



Forum: International Relations as a geoculturally pluralistic field

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Along with the growth of the discipline, the geographical reach of International Relations (IR) has expanded. We have witnessed a proliferation of departments and scholars across the world. Yet, despite this expansion of the discipline, theorizing within international relations is still largely based on theories that originated in the Anglo-American world. For example, authors still widely taught and regarded as foundational to the field—e.g., Kenneth Waltz, Robert Keohane, and John Ikenberry—speak principally to a US academy and a US political context. Nonetheless, the internationalization of IR, among other factors, has pushed scholars to reassess the field as a whole. In recent years, and in various fora, this reassessment has picked up speed, and a growing body of literature now questions the field’s geographical foci and shortcomings. This pace has also been fueled by a parallel exposure and evaluation of the racialized roots of IR theorizing, especially the abiding influence of whiteness oftentimes coded as “Anglo-Saxon” civilization (Bell, 2007; Vitalis, 2015; Vucetic, 2011). The premise that the Anglo-American/Anglo-Saxon departure point must be *the* departure point can no longer be accepted uncritically.

This forum follows from and builds on earlier reassessments of the field. We invited a group of scholars who have variously been involved in the shifting of what Lewis Gordon (2011) calls “the geography of reason,” that is, the imperial cartography that situates authoritative knowledge production in particular racialized locales. We asked our interlocutors to address the following provocations:

What does no longer accepting the core premise that the Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-American departure point is *the* departure point do for our study of IR? To be provocative: is there, can there be – should there be – a geoculturally pluralistic IR?

We framed the provocation in terms of ‘geoculturally pluralistic IR’ as we aimed to capture a host of approaches and theoretical perspectives on the inclusion/irruption of marginalized voices, ideas, experiences, and histories. As the following pages

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show, there is no single assessment of the utility of a geoculturally pluralistic IR nor what such an IR would be comprised of and driven by. The perspectives and arguments are wide ranging, resulting in a rich and varied forum.

The term geocultural pluralism consists of two separate concepts. We take the term “geoculture” from Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1991) reflections in the 1980s upon the end of US hegemony in the world system. Wallerstein was concerned to examine a delinking of the “ideological apparatuses” of US hegemony from its geopolitical dominance. Pointing to the revolutions of 1968, Wallerstein claimed that “liberal verities,” especially the presentation of the state as a rational arbiter of collective will, had become radically undermined. In place of these verities a focus on the importance of culture developed, driven by an increased awareness of the complicity of racism and sexism in the structure of the world economy. Additionally, a “new science” had eroded the certainties of the Bacon-Newtonian model, thereby also eroding assumptions of a linear evolution to human potential (Wallerstein, 1991, pp. 12–13). For Wallerstein (1991, p. 11), the analogy between geoculture and geopolitics was not meant to infer an analytics of scale (i.e., supra-local or supra-national) but rather an analytics of infrastructure, that is, the “cultural framework within which the world-system operates.” In this respect, liberalism, argued Wallerstein, had been the “underside” of the capitalist world economy, and it was important to think of US hegemony in terms of the ramifications of this ideological underside breaking away from its material formations.

Within IR, the term pluralism has been utilized in a number of different but inter-linked ways (Levine & McCourt, 2018). For the purposes of this forum, we wish to draw attention to two particular engagements. First, for scholars working in the tradition of the English school, pluralism refers to the normative differences that obtain in an international society. In essence, individual states have their own norms, rules, and institutions, but these can become shared if they come together around particular limited and fragile institutions (Hurrell, 2007; Schmidt, 2020). Second, pluralism has been implicated in a “sociology of knowledge” tradition that has sought to expose the premise of exemplarity by which the US as actor and as academy has been implicitly or explicitly treated in the field (Hoffmann, 1977; Levine & McCourt, 2018; Tickner & Smith, 2020; Waever, 1998). In this regard, a set of interventions into the provenances of IR theory has deepened—but also on occasion challenged—the English School disposition toward norms such that pluralization now pertains to the bodies of knowledge by which we examine and explain international relations. Discussion on “non-Western” theory has taken root (Acharya & Buzan, 2007, 2010, 2017; Shilliam, 2010), as has the scoping out of “post-western” approaches to IR (Ikeda, 2010; Shahi & Ascione, 2016; Shani, 2008) or a “worlding” of IR (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Ling, 2013; Tickner & Waever, 2009).

Hence, by framing this forum through the heuristic of geocultural pluralism, we are interested in the putative delinking of knowledge production of international relations from political, economic, and militaristic geographies of power, and the prospect of a pluralization of IR that might ensue.

In what follows, we present seven short pieces that respond directly to our provocation, followed by a discussion of the pieces and the question. These contributions each have their own take on the question and identify challenges to addressing



geocultural pluralism as well as presenting paths forward for the field. Most importantly, and as can be seen in the forum, the effort to push against a Eurocentric IR has clearly moved beyond the agenda setting phase. Our aim in this forum is to help scope out in sharper relief the landscapes ahead and the challenges and prospects of traversing them.

The forum begins with Sankaran Krishna's contribution in which he argues that while geoculturally pluralistic IR "sounds like a good thing," it has several pitfalls. He identifies three: the eurocentrism and statism central to not only 'mainstream' IR but also across the world, the 'methodological nationalism' of IR, and "the risk of celebrating nativist forms of cultural essentialism." Second, Audrey Alejandro finds that a focus on geocultural pluralism in IR that neglects differences that do not run along geocultural lines reproduces Eurocentrism in academic discourses and identities. As a result, unempirical and unreflexive incentives toward a more geoculturally pluralistic IR could have a counterproductive, negative effect on IR scholars outside of American and European academia and on academic diversity long-term across the field.

Third, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Swati Parashar contend that in the vein of a geoculturally pluralist push, critical scholars in IR have aimed to reimagine the field by tackling Eurocentrism. However, because of this focus they reproduce an Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-American departure point, just like mainstream IR, and in doing so reproduce Eurocentrism. Fourth, Pinar Bilgin argues that taking geocultural pluralism as the solution to addressing the limitations of knowledge production about the international may lead to what she refers to as "exclusion at the moment of inclusion." Only if pluralism is more critically reflexive, she concludes, can it help address these limitations. Fifth, Inanna Hamati-Ataya contends that the same IR is reproduced everywhere, but because IR scholars operate under socio-historical constraints, it is difficult if not impossible to engineer new (meta) theoretical standpoints from the top down. She puts the call for a geoculturally pluralistic IR in historical perspective and illuminates humanity's common identity and shared cultural heritage, which far preceded the idea of 'Western dominance'. This, she finds, is a reality that IR must address.

While all contributors to the forum propose ways to address the limitations of a geoculturally pluralist IR in some form, Sanjay Seth and Giorgio Shani focus their respective arguments on these possibilities. Sixth, then, Sanjay Seth finds that questioning and critiquing the concept or category of sovereignty that is constitutive of IR would corrode not only the field's Anglo-American departure point, but all forms of IR. Thus, for a geoculturally pluralist IR to improve our understanding of the international, it would have to break with core assumptions of the discipline. Seventh, and in the last individual piece, Giorgio Shani proposes a departure point for post-western IR to challenge the Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-American departure point, namely through the acknowledgement of the existence of different cosmologies, or "different conceptions of universality and particularity." Lastly, Arlene Tickner, Amitav Acharya and Andrew Hurrell reflect on the seven contributions and discuss ways forward.

In putting together this forum, we recognize that all the participants are or have been institutionally connected—in one way or another—to the North American and/or European academies. This, as the forum itself suggests, presents one of the most compelling



challenge to a geocultural pluralism in IR: the institutional investments and hierarchy of resources that accompany the imperial geography of reason. Other forums forthcoming in this journal seek to mitigate the partialities of this institutional geography of reason. At a minimum, though, it could be said that, when it comes to the academy at least, geoculture never clearly delinks from geopolitics.

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