
Introduction*

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The impossible return journey

A special issue about International Political Economy (IPE) as ‘global Conversations’ in *Contexto Internacional* may seem like an IPE return journey, back to the beginnings of the academic discipline that became institutionalised as IPE in the 1970s.¹ *Contexto Internacional* is a *Journal of Global Connections* as its subtitle clearly proclaims. IPE was established with similar ambitions. It was an intended as a space where insights, arguments, and questions from a range of contexts and scholars could be combined, and discussions about their implications thrive. Originally, focus was on economics and International Relations, but the scope soon expanded to include a

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range of disciplines ranging from gender studies to the history of ideas. In IPE, established paradigms were treated ‘as a hindrance to understanding’ (Hirschman 1970). The enthusiasm for openness was seemingly unlimited. Susan Strange compared the discipline she was promoting to a minestrone that could incorporate any ingredient. Similarly, Robert Gilpin’s introductory textbook (1987) offered both an overview of theoretical approaches and an overview of core areas of the world economy. As this shows, at the time, IPE self-defined as a space with open boundaries, where defying and refusing disciplinary boundaries was not only tolerated but encouraged. To follow Benjamin Cohen’s injunction to engage IPE as a global conversations may therefore seem like embarking on a return journey: back to the origins of a discipline celebrating openness and inclusiveness.

The imagery of a return journey is however far too simplistic. IPE is no longer simply counter-disciplinary space although some continued to defend it as such.² Rather, IPE is also a narrow and excluding discipline, with strictly policed boundaries as underlined by some of the contributors to this special issue (also Best and Paterson 2015). Precisely this disciplining of IPE prompted Cohen to encourage ‘global conversations’. Cohen was concerned that IPE was closing in on itself and becoming so narrow, politically irrelevant and scholastic that no one would bother reading it (Cohen 2010). He saw IPE as increasingly caught in the ‘fog of US normal science’ and hence losing its edge in ‘constitutive theorizing’ rather than merely in the analysis of current policies as Guzzini puts it in this issue. Cohen’s recent work on the history of International Political Economy IPE has therefore placed global conversations at its centre (Cohen 2008, Cohen 2014). More than underscoring the desirability of global conversations, Cohen’s recent work has triggered them. A wide range of scholars of various stripes and convictions have commented on and (dis-)agreed with his approach to it.³ These conversations were of course difficult balancing acts

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between self-promotion, narcissism and academic turf-protection on the one hand and substantive arguments, clear claims and novel insights on the other. They were also selective and exclusionary processes. Journal space is as limited as is scholarly attention and distributed through a similarly complex and hierarchical process. However, in spite of their many problems and limits, the debates were signalling a real interest in IPE as global conversations. They were in various ways asking what had happened to openness and inclusion in IPE but also whether that openness had ever existed in the first place.

This special issue takes these developments into account. It therefore is not embarking on a nostalgic return journey to an imaginary past when it engages IPE as global conversations. It fully recognizes that in the 2010s a varied group of scholars are vying to control the IPE label, or inversely to discredit it. They have produced a great number of disciplining disciplinary textbooks and an even greater number of scholarly struggles over the distribution of places in the (anti-)IPE Olympus. However, that does not make it less interesting to reflect on global conversations in IPE. On the contrary, it makes it both more interesting and more challenging. It demands a degree of reflexivity about what a global conversation might imply and what we might learn from IPE history about the fate of such conversations. Perhaps that was the reason Diane Tussie organized the panel on ‘International Political Economy as a Global Conversation’ at the joint ISA/FLACSO conference in Buenos Aires on which this special issue builds.⁴ It certainly is the motivation for prolonging that discussion in this special issue.

Four insights from IPE’s history

Four insights from IPE’s recent history are particularly important in shaping global conversations including in this special issue. The first

is that global conversations are usually stuck between a rock and a hard place. Attention to ‘power-knowledge’ in all its variants and incarnations makes the talk about global conversations smack of epistemological and sociological naïveté. On the one side is exclusion. Conversations are indeed plural, and indeed potentially indefinitely so. Therefore, the purportedly global conversations have to converge towards a ‘shared language’ that is necessarily exclusionary and partial. Whose conversation and what IPE? This is the rock. On the other side is inclusion. If we repent of exclusivity, and seek to remedy it by opening up the conversation to all voices (or all the voices we know), we get little more than a cacophony. Voice becomes noise as the epistemological challenges of understanding are amplified. IPE therefore scatters, as its participants gather around campfires with the like-minded (imagery borrowed from Sylvester 2013). There is no conversation left and no IPE either for that matter. That is the hard place. This predicament is not specific to IPE. ‘If a lion could speak, we would not understand it’, as Wittgenstein pointed out.⁵ Worse still, ‘global conversations’ may destroy the real voices (and subjectivities) of people, and not just misunderstand the hypothetical ones of lions (Spivak 1988). So perhaps global conversations cannot take place, and should not be encouraged? To avoid getting caught between a rock and a hard place, the most obvious thing would be not to go there.⁶

However, and second, ‘global conversations’ continue and have consequences whether or not a scholar or group of scholars participate in them, or approve of them. There is simply no shutting down of global conversations, or blocking their effects. There is no ‘opting out’. In the 1970s, Strange therefore insisted on the pernicious effects of the ‘mutual neglect of politics and economics’ (1970). One of her main sources of inspiration was Karl Polanyi. His book *The origins of our time* (1957)⁷ is a detailed and precise account of the terrifying and very real violence set in motion by the spread,

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affirmation, and implementation of (often very well intentioned) liberal-economic ideas, and particularly the liberal invention of the idea of self-regulating markets (as opposed to markets in general). Polanyi describes a ‘global conversation’ and its far-reaching consequences.⁸ His account is a very strong statement of the potentially devastating consequences of global conversations (including well intentioned ones such as the liberal conversation he is describing). Just letting conversations roll on or rejecting them as undesirable while brandishing the own conversation as the only significant or possible one appears ingenuous at best.

Third, this is no doubt why those most aware of the limits to and dangers inherent in global conversations are also those most likely to want to keep those global conversations alive.⁹ Strange saw herself as representing a marginalized position (the British one) and pulling marginal ideas (drawn for example from Latin American *dependencia*) into the mainstream debates in the United States. She did so because she thought it politically vital that they be understood there (Strange 1989). She wanted to speak truth to power. More generally, intervening in and diffracting conversations is more important for those marginalised, excluded, or obliterated as Haraway insists when highlighting the exclusion of gender and race from the history of science (1997: 34-40).

Finally, neither Haraway nor Strange nor any insight from IPE history can offer a fool proof recipe for nurturing those global conversations. Should one follow what Isabelle Stengers (1995: 25) terms the ‘Leibnizean constraint’ not to offend established sentiment, so that dominant understandings and ideas might be pried open and perhaps even changed?¹⁰ Is it more important to stop reaffirming and reproducing the work of established authorities, start new conversations, and build new authorities, concepts and theorisations that will become influential in their own right?¹¹ Or should one adopt a specific tone or style to make the conversation

work: is irony perhaps the right way to ensure that engagement works, or should we look towards artistic interventions to ensure that the voices which are usually ignored or marginalised are heard in global conversations?¹² There is no unique answer. What works well and is effective in some conversations may have no weight in others. But most importantly, in many contexts, the scope for answering these questions is limited. The answers are already given by the ‘securocrats and knowledgeocrats’ who manage global conversations, including the ones in IPE (see Vale and Thakur below).

These four insights – the awareness that global conversations are inherently limited, that they are performative, and that it is therefore essential to keep them alive even if we don’t quite know how – mark the approach to global conversations in this issue. The issue consequently engages global conversations also by probing their conditions of possibility, limits, consequences and paradoxes. This special issue in other words focuses on the politics of global conversations in IPE both in the sense of what these conversations do and have done in the past but also in the sense of what possibilities they open up for the future.

The outline of this special issue

This special issue reflects the understanding of global conversations just outlined and the emphasis on the politics of these conversations. It did not provide the contributors with a predetermined set of questions, or a preconfigured framework. Rather, the authors were invited to bring their own questions, arguments and hence politics. The issue therefore opens up for conversations in an affirmative and intended plural.¹³ It is both academically and politically encouraging that such a wide range of authoritative IPE scholars accepted to join such a conversation and that Benjamin Cohen accepted to remain

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part of it. The issue is organized according to the kind of reflections on the politics of global conversations the authors highlight.

In the first two articles, Guzzini and Inayatullah and Blaney ask what kinds of global conversations Cohen is inviting us to join and which ones he is therefore ignoring or closing. Guzzini highlights that Cohen's interventions have concentrated on the question of global political order. He traces Cohen's intellectual trajectory, on a return to the origins of IPE as it were, showing how Cohen himself has made a roundtrip: Cohen has returned to the more structural analysis he first opposed. This argument is an invitation to Cohen (and his intellectual followers) to reflect on the own work and more courageously open up to ideas from beyond the mainstream version of IPE. Following this, Inayatuallah and Blaney also explore the conversations Cohen opens, or, as they would have it, close and render impossible. However, they approach this question rather differently. Instead of engaging with Cohen's work as such, they locate it as a specimen of western social science. They then argue that Cohen reproduces the 'racism, imperialism and Eurocentrism of western social science, and therefore of IR/IPE'. For any meaningful conversation to take place, they suggest, 'Cohen and his friends' (and the western social science they exemplify) would have to move their debate to another 'level'. According to Inayatullah and Blaney, unless they do, their call for conversations can only reproduce the 'exigophobia'¹⁴, 'the condemnation imperative', and 'the individualism imperative' that they all share and that render global conversations impossible.

In the next two articles, Weber and Leander pursue the discussion by underscoring the political significance of the theoretical 'elsewhere' in IPE conversations. Weber focuses on the 'politics of method' and the 'problematic meta-theoretical assumptions' of IPE. She argues that there is a long history of feminist, post-colonial and activist research which should be included more systematically. She

believes adequate reflexive engagement with IPE (or, as she would prefer to call it, global political economy, or GPE) would make this presence visible, and hence facilitate broader, more politically significant, global conversations. In the following article, I focus on one particular theoretical elsewhere, that of the social studies of finance, that I find politically important to engage more thoroughly in IPE. Indeed, it is arguably (depending on where the IPE boundaries are drawn) already being engaged. However, I draw attention to its far reaching importance. I do so by bringing it into conversation with Cohen's theorization of International Monetary Relations. I show it raises three politically fundamental questions about the ontology, agency and scope of the politics of International Monetary Relations.

The following three articles highlight non-western conversations in IPE. Helleiner draws attention to the contributions of non-western thinkers to the development of the IPE triad: mercantilism, liberalism and Marxism. He shows that Asante, Egyptian and Japanese scholars were not merely copying and adopting ideas from IPE but engaging, transforming and developing them. He argues that reflecting more explicitly on their presence and arguments would not only substantially alter the way the history of IPE is construed, but also anchor and facilitate global conversations that are more significant (and not just relevant) for most of the world. Next, Vale and Thakur trace the absence of reflexion about Africa in IPE, and its implications. They demonstrate that by neglecting the history of southern Africa and the contributions of those scholars who study it, IPE becomes complicit in reproducing an understanding of political economy that marginalises the foundational role of slavery, racism, and migration. It also makes it possible to 'black-box the state' and the associated 'intellectual-military complex' in southern Africa. Finally, Tussie and Riggiozzi direct attention to the importance of local and regional processes that have become all the more

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significant in a post-hegemonic context. They insist on the importance of the inside-out rather than the outside-in. In doing so, they highlight the role of the micro-institutional revolutions that have swept across Latin America, and transformed the form assumed by regionalism. In the process, they underscore the importance of historically anchored awareness in IPE about the role of Latin American scholars besides western ones.

The final word in the special issue is given to Cohen. In the spirit of conversation, Cohen discusses arguments made in this special issue and responds to points about his work. Cohen's word is however not intended as the final word closing IPE conversations. Instead, we hope that the special issue will be read as inviting and encouraging continued global conversations attentive to the politics of conversing.

Notes

- 1.** As the arguments in this special issue underscore it is important to distinguish that the invention of IPE as an academic discipline, with university chairs in UK and US universities primarily from the traditions on which this discipline was built or traditions that covered its terrain (see Helleiner, Vale and Thakur below).
- 2.** Including for example in the collective projects of de Goede (2006) and Best (2010).
- 3.** A series of special issues were published in the Review of International Political Economy issues: 15(2); 16(1) and 16(2); but the argument went well beyond, including in debates outside formal academic fora, as for example Inayatullah's review published on: <<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/149096591>>.
- 4.** The panel was entitled: 'International Political Economy as a Global Conversation. Keynote Panel in Honour of Benjamin Cohen' International Studies Association / Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (23-25 July 2014). The original contributors to this panel included Diane Tussie,

Benjamin Cohen, Stefano Guzzini, Eric Helleiner, and Anna Leander who are all contributing to this special issue as well as Geoffrey Underhill, Gregory Chin and Margaret Pearson who declined to do so.

- 5.** See Sparti (1992) for a discussion of the implications.
- 6.** This indeed has been the position of some scholars often for limited periods of time. For a development of the reasoning why see WaThiong'o (1981). Another case in point, directly tied to the discussions about political economy is the brilliant, erudite and prolific political economy scholar Jomo Sundaram who for a period of time refused to publish in English (Leander and Rajaram 2013).
- 7.** The time in question is the Second World War.
- 8.** As Guzzini points out below, the continuation of that global liberal conversation may be having even more pernicious effects at present. The impact of liberal ideas is such that the 'spontaneous self-defense of society' further accentuates the liberal movement. They shape the spontaneous self-defence is shaped so that it adopts liberal responses to the liberal movement. The double movement becomes unidirectional. As Hibou has shown, a tangible consequence is the formidable neo-liberal bureaucratization of the world (Hibou 2006, 2012).
- 9.** The self-selection of authors in this special issue of course confirms this. The contributors are mostly prone to critically discuss specific exclusions and closures in Cohen's work (or as in the case Inayatullah and Blaney what they think his work is representing). Yet have all found it important to engage the conversation.
- 10.** Although Bourdieu and Stengers are usually pitted against each other, his practice of 'reading a thinker against that thinker' and relying on authoritative concepts but twisting and transforming their meaning are examples of this kind of strategy (see e.g. discussion in Bourdieu 2003).
- 11.** As Luhmann may have thought when he responded that all he wanted for his professorship in Bielefeld was a desk, a library and thirty years to build a social theory.
- 12.** Haraway (1991: 125) for example suggests resorting to irony (and blasphemy) while Ranciere (2006) thinks art is more likely to move political borders because of its capacity to shape and alter the delimitation of the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and the impossible.

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13. Indeed, it is a plural that contrasts markedly with the global IPE conversation (in singular) among likeminded IPE scholars working on similar issues from similar perspectives that is common in IPE. An authoritative example is the Handbook of International Political Economy (Blyth, 2009).

14. They introduce the concept as referring to the deep anxiety that social explanations foregrounding culture, history and the context of actions justify atrocious conduct. The original concept was developed by Ghassan Hage (2003).

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