

IR'S RECOURSE TO AREA STUDIES: SILOISATION ANXIETY AND THE DISRUPTIVE PROMISE OF EXCEPTIONALISM

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Area Studies is the typically interdisciplinary and close study of specific geographical areas of the world. In its more successful forms, it engages in knowledge production that is self-reflexive, methodologically and theoretically aware, and wary of the application of generalised models to localised conditions.ⁱⁱ Area Studies promises the deep empiricism that can access local-actor theorisations of the international and undo the Western-centrism of International Relations (IR). At the same time, IR's recourse to Area Studies throws up perceptions of risk among some thinkers of the international: of fragmenting the discipline into regional or national silos and thereby producing new parochial formations, an alternate politics of domination and silencing, and ultimately, theoretical degeneration. It is the perception of these risks that I refer to in this short essay as 'silosisation anxiety' and to which I seek to respond by embracing an unlikely analytical resource and counterforce: exceptionalism. I make two analytical moves: framing exceptionalism first, as inherently extra-local and second, as a useful method of casing. Then, to illustrate my argument, I draw briefly on narratives of nuclear exceptionalism in South Asia and examine the relational work they do in framing the global in the local.

The tension between emancipation and risk within scholarly debates over the diversification of the discipline of IR is not new. Disciplinary pluralism has been championed for its potential to remake the boundaries of the field and to challenge its dominant assumptions; it has also been critiqued as a conduit to incoherence, and as an impediment to the accumulation of unified knowledge.¹ The same tension resurfaces in the nascent Global International Relations (Global IR) scholarship.

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iii Again, my thanks to Christopher Gerry for discussions around the promise and power of Area Studies in the context of departmental planning within the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), as well as to the participants of the European Area Studies Networking event convened by Timothy Power, Head of OSGA, from 30 to 31 January 2020.

Global IR seeks both greater inclusiveness and richer understandings of world politics.² Its concern is to understand the ways in which a diversity of actors ('we' IR scholars included) co-produce the global from different locations and with varied intentions, aspirations, and power resources.³ By privileging multiple socially and historically contingent constructions of the international, Area Studies can deliver the first of the two steps in the reconstruction of the discipline that Global IR imagines. However, if Area Studies only prioritises the particular and the exceptional, it can less obviously take the second step, of convening multiplicity into a unified project that contributes to the development of global theory. Implicit assumptions about the insular nature of Area Studies provoke nervousness that 'going local' will lead to a proliferation of multiplicities and therefore disciplinary decentralisation, rather than conventional grand or mid-range theorising. Recent Global IR scholarship has argued that the development of national schools of IR – a Chinese, Indian or Brazilian IR – and the production of exceptionalist national or regional claims, presents a specific kind of fragmentary threat.⁴ These exceptionalist narratives, so the warning goes, silo the discipline and function as an obstacle to the ideational interchange that is needed to globalise IR.

Here, I argue that exceptionalist narratives can be leveraged as a significant analytical resource within Global IR. Specifically, they offer one solution to the challenge of bridging general IR theoriesⁱⁱⁱ and local-actor theorisations of the international. Exceptionalist narratives can reflect the global as much as the local, respond to hegemony, and manifest resistance. This is because beyond the hegemonic core of mainstream IR and its spatial, political, economic, cultural, and racial substrate, 'the West', we very often find that the global is embedded in the local. If the hegemonic structures and logics at work at the global level in part *constitute* the local, then to study the local is also to study the global. What is required is a method through which to engage global-in-local narratives in a way that purposefully disrupts and remakes global theories.^{iv}

The first part of my argument rests on the claim that while exceptionalist narratives may *appear* parochial, they are always in some way extra-local – that is, they reach beyond the local to embrace parts of a wider context. While we might find it intuitive to differentiate between exceptionalist framings produced by policymakers on the one hand, and scholars on the other, exceptionalism-as-practice by definition does the work of highlighting the unique and the particular against one or more

iii Of course, there is an argument that general IR theories, too, most often emerge from local-actor theorisations.

iv While Gerlardi proposes 'different applications', 'revised versions', and 'homegrown theories' as three very useful strategies for 'going local' in Global IR, none aim for this form of radical disruption, see: Gerlardi, 'Moving Global IR Forward—A Road Map,' 9-12.

objects or contexts of comparison. In the practice of exceptionalism – whether narrated by scholars, practitioners or scholar-practitioners – we see not only things that people are doing, thinking, or observing in a particular location and time, but also the ways in which they place their doing, thinking, or observing comparatively within a broader global and historical context.

Numerous scholars have argued that exceptionalism is unexceptional, but it is also the case that not all exceptionalisms are created equal.⁵ Narratives of exceptionalism as they have been produced within the United States and Western Europe have worked to silence the non-West. American exceptionalism elevates the United States above the rest of the world both in discourse and in practice, seeking to transform the global in the image of the United States. But even US exceptionalism validates the point I seek to make about the global in the local. The emergence of US exceptionalism centred on a mapping of the global: distinguishing the United States from other nations, in particular from ‘the historical trajectories... attributed to Europe, to the Soviet Union, and to the Third World’.⁶ Like other forms of national and civilisational exceptionalism, US exceptionalism carries with it a particular evolution and empirical content rooted in politicised modes of differentiation from other nations and other civilisations.⁷ It was (and perhaps still is) inherently comparative.

Exceptionalism elsewhere might be different. Exceptionalist self-narratives can function as a response to hegemony as much as a tool of domination. Exceptionalist framings offer an important strategy for scholars and practitioners alike who seek to construct narratives within and about subordinate states and societies that are positioned in a global hierarchy structured by patterns of material, institutional, and ideological hegemony.⁸ If we agree that global dynamics and logics are nearly everywhere, in the form of ‘geopolitical competition and of new security threats; logics of global capitalism... and logics of social and technological change’, then wherever we study, we will find variations of these global dynamics and logics.⁹ It is unsurprising then that attempts to narrate and order the self, or to make sense of a given state and society from within, will also respond to, and develop narratives, no matter how implicit, about global dynamics and logics.

If exceptionalist framings are narratives of both the local and the global, how do we turn this observation into a method that contributes to theory building at the global level, and why might exceptionalism be particularly well suited to such a method? The second part of my argument draws on a conception of casing developed in the work of social theorist Michael Burawoy. Burawoy builds on the methods of the Manchester School, where a case study is selected not to illustrate a theory or extract a general rule, but on the basis of its disruptive potential. Important is not to seek to establish a ‘case’ as typical or representative.

Instead, we choose a case on the basis that it is an anomaly that *requires* a modification of existing theory.¹⁰ This is quite distinct to the idea of looking for a misfit between theory and empirical observations while at the same time remaining tied to the terms of existing debate and the frames of an existing analytical model. The onus is on producing theoretical change: dominant theories and concepts *must* evolve and respond to the challenge presented by the case, or even be replaced. Here we find a means to reconstruct general theory.

If our core objective is to seek out the cases that disrupt the narrative of casing implicit in a 'grand' or general theory, then exceptionalism does part of this work for us. Exceptionalism's focus on uniqueness places local doing and thinking comparatively and along lines of similarity within a broader global and historical context but is intended to highlight difference. For this reason, exceptionalism pre-cases the local in reference to dominant understandings of the global: it already alludes to the most different. Indeed, exceptionalist narratives, either as an object of study or the first step in our own efforts to read the local, not only tell us how local narratives frame the primary deviations from, or disruptions to, general global or grand theoretical narratives. They also contain important information about what local narratives consider those general global or grand theoretical narratives to be.

To illustrate the value of exceptionalism as an analytical resource, I draw briefly on narratives of Indian and Pakistani nuclear exceptionalism to explore some of the ways in which exceptionalism can function as an analytical resource. What is clear is that aspects of the global are a core feature of the local in these exceptionalist narratives. This must be so, because a central function of these narratives is to do the work of resistance in relation to hegemonic nuclear narratives.

India's exceptionalist narratives of moral superiority in relation to its stewardship of nuclear materials span several decades and have evolved from claims of self-restraint through the renunciation of nuclear weapons, to restraint in the possession of nuclear technologies, and, more recently, to restraint in the testing and possession of nuclear weapons.¹¹ Restraint claims persist as a mechanism of differentiating Indian behaviour within the global nuclear order, centring more recently on what Rajesh Basrur has referred to as 'minimalist' doctrine and practice, for example through the maintenance of small nuclear arsenals, a public commitment to no-first-use, and de-alerting.¹² Moral superiority is just one feature of India's nuclear exceptionalism, but it possesses great disruptive potential in view of the implicit assumption of much nuclear discourse, particularly in the United States, that implicitly frames non-Western states as irresponsible stewards of nuclear technology.¹³

Certain exceptionalist ideas about Pakistan's nuclear programme also resist and challenge the ways in which Muslim countries have been disproportionately subject to anxiety about the spread of nuclear

weapons. The connection between Islam and the bomb originated in Pakistan in the early 1970s, where nuclear weapons held promise to enhance the country's status within the so-called Muslim world.¹⁴ From the late 1970s, 'Islamic Bomb' became a term used by Western states to express fears around, and justify control of, the spread of nuclear weapons to Muslim countries, with attention paid to Iran in particular.¹⁵ After Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998, some scholars drew attention to the status of Pakistan's bomb as the first in the Islamic world.¹⁶ The idea of a bomb for Muslims gained salience for its resistance to historical assertions in the West of Muslim irresponsibility with nuclear technology.¹⁷ The irony of the idea of a bomb for Muslims is that it resists and challenges the dominant Western narrative that an 'Islamic Bomb' is inherently more dangerous.

How can we use these insights to purposefully disrupt general theorising about nuclear proliferation behaviours? Scott Sagan's well-known theoretical model of the spread of nuclear weapons rests on three explanations: national security, domestic political logics, and normative symbolism. Despite engaging with norms and drawing on cases across the globe, Sagan's account does not transcend Western-centrism in terms of its theoretical assumptions. To explain weapons acquisition, the model relies on linkages between national security, prestige, and nuclear weapons embedded firmly in a realist tradition. To engage with decisions to enact restraint in weapons acquisition, it draws on assumptions about the power and attractiveness of ordering ideas and institutions of the 'international' liberal order. Sagan's 'norms model' in particular, examines how state behaviour is shaped by shared understandings of legitimacy and appropriateness.¹⁸ Nowhere does this framework engage seriously with the political contestation around these norms that emanates from subordinate positionalities in the global nuclear order, and the behaviours of resistance and selective compliance that follow as their consequence.

Exceptionalist narratives of Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons decisions render visible the role of resistance to externally imposed racial and religious hierarchies, and strongly held convictions not just about the value of nuclear technologies themselves but also about the right to equal access to technologies of the modern. They also problematise implicit assumptions about the inherent moral value of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and any sense of a clear choice between its acceptance or rejection. Indian and Pakistani elites alike have criticised how the regime tolerates unequal outcomes and is permissive of selective nuclear excess, even as they have instrumentally leveraged parts of the regime themselves in efforts to legitimise their own and delegitimise one another's stewardship of nuclear technology.¹⁹ This is because the NPT regime is not simply a site of moral and political contestation, but as a core hegemonic structure of global nuclear order, it

is also a powerful resource.

Amidst my effort to argue that exceptionalism can manifest as a practice of resistance as well as domination, I remain aware that we should not read that resistance in a sanitised way. As a practice of resistance, exceptionalism can seek relationships of solidarity, or it can (re)produce forms of hegemony that exclude the less powerful. In both the case of India and Pakistan, below the level of the state, these exceptionalist narratives themselves enact dominance: whether we engage with state repression, justified through dominant developmental and nationalist discourses in the context of local resistance to the construction of nuclear power plants in Maharashtra, India; or with the ways in which Indian official narratives about racial exclusion in the global nuclear order under the Bharatiya Janata Party-led governments of the 1990s also drew on racist discourses about Islam and Muslims; or consider how anti-bomb lobbies in both India and Pakistan have been infantilised, branded anti-national, and ultimately silenced.²⁰ To point to the analytical utility of exceptionalist framings in subordinate states in the global hierarchy is not to ignore their real world potential for domination, as well as resistance.

In this short essay, I have proposed that one means through which to alleviate siloisation anxiety is to embrace its imagined core risk: exceptionalism. We should do so with care, being sure to leverage exceptionalism as a means to disrupt dominant narratives of the global (or general IR theories) and being sure not to ignore its capacity for both resistance and domination. The disruptive analytical potential of exceptionalism moves us towards an understanding of the global and the local not as two separate things in need of dialogue or reconciliation, but as already coexisting in a specific place and time, and in constant co-constitution.

Notes

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10 Michael Burawoy, 'The Extended Case Method,' *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998): 4-33; Michael Burawoy, 'The Extended Case Method,' in: *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Michael Burawoy et al. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1991), 271-287.

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