

Global South Perspectives on International Relations Theory

Written by Lina Benabdallah, Carlos Murillo-Zamora and Victor Adetula

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LINA BENABDALLAH, CARLOS MURILLO-ZAMORA AND VICTOR ADETULA, NOV 19 2017

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The Global South is generally understood to refer to less economically developed countries. It is a broad term that comprises a variety of states with diverse levels of economic, cultural, and political influence in the international order. Although International Relations is an interdisciplinary field of study, it has historically been studied from a very Eurocentric perspective that does not always help us to understand developments occurring in the Global South. Understanding Global South perspectives starts with a discussion of the Western-centric focus of mainstream IR theories. It also recognises the challenges facing scholars from the Global South that might help to explain why Global South perspectives are largely absent from mainstream debates. The ultimate goal is to broaden the field of view within IR theory to incorporate a more just and representative understanding of international relations.

The basics of Global South perspectives

The main weakness of mainstream Western IR theories is that they are not universally experienced as mainstream. The concepts they are based on do not unequivocally reflect or match the reality in many Global South states. Furthermore, certain questions that are central to Global South perspectives are absent or under-theorised in mainstream scholarship. Tickner (2016, 1) for example points out that issues of race and empire have been missing from mainstream theories despite the existence of solid scholarship in postcolonial and poststructuralist studies. Curiously, she adds, colonial dominations profoundly shaped the state of the current global order, yet they are not even remotely central to mainstream IR. Today, there is a growing body of scholarship that pays attention to the context of international relations theories in Africa, Asia and Latin America and to the diverse interpretations within these vast regions. Much of this scholarship has been produced under the umbrella term of ‘global IR’.

Mainstream IR also gets it wrong in its reading of history. When major global events are told from a Western perspective, the voices of the colonised and oppressed often go missing, which leads to a different basis for theorising. For example, realist scholarship refers to the Cold War as a period of relative stability given that no major war was fought between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. However, if one looks at the same period through a Global South lens, one can see a world full of proxy wars and human suffering where both superpowers intervened in conflicts to support their interests or damage those of the other. A simple example like this highlights two issues for mainstream scholarship. On the one hand, it is important to incorporate non-Western actors and non-Western thinking in order to explore the ways in which different actors challenge, support, and shape global and regional orders. On the other hand, it is also important to question the relevance of mainstream theories to the context of postcolonial states and theorise the role of emerging economies and other Global South states in shaping international institutions and global governance. So, the prevailing questions are whether traditional IR theories are able to adapt to Global South perspectives, and if not whether new theories and approaches are needed in their place. In answering this question, scholars have taken a wide range of different positions.

While many scholars are united around a call for justice and equality in the way that IR narratives represent the

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world, it cannot be said that there is one grand strategy for theorising Global South perspectives. This dilemma is perhaps best illustrated by the question, 'who are the Global South scholars?' In many cases it would be inaccurate to refer to a single perspective that could be seen to represent a region or even country, let alone the majority of the world's population. While they may share similar experiences of exploitation under colonisation, can such a term as 'African' be used to describe the diverse experiences of states ranging from Malawi to Morocco? Scholars do not even agree on a single definition of which states the 'Latin American' region comprises let alone what a Latin American perspective on international relations might mean. Similarly, it has proved difficult to define a coherent theoretical body that would constitute a 'Chinese school' of International Relations, given the array of different philosophers and interpretations of their work that might encompass. Issues like these make it difficult for Global South scholars to rally around a single theoretical perspective.

While one unifying goal might be to challenge the domination of the Global North, then a further risk of fragmentation lies in the power asymmetries between Global South states themselves. Inequalities are not exclusive to North/South relations but also permeate relations between states of the South. The emergence of strong economies and regional powers within the Global South such as China, Brazil and India has raised new issues of marginalisation and dominance among states *already* marginalised by the North.

A further challenge comes in the historical dominance of Western means of knowledge production and publication. If there is little talk of an African theoretical perspective in IR, for example, this is perhaps more indicative of the impact of Western imperialism on indigenous systems of knowledge production in Africa than of a lack of African theorists. Indeed, the continent of Africa is home to age-old experiences and practices in diplomacy and intergovernmental relations that long predate the arrival of the Europeans in the colonial era. Yet, during colonisation many states were subject to the domination of Western forms of knowledge that consciously or inadvertently imposed certain values on the colonies.

Even since independence, scholarly outputs have tended to reflect Western concerns and experiences, even sometimes when being written from within the Global South. An example of this can be seen in the development of IR scholarship in Latin America. Ever since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which stated the United States' intent to keep European powers out of the Americas, the United States has adopted a policy towards its nearest neighbours that sees Latin America as its strategic backyard, and has regularly resulted in interventionist actions. In spite of notable efforts, much teaching and research about Latin America has been written in or for the United States. This is exacerbated by the fact that to secure careers, scholars need to publish in prestigious English-language publications, which are often based in the United States.

By shining a spotlight on the forgotten past of the pre-colonial era, Global South scholars can demonstrate the injustices of the present. For example, when told from a Western perspective, accounts of African histories begin with the arrival of the Europeans. Yet the accounts of early European explorers themselves towards the end of the fourteenth century testify to the political structures, institutions and organisations that were already in place in many areas. Africa was the site of empires, kingdoms and other social institutions that made it possible for trade, commerce and religion to thrive. The records of early Arab travellers and traders across the Sahara Desert make reference to the diplomatic activities of some early kingdoms and empires in West Africa, notably the Ghana empire, the Mali empire, the Songhai empire and Islamic missionaries who used the trans-Saharan trade routes. In the course of their travels, colonial missionaries from Europe reported that the networks of trade and commerce across the Sahara Desert had successfully bridged North Africa with Europe. Clearly, trade, commerce, diplomatic activities as well as learning and knowledge production were at various levels of development in Africa before the coming of the Europeans. Yet, narratives that start with colonisation see African states as only being independent and 'sovereign' since decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century. They are therefore seen to be 'new states', which only very recently became part of the contemporary international system. This 'newness' is used to defend international institutions that exclude African states from power structures and decision-making systems – such as key bodies of the United Nations like the Security Council – on the grounds that the rules for managing inter-state relations were established long before the establishment of most African states. However, if attention is paid to the histories the West 'forgot', then this becomes more difficult to justify. As a result, many African countries are at the forefront of the campaign for the restructuring of the United Nations and the work of Global South scholars is helping to build their case.

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Global South perspectives on international development

Many of the policies that shape international politics today are based on assumptions that originate in Western modes of thinking. Take, for example, 'development' – a word that has the power to dictate national and international policies and attract or divert vast sums of money. This can be seen through the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals. These involve targets that every country in the world agreed to strive towards and to fund. They are based on an understanding of development that sees many countries in the Global South as not having yet achieved the economic progress of the North.

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of Latin American scholars to IR theory is dependency theory, which challenges dominant understandings of development as an organising principle in international politics. Dependency theory asserts that underdevelopment and poverty are the result of political, economic and cultural influences exerted on such countries from the outside. It presents the relationship between the Global South and the Global North as exploitative and unfair by underlining the ways in which states in the South have been incorporated into the world economic system through capitalist development, which has exploited human and material resources and disrupted indigenous modes of production. Dependency theory analyses the way in which the underdevelopment of many states in the South might be a direct result of the policies, interventions and unfair trading practices of states from the North. From this perspective, the current (unfair) economic relations between the Global North and South will not help the South to develop at all. Rather, they will keep the South poorer than the North. Rather than the need for states in the Global South to 'develop', dependency theory stresses that nothing short of a restructuring of the entire international economic system will deliver economic justice for the world's poor.

Building on the likes of dependency theory, scholars have demonstrated that the economic exploitation of many colonised nations did not stop with decolonisation. In fact, in the final years of colonialism – at the time when independence movements were becoming too strong to suppress – the departing colonial powers instigated a number of policies and programmes that paved the way for a new type of domination of Global South economies. The legacy of such policies was an emphasis on the production of cash crops for export, dependence on foreign financial interventions and the entrenchment of private capital (both domestic and foreign) as the engine of growth and development. North–South trade agreements and the policies of international organisations such as the World Trade Organization have further served to protect the interests of established powers despite repeated calls from the South for a fairer deal in global trade relations. They have served to privilege 'developed' states in trade relationships and to disadvantage the former 'developing' colonies. Viewed from the North, such policies are an instrument for helping the South. However, viewed from the South, they are tantamount to a new type of colonial domination – often referred to as 'neocolonialism' – in that they represent a continuation of unequal and exploitative North–South relationships.

Mainstream IR theories emerging from Western societies largely seek rational explanations for states' interactions. However, some scholars have started to explore the motivations behind interactions between states in the Global South from a relational perspective. An example of this emphasis on relationality can be seen in China's interactions with various African states. In 2015 China became the African continent's largest trading partner. Chinese investments across Africa include natural resource extractions, infrastructure construction, real estate and information technology. African and Chinese economies are mutually interdependent in that China imports a lot of energy sources from the continent and African states in return import consumer goods, commodities, and technology from China. Most African states, however, import far more than they export to China and suffer from unbalanced trade relations. China's development model (the Beijing Consensus) differs from the neoliberal model of development advocated by the International Monetary Fund and other Western-led organisations (the Washington Consensus). The Washington Consensus' emphasis on liberalisation and minimising the role of the state in the market has been denounced by many African leaders as neocolonial and exploitative. By contrast, the Beijing Consensus, with its emphasis on the principle of non-interference, has presented an attractive alternative to some African countries.

Furthermore, while China certainly benefits economically from its developmental role in African states, enhancing cultural dialogue and cultivating networks through people-to-people exchanges also seem to be important motivating factors behind its interventions. As well as funding Confucius Institutes across the continent of Africa showcasing

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Chinese language and culture, the Chinese government has sponsored 200,000 opportunities for training professionals, academics, journalists and public servants from all corners of Africa. It is part of constructing a shared identity based on future aspirations and trajectories that will lift citizens out of poverty. Whether or not China's approach in Africa is in fact a genuinely new type of development policy is subject to heated debate among scholars. But the point here is that China is keen to be seen to adopt a more relational approach, as opposed to the rational one of the North. Indeed, this concept is not exclusively Chinese – it also extends to other societies within the Global South and offers an alternative way of theorising South–South relations to the perspectives that have emerged from the North.

Conclusion

In recent years a lot has been done to highlight the important contributions that actors from the Global South make, and have always made, to international relations. Indeed, IR as a discipline has come a long way in incorporating aspects, actors and concepts that represent the world more widely. Yet, as the dynamics of the international system continue to change with the emergence of new economic powers such as India, China, Brazil, Turkey as well as other rising economies, IR will need to do more to pay attention to the perspectives of those in the South. Global South perspectives not only challenge the dominant theoretical perspectives that have served to create and perpetuate unjust relations between the Global North and South, they also open up the possibility of different, fairer relations that represent the interests of all concerned and challenge international institutions to have more representative power structures and decision-making processes.

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