

Calling for Reflexive Solidarity in International Relations

Written by Yong-Soo Eun

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YONG-SOO EUN, MAY 12 2020

In a previous article on E-International Relations, I discussed the intellectual developments and contributions made by various forms of “non-Western” IR theory-building enterprise. Despite such a significant effort and discussion, several critical questions and issues still remain unclear or under-explored. Following on the foregoing discussion, this article identifies what is missing in the debate and offers suggestions for how to improve the ongoing project of pluralising and globalising the theoretical horizon of IR beyond “the current West-centrism.”

What is missing in the debate?

I suggest that there are (at least) two sets of questions that require more careful attention in our discussion. First, does IR need to embrace theoretical pluralism? Second, to what extent has contemporary IR become pluralistic? Of course, each of these questions invites several subsequent questions. I believe that these questions will eventually lead us to refocus our attention, broadening the range of our own questions and undertakings with respect to non-Western IR theorisation.

Theoretical Pluralism

Obviously, pluralism is a core premise upon which “non-Western,” “post-Western,” and “Global” IR projects are all founded. As discussed earlier, these (what I call) “broadening IR” projects reject the long-lasting dominance of Western/American IR scholarship over the field and are dissatisfied with the corresponding marginalisation of non-Western worlds in the study of international relations. Their advocates persistently argue for the “broadening” of IR beyond the disciplinary dominance of a particular region and call for embracing a wider range of theoretical, historical, or normative perspectives. In Acharya’s words, IR should “not impose any particular idea or approach on others but respects diversity”, and it should be grounded in “world history, theoretical pluralism” (Acharya, 2016: 4–5).

Yet, a pluralistic approach as a “way of knowing” is not without its critics: there are a considerable number of IR scholars who favour epistemic unity or theoretical synthesis over pluralism. For example, John Mearsheimer (2016: 147) has explicitly stated that he “disagrees” with the growing calls for broadening the theoretical horizons of American-centric IR. They believe that pluralism can leave us with “a divided discipline” that not only fails to speak with one voice, but cannot agree on “what we should be studying,” and thus pluralism “masks” the problem that we have “an incoherent field” (Schmidt, 2008: 298; see also, for a fuller explication of this issue, van der Ree, 2014: 218). In this vein, Michael Brecher and Frank Harvey (2002: 2) are deeply concerned with the lack of progress and knowledge accumulation in the field, pointing out that IR has difficulty “agreeing on what they have accomplished” thus far. It is for these reasons that several scholars propose an epistemic synthesis, which has variously been referred to as a “paradigmatic synthesis” of research traditions in IR (Brecher and Harvey, 2002); the theoretical “integration” of different levels of analysis (Hudson, 2007); “analytic eclecticism” based on the mixing and matching of approaches (Cornut, 2015; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010); “multi-method” research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods; and “middle ground epistemologies” that combine positivist and interpretivist epistemologies (Bennett, 2015; Collier and Elman, 2008).

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The point is that pluralism as such is not without controversy, although the view appears unproblematic in the ongoing debate on how to grapple with the issue of the current American/Western-centrism in IR. Therefore, “broadening IR” enterprises—be they “non-Western,” “post-Western,” or “Global” IR—ought to fully address the contested implications of their underlying premise, namely theoretical pluralism. What is more, although it is increasingly agreed that diversity and pluralism are “desirable” for a “better future” for IR (Dunne et al., 2013; Hellmann, 2003; Jackson, 2015; Kratochwil, 2003; Lake, 2016), we also have to ponder how much IR should embrace pluralism. This question is of great importance in the ongoing debate because the answer affects the degree to which the contour and the contents of the various forms of non-Western IR theory-building enterprises are to be either expanded (facilitated) or narrowed (constrained). Nevertheless, even in recent contributions to the “broadening IR” projects, this question is either ignored entirely or treated as something that can be “put aside” (Bilgin, 2016: 5). I think the question of whether and to what degree IR needs to embrace pluralism can only be answered after we have a clear understanding of the current state of diversity in IR. Put otherwise, we need to first examine and comprehend where IR currently stands in terms of diversity in order to determine where it should stand.

“What types” of diversity are we talking about?

Contemporary IR literature in general and arguments regarding “non-Western” IR theorisation in particular have a slim understanding of the extent to which contemporary IR has become diverse and pluralistic; this is mainly due to their partial and limited attention. The simplest way to understand the extent of diversity in IR scholarship is to look at how many knowledge claims exist. Even so, to understand diversity in this numerical sense is not simple as it may appear because knowledge claims are associated with several complex dimensions, including ontological, epistemological, theoretical, methodological, praxical, and geographical ones. Furthermore, even if we zoom in on “theoretical” dimension, we need to look at diversity in terms of not only the number of theories available in the field, but also the epistemological, methodological, and socio-historical aspects of diversity, for all of them relate to theory, specifically theory building and theory testing.

Unfortunately, however, the ongoing debate tends to focus attention on only theoretical dimension; furthermore, theoretical diversity tends to be approached narrowly in socio-historical terms—i.e. in terms of the geographical origins of key IR concepts, theories, or theorists. For example, non-Western IR theory-building undertakings, especially those committed to the establishment of “national school,” tend to situate their rationales along the simple binary geographical or geopolitical lines: either inside or outside of the West. In this sense, Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al. (2016: 18) note, “geography plays a central role” in the ongoing non-Western IR theorisation debate, and its literature “repeatedly categorizes scholars into...regional and national schools.” Interestingly, their study (Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al., 2016: 24), based on the 2014 TRIP survey data, shows that non-Western IR scholars “are more likely to have geographically bounded perceptions of IR communities” than their Western counterparts.

Of course, it is true that non-Western worlds and their voices sit on the margins of the discipline; we must grapple with this marginalisation or underrepresentation. The point is not that these geographically based concerns are misplaced, but that the current terrain of the “non-Western” or “Global” IR debate needs to extend to issues of epistemology and methodology in order to see the extent of the parochialism of IR more clearly, and thus ameliorate it. This is especially necessary, given that there are conflicting views of the extent to which IR has actually become diverse and pluralistic. A cursory survey of the IR literature on pluralism and the sociology of the field will suffice to illustrate this point.

On the one hand, some scholars argue that the discipline has already become pluralistic and diverse. For example, Nicholas Rengger notes that contemporary IR is “a plural, and pluralist, field ... Whether one likes it or not ..., that is simply the reality” (Rengger, 2015: 32). Likewise, Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen, and Colin Wight argue that “IR now seems to have settled into an uneasy truce on the question of pluralism” due to “the proliferation of theories” in the discipline (Dunne et al., 2013: 405, 416). On the other hand, the argument that IR is still monistic and parochial is also repeatedly made, not only in the “non-Western” IR theorisation literature, but also in the IR literature on post-positivism and reflexivity. A recent work by Inanna Hamati-Ataya is a case in point. Calling for “strong reflexivity,” she argues that “three decades after the launch of the post-positivist critique, however, reflexive IR ... remains located at the margins of the margins of the discipline” (Hamati-Ataya, 2012: 670; Hamati-Ataya, 2014: 171–172). Similarly, in

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a discussion of the state of theoretical diversity in IR, Christian Reus-Smit (2013: 604) observes that “[t]raditionally, mainstream International Relations scholars (and political scientists) confined the field to empirical-theoretic inquiry on [positivist] epistemological principle ... The tenuous nature of this position is now widely acknowledged, increasingly by mainstream scholars.”

Given all of the above, the following question arises: what types of diversity are we talking about? Depending on our answer to this question, our understanding of the extent to which IR has become diverse and pluralistic will vary substantially, as will our rationales for and approaches to the “non-Western” and “Global” IR projects. Let us take an example from Chinese IR. Several scholars have expected that the growing discontent with the “US parochialism” and the corresponding interest in non-Western IR theory would lead to the “waning of American disciplinary power” while opening up “new spaces” for international studies (Tickner, 2013: 629; Tickner and Waever, 2009). Furthermore, considerable attempts to develop an indigenous IR theory “with Chinese characteristics” have been made by Chinese scholars for more than two decades. Contrary to the general expectation, however, the research trends in the American and Chinese IR communities are quite similar in terms of epistemology. Of course, the American IR community appears to enjoy “theoretical” diversity in the sense that no single theoretical paradigm dominates the community. It is a “limited” form of diversity, however, based on a clear commitment to positivism. According to the data provided by Maliniak et al.’s study, more than 70 per cent of the contemporary IR literature produced in the United States falls within the three major theoretical paradigms—realism, liberalism, and conventional constructivism—all of which lie within positivist epistemology. Certainly, constructivists are less likely to adopt positivism’s traditional epistemology and methodology than scholars working within the other two theoretical paradigms; yet “most of the leading constructivists in the United States... identify themselves as positivist” (Maliniak et al. 2011: 454, footnote 42).

As is the case with American IR, the Chinese IR community also lacks sufficient attention to alternative or critical approaches. For example, according to the data provided by Eun’s empirical analysis, 78% of theoretical IR studies in China fit within the existing mainstream theoretical paradigms in IR—namely, neorealism and neoliberalism—both of which “lie within the methodological and epistemological ambit of positivism” (Eun, 2016: 33). Other pertinent studies on developments in IR theory in China reach similar conclusions. David Shambaugh’s work (2011: 347) that analyses the articles published between 2005 and 2009 in Chinese IR journals demonstrates that realism, liberalism, and constructivism dominate Chinese IR theory articles – with realist articles being the most numerous. Similarly, Qin Yaqing (2011: 249) observes that “most of the research works in China in the last 30 years have been using the three mainstream American IR theories [realism, liberalism, and constructivism]”.

What the above discussion indicates are twofold: a first point is that an epistemological and methodological monoculture centred on positivism prevails across geo-cultural borders. Although there are various post-positivist theories, they have failed to transform disciplinary practices across global IR communities, including those of Asia. A second (and often neglected) point is the hierarchy of knowledge and scholarship is an issue that cuts across several realms of inquiry in IR, beyond the geopolitical influence or geo-historical origins of theory. In particular, the lack of diversity in IR can be seen in terms of epistemology and methodology. The “marginalisation” of post-positivist scholarship in IR exists *everywhere*, the West and the non-West alike. As it stands, however, the lack of epistemological diversity and how it is connected with “the current West-centrism” do not receive the attention they deserve in the ongoing debate over non-Western IR theorisation. Too much attention is being paid to only one dimension of diversity, namely the geographical origins or historical foundations of theory.

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Viewed in this context, the dominance of the West in IR is synonymous with the dominance of positivism, a *particular* perspective on and approach to science—committed to a methodology which centres on empirical observations with the aim of identifying general patterns of observed phenomena in order to develop empirically verifiable explanations and predictions. Put otherwise, another name for “the West-centrism of IR” is positivism-centred IR. If projects to “broaden” IR consider the issue of the hierarchy of knowledge in terms of not only geography (i.e. Western-centric IR), but also epistemology (i.e. the dominance of positivism), then their proposals can find common ground with post-positivist IR scholarship, whose epistemological underpinnings are marginalised by both the West and the non-West.

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In this respect, I suggest that advocates of the “broadening IR” projects embrace ‘reflexive solidarity,’ an encounter between self-reflexivity and collective solidarity. Let me clarify this further.

First, if we aim to open up IR, we must ensure that IR is researched and taught in a way that more fully endorses the validity of a wide range of epistemological, theoretical, and methodological perspectives. IR publication systems and pedagogy are socially and normatively constructed and thus play a direct role in selecting and eliminating practices closely related to the reproduction of the hierarchical order of knowledge in the discipline. The existing mainstream (i.e. West/positivist) views are reproduced through these mechanisms, as a result of which the intellectual “monoculture” remains unchanged. It is here that our calls for diversity and pluralism must be linked to ‘reflexivity,’ the first element of reflexive solidarity.

Reflexivity: Two interwoven roles

Reflexivity plays two interwoven roles. First, it asks us to keep reminding ourselves that the present state and structure of IR is *of our own making*, and that key agents in this making are individual scholars. This realisation makes it easier for us to recognise and explore previously under-recognised causes of the dominance of the field by one particular way of knowing (e.g. not only socio-institutional causes, but also, and more importantly, individual-praxical ones). Once scholars recognise this, they are more ready to acknowledge the following: if we are still living a ‘West/positivist-centric’ IR world, the world has emerged out of our own practice—as individuals and as a collective—and willingness to persist with the mainstream perspective. If not from us, then from where? *Ex nihilo*? IR as an academic discipline is what we make of it. A meaningful change in the discipline—i.e. a move IR toward a more diverse and pluralistic field of study, especially in terms of practice and geo-cultures—requires a robust recognition of this point.

This leads to the second role of reflexivity: critical self-reflection. More concretely, recognising that the structure of the disciplinary system of IR is of our own making can lead us to realise that it is we scholars who have the ability to change the field; this in turn opens up the possibility for self-reflection and self-awareness in regard to the following questions. What do we research philosophically, theoretically, methodologically, geopolitically, or empirically? How do we carry out peer review of other research? And most importantly, what and how do we teach in the classroom? In other words, we are led to critically ask ourselves whether our research and teaching practices have been rich enough to go beyond mainstream IR and do justice to pluralism in both our publications and our classrooms. If our calls for a pluralistic and inclusive IR fail to generate a substantive set of practices, this is because we do not properly practice what we preach.

Such critical self-reflection provides the necessary motivation to bring about greater diversity in IR theory and practice. With regard to a “stronger” reflexivity in IR (see, e.g., Guzzini 2013; Sylvester 2013; Tickner 2013; Hamati-Ataya 2014), our focus should be on not only IR (meta)theory, but also individual theorists. Recall that the once-dominant positivism has met its demise in the philosophy of science, and that within the philosophy of science it is indeed “critically reflexive” scholars such as Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, and (the later) Wittgenstein who have played a crucial role in this demise. Without critical *self*-reflection, the “performativity” with which our calls for pluralism should be accompanied is likely to remain truncated. The practice of pluralism, after all, begins with the self. Only when critical self-reflection functions as a leitmotif for pluralism in IR will socialised disciplinary mechanisms, such as the Western/positivism-centred IR publication system and pedagogy, be changed in ways that not only accept a flourishing of diverse experiences, theories, and methodologies, but also convey that flourishing in texts and classrooms.

Surely, as Dunne, Hasen, and Wight comment, “structurally, there are strong incentives” to reproduce or support dominant theory (Dunne et al. 2013: 417). To put it differently, there are disincentives to failing to conform to IR’s dominant/mainstream views and practices. In the name of a standard or “scientific” approach, mainstream IR theory or methodology exerts a substantial influence on our behaviour, affecting opportunities for publication, research grants, and academic positions, all of which are critical to our standing as both academics and individuals. Given this structural constraint of the discipline, it may sound like wishful thinking to anticipate that critical self-reflexivity can change the current state of IR.

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At the same time, however, IR is also a world in which scholars are the most powerful agents in shaping the field. As peer reviewers, editors, examiners, chairs, supervisors, and teachers, individual scholars can bring change and diversity to the field. Again, our behaviour is constrained by structural conditions, such as disciplinary norms that reflect the dominant view. But this does not mean that we are powerless. Compared with other types of social actors, scholars are relatively free agents. The structure of IR is largely derived from our disciplinary socialisation practices. Indeed, all social structures are, in Max Weber's (1968: 13) words, "the resultant and modes of organizations of the specific acts of individual men." To be sure, once established, those structures exhibit a certain uniqueness of ontological characteristics, which in turn constrains "the acts of individual men." But whatever the structural constraints, what is presented to us—for example, a lack of epistemological or geographical diversity in IR—has not been determined by the structural conditions as such. Ontologically speaking, it is human agents' intentions and actions that give rise to such structural conditions. We do have a capacity to consciously act and, in doing so, realise our intentions. This is especially so within academia, where scholars have a significant degree of agency, free will, and creativity.

In this vein, we scholars are what Antonio Gramsci (1971) calls "organic intellectuals." We are not merely consumers and producers of ideas and ideologies, but "organic organizers" of them and thus, in Gramscian terms, "organizers of hegemony." We, as organic intellectuals, play a central role in formulating "common sense"—although that common sense should be criticised, according to Gramsci, for leading the masses to believe in ahistorical and "extra-human" realities and "naïve metaphysics" (Gramsci 1971: 199, 441). Further, organic intellectuals have the capability to politically organise the masses by exercising "intellectual and moral leadership" and as such can provide "cohesion and guidance to hegemony" (Gramsci 1971: 57). By the same token, however, if we are in the position to offer "cohesion and guidance" in regard to (political or epistemic) hegemony, we can also weaken that hegemony by exercising the same "intellectual and moral leadership" in a way that repudiates or transcends the dominant way of governing or knowing.

Encounters between self-reflexivity and collective solidarity

This is, I believe, where advocates of broadening IR, especially those engaged in the "non-Western" IR theorisation project, ought to reconsider their narrowly conceived approaches to the project and instead seek alliances with others whose voices remain at the margins of the field. Although we, as organic intellectuals, can deliver "intellectual and moral leadership" in ways that help increase diversity in IR and unsettle the mainstream paradigm, it is unlikely that a push for reform will come from mainstream IR paradigm. John Mearsheimer (2016: 147), a mainstream IR theorist, has explicitly distanced himself from recent calls to broaden the theoretical horizons of IR beyond Western/American dominance. As David Lake has argued in his paper, "White Man's IR: An Intellectual Confession," attempts to enhance diversity are "often resented by currently privileged groups... as a 'watering down' of standards in the discipline" (Lake 2016: 1117). The mainstream of the profession creates "a self-reinforcing community standard" by acting as "gatekeepers" regarding what gets studied and how. Although "privileged groups" in IR—for example, white men working in the American academy—are "rarely self-conscious in their biases and even less... intentional in their exclusionary practices" (Lake 2016: 1116), their practice tends to conform to *the discipline of the discipline*. Who, then, is likely to exercise the intellectual and moral leadership necessary to unsettle the discipline? Marginalised scholars. Since their views, their experiences, and their scholarship are marginalised, they are more likely to attempt to change the parochial landscape of IR or break the disciplinary hierarchy. Indeed, they should do so if their calls for "broadening" the narrow landscape of IR theory and scholarship are to be realised.

Furthermore, since their voices remain marginal, they need allies, not only to have their voices heard, but more importantly to have them accepted as legitimate. Given their marginalised position in the field, their critical self-reflection needs to be performed in association with collective solidarity. Only then can their potential "intellectual and moral leadership" lead to meaningful results.

To this end, what the ongoing "broadening IR" enterprises should all do first is widen their discussion by considering the issue of marginalisation beyond geographical concerns. As noted, "the current West-centrism of IR" (Buzan 2016: 156), is not only a geographical issue, but also an epistemological one. The hierarchy of knowledge and scholarship cuts across several realms of inquiry in IR. In particular, the lack of diversity in the field extends to issues

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of epistemology and methodology. Specific methodological precepts that flow from positivist epistemology, such as operationalisation, quantification, and generalisation, prevail over the entire discipline of political science, including IR, across different (whether Western or non-Western) IR communities. As such, marginalisation is a powerful issue that can find resonance in both non-Western and post-positivist IR scholarships. This is why advocates of “broadening IR,” especially those of “Western IR” theory-building need to revamp their geography-orientated ways of addressing the complex problematic of marginalisation and instead seek solidarity with others whose voices also remain at the margins of the field.

The view that where a theory originates and who originates it matter a great deal is shared by all forms of non-Western IR theorisation. This belief resonates with post-positivist understandings of theory. In contrast to positivist epistemology, in which theory is thought to be objective and neutral—regardless of where and by whom a theory is built—post-positivism emphasises that “theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose” (Cox 1986: 27, emphasis in original). In this regard, post-positivist scholarship engages in critical, normative, and constitutive theorising, as opposed to explanatory theorising. Post-positivist epistemology regards the key roles of theory as criticising a particular social order and analysing how it is constituted, with the goal of changing it. “Non-Western,” “Post-Western,” and “Global” IR projects also want to change IR theory, to make it more colourful, especially in a geo-cultural or geo-epistemic sense. In short, an encounter between non-Western and post-positivist scholarship is not just possible, but also necessary if we are to achieve a more diverse and pluralistic IR.

Whether to welcome and practice diverse epistemologies, theories, and histories that do not depend on the dominant paradigm in IR is an issue that can be decided by the key agents in the discipline, namely IR scholars. Yet this by no means indicates that *any* or *every* individual scholar will attempt to open up the field. Indeed, attempts to unsettle the present hierarchical structure of the discipline face constraints. The role of de-naturalising mainstream norms and practices falls to critical, conscious, and reflexive individual agents. In order for their agential power and leadership to be more fully harnessed in the opening up of IR, critical self-reflection and collective empathy among marginalised scholars are all essential. I believe that by bringing this reflexive solidarity to our everyday debate on the problem of Western-centred IR, new and diverse ways of “doing” IR and thus “knowing” international relations can flourish.

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About the author:

Yong-Soo Eun, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Studies at Hanyang University, South Korea, and the Editor-in-Chief of the Routledge series, IR Theory and Practice in Asia. Yong-Soo is broadly interested in IR theory, Global IR, postcolonialism, and the international politics of the Asia-Pacific region. He is the author of *What is at Stake in Building 'Non-Western' IR Theory?*, and the co-editor of *Regionalizing Global Crises* (Palgrave 2014). His work has been published in *Review of International Studies*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, and *The Pacific Review*, among others.