

A Research Agenda for International Business and Management

Edited by Ödül Bozkurt and Mike Geppert

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This new title: “A Research Agenda for International Business and Management”, edited by Ödül Bozkurt and Mike Geppert, could not have come out at a better time. We are in a pivotal moment in human history. Ours is marked by the debilitating effects of SARS-CoV-2 and its COVID-19 disease along with unpredictable additional variants of infirmities and affliction on a global scale. Before this nightmarish phenomenon, global warming, wars, climate change, resource shortages, international criminal business and economic instability were plaguing our uncertain and volatile world. All these and many more call for the need to review whether we can continue to do business as usual or need to shift gears and direction for future research in International Business (IB) and Management (Ahen and Zetting, 2015; Zetting and Nummela, 2021). In the latter case, we need pluralism, multidisciplinary and critical perspectives while interrogating our conservative positions in IB that have always sought to maintain the status quo.

This book on setting a new agenda for IB and Management is timely, relevant and robust. It touches on the main issues requiring further investigations to broaden our understanding of pertinent themes that are expected to affect policy, practice and management. The manifold unfolding phenomena have also forced new laws on how to organise international trade, travel and tourism, organisation of international production, and coordination of global supply chains. Why are other topics less important than the ones treated in Bozkurt and Geppert’s volume? What must our response be in the midst of the current global turmoil? How should the research culture change to accommodate emerging realities? This volume offers a lot of answers and questions. As Contu (2018, p. 282) points out about intellectual activism, “the point is to change it’ [the business school] – Yes, but in what direction and how?” Bozkurt and Geppert’s book provides both self-critique and a frank outlook on the state of the art of IB and Management while pointing out the way forward.

In less complicated terms, IB and Management are about the study of wealth creation and wealth destruction across borders (Ahen, 2020). The value destruction part, which includes war and domination, is less pronounced in research and conferences. It is the indigenous people of the world and natural resource-rich nations who must deal with that unofficially. Then again who decides what is official knowledge and what is not? That is the epistemological question. And, in setting an agenda for future research, how do we identify the who, the where, the how and the consequences of such a programme?

One thing is certain about IB. That IB is less about IB, as espoused by many top-notch experts and most in the IB epistemic community in the global North, and more about a



combination of geopolitics, global health, environmental challenges and power asymmetry between nation-states and corporations. These are the foundations for the survival or destruction of communities and nations. There are fuzzy boundaries between foreign policy, geopolitics and IB. We have a moral obligation not to abstract away the concrete problems the world is facing right now. This book helps in many ways to figure out how.

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What are the authors' motivations? Why do they even care? IB scholars are not the only ones who produce knowledge about the firm and its international operations. That means the need to remain relevant is crucial. Regarding the big questions mentioned above, more courage, distinctive forms of bravery and leadership is required rather than knee-jerk reactions and arm's length agenda setting away from reality. But here again in the words of James Baldwin, "If you are trying to avoid reality, how can you face it?" Especially with so many important topics that were turned into taboos until 2019. Still, hanging on with Baldwin, "our sense of reality is dictated by what we don't want to see or talk about". This seems to be the main criticism against conservative or elitist positions in IB and Management.

At this juncture, it is instructive to begin to weave this tapestry of complexities, nuance and abstractions into reality by recognising that there is a moral and intellectual bankruptcy in IB in the way it has been mostly presented upside down in recent decades. Here, it is mostly about super-normal profits for certain predictable constituencies while people and the planet are relegated to the margins. Yet, universities exist to serve their main stakeholder: the society that provides peace/stability and congenial institutional conditions for higher education to be possible in the first place. Until late 2019, a person could study IB in a contextless, ahistorical and futureless manner – focusing on the urgency of profits for multinational corporations. The trained ignorant refuses to recognise that IB is about the sale of vaccines with obscured or questionable scientific data, war and genocide. IB creates jobs and profits for some while creating ruin and environmental destruction for others. IB creates wealth for some while, in the words of [Banerjee et al. \(2021\)](#), managing by dispossession and engaging in planetary vandalism ([Ahen, 2018](#)). IB makes the world a business. At present, there are more than 3,000 cases of contentions between multinationals and indigenous people around the world ([Banerjee et al., 2021](#)). It is easy to defend the firm and ignore corporate externalities because that helps in career advancement. No courage or morality is required for that because society hardly imposes any consequences on ungrateful free riders who refuse to fight for people and the environment to maintain the freedoms that allow them to research in the first place. Nevertheless, it is difficult to defend those who are bereft of power because one can be deemed anti-capitalist and based on that academic credit score be ostracised from academia or disallowed to climb the mythical professional ladder. In many ways, IB research is a capitalist industry clothed in intellectual Halloween costumes.

IB is not a single discipline but a multidisciplinary field and the contributions of many IB scholars with various backgrounds have been enormous in shaping and expanding our understanding. We owe them a huge intellectual debt. What the authors have elaborated on answers a slightly different question. We need an actual and not ceremonial system of understandable and shared futures. However, those futures are in many cases shaped by those who grotesquely overlook deep insights. This book provokes and questions the received narrative about the responsibility of the firm in dealing with societal crises as Verena Girschik and Jasper Hotho (2021) explore.

In our quest to reimagine where IB stands in the forest of disciplines, a framework for understanding contemporary issues is needed. But henceforth who will really get to set the agenda? As I have commented elsewhere, it is easier to acquire citizenship on Mars than to

publish in certain IB journals. Thank God, those days of needless elitism no longer have a place in the current era!

Some of the issues raised in the book are not incorrect but they are incomplete. This is because they leave out who will shape the future we are attempting to create. A decade or two from now, the world will be vastly different from this one – it would have moved from a unipolar world to a multipolar one with various regional alliances for self-determination. Some scholars may therefore attempt to recruit people who will carry on the tradition, but it is the citizens and stake owners who will decide what is relevant knowledge. There is now a new concentration of horizontally or downwardly mobile PhD holders. They are being asked to reskill or upskill, but some are already “über-qualifiziert”, which is another way of saying that they are too old. Setting an agenda means seeing what gets highlighted and what and who gets obscured. A lot does not add up in what is presented by mainstream scholars. This book does not spare them from that critique because it would be an exercise in futility if we cannot follow through with what is announced in the book.

IB is nothing more than an area of study about how we create wealth across borders. Wealth for whom? And again, what is wealth? It turns out that health is wealth; that is clean air despite industrialization, clean and unpolluted water and food constitute wealth. This book opens up important themes that have not been properly dealt with and offers directions for future research. However, unlike in traditional articles, the academic freedom to be provocative, forthright, and multidisciplinary seems to be the hallmark of this book. All the chapters are accessibly written, and they devote sufficient efforts to serious agendas rather than fancy topics. It is also noteworthy that the authors do not obfuscate the relevant issues with mere semantics.

The core areas of the book

The nine chapters of the book are well-articulated without overtones of presumptuousness. Rather, the level of assignment has little to do with presentation and more to do with the substance that interests and intersects those of policymakers, managers and society at large – fulfilling the institutional responsibility of university scholars.

Moreover, this book does not treat IB and Management as monolithic albeit seeking the same agenda and being complementary. Thus, by transcending the disciplinary lines, both mainstream IB and critical IB scholars are properly represented to reinvigorate and refill what [Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard \(2019\)](#) refer to as the “ignored and omitted but crucial themes”. The onus is placed on scholars to leave the disciplinary and thematic silos to think outside the box as the editors [Bozkurt and Geppert \(2021\)](#) argue in welcoming what would have traditionally and conservatively been considered as a distraction from the mainstream IB and International Management topics. As the editors put it “This book aims to engage with calls from both mainstream and critical voices for a renewal and revitalisation of IB/M research by offering the space to contemplate to a diverse group of scholars”. Thus, business and society feature prominently in the book along with the role of the state both in home countries and host countries.

At the foundational level, the book revisits IB theories on externalization, behavioural theory and multinational corporations’ decision-making, and the recent surge in outward investments from emerging markets. With new phenomena come new perspectives on the changing contexts and the metamorphosing role of the retreating nation-states and MNEs in different institutional contexts. How ideologies and power relations shape IB also finds a prominent place. This is because current IB would be devoid of substance without reactivating in theory what happens in practice to inform our understanding.

For those of us devoted to the cause of critical perspectives on international business (cpoib), strategic foresight, and the re-envisioning and recreation of IB futures, this book provides a serious analysis of several burning issues. These include modern slavery

(Dörrenbächer and Ellermann, 2021) and emerging phenomena that are shaping IB both in practice and theory in a complex and unpredictable world where the emerging problems are local or translocal but produce a global effect (Zetting and Nummela, 2021).

This book is not the first of its kind, but something sets it apart from manifold others. The originality of this book lies in the fact that it is a bold attempt to address what has not been sufficiently addressed and it wastes no time in challenging scholars to enter new territories while re-examining and re-imagining old paradigms.

The book excludes the trivial. It sheds light on the relevant and urgent, it assembles intellectual resources that address contemporary phenomena. It investigates the future with cautious optimism but does not look at MNEs, the state and other stakeholder issues from a spectator standpoint. Rather, it is positioned as an active scholarship that engages all stakeholders and even through emancipatory theorizing (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2021). This volume gets it right as an intellectually stimulating and sufficiently foresighted read. These are not shallow compliments or superficial praises but the actual descriptions of the content of a book that delivers what it promises (i.e. however, not to suggest that the book is perfect). Majority of the scholars want to have a better world for everyone, so the idea of the mainstream has expired, and it is invalid. In fact, those non-conservatives are the majority, and it is just a matter of time before the content of an article becomes the point of evaluation rather than who or where it was published.

We have moved from the old-style firm-centric analysis to embedding the firm into society while being respectful of the context of MNEs. The role of the firm, society and governments all find a place along with that of IB epistemic communities. The quest is to address bubbling issues of our time and how to strategize toward the future through strategic management that refuses to be myopic but investigates the future with new research agendas and new ways of theorizing and making sense of emerging phenomena.

Looking towards the future after the stock-taking

Contemplating this collection of themes for the future, I offer three fundamental reflections about diverse lines of enquiries featured in this book in the areas of IB theories that are still useful for analysis. Any instrument or theory that does not attempt to explain is a functional equivalent of a product that is a self-defeating concept. There is no pretence that this book answers everything because it does not promise that, as the editors point out already in the opening chapter. Like many of the agenda-setting books of its kind, this is also just a start. A reminder that there is more to be done.

This book gives us a sense of the blind spots and intellectual fault lines. To climb the academic ladder in IB and International Management one needs to write on certain topics and adhere to certain methodologies and publish in certain “A” journals. This means less creativity and novelty that falls outside the box. The box is the point of reference, the point of direction and the content of this box must still appear in the future, whether or not it is needed or useful. This is a tragedy. It means young scholars get co-opted into the conservative views to maintain the status quo where certain issues are sugar-coated, and others remain a taboo – just critical perspectives and therefore not really a part of the mainstream. Those who deviate and attempt to infuse something new are implicitly aware that they are not truly part of this fraternity whose rules are set in many ways by a few.

Traditional IB and Management are still a fortress epistemic community. Young scholars from the global South know this. It is only now being saved by cpoib that now seeks to infuse emancipatory views, subvert colonial views and practice diversity through a plurality of ontological and epistemological contributions. Cpoib provides the missing component in the discussion by seeing modern slavery, international mega corruption (Ahen, 2022), market violence and indigenous issues not as a deviation.

Traditional IB is in many ways ahistorical, and it views context from the standpoint of the powerful. The masses no longer trust those who speak for the corporate lords and in favour of profits and not the planet and people. But what do I know? I am just a critical thinker pointing out issues. However, to keep ignoring the issues that matter to business and society could be intellectual cowardice of the highest order. On certain major issues such as corporate exploitation of indigenous lands and resources, there is total silence that is only punctuated by occasional interventions that seem more like controlled opposition marked by domesticated criticisms. Whose future are we talking about? Ours! The last chapters explain this in-depth, making Bozkurt and Geppert's edited book a useful, state-of-the-art companion for scholars, practitioners and students.

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