

SYMPOSIUM: A SYMPOSIUM ON GLOBAL IR

The United Nations of IR: power, knowledge, and empire in Global IR debates

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Abstract

This paper critiques a core premise of Global IR: the association of knowledge with geography, which we term geo-epistemology. It argues that ‘American’ and Global IR share a Eurocentric spatial imaginary, one that was a product of Western expansion and empire. Through its geo-epistemology, Global IR enables a conservative appropriation of the critique of Eurocentrism in IR. Globality becomes a matter of assembling sufficient geographic representation rather than an analysis of the discipline’s political, historical, and spatial assumptions. Anglo-American policymakers and intellectuals invented the national/international world to replace the world of empires and races that came apart in the era of the world wars. This UN world of sovereign nation-states and their regional groupings was the foundational move of both what Stanley Hoffman called ‘the American social science’ – IR – and the American-centred world order. The paper uses the reception and legacy of Hoffman’s classic essay to show how culture replaced power and history in the study of the discipline, obfuscating the Eurocentrism of Global IR.

Keywords: IR theory; Global IR; geo-epistemology; empire

In diverse ways, IR conceives world politics by connecting culture and territory. Consider the roles played by nation-states, regions, civilisations, and hemispheres. In the debates over Global IR, theories of world politics are commonly categorised by geographic referents. Examples include Western and non-Western IR, or national, regional, and civilisational schools of IR.¹ This tendency to ‘geo-epistemology’, as we refer to it, is neither new nor unique to IR, and has previously been subject to critique.² In this essay, we focus on the linkage between

¹See, e.g., Maliniak *et al.* 2012a, 2012b, 2018; Wemheuer-Vogelaar *et al.* 2016; Zhang and Kristensen 2017; Zhang 2020.

²On ‘geo-epistemology’, see also Agnew 2007, as well as Canaparo 2009 and Mignolo 2009. On previous critiques, see, e.g., criticisms around Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis, for example, Sen 2005. On debates regarding the uses of culture in IR, see Reus-Smit 2018.

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theory and place in debates around Global IR. We do so to draw to attention some of the pitfalls in the strong versions of geo-epistemology evident in recent attempts to globalise IR, to make it less US-centric.³

Geo-epistemological labelling is pervasive in contemporary political and intellectual life. It is necessary for communication and analysis. However, strong forms which naturalise the connections between place and thought run the risk of reification. They ask us to imagine places as having essentially bounded, or internalist, developmental histories, which result in particular ethno-cultural ways of thinking, knowing, and valuing. Ironically, for IR scholars, such a vision of theory misses the co-constitutive, transboundary relations through which theories and approaches to world politics actually develop historically.

Geo-epistemology shapes how Global IR conceives the global. This has consequences for its rethinking of the discipline's Eurocentric political, historical, and spatial assumptions. 'Strategic' uses of geo-epistemological terminology conveniently package particular histories and perspectives, as with the many uses of Third World or Global South to describe vantage points on world politics. Notably, both the real-world referents of these terms, and the theoretic perspectives to which they refer, were historically formed through transnational relations. The complex roles of Marxian thought in Third Worldist perspectives signal this transnational constitution of thought. By contrast, 'strong' uses of geo-epistemology essentialise the relations between knowledge and geography. Theories are rooted in places. Consequently, globality in the discipline risks becoming a matter of geographic representation, of a seat in the United Nations of IR, as if theories were countries.

This version of the global severely limits the critique of Eurocentrism. It does so in no small measure because it retains a set of largely Eurocentric geographic categories with imperial origins. These categories were refashioned and repurposed for the American-centred world order and the mainstream discipline of IR which reflected that order. Until recently, the discipline has neglected the imperial thinking behind the UN idea, originally conceived as a strategy for managing international hierarchy in anti-imperial times. It is something of an irony, then, that in contemporary IR debates, sufficient geographic representation of theories is seen as making the discipline less US-centric. The problem is not just that paradigmatic statements in Global IR make use of essentialist forms of geo-epistemology; but that, in the discipline as a whole, this is conflated with positively and adequately addressing Euro- and US-centrism.⁴ Anti-imperial thought, scholars of race and capital, and post-colonial and decolonial traditions of inquiry provide far more reliable pathfinders for such purposes.

Below, in the first half of our essay, we show how geo-epistemological terms of analysis became naturalised in IR. We think the story begins with Stanley Hoffmann's classic 1977 essay on IR as 'An American Social Science'. Hoffmann meant 'American' as a shorthand for a particular knowledge formation that he

³See Barnett and Zarakol 2023 in this symposium for an overview.

⁴For parallel critique on this point, see Alejandro 2018, 2021. See also the rest of the 2021 *International Politics Reviews* forum on 'International Relations as a geoculturally pluralist field' edited by De Koeijer and Shilliam 2021.

was analysing sociologically. But in the intervening years, his phrasing came to be read geo-epistemologically. Ole Wæver's 1998 response to Hoffmann, which analysed the Americanisation of the discipline in Europe and elsewhere, demonstrates how this happened. We zero in on the tensions between Wæver's overall approach to the sociology of knowledge and the geo-epistemology evident in the empirical operationalisation of his categories. This takes us to the TRIP surveys, where it has become possible to count different flavours of national IRs and to chart the rise and fall of geographically defined approaches to the subject. The 'global' becomes a matter of the quantitative assessment of geo-epistemological representation in journals and subjects.

In the latter half of our essay, we turn to the consequences of geo-epistemology for the critique of Euro- and US-centrism in IR. So-called American IR was a power/knowledge formation, it was shaped by and reflected the American-centred world order. The key move, in practice and in theory, was to replace the imperial world with a world of nation-states, hierarchically ordered and managed through international and regional organisations and powers. The essentialist geo-epistemology of Global IR reflects this world, rather than critiquing or moving beyond it. Alternative resources for addressing the connections between geo-epistemology and international hierarchy can be found in anti-imperial international thought, to which we turn in conclusion. Anti-imperial thinkers had an understanding of the imperial and strategic uses of culture. We can learn from them as we develop reflexive responses to geo-epistemology and relational approaches to the study of world politics.

IR as an 'American social science': as sociology

In the essay that introduced the notion of a distinctively American approach to IR, Stanley Hoffmann situated university knowledge production sociologically, geopolitically, and, especially, historically.⁵ He observed that American IR was shaped by a national ideology of scientific progressivism; transboundary interaction between local and émigré scholars; and links with key institutions of knowledge production and political power. Since then, a disciplinary cottage industry has developed around periodic check-ins to see if IR is still predominantly 'American'.⁶ In this scholarship, characterised by heavy-handed use of geo-epistemological terminology, the belief that IR exists in other national versions tends to offset the conclusion that Hoffmann's overall characterisation of the discipline still holds.⁷ To think through how this has come to be the case requires figuring out how the term 'American IR' has been so misunderstood. Hoffmann's argument is not one that can be properly addressed by questions of geographical representation in journals.

A central premise of Hoffmann's was that the discipline was shaped by the United States' rise to power: 'The growth of the discipline cannot be separated from the American role in world affairs after 1945'.⁸ IR took an 'Athenian'

⁵Hoffmann 1977.

⁶See, e.g., Alker and Biersteker 1984; Wæver 1998; Smith 2000; Crawford and Jarvis 2001; Tickner 2003a; Kristensen 2015; Turton 2015.

⁷Exceptions include Oren 2016 and Tickner 2013.

⁸Hoffmann 1977, 47.

perspective on the world, Hoffmann observed, which was why it was not very good at understanding the weak or the revolutionary.⁹ Like area studies, American IR was one of the policy and social sciences that the professors, the foundations, and the US state invented to manage the American-centred world order. This proximity to power, Hoffmann suggests, motivated scholars to form a discipline specifically concerned with the international.¹⁰

An émigré scholar who came of age in Nazi-occupied France, Hoffmann took it for granted that university disciplines had *transnational* histories even as they came to be embodied in national academies. American IR was a distinctive meld of European realism and American scientific progressivism, in which the latter repeatedly won out.¹¹ Informed by political philosophy and sceptical of rationality, European émigré scholars fashioned a realism that tried to accommodate the cult of scientism in the US. Hoffmann captures the interplay across borders and traditions as the émigré scholars sought to introduce different questions: ‘these were scholars whose philosophical training and personal experience moved them to ask far bigger questions than those much of American social science had asked so far, questions about ends, not just means; about choices, not just techniques; about social wholes, not just about small towns or units of government’.¹² But the fateful choice in the US to make IR a subfield of political science gave the advantage to scientism:¹³ ‘most striking about American social science is its emulation of natural science and its liberal ideological boundaries’.¹⁴ In sum, ‘American’ IR for Hoffmann was shaped by time and place, and had national, transnational, and geopolitical dimensions.

To put it another way, Hoffmann was not waving a flag for American IR, nor did he regard it as a static entity with essentialised properties. He was offering a historical sociology of an intellectual tradition, situating the production and reception of knowledge amid social forces and contexts, what Max Weber referred to as the ‘external conditions’ of scholarship.¹⁵ Such conditions, of course, change. Developing Hoffmann’s insights in the discipline should mean more sociology of knowledge in IR, or power/knowledge studies, to use a different idiom. However, more than 20 years after Hoffmann’s essay appeared, Ole Wæver observed that the sociology of science was still ‘virtually non-existent’ in IR.¹⁶ This area of inquiry remains underdeveloped in IR and political science, significant contributions notwithstanding.¹⁷ This may be because the very idea of a sociology of knowledge contradicts devotion to the scientism Hoffmann observed in IR.¹⁸ Sociologies of

⁹Hoffmann 1977, 58. Also see Barkawi and Laffey 2006.

¹⁰Hoffmann 1977, 49.

¹¹Guilhot 2011, 2017; see also Turner and Mazur 2009. On science winning out, see, e.g., Mearsheimer and Walt 2013.

¹²Hoffmann 1977, 46.

¹³Guilhot 2008.

¹⁴Ross 1992, 100; see also Hoffmann 1977, 51, 52–55.

¹⁵Quoted in Wæver 1998, 687. The phrase ‘external conditions’ is from the Gerth and Mills’ (1946) translation of Weber’s lecture on ‘Science as a Vocation’, 129. As Weber elaborates, this ‘means beginning with the question: how is science set up as a vocation in the material sense of the word?’

¹⁶Wæver 1998, 691 and 687.

¹⁷See, e.g., Oren 2003; Heilbron *et al.* 2008; Owens 2015.

¹⁸Ross 1992 argues that this pattern is common to all American social sciences and can be linked to the notion of American exceptionalism.

science necessarily relativise scientific truths, which become products of history and society rather than objective statements about an external reality.

Read as geo-epistemology rather than historical sociology, however, Hoffmann's seminal article leads to a kind of methodological nationalism or regionalism. Hoffmann's essay has become part of the lexicon of geographic essentialism in our discipline, where 'Chinese', 'European', or 'non-Western IR' present as antidotes to 'American IR'.¹⁹ Over time, in the discipline's reading of Hoffmann, national essentialism overtook the paradigmatic opening to the sociology of knowledge he had provided. How did we get from Hoffmann's thoughtful sociology of IR to the discipline as a kind of UN?

IR as an 'American social science': as country

Ole Wæver's nuanced and thoughtful revisiting of Hoffmann in 1998 offers a useful window on this process. He undertook a national comparative sociology of IR, which he further developed in co-edited work with Arlene Tickner.²⁰ Wæver made his initial contribution in the late 1990s, at the height of the US's unipolar moment. He observed that IR everywhere seemed to be dominated by the American version of the subject. He was well aware of the entangled character of national disciplinary fields: 'Europe and the United States are not only compared; they have also interacted in important ways'.²¹ Given that, how might one systematically and empirically document the 'widely assumed US dominance in IR' and any differences with European scholarship?²² And do so while avoiding "national character" speculations?²³

Any sociology of knowledge has to confront the problem of reductionism, of conceiving ideas and scholarly discourse as mere effects of social or power relations, deprived of any relative autonomy. At the same time, writing histories of ideas runs the opposite risk, of failing to account for the many ways in which social conditions shape knowledge and the fates of its bearers. Dominant ideas, in the academy or elsewhere, do not come about as a result of the 'forceless force of the better argument'.²⁴ Wæver is keenly aware of this tension. He avoids reductionism by layering contexts, developing three dimensions: polity and society; the institutionalisation of the social sciences; and intellectual form and content. He is clear that academic knowledge(s) are not crudely determined by any one context or constituency.

However, the layers as Wæver describes them are situated within geographic referents, which become more explicit with empirical operationalisation. Wæver's article presumes a world of regions, nation-states, and national academies as the ultimate containers of expert knowledge(s). For example, in order to demonstrate the continued dominance of American IR, Wæver provides the percentages of the US, British, and Rest of Europe authors in leading journals. He shows that

¹⁹See, e.g., Acharya 2016; Friedrichs 2016; Zhang and Kristensen 2017.

²⁰Tickner and Wæver 2009.

²¹Wæver 1998, 696.

²²Ibid., 696.

²³Ibid., 694.

²⁴Habermas' distinction between the ethics inherent to discourse and constrained speech. Habermas 1984, 25.

the main US IR journals were largely dominated by authors resident in North American universities. By contrast, European journals have a balance of European and American authors.²⁵ This is the basis of Wæver's finding that US IR is not only hegemonic but insular. Although aware that non-Americans may be based in US universities, Wæver argues that country of residence is more easily operationalised and provides a more relevant measure for the dominance of North American IR.²⁶

Within Wæver's model, scholars and theories can move across borders. However, they become observable as effects only within a country, as when a British journal publishes an American author who becomes effectively 'British'. Authors who may have varied and hybrid origins, and theories with transnational histories, are classified according to the sovereign territorial location of universities and publishers. This approach presupposes the world of nation-states, as prior to and containing academic knowledges. Whether and how problematic this assumption is depends on what is being measured. However so, it leads to thinking about knowledge as inherently connected to place, bounded and contained rather than constituted across borders. Ideas, theories, and even intellectual styles become appended to geographic denominators, obscuring their transnational origins.²⁷

As with Hoffmann, the analysis here contains a danger despite its caution: Wæver's tendency to geographise knowledge *comparatively* threatens to overwhelm the relational sensibility of his overall position. Consider his conclusion that 'The long-term story is thus one of a gradual de-Europeanisation of American IR'.²⁸ Wæver uses the continental shorthand to communicate and to capture knowledge formations, much as Hoffmann. But if we pause to consider them, analogies between continents and ideas quickly break down. Both the Enlightenment (which informs American scientific progressivism) and the counter-Enlightenment (which informs Guillohot's realists) have a European provenance, while all of these traditions took shape in and through Europe's encounters with others.²⁹ Expert knowledge(s) of world politics are inevitably caught up in relational histories of world politics. The positivist and statistical methods so closely associated with American IR have entwined Old and New World histories, and owe fundamental debts to the Second World War.³⁰ Theories and histories always interrelate in world politics.³¹

While Wæver, like Hoffmann, was reflexive about the sociology of IR, the increasing 'Americanisation' of the discipline that he identified ensured that the next iterations of the debate would be even more geographically and statistically reductive. The nation-state has now become almost fully naturalised as the appropriate unit of measurement of knowledge formations in IR. TRIP surveys code IR scholars by country of residence, enabling cross-national surveys. In a discussion on US dominance in the discipline using these surveys, Daniel Maliniak, Susan

²⁵Wæver 1998, Table 2, 698.

²⁶Ibid., 697, n. 31.

²⁷See, e.g., Ibid., 694.

²⁸Ibid., 722.

²⁹See Guillohot 2008 and Malcolm 2019.

³⁰Mirowski 2002, ch. 4.

³¹Consider the relations between deterrence theories and deterrence strategies in US foreign and security policy. See, e.g., George and Smoke 1974.

Peterson, Ryan Powers, and Michael Tierney comment that ‘these data provide a number of behavioural and perceptual measures of how the IR discipline is practiced across countries and time’.³² They assume the most relevant unit of analysis is the national or country level IR community. The perceptions of academics in these bounded communities can be charted and compared: e.g. What are their views about US dominance? Which scholars, journals, and theories are most important for them? Once these are coded geographically, claims can be made about US dominance, or about intellectual diversity, in different national IR communities. Maliniak *et al.*’s data allow them to produce cross-national charts in which IR always already appears in nation-state containers. Their categories of ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ flows similarly work to reify national boundaries. The world of sovereign nation-states, American IR’s core presumption, is uncritically reproduced in the study of the discipline.

And it is not only the TRIP surveys. The periodic check-ins to see if Hoffmann’s finding still applies have become so frequent that they constitute their own subfield in IR. Iterations of this literature have argued, for instance, that the discipline is comparatively more geographically diverse than other social sciences (though still stratified in other ways)³³ or that American approaches are no longer hegemonic.³⁴ But even as these responses make the case for other IRs in the face of American hegemony, they reinforce the notion that geo-epistemological thinking is the best path to a Global IR.³⁵ Perhaps due to the relative, if passing, success of the ‘English School’ label is to blame.³⁶ Once geo-epistemic categories are in such regular use, American, non-Western, or Scandinavian IR appear to be self-evident things. Rather than a shorthand for historical and social developments, with transnational dimensions, these labels become observable and naturalised entities with traits, biases, and other characteristics.

It is only a short step further to thinking of intellectual formations as persons, countries, or races requiring representation. Tellingly, the TRIP surveys come close to conflating intellectual diversity with geographic diversity, observing: ‘No matter how they currently define the field, many scholars argue that IR suffers from a lack of intellectual and/or geographic diversity’.³⁷ ‘Diversity’ understood geographically appears as the problem to be solved or managed; its absence the marker of hegemony and insularity. Ironically, then, a distinctly US liberal discourse of representation appears as the solution to American dominance in the discipline. Affirmative action is required for non-Western IR.

Global IR as an ‘American social science’

In his 2014 Presidential Address to the International Studies Association, Amitav Acharya invoked Hoffmann’s line that IR was ‘born and raised in America’ in

³²Maliniak *et al.* 2018, 451.

³³Kristensen 2015.

³⁴Turton 2015.

³⁵See, e.g., Jørgensen 2000, 2003; Crawford and Jarvis 2001; Inoguchi and Bacon 2001; Tickner 2003b; Brown 2011; Sharman 2008; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Cotton 2012; Hellmann 2014; Kristensen 2015.

³⁶See, e.g., Zhang 2020.

³⁷Maliniak *et al.* 2018, 450.

order to demonstrate the need for Global IR. He observed that the discipline now had ‘mushroomed’ through ‘schools, departments, institutes, and conventions’ around the world.³⁸ However unintended or well-meaning, these kinds of metaphors make it seem that knowledge grows out of national soil. More explicit forms of geo-epistemology organise Acharya’s account of the discipline as well: ‘If IR is to overcome Western dominance, then it must offer concepts and theories that are derived from other societies and cultures’, he argues.³⁹ Here, he conceives diversity and inclusiveness geographically. For Acharya, geographic representation seems to be the solution to the fact that the discipline’s empirical focus and ‘main theories’ are ‘too deeply rooted in, and beholden to, the history, intellectual traditions, and agency claims of the West’.⁴⁰ Acharya’s critique of Eurocentric IR as parochial, and by implication, relative to, or only true for, the West, suggests a corrective course based on giving non-Western national or regional schools the opportunity to include *their* truths.⁴¹

As with American IR, Acharya presupposes, rather than historicises, the world of nation-states and regions. As Duncan Bell observes, ‘This kind of critique remains trapped in the spatial categories it professes to transcend’.⁴² The categories advanced as antidotes to Eurocentrism are products of imperial histories and world order projects. Anglo-American thinkers and policymakers developed the idea of a world of nation-states and regions as a solution to imperial crisis and world war in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴³ American IR naturalised this spatial imaginary by positing states under anarchy as the central, timeless problematic of the discipline.

Indeed, to take a world wrecked by nearly a half century of inter-imperial conflict and reimagine it through the lens of the nation-state was *the* foundational move of both the discipline and the American-centred world order.⁴⁴ In the first half of the twentieth century, questions of empire and race war dominated discussion of world politics, while decolonisation and post-imperial conflicts occupied much of its second half.⁴⁵ Yet, these subjects were more or less invisible in the Rockefeller-funded effort to found a new theory of international politics for US university teaching in the wake of the Second World War.⁴⁶ As Hoffmann remarked, ‘international hierarchy’ was a ‘zone of darkness’ for the IR of his time.⁴⁷ The US had a larger and more significant formal empire than is often recognised.⁴⁸ But US power in the post-1945 world more often operated in and through sovereign nation-states and their regional associations. The US had pioneered its ‘empire

³⁸Acharya 2014, 647; Hoffmann 1977, 59.

³⁹Acharya 2016, 6.

⁴⁰Acharya 2014, 649.

⁴¹However, Acharya also introduces a non-sequitur that the non-Western IR considered for inclusion should have universal applicability. A criterion which, in reference to Western IR, he has already suggested is problematic or impossible. Acharya 2014, 650.

⁴²Bell 2013, 256. See also Heiskanen 2019.

⁴³Smith 2003; Thakur and Vale 2020.

⁴⁴Smith 2003; Zarakol 2017a.

⁴⁵Long and Schmidt 2005.

⁴⁶Vitalis 2015, 120.

⁴⁷Hoffmann 1977, 58. See also Zarakol 2017b.

⁴⁸Go 2011; Immerwahr 2019.

by invitation' in Latin America, economically, politically, and militarily subordinating formally independent states, in part through the development of regional associations and alliances.⁴⁹

The advent of the United Nations marked the globalisation of this strategy.⁵⁰ In traditional accounts, the emergence of the United Nations and the struggles of the League of Nations before it are seen as having primarily arisen from the conflict between democracy and autocracy (or totalitarianism). But 1919 and 1945 were marked even more by efforts of empires to internationalise their 'colonial problem'. Colonies – including those lost by the empires fractured by the world wars – were to be brought under the management of IGOs dominated by the Atlantic powers. Discourses of tutelage and development, rather than racial superiority, legitimated this move.⁵¹ This is the context in which the British imperial statesman and South African leader Jan Smuts, who first stepped into history as a Boer commando, could write – and believe in – the preamble to the United Nations treaty.⁵² Of course, the history of the UN institutions cannot be reduced to Anglo-American intentions of a White-led imperial commonwealth on a planetary scale. As we discuss in the following section, anti-colonial and other voices from the non-Western world soon found their footing.

American IR, area studies, and modernisation theory were some of the Western university counterparts of this UN world.⁵³ American world power structured American IR in ways that went well beyond the overt and instrumental desires of scholars to influence US policy. The states under anarchy model of Cold War IR, along with the subfield distinctions between IR and Comparative Politics, made it difficult to see or theorise how US imperial relations functioned.⁵⁴ Morgenthau and others reassured students, scholars, and policymakers that it was the Soviet bloc, and not the West, that pursued a policy of imperialism.⁵⁵ Conceived of primarily as a problem-solving exercise,⁵⁶ American IR took for granted the world of sovereign states. This largely deflected questions about international hierarchy while allowing IR to focus on the bipolar contest with the Soviet Union. Scholars read the anarchy *problematique* back into history rather than asking how the UN world developed out of the world of formal empires. To the extent they did ask this question, the idea that the European states system diffused to the rest of the world supplied ready answers.⁵⁷ As noted, Hoffmann pointed to the failure to ask these kinds of large, constitutive, historical questions as a distinctive (and unfortunate) feature of the discipline. IR, he argued, was for holders of American state power, and, as a social science of world politics, all the lesser for it.⁵⁸

⁴⁹Grandin 2006; Lundestad 1986.

⁵⁰Mazower 2009; Smith 2003. We do not mean to imply here that the UN project can be reduced solely to US strategy; others had other expectations from the project.

⁵¹See, e.g., Pedersen 2015. See also Zarakol 2011.

⁵²Mazower 2009, ch. 1.

⁵³Gilman 2003.

⁵⁴Nexon and Wright 2007.

⁵⁵Morgenthau 1970.

⁵⁶– in Robert Cox's terms –

⁵⁷See, e.g., Bull and Watson 1984.

⁵⁸Cf. Tilly 1984.

American IR's spatial imaginary, a world of nation-states and distinct regions that exist prior to history, remains sticky even as power shifts in world politics.⁵⁹ Geo-epistemological calls for 'Global IR' frequently reference the agency and power of states in the Global South in post-1945 world politics.⁶⁰ These calls have picked up steam in the discipline as the American-centred order encountered crisis in recent decades. We certainly agree with the claim that agency is globally distributed (and is not just the property of great powers), but reading geo-epistemic categories back into history remains as analytically and methodologically problematic when the category is 'Global South', 'China', or 'India' as it is when the category is 'Europe'.

That calls for Global IR track the rise of the Global South in world politics exemplifies the close relations between power and knowledge in the study of world politics. Under the banner of Global IR, geo-epistemology replicates a spatial imaginary of world politics composed of bounded, culture-defined places rather than of constitutive relations. This version of Global IR adapts and extends a core feature of twentieth century American IR: using a bounded and essentialist notion of culture to legitimate state power and claims to truth. Anti-imperialists frequently pointed out that a major problem with the objective of national liberation was that it would empower conservative and sectarian elements in their own societies, while leaving their new states vulnerable to great power dominance.⁶¹ In ways small and large, subsequent events have validated these fears.

Towards an anti-imperial Global IR

To take stock so far: there are at least three major problems with attempting to make IR more global and less Euro/US-centric through strong forms of geo-epistemology. First, the use of culture to draw boundaries reproduces in Global IR some of the basic assumptions of Eurocentric and American IR. The geo-epistemological vocabulary of Global IR is itself largely a product of modern histories of Western expansion and empire. Distinctions between East and West, the identification of world regions, and even the taken-for-granted category of world religions, arose in the course of geopolitical and imperial interaction.⁶² Second, rooting knowledge in culture-defined places subordinates reason to culture, to relative matters of incommensurable values. This is one reason why imperialists and colonisers found culture such a useful category for making distinctions between levels of civilisation. Global IR's geo-epistemological thinking tends to transform questions of power and knowledge into ones of culture and knowledge. Third, expert knowledges about world politics tend to be internal to, shaped by and caught up in, the geopolitical histories they seek to comprehend.⁶³ Associating knowledge with culture and place risks missing the role of transboundary relations in the formation of such knowledge, the very relations and networks that should be of interest to IR scholars.

⁵⁹See, e.g., Callahan 2004.

⁶⁰E.g. Acharya 2018.

⁶¹Chatterjee 1993.

⁶²Masuzawa 2005; Mitani 2006; Aydın 2007.

⁶³Oren 2003; Bayly 2016; Guillot 2017; Allan 2018.

Is there an alternative to Global IR as geo-epistemology? After all, as noted in the introduction, we all operate with geo-epistemological categories to some extent in our analysis. Furthermore, the various calls for a Global IR emanate from sound critiques, which collectively lay bare the origins of the discipline in the problems of empire, White supremacy, and the policy demands of the Cold War.⁶⁴ Scholars have demonstrated how the discipline encoded into its terms of analysis Eurocentric assumptions, geographies, and histories.⁶⁵ Geo-epistemology, however, refigures Eurocentrism as a problem of national or civilisational bias, to be addressed through the inclusion of other biases. Invoking culture bounds and subordinates reason in territorial packages. So packaged, this move authorises cultural diversity and representation as an appropriate, or even the main, organising principle for scholarship about world politics.

Affirmative action for that referred to as the non-West substitutes for engagement with the Eurocentric critique or a rethinking of the discipline appropriate to the times. There is an understandable political (and professional) logic to such demands for inclusion and the temptation to respond affirmatively is understandable. In this context, we note that the US journals and departments now searching for Global South or non-Western representation have not previously felt the same level of need to see Marxist, critical, or post-modern IR represented, or Third World realism, or the rich and long traditions of anti-imperial international thought. But are alternative IRs, which do not replicate hegemonic narratives, really going to be found in putatively bounded national or civilisational traditions? Will not this move simply recreate the logics of late colonial assemblies, or the South African model for Anglo-American world order, where the tribes and regions were represented by ethnically defined spokespersons for tradition?⁶⁶ Equally, as with such assemblies, this move is an augury for the rise of new sectarian powers and challengers for local and global hegemony.

One of the ways American power preserved the hierarchies of European imperialism was by replacing the racial and civilisational categories of the European empires with a vocabulary of regions, nations, and development.⁶⁷ 'Culture' often served functions similar to race, accounting for backwardness and enabling the ranking of states and societies according to scales of civilisation and development.⁶⁸ Yet this arrangement also promised liberation: national 'cultures' were linked to the right of self-determination and thus sovereignty. Many anti-colonial thinkers and activists were not sanguine about this promise. For one, 'culture' tended to empower conservative rather than progressive tendencies in colonised societies. More fundamentally, they worried that decolonisation into small and penetrable states amounted to a globalisation of *divide et impera*.⁶⁹ 'Sovereignty' was both paltry repayment for colonisation and a potential Trojan horse for neo-imperialism.

⁶⁴Oren 2003; Long and Schmidt 2005; Guilhot 2011; Anievas *et al.* 2014; Vitalis 2015; Bell 2020; Thakur and Vale 2020.

⁶⁵Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Hobson 2012; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015.

⁶⁶Thakur and Vale 2020.

⁶⁷Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002; Zarakol 2011.

⁶⁸Bowden 2009.

⁶⁹Cooper 2014; Wilder 2015; Getachew 2019 for more.

Many of those who rebelled against imperialism, in metropole and colony, were communists, leftists, and others who sought to rise above national and sectarian parochialisms via distinctive ways of blending the universal and the local.⁷⁰ Arising out of such efforts was a tradition of anti-imperial international thought, much of it specifically concerned with the problems of racial and cultural hierarchies. In their engagement with international institutions, anti-imperial internationalists sought new arrangements, which would help them break free from hierarchical relations. This involved new economic frameworks and federations, but also post-colonial conceptions of cultural difference. For example, the U.N. African Group carried out a protracted legal battle against the government of South Africa through the International Court of Justice in the 1960s. In this fight against Apartheid, the African Group had to contend with South Africa's colonial depiction of black African culture as entirely different and incompatible with global white culture, and thus with modernity. To win supporters in the West, the African Group made the case that universal equality for all races was more important than the sovereignty claims of states. Conservation of difference was, at best, a limited strategy in the fight against imperialism.

International institutions offered anti-imperial internationalists the chance to make new justice claims on states based on universal principles, and not just to protect national or cultural rights. Anti-imperialists sought federations with their former colonisers, reparations, and a new international order, among other strategies, such as revolutionary guerrilla warfare.⁷¹ Anti-imperial thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor argued that the cultures and religions considered non-European, which had been suppressed, degraded, and arrested by European colonialism, needed to be reborn in the process of organised protest and armed resistance.⁷² This might entail strategic embraces of non-European culture, but it also required the admixture of modern scientific reason and international moral pressure. More significantly, this combination invoked a future culture, which would not be locked in static or regressive subservience to 'tradition'; a culture neither European nor non-European. Strategic necessity nurtured this embrace of universalism, so that mobilisations against the European presence in Africa and Asia could continue to find allies and supporters outside of narrowly particularistic struggles. The international and strategic thought of these thinkers challenged the spatial logics of geo-epistemology, even as they worked to advance their political projects within that framework.

Culture, rather than merely being a predefined attribute of the Rest, and a subject of Western dominance and repression, was a site of contestation between and within the asymmetrical societies of empire, colony, and post-colony. Culture could be the claimed property of a national or imperial power, but also the outcome of inter-societal interaction. Developments in both contemporary geopolitics and in IR as a discipline have naturalised the former meaning at the expense of our understanding of the latter. Recovery of the thread of anti-imperial internationalisms, as well their histories of global networks and connections, can offer a corrective path:

⁷⁰Fanon 1967; Lenin 1967 [1920]; Wilder 2015; Lovell 2019.

⁷¹Cooper 2014; Lovell 2019.

⁷²Fanon 1967; Wilder 2015.

Global IR can learn to think globally and relationally even as it operates in the world as it exists.

In the politics of decolonisation in the Third World, geo-epistemic legacies of imperialisms were re-incorporated into the post-colonial era via discourses such as ‘cultural rights’, even as other politicians and activists advocated for transboundary visions of post-imperial relations within international institutions. ‘Cultural rights’ flourished through the institutional development and capture of UNESCO by the US during the Cold War years. US policy produced a selection effect: political universalisms seen as rival to American democracy were marginalised and attacked, while members survived through adherence to pro-Western, or, at least, nominally non-political initiatives that reified national traditions. Although the rhetoric of ‘total war against enemies’ eventually passed, and the organisation did not remain dominated by Western interests, the conception of culture as exclusive to place – and as non-political – has largely survived. Third World internationalism and communist solidarity were broken apart by sectarianisms, especially from the 1970s onward. The task of ridding U.N. institutions of rival universalisms, partly through the mechanism of development aid, but through military and other pressures as well, helped transform the global anti-imperial solidarities of the interwar and postwar periods into the more exclusive and particular cultural nationalisms and civilisational identities championed by leading Global IR scholars. Global IR would do well to remember that particularist and essentialist approaches have a way of reinforcing existing hierarchies, just as they limit imaginaries of liberation.

Conclusion

All of us who work within the broader field of a globalising IR should be cognizant that binaries like West/non-West can lead to neglect of the constitutive relations between categories and reify them as opposites. When Acharya points to constructivism’s role in ‘opening space for scholarship on the non-Western world’ because of its emphasis on ‘culture and identity’, the implication is that the non-West contributes cultural insights to IR, which can balance Western scientific reason.⁷³ For Yaqing Qin, the West operates from a knowledge culture of ‘rationality’, which is totalising and rigid in its analytical separation of subjects, and should be corrected with ‘relation’, the Chinese way of thinking and knowing.⁷⁴ It should be obvious that counter-examples of Western rejections of rationality abound, like Romanticism, nationalism, and the counter-Enlightenment, or the nihilist populism currently besieging Western democracies. The modern concepts of East and West arose in the context of interaction between European and other powers. Categories which originated in European racial and civilisational thought became globally shared, ‘a transnational force, utilised in legitimating and delegitimizing structures of international politics and competing visions of world order’.⁷⁵ However inescapable, such categories should not be reproduced un-reflexively.

⁷³Acharya 2014, 650.

⁷⁴Qin 2018; See also Ling 2014.

⁷⁵Aydın 2007, 73.

Always harder to see, and easier to forget, are the relational and hybrid histories behind knowledge formation, especially of knowledges relevant to the study and practice of world politics. To take a representative ‘non-Western’ figure, M.K. Gandhi’s intellectual and political development took place almost entirely outside India. He attributed his ideas to a range of figures, like Thoreau, Ruskin, and Tolstoy, a list which included only a few Indians.⁷⁶ He sought, first in South Africa and then in India, a politics that would overcome the British use of culture to divide and rule its imperial subjects. Even if deployed provisionally, defining thinkers and theories in terms of geographical traits risks essentialism.

Globalising IR offers an opportunity to rethink the discipline from the ground up, to come up with better categories and theories, ones which reflect planetary rather than provincial histories and politics. If we succeed, we can even address some of the long-standing problems of the discipline, as identified many decades ago by Hoffmann: we can speak to big questions about past, present, and future world orders, and in so doing close the gap between the discipline of IR and world politics as they are experienced outside of the centres of power. The false universalism of American IR created numerous blindspots in the discipline, from imperialism to climate change to pandemics, to name a few. But creating other national or civilisational schools of IR is not the solution. We need a proper *Global IR*.

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⁷⁶Devji 2012, 9.

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