

Review - The Making of Global International Relations

Written by Stephen Michael Christian

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STEPHEN MICHAEL CHRISTIAN, MAY 28 2020

***The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at its Centenary*
Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan
Cambridge University press, 2019**

Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan recently published *The Making of Global International Relations*. I review the book by summarizing its key purposes and structure. However, I will largely attend to a specific, ostensibly trivial claim about autism and extrapolate how it matters for the book overall. The book contributes threefold to “IR’s centennial reflection” (p.1). First, it validates literature questioning IR’s “1919 founding myth” (p.4). Second, the book connects how IR develops with how international relations (“ir,” as the authors abbreviate) (p.2) historically changes. While IR is “a slave” of sorts to ir’s caprice, IR can attempt to “capture this shifting reality” (p.7) and prioritize some aspects more than others, magnify and articulate various concepts, and ultimately assist audiences in perceiving the world and acting within it. Third, the book illuminates IR thought beyond the West.

Acharya and Buzan, largely by accounting for and critiquing IR’s ongoing Westerncentric bias, argue that IR parallels how ir changes over time. Realists, liberals, Marxists, constructivists, and English School researchers alike obfuscate their theories’ Western particularities, disregarding how non-Western actors develop or challenge chief IR theories. Throughout, the book discusses how theories shift within both the “core” and “periphery” (p.5) states and colonies to address the one-sidedness of IR’s collective self-narrative.

The authors frame the history of IR and ir as an “unfolding of global international society (GIS) over the last two centuries” (p.6). Indeed, the book discusses modern IR as originating before the First World War, correlating with the rise of a “Western-colonial” “global international society,” or “1.0 GIS” (p.6). The war’s horrors accelerated institutionalizing IR, erasing IR research from the periphery and downplaying the West’s history of imperialism and colonialism. As the Cold-War world decolonized and the core/periphery dichotomy loosened (i.e., a “Western-global” “1.1 GIS”) (p.6), the discipline changed, experiencing a Westerncentric “second foundation” (p.4). Nevertheless, the authors elaborate on how IR incorporated research on the Third World and development studies.

After the Cold War, the core/periphery dichotomy starts dissolving as China and other states ascend (i.e., “the rise of the rest”) (p.5). In the post-2008 world (“GIS 1.2”) (p.6), the still-dominating West declines as new and growing sources of power and legitimacy abound. Yet while non-Western IR perspectives gain recognition and importance, scholars ignore what the West’s descent implies for IR itself. To address this gap, the authors outline what a truly “Global IR” (p.300) would be like.

This book demonstrates an encyclopedic knowledge of both ir and IR, commanding over mainstream and marginalized literature. This book will impress anyone interested in Global IR, possibly using the book’s citations to expand one’s own intellectual horizons. Any scholar interested in international society, postcolonial studies, and constructivism and critical theory would benefit from reading this comprehensive work.

Despite the breadth of Acharya and Buzan’s book, it does not cover all critical and social perspectives in IR. The authors acknowledge possible ignorance pertaining to the politics and scholarship of peripheral regions. Furthermore, they stress that Global IR has conceptual limits. Therefore, claiming that Acharya and Buzan do not

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engage a body of literature should illuminate how or why that scholarship matters for the book.

At least one critical approach could challenge Acharya and Buzan's shared vision: disability studies. Disability studies engages with global politics (e.g., Erevellles, 2011, McRuer, 2018) and has journals on the subject ([click here](#)), disability studies in IR is nascent. However, incorporating disability studies could stimulate Acharya and Buzan to self-reflect. Disability studies' importance is most evident in one minor thesis, but critiquing this claim scrutinizes the ethical and empirical contours of Global IR and GIS.

Chapter 9 dedicates a few paragraphs to "The Nature of Great Powers," opening with how the "great powers that will dominate GIS in the decades ahead will be inward-looking to the point of being autistic" (p.270, emphasis in original). The book defines autism as "being overwhelmed by input from the surrounded society, making [the Autistic person's] behavior much more internally referenced than shaped by interactions with others" (p.270). While some autism is "a normal feature of states," great powers with autism undercuts their "their wider responsibilities...to make the system work" (p.270). Autistic great powers' selfishly brush off their systemic obligations. Therefore, "if this diagnosis of autism turns out to be correct, then we are unlikely to see responsible great powers" (p.270).

The authors' "rationale" involves observing, first, how older great powers like the US, EU, and Japan are both materially weaker than before and "increasingly unable or unwilling to take the lead" (p.271), mentioning Brexit, Donald Trump, Japan's economy and regional anxiety, and the EU's byzantine structure and financial problems. Second, rising great powers, although aspiring for worldwide recognition as great powers, lack any coherent vision for how to shape GIS. Therefore, they focus on developing national economies and buck global responsibilities. The result is a "cycle of prickly action-overreaction relations typical of autism...in US-China, Russia-EU, US-Russia, and China-Japan relations" (p.271).

Later, the book ties great-power autism to a deeply pluralist GIS. "Deep pluralism" (p.265) is a structural reality where power and other resources spread widely in an interconnected system with a GIS that state and nonstate actors alike significantly impact and manage. Autism backhandedly constitutes, but also threatens, deep pluralism. The deeply pluralist GIS can be "embedded," where key powers respect that pluralism, or it is "contested" as great-power autism undermines appreciating the "highly globalized context of interdependence and shared fates" (p.282). The authors thus juxtapose actors appreciating global pluralism against autistic states that reject it. Autistic selfishness can result in a gap between adequately leading efforts of global governance and persistently bickering with great-power rivals and other entities.

Anyone familiar with recent IR scholarship on autism metaphors—or anyone part of a network or community of self-identifying Autistic people—should recognize that conceptualizing autism in terms of self-centeredness harmfully stereotypes and ignores the complexities and diversity of how Autistic people engage the world (Christian, 2018). Indeed, the authors should have known that caricaturing Autistic people as they did essentializes and homogenizes anyone someone perceives to have autism.

Furthermore, lumping states that prioritize internal dynamics over external ones together under "autism" ignores other "bodominds" (moving past mind/body dualism) (Schalk, 2018) whose self-regard is not about autism but about other biological or psychological matters. We do not need to supplant one disability metaphor for another, reinforcing an ableist history of conflating (Dis)abled people and their self-care with narcissism (Siebers, 2008). Nevertheless, such juxtaposition demonstrates autism metaphors' tenuousness. Disability metaphors throughout the discipline legitimize bigoted attitudes about (Dis)abled people. Disability communities and (Dis)abled scholars should not passively tolerate ableist comments marginalizing their place in IR and ir.

Without engaging disability or autism studies, the book offers three sources justifying its autism metaphor—each from existing IR literature. IR scholarship on autism already critiques one source: Edward N. Luttwak's theory of China's alleged autism. Similarly, that same research vicariously critiques the second source: Buzan's *People, States and Fear* (2007, p.280) comments on autism similarly to the essay the critique engages. Buzan's two works reduce autism to infantilism and violence, which are common negative stereotypes of Autistic people. Furthermore, Buzan in both essays connects an anarchy of Autistic actors to mad houses.

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Linking autism with insanity happens in the third source too. However, the prior critique does not engage Acharya and Buzan's third source—Dieter Senghaas's 1974 (republished in 2013) essay on threat policy. Senghaas likely broadly influenced how contemporary IR uses autism metaphors, more extensively discussing autism compared to other IR literature using the metaphor. Much like in other IR pieces, Senghaas construes autism as centering on oneself and lacking empathy and considers states as autistic whenever they are more concerned with internal processes than external matters.

However, Senghaas also explicitly draws on psychoanalytic and sociological literature to apply autism, and it is its psychoanalytic roots that are more important for this review. Notably, Senghaas relies on Eugen Bleuler, a eugenicist and acclaimed psychoanalyst notable for conceptualizing schizophrenia and introducing the term "autism." However, Bleuler understood autism as symptomatic of schizophrenia—and Senghaas cites Bleuler for that outdated understanding (Nadesan, 2005). How Senghaas and Bleuler approach autism—signifying schizophrenia—links the IR literature (including Acharya and Buzan's book) to a history of eugenics. Senghaas ignores that Bleuler's eugenics mingled with his psychiatry, as Bleuler supported sterilizing schizophrenics (Joseph, 2004).

We now come full circle, returning to Acharya and Buzan. The history of eugenics matters, as the authors would know, to "Scientific Racism" (p.42), which abused science to justify European superiority and white supremacy. The authors recognize that "Scientific" Racism influenced an IR that today ignores its own past. However, "Scientific" Racism also operated with and expanded ableism. This Foucauldian "racism against the abnormal" (Tremain, 2017, p.24) involves how the quest to achieve or maintain racial superiority targeted abnormality in a myriad ways—including means of eugenics (see Rembis, 2018). Racism against the abnormal marked what we might today call (Dis)abled people, alongside potential mothers, the mentally ill, immigrants, working populations, the poor, racial minorities, and other groups.

Why does the racism against the abnormal matter for Acharya and Buzan? The authors should have scrutinized the eugenicist history of autism metaphors in IR, one that essentializes autism as threatening (global) international society. If the book had done so, it should have prompted reflecting on how contemporary IR—including much of today's Global IR and international-society research—habituates the traces of historical (and contemporary) eugenics, where "abnormality" threatens strengthening and protecting it. The authors could have answered whether or how ethical commitments toward, and empirical conceptualizations of, international society and Global IR can incorporate, rather than pathologize, the unique ways of life of "Autistic" entities (IR should jettison the metaphor) and individuals.

Individuals opposing ableism, alongside other systems of violence and oppression, must reflect on the possibility and means of divorcing Global IR from a framework pathologizing certain actors vis-à-vis international society. I task future scholarship to further reflect on the history and spaces of ableism in IR and how it challenges GIS and Global IR.

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Stephen Michael Christian studied at the University of Utah and has a BA in political science from Georgia Gwinnett College. Michael focuses on incorporating disability studies into international political theory. The European Journal of International Relations recently published his article Autism in International Relations.