IR and the Global South: final confessions of a schizophrenic teacher

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I have just finished teaching what, probably, is my final class in Introduction to IR Theory. Whatever happens next year, I'll not again have to stand in front of 400-odd African students and try to explain why it is that the world they have elected to study was made by western ways of knowing. As I've hacked my way through the thicket of the Great Debates these thirty-odd years past, I've increasingly wondered what my students must have made of my passion for ideas which appear at odds with the lives they lead – even, indeed, the countries they have come to know. In a curious way, I feel that I have come full circle.

Let me explain why. In my final year of schooling we were required to commit to memory a piece of verse. For marks, we were required to recite this in front of our peers. I remember choosing Thomas Hardy's poem, *The Darkling Thrush*, with its bleak description of a wintry English landscape. The summer's day appointed for the recitation was however boiling hot. I clearly remember looking out of the first floor window of the classroom to the parched scrubland (or veld, as we lovingly call it) and wondering at the bizarre contrast between my faithful mouthing of Hardy's lines and the entirely other world about. In a curious kind of way, then, I've continued to teach Hardy (and his images) to generations of students who have lived their lives under a blazing sun.

That this has all happened in South Africa, is not all that strange. After all, even a thin understanding of the country's history suggests three great *international* moments: British Empire, Afrikaner Republicanism, and African Liberation. The first two were decidedly Western (or European) moments notwithstanding that Britain's imperial project was not inter-state relations in the strictest sense, nor that the second, Afrikaner nationalism, took both intellectual and political refuge in a rather forced African identity.

The origins of the discipline in South Africa are relatively easy to identify: occasionally, taught in Politics departments in the 1950s (and earlier, still, in Law Faculties), a separate academic department called "International Relations" was established at the University of the Witwatersrand (known as Wits) in the 1960s. Its creation was part of a wider scheme to memorialise Jan Smuts – Boer General, Imperial Field-Marshall and South African Prime Minister. A Chair in IR was established at Wits in his name in 1962, but in the new South Africa the habitual honouring of the Chair with this name seems to have ceased – a pity I think.

But if this disciplinary history can be readily traced, less confidently we can explore the development of thinking around "the international" in South Africa and, indeed, the southern African region. A long-standing hunch that the unfolding of the idea was hidden in British imperialism was confirmed a few years back when, at a second-hand book-store, I picked up a copy of a book published in 1912. Called *"South Africa and the British Empire. A Course of Lessons for the Cape Matriculation History Syllabus on 1912"*, it was written by the London-trained, A.S. Bleby who was the Principal of the Girls High School, Rondebosch, Cape – the school is now called "Rustenberg Girls High School". (The importance of the book and its place in the making of IR in South Africa is the subject of research I plan to do with my doctorate student, Georgina Barrett.)

For these immediate purposes, I want to suggest that the syllabus which the book addresses positioned the South Africa under early construction within an imperial project which then had less than fifty years to run. The political prize

offered to humanity by the idea of state and state sovereignty is carefully set down in the opening chapter with a discussion of Wars of the Spanish Succession, and the Treaty of Utrecht which is the subject of the book's second chapter. This is as good a compendium of history, both South African and international, as one would find but its importance for the present exercise is the force of the imperial optic it provides. There is no word amongst these 423 pages that does not reflect Empire as the final sentence in the book so graphically suggests: "The peace and freedom of South Africa, and her leisure to quietly develop her resources, are secured to her by the power of the British Empire and the protection of the British Navy."

The formal study of IR in South Africa remained embedded in this imperial culture into the 1960s. The publications of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), which was modelled on Chatham House, show little inclination to break with the hierarchal understandings of international relations. This is notwithstanding the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism or, slightly later, the pressure for African independence. If anything, analysis of the Afrikaner issue seldom moves beyond the same kind of caricaturing that marked imperial thinking in the lead up to the Boer War in the 1890s. African nationalism, on the other hand, is passed through the same social Darwinist perspectives that drove Modernisation theory and would, with time, morph into Development Studies. Incidentally, the SAIIA got itself into a pickle in the early-1970s when it inadvertently linked development studies issues with the self-styled independence of apartheid's infamous 'independent' Homelands.

When I took a first post-graduate course in IR at Wits in the early-1970s, the staple IR diet had changed, however. The theory course, taught by different lecturers, drew upon two texts, Hans Morgenthau's "Politics among Nations" and Kenneth Waltz's "Man, State and War". This happened because each of the lecturers – contra the South African custom – had studied in the US: one at Chicago where he had been taught by Morgenthau; the other at Cornell where Waltz was all the rage. But more influential than what we were taught was the publication in 1968 of Larry Bowman's piece called "The Subordinate State System of Southern Africa." (1968) which hypothesised "the existence of a sub-ordinate state system" and set out to link the "notion of an integrated" system to 'the possibility of future stability in the region". This idea paved the way for a new way of thinking about southern Africa: its future would be determined not by (what Bowman called) 'historical- constitutional approaches' but by the 'facts' of systemic thinking. By the former, he meant British approaches to IR; the latter, of course, was American positivism.

The attractiveness of this optic as a way to order the world and, more importantly, to manage political uncertainty was stabilised by the appearance, four years later, of the book, *Southern Africa in Perspective: Essays in Regional Politics,* which was edited by two Americans, Christian Potholm and Richard Dale. The collection included contributions by "political revolutionaries, academic experts, and national spokesman" but it certainly confirmed that southern Africa could indeed be viewed as "a system of states". Although some of the contributors to the book were committed to an historicist interpretation of IR, the mood of the book was towards the systems-thinking that would come to dominate the discipline in the US.

It will be plain to readers of e-IR that these approaches remain at some distance from the intense conversations on the issue of liberation – national and other – that was taking place in various places across the world in the 1960s and 1970s. One such place was at the University of Dar es Salaam where, at the time, an interesting and fecund community of political economists was rethinking Africa in its global setting. Writing recently on the experience of the South African exile Ruth First, Barbara Harlow reports that First's Semester at Dar "coincided with the presentations, seminars, debates and colloquia across the social sciences faculty of such intellectual upstarts – now luminaries, even posthumously – as Terence Ranger, Walter Rodney, Mahmood Mamdani, Archie Mafeje, John Saul, Jacques Depelchin and Issa G. Shivji." Quite remarkably, given the array of this talent and the huge outpouring of their work, their names are excluded from the teaching and writing of the IR community in South Africa – and elsewhere, for that matter.

This work has not been entirely ignored in this country, I am relieved to report. In Sociology, in Politics and in History aspects of the Dar (and other African) Schools has been taken up. Happily, too, some of these writers – John Saul and Jacques Depelchin – are now regular visitors to the country; Mahmood Mamdani briefly taught at the University of Cape Town before he was hounded out by the epistemic police in South Africa's oldest university; deservedly, Issa Shivji was recently awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Rhodes University; sadly Walter Rodney and Archie Mafeje, a

South African, have passed on while Ruth First herself was assassinated by an apartheid bomb in 1982.

But IR's determined failure to seriously consider this work suggests a myopia which simply beggars belief. The rejection of it was based on the argument that this was economically-centered work which has no place in IR. It was opportunist of course: a point made by the ease with which the IR community – in South Africa and elsewhere – seized upon the repertoire of neo-liberal approaches to buttress the triumphalism around Globalisation in the early years of this century. In South Africa, incidentally, much public analysis of IR is nothing more than a mindless repetition of the neo-liberal mantra – a la Thomas Friedman – around the salvation to society on offered by free markets.

Drawing South African IR away from its moorings in a world essentially alien to the African experience has proved all the more difficult because the hegemonic form of social organization on the continent remains the sovereign state. More particularly, imagining something else is impossible in South Africa because 'the moment of independence' remains close at hand. As a result, the curse of 'othering' remains – the towering figure of Mandela aside – perhaps the only thing that might be keeping the country together. This was so painfully brought home by the terrible xenophobic attacks which played out in this country eighteen months ago. So, as South Africans approach the idea of the international their first instinct is the state-under-construction. This, even one-eyed globalisers – those local disciples of Thomas Friedman that I've already mentioned – could not rupture.

But, if truth be told, other clocks are ticking on the continent. Sadly, the frantic diplomacy in the Sudan has less and less to do with the immediate tragedy on Darfur and more and more to do with the certainty – a point recently made by Hillary Clinton and confirmed to me by a South African diplomat – that the country will break apart.

How was I to teach my students to anticipate events like these?

There is almost nothing in the IR canon on Africa. Each time there is an encounter between IR and Africa the discipline and its cult figures resort to their individual default position – Realism, Liberalism, Critique and Social Construction. Each of these lenses are carefully grounded in western epistemology and most, of course, are at great distance from Africa and its ways. My own efforts to draw African voices closer have been met with derision. In the late-1970s when Ali Mazrui was talking about an African nuclear bomb I asked my students to read his ideas. The expatriate head of the department in which I was then teaching was near apoplectic when he heard what I had done. And in the 1980s I once asked the then Director of the IISS, of which I am an alumnus and was a member, why the thoughts and ideas of African liberation movements were not ever the subjects of their Adelphi Paper series – I was given very short shrift.

Should there be a fully African IR? Of course not.

But, plainly, there should be is a greater sensitivity to African ways of knowing the international. Siba Grovogui's work has opened important windows on this issue but much greater work needs to be done – a point by the way, I constantly have made to my students. I have also told them that there is no way forward in the discipline without addressing three events which IR, with its penchant for presentism , has never seen – Slavery, Colonialism and Empire.

These are all big topics, of course, but, hey, now that I no longer have to teach IR maybe I can try to really get to understanding it!

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