

SYMPOSIUM: A SYMPOSIUM ON GLOBAL IR

Global international relations and the essentialism trap

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Abstract

Global IR is an encompassing term for a range of work that has set out to globalize the discipline in terms of its core concepts, assumptions, and substantive areas of study. Our symposium supports Global IR's goals but also offers some friendly critiques of the project with the aim of increasing its impact and durability. In this Introduction to the symposium, we posit that Global IR is vulnerable to a dynamic that limits its capacity to upend the status quo, which we term the 'essentialism trap'. Essentialism captures a range of commitments oriented around the notion that the world is constituted by pre-formed, fixed, internally coherent, and bounded social forms. The trap involves the overuse of essentialist categories by radical projects, a process that can result in the reinforcement of status quo categories and assumptions. With reference to previous openings in IR that have succumbed to this trap, we identify the dynamics that lead to this trap and suggest ways in which Global IR can avoid it by leaning more into relationalism and global history, and, thereby, fulfil the promise contained in the range of movements it speaks with and for.

Keywords: Global IR; essentialism; relationalism; IR theory

The challenge of global international relations

The contemporary discipline of International Relations (IR) is home to impassioned debates, from questions over the enduring legacies of imperialism and racism to the ways in which positionality can be used to certify who is, and who is not, a legitimate voice in the discipline.¹ A number of studies have shown that the discipline is dominated by (mostly male) scholars based in Western institutions, who tend to work with Euro-Atlantic histories and theories.² Most of what is considered to be the discipline's agenda-setting scholarship is published in US-based journals that also carry the greatest international prestige.³ Not only do students

¹As a starting point, see Bhambra *et al.* 2020.

²e.g. Colgan 2019; Maliniak *et al.* 2013.

³Maliniak *et al.* 2019.

of IR around the world primarily read US-based scholarship,⁴ they also learn about, and test their theories with, histories of the West.⁵ This Western-centrism affects who and what gets taught, how explanations are tested, and how coding is carried out.⁶

Global IR is an encompassing term for a range of work that has, over recent years, set out to globalize the discipline in terms of its core concepts, assumptions, and substantive areas of study.⁷ This work focuses attention on several points of contention, including the Eurocentrism of much of the discipline's concepts and histories,⁸ how best to conceive the relationship between theory and Area Studies, and how to match a more 'worldly' discipline with a more inclusive infrastructure. Not only does Global IR challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird mainstream approaches,⁹ it also seeks to authorize new sites of knowledge production in order to construct a truly 'global' discipline. Global IR has generated considerable enthusiasm through its capacity to harness the contemporary zeitgeist and serve as a platform for organizing dissent to IR's parochial frames of reference.¹⁰

We aim to advance this conversation¹¹ in two ways. First, we argue that Global IR is vulnerable to a dynamic that limits its capacity to upend the status quo, which we term the 'essentialism trap'. Essentialism captures a range of commitments oriented around the notion that the world is constituted by pre-formed, fixed, internally coherent, and bounded social forms. The trap involves the overuse of essentialist categories by radical projects, a process that can result in the reinforcement of status quo categories and assumptions. For example, advocates of Global IR often orient their challenge around binaries such as 'Western' and 'non-Western', which are inevitably inscribed with essentialist ideas about cultures, regions, and civilizations, and their specific 'brands' of IR. This makes sense as a political move seeking the inclusion of previously marginalized sites of knowledge production. However, it can also enable existing approaches to co-opt large parts of

⁴See the TRIP database: <https://trip.wm.edu/data/dashboard/journal-article-database>

⁵Kang and Lin 2019, 394; Shilliam 2021, 51.

⁶Colgan 2019.

⁷The approach is most closely associated with Amitav Acharya (2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019) and his co-authored work with Barry Buzan (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 2017, 2019, 2021), and others (e.g. Acharya *et al.*, 2021). For reasons of space, this symposium largely engages these central statements. However, Global IR is a diverse rather than monolithic movement. A representative sample of texts within the wider genre includes Bilgin 2016; Deciancio 2016; Hurrell 2016; Wemheuer-Vogelaar *et al.* 2016; Kavalski 2017; Wiener 2018; Alejandro 2019; Yong-Soo 2019; 2022; Gelardi 2019; Baruah and Selleslachs 2019; Barbieri 2019; Fierke and Jabri 2019; Fonseca 2019; Kristensen 2015; Bentil 2020; Kuru 2020; Qin 2020; Lohaus and Wemheuer-Vogelaar 2021; Gonzalez-Vicente and Montoute 2020; Wilkens and Kessler 2021; Williams 2021; Dian 2022; Raineri and Baldaro 2022; Dalacoura 2021; Sula 2022; Do 2022; Thalang 2022; Düzgün 2022; Chu 2022; Costa Buranelli and Taeuber 2022.

⁸On Eurocentrism, see Amin 1989; Chakrabarty 2000; Hobson 2012. On concepts, see Bell 2020; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Jahn 2017. On histories, see e.g. Hobson 2020; Zarakol 2022.

⁹So far the mainstream has paid little mind to Global IR, however. See also Risse *et al.* 2022.

¹⁰Google Ngram searches show a sharp spike in both articles and books using the term 'Global IR' since 2015. As of 2022, there is a Global IR section of the ISA. A range of forums, perhaps most notably the World International Studies Conference (WISC), also serve as a means of pluralizing and globalizing the discipline, including through the development of Global IR.

¹¹e.g. Gelardi 2019; Yong-Soo 2019; Anderl and Witt 2020; Aydınlı and Erpul 2022.

critique without being fundamentally disrupted. Radical intent becomes conformist outcome.

Second, we suggest ways in which Global IR can avoid the essentialism trap and, thereby, fulfil the promise contained in the range of movements it speaks with and for. We support Global IR's aim to open up the discipline theoretically, empirically, geographically, and epistemologically. We see the 'global' as a useful frame for doing this work. We thus focus on the benefits to Global IR of taking up a relational ontology, taking seriously the assumption that relations come before entities. Although Global IR often invokes relationalism, it tends to use the term in a thin sense to denote connections between pre-formed entities (such as cultures, regions, and civilizations) rather than as the entanglements that forge these entities in the first place. A closer alignment with global history can help here.¹² Specifically, global history heightens the empirical warrant for Global IR, demonstrating how a range of processes central to the formation of contemporary international order has been generated by transboundary connections.

Each of the contributions to this symposium demonstrates the promise for the Global(izing) IR project of combining relationalism with global history. This introduction establishes the parameters for these contributions in four sections. First, we outline the core commitments of essentialism and explain why they are problematic. We also show how the essentialism trap has constrained radical challenges to orthodoxies in IR by using examples from the 1970s and 1990s to highlight the ways in which previous moments of opening have been tamed. The second section outlines the main features of Global IR. Third, we explore some of the reasons why Global IR (and previous movements) are susceptible to the essentialism trap: the 'common sense' appeal of essentialism; the cooptation of alternatives by the discipline; and the hold of a particular version of standpoint epistemology. The final, concluding, section outlines an alternative path for Global IR blending relationalism and global history, highlighting how these are deployed in the papers that make up the symposium.

Essentialism: can't live with it, can't live without it?

Essentialism is often used more as a 'slur' than as a clearly articulated term.¹³ At root, essentialism is the claim that social forms have an immutable set of properties. It is the position that entities – personalities, genders, races, cultures, states, regions, and civilizations – have an innate, natural, fixed character.¹⁴ At root, essentialism contains three linked assumptions: first, that there is something natural about differences between peoples, whether biological, cultural, or historical; second, that these differences are enduring, perhaps even eternal; and third, that all members of a particular category are homogeneous, sharing a quality or set of qualities.¹⁵ It follows that these points of distinction distinguish some peoples from others:

¹²Despite being one of six research agendas proposed for Global IR (Acharya 2014, 652), links between Global IR and global history are not well developed.

¹³Hacking 1999, 17.

¹⁴Sayer 1997, 454.

¹⁵Wacquant 2022.

Western and non-Western, white and black, men and women, American and Chinese, Jews and Muslims, and so on. In essentialist tropes, these features are simultaneously points of differentiation and modes of explanation. For example, ideas about an innate ‘Western rationality’, often layered onto claims about racial, geographical, and historical exceptionalism, have long anchored claims about the positional advantages enjoyed by Western states in contemporary world politics.

Essentialism provides a ‘common sense’ for much of the practice of world politics.¹⁶ Indeed, practitioners would find it difficult to work without presumptions of a fixed, readily digestible world, such as the supposedly fundamental differences between democracies and autocracies in which, at least in many parts of the West, the former are considered to be ‘enlightened’, ‘advanced’, and ‘pacific’, while the latter are seen as ‘deficient’, ‘backwards’, and ‘conflict-ridden’. For instance, in an October 2022 speech, Josep Borell, the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called Europe a ‘garden’ of prosperity, to be contrasted to other parts of the world, which were, in contrast, a ‘jungle’ of lawlessness.¹⁷ This ‘essentialism effect’, in which stereotypical attributes are used to underpin and, ultimately, enact policy agendas form an everyday backdrop to IR. Essentialist assumptions can also be found in a range of theoretical claims in IR: that democracies are inherently peaceful in their relations with each other; that capitalist markets are naturally wealth-generating (by advocates) or crisis-generating (by critics); that cultures in certain parts of the world are predisposed towards peace (e.g. historical East Asia) and others towards conflict (e.g. the contemporary Middle East); that the West alone is home to modern notions of reason, progress, sovereignty, and more. Essentialism is, in many ways, a common denominator within IR theory and practice.

Essentialism is sustained by a number of auxiliary claims: substantialism, internalism, and methodological nationalism. Substantialism is an ontological position that sees entities, such as states, cultures, regions, or civilizations, as prior to relations.¹⁸ To take one obvious example, structural realism is substantialist in the ways it ascribes permanent logics to the international system and pre-existing interests to states. Internalism is the tendency to see historical development as the product of processes drawn from within a particular unit. In this way, labels such as ‘the West’ or ‘China’ are given meaning through dynamics that are taken to be internally produced: individual rationality and *guanxi*, balance of power and balance of relations, the separation of powers and Confucianism, respectively.¹⁹ Methodological nationalism is the view that the boundaries of social relations map directly onto the boundaries of the nation-state and that nation-states are the natural units of scholarly analysis.²⁰ This view applies both to contemporary and historical analyses to the extent that politics before the emergence of nationalism in the nineteenth century are usually taken to be nation-states, proto nation-states, or equivalents

¹⁶Phillips 2010.

¹⁷<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/19/josep-borrell-apologises-for-controversial-garden-vs-jungle-metaphor-but-stands-his-ground>.

¹⁸Emirbayer 1997, 283–6).

¹⁹See Qin 2018.

²⁰Wimmer and Schiller 2002.

to nation-states.²¹ Together, substantialism, internalism, and methodological nationalism generate a taken-for-granted backdrop to IR knowledge production in which ‘natural’ national, regional, and civilizational units are differentiated by homogenous characteristics that are the result of endogenous characteristics that are, in turn, produced through shared histories, cultures, or both. Much of IR theory tends to adopt, at minimum, a ‘rump essentialism’, whether this concerns the properties of the structural environment in which world politics takes place, the character of its units, or the assumptions that motivate actors.

We are not the first to point to these disciplinary tendencies towards essentialism.²² Nor are we the first to point to the propensity to divide up, and make explanations through, essentialist reasoning.²³ In many ways, this is to be expected. IR has to start from somewhere, has to adopt the perspective of a kind, has to hold things stable in order to make claims and test theories. This is why essentialist claims of many kinds, whether ‘as-if’ or ‘hard-wired’, ‘strategic’ or ‘unintentional’, ‘explicit’ or ‘implicit’, are so resilient. However, there is a danger in the way that essentialism fixes essences to units, seeing them as containing transhistorical, immutable characteristics, especially given the broader aims of Global IR. As the contributions to this symposium show, historical actors, from states to epistemic communities, are nested within broader scales: imperial orders, transnational knowledge complexes, global practices of accumulation, international social movements, and more.

If there are ways of constructing historical–theoretical arguments in IR that do not rest on essentialism, why are essentialist claims so resilient? We address this question in subsequent sections. For now, it is worth simply noting that we have been here before. Previous critiques of the disciplinary status quo, despite often including critiques of essentialism, often fell back onto essentialist logics. In the 1970s, for example, a range of radical movements challenged global order: ‘Third World’ revolutionary currents, from Ethiopia to Nicaragua; militancy within forums of international administration, from Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to the United Nations (UN); activist rights-based movements – civil, feminist, ecological, and more. During this period, IR was pushed by approaches such as Dependency Theory and World-Systems Analysis to rethink its core categories and modes of analysis, not least the essentialist assumptions of modernization theory. This helped to generate interest in global, relational dynamics, such as the connections between north-south and core-periphery that sustained global order. Major approaches, including Realism and Liberalism, were recast during this period, partly as a response to these challenges. In the process, a moment of potential opening was trapped within essentialist categories. The multilayered insights of Classical Realism, for example, morphed into the substantialist framing provided by Structural Realism, which relied on the ascriptive dynamics of a self-help system, while its like-units-under-anarchy assumption axiomatically generated a state-centric theory in which actor interests

²¹Ferguson and Mansbach (1996).

²²Jackson and Nexon 1999; McCourt 2016. Advocates of Global IR themselves often critique essentialist readings of history, culture, and development. See, for example Acharya and Buzan 2019, 247, 306.

²³Phillips 2010.

were pre-determined. Perhaps more surprisingly, some challengers to the disciplinary status quo also succumbed to these modes of reasoning. For example, World-Systems analysts ascribed innate properties to axial positions within the global economy (core, semi-periphery, and periphery), and located whole regions and sub-regions within these positions. In the process, what appeared to be a dynamic account of core-periphery relations could be taken to support a form of spatialized essentialism. This is the essentialism trap in operation – a form of closure in which theoretical openings become circumscribed and, ultimately, tamed.

A similar process took place in the 1990s. Once again, major events in world politics, notably the end of the Cold War, provided an opening for novel approaches. This time, the pre-eminent challenge to mainstream accounts came from constructivism, which critiqued the rationalist neo-neo consensus for its static, unchanging assumptions about global structure and international actors, arguing instead for their relational constitution and, by implication, the mutable nature of world politics. In this way, constructivism was a call for the discipline to pay more attention to intersubjectivities, historical change, and the ways in which identities were ‘achieved’ rather than ‘ascribed’. But constructivism too, or at least parts of it, fell prey to the essentialism trap. Over time, the constructivist challenge became divided, however crudely, into ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ variants, with ‘thin constructivism’ incorporated into the mainstream and ‘thick constructivism’ largely excluded from it.²⁴ In order to demonstrate that it was theoretically and empirically ‘progressive’, ‘thin constructivism’ attempted to best rationalism on its own terms, reinforcing existing terms of debate and frames of reference.²⁵ Gradually, a disciplinary compromise emerged: constructivists studied identity, culture, and norms (categories that often took on substantialist forms), while realists focused on power and interests, and liberals examined cooperation and institutions.

In this way, mainstream IR theory was reoriented, particularly in the US, around three main approaches (realism, liberalism, constructivism) and one central axis (rationalism vs. constructivism).²⁶ While ‘thin constructivists’ accepted in principle a relational ontology that followed from a social constructionist philosophy, in practice they often reproduced a world of fixed, unitary units. By contrast, ‘thick constructivism’, which maintained more of a relational ethos, found a home alongside more explicitly critical approaches, often outside mainstream spaces.²⁷ In part, this alternative ecology was made possible by the expansion of IR around the world since the 1990s. US-based research outputs in the global social sciences, including IR, have declined from around a half to around a third since the 1990s. The ISA now has 75 partner institutions, from Chile to the Philippines. Global IR speaks directly to this development. It joins a long list of challengers that have sought to open up mainstream IR to accounts of world politics that fall outside conventional histories, concepts, and theories.

In many ways, therefore, the contemporary challenge presented by Global IR is a familiar one.²⁸ So too is the danger presented by the essentialism trap that has

²⁴On the distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ constructivism, see Wendt 1999; Kratochwil 2006.

²⁵Wendt 1999.

²⁶This debate is well critiqued in Fearon and Wendt 2002.

²⁷This was true of earlier challengers too, which often also found refuge outside mainstream US spaces.

²⁸Although we do not have the space to extend this point further, our hunch is that the essentialism trap predates the examples we have given here. See also Bayly in this symposium.

limited the challenge of some previous movements. If Global IR is to fulfil its promise to make IR more global,²⁹ the project needs to avoid this trap.

The global IR project

Like previous challenges from the 1970s and 1990s, Global IR has emerged during a tumultuous moment in the international order, seeking to rethink the discipline in order to meet the challenges of the day. Global IR rests on three core commitments: first, that IR is a particular product of a particular distribution of power at a particular moment in history – a ‘West-side story’ as de Carvalho *et al.* put it;³⁰ second, that the underdevelopment of theories from outside the West can be rectified by attention to ‘indigenous histories and cultures, nationalist leaders, and distinctive local and regional interaction patterns’; and third, that these theories can usefully ‘supplement’ rather than ‘supplant’ existing IR theories.³¹ To date, it is argued, Western IR has used its hegemonic influence over the field to build the stage, write the play, and define the audience.³² It follows that, as global distributions of power are leveling-out, forms of Western-centrism will be challenged. Global IR aims to be an umbrella movement for these challenges, providing a space through which ‘local’ currents of thought can be excavated, animated, and incorporated. To that end, a central aim of Global IR is to connect IR theory to Area Studies, providing a ‘broad-brush overview of some of the key themes and where possible institutional centers of IR in regions outside of Europe and North America’.³³ These regions or countries are taken to have ‘radically different histories and political theories than that of the West’.³⁴ In the case of China, for example, the notion of *tianxia* and the tribute system are seen as stark contrasts to Western traditions of anarchy, sovereignty, and territoriality. By placing these traditions on an equal footing with Western concepts and theories, IR can be ‘reimagined’ as a site of ‘plural universalism’: many civilizations within one world.³⁵

For some critics, this vision of Global IR represents an ‘accommodationist’ approach that works within existing ecologies rather than seeking to replace them. As such, Global IR is said to promise a form of ‘affirmative action’ or a ‘workers’ visa’ for those previously excluded from disciplinary citadels.³⁶ In doing so, it leaves the citadels intact. What is needed, it is argued, is a more revolutionary expropriation of disciplinary strongholds. Post-colonial and decolonial scholarship for example, some of which also seeks to contribute to the formation of Global IR,³⁷ aim to shift the ‘geography of reason’ that sustains stratification between a Western

²⁹e.g. Colgan 2019; Kristensen 2015; Lohaus and Wemheuer-Vogellar 2020.

³⁰de Carvalho *et al.* 2011, 750.

³¹Acharya 2014, 649.

³²Acharya and Buzan 2007, 436.

³³Acharya and Buzan 2019, 1–2. Also, see Acharya *et al.* 2021.

³⁴Acharya and Buzan 2019, 3. Note that this is a starting assumption.

³⁵Acharya (2014, 649). Elsewhere Acharya does caution against ‘assuming a benign Asian hierarchy and seeking evidence to fit this cultural historicist straitjacket.’ Acharya 2003/4, 162.

³⁶Anderl and Witt 2020, 43–4.

³⁷See, for example, Blaney and Tickner 2017; Tickner and Smith 2020.

disciplinary 'core' and a marginalized 'periphery'.³⁸ For decolonial scholarship in particular, non-capture in the present is premised on undoing 'colonial logics of thinking' from the past, which rest on a 'separate but unequal' logic wherein Western experiences are taken to be exemplary and the non-West taken to be incapable of reason and agency.³⁹ If the structural sources of IR's biases are left in place, it is argued, the result will be the cooptation of Global IR into a plural-monoculturalism in which space for 'others' is opened up, but only as satellites around the orbit of a mainstream sun.

For all of their different points of emphasis and political orientations, however, both projects operate through a shared set of binaries. Most obviously, even when the differentiation between West and non-West is normatively disavowed, it has proved to be analytically persistent.⁴⁰ Many of the assumptions that underpin Global IR support the idea of internally distinct cultural units, whether these units are nations, regions, or civilizations. For example, Amitav Acharya writes that 'indigenous' IR traditions are based on 'our' questions and 'our' histories, something that will foster 'mutual engagement' between Western and non-Western approaches.⁴¹ These categories only make sense if the 'our' in this story is meaningful, forged from a particular cultural milieu that is distinct from other, equally meaningful units. Acharya's vision of a 'multiplex world' is premised on the interactions between separate civilizational entities.⁴² Many radical approaches are also premised on the assumption of separate entities. Decolonial work, for example, favours a strategy of de-centering in which 'geocultural sites' premised on 'local cultures, languages, religions, and ways of life' serve as the building blocks of distinct 'worlds'.⁴³ This 'geo-epistemological' stance sees knowledge as bound by 'where you find yourselves' in the world.⁴⁴ From this starting point, it is possible to develop solidarities between geocultural communities, but any 'worldist dialogue' must be premised on the recognition of distinct starting points, which are themselves rooted in diverse historical and cultural inheritances.⁴⁵ Geocultural entities are treated as detached, sealed units. Any notion of a singular world, real or epistemic, represents a 'colonial science' in operation.⁴⁶

In this way, both reformist and radical positions associated with Global IR, whether directly or more indirectly, are, at root, premised on an ethos of separation. Reformist Global IR opens up a space within which distinct national, regional, and civilizational knowledge-communities can be fostered. Radical approaches aim to

³⁸Shilliam 2021, 24. Although post-colonial and decolonial approaches share a common starting point in seeing Western colonialism as the generative grammar of modern world order, they emerged from different geographies and intellectual genres, and have different ways of diagnosing and overcoming the colonial condition.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 52, 86.

⁴⁰Inayatullah and Blaney 2004, 10–11. To some extent, the use of this binary language is unavoidable (we also use it). The issue arises when present-day politics of representation is conflated with analytical purchase.

⁴¹Acharya 2019, 471.

⁴²Acharya 2017, 202.

⁴³Smith and Tickner 2020, 7.

⁴⁴Agnew 2007.

⁴⁵Ling and Pinheiro 2020, 318–9.

⁴⁶Blaney and Tickner 2017, 295.

foster ‘pluriversality’ – the intercommunal recognition of cultural differences free from colonial capture.⁴⁷ The strategy favoured by reformist Global IR is to pluralize IR from distinct epistemological vantage points; the strategy favoured by more radical positions is to delink from the discipline in order to recover ‘local’ worlds. Either way, the order of analysis is: first, internally constructed units; second, connections. This is the ‘essentialism trap’ in action. By operating through essentialist foundations, both approaches are pushed towards an essentialist reading of categories and assumptions: Western and non-Western; global and local; coloniality and indigeneity.

The essentialism trap and global IR

Among the many reasons for the shared susceptibility of various forms of Global IR to the essentialism trap, three stand out: first, essentialism provides a ‘common sense’ for disciplinary knowledge production; second, alternative viewpoints are subject to logics of cooptation; and third, there is the appeal of standpoint epistemologies. We briefly outline each in turn.

First, as noted above, essentialism provides a ‘common sense’ for the practice and theorization of world politics. Essentialized categories are almost required for those who want to understand strategic and instrumental action.⁴⁸ Any time categories of analysis are invoked, there is also necessarily a moment of reification, of fixing meanings. Indeed, by naming ‘Global IR’ as a ‘thing’ that displays certain ‘tendencies’, we could be read as essentializing our object of enquiry, even as we critique advocates of Global IR for doing just this. The same can be said of many other terms we invoke: ‘mainstream’ IR, ‘the West’, and more. However, there is a major difference between recognizing that naming objects involves ‘as if’ assumptions about their intersubjective meaning and relative stability, and resting claims, whether descriptive, interpretative or explanatory, on the essential properties of these objects. The assumption that countries and regions have ‘radically different histories and political theories than that of the West’ relies on claims about homogenous units that are inscribed within unique historical points of origin that, in turn, generate singular, or at least distinctive, cultural packages – and, hence, different theoretical traditions.⁴⁹ Of course, lived experiences are hugely important to the creation of lifeworlds – place matters. And equally importantly, many of the units of analysis that are examined in world politics are stable and, oftentimes, highly resilient: religions, states, racism, and more. But this does not make them static: religions are reconfigured, the character of states ebbs and flows, racism takes diverse forms across time and place. And these shifts are not just the *product* of interactions between units. Rather, they are generated *by* the interplay between peoples, belief-systems, forms of governance, modes of exchange, and more. A relational understanding of ‘things’ does not deny the importance of enduring patterns or relatively stability within objects of analysis. It would be impossible, and nonsensical, to claim that states, regions, and similar entities

⁴⁷Mignolo 2011, 23. See also Bhambra 2014; Rutazibwa 2020; Sabaratnam 2011.

⁴⁸Even sympathisers of relationalism, in fact, worry that substantialism has been thrown out with the bathwater of essentialism, with the implication that actors no longer exist. Pan 2021.

⁴⁹Acharya and Buzan 2019, 3.

were not meaningful categories of analysis. A mix of relational social theory and global history can help both to disrupt 'common sense' essentialism,⁵⁰ however, and serve as an alternative way of examining the space opened up by Global IR.

Second, essentialism is hard to dislodge because of disciplinary logics. Disciplines have material, institutional, and epistemic resources that reinforce the status quo.⁵¹ IR is no exception. As noted above, IR also often adopts features of radical challenges that help to maintain its legitimacy. At present, Global IR is mixing a more radical normative agenda with a conventional ontology. This leaves it vulnerable to cooptation as a kind of disciplinary 'diversity plan'. For example, a core aspiration of Global IR is to recover the agency of actors in the Global South. The point is well-made: Western IR scholarship *has* written history as if the only actors that mattered were Western. By placing non-Western traditions on an equal footing with Western concepts and theories,⁵² it is argued, IR can be 'reimagined' as a site of 'plural universalism': many civilizations within one world.⁵³ However, this is a thin form of globalizing in which representation emerges from the sum of its parts rather than the deep-rooted, entangled histories that forge global order. The papers in this symposium outline an agenda premised on a more consistent link between ethical intent and ontology, with the potential to develop Global IR in novel directions. We hope to replace an 'add and stir' strategy with a 'global all the way down' approach that deepens the remit of the Global IR project.

The third dynamic driving Global IR towards the essentialism trap is the way in which its advocates contain a particular form of standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology is rooted in the notion that worldviews emerge from positionalities: what we think derives from where we stand.⁵⁴ This view lies at the heart of attempts to think IR from different starting points – from a distinct positionality, it is argued, comes a distinctive set of interests.⁵⁵ This assumption also lies at the heart of decolonial scholarship, which rests on a geo-epistemological standpoint underlining cultural dissonance. In both cases, identities shape both how actors act in the world and how we, as observers, see it. If actors 'know' the world through their positionalities (geography, race, class, gender, political alignment, and so on), scholars also 'know' the world through these contexts. Positionalities are inescapable. The question then becomes: what forms of knowledge production are adequate once the centrality of positionality to worldviews is recognized? Standpoint theory valorizes 'insider' perspectives for very good reasons – it helps to empower peoples and communities who have been silenced by hegemonic practices and reveals that these practices are themselves perspectival. Yet when 'insider' positions become the only way in which valid scholarly knowledge production operates, then it follows that only Chinese scholars can teach and research about China, only Muslims about Islam, only white men about white men, and so on.

⁵⁰Wacquant 2022.

⁵¹This assertion lies at the heart of the view of scientific 'paradigms' developed in Kuhn 1962.

⁵²Acharya 2017, 202.

⁵³Acharya 2014, 649.

⁵⁴The classic text is Harding 1986; also see Haraway 1991.

⁵⁵Acharya and Buzan 2019, 2021.

In this way, we return to the essentialism trap, one in which the authorization to take part in conversations about ‘insider’ concerns is restricted to ‘insiders’ who can be identified, through preordained positionalities. In such cases, it is often geography that denotes ‘authentic’ subjectivity. And this subjectivity, in turn, represents the limits of our communities. To reiterate: there are sound reasons why standpoint epistemologies are mobilized to certify lived experiences that have been violently suppressed through exploitation. But in scholarship, there is a need for caution, not least because this positionality can serve as a form of ‘primitivism’ that rests on the idealization of a supposed ‘prelapsarian innocence’.⁵⁶ It can also be vulnerable to cooptation by powerful elites, becoming deployed in tandem with claims to authority that rest on notions of cultural authenticity, something made more likely by trends towards authoritarianism of various kinds.⁵⁷ The unintended consequence of a movement seeking to open up the discipline to more diverse voices then could be to sustain political forces that promote narrow, even chauvinistic, agendas. In IR’s current operating environment, claims around ‘pluralism’ can lead towards closure rather than openness.

Whatever important work standpoint theory does politically, therefore, we do not think it should serve as the only basis for the scholarly project of Global IR. To see positionality, whether around geography or culture, as the start – and end – of conversations about Global IR is, we think, a limited vision of the project’s potential. The challenge is to represent diversity without essentializing difference. The articles in this symposium take up this challenge by identifying both distinct experiences and the deep connections between social sites ‘at home’ and ‘over there’, the ‘foreign’ and the ‘domestic’, the ‘East’ and the ‘West’, ‘metropole’ and ‘colony’. Standpoint epistemologies can occlude these connections and the wider dynamics they are embedded within. This symposium inverts this approach, seeing connections as the basis of units. The foundations of this approach lie in a relational ontology.

Escape velocity: relationalism and global history

Relationalism takes many forms, from the familiar (some varieties of constructivism) to the avant-garde (quantum-inspired hyperhumanism).⁵⁸ Although the differences between forms of relationalism are considerable, all relational approaches recognize that relations are prior to and produce entities. Tilly’s processual sociology, for instance, is pitched against the presumption of ‘coherent durable monads’ to the neglect of ‘contingent, transitory connections among socially constructed identities’.⁵⁹ According to Tilly, bad habits have been passed down by his generation:

We learned and in turn taught a practice of this sort: (1) assume a coherent durable, self-propelling social unit; (2) attribute a general condition or process

⁵⁶Brigg *et al.* 2022, 11–2.

⁵⁷V-Dem 2021. See also Çapan and Zarakol 2017.

⁵⁸Katzenstein 2022, Kurki 2020. For a useful overview, see Guzzini 2017. We do not distinguish between processual and relational ontologies. On this, see Abbott 2016.

⁵⁹Tilly 1995, 1595. Also see Abbott 2016.

to that unit; (3) invoke or invent an invariant model of that condition or process; (4) explain the behavior of the unit on the basis of its conformity to that invariant model.⁶⁰

For Tilly and other relational thinkers, this procedure will not do. Emirbayer makes clear what is at stake: ‘whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static ‘things’ or in dynamic unfolding relations.’⁶¹ Relational thinkers do not argue that interests, goals, and identities cannot be stable. Rather, their position is that, however stable, these entities are forged relationally and subject to ongoing logics of reproduction and contestation. The West, for example, is not a fixed entity that existed prior to its engagement with the non-Western world – transboundary relations between Western and non-Western societies led to a change in their organizing logics, positions, and sense of the world. Similarly, the idea of the West and the institutions that support it are regularly reassessed, contested, and reproduced. It is an entity-in-motion. Against claims of constancy, relational accounts stress the ways in which traditions are always living.

Relations may be fleeting or enduring, deep or superficial, direct or indirect, mono- or multi-directional, interpersonal or impersonal. To assess their significance, we need to know which relations matter and when, where, and how they do so. This directs attention to sites where relations cohere (e.g. borders), actors that direct relations (e.g. powerful polities), gaps where relations are sparse or reversible (e.g. extractive regimes), and historical moments when relations break or global integration is either stopped or reversed (e.g. aspects of contemporary world politics). This symposium, therefore, seeks to identify *patterns* of connections: the structural entanglements, premised on asymmetrical power relations, which generate processes of historical development. Relations, hypothetically speaking, can be egalitarian, but most social relations that concern IR are defined by inequality and hierarchy. Our concern is with the ways in which relations generate systems of stratification: racial, epistemic, geographic, and more.

Despite this shared concern with hierarchical patterns of global order, the symposium offers a major challenge to the use of essentialism and its auxiliary claims in Global IR. Against essentialism, it replaces the starting point of units as entities-with-fixed-attributes with the notion of units as entities-in-motion. Against substantialism, relational approaches argue that it is connections between social sites that produce the entities that are often treated as having an essence: cultures, geographies, nations, regions, civilizations, and more. In contrast to internalism, relationalism stresses the entanglements between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that are generative of historical development. Against methodological nationalism, this approach points to the ways in which actors and units are nested within broader scales. Taken together, these moves have two main components: first, the papers in this symposium identify the ways in which historical processes are boundary-crossing; second, they theorize these boundary-crossing connections as patterns of entanglements. The result is an interest in systems of stratification.

⁶⁰Tilly 1995, 1595.

⁶¹Emirbayer 1997, 281.

A relational starting point leads, in turn, to a focus on transboundary connections, structural entanglements, and systems of stratification.

The aim of Global IR is to use the openness of the contemporary conjuncture to reform or recast core components of the discipline: its forms of epistemic certification, its geographical range, its conceptual grids, and more. We want this project to succeed. However, for this to happen, we think that Global IR must avoid the gravitational pull presented by the essentialism trap. This symposium sets out some ways in which this trap might be avoided and articulates another way of advancing Global IR.

The first article, by Barkawi, Murray, and Zarakol, analyses the underlying power dynamics that have pulled the Global IR project in potentially problematic directions. It argues that both American and Global IR share a Eurocentric spatial imaginary, one that was a product of Western expansion and empire. Insisting that geographical representation – geo-epistemology – is the solution to the problem of Eurocentrism (or American bias) reproduces the very problems Global IR seeks to address, and traps Global IR in essentialist representation. The second article extends this analysis by examining the ways in which proponents of Global IR read IR's disciplinary history. Focusing on India, Bayly shows how a relational sociology of disciplinary knowledge, rooted in imperial knowledge complexes, provides an account of disciplinary IR as 'global at birth', a globality that has subsequently been occluded in favour of a more essentialist reading of a singular birth story. Also deploying insights from global history, the third article, by Hui, questions if students of historical Asia who challenge Western IR for 'getting Asia wrong' do 'get Asia right'. The paper de-essentializes 'China's hegemony' by disaggregating the concept of 'China' and examining the multivocal and contradictory reactions of China's neighbours in the full universe of China's relevant relations across Asia. The final article, by Barnett and Lawson, demonstrates one way of achieving the relational escape velocity discussed above by providing a reappraisal of one of the central theoretical concerns in contemporary IR: the notion of global order. The symposium closes with a series of critical reflections on its main themes by Pardesi, Çapan, and Yunis.

Recognizing that we have been here before is important in terms of analysing what is at stake in contemporary debates about Global IR. It is equally important for attempts, such as ours, to generate alternative ways of theorizing the global. Each of the papers in this symposium therefore rests on a shared sense of critique (essentialism and its auxiliary assumptions) but develops its own particular remedy (relational accounts premised on transboundary connections, structural entanglements, and systems of stratification). The takeaway from the symposium is not, therefore, a single 'solution' for where IR theory in general, or Global IR in particular, should go, but rather a series of openings through which IR theory can use the current crisis productively rather than as another means of closure. But the symposium promises more than this. It argues that engagement with global history, alongside a relational ontology, helps to provide theoretical resources – connections, entanglements, stratification – that can underpin Global IR's research agenda. It is an agenda, we think, that is rich in possibilities.

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