Towards a new international relations? Imperialism, Eurocentrism and Difference

Lena Tan
University of Otago

Until very recently, the ontological foundations of the discipline of International Relations have been built on theoretical and empirical work characterized by the absence of the areas of the world beyond the North. In this review essay, I discuss the contributions of three recently published books to a small but critical and wide-ranging body of work that has emerged to challenge, problematize, and examine this profound Eurocentricity in understanding and explaining world politics.


Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (eds), Thinking International Relations Differently, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2012)

Most academic disciplines are bound, defined and configured by assumptions, rules, norms and practices, both visible and invisible, which contribute to their ontology and epistemology. The academic discipline of International Relations (IR) is no different. In its simplest and most basic form, the distinguishing features which separate IR...
from another sub-field of Political Science like Comparative Politics, for example, are to be found in the fact that IR scholars study war, conflict and the possibility of co-operation among states, terrorism, globalization, international diplomacy, the international politics of trade and finance, and the action, behavior and interests of the main actors in the system. While these areas are perfectly justifiable, the ontological foundations of IR have also been built on theoretical and empirical work characterized, until very recently, by a remarkably unproblematic and unnoticed feature of the discipline—the absence of areas of the world beyond the North in International Relations (Krishna 2001; Ling 2002; Neuman ed. 1998; Chowdhry & Sheila Nair eds. 2002; Doty 1996). Most narratives regarding the historical evolution of our current international system from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 to the end of the Cold War in 1989 as well as main events like World War I, World War II and the Cold War feature the Anglo-American world and western Europe as the main protagonists with little to no agency for the South. When states from the South do feature in International Relations, they are usually part of a study regarding human rights, corruption, poor governance, terrorism, peacekeeping, poverty and the lack of development, or child soldiers and ultimately, in need of help or rescuing from the West. Events, practices and actors from the North have also formed the main basis from which the discipline has derived key conceptual building blocks like anarchy, sovereignty, the state, the international system, and rational choice as well as its main theories which have been universalized to explain actor interests and behaviour, war and conflict, security, co-operation, hegemony and inequality across time and space. Race, which in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois was the fundamental problem of the twentieth century, somehow and quite absurdly does not appear to exist in world politics if the major theories and approaches to International Relations are anything to go by. Implicitly and explicitly, imperialism and coloniality/modernity which have been central to the construction of identities and cultures in both the North and South as well as social, political and economic relations between states for the last five hundred years are considered marginal to understanding and explaining international relations. In other words, the actors, concepts and theories that make up IR are ironically, hardly international at all but instead, marked by a profound Eurocentricity.

IR’s Eurocentric foundations have not stood unchallenged. A small but critical and wide-ranging body of work has emerged recently to question, examine and unpack these ontological foundations while calling for the release of IR from these moorings at the same time. Early scholarship questioned the appropriateness and relevance of dominant understandings of concepts like security and the state for areas of the world beyond the North (see Neuman ed. 1998; Ayoob 1991; Job ed. 1992). Others contributed to a richer and more accurate understanding of the role of the populations, territories and states of the South in the evolution of the international system and critically, the central role of co-constitution in the relations and dynamics between North and South (Krishna 2001; Halperin 1997; Hobson 2004; Doty
Recent works have emphasized and highlighted how race, imperialism, civilizations and the concepts of coloniality/modernity have been central to the social construction of two different international and political orders, and the constitutive norms, identities and social structures in international relations (Keene 2002; Bowden 2009; Barkawi & Laffey 2006; Jones 2006; Taylor 2012). Finally, there have been efforts to explore the sociology of international relations scholarship around the world in an effort to understand the absence of theoretical and empirical scholarly work produced on and in other areas of the world (Acharya & Buzan eds. 2010; Tickner & Waever eds. 2009; Waever 1998).

The books reviewed here are broadly tied together by the contributions that they make to this growing body of scholarship by investigating how IR has been configured, and by tentatively providing us with ideas of what a new ‘international’ could look like, and strategies for how this can be achieved. Their specific contributions come from an engagement with international theories spanning over two hundred years which reveal the deep sedimentation of Eurocentrism in the discipline; an examination of what key IR concepts look like in non-core areas of the world together with factors which may have been influential in their marginalization, adoption or rearticulation; and an in-depth empirical and theoretical study of the role of norms and identities—forced within the social structure and understandings of an international order based on imperialism—in the incorporation of Japan and China into our current international system during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the rest of this review article, I will discuss each book by introducing the work, and then, moving on to concentrate on how they contribute towards decolonizing International Relations by reconfiguring what is legitimately and currently understood as the international.

**Race, Eurocentric Institutionalism and Imperialism in International Theory: John Hobson and The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics**

As noted in the preceding section, the ontological foundations of IR have partly been built on forgetting how race and imperialism are interwoven into the fabric of international life (see Krishna 2001; Vitalis 2000; Chowdhry & Nair eds. 2002). In *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*, John Hobson (2012) concentrates on the other side of this equation—revealing the long invisible traces of how race, Eurocentric institutionalism and imperialism have also been present in the theories developed within the field in order to understand international politics. Ontologically and epistemologically, Hobson (2012, p. 16) concludes that this is an academic discipline which is thoroughly Eurocentric—IR theory ‘is (almost) always for the West and for the Western interest.’
Hobson’s serious challenge to the foundations of IR relies heavily on his argument that a far more accurate conceptualization of Orientalism, as first laid out by Edward Said, involves unpacking previously glossed over internal differences and complexities. The common understanding of Eurocentrism/Orientalism associated with Said ties it firmly and exclusively to racism and imperialism. Hobson, however, argues that Eurocentrism/Orientalism has two main components. The first and far more familiar component is scientific racism which is based on a belief in racial differences and hierarchies. Eurocentric institutionalism, the second component, ‘locates difference in institutional/cultural factors rather than genetic/biological ones’ (Hobson 2012, p. 4). Furthermore and perhaps counter-intuitively, each of these varieties can be manifested in the international arena as pro-imperialistic and anti-imperialistic. Therefore, scientific racist thinking can exist as pro-imperialist or anti-imperialist sub-varieties or more specifically, as offensive (pro-imperialist) scientific racism and defensive (anti-imperialist) scientific racism. Correspondingly, Eurocentric institutionalism can manifest itself as paternalist (pro-imperialist) Eurocentric institutionalism, and anti-paternalist (anti-imperialist) Eurocentric institutionalism.

It is through unpacking Eurocentrism into these four broad strands and engaging with theorists ranging from Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx and Woodrow Wilson through to Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, critical Gramscian theorists and today’s advocates of liberal humanitarianism that enables Hobson to go beyond existing early disciplinary histories of IR which have highlighted the importance of race and imperialism to demonstrate that the general principle of difference on which they operated extended far longer, deeper and more continuously than previously realized (see Schmidt 1998).

For example, pre-1914 work in IR usually focuses on classical and republican liberals like Cobden, Bright, Angell and Kant, and Marxists like J.A. Hobson and Marx. While these theorists are usually discussed in connection with the literature on economic interdependence, the democratic peace thesis and Marxist approaches, they are also often considered stalwarts of anti-imperialism and assumed implicitly to be free of Eurocentrism. Hobson’s engagement with their work points to the fact that these men were in fact not free of the social context of their time as their thinking was marked by Eurocentric institutionalism in various ways. At the same time, Hobson also provides important space for the work of influential late 19th century thinkers such as Charles Henry Pearson, Spencer, Sumner, Blair and Jordan, Mahan and Mackinder who were concerned with race and western civilization but have now been inexplicably erased from the literature.

His discussion of twentieth century IR similarly destroys conventional depictions of IR as a discipline untouched by race, eurocentrism and imperialism. Hobson demonstrates that the portrayal of the 1914 to 1945 period as the discipline’s infant stage and dominated by the first
Great Debate between Realism and Liberalism is overstated as race continued to have a central role in the theories generated. In fact, one of the most important commonalities between Realism and Liberalism lie in ‘their united concern to restore the mandate of Western civilizational hegemony in one guise or another’ (Hobson 2012, p. 135).

In the post-1945 IR period, the vocabulary of overt racism, imperialism, the civilizing mission, and western versus uncivilized, disappeared from the work of IR scholars but all the major theoretical perspectives were, as Hobson and others before him have argued, underpinned by subliminal Eurocentric institutionalism (Jones 2006; Neuman 1998; Holsti 1998; Ayoob 1998). Here, Hobson extends and adds to observations that the construction of what we now understand as the ‘international’ in the work of seminal mainstream figures like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, the English School, critical theorists like Robert Cox, and world systems theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein, is one where the primary focus is on the great powers and the North, and where the West is the source of the current international system and has pioneering agency in world politics. Furthermore, Hobson (2012, p. 189) outlines how major concepts like anarchy and the distribution of power in the international system are built on forgetting, sanitizing or marginalizing colonialism, its European/Western particularities and hierarchy as dominant features of world politics for over four centuries.

All in all, Hobson’s monograph is a powerful and sustained indictment of a discipline that has yet to take Eurocentrism seriously and in doing so, Hobson contributes to efforts to challenge the current configuration of the discipline. A more detailed and explicit exploration of the power/knowledge nexus would have added to the significance of his work, and his discussion of the post-1989 period is focused much more on public intellectuals than on scholarly work. Nevertheless, Hobson (2012, p. 334) succeeds in demonstrating that the central organizing principle of the international system, as underwritten by the knowledge produced within IR, is actually underpinned by ‘the civilizational definitions of sovereignty’ based on race and Eurocentrism’ rather than just plain sovereignty. Beginning the task of understanding the international begins then with this task of deconstructing IR’s image as free of race, Eurocentric institutionalism and imperialism.

The Constitution of Modern International Relations: Shogo Suzuki’s Civilization and Empire

Unlike the lack of engagement with how imperialism is imbricated in the discipline’s own construction of international relations, studies on imperialism and world politics, albeit from the 1980s and earlier, do exist. They remain caught, however, within the power politics garden
variety, untouched by the innovative empirical research and theoretical insights that have emerged from History, Anthropology, Sociology and literary studies. I would also argue that there is a general sense that decolonization and the rise to sovereign statehood and independence of former colonies across Africa and Asia marked the end of racial inequality, colonialism, hierarchy and the standards of civilization which had governed the relations between the North and South. In other words, imperialism is usually considered part of a bygone era and of little relevance for understanding the international today.

Shogo Suzuki’s (2009) Civilization and Empire is one of very few studies clearly situated within International Relations that has been able to go beyond power politics in demonstrating that imperialism has been inextricably tied to the development and construction of the modern international system and world order (see Bowden 2010; Kayaoglu 2010). Broadly, this book engages with the now dominant English School account of how non-European states entered European international society and relatedly, how the latter expanded all across the world, forming our current international system. According to this well-known version, non-European states became part of the system when they fulfilled and accepted the ‘standards of civilization’ in the form of political, legal, economic and social rules, norms and institutions of Europe. Significantly, this process of expansion was also assumed to be one in which norms of toleration and coexistence were transmitted to other parts of the world. Suzuki argues that such accounts may shed light on some aspects involved in this process but they also miss out rather critical elements. Specifically, they gloss over the fact that imperialism and violence, in addition to the norms of toleration and co-existence, were part of this expansion and had important consequences for how non-European states were socialized into the system.

Suzuki’s study re-examines the very interesting question of how Japan and China, member and leader respectively of the very different East Asian international order in the nineteenth century, encountered and responded to the firepower and demands of an aggressive West within the larger social context of relations between the ‘civilized’ states of Europe and the ‘uncivilized’ non-European world based on the latter becoming civilized (see Gong 1984; Suganami 1984). Drawing on an impressive range of Chinese as well as Japanese primary and secondary sources, Suzuki demonstrates in this empirically detailed and theoretically informed study that social meanings, understandings and identities structured and constructed by the imperial mode of relations influenced the ways in which Japan and China interacted with the West and influenced their different paths into European international society. For example, Japan, as is well known, learned quickly and was able to adopt and fulfil most of the requirements of the standards of civilization. This enabled the Japanese to avoid the worst of the unfair treaties which were inflicted on China’s sovereignty by European states during the latter’s century of humiliation. Critically, Japan also learned that imperialism was part
and parcel of the identity of a ‘civilized’ state. In performing this identity, Japan went on to colonize Korea, Taiwan and Manchuria.

In this study, Suzuki shows that current and rather benign accounts of the expansion of European international society (stressing a society that recognizes difference and promotes peaceful coexistence and toleration) must be tempered by a consideration of how imperialism may have constituted and constructed identities and norms of states. Furthermore, foregrounding how Japan and China responded to the demands and norms of the European international order shifts the focus of analysis from the English School’s structural framework to a more agent-centred one. In doing so, Suzuki contributes to a more accurate, complex and non-Eurocentric view of the evolution of the international system. The analysis is weakened by a rather under-specified discussion regarding the concept of identity, and performativity as well as the very notion of ‘civilized’ identity itself. But there is much to commend in this book which not only provides a critique and corrective to the dominant Eurocentric and structural account of the evolution of our international system, but also provides insights which could be helpful for understanding postcolonial states and the way in which they have encountered and responded to today’s international community.

**Difference and the ‘International’ in Other Regions of the World:**

_Arlene Tickner and David Blaney (eds.), Thinking International Relations Differently_

Beyond bringing imperialism and race back as a means of challenging the ontological and epistemological foundations of International Relations, other efforts to do so have included examining the following two questions: How is the international conceived in other parts of the world? (Acharya & Buzan eds. 2010; Jones 2006; Tickner & Waever eds. 2009). Can these conceptualizations be used to build a discipline which is far more international in scope? These are the questions that underpin Arlene Tickner and David Blaney’s (2012) edited volume, *Thinking International Relations Differently*. Their goal is to explore how knowledge of the international is produced around the world and to examine the potential of knowledge from non-western and non-core areas to become a general framework for analyzing world politics. In order to meet these targets, the case studies focus on the question of what ‘X’ concept (security, the state, authority and sovereignty, secularism and religion, globalization, and the international in this volume) looks like in particular geocultural and academic settings, why that is the case, and finally, the implications for global IR.

Generally, the chapters in this volume contribute to the task of decentering IR from its Anglo-American moorings in several broad ways. First, these case studies offer invaluable surveys of often unfamiliar academic literature that exists on security, the state,
authority and sovereignty, and globalization which have been produced about, and in areas outside of the western core. Second, these overviews also support arguments, already noted in what I would describe as the first wave of scholarship criticizing the absence of work on the South in International Relations, that many core IR concepts on security, sovereignty, and the international system are irrelevant or problematic when applied to other parts of the world (see Neuman ed. 1998; Ayoob 1991; Job ed. 1992). For example, chapters by Mullavarapu and Grovogui on the Indian Ocean and Africa respectively confirm critiques that have long been levelled at the ahistorical and Eurocentric assumptions underlying the understanding of the state and processes of state formation in IR theory (see Holsti 1998). Similarly, some of the chapters on security reaffirm work by Mohammed Ayoob and others that it is internal rather than external threats that matter to some states in the South.

Third, these chapters also highlight that different experiences with, for example, the state and security on the ground may not necessarily translate to different readings or conceptualizations of International Relations in non-core and non-western areas of the world. The chapters on the state, for example, show that the Weberian state is still the referent point in literature produced on the state not just within the West but in non-core areas of the world despite the almost forty years that have passed since Charles Tilly questioned the relevance of European state-making processes for other parts of the world (Tilly ed. 1975). When considered with the fact that achieving empirical statehood remains one of the most pressing issues in many areas of the South, this continued and unquestioned place of the European state as the aspirational point in many scholarly analyses underline how little has changed in thinking about these issues.

This lack of fit between lived experiences and the theories used to explain them is also apparent in the area of security. In Bilgin’s chapter, which provides a comprehensive overview and comparison of the development of the literature on security issues in Turkey and the Arab world, she points out that much of the literature produced in Turkey attempted to fit Turkish realities into unsuitable analytical frameworks on security developed in the West. Hence, dominant IR concepts, however irrelevant, may still be the referent point in literature produced on a particular theme not just within the West but in non-core areas of the world.

While this is not to say that dominant IR concepts are not questioned, undergo adaptation and exhibit variation in meanings and usage in and across geocultural locations, there is, as acknowledged in this volume and in other places, limited difference. Unsurprisingly, this limited difference is due to factors ranging from hybridity and mimicry, sociology of the discipline, the local, political, economic and social context, state action and discourse, as well as lived experiences.
Besides investigating the causes for this limited difference, this edited volume also showcases a very important point—the futility of looking for pure, unadulterated difference in a world where ideas, concepts and theories travel across boundaries. Grovogui’s chapter on the state in particular, points out unreservedly that there is no authentic African voice and challenges enterprises looking for difference in understanding the international in other parts of the world. Indeed, he points out that African scholarship is thoroughly inflected by knowledge that has already been produced elsewhere. Therefore, it may make no difference even if Africans are themselves producing knowledge (Grovogui 2012, pp. 120-1). Hence, ‘assessing analyses of Africa should not be illusions of authenticity and irreproachability but whether the methods or modes of analysis’ accurately capture what is taking place (Grovogui 2012, p. 121).

More importantly but perhaps less obviously, there are risks that ironically come from emphasizing difference between scholarship and concepts from and about the core and non-core as doing so is likely to reproduce and reconstitute these differences of ‘the other as particular and non-core against the universality of (western) IR’ (Tickner & Blaney 2012, p. 12). It is the raising of this particular issue of how one should speak, write and think about difference in the quest to challenge and ultimately, reshape the ontological and epistemological foundations of IR to one that is less Eurocentric that is one of the more significant contributions of this volume. The solution offered by Tickner and Blaney (2012, pp. 10-11) in their introductory chapter to treat the non-West as part of the universal is in the same spirit as the work of other scholars who note that, instead of merely speaking back to the centre, we need to think through the lens of multiple worlds in dialogue (see Hobson 2012), use concepts like hybridity and mimicry (see Chowdhry & Nair eds. 2002), relationality (Barkawi & Laffey 2006) and the processes of co-constitution (Doty 1996; Inayatullah & Blaney 2004; Barkawi & Laffey 2006; Taylor 2012), as well as contrapuntal analysis (Chowdhry 2007; Krishna 2001). All of them provide us with numerous ways forward in this task.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, one of the most important litmus tests for moving towards a sustained change in our conception of the international in the discipline will lie in part in demonstrating the legitimacy and necessity of doing so. Individually, each of these volumes contributes to this task with valuable insights into our contemporary international order and the critical importance of understanding the nexus between power and knowledge in the construction of IR. Taken together, they reaffirm the necessity of broadening, deepening and ultimately transforming the parameters of the international by taking the South seriously in the making of international politics as well as the discipline of International Relations itself.
Lena Tan is a lecturer in International Relations at the Department of Politics at the University of Otago. Her research interests include identity, constructivism, and the construction and constitution of the South in International Relations/international relations. She is currently working on a book-length manuscript on twentieth century decolonization.

Notes

1 Very rare early exceptions include Vitalis (2000) and Doty (1993).

2 Pearson, Spencer and Sumner, perhaps more well-known to those familiar with new work on U.S. imperialism, were against imperialism because of fears that the white race would be weakened by miscegenation and tropical climates (See Love 2004). Mahan and Mackinder are known as pioneers of geopolitics but this was a geopolitics heavily tied to concerns regarding race.

3 On the emergence of ideas and positive norms like self-determination, racial equality, human rights in decolonization, see Crawford (2005), Philpott (2001) and Jackson (1998).

References


Doty, R 1996, *Imperial encounters*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.


© borderlands ejournal 2013