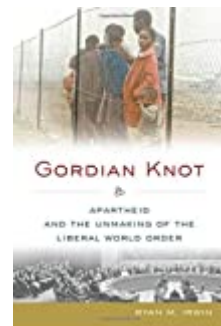




Ryan M. Irwin. *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 244 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-985561-2.



Reviewed by Angela Glodschei

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R. M. Irwin: Gordian Knot

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 pinpoints 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. See for instance Amy Staples, *The Birth of Development*, Kent, OH 2006; Ruth B. Russel, *A history of the United Nations Charter. The Role of the United States 1940-1945*, Toronto 1958; Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation. The Founding of the United Nations. A Story of Superpowers, Secret Agents, Wartime Allies and Enemies and their Quest for a Peaceful World*,

Cambridge, MA 2004. Seminal for liberal institutionalist thinking is John Ikenberry, *After Victory. Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton, NJ 2001; idem, *Liberal Leviathan. The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton, NJ 2011; Elizabeth Borgwart, *A New Deal for the World. America's Vision for Human Rights*, Cambridge, MA 2005. 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. '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 for the 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). It does not come as a surprise, given the subtitle 'Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order'. Nonetheless, for all those not worshipping the liberal intuitionism 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 meant to address the triumphalist narrative of the anti-apartheid movement. See Irwin's response to the reviewers in H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews, Volume XV, No 3 (2013). URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-3.pdf> 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. Ibid, see also (not in extenso): A Roundtable Discussion on Ryan M. Irwin's *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*, in: *Passport* 44 (2013) 1, pp. 24-32; as well as the reviews in: *American Historical Review* 118 (2013) 4, pp. 1292-1293; *Journal of African History* 54 (2013) 3, pp. 453-454; *Journal of American History* 100 (2013) 3, p. 910; *New Global Studies* 7 (2013) 2, pp. 209-210; *Reviews in American History* 41 (2013) 4; *History. Reviews of New Books* 42 (2014) 3, pp. 105-106; *Diplomatic History* 38 (2014) 2, pp. 468-470; *Radical History Review* 119 (2014); H-Net Reviews, April 2014, URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38147>. 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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