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Making Sense of a Pluralist World

Locating IR Theory: Identity and Level of Analysis
Central Concepts in IR: a meta-theoretical conversation
Panel 8-2 – Saturday 8:45-10:30

Dissolving the International? Center and Periphery in the Constitution of IR Theory

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In recent times a greater awareness of inequality in international relations has fueled a number of debates about the adequacy of the discipline's conceptual apparatuses to understand the nature of world politics in the post-Cold War era. The waning of the promise of a progressively inclusive globalization that dominated the intellectual climate and the policy agendas of the 90s has given way to a wide array of criticism of what has been conventionally labeled "neoliberal globalization" by academics, policy-makers and social movements militants in different parts of the world.

In the midst of the growing opposition to liberal ideas about the organization of global markets and the restructuring of the state, and in the context of a poor economic performances and increasing social distress and political instability in less developed countries that adopted neoliberal policies of structural adjustment, representations of a world politics divided between

richer and poorer countries reemerged with a vengeance. The notion that the global political economy increased inequalities between advanced capitalist economies and the majority of intermediate and lower income states, strengthened the claim that the Cold War polarity between East and West had been replaced by ever increasing tensions between North and South.

One of the consequences of such trends has been the recovery of the intellectual legacy of theories of uneven development, world systems and dependency theories, especially by those engaged in opposition to the institutions, policies, and agents of globalization. While still marginalized in most academic circles, especially in departments of economics, political science and international relations, these critical approaches to the political economy of globalization have clearly become more present in political discourse and have had some repercussions in intellectual circles that search for theoretical density to analyze the complexities of the moment.

A parallel movement of recovery of theories of imperialism has emerged in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq and the unilateral tendencies of US foreign policy and its war on terror. Analysis of the peculiarities of unipolarity were replaced, in many instances, by a straightforward definition of American power as imperial power. Here interpretations vary from a more conventional definition of Empire as the concentration of economic and military power in the hands of an expansionist state, to the more sophisticated post-marxian interpretations of Empire as an amalgam of American hegemony and global institutional apparatuses of governance and

policing. It is, however, the legacy of the Leninist theory of imperialism, and its historical influence in Third World political struggles for independence, which has reappeared more conspicuously in radical discourses and analysis, especially in the shape of a recovery of concepts and worldviews characteristic of dependency and world systems theories. (Slater 2004)

It is not uncommon, then, to find nowadays approaches to the problem of inequality in world politics framed in the language of center and periphery in order to convey a dynamics of uneven development coupled with political domination. In fact, there has been already considerable debate in postcolonial studies about the appropriateness of the conceptual double of center and periphery as a representation of contemporary north / south political and cultural relations. Some critical reformulations of geopolitical thinking have also been particularly interested in North / South relations and have sustained that “dependency theory continues to retain contemporary relevance” (Slater, 135-36). These claims are based on the evident worsening of social and economic situation in peripheral countries, which can be attributed to “new and old modes of dependence”; the incidence of greater poverty inequality and marginalization; the increasing denationalization of peripheral economies; and the perceived emergence of a new age of imperialism. Much of the contemporary critique of globalization and of the inequalities of world politics refers more and more to questions of sovereignty and autonomy, in a renewed effort to rescue the state as an instrument of emancipation by means of the articulation national development projects. The recovery of the theoretical contributions produced in the periphery

reflects the search for intellectual autonomy and identity vis a vis the west and the struggle against Eurocentric (or Euroamerican) interpretations of global politics.

In International Relations, however, only recently has the discussion about the asymmetrical and hierarchical structure of the international system, and its implications for theoretical work, acquired more visibility. [develop and qualify this].

The relevance of the conceptual double of center / periphery, however, has been declining steadily since the late 1970's, when its use in development studies came under attack by the growing volume of work on the strategies of industrialization in less developed countries that challenged core assumptions of dependency theory. The processes of internationalization of financial and productive capital would undermine the structural rigidities that, according to dependency theories, sustained and reproduced the divide between center and periphery. Also, theories of interdependence and, later on, globalization, argued that global political and economic relations were increasingly shaped by flows across borders and territories which challenged otherwise spatially fixed representations of center and periphery. (see, for example, pathways from the periphery). In fact, the new political economy argued that the line dividing developing countries from the developed world was moving, and that its mobility indicated that the center periphery dynamics was more the result of domestic structural limitations that could be corrected by adjustment policies than the effect of structural inequalities in the international system.

As a political device, the center periphery conceptual double represented the relations of domination and exploitation which dependency theory argued was determined by the logic of transnational capital, whose principal agent were multinational corporations. Authoritarian regimes in peripheral states were functional to the needs of capital by repressing labor movements in order to keep wages down, and controlling the local national bourgeoisie and middle class sectors who might oppose the denationalization of strategic sectors of the economy. The so-called third wave of democratization, however, contradicted much of dependency-based analyses that the intensification of internationalization would beget increasingly repressive policies in peripheral countries. In fact, the wave of neoliberal globalization articulated free market reform and political liberalization as pathways to more competitive integration to the new global economy and participation in its institutions of governance. It became more and more unclear how the mechanisms of exploitation of the periphery by the center produced the political impact on class struggles predicted by the theory.

In the end, the center periphery representation of the world seemed to dissolve into the broader space of globalization, in which the borders between rich and poor, developed and less developed, powerful and dominated countries seemed less clear and more mobile, at least in the new liberal worldview of the post-Cold War era. The new representation of the world political economy posited a global space shared by developed and less developed countries who were equally submitted to a discipline imposed by

flows states (even powerful ones) could no longer control. In this scenario, competitiveness became associated to adaptability more than to capabilities.

The neoliberal celebration of the dissolution of the international into the global and of its promising new potential of governance can be interpreted as an attempt to rescue the narrative of modernity from the critique that asserted its exhaustion as the center of meaning and the dynamic source of the international's expansion and universalization. The crisis of the modern ethos was denounced as a process of fragmentation of its center and the proliferation of meanings in multiple sites, mostly along the margins of established spaces of signification. Postmodern critiques challenged the homogeneity and stability of the civilizational divide and destabilized the spatiality and temporality of its experience and development. In this context, such a critique enabled efforts to re-signify the experience of marginalization, dependency and subalternity as potential sites of enunciation of alternative subjectivities and knowledges. The movement to de-center western modernity, however, integrated the margins in the efforts to articulate new transversal meanings to fragmented identity of the post-modern self. In this sense, the "periphery's alterity" and "anti-hegemonic protagonism" are reappropriated by the center's rhetoric of difference and critique. (Richard 1995) As a result, peripheral approaches to culture and politics lost much of its critical bite and its appeal as a world view that identified the marginalized majorities with specific geopolitical and social spaces. If the margins were now intertwined with the center, and if contradictions were transversal to conventional socio-spatial coordinates, every antagonistic discourse would

have to be rearticulated, and new relations of authority established between a postmodern culture of the margins and a peripheral imagination still tied to the project of modernity. Within the field of international theory this meant that critical approaches from the third debate on gradually took over from Marxist theories of imperialism and its derivatives, such as dependency, as the main discourses of contestation of world order and its associated theoretical frameworks. The results were mixed.

In the 1970's and 80's center and periphery provided an alternative conceptualization of the division of world politics to the vague and geopolitically residual notion of Third World. Dependency theory asserted that inequality was the result of a domination of the periphery by the center which was exerted through economic (trade, production and financial) mechanisms that transferred surplus capital to hegemonic capitalist countries, and power mechanisms that suppressed class struggle and autonomous national development. As a poor theory of economics, it did not resist the many empirical anomalies presented by the current phase of capitalist accumulation. As a theory of the international politics of peripheral countries, it hardly differentiated itself from realism, with its nationalistic, state-centric view of power asymmetries as the analytical framework that inspired anti-imperialist strategies of resistance. As a world view and as a heuristic device, however, the center / periphery dualism provided a representation of international space that gave expression to post-colonial struggles for autonomy and distributive justice, as well as the continuing reassertion of a world divided along a series of lines of differentiation—

cultural, economic, political (West / non-West; developed / underdeveloped; North / South; and so on).

That such a conceptualization of world politics still persists in the theoretical discourse of many scholars in the field who address contemporary issues of inequality is significant. Surely it indicates that the new liberal orthodoxy of the post-Cold War era failed to provide satisfactory answers to such issues, even though it did discredit the academic and intellectual standing of peripheral theories and promoted the ideology of neo-modernization quite successfully. (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004)

More interestingly, however, is how the conceptual double represented the international. How, or why does it still inform the production of knowledge about inequalities, asymmetries and imperialism in contemporary world politics? How does it contribute to the constitution of identities that today inform the discourses of North/South conflict?

The structure of the international system according to the center/periphery divide corresponds to the logic of the international division of labor between advanced industrialized capitalist economies and underdeveloped non-industrialized countries whose economies were based on the production of a few primary goods exports. Despite later modifications of the model, with the addition of a third sphere, the semi-periphery, the position of peripheral states in the international realm was determined, by most dependency theories as well as by world systems, by its function in the global process of capitalist accumulation. As with most Marxist theories indebted to economic

determinism, dependency was not a theory of politics, much less of world politics. Peripheral countries' political strategies were derived from their necessities of development (industrialization mostly) and resistance to the penetration of transnational capital, frequently supported by interventionist actions of powerful capitalist states. To be clear, imperialism (or great power politics for some) was, for these theorists, an expression of monopoly capital and its surrogate states (central capitalist states).

The identity of peripheral states was given, then, by their common condition as exploited societies in an uneven and unequal international political economy. The political strategies available to such states ranged from de-linking from the world system through revolutionary movements to the adoption of more reformist pathways, such as the establishment of a New World Economic Order to redress structural causes of unequal exchange. In any case, what was at stake was either the adoption of radically autonomous national projects that would entail opting out of the international system as such (see Amin) or the establishment of international policies and institutions that would allow for the transition from peripheries to the center, i.e., to recover the promise of modernization as a global project.

The problem, of course, was that dependency theories were flawed in their attempt to formulate a theory of exploitation at the international level. Transference of surplus occurred in the sphere of circulation (trade and finance), where no value is actually created. The political strategies resulting from the thesis of uneven exchange ended up either being too radical and

costly for the fragile economies of peripheral countries, or pragmatic enough to be subject to negotiations in multilateral forums.

As a perspective about the structure of world politics, dependency offered some insights about the relationship of inequality and domination between richer and poorer states, but was unable to advance much further than realism and Leninism. That the stronger dominate the weaker is a fact of international life since, according to realists, since Thucydides wrote his account of the Peloponnesian war. Once the economic explanations for contemporary power politics lost most of its theoretical appeal, what remained was your everyday basic realism, even if, true, a realism concerned with the plight of the weak (see Ayoobs attempt to reframe a “subaltern realism”).

Why then, has the conceptual pair of center and periphery retained so much currency among perspectives about the international, especially ones concerned with problems of inequality, discrimination and marginalization? For Slater “dependency perspectives that emanated and spread from Latin America to other parts of the periphery were part of a vital project of *counter-representation*”, a conceptualization of the international system that emphasized how international dominance hampered development, questioned modernization theories based on the duality between traditional and modern, recovered the historic specificity of the relationship between the West and the Third World, and that valued the importance of the principle of sovereignty for peripheral countries constantly threatened by foreign

intervention and struggling to determine their own history as peoples and nations. (2003, 119)

Hence, the periphery now appears as a mode of representation of post-colonial, non-western, weak states striving for sovereign equality and autonomy. It became possible to historicize, to determine hierarchy, highlight inequality and define the resolution, in a spatially fixed imaginary, of the problem of North / South relations through sovereignty in the guise of autonomy. The periphery would become, at the same time, both the negative other of the center and the collective space of resistance of weaker states. The strength of this representation of a divided international is, however, in the spatial logic that governs the constitution of the border between developed, strong, western states and the rest of the world. While in world systems theory, for instance, the spatial configuration of the center / periphery divide is governed by the movement of capital which, in its turn is a function of cycles of accumulation (time), in the new (residual) representation of North/South relations so common today in international political economy and, more recently, in some attempts at theoretical moves from the periphery, what we see is a return to a geopolitical perspective that defines politics through categories of fixed space.

In these spaces, historical narratives and cultural foundations of a peripheral identity substitute for social (class) conflicts produced by transnational flows of capital. The legacy of the colonial past is recovered in the effort to reinscribe the West as a parochial subject that claims universality upon the

destruction and subjugation of all non-western (now peripheral) others. Paradoxically, the organization of international space along the new borders of center and periphery provides a more stable terrain on which epistemologies, identities and subjectivities can be defined along exclusionary boundaries of well defined peripheries and centers. Again, these boundaries are not defined by the expansionary and globalizing reach of capital but, on the contrary, by the territorial bodies of states, which are the containers of the history of subjugation and exploitation by the West during the colonial and imperial experiences and after. These states, on the other hand, are defined by their location, the periphery, which not only secures their identities but also sustains the politics of territorialization inherent to the articulation of sovereignty as the existential imperative of every peripheral state.

The center / periphery boundary, and the practices and representations of space it engenders, provides the spatial coherence needed to organized political space, at the national and global levels, along clear and well established boundaries. Such coherence is based on the assumption of isomorphism between space and society, a correlation between political space and territory, of cultures and maps of bounded territories, a geographical imagination that allowed for the expansion of nation-states around the globe and now creates the conditions for the proper constitution of what was before just residual, without identity: the peripheral state. (Massey 2005)

More than a site of expansion of what was already there, international society, the periphery has now become a site of resistance. The problem is that this site of resistance is the product of the same spatial imagination and practice that enabled and legitimized the imperial conquest. The logic of center/periphery is thus reconciled with the world of international relations— or with the international as a boundary-producing device-- for now it is too, defined by absolute spatialization. What resistance can be expected by peripheries defined in such ontological foundations? If by resistance we understand the practices inherent to the need of stabilizing the coherent space of sovereignty against the dangers of imperial interventions, we will find more often than not a politics of homogenization, marginalization and affirmation of some national authentic identity passing for resistance. And here, the periphery enacts what we would expect of a core: in answer to a “religious desire” the attempt to sustain “the semblance of a well-bounded and coherent territory”. (Ashley and Walker 1990)

For Massey, this particular representation of space, so characteristic of modernity in its “enforcement of certain ways of organizing space and the relationship between society and space” (65), intends to stabilize the multiplicity, instability and dynamism of space. To understand space as the non-dynamic element which contains and disciplines time, as that which is lacking in content, or dead (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986) is crucial to organize the international according to separate spaces that, in fact, embody a linear conceptualization of time, and organization of difference according to place. This seems to be all the more clear, for instance, in current

characterizations of the boundaries of world politics as dividing “zones of conflict” from “zones of peace”, or zones of anarchy from zones of stability, or even zones of “Hobbesian anarchy” contrasted to Kantian zones of peace. Spatial differentiations enable the temporal narratives which were previously found in historical perspectives of development or anthropological accounts of civilization.

The paradox here is, indeed, that of a peripheral imagination that feeds practices of resistance and the search for autonomy which, given the sovereign ambition on which it is premised, invites the “centering” of power and knowledge. In other words, the periphery mirrors the center, and through its practices, reproduces itself and the spatial differentiation that sustains it. Attempts to “de-center” or “parochialize” the West struggle with the reluctance to upset the spatial logic that provides the conditions of understanding the asymmetries of power and the subsequent inequalities of the modern international system.(Slater 2004) Such reluctance can be found in much of the contemporary critique of globalization, in the volumous literature on the resurgence of empire and imperialism, as well in many efforts to theorize the international “from the periphery”.(Ayooob 2002; Dalby 2005)

Contemporary world politics has been governed, however, by the specter of the global. These have been, in fact, times in which spatial practices have taken over our vision of the political, but that have also witnessed a “a crisis of singularity and a multiplication of differences, a crisis of centrality and the

proliferating overflow of the margins.”(Richard 1995) The dynamics of the current crisis upsets, as we know, the boundaries of modern political space and, consequently, the separations and differentiations enabled by them. The lines dividing center and periphery are, thus, also blurred by the multiplication of the margins that constantly challenge and displace the familiar representations of the hierarchies of the international system.

To be able to locate where center and peripheries are is the real challenge. The production of boundaries, however, does not follow the conventional assumptions of modern geopolitical imagination. Peripheries turn into margins and destabilize the spatial coherence upon which the organization of the international was once based. However, the international, and the knowledge that articulates its existence, International Relations, have indeed always been defined by its ambition to constitute and organize political space according to a territorial imperative (or what Jackson has termed the “territorial covenant”). As an organizing principle, the conceptual double of center / periphery (or North and South in many current characterizations) has been crucial for the stabilization of the boundaries of the international. It is then, not so surprising that in times of uncertainty about how boundaries are produced and where they are, discourses about the international have dedicated more attention to the insecurities generated by what happens at the peripheries, and considerable efforts to keep them where they are supposed to be. That is, perhaps, why we should be cautious about critical approaches to international theory that claim a peripheral identity.

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