BATTERED, BUT UNBROKEN: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CHALLENGES TO WESTERN IR THEORY (REALISM AND WORLD SYSTEMS THEORY)

Terry McDonald, MA, PhD Candidate
Tallinn University, Estonia

Abstract

Recent developments in the field of International Relations have called into question the nature of the dominant theories used therein. IR has been painted as suffering from an inherent Western bias. This paper does not dispute this fact, but argues that IR scholars must now move forward by acknowledging this bias. Western IR theories can maintain utility, but it must be in a context of knowing the limits associated with their origins.

Keywords: International Relations, Realism, World Systems, Bias, Objectivity, Utility

Introduction

Is objectivity attainable? Can a researcher step outside the confines of his or her personal experiences and culture and look upon the subject matter as an impartial observer? While we may all flatter ourselves so capable, so free of internal bias and prejudice ingrained, it is not assuredly so. Indeed, there rages a debate right now in the field of international relations that could very well mark the changing of an epoch, and it would be folly to go further in one's work without reflecting upon such ideas.

There are a plethora of 'myths' that have long made up the basis of international relations as a discipline (C. Weber, 2009). We have long relied upon these as the foundation for study of the international system; indeed the idea of an international system is one of these myths. Realism, Idealism, the 'great debates' of IR history, all of these are the myths upon which the discipline has been constructed.

This is not to say that these myths are untrue. Nor does it mean that there have never been critiques of the traditional approaches. As Smith (2005) has shown us, everything, from the very nature of science and empiricism itself, has been brought into question over time. It is just that today, these myths are being challenged from a variety of angles, and their claims to universality are thus being undermined.

In this article, the theories applied are that of Realism and World Systems Theory. These were chosen as representative of the IR discipline, as these are normally seen as divergent theories; world systems theory arriving as a critical response to older IR perceptions of the world order. Thus, first we will explain these, providing the basis for later analysis. From there, though, these two supposed opposing views will be subjected to the new critical eye, as defined by Hobson (2012). Here, along with Max Weber's (2005) look at objectivity, we will see if it is fitting to use these Western theories as a means to describe a diverse world.

The Theories
Realism

Dougherty (1997, 58) has given us a breakdown of the central tenets of Realist thought that are useful in gaining a grasp on the theory as it is to be used in this paper. Dougherty has broken these down into six separate assumptions upon which the basis of this paradigm was formed.

The first of these statements is pivotal in the understanding of Realist theory. It is that the international system is made up of nation-states as the primary actors. It is through this view that the entire perspective of Realist thought is based – that which concerns itself most with the nation state.

This leads to the second tenet, which, combined with the first, sets up the anarchical world that Realists present. This tenet is that international systems are inherently conflictual. According to Dougherty, Realists see international politics as a struggle for power in which states are bound to rely upon their own capabilities in order to survive the anarchical competition.

The third premise is then more legal in nature, but with a pragmatic twist. It states that states are always in a condition of legal sovereignty – but not without constraint. The catch is that there are "nevertheless gradations of capabilities" (p.58). This means that, while a state is indeed sovereign in its decision-making capability, there exist constraints on its freedom to act. A particular state's status as greater or lesser will thus determine the parameters within which it will have freedom to act.

Leading then to the fourth premise, we move to the realm of internal politics. This premise postulates that states are unitary actors. We have moved to the domestic realm only to say that it does not matter outside – it is thus suggested that, on the international level, domestic politics can be separated from foreign policy decisions.

The fifth premise is essential to understanding the mindset of these actors in the Realist perspective. In order to predict behaviour of states as actors in a Realist view, one needs to view them as not only unitary, but rational actors. States are thus expected to behave in a manner that would maximize the benefits to their national interest.

The idea of national interest is that with which the sixth and final supposition is concerned. National interest, from a Realist point of view, is in obtaining and preserving power. Power is the central focus, and one should expect all states to pursue it accordingly.

Consequently, the operation of the international system in Realist expectation is, if not predictable, at least comprehendible. States, as the primary and sovereign actors, will make rational choices --within the constraints that they are held – that will enable them to maximize the power they can attain.

World Systems Theory

In contrast to the state centric view of Realism, the other theoretical approach to be used in this paper is less confined by boundaries of a geographical nature. The divisions in the other world-view to be used are more economic and, to a degree, cultural. World Systems analysis goes beyond the view of a state as a dominant, unitary, and rational actor (Wallerstein, 1987). The structure of the system is instead divided into core, semi-periphery, and periphery actors, which do not necessarily correspond with state boundaries.

The core, as defined by Wallerstein (1974) and Kuznar (1999), are areas in which elites control most wealth, technological, and military resources with which to dominate the system. While Wallerstein concentrates on food in his example, others have included more "sumptuous preciosities" to augment this work, such as Kardulias (1990).

In order to sustain this position, the core areas use the discounted resources and labour of the periphery (Wallerstein, 1974). These areas/actors, often are removed from the dominant core culture in the form of language, traditions, and development history. This is a function of "the social organizations of work, one which magnifies and legitimizes the ability of some groups within the system to exploit others." (Wallerstein 1974:349).

In order to bridge this divide, actors within the sphere of the semi-periphery are utilized (Wallerstein, 1974, Kuznar, 1999). These play the role of intermediary, and often feature a mix of the means and capabilities of the core states, such as educational

opportunities and core-style institutions, while retaining peripheral characteristics in cultural and labour-division aspects to relegate them to their non-core status.

These do not necessarily have to be divided along national boundaries. In China, for example, Shanghai billionaire financiers share a national boundary with peasant rural farmers, many of whom are among the 21 million Chinese who live below the official "absolute poverty' line of $90 US Dollars per year (Moyo, 2011).

Criticism

Now that we have explored the two theories themselves, we move on to Hobson's critiques of the Western underpinnings of all such IR theory. He lays down "Six Eurocentric myths of IR: the moral purpose of IR as defender and promoter of Western civilization" (Hobson, p.14). Here we will list these, and apply them to the theories presented above, so as to see if they can withstand the scrutiny of a post-Western worldview.

The' noble identity / foundationist myth' of the discipline

Hobson asserts that IR has always had a delusion that it was born in the bloody aftermath of 1919 in the fields of Europe. It was thus thought to be imbued with the noble purpose of avoiding such bloodshed in the future, born pure of heart. Hobson argues that this veils the truth, that since at least 1760 international theory has been Eurocentric and worked to defend and celebrate the West.

The 'positivist myth' of international theory

This is the myth that IR theory has a foundational 'value-free epistemological base' (Hobson, 17). Hobson states that this is undermined by Cox's "well known critical theory mantra, that 'IR is (almost) always for the West and for the Western interest'." He quotes Keohane referring to the idea of humanitarian intervention being necessary because the 'politics of malign neglect' would "deny the backwards East the privilege of developing into an advanced Western form." (Ibid.,18)

The 'great debates myth' and reconceptualising the idea of the clash of IR theories

Here, Hobson says that the much celebrated 'great debates', such as realism versus idealism, or positivists versus post-positivists, are not actually particularly great. He states that these are all minor variations on the same underlying themes, and that, viewed from a non-Western lens, the differences are miniscule.

The 'sovereignty / anarchy' myth

Hobson here argues that the underlying basis for this myth, that all states possess sovereignty in an anarchic system, is a falsehood. He says that Western states have been granted an implied hyper-sovereignty. Eastern states, alternatively, have at best a conditional sovereignty, which can be withdrawn if "civilized conditions are not met". (Ibid., 19)

The 'globalization myth'

Here the myth presented is not that globalization does not exist, it is that it is a modern phenomenon. Hobson posits that it has been around since at least 1760, and that it could easily just be called Western opportunism in the mission to recreate the world in a Western image. This still rings true, says Hobson, for post-1989 liberal internationalists like 'end of history' Francis Fukuyama, who preach a similar form of Eurocentric paternalism.

The 'theoretical great traditions myth'

Here, Hobson speaks of the 'epic rendering' of the great traditions of IR theory. He posits that in presenting theories such as realism as continuous strains of pure intellectual thought that can be traced from Thucydides to Kissinger is another falsehood that glosses over large differences in the name of convenience and fitting the Eurocentric metanarrative.

So, how then do these stack up with our earlier-explained theories? These will be explored one-by-one.

Realism

When it comes to the 'noble traditions' myth, it is hard to argue that realism began in 1919. Indeed, what is the Treaty of Westphalia if not a realist document? What of the justifications of the creation of the British Empire, or the Dutch East India Company? It is clear that realist thoughts and justifications – the infamous 'white man's burden', have been around since before the First World War. (Ofuno, 2010)

When speaking of the 'positivist myth' in IR, realism seems to fall in this trap as well. Indeed, the imposition of the nation state as the de facto natural state of affairs should not be seen as anything other than a Western creation. One only needs to look at Ofuno's (Ibid.,p.161) description of "'the curse of the nation state', a European conception forcibly thrust onto non-Europeans without any regard for the fact that they might have their own more appropriate systems of organizing society" to see that such a basis is not universal in the least.

As it applies to realism, it is easy to agree with Hobson about a false dichotomy existing in the 'realism versus idealism' debate. It once again presupposes an international community of nation states in the Western model, with slight variances in their motivations and desired outcomes. If one reads Yongin and Buzan (2012), they present the Asian tributary system as existing outside of the Westphalian model entirely. They quote Zhou in explaining that the tributary system represents a "spontaneous order, an endogenous and self-reinforcing institutional arrangement of East Asia, which appeared and was reproduced as an outcome of continuous strategic interactions among actors within the region." (Ibid., 6) Clearly this is a system and means of explaining large-scale interaction that falls outside of these dichotomies.

The 'sovereignty / anarchy myth' is also applicable to realism as it has been presented. Once again we refer to Ofuno, who describes Europeans as having seen Africa a legally res nullis. (Ofuno, 163) This is hardly the way one would treat a true equal in a system of equally empowered and sovereign actors.

The idea of presenting globalization in realist terms as a new phenomenon also seems disingenuous. From gunboat diplomacy, to the afore-mentioned Dutch and British trade corporations, Western trade has been adjusting the 'rest' to fit its aims since the 1600s. (Ferguson, 2003, 11) Globalization is not a 20th century idea that has streamed from a natural evolution, it was systematically enforced and then justified by internationalist thought, as Hobson said.

Consequently, the 'great traditions myth' falls apart as well, when it comes to realist theory. As Hobson himself points out, how can imperialists such as Ferguson and anti-imperialists such as Huntington be part of a continuous intellectual lineage? It does not stand to reason, and largely the thing they have most in common is a Euro-centric worldview.

World \Systems Theory

The application of Hobson's critiques to world systems theory is more complex. As a critical theory itself, there are many elements upon which Wallerstein (and others) and Hobson would at first glance seem to have close to a congruence of opinion. Nonetheless, we will examine it against the six myths presented now.

When it comes to the 'noble identity / foundationist myth', world systems theory escapes and does not at the same time. As it is a critical theory that has disparaged the 'core' states that have engineered a system of exploitation, it is hard to argue that world systems theory sees much nobility in it. Nonetheless, as a study, it still gives almost all agency to the West, and therefore still suffers from the same trappings.

As for the 'positivist myth', here it seems that world systems theory is in stronger standing. Certainly it does not see as benign the effects of previous internationalist study and practice. Even Hobson allows for certain exceptions amongst the "post-colonial-inspired" (p.16). Still, the problem of focus and agency remains apparent in world systems theory.

While it is critical of the West, it is still very much of the West, and thus may not fit into the 'post-colonial' column. Indeed, it reads very much as a critical description of the colonial system.

As for its place in the 'great debates myth', it does not emerge unscathed from this scrutiny either. As critical theory is in the loose lineage that represents the Marxist strain of thought, it still falls into the Eurocentric trap of assigning agency only to the West. This is not a perfect fit, however, as Hobson himself (p.333) points out that there are stark inconsistencies between the writings of Marx and Engels and that of Wallerstein, in that the latter is much more anti-imperialist.

It seems that in the 'sovereignty / anarchy myth', world systems theory performs best. While it can be state-based, and therefore fall under the criticism laid out by Ofuno (2010) earlier, this is not the sole incarnation of world systems theory. As described above in the theoretical description section, world systems theory does not necessarily mean that the core and periphery are always divided by national boundaries. When applied as such, it seems to largely avoid this particular pitfall.

There is a similar argument as it concerns the 'globalization myth'. World systems theory has clearly shown an interest in international economic cycles from before the modern era, going back at least 150 years (Wallerstein, 1988, 311). However, world systems theory may fall into the 'globalization as Western opportunism' construct, which Hobson classifies as 'socialist Eurocentrism' (p.20). Again, here the problem is that of agency, and seeing the Rest as entities to which things happen, not as equally functioning themselves.

As already examined above, the 'theoretical great traditions myth' applies to world systems theory. The idea that it is an intellectual descendent of the Marxist family of thought is rife with internal contradiction, especially on the idea of imperialism (Hobson, 333)

Conclusions
Objectivity, Bias, Utility

As the above analysis has demonstrated, there are definite holes in any claim as to the universal nature of the two IR theories presented, and indeed the others historically dominant in the field. What then, are we to take from this exercise? Is it that any research so formed is inherently biased past the point of utility?

The answer, thankfully, is not that explicit. As Max Weber (2005, 5) explains, "it is not that value-judgements are to be withdrawn from scientific discussion in general simply because in the last analysis they rest on certain ideals and are therefore 'subjective'." Researchers cannot simply throw up their hands and abstain from drawing conclusions just because of the entanglements that come from respective points-of-view any more than can an artist throw down her brush because the colours on her palette inevitably influence the outcome of the art.

What rests, then, is to "offer the person, who makes the choice, insight into the significance of the desired object." (M. Weber, 6) Therefore, it does not necessitate the abandonment of the use of realism and world systems theory in one's work. It simply necessitates the inclusion of the ideas of Hobson, Ofuno, and the others. A paper can speak of a realist world order, but must also point out its biases and limits, and that to a scholar such as Tingyang Zhao (2006), it "misses the mark as a world theory". These theories, then, maintain utility, just not infallibility.

References:

Weber, Cynthia, International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction, Routledge, London, 2005

Smith, Mark J., "Empiricism, Idealism, Realism", from Philosophy and Methodology in Social Sciences, Sage Publications, London, 2005

Hobson, John, The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory 1760-2010, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

Weber, Max, "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy", from Philosophy and Methodology in Social Sciences, Sage Publications, London, 2005

Dougherty, James and Robert Pfaltzgraff, Jr., Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey (4th ed.), Longman, New York, 1997

Wallerstein, Immanuel, The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century, Universtiy of California Press, Berkeley, 1974

Kuznar, Lawrence, "The Inca Empire: Detailing the Complexities of Core/Periphery Interactions", in World Systems Theory in Practise, Nick Kardulias (ed.), Rowan and Littlefield, Boston, 1999

Wallerstein, Immanuel, "World Systems Analysis", in Social Theory Today, Anthony Giddens (ed.), Stanford University Press, 1987

Moyo, Dambisa How the West was Lost: Fifty Years of Economic Folly and the Stark Choices Ahead, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 2011

Ofuno, Cirino Hiteng, "The Changing Images of a Continent: An Eclectic Survey of Writings on Africa in the International System", from Global Society, Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, Nairobi, July 2010

Zhang, Yongjin, and Barry Buzan, "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice", from The Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 5, Oxford University Press, 2012

Ferguson, Niall, Empire: The rise and Demise of the British World Order and Lessons for Global Power, Basic Books, London, 2004

Zhao, Tingyang, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All Under Heaven'", from Social Identities, Vol. 12, No.1, Taylor and Francis, 2006