Interview – Vineet Thakur

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Vineet Thakur is a University Lecturer at Leiden University, the Netherlands. He studied at Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi) and has previously worked at Ambedkar University (Delhi), University of Johannesburg and SOAS London. He was a fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Amsterdam, and Smuts Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University. He is the author of *V.S. Srinivasa Sastri: A Liberal Life* (2023); *India's First Diplomat: V.S. Srinivasa Sastri and the Making of Liberal Internationalism* (2021); *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations* (2020, co-authored with Alexander Davis and Peter Vale); *South Africa, Race and the Making of International Relations* (2020, co-authored with Peter Vale; winner of the Francesco Guicciardini Prize for the Best Book in Historical International Relations); *Postscripts on Independence: Foreign Policy Discourses in India and South Africa* (2018) and *Jan Smuts and the Indian Question* (2017).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am, what they call in cricket — an obligatory mention for a South Asian scholar — a bits-and-piece player. I dabble in IR theory, political and diplomatic histories, disciplinary self-narratives, and whatever else fascinates or frustrates me. So I perhaps have little authority to comment on what the exciting debates are in my field. But currently, I am frustrated by how postcolonial scholarship is so easily appropriated by right-wing intellectuals and authoritarian regimes — my frame of reference here is India. And to understand this, I look at the amazing scholarship on caste, primarily from dalit scholars, who have forever warned against the celebration on a specific brand of nativism which champions a non-rational, anti-secular position.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I will have to credit an institution, rather than individuals, for the most fundamental shifts in my thinking. I studied for nearly eight years at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. It had a strong tradition of progressive student politics which was passionately invested in social justice. Over the course of my studies, I probably learnt more from my peers while walking about in the campus or sitting in the *dhabas* than in the classroom. We had some very good professors, but a few hours in the classroom can't compete with copious hours spent every day discussing and learning about politics (including international politics) with fellow students from across the party spectrum.

After finishing my PhD, I went to South Africa for a postdoc and there began another transformative relationship for me, and this time it is an individual, Peter Vale. By now we have published quite a bit together, which is a decent indicator of how much I have learnt from thinking alongside him. But more importantly I have understood much better the responsibility of being an academic, how our values must reflect in our academic work, and why we must keep exploring new worlds in our own work. In essence, I also blame him for my lack of disciplinary fidelity!

In *Imperial Mission, 'Scientific' Method: an Alternative Account of the Origins of IR*, you argue that the very origin of IR stems from South Africa as a state built on racism and colonialism. How does this contradict notions of IR thus far?

I did this work with Peter Vale and Alexander Davis. When we started out, we weren't really looking for an origins

story. The project actually started with a picture that hung of Peter's wall — it was the cover of a journal called *The State/Die Staat* which was published in South Africa from 1908 to 1912. As we went deeper into the story of this journal, we were surprised to find that the British journal *Round Table* was modelled on it. The more the journal's story unfolded, the more it became evident that an assemblage of individuals, ideas and initiatives that later contributed to the formation of a discipline called IR were first gathered in, then yet-to-be, South Africa.

We were obviously not the first ones to say that IR has racist foundations. Our line of inquiry was certainly inspired by Robert Vitalis's work, but it also built on nearly three decades of postcolonial scholarship that had investigated links between racism and IR. Our contribution is, I think, more about thinking of other routes in which we can think of origins stories of the discipline. IR origins stories are often too focused on the United States and Britain. We wanted to show that those origins stories (such as the ones related to Aberystwyth and Chatham House in the British context) have histories too. If you start with Aberystwyth or Chatham House, you are likely to get a view of IR as a post-WWI 'idealist' project – one that was interested in mitigating, if not solving, the problem of war. But if you start in South Africa, you cannot look past the racist imaginings of that project.

How does re-conceptualising the antecedent of the 'international' as not 'anarchy' but 'Empire' affect the theory of realism?

In the social contractual tradition, anarchy, as any political theorist would tell us, was a 'thought experiment'. And Charles Mills shows very clearly how that was always a racial contract. But without going into conceptual issues, we need to make a distinction between, drawing on Carr, how one imagines the world to be, and what the world is. Anarchy lets us assume that each actor enters the system, constitutionally, more or less as an equal, and it is one's power that determines one's place in the system.

Any historian would balk at this simplistic telling. Until about the second world war, the dominant political form was empire, not nation states, whatever the Westphalian myth might tell us. In attempting to look for constitutional equals, realism invariably focuses on imperial powers. Those not considered part of this system, the colonised and the racialised, become inconvenient data set. Afterall Morgenthau called Africa a 'politically empty space'. As Sankaran Krishna wrote years ago that only in Europe can one talk about the period between the Congress of Vienna and the First World War as 'Hundred Years Peace'. Balance of power worked in Europe, producing peace, because violence was exported to the colonies. Indeed, War, as Tarak Barkawi brilliantly shows, is only a war when it is among European powers.

If one has to understand International Politics in its totality, it is imperative that we focus on those who experienced the world as unequals, those who were often at the receiving end of the imperial power. This is something we see in the current war on Ukraine where some of the most prominent realists cannot just see why a Ukrainian perspective matters.

In what ways can we recognize and learn from the "women whose intellectual labour has been unjustly erased" in the field of IR?

I can't say this enough: what an incredible achievement by Patricia Owens, Kimberly Hutchings, Katharina Rietzler and Sarah Dunstan! 'The Women and the History of International Thought' project needs to be celebrated for all the good reasons. It is not perfect, as they are first to recognise. The project is constrained by the political economy of the discipline – it still focuses on British, European and American women. But this is one of those initiatives that has birthed a thousand new projects. I can think of several colleagues working on the international thought of women from across the world. It has pushed even those who are critically minded to become more self-reflective to engage with the silences — contrived or co-incidental — of the marginalised in their narratives. In my own work on South Africa, I realised how Olive Schreiner, a feisty campaigner for world peace and strong critic of the bunch of privileged Oxford-educated white men I was looking at, went unrecognised. Further, their work has also pushed me to think in other directions and provided methodological cues to engage with other forms of silences. Increasingly, as I mention at the start, my own work focuses on caste and international relations.

You argue in *The multiple births of International Relations* that whilst IR today at times seems self-contained, it is a discipline that should be studied as pluralistic and diverse. Is IR today evolving and moving to re-focus on this for more meaningful, intersectional study? Do you see any rejection within the discipline of an ever-evolving IR?

I would be hesitant to speak for the whole of IR. I am not sure if there is a coherent mainstream — not anymore at least. But I also admit that I deal with only a specific subset of the discipline, that too not fully, so my knowledge is patchy. What needs to be acknowledged however is that there is already such diverse and exciting scholarship in IR (look at e-IR interviews for instance; the range of types of works being done is incredible). We cannot anymore prosaically pronounce that 'IR is state-centric' or that 'IR is American social science'. To me, that assumption just ignores — and dare I say also erases — the immense diversity and plurality of what is IR today. For this we must thank generation(s) of scholars who came before us and fought the good fight. Our responsibility is to keep making that space larger.

All this is obviously not to say that IR doesn't have problems. There is always the inglorious Reviewer 2, who gets to decide what counts as IR. (Who by the way, doesn't come from outside — so I am sure I have been one too). The skewed political economy of the discipline that favours Euro-American voices and specific methodologies has always been a challenge. Those emerge anew in the face of new changes. Increasingly, we must discuss what are good practices of inclusion, when we research on or talk about the marginalised parts/peoples of the world in our works? [Is it enough to just cite Amitav Acharya, for instance, and call your work Global IR?] We also see an uncritical romanticism about the non-West. But despite all of this, I do think we are moving towards a more inclusive and capacious discipline.

What does the study of origins and births of theories, concepts, nations, states offer knowledge creation in IR?

I'm afraid I can only disappoint if I speak more generally, but let me speak from the standpoint of my work. I realise 'origins/births' tends to appear a lot in my titles! An origins story, whether of theories, concepts, nations, states or disciplines, is by its very constitution an exclusionary claim — it discards every other possibility to make a singular claim about where something starts. It is equally an authenticity claim. It legitimizes one rendition over others. So, as I have mentioned above, if one believes that the origins of IR is about mitigating war in an anarchical system, all the future stories of IR can only be told on that basis. But if one argues that IR was about racializing the world, race becomes a legitimate issue of enquiry within IR. Most importantly, origins story may appear to an enquiry about the past, but it is at its core a claim towards carving a particular future. Russia's criminal war on Ukraine best illustrates this.

The alternative origins stories which some of us try to tell are however not claims for recognition of them being the only ones. Alternative stories open the possibilities of not just other pasts, but also other futures. Idea of multiple origins desacralizes the origins story, and allows for a more pluralistic, less deterministic navigation of routes, rather than roots.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Let me faithfully pass on two pieces of advice that I received from my own supervisors. My MPhil and PhD advisor, Siddharth Mallavarapu, once told me that he decided early on that if he had to survive academia, he could not just be reading IR for 30 years. His advice was to read everything from everywhere, with a bit of IR. I may have clung rather fastidiously to reading only 'a bit of IR', but his advice on reading has really helped in general, not merely in keeping academia interesting but also in developing 'skill sets' beyond one's discipline. [His other advice was to read 100 pages every day — I let that slide, of course!]

The second advice was from my postdoc supervisor, Peter Vale. He once read a draft of an article I wrote and returned it with a heavy use of the red pen. But before I took this as a sign of his disapproval of my work, he said gently, paraphrasing Ernst Hemingway, all good writing happens in re-writing, and asked me to go through the piece

at least 15 times. I thought he was only half-joking, until I co-wrote with him. The painstaking rigour with which he edited his own writing was an instructive lesson, but what converted me to his faith was the joy with which he did it. I don't have the patience to edit something 15 times, but re-writing is a process that I have come to enjoy immensely. I wish it upon everyone!