

Decolonizing the 'Great Debates' in International Relations Theory: A Perspective on History, Approaches and Methods

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Abstract

It is indeed true that the several discourses in International Relations (abbreviated as IR throughout the essay) have often tried to establish a dominant discourse of understanding amongst them. However, even though it is imperative to understand that there can be no single way of studying the epistemology, ontology and normative aspects of International Relations, we have often forgotten to look beyond the established debates of knowledge and theory building in the discipline.

Keywords: Great Debates; International relations; Knowledge; Theory

Introduction

Knowledge tries to define reality in terms of goal making. Even though there have been several arguments made against the political scientists to "leave ethics to the philosophers and concern themselves primarily with the description and analysis of political behaviour", [1,2] we try to draw upon India's rich history (using examples from the Mughal Dynasty) demonstrating that knowledge in International Relations need not be ethical in nature so long as it simply serves a purpose or goal in an economic, social and cultural setting.

The acknowledged problem with the 'Great Debates' in the discipline is often how it refused to let other theory building mechanisms to come to the forefront while shaping the method of inquiry [3]. This essay therefore tries to look beyond the spars of the Goliaths into one such aspect of knowledge in International Relations and the process of inquiry and theory building. However, the limitation of such a theory being that it is still not independent of the outcomes of the 'Great Debates.' We therefore highlight that IR theories have often been drawing from a historical source of existing knowledge as tools for goal attainment.

The next part of our argument discusses that man has often been defined as a social and a rational being [4] and therefore "we question, dispute, object, oppose, beg to differ, quibble, and sometimes even cavil" [5]. We try to explore the contradictions of such dominant theories in IR using a metaphysical approach that stress on the method of 'purpose.' Thus highlighting that data interpretation along with meta theory is indeed necessary to build upon the body of knowledge in IR that include questions of governments, parties and policy making.

Reaching Out Beyond the 'Great Debates'

Firstly, what constitutes 'International Relations,' is essentially answering a few basic questions such as:

"Why do nations behave as they do? What is the best way accurately to describe, explain, or predict the interaction of national foreign policies (or of non-governmental groups) in the international arena? How to describe, explain, or predict the workings of the international system?" [6].

However, the answer to such questions has existed long before the discipline made an identity for itself. Even though the concept of a nation is newly formulated as opposed to the Egyptian or the Chinese 'empire' [7], the idea of 'international' or 'systems of governance' have indeed persisted throughout history. Similarly, it is true that the boundaries of the Mughal Empire continuously shifted and there was no concept of 'citizenship,' [8] yet there have been distinct set of governmental structures from time to time. The 'Mansabdari System' is one such example which was reformed by Akbar that helped organize his system of imperial governance and bureaucracy ("A Study on Historical development of Land Ownership and Landed Aristocracy in Pakistan," n.d.).

More importantly, knowledge in an 'international scale' i.e. from all across the world did find a place in the court of the Mughals. However, the problem with such diplomatic exchanges was far from the innocent homilies of culture in local knowledge building processes. Sir Thomas Roe, who was one of the first English Ambassadors in the Mughal Court, in fact found it difficult to balance the interests of the Crown on one-hand and the Company's motives on the other [9]. Therefore, the tapestry of 'foreign policy' had already been embedded in such structures of information crossovers far beyond what the East had previously witnessed. We say this, as it was the first time that the idea of sending ambassadors had reached out beyond the English Channel to find a place in the rich Mughal Court of Emperor Jahangir.

In anthropological terms, the distinction of knowledge in terms of 'emic' (local) and 'etic' (outside the social group) [10] have grown complex while historical accords of it have been almost obliterated while forgetting to looking beyond the prevalent 'Great Debates' in International Relations. These sources of knowledge were instrumental in building an outlook towards Mughal foreign policy. It was 'emic knowledge' that made the Mughals think that the English Empire was no match for the Mughals and representatives from the West could

never be treated as political ambassadors as they were simply 'merchants' for business [11]. In 'etic' terms or in theory, the Mughals had no idea of the strength of the English Empire which led to them following a simple system of appeasement and simply paving the way for the English 'goal of colonization':

"During the 17th century at least, the effective rule maintained by the Mughal emperors throughout much of the subcontinent provided a secure framework for trade. The British did, however, start to intervene in Indian politics from the 1750s, and revolutionary changes in their role in India were to follow" [12].

If one were to gauge deeper, another example would include the view of the newly emergent idealists who tried to prevent war through common institutions after World War I [13]. We would argue that the system that Mughals used was in fact no different. Marriage was used as an institution and a systemic tool to construct alliances and build bridges of diplomacy to prevent the Mughals from engaging in costly wars. This was a key ingredient in the Mughal system of governance. Akbar, the Mughal Emperor therefore married Jodhaa, a Rajput princess to exercise the very same policy of maintaining cordial relations with the Rajputs, often then known as one of the most feisty warrior clans in India [14].

It is nothing new that the differences of culture and knowledge in an international scale have always been vast and this often gets contextualized when one considers daily life in the Mughal Courts as compared to the British Empire. The Mughal Emperors maintained 'harems' (chambers filled with women to derive sexual gratification) and often married tens of women [15]. Gathering of such knowledge in the context of voyeurism and polygamy was in fact unethical to the Europeans and often unheard of. Yet, when Sir Thomas Roe during his time with Jahangir, commented that the court was "as one without rule of law", [9] it remains highly essential to gather such sources of knowledge to understand life under the Mughal Emperors and structures that allowed exchange of knowledge from one part of the globe to another during those days.

Connecting It with the 'Great Debates'

Our contention is therefore that much of the theory that had developed during the 'Great Debates' is nothing new. Also, often what is mistaken as a product of such debates has its roots in history and might be simply drawing from existing sources of such knowledge. More importantly, what counts as knowledge in specific social, economic and cultural settings, is formulated in the very purpose of defining goals. When realists came up in the 1940s and the 1950s stressing on rivalry, power, security and competition [16], the origins of such debates had been long buried in Kautilya's, "Arthashastra", dating to the 4th century BC during the times of the Indian King, Chandragupta Maurya [17].

It is interesting to therefore note that long before the use of the phrase, "balance of power" or even before Waltz and Morgenthau came along, Kautilya had already established that every state should act to preserve its self-interest [18]. He also opined that political, military and economic might are often the key factors to ward off enemy attack and hence determines the strength of a state [18]. It is true that the shape of the argument can take turns into post-colonial theory or often how theory production beyond what the Eurocentric lords said must be focussed upon [19]. However, we would like to focus on the aim of why such knowledge production in the context of international relations had become essential.

The very reason why Kautilya's, "Arthashastra" was written was due to the fact that he was "the theorist of the politico-economic basis of the Mauryan state" [20] and "the general policy of the Arthashastra and that of the Mauryan state were very similar." [20]. Similarly when the realists came up with their version of the theory and its ramifications, it was essentially a form of response in scathing criticism against the idealists, after the failure to prevent World War II through an institutional framework such as the 'League of Nations' [13]. We are not weighing as to which theory in which framework of affairs was good or superior, however, it would have done better for the realists to understand that theories such as theirs in the hunt of establishing a sole ownership of their own knowledge, had already existed since thousands of years.

Robert Cox decided to put all such theories that were a result and part of the 'Great Debates' under the bracket of "problem solving" and "biased." Cox [21] therefore remarks in a talk:

"Problem solving takes the world as it is and focuses on correcting certain dysfunctions, certain specific problems... problem solving theory has to take the basic existing power relationships as given, it will be biased towards perpetuating those relationships, thus tending to make the existing order hegemonic" [21].

We believe that the first step towards knowledge production is often recognizing such biases. Moreover, it is to question why such biases exist and often the environment in which such knowledge is being produced rather than looking at the ramifications of theory production, its arguments and counter-arguments.

"The presence of contrary or contradictory assumptions, explanations, or conclusions is often viewed as an indicator of poor theory building, and theorists are encouraged to devote their efforts to carefully defined and delimited analyses. The value of rigor and coherence cannot be denied. However, these qualities are not sufficient to guarantee good theories" [22].

Even though our example of such an argument is extreme, for clarity reasons, we would like to pick up the case of North Korea. Production of knowledge in the country about the United States essentially revolves around hatred. The entire machinery of the State is devoted to such knowledge building processes. Children in kindergarten are encouraged to draw and colour anti-American cartoons [23] while an entire museum in the town of Sinchon makes them engage with the atrocities of the Korean War as a result of the Cold War [24]. However, rather than engaging in the nuances of information warfare, it is to understand that such knowledge about the international community serves a strategic goal that feeds into the isolation of the North Korean regime, contributes towards its favourability of self-sustenance, allows it to launch missiles, and evokes international commentaries.

But when critical theorists try to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct meanings [25] in the aim to denounce "problem solving theories" Cox [21] and announce their monopoly, the problem becomes multi-folded. Not only are they trying to push their 'goal of knowledge' forward but also the fact that they have essentially forgotten to take lessons from the academics involved with the 'Great Debates,' regarding the exercise of knowledge monopoly and rubbish previous knowledge building methods on the grounds of being biased. Yet, the fact that this contributed to a new theory in International Relations demonstrates how ethicality has often not been engaged towards knowledge and its formation processes.

Metaphysics in Relation to Criticism and Data Interpretation

In order to understand the process of knowledge devoid of ethics, it is time that the approach of metaphysics is re-visited, even in the context of International Relations. Rather, we would say that if we move away from the 'Great Debates' and use an approach of metaphysics, it often validates numbers, statistics and data interpretation techniques. The first aspect that would be dealt with is why human beings oppose each other as it had happened while approaching the IR discipline. A thought is often directed towards solving a problem and initially wants to self-assert itself and when it faces its limitations, there becomes room for contradictions [26]. This was indeed what was going on in the 'Great Debates' in relation to the germination of thoughts and ideas. For example: A positivist approach to social sciences that focuses on data gathering for the formulation of laws was met with staunch opposition from those who believed in a more historical and interpretative approach to IR [13]. The reason for the limitation being that human behaviour is dynamic in social, cultural and economic settings and therefore cannot be measured with such confinements of data, numbers or statistics [27].

This problem brings me to the next aspect of a metaphysical approach to address the 'purpose' of the 'Great Debates' in International Relations. A suitable definition for purpose would mean "a principle used for interpreting the sequence of events" [28]. There is enough novelty in this definition to address theory building in IR. Even though the goal and purpose of knowledge remains devoid of its ethical understandings, it has yet tried to define, address, interpret, understand or predict certain phenomenon or causes. Defining this goal in singular terms is almost impossible as change in various settings of knowledge production also changes its purpose. We believe that such a lens can also be applied to data analysis and interpretation along with the concepts of metaphysics.

For example: A 2% turnout in elections across 38 polling booths was recorded in Srinagar [29]. The numbers convey far more than its surface level meaning. It shows how people in Jammu and Kashmir decided to boycott the elections in strict defiance as the Indian Government has continuously denied them the right of self-determination. The numbers are also pictorial of the turbulent history of the region. It hence raises enough metaphysical questions beyond the constitutional debates of 'freedom of speech and expression' ("Fundamental Rights" Article 19(1) (a)) which include the definitions of 'freedom of thought', 'freedom of existence' and 'freedom of identity'.

Another instance is the favourability of Donald Trump being 39.8% to him being 53.4% unfavourable as of June 11, 2017 [30]. These numbers imply a lot more than percentages. It showcases how people are unsatisfied with the President that they have chosen for themselves; even through democratic methods. This further brings to the forefront the recent increase in a variety of social problems that pertain to racial discrimination, ideologue, immigration and homosexuality. They also highlight essential questions in the metaphysics such as 'who is a good leader?', 'what changes do we require to guarantee us better existence' and 'what can be a better future in itself'?

To link theory to practice, questions of Kashmir have been long inclined to the politics [31] of South Asia rather than perceiving it through angles of culture and history [32]. Similarly, Donald Trump being the President has nonetheless raised eye-balls across the globe for a start. Therefore rather than focussing on the arguments and counter-arguments in International Relations and other social

sciences, we often need to understand and interpret, hand in hand [33]. Both of these aspects make up as key tools of knowledge building and are more often dependent on each other for us to develop a pluralist understanding of the world and goal making in the context of knowledge building processes.

Conclusion

This essay tries to highlight certain patches of knowledge production using history as evidence. The two aspects that we look at in this regard are foreign policy and institutions from the Mughal times. Therefore the essay demonstrates that theory in International Relations cannot be a monopoly in the confinements of arguments and counter arguments of the 'Great Debates'. In the same regard, we try to step out from the paradigm of such knowledge building processes indicating how ethicality has often been kept out of such discussions. More importantly it is to stress on the fact that the 'Great Debates' have forgotten to incorporate and lend credibility to the existing theories in history. We therefore try establishing a common ground between them arguing that knowledge often remains devoid of such ethical concerns and its production is shaped by the existent social, cultural, political and economic factors. However, the novelty of understanding such knowledge is to recognize its biases in understanding, identifying and interpreting the reasons for why such biases exist in the first place. It is also to highlight that even though 'critical theory' has tried to deconstruct meanings, it has failed to recognize its own biases existing within it. In the frame of looking at knowledge in International Relations, we try to look beyond the divides that the 'Great Debates' have created in International Relations and re-instate the importance of metaphysics and data-interpretation working together to re-approach instances in global politics. Therefore, we conclude that the purpose of knowledge building has only succeeded when such forms of plurality have been engaged with.

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