Twentieth Century Benchmark Dates in International Relations: The Three World Wars in Historical Perspective*

Barry Buzan and George Lawson**

Abstract: This paper builds on the author's earlier work on benchmark dates in International Relations. The Introduction summarises this work and explains how this paper extends the analysis from suggestions made, but not developed, in earlier publications. The second section looks in detail at 20th century benchmark dates centred on the three world wars (First, Second and Cold). It argues that the changes clustered around the Second World War are both deeper and more extensive than those clustered around either the First World War or the Cold War. The third section uses these insights to open-up a macro-historical perspective on the 20th century, demonstrating the ways in which choices in relation to both time and scale affect the construction of macro-historical perspectives. The fourth section demonstrates the advantages of a two-century perspective on the 20th century. Here, and in the conclusion, we argue that the key issues that underpinned world politics in the 20th century are best seen as the downstream consequences of the dynamics and challenges ushered in by the 19th century "global transformation."

Keywords: benchmark dates, the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War

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1. Introduction

This paper builds on earlier work by Buzan and Lawson about how to understand benchmark dates in International Relations (IR). [1] That work argued that benchmark dates are most fruitfully seen as tipping points within macro-historical processes rather than as point-in-time events. In other words, benchmark dates are symbolic representations marking clusters of significant changes that may stretch over long periods. In this perspective, the benchmark date of 1648 is less about the particulars of the Peace of Westphalia than being the tipping point for a wider set of processes, namely the emergence of the sovereign, territorial state, which took place in Europe during the period between the later 15th century and the early part of the 18th century.

Our earlier work argued that IR's conventional benchmark dates (1500, 1648, 1919, 1945 and 1989) were: (a) Eurocentric; (b) overly concerned with major wars and their settlements; and (c) insufficiently attuned to large-scale changes beyond war such as major technological advances, ruptures in ideational schemas and revolutions. This bias towards European wars and their settlements has led IR to mostly ignore the "global transformation" that occurred between 1776 and 1914.[2] As a result, IR has adopted a faulty historical antenna that, in turn, precludes effective analysis of some of its most important issue-areas, from capitalist expansion to debates around sovereignty. To rectify this flaw, we adopted several criteria for identifying significant macro-historical change from across a range of IR theories. This generated nine criteria that served as candidates for benchmark status:

1. the organizing principle (aka "structure") of the international system (from neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism);

2. the social organizing principles (aka "the primary institutions of international society" – from the English School);

3. the "interaction capacity" [3] of the international system (defined as the capacity to move goods, people and ideas around the system – from structural realism);

4. the scale of the international system in terms of regular interaction (from realism and systems theory);

5. the scale of the international society in terms of its social structure (from the English School and constructivism);

6. the occurrence of systemic crises such as major wars, revolutions and economic breakdowns (from realism, historical sociology and IPE);

7. changes in the dominant unit of the international system/society (from realism and the English School);

8. changes in the distribution of power (aka "polarity" – from realism);

1 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 437-462;〔英〕巴里·布赞、[英] 乔治·劳森:《重新思考国际关系中的基准时间》(颜震译),载《史学集刊》,2014 年第 1 期,第 3-19 页。

2 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

3 Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

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9. changes in the "mode of power," i.e. basic shifts in how power is constituted, organized and expressed (from historical sociology).

In this paper, we use these nine criteria to assess claims for benchmark dates within the 20th century. We also build on our earlier contention that it is important to differentiate between *primary*, *secondary* and *tertiary* benchmark dates. *Primary benchmark dates* are clusters of events that signify major processes of macro-historical transformation. *Secondary benchmark dates* display a lesser cluster of significant changes without any being both deep and global. They might be more local in influence, or if global in consequence, less significant than primary benchmarks. *Tertiary benchmark dates* are mainly point-in-time events that are not significantly clustered with other dynamics and are local/regional rather than global. Given that the significance of recent events (such as the end of the Cold War in 1989, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, and the 2008 financial crisis) might look quite different a few decades down the line, we have previously proposed a thirty-year moratorium on assigning benchmark date status. [4]

On this basis, and following the idea that benchmark dates are best seen as tipping points identifying a longer period of macro-historical change, our previous work proposed a schema consisting of three primary benchmark dates and three secondary benchmark dates:

Primary:

- 1500, representing the opening of the sea lanes between 1487 and 1522;
- 1860, representing the flowering of the multiple "revolutions of modernity" between 1840 and 1870;
- 1942, representing the multiple crises between 1929 and 1949.

Secondary:

- 1648, representing the emergence of the sovereign, territorial (but crucially *not* the modern) state between the late 15th century and the early 18th century;
- 1800, representing the cluster of revolutions and wars between 1776 and the 1820s;
- 1916, representing the cluster of wars and revolutions that took place during the first two decades of the 20th century.

With the proviso that it was probably "too early to tell," we also mooted the possibility of seeing the First and Second World Wars as a single cluster stretching from 1911 to 1949 with a tipping point date of 1931. Such a view is broadly in line with those who see the First and Second World Wars as two acts within a single play, whether this play is understood as a European civil war or as a way of dealing with the

4 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 437-462;〔英〕巴里·布赞、[英] 乔治·劳森:《重新思考国际关系中的基准时间》(颜震译),载《史学集刊》,2014 年第 1 期,第 3-19 页。

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"German problem." [5] This view could potentially be extended to accommodate those who see the "short 20th century" as a single period, with its origins in the First World War and the associated Bolshevik Revolution, and its end in the formal dissolution of the Soviet empire between 1989 and 1991.[6] This view sees the Cold War as part of a longer-term systemic struggle, characterised by numerous wars and revolutions, perhaps with a tipping point of 1940.

We build on our earlier work in two main ways. First, we examine the extent to which the First World War, the Second World War and the end of the Cold War (which is only four years away from escaping our self-imposed thirty-year rule) serve as benchmark dates according to the nine criteria outlined above. Second, we explore the case for periodizing the 20th century via either of the mooted aggregations noted above: 1911-1949 (with 1931 as the benchmark date) or 1914-1991 (with 1940 as the benchmark date). Our analysis rests on a wager about the current and future shape of international society. We argue that the contemporary world is experiencing a transition away from a Western-centred world in which the modern "mode of power" was both unevenly distributed and highly combined, to a "decentred" world in which the mode of power is less unevenly distributed and the world is increasingly and intensely combined.[7] This perspective agrees that the "short twentieth century" can be usefully seen as an aggregation. But it traces this aggregation back to dynamics that emerged within the 19th century "global transformation."

2. Comparing the Significance of the Three 20th Century IR Benchmarks

This section examines the three main 20th century benchmark candidates – 1916, 1942, 1989 – in light of the nine criteria discussed above. Our aim is to outline the depth, intensity and scale of the changes that these dates represent. This, in turn, allows us to assess their relative significance as nodal points of transformation and to examine how they relate to each other.

2.1 1916

1916 serves as a shorthand for a cluster of changes stretching from the wave of "Constitutional Revolutions" that took place in the early part of the 20th century in Russia, Iran, Turkey, China and Mexico[8] through to the end of the First World War. In

5 Paul Preston, "The Great Civil War: European Politics, 1914-1945," in Tim Blanning, ed., *The Oxford History of Modern Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 153-154.

6 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Penguin, 1994; Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, London: Penguin, 1999, p. xi.

7 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*; Barry Buzan, "A World Order Without Superpowers: Decentered Globalism," *International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 2011), pp. 1-23.

8 Nader Sohrabi, "Historicizing Revolutions: Constitutional Revolutions in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Russia, 1905-1908," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (May 1995), pp. 1383-1447; Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied, 1905-1915*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

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our previous work,[9] we assigned this date secondary benchmark status because of the limited depth and range of the changes that occurred during it.

Few of the criteria drawn from extant IR theories associate this date with significant macro-historical changes. There was no transformation in the organizing principle of the international system (anarchy), unsurprisingly given that this type of change is rare. Likewise, there was no change in the dominant unit of the international system/society, which remained the empire/state. Since the system was already global in scale, the lack of change in this sphere can be discounted. But the lack of change in other areas is more telling. For example, during this period there was no significant change in interaction capacity. Steamships, railways and up to a point aircraft were all available beforehand. Neither steamships nor railways witnessed major innovations during this period. And although aircraft did develop quite substantially, especially during the First World War, this was not on a scale sufficient to constitute a major difference. Their range and carrying capacity remained limited, and their acceleration in capability did not begin to impact interaction capacity until the interwar years.

Nor did the First World War feature significant changes in the mode of power. Most of the technologies with which it was fought were available before 1914. Some, like aircraft, submarines, and tanks saw rapid developments that made significant impacts on war and strategy, but these were *within* the modern mode of power that was established during the 19th century.[10] Likewise, changes in the distribution of power were modest. The system remained multipolar, and contained more or less the same set of great powers after the war as it had done beforehand: seven great powers survived of the nine that had existed before, and there were some adjustments in relative weight amongst these seven. The Ottoman Empire was the big loser from the war, but was the least significant of the great powers anyway. The Austrian-Hungarian Empire also disappeared. But Germany suffered only a temporary diminution of its power and status. The US gained status, but its rise had been prefigured by earlier developments, particularly the "second industrial revolution" of the late 19th century. While the war accelerated Britain's relative decline, it heralded, but did not represent, a power shift from Europe to North America.

Perhaps more significant was the change in the scale of international society. The disintegration of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and the weakening of Russia by defeat and revolution, gave birth to an array of new states in East-Central Europe and the Middle East (although most of the latter were quickly re-colonised by European powers). This change, however, was local to Europe and the Middle East, and did not substantially transform the scale of international society.

The Treaty of Versailles is often seen in the IR literature as a significant moment in which the inter-war order was established. This is in line with the general approach in

9 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 437-462;〔英〕巴里·布赞、[英] 乔治·劳森:《重新思考国际关系中的基准时间》(颜震译),载《史学集刊》,2014 年第 1 期,第 3-19 页。

10 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations.*

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IR to privilege great power war settlements in shaping the structure of international order.[11] But from an English School perspective there were no major changes in the primary institutions of international society. Colonialism, divided sovereignty, great power management, nationalism, international law, human inequality, the balance of power, territoriality and suchlike all carried on. There was some attempt to restrict the right of war, and (secret) diplomacy became a political target, but nothing much came of either move. Even from a liberal institutionalist perspective, the changes instituted post-Versailles were not particularly significant. The League of Nations, often seen as *the* big innovation during this period, was only an extension, albeit an ambitious one, of developments in standing intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) started several decades earlier.[12] Although it posed as a global body, the League was mainly a Western institution that reflected the ongoing dominance of Western empires.[13]

Despite its huge scale, cost and destruction, therefore, the First World War had little impact on the social organizing principles, and not much more on the secondary institutions of international society. Perhaps the idea that there should be a standing global diplomatic forum in which great power management (ideally) should be contained is the major legacy of the war. This leaves the occurrence of systemic crises as the main element underpinning the claim of 1916 for benchmark status. The First World War was, of course, a major crisis involving huge costs, casualties and economic disruption. But as argued above, despite its gravity and scale, in terms of the theoretical criteria for significant change, the War did not have a huge number of knock-on effects. This period did not contain a major economic crisis other than the War itself. What it did contain were several revolutions, including those in China and Russia. The claim for a Chinese Revolution in 1911 is, however, suspect. Certainly the Qing dynasty came to an end, and republicans claimed the right to govern. But this was more a shift from the deteriorating state of the late decades of Qing rule, to the failed state of warlordism and civil war of the period from 1911 to 1949.[14] There was no transformation from one form of government to another, but more a shift from a weak dynasty to an internal anarchy in which a weak central government contended with a host of provincial warlords. The real revolution in China came with the victory of Mao's Chinese

11 E.g. Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflict and International Order, 1648-1989*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999; John G. Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001; Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Ian Clark, *International Legitimacy and World Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

12 Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*; Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Jeanne Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004; Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

13 Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009.

14 Jonathan Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power 1850 to the Present*, London: Penguin, 2013, pp. 119-375.

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Communist Party in 1949, which both asserted strong central control and imposed a new form of government.

Arguably, therefore, the Russian revolution was the most important event in this cluster. By embedding a new social organizing principle within a powerful state, it influenced the make-up of international society for the following seven decades. The link between Russian power and socialist ideology transformed the landscape of international relations, providing a short-term challenge in the form of the withdrawal of Russian forces from the First World War, a medium-term challenge in the provision of support for like-minded movements (the Soviet Union invaded Poland in 1920, provided aid for German revolutionaries in 1923, supported the republicans during the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939, and helped to install socialist regimes in Europe and Asia during the late 1940s), and a long-term challenge in the establishment of a systemic alternative to market-democracy.

Beyond the Bolshevik Revolution, perhaps the most important international event of this period was the Japanese defeat of Tsarist Russia in 1905. The claim for including 1905 is that it signalled the arrival of Japan as the first non-white great power. This was a stirring event at the time, providing a challenge to Western notions of cultural and racial superiority. The global importance of Japan's victories is captured well by the remark made by Alfred Zimmern, perhaps the leading academic-practitioner in British turn-of-the-century IR, in reaction to it. Zimmern was due to give a lecture to students at Oxford about Greek history, but having heard the news of Japan's victory, instead began his talk by announcing that, "I feel I must speak to you about the most important historical event that has happened, or is likely to happen, in our lifetime: the victory of a non-white people over a white people." [15] This remark does more than just illustrate how much force the concept of race had in the early 20th century. It also underlines how Japan's military victories broke the myth of invincible white power established during the 19th century by European and American victories over China, the Ottoman Empire and many parts of Africa. In so doing Japan gave hope to anti-colonial movements around the world.

In retrospect, Japan's victory stands as the first major move in what is currently thought of as "the rise of the rest," when non-Western societies have harnessed industrialization, modern state building and ideologies of progress in indigenous configurations.[16] The wider significance of 1905 is that it marked the end of a period in which the West established the contours of a core-periphery international order. The inter-societal formations that enabled the emergence and institutionalization of this system also contained, paradoxically, the seeds for the rise of such non-Western powers. As a result, the *particular* rise of Japan, as captured in its defeat of Russia, portended the *general* decline of the West. Or to put this in another way, the debate about global (as opposed to merely European/Western) power shifts that occupies many

15 Robert Vitalis, "Birth of a Discipline," in David Long and Brian Schmidt, eds. *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2005, p. 168.

16 FareedZ akaria, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*, London: Penguin, 2008.

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commentators in the contemporary world has its origins in late 19th century and early 20th century dynamics. 1905 represents a segue into this wider dynamic, and in a longer historical perspective might well turn out to be the most important event within this cluster.

2.2 1942

1942 stands as a tipping point in the period between 1929 (the global economic crisis) and 1949 (the revolution in China that brought Mao and the CCP to power). Buzan and Lawson assigned 1942 *primary* benchmark status because of the extensive depth and range of the changes that it represents.[17] As with 1916, there is no change in either the organizing principle of the international system or its scale during this period. There are, however, significant changes in the other seven criteria outlined above.

In terms of interaction capacity, the development of aircraft for both civilian and military purposes reached the point where intercontinental range was achieved. Civil aviation took off on the back of aircraft technology developed during the Second World War, quickly replacing shipping as the main form of international transport for human beings and light freight. Such aircraft, with rockets not far behind, opened the prospect of air attacks across oceans. Alongside this, the advent of nuclear weapons marked a major ratcheting up of destructive power. This was still a change within the new mode of power, but one with huge consequences for war and strategy. Nuclear weapons changed the utility of war by blurring the distinction between victory and defeat, and by opening-up the possibility of human species suicide.

This period also saw major changes in the distribution of power, with a transformation from multipolarity to bipolarity. The former European great powers and Japan dropped out of the great power ranks, while the Soviet Union and the US became superpowers, and China re-emerged as a recognised great power after a century of absence. Unlike after the First World War, the social organizing principles of international society underwent substantial change. Colonialism and racism (human inequality) were formally delegitimized, being replaced as institutions of international society by development and human equality/rights respectively.[18] Sovereignty became based on formal equality, with the exception of the maintenance of great power privileges.[19] The US succeeded Britain as hegemon and helped to extend the scope of liberal international order through secondary institutions such as the UN and the introduction of new financial and trade regimes. The UN itself was an upgraded version of the League of Nations.

The demise of colonialism had knock-on effects on the dominant unit of international society: empires (quite literally) bled away, leaving a greater political uniformity

17 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 437-462;〔英〕巴里·布赞、[英] 乔治·劳森:《重新思考国际关系中的基准时间》(颜震译),载《史学集刊》,2014 年第 1 期,第 3-19 页。

18 AyseZ arakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

19 GerryS impson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order*.

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in which both former metropoles and former colonies held the status of nation-states. Decolonization transformed the scale of international society, prompting a major increase in its membership, and the rise of the "third world" as a major new factor in world politics. During the 1950s and 1960s, membership of Western-global international society tripled as the General Assembly filled with new states from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Between 1940 and 1980, 81 colonies and 4 quasi-colonies became independent states.[20] The General Assembly became the expression of the now universal institution of sovereign equality.

This period also contained a number of systemic crises. The major financial and trading crisis that started in 1929 paved the way to the Second World War via breakdowns in liberal economic and political practices, and ideational changes including the rise of fascism in three great powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) and up to a point in China as Chiang Kai-shek's KMT became more authoritarian. The 1929 crash was followed by Japan's invasion of Northeast China in 1931 and the expansionism of Nazi Germany. By 1942, all the great powers were engaged in a systemic war whose outcome hung in the balance. After the war, events ranging from Indian Independence to the Chinese Revolution maintained a sense of global tumult. The 1942 cluster thus contains changes in the distribution and mode of power, systemic crises, shifts in both social organizing principles and the scale of international society, and a change in interaction capacity. All things considered, the period around 1942 looks considerably more transformational than that around 1916.

2.3 1989

1989 is a point-in-time event (the end of the Cold War) that has become well established within IR as a temporal yardstick, separating Cold War from post-Cold War. It does not represent a historical cluster, and is still sufficiently recent to fall within our 30-year rule. But if 1989 is too close in time to be able to fully assess in terms of its long-term significance, this has not stopped the end of the Cold War from structuring the way IR is taught and analysed. So how does this benchmark rate in terms of the nine criteria for significant change?

The most obvious change associated with 1989 lies in the distribution of power: a shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. There is also a relatively minor increase in the scale of international society with the addition of the fourteen successor states to the Soviet Union, a kind of last gasp of decolonization. But there are few other changes of note, except for the end to the ideological challenge offered by the Soviet Union and its satellites. In terms of changing the distribution of power and, perhaps, serving notice of the end of this ideological confrontation, China's opening-up in 1978 is beginning to look more significant than 1989. Indeed, China's opening-up marks perhaps the most significant change in contemporary world politics: the globalisation of "neo-liberalism." Beginning in the 1970s, neoliberal policies – competitive exchange rates, control of the money supply, inflation targets, the reduction of capital and currency controls,

20 DavidB . Abernathy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 133.

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lower rates of taxation, and so on – have been instituted around the world. By 2000, virtually all states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development had abandoned capital controls.[21] From occupying a minor position within policy-practice circles during the post-World War Ⅱ years, China's opening-up, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, has seen neoliberalism emerge as a kind of global "common sense." [22]

In this way, although: "both academics and policy-makers tend to use 1989 and its surrogate frames (such as Cold War/post-Cold War) as the principal normative, analytical and empirical shorthand for delineating past and present," there are many parts of the world for which 1989 has little, or uncertain, importance.[23] This benchmark date relates to a series of changes that looked big at the time, but appear less so the further away they get. 1989 has not passed any test more stringent than the end of bipolarity and it is questionable how significant that shift is in a longer perspective. Indeed, it is looking increasingly likely that China's opening-up is becoming the "1905" of our times, standing as a point-in-time benchmark date for the "rise of the rest" and the relative decline of Western power.

This analysis yields a simple conclusion: the 1942 benchmark has significantly more depth, spread and scale significance than 1916. Both represent substantial clusters of changes, and their ranking as primary (1942) and secondary (1916) benchmark dates appears justified. By comparison, 1989 is a rather one-shot event that looms large only if observed through the narrow lens of neorealism. In neorealist thinking, changes in polarity increase in significance as numbers get smaller. Thus the change from bipolarity to unipolarity is, for neorealists, a big deal. And it is why the shift from nine to seven great powers during the First World War did not carry as much weight. But since this claim is so narrowly based, and not part of a broader cluster of transformational events, it seems appropriate to give 1989 only provisional tertiary status as a point-in-time event.

3. Should the 20th Century Benchmarks be Aggregated?

Now that we are beginning to get some historical distance from the 20th century, is there a case for either of the mooted aggregations: (1905) 1911-1949 (=1931) or (1905) 1911-1989 (=1940) ? As noted above, we have previously argued that IR has unreflectively fallen into the habit of using the settlements after major great power wars as its

21 Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (Vol. 4), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 144.

22 PhilC erny, *A Theory of Transnational Neopluralism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 140.

23 George Lawson, "Introduction: The 'What', 'When' and 'Where' of the Global 1989'," in George Lawson, Chris Armbruster and Michael Cox, eds., *The Global 1989: Continuity and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 1.

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benchmark dates,[24] and the three 20th century candidates certainly fall into that pattern. Proceeding in that manner excludes events such as economic or environmental crises, technological breakthroughs, ideational changes, and political and social revolutions from consideration as benchmark dates, grossly distorting the question of what it is that is important in shaping the main dynamics of international relations. The question is therefore whether these three world wars should be thought of as more or less self-contained clusters of changes, or whether they are part of larger macro-historical configurations? Thinking along these lines suggests a different approach to assessing benchmark dates. In addition to weighing the relative global significance and depth of their nested changes, as we did in the previous section, it is also possible to place dates within a cluster that represents a specific macro-historical configuration, defining the significance of dates and events in relation to their roles within that configuration.

In favour of thinking along these lines is the fact that the earlier, well established benchmark dates in IR, when examined more closely, nearly all represent tipping points in long running historical processes. Thus, as noted above, 1500 represents the opening of the trans-oceanic sea lanes between 1487 and 1522; 1648 represents the emergence of the sovereign, territorial state between the late 15th century and the early 18th century; 1800 represents the cluster of revolutions and wars between 1776 and the 1820s; and 1860 represents the coming together of the multiple revolutions of modernity between 1840 and 1870. By this measure, the cluster of changes around a significant benchmark date runs from several decades (1500, 1800, 1860) to as much as a couple of centuries (1648). By comparison, the 20th century clusters look rather short: eight or fourteen years for the 1916 cluster (depending on whether 1905 or 1911 is the starting date), twenty years for 1942, and perhaps two or three years for 1989. It is, of course, possible that historical development is accelerating, and therefore some compression of major benchmark clusters might be natural. But even with this caveat in mind, it is worth seeing whether a case can be made for linking the three benchmark dates by framing the 20th century in a macro-historical way.

Taking a macro-historical perspective on benchmark dates raises some tricky philosophical issues, of which two stand out. First is the problem of linear time. There is no doubt that clarity of hindsight increases with distance, yet there is undeniable pressure to focus on recent "big" events as turning points. As argued above, 1989 already has that status in IR with a lot of scholarly debates and teaching organised around the idea of "the world since 1989." For earlier generations of IR students it was "the world since 1945" or "the world since 1919." It may be that the 2008 financial crisis will, over time, acquire similar standing. As things stand, the events of 2008 and after have primarily impacted on Europe and the United States. However, the ripple effects of the crisis are potentially substantial and it may be that these events form part of a broader configuration in which neo-liberalism becomes reduced from orthodoxy

24 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 2014), pp. 437-462;〔英〕巴里·布赞、[英] 乔治·劳森:《重新思考国际关系中的基准时间》(颜震译),载《史学集刊》,2014 年第 1 期,第 3-19 页。

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into one amongst a range of capitalist assemblages.[25] As we note above, it is also possible to see the financial crisis, like the Japanese defeat of Russia in 1905, as part of a broader range of processes that mark the relative decline of Western power. Yet given the relatively short distance that separates us from these events, there is no reliable way of assessing how important they are, at least not for the time being.

Consider as another example—the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. These attacks clearly had a major impact at the time. First reactions encompassed the spectacular nature of the attacks and the gut-wrenching empathy for the passengers on the planes and the people inside the target buildings. Second thoughts turned to the strategic and tactical genius the attacks represented: a novel mode of attack that exposed huge opportunities for violence within modern transportation systems. That this genius was linked to a Hollywood-class villain simply heightened the drama. Then there was the unsettling fact that a non-state actor had successfully attacked the world's most powerful state. The formal US response treated the attack as a declaration of war, elevating the status of its opponent and suggesting that the defining activity of international relations was no longer inter-state relations. Such a response led to questions over the status of sovereignty as the core organizing principle of international society. In its own terms and times, 9/11 thus looked like a very big event.

And yet if we shift our imaginations a century into the future and look back at 2001, what will we see? Perhaps 9/11 will stand as the point when states surrendered their claim to exercise monopoly control over the use of force. If substantial attacks by non-state actors become a regular feature of the coming decades, and especially if these escalate to the use of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, then 9/11 will indeed warrant macro-historical standing. But other scenarios are equally, perhaps more, likely. 9/11 might turn out to be a one-off event with states reasserting control over, and ownership of, war. The ultra-violence of extremist groups may limit their ability to expand or even endure as significant actors. The threat from non-state actors might get brushed aside by other developments such as the rise of China and India, which could create new rounds of great power competition. An environmental crisis such as a substantial rise in sea levels might become the world's central security concern. Machine intelligence might become powerful and pervasive enough to change how human life on the planet operates. In these scenarios, one hundred years from now 9/11 would appear as a footnote within a wider historical optic. We should therefore be cautious about how we understand and signify events, and that caution should be greater when the event in question is recent. Over time, the meaning and significance of events change. This is also likely to be the case for 9/11.

The second philosophical issue raised by the relationship between benchmark dates

25 Saskia Sassen, "The Return of Primitive Accumulation," in George Lawson, Chris Armbruster and Michael Cox, eds., *The Global 1989*, pp. 51-75; Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Capitalism and the Emergent World Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January 2014), pp. 71-91;〔英〕巴里·布赞、〔英〕乔治·劳森:《资本主义与新兴世界秩序》, 载《国际安全研究》, 2014 年第 1 期, 第 78-100 页。

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and macro-historical enquiry lies in the scale of temporal perspective that is adopted. If one takes a very long view, then many events that look big in their own time recede into the background. The Cold War may look no more consequential in the long run of things than the Peloponnesian War, or the Punic Wars, or Hideyoshi's attempts to conquer Korea and Ming China. Nuclear weapons may look like just another instance of military innovation similar to iron swords, war chariots, compound bows and gunpowder weapons. In the very long-run perspective, and assuming that humankind goes on to become a space-faring species, the outstanding event of the 20th century might turn out to be the launching of the first human being into orbit: Yuri Gagarin in 1961. It is easy to imagine an event like that living for millennia in the collective imagination of humankind. Yet seen from 2015, in the narrow framing of where we are now and where we might be in the next ten or twenty years, such events provide little more than diverting background to IR's core concerns.

In this sense, the scale of perspective that is adopted shapes the nature of the narrative that goes with it, and it is the narrative that makes particular events seem either important or unimportant. A narrative with a perspective of a million years would have as its main dynamic the evolution and spread of humankind, and feature benchmark dates based on migration events and evolutionary landmarks in human intelligence. One with a perspective of 5000 years would be primarily concerned with the rise and fall of civilizations, and feature benchmark dates based around this theme. On these mega-macro scales, the three benchmark candidates in the 20th century would not register strongly. But a grand narrative with a perspective of 500 years would have as its central concern the rise of the West to global dominance. And such a perspective is likely to feature prominently the 20th century events we have discussed.

4. Contextualizing the 20th Century in the 19th Century Global Transformation

All in all, therefore, too long a perspective reduces most contemporary events to insignificance; while too short a perspective provides insufficient depth of context to bring the relevant macro-historical configuration into view. On this basis, we propose to contextualise the three 20th century benchmarks by examining them from a perspective of two centuries. This perspective features the revolutions of modernity that transformed the world during the "long 19th century" (the period between 1776 and 1914). Its core dynamic is a complex, intertwined set of revolutions – economic, military, political, social, legal, scientific and technological – that remade the material and ideational character of international order. Because the story of this "global transformation" is told in detail elsewhere,[26] we offer only a brief summary here. The key argument is that the main parameters of modern international relations,

26 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations.*

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both material and ideational, were established during the 19th century, and that what has happened since then can be understood as a working out of the dynamics and challenges set in motion at that time. This perspective should enable us to see whether, and how, the three 20th century benchmarks might be linked together within the wider theme of the unfolding of the "global transformation."

In material terms, the "small planet" that we are familiar with today emerged during the 19th century. From the 1830s onwards, the steamship, the railway and the telegraph integrated the continents. The movement of goods (bulk trade), people (mass migration), military power (colonization, world war) and information (news, military and economic command and control) became quick, reliable and relatively cheap, and humankind became connected into a tightly integrated, interdependent global political economy. In ideational terms, four modern ideologies of progress – liberalism, socialism, nationalism and "scientific" racism – came to dominate concerns about identity, status and legitimacy. These four ideologies dominated the ideational landscape of the 20th century. With the possible exception of environmentalism, no idea of similar weight or transformational consequence has arisen since.[27]

The first durable flowering of these multiple revolutions took place in a handful of Western societies, even if these revolutions were enabled by international dynamics ranging from imperialism to capitalist accumulation. Consequently, a large power gap opened up between a small group of "core" polities, and a much larger group of "peripheral" polities. That a relatively small country like Britain was able to occupy India and inflict military defeat on China, the two longstanding centres of the world economy, shows just how important this power gap was. And because the gap relied on a new mode of power, it was very difficult to close. *In principle* the power gap could be closed: those with access to the configuration that sustained the global transformation could move from periphery to core. *In practice*, this move was made exceptionally difficult not only by the depth of the transformative package, but also by practices of imperialism and other forms of coercive interventionism that reinforced the advantages of the core.

The result of these dynamics is captured well by the idea of *uneven and combined development* (UCD).[28] During the 19th century, development became both more intensely uneven (because of the gap opened up by the new mode of power) and more intensely combined (because imperialism, the extension of the market and improvements in physical interaction capacity saw the core establish its authority around the world). While uneven and combined development has been a longstanding feature in human history,[29] the revolutions of modernity both intensified unevenness between polities and,

27 Only fascism might qualify, and that is best seen as a synthesis of extreme nationalism and "scientific" racism.

28 Justin Rosenberg, "Basic Problems in the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development Part II: Unevenness and Multiplicity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 165-189; Justin Rosenberg, "Kenneth Waltz and Leon Trotsky: Anarchy in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development," *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (March 2013), pp. 183-230.

29 Justin Rosenberg, "Basic Problems in the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development Part II: Unevenness and Multiplicity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 165-189; Justin Rosenberg, "Kenneth Waltz and Leon Trotsky: Anarchy in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development," *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (March 2013), pp. 183-230.

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for the first time, tied the world into a single system. On the one hand, those convinced of their cultural superiority and with access to advanced weapons, industrial production, medicine and new forms of bureaucratic organization gained a pronounced advantage over those with limited access to these sources of power. On the other hand, both core and peripheral polities became deeply integrated into a single world system: economically, politically and militarily. During the global transformation, degrees of combination intensified both because of technological breakthroughs (such as steamships, railways and electronic means of communication from the telegraph to the internet) and social practices (such as imperialism, colonialism and the expansion of capitalism to global scale). The global transformation produced both homogenization and differentiation simultaneously.

The global transformation unleashed the dynamics that characterize much contemporary world politics. In broad-brush terms, what we see is a three-stage process in which the dynamics of UCD and the core-periphery structure work themselves out. In the first stage, which runs up until 1945, the core maintains the gap between itself and the periphery in the form of what can be labelled: *Western-colonial international society*. This featured divided sovereignty and a set of competing empires each with a core modern state as its metropole. During this phase, the core expanded somewhat as Germany, the US, France, and to a lesser extent Russia and Italy followed Britain's lead and acquired the modern mode of power. Notably Japan joined the ranks of the great powers, outpacing many societies within the West. Japan also followed the 19th century "standard of civilization" by generating its own empire. As noted above, the rise of Japan to great power status caused alarm in the West, and the country became caught up in the great power wars of the 20th century. This, however, hides its true significance: a century before Zakaria coined the notion of "the rise of the rest," [30] Japan, a non-western polity, had made the opening move to come to terms with the revolutions of modernity and began closing the power gap that emerged during the 19th century.

The second stage of the global transformation can be labelled: *Western-global international society*. This stage ran from 1945 until the early 21st century; it is possible, as discussed above, that the financial crisis of 2008 will become the benchmark date that signifies the closing of this stage. The main features of Western-global international society were that, while the Western core (plus Japan) remained dominant, its grip began to weaken. Slowly and patchily, substantial parts of "the rest" begin to find a way of coming to terms with the revolutions of modernity. In East Asia, Japan was joined by Korea, Taiwan Region and Singapore. During the 1980s, China began to take off on its remarkable development; India began to do so during the 1990s. Other states, from Turkey to Brazil and from Mexico to Indonesia, also came to signify this process. Yet these dynamics took place within a global political economy still largely structured by the West and this structure, especially its relative openness regarding trade and investment, played a substantial role in the ongoing spread of modernity. The West

30 FareedZ akaria, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*.

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still maintained significant, though diminishing, power advantages, and international society was still largely framed in Western terms.

In the early years of the 21st century, the "rise of the rest" is (slowly and patchily) expanding the core and spreading the revolutions of modernity ever wider. This, in turn, means that the dynamic of uneven and combined development is taking on a new shape. Rather than being highly combined and highly uneven, as was the case during the first two stages of the global transformation, UCD is now highly combined, but becoming notably less uneven. This points towards a third stage that might be labelled: *decentered globalism*. This stage is still emergent, but the direction in which UCD is unfolding suggests three defining features: no superpowers, a narrow ideological bandwidth, and an ever-higher degree of combination.

First, the trend towards lower levels of unevenness in the distribution of power means that this will be a world without superpowers.[31] Although superpowers seem natural to modern IR, they are not. The age of superpowers was a particular consequence of the highly uneven distribution of power created by the Western-colonial phase of global modernity and sustained during its Western-global phase. During these two periods, states like Britain and the US amassed sufficient relative power to be world dominating. That level of capability is no longer possible. With many states becoming wealthy and powerful, no single polity will be able to accumulate sufficient relative power to dominate international society. Even giants such as China and India will be hemmed in both by the rise of each other and other states. Nor are the established powers going away. There will be no modern "fall of Rome." The US will remain *primus inter pares* for some considerable time to come and, whatever their current troubles, the European Union and Japan will remain substantial centres of power, wealth and influence. Superpowers should, therefore, be seen as a corollary of an international order defined by the first two stages of the global transformation. From having two superpowers in the Cold War period, we are now down to one whose position and legitimacy look increasingly tenuous. The rise (perhaps better seen as the return) of new powers will close the window in which superpowers have been a core component of international relations. The world of decentred globalism will have several great powers and many regional powers; it will not have any superpowers.

The second dynamic is the emergence of a relatively narrow ideological bandwidth compared with the deep divisions of the 20th century. All of the great powers are now committed to maintaining a global capitalist economy.[32] Potentially, this provides a new foundation for strengthening international society by constructing a "concert" of capitalist powers. Such a development would require a focus on the powerful shared interests all states have in maintaining the functioning of the global economy and dealing with its many inequities. It would also require a pluralist tolerance of political

31 Barry Buzan, "A World Order Without Superpowers: Decentered Globalism," *International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 2011), pp. 1-23.

32 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Capitalism and the Emergent World Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January 2014), pp. 71-91;〔英〕巴里·布赞、〔英〕乔治·劳森:《资本主义与新兴世界秩序》,载《国际安全研究》,2014 年第 1 期,第 78-100 页。

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differences, because although all (or almost all) contemporary states are capitalist, they remain divided between democratic and authoritarian forms of governance, and this division looks to be durable.[33]

Finally, the trend of increasing levels of combination seems unstoppable. By combination, we mean high levels of economic and societal interdependence, and increasingly "shared fates" (from the operation of the global economy to climate change). This, of course, suggests an intensification of global politics, and probably a larger role for both IGOs and non-state actors. Quite how this tension between pluralising and globalising imperatives will play out is difficult to predict, but that it will be a main axis of world politics seems probable.

What, then, does this two-century narrative focused on the global transformation mean for 20th century benchmark dates? The ideas of Preston, Mazower and Hobsbawm noted above (regarding a 1914-1945 European civil war, a 1917-1989 era of ideological struggle, and a "short 20th century" shoehorned between World War One and the end of the Cold War respectively) retain a degree of resonance. But none captures the whole picture either in terms of the scale of the transformation or the range of factors that it illuminates. In the perspective of the global transformation, we are living within a threefold working out of dynamics that were established during the 19th century: of core-periphery structure; of great powers, and of ideologies of progress. While the new mode of power unleashed by the global transformation gave core states great advantages over those in the periphery, it also destabilized relationships between the great powers by exposing them to the relentless insecurity of permanent and rapid changes in the technologies of military power.[34] How would the great powers deal with this, especially once the international system became "closed," as was the case by the end of the late 19th century by which time virtually all the globe's territory was occupied or colonized?[35] And how were the four ideologies of progress to be reconciled? Liberalism, socialism, nationalism and "scientific" racism contained huge contradictions among themselves – there was no way they could be forged into a single package. The 20th century thus became the time in which the contradictions of the global transformation were confronted and the first resolutions to these contradictions were formulated.

The working out of the core-periphery structure opens with Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905, which as noted above stands as a symbolic date marking the "rise of the rest." Japan struck a blow against "scientific" racism by showing both that white power was not invincible, and that non-white peoples could acquire the multiple revolutions

33 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Capitalism and the Emergent World Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January 2014), pp. 71-91;〔英〕巴里·布赞、〔英〕乔治·劳森:《资本主义与新兴世界秩序》, 载《国际安全研究》, 2014 年第 1 期, 第 78-100 页。

34 Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*.

35 Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1975; Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," in Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Washington, DC: National Defence University, 1996, pp. 175-194.

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of modernity. Japan struck a blow against Western imperialism, but not against imperialism as such, a practice it took up with relish. After 1945, the delegitimation of "scientific" racism and colonialism opened the way to large-scale decolonization. The core gave up its right to occupy the periphery and extended as norms – and to a considerable extent as practices – the rights of sovereign and human equality. But even after decolonization, few polities matched Japan's acquisition of the revolutions of modernity. Only Korea and Taiwan Region, and Singapore, managed to achieve high levels of capitalist development by the 1980s. In the late 1970s, China's shift to "reform and opening up" marked the beginning of a more systematic "catching up," so much so that, by the first decade of the 21st century, the world appeared to be moving towards a condition of decentred globalism. As mooted above, it may be that, over time, 2008 will emerge as the tipping point for a wider shift in global economic power.

The working out of great power competition perhaps also began in 1905 when Japan's surprise defeat of Russia showed how quickly "modernizing missions" could upset the balance of power. Japan's victory opened the way to a period of ferocious great power wars, supporting Preston's idea of seeing the First and Second World Wars as a single event. At the beginning of this period there was a close link between great power dynamics and those that took place between core-periphery polities. Industrial great powers could use their power advantage to build or expand empires, and those empires in turn increased their standing against other great powers. Lenin's idea of intensifying capitalist competition to divide and re-divide the world remains a useful characterisation of this process.[36] From competitive empire-building, it was not a great leap for some great powers to also attempt to pursue the kind of global hegemony that Britain enjoyed for a time during the mid-19th century when it was the only fully-fledged industrial power. The result was not so much a European civil war as it was a knockout process amongst the great powers. Europe was the main location for this process because it was where most of the then great powers were concentrated. By 1945, the knockout process had eliminated all of the small great powers (which, like Britain, were great more because of their acquisition of the modern mode of power rather than because of their territorial and population size). The arrival of nuclear weapons empowered the "defense dilemma" in which the destructiveness of modern weapons outgrew the societies that wielded them with the consequence that fear of war began to outweigh fear of defeat.[37] Only two superpowers were left, and after 1989 this was reduced to one by the implosion of the Soviet Union, albeit with China and India beginning to appear as major great powers.

Although, as ongoing tensions between the US and China signify, great power competition has not come to an end in the contemporary world, the 20th century has seen some significant resolutions of it. Empire building is no longer acceptable in its traditional sense, although quite where the boundary is between empire and forms of

36 Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism.*

37 Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Colchester: ECPR Press, 2007, pp. 217-233.

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regional hegemony is a thorny question. Russia has not given up either imperial ways of thinking or attempts to recover some of its former territories. Quite what China has in mind with its assertion of regional primacy is unclear. Wars between nuclear-armed great powers are no longer thought of as rational, and the idea that any one power might seek global hegemony becomes ever more irrational as the system moves towards decentred globalism. Great powers still wield big military clout, yet increasingly their standing and status rest not on war-making, but on how well they build regional and global level international societies.

The working out of ideologies of progress more or less fits with Mazower's framing of 1917-1989 and Hobsbawm's notion of the short 20th century. The consequence of the First World War was to push dynasticism to the margins and to elevate socialism and fascism as forms of state power. The Second World War delegitimized "scientific" racism and fascism, but left nationalism intact. The Cold War pitched state socialism against both liberal and social democracy, with nationalism remaining legitimate across the board. China's turn away from the economics of state socialism, along with the breakup of the Soviet Union between 1989-1991, marked a further stage within this process. By the 1990s, therefore, the first working out of the ideational contradictions of modernity was more or less in place. Nationalism was the big winner, and "scientific" racism the big loser. Economic liberalism was also a big winner, because most states around the world accepted that, like it or not, capitalism provided a potent means of acquiring wealth and power. But the political and cultural aspects of liberalism remained contested, even if they were also highly influential. Socialism remained intellectually energetic, not least because it retained a powerful analysis of capitalism and its inequities. But because of its inability to solve the inefficiencies of bureaucratic administration and corruption, or, as the fate of the Soviet Union showed, socialism cannot compete effectively with capitalism over the long-term.

By 1989, therefore, we can speak of an initial working out of the ideological tensions first established during the 19th century. To say this is not to suggest any kind of "end of history." Strong tensions remain between nationalism, with its inclination towards territoriality, and liberalism, with its inclination towards globalism and deterritorialization. The old tension between democratic and authoritarian modes of government, which transcends the coming of modernity, also remains live, despite the seemingly victory of capitalism. Capitalism, like nationalism and socialism, is comfortable with democratic or authoritarian forms of governance. Like religion, the authoritarian-democratic tension has been revitalized by the global transformation, and both remain significant elements in the ideational landscape of the 21st century. Even the biggest winner of the past century – capitalism – has not solved its endemic problems: periodic crises and high levels of inequality, which threaten political stability in many parts of the world.[38]

38 Capitalism's dependence on maintaining high levels of growth in order to offset the political effects of inequality points to issues of environmental sustainability. Environmental stewardship might thus become the first post-modern big idea since the 19th century to join the ideational matrix of the global political economy.

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5. Conclusions

The picture of the 20th century that emerges from this analysis is one of transformation and crisis. At the start of the century, uneven development is particularly extreme; in the contemporary world, it appears to be heading towards the kind of leveling out that was normal before the global transformation. During the same period, levels of combination have become far more intense. The dynamic of permanent and rapid technological innovation unleashed during the early 19th century shows no sign of coming to an end, and in that sense both combined development and rapid technological innovation have become the permanent background against which other dynamics operate. One consequence of this development is the end of world wars as a rational way of pursuing great power politics.

If one sees the 20th century in this way, then it confirms the pivotal importance of the cluster of benchmark dates stretching from 1929-1949, while making clear that this cluster does not stand alone. Rather, this period is intimately linked to the other two IR benchmark dates for the 20th century. And these links are, in turn, related to the 19th century global transformation through three main dynamics: a core-periphery order; great power dynamics; and ideologies of progress. Over time, it may be that 1978 serves as a useful tipping point date by which to represent these dynamics. By then, most of the resolutions noted above were either in place or becoming the most likely outcome. Although there is a good case for choosing neutral symbolic dates for benchmarks, this one pegs neatly to China's landmark decision for reform and opening up. In its own way, this was as important to the overall dynamics of the global transformation as Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905. Both work to illustrate the shift from a world that was, but no longer is, dominated by the West.

Reviewer: Wang Wenhua

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