

Book Review

Western Dominance in International Relations?

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Alejandro, Audrey. 2018. *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalization of IR in Brazil and India*. London: Routledge. 207 pp.

There has been a growing interest in the intellectual development of International Relations as an academic discipline. A secular interest in the North, it has become a somewhat new area of studies in the Global South. The publication of a series of books on the subject (Weaver and Tickner 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012, 2013) has stated that the concerns with the developments, uses and abuses of IR are here to stay. *Western Dominance in IR?* can be read as a contribution to the enterprise put forward by Weaver, Tickner and Blaney to the extent that Alejandro's research not only engages with the problematization of the development of IR in two major players of the Global South but also constructs a critical approach to that development departing from a dense and well designed poststructuralist perspective. It could be said that the way Brazilian and Indian scholars have 'claimed the international' – to use Tickner and Blaney's (2013) expression – tells us a lot about how different their institutional IR worlds have come to be and how it informs us of the importance of considering the operations of power/knowledge *dispositifs* to the challenges of the 'internationalization' of a discipline.

The study of IR as a discipline in Brazil has not inspired a sufficient number of researchers yet. Having said that, it is important to note that there has been a growing concern with how IR in Brazil came to be, how it was institutionalized, which are its main schools of thought, who is writing what and to what ends. So far, Brazilian scholars have not published any extensive research on the state of the art of Brazilian IR theories and perspectives. Alejandro's book comes as a very important contribution to fill this void.

The book's title ends with a question mark: *Western dominance in IR?* This alone should inspire us to read it: why is there any doubt that the West dominates IR? For us, in the South, this comes as a truism. Perhaps, for a European scholar it should come, as well. Alejandro's research tells us we should not take it as face value.

The book in question is the result of Alejandro's doctoral dissertation. Departing from a poststructuralist perspective, especially Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge,

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Alejandro's (2018: 1-2) objective is precisely to 'denaturalize the common sense' that permeates IR through the problematization of power/knowledge *dispositifs* that 'reproduce the exercise of power within a society' and that 'limit our capacity to question our perception of the world and our assumptions.' The concept of *performativity* (borrowed from Austin and Bourdieu) is used to stress the material and symbolic conditions of discourse and how their authoritative character depends on their visibility and identification to a socialized audience.

Alejandro designs two main research questions: (1) What are the conditions of the internationalization of IR in Brazil and India and what do these empirical findings tell us about the Eurocentrism of the narrative of Western dominance?; (2) Does the narrative of Western dominance reproduce the Eurocentrism it denounces, and, if so, what would a non-Eurocentric narrative about the internationalization of IR 'in the Global South' look like? In order to answer these questions, she engaged in field research both in Brazil and India where she interviewed a number of scholars who teach and do research in the main IR centers in their countries. Most of her data comes from these interviews although she also explored their bibliographical production and tried to understand their institutional realities. Theoretically and methodologically the book is solid – a more thorough criticism of her methodological and theoretical choices would only be possible in a separate, longer analysis.

Alejandro (2018: 14) comes to three main conclusions: (1) 'There is no theoretically specific production' neither in Brazil nor in India; (2) there are thematic differences between both countries but these 'are experienced as national traditions rather than invested as a counter-hegemonic stance'; (3) the 'invisibility' of Brazilian and Indian scholars at the international level could be explained by the recent institutionalization of IR in both countries in the early 1990s.

Some of these conclusions may strike us as somehow harsh and to the bone. Perhaps, that was Alejandro's intention. Her research reached an uncomfortable conclusion to scholars in the Global South: our voices are not heard in the North not because of gate-keeping practices, mostly, but because our institutional practices have not enabled us to try and participate in the international debate of the discipline. For Brazilian scholars, it is hard to internationalize their work mostly due to overwhelming institutional demands proper to the Brazilian academic environment – meetings, classes, reports etc. – and because the Brazilian tradition of writing is different from that demanded by the North. For Indian scholars, on the other hand, they do not see internationalization of their work as a primary goal of their careers.

Having identified Brazil and India with different IR traditions that limit their internationalization, both countries share what she named the 'recursive paradox.' Such a paradox would be the inability of an agent to understand his/her own limitations to exercise critique because he/she is incapable of perceiving himself/herself as immersed in the same power relations he/she criticizes. We, in the South, often 'reproduce' (Alejandro 2018: 168) the very Eurocentrism we denounce. We may not like to read that but we should pay very close attention to it. This is Alejandro's research highest point, where she engages in criticism and tries to come up with an alternative to that paradox. Unfortunately, there is no room to present Alejandro's input on it in detail. In order to provoke the reader, it should

be enough to stress her intention to ‘balance’ ethnocentrism instead of denying it altogether. Departing from readings of Claude Lévi-Strauss on the topic, she presents ‘Ethnocentrism [as] a condition of diversity,’ a ‘protective interface’ and a ‘defensive mechanism that distinguishes the self from the non-self’ (Alejandro 2018: 177-178). Ethnocentrism, in this perspective, should not be attached to ‘a bounded object [a culture]’; it should be understood in its ‘ambivalence’ that shows ‘the tension that exists within diversity itself,’ and diversity not understood as ‘the attribute of an object but [as] the result of the capacity of a subject to perceive diversity’ (Alejandro 2018: 177). The way she puts the question of ethnocentrism and critique comes out as her most provocative and insightful contribution.

Perhaps, what Alejandro stresses throughout her book is that ‘we [need] to act upon something that we can actually change,’ and that ‘something’ is practice, our institutional practices. This would be the challenge ahead of us in the Global South when it comes to overcoming ‘Western domination’: overcoming our own limitations and prejudices. Alejandro’s book is a sound contribution to that challenge and a must-read for all Brazilian scholars who dare to walk that path.

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