

# International relations: western centric discipline



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In examining whether IR is a Western centric discipline, this essay will firstly look into the significance of the fact that its central thinkers have resided historically in Western countries. It argues that this has an effect on the issues considered relevant to IR, while it also means that IR theory is grounded in a cultural and intellectual context that aggrandises the West, and “Others” the Third World. The essay secondly looks at the key ideas of Realism and Liberalism (the dominant traditions in the field) in all their forms, and explains how they derive from Western-centric presumptions. It thirdly examines the inherent Western-centrism of the Westphalian model in traditional IR.

The majority of IR scholars have come from “core” countries. Third World scholars have largely been excluded because research and debate take place in specialist journals and academic associations, in English and in a particular “language of IR”. Financial scarcity in Southern academic institutions also affects Third World scholars’ ability to participate (Tickner, 2003, pp. 296-301, 311, 324). This has an effect on the discipline overall as scholars are inevitably influenced by their surroundings, both in terms of their distinct academic settings – making them subject to particular frameworks and terminologies – and their concrete working conditions. A scholar who every day witnesses phenomena such as poverty or war will undoubtedly reflect differently upon reality and prioritise different issues in their research agendas than a scholar in the core. The latter’s material benefits as well as autonomy accorded by tenure can serve to separate them from the world’s critical problems, enabling them in conjunction with other academics to artificially construct boundaries to the field through self-

referential interaction, and to ignore analytical categories and perspectives that do not sit with their worldviews. This can account for the marginalisation of the Third World in the study in IR (Tickner, 2003, pp. 300-311).

Additionally, these Western IR scholars are writing against a cultural backdrop that is Western-centric. It is often implicitly assumed that world politics happens exclusively in the Northern hemisphere – and the history regarded as important and relevant in popular discourse reflects this. For example the Holocaust takes a central position in Western historiography while colonial genocides, a routine feature of European expansion, are largely overlooked (Barkawi, 2006, pp. 334-343; Tickner, 2003, p. 307). This is interlinked with the popular and intellectual conception of the (particularly Anglo-American) West as a force for good in the world. WWII for instance is often portrayed as a battle of freedom against tyranny, in which the former supposedly came out victorious. This ignores that the principle of “self-determination” outlined in the Atlantic Charter was only intended by Western leaders to apply to Europeans; the Allies were fighting the war in the far East largely for control over China, and the British only granted India independence because of their realisation that it could no longer be held militarily (Barkawi, 2006, pp. 339-343). There are many examples of such double standards, which are symptomatic of the degrading view of the “Orient” (I use it here to mean the wider Third World) commonly held in the West (Said, 2003, pp. 1-12). This view was implicit within the writings of early progressive and cosmopolitan thinkers, upon which much modern thinking is based. Kant, despite one of the three major revolutions of his time being the Haitian struggle against slavery, omitted the “aspiration of slaves

for freedom from three major treatises on love for humanity”, while Locke went as far as to justify the colonial seizing of land from “Indians”. The moral frameworks set out by such thinkers have sinister implications for the social institutions they inspired. If, for instance, Kant’s theories of international order were not really designed to foster peaceful coexistence, then Liberal institutionalism becomes highly suspect. Axiomatic categories of international ethics and society are therefore to an extent rooted in concepts pertaining to imperialist and colonial perspectives (Grovoqui, 2007, pp. 234-235; Locke, 1764, no page given). As a result the Orient has been defined in Western discourse by what it supposedly lacks – rationality, development, and civilisation – in contrast with the West. The construction of this dichotomy between the West and “Others” serves to falsely homogenise different regions, cultures, and histories analytically, thereby masking the complex nature of international reality and preventing nuanced analyses of phenomena in the Third World. This arrogant and narrow view can be seen for example in mainstream Western explanations for violence in periphery states, which is said to derive from a lack of modern Western institutions (Barkawi, 2006, pp. 336-347; Tickner, 2003, pp. 311-315). These public attitudes have indubitably filtered into academia, and so claims to neutrality and objectivity among Western scholars are inevitably false, serving only to mask intellectual presumptuousness and sympathies with the powerful, imperialist core (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004, p. 36; Barkawi, 2006, p. 344; Grovoqui, 2007, pp. 232-237).

Western-centrism can clearly be identified in the Liberal and Realist traditions of IR. Liberalism is informed by ethical principles, giving it a

normative agenda based on fostering peace and cooperation for mutual gain through international institutions. Yet these ethical principles are a product of Western intellectual histories, while the institutions at the core of their analyses, such as the UN, were founded, and are dominated, by Western powers (Barkawi, 2006, p. 331; Jervis, 1999, pp. 43-63; Powell, 1994, pp. 335-344). It can thus be said that Liberalism serves to rationalise Western hegemony by institutionalising and universalising Western laws, rules and ideas (Agathangelou, 2004, p. 31; Grovogui, 2007, pp. 235-236). Further than this however, these institutions can validly be accused of working in the interests of the West at the expense of the rest of the world. The League of Nations and limited government for instance were two institutions that served to uphold the interstate commercial system. Liberals claim that this leads to corporate growth, which in turn generates prosperity. However, this ignores the pertinent criticism that it in fact may lead to prosperity solely for Western countries, thereby rendering the Third World economically dependent on an increasingly hegemonic Western order (Agathangelou, 2004, pp. 24-25; Tickner, 2003, p. 306). Realism on the other hand is Western-centric by open admission. It regards Great powers as the most important objects of study because it claims that in an anarchical international system only they can account for change; and in modern times they have been concentrated in the West. The actions of the weak are regarded as marginal or derivative of those of the powerful (Agathangelou, 2004, p. 27; Barkawi, 2006, pp. 329-334; Tickner, 2003, pp. 300-301). Such an outlook however comes from an implicit prioritising of the security needs of the strong. Suggesting that only the Great powers have real agency means the weak, which make up the majority of the world's population, are

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left out of the analysis altogether, and therefore their experiences and problems are disregarded. Furthermore, the “strong do what they will while the weak do what they must” attitude rationalises and justifies Western attempts to dominate other countries, while also ignoring the fact that modern Southern movements do have the ability to fundamentally change world politics – as is shown by Al-Qaeda and 9/11 (Agathangelou, 2004, p. 24; Barkawi, 2006, pp. 329-334, 352; Grovogui, 2007, p. 244; Tickner, 2003, p. 300).

Traditional IR is intrinsically Western-centric. Its scope is everything that goes on between sovereign states – which are regarded as the primary actors to be analysed – as opposed to within states. States being the basic units of analysis means that the international arena is regarded as anarchic; containing no supreme body above the state level. This idea is known as the “Westphalian” model (Barkawi, 2002, pp. 111-112; Tickner, 2003, pp. 299, 309). Yet the condition of international anarchy posited is one that only applies in some contexts. Weaker countries are in practice subordinate to more powerful Western countries; making the international system effectively hierarchical. It can only be seen as otherwise from the eyes of those competing for control of it (Tickner, 2003, p. 309). This Westphalian model relies also on an idea of sovereign statehood which is applicable only to particular times and places – mainly the West (Barkawi, 2002, p. 110). In Africa for instance state borders are mostly artificial boundaries drawn up by the old colonial powers, with each “national” territory containing a variety of social, linguistic, ethnic and religious groups. Accepting the state as the foundation for analysis is “the same as acknowledging the legitimacy of

colonial territoriality and the institutional expression of colonialism". It also ignores the fact that many states in Africa have been usurped of many of their functions by other bodies, such as armed militias, organic nationalist movements, and international businesses, making them not the central political actors in the region (Grovoqui, 2007, p. 236; Tickner, 2003, pp. 315-316). Traditional IR ignores the relevance of "community" for study, as well as the relations between local political and cultural groups, and therefore the constitution of states. It cannot comprehend, and therefore dismisses, the complex societal interactions that take place in the Third World (Barkawi, 2002, pp. 111-112; Tickner, 2003, pp. 309-310, 323).

IR scholarship in recent years has attempted to overcome Western-centrism. Dependency theories for instance strove to break Third World economic and intellectual dependence on the core. Later Postpositivist theories acknowledged the artificiality of the discipline's borders and the narrowness of its discourses. However these theories have shown limited success in this regard because they are all based on Western intellectual traditions and analytical frameworks (Agathangelou, 2004, p. 28; Tickner, 2003, pp. 306, 324).

It is apparent that IR is a Western-centric discipline. The fact that the vast majority of its scholars hail from the West has an inevitable distorting effect on academic study, in terms of: the issues considered important, the actors given attention, and the categories of "Self" and "Others". These distortions all ultimately derive from Western intellectual tradition and popular and political discourse, which form the basis of the writers' understandings and worldviews. There have been attempts in recent years to overcome these

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problems, but so long as the field of IR continues to be dominated by Westerners and excludes those born and raised in the Third World, it will remain Western-centric.