

Academic Territory and the Limits of IR

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, FEB 2 2013

For the last twenty years, it is often said that international relations has become a broader, more complex and diverse field of study. The growth in the boundaries of the discipline has come in large part to the end of the Cold War and the overstated “failures” of realist theory, as well as changes in the world itself that scholarship needed to keep up with. Further, the emergence and rise of the critical approaches to the field have also heavily contributed to the expansion of international relations into what is, in most cases, more appropriately referred to as global studies or some variant thereof.

With this expansion has come unclear limits as to what does, or does not, fall within the parameters of the field. There is no ‘hard core assumption’ to use Lakatosian logic to identify when we are actually talking about international relations, or when we are instead into the realm of sociology, law, philosophy, history, anthropology, economics, etc. Such interdisciplinarity is welcomed by many, as it has created a comprehension that scholarship is needed to comprehend the multifarious nature of world affairs. The championing of cross-boundary research is also promoted by universities, who often seek scholars capable of teaching in their primary field of specialization, but also in others. This is particularly true in smaller institutions where the number of faculty expected to cover the diverse expanse of ‘political science’ or ‘political studies’ number less than 10. In this light, diversity in research is a survival skill for academics in international relations.

I have never been necessarily convinced that this trend was a positive for the field, primarily because it is difficult to engage in collegial dialogue on empirical or theoretical issues. Still, I seem to be outnumbered by those that favour this complexity because, as I am normally told, “the world is a complex place.” Just when I think I am convinced that perhaps I need to move past my preoccupation with delineating between the ‘international’ and the ‘global’, I see the recent coverage of ongoing conflicts in Syria and Mali (among others), and the idealism of the field hits its limits.

I have been utterly awe struck throughout the last weeks at the media and scholarly discussions and debates over Mali in particular. My fascination has not come as a result of what is actually going on in Mali or Syria, but at the reactions of those in the scholarly community, especially over social media outlets. Now, regardless of the conflict or crisis, it is fairly safe to assume that the media is going to be limited in its ability to comment. There are those who are superb in the mass media at analyzing or debating such issues, but they are the notable exceptions. Instead, academics are relied on to provide ‘expert’ insights into these issues, even more so when North Americans are expected to know that Mali is a country...on Earth! But what has been of note recently is how territorial academics have been over ‘their’ area of expertise and how the rest of us can easily butcher an analysis.

Do not get me wrong – when it comes to what is happening on the ground in Syria, I will let an expert on Syria do the talking. Hell, as a grand strategy theorist, I am like the meteorologist of international relations – right 10% of the time and the rest I chalk up to ‘irrationality’ or something else that sounds good. My point here is that, as the field becomes larger and more diverse, how do we know whose expertise best fits an explanation and whose can be omitted. Can an international security expert not comment on Mali at all, or is there a limit on just how far their analysis can go?

In theory, most scholars welcome the diversity of the field until, frankly, it impacts the professional side of scholarly life. I certainly can sympathize with Syria experts taking exception to others being asked for insights before them

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because in their lifetime, just how many times is a crisis in Syria going to be in the headlines? Just ask those crazy Soviet Union experts how often they get called these days.

In the end, scholars are also people, and people that pride themselves on a body of work dedicated to a particular subject area. So the next time I get told how closed-minded realists are, I will ask the individual lecturing me for their realist membership card to ensure they are qualified to give me that very lecture.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality

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