



# Transnational Theory, Global World: Theory Matters, Not Geography

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**Abstract:** The tools designed to analyse a globalising world ought to be specifically designed to address problems presented by that global world, rather than settling for those engineered for the century prior. The study of International Relations (IR) is dominated by mainstream problem-solving International Relations Theory (IRT), which tends to describe rather than explain phenomena. Analysis is hindered by dependence upon rigid concepts such as the nation-state and the balance of power. However, IR has witnessed an analytical shift toward concepts that utilise culture by engaging with the discipline's strength: its interdisciplinary nature. Unfortunately, recruiting non-Western and alternative perspectives has become equated to an exercise designed to simply tick-off a certain amount of nation-states from a quota. In this sense, IRT ought to aspire to be transnational in nature, in order to effectively engage with problems presented by the global world in which it exists. Therefore, as this article suggests, in pursuing alternative cultural perspectives, it is the integrity of the theory itself that matters, rather than the geographical origin.

**Keywords:** International Relations Theory; Critical Theory; Transnational Approach; Non-Western Approach; Cultural Perspectives; Power-Knowledge Relations.

## Introduction

Despite evaluating the global, International Relations Theory (IRT) is, as Alex Young describes, “produced in western nations by western authors for western readers.”<sup>1</sup> This Western bias has created privilege, which has in turn produced disparities within IRT, particularly against non-Western IRT.<sup>2</sup> This results in the production of inadequate understandings of international relations, predominantly because analysis is hindered by hegemonic Western approaches, both epistemologically and institutionally.

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1 Alex Young, “Western Theory, Global World: Western Bias in International Theory”, *North America, Perspectives, Science & Technology, Security, World in Review*, (2014): 36.

2 It is worth noting that “non-Western” is understood in these discussions in its simplistic form, meaning anything that is not geographically or ideologically Western.

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In this sense, non-Western approaches are required in order to diversify perspectives and subsequently counterbalance the incredibly narrow Euro/Western-centric understanding of international relations. Of course, it is imperative to avoid implying that all mainstream Western IRT is decisively Eurocentric; or deny the impact that non-Western intellectuals, academics and events have had upon them. For example, consider the role played by European born Marxism in Asian and Latin American perspectives: Mao and the Chinese Revolution, as well as Mariátegui, Allende and Guevara in the twenty-first century Socialism of Venezuela and Bolivia. Therefore, as Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey argue, it is crucial to acknowledge the “mutual constitution of Europe and the non-European world and their joint role in making history.”<sup>3</sup> Young considers this, and suggests a pluralism of perspectives, “in order to craft diverse international theory for a diverse international world.”<sup>4</sup>

This suggestion is further strengthened when considering how oversimplifying is as dangerous as overcomplicating, as it can potentially convey a false impression of the world. Christian Reus-Smit describes this excessive abstraction as “‘Cinderella syndrome’, where the IR community attempts to squeeze an ugly and oversized world into a beautiful theoretical glass shoe”.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is worth advocating a multitude of transnational paradigms in order to positively develop IRT. This will be demonstrated by, firstly, exploring the reasons why scholars have often argued that non-Western approaches are required. During which, problems encountered in pursuing non-Western IRT will be evaluated. Finally, an approach which emphasises the integrity of theory and is devoid of geographical requirement will be explored, with reference to the 2014 Ebola Crisis. In doing so, this article will advocate a critical approach designed to combat problems presented by a globalising world, which focuses on the relationship between power and knowledge. Beforehand, it is worth exploring what is integral in a theoretical framework.

### The IRT Landscape

While analysing IRT, it is worth noting Robert Cox’s assertion that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose.”<sup>6</sup> This is evident as theories are produced by history’s victors; as a form of propaganda for aspiring great powers and hegemon. Moreover, theories are used to address the adequacy of foreign policy, explain the causes of conflict, assess regimes, institutions and leadership, as well as evaluate security threats and analyse social inequality and injustice; and often utilised in order to inform governmental and non-

3 Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey “The postcolonial moment in security studies,” *Review of International Studies*, 32 (2006): 330.

4 Young, “Western Theory, Global World: Western Bias in International Theory”.

5 Peter Schouten, “Theory Talk #27: Christian Reus-Smit on IR Cultures, Re-thinking IR and Bridging the Normative-Empirical Divide.” *Theory Talks* (2009).

6 Robert Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”, *Journal of International Studies*, 10, no. 126 (1981), 128.

governmental policy. Seemingly they resemble guidelines for analysis. However, due to the sheer dynamic enormity of the discipline, analysis is multileveled and incorporates the state level of traditional theories (classical liberalism and realism), a supranational level (observing all international actors, including non-state entities), a sub-state level (for bureaucratic and individual), an intra-state level (for example, migration and nuclear security) and normatively (ideas and norms, such as nationalism). Often these levels are mutually exclusive which results in narrow analysis; therefore, a theory which engages all levels and encourages dialogue between the levels is required.

L. H. M. Ling and Anna Agathangelou describe how the current oppressive and parochial ‘House of IR’ utilises and defines Western tools, such as sovereignty, the nation-state and anarchy, so as to serve the powerful, usually white, bourgeois male. Through using their powerful analogy of a dysfunctional household, they explain how mainstream problem-solving approaches (which, on the contrary, do not provide solutions), such as Realism and Liberalism, are accused of being state-centric, hyper-masculinised, self-fulfilling and, crucially, Western-centric. Ling and Agathangelou recommend decentralising through the use of “Worldism” (a theory considered as post-Western and post-hegemonic) which intends to address the troubling principals belonging to the “House of IR” (hierarchy, legitimacy and power). In doing so, the “poises of IR” are unleashed by focusing upon the institutionalisation of social structures, processes of agency, subjective identity and accountability of self to other.<sup>7</sup> Whilst it offers a fascinating alternative perspective, Worldism is excessively vague and romanticised as it does not provide guidance on how to create such an ideal. Nonetheless, it is the very sentiment surrounding the “poises of IR” that is central to form alternative perspectives and approaches. The poises would present a challenge to Western hegemony, epistemologically and institutionally, and would subsequently encourage the lively dialogue required for intellectual development.

Consider for instance how mainstream problem-solving theory struggles to sufficiently account for sensitive phenomenon, such as state-failure in the twenty-first century. It is important to acknowledge that state failure is not a new phenomenon and has traditionally been understood as the product of an anarchical structure, where nation-states are competing for power and resources. So that motivations toward external state-building attempts, and subsequent failures, are reducible to self-interest and power procurement. This problem-solving explanation is unsatisfactory as it simply evaluates within given parameters, using understandings within the context of twentieth century of great powers such as UK and France as points of reference for the nation-state. Therefore, it fails to question epistemology (particularly its anarchical structure) and limited by its structure-agency dependency. Notably, mainstream approaches are entrenched with dichotomies of “us” and “them”; so that “we” (out of self-interest, a sense of moral obligation or

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<sup>7</sup> L. H. M. Ling, and Anna Agathangelou, “The House of IR: from family power politics to the poises of Worldism”, *International Studies Review*, 6, no.4 (2004): 45.

requirement to balance power) ought to help “them” contain and attempt to resolve “their” calamitous problem. This dichotomous approach is reproduced within state-building policy, and resonates in the language invoked by the international community. For instance, reports on the very possible Grexit in light of the most recent EU debt talks have tended to associate “we” (the international community, specifically the EU) with positive achievements and a sense of duty, whilst tending to associate negative connotations and the requirement to improve the Greek partnership. In order to transcend absent-mindedly “othering” (by identifying its production) as well as to overcome the shortcomings of mainstream problem-solving theories, it is worth adopting an approach which critically engages with epistemologies, by evaluating structural influence and attempts to provide agency to those who it has been denied. Evidently, the current IRT landscape requires re-thinking, in order to decentralise Westphalian definitions, which are currently restraining the emergence of non-Western approaches.

Notably, non-Western approaches are needed in order to decentre the hegemonic nature of Western approaches as the gate-keepers of knowledge. Ole Wæver developed upon Stanley Hoffman’s hypothesis that IR is “an American social science”<sup>8</sup>, through evaluating how American hegemony influences the nature of theory; by analysing the geographical residence of authors in leading American and European Journals between 1970 and 1995.<sup>9</sup> Although the data is outdated, it is indicative of why non-Western approaches, such as Indian, Indonesian and Chinese, are struggling to develop within Western discursive frameworks, where standards are defined by the hegemon; be that appropriate topics, language of publication or favourable treatment to those attending prestigious educational institutions. Moreover, Takashi Inoguchi illustrates that the methodological problem resides with how theory is conceptualised; as by American positivistic standards, a Japanese approach does not exist, yet if the conceptualisation includes normative and legalistic theories, like that adopted by the European sector of the discipline, then it does exist.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, American scholars (and to a certain extent European scholars by extension) can be considered as the gate-keepers of the discipline, as they legitimise and define knowledge by insisting upon a positivist methodology and Westphalian conventions. It is imperative that varying epistemological and ontological approaches are appreciated in order to encourage a cultural methodology and discourage an epistemological hegemony.

This desire to expand the discipline by attempting to incorporate a multitude of cultural and identity perspectives helps to explain how, in recent years, IRT has begun

8 Stanley Hoffman, “An American social science—International Relations”, *Daedalus*, 106, no. 3, (1977) 41–60.

9 Ole Wæver, “The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations”, *International Organization*, 52, no. 4 (1998): 698.

10 Takashi Inoguchi, “Why are there no non-Western theories of international relations? The case of Japan” in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds.), *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010: 62).

to experience a sort of renaissance of area studies; whereby its scholars have helped to enrich a field of study that is grappling with the changes of a globalising world. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan provide a fantastic survey and discussion of the current state of non-Western IRT in their 2010 book *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*. Their book iterated how it is expected for each leading power or hegemon to attempt to formulate its own national IRT by drawing upon its own cultural and political history; in this sense these theories cannot be entirely devoid from national subjectivity. Again, this complicates the application of a nation-state-centric IRT; consider for instance how Western IRT struggles to comprehend non-Western phenomena. In this case, a Chinese IRT would follow the same pattern of struggle if applied to a phenomenon in the Netherlands, for example. Furthermore, Acharya and Buzan provide a comprehensive review of non-Western IRT, sharing perspectives from South East Asia, however they can plausibly be accused of cherry picking theories to add a bit of sparkle to IRT, rather than attempting to truly represent the current state of the discipline. At times, discussions surrounding non-Western IRT feel like an exercise designed to simply tick off a certain amount of nation-states from a quota. Therefore, non-Western approaches ought to provide a variety of different perspectives, evaluations and answers, which are not necessarily geographically rooted, as an alternative to the limited and predictable ones offered by Western-centric approaches. However, that is not to say that scholars ought to completely abandon Western-centric thought.

For example, Postcolonial theory is concerned with the utilisation of dichotomies, and borrowed from studies of literature, and is heavily influenced by Edward Said's 1978 work *Orientalism*, where he argues that whilst "direct colonialism has largely ended", colonialism still manifests itself.<sup>11</sup> Said explores how 'history... just as it can also be unmade and re-written, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that "our" East, "our" Orient becomes "ours" to possess and direct.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly to other critical-theories, Postcolonial theory derives a heavy influence from postmodern understandings of the relationship between power and knowledge, and how that is then subjugated and reproduced. It should be noted, that through insisting on non-Western IRT, academics are maintaining the Western/non-Western binary that it is trying to eliminate.

This considered, there is hope that non-Western approaches would be, at least, partly free from the influences of imperialism; otherwise non-Western approaches would simply reassert Western norms imposed by colonial history, predominantly Western historicism. Julian Saurin expands on Branwen Gruffydd Jones' recommendation of decolonising the discipline by suggesting adopting an anti-imperialism focus rather than identifying colonial influences.<sup>13</sup> However by adopting an "anti-position" there is a danger that a

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11 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003): 8.

12 Ibid., 14.

13 Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "Introduction: International Relations, Eurocentrism, and Imperialism"



dichotomy will be produced which will simply recreate the current hegemonic division, thereby it would be more beneficial to identify how colonialism has influenced non-Western thought and knowledge. Seemingly, it is important to acknowledge that non-Western approaches will not be wholly free from subjective thought and will unavoidably reproduce Western ideals given the interconnectedness of, and Western hegemonic status in, international history. Ching-Chang Chen identifies this and recommends incorporating post-Western approaches instead, which would aim to decolonise the discipline as a joint effort of both non-Western and Western.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, it is worth considering cultural ideals in mechanisms that transcend, or are not subject to, Westphalian structures, in order to avoid further issues of subjectivity and counter-hegemony. Giorgio Shani explores the possibility of post-Western approaches, by assessing contributions from Islam and Sikhism.<sup>15</sup> He evaluates how ideals such as Umma and Khasla Panth, which refer to the collection of spiritual and cultural communities, provide alternatives to the nation-state structure. It is this kind of thought and imagination that Navnita Chadha Behera describes as being central to constructing a “non-hegemonic space.”<sup>16</sup> Thereby, approaches which interweave both the Western and non-Western historic experience, thought and culture ought to be sought, in order to effectively engage with the truly global environment of international relations.

### **Theory matters-not geography**

Crucially, the tools designed to analyse a globalising world ought to be specifically crafted, rather than settling for those engineered for the century prior. While mainstream IRT struggles to explain using rigid concepts such as the nation-state and the balance of power, analysis has shifted toward methodological concepts which utilise culture, like Critical Theory, Critical Constructivisms, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Feminisms and Queer Theory (this is by far not an exhaustive list). Increasingly, postgraduate courses, academics and resources have begun to borrow or be inspired by the interdisciplinary nature of IR: looking towards related disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology. For instance, consider how articles published on *E-International Relations*, which is one of the world’s leading open access website for students and scholars of international politics, has evolved to incorporate discussions relating to neuroscience, corporate branding and popular culture; the latter containing topics regarding comedy, music and computer games.

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and Julian Saurin, “International Relations as the Imperial Illusion; or, the Need to Decolonize IR” in Branwen Gruffydd Jones (ed.) *Decolonizing International Relations* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

14 Ching-Chang Chen, “The absence of non-western IR theory in Asia reconsidered,” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, 11 (2011): 17.

15 Giorgio Shani, “Toward a post-Western IR: The Umma, Khalsa Panth, and critical international relations theory,” *International Studies Review*, 10, no.4 (2008): 722–734.

16 Navnita Chadha Behera, “Re-imagining IR in India” in Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*: 111.

In order to create a transnational IRT that engages with the problems presented by this globalising world, epistemology ought to focus on rectifying inequality and injustice, and seek theories from those forgotten, hidden or side-lined by history; this means not relying on history's victors to write the history books. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to uphold a critical analysis of whose interests are being served when analysing or applying an IRT, as Cox illustrates. Moreover, critical theories attempt to avoid reproducing agency/structure by understanding underlying processes of power and knowledge production, however like mainstream theories they are applied to non-Western international relations with the assumption of universalism. A pluralism of transnational theories would transcend this critique, as paradigms would be designed to focus upon certain cultures and identities, while transcending borders. Furthermore, when combined, the paradigms would create a dialogue, which is considered crucial to the discipline's healthy development.

Rather than geographically categorising IRT according to regional or national discourses, it is worth pursuing a paradigm that is designed to effectively engage with the problems presented by a globalising world. This opens up discussions regarding how the rise of transnational society has affected both collective and individual rights, freedoms and responsibilities; be it gender, race, religion, or an issue relating to fair trade, the environment, cyber and health security. Most prominently, is the seeming disenchantment with national identity, and by extension the nation-state. The modern nation-state, which emerged following the Treaty of Westphalia, tends to be used as the point of reference in mainstream problem-solving IRT. Consider for instance how mainstream IRT is limited to describing issues of transnational identity and security (which in turn becomes global), such as issues relating to gender inequality and injustice as well as the success of ISIS. The power of IRT analysis has suffered from an intra-state fever following a series of international crises that undermine IRT by transcending the role of the Westphalian understanding of the nation-state; this is best illustrated through the 2014 Ebola Crisis.

### *Pathogens of Power*

The Ebola 2014 Crisis has exposed the inadequacies and shortcomings of the World Health Organisation (WHO). This has resulted in members of the international community intensifying their calls for further WHO reform, in order to re-calibrate a more effective approach to transnational health threats. Emphasis has been placed on the requirement for "an effective and universal system of global health governance that has the authority and power to harmonize objectives, establish priorities, coordinate activities, set budgets, execute programs, and monitor progress."<sup>17</sup> Crucially, these suggestions predominantly focus on the agency of the WHO, and relate to its lack of ability to set its own economic global agenda and the increasing politicalisation of the special agency demonstrated

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<sup>17</sup> Howard Markel, "WHO: Past, Present and Future: Worldly approaches to global health: 1851 to the present", *Public Health* 128 (2014): 127.

throughout the crisis. Moreover, considering that the WHO responds to, within and dependent upon a context of neo-liberalism, it is unsurprising that it is associated with neoliberal implications. Multilateral health responses in the modern-era have endorsed this characteristic; the First International Sanitary Conference, Paris in 1851, was designed by the Great European Powers and discussed maritime quarantine in order to contain health threats, primarily to secure the integrity of the trade industry. In this sense, a global health threat is exacerbated by a focus on power politics, whereas analysis (as a quest for solutions) requires an approach that evaluates the power-knowledge dynamic. An adoption of this perspective would encourage a critical analysis of the relationship between the “three UNs” as outlined by Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas Weiss, which serves to find solutions rather than descriptions.<sup>18</sup> Their categorisation refers to the understanding that the global institution is constituted of and functions through the interaction between three distinctly separate agencies: its member states, the secretariat as well as the sector of expertise and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

### Conclusion

The shift toward an IRT that fairly and effectively engages with global problems by recruiting non-Western and alternative perspectives has become equated to an exercise designed to simply tick off a certain amount of nation-states from a quota. Whilst it is evident from the literature reviewed that non-Western IRT is required in order to provide fresh perspectives, and subsequently encourage dialogue amongst the plurality, it is the integrity of the theoretical paradigm that ought to be valued and sought, rather than ensuring that every geographic location is represented. Analysis has demonstrated that an IRT characterised by national representation is insufficient, as these “fresh” perspectives are guilty of all the problem-solving traits they have been designed to transcend. It has been argued that as a response to the limitation of Western IRT, and the problems associated with seeking non-Western IRT, it is worth encouraging a turn to what many perceive as the disciplines greatest strength: its interdisciplinary nature. Continuing to look towards studies of history, psychology, philosophy and sociology, especially the focus upon power-knowledge relations, ought to help facilitate dialogue between a multitude of transnational theories, which are not obsessed with geography and transcends this problem-solving dilemma; whilst maintaining the purpose of a theory: to solve global problems, rather than describe. By extension, through rethinking IRT and designing new perspectives and tools appropriate to analyse global problems at the transnational level, it is hoped that IR as a discipline is re-thought to reflect a critical pedagogy. Therefore, reiterating that it is theory that matters- not geography. **GPR**

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18 Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij and Thomas Weiss (eds.) *UN Ideas that Changed the World* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2009): 32-33.



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