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IPS FORUM CONTRIBUTION (ISSUE 3, VOL. 3)

International Political Sociology Beyond European and North American Traditions of Social and Political Thought

Introduction

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International Relations is mostly defined as a largely North American discipline with a strong anchoring in Europe. There are different views on what such a geographical or geocultural anchoring of knowledge means: the institutional location in the United States and Europe of most of the knowledge production that is defined as IR; the dominance of European and North American intellectual traditions; and/or, the terms of debate are disproportionately dependent on problem definitions in North American and European politics. A similar observation can be made about sociology.

IPS has as one of its main objectives to reach more globally. The question that arises for IPS then is: What can international political sociology knowledge that works beyond the European and North American traditions, institutions and problem definitions be?

This forum presents contributions from authors who anchor themselves in traditions of thought and institutional contexts outside of the usual institutional, intellectual and geographical points of attention in IR and sociology.

Counterpoints and the Imaginaries Behind Them

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I. A Discipline Without a Compass

The central question of this forum has been asked in other contexts and, sadly, will remain with us for the foreseeable future: "What is or can international

political sociology be beyond the European and North American traditions in social and political thought?" The answer would be obvious if the terms of the question were not themselves already beholden to centuries-old traditions of social and political thought. These are vested in certain ideas of "politics" associated with sovereignty and "state" as exclusive foundations of order. It does not much matter whether "Man" is held to be natural, an individual, or person. These notions or categories are all imbued with a modern understanding of historical consciousness and agency that is egotistically self-referential, violently exclusionary, and pathologically delusional. Without these features, it would have been easier to study the state, global order, or civil society and to orient analyses toward imaginaries of order, security, justice, and peace that did not defer to national mythologies and representations and to the identities and "spaces" that they produce. I agree with Pinar Bilgin that the identities and phenomena that structure global politics do not conform to our categories (see below). I undertake this assignment therefore with the proviso that I do not intend my categories to be impermeable and stable.

I am open to pleas by the likes of Stanley Hoffmann, Ole Wæver, and R.B.J. Walker to contemplate new possibilities and modes of actualization of the discipline of International Relations (IR). I take the forum offered by *International Political Sociology* (IPS) to be a crucial step in this direction. I begin with a parallel between IR and anthropology: the study of the social relations and cultures of human beings. When it was moored to the colonial project, anthropology focused on the origins, distribution, and classification of supposed races and regions that it connected *inter alia* to destiny. Some strands of anthropology later emancipated themselves from the colonial project by improving upon their central concerns to relate to all domains of social existence regardless of the origin, place, or aptitude of the entities involved. Today anthropologists not only study communities, they also gaze at the state, corporations, and the like. From this perspective, the greatest failure (and tragedy) of IR is the lack of will to center its reflection on life beyond one's own *polis* or community, the stuff of international thought, occurred (and occurs) only in singular Western or European traditions. Instead, like anthropology of yesteryear, IR is swayed by national mythologies, self-representations, and foreign policy requirements. As such, it has failed to properly relate the study of the state, international community, or civil society objectively to the questions of global order, security, justice, and peace.

IPS could help to reorient IR toward political relations among the discrete units of the global moral universe and to bring to the fore reflections on the objects, objectives, and methods of the discipline. It may be worth recalling that the central justification of IR resides in its aspiration to understand the collective lives of societies and "citizens" beyond their discrete political boundaries, with an eye to larger moral units. This aspiration was enabled by troubling developments in global politics, originating in the discovery of the New World, Europe's ascent to hegemony, and related scientific innovations. Yet, it would be hazardous to claim that international thought—the ability and product of reflections on the moral universe—is the prerogative of one region. International thought depends on faculties that are universally shared by human societies: the action or process of thinking of the world or of imagining and claiming the world based on concrete intentions and plans. Indeed, the capacity and desire to aspire to a place in the world is neither coterminous nor dependent upon the will and power of any entity to impose its vision of the world order on others. This is not to deny that Western science has achieved some advances in giving form and substance to its own reflections on the subject.

IPS could also help restore the fundamental propositions upon which IR was intended. The first is that the discipline could be an expression of common elements of extant or possible visions of the global moral order. The other is that

Western canons may both inspire and guide a quest for common elements acceptable by all. This sentiment is based on validations of Western philosophy, discourses, and modes of inquiry pertaining to the subject of the international. The first proposition cannot be ignored or suspended without vacating the international of all practical meaning. A discipline that seeks to capture the international cannot accommodate cultural and political supremacy or exude xenophobia and exclusion. There are practical reasons beyond moral principles for open-mindedness, skepticism, and humility in our approaches to our objects: society, state, sovereignty, and their systems of value and interest. One is that most systems of thought around the world contain notions and visions of a larger cosmos to which humans are connected. Religions and spiritual orders nearly everywhere have expanded on notions of nature, society, and individual or persons to envision larger moral entities, including the divine.¹

Arising in these contexts, postcolonial consciousness has sought to reject the provincialism and caste system upon which IR was erected. IPS could advance related debates by embracing dialogues, translations, and interpretations inspired by advances in historiography, ethnography, and hermeneutics. For instance, it is commonsense today that Aquinas' thesis on authority has a parallel in Confucianism;² or that enlightenment-derived rights of rebellion against oppression, oppressive rulers, and totalitarian regimes echo prior theological and philosophical justifications of rebellion in the Islamic and other worlds. It is thus not hard to understand that both the actuality and credibility of IR rests in the rejection of a theoretical fundamentalism that finds comfort and justification in the illusion that all other thought systems are wrong, inferior, or impractical.³

II. Three Modest Proposals

The "problem" with IPS is not therefore its location; nor is it that Western traditions of thought play a significant role in it. All traditions of thought are deployed to reflect specific societal challenges! But it would be utter *naïveté* to assume that it suffices to establish dialogue on the liberal model of pluralism and toleration in order to actualize proclaimed disciplinary objectives: for instance, to set our gaze beyond individual borders in order to examine the causes of conflicts, particularly as they are related to the division of humanity according to identity, wealth, power, and the capacity to inflict violence. Political and institutional practices are the primary obstacles to the promise of the discipline. To confront these problems, I propose three modest steps.

The first, following in the footsteps of anthropologists and to some extent political geographers, is to push our discipline away from its imperial moorings and its ideological trappings. In this context, the "international" means both the outside of national jurisdiction of principally "Western states" and Western discourses, and policies toward the "the Rest." It is not merely that such approaches are founded on parochial conceptions of power and political life. They elevate national self-representations and concerns over the need for broader reflections on both the constitutional requirements of global existence and the actual effects of foreign policies on actual "foreign places." Related studies are often ontologically deficient. Take the theory of the democratic peace. The coherence of this theory depends upon two false propositions. The

¹The Confucian idea that what we do as individuals in the privacy of our homes is not only significant for us but also relevant to society, the nation, the world, and the cosmos is not a figment of the imagination but an experienced reality. One finds similar expressions of connectedness in Hinduism, the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions, and so-called animist forest traditions around the world.

²Jasdev Singh Rai, "Taking a leaf out of Confucius' book," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2008.

³For a like conclusion on religion, see Chris Duggan, "Things can be found as well as lost in the translation of words and concepts between religions," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2007.

first is that post-enlightenment and post-revolutionary constitutional orders, cultures, and political economies produce peaceful dispositions in Western liberal states. The second casts "non-Western" entities outside of the "international order" in order to negate the inherent violence of conquest and colonialism. It also discounts the constitutional legitimacy and political integrity of those vanquished by the West.

I do not mean to say that foreign policy traditions should not be central disciplinary foci. But the over-determination of political necessity undermines the truth-seeking enterprise that must be central to disciplinary objectives and purposes. Specifically, the credibility of the discipline suffers when it takes national self-representations for granted and does concern itself with the burden of evidence and/or the actual effects of foreign policy in the "foreign places" involved. There is a seeming paradox, which is not one, that today's liberal democracies depend on militarized foreign policies and a bellicose stance toward weaker formations for the realization of their objectives in the global order. It must be noted that much violence has also come from other systems and circumstances outside of the West, for instance communist and failed states. Such acknowledgment need not negate that, while liberalism and other Western ideologies have been progressive forces in the world, Western states have been the greatest purveyors of violence and its means. IPS could help to promote analyses of the institutional and historical contexts of actual foreign policies, their formulations of interests, the values and consequences that flow therein.

Truth-seeking remains one of the primary functions of any scientific pursuit. It also provides sustenance to the purpose of understanding global politics and, where necessary, the promotion of the goals of justice, peace, order, and security. My second proposal is therefore for IPS to be mindful of postcolonial critiques of Western theory and politics. Postcolonial thoughts vary according to ideological inclinations, but also cultural traditions, historical experiences, institutional developments, and the degrees and terms of incorporation of different regions in the global political economy. Despite this diversity, self-described postcolonial critics give expression to unique modern experiences through analyses of culture and national politics but also the effects and implications of the "Westernization" of global politics. One area of interest is the Westernization of politics, particularly the legitimation of historic forms of violence under the signs of state sovereignty, national security, and capitalism.

Although postcolonial thoughts come in many forms, I wish to highlight two modalities that may be easily incorporated in IPS. The first consists of scholarship that formulates counterpoints to Western interventions in the world. This scholarship offers counterpoints to the regimes of truths underlying common-sense on Western motives, knowledge, and pragmatism. The counterpoints and their base imaginaries are to lay fresh foundations for justice, solidarity, security and other dimensions of international existence.⁴ This scholarship exists alongside another, more structuralist and dialectical, that aims to confront the manners in which Western power, ideologies, and categories structure international existence to the detriment of vast majorities. For their hostility toward the central norms, values, and interests of the international order under Western hegemony, these theorists have caused discomfort in many circles. Their lexicon for describing struggles and conflict (particularly of Marxists and "nationalists") has been dismissed in the West on account of analytical flaws. Still, they are founded upon a hunch that cannot be dismissed: that the political, economic, and

⁴See, Siba N. Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy: Memories of International Order and Institutions* (Palgrave, 2006). Also, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) based in Dakar Senegal may be a useful place to look for ideas emanating from Africa that aims to propose alternative visions of the moral order.

cultural forms and norms instituted by the wealthiest and militarily most powerful nations have wrought misery and insecurity around the world.⁵

My third and final plea is for IPS to index and incorporate knowledge, truth-regimes, and emergent forms of political actions that do not presently figure in disciplinary archives but nonetheless orient the expectations and (re)actions of multitudes. There are everywhere forms of thought and mental cosmologies that aim to foster life within a moral order greater than the spatial locations of individual entities. We know for instance that, centuries before the treaties of Augsburg and Westphalia formalized religious toleration and sovereignty in Europe, the Ottoman empire had institutionalized religious coexistence within systems of *willet* that paid heed to both singularity and universalism. Like other, non-European political orders at the time, the Ottoman empire generated distinct modes of thought that contained identifiable norms of conduct and principles of truth. This fact has been recognized here and there by analysts, but the implications of their findings have not been central ingredients of the discipline. Nor has IR duly acknowledged the validity of such non-European treaty instruments as the wampum of Native Americans as evidence of solemn agreements. Related devalorizations do not just make light of European colonial traditions of deception in both the secular and religious domains; they have real normative implications.

At times, non-European entities have shown critical spirits and attitudes toward life that surpassed those of their European contemporaries. In these instances, the former developed compelling moral systems either before or after epic philosophical movements in Europe. Take humanism. It is said that, as a doctrine, humanism centers on human values and interests and that it stresses individual dignity, worth, and capacity for self-realization through reason. Post-Enlightenment ideologies have promoted humanism as if moral systems elsewhere (in Asia and Africa for instance) had not reflected on ways to ennoble human existence based on values and interests centered around natural beings. A case could be made for instance that the larger moral systems of Asia (including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism) had notable advantages over Europe in their reflections on the human condition. Specifically, they could contemplate likenesses of human faculties and universalism without the burden and constraints of the dualistic and antagonistic orders that the Enlightenment inherited from monotheism: for instance, of saved and damned, chosen and not chosen, and good and evil. In no small ways too, foreign societies in West Africa reserved a category for the human (for the Kpelle, NU) that is neither male (HULONU) nor female (NENU). The human from this perspective is without gender, race, ethnicity, religion or any of those categories that divide humans in Western anthropology. NULA, which means humanism or to be human, resides in all those committed to perfection NU. In contrast, those who endangered human existence, either through sciences that undermined the very existence of the human or through peddling and using weapons of self-annihilation, undermined their claim to NULA.

Conclusion

This is not the place for a full exposé of how one might construe different kinds of humanism from such moral systems. It suffices to say that they contained identifiable doctrines of life, determinate modes of evidence, defensible values. IPS could contribute greatly to advancing "international knowledge" by helping to catalogue the base mental and symbolic categories as well as the moral principles contained in such systems of thought.

⁵For instance, the theories of dependency, empire and imperialism, neocolonialism, and now postcolonialism have attempted to both record and critique significant dimensions of global politics. The related phenomena remain today even if the theories themselves might be said to be seriously flawed.