

How to Globalise IR?

Written by Pinar Bilgin

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PINAR BILGIN, APR 22 2018

Globalising IR has turned out to be a challenging task—perhaps more than initially imagined. Notwithstanding valuable sociology of science inquiries into ‘who’ speaks about the international (Waever 1998, Kristensen, 2015), students of International Relations have increasingly come to realize that the issue at stake in globalising IR is not only about ‘*who* does the theorising?’ but also ‘*what they say*’. We have also come to understand that ‘*what they say*’, be they from the global South or North, is best characterised as a Eurocentric account of the international (see, for example, contributions to Tickner and Waever 2009). Notwithstanding significant achievements of critical IR during the 1980s and 1990s (see, for example, Chan, *et al.* 2001) to open up IR to contributions by those who had hitherto been underrepresented in scholarly publications, our knowledge about world politics has failed to overcome IR’s Eurocentric limitations (Bilgin 2016c).

Eurocentrism refers to a particular narrative about Europe and its place in world history (Bilgin 2016d). That particular narrative is widely recognised as erroneous by many; and non-Eurocentric historical accounts that underscore the role Europeans and non-Europeans played in shaping history are available (Hobson 2004, Wolf 1982). Yet the same Eurocentric narrative is nevertheless allowed to inform research design by virtue of our concepts such as state and security being informed by such an erroneous understanding of world history. As such, addressing Eurocentrism in IR is not about studying other parts of the world. Likewise, the author’s postcode being in the global South is no immediate remedy for Eurocentrism.

For example, Eurocentrism has distorted our understanding state development in Europe. Accordingly, the very notion of state that we adopt in the study of world politics has its limitations not only when transplanted to other parts of the world, but also when studying Europe (Halperin 1997, Halperin 2006). Since it is through concepts developed through a Eurocentric understanding of that world history that students of IR make sense of world politics, addressing IR’s Eurocentric limitations becomes doubly challenging (Bilgin 2016a).

It is in this sense that Immanuel Wallerstein (1997) cautioned against ‘anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism’. He was referring to the efforts of those who seek to identify traces of progress and modernisation outside Europe while failing to recognise how their very notions of progress and modernity are shaped by a particular understanding of world history that fail to recognise the contributions and contestations of others who were also present in their production (see, for example, Ayoub 2002; cf. Sen 2005). Eurocentrism then, is limiting not only for understanding the world beyond Europe but also Europe itself, and world politics in general (Grovgui 2006).

Eurocentric limitations of IR crystallise in prevalent conceptions of the ‘global’. Studying globality is commonly understood as overcoming state-focused analyses that characterise IR. Yet, while ‘globality identifies the planet—the earthly world as a whole—as a site of social relations in its own right’ (Scholte 2002: 14), not all conceptions of the global recognise global social relations. This is partly because while globality ‘links people anywhere on the planet, ... it does not follow that it connects people everywhere, or to the same degree’ (Scholte 2002: 30). While the voices of some who have access to resources are heard, some others remain on the margins. Indeed, not everyone’s contributions and contestations are recognised in prevalent understandings of the constitution of the global (Muppidi 2004). The point being that, as with IR’s conception of the international that has come under criticism for being less-than-sociological, the very meaning of the global that we take for granted is one that has come to prevail by overlooking the experiences, contributions and contestations of peoples and states from the global South (Bilgin

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2018).

To recap, a good place to begin when seeking to globalise IR is to re-consider prevalent conceptions of the global. Identifying the colonial character of the notion of globality would help us think about globalising IR not (only) in terms of opening up the field to contributions from the global South (the answer to the question: *'who does the theorising?'*), but also through considering the contributions and contestations of the global South as the 'constitutive outside' (see below) of what we have come to think of as autonomously constituted dynamics in Europe and/or the West (the answer to *'what do they say?'*).

Early attempts to globalise IR came under criticism for failing to recognise the aforementioned limitations of their understanding of globality, thereby seeking to export concepts and theories originating in one part of the globe to other parts, often without recognising the contributions and contestations of people and states from the global South (see, for example, Dyer and Mangasarian 1989). For, what is missing is not contributions from the global South *per se*, but their due recognition in scholarly studies on world politics (Bilgin 2010). Accordingly, the calls for having a 'non-Western IR theory' would not necessarily offer an improvement insofar as Eurocentric accounts of world history that shape such purportedly non-Western approaches remains unacknowledged. For, the proponents of creating a 'non-Western IR theory' often rely on Eurocentric narratives on world history while failing to see the ways in which peoples and states of the global South have been the 'constitutive outside'. 'Constitutive outside' refers to the ideas and experiences of those people and states in the global South who have shaped the global North even as the latter are not always aware of and/or acknowledge what they owe the latter. Prevalent narratives on world history have portrayed the global South as 'outside' of critical turning points. Yet, being left 'outside' of narratives on X (human rights, democracy, secularism...) is not the same thing as having played no role in their 'constitution'. Hence the notion of 'constitutive outside'.

Consider, for example, Siba Grovogui's (2006) archival study on the contributions of African intellectuals to European debates on the post-World War II order in Europe. While these intellectuals' contributions and contestations shaped debates during World War II, Grovogui showed, their contributions were not always acknowledged when the intellectual history of this period was written. Nor was their advice regarding the post-war order given due value, noted Grovogui. Once the war was concluded in a way that was favourable to the allies, the camaraderie between European and African intellectuals that was formed during the war came to an abrupt end. The point being that understanding the global South as 'constitutive outside' of the global North is not a contradiction to be resolved, but only acknowledged and thought through as regards their implications for the study of world politics. Those who are 'outside' are outside not always because they are physically outside (i.e. in the global South) but because they have been left outside of conventional narratives on world history due to the prevalence of Eurocentrism in history writing (Bilgin 2016a). Recent scholarship on Historical Sociology is increasingly addressing Eurocentric limitations of our narratives, thereby allowing more sociological inquiries into the international—studies that pay attention to the ideational and material, causal as well as constitutive relations between the global South and the global North.

Accordingly, the concept of 'constitutive outside' highlights a contradiction that is central to thinking about the relationship between the global South and the global North. That said, this is not a contradiction to be resolved, but only acknowledged and thought through. For, the global South's ideas and experiences have shaped world politics and yet these contributions and contestations have not been acknowledged explicitly in scholarly studies on the international. What is absent, in other words, is not contributions from the global South *per se*, but their due recognition in scholarly studies on world politics. Accordingly, globalising IR cannot remain content with including some voices from the global South but requires re-thinking the concepts and theories through which 'we' make sense of global history and politics.

This is not to underestimate the significance of turning to global South thinkers but to underscore the challenges involved in doing so (Shilliam 2009). One major difficulty with considering contributions and contestations from the global South is that they do not always take forms that are immediately recognisable to students of IR whose training is based on standard textbooks. According to Mustapha Kamal Pasha (2011), this proclivity is a consequence of the 'naturalisation of Western IR as IR' (also see, Shilliam 2011). Even when global South authors' writings may come across as similar, they may be 'differently different' in ways that are not appreciated by their readers in the global

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North (Bilgin 2008).

Following David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah (2008), I suggest that our strategy for globalising IR should be one of 'excavation' and not one of adding another ('non-Western') body of theory. There are three aspects to 'excavation' as such. First comes the recognition that 'the content of the modern social sciences and humanities was at least in part cultivated by reference to non-European bodies of knowledge and culture' (Shilliam 2011: 2). Second comes considering self/other dialectics in the making of 'European' (and/or 'Western') identity and modernity (Jahn 2000). Third comes recognising multiple authorship of what are viewed as 'autonomously produced' ideas and institutions as revealed by studying 'intertwined and overlapping histories' of humankind (Bilgin 2016).

To conclude, globalising IR entails avoiding approaching 'others' with assumptions of 'absence' of theory and/or 'geocultural difference', but recognising multiple authorship of key notions (such as human rights, see (Grovoqui 2011)) and broadening our perspectives by excavating the contributions and contestations of the global South (Bilgin 2016b). Notwithstanding the difficulties, too much is at stake in globalising IR. The task of globalising IR is not insurmountable in that there is plenty of material out there—if only we went looking for it.

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