

THE EUROCENTRIC FOUNDATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND WHY THEY MATTER

BENEDICT HALDANE

ABSTRACT

Eurocentrism is an interpretation of history and society which gives primacy to the role of the European-Western world in the development of the economic, political and cultural systems which comprise the modern world. It is deeply embedded across the social and political sciences, including International Relations (IR). This essay argues that the ontological foundations of IR theory—including such central concepts as sovereignty and security—are fundamentally Eurocentric, and that an anti-Eurocentric IR theory must interrogate and reformulate these ontological bases. It will be then argued, through considerations of the ‘European miracle’ and the Cuban Missile Crisis, that the inherently Eurocentric epistemology of many IR theory perspectives distorts the ways in which important issues are analysed and explained.

KEYWORDS

Eurocentrism; International Relations Theory; Sovereignty; Security; The ‘European Miracle’; Cuban Missile Crisis

INTRODUCTION

In a statement which has now become an adage for critical (in the broadest sense) perspectives within International Relations (IR) theory, Robert Cox (1981: 128) claimed: “Theory is always for someone and some purpose”. Eurocentrism, and the project of countering Eurocentrism, is a key illustration of this statement. Eurocentrism is an interpretation of history and society which gives primacy to the role of the European-Western world in the development of

the economic, political and cultural systems which comprise the modern world. The term was developed by Samir Amin (1988) in his work of the same name, and has since proceeded to be employed as a widespread criticism of academic scholarship and beyond. This essay will forward three primary arguments. First, Eurocentrism is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon which is deeply embedded across the social and political sciences, including IR. While various typologies have been proposed to delineate the complex notion of Eurocentrism, it is important to distinguish it from the related concepts of Orientalism and Postcolonial criticism. Second, this essay will argue that the ontological foundations of IR theory—including such central concepts as sovereignty and security—are fundamentally Eurocentric, and that an anti-Eurocentric IR theory must interrogate and reformulate these ontological bases. Finally, it will be argued, through considerations of ‘the European miracle’ and the Cuban Missile Crisis, that the inherently Eurocentric epistemology of many IR theory perspectives distorts the ways in which important issues are analysed and explained. Consequently, IR theorists must question their epistemological assumptions and give consideration to a wider range of perspectives in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of global politics.

WHAT IS EUROCENTRISM?

The first section of this essay will outline some perspectives on the definition and extent of Eurocentrism. Amin’s notion of Eurocentrism is, essentially, an account of the emergence of modernity and capitalism. Amin (2011: 62-99) argues that the idea of the “European Renaissance” is an

ideological construction which implies a return to a trans-historical, Greco-Roman source of modernity, when in fact modernity is a distinct break from Europe's past and arose from inter-society relations, not as an isolated European phenomenon. Although employing a Marxian mode of analysis, Amin rejects the Marxist 'two roads' notion (European development from slave system to feudalism and ultimately capitalism; Asia incapable of independent development) as inherently Eurocentric. Rather, he argues that elements of "proto-capitalism" existed in the Arab-Islamic world and indeed influenced the development of European capitalism (1991: 350).

Immanuel Wallerstein (1997: 94-101) offered one of the earliest typologies of the Eurocentrism of social science, describing it as "hydra-headed" and incorporating five main facets: a historiographical explanation of the dominance of Europe in the modern world, the conception of (spatially and temporally) universal truths, the characteristics of 'civilisation' based on a modern and individualist worldview, an Orientalist reading of non-Western societies as the obverse of 'civilisation', and the idea of progress. This classification is complemented by Kamran Matin, who states that "Eurocentrism is a specific mode of comprehending modernity that begins and ends with Europe" (2011: 354). Matin's framework of Eurocentrism outlines four assumptions: historical (the autonomous emergence of modernity in Europe), normative (the superiority of Europe due to the historical aspect), prognostic (the eventual universality of the practices of European modernity), and stadial (internal processes of development unfold in every society throughout the world) (2011: 354). Evidently, identifying Eurocentrism is fundamental to the historical and social understandings of the modern world which are the basis of Western scholarship.

John M. Hobson dedicated a monograph to detailing his framework of Eurocentrism and challenging what he calls Edward Said's "reductive" conception of Eurocentrism and Orientalism in favour of

understanding it as a "polymorphous, multivalent discourse" (2012: 1). Hobson argues that the Saidian notion conflates "Eurocentric institutionalism" with "scientific racism" (2012: 3) which are, in fact, distinct. In Hobson's formulation, "scientific racism" emphasises genetic and environmental differences whereas "Eurocentric institutionalism" locates difference in cultural or institutional factors. Hobson proposes that these two categories can be further subdivided into pro-imperialist and anti-imperialist variants, arguing that, since the mid-20th century, scientific racism has largely receded and Eurocentrism in international theory has taken on a subliminal form, "sanitised" in notions of tradition and modernity, core and periphery, and hegemony (2012: 10). While Hobson's framework is complex, it does provide nuance to understanding the ways in which Eurocentrism is extant in academia despite wider societal changes.

It is important not to conflate the notion of anti-Eurocentrism with the framework of Postcolonialism; the two are related but not equivalent. Anti-Eurocentrism features in a range of frameworks and sub-fields, including Dependency Theory, World-Systems Theory, Poststructuralism and Marxian anti-colonialism. The sub-field of International Historical Sociology (IHS) has contributed, in large part, to IR's challenge to Eurocentrism. IHS perspectives have offered a "thicker" conception of the 'international' by challenging "methodological presentism" (viewing the past in terms of the present) and "methodological internalism" (abstracting social conditions from the wider, international context) (Duzgun, 2020: 285—286). Furthermore, while Postcolonial approaches often critique Eurocentrism, they have been criticised for reifying culture and identity at the expense of the material considerations of imperialism and for failing to offer an alternative conception of modernity (Matin, 2011: 358-359).

To conclude, this section has demonstrated that Eurocentrism is a complex and wide-ranging phenomenon across academia and beyond which

considers European actors and history central to the emergence of the modern world and the systems within it at the expense of a more inclusive comprehension of world history. This has significant implications for the philosophical underpinnings of IR theory, which will be explored in the following sections.

WHY DOES EUROCENTRISM MATTER?

Eurocentrism matters in IR theory because, historically, it has defined the ontological and epistemological perspectives within the field of IR. For the present purposes ontology is defined as the nature of social reality, and what knowledge about this reality is possible to achieve; epistemology denotes who has access to and creates knowledge about the social-political world and how we should approach the study of it. The following section will first elucidate how many of IR's foundational, ontological concepts are inherently Eurocentric and how an anti-Eurocentric IR theory needs to challenge these notions. Then, this essay will consider some examples of cases in which anti-Eurocentric scholarship has challenged the epistemological bases of previous work in order to dismantle the Eurocentric epistemology of IR theory.

CHALLENGING THE ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF IR

Hobson (2012), among others, identified six Eurocentric 'myths' of IR which constitute the history and theoretical foundation of the discipline. These include perspectives on the anarchic, international political system, and theoretical constructions of globalisation. This section will consider the ways in which two of the most fundamental principles in IR theory—sovereignty and security—are Eurocentric, and the ontological implications of this.

One of the central tenets of IR theory is the notion of state sovereignty in a global system which lacks central authority. Realism and liberalism (historically the two dominant trends in IR theory) both view sovereignty as residing within the state, and thus treat the state as the central unit of analysis in global politics. Of course, within both traditions there is great diversity. The classical realism of Hans Morgenthau (1948) treats the state as a rational agent seeking security and power within the anarchic international system. While structural realism gives more prominence to the constraints of this international system, it is restricted to how these structural constraints affect states' actions (Waltz, 2010; Mearsheimer, 1995). Neoclassical realism attempts to incorporate both domestic and external variables, but ultimately still aims to explain state behaviour (Rose, 1998). While there are radical differences within liberalism, liberal theories place more emphasis on the role of cooperation and cosmopolitan ideas in the international system (Richardson, 1997: 6-8). Keohane and Nye's (2001) neoliberalism critiques realism by exploring the interdependence between states, and Doyle's democratic peace theory emphasises how liberal, democratic states act towards each other (1986). While liberalism shifts the focus away from statism, the state is still treated as the central agent in the international system.

However, this essay argues that the concept of sovereignty, its foundations and its centrality to IR theory are Eurocentric. Uneven patterns of state emergence and development have led to hegemonic and hierarchical state systems in which states may have legal equality but in practice, sovereignty is experienced in unequal ways. IR's conception of sovereignty has been branded as "inextricably linked to colonialism" (Pourmokhtari, 2013: 1767). Navid Pourmokhtari argues that the international legal order which emerged in the 19th century was predicated on the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty, but this notion could only be applied

to European states and not colonised states, which were deemed unfit for full sovereignty under colonialism. Moreover, Errol Henderson (2013) has argued that the notion of sovereign states within an anarchic system is based on the racist conception of the 'state of nature,' from which more civilised (i.e. European) peoples have advanced. Tark Barkawi and Mark Laffey (2002) employ Hardt and Negri's notion of 'Empire' (2000) to situate understandings of sovereignty in histories of European colonialism and engagement with the non-Western world. They argue that our understanding of state sovereignty was born out of an encounter between Europe and the non-European world; a more comprehensive understanding of sovereignty must, therefore, consider the effects of structural, imperial relations between European powers and their colonies. Moreover, they agree with Hardt and Negri's differentiation between modern state sovereignty and postmodern, global sovereignty centred around a global hierarchy of states, institutions and corporations (2002: 121-123).

The concept of security is another core theoretical aspect of IR theory which is inherently Eurocentric. The classic development/security nexus in IR views development in the 'Third World' in terms of security in the 'First World.' However, this paradigm is reductive and fails to account fully for the development of the modern state system and emergence of contemporary inter-state security relations. For example, the Haitian revolution is conspicuous in its absence from the most prominent IR theorising, despite producing the first post-colonial, post-slaveholding independent state in the modern world. Rather, the modernisation narrative of centralised state power, military force and fiscal authority is an extrapolation of European state development (Shilliam, 2008: 779-785; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006: 331-333). Robbie Shilliam proposes that a contrasting view of the Haitian revolution would invert the security-development nexus and examine 'Third World' security and threats from the 'First World' (2008: 787). Pinar Bilgin further argues that rather than simply a 'deficiency' of theory, the

Eurocentrism of security studies is "constitutive practice", resulting in "security knowledge that is not only parochial but also peripheral" (2010: 618—620). Challenging conceptions of sovereignty, security and other ontological foundations of IR would trouble many of the established ideas and perspectives of the field. However, if IR is to be truly 'international', it is imperative that these Eurocentric roots be contested.

CHALLENGING THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF IR

Another foundation of IR which Hobson (2012) challenges is the "positivist myth" which assumes that the discipline produces objective, value-free knowledge. Hobson argues that the values of IR and the foci of study stem from an underlying Eurocentrism. This essay will now consider some of the ways in which the epistemological perspectives of IR are Eurocentric and how this leads to a deficit in the scope of theoretical knowledge.

One of the clearest examples of Eurocentrism in IR theory is the notion of the 'European miracle', proposed by Eric Jones as a comparative account of why economic growth and development began in Europe and not elsewhere. In his historical sociological interpretation, Jones argues that acknowledging Europe's success is not to derogate other societies but to recognise the "severe handicaps" of political systems, warfare and natural disasters (2003: 154-170). However, Jones' argument (2003: xxvi) that the fate of "the East" can be explained by "steppe imperialism" creates an Orientalist discourse in which a superior Europe is contrasted with a homogenised 'other' comprising disparate societies from Turkey to India. This conception disregards the material benefits which European colonial states gained from imperialism and the adverse effects on colonised states. The 'European miracle' is a pervasive idea which is influential in IR theory and wider society. For example, William Lind proposed viewing

foreign policy through the lens of an historical European-Christian identity which required the defence of imperilled Western values and culture. Indeed, Lind dismisses the interconnectedness of medieval Europe with the Arab-Islamic world and the violent legacies of colonialism by proclaiming: "The West invented modernity" (1991: 42).

Eren Duzgun (2020: 288-291) draws on IHS to reject the notion of the 'European miracle,' countering that proto-capitalist features such as commercial agriculture and monetised rent were extant in non-European societies, and that the emergence of European capitalism was in fact the result of "the interaction and contribution of multiple and 'unevenly' developed societies." Furthermore, Duzgun argues for disassociating the notions of modernity and capitalism, which are viewed as inextricable in the Eurocentric worldview. In fact, "pre-existent forms of modernity" (2020: 302) occurred entirely apart from capitalism. For example, economic phenomena such as long-distance trade and finance emerged independently in non-European parts of the world, as did principles of emancipation and equality (2020: 288-303). Consequently, the non-Western world cannot be considered simply as a passive recipient of Western capitalism but also as an involved actor in the development of the modern world system. In fine, the notion of the 'European miracle' exemplifies an epistemological standpoint which privileges knowledge of and from the Western world at the expense of a wider range of perspectives.

The Eurocentric epistemology of IR can be seen not only in historical scholarship, but also in analyses of case studies which have been central to debates within political science. One such event is the Cuban Missile Crisis and its treatment in IR theory, which has been the subject of a revisionist reading in recent years. In previous scholarship and wider discourse, the Cuban outlook had been entirely overlooked in favour of a great power conflict perspective between the USA and USSR; in US National Security Council discourses Cuba

was considered to have surrendered its sovereignty to the USSR and it was accorded only passive agency as the physical site of Soviet weapons (Laffey and Weldes, 2008: 555-561). Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes further argue that academic practices in fact contribute to the production of global hierarchies because historic US aggression towards Cuba—and other Latin American states—is not considered an important motivator in Cuba's actions and is thus disregarded. While the European / non-European distinction is more nuanced in this case, it is still a representation of Eurocentrism. The USA and USSR were powerful, hegemonic states which, despite geographical distance, are both rooted in European historical development. On the other hand, Cuba's position in the relationship is that of a postcolonial state. The Eurocentric interpretation of this event provides a 'blinkered' perspective of global politics and conflict in which non-Western actors are disregarded as passive recipients of others' actions. Moreover, it raises important questions for considering previous and future scholarship: Whose perspectives are considered worthy of inclusion? Who is producing knowledge, and on whose behalf? This case exemplifies the epistemological shortcomings of Eurocentric IR theory and demonstrates the need for a more comprehensive approach.

In recent years, there has been greater recognition of these epistemological challenges within IR and the need for a broader set of approaches within the field (inter alia Ticker, 2003). Echoing Martin Wight's (1966) challenge "Why is there no international theory?", Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan have questioned "Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?". They argue that due to IR's origins in the West and the continuing dominance of Anglo-American scholarship within the field, Eurocentrism is inevitable and deeply embedded (2007). Proposals for a 'global IR' or 'post-Western IR' include the incorporation of scholars, theories and knowledge from geographically and culturally more diverse foundations, including disparate religious-intellectual traditions

(Acharya, 2014; Shani, 2008). In general, there is a greater focus on knowledge production within the field (Capan, 2017: 6). These proposals must be taken seriously if IR is to recognise and challenge its own epistemological limitations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Eurocentrism is an extremely significant matter which pervades the most fundamental aspects of IR theory. This essay has forwarded three primary arguments. First, it was argued that Eurocentrism is a wide-ranging phenomenon which can be identified across academia and more widely. The concept, proposed by Samir Amin and explored by many others, essentially places Europe at the centre of world history as the primary agent of the emergence of the modern world. Eurocentric views of history and the contemporary world disregard or marginalise the influences of non-Western actors and view European-Western societies as the primary moral agents whose development will ultimately be emulated by others. Second, this essay has argued that recognising Eurocentrism matters for understanding the ontological foundations of IR. Concepts including sovereignty and security, which are fundamental to IR theory, are deeply Eurocentric and must be challenged if IR is to move beyond its Eurocentric assumptions and achieve a greater ontological understanding of international politics and society. Such an understanding would consider state development, inter-state security relations and the global system of sovereignty not only from the standpoint of European-Western states, but also from the perspectives of other regions of the world and their experience.

Finally, this essay has argued that Eurocentrism also matters for IR theory's epistemological assumptions, such as accounts of the European miracle and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite attempts to recognise and challenge these accounts, more work needs to be done in order to create a more inclusive and comprehensive body of

IR theory. This must start with a critical challenge to the foundational beliefs which underpin the field of IR, but must also endeavour to include a wider range of voices in the field. This is no simple task and will require significant effort from academics, politicians and others. Fundamental to this effort is active listening and engagement with academics, leaders and publics outside the sphere of Western academia. This would allow a more diverse range of perspectives and beliefs to engage with the process of IR theory. IR scholars must actively interrogate their own place in the social and political world they study, and search for perspectives which may disrupt the received wisdom. This will, ultimately, lead to a more comprehensive, and truly international, study of global politics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acharya, A. and Buzan, B. (2007), 'Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 7(3), pp. 287-312.
- Acharya, A. (2014), 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), pp. 647-659.
- Amin, S. (1991), 'The Ancient World-Systems versus the Modern Capitalist World-System', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 14(3), pp. 349-385.
- Amin, S. (2011), *Eurocentrism*, Second edition, Oxford: Pambazuka.
- Barkawi, T. and Laffey, M. (2002), 'Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31(1), pp. 109-127.
- Barkawi, T. and Laffey, M. (2006), 'The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies', *Review of International Studies*, 32(2), pp. 329-352.
- Bilgin, P. (2010), 'The 'Western-Centrism' of Security Studies: 'Blind Spot' or Constitutive Practice?', *Security Dialogue*, 41(6), pp. 615-622.
- Capan, Z. G. (2017), 'Decolonising International Relations?', *Third World Quarterly*, 38(1), pp. 1-15.
- Cox, R. (1981), 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), pp. 126-155.

- Doyle, M. W. (1986), 'Liberalism and World Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 80(4), pp. 1151- 1169.
- Duzgun, E. (2020), 'Against Eurocentric Anti-Eurocentrism: International Relations, Historical Sociology and Political Marxism', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23(2), pp. 285—307.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2000), *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Henderson, E. (2013), 'Hidden in plain sight: racism in international relations theory', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26(1), pp. 71—92.
- Hobson, J. M. (2012), *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, E. (2003), *The European miracle: environments, economies, and geopolitics in the history of Europe and Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keohane, R. O. & Nye, J. (2001), *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed. New York: Longman.
- Laffey, M. and Weldes, J. (2008), 'Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 52(3), pp. 555—577.
- Lind, W. (1991), 'Defending Western Culture', *Foreign Policy*, 84, pp. 40—50.
- Matin, K. (2011), 'Redeeming the universal: Postcolonialism and the inner life of Eurocentrism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(2), pp. 353—377.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (1995), 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19(3), pp. 5-49.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Pourmokhtari, N. (2013), 'A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: the contradictory legacy of a 'West-centric' discipline', *Third World Quarterly*, 34(10), pp. 1767—1793.
- Richardson, J. L. (1997), 'Contending Liberalisms: Past and Present', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3(1), pp. 5—33.
- Rose, G. (1998), 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, 51(1), pp. 144-172.
- Shani, G. (2008), 'Toward a Post-Western IR: The Umma, Khalsa Panth, and Critical International Relations Theory', *International Studies Review*, 10(4), pp. 722—734.
- Shilliam, R. (2008), 'What the Haitian Revolution Might Tell Us about Development, Security, and the Politics of Race', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50(3), pp. 778—808.
- Tickner, J. A. (2003), 'Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 32(2), pp. 295—324.
- Waltz, K. N. (2010), *Theory of International Politics*, Reissue edn. Long Grove, IL: Waveland.
- Wallerstein, I. (1997), 'Eurocentrism and its Avatars: The Dilemmas of Social Science', *New Left Review*, 0(226), pp. 93—107.
- Wight, M. (1966), 'Why is there no international theory?' In M. Wight and H. Butterfield (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations*. London: Allen and Unwin.