
Pacific International Relations Theory?

Abstract

Western International Relations Theory has been developed to explain or understand the reality of the world; nonetheless, the world is in constant change and in the latest years it has been possible to observe diverse realities in different regions: political change and economic growth in North America; economic and political crisis in Europe; political consolidation and transformation in Latin America; political turbulence in Africa and economic growth and pacification in Asia. Are Western IR theories able to explain the Asian pivot? This paper will explain how IR theories respond to historical and regional contexts and questions if they are enough to include beyond the Western world.

Keywords: non-western IR theory, middle range theories, historicism

1. Changing theory, clash of theories

Every year is possible to identify new books and articles discussing the theoretical framework of International Relations, nonetheless, the latest years have witnessed more hypotheses testing than theory development papers (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013), and have made scholars analyze weather if we are beholding the end of IR theory, or if theoretical development is needed, in order to improve the discipline. Many different answers have been elaborated for this discussion. Some argue that theory development has created more focus in the study of theory than in the international system, others consider that theory enlargement produces more possibility of knowledge.

Since the beginning of IR as a new field of study, theories and traditions started to appear –and dispute it hegemony-, having as a result, the ‘Great Debates’

1 According to Ole Wæver, in the discipline of IR there have been four theoretical debates, based on ontological (focused on the object of study) and epistemological differences (concerning the way in which knowledge is acquired).
(Wendt, 1998), that have been useful to explain and give sense to theoretical evolution and understand the proliferation of multiple theories that have risen to consolidate plurality within the discipline. The ‘Great Debates’ helped to organize philosophical visions, as well as to consolidate ontologies and epistemologies, helpful to define methods and units of analysis in the international system. Also, theoretical eclecticism (Katzenstein, 2008; Lake, 2014) has made possible the combination of different approaches that allow the development of polymorphic theories, instead of monolithic. The mid-level theory, instead of focusing on the process and elements of theory, analyzes parts of the political process and its outcomes, generating knowledge for the political realm, instead of the philosophical (Lake, 2013). In this sense, scholars question if growing plurality helps to make sense of IR theory, or the opposite. Lake (2013) argues that eclectic theory could become the source of progressive research in IR, while the ‘paradigm wars’ have been reduced into proving-theory in order to gain more recognition in the theoretical field. On the other hand, Jackson & Nexon (2013) claim that ‘paradigm wars’ helped to develop IR theory.

Scholars have created a plethora of visions that try to explain the world that we live in; nonetheless, the emergence of new approaches has brought more complexity and focus in the theory, rather than the object of study. In 2013, the European Journal of International Studies (EJIS) published the Special Issue: The end of International Relations Theory? dedicated to the analysis of where theory is heading to. The main debates on this edition were mainly about the proliferation of IR theory and its implications. While scholars like John Mearsheimer & Stephen Walt (2013) or Smith (2004) considers that the creation...
of theory is more important than hypothesis testing, others like Lake (2013) or Dunne (2013) questioned the theoretical plurality.

Lake (2011) argues that scholars have developed five pathologies that “transform research tradition into sects”: 1) reification of research traditions, 2) reward extremism, 3) mistake research traditions for actual theories, 4) narrow the permitted subject matter of studies to topics that tend to confirm strengths of ‘our’ tradition, 5) scholars aspire for their approach to be the ‘scientific paradigm’. In this sense, the author proposes that instead of studying approaches, we should study the problems that are visible in the world, and not try to find the hegemony for a single theoretical or epistemological approach. The aim of theory should be to improve human life, and it seems that the proliferation of theory produces less understanding of reality and more struggles among visions, that instead of coexisting and complement current knowledge, try to position in higher theoretical status from the rest.

Tim Dunne (2013) points out different drivers that have boosted the theoretical proliferation in IR: 1) a new historical context needs new analytical tools; 2) we have imported theories from other related disciplines like philosophy, sociology or political science; 3) the discipline by itself has evolved and generated new theory. He assures that “some of these developments have led to alternative theories that are embedded within the basic assumptions of a particular approach, but which claim to articulate differences so substantial that a new label is required to delineate the variations within that theory” (Dunne, 2013). This has led to the emergence of a plurality of theoretical visions and it might lead to a fragmentation. His proposal is to find an ‘integrative pluralism’ that “accepts and preserves the validity of a wide range of theoretical perspectives and embraces theoretical diversity as a means of providing more comprehensive and multi-dimensional accounts of complex phenomena” (Dunne, 2013:416), which suggests a selection of some theories and the rejection of others.
In a similar sense, Katzenstein & Sil (2008) establish that “viewing social inquiry solely through the lens of competing research traditions risks excessive compartmentalization of knowledge unless some effort is made to illuminate connections and complementarities between the various problems, interpretations, and mechanisms posited by different research traditions”. Their contribution lies on the proposal of analytic eclecticism, that promotes “seeking the best available answer for a given problem at any given time, and courageous, in pursuing intellectual engagements with diverse styles of thought and putting its wager unconditionally on the dialogical model of science” (Katzenstein & Sil, 2008). Eclecticism allows to ‘use’ existing theoretical framework to solve real life problems, using theory as a toolbox that provides the needed material to face the IR field of study.

The third debate or ‘inter-paradigmatic debate’ embraced IR theoretical diversity, admitting three paradigms: state-centered, pluralist and structuralism. Later, with the fall of the USSR, structuralist visions started to vanish, and the state-centered and the pluralist approaches synthetized into the ‘neo-neo binomial´ (neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism), known as the mainstream visions, which ontologically and epistemologically were quite similar. The mainstream wasn’t similar at the beginning, but the changes in the real world made both theories closer (Ole Wæver, 1996). The dominant visions co-existed in harmony since they found more similarities than differences. Both standings are rationalists, explanatory, foundationalist and individualistic.

During the third debate, the “mainstream synthesis” made theoretical coexistence more plausible and allowed ‘theoretical peace’ giving an end to ‘paradigms war’. At the end of the Cold War, new actors and topics started to appear on the global agenda, scholars accepted that the mainstream wasn´t enough to explain international affairs, leading to the introduction of new theories as important toolboxes, helpful to complete the IR theoretical analysis (Sodupe, 2003). Theories started to be seen as a complement instead of contenders, but that
didn’t last too much. This debate came to an end due to the acknowledgment of significant ontological and epistemological that started to appear by the end of the 1980’s decade. In 1998, during his lecture at the 29th International Studies Association annual conference (ISA), Robert Keohane pointed out new ontological and epistemological differences in the upcoming discussions within IR theory, leading to the beginning of the fourth debate, characterized by its philosophical content (Sodupe, 2003).

The fourth debate brought new visions, making more difficult coincidence among the new approaches. IR great debates have shown that differences have grown among scholars regarding the analysis of the international system, nonetheless, “the boundaries of each paradigm are permeable” (Walt, 1998:43), or at least they were. Currently is harder to find coincidences among critical and traditional visions, which generates more plurality within the discipline.

The fourth debate distinguishes positivism from post-positivism, rationalism from reflectivism and explaining from understanding. The new approaches include a holistic ontology focused on interpretation and the use of a relativist epistemology and qualitative methods over empiricism and scientific rigor (Kurki & Wight, 2013:23-25). The current debate differentiates between tangibleness, objectivism, and hypothesis testing methods from subjectivism and interpretative methods (Sterling-Folker, 2013:7-10).

According to Christian Reus-Smith (2001), four elements made possible the emergence of new International Relations (IR) theories at the end of the Cold War: 1) in an effort to demonstrate the theoretical superiority of the rationalist schools, positivist scholars gave opportunity for the emergence of new approaches, which prove their efficiency to explain the world through heuristic perspectives, 2) the inability of rationalist trends to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the emergence of a new international order, 3) the pursuit of new theoretical approaches by scholars to explain new phenomena on
the international agenda, and 4) the failure of rationalist thought (neoliberalism and neorealism) to elucidate the changes of the new world order. New theoretical perspectives were very different among reflectivists’ approaches considering their main focus, ontology, and epistemology. The new visions are loaded with philosophical content that wasn’t considered in the past. Some scholars consider that new theories bring more complexity and less understanding, but others claim that the rise of new ‘family’ of theories translates into a better map to understand IR (Jackson & Nexon, 2013).

The fourth debate made clear the division between rationalism and reflectivism; the mainstream and the critical theories, but also, the recognition in the middle ground of “constructivism”, term coined by Nicholas Onuf in 1989, as a moderate vision which introduces the possibility of analyzing the international system with a reflectivist ontology and a rationalist epistemology. This approach became very popular in a very short time because it does not follow strictly the positivist (mainstream) nor the post-positivist branch, and shares structures of both methodological schemes (Bravo & Sigala, 2012: 436; Adler, 1997).

This perspective bases its ontology in the study of social structures considering intersubjective meanings –collective knowledge shared by a society, such as ideas, history, norms, language, culture, and identities as elements that have to be studied and interpreted, instead of the States, as the mainstream does; nonetheless, it doesn’t totally reject the positivist ontology since it recognizes the existence of an objective world. It accepts a positivist epistemology, but it also considers the use of hermeneutics and interpretation of international reality. These elements situate the constructivist perspective in the middle ground, considering both theoretical assumptions: rationalism and reflectivism, keeping a moderate position between both visions of international affairs and focusing on the analysis of social structures (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 127-132; Bravo & Sigala, 2012: 436; Sodupe, 2003:1665-171). The fourth debate introduces a long philosophical tradition that includes different epistemologies and method that
were not part of IR theory in the past. New methods are less foundational and more interpretative, “empirical research must study ideas and interests as part of a unitary process of the creation of social reality” (Adler, 1997).

The emergence of the constructivist approach represented the beginning of the fourth debate in IR, criticizing the material elements and emphasizing the ideational components of social structures for the analysis of the international system, assuming that the international society is a social construction created by ideas (Fierke, 2013). Along with constructivism and critical theories, middle-range theories became popular and started to constitute most of the empirical papers published in the most relevant academic journals.

2. Middle range theories and non-Western IR theory

According to Dunne (2013), we have different types of theories focused on diverse aspects: explanatory theory, constitutive theory, critical theory, theory as a lens, normative theory. These theoretical plurality helps to make sense of the world that we live in, and to understand different contexts. He argues that it is possible to change the ‘lenses’ to see the world in a different way; contradicting Marsh and Furlong’s ideas. He also argues that we have achieved ‘theoretical peace’; since we have accepted pluralism, theoretical wars are less visible among academic publications. But, is IR theory really over in a dialectic sense (have we reached its purpose)? Have we achieved the ‘perfect’ theoretical stage? And, should we not produce more theory? Should we leave theory behind and leave theoretical creation to philosophers? Is the proliferation of ‘ism’ an achievement or a threat? These questions are not new, but several answers have been given to respond and try to make sense to theoretical reality. Monterio & Ruby (2009) would try to find theoretical prudence, Lake (2009) considers that “isms” are evil, since they produce the proliferation of theories instead of the analysis of contexts and situations; Dunne (2013) suggests an ‘integrative pluralism, and, Reus-Smith (2013) underlines the importance of metatheory, while other consider that we should leave it behind and focus on middle range theories.
IR theory proliferation becomes relevant for regional studies, since there is no consensus on which kind of theories should be used for specific regions of the world, however, middle range theories have become useful to explain different phenomena. According to Acharya & Buzan (2014), IR theory ought to be recognized by IR academic community, and should help to generalize IR topics. In this sense, IR theory must be general instead of regional, however, in general it has been developed by Western academics, so it does not necessary fit non-Western visions.

Middle range theories are defined by Mertus (1949) as “theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization, and social change”. These kind of theories are more pragmatic and help to analyze a specific situation, context or phenomena. Middle-range and eclectic theories leave behind meta-theoretical content (ontology and epistemology) and follow a more pragmatic path, mainly because they consider that meta-theory represents a no-end debate that doesn’t provide real world knowledge (Reus-Smith, 2013). It is common to lose sight when analyzing meta-theory, however, it should not be a constraint, as Wendt said, “we all do ontology” (cited in Reus-Smith, 2013). It is pointless to try to solve the meta-theoretical debate, nonetheless is important to recognize that theory construction is not pointless if it adds value to current framework.

The lack of IR theory development in the non-Western world has called the attention of scholars since the beginning of the 21st century, specifically when Acharya & Buzan (2010) questioned why there is no non-Western international relations theory. The authors acknowledged the existing dichotomy between the rationalist vision that dominates in the US, and the reflectivist vision that is more popular in Europe, nonetheless, there is not a dominant tradition visible in Asia.
Of course, that does not mean that there have not been theoretical contributions in non-Western countries, but it is perceptible that IR theoretical dominant voices respond to the West. In this sense, Acharya & Buzan (2010) point out that even though there has been some development of political theory in Asia, there is no clear distinction between international and domestic theory. Also, they identify different foreign policy approaches that respond to the set of ideas of one leader, but not as the development of an academic community. Likewise, non-Western IR theory has been “under the shadow” and “catching up to Western powers”, that are currently hegemonic (Chen, 2011). In this sense, Chen (2011) suggest a reorienation of the discipline toward a post-western vision, nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that most Asian scholars have developed their academic work in western universities, but mainly, they have been dedicated on testing western IR theory in their different contexts, as well as trying to dismantle the western IR theoretic hegemony, such as the postcolonial visions (Acharya & Buzan, 2010).

It is important to acknowledge that the relevance of the development of IR theory lies not in the need of replace Western IR theory, but in the need to understand why Western theories have become dominant even in non-Western countries. According to Chen (2011), this has to do with the hegemonic logic that divides “us”/”them”, “in”/”out”, “master”/”oppressor”, which has made Western IR theories emerge over the rest, creating a Hegelian trap. In the same sense, the lack of non-Western theories represents a challenge in the agent-structure debate and a challenge in terms of identity, considering that Western theories follow western idiosyncratic values. In this sense, it is possible to observe how non-Westerns scholars have tried to find similarities between non-Western theories and Asian

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2 The Hegelian trap has to do with the dialectic method and the end of history in Hegelian terms, when there is no opposition to the current order.
3 According to the constructivist vision, agents and structures are mutually constituted, nonetheless, a postcolonial vision doesn’t allow the agent to shape the structure.

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political reality. In Japan, for example, Takashi Inoguchi (2007), found that the first debate could be comparable to the San Francisco Peace Treaty discussion that took place in Japan as an idealism-realism political debate.

Acharya & Buzan’s work regarding the lack of non-western IR theory explores the cases of China, Japan, Korea, India, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and the Islamic worldview through the eyes of non-western scholars, trying to respond to the central question, why there is no non-Western IR theory. According to Quin (2011), China has always been away from the international society, not only in geographical sense, but also in terms of identity and ideas. Through another perspective, Chen (2010), argues that introducing non-Western theories to the academic debate will not make a difference nor change the Eurocentric perspective of IR theory. He considers that theory should be more international and less American. Nonetheless, “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox).

Japanese theoretical vision stands closer to the English School, considering the normativist position of the theory, even though it responds to a Eurocentric perspective. In this sense, Keene (2002) points out that norms are established in a hierarchical sense that respond to a postcolonial relation the divides the East and the West as colonized and colonizer (Ikeda, 2008). It is observable that when trying to adjust Western IR theory to non-Western realities it does not fit quite well, proving that current IR theory is not that international, but that they follow a Westphalian-Eurocentric vision that does not include a global agenda. For this, Acharya (2011) suggests the promotion of non-Western studies and to avoid assuming the superiority of Western ideas and values for constructing IR theory.

In terms of power and structure of the international system, the world is facing a period of transition, where the role of China is becoming more important and it is now determinant for the international order. The rise of China cannot be explained
by Eurocentric visions. There is a need of a more international IR theory, able to represent identities and values of non-Western cultures that are part of the process of the construction of the world. Peter Shearman (2014) introduces the concept of “Chimerica” to refer to the China and America binomial and the focus the United States has had to the Asia Pacific Region. He acknowledges that IR scholars forgot to include the analysis of the region because practitioners were not sure whether to “contain” or “engage” with China and other emerging powers, and now we face to a lack of theory regarding the pacific.

Conclusions
We haven’t achieved ‘theoretical perfection’ and scholars, shouldn’t be against the development of theory; not everything has been said and it would we presumptuous to believe that the end of theory has arrived, considering that it would mean that weather is pointless because theory is not leading anywhere, or that we have really achieved all the possible knowledge in this realm. Neither of those visions seem satisfying. Arguments criticizing theoretical proliferation have proved their point; ‘isms’ create pathologies and produce more confusion instead of understanding. But also, the development of theory creates a wider spectrum of knowledge and give more tools for the analysis of social life and theory per se. In this sense, theoretical development needs more order. Scholars need to agree in their disagreement, theoretical proliferation can benefit IR as long as it doesn’t create more confusion.

IR theory must be a referent of the reality and there is a lack of non-Western IR theory. The world order is changing, and current theories are short to explain the rise of China and the rest of Pacific powers. IR theory should reflect a global vision and currently it is fragmented and still responding to a Westphalian-Eurocentric vision, that is not enough to give sense to the current world order. IR theory should reflect identities and values of Western and non-Western communities, eliminating the superiority of the West.
References


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