REVISITING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY: DISCOURSES FROM AFRICA

Sandy Africa*, **Suzanne Graham****

Abstract

African voices and experiences have been erased from the canon of mainstream IR theory, and even in well-intentioned accounts that take the power dynamics between the developed and underdeveloped world into account. This is a product of a worldview that sees the European experience of modernity as a template for what the world should look like. Denying the experiences of slavery, colonialism and imperialism as pivotal in understanding international relations, as well as refusing to acknowledge the philosophical and intellectual contributions of African thinkers, and the agency of African actors, is detrimental to our understanding of the international, and to IR. There is a new generation of young intellectuals, including women from the Global South, who are rewiring the African experience and offering new theoretical insights.

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* Sandy Africa, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, holds a MA in African Politics and a PhD in Public Management. Her research interests include civil-military relations, security sector governance, intelligence oversight, geopolitics and peacebuilding. Contact: sandy.africa@up.ac.za

** Suzanne Graham, Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, holds a PhD in Political Science. Her research interests are South Africa's foreign policy, the United Nations, small states, and terrorism studies. Contact: suzyg@uj.ac.za

Introduction

There are 195 states in the world today. Two of these are recognised as non-member observer states by the United Nations – the Holy See and the State of Palestine. If we break this down, 54 states are African, 48 are Middle Eastern and Asian, 44 are in Europe, 33 are Latin American or Caribbean, 14 exist in Oceania and 2 in Northern America. And yet mainstream International Relations (IR) theory is defined by the Anglo-American perspective, notwithstanding the fact that each of these regions has contributed to scholarship on international dynamics through the contributions of their philosophers and intellectuals. The Anglo-American bias has troubled scholars of IR for some time, since it skews global realities and excludes from scrutiny inequalities, disparities, marginalisations, and other forms of power relations in the international system, reducing them to footnotes within the constructed limits of IR[1].

This is not to say that geography should be the priority indicator of the seat of knowledge production – at least not anymore. The growing network of academics and theorists travelling the globe in the wake of globalisation, the expanded opportunities provided by the internet and online communication tools, as well as the growing importance of conference diplomacy and diaspora communities means that scholars from anywhere can produce knowledge while sitting in an office in Cambridge or Oxford in Great Britain. Tickner[2] argues that "many aspects of the inner workings of IR continue to be underexplored, including its 'geography,' that is, its placedness or situatedness… What role specific locations have in the making of scientific knowledge, how

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[1] Steve Smith, "The United States and the Discipline of International Relations: 'Hegemonic Country, Hegemonic Discipline'" in *Review of International Studies*, no. 2(4), 2002, pp. 67–86; Arlene B. Tickner, "Hearing Latin American Voices in International Relations Studies" in *International Studies Perspectives*, no. 4, 2003, pp. 325–350.

[2] Arlene B Tickner, "Core, Periphery and (Neo)imperialist International Relations" in *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 3(19), 2013, pp. 627-646.

local experience is transformed into shared generalization, and, vice versa, how local scholarship is influenced by global forces, are all questions that have only begun to be addressed." Mgonja and Makombe[3] support this view. According to them:

> "…knowledge produced in IR is a predominantly Eurocentric worldview which mystifies the ways in which states and international systems are anchored in political, social and economic relations. In fact, this worldview remains too parochial to accurately describe, explain and/or predict the behaviour of the world in its 'inclusive' manner."

Zondi[4] takes the argument even further, stating that international relations is in fact not 'international' at all, at least it is not global or universal, but rather it is sectional and regional and that this is central to the question of the relevance of IR theory in non-European, non-Western, contexts.

The question that arises is not so much where scholars are located geographically, as the assumptions that are made of the world, and of Africa and the lenses through which it is seen. This article highlights important debates raised in several seminal pieces in the literature that help us to tease out the core thinking behind why, what and how we can think of Africa in IR. It further examines selected trends and issues prevalent within the developing body of IR theory in Africa. In so doing it raises the question of what it means to study IR in a time of extensive global political, economic, social, cultural technological and environmental change and contradictions, a potentially and transformative moment in the study of the international or global. Exploring African conceptual contributions to IR in this context allows us to break free of exclusionary identities or limited, narrow, historical IR

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[3] Boniface E.S. Mgonja and Iddi A.M. Makombe, "Debating International Relations and its Relevance to the Third World" in *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, no. 1(3), 2009, pp. 27-37.

[4] Siphamandla Zondi, "Decolonising International Relations and Its Theory: A Critical Conceptual Meditation" in *Politikon*, no. 1(45), 2018, pp. 16-31.

constructs and rather explore all viewpoints and experiences with equal weighting, in a holistic way and with the understanding that diverse voices can and should contribute to IR discourses.

The contribution of African scholars to IR theory and debate

It is not our intention to provide an exhaustive account of African contributions to IR theory: this would require a much more detailed treatment. Instead, we hope to illustrate, not only that African scholarship has contributed to the discipline that is defined as IR, but that there are specific considerations which, if placed more centrally in the body of the discipline, could provide a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of the global. Smith[5] argues that it is "important to clarify what is meant by 'African' in IR scholarship and the related question of who can speak on behalf of Africa(ns)". Africa has incredible political, ethnic, and social diversity, and no one part or group can claim to speak for the lived experiences of all the others. The topic of 'who can speak for Africa' is an overarching one and full of complex issues including heritage, culture, indigeneity, roots and genetics[6]. There are some authors[7] who believe that a truly African scholar writes only on Pan-Africanism or from a Pan-Africanist perspective and is black.

And yet we know that there are many worthy accounts of IR in Africa that emanate from Western authors. Zartman[8] provides a rich account of the foreign relations between states in North and West Africa

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[5] Karen Smith, "Has Africa Got Anything to Say? African Contributions to the Theoretical Development of International Relations" in *The Round Table*, no. 402(98), 2009, pp. 269-284.

[6] And if you believe in reincarnation, the possibility of one human soul living multiple lives and experiencing multiple lifetimes, cultures and contexts can make the debate even more complicated.

[7] See the discussion in Isaac Odoom and Nathan Andrews, "What/who is Still Missing in International Relations Scholarship? Situating Africa as an Agent in IR Theorising" in *Third World Quarterly*, no. 1(38), 2017, pp. 42-60.

[8] William Zartman, *International Relations in the New Africa*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966.

from 1956 -1965, coming to the conclusion that what drove the relationships were the goals of independence, unity and development. The realities confronting these states domestically, and the issues faced by other states in the region, drove decisions around alliances and cooperation, national security, and economic development. Tandon points out how the relations of dependency have been strengthened and reinforced in post-colonial Africa, pointing to the way in which post World War II international structures have favoured Western nations at the expense of the underdeveloped countries, and created an economic disequilibrium for Africa, particularly. Ian Taylor[9] has written of African international relations in contemporary times, arguing that South-South relations are a growing feature in Africa's international relations and that African political elites are conscious actors in how they engage in global processes and international institutions. And Carbone[10] reflects a body of IR scholarship in contemporary times that does not see or theorise Africa as a passive space, but a dynamic area where actors are engaged in multiple and complex interactions, between themselves and with the rest of the world.

Smith[11] contends that African contributions can include "insights or contributions by African scholars (working both within Africa and beyond); insights or contributions by non-African scholars working on Africa; insights gleaned from a close interpretation of African experiences."

Within the discipline of IR, Africa and its challenges are not ignored; but what African scholars may have to offer in the form of knowledge production is, and it this is distinction which we contend is unhealthy for the discipline. More charitably, it is not that Africa and the challenges it faces have been ignored by non-African scholars, but rather

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[9] Ian Taylor, *The International Relations of Sub-Saharan Africa*, N.Y, London: Continuum, 2010.
[10] Maurizio Carbone (ed.), *The European Union in Africa. Incoherent Policies, Asymmetrical Partnership, Declining Relevance?*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013.
[11] Karen Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

that the fallback position is simply to assume how Western mainstream theory can be used by Africans to deal with these challenges. That is, this disregard or lack of awareness of the value that African theorists could provide contributes to the perception of a stagnant discipline that cannot explain the lived experiences of many people across the globe. Part of this stagnancy is African scholars themselves who may be limited by their beliefs in conforming to these entrenched perspectives[12]. Another challenge is that Africa has many life-threatening situations to resolve and so the perception exists that intellectual efforts would be better spent on policy solutions to these crises, as opposed to theoretical efforts to explain the world around us.

Nkiwane[13] contributes to the literature by drawing upon the salient arguments proffered by African scholars to prominent themes within international relations discourses, but not before pointedly remarking that 'a fact that is rarely mentioned in the literature is that colonialism and imperialism in Africa existed parallel to the development of the canon of IR'.[14] She invokes the work of prominent African studies scholars such as Mkandawire, Ake, Amin and Mamdani[15], all of whose analyses on the state, citizenship and identity in Africa provide important departure points for IR scholarship. She examines the simultaneous growth of both postcolonial debates and IR as a Western discipline. The decolonisation of the rest of the Africa continent, for example was a crucial driver of postcolonial pan-African solidarity, for example – a crucial factor in international relations. She also lays bare some of the assumptions of liberalism from the traditional Western perspectives which for a long while held that Africa had nothing to offer the democratic, liberal debate as the continent has offered

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[12] *Ibidem*, pp. 269-284.
[13] Tandeka C. Nkiwane, "Africa and International Relations: Regional Lessons for a Global Discourse" *in International Political Science Review*, no. 3(22), 2001, pp. 279–290.
[14] *Ibidem.*
[15] *Ibidem.*

numerous examples of non-starter states. Therefore, by implication, African scholars would have no experience to draw from in their writings about this enduring question within the discipline. Whether it is ignorance of African voices, or disinterest in what they may have to offer, what is clear is that 1.3 billion people in Africa have 1.3 billion lived political, economic and social experiences to share through study and interpretation and this is a gift to the intellectual world more narrowly and to the 'switched-on' world globally.

Nkiwane also provides a critique of mainstream liberalism- so embedded in the value system associated with Anglo-American IR - which refers to rights and responsibilities but historically has been selective in terms of whose rights mattered and who ought to take responsibility for the welfare of fellow human beings. This debate continues today but how much more enriched would this debate be if African scholars' conceptions of the rights debate were included in the discussion? For example, liberalism traditionally does not deal with the question or concept of 'racialized privilege' and its consequences for millions of people who may or may not have benefitted from colonialism and its legacies in Africa and around the world. By delving into this concept, and its related phenomena, and by embracing critical reflection, intricacies underpinning theoretical understandings could be revealed or more deeply explored in terms of how states deal with rights and responsibilities in respect of each other in the 21st century.

Another mainstream assumption of liberalism, for example, which Western IR has tended to universalise, is the democratic model which expounds that all citizens ought to have the right to select their own governments through routinely, free and fair elections. Graham[16] contends that there is ample literature to attest to the fact that forms of democratic practice already existed in Africa, and in ancient India and Mesopotamia, long before territories were colonised and therefore

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[16] Victoria Graham, *Pass or Fail? Assessing the Quality of Democracy in South Africa*, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2015, p. 47.

African 'consensual governance' as a theoretical contribution to the discipline ought to be recognised as a serious contribution to the body of knowledge on democratic governance as a liberal tenet. Others argue that ancient African communal governance, or variants thereof, can be reconstructed and applied in contemporary circumstances globally[17].

Within a decade of Nkiwane's article, Smith[18] writes in 2009 of how contributions from Africa can enrich our understanding of IR. Smith offers us four ways in which African stories can be utilised. The first pertains to the reinterpretation of old stories. In other words, a valid argument exists that suggests that there is nothing more to discover in IR theory and that scholars would simply be mimicking, localising or rehashing old stories in new ways. Smith's argument here is that there is nothing wrong with rehashing old stories and that this is the point of opening up the sphere of academic knowledge and influence. Re-interpretation is one way to do this. So is originality and imagination. Smith[19] contends that "…these potential contributions from the non-western world are worth inquiring into, and revision/adaptation of existing theory should not be excluded".

A second way is telling stories in a different language. By this Smith means that stories can be retold by localising the language, or the concepts, used. An African re-reading or reconstruction of terms could help general IR concepts 'fit' better in the context of Africa. Qobo and Nyathi[20] provide an analysis of the need for an Ubuntu paradigm in IR. Although in their view, the concept 'ubuntu', has been "used as a 'catch-all' term to characterise the norms and values that are inherent in many traditional African societies", they prefer to characterises ubuntu as

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[17] Claude Ake, "The Unique Case of African Democracy" in *International Affairs*, no. 2, vol. 69, 1993, pp. 239-244.

[18] Karen Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-284.

[19] *Ibidem.*

[20] Mzukisi Qobo and Nceku Nyathi, "Ubuntu, Public Policy Ethics and Tensions in South Africa's Foreign Policy" in *South African Journal of International Affairs*, no. 4, vol. 23, 2016, pp. 421-436.

"those frames of knowledge that are primarily grounded in African realities, perspectives and cultural practices, but resonate with humanism in its universal sense". Thus, ubuntu in foreign policy could be offered as an alternate paradigm to neutralise the power politics at play between Global North, developed, and Global South, developing, countries. Of course, language can hold unpalatable connotations. It can be a value-laden and highly emotive identifier and the use of certain words can create controversy. Consider the fallout in African scholarly circles in response to Ali Mazrui's[21] use of the word 'self-colonisation', when he argued that African leaders ought to take responsibility for Africa's challenges. It is also necessary to consider how Francophone countries in Africa, and Anglophone countries, may still be experiencing indirect 'influence' in terms of their day-to-day language use tied to colonialism.

Smith's third option is to tell stories in IR with new main characters. In other words, non-state actors should be feature more prominently in IR, especially in light of the retreat of the state debate and African society offers an abundant wealth of data on national versus international politics. Chipaike and Knowledge[22] contend that African actors are not peripheral players in IR and have proven themselves to be active agents in global politics. This agency can be even more effective if African agents continue to harness the delicate relationship between state and non-state actors in their relations with non-African partners.

Smith's final option is to tell stories about existing characters but with a new plot. By this she means that it is worth exploring those African cases considered to be contrary to the norms of the IR discipline as examples for the discipline on how to understand Africa and the greater world. Her reference to West African regional integration is one such example. Ihedru (quoted in Smith) discusses how Africa appears to

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[21] Ali Mazrui, "Self-Colonization and the Search for Pax Africana: A Rejoinder" in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 20-22.
[22] Ronald Chipaike and Matarutse H Knowledge, "The Question of African Agency in International Relations" in *Cogent Social Sciences*, no. 1(4), 2018, pp. 1-16.

be setting the trend through novel forms of regional integration such as the adoption of a formal mixed-actors coalition of states and civil society groups in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Zondi[23] and others who are increasingly committed to a 'decolonial turn' in IR contend that there are five key areas that ought to be investigated in order to diversify voices speaking in the field of IR. Zondi labels the first as the long-needed "methodical medications required as the first step in exploring the decolonisation of knowledge and IR as a discipline". The second deliberately asks who speaks and who does not speak in IR discourses. The third follows on from this point and induces scholars to reveal the historical and contextual circumstances feeding the 'classic' IR texts considered to be fundamental to the IR discipline and in turn highlight the presence of marginalised voices in this discussion. The fourth argument considers the practice of teaching IR to 21st century students and the need to revisit teaching philosophies in a mindful way, in order to ensure that what we teach reflects global realities and does not perpetuate closed or limited paradigms. Zondi's final note concerns asymmetric power relations in the IR academy. Justifying the case for a more Afrocentric approach in IR, Zondi cites as an example the fact that the European experience of integration is held up as the benchmark against how African integration should be seen and measured. The Afrocentricity he calls for in IR is driven by the search for an alternative lens. Nevertheless, he cautions that "this is not a case for valorisation of every thought, philosophy or theory with African origin, but a demand for recentering Africa by de-centering Europe in the study of Africa."[24]

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[23] Siphamandla Zondi, *op. cit.*, 2018, pp. 20-25.
[24] Siphamandla Zondi, "Decolonial Turn and the Case for an Afrocentric Analysis of African Integration", in Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Siphamandla Zondi (eds.), *Decolonizing the University, Knowledge Systems and Disciplines in Africa*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2016, pp. 239-259.

In the IR sub-discipline of diplomacy studies, Spies[25] challenges the notion that Western diplomacy is the civilised tool of foreign policymakers. She argues that Africa is the birthplace of diplomacy. Her evidence is inscribed clay tables dating back to antiquity which reflect Egypt's relations with its neighbours. She also refers to the rich and vibrant international relations existing on the continent in ancient Aksum (Horn of Africa) and elsewhere, including the "use of intermediaries, observance of ceremonial protocol, presentation of credentials, and respect of customary legal norms such as the sanctity of treaties and inviolability of envoys". The *Encyclopdedia of Diplomacy* is a useful review of diplomatic practices from the viewpoint of the marginalised South.

Coming full circle, Thakur, Davis and Vale[26] contribute to the literature by revisiting the origins of IR conventionally considered to be 1919 in the first Department of International Politics in Wales. This article systematically examines an alternate origins story of how central IR ideas such as the 'international'; sovereignty, empire, and Commonwealth were really born from the margins of the empire, Johannesburg, South Africa in particular. According to these authors, Johannesburg became a "laboratory of such ideas and their first implementation. These ideas were then circulated, moulded and formalised through networks of people and institutions across the British Empire". This refers to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The second Anglo-Boer War, prior to the union, had induced the four colonies of southern Africa to merge into a union, thereby dissolving their individual sovereignties. A group of young intellectuals committed to achieving imperial goals were important actors at the time and helped to extrapolate the South African experience to the global imperial arena. Among them were Lionel Curtis, Robert H Brand and Philp Kerr, all mentored by the former British High Commissioner to

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[25] Yolanda Spies, "African Diplomacy", in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Encylcopedia of Diplomacy* <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118885154.dipl0005> accessed on 11 November 2019.

[26] Vineet Thakur, Alexander Davis, Peter Vale, "Imperial Mission, 'Scientific' Method: An Alternative Account of the Origins of IR" in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, no. 1(46), 2017, p. 7.

South Africa (1897-1905), Lord Alfred Milner, and who became known as 'Milner's Kindergarten'. This article helps to reveal how "considering IR's pasts would tell us more about its conscious blinkers built through theory"[27].

Emerging issues and trends in International Relations Theory in Africa

African scholars teaching International Relations in Africa, have for some time been concerned that the framing of the discipline has not captured or reflected the African experience in international affairs. Yet to argue that the issues around which IR education is generally constituted - theories and assumptions of IR (such as realism, idealism and constructivism); the evolution of the global political economy; states and the inter-state system; foreign policy and diplomacy; international organisations; non-state actors in IR; and globalisation - are irrelevant in Africa, would be to deny their constitutive role in how the world is seen and sees. What African IR scholars have done, and continue to do is to locate the unique contribution and location of Africa in the global system and in the contemporary world, to explore the sub-regional dynamics in key geopolitical spaces (Southern Africa, West Africa, and East Africa), as well as to interrogate the challenges of conflict resolution and promoting development. This approach to the study of IR engages with the discipline in its ever-evolving state, whilst recognising that it offers an incomplete account.

There is a host of issues and themes deeply implicated in the study of Africa, the primary one being the state. Comparing the African experience of state formation, South African IR scholar Schoeman[28] has written:

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[27] *Ibidem*, p 23.

[28] Maxi Schoeman, "Africa's International Relations", in Patrick J McGowan, Scarlett Cornelissen, Philip Nel (eds.), *Power, Wealth and Global Equity: An International Relations Textbook for Africa*, Cape Town: Institute for Global Dialogue & UCT Press, 1999.

The Westphalian states of Europe developed over centuries to reflect compromises between the rulers and the ruled, and between rulers themselves. These states came to form units of production and units of meaning, thereby making social, cultural and economic sense. In contrast, African states were 'created', and statehood was imposed at independence regardless of logic or historical, social, economic and political conditions.

The slave trade, the 'Scramble for Africa' and the decades of colonialism that followed have had an enduring effect on the lived experiences of African, African descendants and the African diaspora. For Europe these developments have expedited global expansion in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, a bloody period of inter-state conflict. For Africans, the experience of the same period was one of colonial conquest, land dispossession, nationalist movements and liberation struggles. But it would be wrong to ignore the exploitation of the working class that was taking place in Europe, the international solidarity that was established between trade union movements across the world, the growth of the non-aligned movement to resist the pressures of the bipolar confrontation between the US and the Soviet during the Cold War, and the solidarity that was shown by people of conscience who were involved in the international campaign to end apartheid in South Africa. When these experiences are introduced into the narrative, they provide new analytical lenses for understanding the international. The so-called World War I and World War II must be seen through the prism of what territory, statehood and citizenship mean for the persons who fought in the wars, and on whose lands the wars were fought; the Cold War, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, '9/11' and the 'War on Terror', – all these experiences were experienced as sources either of security for some and insecurity for others.

It is only a view of history, and of international relations that takes into account the broad sweep, that does justice to history, and can begin to build a robust theory and understanding of international relations.

In his critique of IR theory Grovogui[29] warned of a post-Cold War tendency to assume that Western hegemony had 'won' and that liberal democracy and capitalism were assuming their 'rightful' places, rendering irrelevant "theories of imperialism, dependency, uneven development and others that once sought to explore the political and institutional context of late-modern inequities between states, nations, classes and genders". Instead they had looked to cultures and civilizations as ways of explaining away the unevenness of modernity. The 'Asian Tigers' (Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong) were therefore deemed as successful, whilst African states were pathologized and treated in the literature as 'failed', 'collapsed' and 'rogue' states. Grovogui warned against these subtle references to race as a basis for explaining state failure - pointing out that even established IR scholars are guilty of this false understanding – referring to it as a racialisation of IR theory. By this he means the "internalisation by international relations theory of the modern ontological discourse pertaining to civilizations, cultures and race"[30].

This ontological framework has penetrated the frame of international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which portray Africa as incapable of operating like other continents. The basis of this racialisation of IR has been the claim that westernisation equates to humanisation, whilst erasing from its history, the violent nature and impact of colonisation, including the imposition of Western institutions as universally appropriate. The extolling of the virtues of white modernity has held the politically "chaotic European context of modernity as the proper place to look for useful insights for the future."[31]

So whilst the ideas of 'Hobbe, Locke, the Abbe de Saint Pierre, Rousseau, Jefferson, Madison, Kant and Wilson' are looked on favourably and have informed IR theory, he claims that there is a lack of interest in

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[29] S. Grovogui, "Come to Africa: A Hermeneutics of Race in International Theory" in *Alternatives*, no. 26, 2001, pp. 425-448.

[30] *Ibidem.*

[31] *Ibidem.*

theorising the black experience, or of properly narrating the experience of revolution and social change in society. Obviously, this is going to call for a new set of philosophers to account for and interpret the African experience in international relations. For example, Grovogui points to a 'whitening' of European history, using the example of De Gaulle's efforts to whiten the image of French troops after World War II, by confining African soldiers to barracks, away from Paris. This is but one example that many international scholars are guilty of perpetuating and is little different to the uninformed view that African-descended societies were without any order, legitimising the project of colonial conquest.

In current debates on the decolonisation of IR, the erasure of the contributions of political actors from places other than the Western world, is being challenged, along with the domination of Western epistemology and methodology. Intersectionality in IR offers a great opportunity to make the connections between race, class and gender. At a recent Millennium conference held at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences in October 2019, under the theme *Extraction, expropriation, erasure? Knowledge production in International Relations*[32], the listed topics are encouraging and also offer an indication of where thinking is going in IR discourses. Significant in the debates were the voices of women. Yolande Bouka[33] for example, criticises the prioritization of Western history in IR and argues that the erasure of non-western stories and experiences leaves the discipline the poorer for it. Sara Salem[34], through the lens of postcolonialism and feminist theory, uses memory studies to explore how our understandings of time and space impact on how we make sense of the

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[32] Kelly-Jo Bluen, Extraction, expropriation, erasure? Knowledge production in International Relations, 2019 <https://millenniumjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ conference_ programme_SPREADS_V5_compressed.pdf> accessed on 15 November 2019.

[33] Yolande Bouka, Department of Political Studies, 2019 <https://www.queensu.ca/ politics/people/faculty/yolande-bouka> accessed on 21 November 2019.

[34] Sara Salem, Department of Sociology, 2019 <http://www.lse.ac.uk/sociology/people/sara-salem> accessed on 21 November 2019.

world. And Olivia Rutazibwa[35] is exploring a decolonial critique of 'ethical foreign policy' of regional actors such as the European Union.

Of particular interest is the growing number of contributions dedicated to questions about the climate and environmental degradation. This African agency is especially important as the continent faces address challenges of food security, climate change consequences, and sustainability issues going forward. Less encouraging is the lack of attention directed at small states and the voice they have in IR[36]. Power politics must be acknowledged for what it looks like in every avenue of inter-state relation and this means that small states, and small island states, also have a role to play.

Emerging from discussions around increasing insecurities in the modern world due to the role and activities of human beings is the unstable geological epoch – the Anthropocene. Harrington[37] contends that IR has "largely failed to engage the Anthropocene challenge". This is an important and unique opportunity for IR scholars globally, as it offers an avenue of relatively underexplored study in IR. This reflects 'a clean slate' for voices from across the globe. There is no mainstream view, as yet, to limit how this topic should be navigated. Moreover, Harrington urges IR thinkers to "reconsider some of its core understandings – particularly the relationships between the normative categories of humanity, the international system of states based on sovereignty and non-interference, and the natural world. It must abandon its atomistic theories of the international and begin thinking much more deeply about ideas of human entanglements with the larger world within which we exist"[38].

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[35] Olivia Rutazibwa, University of Portsmouth, 2019 <https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/our-staff/olivia-rutazibwa> accessed on 21 November 2019.

[36] Suzanne Graham, "Drivers of the Foreign Policies of Southern African Small States" in *Politikon* no. 1, 2017, pp. 133-156.

[37] Cameron Harrington, "The Ends of the World: International Relations and the Anthropocene" in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, no. 3(44), 2016, pp. 478–498.

[38] *Ibidem.*, p. 479.

African scholars cannot afford to be complacent about the massive geopolitical shifts taking place, in particular the return of Great Power politics, this time with new actors, like China in the mix. Here it is interesting to note, that contrary to much Western scholarship and foreign policy outlook that assesses China's role in Africa as essentially predatory, there is a more complex view on China's role in Africa in the literature coming out of Africa.

Superimposed on a landscape which still bears the scars of the past, it becomes urgent for scholars trying to understand Africa to equip themselves with the relevant knowledge and frameworks. That the role of emerging powers is receiving attention is to be welcomed. New trends are emerging and the implications of the role of middle powers is receiving attention in the literature. With the influence of traditional powers in international security, Call and de Coning[39] provide an excellent comparative account of the role of rising powers in peacebuilding. The fact that these include African countries such as South Africa, alongside countries like Brazil, India, Turkey and Indonesia, opens up new and underexplored pathways for the study of international relations.

Conclusion

The articles in this special edition of *Studia Europaea* reflect the thinking of IR scholars on contemporary problems and challenges that impact on Africa. The changing global political economy, the problematization of space (including the maritime domain) and citizenship, the role of non-state actors in international relations, the quest for peace and the implications of migration for identity and belonging, are some of the themes that the authors grapple with. The opening of the intellectual space for new theoretical framings of international relations in Africa, is significant and driven to a large extent by developments in academic institutions which are being challenged to think deeply about their

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[39] Charles T. Call and Cedric de Coning (eds.), *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding: Breaking the Mold?*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

relevance. The contradictions in higher education – unaffordable fees; lack of adequate accommodation; alienating institutional cultures; poorer job prospects as economies go into decline – has raised questions about the role of academic institutions. Student movements have been at the forefront of challenging them for legitimising the trend of growing inequality, both within countries and globally. In South Africa, in March 2015, the student-led #Rhodes Must Fall movement that began at the University of Cape Town, rapidly grew into a nationwide campaign pitting protesting students against the state and university administrations as they demanded free higher education, job security for workers whose functions had been outsourced to save the institutions costs, changes in institutional culture, as well as curriculum transformation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi[40] provide a space for a 'decolonial turn' in the discussion on the role of the university in Africa. Dismissing superficial initiatives in 'decolonising' the African university (name changes, changes of mission statements and so on) the authors in this edited volume decry the power relations entrenched in the coloniality of knowledge in African higher education institutions. The groundswell against the marketization of education in Africa and the domination of an ideological project perceived as subjugating African knowledge creation to Western knowledge production, finds expression in calls for curriculum change, and revisiting the canon.

Even before the student protests, in a precursor of the debates that came later Matthews[41] published a revealing study in 2011 which summarised the views of black and white, mostly South African, students through an online forum discussion debating the topic of Afrocentricity. The central preoccupation emerged as to whom can legitimately call themselves African. Suttner[42] also provides a sensitive view of this debate

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[40] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Zondi, *op. cit.*, 2016.

[41] Sally Matthews, "Becoming African: Debating Post-Apartheid White South African Identities" in *African Identities*, no.1(9), 2011, pp. 1–17.

[42] Raymond Suttner, *Recovering Democracy in South Africa*, Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2015, p. 130.

in the South African context in his book *Recovering Democracy in South Africa*. He suggests that the word 'African' has two meanings: "we are all Africans in the sense of belonging in Africa, but only some can be Africans in the sense of their unique past experiences of oppression".

This in no way suggests that it is not possible to see the world through fresh eyes. At the same time, it should not prevent us from asking 'Whose Africa'… the Africa of the elites or the Africa of the poor; the Africa of states or the Africa of citizens, and who indeed are the citizens'?

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