

**WISC-AMEI Exploratory Workshop**  
**“The current state and future of IR studies in the Global South”**  
**Cancun, October 16, 2015**

**A Personal Summary**

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The *World International Studies Committee* (WISC) represented by its Executive Secretary, Gunther Hellmann and *Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Internacionales* (AMEI/MISA) represented by its Vice-President Roberto Domínguez, had issued a “Call for Papers” to participate in a four-hour workshop on 16 October 2015, convened at AMEI XXIX Convention in Cancún, México.

Participants had submitted short memos focusing on two questions about the current state and future of IR studies in the Global South (see the [“Call for Papers”](#)).

The discussion started off with a focus on the question *What should be the key themes and the primary theoretical concerns in International Studies in the Global South?*

Opening remarks by the former President of the *International Studies Association* (ISA), Amitav Acharya, recapped that ISA, like other professional organizations of the discipline of IR and IR journals, started off with the idea of operating globally despite the fact that the home base was clearly “national” or regional (as for instance in the case of professional organizations of IR in Europe). Still, ISA has grown from largely being a North American (ie. American and Canadian) organization with approx. 2,000 members, to one with more than 7,000 members from many parts of the world, divided by sections and subfields and systematically publishing a diverse set of journals.

ISA and WISC have cooperated closely ever since the founding of WISC in the 1990s in order to bring together ideas and scholars that cannot attend conferences in the United States (US) and Canada. Thus, different conferences have been organized in places like Istanbul, Ljubljana, Porto, Frankfurt, Singapore, now Mexico and next year in India.

The first concept discussed in the Cancún workshop was the concept of “Global South”. To some, this concept embodies an idea which might bring together scholars in IR in a dialogical mode without forgetting that “Global IR” includes a very diverse set of scholars –marginalized or not– in the discussion. And this was also considered to be one of the reasons for pursuing two tracks: a global dialogue that broadens IR, since key problems are ~~not longer~~ unique to individual countries; and discussions from different perspectives, like post-colonialism or dependency theory in parallel to the more typically “Western” theories of liberalism and realism.

The goal would be to make all “isms” and theorizations of the discipline more inclusive.

Then, there is a second generation challenge: to be able to export those dialogues to other regions, taking the example of the Chinese school of IR, that has expanded considerably but without being explored in other regions besides China.

Furthermore, debates over colonial and post-colonial studies, from the notion of “nation-states” in a “Westphalian world” have been long studied, but not pre-colonial epochs, given that “civilization” didn’t start in 1648.

This reasserts the importance of a gathering like WISC-MISA where more attention can be given to discuss ideas globally. And this is why there is no need for separating a “Global South” in IR, but instead to focus on inclusive “Global IR”.

And then, there is the problem of mutual recognition. Is there a boundary for globalism? It was said that China is using the concept of recognition to pursue hegemony in Asia and that the so-called “Global South” has a problem of recognition. Furthermore, a vision from the “Global South” of the existence of hegemonic schools of IR and the problem of legitimation, since scholars from the South have advanced the same arguments than scholars from the north, without being recognized. Nevertheless, it was also stated that scholars from developing countries will be listened to, just like anyone else, if they succeed in coming up with “good arguments” – which is a simple question of professionalism and tenacity.

Thus, “Global South” as a category is problematic. IR has become a discipline with an enormous diversity. While this is a positive development, the accompanying diversity has *blurred* the discipline’s boundaries. Research shows a tendency to include every possible topic and to do research in any possible way, sometimes not paying sufficient attention to the rigor required, or including topics that don’t necessarily fit in IR, or that lack of practical recommendations. Furthermore, the theoretical concerns should reflect all important issues in a global discipline, not just for those that are seen to be relevant for the so-called “Global South”. Regionalizing is good to a point, but it does not mean that in IR theoretical work should be conceived as being non-translatable.

Others found it positive that countries focus on their own problems and develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks *from* the “Global South” and then place these topics on a regional research agenda. However, since there is a need for distinctions, the distinction “Global South” versus “Global North” has been seen as a less pejorative distinction compared to the old “developed” versus “underdeveloped” world. There is now an imperative of “productive distinction” where dialogue starts by identifying common interests and shared problems. Nevertheless, dialogue in IR is tremendously difficult, since so many languages, and differences exist, as there are barriers even within the same language community. The problem of *incommensurability* is real, but so is the need to recognize, acknowledge and empathize with others.

Specifically as far as theories are concerned, there are different ways of incorporating knowledge. The challenge is to not only transfer Western theory to other regions, nor to build narrowly conceived theories from a “national” point of view (eg. “Chinese School”). Rather, the aim should be to build universal theories with as many intersections as practical.

Still, there is at least the perception that thinking/reflecting/theorizing is related to political and economic hegemony. China is an example for that, since it has succeeded in asserting itself by establishing a Chinese agenda in IR that can no longer be ignored.

Another problem is how to carry on with exploring new ideas and common concepts on the Global South with works in – for example – Spanish, which might not be translated, and therefore, may be ignored. Moreover, how is it possible to collect under the umbrella of the “Global South” countries as different as China, India, or Mexico, if even within Latin America when there are significant obstacles to establish deeper cooperation?

To some, it is important that mainstream theories change their narratives and leave their ethnocentrism aside in order to promote dialogue with others. Participants agreed that there is a need for concrete projects in order to mobilize funding. WISC should promote and support different initiatives. For instance, the group proposed the development of two concrete products: a joint textbook on IR and a conjoint syllabi project, in order to learn what is taught in what form in the field of IR in the “Global South” and elsewhere. It was noted that research on IR theories/introduction to IR around the North and South in order to know how, what and who is contributing, was desirable, although maybe not be entirely feasible.

There was also an idea to publish a book with different essays on how IR is taught in different countries and also to publish a textbook in different languages. At the same time, it was suggested, not to narrow topics on IR; some pointed out that in some areas, like International Political Economy (IPE) there is no development. Also, a textbook might not be easily achieved. However, a joint dictionary of concepts important for IR could be developed in the short run.

About teaching, it was said that it would be important to identify scholars teaching IR differently, in order to promote diversity in how the discipline evolves and is presented to students.

WISC should be the coordinator of this effort, bringing together different voices, getting to agree on some kind of criteria in order to develop a syllabus. Also, there could be a dialogue of the “voices of the South” as part of a journal publication. In addition, workshops on how to teach IR *differently* might be helpful as well. For all this, it was clear to all that local hosts would be needed for every initiative, since resources are limited. The problem of distribution of books was also brought up as another concern.

As much as there was agreement on pursuing a syllabus project and a textbook project, the problem of how to define what important IR concepts needed to be addressed as well. This includes (but is not limited to) concepts such as “Global South”. If one (or more) book(s) on different concepts and their uses in different language communities would result, special care should be devoted to include/define competing epistemologies and the embeddedness of these concepts within specific theoretical vocabularies.

In conclusion, participants agreed on three main issues: 1) the development of a syllabus for teaching IR which must not be limited to “Western” audiences; 2) the development of a textbook (or a series of textbooks) which includes non-Western perspectives; 3) elaboration of a dictionary of key concepts in the context of different linguistic and theoretical perspectives.