

Assessing the Claim That the Development of International Theory Is Over

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MUZNAH SIDDIQUI, MAR 15 2019

As International Relations (IR) nears its fin de siècle, exponents of “endism” have refocused their gaze away from the disciplines of art, history, nature and science, and begun to sharpen their arrows in preparation for a swift, brutal attack (Danto, 1997; Fukuyama, 1989; Horgan, 2015; Kuspit, 2004; McKibben, 2001). Publications akin to a rushing cavalry have already begun their charge, at the forefront of which leads the special issue in the *European Journal for International Relations* proclaiming the cry ‘The End of IR Theory?’ (Buzan and Little, 2001; Dunne et al, 2007; Dunne et al, 2013; Reiter, 2009). It is a query queerly reminiscent of Wight’s (1960) similar inquiry six decades prior, where he woefully lamented ‘Why is there no International Theory?’ (IT). Whilst a superficial analysis may pit both questions at opposite ends of a theoretical and temporal spectrum, in reality it is a circular inquiry underlying a deeper disquietude about IR’s absent ontology.

This essay will therefore explore the claims concerning the lack of theoretical development in IR, at first identifying the evidence for such claims, followed by an exploration into IR’s “borrowed ontology” as the cause for this lack of development (Rosenberg, 2016:128). It will concur with the view that the discipline remains trapped within “the prison of Political Science.” It is therefore unlikely to develop any new theories (*ibid*). However, this essay will also explore the concepts of “societal multiplicity” and “pluralistic universalism” as alternative ontological frameworks unique to the *international*, which can solve its crisis of ontology and lead to more diverse theoretical development within the field (*ibid*; Acharya, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Acharya, 2016; Acharya and Buzan, 2017) . At first, it will explore how these concepts can provide a more holistic understanding of the international, before additionally investigating broader formulations of ‘theory’ that can overcome the parochialism prevalent within the discipline and lead to a proliferation of new and truly *international* theories.

A Crisis of Ontology

Critics, like any observers, have been quick to point out the symptoms of what seems to be a decaying discipline intent on clinging to its last, few precious breaths. They point to the intellectual fragmentation of the discipline into theoretical “camps”, the shift away from theory building towards hypothesis testing, and like a patient dependent on an oxygen mask, the importing of ideas and concepts from other disciplines to develop new theories (Brown, 2013; Dunne, 2007; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016; Sylvester, 2007; Sylvester, 2013). These criticisms will be explored in order, before turning to a general diagnosis rooted in IR’s lack of a clear and distinct ontology. In regard to the first complaint, Sylvester has noted that theories within IR are divided into “intellectual camps” that tend to “see only by the light of their own campfires”, and thus remain largely isolated except to engage in “barely useful, sometimes harmful theoretical debate” (Dunne et al, 2007; Lake, 2011; Lake, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016:128; Sylvester, 2007:561).

Whilst many IR scholars point to the four ‘Great Debates’ as ample evidence of a thriving and flourishing field, critics such as Lake hold a different view, considering them to be harmful “impediments to the development of an integrated body of knowledge”, as rather than engaging in constructive dialogue or developing new theories, any form of diversity is instead stifled (Dunne et al, 2007; Lake, 2011:390). Consequently, what ‘theorizing’ has taken place over the past few decades has usually tended to veer towards hypothesis testing or critiquing existing paradigms

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(Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013). Dunne, in fact, goes as far as to claim that “all theoretical development since 1979 is simply a series of footnotes on Waltz” (Dunne et al, 2013:407). The stagnation of authentic theorizing about *international* relations is made all the more evident, given the manner in which recent schools of thoughts imported concepts and paradigms from other disciplines, the most obvious examples being feminist and post-colonial theories (*ibid*:413; Rosenberg, 2016:133). Thus, while there is indeed a proliferation of theories within the discipline, the only problem is that it is “not IR theory” (Dunne et al, 2007:302).

A diagnosis of these ills can be attributed to IR’s lack of its own distinct ontology, and its founding within the “borrowed ontology” of Political Science (Rosenberg, 2016:128). The effect of its captivity as a “prisoner of Political Science” has been that IR academics operate out of the presumption that the *international* is represented by the “absence of a centralized authority” (in essence, a negative political ontology) (*ibid*:131). Consequently, IR theories do not truly engage with the *international* in its full complexity and scope of breadth and are instead limited within a political niche. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the discipline has fragmented into camps which cannot see eye to eye over the *international*, and as a result no ‘big’ ideas have made their way across disciplinary boundaries to have a similar effect on other fields (*ibid*:128; Buzan and Little, 2001).

Rediscovering The ‘International’

And yet, there is a cure. Hard-earned, to be sure, but capable of reversing the discipline’s ills and restoring it to the form of a healthily functioning field. Be it rooted in the concept of “societal multiplicity” or “pluralistic universalism”, the idea remains the same: namely an acknowledgement of the fact that the term *international* encompasses within itself a “multiplicity” of actors, experiences and realities, whose interaction shapes the International System (IS) (Acharya, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Acharya 2016; Acharya, 2017; Rosenberg, 2016:131). In regard to the former, Rosenberg (2016:141) identifies the concept of societal multiplicity under the larger framework of ‘Uneven and Combined Development’ (UCD), which argues that societies develop in a dialectical and multi-linear fashion as a consequence of the “multiple and interactive” relations between states. Consequently, the *international* is not limited within the confines of an absent polity and instead, “at its highest level of organization...opens out into a lateral field of co-existing societies” (*ibid*:136). Any conceptualizations of the IS must, therefore, begin by envisioning the *international* as an “overarching canopy with multiple foundations and histories” (Acharya, 2014:649).

Thus, the concept of societal multiplicity is congruent with the concept of pluralistic universalism, which operates under the framework of Global IR. Unlike UCD, Global IR is not a theory as much as it is an “aspiration for greater inclusivity and diversity within IR” (*ibid*). Nevertheless, its precept of pluralistic universalism serves as an ontological starting point for conceptualizations about the *international* rooted in “recognizing and respecting diversity” (*ibid*:650). Consequently, Global IR is “grounded in world history” and eschews the Western exceptionalism inherent in the current discipline (*ibid*:652). It also challenges the frequently held assumption that the IS is ahistoric and universal, by noting the multiplicity of International Systems which existed before the one established in seventeenth century Europe, such as the Amarna system (*ibid*; Cohen et al, 2000:4). Furthermore, where contemporary IR struggles to incorporate the role of individual actors, groups and social movements, by “recognizing multiple forms of agency”, Global IR overcomes this problem and consequently is able to “uncover stories about forgotten spaces” (Acharya, 2014:649; Tickner, 2011:13). Thus, under both concepts, the *international* is rooted in the idea that there are multiple co-existing societies, whose interactions on the individual, group, institutional, state or intra-state level are encompassed under the umbrella of the IS.

Transforming Theory

A frequent criticism raised against contemporary IR is its inherent parochialism, which in regards to theory building has rather ironically (given the multiple nature of the *international*) manifested by way of “gatekeeping”, “blocking Third World alternatives and muffling epistemological/methodological diversity and dissent” (Ashley and Walker, 1990; Bilgin, 2008; Chowdhry et al, 2004; Ferguson and Mansbach, 1988; Ferguson and Mansbach, 1991; Harding, 1986; Smith, 2006; Sylvester, 2013:612; Tickner, 2003:301; Thomas and Wilkin 2004). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that theoretical development has stagnated within the discipline or that IR has been unable to export any of its ‘big’ ideas to other disciplines (Rosenberg, 2016:141). Fortunately, however, the ontologies of ‘societal

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multiplicity' and 'pluralistic universalism' can solve this quagmire by "refining existing paradigms", whilst simultaneously "producing new theoretical concepts and explanations by Third World academics with broader cross-regional and global applicabilities" (Acharya, 2017:359). An example is the Confucian model of Tianxia which, being rooted in the concepts of hierarchy and bandwagoning, can provide a more accurate illustration and explanation of Chinese foreign policy, as opposed traditional Realist principles of balance of power and sovereign equality (*Ibid*:363). Furthermore, where Liberal international theory has failed to analyze regional Asian politics using the assumptions of "rationalistic, interest-driven, legalistic and bureaucratic institutions", regional IR scholars are instead able to provide a much more relevant analysis highlighting the "informal, consensual and process centric approaches" prevalent within Asian politics (*Ibid*:357).

Additionally, keeping in line with the concept of pluralistic universalism, Global IR encourages the incorporation of various non-Western authors such as "Ashoka, Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Ibn Khaldun, Jawarhalal Nehru, Franz Fanon, etc" into the traditional canon of International Theory (Acharya, 2014:648). Doing so would encourage a proliferation of International Theory based on concepts and ideas brought up in the works of these authors, whilst simultaneously allowing scholars to improve their ability in "addressing the issues where Western theorizing has been relatively thin" (Acharya, 2017:364). Moreover, Global IR also advocates for the expansion of diversity within theoretical sources to include a variety of knowledge including "indigenous histories, classical philosophy, religious traditions, the ideas of national leaders, the writings of contemporary scholars, the foreign practices of modern states and the norms and process dynamics of regional interactions" within International Theory (*Ibid*:356). This is particularly important, as in addition to overcoming the parochialism deeply embedded within the field, it enables a multiplicity of understandings and approaches to be brought to the theorizing of the 'international'. This can simultaneously serve to uncover and unearth new challenges and areas in need of theorizing within international relations, whilst additionally providing a fresh perspective and innovative solutions to contemporary issues, such as climate change.

Furthermore, interacting with various empirical sources may enable us to discover continuities in structures and knowledge which have long been forgotten, and enable the empowerment of various non-epistemic communities by challenging taken-for-granted facts. For instance, it is widely believed that the origins of classical economics can be attributed to Western writers such as Adam Smith in the 17th/18th century. However, engagement with philosophical treatises written by medieval Arab-Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Tayimmah and Ibn Khaldun reveals how these scholars precipitated various economic principles and how this knowledge was geographically transferred from the Middle East to Europe, yet never cited in disciplinary historiographies (Ghaznafar, 2007). Additionally, the inclusion of various empirical sources enables the empowerment of actors on the ground level, who are continuously affected and, indeed, *affect* the international system in ways which have henceforth gone unnoticed in contemporary academia.

Thus, whilst Wight (1960) previously lamented the lack of a canon primarily devoted to theorizing the *international*, Global IR instead acknowledges the diverse ways in which the *international*, besides being theorized, is present within the everyday realities of individuals, groups, movements, institutions and states and is reflected within their "resistance, normative actions and local constructions of global order" (Acharya, 2017:49).

Conclusion

However, it remains to be seen if academics and scholars within IR are willing to address the problematique of its existing ontology and conceptualize the *international* under the congruent concepts of societal multiplicity and pluralistic universalism. Given the discipline's proclivity towards rarely constructive debate, it can naturally be presupposed that theoreticians within the discipline will find several points of contention with the ontologies offered as alternatives within this essay. Nevertheless, it is important to take the first step to accept and identify problem areas if we are to begin to find a solution. In that respect at least, IR has passed the test. Thus, whilst at this point the state of the discipline is that of a sick man on his deathbed, the similar sick-men of art, history, nature and science have been able to make a miraculous recovery and so, we have every reason to hope the same.

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