

# Introduction

International relations as the topic usually is taught at the university has next to no historical depth. In an introductory class your teacher might tell you that the basic rules of international politics were established in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth-century, or you might hear something about European colonialism in the nineteenth-century and perhaps a word or two about the First World War. Once the class gets going, however, historical references are unlikely to stretch further back than to 1945. It is as though the world was created only some 75 years ago. In addition, international politics as it usually is taught is hopelessly Eurocentric. That is, the discipline takes Europe as the standard by which every other part of the world is measured – although “Europe” here also includes the United States and other places where the Europeans settled. The European model is obviously the most important one, your teacher will imply, since this is the model that went on to conquer the world. The world in which we all live today is the world which the Europeans made in their own image.

One of the most important things you should learn at the university is not to trust your teachers. No matter how smart or well read, your teacher’s perspective will always be only one perspective among many. This is not to say that he or she deliberately is trying to deceive you, but it is to say that there always is another story to tell. In this book we will tell other stories. Our historical perspective goes back to the first millennium CE and our perspective is explicitly non-European. This is a textbook on international politics which takes history seriously and which puts Europe firmly in its place. The reason is simple: history really is quite long and the world really is quite a big place. There are so many other things to talk about. And, as we will discover, this alternative history has left an endless number of traces in

our contemporary world. Indeed, if you want to understand anything at all about what is going on in today's Middle East, in China, in Latin America or anywhere else, a historical and non-European perspective is essential. This is what this textbook will provide.

This is not to say that there is something inherently wrong with studying European history, or that Europe does not matter. Europe matters too of course, but, as it turns out, not as much as your teacher suggested. It is simply not the case that the history of other parts of the world began on the day the first European colonizers arrived. The Europeans did not, as a previous generation of scholars used to argue, "wake up" the natives of various non-European lands, or "invite them into world history." Non-Europeans were always plenty awake, thank you very much, and the idea that the history of Europe is equal to history of the world is just ridiculous. In this book it is these non-European histories we are going to tell, and we will try to tell them on their own terms, not as they were impacted by, or had an impact on, Europe. Indeed, a non-European perspective on the past is particularly important in a world which once again seems to be changing. Europe and North America play a far less dominating role in world politics today than previously was the case, and in the future this role is likely to become less important still. This is how changes taking place in our present allow us to gain new perspectives on the past. By learning about history you can learn about the future. And besides, there are such a lot of fascinating things to talk about once you leave Europe and the twentieth-century behind.

Or, differently put, this book is quite a mad undertaking. A textbook in the history of international relations which takes non-European perspectives seriously will always risk turning into a "history of everything that ever happened." Obviously such a book cannot be written – or it will be just as long as history itself. For that reason we have to simplify and make

choices regarding what to include and what to exclude. That is, this textbook too has a particular story to tell, and there are indeed many others. To simplify matters, we will in what follows focus on what we will call "international systems." An international system is a set of political entities, states, which have sufficiently close connections with each other to be forced to constantly take each other's decisions into account. We will discuss the international systems of seven different parts of the world: East Asia, India, the Mongol empire, the Muslim caliphates, Europe, Africa and the Americas. We will have nothing to say about Australia and the islands of the Pacific Ocean; South-east Asia will be discussed but only in the context of Indian history, and there is no single chapter dedicated to Persia although there are plenty of Persian references in the chapters on India and the Muslim caliphates. We could have said much more about Japan, and about North America before the Europeans arrived. In addition to the seven main chapters, however, there will be one concluding chapter which deals with European imperialism.

And there are also limits in time. We have restricted ourselves to historical events that have left a strong imprint on the contemporary world. Everything we see around us can certainly be retraced to a remote beginning of some kind or another, but some of these traces are more conspicuous than others. What we are interested in are cases where history still is making itself present. In some cases we will have to go back over 1,000 years but in some other cases the story is more recent. This book will tell you only very a little in the end, but that is fine. It is surely better to learn a little than to learn nothing at all. The aim of this book is to open up a world, not to conclusively describe it. And once your appetite has been sufficiently whetted you can go on exploring things on your own. The madness of this undertaking is no more glaring than the madness of teaching international politics as it has been taught up to now. And at least our madness is fun

and mind-altering.

One more difference between this textbook and others: international politics as it usually is taught at the university is often replete with references to “theories” of various kinds. Indeed, an ability to “theorize” is often taken to be the difference between a pontificating professor and the comments provided by other, more casual, observers. To introduce students to theorizing is thus regarded as an important obligation of any textbook. Yet in what follows there is next to no discussion of theories and concepts, and what little we need is introduced already in the following sections of this chapter. The reason is that theorizing never can substitute for actual historical knowledge. We cannot learn about the world from theory but only from historical facts. Once we have the facts at our disposal, we will immediately start thinking about them, analyzing and explaining them, and in this way we will quite automatically come to think in theoretical terms. But this is thinking which is deeply embedded in history, and that makes all the difference to how we proceed. Basically the fourteenth-century historian Ibn-Khaldun had it right. [*Read more: Ibn Khaldun on assabiya*] At first he set out to write a history of the Berber people, but before long he realized that he needed to start thinking about what it is in general that makes empires rise and fall. In this way he came to produce one of the first systematic accounts of international history. Ibn-Khaldun theorized, but he always stayed very close to his historical sources. We will try to do the same.