Does International Relations theory privilege Western ways of thinking and acting?

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FRANCESCA LO CASTRO, SEP 4 2011

'Theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox, 1986:207). This statement appears highly relevant when discussing the Eurocentrism embedded in the academic discipline of International Relations (IR) since it reminds us that IR theories, as with any other theoretical approaches, developed at certain times and for certain reasons. Keeping that in mind, this essay will discuss whether IR is a parochial discipline whose principles should not be universalised. On the one hand, this tendency can be legitimised by the fact that IR developed in Europe and in the United States, with the latter being the leader in the academic field. On the other hand, its discourse cannot be applied globally as it persistently omits those security and economic issues which are of great concern for most part of the world population. Nevertheless, it appears that for IR to become more comprehensive and unbiased, it needs to go beyond the Western boundaries towards the "South" or "East" of the world by re-introducing the roles of cultures and identities as essential in the analysis of world politics. To begin with, this paper will show how IR theory favours a Eurocentric thought by considering both the mainstream and the Critical IR approaches. Secondly, it will proceed by demonstrating, through the use of various examples, that IR theory also privileges the way Western states operate within the international arena, by pointing out at the necessity of referring to colonial legacies in order to have an unbiased understanding of contemporary security issue. Thirdly, it will show the importance of focusing on representation as an essential tool for uncovering power relations between states and peoples, and it will introduce postcolonial theory as it offers a deeper understanding of those states relations which are based on imperialism. The final goal is to argue that postcolonial theory can be a powerful means for IR to become less parochial in its perspective, but also aware of the legacies that past colonial experiences are perpetuating in contemporary politics.

To avoid any misunderstandings and remain coherent with what will be discussed later, this essay will begin by defining the key words in question, namely the 'West' and 'IR theory'. On the one hand, the 'West' can be understood in both its geographical and ideological connotations, as it refers to the western part of the world and also to those set of ideas and meanings brought by the Cold War conflict between the West and the East and by the need of the West to define itself in accordance to another entity (i.e. the Orient) (Abrahamsen, 2007). In addition, in this essay, it will refer to the old and new imperial powers which have and are still exercising economic or military control over their former or 'new' colonies (even though today no country takes the appellative of colony). On the other hand, 'IR theory' defines the branch of political and international studies which has developed after the end of World War I as a positivist discipline and in which the US is the leader in the academia. It is argued that due to the failure of being a social science and due to its status as an instrument for power politics, IR is a discipline in crisis. This essay will also argue that this is the case, and for this reason a change brought through emancipation is needed for IR to become more coherent and fulfilling.

It is striking to realize that in most books on IR there is little or nothing on the Third World perspectives or on non-Western issues. For this simple reason, IR theories can be understood as being Parochial or Eurocentric as they seek to apply Western values and way of thinking in their understanding of the 'other' world and tend to depict the 'other' as being subordinate, inferior and uncivilised (Hobson, 2007). The above claim is to be applied not only for the problem-solving mainstream IR (realism, liberalism and constructivism) but also for the emancipatory & Critical IR (Marxism, feminisms, post-modernism). In a simplistic way, this inclination could be explained by the fact that the discipline of IR originated in the West as a 'tool' aimed at advising policy-makers on the maintenance of peace and

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conflict prevention (Chernoff, 2005). However, this is not the case as, not only has this discipline pretended to apply its standards to non-Western contexts, it has also neglected historical and cultural factors as fundamental tools of analysis (Anand, 2007). As a matter of fact, the primary focus of analysis for mainstream IR theories is states, that are not seen as collective representations of their peoples, but as depersonified entities, which act and take decisions on their own (it is important to consider here the neorealist and neoliberal notions of states behaviour according to which the state of nature is the key explanation for either cooperative or competitive attitudes, but in which no account is taken for the policy-maker or the societal level) (Darby, 2000). Moreover, it is necessary to point out that what is nowadays called *Strategies Studies*, which analyses the patterns of war and peace and of the balance of power, has become the core of IR (Persaud, 2004), thus limiting the scope of this social discipline to an ahistorical account and analysis of conflicts, with the controversial goal to be able to predict and thus avoid wars (Buzan and Little, 2000). The lack of concern for history and the focus on "presentism" (Buzan and Little, 2000: 18), as the notion of making the present eternal and detached from the past, are profoundly affecting the credibility of IR, as it is not sensible to disregard the correlations which exist between different events on different timelines for the sake of creating a problem-solving theory.

Mainstream IR theory not only rejects the notion of culture and literature, but most importantly it does not recognise the value of considering North-South relations and the knowledge formation processes that take place between them. Therefore, mainstream IR's lack of understanding of the social construction of reality, together with the unwillingness to give further emphasis on the emancipatory possibility of people, show how this discipline is detached from reality and intrinsically subject to power constrains or discourse management (Darby, 2000). In contrast with this anti-multidisciplinary approach, Critical IR theories aim at unmasking the relations between power and knowledge and the consequent exercise of *hegemony,* that is practised over the *subalterns* (using Gramscian words) through both consent and coercion (Loomba, 1998). The world is not a given, but it is a social construction modelled on the interests of the elites, which can however be overthrown through emancipatory movements and political dissent (Linklater, 2007). Nevertheless, even though power assumes another connotation with Critical Theory, as it does not just represent military or economic power but the power to free oneself and emancipate, these group of approaches remain confined within a clearly demarcated Eurocentrism and fail to highlight the issue of 'freedom from' of the non-Western countries (Hobson, 2007). In this regard, it is peculiar to see that IR theories never mention or try to explain the independence movements of the 1960s in the old colonial territories in the African and Asian continents (and also the social and political revolutions which took place in the post-communist countries) (Anand 2007). Instead, those profound changes have been explained in the light of development theories that totally ignore the colonial experience, and which argue that a socio-political shift was needed for those populations in order to reach an adequate level of civilisation, as much close to the Western model as possible.

The reasons behind this fervent Eurocentrism in the study of world politics could be explained with the need of IR to privilege Western ways of acting for *propaganda* or *neo-imperialist* purposes. Referring back to the sentence by Robert Cox reported in the introduction, it should be noted that during its development, academic IR was very close to the policy-makers and to the external influences or power constrains (particularly of the Cold War era) which made their thinking strongly biased, even though objectivity was what was sought by the positivists (Anand, 2007). Nevertheless, as Smith (2000) has argued, American IR academics are still subject to this sort of constrain. This tendency can be exemplified by analysing the work of many IR theorists who have either justified the lesser evils of the West or manipulated knowledge for the goal of rewriting history (a method that has been employed by all authoritarian regimes over time) (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). For instance, quite remarkable in this sense is a comment made by Mearsheimer (1990) in which he stated that everyone would miss the Cold War as a perfect balance of power and peace had been achieved between the Great Powers; the conditions of rest of the world, which had been a background scenario for competition between the US and the Soviet Union, were obviously neglected in that sentence (Anand, 2007). Numerous examples can be made on the discourse management practised by power politics, however this essay will only limit them to a few.

Evidence of IR privileging of Western states behaviour can be found in Fukuyama's compelling thesis on the *End of History* (1992), in which he asserts that history is ended due to the achievement of the most elevated stage in the history of men, reached thanks to the success of both free-market economy and of the democratic peace theory. It takes little to understand how such an idea is incorrect when considering the economic, social and political struggles

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which the 'other' are enduring in the era of capitalism. A similar type of critique can be made against Huntington's (1993) famous essay on 'The Clash of Civilisations?', in which he concludes that we are now living in an insecure world in which new security threats are being created out of the constant clash between the West and the 'rest', with the latter being pictured as a fomenter of evil and backwardness. Clearly, his thesis has been re-evaluated and re-elaborated since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, as for many it seems to explain the reasons behind those violent and unjustified attacks against the US. This viewpoint highlights the neglect of considering the past colonial and contemporary new-imperial experiences when trying to give explanation for this extreme actions. In addition, it fits perfectly with the process of IR identity formation and its vision of the world as being dominated by the West whose stability is threatened by the non-West (Weber, 2005). There is therefore a tendency to simplify identities, by discussing and pointing at the rivalry between the Muslim world and the West through the use of stereotypes (Said, 1979). This is also the way IR theory faces the issue of the different and the 'other" as being a debilitating entity both politically and culturally, and not as a possibility for further cultural enhancement (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2002). What follows is that today most of the people in the West would associate the word *terrorist* with the image of a bearded Arab man with a rucksack on his shoulders. As suggested by Anand (2007), the Third World is discussed in IR only in two cases: as a war and competition scenario for powerful states, or as an object of study when it does not comply with Western norms or rules (think about Iran). This lead to a perceptive alteration, in which the victims become the ones to be blamed (Anand, 2007).

Therefore, "If the theories that are available are almost exclusively Western in origin and perspective, can they convey an adequate understanding of a world political system that is predominantly non Western?"(Bull, 1972:55). This necessary question lead us to realize that for IR to succeed in comprehending the 'other' world, it needs to develop a new theoretical approach which incorporates the analysis of history, culture and identity. It can be argued that Postcolonial Theory, which is placed between cultural studies and IR, can be this alternative approach. The aim of this new theoretical framework is to re-evaluate IR and turn its object of analysis towards cultures and identities of the Global South. This is done through the uncovering of the mainstream IR representation of states' relations, which is too focused on states, the military and the balance of power. Thus, postcolonialism takes as its object of enquiry the perspective of the colonised or the subalterns and tries to undermine the still existing influence of the big powers over their ex-colonies (Abrahamsen, 2007). What is important is that 'rather than pointing to fixed temporal and geographical periods and spaces, postcolonial theory draws attention to continuities, fluidity, and interconnectedness, economically, politically, and culturally' (Abrahamsen, 2007: 114). This explains why the 'post' in postcolonial theory does not represent a temporal, historical point of separation from the colonial era. Indeed, it aims at representing the legacies of colonialism in today's world politics, and it stresses the importance of highlighting this power relation as it is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of IR (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). Given the fact that IR discourse reflects the way the West identifies itself as in contrast with the 'other', representations become biased and not aimed at unmasking power relations which will always exist between the colonisers and the colonies (Abrahamsen, 2007).

Hence, representation should be seen as a powerful practice which aims at constructing images of the 'self' and 'other', which takes place when the 'self' applies to the 'other' all of the characteristics that he does not represent (Anand, 2007). What is needed is not only an acceptance of this ongoing social construction of identities, but also a willingness to understand the impact that such regimes of representation have on the ones who are being represented. Thus, "the question is no longer whether a representation is true or false but what discursive practises operate to render it true or false" (Anand, 2007: 16). As a matter of fact, the growing status of Postcolonial theory within IR can be explained by its epistemological and ontological emancipatory role which offers the missing link between IR, history and cultural studies. On this ground, Anand (2007) argues that the greatest value of "Postcoloniality" is that it "politicizes cultures and encultures politics" (pp. xv). Consequently, a focus on the people can empower the social discipline of IR, particularly because since the end of World War II, ordinary people seem to have had a greater impact on the development of international politics than before (Darby, 2000). It is necessary to note that the fundamental work which laid the basis for this theory is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) which shows a compelling analysis of the failure of IR to include identities and cultures in its international politics investigation, and in which he defines Eurocentrism as equal to Orientalism and to the representation that has been constructed on it. For the above reason, he asserts that nowadays we are living in a "clash of definitions" and images and not of civilisations (Said, 1996).

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As outlined in this essay, at the starting point of any theoretical analysis it must be acknowledged that ideas are developed in particular contexts, therefore both the environment and the historical background must be taken into account for achieving a better understanding of IR as a theory. By considering these aspects, it can be argued that IR is a Eurocentric discipline as its theories are a reflection of Western thinking. This can be understood by the lack of analytical insights within Third World issues and the willingness to elevate Western thought to a universal degree as opposed to the 'other'. This essay has exemplified this attitude by pointing out the practice of discourse management and also at IR's neglect of history, which results in neo-imperial constructions of regimes of knowledge and representation. Therefore, Postcolonial theory can be a valuable means for rendering IR into a real social discipline which encourages the inclusion of history and culture as fundamental when analysing world politics.

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