

Towards a Truly Global IR Theory?: The Middle East and the Upcoming Debate

JORDI QUERO ARIAS*

Rethinking Power, Institutions and Ideas in World Politics: Whose IR?

By Amitav Acharya

New York: Routledge, 2014, 264 pages, £31.99, ISBN: 9780415706742.

The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations

Edited By L. H. M. Ling

New York: Routledge, 2014, 277 pages, £31.99, ISBN: 9780415603782.

Knowledge Production in the Arab World: The Impossible Promise

By Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis

New York: Routledge, 2016, 354 pages, £90, ISBN: 9781138948815.

In 2015, the philosopher Hamid Dabashi published a book with the provocative title, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*. Over its pages Dabashi echoes authors from what have been labelled “post-colonialism” approaches (from founding fathers like Frantz Fanon to Edward Said, to provocative interlocutors like Gayatri Spivak and Walter Dignolo), and questions the contemporary “regime of knowledge.” According to Dabashi, this by-product of modernity/colonialism silences the voices and experiences of many “subaltern” thinkers

whose work is dismissed, neglected and delegitimized.

International Relations (IR) is not alien to this meta-theoretical debate. For some years now an ongoing debate has been unfolding, mainly on the margins of the discipline, about the need to internally confront the problem underlined by Dabashi, Mignolo *and the Rest*. It is nothing new to hear critical voices *from within* (Buzan, Olson and Onuf, Nayak and Selbin) pointing out the discipline’s need to advance towards a truly

* Universitat Pomeu Fabra, Spain

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global theorization of international reality by incorporating non-Western voices into our theoretical corpus. Put differently, it is the project of turning Hoffman's "American science" into something more sensitive to alternative, subaltern approaches to world politics. However, it seems that translating this general cry into real theoretical proposals has been far more difficult than what one might think. This article reviews three recently published books which can shed some light on some of the fundamental issues driving this debate, especially focusing on the experience of neglected Middle Eastern voices. The books, read together, offer a clear picture of where we are now (Acharya), why we are here (Hanafi and Arvantis) and how we could move forward (Lin).

Amitav Acharya, in his book – a compilation of his most important contributions to the study of world politics – sets the basis for any future debate. For him, International Relations theory suffers from a historical malaise: we should get rid of privileging Western historical trajectories to the detriment of alternative, so-called peripheral ones, in articulating supposedly universal theories. The "problem of Western dominance" has triggered discussions on the adequacy of existing IR theories (both mainstream and critical ones), the validity of developing distinctive local concepts and theories, and even the usefulness of notions like "West," "non-Western," or "post-Western" to describe international theory. In his view, though, this de-privileg-

ing should not mean fully discrediting the existing core of IR theories and replacing them with new ones, but rather incorporating other voices into the dialogue and testing the validity of mainstream theoretical proposals by contrasting them with alternate experiences.

Among many other attractive ideas, Acharya offers three critical contributions to the discussion that make this volume a must-read for anyone interested in the future of IR theory. The first one is that he provides an analytical framework to comprehend the variety of steps Western dominance has taken to consolidate its privileged position. They can be encapsulated in four categories. Auto-centrism appeals to the trend of providing explanations about how the international system works by using "Western ideas, culture, politics, historical experiences and contemporary praxis" as a default. Acharya relates this tendency to a shared sense of superiority, evidenced by prizing some experiences over of others. False universalism indicates the tendency towards accepting "Western ideas and practices as the universal standard," and understanding any other alternative as parochial and particularist. Disjuncture refers to the existing gap between the proposals of mainstream International Relations theory and the realities of the non-Western world. Lastly, agency denial describes the phenomenon by which international, non-Western actors see their agency *vis-à-vis* the world order negated. These are the mechanisms that, from a prescriptive

perspective, all three authors examined in this review article are willing to confront and remove from the IR discipline.

The second remarkable contribution has to do with Acharya's effort to translate his meta-theoretical concerns into precise, narrow discussions about IR general concepts – again, something not as common as one might assume. After the first section, which introduces the broader discussion, the book is organized into three blocks, each one devoted to one of the elements underpinning international theory: power (equated by the author to his discussion on realism), institutions (particularly liberalism), and ideas (in this case, constructivism). For each of these elements, the scholar discusses some of the key notions underpinning their understanding of international reality, including the state and sovereignty; security and polarity; international interventions and humanism; norm diffusion and subsidiarity; regionalization and multilateralism. In doing so, Acharya opens new avenues for questioning existing Western IR theory and indicates ways of challenging some of the fallacious underpinning assumptions of universalism.

Last but definitively not least, the author's third contribution seems to me even more far-reaching than the other two: he poses readers the question of the consequences of truly globalizing the methodology of IR theory. Among the implicit consequences of Western dominance we find a quasi-hegemonic approach towards

methods in IR, rooted in some of the discipline's great debates (namely the second and the fourth). Acharya acknowledges that de-westernizing IR theory goes hand in hand with opening a space for alternative methods of grasping reality. The shift he advocates applies not only to the episteme of IR but also to its epistemology. Bringing on board subaltern voices also means recognising the methods through which they approach international life, even if these might clash with Western Cartesian/Illustration-based epistemologies. This gives a whole new dimension to the dialogue, as any step forward will unquestionably trigger a new episode in our discussion of IR *vis-à-vis* the philosophy of science.

L. H. M. Ling's text, *The Dao of World Politics*, speaks directly with Acharya's as both tackle the difficult question of how to confront the problem of Western dominance in IR theory. Ling proposes that we recognize the existence of what she calls "Multiple Worlds" or a "Worldist" perspective: the idea that different understandings of what the world is live side by side, each one derived from hybrid historical and cultural legacies. This conundrum ultimately shapes world politics and economics. According to Ling, the Westphalian World, or the West, has exercised profound violence by coercing and negating the existence of multiple comprehensions of what the world is. In this light, the discipline of IR is understood as a tool which legitimates hegemonic political projects. Once recognized in terms of her proposed

pluralistic dimension, she vindicates Daoist dialectics (based on ontological parity, creative and transformative mutuality, and contextualization of knowledge and agency) as a way of accommodating these different cosmo-visions with respect and fluidity.

However, besides all these far-reaching contributions, there is a striking element in this book that directly appeals to Acharya's third underlined contribution about epistemology. In Ling's presentation of her Worldist approach, she uses a range of different methodologies to advance her arguments, an approach unparalleled in mainstream IR. This includes drawing on literature and story-telling (narrative and poetry), food and medicine discussions, as well as the inclusion of two different theatre plays in the book that help the author add nuance to her arguments (with Thomas Khun and Michel Foucault living side by side with monks and fairy spirits). For someone who has been socialized and trained in Western epistemologies, this immersion into alternative approximations to scientific knowledge might result in a sideways glance, to say the least. Yet, besides any particular assessments based on individual limitations, this book goes beyond the meta-theoretical debate and puts into practice some of the procedures advocated by the critical approaches described above. In that sense, Ling's text may result in inspiring many willing to do things differently in IR, and bringing literature and cultural studies (among other disciplines)

more overtly into our discussions on global politics.

In light of all that has been discussed so far some fundamental questions arise: Where is the Middle East in these discussions about post-Western IR theory? Are voices from the region contributing to this incipient, burgeoning dialogue? Curiously enough, one might think it odd that there are far more international actors in the region questioning different elements of the globalized, Western-influenced order, than scholars from/in the Middle East questioning hegemonic explanations of this order. By that it should not be implied that scientific production about IR coming from the region is totally non-existent (especially if we consider expats working in Western research centres as well), but rather that there are some structural elements in place that prevent Middle Eastern subaltern voices from being articulated with normality, contributing to global discussions, and ultimately reaching global IR audiences. Unlike what happens in the case of India and, increasingly, China, where an incipient discussion is taking shape and alternative, non-mainstream theoretical proposals are being put forward, the Middle East seems to be out of the equation. Once described as "the most penetrated international relations subsystem of the world," the Middle East plays a minor role in the construction of Global IR theory. The presence of Middle Eastern voices, besides sporadic Israeli and Turkish ones, is at a minimum, particularly when compared to the impact of

the region on world politics. What is happening then?

Some of the reasons that might explain why this is the case may be found in Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvantis' book on *Knowledge Production in the Arab World*. Both authors offer here a complete picture of the status of current scientific production in the Arab countries (not only the production of International Relations theory, nor even the broader Social Sciences, but *all* scientific knowledge in general) that helps them to place the region within the global matrix of knowledge production. The first part of the book provides an impressive – in some instances, overwhelming – amalgam of statistical data resulting from self-conducted surveys and interviews, as well as indicators from hundreds of international reports. The second section narrows down the topic to social science production and draws on case-studies mainly from Lebanon and Jordan. All this is accompanied by strong doses of prescriptive conclusions placed by the authors at the end of every chapter.

The situation described in *Knowledge Production in the Arab World* is not really encouraging. In general, even if the authors recognize an increase in scientific production over the last decades, the Arab states are still part of a group of “non-hegemonic countries” sitting on the margins of the global hierarchical matrix of knowledge creation. Alternatively, a hegemonic center of research production continues to configure and dominate trans-

national research agendas (effectively, but also normatively). Knowledge production, again, becomes an expression of power. Worth noting in that respect is the chapter discussing the research coverage of the so-called Arab Spring and the hierarchies and legitimization dynamics in place among researchers from the “center” and those from the “periphery.”

This book is important for our discussion, as many of the structural shortfalls in IR theory pointed out above represent some effective limits that are also playing out in the Middle Eastern production of International Relations theory. To start with, specialization patterns in the region demonstrate the preponderance of natural science and engineering (especially clinical sciences, medicine and broader applied sciences) in preference to social sciences and the humanities. Especially worrisome in that respect are the regions of Arab Mashrek and Egypt. Additionally, it seems fair to claim that research on International Relations might be negatively affected by the four important factors accounting for cross-disciplines low knowledge production. Firstly, the universities' agenda favouring teaching in front of high-quality research. Secondly, the absence of incentive structures prompting research as a necessary step for career advancement. Thirdly, the lack of a fully-functional and comprehensive network of journals published in Arabic. And finally, the nonexistence of systems in place that would measure the impact of research programs.

Other important deficits examined in the volume are the lack of scientific community formation; broader fragmentation of social sciences; regional brain-drain; problems in setting an independent research agenda; language barriers for researchers; troubles in publishing in international peer-review journals (research not taken seriously by the “hegemonic” establishment); difficulties in accessing international journals due to logistical problems; low level of citations of scientific publications produced in the region (conceptualized as a proxy for global influence, prestige and reputation); lack of a significant number of local journals in Scopus and WoS databases; and the negative impact of forces delegitimizing the social sciences (such as authoritarian political elites and some ideological-religious groups). All together, *Knowledge Production in the Arab World* offers a nuanced sketch of some of the reasons which ultimately prevent a more decisive role for Middle Eastern voices in the discussions on how to globalize the IR discipline.

Considered together, the three texts make evident that fact that the IR community must inaugurate a new

debate on how to leave behind a discipline that has narrowed to providing explanations on how world politics “works” and instead move toward one willing to interpret different human communities’ understandings of how global politics do and should work. This need becomes even more pressing as the first objective cannot be fully achieved without attaining the second one: world politics’ machinery cannot be fully understood if we do not grasp all of the diverging conceptions that human communities hold about it. Otherwise, International Relations theory will never live up to its foundational and critical aspiration of helping us to better understand the political dimension of the world we live in. Yet, as suggested by Acharya, the ethical dimension of IR might be even more important than its epistemic one. If, as stated by Robert Cox, “theory is always for someone and for some purpose,” those of us working on IR theory should ask ourselves whether we are contributing – by commission or by omission – to the consolidation of a specific set of power relations if we fail to foster a truly Global IR theory when researching, writing, and teaching. ■