

## Review – The Wretched Atom

Written by Ruoyu Li

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### ***The Wretched Atom: America's Global Gamble with Peaceful Nuclear Technology***

**By Jacob Darwin Hamblin**

**Oxford University Press, 2021**

Jacob D. Hamblin's *The Wretched Atom* is a lucid and engaging book on the history of the global promotion of nuclear technologies — the supposedly more 'peaceful' use of the atom. The main argument, in Hamblin's words, is that "[t]he promise of civilian atomic energy was a formidable tool of state power in the late twentieth century because it took advantage of social aspirations, anxieties, and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in the developing world" (p.6). Nuclear technologies, in other words, were not inherently but politically framed as 'peaceful' and 'promising' to advance the U.S. and the Soviet state's interests disguised under the ideological rhetoric of science and prosperity that lured third-world countries to subject to U.S. global hegemony.

Hamblin illustrates his central argument in three parts. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on how, in the post-WWII decades, the U.S. quest for monazite and uranium — minerals essential for weapon development — and U.S. interests in advancing and expanding the nuclear arsenals underlay its position on sharing certain nuclear technologies with developing countries under the banner of the "peaceful atom." In the 1940s, the U.S. urged developing countries like India, Brazil, and Argentina to focus on applications of atomic technologies for agriculture and public health purposes (p.14). Unlike nuclear technologies for electricity which requires uranium as raw material, these applications only require radioisotope — a waste product of U.S. nuclear weapons production. By selling atomic technologies for agriculture and health but not nuclear power plants, the U.S. could distract other countries from competing for uranium and monazite, and sell its nuclear waste products. To cover up its dismissal of the request for nuclear power plants from the third-world, the U.S. promoted, what Hamblin calls, a 'cornucopian vision' of the peaceful atom— that nuclear technologies promise a future of abundance and prosperity, overcoming the limit of nature and solving poverty, starvation, and overpopulation in the developing world. This cornucopian vision was, however, more ideological than practical or scientific. For instance, studies conducted by the scientists and the U.S. Department of Agriculture "found no significant difference between X-rays and sources from atomic energy" in altering plants' growth patterns (p.46); in the case of India's irradiated Sharbati Sonora wheat, scholars disputed whether this wheat had a higher amount of protein and whether it was a viable way to solve malnutrition and starvation in India (pp.138-142). Instead of actually solving problems, the cornucopian vision served as "a creative distraction from the [U.S.] administration's lack of progress on disarmament" (p.55). And it suited a colonial division between the civilized West and the backward rest: one kind of atomic power for electricity and more complicated usage suited for the white world, and another kind for backward countries still trapped by "age-old problems of disease, overpopulation, and food insecurity" (p.93).

The second part of the book, from Chapter 3 to 5, explores how Asian and African countries react to or resist the empty promise of the peaceful atom and the U.S.'s reluctance to provide them with nuclear power plants. Though the main subject of the book is the "promoters" of nuclear technologies — powerful Western states and especially the U.S. —, the "receivers" are not portrayed as passive or irrelevant — a problem of Western-centric narratives that, for instance, refuse to write about Cuba in the *Cuban* Missile Crisis and instead stage the U.S. and the Soviet as the only agential actors (Laffey & Weldes 2008). In Chapter 3, for example, the powerful Japanese newspaper magnate, Matsutarō Shōriki, was first complicit with U.S. propagandist efforts to promote nuclear technologies in Japan— the

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country devastated by U.S. nuclear bombs only a decade ago. However, after it was clear that the U.S. did not intend to share nuclear technologies for electricity, Shōriki and the Japanese government purchased nuclear power plants from the U.K. in 1957 as a reprisal for the arrogance and insincerity of the U.S. (pp.86-90).

The third part of the book turns to how the U.S. reoriented its policies to promote nuclear electricity plants in the third-world starting from the late 1960s. As Chapter 6 shows, after China detonated its first atomic bombs in 1964, the U.S. felt urged to hinder developing countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation was part of this effort, prohibiting horizontal though not vertical nuclear proliferation within existing nuclear states. The U.S. became more willing to share nuclear power technologies as a means to justify its growing nuclear arsenal while promoting nonproliferation and to lure potential nuclear powers, such as India and Iran, to forgo weapon development in exchange for civilian nuclear technologies. The strategic nature of promoting nuclear power in the developing world is also well-captured in Chapter 7. In the 1980s, the U.S. sold nuclear power plants to OPEC countries as leverage against these countries that had control over petroleum and thereby challenged U.S. global dominance. Once again, using the cornucopian rhetoric, the U.S. framed nuclear power as a clean and secure energy source to entice OPEC countries like Iran to massively invest in nuclear power and keep purchasing uranium. As a result, these countries had to sell petroleum at a price favorable to the U.S. to sustain the commitments made to nuclear power. In Kissinger's words, "[w]hat we need to do... is to preempt the structure of relationships in the area and to develop a flow of benefits which they [the OPEC countries] won't want to lose" (p.210).

*The Wretched Atom* is empirically rich, and it offers plenty of directions for critical studies of nuclear weapons in International Relations. I will highlight two of the directions. First, this historical study challenges the taken-for-granted categorical division between "harmful nuclear weapons" and "peaceful nuclear power." In this binary, nuclear weapons are presented as exceptional weapons of annihilation that transformed international politics and unleashed power struggles in the form of arms race and nuclear deterrence (Such arguments are made most explicitly by proponents of the "nuclear revolution." See works by Bernard Brodie, Robert Jervis, Glenn Snyder, and Kenneth Waltz.). Nuclear power, in contrast, is understood as peaceful, marking humanity's progress in controlling science and converting lethal technologies into life-giving applications. In this formulation, nuclear power is depoliticized and reduced to a tale of good intentions and prosperity. Hamblin's book, however, illustrates the exact opposite: the so-called peaceful atom has been deeply connected to "racism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, propaganda, surveillance and control, weapons programs, and war" (p.256). Nuclear power has been "an extraordinarily useful instrument of power" (p.256), and the cornucopian vision of the atom has served imperial and hegemonic U.S. interests. In a way, nuclear power is a piece of weapon. It has been waged by the U.S. to trap, force, or induce the developing world to be subject to its global domination. Once the binary between nuclear weapons and power is taken down, new critiques and insights could be developed to reflect upon past (failed) efforts of denuclearization and disarmament.

The second direction foregrounds the centrality of race, racism, and coloniality in the constitution of nuclear weapons, nuclear power, and nuclear order. As Rens van Munster comments, IR nuclear studies have yet to fully examine "the colonial foundations and racial dimensions of nuclear weapons" (van Munster 2021). *The Wretched Atom* provides a plethora of historical materials to mobilize the concept of race and coloniality to reinterpret the history of nuclear weapons and nuclear power. For instance, Hamblin illuminates the linkage between, on the one hand, the division between two kinds of nuclear technologies, and on the other hand, the racialized division between the West and the rest. Another illustration of the racial and colonial order is how the U.S. tried to systematically exclude non-Western countries from the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) board. Hamblin makes clear the colonial and racialized power relations required and reinforced by U.S. political maneuvers, pointing IR to further investigate these relations. Therefore, in addition to scholars of nuclear weapons, IR scholars interested in the broader issues of (U.S.) empire-building, global racial order, and the constitution of force and power will also benefit from *The Wretch Atom*.

## References

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### About the author:

Ruoyu Li is a Ph.D. candidate at Johns Hopkins University in the department of Political Science, studying International Relations and Political Theory. Her research interests include nuclear weapons, race and colonialism, East Asia and the Pacific region.