Recognition of international law as “law”, “true law”, or “real law” has always been a bone of contention. Several jurists have registered their expostulation against its existence as “law”, including but not limited to the Austinian conception of international law as “positive morality” and Holland’s view of international law as a “vanishing point of jurisprudence”. In recent years, with the metamorphosis of international law through new jurisprudential acumen and the reliance of international organizations thereon, international law is commonly accepted as the sum and substance of its “functions” in relation to world order.

Anthea Roberts, having a rich experience of working in universities of repute in Australia, Europe, and North America, has raised an extremely profound question concerning the universality, purity, and globalized aspiration/aspects of international law, which is: Is international law international? It is a courageous question and in order to answer it she has not only considered several of the key stakeholders of international law but also geopolitical influences on the law.

Roberts begins by considering the “divisible college of international lawyers”. She identifies three variables—difference, dominance, and disruption—to initiate an inquiry into the pragmatic or practical side of international law. Things that influence the character of international law but that are usually out of sight include where the international lawyers in different states study, the languages and places where they publish, the textbooks and casebooks they use, and where their own teachers had studied.

Roberts uses the Crimean crisis and the South China Sea arbitral award as case-studies by which to analyze the approaches taken by international lawyers, including the influence of geopolitics on their writings and the funding they have received. This sociological inquiry makes her study pragmatic, thought-provoking, and intellectually intriguing. Her comparative approach is based on the “pure relativism”, which has spawned the idea of “international law pluralism”. It has, in turn, led to “disruption” [as termed by her], birth to a new “competitive world order”.

Furthermore, she has highlighted the role played by the international organizations, which generally concede to the interests of certain dominant states. Interestingly, she has scoped out the kind of case-laws or references which are usually referred to and cited by adjudicatory bodies.

This book is not intended to reach any finality; rather, it adds fuel to the fire by infusing multifarious dimensions to the debate on the “internationality” of international law. Roberts prefers the appellation “comparative international law” rather than “international law”. The book suggests that change would need to be planted at the root level, in the classroom, so that future students can consider international law from various perspectives, including national, universal, and comparative. In concluding, it may be worth reflecting on why we may need an international law in an abstract sense and why we should in any case expect international law to be detached from national or regional concerns.

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