International Studies Journal (ISJ)
Vol. 15, No. 4 (60), Spring 2019
Recived Date: 1 February, 2019
Acssept Date: March 27, 2019
PP: 43-51

After the West: Critical Movements in the Discipline of International Relations

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam Ph.D. *

Abstract

This short intervention peruses new movements in the discipline of International Relations with a particular emphasis on the "post-western" turn in IR theory which promises to usher into better concepts for the analysis of world politics.

Keywords

IR theory, Post-colonialism, Eurocentrism, Arab revolts

Introduction

It would be too farfetched to argue that IR has become a "post-western" discipline, but the idea that the theoretical models of previous generations prioritized and universalized a western ontology has been central to a range of pioneering studies (e.g. Acharya 2011; Tickner & Blaney 2012). Despite important movements away from the Euro-Americo centric legacies permeating the discipline, there is still controversy about the repertoire of strategies required to facilitate a post-western turn, which ranges from challenging dominant historical narratives to disclosing how conceptual frameworks reinforce certain hierarchies. We will find in the following paragraphs that several scholars have recently proposed to emphasise the multiple political subjectivities that constitute world politics. These studies point out that the 'western' approach is one among many.

* SOAS, University of London and Fellow, Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge / Email: aa106@soas.ac.uk

The idea that the representation of world politics is relative to context is an important starting point to think seriously about the global realm from a non-Eurocentric perspective. As Nayak and Selbin rightly suggest (2011, 15): "Everybody starts from somewhere, everyone stands in some place, and all of us are ineluctably shaped by our circumstances." In this short research note, I peruse some of the arguments that recognize difference as an analytically necessary signpost for this new thinking in IR. At the same time, it is acknowledged that there exists an emergent global realm, which can be conceptualized as "hybrid" as a new book series called "The Global Middle East" that I initiated with Cambridge University Press stipulates . In order to locate this approach in its current "post-modernist" lineage, we need more studies that bring out the surprising and unpredictable instances when the imagined boundaries between "us" and "them" crumble in a grand display of cultural syncretism. To that end, critical IR theory has to operate in more dimensions than the one defined by the outdated binaries that are so familiar to many students of international relations, including civilisational approaches which emphasize a clash between supposedly homogenous cultural "entities" (see further Adib-Moghaddam 2011, 2013a).

Challenges to Eurocentrism

Hobson has proposed (2007, 93) that Eurocentrism does not merely take the form of feting 'western' culture, technology or politics and relegating 'non-western' phenomena to deviances of the model. According to him, critical approaches from the 'Left' get caught up in the Eurocentric trap as well as they often depart from a core-periphery differentiation of the international system, which runs the risk of assuming that the 'west' continuously determines events in the rest of the world. While it is prudent to appreciate the impact of 'neo-imperial' foreign policies and hegemonic systems, many scholars have stressed the multiplicity of linkages among multiple worlds that defy unidirectional power relations (Bilgin 2008, 6).

The language and research design of these studies challenges the overwhelmingly positivist value placed on 'western' power. Setting such

research signposts for the future does not call for substituting westernism with easternism, but it requires analyses of the hybrid fields of intercultural engagement endowed in global history, which offer an opportunity to capture a common human narrative. This is particularly important within politico-cultural contexts where there is a particular emphasis on justice and equality (such as Iran), even if it is sometimes merely rhetoric. In this way, critical theory could thrive in the absence of an obligation to centre world politics on geography or culture or to reinvigorate ideational markers that reproduce the myth of primordial, all-encompassing and insurmountable differences between 'us' and 'them'.

From a historical sociological perspective, it has been pointed out that the 'Westphalian' state system, assumed to be quintessentially European, received significant impulses from the 'east' (Hobson 2009, 682-686). Other studies have shown how the Arab and Muslim worlds have affected the ideational and material constitution of the 'west' (Adib-Moghaddam 2011). Another approach has experimented with concepts beyond the 'west' applying those to empirical examples in Europe and North America in order to unravel Eurocentric assumptions (Khong 2013; Ling 2013). These studies navigate in the zone where geography and transcultural/transidentitarian factors trouble each other. They direct the discipline toward the limits of coherence to identity, culture and race.

Putting emphasis on the entangled history of subjects and collectives on a truly international scale does not deny the persistence of antagonistic differences, or forms of disjunctive syntheses. Recent scholarship has made great strides toward appreciating the zones of convergence and conflict between local developments and global factors, specific ideational trends and general trans-identitarian movements, between sub-national divergence, national disintegration and transnational loyalty (Chen, Hwang and Ling 2009). Pinar Bilgin (2008, 6), for instance, proposes to trace difference through investigating the "emergence of ways of thinking and doing the same but not quite." As an emergent theme in critical theory, the appreciation of difference within a common human experience has offered an important route away from

the deceptive promise of 'identity'.

Off Anders Breivik and Osama bin Laden: Local particulars, Global Spaces

Difference within a common, globally experienced universality can be pinned down further with reference to the Arab revolts. The uprisings which started in Tunisia and spread like a wild fire throughout both sides of the Mediterranean, to Egypt, Libya, Greece, Spain and further afield, revealed a dual tendency, a paradox if you want. On the one side, they point to the process of hybridisation, the break-down of grand narratives and ideational systems in an increasingly networked, post-modernized order, where ideational factors such as religious affiliation and nationality play a secondary role. The Arab revolts are indicative of this post-ideological and trans-ideational world (Adib-Moghaddam, 2013 b). The demonstrations were carried by universal themes such as democracy, social justice, empowerment, pluralism etc. At the same time, they were local, steeped in the secular and Islamic symbols and imagery that permeate the societies in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. It has been a misjudgment of Eurocentric theories of globalization to assume that 'the local' will evaporate in the great stream of 'the global'. Rather, globality and locality are increasingly intermingled and inseparable. The properties of both are being changed in a grand dialectical firework.

At the same time the mythical stories about origin and the almost sacrosanct service it supplies to worldly power continue to be a root cause for many conflicts on a global scale. In Europe, confrontational ideologues with access to power such as Geert Wilders fan the flames of Islamophobia giving new life to the psycho-nationalist politics of exclusion, sometimes with insidiously racist undertones. In Hungary, Sweden, France and Britain, the exclusionary agendas of right-wing parties have gained a foothold among mainstream politicians. Terrorists such as Anders Breivik in Norway, who was responsible for the murder of dozens of teenagers, or neo-Nazi movements in Germany who organized and executed the systematic killing of immigrant workers, defy politics and position themselves explicitly against the state,

summoning their supporters into a new dawn of fascism. Decentralized terrorist movements such as al-Qaeda (or Daesh) and their sympathizers are equally adamant to remind their constituencies that they are killing in the name of a higher ideal. Contemporary terrorism feeds on the fertile ground of exclusionary identity politics. The symbols, imagery and norms vary in accordance with local realities, but the mechanism and political rationale behind the actions is largely comparable.

Where the power of exclusionary identity politics is invoked, it is often in reaction to the disorder of our postmodern condition, which unsettles the safe territories carved out by the grand narratives of modernity, which have failed to deliver the promised utopia whether in its fascist, communist, or Islamist disguise. In our modern past, grand narratives were rather more successful in simulating order and giving a common sense of shared identity, which molded the nation/civilization/community into a seemingly coherent unit. The transversal movements of our current condition, which has created mixture, hybridity and difference, have unsettled the myth of cultural purity. It should not be forgotten that both neo-Nazi movements in Europe and al-Qaeda terrorists kill in the name of sameness, the former with an emphasis on race and ethnicity and the latter with an obsession with religious separation. As Gilroy pointed out in his indictment of the politics of exclusion (2000, 106):

> To have mixed is to have been party to a great betrayal. Any unsettling traces of hybridity must be excised from the tidy, bleached-out zones of impossibly pure culture. The safety of sameness can then be recovered by either of the two options that have regularly appeared at the meltdown point of this dismal logic: separation and slaughter.

The particular merit of Gilroy's analysis lies in its emphasis on inter-cultural empirical examples for the lamentable politics of exclusion, which can be linked back to the concern of this analysis with local difference and global

comparability. At a basic analytical level members of al-Qaeda and neo-Nazi movements operate on the premise of a closely related political rationale and logic: Identity is assumed to be fixed and primordial (rather than socially constructed); the fortified in-group is thought to be on an inevitable collision course with the equally homogenized out-group; us and them are presented as essentially different; there is no room for negotiation with the other side; hence the strategy of terrorism is justified in order to bring about total change.

This ideational transmission belt delivering contemporary totalitarianisms, may serve as an example about how the local and the global can be analyzed from a de-centered perspective. The global appeal of exclusionary identity politics brings geographically disparate movements analytically together. In its imagination of absolute difference from the "other", thought to be devoid of the particularized norms/culture/race of the "self" which serves as the marker of incompatibility and antagonism, the ideology of al-Qaeda is rather more akin to European fascism than to the tenets of mainstream Muslim political thought. One hears echoes of Anders Breivik's prescription emphasizing that 'any delays' in the western battle against Islam 'only serve to up the butcher's bill on both sides' (The Telegraph, no date, 7) in Osama bin Laden's enthusiasm for the 'importance of conflict' (Lawrence, ed., 2005, 217). The grievances against the international media are comparable as well. Breivik laments that the "mainstream media has been hijacked by cultural Marxists, humanists and globalists and are not acting in the interest of Europeans and Europe" (The Telegraph, no date, 1). Obama is equally perturbed. For him "the media people who belittle religious duties such as jihad and other rituals are atheists and renegades." Like Breivik he indicts them for betraying the virtuous "ingroup": "This is as far as concerns those forces that have diverted the course of our march from within" (Lawrence, ed., 2005, 216).

Trans-Central Thoughts

The short examples mentioned above indicate that particular political constellations such as the protests in the Arab world and Europe always reveal both universalized marks and local signs, symbols and relations of dissociation.

For critical students of international relations, the presence of universals means that concepts are generalisable, that they have theoretical stamina, but that in their empirical operationalisation they need to be acutely sensitive to difference and cultural variation. Taking these signposts into account, then, a trans-central research agenda would be sensitive to the subtle interplay between global similarities and local differences. Here lies the future of a truly international theory for IR.

Bibliography

- Adib-Moghaddam, A 2013 a, 'Interview – Arshin Adib-Moghaddam', ***e-International Relations***, 7th May 2013. Available at <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/07/interview-arshin-adib-moghaddam/> [accessed 12 July 2013]

- Adib-Moghaddam, A 2013 b, ***On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and Resistance Today***, Bloomsbury, New York.

- Adib-Moghaddam, A 2011, ***A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and them beyond Orientalism***, Oxford University Press/Hurst, New York, London.

- Acharya, A 2011, 'Dialogue and Discovery: In Search of International Relations Theories beyond the West', ***Millennium***, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 619-**637.**

- Bilgin, P 2008, 'Thinking past ,Western 'IR?', ***Third World Quarterly***, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 5–23.

- Bliesemann de Guevara, B & Kühn, F 2009, 'The 'International Community' - Rhetoric or Reality? Tracing a seemingly well-known apparition', ***Sicherheit + Frieden***, Vol. 27, No. 2 pp. 73-79.

- Butiku, J 2004, 'The Facilitation of the Burundi Peace Negotiations', G Mpangala & B Mwansasu (ed.), ***Beyond Conflict in Burundi***, Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation, Dar es Salaam.

- Campbell, D 1998, ***Writing Security. United States Foreign Policy and the***

Politics of Identity, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Chakrabarty, D 2007, ***Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference***, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Chen, B., C.-C. Hwang and L.H.M. Ling 2009, 'Lust/Caution in IR: Democratising World Politics with Culture as Method'**,** ***Millennium***, Vol. 37, No. 3, 743-766.
- Fisher, J 2012, 'Managing donor perceptions: contextualizing Uganda's 2007 intervention in Somalia'. ***African Affairs***. Vol. 111. No. 444. 404–423.
- Gilroy, P.. 2000. ***Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line***, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Harrison, G 2001, 'Post-Conditionality Politics and Administrative Reform: Reflections on the Cases of Uganda and Tanzania', ***Development and Change***, Vol. 32, pp. 657-679.
- Hobson, J 2009, 'Provincializing Westphalia: The Eastern Origins of Sovereignty', ***International Politics***, Vol. 46, No. 6, pp. 671–690.
- Hobson, J 2007, 'Is Critical Theory always for the white West and for Western imperialism? Beyond Westphalia towards a postracist critical IR', ***Review of International Studies***, Vol. 33, pp. 91–116.
- International Crisis Group [ICG] 2000, 'The Mandela effect. Prospects for Peace in Burundi', ***ICG Central Africa Report***, No. 13.
- Khong, YF 2013, 'The American Tributary System', ***Chinese Journal of International Politics***, Vol. 6, pp. 1–47
- Laclau, E 1992, 'Beyond Emancipation', ***Development and Change***, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 121-137.
- Lawrence, B 2005 (ed.), ***Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden***, Verso, London.
- Ling, LHM 2013, 'Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist dialectics and the 'China threat'', ***Review of International Studies,*** Vol. 39, pp. 549–568.
- Nayak, M and Selbin, E 2010, ***Decentering International Relations Between the Mainstream and the Margins***, Zed Books, London.
- Nyerere, J 1998, 'Africa Today and Tomorrow', ***Review of African Political***

Economy, Vol. 25, No. 75, pp. 149-152.
- Paris, R 2002, 'International Peacebuilding and the 'Mission Civilisatrice'', ***Review of International Studies***, Vol. 28, pp. 637-656.
- Regional Initiative 1995, ***Cairo Declaration***.
- Richmond, O 2005, ***The Transformation of Peace***, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, New York.
- The Telegraph, 'The Norway Shootings: Anders Breivik Bombmaking Diary and Notable Quotes', ***The Telegraph***, No date. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/norway/8660428/Norway-shootings-Anders-Breivik-bombmaking-diary-and-notable-quotes.html> [accessed 12 June 2013].
- Tickner, Arlene & Blaney, David 2012, ***Thinking International Relations Differently***, Routledge, London, New York.
- Vandeginste, S 2009, 'Power-Sharing, Conflict and Transition in Burundi: Twenty Years of Trial and Error', ***Africa Spectrum***, Vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 63-86.
- Wolpe, H 2011, ***Making Peace after Genocide; Anatomy of the Burundi Process***, United States Institute for Peace, Washington.