

# A Defence of Macro-History in International Relations

Written by Ayşe Zarakol

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AYŞE ZARAKOL, AUG 27 2023

More than three decades ago, in an article called 'The Mega-Historians', Randall Collins argued that historical sociology was experiencing a 'Golden Age' but that much of historical sociology of the time was anti-theoretical: 'When we step into the rank and file of today's historical sociology, the belief is all too frequent that sheer, massive, specialized historical detail is the ideal, and that theoretical generalizations are out' (Collins 1985, 115). According to Collins, historical sociologists were increasingly leaning that way in order to curry favour with the historians, and historians were forced down this path because of their sheer numbers. However, Collins bemoaned the fact that historians had come to see specialisation as a good in and of itself: 'There is a scorn of secondary sources-as if historians themselves were not the authors of these same secondary sources. There is the ritual glorification of the dirt of the archives: in short, an ideology of intellectual "manual labor"' (Collins 1985, 115).

Thirty years later similar patterns can be observed in International Relations (IR) as well, but in our field the fetishisation of methods is not limited to archives or history adjacent IR scholars. It can be found in IR scholarship of all stripes. What varies is the method that is vaunted at any given time by any IR sub-community — the latest statistical innovation, a cool experimental design, new archives, etc. — but the idea that real cutting-edge scholarship happens through methodological manual labour is one of the rare commonly shared values of our discipline.

I think the main culprit here is the fragmentation of the discipline and our growing inability to judge each other's arguments. When you cannot evaluate the quality of the substance of the work because it is outside of your epistemological expertise, methods become the primary way to evaluate whether the scholarship is 'good' and 'publishable'. Of course, this then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that having to constantly catch up with new methods and the labour required by each — not to mention the need to continuously publish research — comes at the expense of acquiring the knowledge base that could help us evaluate colleagues' work on more substantial grounds.

Collins advocated another approach, one that is also applicable to IR. He suggested not only that grand history — the archetype of which is Gibbon, Herodotus and Livy — is where history comes closest to addressing the theoretical concerns of historical sociology, but also 'that accomplishments of specialized historiography have made possible grand history on a level that is technically much more impressive than what has existed before' (Collins 1985, 117). One of the main improvements was in the accumulation of knowledge about parts of the world beyond Europe. Collins argued that mega-historians (of 1985) were less Eurocentric than their predecessors: here, his examples are Fernand Braudel and William McNeill (compared favourably in this regard to Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, though Collins still favours Weber overall).

Braudel showed, for instance, 'the remarkable extent to which markets, shops, fairs, promissory notes, maritime insurance, and networks of credit existed outside Europe' and McNeill looked to all of world history and ended up contextualising Europe in the process: 'the most ambitious historian of all...the author of the best book ever written on the history of the entire world' (Collins 1985, 119-20). Attempting to turn Spengler and Toynbee on their heads, as Marx had done with Hegel, McNeill weaved a picture of world history wherein civilisations were not separate entities, but one where knowledge diffused and accumulated over time. They also changed in response to external stimulus, for instance from the environment, but also due to political and military competition. In fact, for those who know where to look, there is a sizeable corpus of macro history literature scattered across different disciplines — not all of it in

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agreement with each other, but all sharing a certain *je ne sais quoi* ambition in terms of their comprehensive vision — that model what kind of a knowledge revolution non-Eurocentric, comprehensive understandings of the world can help us achieve.

Yet while the social sciences in general — and IR in particular — have become more acutely aware of the pervasiveness of Eurocentric assumptions as both a methodological and an epistemological problem in its theorising, macro-historical approaches are hardly ever posed as the antidote. Macro-history is even more rarely encountered in IR than it was in 1985, despite the growth of interest in recent decades in what is called 'global history'. This could be because IR grand theorising of yesteryear has often been accused of advancing potted and schematic histories that are Eurocentric, reductionist or simply wrong.

What we need to acknowledge however is that even though it is macro-history and grand-theorising that is often (and often justifiably) accused of Eurocentrism, the reverse can also be true: the fetishisation of archival methods and micro-histories can also reproduce Eurocentrism. There is the very basic logistical problem that primary sources are not equally distributed or equally accessible or equally preserved (and the patterns that they are or are not often reproduce the inequalities and hierarchies of the last century), coupled with the fact that 'national' archives often reproduce methodological nationalism in ways that are very difficult to transcend unless one is already coming at them with an alternative vision. There is also the issue that historians writing about other parts of the world besides Europe inevitably are pushed towards grand history because there is still a lot of ground to cover. Collins for example discusses Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China* (1954-2015) and notes that Needham had to write a grand history because his work was pioneering the subject. With so much ground to cover insisting exclusively on micro-approaches and archival work runs the danger of reproducing existing epistemological hierarchies and blindspots.

Is it fair that hundreds or thousands of gallons of ink have been spilled parsing the meaning beyond — say — Hobbes' every word, whereas — a few token exceptions notwithstanding — most non-Western political thinkers of the same period (or before or after), languish in complete obscurity, perhaps only nowadays getting to be the subject of a PhD thesis here and there? No, it is not. I welcome every new page that is written on a non-Western historical figure, event or polity, however trivial, that has been unfairly neglected until now due to the social hierarchies of the modern order. Yet mountains of such work are not enough to correct the epistemological damage we are dealing with, if the grand narratives of history remain undisturbed. This is because readings of archives or primary texts, including those of political theorists, cannot happen in a vacuum, without a bigger picture background in which the text is to be located. One does not have to subscribe to the Cambridge School to believe this; even the most stridently textualist of Straussians are operating with an implicit grand narrative of history (otherwise, how could they distinguish between the ancients and the moderns?). That suggests to me strongly that the desire to move away from all macro history and synthetic work actually runs at times counter to the desire to move social sciences towards more global and less Eurocentric accounts.

If we dismantle Eurocentric grand histories that have animated our modern international order without replacing them with anything but micro-oriented work, those macro-historical accounts that we think we have dismantled through our brilliantly devastating critiques of Eurocentrism will simply live on as zombie common-sense versions of themselves, filling in the blanks wherever there are some, and every account has blanks. Eurocentrism critiques have been well-made and are increasingly well-received in IR. But they are not enough by themselves. We need alternative grand narratives, and for that we still need macro-history.

This article is adapted from the author's recent book *Before the West: the Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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## About the author:

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