

World History Reordered

Ilhan Niaz

Review of Ayşe Zarakol's *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*.

Book Details: Cambridge University Press, 2022, paperback, 330 pages, ISBN-10 1108971679, ISBN-13, 978-1108971676, \$ 39.05. Available on Kindle.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for thinkers who are from beyond the West is the need to develop rational theories and frameworks that aren't grounded in the definitions produced in recent centuries by Western scholars. Theorization and macro-history remain, overwhelmingly, fields that are dominated by members of a Western and metropolitan elite. At best, the role of non-Western scholars is to take a Western framework and apply it to the circumstances of their local communities and cultures. More typically, non-Western scholars aren't expected to have ideas or definitions of their own when it comes to the big questions of human social and historical development. Ayşe Zarakol, in *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*, set out to achieve two great interrelated objectives. One is to demonstrate the existence of world orders that predated the rise of the modern West. The other is to challenge the narrative coherence of the traditional and still dominant Eurocentric view about the emergence of world order. To Zarakol's credit, she succeeds on both scores and in so doing greatly enriches the epistemic basis of both modern history and international relations.

Before the West advanced the perspective that for about five hundred years before the European colonial onslaught, Asia, North Africa, the Mediterranean, and even parts of Europe, were integrated into a Chinggisid world order. This world order originated in the Mongol conquests initiated by Genghis Khan and continued by his successors, and it underwent different shifts in emphasis and great power dynamics during the five centuries or so of its existence. At its peak, this world order covered most of Asia, from present-day China in the East to present-day Russia in the North and the present-day Middle East in the West. Even so, the basic principles and practices of this order created a pool of shared experiences and norms over most of the Old World.

The first of these was the concept of the state (or supreme ruler) as a *lawgiver* elevated above traditional, local, and religious affiliations. Provided these affiliations posed no direct challenge to the authority of the regime, paid taxes or tribute, and remained outwardly loyal, they could organize their civil and communal life as they saw fit. This cosmopolitanism stood in sharp contrast to the religious and racial xenophobia that characterized medieval Christendom and the modern West, respectively.

The second was the ordering of the world into Great Houses, many of which could claim descent from Genghis Khan, and all of which accepted the sovereignty model embodied in the first concept. These Great Houses were analogous to the Great Powers of the Westphalian system, and, at various points during their historical evolution, established balances of power

of varying stability between each other. Fascinatingly, it was the Habsburg struggle with the Ottomans, and not with *other European states*, that represented the real frontier between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’ and set the stage for the eventual secession of Europe from the Chinggisid order.

The third was the practice of tanistry as the mode of succession within states. In contrast with primogeniture, which generally prevailed in feudal European societies, tanistry held that all members of a Great House were, in theory, eligible for succession to the throne. The will of the previous ruler could be set aside by successors, and different mechanisms could be put in place to manage the transition from one ruler to the next, but, in practice tanistry was bloody. This meant that the Great Houses regularly experienced wars of succession and those with a leadership claim understood that when the time came, they would either win, die, be exiled, or be imprisoned.

The concurrent operation of these principles meant that for five hundred years most of the Old World operated an international order organized as a series of inter-house relations. Each of the larger empires in this order aspired to outshine the others in terms of their territorial reach and cultural and aesthetic refinement, and some, like the Yuan, Ottomans, and Mughals, had universalist pretensions. The smaller and weaker states aligned themselves as tributaries of the larger and more powerful empires and bided their time till they too might rise to greatness. War, trade, diplomacy, and communications were organized with such coherence and familiarity that a traveler like Ibn Battuta could travel across multiple realms while easily transferring social and educational capital. And this world system, like that which prevails today, was vulnerable to disruption on account of excessive warfare, political collapses, the outbreak of diseases, and economic downturns, and yet it remained capable of renewal and reinvention – evolving in response to external and internal challenges.

This system came under intense strain in the 1700s and broke down during the 1800s under the withering assault of European nations. Within Europe, a balance of power rooted in state-centric notions of sovereignty prevailed. In the rest of the world, European states competed to create universalistic empires employing naval domination and overseas colonialism as instruments of aggrandizement. And the shock of these defeats (comparable in swiftness and scope to the original Mongol conquests), spelled the end for the Chinggisid world order of Great Houses.

The fall of the East was accompanied by a reordering of the historical narrative. Rather than seeing the rise of the West as a temporary situation arising from critical breakthroughs that necessitated adaptation by its victims, the very notion of world order was expropriated from the East. In its place came a story of a decadent, isolated, and fragmented world, that had been woven into a durable fabric through European empire-building, commerce, and science. All that mattered was what had happened in the West (and that too, within certain parts of the West), which now constituted a universal history. This approach was (and is) fraught with danger as Zarakol explains:

“In the sixteenth century, other parts of the world still well outshone Europe in riches, arts, crafts, and even sciences. Access to the resources of Asia was still the main driver

of European trade and prosperity. Imagine that a few centuries from now South America became the core region in world politics, in the way Europe/ the West has been in the last two centuries. No doubt the twenty-fourth-century scholars would then trace the roots of its future success back to our present day, to the capable and innovative individuals who populate South America today and the choices that they are making now. Would that imply that twenty-fourth-century historians can best understand our present-day order by focusing only on South America? That is essentially how we have been studying sixteenth-century world politics.” (p. 131)

Paul Kennedy’s *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, in particular, comes in for a (well-deserved) drubbing for reading into the past developments that lay in the future. His claim, in particular, about the Ottomans being in decline in the sixteenth century makes no sense given that the period was the Golden Age of that sultanate, nor does his relegation of Japan and Russia to the status of outsiders, pointedly observed by Zarakol. But, of course, the tendency to view the past as a prologue to present outcomes is widely shared and is part of the inter-subjective glue that holds current international relations and much of macro history together:

“Western social domination is the ‘secret sauce’ that much IR (and other) theorizing about how the world works relies on; many of our theories, though seemingly identifying other causal mechanisms, could cease to have power in a world where recognition by the West was not such a sought-after good (and also the cause of such resentment). Western-centrism is thus baked into our approaches; because of this, very few of us trained in twentieth-century IR traditions can genuinely imagine the end of the current order in an ecumenical sense. Fish cannot imagine the end of the oceans.” (p. 241)

Before the West is a remarkable study for its originality and sweep. It moves effortlessly from a wealth of individual examples (such as Sultan Suleiman’s Venetian bling) to broader forces shaping the world (such as the Bubonic Plague). What makes it so powerful is that it forces the reader to rethink the definitions and historical context of international relations – this can be a painful process for some, but it is increasingly important as more and more scholars and statesmen contemplate the world *after* the West. This is a book that should be compulsory reading for students and practitioners in the international relations field, while, for the general reader, it is just a well-told history of the world.

Ilhan Niaz is a Professor of History at the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, and the author of *Old World Empires: Cultures of Power and Governance in Eurasia*.

Email: in1980@qau.edu.pk