

The Dangers of Parochialism in International Relations

Written by Karen Smith

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KAREN SMITH, AUG 30 2018

Much has been written in recent years about the Western-centric nature of existing International Relations (IR) theory, the need for the field of IR to engage with voices from outside the West[1], and the importance of developing alternative approaches to understanding the world. The increased interest, no doubt, stems partly from a growing sense of anxiety about changes occurring in the international system, linked to the rise of new actors whose behaviour and motivations existing theories are not able to make sense of. The debate, however, continues about whether universalist IR theories are at all possible, or whether the way forward is to develop regional- or national approaches. It has also been reflected in calls by students (in South Africa and elsewhere) to decolonise the knowledge that they are exposed to at universities.

While much of mainstream, Western IR scholarship can justifiably be criticized for being biased, shortsighted and simply illegitimate in its assumptions of universality, I want to comment on how we could respond to the obvious shortcomings inherent in the discipline without throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water. Firstly, we should guard against adopting a parochial approach to decolonizing existing knowledge and uncovering alternative understandings from the global South of how the world works. Secondly, approaches aimed at replacing 'Western' with authentically indigenous ideas are inherently misguided, due to the interconnected nature of knowledge. They also deny the role that the non-West has played in constructing what is regarded as Western knowledge. Thirdly, liberating ourselves from a parochial approach will enable us to recognize a much wider range of theoretical innovations, and also allow for the discovery of similarities of seemingly different worldviews.

With regard to the first point: we should be cautious about suggestions that any project aimed at decolonising knowledge must necessarily entail rejecting existing (Western) scholarship. We cannot claim this if we do not engage with it, in all its plurality, and draw our own conclusions. On how to do this, we can look to one of the most frequently cited authors in the decolonisation debate, Frantz Fanon, for guidance. In response to the selective reading and employment of Frantz Fanon by many who are at the forefront of the calls for decolonising knowledge, Achille Mbembe (2016) called on those drawing on extracts from Fanon's work to read his work in its entirety and in context, and to also recognise that he was heavily influenced by a diversity of thinkers – most of them Western (for this, Mbembe was himself criticised). Writing about Fanon, Mbembe said the following:

The fact is that his library cut across disciplinary boundaries. It spoke well beyond the strictures of his own birth place or his racial origins. In reading, he was not seeking to inhabit a zone of comfort or what some today call 'a safe space'. He was not looking to meet himself or someone who looked like him in the text. He assumed that to read was to willfully enter a zone of insecurity, to embrace this insecurity as the door we need to enter in our quest to know what we do not know yet. If anything, such a practice of reading as first and foremost a journey into homelessness, is more than ever needed in this age of pieties of all kinds. (Mbembe, 2016).

This, of course, does not mean that Fanon uncritically internalised the ideas he read about. Instead, he used them to develop his own thoughts, adopting, adapting, criticizing and discarding them as he saw fit. In other words, he dealt with knowledge instrumentally.

Secondly, a radical purging of colonial/Western influence is also arguably impossible, given the interconnected nature of knowledge in a globalised world. Scholars like Pinar Bilgin (2008) have highlighted the ways in which

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knowledge sharing has always been an interactive process, and the difficulties in determining what is Western, colonial, imported knowledge versus what is truly indigenous. Examples of how often impossibly complex trying to isolate the origin of objects and ideas is abound. Let us take the case of what is regarded by most people as authentically West African wax printed fabric – the kind of colourful prints that are readily associated with the clothing worn by people in countries like Ghana. These fabrics have become part of West African culture, but are in fact predominantly imported from the Netherlands, where they have been produced and exported by a Dutch company for more than a century. At the same time, the fabrics can also not be considered authentically Dutch, as the Dutch copied both the technique and the design from Indonesian batik prints, and have consulted with West African traders and consumers in creating and adapting designs. Tracing the origin of ideas can be equally, if not more, complicated.

Shifting our gaze back to IR, should we then reject realism on the basis that it is a Western theory? Sure, it has reached its dominant status partly as a result of the dominance of American IR during the 20th century, which in turn is linked to the military, economic, cultural and intellectual hegemony of the USA. However, thinking about the world in realist terms has never been the exclusive entitlement of the West. The work of Chinese thinkers like Tsun Tzu and Indian political philosopher Kautilya shows us that the *realpolitik* approach is not something only the West thought of. So, instead, we should reject claims that realism is a Western theory, rather than refuse to engage with the theory itself based on a narrow understanding of its origins. As others have noted, an important part of our project should be to construct an inclusive global history of ideas, which recognises the multiple origins of what are regarded as Western ideas.

Thirdly, another danger of an inward-looking, parochial approach to understanding the world is that one runs the risk of missing out on the important insights that an inclusive, comparative approach can provide. While we may find difference (but also similarities) between Western perspectives and views from outside of the West, what I have found striking is the many similarities between views from outside of the West. In particular, the distinction between societies based on individualism and those based on collectivism can generally be seen as a distinction between the West and the rest (with some exceptions). In turn, that means that views from Asia, Africa, and South America, are based on a similar collectivist foundation. On a more concrete level, when one starts comparing the African worldview of *ubuntu* with, for example, Chinese Confucian and Daoist philosophy, and the Andean cosmovision, there are common elements across these (see, for example, Tieku 2012, Ling 2014, and Qin 2018). As a gross generalization and simplification, one could say that they all focus on the whole rather than the parts, and that the parts that make up the whole (whether individual people or states) are all intimately connected to one another. In *ubuntu*, this is expressed through the idea that “I am human though other humans”. In Confucianism, the idea of relationality similarly holds that the world consists of interdependent actors locked in complex relations with one another and with the context: (Qin, 2018: 114). Instead of overly focusing on difference, it is therefore important that we also pay attention to similarities. Otherwise we run the risk of unjustified exceptionalism, where we claim that an idea is, for example, distinctly African, only to find that it is not so different from views held in other parts of the world.

Relatedly, in light of the challenges pointed out above, calls for authentic, homegrown, non-Western theories, while necessary and important, can also be limiting when the implication is that anything less than one hundred per cent authentic and original is not valuable. Adaptations of existing theories or concepts (including those of Western origin) by scholars from outside the West, are often rejected as inferior, for using Western theories and concepts as reference points (by some versions of the decolonisation debate) as well as by the powers-that-be in the core of the field, who seem to hold contributions from outside of the West to higher standards than they hold themselves.

The position put forward here is that such scholarly work constitutes and should be recognised as equally valuable theoretical contributions. After all, knowledge is by nature cumulative. Even in mainstream IR, the emergence of entirely new theories or ways of looking at the world are few and far between. Revisions of existing theories, like realism, are regarded as important contributions in their own right. As Bilgin (2018) also recently pointed out, scholars in the global South have been engaged in this kind of work, but have not always been recognised for their contributions for various reasons. These include the gatekeeping practices of the major IR journals, and the linguistic dominance of English in the field. Some examples of such contributions by non-Western scholars include local adaptations of the concept ‘autonomy’ by Latin American scholars (see Tickner, 2014), and reinterpretations of the concept ‘middle power’ by South African scholars. Ghanaian scholar Thomas Tieku’s (2012) work calls for the state

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to be reconceptualised in a collectivist, societal way (I explore these examples in greater detail in a recent article). This is not to suggest, however, that entirely new ways of looking at international relations originating from the global South and based on different ontological foundations are not possible, as illustrated by Ling (2014) and Qin's (2018) work, for example. What is important, however, is that we do not focus our attention exclusively on discovering such exceptional cases.

In summary, if our aim is to build a more inclusive discipline, we should be cautious of outrightly rejecting existing knowledge without critically engaging with it, being too parochial in our search for innovation, and dismissing the work of scholars from outside of the West who have revised, or further developed existing concepts or theories. Claiming that such interventions are not authentic (enough), not only denies agency to scholars but also severely limits the possibilities for theoretical innovation. It is only when we stop regarding such reinterpretations as inferior that we will make significant advances in broadening the discipline of IR. After all, our goal as scholars should be to expand knowledge and understanding, not to stifle and restrict it.

Notes

[1] I recognize that the West / non-West distinction is problematic, especially in light of arguments about the interconnectedness of knowledge. I use these terms, however, as they continue to be widely used in the discussion about alternative sources of IR.

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