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Five Limitations: Political Science Applied to The Non-West

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ABSTRACT: That political science tends to fall short when applied to the non-West is writ large to academics in the field. Patterns emerge when documenting past failures of political science and international relations theory (IRT) in the global periphery. These patterns can be categorized into the five limitations suggested in this paper: western bias, historical amnesia, scope, willful othering, and political ontology. Ranging from questions of methodology to the nature of the field overall, the five limitations of political science when applied to the non-West illuminate origins to shortcomings in major theories. Understanding these limitations motivates a sharpened lens for adapting theories towards superior robustness.

Keywords: International Relations Theory, Political Science, Critical Theory, Non-Western Theory, Political Methodology, Political Philosophy.

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Introduction

Readers of this paper are likely no stranger to the general concept of political science. In fact, most are likely to be scholars of some degree on the subject. It is thus no secret that political science is inchoate in achieving unconditional and universal applicability, particularly outside of the Western canon.

This paper examines five limitations that engender the well-known weaknesses of political science as it is applied in the non-West. The term "theory" connotes the practice of developing principles based on identifiably common aspects between distinct circumstances or observations. In doing so, theory corrupts when the underlying observations contain errors. These errors are categorized into five types of limitations, summarized below:

1. *Western Bias* – An error of selection bias
2. *Historical Amnesia* – An error of omitted data
3. *Scope* – A question of relevance
4. *Willful Othering* – An error of a false imaginary
5. *Political Ontology* – A reflection of underlying assumptions

In examining the errors of western bias and historical amnesia, this paper identifies

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shortcomings in theories of the modern state, as it is a central unit of analysis for international relations theory. Whether state formation is a normatively desirable outcome is not a question for this paper. It then compares the applicability of modernization theory in how it was used to describe the non-West. Finally, it considers the philosophical underpinnings of political science as a harbinger of inaccuracies.

This paper does not assert the monocausality of why any of the theories discussed does not apply in non-Western contexts. Any of the five means may interweave with any of the others. The first four means are issues of methodology. The last one is of ontology.

Assumptions

While there is some debate, political science is broadly defined as the branch of knowledge surrounding the mechanisms of government and the scientific analysis of political activity and behavior. Its subject matter covers the function of power; the exchange, ownership, and transactions transferred through power. The discipline follows methodological and epistemological approaches of the material sciences, with the collection of empirical data to test upon formed hypotheses.

In initiating this examination, it becomes imperative to develop a definition of the "West." The "West," as a standalone and arguably problematic phrase, for the purposes of this paper refers to Europe and North America. This paper assumes the possibility of a "non-West" in contemporary society. A Gramscian perspective could imply that due to the extensiveness of hegemonic Western societies, a "non-Western" context possibly no longer exists.

This paper assumes a definition of theory as a generalization of facts, recognizing that even within the Western canon there exist epistemological distinctions between European and American theory. Theory is "about abstracting away from the day-to-day events in an attempt to find patterns and group events together into sets and classes of things."[1] Robustness is a qualifying tenet for powerful theory, and to achieve this, a small set of facts and observations must align for a causal pattern to form principles that can explain a much wider set of cases. It is in this quest for robustness – the attempt to find universal and timeless theory – that we begin to see the faults of Western bias and historical amnesia.

Western Bias

A normative foundation to international relations theories is the concept of the modern state. According to the Weberian conceptualization, the defining characteristic of statehood is the possession of a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. Importantly, the modern state extends domination of a territory and all of its inhabitants. Where the

1 Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, "Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 3 (2007): 287–312

state is the sole actor with legitimate use of force, non-state actors can enact illegitimate violence. From the perspective of Charles Tilly, the definition of the modern state abides by the concept that "war makes the state and the state makes war."[2] The theory came to be known as the predatory theory of the state, as Tilly compared these four functions to the structure of protection rackets by organized criminal organizations. Faced with material scarcity and high population density that exacerbated the threat of war, European kings expropriated resources from rural areas for defense purposes, centralizing to eventually form the modern state.

The Weberian concept of the modern state remains noticeably unfulfilled by the political landscape of postcolonial Africa. The concept of the authoritative "state" differs from the realities of Africa such that states in Africa are often labeled as deviant, weak, or fragile. This paper is disinterested in depicting the continent of Africa in a monolithic sense; it will abstract patterns as a foil to the Weberian concept of the state. Contrary to the Weberian definition, the African state does not necessarily claim monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Postcolonial statehood in Africa did not reproduce the Westphalian system of Europe. Instead, African states represent a fragmented collection of sub-state actors representing varying nationalities and ethnicities, many of which operate substantial mechanisms of violence.[3] One explanation offers that "the central issue has always resided in the fact that the African state – as imposed by European colonial powers – was artificial…the drawing of colonial borders neglected to take into account the national and ethnic divisions on the ground."[4] The assiduous use of violence by sub-state actors appears in the vicissitudes of civil strife; to name just a few, one could look at the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Liberia, or Somalia. Contemporary "states" of Africa are shaped upon impositions of arbitrarily drawn borderlines generated by the colonial powers at the table of the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Thus, the Weberian characterization of the state was able to prevail in Western modalities but is not a replicable theory in this non-Western context.

Discordance between Weber and Tilly's theories and statehood in Africa is a case of *Western bias*. Weber's theory of legitimacy was built upon examples from European history, namely Great Britain. Tilly's theory rested upon observations of the consolidation and expropriation of land, resources, and means of violence in the transition from European feudalism to the rise of modern states. Because the underlying observations pertained to the West, the predictive capability fell short when applied to Africa. Western bias, in this analysis, can be compared to a circumstance of selective data. From a methodological

2 Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in "*Bringing the State Back In"* ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–91.

3 Abou Jeng, *Peacebuilding in the African Union: Law, Philosophy and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

4 Assis Malaquias, "Reformulating International Relations Theory: African Insights and Challenges" in *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* (2001), 11-28.

approach, selection bias causes distortion in results. Of note, Weber is explicit about the bias in his writing; with statements such as the "city state… is peculiar to the Occident," "the constitutional state…is indigenous only to the Occident," and that it is "only in the Occident that we find…professional politician in the service of powers other than the princes."[5] Weber makes valuable comparisons to other regions of the world, including China and India; however, the theory is pithy on the description of Africa, and ultimately focuses on Western history for the emergence of the modern state.

Western bias alone need not constitute the entirety of why a theory does not apply in non-Western contexts. That Weber and Tilly's approaches show Western bias error does not undermine the legitimacy of their theories overall. Synthesized with other concepts such as geopolitics, the reality of African states may be better understood. Herbst offers an explanation discussed in the next section. Certainly, there is more to be said about African statehood beyond an issue of Western bias in political science. Nonetheless, the centrality of Western history used for Western theory demonstrates an error of selective data.

Relatedly, language barriers may exacerbate the tendency for Western bias. Effective contextualization in one part demands a widened lens in historical renderings. In another, it may demand that historical renderings (and their interpretation) engender from a local perspective. That much of political science takes place in the lingua franca of English precludes theory from other languages.

Historical Amnesia

"Theory is always for someone and for some purpose"
- Robert Cox

In observing the aforementioned configurations of African statehood, Jeffrey Herbst proposed a theory of state formation in Africa. Herbst argues that the structural conditions of state formation in Europe were deficient in Africa. In comparison to Europe and its high population density, there was less of a demand for the formation of property rights in Africa. It was not land but labor (people) that were scarce in low-density regions of Africa. This impeded the need for state institutions in the fashion of Europe. Additionally, during the colonial period, there was little external threat to conflict between colonial powers in Africa. Following independence, colonial boundaries were reinforced from the international sphere, namely the Berlin Conference and the United Nations. Thus, this was another disincentive to institutional development according to Tilly's concept of the role of the state as war making. Herbst concludes with the policy recommendation that the international forum should allow for and encourage the disintegration of the current African states, in favor of smaller states that better represent domestically recognized

5 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Essays in Sociology*, ed. Howard Garth and Cynthia Mills (New York: Macmillian, 1946), 26-45.

boundaries of states.

Critics of Herbst' assessment point to his de-emphasis of the impact of European imperialism and colonialism on hindered state formation in Africa. Herbst's focus of analysis is on factors that supersede what he describes the "few decades" of colonial rule, stating "it was impossible for Europeans to have changed 'everything.'"[6] That the project of colonialism could be limited to a "few decades" is a bold claim, and projects ignorance regarding the effects of the Atlantic slave trade that had been in operation for hundreds of years prior to the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Patrick Manning argued that the slave trade alone was a destabilizing variable in the development of state institutions, and that "with the allure of imported goods and the brutality of capture, slave traders broke down barriers isolating Africans in their communities. Merchants and warlords spread the tentacles of their influence into almost every corner of the continent. By the nineteenth century, much of the continent was militarized; great kingdoms and powerful warlords rose and fell, their fate linked to fluctuations in the slave trade."[7] Problematically, Herbst also concludes that "most territory in Africa was not actually physically conquered but ceded more or less legitimately by African rulers," in contradiction to historical accounts of violent plunder and conquest.

Herbst's errors are a case of what this paper considers *historical amnesia*. Western political science has practiced historical amnesia from an institutional and methodological standpoint. Historical amnesia can be considered an error of omitted data. Similar to Western bias, historical amnesia distorts the underlying data that forms theories. That Herbst omitted the influences of imperialism would encourage readers to practice caution in accepting the policy proposal of smaller states for a more peaceful Africa. Perhaps such a solution would still fail to disentangle Africa from the reaches of European imperialism.

Historical amnesia in the case of Herbst was a methodological error, but the error exists for the discipline of international relations at an institutional level. In *White World Order Black Power Politics*, Robert Vitalis uncovers that international relations in the United States began as a study of race relations, a finding that comes as a surprise given that most scholarship taught at universities hardly covers this fact.[8] He asserts that the field of international relations in the United States was borne of the motivation to secure White supremacy on a global scale. Where Jim Crow laws assured dominance of Whites in the domestic sphere, American scholarship became concerned with strategies to prevent a global race conflict in the face of emerging development and globalization. While such scholarship started as an unabashed study of maintaining White supremacy,

6 Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rrtj.

7 Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8 Robert Vitalis, *White world order, black power politics: the birth of American international relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

the language began to shift towards perceivably raceless contracts such as international security in parallel to the growing discomfort of Americans towards racist language. Cold War fears also diluted concern from race relations towards security studies between the bipolar powers. Yet Vitalis considers the shift a matter of tone or syntax, not content. Vitalis details the theories of an impressive array of Black intellectuals who produced theory relating to this phenomenon, despite exile from the preeminent universities that at the time would educate but not hire Black scholars. Dubbed the Howard School after the preeminent Historically Black College (HBCU) where they concentrated, these intellectuals theorized that international relations was not merely study of race relations but more so a substantiation of racism.

This historical retelling unhinges the validity of international relations theory overall. If original motivations aimed to conjure strategies to control the non-Western and non-White, thus embracing international inequalities, what legitimacy remains for unbiased research on power relations in international theory? A general condemnation of international relations theory will not be dissected in this paper. However, the motivations behind historical amnesia illuminate an institutional backdrop for why methodological errors may occur in producing theory that does not apply to the non-West.

Scope

Foundational neorealist Kenneth Waltz stated in his main work on international relations that "it would be…ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics on Malaysia and Costa Rica... A general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers."[9] This underlines the question of scope: it was not necessarily the intention for some political science theories, even those of international relations, to explain all aspects of international interactions. For varieties of realism, the emphasis is on the imperatives of the "great powers"; thus, theories become tenuous or sparse when applied to anything in the global periphery, including lesser-developed countries (LDCs).

The appeal of neorealism is found in its parsimonious, detached and scientific telling of world history; that a relatively simplistic approach can be taken to find patterns in international relations. Waltz made no claim to explain every unit of historical event, and the theory duly does not do so. Political science, for some cases, does not work in non-Western contexts because it intentionally removes the non-West from the scope of study.

9 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Waveland Press, 1979).

Williful Othering

> *"The West's authorship of IR theory is a hegemonic practice which closes out other possible readings/writings of world politics. As a product of Modernity, Western IR theory therefore rests on the necessary marginalization of…other non-Western sites of knowledge."*
>
> - Kevin C. Dunn

Descriptions of the non-West as the aberrant "other" have been deployed as a method to explain away outcomes that stray from the predictions of Western political science. Regarding deviations from modernization theory in Asia, explanations have been drawn from the notion of oriental despotism. Oriental despotism and its offspring suggest Asia and its people are predisposed or more likely to accept authoritarian modes of governance. With origins in texts as foundational to political science as Aristotle's *Politics*, oriental despotism has influenced theories across time and ideologies – including Marx's "Asiatic mode of production" and Weber's "Sultanism."[10] Karl Wittfogel's now-contested summation of such a theory is found in his book, *Oriental Despotism.*[11] For Wittfogel and his followers, the Asian region's dependence on large-scale irrigation systems required efficient management and centralized control, which in turn required a chronically weak civil society and thus an environment conducive to authoritarianism. In adopting this position, theories maintain veracity by distancing the possibilities of application in Asia – an issue of willful othering. Willful othering can be considered a sort of intentional historical amnesia. Through methods like oriental despotism, willful othering reduces causal thinking to culturist perspectives that can prevent reconciliatory theorizing of a more accurate gradation.

As an example, in the latter portion of the 20th century, the Middle East seemed ready to fulfill the conditions of economic advancement necessary for democracy to flourish. Puzzled by the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East, some discourse pointed to oriental despotism to explain the deficit of democracies.[12] In this argument, the Middle East warded off the implementation of democratic rule and upheld authoritarianism through cultural means. This pathway of economic development, combined with authoritarianism, was unpredicted by the followers of the variant of democratization theory that considered the structures of the West as the final idealized outcome. Critics of the oriental despotism argument note the survey evidence pointing to support for democracy in Middle Eastern states.[13] Oriental despotism, on one hand a case for cultural sensitivity, also exhibits reductionist tendencies that disallow accurate depictions of behavior. The willful othering

10 Rolando Minuti, "Oriental Despotism" in: *European History Online (EGO)* (Mainz: Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG), 2012). URL: http://www.ieg-ego.eu/minutir-2012-en

11 Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental despotism a comparative study of total power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

12 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique" in *Democratization* 22, no. 2 (2006): 373-395.

13 Mark Tessler, "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: the Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes toward Democratization in Four Arab Countries," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 3 (2002): 337–54.

of non-Western cultures asserts a set of inaccurate facts that become foundational to inaccurate theory.

Political Ontology

"No political analysis has ever been ontologically neutral."
- Colin Hay

A debate overall exists on whether the social world can be explained through the material sciences. Some argue this question is outside of the scope of political science. However, in examining why certain theories continue to fail in non-Western contexts, it is worthwhile to conduct a limited discussion on political ontology. Political ontology refers to the "the sorts of social entities whose consistent existence analysts can reasonably assume."[14] Choices made in political ontology will logically antecede the choices in epistemology and methodology. Ontological debates surround underlying assumptions to theories, such as the individual-group relationship and the structure-agency relationship.

Ontological assumptions, based on some level of consensus on these debates, make possible the naturalist attempts to explain the social world. As an example, in the debate of individual-group relationship, perhaps it is a case of over-exerting Western conceptualizations of the individual that brings political science to a reliance on some (light) consensus towards the idea that society is an aggregate of its individually motivated actors. It is possible to imagine that these relationships, given their origins in Western philosophical thought, underpin overall the fragility of political science theories when applied universally.

Concluding Remarks

The errors stipulated in this paper do not demand or normatively expect an end to Western contributions to IR, nor do they undermine the overall quality of contributions of Western origin. As alluded to before, the theorists discussed above have addressed the non-West in more than a handful of capacities. And of course, palpable is the irony of this paper itself being written in English for a largely Western audience.

Ethnic conflict, racial tensions, and mass shifts in global migration patterns result from an era of hyper globalization. In the ever-shifting power balances of the West and the rest, political science comes under increasing pressure to strengthen the robustness of theories to apply soundly in non-Western contexts. Towards this horizon, theorists may sharpen their analysis by considering the aforementioned five limitations upon which political science fails when placed adjacent to the Western canon.

14 Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. R. E Goodin and C. Tilly. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 3-32.

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