

Review Article - The BRICs and International Relations

Written by Ray Kiely

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The BRICS and the Future of Global Order

By Oliver Stuenkel

Lanham: Lexington, 2015

BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique

Edited by Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia

London: Pluto, 2015

The decade from 2000 was, on the face of it, dominated by the war on terror, the question of US unipolarity, and whether the US 'empire' was a malign or benign force. What became clear, not least after the disaster of Iraq and the financial crisis of 2008, was that the foundations of US 'empire' were not necessarily as strong as many detractors and supporters initially thought. With the financial crisis, and perhaps above all, the US decision, taken in the face of enormous pressure from China, to take over the privately owned but government sponsored enterprises Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, it became clear that there was something of a transformation occurring in the international order. This was reinforced further by the rapid recovery in the South from 2010 onwards, in contrast to negative growth in Europe and low growth in the US and Britain.

In other words, something else had occurred in the previous ten years, and this was the 'rise of the South'. What was so significant about this, in contrast to say the rise of the first tier East Asian newly industrialising countries, was that a number of new middle income countries in the South had very high populations, above all China and India. In 2001, former Goldman Sachs employee Jim O'Neill coined the term the 'BRIC', which referred to Brazil, India and China, and more problematically (but conveniently for the acronym), Russia. Initially the idea was one made to encourage investors, but in this period the BRIC countries, and then the BRICS (when South Africa was added) started to hold annual summits critical of the western dominated international order. Furthermore, the size of the BRICS made it possible for much of the rest of the South to benefit, theoretically in terms of a wider Southern voice in international institutions, and practically in terms of benefiting from demand for their products from the BRICS, and China in particular. With the problems in the US, and 'the West' in general, this has been described as a moment of significant transformation in the international order.

While there are a number of popular books on China's rise, on Africa rising, on the decline of the US, and a number of official reports (from the UNDP, OECD, and World Bank) about transformation and convergence in the international order so on, there is surprisingly little academic work on the rise of the BRICS. The publication of these two books is thus to be welcomed, not least as they both have the kind of academic rigour lacking in works like Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World*, which welcomes China's rise, or Stefan Halper's *The Beijing Consensus*, which regards China as a threat because it promotes and supports authoritarian regimes around the world.

Stuenkel's book focuses mainly on questions of geopolitics and the extent to which the BRICS might challenge, rather than accommodate to, the liberal international order. He provides a very detailed account of the development of the BRICS, and there is a wealth of detail on each summit from 2009 onwards. While there is an admirable amount of research in this work, sometimes the wealth of empirical material tends to dominate any wider analysis. Stuenkel's

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contentions are that (i) the BRICS are not as united as is sometimes assumed; (ii) in some respects the BRICS are happy to accommodate to the liberal order; (iii) and the extent to which they criticise it, is due as much to western double standards and inconsistencies as to any objection to liberal internationalism per se. This is generally plausible and convincing though one does not have to share Stefan Halper's world-view to recognise that the BRICS themselves, especially Russia and China, are hardly paragons of virtue. What is perhaps most lacking in Stuenkel's otherwise very rigorous empirical account is a broader understanding of the nature of this liberal international order, and of the role of the US in leading that order.

This is not to say that Stuenkel's book is bad, quite the contrary it is a very valuable guide to the BRICS as an international actor, and indeed is the most informative account that I have read. But if one wants a better theoretical account, one has to turn to the collection edited by Bond and Garcia. As the sub-title makes clear, this is a book from within a broadly Marxist tradition. In contrast to some current 'de-colonial' approaches which support the rise of the BRICS as an alternative to the West, the authors of the 25 chapters in this book are much more sceptical of the idea that this represents a progressive development in the international order. Having said that, there are some significant differences in approach in the chapters, and the quality is quite variable, perhaps exacerbated by the fact that some chapters are very short and some very long. Gonzalo Pozo's chapter on 'Russian neoliberalism' appears to uphold a 'Leninist' view of inter-imperialist rivalries, though thankfully he does not then advocate a position which implicitly supports Russia against NATO in the current conflict in Ukraine, on the grounds that my enemy's enemy is my friend – rather he puts a plague on both houses. There are chapters which show why there are good grounds for not seeing the rise of the BRICS as a progressive challenge to US hegemony, including analysis of BRIC neo-colonialism in Africa, whereby the continent is regarded as a source of primary commodities for developing industrialisation, above all in China, and the extent to which the BRICS do support the liberal order in terms of trade, investment and so on. The question of finance is more ambiguous, as Stuenkel also shows, but the much lauded development bank in many ways should be seen as complementing, rather than challenging the work of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

The final section of the book attempts to theorise the BRICS within global capitalism, and while there are significant differences (in approach and quality) between chapters, the broad view appears to be that we cannot simply regard the rise of the BRICS or the south in the same, quasi-realist (and Leninist) way in which the rise and fall of powers has been understood in the past. Robinson thinks of this in terms of a transnational capitalism and while I think he seriously downplays the leading role of the US state (and US capital) in leading this process, he is right that the making of a global capitalism significantly alters the story. At the same time, this remains a highly unequal global capitalism, not just in terms of class inequalities within countries, but also wider inequalities between countries, and the rise of the BRICS has changed this, but certainly not transformed it. Both books were presumably published too late, but it may well be that the coming years will be dominated less by talk of the rise of emerging powers, and more by a new emerging markets crisis.

About the author:

Ray Kiely is Professor of International Politics at Queen Mary University of London. Currently his research is focused in the areas of: international political economy; globalisation, empire and imperialism; and neo-liberal theory and practice. Throughout his inter-disciplinary career Ray has published numerous journal articles and books, most recently including *The Neoliberal Paradox* (2018, Elgar), *The BRICs, US 'decline' and global transformations* (2015, Palgrave), *Rethinking Imperialism* (2010, Palgrave), and *The New Political Economy of Development* (2007, Palgrave).