to which since industrialization we have become a hydrocarbon and chemical dependent order. The implications of this, of course, are that with hydrocarbon depletion, climate change due to carbon emissions, and chemical distribution and pollution, the great transformation is now taking a decidedly ugly turn that threatens industrial society with collapse.

The second is an appreciation of the history of international thought from the nineteenth century onwards. The IR that Buzan and Lawson criticize is a particular post-1945 variant of international thought that largely abandoned materialist approaches to global order in favour of what might best be described as a philosophical idealist position. Both the classical realists – with their emphasis on the *animus dominandi* – and their behaviouralist and post-behaviouralist rivals were a reaction against the more materialist approaches to IR that existed before 1950. This abandonment of materialism led to the fading away of the nineteenth century in IR. When we look at international thought between the 1880s and the Second World War there was a clear understanding of the importance of the new political economy released particularly by what we now call the second industrial revolution. Writers as diverse as Paul Reinsch, A. T. Mahan, Norman Angell, H. N. Brailsford, J. M. Keynes, Isaiah Bowman, David Mitrany, Derwent Whittlesey, and Karl Polanyi recognized that major changes had occurred in the late nineteenth century, and that these were based in material changes that had altered both ideology and the role of the state. In other words, there is something that happens to IR in the late 1940s and 1950s that leads to the abandonment of a materialist political

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economy and geographical approach. This, in turn, leads to the nineteenth century disappearing from view. It is time to forget the myth of a realist-idealist debate, and instead ask why we do not give more attention to the mid-twentieth century marginalization of a materialist political economy in IR.

In all, though, the picture that Buzan and Lawson paints is of a global transformation that is not confined to the long nineteenth century, but rather is still playing itself out in the twenty-first century. If we add to that climate change brought on by the burning of the fossil fuels necessary for industrialization, and the changes to rock strata and atmospheric composition brought on by the chemical revolution, what emerges is a sense that we are not living through a long period of global order. Rather, it seems that we are living through the tail end of the global transformation that started nearly two centuries ago.

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