

The global transformation, multiple early modernities, and international systems change

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This article critically engages the Global Transformation thesis through the lens of multiple early modernities. The 19th century undeniably saw a profound shift in the global mode of power, driven by industrialization, rational state-building, and the rise of ideologies of progress. But this triad impacted on regions that had already been reconfigured by an early modern Eurasian Transformation, centered on an ‘industrious revolution’, absolutist state-building, and the spread of ‘civilizing processes’. This Eurasian Transformation yielded distinct early modernities and regional orders, which fundamentally conditioned the nature, extent, impact, and legacy of later Western expansion. Acknowledging the diversity of these early modern orders enhances our understanding of the variance in patterns of order reconfiguration that attended the Global Transformation. Equally, it strengthens the case for reconceptualizing international systems change as encompassing reconfiguration as much as revolutionary transformation. This cautions against thinking of ‘great transformations’ in world politics as constituting radically discontinuous breaks with the past.

Buzan and Lawson (2015) make an important contribution in identifying the Global Transformation as crucial to the construction of modern international order. Their argument that a triad of industrialization, rational state-building and the rise of ideologies of progress transformed the international system in the 19th century is convincing. My purpose here is not to contest their central claims. Instead, I interrogate the conception of historical change that informs *The Global Transformation*, as well as much of IR scholarship on international systems change (e.g. Philpott 2001; Bukovansky 2002). Specifically, my goal is to critique approaches that conceive of systems change in terms of ‘breakpoint’ transitions (Reus-Smit 2016), and imagine history as a succession of starkly different social orders separated by radically discontinuous ‘macro-transformations’ (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 15). These approaches understate important continuities spanning supposedly seismic disjunctures. In privileging global over

regional dynamics, they also obscure the critical ways ‘processual’ (Reus-Smit 2016) macro-drivers of change, such as those composing the global transformation, were mediated by regionally specific constellations of ideas and institutions.

To flesh out my critique, I consider the impact of a prior early modern Eurasian Transformation on Buzan and Lawson’s global transformation. Well before the 19th-century global transformation, early modern Eurasia was re-shaped through a transformative triad consisting of an ‘industrious revolution’, absolutist state-building, and normative pacification through the spread of ‘civilizing processes’. This transformation bequeathed distinct multiple early modernities and regional orders, through which the 19th-century global transformation was later refracted. I conclude by suggesting how a ‘multiple early modernities’ perspective might supplement rather than supplant the global transformation thesis, as well as providing a more refined lens to capture the reconfigurative as well as revolutionary transformative dimensions of international systems change.

The early modern Eurasian Transformation

Buzan and Lawson’s central claim is that the 19th century witnessed a transformation in the mode of power, on a scale comparable with the transition from hunter-gatherer to agrarian societies (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 17, 18). This raises a key question: Were the changes the Global Transformation inaugurated so vast to render meaningless the search for connections or comparisons with earlier eras? Buzan and Lawson (2015, 320) confront this issue, but without declaring a definitive position. For example, they acknowledge the importance of early modern colonialism in fueling the West’s later rise to global dominance (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 26). But early modernity’s larger significance remains otherwise unexplored.

Exiling early modernity to the margins is perhaps necessary to maintain Buzan and Lawson’s focus on explaining what made international politics so distinct following the global transformation. But what is lost is the opportunity to explore the deep origins of the regional divergence that defined international politics as the global transformation unfolded. In rectifying this lacuna, I proceed from the claim that the global transformation was filtered through regionally distinct orders forged out of an earlier Eurasian Transformation. Like the global transformation, the Eurasian Transformation entailed a configurational pattern of changes, centered on a triad of (a) an ‘industrious revolution’; (b) absolutist state-building; and (c) large-scale normative pacification, in the form of court-centered ‘civilizing processes’.

As Buzan and Lawson acknowledge, and as the papers by Anievas, and Musgrave and Nexon re-emphasize in this symposium, the early modern period saw a surge in transcontinental commerce. This trading boom was underwritten by shifting patterns of household production and consumption throughout Eurasia. An ‘industrious revolution’, centered on households’ increasing integration into the money economy as producers and consumers, ‘prepared and paved the way for the “Industrial Revolution”’ (de Vries 1994, 256). Throughout early modern Eurasia, household handicraft manufacturing surged after 1500CE. China’s ‘single whip’ tax reforms meanwhile accelerated the monetization of the 16th-century world’s largest economy (Flynn and Giraldez 1995). The Europe–Asia spice trade, and the consolidation of the plantation economy, also sustained a diversification of Eurasian consumer tastes. Regionally distinctive economies of taste further boosted long-distance trade, stimulating an additional monetization of formerly subsistence agrarian economies (Bayly 2001, 53).

Beyond providing the necessary precursor to the Industrial Revolution, the ‘industrious revolution’ also mattered for the new forms of absolutist state-building it nourished (Bayly 2001, 63). Before 1500CE, rulers’ ambitions were limited by the rudimentary commercial state of their patrimonies. But from the 16th century, commercial growth sustained new forms of ‘military fiscalism’ (Hopkins 2001, 5), which strengthened the links between ‘territory, taxation and sovereignty’ throughout Eurasia (Hopkins 2001, 5). The arbitrage opportunities stemming from long-distance trade in luxuries enabled entities such as Muscovy, the Manchu Empire, and the Dutch and English East India companies to pursue mercantilist state-building projects. Likewise, the vast territorial expansion of empires such as Habsburg Spain and Manchu China spurred innovations in long-distance administration, and compelled extensive reformulations of the ideational bases justifying conquerors’ rule over culturally alien subject populations (e.g. Todorov 1984; Perdue 2009).

Finally, already from the late medieval period, sedentary Eurasian societies had been subject to ambitious programs of normative pacification. These were expressed in ‘civilizing processes’ (Elias 2000), which aimed to socialize warrior elites into conformity with courtly standards of civility. These processes found their most familiar Western expression in the aristocratic chivalric code. But they had analogues throughout Eurasia, such as the spread of Islamic ideals of *adab*, and the Confucian ‘civilizing mission’ in Sinic East Asia (Phillips 2014). Late medieval and early modern ‘civilizing processes’ were not as totalizing as the ideologies of progress of the global transformation. But they equally rested on the presumption that governments could and should work to morally improve their subjects, and

likewise developed a common normative framework for peoples pulled together through imperial expansion.

Multiple early modernities, diverse regional orders, and the great divergence

In sketching the Eurasian Transformation, I do not aim to tack on a dispensable prologue to the global transformation. My point – again echoing the contributions by Anievas, and Musgrave and Nexon – is that the world that the global transformation re-shaped was *already* marked by considerable global connectivities. It was also one that had *already* spawned regionally specific ‘multiple early modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000).

The concept of multiple modernities encompasses the idea that modernization need not equate with Westernization. Diverse societies may acquire modern features, such as marketized economies and direct forms of rule, without converging on a common cultural program or standardized institutions (Eisenstadt 2000, 1, 2). Scholars have fruitfully applied the multiple modernities framework to capture the transformations that re-shaped political orders in late medieval and early modern Eurasia (e.g. Wittrock 1998). Nevertheless, Buzan and Lawson reject the idea of multiple modernities. First, they assert that it privileges Europe as ‘the original, definitive modern experience ... analytically prior to the regional variations that are compared to it’ (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 7). Second, they reject it ‘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’ (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 7, emphasis added).

These criticisms are fair when leveled at Eisenstadt, the originator of the multiple modernities framework, who uses it to explain non-Western societies’ failure to converge to Western modernity after 1800CE (Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998, 3, 4). Nevertheless, I dispute the more general charge that the idea of multiple modernities *necessarily* remains compromised by Eurocentrism and methodological internalism. Instead, the concept may be redeemed when re-framed temporally, around the early modern epoch, and substantively, by being applied to foreground the diverse regional orders that consolidated at this time.

By rejecting comparison in favor of a focus on transnational connections as their preferred mode of analysis, Buzan and Lawson imply that we must choose between the two. However, while it is true that comparative analysis and a focus on ‘connected histories’ (Subrahmanyam 1997) constitute distinct modes of historical analysis, they are not incompatible.

In an intervention on this subject, Kocka argues: 'It is not necessary to choose between *histoire comparée* and *histoire croisée*. The aim is to combine them' (2003, 44). This injunction is consistent with recent historiography on early modern globalization, which foregrounds the expanded transcontinental connections that distinguished early modernity from previous historical epochs (e.g. Dirlik 2015). At the same time, it also acknowledges that these interconnections helped consolidate regionally diverse orders, centered primarily around loose imperial hierarchies. From the Habsburgs in Europe, through the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals in the Islamic world, to the Ming and then Manchu dynasties in China, these imperial conglomerates possessed both greater capacities and ambitions than their historical precursors. These structural affinities notwithstanding, they differed meaningfully in their core ideas and institutions in ways that radically shaped the course of the later global transformation.

The contrasting regional orders that formed around Mughal India and Manchu China illustrate this point. The Mughal Empire arose in 1526, the product of an Islamized Timurid dynasty originating from Uzbekistan. An alien conquest elite, the Mughals united much of South Asia, and adapted to ruling an immensely diverse population. Ideologically, this entailed formulating a Mughal 'civilizing mission', which justified imperial domination on the basis of the emperor's critical role in unifying and reconciling the sub-continent's otherwise irredeemably divided communities (Khan 2009, 51). *Incorporation – not assimilation – was the hallmark of Mughal ideology*. Rather than aspiring to direct rule, Mughal imperialism moreover rested on notions of shared sovereignty in which the emperor allocated sovereign prerogatives to powerful indigenous and foreign intermediaries (Richards 1996, 23). Uninterested in controlling overseas trade, the Mughals lastly ruled their maritime frontiers with a light touch. They continued traditions of commercial extra-territoriality, permitting limited self-government to resident trading diasporas, including European 'company sovereigns' (Stern 2011) such as the English East India Company (EIC).

The Manchu dynasty, dominant in East Asia from 1644, differed fundamentally from the Mughals. A 'barbarian' conquest dynasty, the Manchus, nevertheless, adopted a Confucian high culture in their dealings with the empire's Han majority, and in their engagements with foreigners. Unlike the Mughal's *incorporative* ideology, the Confucian 'civilizing mission' was *assimilative*, resting on the idea that the Emperor possessed a sacred responsibility to acculturate others to conform to a Confucian civilizational standard (Rawski 2012). The Manchus moreover aspired to a far more comprehensive grasp on political power than the Mughals. In place of the Mughals' regime of shared sovereign prerogatives,

the Manchus harnessed China's formidable bureaucracy to maintain their paramountcy (Wong 1997). Finally, in contrast to the Mughals' *laissez faire* approach to governing the Indian Ocean, the Manchus proved resolute in seeking to regulate overseas trade, and to prevent the rise of rival power centers on their maritime frontier.

The Eurasian Transformation thus bequeathed profoundly different orders in South and East Asia. This mattered profoundly for the subsequent composition and course of the global transformation. In its incorporative ethos, its willingness to farm out sovereign prerogatives, and its openness to foreign trade, the Mughal order proved permeable to early Western infiltration. Moreover, once Mughal power faltered from the early 1700s, the Mughals left behind a protean state system composed of highly commercialized and militarized polities, including the English EIC. Warfare between these successor states, coupled with the globalization of European rivalries during the Seven Years War (1756–63) paved the way for the EIC's later rise to sub-continental hegemony. This enabled Britain to de-industrialize India, subordinating it within an increasingly Western-dominated world economy by the mid-19th century – well *before* the global transformation.

Conversely, the Eurasian Transformation yielded in Manchu China a bigger and tougher imperial core-state than Mughal India. In its assimilative ethos, its aspirations to direct rule, and its commitment to managing foreign trade, Manchu China repelled large-scale Western encroachment before the Global Transformation. This meant that once the Global Transformation did take hold, Westerners confronted a beleaguered but still viable imperial order. This foreclosed China's direct colonization on a scale comparable with India. The *timing* of Western encroachment – itself partly an artifact of the downstream consequences of the Eurasian Transformation – profoundly shaped its character and consequences. Notwithstanding the indignities of its 'century of humiliation', the unequal treaties the West imposed on China left room for successive Manchu and republican projects of national renewal. These meant that China's 'differential integration' (Buzan and Lawson 2015) into a Western-dominated core-periphery order was later, less complete, and (at least temporarily under Mao Zedong) more reversible than in India.

Re-thinking international systems change: transformation, revolution, and reconfiguration in international relations

In this intervention, I have re-contextualized the Global Transformation temporally, by relating it to an earlier Eurasian Transformation, and geographically, by foregrounding the multiple early modernities that

filtered the Global Transformation. I have broadened the historical backdrop to Buzan and Lawson's thesis to foreground one of its limitations, and to hint at a remedy. As other symposium contributors have noted, Buzan and Lawson's synthetic mode of analysis constrains their capacity to explain the underlying causes of the 'great divergence' (Pomeranz 2000). In particular, characterizing the global transformation as marking a tectonic break with what came before prevents a consideration of the historical pre-conditions that helped produce the vast inequalities of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In arguing for a Eurasian Transformation, I suggest that the power asymmetries the global transformation produced have their origins in an earlier epoch, in which a prior transformation generated varied regional orders that filtered the vast changes of the 19th century. The Global Transformation was defined by the West's improbable rise to dominance, and Buzan and Lawson masterfully capture the macro-trends that made this ascent possible. But this domination took hold in different parts of the world in different ways, and at different times. It assumed diverse institutional forms and left distinct legacies once the tide of Western dominance receded.

As we move into a world of 'de-centered globalism' (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 273), where the return of non-Western Great Powers is again yielding diverse regional orders, it is imperative that we acknowledge the deeper historical roots of this resurgent diversity. That India was colonized but China was not (or at least not prior to the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–45) proved hugely consequential not only for these countries themselves, but for the regions they now dominate. A focus on the multiple early modernities the Eurasian Transformation begat provides an entry point for thinking about when and why these (and other) regions first diverged from one another. Reinstating the importance of early modernities moreover strengthens our capacity to understand the 'differential' aspect of peoples' uneven and combined integration into Western colonial modernity, once the global transformation took hold.

There are larger theoretical stakes at play in this discussion. Fairly or otherwise, I and a number of other symposium contributors have characterized the global transformation thesis as embodying a 'breakpoint' conception of international systems change. The authors' claim is that international politics was *fundamentally transformed* through a conjuncture of industrialization, rational state-building, and ideologies of progress. The form of this argument resembles that of other influential takes on international systems change, which posit a punctuated equilibrium model of international evolution. Epochs of stability are disturbed by 'great transformations', occasioned by ideological crises (e.g. Philpott 2001;

Bukovansky 2002), the rise of new modes of production (e.g. Teschke 2003) or destruction (e.g. van Creveld 1991), or some combination of the two (e.g. Phillips 2011).

The advantage of these approaches is that they allow us to see the ‘big picture’. They give us grand narratives and a ready-made periodization of the international system’s evolution. But what often underpins this work is an understanding of change as revolutionary transformation, entailing a serial succession of qualitatively different orders separated by seismic historical breaks. Yet, as historical institutionalists have shown, macro-historical accounts of international systems change would do well to move beyond a binary of system equilibrium and tectonic transformation (Thelen 1999; Pierson 2004). Rather than seeing change as episodic, global, and transformative, historical institutionalists have evinced a more ‘processual’ understanding of change, as something that can also be continuous, locally diverse, and incremental, involving the reconfiguration of existing ideas and institutions, rather than their wholesale replacement (Thelen 1999; Pierson 2004).

The global transformation thesis embodies an approach to studying international systems that equates change with transformation, conceived in revolutionary terms. A more fruitful way of thinking about international systems change may be to conceive it as being *reconfigurative* as much as revolutionary. Such a perspective would allow for the fact that international systems are rarely completely displaced by disruptive forces, even those on the scale of the global transformation. Instead, macro-processes such as industrialization, rational state-building, and the rise of ideologies of progress impact on pre-existing constellations of ideas and institutions. Agents’ capacities for collective mobilization are in turn mediated by the distinctive opportunity structures (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 13) that arise out of the interaction between these transformative macro-processes and extant local orders. The resulting changes to existing orders *may well be revolutionary in scale and scope*, sufficient to warrant characterization as being instances of systems – rather than merely systemic – change (Gilpin 1981). But in their essential character, they are just as likely to entail the selective *reconfiguration* and incorporation of elements of the old order into the new, perpetuating regional differences even in the face of transformative pressures.

Thinking in terms of reconfiguration rather than, or perhaps alongside, revolutionary transformation has important implications for how we approach international systems change, both retrospectively and prospectively.

Retrospectively, a reconfigurative sensibility cautions against casting the global transformation as a ‘singularity’ (Musgrave and Nexon 2013) that cauterized the link between the pre- and post-19th-century world.

The global transformation was notable for temporarily severing the link between demographic size and aggregate wealth and power. Industrialization propelled a handful of Western European polities to dominance in a new core-periphery global order. But the pattern, mode and outcomes of Western expansion remained tightly conditioned by the lineaments of older regional orders. The availability of local collaborators, the existence or absence of free-floating resources capable of being mobilized by outsiders, and indigenous elites' receptivity to the inflow of Western ideas, capital and people all conditioned the regional orders that *re*-formed as a result of the global transformation. It was these variations in local conditions that accounted for the global transformation's 'uneven and combined' character – variations that can only be understood by conceiving of systems change as a reconfigurative phenomenon.

Prospectively, a reconfigurative approach suggests the need to ground our speculation on the likely impact of 'exotic' shocks (Musgrave and Nexon 2016) within frameworks that accommodate the potential diversity of responses these shocks are likely to evoke. The resurgence of religion may indeed 'presage radical new possibilities akin to the role that "ideologies of progress" played in the past' (Musgrave and Nexon 2016). But as the global renaissance of public religiosity has already demonstrated, these 'radical new possibilities' will articulate differently in varied regional contexts, reflecting in their form and content the legacies of the differential integration of these regions into the Western-dominated order the global transformation made possible. Likewise, disruptive technologies – from information technology to the biotech and nanotech revolutions – may transform the material context in which international relations play out. But the differential spread of these technologies will still likely bear the legacies of the Global Transformation, reconfiguring rather than erasing the regionally uneven patterns of inequality that the global transformation first engendered. We are unlikely to have seen the last of humanity's 'global transformations'. But global transformations to come will remain conditioned by the regionally uneven legacies of their 19th-century precursor, just as it too was shaped and made possible by the multiple early modernities that preceded it.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge George Lawson and Christian Reus-Smit for their comments and advice on earlier versions of this manuscript, which have improved it immeasurably. Any remaining errors are my own.

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