

BOOK REVIEW

Marta Iñiguez de HEREDIA and Zubairu WAI, *Recentring Africa in International Relations: Beyond Lack, Peripherality, and Failure*

(London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

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Recentering Africa in International Relations: Beyond Lack, Peripherality, and Failure

Marta Iñiguez de HEREDIA and Zubairu WAI (eds.)

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The discipline of International Relations (IR) is currently witnessing a sustained critique geared towards exposing the parochial origins of its epistemic orientation, namely Eurocentrism. As a system of knowledge production, Eurocentrism establishes Europe as the key referential figure in world history, from which all non-Western experiences and events are derived and subsequently hierarchized in their temporal and political significance.¹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discourses, practices, and images that construct Africa's place in the international arena as a foil against the alleged civilizational superiority of the West. Some of the few ways in which IR conventionally conceives of Africa are either recurring to the paradigm of development or conducting performance-driven comparisons of political institutions based on a Western idea of statehood. It is thus that the continent "is never allowed to be a contingency, or value in itself, but as a product of a narcissistic obsession with its difference and alterity [...] these narratives never allow Africa to be complex, layered, nuanced, or differentiated" (p. 4).

The edited volume under discussion therefore writes against such modes of knowledge production in IR and general Africanist scholarship that continue to portray Africa as non-integral, marginal, and peripheral to the international. To give an overview, the contributions of this book cover three broad topics. Primarily, the already mentioned critique of the epistemic project of IR, and alternatives to thinking Africa with and beyond it, is an undercurrent in all pieces (particularly Wai, Bird, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Iñiguez de Heredia). The historical institutionalization of sovereignty and statehood and their effects on the political subjectivity of Africans constitutes the volume's second pillar (Wai, Niang, Gruffyd Jones). Thirdly, contemporary issues of the continent are reinterpreted from a perspective that takes the African experience as central to understanding the international dimensions of, for instance, land grabbing, development, or nation-building (Gill, Matthews, Kolia). In contrast to existing IR books about Africa – of which there are still very few respectable contributions – this volume offers an alternative by giving voice to critical scholars with deep personal and professional

¹ Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, "Decolonizing International Relations?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No 1, 2017, p. 1-15.

ties to the continent. Moreover, it is distinguishable from its peers in that the contributors succeed in depicting the conceptual renovations of postcolonial theory and the decolonial body of thought as alternatives to probing the international without overloading on abstract terminology, thus making it accessible to the uninitiated reader.

The book's aim is "to reaffirm Africa's central role in the constitution of the international and world politics" (p. 309) by providing a conceptual repertoire to uncover histories previously untold and to visualize co-constitutive social relations currently overlooked. An important ethical point that stems from this attempt at rebooting the theoretical and empirical outlook of the discipline is to sensitize its scholarship to the political subjectivities that continue to get reproduced on both sides of the exchange through the coloniality of knowledge production.

In that regard, a significant strength of the volume is the dialogue between its different contributors on which conceptual registers from which to draw when engaging with the historical and political entanglements of Africa and the international. Inspired by Y.V. Mudimbe's notion of the colonial library, they all wrestle with the question of whether it is possible to transform the current debate from within the discipline or if IR is unable to envisage alternative pasts, presents, and futures outside such indexes. Given the context of its institutionalization at the heights of Western imperialism, the editors suggest that "attempts to transcend the violence of IR and its objectifying discourses are still also always encoded within its fames and rules" (p.10). Moreover, as several contributors such as Niang and Gruffyd Jones emphasize, international legal theory and Anthropology have indeed provided a vocabulary ostensibly sanitized of its colonial and racialized conditions of emergence, all the while giving the state, sovereignty, or civilization a central role in those discourses, by which the international was rendered intelligible. This leads Ndlovu-Gatsheni to argue near the conclusion of the book that, for as long as IR's disciplinary accounts continue to interpret African political life solely through the lens of European modernity, any attempts to 'bring Africa back in' will continue to obstruct our understanding of the international and its global co-constitutive dimensions.

The sheer analytical depth and timeliness of the intervention notwithstanding, what this book lacks as suggestions to resist IR's conceptual straightjacket is an account of how IR is practiced outside the centers of academic knowledge production, specifically the pedagogy of international relations and international history with regards to Africa on the continent itself. For better or worse, it fails to draw upon recent currents within the debate – the prospects of a 'Global IR'² or 'Doing IR Differently'³, which are at their core also highly doubtful of the adequacy of Western IR's toolbox to account for other geo-cultural spheres – and to discuss the possibilities of a global scholarly dialogue. Nevertheless, it initiates important space to think about to the quest to study world political life through the lens of International Relations. The example of a materially, culturally, and epistemically violated Africa strongly urges the reader to reflect upon IR's predilection to limit its lines of inquiry to the state as the defining marker of space and time, before and beyond which the international appears as both uninteresting and inconceivable.

2 Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No 4, 2014, p. 647-659; Melody Fonseca, "Global IR and Western Dominance: Moving Forward or Eurocentric Entrapment?", *Millennium*, Vol. 48, No 1, 2019, p. 45-59.

3 Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (eds.), *Thinking International Relations Differently*, London, Routledge, 2012.