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The International Political “Sociology of a Not So International Discipline”⁹

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The question “what is or can be international political sociology beyond the European and North American traditions in social and political thought?” rests on an apparent divide between two worlds of knowledge about “the international”: that of “the West” and “the rest.” The former’s interest in the latter implies that these two worlds are so alienated and/or distinct from each other

⁹The title invokes Ole Wæver’s (1998) groundbreaking work, “The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline.”

that there has transpired a need for engagement. This is not to contest Forum Editors' observation regarding "the dominance of European and North American intellectual traditions" in International Relations (IR) as evinced in most mainstream journals and some non-mainstream ones. Nor is it to downplay important insights to be gleaned from hearing from "the rest." Rather, it is to suggest that the way this question is formulated risks essentializing these two worlds, thereby disallowing further inquiry into knowledge as produced in/by "the rest." In what follows I will seek to go beyond the present reality of multiple worlds of knowledge about the international and call for inquiry into their emergence and persistence. My point being, moving beyond the current "dominance" of European and North American intellectual traditions requires looking into the international politics of the ways in which the international is studied in different parts of the world. As such, I join the plea for inquiring into the sociology of the discipline; but I still want to underscore the international politics dimension—*not only* in terms of studying how events "out there" shape IR (a preoccupation of mainstream accounts), *but also* in terms of how IR in different parts of the world has evolved in the attempt to shape international politics. I will make three points.

My first point is that the assumption behind this Forum (that knowledge production in Europe and North America and "the rest" are alienated and/or distinct from each other) risks essentializing both worlds. For, these assumptions fail to acknowledge centuries of give and take between the two, thus concealing (albeit unintendedly) the fact that what we expect to find when we look beyond "Europe and North America" is already "here." That much of what the Western Civilization" borrowed from the others has been obscured by mainstream historical accounts, thereby helping to invent "the West" and justify centuries of conquest and dominance—as John Hobson (2004) revealed in *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*—should impel us to challenge such well-worn assumptions upon which mainstream IR is also built.

Challenging such assumptions is significant for the more specific purpose of this Forum. Currently, the critics berate European and North American IR for its "rationalism" (which has resulted in mistaking certain particularisms for "universal" Social Science) and turn to "the rest" for alternative ways of engaging with the international. The problem here is not only that "the rest's" authorship of the 'dominant' approaches remains unacknowledged, but also that 'the rest' is expected to be something completely different from what 'the West' is" (Sen 2006).¹⁰ More often than not, such assumptions underscore "Western" authorship of rationalism, and assign "the rest" the role of contributing the non-rational (read: "spiritual") dimension (Chan, Mandaville, and Bleiker 2001; Jones 2003).¹¹ This is not to privilege one over the other, but to warn against juxtaposing "Western science" with "Eastern spirituality." After all, "Socrates meets the Indian peasant" (Sen 2005:158) was *the* dichotomy that helped to justify colonialism. What is more, such juxtapositions do not only void "the rest" of its claim to "rationalist" heritage (with all its "successes" and "failures") but also void the "West" of its own "spirituality." Whereas spirituality could be present even in its absence—as with the seeming "absence" of identity in IR (see Williams 1998). As such, starting from the assumption that knowledge production in Europe and North America and "the rest" are alienated and/or distinct from each other over-determines the answer. Whereas, the task of moving past "dominant" ways of approaching the international requires us to radically challenge our knowledge about "the West" as well as "the rest."

¹⁰What I have elsewhere referred to as "assumptions of radical difference." See Bilgin (2008).

¹¹See Grovogui and Chan (this volume) for glimpses into how spirituality is already present in "Western" approaches.

My second point concerns the presumed significance of geo-cultural differences in producing multiple worlds of knowledge about the international. Invoking the significance of "geo-culture" in the study of the international rests upon the conjecture that different histories, as experienced in different geographies, give rise to different rules and meanings about the world (i.e., what we call "culture") as well as different ways of approaching the international (Tickner and Wæver 2009). What often goes unnoticed is that the reverse is also true. What we take to be geo-cultural differences are not products of geography and history alone, but are also shaped through "our" ways of approaching the international. Put differently, different ways of approaching the international produce different accounts of the same historical phenomena, which, in turn, shape what we take to be geo-cultural differences.

Take the case of "Europe" and the "Third World." Over the years, theories of modernization have looked at the former to map out a development trajectory for the latter. In time, as the "Third World" deviated further and further from that trajectory, its "failures" were ascribed to geo-cultural differences. Alternative accounts of those who explained why the "Third World" did not fit the ascribed "pattern" (see Cardoso and Faletto 1979) were, in turn, received as knowledge shaped by geo-cultural differences. In the meantime, the geo-cultural roots of our body of knowledge about development in Europe were left unquestioned. However, as Sandra Halperin (1997:viii, ix) has shown, the European model against which the "Third World" is measured is "more fiction than fact" and that, in fact, "the pattern displayed in contemporary Third World dependent development is analogous to the pattern of development in pre-1945 Europe." That is to say, as with the "Eastern origins of Western civilization" (Hobson 2004), "Europe's colonial past" (Halperin 1997:28–52) has been obscured through the construction of a "Western" identity as distinct from if not superior to "the rest."¹² The point being geo-cultural differences do not only produce different ways of approaching the international; they are themselves products of international politics. Even so, mainstream historical accounts insist upon seeing an insurmountable discrepancy between the development trajectories of "Europe" and the "Third World," while mainstream IR explains such discrepancy as a product of geo-cultural differences. Hence the potential insights to be gained from refusing to take geo-cultural differences as a point of departure and treating them as products of particular historical junctures as seen through our very ways of approaching the international.

My third and related point is about the need to inquire into the dynamics behind the persistence of the "dominance" of European and North American traditions in other parts of the world. Disciplinary IR's spread to "the rest" of the world in the post-war era is often explained with reference to the emergence of the United States as the "dominant producer of both ideas and things" (Bell 1991:97). The assumption being that the United States way of "doing IR" was emulated by elites in other parts of the world in a somewhat unthinking manner. Be that as it may, such explanations fall short of accounting for the persistence of European and North American ways of thinking about the international elsewhere in the world even as the critics lay bare its remarkable weaknesses. Arguably, this is because such explanations only capture part of the reason why US IR was emulated by "the rest." While the agency of the United States in this process is recognized (IR traveled to other parts of the world through scholarships and grants provided by the United States in an environment shaped by Cold War concerns), the agency of "the rest" remains underexamined. Whereas what IR had on offer at the time (a state-focused approach to world politics and

¹²As such, Halperin's argument incorporates the insights of Postcolonial Studies and Historical Sociology, thereby standing aside from the categories identified by Seth (this volume).

“national security” as language of state action) also served the interests of elites busy with state-building in their parts of the world. What is more, in such contexts, doing IR as it was done in “the West” emerged to be a way of signaling a break with the (ostensibly) “non-rational” past and embracing “rational” ways of doing things. Experiences of “the rest” with European and North American ways of doing research [“the word ‘research’ is one of the dirtiest in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” reminds Smith (1999:1)] and policy practices justified by such research (as with international law’s relationship with colonialism, [see Anghie 1999]) has had consequences for the development of the study of the international. Considering how the dichotomy of rational/non-rational had in the past served to justify interventionism and colonialism, emulating “Western” ways of doing things (including IR) may have emerged as one (albeit not the only) way of responding to the dynamics of international politics.¹³

As such, the spread of IR to different parts of the world was not devoid of international political concerns; nor is its persistence. Understanding the emergence as well as persistence of the dominance of European and North American approaches to the international in “the rest” of the world requires looking beyond local dynamics and into international politics. If IR, as it is studied in the rest of the world, comes across as “similar,” the emergence and persistence of such seeming similarity should also be a focus of our analyses—as opposed to explaining it away with reference to the present “dominance” of European and North American ways of approaching the international (Bilgin 2008). After all, not only “mimicry” (Bhabha 1994; Ling 2002) but also “imagined” (Anderson 1983) authenticity could be a response to the encounter between those whose relationship is characterized by a power disparity. Unless we inquire into the emergence and persistence of such dominance, those endeavoring to move past it are likely to encounter imagined authenticity as a product of “the rest”—for, this is apparently what “the rest” is expected to provide—that is “difference.”

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¹³That even Iran, notwithstanding its rejection of both “East” and “West,” has chosen not to have its own “authentic” school of IR but sought to integrate in one way or another into “Western” IR (see Moshirzadeh, this volume) calls for inquiry into the international politics as well as the sociology of the evolution of IR.

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A "Hegemonic Discipline" in an "Anti-Hegemonic" Country

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The development of International Relations has been regarded as the result of the conjuncture of particular intellectual predispositions, political conditions, and institutional opportunities that existed in the United States as a world power in the post-World War era resulting in the formation of an "American discipline" (Hoffman 2000[1977]). Yet IR and related fields and sub-fields have always been influenced by European traditions from Machiavellian realism to Kantian liberalism. More recent changes, especially the emergence of critical and post-structuralist IR as well as new security studies, reflect the increasing role of intellectual developments in Europe resulting in a more diversified field of inquiry. The contribution of non-Western cultures to the study of international relations, however, has been very limited. Even non-Western thoughts have been most often introduced to the field by Western scholars.¹⁴ The subordinate position of the South in the international division of labor is not only seen in material and technological aspects but also in the production of knowledge. The gap between the West and the "rest" is perhaps more spectacular in social science in general and IR (including international political sociology) in particular (see Wæver 1998).

One should, however, avoid a monolithic understanding of the conditions of international studies in Third World countries. In some smaller countries there might be little publication in the field even at the domestic level. Some others seem to be more or less active in producing literature for domestic audience but do not tend to be active at the international level; this has led to their work being "hidden" from the debates within IR (see Acharya and Buzan 2007). And again other scholars are more active in publishing their work by Western publishers, or in well-known international/Western journals; hence their contributions are more "visible" within the IR community.

The studies done from a Third World perspective have similarities to and differences from those done by Western scholars. The existence of similarities and

¹⁴One may point, for example, to short references to Indian and Chinese thinkers in chapters on realism in some textbooks (see, e.g., Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1971; Coulombis and Wolfe 1990) and to Robert Cox (1996[1992]) for introducing Ibn Khaldun to the IR community.