THE FORUM

A case for re-thinking geo-cultural pluralism in International Relations

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Thinking about calls for geo-cultural pluralism in International Relations (IR) does not invoke a warm, fuzzy feeling. 'Geography', 'culture' and 'pluralism' all have complex histories that are in tension with the ambition to address the limitations of existing modes of producing knowledge about the international. While the notion of 'geo-cultural epistemologies'(Tickner & Wæver, 2009) was once offered as part of an attempt to think through those very limitations, that we have come to consider 'geo-cultural pluralism' as the solution suggests to me that we may be deliberating yet another endeavour that excludes at the moment of inclusion. In what follows, I explain what I mean by 'excluding at the moment of inclusion'. Let me begin by exploring the three components of 'geo-cultural pluralism'.

What is meant by *pluralism* has been far from clear in the scholarship that has sought to identify and address IR's limitations. In one of the earliest explorations of this issue, Holsti (1985) pointed to pluralism as a solution. If only students of IR were to become more aware of each other's scholarship, IR's limitations would eventually be addressed Holsti suggested. But then, the 'messiness' (Chan, 1993) that was likely to follow embracing pluralism as a solution was not explicitly considered. Let me clarify. On the one hand, plurality is the state of IR as a discipline: there exist multiple approaches to the study of world politics. This was also Holsti's starting point, *The Dividing Discipline* being the title of his book. On the other hand, historically, not all approaches have carried the same weight in training students, generating funds and finding outlets for publication. Even more importantly, adherents of these approaches do not always listen to each other let alone reflect upon their own limitations. This is in contrast to the expectation that pluralism entails embracing 'diversity as inherently valuable for students of international politics', for 'social-scientific concepts and categories can never do more than make provisional claims about a world that resist comprehensive organization through any single mode or scheme of explanation, interpretation of analysis' (Levine & McCourt, 2018, p. 93). Yet, such an acknowledgement would have meant 'forsaking neatness' and learning

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to deal with 'messiness', as Stephen Chan (1993) forewarned. As we now know, learning to deal with 'messiness' was not something most advocates of pluralism in IR were ready or willing to do at the time (but see Bleiker, 1997). I do not mean to imply that this is a matter of insincerity on the part of those who have advocated pluralism in IR. Rather, I submit, it is a consequence of our own limited awareness of the complex histories of 'geography' and 'culture', and the implications of those histories for practising pluralism. This is not to say that critical explorations such complex histories are not available; but that their potently radical implications are not always acknowledged, embraced or allowed to shape practices of pluralism.

Speaking of complex histories, let's turn to *geography*. 'Geography serves, first and foremost, to wage war', wrote Yves Lacoste in 1976. The author was pointing to the ways in which geo-graphing has always been tied up with colonization at local and global levels. In *The Myth of Continents*, Karen Wigen and Martin Lewis (1997) highlighted the colonial politics of identifying particular land masses as continents. It is in this sense that Edward Said (1977, p. 168) referred to 'imaginative geographies' in so far as what is known about far-away lands 'is more than anything else imaginative'. And, imagination as such is never independent of power. Indeed, what is it that renders Europe a continent (and not the westernmost region of Asia) other than imaginary geographies as such? This is not to say that knowledge about geography is imaginary in the everyday sense of the term, but that '[a]lmost from earliest times in Europe the Orient was something more than what was empirically known about it' (Said, 1977, p. 169). Replace 'Europe' and 'the Orient' with any other power relationship, and you encapsulate complex histories of Geography.

Culture, the other component of geo-cultural pluralism is no less troubled by its complex history. Anthropology, the discipline dedicated to the study of culture, has been tied up with power. With the founding of Anthropology in the nineteenth century, the study of 'the Other' went through a transformation. No longer approached as 'demonic' as in the sixteenth century, or 'ignorant' as during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, 'the Other's 'cultural difference' became the subject of study. As such, 'Anthropology fossilized difference; it saw difference as fossilization' (McGrane, 1989, p. 94). The point here is that not this is all that the study of culture has been or can be. The point is that this is how Anthropology had its start: as 'the modern West's monologue about "alien cultures"'. That, 'the Other's empirical presence as the field and subject matter of anthropological discourse is grounded upon his theoretical absence as interlocutor, as dialogical colleague, as audience' (McGrane, 1989, p. 128) has plagued not only Anthropology, but also other disciplines such as IR that have borrowed from it without necessarily reflecting on the complex histories involved.

The point being, turning to geo-culturalism as a solution to IR's limitations without considering these complex histories and their implications for pluralism amounts to 'excluding at the moment of inclusion'. My meaning here draws on Walker's (2006, p. 58) discussion on the 'always doubled outsides that are at work in what we have come to call the international'. One of the 'doubled outsides' is about assumptions as regards where politics takes place—mainstream IR's presumption being that outside is the realm of anarchy and not politics and therefore requiring a different mode of analysis, as explored in Walker's *Inside/*

Outside (1993). The other of the 'doubled outsides' is about who is considered as a part of our ongoing considerations regarding 'where and what politics must be'; for, some are presumed to exist 'outside to the space and time that is projected out as the limit of the modern world'. Indeed, not even 'internationalization as internalization' has changed the 'outside' status of some, argued the Walker, insofar as they were 'brought in' the international not on their own terms. To quote Walker,

> The official stories all tell tales of inclusion. But official stories about the inclusions of the sovereign state and system of sovereign states systematically erase the complex patterns of exclusion that have enabled official stories of inclusion (Walker, 2006, p. 67).

Put differently, those who were brought into the international via the expansion of international society (to use English School parlance) were excluded at the moment of their inclusion.

Similarly, geo-cultural pluralism, if adopted without due critical stance towards complex histories of 'geography' and 'culture', is likely to meet the same fate. For, such an endeavour is likely to amount to no more than collecting perspectives on the international from different parts of the world by 'fossilizing difference', i.e. without treating others as our contemporaries (Fabian, 1983), let alone as fellow thinkers (Shilliam, 2009). But then, even when they are included, thinkers from other parts of the world are often expected to fit certain expectations: i.e. 'radical difference' and/or 'authenticity'. And if and when fail to meet such expectations, they may be dismissed as alien to their own 'culture' and therefore not worth paying attention to (for a discussion, see Bilgin, 2016b).

Accordingly, turning to geo-cultural pluralism as the solution to IR's limitations runs the risk of excluding some even as they are being invited to join in. But then, if not geo-cultural pluralism, what? Uma Narayan's (2004, p. 221) preferred approach of utilizing the 'double vision' that the previously excluded possess by virtue of their insight into 'both of their own contexts and those of their oppressors' is reminiscent of Said's emphasis on the exile's ability to inhabit at least two worlds (at the cost of not feeling 'at home' in either place, it has to be said), which is an entirely different way of thinking about 'epistemic advantage'. Said wrote:

> Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal (Said, 1984, pp. 171–172).

Such 'double vision' (Narayan) explored through a 'contrapuntal reading' as method (Said) (i.e. by considering the experiences of the oppressors and the oppressors together with a view to their co-constitutive dynamics) would allow addressing IR's limitations without approaching others while carrying expectations of 'radical difference', or imploring them due to apparent lack of 'authenticity (Bilgin, 2016a). This is not only because there is no easy access to 'authentic', say, Indian knowledge that is not shaped by and in response to the colonial condition, but also because there is no 'authentic' British knowledge that is not shaped by and in response to the colonial condition. Such intellectual give and take between the imperial centre and colonies is

captured in Priyamvada Gopal's (2019) study of the ways in which anticolonial resistance in India and Indian activists and intellectuals' interaction with their counterparts in Britain challenged and transformed ideas about empire in both places.

To conclude: Pluralism can only help address limitations of IR if it entails 'a more critically reflexive role than present debates have recognised' (Levine & McCourt, 2018). This is a far cry from many who profess the need for geo-cultural pluralism in IR while failing to reflect on their limitations, or celebrating 'exclusion' and 'marginalisation' (a stance that Narayan (2004) cautioned against). For, replacing monist epistemological stances with a relativistic view of knowledge (as with the calls for national schools of IR; for a discussion see (Bilgin, 2020)) is not the solution that a discipline tasked with understanding the world is in need of. Students IR need to learn how to 'embrace messiness' as Chan suggested. Letting go of the pretention that 'we' understand how the world works is bound to get messy. Yet, as argued above, geo-cultural pluralism may not be the way out for students of IR.

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