

Not Different Enough?

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International Relations and the Problem of Difference. By Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney. London: Routledge, 2004. 288 pp., \$80.00 cloth (ISBN: 0-415-94637-9), \$26.95 paper (ISBN: 0-415-94638-7).

In *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney argue convincingly that, as an academic field, international relations (IR) has consistently failed to confront the issue of cultural difference. Part 1 of this stimulating and rewarding book effectively presents this thesis in what amounts to an alternative history of the field. The treaties of Westphalia are interpreted, not as licensing and authorizing difference, but as creating a limiting framework: an “empire of uniformity.” Inayatullah and Blaney plausibly link this empire to wider movements in European social thought that attempt to privilege the universal and permanent over the local and transitory, drawing on, in particular, Stephen Toulmin’s (1990) *Cosmopolis*. This point is reinforced in the same formative period by the failure of Western thought to come to terms with the “Indians.” A key source in this respect is Tzvetan Todorov (1984), who traces the inability of the European conquerors of the Americas to develop the category of “different but equal.” Instead, difference is either denied in the name of human equality or stressed in order to establish inequality. Rather more controversially, Inayatullah and Blaney argue that subsequent Westphalian international relations theory has been a theory of modernization, and, via the work of such authors as Samuel Huntington (1969, 1987), Andrew Linklater (1998), and David Held (1995), it is still committed to a modernization framework.

In the somewhat shorter Part 2, Inayatullah and Blaney turn their attention to international political economy (IPE). International political economy is seen as privileging a culture of competition. Thus, the writings of Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek are discussed to show how the version of freedom and autonomy that has come to dominate the IPE discourse entails a particular kind of competitive individualism. The work of Karl Polanyi, on the other hand, is viewed as a critic of IPE’s separation of the economy from society, and a potential sponsor of an alternative, ethnological approach to international political economy. Finally, Inayatullah and Blaney set out the notion of multiple and overlapping sovereignties as an alternative to the characteristically linear conception of sovereignty prevalent in Westphalian thought. They develop this concept by contrasting the different modes of landholding in Mughal and British India.

International Relations and the Problem of Difference is an impressive achievement. Inayatullah and Blaney have brought together a number of key topics in contemporary social thought. They draw on a wide range of material in order to make a case that synthesizes the work of others—especially Toulmin, Todorov, and Ashis Nandy (1987)—but with considerable added value. The book ought to be required reading for students of international relations theory at all levels, as well as for those more generally interested in the non-Western world. Still, two grounds for criticism

are particularly telling—one of which accepts the assumptions of Inayatullah and Blaney's argument, whereas the other does not.

First, as an author, it is always irritating to be criticized for ignoring a particular topic. Obviously, not all potentially salient authorities can be considered within the compass of one book—even a book of almost 300 pages. Nonetheless, two names are missing from *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* that are of such obvious relevance that warning bells ought to be heard in the background. Unquestionably, the two thinkers who have been most responsible for promoting a Eurocentric, developmentalist model of the world were Hegel and Karl Marx, neither of whose work is explored, although Inayatullah and Blaney do make a brief, somewhat embarrassed, reference to Marx's work on India. To use Smith and Hayek rather than Hegel to trace the connections between freedom, autonomy, individuality, and competition is a little eccentric, but the failure to discuss Marx at length (or even Gramsci) seems positively perverse in a work that purports to offer a critical account of IR theory and international political economy.

The failure to discuss the Marxist tradition is felt in several ways. For example, the "modernization" theory discussed in chapter 3 is mostly produced by non-Marxist writers, such as Gabriel Almond and Lucian Pye, but the extent to which they were not simply reacting against Marx but also writing in his shadow can hardly be overstated. Again, Linklater is accused of recycling modernization theory in contemporary international relations, and this judgment is not unreasonable, even if it is somewhat harsh. But the modernization theory that Linklater is recycling is explicitly based on Marx—and Hegel, as it happens. In short, Inayatullah and Blaney ought to have confronted the source of these arguments and not just the later epigones and critics.

Perhaps the reason why Marx is not confronted has something to do with the academic field of international relations as it exists today. In short, if one is going to take on the liberal rationalists, as Inayatullah and Blaney do, it may not be wise to simultaneously alienate the Marxists and Gramscians. But this raises a more fundamental question: why this discussion has been cast in terms of the *field* of international relations in the first place, as opposed to the *activity* of international relations. The international relations in the title of this book is very clearly the academic field, and therein lies a problem. Is it not somewhat solipsistic to be so concerned with the discourse that one ignores its subject matter?

In this light, one might agree broadly with Inayatullah and Blaney's criticisms of both Huntington and Linklater but still find the discussion unsatisfactory. Neither of these authors is actually much concerned with the development of IR theory. Both Huntington and Linklater are attempting to intervene in what is still sometimes called the real world, and for them the key issue is not whether they are recycling modernization theory but whether they are saying something that helps us to manage that world, or in Linklater's case to change it.

A more serious, but obviously related, problem is the strange absence of actual *difference* in a book ostensibly devoted to that topic. Numerous Western and Western-educated theorists of difference are heard from, but where are the voices of those who actually are different? Perhaps they simply cannot be heard because they are not saying the kind of things that fit into a book about a Western academic field. What would post-Western thought on difference actually involve? John Gray's *Straw Dogs* (2002)—aphoristic, nihilistic, quasi-Buddhist—is a brilliant, if ultimately unsatisfactory, attempt by a one-time Western political theorist to answer this question. But Gray's answer has been comprehensively panned by those whose horizons are bounded by our conventional academic disciplines, and this same fate is likely to befall other attempts to think outside this box.

In short, it is difficult to imagine what a genuinely different discourse in international relations theory would look like. As a result, for all its undeniably good qualities, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* is not a book that gets to

the heart of the question. It does, however, get close to the heart of international relations as an academic enterprise, which is no mean achievement.

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