

# Problems with Anglo-American Centered International Theory

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### **Does it matter that international theory has been produced overwhelmingly in an Anglo-American context?**

The standard answer from mostly American international theory scholars would be that it does not matter that international theory has been produced overwhelmingly in an Anglo-American context; this does not affect its legitimacy and validity. Consequently, this question is downplayed in its significance and often marginalised from international theory's field of inquiry. However Hoffman's (1977) article, "An American Social Science: International Relations," is often cited as initially challenging this viewpoint. Undoubtedly, others have argued the problems of a theory that claims to be 'international' as being produced overwhelmingly in two powerful countries (Holden 2001).

This essay will argue that it does matter that international theory has been produced overwhelmingly in an Anglo-American context. The main consequence of this is Euro-centrism, which heavily distorts our understanding of international politics. Consequently, international theory has been accused of acting as a tool that legitimises a concealed imperialism in international politics.

Indeed, international theory has become more diversified in recent years (Barnett 2002), and, in this essay, reference to international theory will mostly be in relation to the mainstream theories: liberalism and realism. However, it is important to note that even alternative theories offered in international relations can be accused of euro-centrism (Jones 2006). Furthermore, alternative international theories that do challenge the status quo of the discipline are often dismissed by the mainstream (Ayoob 2002).

The first section of the essay will argue that it does matter that international theory has been produced overwhelmingly in an Anglo-American context, as this has resulted in a euro-centrism. The second section develops this reasoning by arguing that when looking at international politics through the lens of Eurocentric international theory, our understanding is heavily distorted. This links to the third section, arguing that a distortion of international politics legitimises a concealed form of imperialism. What international theory conceals is no coincidence. In relation to this, the fourth section will briefly argue that the context of international theory is important to the extent that scholars in the field of IR need to explore the implications of the relationship of international theory's origins and the way it explains international politics.

The production of international theory in an Anglo-American context does matter, as it produces euro-centrism, an idea that promotes the centrality of Europe, or now 'the West,' in its interpretation (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). This has manifested itself in two ways. First, international theory's field of enquiry remains problematically narrow; only reflecting issues of concern to great powers and marginalizing the perspective of the powerless (Barnett 2002). This can be illustrated with the example of the lack of attention neo-liberalism and neo-realism have given to the process of decolonisation and the challenges it poses to mainstream theories (Ayoob 2002). Ayoob (2002) argues that the reason for this neglect is due to international theory's fixation with bipolarity, superpower rivalry and nuclear weapons after World War II. This preoccupation with issues concerning superpowers marginalises an important event that has far more implications for international politics.

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Another example is the centrality of security studies in international theory and its treatment of war and conflict. Noticeably, its definition of what constitutes war is limited to what vulnerability would be for a great power (Jones 2004). For example, Chomsky (2008) highlights how 9/11 was an act openly interpreted as a declaration of war by the US, which then, supposedly, justified 'self-defence' in the manifestation of an invasion of Afghanistan. Yet, US foreign policy of state-supported international terrorism throughout Latin America in the 1960s, and Central America and the Middle East in the 1980s, where the US has been directly involved in the murder of civilians, has not been theorised as war.

The second way that euro-centrism manifests itself in international theory is its heavy reliance on western political thinkers (Jones 2006) and the lack of inclusion or interest in literature in languages other than English (Holden 2010). This subconsciously implies that there has been a lack of theoretical innovation in relation to international politics outside of 'the West' and further denies legitimacy of thought, struggles, and discourses from other parts of the world (Jones 2004). It has led to the accusation that international theory is guilty of a failure to recognise events, processes, scholarship from other parts of the world, often downplaying their contribution and significance (Jones 2006). Indeed, Jones (2006) highlights that even critical IR thought, which is concerned with emancipation and social transformation, derives its ideas from European thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas. Significantly, it never draws parallels with thinkers outside of 'the West' who have significantly contributed to these concepts, such as Mohandas Ghandi, Amilear Cabral, Samora Michel, Kwame Nkrumah, and Frantz Fanon (Jones 2004), indicating euro-centrism even within alternative international theories.

Developing from this last point is an important reason as to why international theory's contextual derivation matters. When looking through the lens of a mainstream euro-centric international theory, our interpretation of world history, international politics, and the position of 'the West' is significantly distorted (Jones 2006). Consequently, it has little explanatory ability (Ayoob 2002, Barnett 2002). This deficit is rooted in mainstream international theory's attempt to take the narrow experience of the West and universalise it (George 1994). This is done through a positivist approach that claims that theories are 'scientific' and objective. As a result, the theories become a-historical and detached from geography, which arguably makes them weak in explaining change in international politics (Ayoob 2002). This directly leads to the accusation that international theory and the discipline of IR "contributes systematically- and indeed arrogantly- to the reproduction of ignorance" through euro-centrism (Jones 2006 p12). A couple of examples can illustrate these points.

As international theory has explained world history and international politics according to the rise and fall of great powers and great power struggles, the weak and the powerless are often marginalised and only focused on when of concern to the great powers (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). Barkawi and Laffey (2006) illustrate how this distorts our understanding by focusing on the standard interpretation of the Cuban Missile Crisis. This crisis is often explained as an affair of the superpowers only and is used as a central example in theories of deterrence, rational decision-making, and the nature of the Cold War. Throughout this standard narrative, Cuba is portrayed as a mere client state or the location of the dispute. However, this well-known account often misses out the significant role played by Castro and the underpinning impact of the hostile US foreign policy towards Cuba in creating the crisis. Therefore, the crisis may not have occurred if Cuba had not felt the need to defend itself from the US. This highlights how Eurocentric accounts can heavily distort our understanding of key events in international politics and actually explain very little as to how it occurred (Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

Another example of the constraints international theory poses on ones understanding of international politics can be seen in the interpretation of the events of World War Two. In this case, liberalism also obscures ones understanding of the West. The holocaust is often 'othered' from 'the West' (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, Bauman 1989) and used to reinstall the image of 'the West' as morally superior, emphasising that the allies were the ones who liberated the camps and brought justice. This then lays the groundwork for the west as being perceived as the defender of human rights and preventer of genocides through humanitarian intervention (Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

Hannah Arendt (1951), on the other hand, claims that European imperialism played a key role in shaping future totalitarianism and genocide. Her work has led many scholars of other disciplines to draw parallels between the nature of violence and mass slaughter under colonialism with the similar nature of mass murder that took place

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during the holocaust (Madley 2005, Zimmerer 2008). In this light, Bauman's (1989) postulation that the holocaust was indeed a product of modernity carries significant weight and leads one to question the liberalist portrayal of the West. Here, we can see how a 'scientific', positivist approach leads ones understanding astray towards a-historicism. A-historicism prevents one from drawing upon history to contextualise current international politics (Ayoob 2002, Barnett 2002).

What mainstream international theory, in its distortion of international politics, leaves out in its analysis is no coincidence. Indeed, it has a "wilful amnesia" (Krishna 2001). This leads onto to the next reason as to why the Anglo-American monopoly over the production of international theory matters: its euro-centrism and distortion of international politics significantly contributes to a covert legitimisation of imperialism (Barnett 2002). Here, what is being highlighted is that its contextual production is significant due to the relationship between power and knowledge (Jones 2004).

Cox (1981) highlights that "theory is always *for* someone *for* some purpose" (Cox 1981 p128). In relation to this, Ayoob (2002) points out that "leading academic institutions in powerful countries have produced these theories and thus cater to the perceived requirements of the policymaking communities in major capitals" (Ayoob 2002 p27). This is reinforced by Callahan's (2004) claim that, since the 1960s, there has been a revolving door between academics, politicians, and intelligence services. In this light, it would not be unrealistic to argue that theory serves those who have produced it, which is especially significant, seeing that it is produced by the powerful in an unequal international system. Accordingly, "power translates into domination in the sphere of the manufacturing and reproduction of knowledge" (Ayoob 2002 p27), as "knowledge and ideas can serve either to mystify or reveal those unequal relations" (Jones 2006 p5).

Jones (2004) would argue that by carrying out a genealogy of the discipline, one would see its imperialist tendencies through its methodological misrecognition of imperialism, combined with the promotion of ignorance about imperialist history. In its self-representation, the discipline of IR remarkably fails to acknowledge its colonial and imperial roots (Jones 2006). Indeed, the often-cited date for the official establishment of the discipline is at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1919- a date that locates the discipline's birth at the height of imperialism. Furthermore, theorists who are overwhelmingly relied upon, such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and others, lived in a time during, and contributed to the legitimisation of, European violence and racism against non-Europeans. In this light, Jones (2004) claims: "if a discipline was born in such a historical context and in the heartlands of colonial imperialism, then ideological assumptions are likely to have been embedded in early IR thought and practice" (Jones 2004 p4). Here, it is significant to highlight that: "There is... no such thing as a theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space. When any theory so represents itself, it is the more important to examine it as ideology, and to lay bare its concealed perspective" (Cox 1981 p128).

With this in mind, one can argue that these "systematic absences" (Jones 2006 p10) in euro-centrism serve to "quietly remove the massive world history of imperialism from the theories and substantive concerns of the disciplines of... IR"(Jones 2006 p9). It serves to "systematically tear or isolate the west from world history and its racialized structures" (Jones 2006 p10). This removal results in the claim that imperialism, colonialism and racism are of the past and are now to be left to specialist studies. This has led to the interpretation of some policies, such as those regarding aid, humanitarian assistance and intervention, as innocent rather than, perhaps, imperialist in nature, neglecting the infusion of ideas of 'progress' and 'civilising' (Jones 2006).

The fact that international theory is produced overwhelmingly in an Anglo-American context matters to the extent that scholars in the field need to explore the relationship of international theory's origins and the way it explains international politics, its roots in the height of imperialism and who it now currently favours in its interpretation (Jones 2006). It is perhaps too defeatist to argue that the discipline should be dismissed altogether. Brown (2006) highlights the danger of alternative theories maintaining the problems of mainstream international theory, as they tend to rely on its conceptualisations to make criticisms and offer solutions. Indeed, Barnett (2002) points out this exact problem in Ayoob's (2002) idea of subaltern realism. It can also, arguably, be seen in Jones (2004) commitment to objectivity or in conventional constructivism (Hopf 1998). Such a problem may support Saurin's (2006) claim that, in order to 'decolonise' international theory, one cannot rely only on subaltern histories. There is a need for anti-imperialism to

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challenge the very structures and foundations of the discipline.

In conclusion, the question regarding whether it matters that international theory has been produced overwhelmingly in an Anglo-American context has often been sidelined by mainstream international scholars is unimportant. However, there is a growing amount of literature highlighting the problematic implications of international theory. This essay has argued that it does matter that international theory has been overwhelmingly produced in the United Kingdom and, more so, the United States. It has resulted in a Eurocentric theory that can be seen in its fixation on the interests of great powers and its heavy reliance on western political thinkers. A Eurocentric international theory heavily distorts one's understanding of international politics and proves limiting in its explanatory ability. This was illustrated with two standard accounts of international political events. The most important reason as to why its contextual derivation matters concerns the accusation that international theory's distortion of politics covertly legitimises a concealed imperialism in international politics. Finally, it has been argued, what comes from this is the need to expose the relationship between the discipline's roots and whom it currently favours in its interpretation. Only then can one begin to work towards a truly 'international' theory.

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