

SINGULARITY OR ABERRATION? A RESPONSE TO BUZAN AND LAWSON

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A long-standing debate within the Science-Fiction (SF) community concerns the merits of “Steampunk”—a subgenre that “involves a setting where steam power is widely used” and “often features... futuristic innovations as Victorians might have envisioned them, based on a Victorian perspective on fashion, culture, architectural style, and art.” In order to explain what novelist Charlie Stross (2010) unflatteringly refers to as the “current glut of Steampunk,” such noted SF commentators as editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden (2010) and political scientist Henry Farrell (2010) have invoked Cosma Shalizi’s (2010) claim that “the Singularity has happened; we call it ‘the industrial revolution’ or ‘the long nineteenth century.’ It was over by the close of 1918.” As Hayden notes, Shalizi’s insight “might even hint at why SF (and fantasy!) keep returning to the ‘long nineteenth century’ like a dog to its bone.”

In their excellent article, Buzan and Lawson (2012) advance a series of arguments suggesting that the “long nineteenth century” was, indeed (as elaborated below), the Singularity and that it is long past time for International Relations (IR) scholars to unearth their bone. In doing so, they participate in a so-far unresolved debate about the origins of the economic and political divergence between the global north and south. It remains unclear whether the origins of the great divergence date from 1500, 1750, 1820, or even later.

Regardless, we are unequivocally living through an unprecedented revolution in the global distribution of economic development. Never before have so many grown so rich so quickly. The “great divergence” is giving way to the “great convergence,” which may constitute something of an effacement of the long nineteenth century. Thus, whether the long nineteenth century was a Singularity or an aberration, we need to be careful about focusing overmuch on the idiosyncrasies of the period lest 1870 becomes the new 1648.

The Nineteenth Century as “Singularity”

According to Vernor Vinge (1993), the “technological singularity” involves “the technological means to create super-human intelligence.” After that happens, “progress will be much more rapid.” From “the human point of view, this change will be a throwing away of all of the previous rules.... Developments that before were thought might only happen in a ‘million years’ (if ever) will likely happen in the next century.” The Singularity is therefore “a point where our models must be discarded and a new reality rules....” Among the consequences of the Singularity: “ideas themselves should spread ever faster, and the most radical will quickly become commonplace.” Indeed, the Singularity creates a metaphorical event horizon, in which the world before and after are so radically different from one another that the two may be mutually incomprehensible.

Thus, Shalzi’s argument for the nineteenth-century-as-singularity:

exponential yet basically unpredictable growth of technology, rendering long-term extrapolation impossible.... Massive, profoundly dis-orienting transformation in the life of humanity, extending our ecology, mentality, and social organization.... Annihilation of age-old constraints of space and time.... Embrace of the fusion of humanity and machines.... Creation of vast, inhuman

distributed systems of information-processing and control.... An implacable drive on the part of those networks to expand, to entrain more and more of the world within their own sphere.... (Shalizi 2010)

This is strikingly similar to Buzan and Lawson's analysis. True, they note that the "global transformation" of the nineteenth century was not a "big bang," but the logic of their arguments suggests that it constitutes a kind of event horizon: a radical transformation—produced by the configuration of various strands—that makes the modern era fundamentally unlike the premodern one that preceded it.

This claim has more significant implications than Buzan and Lawson discuss. It suggests that international politics in the current era cannot be compared to those before the nineteenth century. Thus, not only should realists abandon attempts to demonstrate transhistorical continuities in state behavior, but IR scholars of all flavors should eschew invoking processes and dynamics prior to the nineteenth century for insights about contemporary politics. If the nineteenth century 'changed everything' then we should not, for example: build theories about contemporary (or future) imperial formations from the dynamics of premodern empires; engage in any sort of long-cycle analysis that involves empirical data from before the late eighteenth century; or study the behavior of powers before the Victorian era for clues about how power transitions unfold.

In essence, if the nineteenth century was an event horizon, then most of the research associated with what might be termed "historical international relations" becomes interesting only insofar as we care about humanity's past—because it has little to tell us about our future. Moreover, this renders problematic Buzan and Lawson's call for broader disciplinary engagement with the nineteenth century. If 1918 marked an (however imprecise) endpoint of processes of radical

transformation, then analysis of what happened during the process of transformation likely *has little direct bearing on current international affairs*. It may not provide “a clearer view of where the downstream momentum of the global transformation might be taking us” (Buzan and Lawson 2012: 35), and so we should not assume that *subsequent* processes of change should reflect those at work in the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-Century Transformation in Context

Consider economic growth rates. Viewed from 2012, the most impressive fact about nineteenth century growth rates is how *low* they were. Maddison (2006, 92) estimates that per-capita GDP in the major European powers grew at about 1 percent per year over the “long nineteenth century” (and about 1.6 percent in the United States).ⁱ By contrast, Chinese per-capita GDP over the period 1950-1998—a period that includes both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—grew at more than 4 percent per annum, and World Bank figures suggest that annual growth rates of more than 10 percent have been routine in the post-Deng era.

Figure 1 makes clear that the major inflection point in global development occurred *not* during the long nineteenth century, but in the decades following the Second World War. Figure 1 represents selected country and regional per capita GDP as multiples of Chinese per capita GDP.

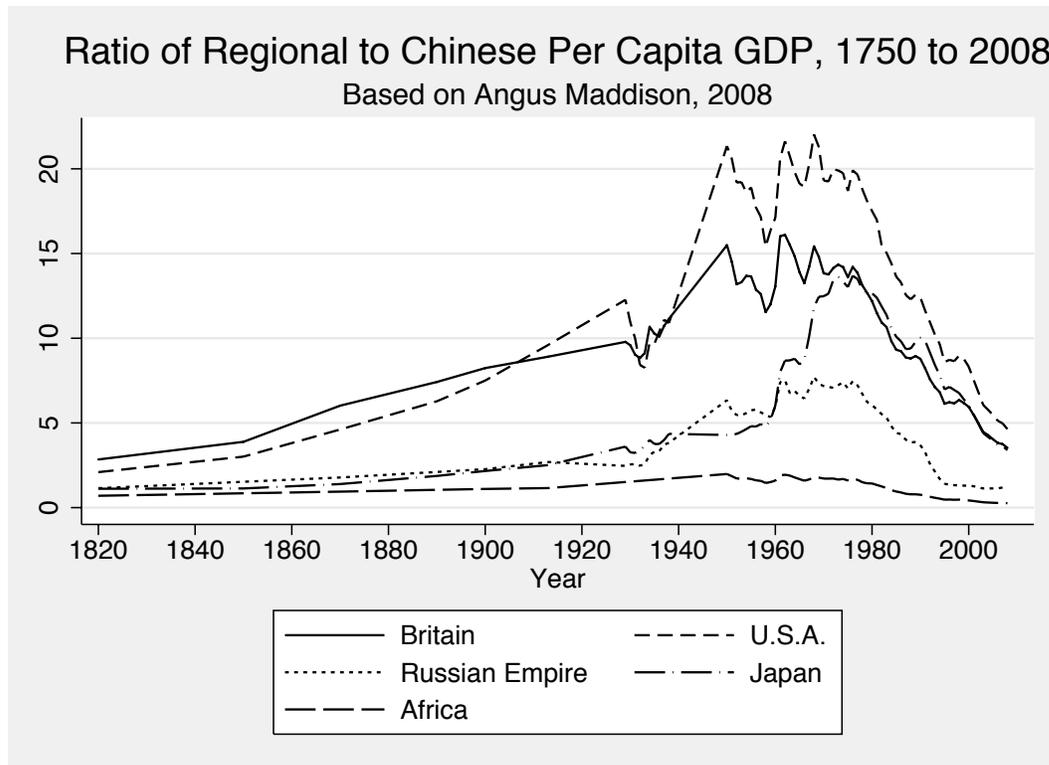


Fig 1. The Great Divergence and Convergence

After a period of centuries (not shown here) in which Chinese economic development matched or led the rest of the world, the gulf between China and the rest peaked sometime in the middle of the twentieth century. Despite the crudeness of this sort of comparison, it provides some evidence for the Singularity interpretation: the consequence of the nineteenth century is an era incomparable with the nineteenth century itself. Indeed, as hackneyed comparisons of Shanghai to Gilded Age New York or of the industrial areas of Shenzhen to the “dark Satanic mills” of Britain during the Industrial Revolution suggest, what is now happening to China is in some ways nineteenth century in one country—but accelerated to rates unimaginable in, say, 1860. At one percent annual growth rates, a country doubles its GDP about every seventy years; at ten percent, it doubles its GDP about every seven. In these terms, the nineteenth century looks much more like prior periods of high growth than it does like the present.

Consider also empires and imperialism. Buzan and Lawson (2012: 32) argue that taking the nineteenth century seriously involves recognizing “the centrality of dynamics of empire and resistance to the formation of international order.” Not long before, they (2012: 33) invoke the Indian War of Independence as “the forerunner to later anti-colonial movements.” But, from the vantage point of 1857, there was little to distinguish it from innumerable earlier anti-imperial rebellions across time and space. Just as members of the rebellion sought to restore the Moghul empire, so Catalans, Portuguese, British Celts, Jewish Romans, and countless others sought to restore their lost independence against imperial conquerors.

From the vantage of 2012, though, the events of 1857 seem as though they belong to another world. Formal colonial empires no longer exist; the territories of Africa and Asia are *de jure*, if not always *de facto*, sovereign states. The best analogies involve relatively sparse and short-lived events—such as the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq—or colonial imperialisms masquerading as sovereign states—such as the dynamics of Chinese rule over inarguably colonized indigenous peoples in Xinjiang and Tibet. Empire remains relevant in the early twenty-first century—both in constituting geopolitical space and in contemporary political formations—but we quite clearly do *not* live in an “age of empire.” Indeed, as Wimmer and Min (2006: 893) conclude in their path-breaking study of institutional change and violence:

[P]olitics in the age of empires followed a quite different logic than politics in the current world of nation-states.... [E]mpires behave differently toward other polities than do nation-states, and the transition from the former to the latter has redefined the political character of dyadic relationships between states....

It is also telling that developed states’ “demand” for formal empire *ended* just as those states were richest in relation to the global South. If the relationship between “imperial circulatory systems”

and political structures was as straightforward as Buzan and Lawson suggest, we would surely observe the opposite pattern.

Or Was The Nineteenth Century a Detour?

Current trends suggest an alternative interpretation: the nineteenth century as a world-historical detour. Additional indicators of the aberrant character of the nineteenth century include not only the efflorescence of European colonial empires in the nineteenth century followed by their rapid collapse in the post-war era, but also the overall diminished power-political significance of Europe and the downstream effects of the digital revolution. Buzan and Lawson rightly reject Eurocentric explanations for global political development, but it is striking that in their story non-European actors are largely the objects, not the subjects, of the political, technological, and social forces they describe. In choosing to focus on the societies of Western Europe, Buzan and Lawson may exaggerate the changes that took place within those countries while downplaying the fact that over the past century—and particularly the past thirty years—many countries in the global South have begun to develop at rates that put industrial age England or Germany to shame.

If China and other countries continue to develop rapidly as the rich world stagnates, then post-1800 divergence in the distribution of the world's wealth and innovation will be noteworthy because it was exceptional. Much like an autoregressive function returning to trend after a shock, the global distribution of wealth is becoming more balanced, as the technologies and institutions that abetted greater economic growth in Europe and its offshoots (such as the United States) become more widely available.

If we agree with Buzan and Lawson that the nineteenth century was constitutive of present-day global order, this implies that the rapid growth of the global South will have dramatically

unsettling effects on that order. A world in which most countries have per-capita GDPs of \$20,000 or more will make very different claims on international institutions, that were imposed by a handful of dominant countries in a very unequal world.

Conclusions

Should we view the nineteenth century as an historical perturbation—a disruption in the geopolitical landscape brought about by the temporary ascendancy of the peoples of western Eurasia—or a Singularity? The answer depends upon two inter-related commitments: (1) our underlying theories of continuity and change and (2) the particular patterns we seek to understand. Whatever our decision, Buzan and Lawson demonstrate that it simply won't do to study the interactions of nineteenth-century European states in isolation from the imperial, economic, and technological processes in which they were embedded. They convince that major transformations took place in the nineteenth century that have been largely ignored by IR scholars in favor of unproductive debates over Westphalia. And they remind us that the origins of contemporary social science—as found in canonical thinkers as diverse as Smith, Hegel, Marx, Tocqueville, Mill, Durkheim, and Weber—involved understanding how and why the world of the nineteenth century—of “modernity”—differed so radically from the European *ancien regime*.

For those of us who believe that “international-relations scholars study world politics, whether in its historical or contemporary manifestations” (Nexon 2009: 10), Buzan and Lawson provide ample reason to remember the long nineteenth century. But, when it comes to theorizing contemporary international politics, we believe that their line of reasoning may point in the opposite direction. Regardless of whether we take their arguments to show that the nineteenth century was a perturbation *or* a Singularity, it might well turn out that the nineteenth century was *sui generis*. Better, then, to temper our re-centering of the nineteenth century, lest we (wearing

bulky goggles, ignoring the clanging of steam pipes, and readying our Tesla cannons) waste our time scanning the skies for dirigibles—only to find, amidst the heavier-than-air flying machines called “airplanes” and “helicopters,” a rather lonely Goodyear Blimp.

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ⁱ The compound effect of increases in growth during the nineteenth century remains significant. The puzzle of low productivity growth during the nineteenth century has long attracted scholarly attention; see, for instance, Williamson (1984). One line of argument holds that the industrial revolution itself was simply an accident caused by Britain's unique combination of expensive labor and cheap coal (Allen 2009).