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SOCIETY RESEARCH

GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

‘Doing Theory’ from ‘Somewhere’

CSS WORKING PAPER SERIES
Working Paper No.5 – May 2022

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Website	http://uhh.de/wiso-css
ISSN	2699-8327
DOI	https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-005
Image Credits	unsplash

To cite this paper:

Merschel, Oliver; **Wiener**, Antje; **Brückner**, Hauke; **Datchoua-Tirvaudey**, Alvine; **Riebe**, Lennart; **Soares**, Ana; **Mondragón Toledo**, Gabriel (2022): Global International Relations. ‘Doing Theory’ from ‘Somewhere’. CSS Working Paper Series No 5, Hamburg, <https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-005>.

Abstract

What does it mean to take the call for more ‘global’ International Relations (IR) seriously for the practice of research in IR and adjacent disciplines? This paper presents specific *themes* that Global IR could engage with in the ‘pluralist’ and ‘dialogical’ spirit of the GIR initiative. To flesh out six potential themes that relate directly to the six dimensions of Acharya’s original proposal for Global IR, this paper draws on a reflexive epistemology which prioritises ‘doing’ over ‘applying theory’ based on a ‘view from somewhere’. The themes are identified and outlined in this paper as follows: (1) practicing global IR, (2) towards more global historiographies, (3) decolonising IR contextually, (4) deconstructing concepts for a post-colonial language, (5) mapping agencies, and (6) eschewing exceptionalism. Put forward by a diverse group of authors, the paper exemplifies the productive dialogue among several ‘views from somewhere’. The point of discussing these six themes is precisely to refrain from narrowing down the debate or proposing fixed agendas for future research, and to resist canonisation by conceptualizing Global IR not as a specific theory or worldview but as a continuous impulse to keep reflexivity going. In a nutshell, we argue that if this reflexivity and openness for dialogue are genuinely practiced, Global IR will enrich and advance diverse fields of research without submitting to traditional disciplinary boundaries, hierarchies and modes of knowledge production.

Keywords: agency, de-colonial approaches, doing theory, historiography, language, mapping, practices, reflexivity

Acknowledgments

This paper was presented at various prior occasions including the roundtable “Global International Relations: Prospects and Challenges” at the *International Studies Association’s Annual Convention*, Las Vegas, Wednesday, April 7, 2021, 5:00 PM - 6:15 PM (Zoom), and the Hamburg International Relations Jour-Fixe, University of Hamburg, 7th July 2021 (Zoom). We would like to thank all participants for helpful comments, special thanks go to Amitav Acharya, Lucrecia Iommni, Franziska Müller, Maren Hofius, Dennis Schmidt, Jan Wilkens, Regina Heller, and Anna Geis. And we also thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments. This version of the paper is exclusively the responsibility of the authors.

GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

‘Doing Theory’ from ‘Somewhere’

Oliver Merschel, Antje Wiener, Hauke Brückner, Alvine Datchoua-Tirvaudey, Lennart Riebe, Ana Soares, Gabriel Mondragón Toledo.

Prologue: A View from Somewhere

In a seminar room at the University of Hamburg in 2019, something extraordinary developed. At first glance, it could have been easily overlooked by the PhD candidates, MA students and the professor that had gathered for the seminar. Indeed, it's not even possible to tell at which point in time during the various sessions this achievement began to emerge, and it has not ceased to further evolve since. At some point during the seminar, which addressed attempts of putting forward more 'global' approaches to International Relations (IR) theory, something must have clicked. Trying to understand what the practical relevance of these rather theoretical debates could be, we were able to perceive our own positionality and practices of knowledge production in a novel way. This realization was not the result of the individual brilliance of any participant of the seminar, its impact was located precisely in the conversation of multiple distinct perspectives. During these sessions, we realized that Global IR is not something abstract and far away, but that our specific conversation, in this very room at this very moment in time, represented multiple specific 'views from somewhere' that have the potential to move us away from the often criticized, western-centric 'view from nowhere'. We came to understand that, through *relating* our distinct perspectives of students and scientists from diverse socio-cultural and academic backgrounds to each other, a self-reflective 'view from somewhere' might become possible. And it dawned on us that, if we further flesh out this relationalist and pluralist approach to knowledge production, which puts our perspectives in conversation with each other without attempting to merge them, we might indeed get closer to putting Global IR into practice. This paper represents precisely this: an open-ended attempt to enhance and inspire further conversation on the possibility of a more global IR building on reflexivity and multiple 'views from somewhere'.

Introduction

With his programmatic call for a more 'global' International Relations (IR) theory, Amitav Acharya has inspired scholars around the world to critically rethink traditional concepts for better fit with the global world. He suggests referring to IR theory as "a heritage site" that enables critical reflection in order to ask novel questions that are of global relevance because they take local and regional diversity, experience and unequal power relations into account. Rather than proposing a novel "non-Western" or "post-Western" IR theory (Acharya 2014: 649),

we understand Acharya's initiative as an invitation to ask questions that are not only 'of global relevance' (thereby perpetuating the universalist assumptions that base legitimacy claims on a 'view from nowhere'), but which bring local, regional, or even individual experience to bear in order to generate critical questions about principles, norms, and mechanisms of global ordering that are legitimated through a 'view from somewhere' (Kratochwil 2007), instead. In a world increasingly shaped by fundamental transformations and planetary crisis, addressing global questions while at the same time doing justice to local experiences is all the more crucial. The productive, non-hierarchical dialogue among diverse actors that Global IR aims for is necessary to imagine and work towards a more sustainable future. The intention of this article is to take Acharya's Global IR proposal further. To that end we explore avenues of potential theoretical development according to 'themes' which related directly to the six dimensions identified by Acharya's programmatic call. The purpose of this project lies in teasing out theoretical and conceptual detail where we see special potential based on advancement in a selection of subdisciplines of IR including decolonial, regional, historical, norms, and practice approaches.

Against this background the following critically engages with Acharya's initiative in order to flag some themes for more in-depth theoretical and conceptual debate in Global IR. The paper attempts to frame this enterprise by taking a theorising-from-somewhere position. This position is developed against the backdrop of knowledge production as a key driver for the constitution of academic fields, on the one hand, and the ontological choice of situating that practice, on the other. The first is mindful of Stefano Guzzini's insight that "[T]he discipline was not there to produce knowledge; knowledge produced its discipline [and] it is not with the distant view of science that social and political practice is improved; it is rather the other way round: it is through recourse to the lessons of practice that science is constituted" (Guzzini 2013: 523-24; see also Bueger 2022: 6, in press, following Schatzki 1996: 89). The second draws on Nicholas Onuf's argument that "[t]here is always a *somewhere*, and it is foundational. It makes human agency, choice in the face of others' choices, and agents' goals the place to start, albeit in time, in the flow, in the middle. It takes self, selves and world as given — [...] by the circumstances making us all what we are. *This is the ontology of choice for social constructivists*. In no way is it beholden to some vacuous methodological quarrel over what can be seen." (Onuf 2021: 526, second emphasis added).

With regard to exploring the potential of Acharya's six dimensions, we ask whose knowledge counts, and whose knowledge is accounted for towards building GIR? Here it is important to cast the view on a multiplicity of agency that reaches beyond the familiar and central role of diplomats (for the oft-cited role of Morgenthau see Guzzini 2013: 523). To explore the impact of a broader field of practitioners with a constitutive role for the constitution of the field, we therefore argue that in order to bring the notion of doing theory from somewhere to bear, it is important to read both arguments together. This dual sensitivity for the role of specific practices of knowledge production that shape academic fields and perspectives on the one hand, and for the importance of situating these practices within their contingent context (knowledge always comes from 'somewhere') on the other hand, constitute our approach of theorising-from-somewhere that this paper puts into practice.

Students at the University of Hamburg, Germany have been inspired by Acharya's call for a rigorous reconceptualization of key concepts and authors. And in a 2019-20 graduate seminar on this subject¹ we have considered the call as an invitation to critically engage with the six dimensions Acharya lists as guidelines with a view to rethinking, and restructuring the way we 'do' IR, i.e. (1) *pluralistic universalism*, recognizing and respecting the diversity in us; (2) *grounding IR* in world history, not just Greco-Roman, European, or US history; (3) *subsuming*, rather than supplanting, *existing IR* theories and methods; (4) *integrating the study of regions*, regionalisms, and area studies; (5) *eschewing exceptionalism*; and (6) *recognizing multiple forms of agency* beyond material power, including resistance, normative action, and local constructions of global order (Acharya 2014: 649). Mindful of our own local view from somewhere, our discussions have engaged with these dimensions in order to constructively address blind spots in IR theory. These discussions have drawn on a relationalist understanding of conversations that does not aim for consensus or definitive answers (Fierke and Jabri 2019), but rather attempts to open up thinking space by relating several perspectives to each other and reflecting on their potential to contribute to a more 'global' IR.

To that end, we propose producing more in-depth knowledge for GIR as a 'heritage site' by exploring six *themes* more systematically, which are each addressed in the respective sections of this paper: (1) practicing global IR, (2) more global historiographies, (3) decolonising IR contextually, (4) deconstructing concepts for a post-colonial language, (5) mapping agencies, and (6) eschewing exceptionalism. Each of these themes speaks to Acharya's six dimensions. The themes have been developed through a series of interdisciplinary conversations that brought the principles of conceptual pluralism, reflexivity, and responsible academic intervention to bear. The aim of these conversations was to carve out ways of doing theory from somewhere (rather than applying theory from nowhere) in order to scrutinise extant IR theories and highlight opportunities for future research. Working towards more concrete understandings of what doing theory from somewhere means also requires substantial methodological reflections, which several of the paper's sections explore with different emphases. Accordingly, this paper's conceptual discussion follows Kratochwil's point that "critical theory cannot invoke a 'view from nowhere' and use the traditional instruments available to its adherents: clear, stipulative definitions, acceptance of ready-made datasets, methods of 'inference', and so on. Instead, it has to do its work by engaging with the vocabulary of theorists, or with a generally accepted 'truth', and has to subject it to cross-examination." (Kratochwil 2007: 30) Our critical take on key themes of global IR therefore evolves from a principled epistemological standpoint which prioritises 'doing' theory (i.e. conceiving concepts through reflexive real-world engagements) over 'applying' theory (i.e. using theory in order to explain real-world events based on being "trained in [...] the 'scientific method'") (Kratochwil 2007: 27).

In a nutshell this paper aims to identify options of 'doing' IR theory based on concepts 'from somewhere'. That "entails not relying on normalised datasets or searching for transhistorically valid generalisations but tracing the changes in the constitutive and regulative rules underlying the institutions and practices" (Kratochwil 2007: 33) of global order in an increasingly globalised

¹ For details see: 24-206.12 Global International Relations Theory (MA), Department of Political Science, University of Hamburg, Winter semester 2019-20 including both advanced MA and PhD students at the Chair of Political Science, especially Global Governance and the WISO-Graduate School.

world. The group is constituted of authors with diverse individual trajectories both with regard to socio-cultural and academic experiences in a range of countries including Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, the UK, and the US, and its formation was shaped by a common in-class experience of discussing Global IR with further students from Ukraine and Russia. As outlined above, the remainder of the paper addresses each of the six themes in their turn. In the concluding section, the paper offers an assessment of the potential of Global IR conceived as an impulse to keep reflexivity going by doing theory from somewhere.

1 Practicing Global IR

Questions of methodology and research practice, which Acharya addresses in the third dimension of his call to rethink IR, i.e. “*subsuming*, rather than supplanting, *existing* IR theories and methods” (Acharya 2014: 649), have not been in the centre spot of debates on Global IR. These debates have tended to focus on other dimensions of Acharya’s proposal such as integrating the study of regions into Global IR or reconciling a pluralistic version of universalism with respecting diversity as well as critical self-reflection of existing western-centric modes of theorizing in IR as an ‘American Discipline’ (Hoffmann 1977), so far. Indeed, Acharya himself (2014: 650) has said more about specific theories that one may engage with and modify (realism, liberalism, constructivism) than about the exact role of (novel) methodologies and methods for Global IR. Yet, such methodological reflections, which cut across the boundaries of established theories, should deserve special attention, since it is not immediately clear what modifications of the actual practice of research in IR are needed when taking Global IR seriously. The abovementioned suggestions of on the one hand taking local and regional knowledge and experience into account (Acharya 2014) and on the other hand adopting a self-reflexive ‘view from somewhere’ (Kratochwil 2007) are not as easily reconciled as one might expect. How to reconcile for example a view from Central Europe or ‘western’ academia in general and the aim of accounting for local knowledge across the globe? Both the dangers of essentialising local knowledge that is studied and of failing to reflect on the local nature of one’s own perspective as a researcher must be addressed when practicing Global IR. Such reflection on the local character of any knowledge is crucial for practicing Global IR in a credible manner because it impedes the danger of establishing (implicit) hierarchies between different modes and localities of knowledge production. This section, and indeed all sections of this paper, thus picks up themes that are vital in Acharya’s proposal and subsequently goes beyond his initial arguments in evaluating tangible ways of ‘doing’ Global IR in the context of conceptual, historiographic and de-colonizing tools that have not been highlighted sufficiently in extant discussions of Global IR.

Along these lines, it would be a good idea for Global IR to highlight the conceptual autonomy of both social sciences and the practices they study (Gunnell 2014) - a view that has recently been picked up in calls to advance a “Theory of the Gap” (Hofius 2020) between practice and subject matter of social sciences and that has – as a rather implicit theme – already been prominent although not fully developed in several recent contributions to practice-oriented and interpretive IR (e.g. Bueger and Gadinger 2018; Hansen-Magnusson 2020; Pouliot 2010; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). In a nutshell, this view assumes that a potential conflict between the social sciences’ language of describing and analysing social practises and the pre-constituted, original meaning of these practices is likely to arise. It is wiser and, so the argument

goes, more just to lower the expectations of social sciences in the sense of striving merely for a fair representation of the subject matter than to get entangled in claims of exact reproductions of for example local knowledge (Gunnell 2014); which would, one might add, involve the danger of falling back on an accidental ‘view from nowhere’ that does not reflect on the local, contingent character of its perspective. Such a perspective would also be able to establish fruitful connections with a relational understanding of conversations, which has already been suggested as an advancement for Global IR (Fierke and Jabri 2019). This understanding of conversations assumes “that participants [of the conversation], precisely because they are different add something unique and that both may, through the process, be transformed” (ib.: 529). In this relational view, the gap between scholarly perspectives and their subject matter is not a problem that must be overcome, but rather an opportunity to engage in conversation on an equal footing with the goal of transforming one’s own perspective – i.e. generating novel knowledge that both perspectives on their own could not have produced.

Taking the close connections between these philosophical considerations and practice-oriented approaches and methodologies in IR seriously, concepts such as “background knowledge” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, see also Bourdieu 1990), “meaning-in-use” (Wiener 2009, 2018) or “abduction” (Reichert 2014; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) therefore become crucial for conceptualizing research designs in Global IR. Such concepts are of great value for developing a self-reflective research practice in IR that avoids the danger of confusing the scholarly means of representation (themselves local forms of knowledge production and research routines) with the object that is studied and its distinct local meanings that must be respected. Topical examples of such research practice can be found in recent attempts to revitalize hermeneutics as a conceptual tool for studying international relations: Hansen-Magnusson (2020) for example develops and applies a notion of ‘topoi’ that function as meta-narratives of a given research setting one is interested in and provide an “intelligible account that captures the play’s plot” (Hansen-Magnusson 2020: 48). These interpretive devices provide orientation within a practice and produce insights about them without denying the external, distinct position of the researcher (‘view from somewhere’), as Hansen-Magnusson demonstrates with regard to the research fields of ocean governance and military interventions. Another example for the use especially of the concepts of relationality and conversations for Global IR can be found in the study of transnational or ‘global’ debates on climate change and justice: When attempting to map border-crossing debates that engage with this uniquely border-crossing problem, it may be useful to keep in mind and respect both the irreducible differences between potential participants (who are affected differently by climate change) of such a more or less ‘global’ conversation on climate change, but also their entanglement in a relational whole (Fierke and Jabri 2019: 519), in this case the warming earth.

Far from depreciating other approaches to the methodology of Global IR, these reflections could be the starting point for further debates and serve to highlight the possible complementarity of the project of Global IR and emerging approaches within the relationalist tradition of the philosophy of social sciences that put an emphasis on the gap between scholarly practice and its subject matter and reflect on the relation between those practices.

2 Towards more Global Historiographies

Acharya's second dimension brings forward the claim to ground Global IR in "world history, not just Greco-Roman, European or US history" (Acharya 2014: 649). The inherent diagnosis is congruent to some recent postcolonial (self-)critique of IR, namely the theoretical and historiographical Western centrism of the discipline. Following these scholars, critical historical research is needed to reveal the colonial contexts of IR's theoretical foundations, reject its traditional Western canonisation and debunk its founding myths (see for example Carvalho et al. 2011, Hobson 2012). By disclosing the complex entanglements between the emergence of modern science and the European domination of the world, critical historical research enables us to identify the allegedly objective 'view from nowhere' as a historically contingent product of specifically Western colonial ideas and practices. While sharing the postcolonial diagnosis, the Global IR project seeks to go beyond its critique by exploring possible alternatives to a Western-centred historiography. This opens up the field for a variety of promising approaches but also holds own theoretical and methodological pitfalls. The following addresses these by presenting three possible strategies for arriving at a plurality of more Global Historiographies, which we see as the necessary consequence of Global IR's strive towards reversing ahistorical takes on the global world in-the-making. In this sense, a Global Historiography should not be understood as a completed research design, but rather as a specific way of asking about the relationship between the irreducible locality of historical experience and its potential global relevance. Crucially, these three strategies do not aim to merely supplement Western-centred Historiography by drawing on non-Western concepts and ideas. They rather destabilize the very distinction between Western and non-Western thought and thus enable scholars to critically engage with socio-political and intellectual history based on a 'view from somewhere'.

One important strategy would be the establishment of counter-histories (in the domain of socio-political history) and counter-canonization (in the domain of intellectual history) by using historical sources from non-Western contexts. In this sense, the early modern trade system in the Indian Ocean could be studied as an example for a regional or international order (Phillips and Sharman 2015) while the political and historical writings of the 14th century Arab intellectual Ibn Khaldun could offer a different view on the relationship between state and society in the early modern age (Ashworth 2007). It remains crucial to pay attention to the function of these kinds of counterexamples in one's own argument: They can serve as an enriching perspective on the construction of social and intellectual history and show the historical contingency of our prevailing worldview, which is still largely blind to history outside the West. They might question the ideology of uniqueness of Western tradition by revealing the social complexity and intellectual achievements of non-Western societies. However, one should not fall into the trap of essentialising them as the definite or best way of analysing the current social reality. As Chakrabarty (2008) and Hurrell (2016) point out, the centuries-long domination of Western practices and concepts already inscribed itself deeply into the hegemonic social and imaginative institutions thus making it impossible to avoid Western categories completely. Instead, one should focus on the different modes of interplay between Western and non-Western practices and categories (e.g. complementary, contesting, parallelizing) and "explore how ideas that emerge from different historical, developmental, and cultural context can have more general, even global, relevance, and application" (Hurrell 2016: 151; see also Moyn and Sartori 2013).

This leads to a second strategy of challenging Western-centred historiography, namely highlighting the interconnectedness of allegedly “Western” events or concepts. As Bhabra (2007) demonstrates, the challenge for a postcolonial critique is not (only) questioning Western concepts and ideas but questioning them as being genuinely Western. Her approach of a Connected Historiography places concepts like modernity “in a frame of interconnections, or networks, of peoples and places that transcend the boundaries established within the dominant approaches” (ibid: 152). For the critical historian, this means to uncover the forgotten or suppressed sides of the grand Western narratives and “achievements” like the nation-state or the capitalist world system. By highlighting the interregional interconnectedness of historical processes, problematic geocultural categories such as “the West” can be gradually questioned and transcended. Following the general trend in historical research towards global and entangled histories (see for example Bayly 2004, Subrahmanyam 2005, Conrad 2016), practices of migration, translation, and circulation move into the focus of historical inquiry. In doing so, Bhabra is primarily concerned with recognition of normative and epistemological differences within the process of producing historical knowledge. Instead of Eurocentric “pre-determined hierarchies of knowledge” a Connected Historiography tries to mediate between the particularity of historical experience and the totalizing move of historical ‘objectivity’ through mutual “dialogue of learning and movement that builds knowledge through the address of problems” (Bhabra 2007: 154).

With regard to the irreducible differences that precede historical knowledge production, a third strategy becomes visible. Since our aspiration is doing theory ‘from somewhere’ (and in our case: from Europe), it might be a useful contribution to the GIR project not only to decolonize our intellectual context but also to critically re-examine it. While postcolonial approaches have shown how the history of Western political thought and colonial domination are not separable from each other, there still might be important intellectual resources for anti- or post-colonial criticism in the (intellectual) history of our ‘somewhere’. Especially the era of Enlightenment is not solely a unified theoretical project for legitimizing European colonialism but a rather diverse field of intellectual tension, which provides many ideas and concepts for addressing the challenging relationship between cultural diversity and philosophical universalism (Festa and Carey 2009). Furthermore, exciting historical figures like the Afro-German Enlightenment philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo challenge our view of 18th century scholarship (Mabe 2014). By recognizing this “plurality of Enlightenment” (Festa and Carey 2009: 21) and its “multiplicity of universalisms” (Muthu 2003: 266), we seek to contribute to the contestation of Eurocentric historiography from Europe itself. This critical re-examination does not aim at a Western exclusivity, which imposes a “universal” method of decolonization, but rather represents one possible geo-historical underpinning of the enterprise of ‘doing (GIR) theory from (a European) somewhere’. As we note above, this context-dependent strategy is also in line with the acknowledgement that in light of extant ‘large practices’ of constitutional genealogies (Tully 1995; Tilly 1984), deeply inscribed Western modes of thought can neither be neglected nor should they be ignored. It is important therefore to learn from and work with post-colonial approaches, such as for example in Political Theory, Public Philosophy, or IR, which have already demonstrated the possibility of productively engaging with problematic Western concepts and

which have identified pathways for critical post-colonial theorizing (see for example Allen 2017; Wilkens 2017; Getachew 2016; Bell 2019).

The three presented strategies for arriving at more Global Historiographies (counter-histories, connected histories, and re-examining European intellectual history) are neither exhaustive nor without contradiction to each other. The question of producing theoretical and historical knowledge under globalized conditions is therefore still open and its raising level of complexity requires further interdisciplinary endeavours and approaches.

3 Decolonising IR Contextually

To this effect, looking more closely at the conditions necessary to attain the step of producing counter- and connected histories is essential. We focus here on “how to” produce academic knowledge and address three shortcomings of decolonial IR research agendas showing the importance of decolonising contextually. Acharya’s fourth dimension is relevant to that extent, as it calls for the ‘acknowledgment of regional diversity and agency’ (2014: 650) and as such rather than ‘*integrating the study of regions*, regionalisms, and area studies’ by Western authors, we advocate increasing the visibility of continental or regional scholarship to inform Global IR theory work (Acharya 2014: 650).

First, if one is to take IR as a heritage site seriously that enables critical reflexion to account for multiple histories, ontologies, epistemologies and stories, one needs to focus on the heritages of colonization, why and how in many cases it never stopped (only to be disguised under various forms), how it still affects people today and concerns us all as everyone has a part to play. The impacts of colonization manifest differently locally and the ways to decolonize should thus meet the local requirements and self-determination claims of what decolonizing contextually means and which actions it entails (Tuck and Yang 2012). Decolonising IR is both scale-specific and location-specific (Niang 2016). It is scale-specific because the sites of agency and action manifest at several levels and to begin with in the families who address the intergenerational trauma of colonization, e.g. in African descendant, diaspora and Afrodescendant families for instance (*individual level*). In some instances, the entanglement between domestic politics and (former) colonizers put hurdles locally to the work of memory and to challenging current political, business, economic or intellectual colonial practices (*domestic level*). In Cameroon (especially South-West/East, Ambazonia), decolonising IR implies deconstructing the disciplines that feed into IR like history (Ndille 2018). For instance, pre-colonial history and the Cameroonian independence wars (1948-1970s), which constitute a significant part of the history of IR, are wiped out from the school curriculum (Deltombe et al. 2011). Hence, decolonising IR and history in this case has political implications, due to the strong interests of current political leaders with former imperialist powers.

Finally, the scale specificity is also evidenced by the challenge both in theory and in practice to account for diverse cultural perspectives of knowledge in IR production at the global scale. Indeed, one could ask oneself four key questions. Where is IR published? Who is published? Who is read? Who is the most cited? Picq (2013) states that we should not hide ourselves behind the apparent progress that constructivism has brought to IR, as the majority of academic journals are still located in the USA. Such patterns enable the multiplication and interconnection of

barriers to access, disseminate and share knowledge that is not embedded in a Western ethnocentric view of IR. These ‘unpenchant hegemonic global mechanisms’ (Fomunyan 2019) constrain locally ‘how’ and ‘what/which’ knowledge is produced and taught. Globally, 58% of readings in undergraduate IR curricula are based on US authors with realism being the highest taught theory (Picq 2013). Locally, it contributes for instance to having only 6 out of 45 courses offered in International Relations that ‘reflect the African experience’ in Nigerian universities (NUC-benchmark) (Faleye 2014: 157). At a regional and local scale, such ethnocentric and exceptionalist patterns can create issues of acculturation and identity loss. Centring Global IR on the contribution made by African scholarship to IR theorizing is a mandatory step in that regard (Odoom and Andrews 2017). Indeed, ‘it centres Africa as a home for theory-making, and Africans as theory-builders’ and ‘requires white and European scholars to do extra work to catch up with African-led debates, indigenous knowledge processes, and public discourses for the purposes of listening and dialogue, not commodification or co-optation’ (Kessi et al. 2020).

Second, decolonising in context is an imperative to undoing ‘epicolonial dynamics’ (Kessi et al. 2020): ‘phenomena for which the cause may or may not be directly traced to legacies or histories of overt or observed colonial encounters, but in which power relations and outcomes are recognizably colonial’ (Kessi et al. 2020). In the aftermath of the ‘decolonial turn’ in IR, one has seen the danger of reproducing patterns of (*White*) Euro-Western hegemony in dominating the debate on how to decolonize, confirming that ‘IR’s unspoken locus of enunciation is first world and white’ (Krishna 2021). Such non-“responsible academic interventions” (Wiener 2021) take away the essence of the power of agency in the act of decolonizing away from those affected by colonization and racism (Fierke and Jabri 2019; Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022). Referring to Acharya’s fourth dimension, it seems essential to facilitate the visibility of and engage with ‘regional studies’ to account for the diversity of regional specific IR decolonial thinking and avoid falling into the trap of universalising. Such reflection suggests that generalising calls to decolonize IR might be useful to raise awareness but lack specific targets which cannot be ‘globalized’ but rather contextualised locally and regionally, thus rendering visible regional meanings of the global. Indeed, IR scholars who focus on specific aspects of their university or region come up more often with concrete actions to decolonize IR contextually (Niang 2016). As such, doing theory from somewhere means to decolonize oneself from one’s own location e.g. Black Feminist scholarship in European universities (Matiluko 2020). As soon as one starts to export one’s ideas and concepts of decolonising elsewhere, the somewhere can become a nowhere (Behera et al. 2021). According to Niang (2016) “the third task is one of extending the epistemological relevance of thinking about theory and practice in IR from a locus of difference”.

The third shortcoming consists in the passivity (though with good intentions) of some Western decolonial IR research agendas, which tend to set decolonizing as the goal rather than understand it as active and ‘context-specific processes’ (Tucker 2018). Although critics have underlined the pitfalls of this approach (Richardson 2018, Fomunyan 2019, Sabaratnam 2017, Çapan 2019), it is still a widespread expectation that decolonising can be ‘achieved’ through one recipe for all, a set of generic principles that would be applicable in many places and therefore to some extent universalised or globalized, as if we could decolonize from ‘nowhere’. The focus on ‘methods’ as a technical fix often reflects these assumptions. In that view, Zondi (2018: 18) criticizes the restrictiveness of methods, which are “contaminated with the ideological imports

of epistemic imperialism”. Although participatory approaches constitute an increasing share of IR studies, they are still often led by Western researchers, instead of following the self-determined methods of research and engagement already present locally. Against this background, this article suggests following Ndlovu-Gatscheni who conceives of research ethics as a more fluid space of discussion on equal terms as an approach that helps deconstructing the pre-existing power structures which are inherent to undertaking research (Ndlovu-Gatscheni 2017) and which therefore enables ‘doing theory from somewhere’.

4 Deconstructing Concepts for a Post-Colonial Language

Words can create worlds, and the practice of a contextually decolonised IR based on more global historiographies also revolves around the use of words, around the use of language. As human beings, we experience our realities and live our lives by telling stories (Souto-Manning 2014), and language is an essential part of the story-telling process. In this section we propose to deconstruct concepts to create a new language to tell a new story: a post-colonial one. Here, the deconstruction of concepts works as poststructural movement towards the critical understanding of how we communicate in a way that perpetuates outdated structures. To deconstruct is “above all [...] to reverse hierarchy” (Culler 1985: 85), and to establish a global IR, it is the scholar's duty to fight the hierarchy imposed by hegemonic intellectual spaces (Darder 2015).

Only a very small group of states were within reach of the revolutions of modernity that gave birth to the ideologies and material landscape that compose the international society we know today (Acharya and Buzan 2019). It is important then to remember that it was this oligopoly of the founding structures of IR that created the exclusionary core-periphery dynamic that rules the global. As mentioned in the sections above, this gap between the core and the periphery lies not only on practicing IR and its historiography, but on the knowledge production and reproduction of the discipline as well. It is a matter of failing to explore distinct “geocultural epistemologies” (Tickner and Waever 2009: 6), meaning the lack of recognition of cultural dimensions and structural exclusions. Exclusions are engrained in academia as invisible lines, because “[k]nowledge outside the Western purview [is] not only rendered invisible but either absorbed or destroyed, as is precisely the case when we speak of colonializing epistemologies.” (Darder 2015: 69). The first apparent response to this westernised-restricted and colonized IR is regionalism. There is a disciplinary tendency to invest in area-studies, by regionally oriented scholars (Acharya 2014), that are still performed with reference to the logic of the core. This logic treats the periphery as a cause without a voice (Muppidi 2005) and utilizes a language that has often been anchored in dominant intellectual streams and social colonization of subaltern populations (Darder 2015).

As a matter of fact, “where you stand depends on where you sit” (Allison 1971: 176; Miles 1978: 399), but this is not enough to create a truly global IR. For Epstein, the answer lies in poststructuralist elaborations and their interpretivist possibilities: “the prefix ‘post’ signals the effort to break away from a theorizing that remains wedded to the eternal return of natural universals” (Epstein 2013: 507). Nevertheless, no concept can work without some kind of edifice. On the one hand, structuralism – as a naturalist model – is always looking for universals, for

“what may be innate to human” (Epstein 2013: 501). On the other hand, Epstein focuses her ideas on the constructed-ness of IR. According to her, “appraising the dynamics of social construction requires going ‘all the way down’” (ibid.: 501). For this reason, Epstein resorts to language as a poststructuralist tool instead of the purely constructivist logic of “agent-structure dynamic”.²

A post-colonial language thus appears here as the possibility to reconstruct concepts. Indeed, “a decolonizing [...] knowledge construction is often considered a meta-process of investigation, in that it involves the interrogation and disruption of currently held values, beliefs, and assumptions and from this systematic interrogation” (Darder 2015: 66). Therefore, we come back to the initial argument presented in this section that the revolutions of modernity were enjoyed only by a select group of states and that they “set the rules according to their own interests” (Acharya and Buzan 2019: 16). Every rationale we experience is the result of these rules. Consequently, it is imperative to acknowledge that this process of deconstructing ideas and building a new vocabulary for IR needs to happen through an inclusive manner.

According to Neal (2019), scholars suffer from what can be called neophilia, the problematic tendency of always looking for new empirical findings and new theories to explain and understand society. What we propose here is, however, to create the new from the old by the constant questioning of taken-for-granted ideas permeating our daily lives as humans in a global environment. Concepts need to be analysed under a dialectical view of knowledge, embedded in context and aiming towards a counter-hegemonic language. Darder (2015: 65) understands that this “process then entails a multitude of careful (re)readings of the world and of histories, in ways that critically and openly engage [...] the oppressor/oppressed contradiction”. Contradictions such as the one that turns the oppressed into a cause, removing therefore their agency and their voice.

A post-colonial language does not merely describe and analyse contradictions, it also undermines them: crafting a language that is based on the mapped agency of the oppressed is the first step towards overcoming such oppression. This task is not shaped by a fixed formula or pre-defined ending point, it is rather characterized by continuously challenging and refining attempts of post-colonial languages in a dialectical and inclusive process. Thus, to transform IR into a truly global scholarship, first we need to deconstruct and then rebuild over the scattered debris, maintaining language – a post-colonial one – as the unit that holds reality together (Burgess 2019).

5 Mapping Agencies

Just like language, the concept of agency is almost everywhere in social sciences, as the vital backdrop that delineates actors and how and why they act in certain ways to create social reality. Hence, striving for useful IR models requires mapping agencies closely to their ontological counterparts. Therefore, in order to advance IR to become truly ‘global’, the Global IR project encourages us to re-think agency and overcome orthodox notions of it, which exhibit for

² The concept of co-constitution of the agent-structure dynamic developed by Wendt, even though ontologically constructivist, ends up with the naturalist model when he distinguishes the natural and the social world by creating the concept of “essential properties” of the structure (Wendt 1987: 345).

example, a "lack of acknowledgement of the agency of Non-Western states, regional institutions and civil society actors in contributing to world order" (Acharya and Buzan 2019: 286). Said views on agency are consolidated in many popular IR approaches (e.g. realism, liberalism) and rooted in outdated conceptualisations that define agency as willed voluntary action linked to human ability of self-reflection and corresponding directed activity (Brown 2014; Corry 2014; Gay 2008: 24). Thus, agency is regularly assumed to be only located *inside* neatly packaged organisational units – powered by humans' deliberate acts – that conform to an ethnocentric 'common-sense', like market-embedded corporations, Westphalian nation-states and 'Western' intergovernmental institutions. Yet, these are inherently problematic perspectives, because instead of being uniform, intentional and human-centred, agency is *emerging* out of context and (dis)connections between diverse (non-human) actors (Gay 2008; Cochoy and Grandclément-Chaffy 2005; Prout 1996). Agency is constructed, multiple, distributed, highly contingent and built in/on non-human actors (Cochoy 2014). To rephrase, hybrid human-material-technical networks are produced by and simultaneously constitute and mediate practices, knowledge, meanings, attributes, potentials, comportments, (material) resources and so forth. Hence, they (un)make and shape global agencies – these are not hard-wired within self-contained individual units which seemingly align with our 'sensible' perception of the world.

Consequently, if we continue to stick to defective projections of agency and its dissemination, we cannot grasp the real makeup of the global. Thus, we have to emancipate ourselves from epistemological dispositions that deny agency for non-'Western' polities and governance arrangements, trap themselves in universalism and determinism, exclude non-human, regional and local actors from analytical equations and fixate on nation-states as the eternal *naturalised* political bodies to which virtually all tributary agencies flow linearly. Paul du Gay (2008) suggests accordingly that one should refrain from incorporating any actors with an integrated and predetermined selfhood and taken-for-granted agency into theory frameworks. Actors have to be stripped in a conceptual sense of the agency we presume they already possess, subsequently, one can examine how global orders are really tied together and investigate the complex linkages that reveal how people, institutions and other actors are 'made up' to act. Ergo, we have to recognise a broader and more abstract notion of agency that can traverse vastly different terrains and help to map the numerous and miscellaneous actors and their (lack of) motivations and means that will be encountered to a comprehensive global whole. So far, we miss academic tools that can complete such a global journey, but this paper proposes criteria that may guide us to them.

Scientific instruments to map global agencies should have the ability to scale – analyse differently sized social worlds – since the global is not floating above other domains, rather it is an assembly of social worlds which are still distinct and separated from each other in some dimension(s), be it locality or function. Additionally, our theories should display a pronounced degree of abstraction that allows to investigate social figurations beyond the repertoires of modern, liberal or 'Western' political formations; yet offer at the same time robust methods that deliver precise empirical data to abstract terms. Also, they should enrol the material to co-produce the global, as broader social setups rely heavily on an intertwined cascade of socio-material components. Reversely, they shall abstain from linear readings and account for norms and meanings to be constructed and substantially influence global ordering. Hence, it is

highlighted that the social is made, but also unmade, and that many attempts to construct social things fail and involve resistance, in order to explain the always fragile (re)negotiations of global interactions. Such processes should be captured through a lens that sees social worlds in constant flux and records their continuous and local construction in detail and nuance. To handle all this complexity, compatibility with other theories is also advised, so that those can be selectively imported to explain certain observations.

Overall, these are essential operations to retrieve (ought to be) forces that constitute global order, including the histories and language of currently neglected sites and communities of practice, instead of interpolating them by precarious guesswork or ignoring them altogether. IR might then escape from the narrow confines imposed by skewed ethnocentric presumptions and move towards more global and more accurate *views from somewhere*, from which one can chart vast global landscapes and map properly the entities, actors, actions and agencies within them.

6 Eschewing Exceptionalism

As it has already been discussed, concepts and practices diffused by dominant groups are embedded as conceptual imperatives which in turn “shape our understanding and study of the international” (Bilgin 2020: 23). The persistence of exceptionalism refers to a “tendency to present the characteristics of one’s own group (...) as homogenous, unique, and superior to those of others” (Acharya 2014: 651). This has been usually seen as a Western self-perception that has been held and even shared by the so called “non-Westerners”. A perception that comes as a result of the West’s ability to project its culture, institutions, norms and structures at the global level although these “remain particular to the West, rather than universal or a complete body of knowledge” (O’Hagan 2002: 6).

This involves not only a specific representation of the world through Western lenses, but also a hierarchy within the production of knowledge and knowledge itself. The West was willing and able to expand its global reach during the colonial era. Those enterprises led to the fact that “the current shape of IR [is] itself partly a legacy of colonialism” (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004 :2). Consequently, on the one hand, this meant the suppression of other knowledges and ways of knowing as can be seen throughout IR. As Fierke and Jabri argue, knowledge of the world is “constituted by contingent and relational structures and dynamics that inform being in the world” (Fierke and Jabri 2019: 516) and these structures and dynamics are dominated by the West. Brigg and Bleiker (2010) suggest that Western knowledge conventions have legitimised and delegitimised different ways of knowing even if they are not necessarily shared by other cultures. For example, Critical Security Studies “remains insufficiently influenced by non-Western modes of thinking, and realities that are clearly non-Western remain understudied” (Oliveira 2019: 22). On the other hand, Sabaratnam (2020: 8) also considers there has been an “epistemological sanitisation of imperial history in IR” through what she denominates as epistemologies of immanence, ignorance, and innocence. These sustain a Western perspective which does little to recognize the role of the West in the establishment of the current order and in the understanding of power dynamics. Both approaches contribute to a rather standardized perception of the international system for Westerns and non-Westerns alike. Hence, maintaining exceptionalism in IR justifies dominance and thus must be eschewed.

However, we must remain cautious to consider that although this allowed for the imposition of a world view or cosmogony through a particular historical process, the tendency to present a culture as unique or superior is not a specific trait of the West. This practice is not exclusive to a state or region, “nor is it necessarily confrontational, exemptionalist, or a natural feature of great powers” (Nymalm and Plagemann 2019: 33). As such, the exceptionalism Acharya seeks to counter should not be limited in its understanding as a Western perspective and “others” exclusion. Instead, as suggested in this paper, a Global IR approach should strive to embrace a multiplicity of knowledges that provide theoretical and empirical content “on its own terms” (Narlikar 2016: 3) to generate a better understanding of International Relations. This insistence on multiplicity is of crucial importance for eschewing exceptionalism: a non-exceptionalist perspective is not reached by overlooking or denying the importance of local knowledge and particularities. Approximating such a perspective is on the contrary enabled by reflecting on this local situatedness of any form of knowledge production (‘view from somewhere’) and by making an effort to engage in genuine dialogue between diverse local perspectives. This idea follows Fierke and Jabri’s (2019) proposal of global conversations which highlights the need for a mode of engagement that brings subjectivity and situatedness into IR. These two commitments (reflecting on one’s local perspective and furthering dialogue between a multiplicity of perspectives) form the core of eschewing exceptionalism.

More specifically, in order to avoid further exceptionalism(s), the issue must be addressed through reinforcing diversity on several positions; theoretical, methodological (Acharya 2016), and applied. Narlikar (2016) argues there are persisting disciplinary divides with two consequences: a comfort zone positioning and the neglect of relevant insights from other fields. The author argues in favour of a “willingness to work with alternative theoretical approaches and consider hitherto excluded voice” and “to recognise the existence of alternative intellectual philosophies, theories, models, norms, and values” (ibid.: 3-4). Therefore, exceptionalism must not only be opposed as a dominant perspective, but also as a disciplinary boundary that prevents inclusiveness which would allow for a better and more complete understanding of the world surrounding us. Additionally, it must be a cautionary standard for policy discourse, be it imperialist, civilizational, international or globalist (Nymalm and Plagemann 2019) because it has a direct impact on the lives of those governed.

Therefore, eschewing exceptionalism has the possibility of at least being threefold. First, hindering the subjugation and silencing of non-Western knowledges and allowing them to create or improve existing theories from somewhere. Second, recognizing that although there is a universalizing desire for theories which may seem to come from “nowhere”, they have an origin and thus directly or indirectly allow for the sustainment of certain worldviews. Third, an academic inclusiveness of multiple intellectual approaches to International Relations that may yield alternative explanations for any given analysed phenomenon is needed. Although the answer to the problem of exceptionalism is not easily reachable, a reflexive ‘view from somewhere’ is a crucial step forward when conceptualizing research and practice in Global IR.

Conclusion: Global IR as an Impulse to Keep Reflexivity Going

This paper highlighted six themes that we deem important for achieving a truly ‘global’ dimension in IR theory, and for fleshing out the multiplicity of perspectives that such a global IR is expected to encompass. By doing so the paper sought to both reflect upon and address the challenge and promise of Global IR. A core motivation for this paper’s decision to present this particular selection of themes (and we are well aware that there are many more) consisted in the attempt to develop a cautiously yet rigorously self-reflective collaborative attempt to explore ways out of the predicament of a ‘western discipline’. We contend that the achievement of this paper’s six themes lies precisely in their diversity and open-mindedness. Guiding questions for this collaborative endeavour were: How can Global IR advance our understanding of agency? How and with which methodology can empirical research in Global IR and more global historiographies be practiced and possibly benefit from each another? Which forms of knowledge production and scientific language are actually post-colonial?

The fact that these contributions do not reach definitive answers to such questions is far from accidental. The form of dialogue, or rather conversation, that this article calls for and attempts to demonstrate does not aim for consensus or resolving opposing points of view (Fierke and Jabri 2019: 519). This form of conversation rather aims to “place the relational dynamic within a whole where the parts do not exist in total isolation and alienation, and the conversation is ongoing” (ib.). This relationalist approach to knowledge production should however not be mistaken as a strong ontological commitment that ‘solves’ the problem of Global IR. Global IR does not strive to be another ‘turn’ of the discipline or to attempt systematizing knowledge production in IR according to specific epistemologies, ontologies, or methodologies. No single formula can de-colonize IR theory or make it global. Rather, we must question what is meant by ‘theory’ in order to truly pluralize knowledge production in IR and to shake up power structures of the discipline. As long as ‘good’ or successful theorizing is identified by arriving at clear answers, erasing doubt, levelling differences, ignoring hierarchies and the multiplicity of actors that are actually relevant for global conflicts, it could not be less interesting for Global IR.

The theorizing and research practice that Global IR would actually entail and that the above contributions demonstrate is distinguished precisely by its reluctance to terminate reflexivity at any point in the research process. The innovation of Global IR consists not in performing any number of theoretical or practical innovations that subsequently render itself superfluous (i.e. finally arriving at a truly de-colonized theorizing and researching). On the contrary, Global IR succeeds if it re-appears time and time-again, perpetually reflecting on the blind spots and situatedness of any imaginable research practice. And as recent “friendly critiques” of this project indicate (Anderl and Witt 2020: 7), Global IR seems to be well equipped to achieve such success. Taking the need to reflect on “the global” as an analytical and normative category seriously and investigating Global IR’s own conception of the global, including its potentially problematic ideological components (Anderl and Witt 2020: 25), signifies one of hopefully many turns of self-reflexivity in the project of Global IR. The incentive of advancing this project is rooted in keeping precisely this reflexivity alive, not by striving for a uniform worldview, but rather by working towards viewing the world in its multiplicity by reflecting on one’s local view and by furthering genuine dialogue.

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