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According to the author, Ryan Irwin, currently assistant professor at the State University of New York at Albany, the book at hand attempts no less than „to answer one of the twentieth century’s fundamental questions: How did the rapid growth of small non-European nation-states at midcentury affect the international community?” Irwin considers that South Africa, „located at the meeting point of the African, Atlantic, and Indian worlds”, provides an answer. The apartheid debates during the 1960s, „a period bracketed by feelings of intense optimism and pessimism toward the decolonization”, constitutes the starting point for his analysis. (p. 5)

Decolonization as a global phenomenon that shattered the international system and transformed international relations is still on the margins of research in diplomatic history. Moreover, Irwin shows in his study all the more how important transnational approaches are in order to widen genuine diplomatic history topics. Particularly, by incorporating state and non-state actors into his analysis Irwin manages neither to exaggerate the role of state actors (diplomatic history) nor to exclude them from the narrative (social history). The same applies to the non-state actors in the shape of a more or less global anti-apartheid network.

Irwin concentrates on the apartheid debate in the 1960s in the UN General Assembly and Security Council as a major forum where the debate took place. However, South African-US relations compose the overarching framework for analysis. For this reason Irwin pinpoint s two strands of argumentation for his further analysis, firstly decolonization and secondly America’s rise to a world power after World War II, globalizing her ideas and political goals through liberal institutions such as the UN, IMF, World Bank and ICJ. In short the global rise of America’s liberal world order through the newly founded international organizations after the Second World War. Indirectly, Irwin develops a third argument: namely that through African decolonization the ‘Third World’ took over the liberal international institutions, thereby initiating the slow decline of America’s liberal world order. It does not come as a surprise, given the subtitle „Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order”. Nonetheless, for all those not worshiping the liberal intuitionalism approach Irwin’s devotion to America’s so-called liberal world order limits the otherwise valuable and innovative analysis.

Notwithstanding this criticism Gordian Knot is an enrichment for transnational and global history studies. The author gathered together an impressive amount of archival material - all in all from fourteen different archives across three continents (Great Britain, the US and South Africa). Thereby, not only claiming a multi-(national) archival approach but pursuing it. Despite the complexity of the material Irwin succeeded in constructing a coherent, well written and detailed story of the anti-apartheid debate where he skillfully guides the readers through the different strategies and rationales behind the argumentation of actors and interest groups. Irwin himself admits that the book was in parts


2 „African decolonization challenged the intellectual edifice of Washington’s world view. It marked the moment when small non-European states took formal control of the agenda of the international community” Further down Irwin states: „As U.S. policymakers lost confidence that institutions could bring about pro-American consensus, their support fort he larger idea of liberal internationalism eroded, eventually leading to new attitudes toward organizations like the United Nations, World Bank and IMF. This process not only laid the seeds of detente; it also marked the unmaking of America’s liberal world order.” (p.12).
meant to address the „triumphalist narrative of the anti-apartheid movement“³ but at times it falls for constructing in almost the same manner a triumphalist narrative of decolonization that changed the world to a more democratic, equal and pluralistic place, especially when it comes to the United Nations. Likewise European imperialism did not end in the 1960s as Irwin indicated at the end. (p. 188) The conclusion remains a little short on the side and way too general, thereby not living up to the ambitious introduction and the expectations involved.

Gordian Knot has received wide publicity through a large number of reviews.⁴ Bearing in mind that it is Irwin’s dissertation PhD-students can only dream of such a throughout positive evaluation, ranging from ‘outstanding’ to ‘path-breaking’ and so forth, by experts in various disciplines - the latter also revealing the interdisciplinarity of global and transnational history. I can only join others reviewers in their appreciation of the book and hope that it will continue to be received widely and will find its way into curricula of Global, African and International Studies.


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