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Contents

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A statue of Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi has been recently erected in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) and Almaty (Kazakhstan) and will be soon erected in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), too. A statue of Manas, the Kyrgyz epic hero, will be erected in Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan).[1] In September 2018, monuments to the classics of Tajik and Uzbek literature, Abdurahmon Jomi and Alisher Navoi, were exchanged in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan). In May 2022, a statue of Kazakh poet and philosopher Abai Kunanbay-uly was unveiled in Bishkek. Moving from statues to architecture, when travelling across Central Asia one can notice the similarity of *registans* in different squares of cities and villages, and the family resemblances of the blue domes of madrassas and mausoleums in Turkistan, Bukhara, Koqand, Samarkand, Khiva among others, which bear strong familiarity to those in Iran, Afghanistan, and other parts of Eurasia. *Plov* (or *pilaf*, or *palaw*, or many other names from the same Sanskrit root) is eaten widely across the whole territory of Eurasia, and so too *Nowruz*, the Mithraic and Zoroastrian festivity to celebrate the new year and the arrival of spring, is celebrated. These cultural connections rest on a deep substratum of commonality, familiarity, and shared histories and cosmologies that have resisted the sway of empires that crossed Eurasia over the centuries, including the Tsarist one and, later, the Soviet Union.

Before the West theorises and analyses such deep substratum, and does so in a way that cogently centres, or rather re-centres, Eurasian order-making principles and practices in International Relations (IR). This book is a welcome, necessary, and long-awaited opus. Part of what can be perhaps called by now "the Eurasian turn" in Global Historical Sociology, (historical) IR and humanities writ large,[2] the book makes a much-needed contribution by investigating the development of historical political orders in Asia "in its own right" (12) and showing that far from being a chaotic, anarchic, and fragmented area where a "chaotic tribal system" lived (26), Eurasia was home to empires, polities and "houses" that were very much connected for centuries.

This argument is a novel contribution for the discipline of IR, which is still too often prisoner of its own comfortable myths, timelines, concepts, and truths of Eurocentric origins, which are indeed discussed and again dismantled in the book. For those who work in history or in Area Studies, the rule-based connectivity, synergies, relations, and interactions between these peoples, houses, and polities analysed and theorised in the book are perhaps less surprising.[3] Yet, it must be clear from the very beginning that this is not a limit or a

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[1] At the time of writing, the Kazakh government has agreed to revert the name of the capital to its former designation, Astana, in a move backed by the current President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Yet, given that it is not clear when the change will officially take place, in this review the current name Nur-Sultan is used.

[2] For example, see: Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen, *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations: Russians, Turks and European State Building 4000 BCE–2017 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Marie Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021).

[3] For an overview, see: Nurlan Kenzheakhmet, *The Tūqmāq (Golden Horde), the Qazaq Khanate, the Shībānid Dynasty, Rūm (Ottoman Empire), and Moghūlistan in the XIV-XVI Centuries from Original Sources* (Almaty: Eurasian Research Institute, 2019); Dughlát Muhammad Haidar, N. Elias, and Edward Denison Ross, *The Tarikh-i-Rashidi: A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia* (Norderstedt: Hansebooks, 2017); Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Yuri Bregel, *An Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003); Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, eds., *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks: From the 14th Century to the Present : A Cultural History: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present: A Cultural History* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1990); Ron Sela, *The Legendary Biographies of Tamerlane: Islam and Heroic Apocrypha in Central Asia*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Scott C. Levi and Gurcharan Das, *Caravans: Punjabi Khatri Merchants On the Silk Road* (Gurgaon, Haryana, India:

shortcoming of *Before the West*. It is, rather, a sign of how IR as a discipline is still to free itself from deep-seated conventions and artificial benchmarks, which in other disciplines have long ago been demystified. Seen in this way, the book is not simply a fresh light shed on a (theoretically as much as empirically) underexplored area of historical international relations, but is also, and especially, a crucial call to expand our conceptual, theoretical and geographical toolkit, and to venture with curiosity and without preconceptions into areas that have long been deemed as "not worthy" studying.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book, and one that is not often seen displayed by academics, is the reflexivity and the awareness of the limitations, aporias, and doubts that the author faced during the research process. In this, Zarakol's narrative is inspiring, and its frankness is to be emulated. It is refreshing, and captivating, to have the feeling of actually taking part in a conversation about how a study of Eurasian orders can be conducted, with what difficulties and what analytical trade-offs. In this respect, an interesting aspect of the book is the methodological one. Here is where, perhaps, Zarakol's positioning could have been more outspoken. Instead of telling the reader how the research process was conducted and what criteria were followed for the selection of secondary sources, she offers a detour of the life and work of Arnold J. Toynbee, Karl Wittfogel, and Owen Lattimore (246 and subsequent).[4] One understands the move as a support for the broader argument of the validity of the macro-historical approach (more on this later), but I remain convinced that it would have been more interesting to hear from the author herself on her reflections and choices about the methods of the research and the justification for the selection of sources, as well as her take on periodisation, ontology, and what counts as "data" in this historical-sociological work.

On the defence of the macro-historical approach, I found the discussion offered by Zarakol cogent and well justified, although I personally think that while the aprioristic fetishization of specific methods is wrong (267-268), the critical interrogation of what our methods add to research and of how different methods can be combined should be a hallmark of scholarly enquiry, especially in times where a more pluralistic, interdisciplinary and "global" IR is advocated. The argument advanced against the "fetishisation" and "glorification" of archives in particular is an interesting one. For if the use of only secondary sources is a perfectly legitimate strategy (provided that if fits the research task at hand), it is also true that if all scholars were to do "big histories," arguably there would be very little archival research left, which in fact often constitutes a sizeable component of the secondary literature that is used for macro analyses. Many of the secondary sources used in the book *do include* primary materials—translated, and available. All this to say that while I concur with the need to avoid aprioristic and almost blindly devoted fetishization of a given method for its own sake, a productive and intellectually nourishing way forward would be to rely on interdisciplinarity and more collaboration between IR, History, and Area Studies, incorporating methods such as "triangulation" and "textual ethnography" that are able to bridge secondary and primary sources.[5]

After reading *Before the West*, I am all the more convinced of this. In this respect, I am not even sure that Zarakol's book is fully on the macro side of the analysis. Despite the repeated advocacy for the macro vision of historical Eurasian orders, it features several accounts of personalities, of individuals, of order-makers and of actors who were vital in the sustainment and reproduction of these very orders across the centuries. In turn, these zoom-ins on personalities and specific historical figures are supported and correlated with

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Penguin/Portfolio, 2016); Favereau, *The Horde*; Shoshana Keller, *Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); Khalid, *Central Asia*.

[4] Owen Lattimore, "Spengler and Toynbee," *Atlantic Monthly* 181:4 (1948): 104-5; Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilisations* (London: Constable and Company, 1922); Karl A. Wittfogel, "Russia and Asia: Problems of Contemporary Area Studies and International Relations," *World Politics* 2:4 (1950): 445-62.

[5] Tobias Lemke et al., "Forum: Doing Historical International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (11 March 2022): 1–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2044754.

biographies, anecdotes, and micro-events that enrich the narrative and provide more context and meaningfulness. They are true thick descriptions of multiple subjectivities which shed light on "the contexts and interpretations of agents contesting political orders."[6] If, in other words, the preference is for the forest and not for the trees, then I still believe that in the book there are several discernible trees. One therefore wonders where the author locates herself on the macro-micro spectrum. My impression from the book is that there is more "meso" than one may think, what Dan Green has recently termed "meso-scale historical narratives" which are neither nomothetic nor idiographic,[7] but I may be wrong.

Another point I would like to raise is one about the title. Here, the necessary caveat is that I am not familiar with the publishing process behind the book, and hence I am not aware of any suggestions by, or discussions with the publishers, with respect to what title should be given to the book. The point I want to raise is that if the story told is about Eurasian actors and orders in their own right, and about the fact that despite the interknitted character of the different "houses" populating Eurasia there was still a high level of connectivity between the East and the West, then going for *Before the West* presents us with two issues. The first one is that this title somehow counterintuitively recentres the West, as it becomes the *terminus ante quem* "before which" something happened. The second one is that the title creates a sense of a strict temporal break, an arbitrary "before" and "after" which in the book itself is (rightly) problematised, given how much the notion (and the presence) of connectivity is stressed. What is the "Before" referring to, exactly? Is it before Westphalia? But we know, from the book itself and other bodies of work, that "Westphalia" has been largely a myth. Is it before "the West" understood as a unified category in international relations? But the lack of awareness of "the East" as a unified ensemble of polities could be mentioned, too. Is it "before the West" in the sense that we forgot much of what was going on in the East due to the in-built Eurocentrism and Westerncentrism in the discipline of IR? This seems to be the most plausible understanding, although then the problem becomes the fact that "before" and "after" create a sense of dichotomic temporality which does not correspond to the history offered in the book. This is all the more evident if one considers the fact that the period covered in the book is indeed before Westphalia, and therefore its IR and specific sovereignty model had yet to be found in the West, too.[8]

Books cannot cover everything. It is part of the writing process, let alone of that of research, that some areas remain underexplored or postponed to further studies. With respect to *Before the West*, one of these areas is the impact that the processes and the legacies of the ecumenes studied in the book have had on modern and present-day times, particularly with respect to Central Asia. As a matter of fact, there is ample space to study the long-lasting effects that the politics of empires, khanates, and *ulus* are having *on* and *in* contemporary Eurasian politics. I can provide two examples. The first one is the routine, periodic attempt of Russian President Vladimir Putin to deny contemporary Kazakhstan its history and statehood, reminding Kazakhstani elites with jokes and remarks that Kazakhstan was created by the Tsarist Empire in the nineteenth century, something that has was indeed used as part of the "Europeanisation" process of the empire.[9] In fact, the Kazakh Khanate (which is surprisingly absent in the book) was one of the strongest polities in Eurasia,

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[6] Lemke et al., *Forum*, 4.

[7] Lemke et al., *Forum*.

[8] This of course does not mean at all that international relations were absent. See for example Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press [for] the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1977); Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992); Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society* (London: Clarendon Press, 1984); Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems In World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 2000); Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, and Halvard Leira, *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[9] Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Knockin" on Heaven's Door: Russia, Central Asia and the Mediated Expansion of International Society," *Millennium* 42:3 (1 June 2014): 817–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829814540356.

created in the second half of the fifteenth century and was as big as the size of continental Europe. Arranged along Chinggisid (more specifically Jochidi) lines and based on the suzerainty extended over loyal and subjugated houses, this polity was a thriving one, contributing to order-making in Eurasia through trade, perpetuation of the Chinggisid model of sovereignty, war, and especially diplomacy—specifically, although not only, with Tsarist Russia and the Timurid, when Kasym Khan ratified his alliance with Babur on his way to create the Mughal empire after the fall of the Shaybanids in the first half of the XVI century.[10] The second example that one can put forward to stress the importance of these historical and social legacies for Eurasia in today's time is the renewed attempt to use international organisations and multilateral groups to revive Turkic identity and solidarism, for example the Turkic Council. I believe that an incorporation of these dynamics and trends would have had enhanced even more the argument offered about the necessity of studying these orders in light of the present, too. The discussion offered in the "Am I a Eurasianist?" section (244) would have been a nice home for these reflections.

One of the strongest contributions of the book is that of investigating and presenting a conceptualisation and practice of sovereignty that is specifically "Mongol," or "Chinggisid," or "Eurasian." This understanding of sovereignty, called "universal sovereignty," is very much different from the territorially-bounded practice to be found in the West, and presents specific "derivative" institutions: tanistry (which interestingly was used also by Viking houses in Kievan Rus' way before Chinggis Khan), legitimacy through conquest, and syncretism. These institutional bundles are still very much understudied in IR, and therefore their introduction into the discipline's conceptual vocabulary is a ground-breaking contribution, especially to facilitate comparative historical work, something that for example the English School started doing in the 1960s and 1970s.[11] However, I wonder if sometimes the book privileges too much the uniqueness "universal sovereignty," both in its own right and in relation to other institutions. With respect to the first point, universal monarchy and legitimacy through conquest did not happen in a vacuum but were legitimised by the *qurultai*, i.e. the assembly of leaders and elders (crucially women, too) who would always, and not just ceremonially, elect officials and khans whenever needed through negotiations and consensus. Given the deeply intertwined system of alliances and marriages (it is not by chance that from the same root of kurultai comes the Mongol word for "wedding") which worked as the social fabric of Mongol empires, it was the *qurultai* who ultimately had the keys to legitimacy, at least until more institutional and normative syncretism ensued. Crucially, the *qurultai* was in itself a resulting institution deriving from a complex web of fundamental, almost cosmological practices within the Chinggisid polity: *anda* (sworn brotherhood); *kuda onda* (marriage); *dooq* (family); *sulde* (vital force) and *uruq* (male lineage) among many others.[12] The *qurultai* is indeed mentioned in the book, but its deep institutional connection with universal sovereignty may be explored more to locate the latter in the broader Mongol social order and its predecessors.

With respect to the second point, the book portrays an "ecumene," which is understood as something deeper than order denoting "a deep-settled way of seeing and inhabiting the world" (224), on the basis of sovereignty norms, war, diplomacy, religion, and trade and arts. Yet, there is room to analyse more in depth the way in which this ecumene was sustained. For example, how was diplomacy performed? On page 204, for example, one reads of "Chinggisid practices in diplomacy," but what they consisted of is not explained. What sort of equivalent of "international law" was operating in Eurasia? For instance, the Peace of Amasya (1555) is arguably a pivotal episode in the history of the system of houses that developed in Eurasia, but the way in which it was achieved, conducted, and upheld is not illustrated. For however despicable this is, slavery was

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[10] See, for example, Jin Noda, *The Kazakh Khanates between the Russian and Qing Empires* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Kenzheakhmet, *The Tūqmāq (Golden Horde); Dughlát, Elias, and Ross, The Tarikh-i-Rashidi.*

[11] Wight, *Systems of States*. In that period, Adam Watson also wrote a number of draft papers (for example on the Ancient Indian and Macedonian state systems) which would then be published as part of his *Expansion of International Society* (edited with Hedley Bull, 1984) and *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[12] Favereau, *The Horde.*

one of the pivotal institutions of the Eurasian landmass and part of the circular economy existing between nomads and settled people, and involved Shias, Hindus, and Christian orthodox among others. All this to say that *Before the West* presents a compelling argument for considering Eurasia as an interconnected system, but also leaves space for further studies on how specific order-making relational practices were performed and legitimised. This would constitute an authentic move toward decolonising historical IR and a solid contribution to the Global IR programme, and in my opinion would rely on the interdisciplinary synergies identified above.

Related to this, and to the point on primary/secondary sources discussed above, is the distinction between emic and etic, which is dear to anthropologists. Was there a sense of ecumene in Eurasia? Were these houses feeling part of a broader whole? Was there, in English School terms, a *raison de système*? This is a methodological as much as an epistemological question. Perhaps this is the trade-off when a macro-approach is adopted through methodological analyticism, as opposed to interpretivism based on primary sources. Empirically, the book shows that there was an interconnected system of houses and empires which ultimately gave birth to "the East." But was it there for the people involved? After all, the Zhungars never became Islamic, several Mongol houses embraced Christendom and lamaic Buddhism, the Kyrgyz did not claim Chinggisid leadership and did not have khans (like the Turkmens), there were deep fractures within the ecumene, such as the Sunni-Shia divide (which, as noted above, fuelled the odious institutionalisation of slavery), across the steppe the customary nomadic law of *adat* continued to develop in parallel with Sharia, and Turan, far from being only a synonym for "Inner Asia," was a toponym to indicate "the land of threatening nomads."

The book does an excellent job in showing how the Mongol hordes and their epigones were not bands of marauders prone to looting and devastations, but were sophisticate forms of order in themselves, with their own principles of legitimacy, practices, and institutions. One thing that I believe is an area of necessary further engagement is an analysis of the role that specifically mobility and circularity played in establishing these empires. These were not just empires,[13] but *nomadic* empires. Now, this does not mean that territoriality was entirely absent, but rather than the constituent units of these polities were mobile, with huge implications for the sovereignty-suzerainty dynamics within *ulus*, the flexibility of political rule, the way in which war was fought (one can only think of the rapidity with which alliances formed and dissolve, and of development of archery and the importance of the horse, an asset in both warfare and trade), and the way in which a sense of ecumene was created. With this mobility came a specific *circularity* of the economy, within which sedentary and nomadic groups exchanged and traded finished goods and raw materials in a complementary fashion. From what I see, these empires were not necessarily unilateral expansions on the metropole-periphery line, nor were they extractive in kind (even if levies and taxes were exacted).

Mobility and circularity were underpinned, and at the same time encouraged, syncretism and synthesis of religions, cults, traditions, and "best practices"—all factors that substantiated the connectivity and relationism that is so much at the centre of Zarakol's analysis. The reader has the sense that mobility and circularity played a pivotal role in advancing these imperial logics, which were vital, adaptive, flexible, and ingenuous, but perhaps more theorisation of them would open up fascinating spaces to study the heterogeneity of empires and their core characteristics, especially since the nomadic understanding of territoriality ended up being a fundamental aspect of the nineteenth century's standard of civilisation.[14] Furthermore, current research makes the argument that the period 1856–1955 was not marked by international relations, but rather

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[14] Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Standard of Civilization, Nomadism and Territoriality in Nineteenth-Century International Society," in Jamie Levin, ed., *Nomad-State Relationships in International Relations: Before and After Borders* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020): 77–99.

by inter-empires relations.[15] *Before the West* aptly shows how this argument was relevant in Asia many centuries ago and much earlier than in Europe, and theorising on mobility and circularity would surely enhance its contribution to a diachronic comparative study of empires.

To conclude, *Before the West* is poised to become a reference in the field of Historical IR and Global Historical Sociology. The argument is original and craftily theorised and adds to current calls to challenge Western/Eurocentrism in the IR field. As noted, its originality may resonate more within (Historical) IR circles as opposed to Area Studies, for many of the arguments described in the book as "usually assumed" pertain more to the incorrect, Eurocentric, and myopic axioms of IR than the research done in other disciplines. Nonetheless, this may be said to be a plus. By showing how much work IR has still to do to achieve a deep comprehension and knowledge of historical inter-polity orders, *Before the West* will become a necessary starting point for all those who are interested not simply in Eurasian world orders, but also and especially in making IR more interdisciplinary, multi-method, and more imaginative.

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[15] Dan Green and Thomas Müller, *Workshop: "Making the State-System Unfamiliar: The Dynamics of the Global Empire-System, 1856–1955,"* Call for Papers, EWIS 2020, Brussels, 1-4 July 2020.