

From Empires to Nation States? Enduring Legacies and Historical Disjunctures

Millennium: Journal of
International Studies
1–6

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DOI: 10.1177/03058298231214004

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This year Millennium's special issue: 'From Empires to Nation States?: Enduring Legacies and Historical Disjunctures' aims to critically assess arguably one of the most important historical developments in international relations (IR) during the modern period – namely, the transition from empires to nation states. This transition had fundamental consequences in the development of International Relations in the 20th and 21st centuries as well as profound consequences for the discipline of IR.

IR as an academic discipline arose in a particular historic context following the end of the First World War as a new 'modern' social science, established to understand the cause of conflicts and advise policy makers so that future cataclysms of the great powers could be avoided. Although fragments of what would become IR can be traced from the late 19th century, the institutionalisation of the discipline within universities began in the aftermath of the First World War.¹ The field was in its relative infancy when its most important institutions, sources of funding and new innovations would shift to the United States following the Second World War. This would be combined

1. On the debate regarding International Relation's beginnings see Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, 'The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths That Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919', *Millennium* 39, no. 3 (2011): 745–55.

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with a new scientific, positivist methodology which left behind the traditional focus on the understanding of diplomatic practice and moved the field towards behaviourist models of understanding for states. These two simultaneous trends gave IR a uniquely American character, with Hoffman going so far as to call it an 'American Social Science'.²

IR's uniquely American character has been slowly challenged by the expansion of the field through the inclusion of new theorists, new centres of knowledge and new approaches, transforming IR into an increasingly global discipline. However, one of the lasting legacies of the Cold War, American-centric period of IR research has been the fixation on the nation state as the central referent object of study. Many early realists and liberals imagined the world as populated by scores of states identical if not in character, in thinking to the United States, fixed, durable, centralised and governed by behavioural models that could predict decision-making outcomes. This status quo-oriented conception of the international system was captured in the debate between neorealists and neo-liberal institutionalists that dominated the discipline at the height of the Cold War.³ It was also part of a broader push that had begun immediately after the Second World War, in the 1950s and 1960s, to think of IR as a Science.⁴

The proposition that the nation state was the fundamental unit of the international system does not hold water historically. The period of the nation state as the norm is a relatively new innovation in modern history, arising just as IR took on its particular social scientific character in the mid-20th century. Prior to this, the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional empire was the regular political unit of IR, and the great powers of the international system were also largely imperial powers.⁵ The transition of the field to a nation whose formal empire was short lived and whose political culture had a far more limited salience on empire in many ways obscured the centrality of empire and imperialism to the foundations of modern IR practice in the field of IR research.

The increasing prominence within the field of academics from the post-colonial world who highlight the importance of colonialism in the political experience of the Global South, as well as a re-emergence of an interest in assessing the legacies of empire in Europe and the United States has allowed for a recognition of the importance of the particular histories of colonialism to the development of our contemporary international system. An assessment of the legacies of empire and how decolonisation fundamentally

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2. Stanley Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Daedalus* 106, no. 3 (1977): 41–60.
 3. The two most important contributions are Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). On the neo-neo debate see Joseph S. Nye, 'Neorealism and Neoliberalism', *World Politics* 40, no. 2 (1988): 235–251.
 4. Morton A Kaplan, 'The New Great Debate: Traditionalism vs. Science in International Relations', *World Politics* 19, no. 1 (1966): 1–20.
 5. Of course the majority of modern nation states share this multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character albeit under the dominance of a single national identity.

changed the international system is essential for the strengthening of the Global IR project, as well as a better understanding of the historical realities of the international system.

With this legacy of the field in mind, we at Millennium felt it was time to critically assess the transition from empires to nation states as the primary mode of international politics. The papers in this special issue aim to address this topic, and emerged from the Millennium symposium held in November 2022 at the London School of Economics (LSE) on the same theme. This was the first symposium held in person following a series of online conferences necessitated because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was excellent to meet a wide range of scholars from across the globe at the LSE for a collaborative event, which helped develop the work into the highly researched pieces included in this issue. The event also signalled the move away from a large conference towards a smaller symposium, signalling a new norm for the journal.

When we called for papers for this conference we had four goals for the research which would eventually come to make up this special issue. The first was a critical assessment of the continuing legacy of colonialism in IR and the international sphere. Many of the articles within this issue uncover the lasting legacies of colonialism in contemporary IR practices that have lacked focus on mainstream IR research. The second, related goal was a reassessment of the success and failures of the decolonial moment. The year of the symposium coincided with both the 75th anniversary of the independence of much of South Asia and the 60th anniversary of the independence of a number of states in Africa. Decolonisation did meaningfully change the normative structures and practices of the international system, opening up the possibilities for freedom across the Global South. It was important to recognise the ways in which the international system was changed by decolonisation, but also how old inequalities were imbedded into this new system of sovereign equality.

Our third objective was to question the lasting impact of decolonial and post-colonial contributions to national and international institutions, both globally and within the post-colonial world specifically. The transition point from empires to nation states was not only a period of national independence but also a great period of internationalism, for anticolonial activists both within the Global South and the Global North. We wanted to assess the contribution the post-colonial world made to the newly emerging international institutions of the post-war international order, and the ways in which post-colonial internationalism was institutionalised into new international and domestic institutions.

Finally, our last goal was to revisit and analyse the lasting impact of thought emerging from the post-colonial world. The post-colonial contribution to IR unleashed by the transition from imperialism in the Global South was not only limited to the development of new international institutions. The explosion of new ideas that emerged from the postcolonial world before and following decolonisation radically changed international practice, and this special issue seeks to interrogate the contributions of post-colonial thinkers to IR.

Shikwa Dilawri's contribution on the 'worldmaking of mobile vernacular capitalists' provides key insights into the colonial expansion of global capitalism in the Indian

Ocean. The piece centres on the memoirs of the merchant turned-industrialist-and-philanthropist Nanji Kalidas Mehta and illustrates a form of worldmaking that is distinctive from the ‘progressive internationalism’ set out in Bandung Conference. By focusing on Mehta’s life, Dilawri illustrates the entanglements between race, caste and capital. The outcome is a rich account of the expansion of global capitalism where local hierarchies became enmeshed with colonial capitalism.

Robbie Shilliam turns to one of Hans Morgenthau’s neglected interventions to revisit the connection between ‘domestic racism’ in the United States and foreign policy and IR in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations in 2020.⁶ By using Morgenthau’s powerful yet forgotten analysis Shilliam seeks to ‘provide a contribution to what might be called post-BLM IR’. To achieve this, the author constructs an intellectual archaeology between republicanism and imperialism focusing on key thinkers within IR – William Francis Allen, Frederick Jackson Turner, Morgenthau and Merze Tate – through the racialised concept of the ‘frontier’. Shilliam purports that this archaeology can help us come to terms with IR post-BLM.

Sanchi Rai zeroes in on the colonial legacies in post-colonial states. The question posed by Rai is why the post-colonial nation may wish to maintain colonial legacies or seek to break away from them. The focus is on the partition of British India. Using extensive archival research Rai argues that India went to great effort to ensure that the new nation maintained the legal status as the continuation of British India. Rai’s contribution highlights an interesting paradox where the colonised seek to ensure continuity with coloniser’s legal status in the international sphere even after the end of formal colonialism to maintain the prestige and power of existing institutions.

Pedro Salgado’s contribution focuses on the impact of the transition from empires to nation states on global crises. He advances the argument that this transition is characterised by colonial legacies that impose a political framework that is problematic when tackling global crises. In this respect, Salgado argues that it is necessary to think ‘not only beyond, but against sovereignty’. Rejecting sovereignty, the author acknowledges, is not ‘a finished project’. However, this rejection will enable the overcoming of colonial legacies in current political forms epitomised by the nation state and enable much needed political action and academic reflection that aims to look for alternative ways of addressing the many crises of the present while abandoning the colonial legacies of our current political forms.

In the final research piece Mateus Borges seeks to answer a range of questions; ‘What accounts for the nation’s persistence as a central object of identification in anticolonial movements during the 1960s? How can we understand the appeal of nationalism when it simultaneously could signify one path to and a pitfall of decolonisation, as Frantz Fanon warned?’ Borges zeroes in on an important thinker of pre-revolutionary Iran, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, to answer some of these questions. Al-e-Ahmad according to Borges, offered an

6. Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960).

important ‘diagnosis of cultural imperialism, gharbzadegi’ which highlighted that expressed tensions between the translocality of his framework and the inflexibility of the nation state. Through a reading of the gharbzadegi and the social and historical context in which Al-e-Ahmad was a part of, Borges seeks to account for the limitations and dangers inherent in Iran’s anticolonial movement.

Beyond these contributions on the transition from empires and nation states, we were fortunate to organise a public event on the *Meanings of Internationalism* with the Radical International Theory Research Group based at Queen Mary University, London. The event focused on different conceptualisations of internationalism from the 20th century, seeking to answer the question ‘What do we mean when we talk about internationalism?’. The emergence of this canon of internationalist thought, associated with diverse developments ranging from modernism to decolonialism, is intrinsically linked with the transition from empires to nation states. In many ways, certain political actors and thinkers visualised the transition to nation states as a process towards particular type of internationalism. Simultaneously, others had to reconcile their internationalist goals with the pursuit of a nation state.

The insights shared by the participants in that event have been curated and edited by Miri Davidson into a discussion forum which forms an integral part of this special issue. The forum sought to move away from popular conceptions of internationalism and focus on political movements spanning the 20th century was often overlooked. Musab Younis’ intervention centred on anticolonial and pan-African internationalisms of the 1920s–40s; Maria Chehonadskih brought the interwar Soviet internationalism of Alexander Bogdanov to the forefront; Layli Uddin interrogated Maulana Bhashani’s Islamic socialism; and Dilar Dirik interrogated internationalism via the history of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. As Miri Davidson notes, ‘these movements bore witness to a fundamental set of shifts in the nature of the international system as empires collapsed and new nation states were born, while global structures of exploitation and extraction recomposed themselves in the Cold War and post-Cold War landscape’.

The transition from Empires as the dominant mode of political subjecthood to nation states was one of the most important events of the 20th century, which has been significantly understudied by IR scholars in comparison to the other big changes of contemporary history. Reassessing the legacies of colonialism and imperialism will be key to the expansion of IR beyond the Western canon into a truly global IR research space. This special issue aims to be a starting point for further discussion on how we as IR theorists and scholars can tackle the importance of this transition point and the legacy of colonial history in the field. We hope the work contained within this special section will continue to spur discussion and recentre the historical legacy colonialism played in shaping the political realities of much of the globe, and how it endures in IR today, both in practice and research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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