

International Relations Theory: Still a White Man's Burden

Written by Seema Narain

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SEEMA NARAIN, MAY 29 2020

The discipline of International Relations (IR) comes full circle after completing a centenary. Its first chair was established in 1919 at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. At the end of a century, IR is still grappling with the familiar issues of conflict and instability. The movement for a 'Global IR' revolves around deconstructing the big bangs of IR, the myths of 1648 and 1919. A burgeoning literature by revisionist scholars attempts to debunk the myths of 1648 and 1919, yet the myths persist because disciplinary IR is constructed and given meaning through the popular course "texts" that persist with these myths. For example, Baylis and Smith's "Globalisation of World Politics" and Ken Booth and Steve Smith's "International Relations Theory". Using deconstruction as method any movement towards a Global IR will have to revolve around a rewriting of IR texts to include perspectives and historical anecdotes from the global South that seek to deconstruct European exceptionalism and the classical canons of IR theory. This will also have to entail a cross national dialogue between and within the national 'Silos' of IR, whether it is Chinese, Indian or Korean IR. Language as a vehicle to evolve IR to a more democratic and global perspective becomes critical by empowering scholars of IR to develop, give meaning, interpret the discipline and to develop knowledge systems that are more de-centred from its Eurocentric core.

In the past few decades there has been a burgeoning critical movement denouncing Western dominance in IR. If there is one area where we see a globalism of the discipline, after the initial calls made by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan as to 'why is there no non-western IR theory?', there is a near consensus among scholars of IR of its Eurocentric vein. Yet, although the discipline's Eurocentric orientation is widely acknowledged, it is important to keep interrogating it because in theory and praxeological IR we have not been able to plug the loopholes in the core/periphery divide in IR scholarship. Therefore, it is imperative that newer aspects must be contributed towards the movement for a 'Global IR' to solicit a varied response to Eurocentrism than what has already been articulated and acknowledged in IR scholarship. Many times, what may be articulated need not necessarily be acknowledged or accepted in scholarship. Example, although revisionist scholars disparage the genesis of the discipline from the widely accepted Big Bangs of IR 1648 and 1919, in pedagogical sources popular textbooks of IR hardly acknowledge it and persist in anchoring IR's origins on the Big Bangs of IR. This also underlies the importance of rewriting and rereading texts as a way to decolonise the discipline, the classroom as well as the universities.

Scholarship, both from the West and Non-West, has articulated the need for a more inclusive IR representing the voices from the Global South. A growing critical movement has denounced western monopoly of the IR discipline and the worldwide production of knowledge (Weaver 1998). A recent empirical study has countered this critical literature by citing local factors that have disincentivised the internationalisation of the discipline rather than the 'presumed' western dominance.

The construction of the West is not only polemical but also hegemonic, privileging the thinking of the West (self) as against the Non-West (other) in order to rationalize the actions of the west. The historical and cultural aspects of the third world are conspicuously missing in the books of IR and therefore the discipline is viewed by its critics as exclusionary, parochial and Eurocentric. The IR discipline applies western values of the 'self' (superiority, civilized and dominant) and thinking on the 'other' which is often (inferior, uncivilised and subordinate). Therefore, IR literature noticeably excluded the study of colonialism and imperialism which have had a significant impact in shaping western

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history

It was claimed that IR originated in the West as a tool in the hands of policy makers to impose peace and conflict prevention. The goal posts of mainstream IR were simply to predict and avoid wars with states as the primary, unitary actor, depersonalised and acting on its own. Political phenomenon was analysed in the Global South using the lenses of a Eurocentric IR, but unsuccessfully. The rational actor model was instrumental in establishing peace along the US-Soviet highway then by extension applicable to the regional context, for example, South Asia. In fact, the postcolonial turn in IR, has been particularly useful in opening up the epistemological and the methodological debates by deconstruction of existing methodology that reproduce the coloniality of knowledge and a reconstruction of colonial practice.

Responses to a Eurocentric epistemological underpinning of the IR discipline led to a proliferation of literature on issues, contentions and prospects of a non-western IR theory from scholars located both in the centre and the periphery. Lamentations of Acharya and Buzan on 'Why is there no Non-Western theory of IR' flowered into a sequel of national schools of IR by local scholars. A more erudite understanding points to the existence of diversity in the responses to Eurocentrism across the Non-West. The category Non-West is not a monolith impenetrable structure and remains contested. It needs to be further interrogated to lay bare the teleology of western modernity and language use to generate the binary oppositional categories that impose ethnocentrism in the social sciences, and by derivation, to IR.

IR scholarship is crafted by the political and ideological affinities of the IR scholars. Its ethnocentricity is manifested in the standard historical references of the disciplines description of the evolution of the state system its institutions and international relations, which are almost exclusively drawn from European history. This skewed narrative has had a profound impact on theorizing about modern international relations and presents European thought as the motor that animates the international system with its values of enlightenment, modernity, democracy and human rights. Once these values of Westphalia are assimilated and consolidated amongst the European states, a second narrative is crafted dealing with the non-western states devoid of western values. The quintessential binary opposites are derived from the European reasoning of superiority and exceptionalism of the 'self' as against the 'other'.

The silences in the Westphalia narrative, speak louder than the written script, in ringing in the tones of Eurocentrism. The marginalisation of imperialism, race, colonialism, forces that have been most influential in shaping world politics and have been the causes belle of the very wars and conflict that IR aims to prevent. The Eurocentric prism not only give a skewed image of the current world order but portrays it as one that is based on sovereign equality of states despite the prevailing influences and legacies of imperialism existing in post-colonial states. That realism has its antecedents in the political treatise of the Arthashastra is now well established and recognised by scholars from both the West and Non-West but obliterated in the annals of the 'Great Debates'. A truly global IR will have to accommodate references to diverse ethical systems such as Jewish, Chinese, Indian, and Islamic. The Non-West cannot remain the object of knowledge but rather included as the subjects of knowledge production.

Evidentially, the categories West and Non-West need to be further interrogated in order to bridge the gap between the core and the periphery. Eurocentrism is an epistemological construction. The West as a construction is better understood by further reiterating the 'difference' or the oppositional qualities with the Non-West. The binaries feed on each other to perpetuate the hierarchies. Therefore, an analysis that interrogates beyond the binaries is imperative if the gaps are to be narrowed and the IR historical narrative is to be read in a singular voice. This calls for rewriting and reinterpreting the histories of IR not as bounded spaces of the West and the Non-West but as a cross cultural/civilisational exercise and inclusive of other 'third' spaces as well.

The dominance of the English language in pedagogical structures, published articles in peer reviewed journals, the use of binaries in the English language also perpetuate hierarchies. Theory is written for someone and for some purpose. However, theory is also written by someone and for an audience. Hence it at once becomes ideological and contextual. Here, vernacular languages can be used to promote the accessibility of IR literature locally, hitherto deprived because of language unproficiency in English. Locally, within India and other regions like China and Japan, researchers are satisfied with having successful careers in their own local languages. Developing local languages will

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also help counter the language hegemony in the IR discipline.

Modern India was built on the legacy of British institutions, whether it be the administration, communication and legal systems and the modern education system. The term Macaulayism is referred to as any attempt by a colonizing culture to impose itself on its colonies through education. Language, which is the key vehicle for the creation of knowledge through communication, has catapulted English as the medium of instruction in premier central universities, although bilingualism does exist. The education system has been established along the lines of the British System. Even the current international relations course structure for undergraduate study, at the University of Delhi, has a major section on the world history of Europe from 1919 to the end of the cold war. Other sections include the study of mainstream IR theories with the reading list including books written by western authors and predominantly in English, a formula to reproduce Eurocentrism.

The paradigmatic structuration of the IR discipline privileges it with the first mover advantage as the introductory lectures in IRT begin with the positivist debates. Other theories are mere footprints to realism. The hold of Eurocentrism due to the tecnicization of the discipline in terms of certain standards of the English language, publication standards that conform to either the Chicago Style manual or other Anglo-American writing styles, gate keeping and publication practices of peer reviewed journals explain the challenges of crafting a robust IR discipline in these countries, besides resource inequities. Decolonizing the university system together with revision of the course structures to include historical and innovative research methods to integrate traditional knowledge systems is called for to decentre IR discipline from its Eurocentric orientation. This would translate into a complete overhaul of the university structure, which is one of the primary sites of knowledge creation, to include texts from the Indian traditions and to encourage research programmes to develop concepts from this repertoire of traditional knowledge systems. The internationalisation of the discipline in India must be seen in conjunction with the a priori structures, institutions and practices that have been inherited from the colonial legacy.

Indigenous scholars and Indologists have taken the call for historicity very seriously and undertaken a lot of work on Arthashastra and other Indian traditional resources. Kautilya's Arthashastra has been compared to a treatise on realpolitik and viewed as a precursor to realism. Given the Foucauldian nexus between knowledge and power, it is deemed crucial to have Indian IR in order to negotiate with India's rise and its ability to deal with its neighbourhood and global power relationships. However, the extrapolation of Arthashastra as qualitatively superior to Machiavelli's 'The Prince', relapsed Indian IR into a nativist discourse. Scholars tried to extricate themselves from nativism by widening the intellectual base of Arthashastra and drawing overlaps with Alexander Wendt's social constructivism, a western construct that is sympathetic to identity formations in the third world. However, attempts at comparing traditional Indian concepts to western counterparts only reproduce Eurocentrism although such apprehensions should not restrain dialogue and discovery of concepts in the Indian historical repertoire that are relevant to providing tools for India to negotiate its rise successfully with the global system. The lineage of the 'International' can be located in the cultural and historical narratives of the Mughal dynasty. The 'mandala' theory can be applied to study India's policy in its extended neighbourhood. Stitching up peace agreements or 'cooperation' can be inferred from Akbar's matrimonial alliances and religious pluralism.

Ergo, western scholars should also engage in the study of the literature from the periphery to decentre the discipline from its western orientation. At present the conversations on a globalising IR are a monologue, not a dialogue. The conversations are bordering incest as they are going on within the various conclaves of national and regional schools/perspectives of IR (e.g. American, Chinese, Korean, Arab, and Japanese or Indian schools of IR). Whereas the conversations must be cross cultural and dialogic. This will lead to increased networking and cross flow of ideas, concepts and interests across geo-epistemological and geo-cultural boundaries and encourage the process of 'travelling' of theories and concepts across the core/periphery dichotomy. Western IR academe can contribute ideas from the indigenous resources of the Non-West repertoire of literature and vice versa. The cross cultural dialogue will have to be carried out within the agora of the Global IR academe as well as the academic structures, be they institutions, universities, published texts and journals because it is here, through written 'texts' and 'speech' that knowledge is produced, given meanings and consumed by the 'knowers'.

How many academics from the Non-West/periphery are contributing to the flagship journals of IR? Are there gate

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keeping practices? Who is writing, what and from where? How is knowledge received, given meaning and legitimised? These are the key questions concerning the production of knowledge and theory building. Popular practices reveal that Western hegemony has a Gramscian hold over IR knowledge production which is still skewed in favour of the West. Much has already been written on this. When it comes to publishing, scholars from the west or those who work at the centre of IR Studies (America and Western Europe) have a clear advantage over those in the periphery. We have yet to see greater diversity in the contributions from the periphery in the flagship journals of IR, for example those published by ISA or the European Journal of International Relations, Millennium, International Security and International Organisation. Articles received from scholars from the periphery having substantive knowledge or ideas should not be rejected but re invited to submit with the revisions of writing style. The editorial boards should be more diverse and inclusive of editors from the periphery. These steps will incentivise scholars from the periphery and standardise their writing styles to measure up to the high-quality standards expected by flagship journals in the field.

Drawing from the postulates of analytical eclecticism and syncretic analysis; a movement towards a global IR will have to alter the 'lenses' to a more layered one. The prism to view global politics to pull in greater diversity will have to be through a layered approach employing methods from both traditional IR and the movement towards global IR. The various levels of situatedness of actors and groups, at the level of individuals, state and the international, together with structures, processes, agents and their interactions can usher in greater inclusiveness.

The analysis will have to be agential and one of agency. This method can reign in a wider set of actors (state, non-state, institutions, religion and culture) and have a universal application. It will be empirical as well as normative while casting its analytical net more comprehensively ontologically and epistemologically. Constructivism, by being sympathetic to cultural and identity formation cannot be abandoned as methods merely because they have Eurocentric IR as their reference point. The intervention of postcolonialism can only be welcomed in raising the visibility of intersectionality and persistently interrogating the international. Deconstruction as a method to debunk the myths and expose the European exceptionalism and the ahistorical prism with which IR is perceived will have to be infused in the newer methods. Post colonialism's contributions lie in problematising race, gender, sexuality as a major variable in constructing a Eurocentric IR, the concept of the nation and the international.

There is an imperative to deepen and broaden global values drawn from the traditions of political and religious systems e.g. from the Ottoman millet systems, Chinese tributary system or Mughal Emperor Akbar's religious pluralism etc. Decentring the IR discipline from a westphalian spotlight to a more objective analysis of the international system and international society is in order. The European centric model of a linear progressive evolutionary development of the international system, international society and international relations theory will have to be replaced by a multilinear or multi-layered, non-hierarchical, competitive and even a politicized narrative of IR in its diverse avatars. This is not to conclude that old theories have become irrelevant. They did serve a purpose during a certain context and time. It is time to move forward.

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