

## **“Diversity For and By Whom? Knowledge Production and the Management of Diversity in International Relations”**

The myriad paths taken by social groups across time and space have turned us into distinct living libraries from which we can learn about and explore the variegated facets of human experience. In this regard, difference is a blessing. But it is also a curse: discourses of diversity are all too often used to justify both the hubris of thinking that we know all that there is to know, and the violence we create when this way of thinking is hidden within well-meaning yet often hurtful moves to embrace difference.

This is how I felt reading the question at the heart of this forum: ‘Is there, can there be – should there be – a geo-culturally pluralistic IR?’.

The case involves International Relations (IR), an academic discipline whose contentious *raison d’être* is to produce a knowledge capable of representing the whole world whilst institutionalised unevenly across countries in the service of states and their foreign policy. More precisely, it involves IR’s pluralistic ambitions to promote and cultivate diversity within the discipline. In this essay, I take a step back from questions of pluralism to focus on the object of pluralism: the management of diversity. I distinguish ‘difference’, which characterises a relation between two elements, from ‘diversity’, which adds a third dimension to this relation: a uniting ensemble – either real or imagined – that comprises (at minima through discourse) the elements whose differences are assessed or promoted. ‘IR’ becomes the uniting category used to bring together allegedly different IR communities.

I started researching IR diversity ten years ago. I wanted to support IR’s pluralistic agenda by providing the empirical evidence it lacked to defend its core belief that IR Western dominance was preventing the advancement of IR ‘geo-cultural’ diversity. To do so, I constructed a historical sociology of IR in Brazil and India (its condition of production and internationalisation) for which I conducted seventy-nine interviews, engaged two periods of participant observation, conducted online archival work, and produced descriptive statistics about scholars’ resume.

I published the results of this investigation in my book *Western dominance in International Relations?* (2018) from which I draw some of my arguments in this essay. At this stage of my journey, it feels like I have unlearned as much as I have learned. While my findings did not strain my commitment to understand diversity, they definitely challenged what I thought I knew about it. They showed me that the initiatives I then perceived to be solutions to the problem of difference in IR were in fact part of it, as they naturalise violence within the pluralistic management of diversity instead of developing alternatives to it. Instead of producing alternatives to the spontaneous ethnocentrism through which we filter the practices and choices that we can comprehend as valid and even possible, solutions unreflexive of their own ethnocentrism run the risk of monopolising institutional spaces in a way that entrenches their ethnocentrism. Doing so, they might further homogenise the field through the belief that the only legitimate way of diversifying IR is their own.

## **IR's diversity does not run along 'geo-cultural' lines**

In its broadest sense, 'culture' describes any production common to a social group. In IR, the term 'geo-cultural' refers more specifically to the idea that scholars from the same geographical areas (i.e., 'South America', 'Africa', the 'West' vs 'non-West') share a similar worldview and produce IR knowledge that reflects this shared vision. The pervasive and persistent conflation of 'geo-culture' and 'geo-politics' is not unique to the literature focusing on IR diversity, and is encountered perhaps most notoriously in Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.

In India, many resources could be used to produce IR Theory from a 'non-Western' perspective (as promoted by 'Global IR' advocates): travelogues in vernacular languages, political doctrines such as non-violence and non-alignment, renown literary work engaging with international relations topics (e.g., the writings of the 1913 literature Nobel Prize Rabindranath Tagore), pre-colonial written work dealing with international affairs (among which are the famous Arthaśāstra written in Sanskrit, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) and one of the largest 'autochthonous' populations, whose worldviews could have been analysed.

While such resources have been of interest to 'Western' scholars in their attempt to create a more 'geo-culturally' diverse 'Global IR', they have received limited interest in India. Some would conclude there is no need to look further than 'coloniality' to explain this situation. As seductive as this explanatory factor may be, it cannot tell us why disciplines other than IR – such as sociology and political science – have engaged in the 'indigenization' of concepts and the production of Indian political thought since the 1950s. The specific conditions of knowledge production vary from decade to decade between different disciplines, and need to be contextualized and studied accordingly.

Moreover, other (non-geo-culturally-labelled) differences exist which have not been promoted as legitimate alternatives to IR 'Western' homogenisation. For example, while the diversity of target audiences and writing styles across the world directly addresses concerns regarding the rigid format of academic journals and their limited audience, these differences have been neglected by the literature promoting diversity in IR. As Brazilian scholars commented upon, writing formats are not universal. The interviewees distinguished 'Portuguese' styles of academic writing from the 'less melodic' and 'less complex' 'Anglo-Saxon writing model' (a model that historically resulted from a double process of normalisation to 'plain English' and the adoption of the IMRAD model – 'introduction, methods, results, discussion' imported from American natural sciences). As illustrated by Indian scholars' publishing strategies, peer-reviewed foreign journals are not the universally-favoured outlet for IR publication either. In the Indian context, where IR deals with key national security issues (such as Kashmir or the Indian-Chinese border), scholars and scientific agencies favour open-access policy-oriented work capable of addressing a large readership.

Why have differences other than 'geo-cultural' ones not garnered the same level of interest in the literature about IR diversity? What does this double standard discourse reflect? What effects does it produce?

## **The white (wo)man's burden of managing (IR) diversity**

I argue that this double standard reflects IR's difficulty in challenging Eurocentric roles colonially entrenched in academic discourses and identities. Eurocentrism is an ideology emerging from European ethnocentrism which, among other things, frames the 'West' as the

sole agent of world politics and represent the rest of the world as denied of agency. IR discourses of diversity frame European colonialisms and their postcolonial manifestations as the catch-all variable that determine IR's level of diversity, and Western scholars as both the villains that keep IR 'geo-cultural' diversity at bay and the saviours in charge of enabling 'geo-cultural' diversity to thrive. The 'West' is framed as the bad, the good, indeed the *only* agent of IR diversity management.

Colonial legacies play a role in regard to IR diversity, but this role is more complex than the cultural epistemicide that impacted other forms of knowledge. Indeed, the postcolonial globalisation of the state as the main political unit led to the global institutionalisation of IR as a science of government in the service of so called 'non-Western' states and their foreign policy. In many cases, this instrumentalization both severed 'IR' from cultural resources and produced a variety of professional practices.

This argument might be disappointing for the Eurocentric mindset that craves a binary world (e.g., 'West' vs 'non-West') that enables non-European knowledge to be represented as something other than knowledge (e.g., 'cultural', 'local', 'indigenous'). It shows that despite inequality in higher education and research across the world, scholars from the 'West' can benefit from adopting professional models of knowledge production developed elsewhere. By acknowledging the multipolarity of IR agency in regard to IR diversity, it takes away the symbolic, psychological and socio-political appeal that the 'geo-cultural' narrative provided to those willing to identify themselves as saviours of IR diversity.

What other effects might the emphasis on 'geo-cultural' difference produce to the detriment of other forms of difference?

### **IR is becoming more 'geo-cultural' and it might not be a good thing**

In my research, I show that globalised discourses about 'geo-cultural' diversity perform 'geo-cultural' diversity by incentivising IR scholars to produce knowledge matching this narrative. Indian and Brazilian scholars mentioned that while this strategy can provide them with a comparative advantage to internationalisation (to the extent that they can use processes of tokenisation to their own advantage), they lamented the essentialisation and nativism often accompanying these initiatives (e.g., the expectation that Indian scholars are interested in uncovering Sanskrit sources despite their European counterparts not being expected to theorise from Latin texts). Indeed, the freedom to pursue universalist ambitions on their topic of expertise, rather than on topics defined by others as allegedly bringing 'diversity' to the field, seemed more valuable to many than being confined to a perspectivist or relativist mindset for 'being from somewhere' or having to defend a 'non-Western' or 'post-Western' 'cultural' posture.

Whose interests does the global 'geo-culturation' of IR actually serve then? The idea that apparent strategies of resistance to a socio-political system may, in fact, enable its naturalisation echoes Ashis Nandy's argument in his book *The Intimate Enemy*. Nandy shows that early anti-colonial Indian movements plucked elements from India's rich cultural background to formulate nationalisms that unwittingly reorganised Indian identity in a way that legitimised the value-system of the British coloniser, and thereby his rule. The explicit resistance hid an invisible participation in a social configuration that was counter-performing its objectives. This should prompt us to pose the question: How might the 'geo-cultural' solution to resist IR 'Western hegemony' inadvertently undermine the interests of the academic communities it is supposed to 'emancipate'?

Put simply, this 'solution' further pulls IR further towards an Anglo-American core (rather than a broadly defined 'West'). It contributes to shifting IR's current multipolarity (organised around national fields) and diverse disciplinary ties (as IR in different countries stem from different disciplines) toward a global disciplinarianisation under one 'IR' roof. Framing 'IR' as the unit to be diversified denies the centralising performative force of 'IR's' treatment as an already-existing singular globalised entity. This denial naturalises criteria of doing and publishing IR that are not neutral and have consequences on and beyond IR diversity. Teaching scholars across the world how to write 'properly' — i.e., according to the dictates of 'good' journals — in an attempt to help them emancipate themselves from 'Western dominance' and achieve the 'geo-cultural' dream of 'Global IR', delegitimises the existing different forms of writing and publishing IR. It establishes as universal standards criteria of evaluation of research valued by a minority of scholars within 'the West'. It naturalises as 'good' and 'normal' the ways of doing IR that benefit institutions at the top of an already unequal higher education and research world-system in a classic case of academic ethnocentrism.

Processes of internationalisation are streamlined into processes of centralisation. Processes of centralisation favour the accumulation of symbolic, economic and human capital that increases rather than decreases IR inequalities. Moreover, the cost-benefits of IR geo-culturalisation are unequally shared. Surely, I could find it interesting that scholars across the world enrich IR using humanity's untapped 'cultural' resources; and it could also serve my career advancement if the impact factor of the journals in which my institution required me to publish increased. But asking the rest of the world to diversify my profession by reaching out to the outlets I am familiar with, when I myself am safely unrequired to shake up the criteria of research evaluation that maintain institutions like my own at the top of the IR food chain, is a deceptive and spurious transformation to say the least.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The path to IR homogenisation is paved with good normative intentions. Not only does the idea of 'geo-cultural' diversity not match empirical research, it also partakes in a postcolonial Eurocentric fantasy that needs to be interrogated. We need to be vigilant that initiatives to diversify IR do not in fact reproduce the problems they aim to address. I have faced this paradox over and over in my research and have unlearned so much that I honestly feel quite drained by the complexity of the situation. Having left my home country due to a lack of job opportunities, my words are also tainted by my experience of having had to adopt 'Anglo-American' ways of doing research in order to get a job, and having been co-opted, as a tenure-track faculty, into producing work that abides by these ways in order to secure my position.

I do not wish to end this essay on a pessimistic note though. So here are two points I hope our field can take into account in order to address these important questions.

First, I hope that we can collectively problematise diversity to ensure that part of the problem we face is not implicitly carried within the under-theorised concept at the core of its formulation. Following Ahmed (2012), I argue that diversity should be seen as a problem rather than a solution. Going one step further, I suggest rethinking the polarisation between diversity (=good) and ethnocentrism (=bad), to acknowledge the ambivalence and complementarity of these phenomena. On the one hand, diversity (and discourses of diversity) entail homogenising dynamics (in this instance, the disciplinarianisation under one 'IR'

roof). On the other hand, ethnocentrism represents a safety net that, if balanced, legitimises each group's specific production against the siren songs of co-optation and alienation.

Second, I argue for the need to produce empirical knowledge about IR globalisation as a prerequisite to formulating adequate practices and policies. The time for agenda-setting is behind us. In the same way that we would not substitute IR scholars' knowledge for the knowledge produced by professionals of world affairs, we should not settle for opinion pieces or anything other than work that combines IR frameworks (about, for example, internationalisation, transnationalisation or multi-level governance) with tools developed in fields specialising on knowledge production (e.g., sociology of science or anthropology of knowledge). Otherwise, we risk making inferences and shortcuts that can be more harmful than doing nothing at all. Decentring agency and not accepting 'Western dominance' uncritically as a starting point from which we ask all questions, are some of the methodological steps that worked for my project. I am confident that this move is far from isolated and that IR scholars are developing practical steps that will help us move away from the invisible dynamics that shape the way we perceive IR and social sciences global knowledge production.

## References

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