

**Book Review: ASHWORTH, Lucian M.; (2014) "A History of International Thought: From the origins of the modern state to academic international relations"; Routledge, London and New York; ISBN: 978-1-408-28292-2 (paper back).**

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International Relations History has been a much-discussed theme in the discipline of IR. Over time, some discourses have consolidated themselves as the mainstream. However, these narratives have been established on top of feeble ground put forth with the purpose of stabilizing them, what, at the end of the day, only weakens those discourses to a point that they end up not holding any water. Some of those ways of "telling" the history of the field have become so strong that they obscure other ways of viewing things, something that can be detrimental to any academic subject and especially to International Relations. The type of narrative used may have a pressing influence on ontological, epistemological and methodological postures vis-à-vis the field and its object, that is, relations between international actors.

"That is precisely the point stressed by Ashworth, who defends the need of de-constructing certain "myths" (as he calls the consolidated "truths" of IR) in order not to ignore other important events that happened in the process of "history making", most of it a myopic, exclusive, and Eurocentric way of accounting events and framing debates. Some events are reassessed and retold in order to unearth biases so pervasive in the field. This process makes so that some premises be questioned: the Peace of Westphalia as the dawn of the state system; until what point can we really consider the Enlightenment movement as

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something de facto pacifist and universalist; the extent to which the end of World War I and the treaties associated with it really represented a rupture with all previous thinking and inaugurated a new way of thinking all on its own; to what extent can we really consider there existed a clear-cut idealist paradigm of IR; the actual existence of the so-called “First Great Debate” of realists vs. idealists; where does appeasement stand in international thought; and the effect of World War II on international theorizing.

Ashworth breaks away from that cycle by explicitly showing that all International Relations theorizing have been strictly Eurocentric, both in terms of authors’ ascendance and the values conveyed in their works. This dynamic became even more exclusive after World War II, as both the American School of realism and the English School of thought rose to prominence (or rather dominance) in the field of International Relations.

What is more, we, as scholars and students of IR, are all responsible for the way things unfolded. Practitioners and academics alike must bear in mind that historical accounts, no matter how biased or unrealistic or flawed they may sound and be, are put forth with a very specific reason: to legitimate, to justify certain political positions, policies and preferences. This, it is important to note, is not something restricted to IR, but is, rather, present in many human collectivities and fields of study. On top of that, deliberately favoring one position to the detriment of many others over-simplifies the past and, as if this were not enough, imposes anachronistic limits to it.

Ashworth does state that his own take on the history of the field is, in itself, Eurocentric too. The major difference, however, is that he tries and delivers an account that makes a hard effort towards doing justice to other alternative ways of telling the great tale of IR. In order to do so he employs an interesting strategy: to try and understand ideas within the context of their own times. He does that in order to address three facts: 1) that political arguments, accounts and narratives are key to our society; 2) that there is a tendency in IR of reading past theorists with “the eyes of the present”, limiting our understanding as the texts become de-contextualized; 3) historically contextualizing texts and ideas can only help to further our understanding of them. The book, however, is neither a work of international history, nor of theories of IR, and not still an account of International Political Theory, even though it helps expanding our knowledge of the three indirectly.

Ashworth is also concerned about challenging two assumptions that are taken for granted in the discipline: 1) the way we interpret past international thought, framing it only as either realist or idealist; 2) the claim that International Relations is “an objective an universally relevant attempt to understand global politics, rather than [...] a parochial celebration and defense of western ideals” (Ashworth, 2014:6).

The book is divided in three parts. The first is mainly concerned with studying international relations even before the formal appearance of the field. Here, an account of the formation of an inter-state system, as a consequence of the modern western state, from the sixteenth century onwards, is delivered. The second part deals with the formation of IR as an academic subject in the midst of a complex chain of events including the two world wars. In this part the author is mainly concerned with the international within the scope of the process of industrialization. The third delivers an account of the development of IR as an university subject after 1945. Ashworth focus much more on the first two phases and uses the third phase to draw some conclusions as to how the path the discipline followed

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since its incipience yielded to generating IR as we know it today. There he also draws some conclusions as to the whole process. This book can be considered a revisionist effort aimed at de-constructing the currently en vogue image of mainstream IR and also at alerting the inattentive reader that there are other ways of viewing things and that we cannot take things for granted.

Nevertheless, some shortcomings can be pointed in relation to the whole effort. In the first place the claim that what he does in terms of reconstructing the history of IR corresponds to better scientific enterprise than the history of IR he criticizes. Ashworth's claim is grounded in clearly defined methodological and epistemological options in cross checking debates and texts. In essence, the corpus of his research is theoretical, philosophical, and historical pieces treating the International. As strictly defined and tight his research design may be, the result produced is composed, also, by a normative claim to being better. This harbor's a big problem in that ontological preferences guide research options providing, in themselves, normative preferences that are bound to influence the final result. Ontological preferences are hardly falseable, what makes so that they be taken for granted. In this sense, there is not really much ground for the establishment of credible external critiques aiming to falsify arguments informed by other strands of thought. What is surely in order are internal critiques. However, there are not that many works using the same ontological preferences and tackling the same problems.

A second source of criticism can be found in the claim that discourses are actually constructed to politically legitimate some positions to the detriment of others and that such "myths" are perpetuated through time. The assumption does hold water. The question I ask is the following: should it not? Science production processes are not neutral, as Marx and Kuhn stated. This happens for science is an integral part of human realm of activity. As problematized by a multitude of political philosophers, from Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Marx, Croce, Russell, and many others, human beings harbor different interests and defend different agendas in various fields. Science production is one of them. The problem becomes all the more serious in IR, a field so ridden with conflicts of interests. To state almost in a denouncing tone the issue makes an uninformed reader think the case is an exception when, however, it is the rule.

A third source of criticism can be found in the effort of trying and reading historical texts on their "own terms". This is basically an attempt at unearthing the contexts in which texts were written in order to better grasp what authors must have been thinking when they wrote what they did, and what were the social contexts precipitating works. This runs against a basic tenet in discourse analysis that is: authors "die" after writing, as contend Barthes and Derrida. Trying to grasp contexts is an exercise in futility for what one thinks authors must have been thinking at the time of writing are, actually, informed extrapolations of previous events.

All in all, it is a good read and warns readers to be always careful in addressing the matter. It is also a valuable addition to the discussion and reveals an alternative form of telling the "tale of IR". The book might interest students of IR and related fields, especially when it comes to themes such as history of the International, in academic terms.

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- Key-words: History of IR, Eurocentric, Debates
- Palavras-chave: História das RIs, Eurocêntrico, Debates



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