

## A hectic season for IR junkies

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, APR 4 2011

This is a hectic season for IR junkies – another American-led war, several new African catastrophes, another crisis over the Euro, and (perhaps, best of all) the return of the nuclear issue.

As these have arisen I've been wondering what kind of a creature IR is in the aftermath of the endless procession of experts that have been paraded on my new flat-screen TV.

Wondering why?

For several years I have been co-Chair of a national panel that has looked into the state of the Humanities – broadly defined to include the Social Sciences. We're at the writing up phase of the exercise and I have been thinking a lot about how one protects the integrity of the Humanities in a world enraptured by the lore of the market and the lure of finance.

Why?

Well, first, there's the chronically under-developed state of IR in this country – thinking and theory is mainly eschewed and most of the energy continues to be devoted to catching the eye of policy-makers or commenting on the dramatic unfolding of the world's far too many wars. The latter in a kind of high-brow journalism of which an earlier generation of IR thinkers so strongly disapproved. To appreciate this – but also for a pleasurable read on the history of the early English School – take a look at the second Martin Wight Memorial Lecture which was delivered by Hedley Bull at the LSE in 1976.

But, mainly, and this is the second point, is that IR itself doesn't know what it is either here, or anywhere else. A weighty tome, the (second) World Social Science Report ([www.unesco.org/shs/wssr](http://www.unesco.org/shs/wssr)) recently crossed my desk – in its 422-pages there's no single mention of IR despite the fact that there's a lot of discussion about the international and the increasingly discredited idea of Globalisation. In the report, geographers (like David Harvey), Sociologists (like Craig Calhoun) and even political scientists (like David Apter) have much interesting stuff to say about the importance of social science but, alas, there's no IR in this tome.

So, is IR, as has been claimed for so long, a social science – or is it something else?

Just the other day, I discovered that an early student of IR in this country, a man called Piet Beukes, read IR with Sir Alfred Zimmern as a Rhodes Scholar in the 1930s. A journalist (and spin doctor) by profession, the most influential book Beukes wrote is called "The Romantic Smuts"[1] which discreetly deals with the saintly Jan Smuts' various liaisons with mainly upper-class British women. The book merely confirms that the undergraduate mantra – the discipline has many roots.

Knowing this, then, is it any wonder that cynicism comes to mind whenever those all too unctuous experts pop up in the media to declare on this or that topic.

If truth be told, and we should admit this, IR is little more than a kind of intellectual chop-shop – a little bit of this, a

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little bit of that – the real truth is wherever that the fickle public finds itself, there you'll find IR: ready – no, yearning – to be of some use – mainly, of course, in service to the rich and powerful.

If you doubt this, listen to how closely the language of those IR junkies that currently making hay over Libya, the Ivory Coast, the Portuguese debt crisis, or Fukushima resembles stock-market talk.

[1] Piet Beukes. *The Romantic Smuts. Woman and love in his life*. Cape Town. Human & Rosseau. 1992.

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