

Review – International Relations from the Global South

Written by Maiken Gelardi

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International Relations from the Global South: worlds of difference

Edited by Arlene Tickner and Karen Smith

Routledge, 2020

Around the world, we are currently witnessing a push to acknowledge diversity. There is increasing awareness that our understanding of the world has been written by white Western men and that the failure to include other perspectives is driving an unintentional bias. One might assume this pattern of parochialism, Western-centrism, and discrimination to be less pronounced in a discipline such as International Relations (IR), which is concerned with global politics and interactions between different societies. Hence, the IR subject matter would be expected to render the discipline more global and diversity-sensitive. However, this does not appear to be the case. Already in 2003, Tickner noted that IR sets the boundaries for what is considered important and relevant, yet the knowledge of global realities often transcends these constructed disciplinary boundaries (Tickner 2003). Since the turn of the new millennium, an important discussion within the IR discipline has therefore concerned how ethnocentricity and Western-centrism have limited our understanding of “the international”, arguing that IR must tackle the issues facing states, non-state actors, and citizens around the world in order to be relevant (Acharya and Buzan 2007, Bilgin 2008, Tickner & Wæver 2009, Deciancio 2016, Peters and Wemheuer-Vogelaar 2016, Picq 2016).

This debate has mostly taken place in academic journals – and sadly one can question the reach and impact of these beyond academia. Arguably, it is in the classroom where IR scholarship really has the potential to make a difference. In the classroom, we influence how the next generation of not only researchers but also policymakers and activists encounter the world. However, students are seldom introduced to theories and knowledge from the Global South. In an empirical analysis of IR syllabi, Biersteker (2009, 320) succinctly concludes that “the nature of American IR parochialism is that it is rationalist, positivist, US-centric, monolingual, recently published, and written by men.” This claim is supported by results from the 2014 TRIP survey: “the geographic distribution of assigned authors, in short, reinforces the notion that the United States is hegemonic in the discipline, that the flow of ideas is largely outward from an insular United States” (Maliniak et al. 2018, 462). In short, the core texts in IR are primarily written by old white Western men and embedded in one particular way of viewing both science and the world.

Arlene Tickner and Karen Smith are trying to change this with their new impressive IR textbook. They give us a tool that enables us to teach IR in a way that transcends the conventional western-centric lens. The chapters are written by a world-class diverse set of authors and each chapter brings a high quality of insight and analysis. The book seems to have found a balance between chapters that speak to one another, creating a coherent narrative, while also being able to stand on their own. In one way or another, all chapters explore the complex relationship between local manifestations and the global world(s). Moreover, all chapters introduce cases, theories or history that have been ignored in mainstream IR textbooks, recognizing that theoretical knowledge not only reflects the world but also produces it.

Defying traditional thinking and expanding horizons

The book is structured in four parts: 1) Discipline, 2) concepts, 3) issues and 4) futures. While I cannot engage with all of the chapters here, they are all thought-provoking and full of insights. The first part consists of three chapters

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focusing on IR as a discipline. A highlight here is chapter three where David Blaney produces a complex and thought-provoking contrapuntal reading of the IR discipline through the case of the Amerindian homelands in North America. By highlighting the connectivity, trade, and diplomacy of the Amerindian peoples, Blaney shows that the idea of fixing a point in time when international relations and diplomacy begin is redundant. Moreover, it is produced by a dangerous and erroneous systematized linear thinking that seeks to tie theoretical origins to particular times and places. Instead, Blaney argues that past and present coexist in a multidimensional society made up of multiple and interrelating sovereignties. In this way, the global is made up of overlapping and complex relations that challenge traditional IR thinking. Peter Vale and Vineet Thakur help unfold this point in chapter 4, where they argue that there is a “disciplinary amnesia” (p.69) about the role of IR as the scientific advisor to the “new imperialism” of the early twentieth century. It was an IR in which racism and colonialism were disguised as idealism and moralism.

The second part tackles the different concepts that make up the IR discipline. In chapter 6, Amy Niang argues that ‘the “international” is necessarily an extension of the colonial in a postcolonial world’ (p.97) through the interesting example of the currency regime of the French African colonial franc (CFA) in a world of presumed sovereignties. Navnita Chadha Behera’s chapter on state and sovereignty (ch.8), should be required reading for every student who engages with the state as a concept. With various cases and stories, Behera illustrates how statehood and sovereignty are experienced in very different ways by their respective inhabitants across historical spans and geographical loci. IR’s disciplinary debates fail to account for this diversity across time and space. It reminds us that there is no necessary quality to the geographical units we use in the social sciences. Instead, we continuously construct and reconstruct our spatial imaginaries.

Part three of the book focuses on key issues in IR such as migration and resistances. In chapter 14, Nizar Messari claims that while migration is an ancient phenomenon, the way it is now being securitized is new. Messari also makes the case for giving more voice to migrants, which is particularly interesting when put into conversation with other chapters highlighting the detrimental prevalence of state-centred thinking in IR. Per definition, migrants disturb our binary border thinking. In the next chapter, Carolina Cepeda-Másmela introduces an often-overlooked topic in IR, namely resistances (ch.15). She highlights how the neoliberal order has been challenged around the world, arguing that we should recover local forms of resistance against neoliberalism and analyse how they help to envision global alternatives. In this way, these resistances once again emphasize the complex relationship between the local and the global.

The final and fourth part is perhaps the most radical part of the book. In chapter 17, L.H.M. Ling and Carolina M. Pinheiro show “how the global South can speak with and listen to each other – a “chat” among friends, so to speak – and, in the process, improve communication between North and South” (p.318). The authors walk the talk with their ambitious attempt of making Daoist yin/yang dialectics and the Andean notion of pacha converse with one another. This work serves as an example of how South–South talk can express a new form of social relation and create new languages.

A book that invites discussion

With a declared mission to diversify voices and stories in IR, questions regarding what scholars, concepts and cases are included in the book will naturally arise. However, the editors address these questions in their interesting introduction chapter where they argue it is never possible to represent the full extent of global South experiences; instead, readers should actively question the views and cases presented in the book. Perhaps it is this honesty; that there are many ways of doing it, that sets this book apart.

With a book of this kind, one can always question some of the choices that go into structuring the book. To me, the biggest question is why the editors chose the delineation between concepts and issues (part 2 and 3), especially as the various authors appear to address their topic in similar ways. For instance, while security is labelled a concept, resistance is discussed as an issue. I am sure that many scholars working on various forms of resistance would argue that resistance is also very much a concept. Similarly, security would also be perceived as an issue for many.

Small quibbles aside, the book takes you on a journey to places and stories that have often been ignored in IR: From

Review – International Relations from the Global South

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relations between Amerindians peoples (ch.3) to the CFA currency regime (ch.6), migrants in France (ch.14), to the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve in the Brazilian state of Amazonas (ch.16). In addition to providing students with a more nuanced understanding of the concepts and issues making up IR, the book also introduces new and lesser-known empirical cases that educators and students can work with.

The editors and authors challenge mainstream IR by exploring attempts at imagining politics beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries. They remind us that a discipline is not an objective space but something that is continuously being constructed and reconstructed through the scientific practices in the field. Therefore, they encourage us to rethink the disciplinary boundaries and broaden our horizons so that we can deliver truly international perspectives to our students. This book is a step forward for IR.

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Maiken Gelardi holds a PhD from the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University and has been a visiting researcher at both FLACSO Ecuador and Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá, Colombia. She has published articles in *International Studies Review* and *Alternatives* on Western-centrism, post/decolonial thought and Global South contributions to IR theory. She currently works for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Research and Policy Advisor.