The Geopolitics of Knowledge About World Politics: A Case Study in U.S. Hegemony

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Much of our knowledge about world politics involves the universalizing of what can be called "doubtful particularisms." These interpretive projections are from the knowledge experiences of specific places and times onto all places and times. By knowledge I mean explanatory schemes, frames of reference, crucial sets of assumptions, narrative traditions, and theories. A great deal of interpretive projection is the result of the imposition of intellectual and political hegemonies from some places onto others. Thus, much of what today goes for "international relations theory" is the projection onto the world–at large of U.S.-originated academic ideas about the nature of statehood and the world economy derived from a mixture of largely mid-twentieth-century European premises about states and American ones about economies. The theory reflects the application of ideas about how best to model a presumably hostile world, which are drawn from selected aspects of U.S. experience and a U.S.-based reading of world history. In this chapter I propose a way of thinking about this geopolitics of knowledge by using the example of theories of world politics.

My point is not so much that knowledge of world politics is simply a coercive imposition of the view from some places onto others as that the dominant ways in which intellectuals and political elites around the world have come to think about world politics are not the result of either an open "search" for the best perspective or theory or a reflection of an essentially "local" perspective. The most prestigious repertoires of thinking about world politics represent the historical emergence of theoretical genres intimately associated with specific times and places which circulate and adapt in association with the spheres of influence of schools and authors with the best reputations and which in turn reflect the current geopolitical order.

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The idea that there is some sort of "geography" of knowledge is increasingly seen as helpful in understanding the production and circulation of knowledge of all kinds. Shapin (1998, p. 9) has best expressed perhaps the basic intuition upon which a much larger theoretical edifice can be constructed: "We are importantly attracted to, or repelled by, ideas as they are embodied in familiar others—kin, teachers, colleagues, neighbors." From this primitive sociological premise about the geographical bias built into knowledge creation and dissemination, it is possible to hypothesize about which ideas crop up where, how ideas adapt as they circulate, and why some ideas never quite make it into wider circulation, to name just a few of the ways in which geography in an expansive sense shapes knowledge.

After providing a brief summary of various ways of conceiving the geography of knowledge, I present four premises for what I am calling the geopolitics of knowledge. I then consider the specific case of how a particular theoretical perspective of peculiarly American provenance came to dominate much academic thinking about world politics outside the United States. A short conclusion summarizes the main points of the chapter.

Geographies of Knowledge

I have previously surveyed some of the ways in which "the geography of knowledge" can be brought into the study of world politics (Agnew, 2007). The purpose was to review this developing field and what it can offer to students of world politics. I suggested that there are five ways in which the geography of knowledge can be conceived and related to world politics.

The first way of conceiving of the geography of knowledge is the *ethnographic*, by which I mean approaches that conceive of knowledge as inherently plural and focus on the venues and sites in which knowledge is produced and consumed. The focus lies in either rehabilitating what are sometimes called "indigenous knowledges" or pointing out how "science" is culturally inflected. A good example of this approach is Nader's (1996) collection of studies of how scientific experiments on the same topic are conducted in different ways in different countries. A related but distinctive position tends to privilege the role of *coloniality* or the effects of colonialism on knowledge hierarchies. This approach is, of course, closely associated with the name of Said (1978), but others, such as Mignolo (2000), have developed it much further. A third derives more immediately from the philosophies of *phenomenology* which emphasize the intimate relations between particular geographical contexts of "being," on the one hand, and knowledge acquisition, on the other. In historical geography, a classic work of this genre would be that of Lowenthal (1961) on "geographical epistemology."

While also seeing knowledge as produced locally, a fourth approach emphasizes *how the local becomes the global* given the rise and fall of ideas as their political or intellectual sponsors undergo a similar process. A good example of such a process is the spread of neoliberal modes of economics under U.S. influence and as a result of the hegemony exercised by U.S.-based economics since the 1970s (Biersteker,

1995). Finally, emphasis has shifted somewhat in some recent accounts from simply knowledge production to knowledge circulation and consumption in the form of highlighting what is called by Livingstone (2005), one of its main proponents, the *geography of reading*. This approach assumes that similar ideas circulate widely but generate distinctive readings in different places, thus potentially creating different perspectives that then inform different practices.

In this chapter I focus my attention primarily on the fourth of these approaches, how the local becomes the global, with special attention given to theoretical thinking about world politics. My reason for doing so is that world politics is itself fundamentally an outcome of a basic hierarchy among states and between world regions (Agnew, 2005). It is not that the other conceptions of the geography of knowledge are irrelevant—the fifth is also in play to a certain extent, as the examples will show—but that in this context they are secondary to the primary one. The presumption of my approach is that global structures of political inequality underwrite whose imagination gets to dominate globally in theorizing about world politics. This conception in turn has obvious implications for any liberatory politics. In other words, thinking about world politics reflects the relative hierarchy of power within world politics. Yet much of the dominant thinking about world politics usually makes claims that either obscure or limit the degree to which world politics is hierarchical. I first provide some premises upon which the argument is based, and then use U.S., English, Russian, and Chinese examples of thinking about world politics to illustrate the argument.

The Geopolitics of Knowledge

The first premise is that the marketplace of ideas is never a level playing field. There is a geopolitics to knowledge production and circulation. Which knowledge becomes "normalized" or dominant and which knowledge is marginalized has something to do with who is doing the proposing and where they are located (Agnew, 2005). In the context of world politics, all knowledge, including that claiming the mantle of science, is socially conditioned by the rituals, routines, and recruitment practices of powerful educational and research institutions. On a global scale perhaps the outstanding feature of past centuries has been the way most places have been incorporated into flows of knowledge dominated by Europeans and extensions of Europe overseas, such as the United States. This phenomenon is the story, in Wolf's (1982) evocative phrase, of "Europe and the people without history."

The second premise is that, as Geertz (1996, p. 262) said, "No one lives in the world in general." Actual places, both as experienced and as imagined, serve to anchor conceptions of how the world is structured politically, who is in charge, where, and with what effects, as well as what matters to us in any given place in question. Thus, for example, Americans and U.S. policy-makers bring to their actions in the world a whole set of presuppositions about the world that emanate from their experiences as "Americans," particularly narratives about U.S. history and the U.S. "mission" in the world, which are often occluded by academic debates

about "theories" that fail to take into account such crucial background geographical conditioning. As Anderson (2003, p. 90) has noted, much of the "liberal tradition" that has shaped social science in the United States has had "a geographical, territorial association." She quotes Prewitt (2002) in support of this idea:

> The project of American social science has been America. This project, to be sure, has been in some tension with a different project—to build a *science* of politics or economics or psychology. But I believe that a close reading of disciplinary history would demonstrate that the "American project" has time and again taken precedence over the "science project" and that our claims to universal truths are, empirically, very much about the experience of this society in this historical period. (p. 2)

Of course, the very idea of requiring a "scientific" theory of politics may itself be seen as arising out of a specifically American desire to account for the United States and its place in the world in such terms.

Third, universalizing creeds must recruit adherents beyond their places of origin in order to become hegemonic. Gramsci's (1992) concept of "hegemony" is helpful in trying to understand how elites (and populations) accept and even laud ideas and practices about world politics and their place in it that they import from more powerful countries and organizations. If part of American hegemony in the contemporary world, for example, is about "enrolling" others into American practices of consumption and a market mentality (and, crucially, supplying intellectual justifications for them, such as those provided by various management gurus and journalists), it also adapts as it enrolls by adjusting to local norms and practices (Agnew, 2005). This facility is part of its "genius." During the Cold War, the Soviet alternative always risked political fission among adherents because it involved adopting a checklist of political-economic measures rather than a marketing package that could be customized to local circumstances as long as it met certain minimal criteria of conformity to governing norms. Today, the conflict between militant Islam and the United States government is largely about resisting the siren call of an American hegemony associated with globalization that is increasingly detached from direct U.S. sponsorship and that has many advocates and passive supporters within the Muslim world itself.

Fourth, knowledge about world politics (or anything else) from one place is not necessarily incommensurable or unintelligible relative to knowledge produced elsewhere. Cross-cultural communication goes on all the time without everything being lost in translation. Cultures in the modern world never exist in isolation and are themselves assemblages of people with often cross-cutting identities and commitments (Lukes, 2000). From this viewpoint, culture is "an idiom or vehicle of inter-subjective life, but not its foundation or final cause" (Jackson, 2002, p. 125). Be that as it may, knowledge creation and dissemination are never innocent of at least weak ontological commitments, be they related to nation, class, gender, or something else. But the history of knowledge circulation suggests that rarely are ideas simply restricted within rigid cultural boundaries. Rather, with powerful sponsors, international and transnational networks arise to carry and embed ideas from place to place (e.g., Sapiro, 2009).

Taken together, these premises make the case for referring to the geopolitics of knowledge: The question of *where* brings together under the rubric of spatial difference a wide range of potential ontological effects. At the same time, however, massive sociopolitical changes in the world are shaping how we (whomever and wherever *we* are) engage in how knowledge is ordered and circulated. Cross-global linkages are arguably more important today than at any time in human history, not so much in terms of the conventional story of producing places that are ever more alike, but more especially in terms of creating opportunities for interaction between local and long-distance effects on the constitution of knowledge. As a result, anomalies in established dominant theories can be exposed as the world unleashes surprises. The subsequent limits to the conventional theoretical terms in which social science theories have been organized—states versus markets, West versus rest, religion versus secularism, past versus present, the telos of history versus perpetual flux—pose serious challenges to the disciplinary codes that have long dominated thinking about world politics.

Perhaps the most serious issue concerns the continuing relevance of the idiographic–nomothetic (particulars–universals) opposition that has afflicted Western social science since the *Methodenstreit* of the late nineteenth century. Knowledge is always made somewhere by particular persons reflecting their place's historical experience. "Universals" often arise by projecting these experiences onto the world at large (Seth, 2000). What is needed are ways of understanding how this process occurs and drawing attention to the need to negotiate across perspectives so that world politics in itself can be less the outcome of hegemonic impositions and more the result of the recognition and understanding of differences, both cultural and intellectual (Agnew, 2009).

Geopolitics of Theories of World Politics

Much of what goes for international relations theory today is the projection onto the world at large of U.S.-originated academic ideas about the nature of statehood and the world economy derived from a mixture of mid-twentieth-century European premises about states and American ones about economies even when these ideas can often depart quite remarkably from the apparent contemporary sources of U.S. foreign-policy conduct. The theory reflects the application of ideas about how best to model a presumably hostile world, which are drawn more from selected aspects of U.S. experience and a U.S. reading of world history than from fidelity to how actual U.S. policies are constituted from a mix of domestic interests and foreign-policy inclinations. Contrast the predictions of a defensive U.S. neorealism, for example, which might counsel prudence in invading other countries without a set of clear objectives and an "exit strategy," with recent U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East driven by what Connolly (2005) calls a domestic alliance in the United States between "cowboy capitalism" and evangelical Protestantism.

The intellectually dominant realist tradition of U.S. international relations theory (even its opponents, including liberals and idealists, share many of its assumptions)

is based on a central assumption of "anarchy" beyond state borders (Agnew, 1994; Powell, 1994). This conception is not a straightforward objective fact about the world but a claim socially constructed by theorists and actors operating in conditioning sites and venues (premier universities, think tanks, government offices, etc.) who unthinkingly reproduce the assumption, drawing on particular interpretations of unimpeachable intellectual precursors (such as the early modern European thinkers Machiavelli and Hobbes) irrespective of its empirical "truth" status. Other related ideas, such as those of a world irretrievably divided into territorial "nation-states" organized along a global continuum of development, and even ideas often presumed to challenge the mainstream view such as "rational choice" and "hegemonic succession," can be thought of similarly as reflecting social and political experiences of particular theorists in specific places more than as objective truth about the world per se. If believed, of course, and if in the hands of those powerful enough, they can become guides to action that make their own reality (Agnew, 2003).

The constitutive ideas of so-called realism as developed by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and others have taken on a very different form in the hands of the German refugee scholars in the United States, such as Hans Morgenthau, most responsible in the early Cold War years for creating the realist perspective, and then in the hands of more Americanized theorists, such as Robert Gilpin, than the originals might initially suggest could ever be the case (Inayatullah & Rupert, 1994). Most notably, what became in the 1970s and 1980s the main consensus position, so-called neorealism, combines elements of classical political realism and liberal economics that have traveled some intellectual distance from their geographical roots in, respectively, Renaissance Italy (with Machiavelli) and late eighteenth-century Scotland (with Adam Smith) (Donnelly, 1995). This American synthesis and related emphases have ruled the academic roost in international relations much as the neoclassical synthesis has in U.S. academic economics.

Realist theory was both a reaction against the behavioral trend in U.S. political science in the 1940s and 1950s, which presumed a science of politics could be founded entirely on the basis of rational principles of individual behavior, and the result of the desire to maintain close connections between the practitioners and the academic study of world politics in a furthering of *Staatslehre*, or the proffering of advice to political leaders on the basis of profound and presumably unchangeable truths about human nature and the state system (Guilhot, 2008). It was to be a "special field" separate from the other social sciences. With support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the powerful example of Hans J. Morgenthau with his influential textbook, *Politics Among Nations* (the systematic confusion between nations and states is suggestive of the overall orientation), this vision became ensconced widely in U.S. academia particularly through the influence of academics at Columbia University and the University of Chicago. Relative unease over whether or not "international relations" constituted or could constitute a separate "discipline" (Kaplan, 1961) was never paralleled until recently by fears that it might well be a "science" based largely on projecting American views onto the world at large (Gareau, 1981; Grunberg, 1990; Kahler, 1993; Kripendorff, 1989; Smith, 1987). Eventually even the behavioralists at Princeton University melded into the pot by bringing their ideas of

modernization (basically, following in American footsteps) into the mix of what rapidly evolved into neorealism. The myriad students from all over the world who go off to do a preprofessional master's in International Relations at Tufts, Harvard, Chicago, and elsewhere (prior to working in the practice of foreign policy) find that most of their teachers subscribe to this theory of world politics, even if they also sometimes review other theoretical options, such as liberalism and constructivism. The most systematic study of research and teaching trends I am aware of (Long, Maliniak, Peterson, & Tierney, 2005) uses the terms "realism," "liberalism," "constructivism," "Marxism," and so on (terms with special definitions in the field of international relations that all seem to share many of the assumptions referred to in the next paragraph) to show, by means of a coding of research articles and a survey of teachers, that realism has declined relative to liberalism in research but remains dominant, if less so more recently, in syllabi and classroom teaching.

In this understanding, states stand as naturalized abstract individuals, the equivalent of individual persons in the realm of "international relations"; the distribution of technological and other economic advantages drives communication, competition, and cooperation; central or hegemonic states rise and fall as they succeed or fail in capturing the economic benefits of hierarchy; and the overall dynamic as far as each state is concerned is of gaining improvement in "advantage," either absolute (typically realist) or relative (typically liberal), within the overall system (Agnew, 2003). The heart of the perspective is a conception of a state of nature in the world in which the pursuit of wealth and power is projected onto states as the only way of escaping from the grasp of anarchy. A Freudian egotism is translated from the realm of the individual to that of the state (e.g., Schuett, 2007). Thus, a particular cultural conception of life is projected onto the world at large (Inayatullah & Rupert, 1994, pp. 81–82). More specifically, the belief in spontaneous order long regarded in the American ethos as the persisting motif of Americanism, as individuals pursue their own goals unhindered by government and thereby reach a higher synthesis out of disparate intentions, is thus brought to bear in the broader global arena with states now substituting for persons, albeit now tinged with a Germanic-Lutheran pessimism that necessitates interventions by the United States as the most benign and public-minded of "powers" when the "best" order fails to arise spontaneously (Agnew, 2005, p. 97; Grunberg, 1990; Inayatullah, 1997; Nossal, 2001).

The connection with actual U.S. foreign-policy making is crucial. Though international relations has claimed both a basis in the eternal facts of human nature and/or the state-systemic constraints on political action and an advisory role to the U.S. government in pursuit of its particular interests, it has been the latter that has tended to dominate. As a putative policy field, international relations has long attracted adherents more through its putative practical appeal than through its intellectual rigor (Kahler, 1997). Kripendorff (1989, pp. 31–32) refers to this attraction as the "Kissinger syndrome" or the "ambition to be accepted by or adopted into the real world of policy making, to gain access to the inner halls of power." He sees this ambition as something specifically American in its desire to provide a fixed intellectual foundation for why international relations must remain the domain of a specialized elite rather than be subject to democratic discussion and critique. In his

view, since the inception of the field following the Second Word War, the goal of international relations was the training of specialists and practitioners, not the creation of a “critical scholarly enterprise” (Kripendorff, 1989, p. 36).

In fact, considerable energy in academic international relations today in the United States and elsewhere focuses on the weaknesses of the neorealist synthesis even as the master’s programs continue to churn out would-be practitioners often oblivious to the political and theoretical bases of the arcane debates among some of their teachers (Long et al., 2005). The continuing, even revived, appeal of the neorealist synthesis seems to lie in its ritual appeal to U.S. centrality to world politics (the “necessary nation,” “the lender of last resort,” etc.) and in the enhanced sense since the end of the Cold War and after 9/11 of a dangerous and threatening world that must be approached with trepidation and preparation for potential violent reaction and intervention as mandated by realist thinking. Yet in practice there is a massive gap between the predictions of such theorizing and what actually goes into the making of U.S. (or any other) foreign policy, much of which has to do with persisting geopolitical orderings of the world and domestic interests and their relative lobbying capacities (Hellmann, 2009; Oren, 2009).

International relations as a field around the world has followed largely in American footsteps. I can attest that my own introduction to it in the late 1960s in Britain involved reading textbooks that came overwhelmingly from the United States. Debate about the relative degrees of theoretical “pluralism” in the United States and Britain suggests that at least the modes of categorizing theories are somewhat less hidebound in the latter than in the former and that in recent years at least there has been something of a parting of the ways across the Atlantic, with nonrealist views becoming much more widespread in British universities than in their American counterparts (Schmidt, 2008; Smith, 2008). More recently and elsewhere around the world, U.S. theories, particularly neorealism, have proved rather more pervasive and persistent. In Russia, for example, which one might not expect to be particularly congenial to U.S. ideas, the main academic journal about world politics, *Mehdunarodnyye protsessy* (International Trends), seems to adhere to ideas about international anarchy, nation-state developmentalism, and systemic constraints on state action that are remarkably similar to those represented by U.S. neorealism. Even the more liberal currents, reflecting on globalization and a less state-oriented world, mainly cite U.S. sources (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2007). Perhaps this tendency reflects the lack of local alternatives following the demise of official Marxist conceptions, dependence on funding from Western foundations, and a general disorientation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It does not, however, entail much by way of support for U.S. foreign policy, only a similar theoretical logic in arriving in this case at Russian-centered positions (Müller, 2008). The recent revival of Eurasian geopolitical thinking perhaps is a harbinger of a more Russian-centric mode of thinking as an alternative to imported brands (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2004).

Given the cumulative crisis of the United States in world politics over the past two decades, one might expect to see some emerging alternative theoretical visions

emanating from beyond U.S. shores. The so-called English School of international relations, associated in particular with the idea of "international society" but effectively realist in many respects, has recently undergone a concerted revival as an alternative to U.S. theories. It has certainly traveled well beyond Britain, even if with questionable success (e.g., Waever, 1992; Wendt, 1999). Zhang (2003) has examined how well it has traveled to China since Adam Roberts, one of its main advocates, visited Beijing in 1991. Lacking in equivalently talented entrepreneurs or salesmen and the institutionalized connections between U.S. and Chinese universities, the English School has had limited influence, according to Zhang, in comparison to the continuing dominance of U.S. scholars. But most of the main works are also not available in Chinese, and the major research institutes in China are run by people trained in the United States. To a large extent, therefore, academic Chinese knowledge of the "international" largely remains refracted through intellectual lenses made in the United States.

Within China, however, change is in the offing. Some Chinese academics write explicitly about what they term "international relations theory with Chinese characteristics" (Xinning, 2001). In other words, China has become involved in developing something akin to what happened in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. What is this Chinese synthesis? According to Xinning (2001), there are two variants, with the second smaller but growing more quickly. The first borrows the phrase "Chinese characteristics" from Deng Xiaoping to indicate an international relations theory that centers on China's need to protect its sovereignty, engage in peaceful coexistence with other states, and use Chinese language, thought, and expression. The second asserts a more radically Chinese vision of the world with China's status at the center of a surrounding system, Confucian "benevolent governance," the winning of conflicts without resorting to war, and interests, not morality, as the basis of interstate behavior. In Xinning's words:

> After the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, most social science disciplines (especially political science, sociology, and journalism) suffered a setback because of the government's campaign against the ideological liberalism of Chinese scholars and the so-called peaceful evolution initiated by the West. However, International Relations received a different treatment. Theoretical studies on IR continued to develop. The teaching of Western IR theories continued at key universities, and academic exchanges with the West in IR studies became more active. This was mainly because Chinese leaders worried more about China's isolation from the outside world than a "peaceful evolution." (Xinning, 2001, p. 62)

More recently, as Xinning makes clear, a new Chinese international relations is evolving which combines a range of elements (also see Yang & Li, 2009). As in the U.S. case, however, it is its connection to state policy that gives it special status. As in so many other features of the relationship between the United States and China, there is an almost mirror image in assumptions between the theory imported from the United States and what increasingly goes for "Chinese" international relations theory. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Conclusion

In brief compass, I have tried to illustrate one facet of the geography of knowledge, what I have called the geopolitics of knowledge, in relation to one body of thinking, so-called international relations theory. I have emphasized its founding in the early postwar United States, its travels around the world as a function of American hegemony, and the story of two alternatives, the English School, to illustrate the limits of pluralism, and the rise of an IR theory with "Chinese characteristics," to show how an alternative with hegemonic potential can begin to emerge. Who knows, particularly if this latter, as Callahan (2001) has said in direct response to Xinning's (2001) essay on Chinese thinking about world politics, adjusts to the more globalized and transnational world that has seemed, at least until recently, to be in the offing, then we may actually end up with a theory of world politics that avoids the inside–outside views of sovereignty and the need for a single hegemonic power that so much of recent IR theory has been devoted to normalizing (Agnew, 2009). Don't bet your house on it. As long as we have global political hierarchy, we are likely to have parallel "theories" of world politics which naturalize that state of affairs.

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