

SILENCED VOICES - WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE IR DISCIPLINE?

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional history taught to students of International Relations follows the narrative outlining that the sovereign state and the anarchic state-system were born in 1648 in the Treaties of Westphalia and that IR as a discipline itself was born in 1919 as an attempt to solve the problem of war. The impact of the years 1648 and 1919 is, however, a myth and the conventionally orthodox narrative relying on these mythical origins about the birth and development of the discipline has obscured its real history. There are important reasons to study the history of IR, but most crucially to allow for the exposure of the Eurocentric, racist and patriarchal origins of the discipline. This can be done by taking a revisionist approach and unfolding myths about its origins, while highlighting how some important voices and topics have been excluded from it.

This essay will hence explain why 1648 and 1919 are myths and what the problems of these myths to IR are. It will then discuss how the reliance of mystic origins contributes to the marginalisation or exclusion of certain voices and highlights that acknowledging the disciplinary history and the marginalisation of certain theories matters because theory cannot be separated from the real world but is instead an active contributor in the process of reshaping it.

THE MYTHS OF 1648 AND 1919

The myths of IR (the Westphalian Treaties in 1648 and the year 1919 after the First World War) are traditionally seen as the important historical events forming the basis of the discipline and therefore its ontological and epistemological foundations. The conventional narrative tells us that the sovereign state and anarchic state-system were born in 1648 in the Treaties of Westphalia at the end of the Thirty Years' War (de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson, 2011: 738-40). These Treaties are seen to mark the beginning of the modern international system as a one composed of sovereign states with exclusive authority within their geographical territories (Krasner, 1995: 115). Revisionist scholars, however, have shown that the concept of sovereignty precedes the Westphalian Treaties and that sovereignty was actually restricted rather than invented in them. The idea that rulers had authority over their territories was already present, for example in the Peace of Augsburg a century earlier (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 738-40). The Treaties also included a number of restrictions regarding the domestic authority of each state's ruler, for example on religious practices (Krasner, 1995: 115). This notion that the concept of sovereignty was not simply born out of a single set of peace treaties is far more plausible than the conventional narrative about the meaning of the Westphalian Treaties. Although it is possible for a single event to cause a massive transformation in the political world order and

state relations, most often transformations are likely to happen over decades of political practice. This is true at least for the concept of state sovereignty. Therefore, the emphasis on Westphalian Treaties is an oversimplification of a complicated and long process of change. This kind of false assumption about the origins of one of IR's basic concepts can set challenges for understanding the complexity of the global world order (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 737).

One of the problems of this simplified interpretation of history is that it ignores how Eurocentric IR is. There are some links in the Westphalian Treaties to the concept of sovereignty, such as the rights of states to have their own foreign policy. The Treaties, and hence the right of states for their own foreign policy, however, were only applicable to states within the Holy Roman Empire (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 740). Yet, many scholars misinterpret that the Treaties applied to Europe in general. The Eurocentric approach to the history of Europe and the world thus assumes that state sovereignty became the universal feature of world politics after Westphalia (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 742). Yet, since the year 1648 neither the global nor the European political system have been solely based on an anarchic system of states. Alongside anarchy they have exhibited combinations of "sub-systems hierarchy" (Hobson and Sharman, 2005: 64) whereby imperialist hierarchies centered on states in possession of sovereignty were the dominant actors of international relations at least until the Second World War (Hobson and Sharman, 2005: 70). It was only during the postcolonial era that the sovereign state started to feature as the central unit in global politics (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 742). Non-sovereign political formations have therefore remained in world politics

throughout the modern era long after Westphalia (Hobson and Sharman, 2005: 70). Even today imperial legacies continue to affect world politics to some extent (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 742), for example in the form of humanitarian intervention later discussed in this essay.

The second myth of IR equally contributes to a problematic interpretation of the history of the discipline. According to the conventional narrative, the end of the First World War and the year 1919 marks the creation of the study of IR. This myth claims that IR was born following the devastation of the First World War when Idealists sought to find a solution to the problem of war (Henderson, 2013: 89). They believed that there exists such a thing as positive progress that contributes to a better understanding of the global system and answers to the problem of war (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 745-46).

This myth about how the discipline was born is equally Eurocentric for various reasons. One reason is that reading IR history through the aforementioned ideal lenses of positive progress further allows the discipline to gloss over its racist and imperialist origins (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 737). As said, through this approach, IR was seen as a noble discipline that would solve the problem of war and, therefore, serve all people. However, no matter how noble IR and its solutions to war were thought to be, the fact remains that mainstream IR has been concerned with retaining and promoting Western ideas and concepts to the world, often with a racist lens (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 750). As Vitalis (2015: 2) powerfully notes, the scholars of IR were often concerned with proceeding strategies to protect and expand their

hegemony over the marginalised. The early scholarly focus of IR was on race and colonial administration, and built on a “wilful forgetting” of the imperialist origins of the discipline (Bell, 2009: 8).

A closer examination of the Treaties of Westphalia and of the ideologies behind the creation of IR as a field of study thus clearly reveals that the discipline has read its own history in a selective and inaccurate way. Yet, especially in mainstream IR, the conventional picture has remained largely unchanged (Hobson and Sharman, 2005: 63) and many IR textbooks still maintain the traditional storyline (de Carvalho et al., 2011: 143). Continuing to teach the history of IR through the myth of 1919 allows scholars to ignore the importance of colonialism and white supremacy as central to the origins of the field (Henderson, 2013: 89). Therefore, as long as this distorted history reading prevails, it remains important to highlight the revisionist literature debunking the myths and the serious consequences this history has to both the making of current theory and world politics.

THE WORLD IS MORE DIVERSE THAN THE SCOPE OF MAINSTREAM IR SUGGESTS

But what are the consequences of an inaccurate history reading on political theory and practice? Most importantly it has resulted in mainstream scholars, especially those in the camps of liberalism and realism, interpreting the world from narrow perspectives and excluding or marginalising critical approaches. Mainstream IR theories reflect the desires of those in power, which throughout history has mainly meant the desires of white Western males and powerful Western states.

This is not to argue that there are no alternative voices. The discipline has undoubtedly broadened its theoretical lens to include both approaches and topics from a variety of other disciplines that include critical thinkers and those of marginalised identities such as feminist theories or African American studies. These critical views indeed demonstrate that the arena of international politics is more diverse than what mainstream IR suggests. For instance, while the emphasis on the myth of the Westphalian Treaties has contributed to the hegemonic position of realism and its main unit of analysis, the state, various feminist approaches have challenged the realist approach and revealed the gendered nature of IR by focusing on social relations and individual experiences in social and political settings (Tickner, 1997: 616). For example Cynthia Enloe, one of the key scholars during the emergence of feminist approaches in the late 1980s, has argued for the importance of the lives and experiences of ordinary people in understanding violence and how violent practices are related to gender constructions (Enloe et al., 2016: 539).

To suggest that IR is obtuse does also not mean that marginalised critical voices have only arisen recently. Critical scholars were already addressing the problematic racist origins of IR during the interwar years. African American scholars W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and the Howard School challenged the dominant idea that the global world order is based on racial superiority. These academics were originally at the forefront of the development of IR. However, they were eventually relegated to separate disciplines such as African American studies, allowing privileged voices to continue dominating and defining IR (Vitalis, 2015: 158).

Its logic has therefore been based on racist white supremacy (Vitalis, 2015: 1). In the late 19th and early 20th century, the general understanding of the global world order was biologically rooted and white social scientists created theories based on the fundamental belief that there were inferior beings who threatened white supremacy (Vitalis, 2015: 26-27).

Eurocentrism becomes visible in the way that racism was ignored or pushed to the margins of the discipline around the era of its supposed creation. IR discipline was thus initially developed to help maintain a system and world order that excluded countries and people that were not white or Western (or male). To this day, the silencing of voices who would discuss racism in IR perpetuates. According to Henderson (2013: 89), there is a “norm against noticing” racism in IR that makes it difficult to get critical views on white supremacy published in any major Western IR journals. Content that does get published discusses racism in ways that allows for white individuals and the IR discipline to distance themselves from taking responsibility for white supremacy. While there are of course differences between the development of the discipline in different countries even within Europe (Schmidt, 2013: 7), it can nevertheless be argued that IR has been a mainly Western discipline and has its leading scholars in the US and Europe. In 2015 in the US, IR scholars still consisted mostly of white individuals (Lake, 2016: 1112).

The same argument about the Western and masculine world order applies to the current position of feminist voices within IR. They still remain marginal because issues of gender continue to be considered less important in

politics (Youngs, 2004: 79) than the state and international structures (Tickner, 1997: 616). There is a lack of dialogue and understanding between feminist and mainstream IR scholars, which ultimately results from their diverging ontological and epistemological approaches. For example Realists focus on sovereign states operating in an anarchical international system and are not concerned with analysing how armed conflict and the behaviour of states affects the life of individuals, or how these are constructed through unequal gendered power relations (Tickner, 1997: 616). Those mainstream scholars who engage with feminist arguments, such as Kehone, argue that in order to have a place within IR, feminist scholars should use “publicly known methods” which are “checked by a community of scholars” (1998: 196). The problem is, because Feminists ask different questions to those of mainstream scholars, their methodology is often also different to that of methodologies in mainstream IR. Their questions cannot necessarily be answered by framing them in terms of testable hypotheses (Tickner, 2005: 1). Furthermore, if this community of scholars Kehone refers to consists of mainstream IR theorists, the accepted methods are those accepted by the mainstream scholars. Attempts to make feminist approaches to comply with mainstream accepted methods further demonstrates the fact that men have historically dominated both international politics and the discipline of IR, and that knowledge construction has happened from a male perspective which is taken as a given by mainstream scholars (Youngs, 2004: 77).

THEORY IMPACTS REAL LIFE

Engaging critically with IR theory is crucial because it fundamentally contributes to shaping the world and thus is not something occurring hermetically in academia and research institutes. Theory can in itself be seen as a form of practice since it affects the world. By advancing a theory, it is possible to change mindsets and therefore, social realities (Kurki and Wight, 2016: 31-31). Since theory and practice can be seen as interrelated, studying the history of IR as a discipline is crucial in understanding why world politics are organised the way they are. By engaging with a critical view of the history of IR, it is possible to understand how this history affects the ways in which IR scholars interpret the world and produce knowledge that in turn is utilised in real-world policymaking. Theory participates in classifying and conceptualising actors and events in global politics, for example when deciding who is a terrorist or what means a civilised state (Bell, 2009: 17). We often take these concepts for granted without realising that alternative interpretations can be made. Since Western and male voices have been dominant in the construction of IR theory, it can be argued that the dominance of these voices has influenced what is considered important in IR and which voices and topics are excluded.

One example of the imperialist history of IR and the implications thereof is the concept of humanitarian intervention. It has been asked whether the principle behind the concept of humanitarian intervention is the idea that states have a responsibility to protect, or if these interventions are a Western imperialist project with motives of national self-interest (Daombeck, 2012: 1). By tracing the imperialist origins of IR,

we can understand how modern social and political thought continues to use imperial policies, for example by intervening in the matters of a sovereign state under the justification that the state has internal shortcomings such as lack of good governance or failure to protect human rights of its citizens (Jahn, 2017). The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle was adopted in 2005 by the UN and was a result of a debate on how the international community should react to systematic violations of human rights in a world of state sovereignty after the mass atrocities in Rwanda and the failures in Kosovo. R2P includes the notion that sovereignty is not only protection from external interference but also a positive responsibility of the state to protect its citizens. Should the state fail in this task, it is then the matter of the international community to provide this protection (The Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect). It is, however, the unequal imperial power relations that make policies of, for example interventions, possible in the first place (Jahn, 2017). The mere fact that the Security Council has the power to decide whether to invoke R2P demonstrates that. Scholars on humanitarian interventions have shown that states have not intervened unless there has been a vital interest at stake and that especially the permanent five members of the UN Security Council with veto power use the SC as means to promote their interests in the world. Interventions have hence been highly selective rather than based on the principle of protecting civilians from human rights violations committed by the targeted state of intervention (Hehir, 2013: 156). For example, the R2P was applied to Libya (Bellamy and Williams, 2011: 825) but in Myanmar the SC has not intervened even though the situation of the Rohingya clearly counts as gross violations of human rights (Hehir, 2017).

Feminist approaches to war and security provide another example of how the limited mainstream IR theory can bear consequences in real life. While conventional IR scholars view states as the best entity to ensure the safety of individuals, feminists have shown how the lived experiences of women in war are all but safe. Violations of all kinds on women demonstrate that sometimes the state and militarism are the reasons for certain aspects of insecurity (Tickner, 1997: 625). The impact that war has on women as well as on men and other gender identities highlights that states are not always adequate security providers for civilians. Mainstream IR scholars, many of whom contribute to advising policymakers in real life, do not consider how gender matters in politics. Focusing on the state-level analysis of foreign policy makes it easier to distance oneself from the fact that each decision has consequences on the lives of individuals in the affected state, for instance civilians in times of war. Could the foreign policy decisions of states perhaps be somehow different if decision makers were more informed by critical perspectives such as feminist or postcolonial theories?

CONCLUSIONS

It is crucially important to study the history of IR because it has been distorted. This becomes evident in the disciplinary myths of the creation of the sovereign state and the modern state-system in the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 and the birth of the discipline itself in 1919 as a response to the horrors of the First World War. A critical review of this mainstream narrative of IR disciplinary history reveals that neither the initiation of the concept of a sovereign state nor the discipline itself is that simplistic.

Furthermore, adopting an oversimplified view of IR's history is dangerous as it underplays or ignores the discipline's racist, Eurocentric and patriarchal roots. Based on white supremacy and an upholding of the imperial system, as well as on the focus on the state as the main unit of analysis, the discipline has failed to include certain voices because they were initially seen as inferior or irrelevant. By excluding some voices, mainstream IR helps to perpetuate a world view that reflects the power of the privileged instead of the full social reality of all people (Youngs, 2004: 76).

Therefore, if we ignore analysing the narrative of how the discipline of IR was born and developed, we might miss the fact that the production of knowledge and power interests are interrelated. There is always a reason why a particular theory has been formed. It would be dangerous to use a theory in current world politics while not understanding how historical events and power dynamics that were dominant at the time of the construction of the theory affected the shaping of it. Studying the history of IR thus enables us to be self-reflective so that we do not merely accept what the textbooks tell us about its origins.

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