

# Review

*Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order*, Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry, and Karoline Postel-Vinay, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 312 pp., cloth \$99, paperback \$29.95, eBook \$19.99.

doi:10.1017/S0892679423000394

On the surface, talk of order in this era of permacrisis may seem misguided. World order today appears elusive, even illusory. *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order*, edited by Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry, and Karoline Postel-Vinay, is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on narrative and international relations. The editors situate the volume as a contribution to debates on the development of international order and the extent to which liberal internationalist narratives of world order can survive the rapid changes in global politics we are today witnessing. Narrative contestations are increasingly a defining characteristic of international relations. Narratives we hold of others can define our bilateral relations—of friendship or enmity—and enable or constrain the potential for cooperation. Narratives are central to the human experience. They shape our understandings of where we have come from and our legacies, our sense of the present, and the future we imagine. Narratives are used to define who we are both as

individuals and collectives. Policymakers often narrativize the policy environment to propose certain outcomes over others, or to simplify policy options in the face of multiple wicked problems. We also see significant attempts by political and economic leaders to shape the story of the international order—how it is today and the direction in which it should go. All of this is not only taking place within a global sphere with many voices but also being influenced by the rapid evolution of how we communicate and where power resides.

The objective of the volume under consideration is “to analyse the content, function, evolution and impact of narratives of modern global world order as they have been defined and wielded by political actors across time and space” (pp. 9–10). The book takes a largely historical lens to examine the role of narrative in the development of world order. The contributions cover a wide array of actors, policies, and policy areas.

One important aspect of narratives of international order rests on who narrates,

*Ethics & International Affairs*, 37, no. 4 (2023), pp. 490–492.

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or shapes, the order. Duncan Bell highlights the development of Angloworld narratives of order and how they shaped practical manifestations of this order. Michael Cox outlines the Soviet Union's narrative as a counterpoint to that of the West and shows how aspects of this narrative remain relevant in the shadow of the war in Ukraine. Debates in international relations have sought to understand the process of change in international order and the consequence of new voices demanding their say. The editors focus on this plurality of narratives of order and how to manage the diversity of views on what form international order should take to avoid fragmentation in the international system. Cemil Aydin's contributing chapter on pan-Islamic narratives; Rana Mitter's analysis of post-1945 Chinese narratives of order; Kei Koga and Saori Katada on Japan's reticence to expand an ambitious narrative in the face of other, more powerful states; and Itty Abraham on Indian narratives bring important context to contemporary debates. Each of these chapters highlights the complexity of national debates within China, India, and Japan, and in Muslim narratives of the world, which is important to consider when assessing the implications of national narratives of order. Jean-François Drolet and Michael Williams, Jeremy Adelman, and Daniel Deudney demonstrate in their respective chapters how narratives and their contestation inform the substance of international order—its institutions, its ideas, and its dominant actors.

Reflecting on the contributions in the collection, Postel-Vinay poses an important question in her concluding chapter: how do narratives of the global emerge and become dominant? The chapters in this collection illustrate the emergence of dominant

narratives and how in different national contexts and across policy arenas varying narratives take hold and, importantly, continue to shape perceptions of international order. Significantly, they also show how resistant to change these narratives are.

It is increasingly important that we develop methods to understand how narratives flow and make a difference in an increasingly complex media ecology. Scholars and policy practitioners have wrestled for some time with the role of mis- and disinformation in our domestic and international politics, highlighting concerns about how this not only can determine short-term responses to ongoing events but also how it can come to define how we understand our future. Artificial intelligence has already entered the world of diplomacy, and political communication more broadly. Despite this rapid technological acceleration shaping how we communicate, the practice of actors using narratives to shape our understandings of international order, and the ongoing importance of narratives being fundamental to how citizens view the world, remains unchanged. We also must acknowledge that who gets to narrate is inherently political. The exclusion or marginalization of voices in debates on international order limits our ability to imagine new, or better, orders. This is exacerbated by challenges to multilateralism, and the process of negotiating the evolving international order. In April 2023, António Guterres, the United Nations secretary-general, complained that the multilateral system is under greater strain than at any time since the creation of the United Nations. Ted Anthony of the Associated Press recently commented on the United Nations General Assembly: "You hear a lot about 'the narrative' these days in politics (and everywhere else). It's a way to

punch through the static and make sure people are absorbing your message—and, ultimately, doing what you want them to do. But how to establish a coherent storyline when the very notion of many nations with many voices is baked into the pie to begin with?” (AP News: September 21, 2023).

Debates on what form international order should take have implications for multilateralism—and go beyond diplomatic gesturing. For instance, the emergence of polycentric governance on climate, economic, and energy policy, including particular “regime complex” structures and alliances and qualitative increases in the fragmentation of policymakers and enforcement, has been extensively researched. This illustrates that international order contains systems not

reducible to a liberal or nonliberal international order, nor reducible to a United States- or China-led order.

We need to take narratives seriously, particularly in this time of global change. Narrative analysis offers a framework to highlight how actors contextualize events in a historical timeline they construct toward a strategic goal. *Debating Worlds* offers an excellent addition to research on narratives of international affairs, adding to our understanding of how actors have sought to shape international order over time.

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