

Searching for Difference in a Homogeneous Discipline

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

By its very subject matter, international relations (IR) scholarship ought to engage the complexities and diversities of world politics: the myriad cultural, linguistic, political, religious, and ideological experiences that encompass the globe. And yet, few disciplines are as homogeneous as international relations. Its most influential conceptual models have emerged almost exclusively from observing the behavior of Western states. Non-Western experiences, perspectives, and ideas only rarely enter the purview of leading theorists. Texts, other than those written in English and approved by social science conventions, are rarely consulted.

In *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*, Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney address this shortcoming, and they do so in a stimulating and sophisticated manner. Drawing attention to the striking absence of voices from the Third World, they reach beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of conventional international relations. Rather than accepting the interwar period as the origin of IR scholarship, they trace the roots of current IR theory and practice back to the early modern period. The contours of contemporary world politics thus become intrinsically linked to historical practices of colonialism and religious cleansing.

The main proposition of *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* is that the theory and practice of international relations is in many ways about the erasure of difference. To be more precise, it is about the effort to mark and contain difference as “international difference.” This process, Inayatullah and Blaney argue, is characterized by two essential dimensions. One is spatial; the other temporal. Spatially, IR has been characterized by the emergence of a society of states, which they interpret as a “spatial containment of cultural difference” (p. 23). The domestic sphere is constituted as a sphere of sameness, whereas everything that lies beyond the boundaries of sovereignty is marked as different. This, in turn, leads to a “deferral of genuine recognition, exploring and engagement of difference” (p. 44). Temporally, difference is constituted in reference to processes of development and modernization. Modernity has, in many ways, been about the imposition of one model of development over alternative ones. This has been the case from the conquistadores of the Renaissance to the modernization theorists of the 1960s. Inayatullah and Blaney stress that this tendency is very much alive today. It manifests itself, for instance, in the prevailing model of liberal peace, which relies on the idea that one sociopolitical model—revolving around liberal democratic and market-oriented values—will inevitably replicate itself until it achieves an uncontested global reach (pp. 116–117).

Whether in the spatial delineation of inside-versus-outside or the temporal division of modern versus traditional, the result is the same: difference is held at a distance and constituted as inferior. It inevitably becomes synonymous with

“disorder, fear, suspicion, and condescension” (p. 123). As a result, notions of justice and equality—and a more peaceful order in general—can only be achieved through assimilation and by erasing difference.

Although *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* is a very impressive book, it will not be to everyone’s liking. For one thing, Inayatullah and Blaney are particularly skeptical of currently influential forms of cosmopolitanism (for relevant sources see, for instance, and Pogge 2001; Moellendorf 2002). In fact, they see far more similarities than differences between cosmopolitan aspirations for global justice and the communitarian constitution of international politics as a society of independent states. The latter model is based on practices of division and separation whereas the former relies on processes of unification and homogenization. But both are strikingly similar because they revolve, in essence, around a deep-seated desire to erase difference.

Inayatullah and Blaney’s mistrust of cosmopolitan ideas are primarily expressed through a brief engagement with Andrew Linklater’s work. They are particularly skeptical of Linklater’s attempt to combine respect for cultural difference with an explicit defense of universal cosmopolitanism (Linklater 1998:2–3). Inayatullah and Blaney still see this attempt as a teleological march toward a universalism that inevitably suppresses respect for difference (p. 121). This is the case, they argue, because Linklater sees the problem of difference only as a matter of discrimination. Doing so, even through a “thin” form of procedural universalism, cannot meet the bigger challenge. It cannot open up spaces in which different identities and visions can coexist in mutual respect.

An alternative approach, proposed by Inayatullah and Blaney, emerges from a radical critique of universalism, that is, from a willingness to accept incommensurability. Difference, they argue, is then not constructed as sinister and dangerous. Indeed, it can become a source of wonder and inspiration. By promoting the notion of a “contact zone,” Inayatullah and Blaney argue for “an IR based on the creation of conversations among cultures.” Drawing upon such authors as Ashis Nandy (1987), Tzvetan Todorov (1984), and R. B. J. Walker (1993), they visualize a space in which social criticism, alternative discourses, and the like can create possibilities for ethical politics. Such a space would inevitably be located beyond the traditional division of inside-outside. Inayatullah and Blaney suggest, instead, a model of overlapping notions of sovereignty. This model is based on the promotion of multilayered cultural and spatial interactions, which are said to “unleash new democratic energies” in contemporary international relations (p. 214).

Although some readers will accuse Inayatullah and Blaney of relativism (particularly scholars who defend a strong version of cosmopolitanism), one could also lament that they have in fact not taken their criticism far enough. Except for a few pages on Linklater, their critique of cosmopolitan theory is mostly implicit. Many of their arguments could have been sustained more forcefully had they engaged the Euro-, Anglo-, and male-centric nature of cosmopolitanism as thoroughly as they did some of the early modern sources of contemporary international relations. In fact, despite its advocacy of difference, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* draws upon surprisingly few non-Western sources. All references are to English language texts, and most arguments are still based upon an examination of European historical examples. Furthermore, some of the criticism of relativism could have been preempted, at least in part, by making a closer distinction between foundationalism and universalism. Not all versions of the latter are as disrespectful of difference as Inayatullah and Blaney believe, at least not if one constantly scrutinizes the contingent foundations upon which they operate. Moreover, there are instances in which the erasure of difference—the imposition of one identity over another—is desirable, even imperative. The spread of fascism is only one of many recent historical examples of political challenges that could not have been adequately met through a toleration of incommensurable identity practices. How to

deal with such challenges is, of course, a matter of debate. And this is precisely why *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*—radical and controversial though it may well be—should be welcomed and engaged.

References

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