Beyond Babylon? Teaching International Politics in the 21st Century

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JONAS HAGMANN, MAY 7 2015

"The voice of the Third World," Jean-Paul Sartre famously rejoiced in his preface to Frantz Fanon's 1961 book*The Wretched of the Earth*, "has finally been articulated and can no longer be ignored."[2] Back in the 1960s and 1970s, progressive North American and European universities had indeed started to address international affairs from more diverse vantage points. This process was not uniform across academia. But at least some scholars made efforts to understand the politics and societal dynamics of other nations from the inside out, as opposed to assessing and explaining them through projections from afar.

Fifty years after the works of Sartre and Fanon, one might expect academic diagnoses of international affairs to have become ever more differentiated and comprehensive. After all, scholars such as Edward Saïd[3] or Dipesh Chakrabarty[4] popularised the call for perspectivist approaches. Considerable time has passed since these thinkers' statements, giving their arguments ample opportunity to sink in. Yet, the discipline of International Relations (IR) shows surprisingly little signs of such a globalist development. Certainly – a few scholars still question how academic diagnoses and concepts of world politics emerge from particular cultural sites.[5] But within the larger IR discipline, there is, at best, merely an emergent critical questioning of the analytical dispositions inherent in scientific diagnoses of international political phenomena.[6]

Classroom Socialization Practices in the US and Europe

A recent inquiry into classroom socialization practices – the first analysis of this kind – shows that in the theory courses of American and European elite universities, thousands of graduate students in IR continue to be handed a distinct, 'lopsided' kind of knowledge. [7] For example, an analysis of mandatory reading shows that the core IR courses at elite U.S. universities such as Berkeley, Princeton, and Harvard rely on analytical schemes such as those developed by neorealist Kenneth Waltz and neoliberal institutionalist Robert Keohane. No less than three quarters of the readings assigned at the top-ten American universities follow the clinical suggestion to understand societies and policies as utility rationalist behavior.

By the same token, more than 80 percent of the works assigned in these programs are written by male academics, and an astonishing 95 percent of the material is authored by U.S. scholars, or scholars who were intimately socialized into American social science after decades of living and working in the United States (see table below). [8] Consequently, IR students become proficient in addressing global social and political problems at the hands of economistic, male, and American perspectives. But the same students are neither taught to apply reflexive perspectives to world politics emphasizing the role of local, not necessarily economistic motives, nor are they sensitized to non-American, non-Western, and female scholars' perspectives on international affairs.

Teaching international politics in the 21st century – coding of assigned readings in IR theory courses[9]

IR elite universities	Authors' national base %				Type of knowledge %			Author gender %		
	National	U.S	Other EU	Rest of world	Utility rational	Reflexive	Other	M	F	Joint
In the U.S.	*see 'U.S.'*	94	6	0	73	10	17	82	10	8
In Europe	25	57	18	0	41	24	36	86	11	3
In the U.S. and in Europe	54	73	13	0	55	18	28	84	11	5

Certainly, the pedagogical programs of the leading European schools of international affairs differ more strongly from each other, as opposed to the seemingly standardized curricula of the American universities. The distribution of universities in Geneva, Moscow, Cambridge, or Florence across diverse national and cultural settings means that European higher education offers a more heterogeneous set of teaching formats than their American counterparts. The London School of Economics, for instance, strongly emphasizes historical analyses and Anglo-American scholarship, dedicating more time than anyone else to discussing the so-called English School perspective on world politics, primarily the analyses of scholars such as Hedley Bull and Martin Wight. In contrast, Sciences Po in Paris prominently focuses on sociological analyses and scholarship produced by Europeans, assigning works such as those of Raymond Aron and Pierre Bourdieu. The University of Munich, to give a third example, stands out for its exclusive reliance on IR scholarship produced by male academics and its generous mobilization of American IR.

Such relative divergences between individual institutions aside, however, the elite European universities' emphasis on economistic, utility rational models of society is still strong overall, and their focus on male scholarship is just as pronounced as in U.S. schools.[10] Furthermore, even if European political science departments do teach world politics in less self-referential ways than their American counterparts, at least assigning *both* American and European views on world politics, the elite European institutes draw exclusively on transatlantic knowledge also for their take. No matter that the top universities of the North Atlantic region emphasize American and European scholarship differently, then, none of these elite schools teaches *any* non-Western theory of world politics in their core IR courses. So if it holds true that distinctly non-Western voices have been articulated, as Sartre and others proclaimed half a century ago, then such voices are not actually listened to by the relevant branches of Western academia today. In the early 21st century, non-Western knowledge of world politics is not addressed whatsoever in the International Relations core courses of Western elite universities, the most powerful institutions and study programs in charge of scientifically explaining world politics.

Is this teaching strategy intended?

It is difficult to tell to what extent Western academics and university administrators are cognizant of the schooling practices described here. In many places, so it seems, IR is simply held capable of providing neutral explanations of social and political dynamics worldwide.[11] A number of established political science theories and journals, so it appears, are seen objectively superior to any other kind of knowledge. With this assumption at hand, knowledge is conceptualized hierarchically, i.e. as scientifically superior or inferior. Thus there is no pressing need to reflect on the cultural and historical dispositions of Western social science beyond methodological quality – notwithstanding the fact that all of these theories and journals happen to emanate from North America and Europe, and regardless also of the fact that the bulk of current IR theories have been produced during the Cold War, a period marked by political and military (nuclear) frameworks fairly specific to the North.

Regardless of whether the narrow analytical schooling practice of Western universities is a deliberate strategy or not, however, it is clear that contemporary classroom practices create both epistemic conflicts and practical problems of communication. On the epistemic level, the rigid projection of distinctly regional theories onto the world seems an exceedingly authoritative academic strategy, if not a crude kind of epistemic power politics. It presents as a strategy that stands in stark contrast to both academia's and Western societies' own democratic ideals. In its substantive analyses, IR and Western political systems are squarely dedicated to fostering pluralism and peace and cooperation between nations. Epistemologically, however, the discipline appears to have little concern about its own practice of projecting a distinct body of thought onto the globe, or about the resulting disregard of others' perspectives on world

politics.

More importantly perhaps, on a practical level, problems of communication and understanding are a consequence of this schooling practice. In a time of accelerated globalization processes, the exposure of students to narrow perspectives obstructs their comprehension of contending systems of thought. With its lack of contrast with alternatives, such teaching complicates students' own emancipation from fixed ideas. And the strong emphasis on economic behavior makes it difficult for students to overcome abstract utility rationalist diagnoses and policy manuals, and to stop likening the interplay of societies to businesses competing in an imaginary market.

As surprising as it may seem, students are still made to learn a fairly one-dimensional understanding of international reality in the early twenty-first century, as opposed to dealing with the issue of how different local, methodological, political, and gendered approaches provide different renderings of reality in different places. Whether discussing unrest in the Arab world, security dynamics in Afghanistan, or foreign politics in Latin America – many academic core curricula still seek to assess and explain world politics from an Archimedean vantage point, on the basis of a singular and objective body of thought. Such a modernist non-engagement with the cultural foundations of academic study programs not only strikes as excessively assertive, and unduly 'retro'. It also strikes as a daring intellectual strategy. Since when narrowly defined diagnoses are projected onto the world, the danger of constructing transfigured and under-differentiated representations of distant places becomes especially acute. Students of international politics are led to act on imageries of Africa, Islam, the Balkans, China, and any other seemingly 'exotic' or 'distant' region or topic, without an awareness of the ways in which these imageries have been intimately colored by Western authors and their respective histories, trajectories, values, and world views. Instead of speaking *with* others about political issues, students of world politics are essentially induced to speak *about* others and their political topics.

Today, there are few reasons for not addressing this lopsided intellectual schooling at the top of the specialized knowledge tree, and plenty of opportunity to develop a more reflexive and comprehensive pedagogical stance on world politics. For the Western university system, regardless of its parochial teaching predilections, does not represent a unitary professional system, a social system *mise au pas* whose works and arguments cannot be revised or critically engaged. In numerous places, both within and outside leading schools, dominant instruction patterns can, or at least could, be put into perspective. Yet, it is also the inner organization of Western academia that complicates the emergence of a more comprehensive engagement with contending understandings of global order. Effectively, an entire battery of measures and self-regulations inside contemporary higher education works against such a practice. In IR as in other disciplines, writing many texts rather than pertinent ones, publishing in American peer-reviewed journals, writing in English as opposed to the language of a scholar's own language, acquiring third-party research funds just for the sake of successfully acquiring money, and – ironically, given their unrivalled economist and utterly self-referential penchants – spending research stays at top American universities are put forward as key elements of scholarly accomplishment, and hence also of university recruitment and academic reproduction. By contrast, teaching philosophy and other critical public schooling functions are valued very little, if they are recognized at all.[12]

What knowledge does IR seek to disseminate, and what kinds of analysts does it seek to produce?

As a junior IR scholar, this makes me wonder: Is the discipline intended to enforce a singular reading of world politics, or can its instruction be redirected toward an overt engagement with the multiplicity of local diagnoses that are formulated in everyday practice? And, on a higher level of organization, what critical public function does IR really seek to fulfil? With its distinct trajectory, it seems to me that 'the West' in general, and IR theory in particular, had not only historically set out to explain the world in specific ways, ways that postcolonial intellectuals decoded and challenged decades ago. In recent years, the discipline's own organizational dynamics have also reinforced its self-referential practices ever more strongly, directing its professional ideals toward performance aims that have less and less to do with a critical public function.

A reflected re-engagement with the pedagogical practices and ideals of academia, then, seems paramount today if IR is to be prevented from turning into a proverbial ivory tower, a self-referential site of knowledge generation that fails to connect with the practiced global multiplicity of world views. The point of such re-engagement is not at all to deny core values that Western societies uphold, and neither is it to suppose that other knowledge systems – some of

which overlap fairly intimately with Western ones in practice (such as those oriented to socialist political theory), and other of which are even less pluralistic or open to dialogue than the Western systems themselves – would be free from spin. The point is to stop reducing the world to a restricted and one-sided number of dimensions in higher education, and to train students better and to provide better public policy advice by exposing, contrasting, and critically subverting the multiplicity of international knowledges that exist.

To progress in this direction, it seems that one should yet not stop at addressing and debating the geo-epistemic values and dispositions of those knowledge systems that claim scientific authority over world politics – even if in many instances, such a practice would already represent quite some achievement. Moving beyond critique of existing IR penchants, it seems as important to reflect more systematically on the discipline's own sociology as such. How IR is conditioned *itself* by powerful and evolving managerial, economic, political and professional logics also forms part of the larger puzzle, for such logics have strong effects over both the discipline's own organization and its relations with the lay public. Seen this way, the development of truly globalist perspectives on world politics should not stop at the epistemological level. It should also entail more sustained reflection and a deeper understanding of the politics and sociology of IR proper.[13]

Notes

[1] In this article, the term Babylon is a loose reference to the Rastafarian critique of projected knowledge systems.

[2] Jean-Paul Sartre (1961). Préface. In: Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Paris: Éditions Maspero.

[3] Edward Saïd (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

[4] Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[5] For examples see Steve Smith (2002). The United States and the Discipline of International Relations: Hegemonic Country, Hegemonic Discipline. *International Studies Review* 4(2): 67-85, or David Chandler (2008). Human Security: The Dog That Didn't Bark. *Security Dialogue* 39(4): 427-438.

[6] See Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver (2010). *International Relations Scholarship Around the World.* London: Routledge.

[7] For the full analysis – including a longer discussion and the results of the individual schools mentioned in this essay – see Jonas Hagmann and Thomas Biersteker (2014). Beyond the Published Discipline: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of International Studies. *European Journal of International Relations* 20(2): 291-315.

[8] For an earlier analysis of IR teaching at U.S. universities see Hayward Alker and Thomas Biersteker (1984) The Dialectics of World Order: Notes for a Future Archaeologist of International Savoir Faire. *International Studies Quarterly* 28: 121-142.

[9] The U.S. schools include Berkeley, Columbia, Chicago, Harvard, Michigan, MIT, Princeton, San Diego, Stanford and Yale; the European schools Aberystwyth, Berlin, Bologna, Budapest, Florence, IHEID Geneva, London, Moscow, Munich, Oxford, Paris, Tübingen and Zurich. The coding category 'Other' mainly includes historical texts, biographies of statesmen and methods texts.

[10] Indeed, European schools teach as much Applied Rational Choice literature as the U.S. schools of this sample. It is just that the latter also add formal theory and quantitative works to that sub-category of utility rationalism, whereas the former complement their focus on ARC with reflexive and historical works.

[11] Paul Feyerabend (1987). *Farewell to Reason*. New York: Verso. Also see Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond (2006). La science est-elle universelle? *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May issue.

[12] Milja Kurki (2011) The Limitations of the Critical Edge: Reflections on Critical and Philosophical IR Scholarship Today. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40(1): 129-146.

[13] Félix Grenier and Jonas Hagmann (2015). How to Defend World Politics Against International Relations? Toward a Political Sociology of IR Education. Paper presented at the ISA Annual Convention, New Orleans, 21 February.

About the author:

Jonas Hagmann is a Senior Researcher and Lecturer at ETH Zürich. His research focuses on the local conceptualization of world politics, with special attention to notions of international insecurity. Jonas Hagmann is the author of *(In)Security and the Production of International Relations* (Routledge, 2015), and his articles appeared in *European Journal of International Relations*, *Security Dialogue*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* and *Contemporary Security Policy*, among others.