

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #57

SIBA GROVOGUI ON IR THEORY AS THEOLOGY, READING KANT BADLY, AND THE INCAPACITY OF WESTERN IDEAS TO TRAVEL VERY FAR IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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SIBA GROVOGUI ON IR AS THEOLOGY, READING KANT BADLY, AND THE INCAPACITY OF WESTERN POLITICAL THEORY TO TRAVEL VERY FAR IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS



The study of International Relations is founded on a series of assumptions that originate in the monotheistic traditions of the West. For Siba Grovogui, this realization provoked him to question not only IR but to broaden his enquiries into a multidisciplinary endeavour that encompasses law and anthropology, journalism and linguistics, and is informed by

stories and lessons from Guinea. In this *Talk*, he discusses the importance of human encounters and the problem with the Hegelian logic which distorts our understanding of our own intellectual development and the trajectory of the discipline of IR.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I don't want to be evasive, but I actually don't think that International Relations as a field has an object today. And that is the problem with International Relations since Martin Wight and Stanley Hoffmann and all of those people debated what International Relations was, whether it was an American discipline, etc. I believe you can look at International Relations in multiple ways: if you think of à la Hoffmann, as a tool of dominant power, International Relations is to this empire what anthropology was to the last. This not only has to do with the predicates upon which it was founded initially but with its aspirations, for International Relations shares with Anthropology the ambition to know Man—and I am using here a very antiquated language, but that is what it was then—to know Man in certain capacities. In the last empire, anthropology focused on the cultural dimension and, correspondingly separated culture from civilization in a manner that placed other regions of the world in subsidiarity vis-à-vis Europe and European empires. In the reigning empire, IR has focused on the management and administration of an empire that never spoke its name, reason, or subject.

Now you can believe all the stories about liberalism and all of that stuff, but although it was predicated upon different assumptions, the ambition is still the same: it is actually to know Man, the way in which society is organized, to know how the entities function, etc. If you look at it that

way, then International Relations cannot be the extension of any country's foreign policy, however significant. This is not to say that the foreign policies of the big countries do not matter: it would be foolish not to study them and take them into account, because they have greater impact than smaller countries obviously. But International Relations is not—or should not be—the extension of any country's foreign policy, nor should it be seen as the agglomeration of a certain restricted number of foreign policies. International Relations suggests, again, interest in the configurations of material, moral, and symbolic spaces as well as dynamics resulting from the relations of moral and social entities presumed to be of equal moral standings and capacities.

If one sees it that way then we must reimagine what International Relations should be. Foreign policy would be an important dimension of it, but the field of foreign policy must be understood primarily in terms of its explanations and justifications—regardless of whether these are bundled up as realism, liberalism, or other. Today, these fields provide different ways of explaining to the West, for itself, as a rational decision, or a justification to the rest, that what it has done over the past five centuries, from conquest to colonization and slavery and colonialism, is 'natural' and that any political entities similarly situated would have done it in that same manner. It follows therefore that this is how things should be. Those justifications, explanations, and rationalizations of foreign policy decisions and events are important to understand as windows into the manners in which certain regions and political entities have construed value, interest, and ethics. But they still belong, in some significant way, to a different domain than what is implied by the concept of IR.

I am therefore curious about the so-called debates about the nature of politics and the proper applicable science or approach to historical foreign policy realms and domains, particularly those of the West: I don't consider those debates to be 'big debates' in International Relations, because they are really about how the West sees itself and justifies itself and how it wants to be seen, and thus as rational. For the West (as assumed by so-called Western scholars), these debates extend the tradition of exculpating the West and seeing the West as the regenerative, redemptive, and progressive force in the world. All of that language is about that. So when you say to me, what are the debates, I don't know what they are, so far, really, in International Relations. The constitution of the 'international', the contours and effects of the imaginaries of its constituents, and the actualized and attainable material and symbolic spaces within it to realize justice, peace, and a sustainable order have thus far eluded the authoritative disciplinary traditions.

Consider the question of China today, as it is posed in the West. The China question, too, emerges from a particular foreign policy rationale, which may be important and particular ways to some people or constituencies in the West but not in the same way to others, for instance in Africa. The narrowness of the framing of the China question is why in the West many are baffled about how Africa has been receiving China, and China's entry into Latin America, etc. In relation to aid, for instance, if you are an African of a certain age, or you know some history, you will know that China formulated its foreign aid policy in 1964 and that nothing has changed. And there are other elements, such as foreign intervention and responsibility to self and others where China has had a distinct trajectory in Africa.

In some regard, China may even be closer in outlook to postcolonial African states than the former colonial powers. For instance, neither China nor African states consider the responsibility to protect, to be essentially Western. In this regard, it is worth bearing in mind for instance that Tanzania intervened in Uganda to depose Idi Amin in 1979; Vietnam ended the Khmer Rouge tyranny in Cambodia in 1979; India intervened in Bangladesh in 1971—it wasn't the West. So those kinds of understandings of responsibility, in the way they are framed today in the post-Cold War period, superimposes ideas of responsibility that were already there and were formulated in Bandung in 1955: differences between intervention and interference, the latter of which today comes coded as regime change, were actually hardly debated. So our imaginaries of the world and how it works, of responsibility, of ethics, etc., have always had to compete with those that were formulated since the seventeenth century in Europe, as “international ethics”, “international law”, “international theory”. And in fact that long history full of sliding concepts and similar meanings may be one of the problems for understanding how the world came into being as we know it today. And this is why actually my classes here always begin with a semester-long discussion of hermeneutics, of historiography, and of ethnography in IR and how they have been incorporated.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I came to where I am now essentially because of a sense of frustration, that we have a discipline that calls itself “international” and yet seemed to be speaking either univocally or unidirectionally: univocally in imagining the world and unidirectionally in the way it addresses the rest of the world, and a lot of problems result from that.

I had trained as a lawyer in Guinea, and when I came to the US I imagined that International Relations would be taught at law school, which is the case in France, most of the time, and also in some places in Germany in the past, because it is considered a normative science there. But when I came here I was shocked to discover that it was going to be in a field called Political Science, but I went along with it anyway. In the end I did a double major: in law, at the law school in Madison, Wisconsin, and in political science. When I came to America and went the University of Wisconsin, I first took a class called “Nuclear Weapons and World Politics” or something of the sort, it was more theology and less science. It was basically articulated around chosen people and non-chosen people, those who deserve to have weapons and those who don't. There was no rationale, no discussion of which countries respected the Non-Proliferation Treaty, no reasoning in terms of which countries had been wiser than others in using weapons of mass destruction, etc.: there was nothing to it except the underlying, intuitive belief that if something has to be done, we do it and other people don't. I'm being crass here, but let's face it: this was a course I took in the 1980s and it is still the same today! So I began to feel that this is really more theology and less science. Yes, it was all neatly wrapped in rationalism, in game theory, all of these things. So I began to ask myself deeper questions, outside of the ones they were asking, so my Nuclear Weapons and World Politics class was really what bothered me, or you could say it was some kind of trigger.

This way of seeing IR is related to the fact that I don't share the implicit monotheist underpinnings of the discipline. That translates into my perhaps unorthodox teaching style, unorthodox within American academia anyway. Teaching all too often tends to be less about understanding the world and more about proselytizing. In order to try to explore this understanding I like to bring my students to consider the world that has existed, to imagine that sovereignty and politics can be structured differently, especially outside of monotheism with its likening of the sovereign to god, the hierarchy modelled on the church, Saint Peter, Jesus, God, uniformity and the power of life (to kill or let live), and to understand that there have always been places where the sovereign was not in fact that revered. Think of India, for example, where people have multiple gods, and some are mischievous, some are promiscuous, some are happy and some are mean, so there are lots of conceptions and some of these don't translate well into different cultural contexts. The same, incidentally, goes for the Greek gods. Of course, we had to make the Greeks Christians first, before we drew our lineage to them. You see what I mean? Christianity left a very deep impact on Western traditions. Whether you think of political parties and a parallel to the Catholic orders: if you are a Jesuit, the Jesuits are always right; if you are a Franciscan, the Franciscans are always right. The Franciscans for instance think they have the monopoly on Christian social teaching. In a similar way, it doesn't matter what your political party does, you follow whatever your party says. The same thing happens when you study: are you a realist, are you liberalist, etc. You are replicating the Jesuits, the Franciscans, those monks and their orders. But we are all caught within that logic, of tying ourselves into one school of thought and going along with one "truth" over another, instead of permitting multiple takes on reality..

For me, as a non-monotheist myself, everything revolves around this question of truth: whether truth is given or has to be found and how we find it. Truth has to be found, discovered, revealed—we have to continuously search. The significant point is that we never find it absolutely. Truth is always provisional, circumstantial, and pertinent to a context or situation. We all want truth and it is always evading us, but we must look for it. But I don't think that truth is given. It is in the Bible, the Quran, *and* the Torah. And I am comfortable with that but I am not in the realm of theology. I dwell on human truths and humans are imperfect and not omniscient, at least not so individually.

If I had the truth, then I might be one of those dictators governing in Africa today. I was raised a Catholic by the way, I almost went to the seminary. If you just think through the story of the Revelation in profane terms, you come to the realization that ours are multiple revelations. Again in theology, one truth is given at a time—the Temple Mount, the Tablets, and all that stuff—but that is not in our province. I leave that to a different province and that is unattainable to me. The kind of revelation I want is the one that goes through observing, through looking, through deliberating, through inquiry—that I am comfortable with. There can be a revelation in terms of meeting the unexpected, for example: when I went to the New World, to Latin America for the first time, I said, 'wow, this is interesting'. That was through my own senses, but it had a lot to do with the way I prepared myself in order to receive the world and to interact with the world. That kind of revelation I believe in. The other one is beyond me and I'm not interested in that. When I want to be very blasphemous, even though I was raised a Catholic, I tell my students: the problem with the Temple Mount is that God did not have a Twitter account, so the rest of us

didn't hear it—we were not informed. I don't have the truth, and I don't really don't want to have it.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

I am not sure I want to make a canonical recommendation, if that's what you are asking me for. Let me tell you this: I have trained about eleven PhD students, and none of them has ever done what I do. I am not interested in having clones, I don't want to recreate theology, and in fact I feel this question to betray a very Western disposition, by implying the need to create canons and theology. I don't want that. What I want is to understand the world, and understanding can be done in multiple ways: people do it through music, through art, through multiple things. The problem for me, however, is actually the elements, assumptions, predicates of studies and languages that we use in IR, the question to whom they make sense—I am talking about the types of ethnographies, the ways in which we talk about diplomatic history, and all of those things. The graduate courses that I was talking about have multiple dimensions, but there are times in my seminars here where I just take a look at events like what happened in the New World from 1492 to 1600. This allows me to talk about human encounters. The ones we have recorded, of people who are mutually unintelligible, are the ones that took place on this continent, the so-called New World. And what this does is that it allows me to talk about encounters, to talk about all of the possibilities—you know the ones most people talk about in cultural studies like creolization, hybridization, and all those things—and all of the others things that happened also which are not so helpful, such as violence, usurpation, and so forth.

What that allows me to do is to cut through all this nonsense—yes I am going to call it nonsense—that projects the image that what we do today goes back to Thucydides and has been handed down to us through history to today. There are many strands of thought like that. If you think about thought, and Western thought in general, all of those historically rooted and contingent strands of thought have something to do with how we construct social scientific fields of analysis today—realism, liberalism, etc.—so I'm not dispensing with that. What I'm saying is that history itself has very little to do with those strands of thought, and that people who came here—obviously you had scientists who came to the New World—but the policies on the ground had nothing to do with Thucydides, nothing to do with Machiavelli, etc. Their practices actually had more to do with the violence that propelled those Europeans from their own countries in seeking refuge, and how that violence shaped them, the kind of attachments they had. But it also had to do with the kind of cultural disposition here, and the manner in which people were able to cope, or not. Because that's where we are today in the post-Cold War era, the age of globalization, we must provide analyses that are germane to how the constituents (or constitutive elements) of the historically constituted 'international' are coping with our collective inheritance. For me, this approach is actually much more instructive. This has nothing to do with the Melian Dialogue and the like.

All of the stuff projected today as canonical is interesting to me but only in limited ways. I actually read the classics and have had my students read them, but try to get my students to read

them as a resource for understanding where we are today and how we were led there, rather than as a resource for justifying or legitimating the manner in which European conducted their ‘foreign’ policies or their actions in the New World. No. I know enough to know that no action in the New World or elsewhere was pre-ordained, unavoidable, or inevitable. The resulting political entities in the West must assume the manners in which they acted. It is history, literally. And of course we know through Voltaire, we know through Montaigne, we know even through Roger Bacon, that even in those times people realized that in fact the world had not been made and hence had not been before as it would become later; that other ways were (and still) are possible; and that the pathologies of the violence of religious and civil wars in Europe conditioned some the behaviours displayed in the New World and Africa during conquest and enslavement.

For the same reason I recommend students to read Kant: I tell them to read Kant as a resource for understanding how we might think about the world today, but I am compelled to say often to my students that before Kant, hospitality, and such cultural intermediaries as the Dragomans in the Ottoman Empire, the Wangara in West Africa, the Chinese Diaspora in East and Southeast Asia, and so forth, enabled commerce across continents for centuries before Europe was included into the existing trading networks. This is not to dismiss Kant, it is simply to force students to put Kant in conversation with a different trajectory of the development of commercial societies, cross-regional networks, and the movements to envisage laws, rules, and ethics to enable communications among populations and individual groups.

This approach causes many people to ask whether the IR programme at Johns Hopkins really concerns IR theory or something else. I actually often get those kinds of questions, and they are wedded to particular conceptions of IR. I am never able to give a fixed and quick answer but I often illustrate points that I wish to make. Consider how scholars and policymakers relate the question of sovereignty to Africa. Many see African sovereignty as problem, either because they think it is abused or stands in the way of humanitarian or development actions by supposed well-meaning Westerners. I attempt to have my students think twice when sovereignty is evoked in that way: ‘sovereignty is a problem; the extents to which sovereignty is a problem in Africa; and why sovereignty is unproblematic in Europe or America’. This questioning and bracketing is not simply a ‘postmodernist’ evasion of the question.

Rather, I invite my students to reconsider the issue: if sovereignty is your problem, how do you think about the problem? For me, this is a much more interesting question; not what the problem is. For instance, if you start basing everything around a certain mythology of the Westphalia model, particularly when you begin to see everything as either conforming to it (the good) or deviating from it (the bad), then you have lost me. Because before Westphalia there were actually many ways in which sovereigns understood themselves, and therefore organized their realms, and how sovereignty was experienced and appreciated by its subjects. Westphalia is a crucial moment in Europe in these regards—I grant you that. If you want to say what is wrong with Westphalia, that’s fine too. But if Westphalia is your starting point, the discussion is unlikely to be productive to me. Seriously!

In your work on political identity in Africa, such as your contribution to the 2012 volume edited by Arlene Tickner and David Blaney, the terms periphery, margin, lack of historicity recur frequently. What regional or perhaps even global representational protagonism can you envisage for IR studies emerging from Africa and its spokespeople?

The subjects of ‘periphery’ and ‘marginalisation’ come into my own thinking from multiple directions. One of them has to do with the African state and the kind of subsidiarity it has assumed from the colonization onward. That’s a critique of the state of affairs and a commentary on how Africa is organized and is governed. But I do also use it sometimes as a direct challenge to people who think they know the world. And my second book, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Anarchy* (2006), was actually about that, and that book was triggered by an account of an event in Africa, that everybody in African Studies has repeated and still continues to repeat, which is this: in June 1960, Africans went to defend France, *because France asked them to*. This is to say that nobody could imagine that Africans—and I am being careful here in terms of how people describe Africans—understood that they had a stake in the ‘world’ under assault during World War II. And so the book actually begins with a simple question: in 1940, which France would have asked Africans to defend it: Vichy France which was under German control, or the Germans who occupied half of France? But the decision to defend France actually came partly from a discussion between French colonial officers in Chad and African veterans of World War I, who decided that the world had to be restructured for Africa to find its place in it. They didn’t do it for France, because it’s a colonial power, they did it for the world. That’s the thing. And Pétain, to his credit, is the only French official who asked the pertinent question about that, in a letter to his minister of justice (which is an irony, because justice under Pétain was a different question) he said: ‘I am puzzled, that in 1918 when we were victorious, Africans rebelled; in 1940, we are defeated, and they come to our aid. Could you explain that to me?’ The titular head of Vichy had the decency to ask that. By contrast, every scholar of Africa just repeated, ‘Oh, the French asked Africans to go fight, and the Africans showed up’.

Our inability to understand that Africa actually sees itself as a part of the world, as a manager of the world, has so escaped us today that in the case of Libya for instance, when people were debating, you saw in every single newspaper in the world, including my beloved *Guardian*, that the African Union decided this, but the International Community decided that, as if Africans had surrendered their position in the international society to somebody: to the International Community. People actually said that! The AU, for all its ‘wretchedness’, after all represents about a quarter of the member states of the UN. And yet it was said the AU decided this and the International Community decided that. The implication is that the International Community is still the West plus Japan and maybe somebody else, and in this case it was Qatar and Saudi Arabia: “good citizens of the world”, very “good democracies” etc. That’s how deeply-set that is, that people don’t even check themselves. Every time they talk they chuck Africa out of the World. Nobody says, America did this and the International Community decided that. All I am saying is that our mindscapes are so deeply structured that nothing about Africa can be studied on its own, can be studied as something that has universal consequence, as something that has universal value, as something that might be universalising—that institutions in Africa might actually have some good use to think about anything. Otherwise, people would have asked them how did colonial populations—people who were colonized—overcome colonial attempts to strip

them of their humanity and extend an act of humanity, of human solidarity, to go fight to defend them? And what was that about? Even many Africans fail to ask that question today!

And it could be argued that this thinking is, to some degree, down to widespread ignorance about Africa. We all are guilty of this. And oddly, especially intellectuals are guilty of this, and worse. Let me give you an example: recently I was in Tübingen in Germany, and I went into a store to buy some shoes—a very fine store, wonderful people—and I can tell you I ended up having a much more rewarding conversation with the people working in the shoe shop than I had at Tübingen University. Because there was a real curiosity. You would like to think that it is not so unusual in this day and age that a person from Guinea teaches in America, but you cannot blame them for being curious and asking many questions. At the university, in contrast, they actually are making claims, and for me that is no longer ignorance, that is hubris.

Your work presents an original take on the role of language in International Relations. How is language tied up with IR theory?

The language problem has many, many layers. The first of these is, simply, the issue of translation. If I were, for instance, to talk to someone in my father's language about Great Power Responsibility, they would look totally lost. Because in Guinea we have been what white people call stateless or acephalous societies, the notion that one power should have responsibility for another is a very difficult concept to translate, because you are running up against imaginaries of power, of authority, etc. that simply don't exist. So when you talk about such social scientific categories to those people, you have to be aware of all the colonial era enlightenment inheritances in them. When we talk about International Relations in Africa, we thus bump into a whole set of problems: the primary problem of translating ideas from here into those languages; another in capturing what kind of institutions exist in those languages; and a third issue has to do with how you translate across those languages. Consider for instance the difference between Loma stateless societies in the rain forest in Guinea, and Malinke who are very hierarchical, especially since Sundiata Keita came to power in the 13th century. But the one problem most people don't talk about is the very one that is obsessing me now, is the question how I, as an African, am able to communicate with you through Kant, without you assuming that I am a bad reader of Kant.

The difference that I am trying to make here is actually what in linguistics is called vehicular language which is distinct from vernacular language. Because a lot of you assume that vehicular language is vernacular—that there is Latin and the rest is vernacular; that there is a proper reading of Kant and everything else is vernacular; or you have cosmopolitan and perhaps afropolitan and everything else is the vernacular of it. But this is not in fact always the case. The most difficult thing for linguists to understand, and for people in the social sciences to understand, is that Kant, Hegel and other thinkers can avail themselves as resources that one uses to try to convey imaginaries that are not always available to others—or to Kant himself for that matter. And it is not analogical—it is not 'this is the African Machiavelli'. It is easy to talk about power using Machiavelli, but to smuggle into Machiavelli different kind of imaginaries is more difficult. Nonetheless, I use Machiavelli because there is no other language available to me to convey that to you, because you don't speak my father's language.

Moreover, there is a danger for instance when I speak with my students that they may hear Machiavelli even when I am not speaking of him, and I warn them to be very careful. Machiavelli is a way to bring in a different stream of understanding of *Realpolitik*, but it's not entirely Machiavelli. If you spoke my father's language, I would tell you in my father's language, but that is not available to me here, so Machiavelli is a vehicle to talk about something else. Sometimes people might say to me 'what you are saying sounds to me like Kant but it's not really Kant' then I remind them that before Kant there were actually a lot of people who talked about the sublime, the moral, the categorical imperative, etc. in different languages; and if you are patient with me then we will get to the point when Kant belongs to a genealogy of people who talked about certain problems differently, and in that context Kant is no longer a European: I place Kant in the context of people who talk about politics, morality, etc. differently and I want to offer you a bunch of resources and please, please don't package me, because you don't own the interpretation of Kant, because even in your own context in Europe today Kant is not your contemporary, so you are making a lot of translations and I am making a lot of translations to get to something else: it is not that I am not a bad reader.

At an ISA conference I once was attacked by a senior colleague in IR for being a bad reader of Hegel, and I had to explain to him that while my using Hegel might be an act of imposition, and a result of having been colonised and given Hegel, but at this particular moment he should consider my gesture as an act of generosity, in the sense that I was reading Hegel generously to find resources that would allow him to understand things that he had no idea exist out there, and Hegel is the only tool available to me at this moment. But because all of you believe in one theology or another, he insisted that if I spoke Hegelian then I was Hegelian, and I retorted that I was not, but that deploying Hegel was merely an instance of vehicular language, allowing me to explore certain predicates, certain precepts and assumptions, and that is all. In this way, I can use Kant, or Hegel, or Hobbes, or Locke, and my problem when I do this is not with those thinkers—I can ignore the limitations of their thinking which was conditioned by the realities of their time—my problem is with those people who think they own traditions originating from long dead European thinkers. Thus, my problem today is less with Kant than with Kantians.

Or take Hobbes: Hobbes talked about the body in the way that it was understood in his time, and about human faculties in the way that they were understood at that time. Anybody who quotes Hobbes today about the faculties of human nature, I have to ask: when was the last time you read biology? I am not saying that Hobbes wasn't a very smart man; he was an erudite, and I am not joking. It is not his problem that people are still trivialising human faculties and finding issue with his view of how the body works—of course he was wrong on permeability, on cohabitation, on what organs live in us, etc.—he was giving his account of politics through metaphors and analogies that he understood at that time. When I think about it this way, my problem is not that Hobbes didn't have a modern understanding of the body, the distribution of the faculties and the extent of human capacities. Nor is my problem that Hobbes is Western. My problem is not with Hobbes himself. My problem is with all these realists who based their understanding of sovereignty or borders strictly on Hobbes' illustrations but have not opened a current book on the body that speaks of the faculties. If they did, even their own analogies may begin to resonate

differently. There is new research coming out all the time on how we can understand the body, and this should have repercussions on how we read Hobbes today.

The absence of contextualization and historicization has proved a great liability for IR. Historicity allows one to receive Hobbes and all those other writers without indulging in mindless simplicities. It helps get away from simplistic divisions of the world—for instance, the West here and Africa there—from the assumptions that when I speak about postcolonialism in Africa I must be anti-Western. I am in fact growing very tired of those kinds of categories. As a parenthesis, I must ask if some of those guys in IR who speak so univocally and unidirectionally to others are even capable of opening themselves up to hearing other voices. I must also reveal that Adlai Stevenson, not some postcolonialist, alerted me to the problem of univocality when he stated in 1954 during one UN forum that ‘Everybody needed aid, the West surely needs a hearing aid’. Hearing is indeed the one faculty that the West is most in need of cultivating. The same, incidentally, could be said of China nowadays.

One of the things I would like to deny Western canonist is their inclination to think of the likes of Diderot as Westerners. In his *Supplément au Voyage a Bougainville (1772)*, Diderot presents a dialogue between himself and Orou, a native Tahitian. Voltaire wrote dialogues, some real, some imaginary, about and with China. The authors’ people were reflecting on the world. It is hubris and an act of usurpation in the West today to want to lay claim to everything that is perceived to be good for the West. By the same token that which is bad must come from somewhere else. This act of usurpation has led to the appropriation—or rather internal colonization—of Diderot and Voltaire and like-minded philosophers and publicists who very much engaged the world beyond their locales. I have quarrels with this act of colonization, of the incipient parochialization of authors who ought not to be. I have quarrels with Voltaire’s characterization of non-Europeans at times; but I have a greater quarrel with how he has been colonised today as distinctly European. Voltaire rejected European orthodoxies of his day and opted explicitly to enter into dialogue with Chinese and Africans as he understood them. Diderot, too, was often in dialogue with Tahitians and other non-Europeans. In fact, the relationship between Diderot and the Tahitian was exactly the same as the relationship between Socrates and Plato, in that you have an older person talking and a younger person and less wise person listening. A lot of Western philosophy and political theory was actually generated—at least in the modern period—after contact with the non-West. So how that is Western I don’t know. I encounter the same problem when I am in Africa where I am accused of being Western just because I make the same literary references. It is a paradox today that even literature is assigned an identity for the purpose of hegemony and/or exclusion. Francis Galton travelled widely and wrote dialogues from this expedition in Africa, so how can we say to what extent the substance of such dialogues was Western or British?

So in sum you are not trying to counter Western thought, but do you feel that the African political experience and your own perspective can bring something new to IR studies?

I am going to try and express something very carefully here, because the theory of the state in Africa brought about untold horrors—in Sierra Leone, in Liberia, and so on—so I am not saying

this lightly. But I have said to many people, Africans and non-Africans, that I am glad that the postcolonial African state failed, and I wish many more of them failed, and I'm sure a lot more will fail, because they correspond to nothing on the ground. The idea of constitutions and constitutionalism came with making arrangements with a lot of social elements that were generated by certain entities that aspired to go in certain directions. What happened in Africa is that somebody came and said: "this worked there, it should work here"—and it doesn't. I'll give you three short stories to illustrate this.

One of the presidents of postcolonial Guinea, the one I despise the most, Lansana Conté (in office 1984-2008), also gave me one of my inspirational moments. Students rebelled against him and destroyed everything in town and so he went on national TV that day and said: 'You know I'm very disheartened. I am disheartened about children who have become Europeans.' Obviously the blame would be on Europe. He continued, "They are rude, they don't respect people or property. I understand that they may have quarrels with me, but I also understand that we are Africans. And though we may no longer live in the village", and it is important for me that he said that, "though we may no longer live in the village, when we move in the big city, the council of elders is what parliament does for us now. We don't have the council of elders, instead we have parliament. They, the students, can go to parliament and complain about their father. I am their father, my children are older than all of them. So in the village, they would have gone to the council of elders, and they could have done this and I would have given them my explanation". And the next morning, the whole country turned against the students, because what he had succeeded in doing was to touch and move people. They went to the head of the student government, who said: "The president was right. We had failed to understand that our ways cannot be European ways, and we can think about our modern institutions as iterations of what we had in the past, suited to our circumstances, and so we should not do politics in the same way. I agree with him, and in that spirit I want to say that among the Koranko ethnic group, fathers let their children eat meat first, because they have growing needs, and if the father doesn't take care of his children, then they take the children away from the father and give them to the uncle. Our problem at the university is that our stipends are not being paid, and father has all his mansions in France, in Spain, and elsewhere, so we want the uncle." He was in effect asking for political transition: he was saying they were now going to the council of elders, the parliament, and demand the uncle, for father no longer merits being the father. He was able to articulate political transition and rotation in that language. It was a very clever move.

The second one was my mother who was completely unsympathetic to me when I came home one day and was upset that one of my friends who was a journalist had been arrested. She said, 'if you wish you can go back to your town but don't come here and bother me and be grumpy'. So I started an exchange with her and explained to her why it is important that we have journalists and why they should be free, until our discussion turned to the subject of speaking truth to power. At that moment she said, 'now you are talking sense' and she started to tell me how the *griot* functioned in West Africa for the past eight hundred years, and why truth to power is part of our institutional heritage. But that truth is not a personal truth, for there is an organic connection between reporter and the community, there is a group in which they collect information, communicate and criticize, and we began to talk about that. And since then I have stopped teaching Jefferson in my constitutional classes in Africa, as a way of talking about the free press,

instead I talk about speaking truth to power. But it allows me not only to talk about the necessity of speaking truth to power, but also to criticize the organization of the media, which is so individualised, so oriented toward the people who give the money: think of the National Democratic Institute in Washington, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Germany, they have no organic connection to the people. And my mother told me, ‘as long as it’s a battle between those who have the guns and those who have the pen, then nobody is speaking to my problems, then I have no dog in that fight’. And journalists really make a big mistake by not updating their trade and redressing it. Because speaking truth to power is not absent in our tradition, we have had it for eight hundred years, six centuries before Jefferson, but we don’t think about it that way. I have to remind my friends in Guinea: ‘you are vulnerable precisely because you have not understood what the profession of journalism might look like in this community, to make your message more relevant and effective’. You see the smart young guys tweeting away and how they have been replaced by the Muslim Brotherhood, because we have not made the message relevant to the community. We are communicating on media and in idioms that have no real bearing on people’s lives, so we are easily dismissed. That is in fact the tragedy of what happened in Tunisia: the smart, young protesters have so easily been brushed aside for this reason.

The third story is about how we had a constitutional debate in Guinea before multipartism, and people were talking about the separation of powers. And I went to the university to talk to a group of people and I put it to them: why do you waste your time studying the American Constitution and the separation of powers in America? I grant you, it is a wonderful experiment and it has lasted two hundred years, but that would not lead you anywhere with these people. The theocratic Futa Jallon in Guinea (in the 18th and 19th centuries) had one of the most advanced systems of separation of powers: the king was in Labé, the constitution was in Dalaba, the people who interpreted the constitution were in yet another city, the army was based in Tougué. It was the most decentralised organization of government you can imagine, and all predicated on the idea that none of the nine *divés*, or provinces, should actually have the monopoly of power. So those that kept the constitution were not allowed to interpret it, because the readers were somewhere else. But to make sure that what they were reading was the right document, they gave it to a different province. So the separation of powers is not new to us.

In sum, the West is a wonderful political experiment, and it has worked for *them*. We can actualize some of what they have instituted, but we have sources here that are more suited to the circumstances of the people in that region, without undermining the modern ideas of democratic self-governance, without undermining the idea of a republic. Without dispensing with all of those, we must not be tempted to imagine constitution in the same way, to imagine separation of powers in the same way, even to imagine and practice journalism in the same way, in this very different environment. It is going to fail. That is my third story.

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