

# The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'

Written by Adeelah Kodabux

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## The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/11/11/the-future-of-ir-lies-in-creativity-rather-than-new-thinking/>

ADEELAH KODABUX, NOV 11 2019

### **This article has been shortlisted for the 2019 E-IR Article Award**

This paper is about stressing the recurring failure to shape International Relations (IR) as a vibrant discipline. It underlines the obsolescence of calls for 'new thinking' in IR because these are essentially repetitive attempts to identify the academic field's limitations that do not necessarily offer novel insights. Although these calls invite extra features other than the states such as non-state actors, individuals, organisations, and questions of religion, culture, ethnicity, or identity among others to be incorporated in the subject, it is creative engagements in the ways to address these topics that should receive greater attention. 'New thinking' has resulted in a saturation of identification of problems to be considered in IR rather than encouraging sophisticated ways that these issues could be tackled and addressed. This is why, instead of 'new thinking', this paper argues that there should be greater calls for creativity in IR. Creativity in engagements with fresh or long-existing issues rather than 'new thinking' offers greater potential to avoid stagnation in IR and to make the academic field truly engaging.

### **A Saturation of Appeals for 'New Thinking' in IR**

Conversations about the limitations of IR are not new and pervade the literature, lectures, discussions at conferences, and student-led seminars from different degree levels. Diverse strands of criticisms are associated with this field of study. The very essence of IR as an academic discipline is contested owing to its composite of distinct sub-disciplines (Puchala 2003, 9). Another strand of criticism is concerned with the disengagement between the variety of theoretical paradigms and the policy world and vice versa (Walt, 1998; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013). Other identifications of flaws with the subject are concerned with the obsolescence of the theories and methods of IR and their continuing fascination with the state as the primary unit of analysis in world politics (Acharya, 2011; Acharya and Buzan 2010; Budd, 2013).

What continues to be noticed is that the so-called traditional, mainstream, and deep-rooted theories, which are referred to as problem-solving or uncritical theories, are deemed as ideal to explain state relations and interactions that can be quantified and empirically explained (Reus-Smit and Snidal 2010, 6). These theories explain the world as they find it without questioning its very basis. Meanwhile, societal complexities, which transcend traditional assumptions and are of a non-state nature, are cast as inconsequential and little theorised in IR (Langlois 2015). The irony is that the possibilities of borrowing insights from different disciplines and the prospects of multiple theories should not have let IR scholarships turn oblivious to varied societal dynamics including gender, race, or identity and other issues in the first place.

To overcome the limitations of IR, new ways of thinking about the subject have been sought. 'New thinking' has especially been concerned with devising ways of accounting for the novelties in the world order that emerged in the post-Cold War era marking the end of bipolarity. On top of appeals for embedding actors over than the states, namely, of a non-state nature, in studies of world politics, 'new thinking' in IR has involved acknowledging the influence of religion, culture, conflict, ethnicity, or identity in global affairs. The calls for 'new thinking' have been marked by the recognition that IR in its traditional format is inadequate to address these 'new' issues and study them

# **The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than ‘New Thinking’**

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with a lens, which would add extra perspectives other than those originating from the West.

In addition, related to the invitations for ‘new thinking’ in IR, there are existing and ongoing calls for IR to become more inclusive. When requesting for IR to become inclusive, scholars have called for a post-Western conceptualisation of the discipline (Acharya, 2011; Acharya and Buzan, 2010; Shilliam, 2011). To address the unevenness in contributions to the field, there are encouragements for scholars from the Global South to be greater involved in the shaping of global IR (Tickner, 2003; Tickner and Blaney, 2013). The hope had been that incorporating perspectives beyond the West would strengthen IR as being inclusive and essentially remind scholars in the field to be conscious of the necessity to embrace novelty and diversity in their ways of thinking about the subject. This would in turn be helpful in reading about the discipline and in teaching it in such a way that it resonates with a wider audience and becomes meaningful for a broader range of issues.

To date, however, despite attempts to include varied contributions from the scholarly community, much remains to be done to stimulate creativity in the field. As noted by Mansour (2017, 2), ‘IR’s mainstream still lacks vibrancy’. To overcome this dormant phase, certainly, there is a need for more scholars from the Global South to get involved in the production of what would be assumed less artificial and surface-level treatment of topics of study in IR. However, this pressure on scholars from the Global South should also not trap them in a conundrum pushing them to reinvent an entire new school of thinking.

What is currently also noted in IR is theoretical saturation. The calls for overcoming the flaws of IR encourage deviations from traditional Western-inspired models. They invite new ways of thinking about long-existing complexities in world politics. Yet, rather than inviting inspiring sets of tools for analytical purposes, there is a continuing focus on acknowledging the relevance of IR theories, acceptance of their limitations, but little to no proposals or initiatives about how to overcome their margins of analysis. Theorising about why established theories in IR are flawed seems to be the norm. This theorising about theories is resulting in theoretical saturation, that is, an inflow of theoretical explanations without new insights. The ‘new thinking’, therefore, encompasses just a phase in the development of IR whereby there is an acknowledgement about what is not working in IR. It is not enough because it only acknowledges IR’s limitations and does not necessarily inspire about what should be done to avoid the cycle of recurring obsolescence and lack of creativity in the field.

## **A Call for Creativity in IR**

Instead of stagnating in the phase of ‘new thinking’, it is high time to elevate to a higher degree of creativity in IR, which holds more promise for the field. This paper refers to creativity as originality and sophistication in thinking. It is about being original in the sense of going beyond obsolete ‘new thinking’ that attempts to explain subject matters by using regular patterns that have been followed, tried, and tested beforehand for the new issues. Instead, this paper envisages creativity in IR as creative engagements, which have not been considered before, with existing paradigms even though these may be narrow in their analytical potential. The idea is to dare to take risk to think about a topic of study using a given theoretical framework but in a sophisticated way. It could involve adding new dimensions or considering what can be done differently with prevailing frameworks. Rather than pre-defined boundaries inspired by old models, creativity in IR should be cumulative, that is, encouraging greater creativity, instead of stagnating at only an identification of new issues deemed to now be important to be theorised in IR.

Creativity in IR could encompass the exploration of the intersection among different components of a subject rather than fitting only the features that can be plugged into established theories and casting the allegedly less meaningful ones as irrelevant. For example, this has been the case in Coxian critical theory in IR which despite its attempt to invite analysis of the interplay among materials, ideas, and institutions has resulted in a neglect of ‘non-material ideas about the good life, justice, political or social order, religion, values, norms, family relations, gender’ (Hopf 2013, 321). At one point in the timeline of IR’s development, Coxian critical theory (Cox 1981, 1983) had been a demarcation from mainstream IR theories but it eventually suffered from the same criticisms as the latter for lack of continued creative engagements. This evokes a tendency to apply theories in IR as fixed analytical frameworks with little consideration for thinking outside their respective boxes. Realists, Mearsheimer and Walt (2013, 429), have also noted this point:

# The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'

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Scholars do not have to invent their own theory, of course, or even refine an existing theory, although these endeavors are highly prized. It is necessary, however, that social scientists have a solid grasp of theory and use it intelligently to guide their research.

What their work indicates is a lack of innovation and creative thinking in using existing theories due to, for example, concerns for thinking of novel ways of collecting more data at the expense of an intelligent and creative engagement with existing theoretical frameworks.

Being creative in IR should be eclectic. Given that the discipline constitutes sub-disciplines and is interdisciplinary, creativity can be about inputting ideas from disciplines, which are not self-evidently IR. For example, parts of this paper are inspired by Vygotsky's contributions to developmental psychology, which are far from connected with IR, and his theory of creativity to suggest ways of creative engagements in the discipline. The chapter entitled 'Creativity' by Sylvester (2016) in *Critical Imaginations in International Relations* also identifies a series of contemporary work, which have shown several authors' individual creativity in IR. These have been in the various ways the scholars have been immersing themselves in their topics of study in order to generate knowledge or in the ways that they have shared their scholarly contributions' meanings for IR including, for example, an imagined conversation with a terrorist (Jackson, 2014). Weber's (2013) book is also a creative approach using popular films to explain IR theories.

Another format that creativity can take in IR is visual illustrations of the theories. To non-specialists, concepts such as balance of power, anarchy, or hegemony may not hold much meaning if these are presented as academic concepts and continued to be theorised in traditional written formats with emphasis on their implications for academia. On the topic of 'aesthetic sources of insight, such as poetry, literature, visual art or film', Bleiker (2009, 4) notes that there have been attempts to study world politics differently but these are rare. While Bleiker underlines the scope of literature and art in helping to understand world politics, this paper offers an additional dimension for integrating the visual creatively in IR so as to engage with the receivers of the information.

Teaching or reading about IR is traditionally dominated with written texts, which explain the inner workings of theories and methods used in the discipline. While this format of explanation remains relevant, it also perpetuates traditional modes of communicating ideas in IR. It is a one-way linear flow of information. Creativity in explaining IR theories can involve using mind maps and visual illustrations to invite the receivers of the ideas to situate themselves in the diagrammatic. Rather than primarily positioning their perspectives at the centre of a given mind map, readers or interpreters of IR texts can begin at a different level in the visual illustration. It invites them to draw relationships among the different concepts on their own and to engage with the theories and concepts in more diverse patterns.

Introductory classes to IR are additional examples where a lack of creativity in teaching IR can also be noted. In general, the course begins with the history and mainstream theories of IR during the first blocks of teaching before proceeding into the critical interpretations of IR. Students are invited to debate about the content of the course and to present their ideas verbally or in writing. While this is the norm, it is also limited because it does not allow for an exploration of the connection of ideas covered at the beginning of the course until the end of teaching. What if students of IR were asked to assemble their ideas throughout the course visually rather than in the traditional written format and to position concepts and theories from the course gradually onto their existing map as they are introduced to them? The insights from such a diagrammatic diary could enable an exploration of the varying configurations in which ideas in IR are connected. While this proposal can seem abstract, the section below offers an example of a visual illustration of a widely used theory in IR.

## Creativity in IR: An Additional Example of What it Could Look like

Much has been written on Gramsci, about Gramsci, and the relevance of his prison notes from the early twentieth century for contemporary contexts. Due to the conditions in which these notes were written and smuggled out of prison, his ideas had to be interpreted and translated. Although Gramsci did not have much to say about international relations, his ideas have been extrapolated beyond their original context. Despite his fragmented notes, these have been widely used in theoretical explanations of societal transformations to the point that Worth (2011, 374) has commented that the central interest in echoing Gramsci's ideas on domestic politics into global politics has saturated

## **The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'**

Written by Adeelah Kodabux

the literature in IR such that Gramscianism now suffers from lack of theoretical originality. '[L]ess has been made in actually analysing the concepts used themselves' (Worth 2011, 374). This echoes the argument made in this paper that thinking of new ways about how to apply a theory does not necessarily result in new insights and instead overwhelms the literature with allegedly novel approaches.

When using Gramsci's notes, this paper proposes instead creative engagements in illustrating his concepts and in communicating ideas about them. 'Hegemony', 'integral state', 'political society', 'civil society', 'common sense', 'good sense', 'war of position', 'war of manoeuvre', 'passive revolution', and 'trasformismo' among others are different concepts which can be found in his notes. The tradition has been to apply these concepts to new situations. Scholars have argued that such modern applications have blurred the concepts' initial meaning (Germain and Kenny, 1998). Callinicos (2010, p. 492) also speaks of 'concept-stretching', that is, 'extending the scope of a concept beyond that originally intended for it'. Before any attempts at analysing Gramsci's concepts, this paper suggests a visual illustration of the concepts to study their linkages.

# The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'

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Figure 1 is a visual illustration of Gramsci's key concepts.[1] While the intent of this paper is not to explain each concept in details, the idea behind this illustration is to provide an example of how they can be shown as related to one another other than the written context. Certainly, there is a need for a written explanation but the potential of this illustration is to orient readers of the map to creatively find patterns of relations among the concepts. In the Gramscian context, it helps to simplify the complex concepts and organise them in logical configurations. The idea of the diagram is not to facilitate memorisation but rather to encourage creative reasoning. To overcome the lack of original thinking in using Gramsci's ideas to the point of leading to a saturation of Gramscian analysis in IR, the above illustration differs from thinking of new ways of applying the concepts. Instead, it goes back to the basics of finding creative means of understanding and engaging with the concepts.

## The Prospects of Creativity for IR

Requesting 'new thinking' is different from encouraging creativity in IR because the former is about identifying new items or problems needing to be addressed or solved. Inversely, creativity is about sophisticated ways to approach these items or problems. While 'new thinking' is inherently connected with past activities and finding ways to integrate novel items, creativity is about unlearning and relearning by using different approaches of studying a topic from the beginning. Creativity, from the onset, involves criticality, which is not necessarily the case in 'new thinking'.

Certainly, creativity also invokes novelty but it is new in the sense of uncovering options and realities, which have not been previously considered. It involves challenging foundational premises and thinking differently about how a topic can be studied. 'New thinking' can start on the very basis of accepting status quo whereas creativity, by its nature, involves questioning a current state of affairs. This has greater potential for generating enhanced knowledge because it opens minds to diverse possibilities.

Creativity also invites a two-way exchange of ideas between the producers of knowledge and the receivers. This makes the subject inclusive and also offers the possibilities of either accepting or rejecting patterns of relations from the beginning and considering alternatives. For IR, this means that the prospects of creativity are much more diverse. Creativity requires researchers to have both knowledge of the subject and encourage them to contemplate creative strategies to engage with their topics of study as well as invite readers to be part of the exchange.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper differentiated between the prospects of 'new thinking' and creativity for IR. It argued that the future of IR risks stagnating if 'new thinking' is merely concerned with identification of novel items to be considered for study. Inversely, calls for creativity are more multidimensional and, as such, should be the way forward. Although both approaches may seem similar and this paper's contributions are generalised at this stage, it remains that there are growing attempts to showcase creative skills in IR which show unprecedented resourcefulness in handling

# The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'

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complex issues. This range from using aesthetics, imagined realities, or distinct methods of immersing into topics of study to generate knowledge. Already, there is an indication that creativity in IR is not uniform and standardised.

Yet, despite some attempts, creative engagements with topics of study in IR are still uncommon owing precisely to a lack of uniformity in such approaches. Another reason for this limited engagement can be because the 'new thinking' in IR have rotated around mainstream scientific conventions, which favour methods that can be repeated. Such a mind-set ultimately casts creativity as offering little scope for the discipline. This paper further concludes that it is this outlook in IR, which needs to be reframed. It appeals to researchers in IR to consider the prospects of creativity and how it is different from 'new thinking'. With creativity, the sky is the limit. It holds promise for truly thinking of IR differently, encourages multidimensional engagement in the discipline, and offers the possibility of delivering diverse perspectives. For this reason, this paper concludes that the future of a vibrant, engaging, and inclusive IR is in creativity rather than obsolete calls for 'new thinking'.

## Notes

[1] The author of this article understands that 'images, figures, and tables are forbidden'. However, the nature of this paper's discussions requires a visual illustration as an example.

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# The Future of IR Lies in Creativity Rather than 'New Thinking'

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