

The Trap of Diversity: What Constitutes ‘Non-Western IR Theory’?

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FERRAN PEREZ MENA, MAY 8 2020

During the last decade, the field of International Relations (IR) has witnessed the emergence of ‘non-Western IR theory’. Acharya and Buzan’s seminal work titled *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (2009) marked a watershed for the discipline. Acharya and Buzan’s book contributed to a disciplinary self-reflection, which resulted in a wide range of academic publications aimed at turning the field of IR into a more pluralistic discipline that respects the subaltern voices that have been silenced by the imperial origins of IR. For this reason, the celebration of ‘cultural diversity’ as an ontological source has become the central focus of new theoretical endeavours. Both the projects of ‘Global IR’ (Acharya, 2016; Yong-Soo, 2019) led by the prestigious scholar Amitav Acharya and the various ‘national schools of International Relations’ (Cho, 2013; Qin, 2018; Shahi, 2019; Shih et al., 2019; Yan, 2019; Zhao, 2019) are prime examples of this new phenomena. Despite the welcoming efforts of promoting ‘cultural diversity’ (Acharya, 2016; Reus-Smit, 2018; Tickner and Blaney, 2012) to produce theoretical projects that seek to transcend both the ‘Western’ and ‘imperial’ origins of the discipline, the field of IR has fallen into a dangerous dynamic that stems from the very imperial origins of discipline: the reification of culture as an essentialist construction.

In this sense, essentialism is ‘the view that cultures have fundamental or “essential” properties, among them their values and beliefs’ (Goodhart 2003, p.940). In the late 19th century, Western imperialism had to imagine essentialist cultural forms beyond the domains of the ‘West’ to rationalise its ‘civilising mission’ (Said, 2014). In a historical and disciplinary twist, both the celebration of ‘cultural diversity’ and the promotion of pluralism have allowed and legitimised the arrival of ‘essentialist’ theoretical projects by a disciplinary ‘back door’. Put it differently, in an act of disciplinary redemption, the field of IR has accepted forms of theorising that would have been disqualified some years ago due to their essentialist tendency. For instance, the celebrated ‘Chinese school of IR’ solely reactivates Confucianism as an ontological source, dismissing thus other political traditions that exist or have existed in China such as 1930’s revolutionary Chinese thought, Mao Zedong’s thought, Buddhism or even a ‘sinicised’ Islam. In this way, only Confucianism is equated with *Chineseness*. Regarding the project of ‘Global IR’, Hurrel (2016, p.150), wisely warned us about the dangers of Global IR as it ‘can also lead to a cultural and regional inwardness that may work to reproduce the very ethnocentricities that are being challenged’. This is perhaps one of the main paradoxes that exist in IR given the massive and recent disciplinary efforts to evade such ‘essentialist’ constructions. This is what I call the ‘trap of diversity’ in IR. It is worth mentioning that the production of ‘non-Western IR theory’ has manifested several degrees of ‘essentialism’. Although, there are some great contributions (Hurrel, 2016) that seek to transcend these dynamics.

Nonetheless, I contend that such essentialism that informs the production of ‘non-Western IR theory’ is a result of the impact of the ‘dual legacy’ (Chibber, 2018) of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in the discipline of IR. As Chibber (2018, p.37) argues ‘[Said’s] legacy is therefore a dual one – propelling the critique of imperialism into the very heart of the mainstream on the one hand, but also giving strength to intellectual fashions that have undermined the possibility of that very critique’. Specifically, in the field of ‘non-Western IR theory’, these academic trends have been crystallised in (neo)-Weberian and postmodern approaches and a problematic scholarly tendency to understand the production of international theory as an independent intellectual process that is completely disjointed from a specific form of political economy or material reality.

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In this light, the main challenge that the IR discipline has to address is the legacy of 'Western cultural imperialism', in an idealist fashion, rather than the specific social and geo-economic structure that both enabled and shaped the form in which 'Western IR' has been materialised since 1919. As a result of this idealist critique, it is widely recognised that 'cultural representation' (Acharya, 2014) is indeed the deep structural problem of the IR discipline rather than the material historical pillars and infrastructure that enabled its emergence. The logical consequence of this has been the mainstream approach that understands 'non-Western IR thought' as the theory produced in non-western societies, which are in opposition to the conventional geography of an eternal 'West'. Hence the apparent importance of Confucianism, Hinduism or political Islam as 'non-Western' ontological sources in the new theoretical formulations. The activation of such cultural imaginaries as ontological foundations from 'non-Western' societies in the context of the production of 'non-Western IR theory' is conceived as the logical step towards a more pluralistic and 'cultural' egalitarian discipline.

It is worth clarifying that I am not arguing against cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is the very foundation of humanity. On the contrary, I argue that it is important to critically engage with the very enterprise of 'non-Western IR theory' in its current disciplinary form. Despite the respectable efforts to turn the IR discipline into a more pluralistic field, critical scholars have taken for granted the essentialist notion of 'non-Western IR theory', uncritically assuming that such theory is only produced in non-Western societies in a binary contrast to that of conventional IR. This not only reifies 'the West' as an eternal and fixed entity but also orientalises the 'non-West'. For this reason, this article seeks to answer the following question: what constitutes 'non-Western IR theory'?

To properly analyse the production of 'non-Western IR theory', we first need to sketch out what we mean by 'the West' and its relationship with the emergence of the IR discipline. In the next section, following the work of Kees van der Pijl, I will define the 'West' as what he describes as the 'Lockean Heartland'.

The 'Lockean heartland' and the origins of the IR discipline

In his work titled *The Discipline of Western Supremacy. Modes of Foreign Relations and political economy, volume III*, the critical scholar Kees van der Pijl (2014) attributed the origins of the IR discipline to the imperial pulses of what he describes as the 'Lockean heartland' (1998, 2006, 2007, 2014). According to Van der Pijl (2006, p.13), 'the heartland is therefore best understood not as some massive central island but as a networked social and geo-economic structure comprising a number of (originally English speaking) states and a regulatory infrastructure. Expansion occurs on two dimensions: one of capital, to global proportions; and the other of the West, which by definition has a more limited reach. In their combined advance across the globe, the two progress in tandem as a way of life, a culture, and a politics, with their means of coercion complementing discipline'. Its Lockean nature stemmed from the specific legal culture which was epitomised by Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* that took a transnational form after the immigration from the British Isles to North America and the settle colonialism that followed thereafter. Such state/complex was sealed in the British Isles after the Glorious Revolution in 1688. According to Van der Pijl (2006, p.8), 'the Lockean state, governed by a constitutional monarch controlled by a parliament, is the true bourgeois political formation; a state that 'serves' a largely self-regulating, 'civil' society by protecting private property at home and abroad'. This last point is crucial because it was the main ontological source of the idealist IR theory produced in the 'Lockean heartland' at the beginning of the 20th century.

In parallel, during the 17th century, the expansion of the heartland and the Protestant Reformation mounted geopolitical pressures on other contender states such as catholic France. To not be dispossessed and 'resist peripheralization by the Lockean heartland' (Van der Pijl 1998, p.78) and catch-up with it, France was forced to develop a strong state. The specific form of the new French state was described by Van der Pijl (1998, p.79) as the 'prototype of the Hobbesian contender state'. Such Hobbesian state/complex was characterised by 'the paramountcy of the state as the institution driving forward the social formation and pre-emptively shaping, by action, sometimes revolution from above, the social institutions which have evolved 'organically, if not necessarily autonomously, in the heartland' (Van der Pijl 1998, p.80). In such state/complex, society is completely confiscated in favour of the social and economic development of the state. As I will demonstrate later on, this point is crucial to understand the production of 'non-Western IR theory'.

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As Van der Pijl (1998, p.83; 2006, p.1) argues, the structure of the 'Lockean heartland' *vis-a-vis* contender states has been the main structural divide of world politics since the European Enlightenment until the present. The evolution of international affairs has been characterised by the expansion of the 'Lockean heartland' and the (semi or full) integration of several contender states such as France, Prussia, Japan, the Soviet Union, China to its expansionist network. Against this backdrop, the origins of the IR discipline in 1919 was marked by the willingness of the Anglo-American ruling elites of the heartland via education institutions to produce academic knowledge to legitimise and guide their imperial expansion. For this reason, as Schmidt argues in (Van der Pijl 2014, p. viii) 'the academic discipline is marked by British, and especially, American parochialism'. As we have seen since its origins, the evolution of IR has gone hand in hand with the imperial project of the Liberal West after the First World War. Due to the historical evolution of the 'Lockean heartland' and its dialectical relation with other contender states, the production of international thought in its core was crystallised in an idealist form. As Walker (1993, p.42) points out, 'if it is necessary to identify a tradition of international relations theory, then the most appropriate candidate is not 'realism' but 'idealism'. As Van der Pijl argues (2014, p.ix), 'English-speaking social thought, which today dominates academic life the world over, remains locked into the antinomy between (materialist) empiricism and (religious-idealist) moral judgement.

Contender states and 'non-Western IR theory'

With this in mind, I argue that, paradoxically, the current production of mainstream 'non-Western IR theory' (Cho, 2013; Qin, 2018; Shahi, 2019; Shih et al., 2019; Yan, 2019; Zhao, 2019) has been informed by the antinomy between (materialist) empiricism and (religious-idealist) moral judgement, which is the main characteristic of the 'English-speaking social thought' and not that of other external societies to the Lockean heartland. In this vein, despite the influences of Daoism and Confucianism in their theoretical propositions, both Qin's constructivist relational theory (2018) and Yan's moral realism (2019) are a case in point. The existence of such persistent antinomy explains why the production of 'non-Western IR theory' has been materialised in its current form and its unable to transcend the logics imbued by the imperial origins of the discipline. On the contrary, to overcome the 'trap of diversity' in the field of IR, I propose an alternative path to conceive the development of 'non-Western IR theory'. Against culturalist approaches, I argue that 'non-Western IR thought' should be better understood as the knowledge informed by the legacy of the structural experience of several historical contender states since the 18th century. Put it differently, the production of 'non-Western IR thought', rather than being a product of a reified and sealed cultural background, is the logical consequence of the knowledge that emerges from a specific structural position of a given society within the wider historical structure of the 'Lockean heartland' *vis-a-vis* contender states.

In this vein, the distinctiveness of the production of international knowledge in the 'non-West' is not solely manifested by a cultural divergence but a structural one. In this light, the primacy of the state over society, which is one of the main characteristics of the contender states experience, is perhaps one of the fundamental ontological foundations that has shaped the production of 'non-Western IR Theory' since the 18th century. For this reason, in addition to the 'Global IR' and the 'national schools of IR', the international thought produced in contender states such as 18th century France, Prussia, imperial Japan or the Soviet Union could also be described as being produced in a non-Western setting. For instance, following my argument, ontologically speaking, Prussian political realism which is always regarded as the quintessential IR theory of the 'universal' West, has more in common with the Qin's Confucian relational IR project (Qin, 2018) than with Anglo-Saxon liberalism. Both theoretical projects are shaped by the same ontological premise of the primacy of the state over society. For this reason, in the context of the production of IR theory in China, the reactivation of Confucianism as an ontological source to build the 'Chinese school of IR' is not a solely consequence of its eternal existence within the Chinese civilization but also due its political meaning within the wider structural position of China. Put it differently, Confucianism is indeed a political tradition that gives primacy of the state over society and can rationalize best the structural contender posture of contemporary China.

This crucial structural ontological foundation that shapes the production of 'non-Western IR theory' is one of the elements that has been obscured by the dominant essentialist approaches that exist within the discipline of IR. During the past decade, the field has tended to emphasise the ontological value of 'cultural otherness' rather than the existence of universal structural elements that are reproduced in different cultural settings due to the geopolitical pressures of the 'Lockean heartland'. The obscuration of this crucial point not only has to do with the internal

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evolution of the IR discipline in the Anglo-American academia and its postmodern drift, but also with the neoliberal forces that has shaped the discipline since the 1980s. Davenport (2019, p.535) argues that these 'debates [the Third Debate] should be understood, in both its timing and its substance, as a phenomenon of neoliberal globalization: it was the reflection into disciplinary IR of the enormous transformations through with so many of the structures and hierarchies that had characterized the modern age were disintegrated'.

It is worth mentioning that I am not dismissing the importance of culture in the process of production of IR theory. Cultural multiplicity plays a fundamental role in shaping theoretical knowledge and the diverse cosmovisions that enable communities to make sense of the world. Nonetheless, with the alternative path that I have outlined above, I attempt to denaturalise the deep-seated interpretation of the problematic dichotomy between 'Western IR theory' vs 'non-Western IR theory' which is reproduced in most of the mainstream literature on 'non-Western IR theory'.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the uncritical engagement with 'cultural diversity' in the discipline of IR, which has been epitomised by the development of 'non-Western IR theory', has not succeeded in transcending the 'imperial' or 'Western' origins of the discipline. On the contrary, the interpretation of the production of non-Western International thought as the knowledge produced by societies beyond the territories of the West has reinforced new forms of essentialism. This is what I have described as 'the trap of diversity' in IR. For this reason, the form in which 'non-Western IR theory' has materialised should be understood as a form of disciplinary 'identity politics', a struggle for the representation of abstract and reified cultural entities, rather than as a real theoretical challenge to question its imperial foundations and the material infrastructure that enabled that specific production of knowledge. In other words, I maintain that these approaches are a disciplinary 'dead-end'.

On the contrary, to overcome this problem, this article has argued that it is important to reflect on what constitutes as 'non-Western IR theory'. I have offered a materialist approach that understands the production of non-Western international thought as the result of the structural experience of the contender states which is embedded in wider historical structure led by the 'Liberal heartland'. By doing so, the boundaries between what is 'Western IR theory' and 'Non-Western IR theory' are blurred. Subsequently, ontological commonalities can be found in the production of international thought in 18th century France, Prussia, imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, South Korea, Taiwan or China. It is important to mention that this is not a transhistorical claim. My claim is only applied to the production of international thought that has taken place in contender states since the European Enlightenment and the expansion of the imperial Western modernity. For this reason, if the IR discipline wishes to redeem itself from its imperial origins, rather than reproducing essentialist forms of theorising, IR scholars should begin to address how structural divergences within the historical structure of the 'Liberal heartland' vis-a-vis contender states have actually shaped the production of international theory. Put it differently, materialist approaches to the production of IR theory are better equipped to understand and challenge the deep-seated structural problems. Only by addressing this, IR would be able to transcend the 'trap of diversity'.

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