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THEORY TALK #71

JOHN M. HOBSON ON EUROCENTRISM, HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE CURIOUS CASE OF POSTCOLONIALISM

Theory Talks

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JOHN M. HOBSON ON EUROCENTRISM, HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE CURIOUS CASE OF POSTCOLONIALISM



International Relations, it is widely recognized, is a Western discipline, albeit one that claims to speak for global conditions. What does that mean are these regional origins in and by themselves a stake in power politics? This Eurocentrism is often taken as a point of departure for denouncing mainstream approaches by self-proclaimed critical and postcolonialist approaches to IR. John Hobson stages a more radical attack on Eurocentrism, in which western critical theories, too, are complicit in the perpetuation of a dominantly western outlook. In this extensive *Talk*, Hobson, among others, expounds his understanding of Eurocentrism, discusses the imperative to historicize IR, and sketches the outline of possible venues of emancipation from our provincial predicament.

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

In my view, there are two principal inter-related challenges that face IR. The first is the need to deal with the critique that the discipline is constructed on Eurocentric foundations. This matters both for critical and conventional IR. The latter insists that it works according to value-free positivistic/scientifistic principles. But if it is skewed by an underlying Western-centric bias, as I have contended in my work, then the positivist mantra turns out to constitute a smokescreen or veil behind which lies the dark Eurocentric face of conventional IR. And of course, if Eurocentrism in various forms infects much of critical IR, then it jeopardizes its critical credentials and risks falling back into problem-solving theory. For these reasons, then, I feel that the critique of Eurocentric IR and international political economy (IPE) poses nothing short of an intellectually existential challenge to these disciplines.

The second inter-related challenge is that if we accept that the discipline is essentially Eurocentric then we need to reconstruct IR's foundations on a non-Eurocentric basis and then advance an alternative non-Eurocentric research agenda and empirical analysis of the international system and the global political economy. This is a straightforward challenge vis-à-vis conventional IR/IPE theory but it is more problematic so far as critical IR/IPE is concerned (which is why my answer is somewhat extended). The more postmodern wing of the discipline would view with inherent skepticism any attempt to reconstruct some kind of (albeit alternative) grand narrative. And the postmodern postcolonialists would likely concur. It is at this point that the thorniest issue emerges in the context of postcolonial IR theory. For however hard this is to say, I feel that simply proclaiming the Eurocentric foundations of the discipline does not hole its constituent theories deep beneath the waterline; a claim that abrades with the view of most postcolonialists who view Eurocentrism as inherently illegitimate either because it renders it imperialist (which I view as problematic since there are significant strands of anti-imperialist Eurocentrism and

scientific racism) or because they conflate Eurocentrism with the unacceptable politics of (scientific) racism (which I also find problematic notwithstanding the point that there are all manner of overlaps and synergies between these two generic Western-centric discourses, all of which is explained in my 2012 book, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*). The key point—one which will undoubtedly get me into a lot of trouble with postcolonialists—is that I feel we need to recognize that in the end Eurocentric IR (and IPE) theory constitutes a stand-point approach, just like any other, and its merits or de-merits can ultimately only be evaluated against the empirical record, past and present (notwithstanding the points that I find Eurocentrism to be deeply biased and that what I find so deeply galling about it is its dismissive ‘put-down’ *modus operandi* of all things non-Western, wherein all non-Western achievements are dismissed outright, alongside the simultaneous (re)presentation of everything that the West does as progressive and/or pioneering).

So the second principal challenge facing the discipline—one which will no less get me into trouble with many postmodern/poststructuralist thinkers—is the need to reconstruct an alternative non-Eurocentric set of disciplinary foundations, which can then generate fresh empirical narratives of the international system and the global political economy. For my view is that only by offering an alternative research agenda and empirical analysis of the world economy can IR and IPE be set free from their extant Eurocentric straitjackets and the Sisyphean prison within which they remain confined, wherein IR and IPE scholars simply re-present or recycle tired old Eurocentric mantras and tropes in new clothing *ad infinitum*. For if nothing else, the absence of an alternative reconstruction and empirical analysis means that IR and IPE scholars are most likely simply to default to, or retreat back into, their Eurocentric comfort zone. Accordingly, then, the battle between Eurocentrism and non-Eurocentrism needs to be taken to the empirical field and away from the high and rarified intellectually mountainous terrain of metanarrative sparring contests.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about International Relations?

Another way of asking this question would be: what influenced you to become a non-Eurocentric thinker? I get asked this question a lot, especially by non-white people. A good deal of this is related to my life-experience, much of which is sub-conscious of course and both too personal and too detailed to openly reflect upon here (sorry!) More objectively, the initial impetus came around 1999 when I came across [a book on Max Weber](#) by the well-respected Weberian scholar, Bryan Turner, in which he argued *inter alia* that Weber’s sociology had Orientalist properties; none of which had occurred to me before. Following this up further I became convinced that Weber was indeed Eurocentric, as was Marx. More importantly, I came to see this as a huge problem that infected not just Marx and Weber but pretty much all of historical sociology (which was reinforced in my mind when I came to read James Blaut’s books, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World* (find it [here](#)), and *Eight Eurocentric Historians*). So I set out to develop an alternative non-Eurocentric approach to world history and historical sociology as a counter (which resulted in my 2004 book, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*).

Two further key IR texts that I became aware of were L.H.M. Ling’s seminal 2002 book, *Postcolonial International Relations* and Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney’s equally brilliant 2004 book *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, both of which led me to explore further the Eurocentric nature of IR and later IPE. But it would be remiss of me not to mention the influence of Albert Paolini; a wonderful colleague whom I had the pleasure to know at La Trobe University in Melbourne back in the early 1990s before his exceedingly unfortunate and premature death (and who, I must say, was way ahead of the game compared to me in terms of

developing the critique of Eurocentrism in IR (see his book, *Navigating Modernity* (1997)). However, it would be unfair to the many others who have influenced me in countless ways to single out only these books and writers, though I hope you'll forgive me for not mentioning them so as to avoid providing yet another overly extended answer!

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

This is an excellent but very challenging question and I want to try and make a succinct answer (though I shall build on it in some of the answers I will provide later on). The essential argument I make about 'thinking inter-culturally' is that while the more liberal side of the discipline thinks that its cosmopolitanism does just this, its Eurocentrism actually prevents it from fulfilling this. Because ultimately, cosmopolitanism wants to impose a Western standard of civilization upon the world, thereby advancing cultural monism rather than cultural pluralism. And this is merely the loudest expression of a spectre that haunts much of the discipline. But I guess that in the end, to achieve genuine cultural pluralism and to think inter-culturally requires us to take seriously how other non-Western peoples think of what their cultures comprise and what it means to them, and how their societies and states work along such lines. Dismissing them, as Eurocentrism always does, as inferior, backward and regressive denies this requirement outright. Interestingly, my great grandfather, [J.A. Hobson](#) flirted with this idea in his book, *Imperialism: A Study* (though this has largely escaped the notice of most people since few have read the more important second part of that book where all this is considered). But this is merely a first step, for as I will explain later on in the interview, ultimately thinking inter-culturally requires an analysis of the dialogical inter-connections and mutual co-constitutive relations between West and non-West which, in turn, presupposes not merely the presence of Western agency but also that of non-Western agency in the making of world politics and the global political economy.

All of which is clearly a massive challenge and I am certainly not advocating that the discipline of IR engage in deep ethnographical study and that it should morph into anthropology. And in any case I think that there are things we can do more generally to transcend Eurocentrism while learning more about the other side of the Eurocentric frontier without going to this extreme. I shall talk about such conceptual moves later on in this interview. One such theoretical move that I talk about later is the need to engage historical sociology (albeit from a non-Eurocentric perspective) or, more precisely *global* historical sociology. Again, though, I'm not advocating that the discipline should morph into historical sociology. And I'm aware that one of the biggest obstacles to IR making inroads into historical sociology is the sheer size of the task that this requires. It has always come naturally to me because that is where I came from before I joined the IR academic community. But there is quite a bit of historical sociology of IR out there now so I do think it possible for new PhD students to enter this fold. All of this said, though, I'm unsure if I have answered your question adequately.

The west is often seen as the source of globalization and innovation, which have historically radiated outwards in a process without seeming endpoint. What is wrong with this picture, and, perhaps more interestingly, why does it remain so pervasive?

In essence I believe this familiar picture—one which is embraced by conventional and many critical IR/IPE and globalization theorists—is wrong because this linear Western narrative brackets out all the many inputs that the non-West has made (which returns me to the point made a moment ago concerning the dialogical relations that have long existed between West and non-West). In my aforementioned 2004 book I argued that the West did not rise to modernity as

a result of its own exceptional rational institutions and culture but was significantly enabled by many non-Western achievements and inventions which were borrowed and sometimes appropriated by the West. In short, without the Rest there might be no modern West. Moreover, while the West has been the principal actor in globalization since 1945, the globalization that preceded it (i.e., between 1492 and c.1830) was non-Western-led (as was the process of Afro-Eurasian regionalization that occurred between c.600 and 1492 out of which post-1492 globalization emerged). And even after 1945 I believe that non-Western actors have played various roles in shaping both globalization and the West, all of which are elided in the standard Eurocentric linear Western narrative of globalization.

But why has this image remained so persistent? This is potentially a massive question though it is a very important one for sure. Conventional theorists are most likely to disagree outright with my alternative picture in part because they are entirely comfortable with the notion that the ‘West is best’ and that the West single-handedly created capitalism, the sovereign inter-state system and the global economy. Critical theorists are rather more problematic to summarize here. But one that springs to mind is the type of argument that Immanuel Wallerstein (*Theory Talk #13*) made in [a 1997 article](#), in which he insisted that it be an imperative to hold the West accountable for everything that goes on in the world economy so that we can prosecute its crimes against the world. Arguments that bring non-Western agency in, as I seek to do, he dismisses as deflecting focus away from the West and thereby diluting the nature of the crimes that the West has imparted and therefore serves merely to weaken the case for the critical prosecution. I fundamentally disagree with him for reasons that I shan’t go into here (but will touch upon below). But in my view it is (or should be) a key debate-in-the-making not least because I suspect that many other critical theorists might agree with him and, more importantly, because it brings fundamentally into question of what Eurocentrism is and of what the antidote to it comprises. Either way, though, critical theorists, at least in my view, often buy into the Western linear narrative, albeit not by celebrating the West but by critiquing it. All of which means that both conventional and many critical IR scholars effectively maintain the hegemony of Eurocentrism in the discipline though for diametrically opposed reasons; and which, at the risk of sounding paranoid, suggests a deeply subliminal conspiracy against the introduction of non-Eurocentrism.

Nevertheless one final but rather obvious point remains. For the biggest reason why Eurocentrism persists is because it makes Westerners feel good about themselves. And at the risk of sounding like sour grapes (notwithstanding very decent sales for my non-Eurocentric books), I have been struck by the fact that there seems to be an insatiable appetite—particularly among the Western public readership—for high profile Eurocentric books that celebrate and glorify Western civilization; though, to be brutally frank, many of these rarely add anything new to that which has been said countless times in the last 50 years, if not 200—notwithstanding Ricardo Duchesne’s recent avowedly Eurocentric book *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* as constituting a rare exception in this regard. All of which means that writing non-Eurocentric books is unlikely to get your name onto the bestseller list (though granted, the same is true for many of the Eurocentric books that have been written!)

International theory and political theory originates mainly from Europe, but makes universal claims about the nature of politics. How does international theory betray its situated roots and how do these roots matter for how we should think about theory?

I’m not sure that I can answer this question in the space allowed but I’ll try and get to the broad-brush take-home point. I guess that when thinking about modern IR theory we can find those theorists who in effect advocate a normative Western imperialist posture even if they claim to be doing otherwise. Robert Gilpin’s work on hegemonic stability theory is perhaps the clearest

example in this respect. Anglo-Saxon hegemony, he claims, is *non-imperialist* because it always seeks to help the rest of the world, not exploit it. But the exercise of hegemony, it turns out, returns us to the old 19th century trope of the civilizing mission where Western practices and principles are transferred and imposed on non-Western societies in order to culturally convert them along Western lines. And this in turn issues from the assumption that the British and American interests are not selfish but are universal. This mantra is there too in Robert Keohane's ([Theory Talk #9](#)) book, *After Hegemony*, where cultural conversion of non-Western societies to a neoliberal standard of civilization by the international financial institutions through structural adjustment is approved of; an argument that is developed much more expansively in his later work on humanitarian intervention. And this trope forms the basis of cosmopolitan humanitarian interventionist theory more generally, where state reconstruction, which is imposed once military intervention has finished, is all about re-creating Western political and economic institutions across the world. I don't doubt for a moment the sincerity of the arguments that these authors make. But they can make them only because they believe that the Western interest is truly the universal. In such ways, then, IR betrays its roots.

Ultimately, Western IR theory constructs a hierarchical conception of the world with the West standing atop and from there we receive an image of a procession or sliding scale of gradated sovereignties in the non-Western world. For much of IR theory that has neo-imperialist normative underpinnings, it is this construction which legitimizes Western intervention in the non-Western world, thereby reproducing the legal conception of the (imperialist) standard of civilization that underpinned late 19th century positive law. Nevertheless, there has been a significant strand of anti-imperialist Eurocentrism within international theory (and before it a strand of anti-imperialist scientific racism, as in the likes of [Charles Henry Pearson](#) and [Lothrop Stoddard](#)). But once again, as we find in Samuel Huntington's famous 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations*—which comprises a modern equivalent of Lothrop Stoddard's Eugenicist texts, *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920) and *Clashing Tides of Color* (1935)—the West is held up as the highest expression of civilization, with non-Western societies viewed as socially inferior such that the West's mandate is not to imperially intervene across the world but to renew its uniquely Western civilized culture in the face of regressive and rampant non-Western regions and countries (particularly Middle Eastern Islam and Confucian China). [Hedley Bull](#)'s anti-imperialist English School argument provides a complementary variant here because, he argues, it is the refusal of non-Western states to become Western wherein the source of the (unacceptable) instability of the global international society ultimately stems. All of which, as you allude to in your question, rests on the conflation of the Western interest with the universal. It is for this reason, then, that the cardinal principle of critical non-Eurocentrism comprises the need to undertake deep (self) reflexivity and to remain constantly vigilant to Eurocentric slippages.

In turn, this returns me to the point I made before: that IR theory does not think inter-culturally because it denies the validity of non-Western cultures. Because it does so, then it ultimately denies the full sovereignty of non-Western states. For one of the trappings of sovereignty is what Gerry Simpson usefully refers to as 'existential equality', or 'cultural self-determination'. It seems clear to me that the majority of IR theory effectively denies the sovereignty of non-Western states because it rejects cultural pluralism and hence cultural self-determination as a function of its intolerant Eurocentric monism. The biggest ironies that emerge here, however, are two-fold; or what I call the twin self-delusions of IR. First, while conventional IR theory proclaims its positivist, value free credentials that sit comfortably with cultural pluralist tolerance, nevertheless as I argued in my answer to your first question, this positivist mantra turns out to constitute a smokescreen or veil behind which lies the face of intolerant Eurocentric cultural monism. And second, it means that while IR proclaims that its subject matter comprises the objective analysis of the international system which focuses on anarchy and the sovereign state, nevertheless it turns out that what it is really all about is narrating an analysis of Western hierarchy and the

'hyper-sovereignty' of Western states versus the 'conditional sovereignty/gradated sovereignty' of non-Western states.

Linking your work to Lizée's as a critique of extrapolating 'universals' on the basis of narrow (Western) experiences, Patrick Jackson ([Theory Talk #44](#)) wrote as follows: 'Perhaps the cure for the disease that Hobson and Lizée diagnose is a rethinking of what "theory" means beyond empirical generalizations, so that future international theorists can avoid the sins of the past.' What is your conception of what theory is or should be?

As noted already, I am all in favor of developing non-Eurocentric theory. To sketch this out in the most generic terms I begin with the proposition that Eurocentric IR/IPE theory is monological, producing a reductive narrative in which only the West talks and acts. It is essentially a 'winner/loser' paradigm that proclaims the non-West as the loser or is always on the receiving end of that which the West does, thereby ensuring that central analytical focus is accorded to the hyper-agency of the Western winner. And its conception of agency is based on having predominant power. We find this problem particularly within much of critical IR theory, where because the West is dominant so it qualifies as having (hyper) agency while the subordinate position of the non-West means that it has little or no agency. In turn, particularly within conventional IR and IPE we encounter a substantialist ontology, where the West is thought to occupy a distinct and autonomous domain. From there everything else follows. And even in parts of critical IR and IPE where relationalism holds greater sway we often find that the West still occupies the center of intellectual gravity in the world.

My preference is for a fully relationalist approach which replaces the monologism of Eurocentrism and its reification of the West with the aforementioned conception of dialogism that brings the non-West into the discussion while simultaneously focusing on the mutually constitutive relations between Western and non-Western actors. It also allows for the agency of the non-West alongside the West's agency (even though clearly after c.1830 the West has been the dominant actor). This in effect replaces Eurocentrism's either/or problematique with a both/and logic, enabling us to reveal a space in which non-Western agency plays important roles without losing focus of Western agency, even when it takes a dominant form as it did after c.1830. In this way then, to reply to Wallerstein's argument discussed earlier, one does not have to dilute the critique of the West when bringing non-Western agency in for both can be situated alongside each other. While I could of course say much more here, these conceptual moves are paramount to me and inform the basis of my empirical work on the international system and the global political economy.

All in all, IR theory needs to take a fully *global* conception of agency much more seriously; structuralist theory in its many guises is necessary but is ultimately insufficient since it diminishes or dismisses outright the prospect or existence of non-Western agency. Moreover, I seek to blend materialism and non-materialism, which means that neither constructivism nor poststructuralism can quite get us over the line. Even so, blending materialism and non-materialism is not an especially hard task to achieve though IR's preferred ontologically reductionist stance certainly makes this a counter-intuitive proposition.

You combine historical sociology with international relations. What promises does this interdisciplinary approach hold? Why do we need historical sociologies of IR?

Following on from my previous answer I argue that a relationalist non-Eurocentric historical sociology of IR is able to problematize the entities that IR takes for granted—states, anarchy (as

well as societies and civilizations)—in order to reveal them, to quote from the marvelous introduction that Julian Go and George Lawson have written for their forthcoming edited volume *Global Historical Sociology*, as ‘entities in motion’. Indeed such entities are never quite complete but change through time. Here it is worth quoting Go and Lawson further, where they argue that

‘social forms are “entities-in-motion”: they are produced, reproduced, and breakdown through the agency of historically situated actors. Such entities-in-motion, whether they are states, empires, or civilizations often appear to be static entities with certain pre-determined identities and interests. But the relational premise, and perhaps promise, of GHS is its attempt to denaturalize such entities by holding them up to historical scrutiny’.

It is precisely this global historical sociological problematique that underpins the approach that I develop in a forthcoming book, provisionally entitled *Reorient International Political Economy* where *inter alia*, I show how many of the major processes of the global economy are never complete but are constantly mutating as they are shaped by the multiple interactions of Western and non-Western actors. To take the origins of capitalism or globalization as an example, I show how these have taken not a Western linear trajectory but a highly discontinuous path as West and non-West have interacted in complex ways.

A good number of IR historical sociologists have focused specifically on particular historical issues—especially that of the rise of the sovereign state in Europe. Such analyses have in my view proven to be extremely valuable because they allow us to puncture some of the myths that surround ‘Westphalia’ that populate standard or conventional IR reportage (particularly that found in undergraduate text-books). But ultimately I feel that the greatest worth of the historical sociology of IR project lies in using history (understood in historical-sociological terms rather than according to traditional historians’ precepts) as a means of problematizing our understanding of the present international system and global political economy. Thus, for me, historical sociology is ultimately important because it can disrupt our understanding and explanations of the *present*. And I believe that this kind of inter-disciplinarity can bear considerable fruit (notwithstanding the difficulty that this task poses for IR scholars).

You famously criticized IR’s Eurocentrism and argued for the need for inter-cultural thinking. What is inter-cultural thinking and how can it benefit IR?

As I already discussed what inter-cultural thinking is a bit before, I shall consider how it might benefit IR and indeed the world in various ways. First, if the rise of the West into modernity owes much of this achievement to the help provided by non-Western ideas, institutions and technologies, then acknowledging this debt could go a long way to healing the wounds that the West has inflicted upon the non-West’s sense of self-esteem. Moreover, the hubristic claim ushered in by Eurocentrism, that the West made it to the top all by itself and that the very societies which helped it get there are then immediately denounced as inferior and uncivilized, significantly furnishes the West with the imperialist mandate to intervene and remake non-Western societies in the image of the West. So in essence, the help that the once-more advanced non-Western societies that the West benefited from is rewarded by 150 years of imperial punishment! Of course, IR scholars do not really study the rise of the West, but it is implicit in so much of what they write about. So acknowledging this debt could challenge the West’s self-appointed mandate to remake the world in its own image as well as problematize many of the historical assumptions that lie either explicitly or implicitly within IR.

Second, and flowing on from the previous point, thinking inter-culturally means recognizing the manifold roles that the non-West has played in shaping the rise of Western capitalism and the sovereign state system as well as the global economy, as I have just argued, but also appreciating their societies and cultures on their own terms rather than simply dismissing them as unfit for purpose in the modern world. Less Western Messianism and Western hubris, more global understanding and empathy, is ultimately what I'm calling for. But none of this is possible while Eurocentrism remains the go-to *modus operandi* of IR and IPE. And this is important for IR not least because significant parts of it have informed Western policy, most especially US foreign policy.

Third, a key benefit that inter-cultural thinking could bring to IR is that while the discipline presumes that it furnishes objective analyses of the international system, the upshot of my claim that the discipline is founded on Eurocentrism is that all the discipline is really doing is finding ways to reaffirm the importance of Western civilization in world politics, defending it and often celebrating it, rather than learning or discovering new things about the world and world politics. I believe that only a non-Eurocentric approach can deliver that which IR thinks it's doing already but isn't.

You've said that 'what makes an argument [institutionally] Eurocentric...lies with the nature of the categories that are deployed to understand development. And these ultimately comprise the perceived degree of 'rationality' that is embodied within the political, economic, ideological, and social institutions of a given society.' In order to think inter-culturally, does IR need new conceptions of rationality, or standards other than rationality altogether?

What an extremely interesting and perceptive question which has really got me thinking! Again, it's something that I've been aware of in the recesses of my mind but have never really thought through. Certainly the essence of Eurocentrism lies in the reification of Western rationality (or what Max Weber called *Zweckrationalität*) and its simultaneous denial to non-Western societies. But what with all the revelations that have happened in Britain in the last decade, where a seemingly never ending series of fraudulent practices have been uncovered within British public life—whether it be MPs' expenses scandals, banking scandals, newspaper scandals and the like—then one really wonders about the extent to which the West operates according to the properties of Zweck-rationality that Weber proclaimed it to have. Corruption and fraud happen in the West but clearly they are much more hidden than in those instances where it occurs in non-Western countries (notwithstanding the revelations mentioned a moment ago). But if one were to open the lid of many large Western companies, for example, and delve inside one might well find all sorts of 'rationality-compromising' or 'rationality-denial' practices going on. To mention just two obvious examples: first, promotions are often tainted by personal linkages rather than always founded on merit; and second, managers often mark out and protect their own personal position/territory even when it (frequently) goes against the 'rational' interests of the said organization.

To return to your question, then, one could conclude that many Western institutions are far less rational than Eurocentrism proclaims, which in turn would challenge the foundations of Eurocentrism. Of course, corruption and fraud are not unique to the West, but it is the West that proclaims its unique 'rational standard of civilization'. Whether, therefore, we need to abandon the term (Zweck) rationality on the grounds that it is an impossibly conceived ideal type remains the question. Right now I don't have an answer though I'll be happy to mull over this in the coming years.

You've written that engaging with the East 'creates a genuinely *global* history' and articulate a 'dream wherein the peoples of the Earth can finally sit down at the table of global humanity and communicate as equal partners'. Do you consciously operate with an 'ontology' of 'peoples' and 'civilizations' as opposed to 'individuals'? How do you conceive of the relationship between global humanity and plural peoplehood? Is there an underlying philosophical or anthropological view that you are drawing on in these and similar passages?

Certainly I prefer to think of peoples and even of civilizations rather than individuals and states, though I'll confess right now that dealing theoretically with civilizations and articulating them as units of analysis is extraordinarily challenging. At the moment I leave this side of things to better people than me, such as Peter Katzenstein ([Theory Talk #15](#)) and [his recent pioneering work on civilizations](#). The term 'global humanity' concerns me insofar as it is often a politically-loaded term, particularly within cosmopolitanism, where its underbelly comprises the desire to define a single civilizational identity (i.e., a Western one) for 'global humanity'. In essence, cosmopolitanism effectively advances the conception of a 'provincial (i.e., Western) humanity' that masquerades as the global. So I prefer the notion of plural peoplehood, so as to allow for difference. I wouldn't say that I am operating according to a particular philosophical view although it strikes me that such a notion is embodied in [Johann Gottfried Herder's](#) work which, on that dimension at least, I am attracted to. But to be honest, this is generally something that I have not explored though it is something that I've thought that I'd like to research for a future book (notwithstanding the point that I'll need to finish the book that I have started first!).

In your reply to Erik Ringmar, you draw on psychoanalytic metaphors to discuss the benefits of overcoming Eurocentrism, writing that, 'Eurocentrism leads to the repression and sublimation of the Other in the Self. Thus, doing away with Eurocentrism can end the socio-psychological angst and alienation that necessarily occurs through such sublimation.' How do you envision what we now call the West (or Europe) after its socio-psychological transformation? What does a world after angst and alienation look like? Is it possible, and is that the goal you think IR theory should aim at?

Another massively challenging and fascinating question, let me have a go. Since you raised the issue of socio-psychological/psycho-analytical theory (though it is something that I am no expert on), it has always struck me that Eurocentrism itself is not simply a construct designed to advance Western power and Western capitalist interests in the world. This seems too mechanistic. For recall that it was a series of largely independent sojourners, travel-writers, novelists, journalists and others rather than capitalists who played such an important role in constructing Eurocentrism. Something more seems to be at play. One can think of the battles between 'Mods and Rockers' or Skinheads and heavy metal fans in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, who detested each other simply because they held different identities and prized different cultural values. Most importantly, I feel, the constant need to denounce, put down and dismiss the Other as inferior seems reminiscent of those kinds of people we sometimes meet who, in constantly putting down others to falsely elevate themselves to a position of superiority, ultimately reveals merely their own insecurities. The same issues, of course, underpin racism and Eurocentrism. The West rose to prominence in my view as a late-developer and having got to the top it very quickly came to view its duty as one of punishing all others for being different – all done, of course, in the name of helping or civilizing the very 'global humanity' that had done so much to help the West rise to the top in the first place! And to want to culturally convert everyone in the world according to the Western standard of civilization seems to be symptomatic

of a deeply insecure mindset. A secure person or society for that matter does not feel threatened by, but openly embraces, difference.

Can we move beyond this stand-off given that such a mentality has been hard-wired within Western culture for at least three centuries? And ten if you count the sometimes terse relations between Europe and Middle Eastern Islam that emerged after 1095! We need to move beyond an identity that is based only on putting others down. It's 'bad karma' and, like all bad karma, damages the Western self, not just the non-Western other. But to transcend this identity-formation process requires us to do away with logocentrism; clearly a very big task. Nevertheless, that is exactly what my writings are all about. And it is something that I think IR theory needs to strive to achieve. Because IR theory is to an extent performative then I live in the hope, at least, that such a mentality might, just might somehow seep into international public life, though if it were to happen I strongly suspect that I would not be around to see it. Still, your question—what would a world beyond Eurocentrism look like?—though very important is nevertheless perhaps too difficult to answer without seeming like a hopeless idealist... other than to say that it could be rather better than the current one.

You write that 'IPE should aim to be an *über-discipline*, drawing on a wide range of disciplines in order to craft a knowledge base that refuses to become lost in disciplinary over-specialization and the depressing academic narcissism of disciplinary methodological differentiation and exclusion.' Why do you prefer that IPE should be the *überdiscipline*, instead of IR (or something else altogether), with IPE as a subset?

My degree was in Political Economy, my Masters in Political Sociology and my PhD in Historical Sociology and (International) Political Economy. Despite the fact that the majority of my academic career to date has been in IR research, I have always returned at various points to my old haunting ground, IPE (as I have most recently). I have always found IR a little alienating for its reification of politics, divorced from political economy. I'm not a Marxist, but I share in the view that political economy, if not always directly underpinning developments and events in the international system is, however, never far away.

The quote that you took for this question came from the end of my 2-part article that came out in the 20th anniversary edition of *Review of International Political Economy*. This was partly responding to Benjamin Cohen's ([Theory Talk #17](#)) 2008 seminal book, *International Political Economy: A Intellectual History*. One of the challenges that I issued to my IPE readership, echoing Cohen, is the need for IPE to return to 'thinking big' (in large part as a reaction to the massive contraction of the discipline's boundaries that has been effected by third wave American IPE, which labors under the intellectual hegemony of Open Economy Politics). In that context, then, I argued that IPE needs to expand its boundaries outwards not only to allow big or macro-scale issues to return to the discipline's research agenda but also to incorporate insight from other disciplines. For in my view IPE has the potential to blend the insights of many other disciplines that can in turn transcend the sometimes myopic or tunnel-vision-based nature of their particular constituent specialisms.

One of the implications of 'thinking big' is that IPE should be able to cover much of that which IR does... and more. Like Susan Strange, who expressed her exasperation with IR for its exclusion of politico-economic matters, so I feel that the solution lies not with IR colonizing IPE (which is not likely for the foreseeable future!) but with IPE expanding its currently narrow remit. If it could achieve this it could become the 'über-discipline', or the 'master discipline', of the Social Sciences, notwithstanding the point that my postcolonial and feminist friends will no doubt upbraid me for using such terrible terms!

Final question. Beyond the East outside the West, Greece is now being remade as the 'East' within the West, with a range of measures applied to it that had hitherto been the preserve for the 'East' or Global South. How can your work help to make sense of the stakes?

Your question reminds me of a similar one that I was asked in an interview for *Cumhuriyet Strateji Magazine* concerning Turkey's ongoing efforts to join the EU, the essence of my answer comprising: 'be careful what you wish for'. One of the things that I have felt uneasy about is the way, as I see it (and I might not be quite right in saying this), that European Studies (as a sub-discipline) sometimes appears as rather self-affirming, thereby reflecting the core self-congratulatory *modus operandi* of the EU. I am not anti-European or in any way ashamed to be Western (as some of my critics might think). But I'm deeply uneasy about the EU project, specifically in terms of its desire to expand outwards, not to mention inwards as we are seeing in the case of Greece today. For this has the whiff of the old civilizing mission that had supposedly been put to rest back at the time of the origins of the European Economic Community. Although Greece is a member of the EU (notwithstanding its non-European roots), it seems clear that what is going on today is a process of intensified internal colonization under the hegemony of Germany, wherein Greece is subjected to the German standard of civilization. All of which brings into question the self-glorification of the self-proclaimed 'socially progressive' EU project. And to return to my discussion of Turkey I recognize that candidate countries have their reasons for *wanting* to join the EU. But I guess that what my work is ultimately about is restoring a sense of dignity to non-Western peoples, in the absence of which they will continue to self-deprecate and live in angst in the long cold shadow of the West. All of which brings me back to the answers I made to quite a few of the earlier questions. So I would like to close by saying how much I have enjoyed answering your extremely well-informed questions and to thank you most sincerely for inviting me to address them.

Professor Hobson gained his PhD from the LSE (1991), joined the University of Sheffield as Reader and is currently Professor of Politics and International Relations. Previously he taught at La Trobe University, Melbourne (1991–97) and the University of Sydney (1997–2004). His main research interest concerns the area of inter-civilizational relations and everyday political economy in the context of globalization, past and present. His work is principally involved in carrying forward the critique of Eurocentrism in World History/Historical Sociology, and International Relations.

Related links

- [Faculty Profile at the University of Sheffield](#)
- Read Hobson's *The Postcolonial Paradox of Eastern Agency* (Perceptions 2014) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Hobson's *Is critical theory always for the white West and for Western imperialism?* (Review of International Studies 2007) [here](#) (pdf)