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Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/12/12/toward-an-affirmative-critique-of-abstraction-in-international-relations-theory/>

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The act of abstraction is never devoid of power. Generally, abstraction tends to be understood as a method of cognition, a way to make sense of a world that is so diverse and vast that it would otherwise be incomprehensible. This method of cognition selectively reduces the world's complexities to a comprehensible account. Through selection, certain aspects of the 'limitless reality' are centralized, and other aspects are backgrounded or even left out. In this sense, abstracting, as the process whereby selection takes place, and abstractions, as the representational forms through which this process is stabilized and through which its results function, are often charged for leading to oversimplification and overgeneralization (McCormack, 2012: 715-717). Problematically, abstractions in theorization are more often than not based upon a particular subject position, which fulfills an ostensibly neutral function, but is implicitly white, male, and Western (McCormack, 2012: 718). As a result, it is 'difficult to overestimate the violence generated by processes of abstraction' (Loftus, 2015: 366).

Similarly so, in the discipline of International Relations (IR), where the process of abstraction and the resulting abstractions can be said to be at once political and depoliticizing, as particular voices, agencies and political aims remain far removed from the battlefield (Krishna, 2001: 402). Problematically, IR's abstractions have tended to exclude questions of race, and misunderstand contexts outside of the West. The English School exemplifies these problems. Accounts of the expansion of International Society have obscured the role of colonialism (Keene, 2002), neglected indigenous populations (Keal, 2003) and misunderstood processes of socialization outside of the West (Suzuki, 2009). While the Western-centric concepts and theories of IR are increasingly being called into question, many of the newer ideas remain embedded within the same racialized logics (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam, 2014: 10; Buzan and Gonzalez-Peleaz, 2009). This analysis will focus on the issue of race, in light of IR's abstractions, which has influenced international relations in a myriad of ways, but has been given the epistemological status of 'silence' within the discipline (Persaud and Walker, 2001: 374). Therefore, according to Sankaran Krishna, in constituting the dominant narratives, the processes of abstraction within IR continue to empower the colonizer in its relations with the colonized (Krishna, 2001: 408).

While I sympathize with these arguments, I will argue that many critiques of abstraction in IR theory tend to depend upon a very limited conception of abstraction. While they often do acknowledge that abstraction is an unavoidable moment in the constitution of knowledge, abstraction is often contrasted with historicity and with knowledge derived from 'lived experience' (Krishna, 2001: 403). I will demonstrate that 'bottom-up' or 'lived experience' approaches are not the only ways to move beyond the problematic character of many of IR's abstractions. I will problematize the distinction between concrete 'lived' experience and abstraction, and emphasize the real and productive facets of abstraction. I will argue that rather than moving away from abstraction, we have to investigate the emergence of silencing abstractions within IR, and their concrete impact of these abstractions, in order to understand and utilize the fact that there is always more than one way of something being or becoming abstract. The main problem with abstraction in IR theory is the lack of reflexivity regarding the conditions under which these abstractions emerge. This reflexivity is needed in order to understand and modify the ways in which abstractions are woven into the very actions that produce and reproduce racial relations and other aspects of international relations (Toscano, 2008b: 73). I will argue that abstraction is not only insurmountable in the theorization of the international, but that a rethinking of the process of abstraction as fundamentally historical can help constitute a critical praxis that is rather more abstract, to

Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

be able to grasp the real potential for emancipatory change.

Knowing and Abstracting

Abstraction is crucial to organize and understand the world around us, as abstraction is a prerequisite for cognitive operations such as symbolization, classification, generalization and pattern recognition (Welling, 2007: 171). As Hans Welling demonstrates, abstraction is especially crucial in creative processes, by enabling the understanding of relationships between entities (Welling, 2007: 171-172). The prominent historical conception of abstraction is in the form of 'generic abstraction', which is for instance present in humanist thinking. In this sense, 'humanity' and other political, religious and economic abstractions such as 'the state' or 'God' are established a priori, and are not prey to historical or logical becoming (Toscano, 2008a: 274-275). This conception of abstraction became criticized by Karl Marx for not being 'rational' but 'infantile' abstractions, as we cannot constitute an abstraction of something like humanity in general (Parekh and Parekh, 2015: 157).

Abstractions can also be derived a posteriori, such as through observation in empiricist logic. In most dominant contemporary conceptions of abstraction in IR, such as positivist conceptions, abstractions are constituted a posteriori through an intellectual withdrawal from the world. This withdrawal enables a rational examination of the world's complexities. This logic of distancing is the act of separation of subject and object (McCormack, 2012: 718). These latter, dominant conceptions of abstraction in IR are criticized by post-positivists and others for its reductionism, universalism and misguided sense of objectivity. Through reduction, the lived experience of human existence is reduced to delimited categories. Meanwhile, the subjective character of abstractions and categories of human existence is often denied. The dominance of Western-centric abstractions in IR leads to an understanding of international phenomena in relation to a prefabricated set of possibilities, exemplified by fallacies such as the 'failed state' and 'quasi-state' discourses, which form very problematic misunderstandings of political formations outside of the West (Sabaratnam, 2011: 8; Call, 2008). By normalizing dominant categories of understanding, a universalism that suppresses different conceptions of human existence is established. Moreover, in the process of abstractionism, the diverse agencies of people are moved aside, while the world of states and other abstract actors remains (Sylvester, 2013: 613; Sylvester, 2012).

Critiques of Abstractions on Race in IR theory

The issue of race 'signifies and symbolizes socio-political conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies'. (Omi and Winant as in Thompson, 2013: 136). While race is a social fact, this does not mean that racial categories do not acquire real-life social meaning through social, political and economic forces and institutions (Chowdhry and Rai, 2009: 86). The social construction of the meaning of race and the theorization of the international have a long and complex history. Race has not only been a fundamental force in the making of the world system, but also in the representations and explanations of that system (Persaud and Walker, 2001: 374). As Robert Vitalis demonstrates, the history of the discipline of IR cannot be disentangled from racial politics, as concerns over colonial administration and 'race development' have been central to the development of the discipline (Vitalis, 2010: 910).

But while the factor of race is to an extent taken seriously in IR theory, for instance as a factor impacting the spatial and demographic configuration of the world and economic exploitation, the importance of racial politics in the constitution of the discipline itself has been neglected, or rather silenced (Persaud and Walker, 2001: 374-376). According to Vitalis, there is a dominant 'norm against noticing' that many of IR's concepts and theories are founded on racialized logics (Vitalis, 2000: 333). As Geeta Chowdhry and Shirin Rai argue, a series of ontological and epistemological maneuvers within the discipline structure a 'common sense' regarding the boundaries of the subject matter of IR, which does not include the racialized foundations of IR theory (Chowdhry and Rai, 2009: 85). Krishna calls this structure of common sense the 'ideology of the discipline'. This ideology is achieved through certain disciplining moves within the pedagogy of IR, among which 'a fetish for abstraction', which obstructs other ways of knowing and the development of self-awareness and reflectivity (Krishna, 2001: 407). Tarak Barkawi argues that meaningfully including phenomena such as imperialism and empire into IR theories would challenge the discipline's generalizing tendencies, as the forms, degrees and mechanisms of empire varied considerably in historical perspective (Barkawi, 2010: 14). The discipline's ahistorical fetish for abstraction is not only problematic in

Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

understanding concrete history, but also 'screens, rationalizes and elides the violence, dispossession and genocide that have characterized encounters between Europe and the rest of the world since 1492' (Thompson, 2013: 134).

These scholars point at a discrepancy between IR's ahistorical abstractions that centralize Western experiences and mask the discipline's racialized foundations, and the reality of racism and violence in past and present international relations. These scholars are rightfully critical of the ways in which abstractions in IR include certain issues as being important, such as great power politics, sovereignty and terrorism, and others as not so important, such as issues of imperialism, and experiences from outside of the West (Barkawi, 2010: 1; Krishna, 2001: 421). They then turn towards the particular, the historical, and the 'real', to break the silence on marginalized issues, and to move from a 'wilful amnesia' (Krishna, 2001: 401) or 'aphasia' (Thompson, 2013: 135) on race towards a greater sense of self-awareness.

Rethinking Abstraction

While I fully encourage renewing the focus on the particular and the historical in IR scholarship in order to take seriously issues of race and the racialized foundations of IR theory, this does not mean that abstraction cannot aid us in working towards goals of emancipation via a different route. Rather than contrasting the abstract and the concrete, I propose that we turn towards the dialectics of abstraction and concrete experience. While critics of the fetish of abstraction in IR theory often acknowledge the necessity of abstraction as a method of cognition (Krishna, 2001: 403), they do not provide meaningful ways of working with abstractions against the dominant abstractions in IR theory that they deem problematic. Abstractions are not only necessary evils, but they constitute perception as well as practice, including, as I will argue; a critical praxis that works towards acknowledging and opposing racialized logics in IR theory. In rethinking abstraction, we have to be aware of the fact that abstractions are never simply explanans, but above all explananda (Toscano, 2008b: 64). Therefore, the act of abstracting brings with it a whole set of risks, among which neglecting the 'impurities and entanglements that lie behind the apparently purifying character of abstractions themselves' (Toscano, 2008b: 64).

Marxist theory contributes much to this discussion, perhaps most importantly in demonstrating the productive character of abstractions. Within Marxism, capitalism is often seen as the 'culture of abstraction' (Toscano, 2008: 273). Moving away from the conception of abstraction as distancing, Marxists emphasize the role of abstraction as a force operating in the world, or so-called 'real abstractions' (Toscano, 2008: 274). Marxist real abstractions such as 'abstract things', like money, and 'abstract people', like bourgeois property owners, are social realities (Sohn-Rethel as in Toscano, 2008: 282). Marxist theory then makes us aware that such real abstractions effectuate historically specific forms of social domination in capitalist society, which may be called 'rule by abstractions' (Loftus, 2015: 367). In such conceptions, the processes of abstraction have in many ways provided the necessary generative preconditions of what we see as lived experience (McCormack, 2012: 720). While the Marxist conception of real abstractions is concerned with commodity exchange and the conceptual abstractions deriving from this, ideas on real abstraction are useful to rethink abstractions in IR, as social facts having real, productive effects.

Real abstractions are merely one way in which the abstract and the concrete interact. Debates in Human Geography on this issue have much to offer to the present discussion. In Derek McCormack's assessment, for instance, experience is always partly withdrawn from us, as experience is not a self-contained locus of perception. Furthermore, material things and concrete experiences are conceivable through abstract phenomena such as space and time, and held together spatially and temporally (McCormack, 2012: 722). Therefore, we can say that abstracting is not so much a process of withdrawing from the world, but rather a way of drawing the world together. The challenge is then, to draw elements of the world together without reducing them. And, to understand that a particular dominant abstraction is but one way of representing the world, and to provide alternative abstractions. McCormack emphasizes how such a conception of abstraction can enable us to think about different possibilities. This approach to an 'affirmative critique' of abstraction both takes abstraction as an object of critique and acknowledges that abstraction is a necessary mode of cognition, which is useful in envisioning processes of transformation. This approach shows that a critique of abstraction in IR theory is not a critique of abstraction per se, but rather an incentive to search for abstractions that are committed to human struggle (Harvey as in McCormack, 2012: 729).

Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

This productive and transformative power of abstraction reverses the logic of the dominant conception of abstraction in IR, whereby elements of the world are omitted by withdrawal rather than productively created. A renewed interest in practical knowledge, which may be called the 'practice turn' in IR theory, has in fact led many to move away from abstractions. In this sense the Aristotelian phronetic concrete, practical, context-dependent knowledge is contrasted with episteme general, theoretical and context-independent knowledge (Brown, 2012: 446). However, ideas on 'real abstraction' and the dialectics of the concrete and the abstract can be combined in a critical praxis, which has the potential to yield productive outcomes in acknowledging and opposing racialized logics in IR theory.

Abstractions on Race in IR

Like theory, abstraction 'is always for someone and for some purpose, and its perspective is derived from a particular position in social and political space and time' (Cox, 1981: 128). While abstraction is a method of cognition, the content and character of its products are brought about through 'intellectual strategies', which are concerned with particular problems and are directed towards particular interests (Sabaratnam, 2011: 4). Therefore, an affirmative critique on abstraction emphasizes that abstractions are always historical products and investigates the conditions under which they emerge, as well as the possibilities for change. By placing the dialectics of the concrete and the abstract at the center of debates over the role of race in IR, we can move to different transformative strategies.

Although the issue of race has previously surfaced in the discipline of international relations, the discipline can be characterized by an unawareness, or rather conscious obfuscation, of the politics of race in the constitution of its theories (Chowdhry and Rai: 86, 2009; Shilliam, 2008: 784; Persaud and Walker, 2001: 374). The study of the emergence of dominant abstractions from concrete experience is a first move in transforming racialized abstractions. Through the silencing moves within the discipline the racialized foundations of IR dominant narratives and abstractions, such as the state, are often (purposefully) forgotten (Chowdhry and Rai, 2009: 85). Krishna hereby aptly quotes Nietzsche, in stating that 'truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are' (Krishna, 2001: 411). This can be demonstrated through the formation of the North-South and East-West binaries, as abstractions that take a central role in IR theory and practice. The meanings and identities attributed to the North and the South, as well as the East and the West, reinforce hierarchical racialized relationships between formerly colonizing and colonized peoples (Sabaratnam, 2011: 7; Doty, 1996: 2). Positional superiority is exercised through narratives in IR ranging from historical framings of colonialism to contemporary conceptions of counterinsurgency and foreign aid (Doty, 1996: 9). These forms of representation cannot be disentangled from real historical practices in international relations and reinforce historical hierarchies. The same can be argued for abstractions separating the 'core' from the 'periphery', and the 'First World' from the 'Third World'. While these abstractions are partly configured by concrete geographical space, they more than anything else are related to particular issues and directed towards particular interests. As Roxanne Lynn Doty demonstrates, such abstractions are formulated and reformulated within changing contexts of expansion and political ideas (Doty, 1996: 9). By exposing the historical construction of North-South relations and by counteracting the naturalization of this abstraction in the study of international relations, Doty lays the foundations for an anti-universalist conception of abstraction.

A further step in moving towards alternative abstractions is to criticize dominant abstractions for their incomplete or inaccurate representation of historical realities. For instance, by tracing back the East-West divide, John Hobson demonstrates that the East-West dichotomy is a distinction that exists in Western thought more than in anything else, and that the development of both entities has historically been interrelated. Therefore, the constitution of the East as a passive object of mainstream Western world history is misguided, as we cannot understand global history without the fundamental role of Eastern agencies (Hobson, 2004). Rather, according to Hobson, Eastern agencies were the prime movers of global development, through Eastern inventions, Eastern resources, and an Eastern-led global economy between 500 and 1800. By destabilizing the dominant abstraction of East-West relations, Hobson moves towards an alternative, emancipatory abstraction: a co-constituted East and West. From this starting point Hobson then develops a 'post-racist emancipatory political project that can help begin the urgent task of effecting global reconciliation between East and West' (Hobson, 2007: 91). In the process, he demonstrates that most of IR theory is based around an intellectual move which deems racism something that occurred in the past. Hobson's distinction between scientific and cultural racism is hereby useful. Racism in IR is often equated with scientific racism, and therefore assumed to have ended. However, racism takes multiple and historically contingent forms, and cultural

Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

racism continued to play a paramount role in contemporary Western centrism in IR theory (Hobson, 2007: 105). By moving away from a monological development of an exceptionalist West, Hobson constitutes a dialogical conception of civilizations. The co-constituted understanding of civilizations fundamentally challenges established meanings to East and West in IR theory, by uncovering and reconfiguring their racialized logics.

Dominant abstractions 'both affect and reflect the meanings we assign to key terms' and thereby have real effects in international relations (Yinger, 1986: 21). As IR's dominant abstractions are mostly produced 'by and for the West', they have established a particular white, male, and Western subject position (Acharya and Buzan, 2007: 288). These real abstractions 'cement structures of exclusion that continue to deny the experience of 'most of the world' as legitimate bases of knowledge (Sabaratnam, 2011: 18). In response to these dominant abstractions, many strategies of decolonization in IR theory are aimed at criticizing and re-centring this dominant subject position (Sabaratnam, 2011: 12-13). This is for instance done through exploring the 'lifeworlds' of those positioned at the lower end of the racial and civilizational hierarchies, in order to posit these particular experiences and lifeworlds against the general abstract level of IR theory that omits such experiences (Mignolo, 2012; Laffey and Weldes, 2008). While the strategy of 'recovering alternative political subjecthoods in both historical and contemporaneous contexts' supports the critique of dominant abstractions, we have seen that is misguided to simply position such concrete and historical perspectives as fundamentally opposed to abstractions. By demonstrating that abstractions are always time-bound and place-bound, we have actually reached more emancipatory conclusions (Loftus, 2015: 370). Besides positioning marginalized concrete experiences against general abstractions in IR to criticize the latter's incompleteness and inaccuracy, these experiences could form a starting point for alternative ways of being and becoming abstract. Thereby, as suggested by McCormack, we should work with abstractions against the racialized dominant abstractions in IR theory. Abstractions could be used to foreground aspects of lived experience in ways that would otherwise not be possible (McCormack, 2012: 729). In this sense the dominant conception of abstraction in IR as detached from lived experience might not be abstract enough to grasp the 'real abstractness of potential for change and variation' (McCormack, 2012: 721). As abstractions like East and West or race have no fixed specificity and objective properties implicates that their abstract meaning can be configured in light of a different set of interests (Doty, 1993: 453). For instance, Hobson uses the power of abstraction to redefine the dominant subject position through a focus on Eastern subjectivity in opposing Western cultural racism. Clearly, as Hobson demonstrates, abstracting the complex world of international relations can possibly be done through the eyes of multiplicity of subjectivities. Hereby we need to be aware of the limitedness of alternative abstractions. The necessarily limited and incomplete nature of our abstractions is not a shortcoming, but a 'constitutive feature' of the endeavor (Sabaratnam, 2011: 4). This rather means that scholars of IR can experiment with combining different levels of abstraction, and with contrasting multiple abstractions and their real-life contexts and effects (Yinger, 1986: 34). In other words, we can be critical of dominant abstractions in IR while not allowing 'the terms of critique to foreclose an ethos of presumptive generosity towards the object of this critique' (McCormack, 2012: 726).

By acknowledging that dominant abstractions are but some of the possible ways to abstract the world, I do not mean to argue that we can simply transform 'bad abstractions' into critical 'good abstractions'. Such a conception is ultimately naïve. The proposed focus on the dialectics of concrete experience and abstraction rather acknowledges that abstractions have to be situated in specific social, political, and historical circumstances. This also means that abstractions are embedded within the particular meanings and realms of possibility within those circumstances, and that any attempt to transformation will be limited. This discussion ultimately enters the domain of what knowing is, in which we have to acknowledge that categories of perception tend to be framed by the dominant. The present argument has been an attempt to open up the debate concerning the possibilities that an affirmative critique of abstraction may yield in IR theory.

Conclusion

I have argued that dominant conceptions of abstraction in IR theory are limited in their understanding of what abstraction does, as well as of its transformative potential. By relying on a separation between abstraction and lived experience, abstractions are not adequately acknowledged as productive forces in the world. Most problematically, the historical specificity of abstractions is often not acknowledged, leading to the ahistorical projection of Western experiences onto different spaces and places. However, the present critique of abstraction in IR theory is an

Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

affirmative critique. Abstractions are crucial in making sense of the world, both cognitively as transformatively in envisioning desired change. By provincializing the dominant abstractions within IR theory and uncovering and opposing their racialized logics, we form a starting point for the formulation of alternative abstractions that centralize different subjecthoods (Chakrabarty, 2009). The study of marginalized concrete experiences should not only serve to critique general abstractions, but to imagine new ways of drawing the world together, for instance by imagining a co-constituted East and West. By centralizing the dialectics of concrete experience and abstraction, an affirmative critique of abstraction rather works with abstraction against the dominant racialized abstractions in IR theory.

The present argument represents a move away from a generic or reductionist understanding of abstractions, towards an understanding of abstractions as necessarily situated. The dialectics of the concrete and the abstract blur the boundaries between negatively valued 'abstract universals' and positively valued lifeworlds, lived experiences, or 'networks of local knowledge' in IR theory, by understanding that these forms of knowledge are already connected in a multiplicity of ways (Mignolo, 2012: 22). The interaction of the abstract and the concrete might make one wonder: 'how it is that humans can be the same and yet different? And how does our work reflect assumptions about the relevant degrees and nature of sameness and difference?' (Sabaratnam, 2011: 13). An affirmative critique of abstraction in IR may contribute to this discussion by exploring the tensions between sameness and difference in our understanding of experience and the constitution of theory. By transcending the dichotomy of lived experience and abstraction, this affirmative critique has attempted to shift reflexivity, limitedness and diversity to the constitutive core of what it means to abstract.

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Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

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Toward an Affirmative Critique of Abstraction in International Relations Theory

Written by Enrike van Wingerden

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Date written: March 2016