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Subject and object dualism: Problematique of the discipline of the international

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ABSTRACT

The subject and object separation with its roots in Cartesian dualism constructs the realm of ‘the international’ as universal and cosmopolitan. Europe emerged as a homogeneous space embedded in modernity ushered by enlightenment and renaissance, invented static spatio-temporality, synchronic history and geography, and installed the rest of the world (object) in this montage of ontological singularity (Kumar, 2023). The knowledge was produced by the civilised West and engraved on the tabula rasa of inferior and uncivilised non-West. The politicisation and naturalisation of the vocabulary of the paternalistic eurocentric world view led to the construction of ‘the international’ as monochromatic realm. A multifaceted multilayered epistemic approach to international can ground the subject and object into a relational epistem of ontological multiplicity. The examination of problematique of subject and object have the potential to free the ship of ‘international’ from the firm docking of the Eurocentric harbour and anchor it to the pluriverse of knowledge. This approach can explain the absent silent thought of space outside West.

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Introduction

The subject is the knower who constructs the object. The object is to know itself through the lens of the subject as it has no mind of its own. This subject and object dualism manifest itself in the construction of Europe as superior in relation to the inferior and uncouth non-West in the realm of the international. The autopoietic model of growth by Europe embedded in modernity occupies the positionality of subject which produces the object following its own expediency. The problematique of subject and object dualism underpinning Eurocentric meta-theoretical routes of the ‘international’ requires looking into Goldmann (1995) ‘discourse about IR discourse’ (Kumar, 2023). This notion put forth the discipline of IR into the dock of scrutiny. The history, geography, the politics, the identity of IR needs reexamination and needs inclusion of the context of distinct sociological topographies. The theories and methodologies of the discipline of International Relations being embedded in idiosyncratic ontology constitutes the world as a whole. There is a need to integrate the vernacular tropes of epistemology into the cosmopolitan episteme whose meta-theoretical routes are deeply Eurocentric. Mignolo (1995) reflects the role play of subject-object dualism and eurocentrism when he argues that the world is not one, but it is one for Europeans.

These concerns about the epistemological and the political implications of examining the situatedness of knowledge instead of taking it as pre-given have assumed increasing importance in IR since the Third Debate (Saramago, 2019). The positivist model of ‘truth as correspondence’ and its understanding of knowledge as a direct representation of an objective and independent world entailing a separation between subject and object critiqued by the post-positivists (Ibid.).

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Non-European scholars must bring into the consideration the distinct ontological embeddedness of their respective societies, which demands the instrumentalization of the episteme for the purpose of explaining the phenomenon known as 'the native' (Kumar, 2023). The native is the product of the subject object dualism. Eurocentrism is a contest between alterity and alterity of doubleness grounded on the very premise where constructing 'the other' and Europe as an epicentre, is accepted as the truth.

There is a need to actively look out the metatheoretical limitations that have been superimposed upon modes of understanding of the phenomenon of 'international' by grand theories of IR. Walt (1998) has analysed that a single theory is insufficient to explain complexities of the field of 'international' and suggest a pluriversal discipline. Neorealism is based on the premise that the world order is some fixed tangible entity. It is a singular monovalent notion, which imagined in terms of an ontology of the structuralist constant (Kumar, 2023). The materialist determinism in structural theory as propounded by Waltz, governed by the historicist logic of teleology which denies any possibility of transformational logic (Hobson, 2000). The methodological linearity of positivism through its endeavours to transcend history traps into unconscious ideology (Cox, 1986) and the history on which structural realism is based works on a methodology that separates the subject and object (Ibid.). In this way, history seen as objectified data, something which can arranged in strict chronology being oblivion to other parallel events. The grand theories have established a monolithic portrait of the world.

Construction of the 'international' through subject-object dualism

This portrait grounded in the ontological singularity which can be situated in the metaphysics of modernity (Kumar, 2023). Derrida (1968) concept of *différance* and iteration are pivotal in basing the subject as superior. Most of the dominant theories of IR reduce the phenomenon of 'international' to a particular static synchronised time and space. The predominately eurocentric universal model of the international dreads a multifaceted and multilayered epistemic approach as the latter approach brings in context of different sociological topographies, thereby dismantling the control of 'the subject' on object. The subject i.e., West is constructing knowledge itself and imposed it on object in a homogenous manner. The object in this way, is made aware about itself by the subject. Fanon (1952) in *Black Skin, White Masks* has highlighted that how ontologically being a Black man is not possible as the language of thought and recognition itself is of coloniser. The object embraces international paternalism as a discourse of benevolence rather than of exploitation, where the intervening subject acts on behalf of the weak and inferior object in such a way that it keeps prioritising the subject (Hobson, 2012). The order and anarchy dichotomies too build on the subject-object dualism. Anarchy emerges as the foundational truth and a self-evident proposition in designing the ontology of the 'international domain.' The anarchy-hierarchy principle has framed the linguistic cartography and conceptual vocabulary of the discipline of IR (Schmidt, 1998). The subliminal Eurocentrism of modern realism leads the international anarchy to deploy the conceptions of formal or informal hierarchy and gradated sovereignty where the West held as the subject of world politics while the East portrayed as the passive object following the norms of the Western powers (Hobson, 2012).

The emphasis on the systemic analysis was in fact founded on the motivation of making the international discipline in terms of methodological design of pure science. The theories were supposed to give an objective theorem of world order which explains as well as simultaneously predicts both war and peace. Thus, in a way 'international' consists of elements which are constant substratum of a changing and accidental manifestations (Cox, 1986). The nonlinear formulation grounded in historicist teleology presents a monochromatic view of the 'international.' The hegemony of the grand theoretical narrative is maintained by persistent repetition, reiteration and representation of the vocabulary which get its meaning from the Euro-American underpinning (Kumar, 2023 cited Derrida, 1978). The 'civilisation' which had been the most important categorisation in defining the realm of international itself was parochial, located in the definitive Eurocentric conception of time and space. Its definition designed on the eurocentric antinomies of science, reason, logic vs dogma, irrationality and blind belief (Kumar, 2023).

The distinction between enlightened modern world and a dark backward world pivoted upon a Manichean yardstick that differentiates societies between the culture of the post-enlightenment Europe and the culturally nonage races that lie beyond Europe (Kumar, 2023). It is in this montage where the subject and object get constructed. The question of what proper knowledge is and what is not, fabricates the agency of knowledge production. The Euro-American world takes the position of producers of knowledge basing its legitimacy on the fact that this world is 'civilised' based on modernity and science. The knowledge comes from rational enquiry and empirical observation in line with pure science. The rest of the world is to consume the knowledge uncritically to be able to be part of the 'international.' The object by default of being backward, considered as incapable of producing any knowledge and must mimic the pre-given progress teleology to be part of the IR discourse. Thus, in this way the subject and object dualism forms the foundation of intellectual history of the West which is ontological singular embedded in the principles of synchronic history.

Hegel has been one of the prominent influences in the framework of the grand theories of IR. His concept of 'the end of history' implies that the trajectory of history progresses to achieve the given goal and after realisation of the aims, the process of history culminates. Thus, for Hegel (1971) the post-enlightenment Europe due to its ability to logic and reason is a free world and represent 'the end of history' and Asia which lags in progress of civilisation, is the beginning of history (Kumar, 2023). Now, this conception of 'the end of history' exteriorises world history into hetero-spatial and hetero temporal civilisational formations, where the West and the East come as the places to exist in different time zones simultaneously (Ibid.). In this way, we can see how the subject has carved the road which must be taken. The path is reductionist, monovalent well as universal.

The very combination of post-cartesian positivist conception of instrumentalist knowledge and the post-hegelian notion of historicist teleology constitutes the foundational pillars of the grand theories of IR (Kumar, 2018 cited Davetak, 1995; Dodson, 2007). The hypostatisation of knowledge which was exclusively located in the monolithic metaphysics of modernity has served as the disseminator of knowledge to the object i.e rest of the world (Ibid.). The notion of culture hijacked in this subject and object dualism is based on post-Christian epistemology. Anghie (1996) highlights that how the sovereignty doctrine itself brought in to address the problem of cultural difference, which later formed the base for Grotius international law. The only valid knowledge was the knowledge by the logic and rationality of Cartesian dualism which accentuated the materialistic separation of the subject and the object. The mind served the montage of a singular civilisational geography, and the matter was supposed to follow it blindly. The Foucauldian nexus of knowledge/power is crucial in colonising the minds of the object (Kumar, 2023). Behera (2009) argues that modern Western belief systems premised on the separation between human beings (subject) and nature (object) and this very distinction serves as the basis for an instrumental relationship of domination. Seen from Nietzschean lens, the dark medieval age of Europe which had the ability to delegitimise Europe's position as the subject removed carefully from historical evaluation. Foucault has problematised the modern forms of knowledge which appear as given and natural, are contingent socio-historical constructions of power and domination and the task of enlightenment was to multiply the political power of reason (Kumar, 2023).

The language of translation and the language of mediation elaborate sovereignty doctrine as historically contingent and thereby serves for the unproblematic articulation of a European model of governance (Niang, 2018). The Berlin Conference of Africa (1884-1885) confirmed this sovereignty principle and asserted civilisational, cultural, racial, and political dominance of Europe over Africa (Ibid.). Africans divided into some arbitrary bounded identities to make nation states. The politicisation and naturalisation of this sovereignty principle considered Africa as tabula rasa and thus the subject provides the knowledge of the object called Africa. The language of colonisation- discovery, civilization and rescue perfected fiction into facts (Singh, 1996), and in this way the object got to know its history.

The order and anarchy dichotomy which is based on subject and object dualism to legitimise the superiority of the West over the rest of the world, which I have mentioned earlier can be reflected by examining neorealism. Neorealism is one of the grand narratives of international politics which again is based on structuralist ontology of system-centrism dismissing the agency of the unit level actors. Karl Popper (1959 as cited in Kumar, 2023) in his work 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery' explains the notion of falsification, which Waltz employs to make his conception of world order in allegiance to scientific theory. The notion of 'demarcation' which Popper uses for the purpose of differentiating between science and pseudoscience, has been employed by Waltz to distinguish between an anarchical and non-anarchical world (Kumar, 2023). The balancing equilibrium of Waltz's bipolarity model of the international system emanates from the Westphalian conception of international society. The Westphalian sovereignty model has been universalised by the subject by serving it on the platter and the object has idealised it to an extent where the the order of eating the dish from the platter too needs learning from the subject. The oriental world had to think now of their stepping into modernity, which was not the concern before, thus in a way the subject was making them aware of themselves. This paved the way for intellectual colonisation by the subject and a particular context limited in monovalent sociological topography through lexical cartography became cosmopolitan. In culmination the enlightenment universalism is an overarching imperial project which got internalised in such a way that it became a characteristic feature of the object.

The colonial encounter turned sovereignty into a reality which rationalised the configurations of differentiation (Nayar, 2014). Europe placed as a homogeneous space which endowed with the highest degree of human development. This homogeneity of space situated in a particular temporal trajectory i.e., the emptiness of time got its manifestation in uniformity, regularity and governmentality which emerged as byproducts of enlightenment (Kumar, 2023). The paradigms of European knowledge have been sanitised of references to substantive traces of others in the European self and the very coloniality of its power structure on the other (Quijano, 2007). This domination of Europe over the rest of the world as manifestation of the subject and object relations produces an alleged 'time gap', this gap introduces the problem of coevality (Fabian, 2002 as cited in Tickner and Smith, 2020). This 'time gap', later transformed into empty time where the non-age world is inferior to the West. The dual modality of historical time enabled representation of events as at once contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous and in between also allowed presentation of some conditions as more progressive than the others (Koselleck, 1988). This is what Goody (2006) refers to as 'theft of history'. It can, therefore, that every single dynamic, every aspect, and the process of international imbibes some degree of interdependence and intersubjectivity (Tickner and Smith, 2020).

Hedley Bull (1977) conception of international society originated in Europe with the Westphalian treaty. It is through colonisation by Europe that the rest of the world was integrated into the international order. This can also be genealogically connected to Waltzian balancing equilibrium (Kumar, 2023). In a way, the paradigmatic situatedness of the Westphalian Treaty has assumed the status of 'Copernicus revolution' in the discourse of IR (Linklater & Suganami, 2006 as cited in *ibid.*). However, this revolution which keeps Europe at the centre of cosmos, is half baked and resists the idea of ontological multiplicity. The modern West was the result of renaissance and enlightenment which brought the idea of thinking man. However, the geography where modernity could not reach, were considered as incapable of having any mental faculty or inferior weak mind, thereby the subject and object were craftily framed. The white man used the logic of inferior mind to exploit the resources as the native were not capable of rationality. Taking inspiration from Rousseau that freedom is not a fruit which can be grown under all conditions, self-determination was actively denied to the non-West based on the premise that they were not mature enough (Niang, 2008). The productive logic of capitalism was imposed on the rest of the world. Modernity, therefore served as the temporal taxonomy that gave Europe the power and exclusivity over thinking and with this authority taken as legitimate Europe took over writing histories of the world beyond suited to its own expediency.

The concepts of State, sovereignty, territoriality, anarchy, hierarchy, and order have been foundational in determining the semantic and semiotic trajectory of discourse of International Relations (Kumar, 2023). These concepts constitute the global lexicon of the ontological, epistemological and pedagogical formulations of the structured dissemination of knowledge in the domain of International Relations. The non-west thus inherited these concepts as a borrowed, alien language and practice; an effort to master the borrowings is possible, however, could never be made as their own (Niang, 2018). European disregard to the non-Western world and heuristic ignorance grounded in the cartesian dualism between subject and object creates an ontological imaginary of the world beyond Europe, which is typically stereotyped as uncouth, despotic and unruly. These sedimented meta theoretical lens induces a void between the realm of theory and the practical world. Its clear manifestation is observed when Western knowledge attempt to script the story of the history and nature of non-West. The historical project results in provincialization of globe as its epistemology is grounded in problems of modernity which resorts to the ontological singularity of the post-Hegelian interpretation of history (Kumar, 2023). As a result, a Eurocentric Westphalian conceptualisation of State, sovereignty, territoriality and spatiality guides its meta-theoretical imagination (Spruyt, 2020). The locating of cultural social situatedness of all knowledge process is crucial but has been ignored by positivist grand theories of IR which have assumed the immutability of world politics and thus, as a consequence are liable to reproduce, even if unintentionally, the perspectives of the national, state or class interest that predominately shape and benefit from existing world order and reiterates the subject-object dualism (Saramago, 2019).

The road to decolonising the dualism

Integration of mid level theory providing ontological distinctiveness with grand theories of IR by way of deparochializing the epistemic practices and vernacularisation of the vocabulary of grand theories (Kumar, 2023). The historicist teleology is inherently flawed guiding the ontological singularity of global world order. Sinocentric tributary system, the Islamic imperial geography, the South Asian Galactic empires have existed before the Westphalian big bang, therefore, Hendrik Spruyt (2020) demonstrates that international orders can also be formed even in absence of a hegemon (Kumar, 2023). Guha (1998) has highlighted the myth of ideological neutrality, which is central to liberal historiography, which performs the dual function of changing the world as well as simultaneously keeping the current state. The virgin births of IR needs to introduced in the institutions with a word of caution. Hoffman (1977) has highlighted that how International Relations was made as an American social science. Aron characterised international relations as the specialised activity of diplomats and soldiers, isolating the discipline from domestic policy (Hoffman,1977).

Gadamer (2013) has argued that the past cannot be seen as some objective phenomenon that can be decoded with mere positivist empirical enquiry rather the historical consciousness that acts as an epistemic lens of the understanding of the past tends to be deeply situated in the ontology of particular tradition (Kumar, 2023). Hence, horizontal dialogues are necessary to bring in alternative knowledge and in alternative knowledge and worldview. Horizontal dialogues entry into the debates of IR discourse would help in transcending anthropocentrism and the dualisms of modernity, particularly the nature/society divide (Tickner and Smith, 2020). The historicist teleology of Hegel which specifically builds the semantic base for the wall of separation between subject and object should be abandoned as the only way, there is need to see history in diachronic terms. The prismatic idea of civilisation which considers a spectrum of diverse cultural life forms should be the way out rather than treating the post-enlightenment of Europe as the only legitimate source of knowledge (Maletz, 1983). In this light, colonisation acted as as a form of self inscription onto the lives of people who were conceived artificially by pinning them into a particular cultural and geographical space which was hollow and blank (Spurr,1994).

Foucault has asserted that man is simultaneously subject and object of knowledge, this idea as a transcendental doublet can help in designing the conceptual map of a decolonised International Relations (Kumar, 2023). Locating at how the IR theory became the principle epistemic mediating and

disseminating the story of the history and how it got conditioned into a doublet that simultaneously manifests in the form of the subject as well as the object of spatio-temporal trajectory of the era of post-enlightenment era serves as the locus of decolonising the discipline (Ibid.). There has been effort to envisage a new era of 'non-Western IR.' However, such theorisation can lead to dangerous relativism diminishing any dialogue between national schools (Owen, et al., 2017). Moreover, non-Western IR falls again in the shadow dualism battle of who is the subject making the emancipation of the discipline of international difficult. This also makes IR about 'us and them' and therefore transforms into a self-referential project (Owen, et al., 2017). In this light, Prakash (1990) jests the Third World countries try to write their history as mere project of essentialism arising from a fixed space of enunciation (cited Kumar, 2025). Bilgin (2020) argues that IR needs to be opened up to researchers beyond West. Acharya (2014) talks of conception of Global IR, which can transcend the separation between the West and the rest by taking in account resistance and local constructions of global order.

Conclusively, Descartes' (1641) subject and object dualism which makes the distinction between the knower and what is known needs a pedantic look from the Heidegger perspective of Dasein which implies being in the world can help shed the distinction (Çüçen, 1998). The principle of relationality can lead us to the path of countering the subject and object dualism. It can provide a conceptual map for the arena of discipline of international relations which values interdependence. The paternalism of the Eurocentric theoretical framework of the grand theories of IR where the West is the subject and non-West is the passive object can be shed once the relationality principle enters the forte of international. This brings forth the idea that West and non-West are dependent on each other for the progress of history and displaces Europe from the position of subject. The international needs shaping through ontological multiplicity which takes in account the context of different sociological topographies. Designing any such discipline must take in account that multiplicity is not just about creation of national schools in international, but it also entails taking in account dissimilar cultural dialogue. The language English needs to serve as the lingua franca rather than being a lexical tool aiding the concealment of alternative knowledge systems and reiterating that the object has no mind. The object does have a mind of its own and is not tabula rasa, however, its rationality not guided by post-enlightenment of a particular geography. The reification of state as fixed territorial spaces is problematic as "chronopolitics" keeps changing the geographical basis of conventional international relations theory (Agnew, 1994, p.). This dynamism requires integration in the discipline of 'international' in real sense. Pogge (1993) has proposed the idea of vertical dispersal of sovereignty. This can prevent the hegemonisation and homogenisation of nation states. Therefore, sovereignty principle has played important role in historicist teleology. Seeing sovereignty as "a relational norm, as a divisible norm and as a modernization-bound norm" (Niang, 2018, p.) can rehistoricize the temporality in the discipline. Acharya (2014) questions why the Cold war period was seen as "long peace" despite battle deaths taking place outside Europe (p. 648). This predicament highlights how characterisations of time periods across world is centred on the subject's convenience.

Conclusion

The discipline of international is based on accounting dynamism on the world stage, however, in all practical sense, the discipline cages the plurality and constructs idea of cosmopolitan entailing subject-object dualism. The West defines what it is to be cosmopolitan, the rules are set by the subject to include the object. The paper, however, doesn't ask to abandon or displace the grand theories of the discipline, rather it actively proposes to situate the grand theories in their respective cartographic spatio-temporal location. The concepts deployed in the discipline of 'international' should be reformulated so that the bias toward the subject can be minimised. For example, sovereignty as a principle was used by West to ground its position in the global map, however, this same principle alienates and questions the autonomy of the non-West (Niang, 2008). The whole bucket of 'failed state' seeks its legitimacy from the very point that subject knows better. In contemporary geopolitical scenario, US invasion on Venezuela was deploys subject and object dualism; the object needs nurturing under the subject. Looking at the discipline from this lens reminds us of the paradox highlighted by Chatterjee (1993) that we tend to think that colonialism

is something which we have kept behind, however, when we talk of modern world, we keep invoking and worshipping the linearity. The concept of ‘discovery’ needs to be problematised. The decolonial lens involving anthropology as the methodology can question the privileged epistemological position of the West. The subject i.e the discoverers brought in new knowledge which was circulated via binaries such as civilization and barbarism; tradition and modernity (Singh, 1996). The native agency becomes an empty signifier (Kumar, 2025). Space is abstract and lacks human values, can be accessed discursively through symbols and representations but is empty; however place is a location marked by human experiences (Tuan 1977 as cited in Chatterjee, 2019). The domain of ‘international’ stemming from subject and object dualism concerns itself with only space. However, what is needed is grounding of the discipline of ‘international’ in the ontological plurality, so that people and place as concepts are not ghettoised. The core of dualism doesn’t allow the autonomy for heteronormativity to coexist and thereby it is crucial to be critical of the very foundation of the discipline, so that subaltern can speak as well as gets heard. The discipline should be cautious to not get caught in the maze of relativism rather should aim for pluralism. Tickner (2011) has urged to “uncover stories about forgotten spaces that respect difference, show tolerance and compassion, and are skeptical about absolute truths”.

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