Political economy, economics and development

The book asserts that the stability achieved in this modern age is not a story that can be solely attributed to economic progress. This book is a timely reminder that the conditions that facilitated this progress were created not only through the progress of health science, but through a political effort to ensure that science benefited all.

Sara Davies, Queensland University of Technology, Australia


The world, according to Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singaporean diplomat and one of Asia’s most visible international affairs specialists, is becoming a safer, richer, more equal and overall better place. In addition, ‘a consensual cluster of norms has been sweeping the globe and has been accepted by policymaking elites around the world’. The reader is bombarded with a string of seemingly never-ending good news: ‘Policy makers in all corners have essentially developed the same set of perspectives on how to improve and develop their societies.’ His overall point is that despite a sense of crisis in the West, the remaining 88 per cent of the world is very optimistic about the future. Five hundred million Asians have recently emerged from poverty, and that number will rise to 1.75 billion by the end of the decade.

The remaining problems, Mahbubani writes, could be solved through stronger and reformed international institutions: ‘People no longer live in more than one hundred separate boats. Instead they all live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat. But this boat has a problem. It has 193 captains and crews, each claiming exclusive responsibility for one cabin. However, it has no captain or crew to take care of the boat as a whole.’

Mahbubani is an impatient, somewhat rancorous, big-picture writer, using many analogies and aphorisms, so he dedicates very little time to explaining how exactly the changes he proposes should take place. Few would disagree that the UN needs reforms, but how can we overcome the many obstacles to get there? He proposes making Brazil, India and Nigeria permanent Security Council members and replacing the UK and France with a joint EU seat—an excellent proposal—yet are there any historic examples of Great Powers giving up institutional privilege without losing a war? Rather than spend time discussing such details, The great convergence seeks to serve more as a visionary manifesto than as a how-to guide.

In many ways, The great convergence sounds eerily like Norman Angell’s The great illusion, which argued that economic interdependence had made war all but impossible. Soon after its publication, however, the First World War broke out in a profoundly interconnected Europe. Why exactly should things be different this time around? Why is the author so sure that a conflict between China and Japan is unthinkable?

His answer shows a worrying degree of elitism and unworldliness. Mahbubani simply reports how, during his debates at the World Economic Forum in Davos, global elites increasingly think alike: ‘It helps enormously when leaders of different countries have been trained at Harvard or Yale, Columbia or Stanford’, he writes.

Yet one might contend that such an argument misses the point in four important ways. First, governing elites in the majority of countries have not studied at American Ivy League universities. Second, the proposition that the world’s elites should all learn the same ideas is problematic; it is precisely the Cambridge, Massachusetts-centric world-view of many international institutions that has kept them from understanding diverging local perspectives.
Third, even Yale-educated leaders will have to consider the immediate interests of domestic constituencies that empower them, which are usually not aligned with those of the champagne-sipping elites of Davos that have the capacity to look at global challenges from a long-term perspective.

Finally, Mahbubani himself is a perfect example of how a non-western elite trained in the US may very well disagree with many western values. He (rightly) criticizes the United States for its lack of enlightened leadership, yet fails to mention the many shortcomings of China’s policies. The author has been one of the most forceful proponents of ‘Asian values’ (emphasizing order, stability and authoritarianism), arguing that the West places too much value on freedom, democracy and individualism. While he no longer explicitly supports these ideas, he continues to speak of Asia as if it were a single, cohesive unit. Yet how exactly do the values that India cherishes align with those of China’s society? Many thinkers in Asia would disagree with the notion of a unified set of Asian values.

Few of the ideas presented in The great convergence are truly original and the book is filled with truisms and sound bites that, on closer inspection, make little sense (‘We will increasingly realize that our village is a world and not that our world is a village’).

And yet, given the scarcity of books on global order written outside Europe and the United States, it is likely to gain a considerable readership around the world, and rightly so. Despite its flaws, The great convergence may help western scholars get a glimpse of non-western perspectives, which continue to be greatly underrepresented in the international debate.

Oliver Stuenkel, Fundação Getulio Vargas, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Energy, environment and global health


For long on the margins of the study of international politics, natural resources have made a comeback over the last decade, in tandem with the rise of prices and the politicization of global markets. Pulling together some of the leading experts in this vast field, this collection of essays stands out for its thoroughness, critical acumen and comprehensive review of the relevant scholarly literature. Many contributions in this regard tend to treat mining and oil—and increasingly, natural gas—as essentially unrelated. Global resources provides a comparative analysis of the three. While not papering over their substantial differences, the book instead underlines their shared trajectories to great effect, bringing to the surface ‘dynamics which can be lost in a more narrowly defined study’ (p. 233).

The book also eschews the two extremes of resource-related debates, the realist focus on conflict and the liberal belief in ultimate cooperation as the underpinning of international resource markets. Instead, the editors highlight a complex relationship between conflict and cooperation across the long span of the last century. This historical approach is key to the success of this volume, emphasizing the colonial roots of the extractive industries without knowledge of which the behaviours of resource-rich states in the developing world would remain obscure. The five historical and theoretical chapters explicitly address this frequently unknown or misunderstood record, in terms of both successive commodity regimes and the intellectual paradigms that accompanied them. This historical approach is matched by a strong interdisciplinary commitment that brings together insights from geography, economics, geology and International Relations, among others.