

1 Social Theory and the Multicultural World

The universality of social theory has long been both a dream for realization and a topic for debate. Theory of the natural sciences is almost universally acknowledged as universally applicable, and, following this logic, the behavioral revolution in International Relations (IR) seems to have won an overwhelming triumph in the debate between the scientific school and the traditional approach, making universality the standard for evaluating a social theory. Mainstream theorists of IR, especially those in the United States, have persisted in the principles of the natural sciences, trying to develop theories that are universally valid, across time and space and beyond culture and geography.

At the same time, challenges to this mainstream belief have also been persistent. It is true that a well-established social theory should have broader applicability and gain more validity, even though no social theory is completely universal in the final analysis. However, it is absolutely necessary to discuss how a social theory originates in the first place. Social theory may well aim at universality and it is in a sense justifiable, but no theory starts from a temporo-spatial null, in a uniform homogeneity, and with an initial universal meaning. A social theory tends to originate in a particular geo-cultural setting, which shapes the practices of the cultural community and thus defines the efforts to develop theory, too. Social theory is therefore from the very beginning imprinted with the characteristic features of the cultural community of its origin, for it is this community that shapes the background knowledge of its members and thus provides the menu for the theorist to choose throughout the process of her theoretical construction. Furthermore, the theorist herself has lived in this community, being immersed in its culture, following its practice, and thinking spontaneously and effortlessly as a member of the community. In other words, social theory bears a cultural birthmark, which will be with it even when it becomes a well-established theory with a higher level of universality. This birthmark is indelible.

It is thus clear that I place particular emphasis on culture as a significant incubator and shaper of social theory. In fact, culture used to be taken as an important factor for social studies. "In the 1940s and 1950s, much attention was paid to culture as a crucial element in understanding societies, analyzing differences among them, and explaining their economic and political development."¹ In IR, "from the 1940s to the 1960s culture played a meaningful part in IR theory and research."² However, in IR, as well as in other disciplines of social studies, culture as an analytical element declined conspicuously in the United States later on due largely to the triumph of the behavioral revolution and the rise of the ambition for grand and scientific social theory. Even with the revived interest in culture as an explanatory variable since the 1980s, culture seems to be used mostly for analysis of actors' behavior and has never had a place in building and developing IR theory. I intend to explore the link between culture and social theory construction, arguing that to a significantly large extent, culture shapes social theory. It is not a far-reaching exaggeration to argue that the social sciences are in fact the cultural sciences, for "nature" is paired with "culture" rather than "society." It is undeniable that social theory is developed by people, who are cultural beings and have deeply embedded background knowledge of the cultural communities where they are brought up. In this sense, social theory is a product of culture. As to exploring how and why culture shapes theory, we need first to discuss social theory and analyze the two major approaches to social theory building and development.

Theory and Social Theory

Theory is a system of ideas. No matter whether it is in the natural or the social sciences, theoretical construction means to systemize ideas³ and produce abstract knowledge.⁴ Immanuel Kant has made a meaningful

¹ Harrison and Huntington 2000, xiii–xiv. ² Lapid 1997, 5.

³ The definitions of "theory" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* include, *inter alia*, : (1) "A scheme or system of ideas and statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena; a hypothesis that has been confirmed or established by observation or experiment, and is pronounced or accepted as accounting for the known facts; a statement that is held to be the general laws, principles, or causes of something known or observed;" (2) "Systematic conception or statement of the principles of something; abstract knowledge or the formulation of it: often used as implying more or less unsupported hypotheses." The Compact Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3284.

⁴ The definitions of theory by *Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* include, *inter alia*,: (1) "the body of generalizations and principles developed in association with a field of activity . . ."; (2) "the coherent set of hypothetical, conceptual, and pragmatic principles forming the general frame of reference for a field of inquiry . . ."; (3) "abstract knowledge." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2371.

definition of “system” by referring to architectonic. It is meaningful because it shows clearly why we should take theory as a system of ideas or systematic knowledge. He says,

By architectonic I understand the art of systems. Since systemic unity is that which first makes ordinary cognition into science, i.e. makes a system of a mere aggregation of it, architectonic is the doctrine of that which is scientific in our cognitions in general, and therefore necessarily belongs to the doctrine of method.

Under the government of reason, our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody, but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of manifold of cognitions under one idea. This is the rational concept of form of the whole, insofar as through this domain of the manifold as well as the position of the parts with respect to each other is determined *a priori*.

For its execution, the idea needs a schema, i.e., an essential manifoldness and order of the parts determined *a priori* from the principle of the end.⁵

I do not mean here to discuss Kant’s ontological position, his argument on the rule of reason, and his means-end justification, but what is important in his understanding of theory is the difference he makes between an “aggregation of ideas” and a “system of ideas.” His differentiation of “system” from “aggregation” indicates the essential quality of theory and his “one idea” refers to a system or a “schema” of thoughts. Thus, “a system of ideas” provides a general definition of theory. It is acknowledged by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan as they point out one of the important conditions for IR theory: “its contribution identifies it as a systematic attempt to abstract or generalize about the subject matter of IR.”⁶

It seems true that there is little argument or disagreement about this general definition of theory, but controversies and debates flare up when social theory is drawn into the picture. One of the most conspicuous disagreements is whether social theory is the same as natural theory, behind which is the argument as to whether the social world is the same as the natural world. In the study of IR, for example, Kenneth Waltz distinguishes between “theory” and “thought,” arguing that Raymond Aron and Hans J. Morgenthau provide mere realist thoughts and not realist theory because theirs do not “take the fateful step beyond developing concepts to the fashioning of a recognizable theory,”⁷ which, among others, has distinctive dependent and independent variables to explain the causality.⁸ Robert Keohane discusses “rationalistic” and “reflective” approaches to the study of international institutions, believing that the latter is “less specified as theories,” need to develop testable

⁵ Kant 1997, 691. ⁶ Acharya and Buzan 2007, 292. ⁷ Waltz 1995, 71. ⁸ Ibid., 70.

hypotheses, and carry out “systematic empirical investigations.”⁹ Martha Finnemore believes that the English School of IR cannot be qualified as theory in a strict sense.¹⁰ It is clear that all these scholars have a deeply internalized yardstick to judge what social theory is and their primary benchmark is no doubt the principles for theory construction in the natural sciences, underlined by a strong positivist worldview, one that has existed in the background knowledge of the IR community, especially in the United States, represented by mainstream theorists there and reinforced by IR students elsewhere in the world.

Acharya and Buzan, in a project for exploring non-Western IR theory,¹¹ gave two different definitions of social theory: “the harder positivist, rationalistic, materialist and quantitative understandings on one end of the theory spectrum, and the more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern on the other.”¹² Their categorization of hard positivism and soft reflectivism, similar to the distinction of “scientific” and “hermeneutic” theories by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith,¹³ has important implications: The former, dominating in the study of IR in the United States, recognizes only one form of social theory, i.e. theory that fits into the “hard positivist definition” and stresses “being scientific,” which means the provision of neat explanations, including hypotheses with clear causality, rigorous empirical testing, and a deductive approach to observation. Causal mechanisms are considered the objective of theorizing and empirical testing is the method for “scientific” research. The latter, or the reflective definition, is much “softer,” requiring putting forward meaningful questions, setting out systematic ideas, and developing a set of concepts and categories for the production of abstract and general knowledge.¹⁴ Acharya and Buzan label correctly their own approach as the “pluralist view,” for it recognizes various

⁹ Keohane 1989a, 174. ¹⁰ Finnemore 2001.

¹¹ Acharya and Buzan organized a project entitled “Why is there no non-Western IR theory: reflections on and from Asia?” The participants were mainly scholars from Asian countries. The title suggested that it was a challenge to the monist approach to IR theorizing. The organizers were puzzled by the situation: On the one hand the Western IR theory cannot readily answer questions that have arisen from a globalizing world and on the other hand there is no non-Western IR theory that is recognized by the academic IR community. The participants listed several causes that have led to such a situation, among which the one that all were agreed on was that IR remained massively dominated by Western thinking though it was now a global activity. However, “the case studies” in the project, as the two organizers said, “point to the existence of abundant intellectual and historical resources that could serve as the basis of developing a non-Western IRT that takes into account the positions, needs and cultures of countries in the region.” Acharya and Buzan 2007, 427.

¹² *Ibid.*, 291. ¹³ Hollis and Smith 1990, quoted in Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001, 22.

¹⁴ Acharya and Buzan 2007.

forms of theory through identifying a “theory spectrum,” including hard positivism, the soft reflectivism, and perhaps some others in between.¹⁵

Buzan uses “pluralism” and “monism” to tell the methodological position of the English School theory of IR from that of the American mainstream IR theory. He has argued that American mainstream IR theories, such as neorealism and neoliberalism, take a monist approach to social theorizing, for they believe that all theory, natural and social alike, should follow the single and same set of standards, while the English School adopts a pluralist approach, for example, taking history into serious consideration.¹⁶ For the purpose of this study, I will explore in some more detail the two approaches of monism and pluralism and analyze their implications for the construction of IR theory, especially in non-Western cultural settings.

Monism

Monism holds that the natural sciences and the social sciences are both scientific by definition, and therefore the ontology, epistemology, and methodology should be the same.¹⁷ Science aims at finding laws, laws in the natural world and laws in the social world, too. The most important or the essential law, by the influence of the Enlightenment, is causality. For every effect there must be a cause. In this sense, there is little difference between the natural and social sciences. International studies used to be more flexible, combining a multiplicity of factors such as history, law, and culture. However, IR in the post-WWII United States, especially since the behavioral revolution, has typically reflected the positivist and scientific tendency. Monism has become the signboard of the mainstream American IR theory and exerted strong influence in the rest of the world.

Monism seeks homogenization of social theory. In Robert Cox’s words: “In the Enlightenment meaning universal meant true for all time and space – the perspective of a homogeneous reality.”¹⁸ Inspired by Cox,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 290–291. ¹⁶ Buzan 2001.

¹⁷ Patrick Jackson has discussed in detail dualism and monism. He defines dualism as an ontological stance whose “central presupposition is a kind of gulf or radial separation between the world and the knowledge about the world,” and monism as its opposite that does not posit such “a radical gulf and does not begin by separating things and thoughts as dualism does.” Monism assumes a fundamental continuity of knowledge with the world. Jackson 2008, 132, 133. I do not use here the term of monism as Jackson does. Rather I argue, with Acharya, that the opposite of monism is not dualism, but pluralism, for it covers more areas and concerns competing ontological positions even inside the social sciences.

¹⁸ Cox 2002, 53, quoted in Acharya 2014, 3.

Acharya criticizes the dominant meaning of universality in today's IR discipline as follows:

The dominant meaning of universalism in IR today is what I would call a monistic universalism, in the sense of "applying to all." It corresponds closely to Enlightenment universalism, which may also be called "monistic universalism." . . . And the Enlightenment has a dark side: the suppression of diversity and justification of European imperialism . . . In IR theory and method, such universalism manifests as a way of much arbitrary standard setting, gatekeeping, and marginalization of alternative narratives, ideas, and methodologies.¹⁹

Since there is only one set of standards, there is necessarily only one form of theory. Furthermore there is only one form of social reality, too. Representative of this approach is no other than Kenneth Waltz, whose monumental work of *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 seems to have won the decisive battle for the scientific school over the traditional school in IR. For him, IR theory is a set of laws and must satisfy three conditions: It is a distinct system of the international; it indicates with clarity the causal directions; and it is parsimonious and rigorous.²⁰ He admires Newton's theory of universal gravitation, for it "provided a unified explanation of celestial and terrestrial phenomena. Its power lay in the number of previously disparate empirical generalizations and laws that could be subsumed in one explanatory system . . ."²¹ He stresses the universal oneness, the explanatory power, and the empirical testing, and his structural realism is indeed an imitation in the international relations world of the Newtonian theory in the natural world: An international system with anarchy as its ordering principle, a systemic structure with the distribution of capabilities as its most distinctive feature, and rational nation-states as the like units of the system, who abide by the principle of anarchy, weigh rationally the structural balance of power, and take action through a means-end calculation.²² In this way Waltz does not only establish a distinctive system of international polity clear of all other features and develop a systemic and scientific theory of international politics, but more importantly, he sets the homogeneous standards for evaluating an IR theory. A theory is qualified as a theory if and only if it satisfies the conditions set forth by this homogeneity. The publication of *Theory of International Politics* not only marked the triumph of structural realism over other strands of IR theories, but also started an era of Waltzianization of IR theory, which is characterized by using one set of overwhelmingly positivist standards for evaluating all IR theories: It is qualified as a theory if the Waltzian standards are satisfied; otherwise it is dismissed as a non-theory. Thus the standard-setting and gatekeeping

¹⁹ Acharya 2014, 3. ²⁰ Waltz 1995, 67–82; Waltz 1979. ²¹ Waltz 1979, 6. ²² Ibid.

role of the Waltzian phenomenon is much more influential than his substantive theory of structural realism. Later comers within the mainstream camp, despite the fact that they have strongly criticized the assumptions and hypotheses of structural realism, have followed closely Waltz's logic of theorizing, the positivist principles, and the scientific methodology. The emergence of neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism, rather than fundamentally challenging Waltz, have in fact proved and reclaimed the victory of Waltzianization and of homogeneity in IR theoretical development. Its powerful influence or perhaps unconscious violence has continued to exist in a dominant way up to date.

Homogeneity means, by necessity, exclusion. The mainstream of the American IR studies, for example, offers little recognition of the reflective approach, and scholars of mainstream theories, especially the "big three" in the United States, simply refuse to give credit to it. Waltz believes that anything that does not follow the positivist tradition cannot be qualified as "theory": Non-positivist studies provide mere thoughts, for they are the "kind of work that can neither provide satisfactory explanations nor lead to the construction of theory. Such studies cannot explain the causal mechanisms with certainty and clarity."²³ Keohane, in his influential presidential address to the International Studies Association in 1988 entitled "International Relations: Two Approaches," contrasts the rationalistic approach with the reflective approach, arguing that the former is hard while the latter is soft, very much like the Acharya-Buzan categorization, and that the former is positivist while the latter is analytical; that the former is rigorous while the latter is complex; that the former aims at finding the causal mechanisms while the latter seeks coherent arguments. Keohane explicitly supports the former and believes that the rationalistic approach, despite the fact that it is not perfect, has made remarkable achievements, for it successfully explains actors' behavior. Scholars who use this approach are self-conscious about the methodology and their products are widely recognized.²⁴ As for the reflective approach, Keohane puts forward sharp criticism, saying:

Indeed, the greatest weakness of the reflective school lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective research program that could be employed by students of world politics. Waltzian neorealism has such a research program; so does neoliberal institutionalism, . . . Until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a program, and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues in world politics, they will remain on the margin of the field, largely invisible to the

²³ Waltz 1995, 68–69. ²⁴ Keohane 1989a, 160.

preponderance of empirical researchers, most of whom explicitly or implicitly accept one or another version of rationalistic premises.²⁵

Keohane's criticism of the reflective approach in fact indicates his belief that such an approach cannot produce qualified social theory because it does not have theoretical hypotheses and pays little attention to rigorous empirical testing. His emphasis on a clear research program, on causality, and on the function of explanation shows that what in his mind constitutes theory is the positivist one or the so-called scientific one and other theories can be only on the margin of IR studies until they change and live up to the scientific standards or until they become the same with rationalistic theories like Waltz's and his own. Before they become the same as positivist and scientific theory they are no theory at all. Keohane, with his neoliberal institutionalism, has not reduced the significance of Waltzianization. Rather, he has helped the Waltzian way of theorizing to further establish itself as a universal standard. Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba again stress the importance of causal inference and further define the model process of scientific research by dividing a research design into four components: the research question, the theory, the data, and the use of the data, making the standards for being scientific more specific and operational.²⁶ As one of the most influential textbooks in IR methodology, *Designing Social Inquiry* tells IR students the right way to carry out scientific inference in qualitative research.

The scientific standards and positivist assumptions embedded in the mainstream IR theory of the United States have thus become the only yardstick to judge whether or not a self-claimed theory is a theory. Martha Finnemore expresses similar views about theory in her criticism of the English School. She again argues that the English School does not produce theory, that it lacks clarity in methodology, and that therefore its effort for theory building is not successful. American IR studies focus on causal relationship, make clear hypotheses on it, and try to find it in rigorous testing, while "much of the English School work does not fit well into the independent/dependent variable language that dominate the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 173. Keohane later realized the importance of ideas in international relations. The book coedited by Judith Goldstein and himself was entitled *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). However, his rationalistic way of thinking did not change and the ideational factor was treated as a mere additional causal variable. As the editors said, ideas helped actors to clarify principles and conceptions of causal relationships, and to coordinate individual behavior, but they do not "challenge the premise that people behave in self-interested and broadly rational ways" Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 5.

²⁶ King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 13.

American IR,” making it “difficult for the American scholars to incorporate it into their research.”²⁷ Even Wendtian social constructivism follows very much this tradition, supporting the positivist standards and explicitly hypothesizing the constitutive causality. It is exactly because of this characteristic that the constructivism developed by Alexander Wendt has become a mainstream theory of IR in the United States. It is the fact that most English School scholars lack the clarity about causal relations between operational variables that prevents it from completely entering the mainstream in the United States.²⁸ It would not qualify as a social theory by merely raising meaningful questions, setting out systematic ideas, and developing a set of concepts and categories for the production of abstract and general knowledge.

It should be abnormal or even absurd to take non-positivist theories as non-theories, but it is the case today because of the persistent dominance of the positivist mainstream in the theoretical discourse of IR despite voices against it.²⁹ Robert Crawford, from a different perspective, sharply points out such dominance. He has found that American IR theory has a conspicuous tendency and strong ability to change a heresy or a heretic theory into a paradigm. The English School is a telling example. It started as a unique theory that the American mainstream paid little attention to in the so-called inter-paradigm debates until it was “discovered” by the American mainstream, especially the key concepts of international society, international cooperation, and international regimes. Once discovered, it has become supplementary to the mainstream study of international regimes and institutions rather than a unique and original theoretical system of its own.³⁰ Even inside the United States, a similar story is seen. John Ruggie has argued that the rise of constructivism can be traced to such classic roots as Weber,³¹ who believed that the social sciences are differentiated from the natural sciences because the former has the task of interpreting the meaning of social action. However, it is clear that the social constructivism developed in the United States soon merged into the mainstream and became a positivist research program and that the study of international norms, for example, is now a “scientific” discourse with the independent/dependent variable language, having been rigorously tested through either

²⁷ Finnemore 2001, 509 and 510–512.

²⁸ *Ibid.* I will discuss it later on, arguing that the situation is changing not only because of the effort made by the English School to join the American mainstream, but also because of the fact that they do share something essential that makes their integration easier.

²⁹ See Smith, Booth and Zalewski 1996; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012; Tickner and Blaney 2013.

³⁰ Crawford 2001, 6–7. ³¹ Ruggie 1999, 217–222.

quantitative inference or case studies.³² In this way, exclusion is both the result of homogenization and a way to reinforce homogenization through either elimination of alternatives or assimilation of dissidents.

Monism is also cultural nihilism. It is perhaps the most profound and effective way for hegemonic dominance, for it negates completely historical heritages and cultural traditions, and denies their important role in the construction of social theory. Whereas there is plenty of criticism against the poverty of the monist approach to social theory, there is little questioning about the connection between culture and theory building. For international studies, a monist, from her view and standard of social theory, would argue that there should be no national borders, for IR theory, and any theory indeed, if it is scientific, is universally applicable, across time and space and beyond geography and boundary. The two criteria to evaluate whether it is a scientific theory or not are universality and replicability, which constitute the absolute and ultimate standard for theory evaluation.³³ Accordingly, there can be schools of theory, but there cannot be theory with national labels. Nobody, for example, can say Newton's theory is British and Einstein's theory is American or Jewish, for no matter where it originates it is true everywhere. It is also true in the social sciences. Any theory should have rational assumptions and falsifiable hypotheses, and must go through rigorous testing so as to reach scientific conclusions. Theories, such as the English School, do not fit into these standards, and thus cannot be defined as theory.³⁴ Concepts based upon local and practical knowledge are termed false concepts, and efforts to construct social theories with a local focus are criticized as either un-scientific or culturally nationalistic.

This is a clear and categorical inclusion/exclusion dichotomy. Consciously or unconsciously, monism draws a single line to distinguish theory and non-theory, to define a strict boundary to tell knowledge which is inside from non-knowledge which is outside. As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner have criticized: "IR . . . fails to see alternatives because those who make it assume the West, its science and its development as the universal 'norm'."³⁵ If this disciplinary view dominates, then even if some advocate pluralism and encourage dialogue between the mainstream IR and the marginalized theories, such plurality can only be one "that evolves within a (narrow) space allowed for by the United States and Western European core, which exercises a strong disciplinary

³² For example, *International Organization* published many articles on international norms, most of which follow the positivist and therefore scientific tenets. See *International Organization* 59 (Fall 2005) and 61 (Winter 2007).

³³ Kagan 2009, xi and 1. ³⁴ Finnemore 2001. ³⁵ Blaney and Tickner 2013, 7.

function in terms of the theories, concepts, and categories authorized to count as knowledge of world politics.”³⁶

Fundamentally, it is a matter of culture. Underlying the monist view of theory building, it is the monism that embraces the “self-culture” as the only rational culture, advanced and superior, and regards the “other cultures” as simply non-rational, backward, and inferior. They should catch up and become the same as the self-culture. Since I argue that culture plays a particularly important role in social theory building, this monist view of culture implicitly but fundamentally believes that only the Western culture works to make theory, and other cultures cannot produce key concepts, provide proper categorization, and therefore are not qualified as resources of social theory. It thus denies completely the multiple possibilities for the prosperity of social theory and plays the role of gate-keeping to prevent other cultures from producing systematic knowledge. The result, in fact, would be the demise of IR knowledge as well as the eventual fall of the mainstream IR theory dominant in the discipline today, for they simply would have nothing to dominate over and would therefore prepare themselves for the final demise.

Pluralism

The second view, pluralism, argues that the social world differs significantly from the natural world, for the latter focuses more on matter, while the former is lived by people with the students and the studied both as human beings. In social sciences, therefore, no study is value free and they cannot treat human beings, who are the studied, as iron, gold, or mechanical parts. The social sciences should try to find social laws, but equally important, they need to understand social meanings and interpret social phenomena. It should encourage multiple interpretations, just as artists and architects express the observed from their respective perspectives. Furthermore they create social facts, give meanings to make the social come alive, and construct laws through human agency in this process. The social sciences thus differ essentially from the natural sciences. It is the latter function of understanding and interpreting that natural theory does not have and therefore becomes the characteristic feature of social theory. And this feature is so significantly primary because it is human in nature.

Pluralism, by definition, does not seek and work for homogeneity. As the broader definition by Acharya and Buzan of IR theory goes, they include contributions that are substantially acknowledged in the IR

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

academic community as being theory, self-identified by its creators as theory, and recognized as a systematic attempt to abstract or generalize about the subject matter of international relations.³⁷ Pluralism does not privilege one type of theory over others and can help find theories of a local produce.³⁸ The most recent advocate of pluralism is the Global International Relations (GIR) agenda put forward by Acharya in his presidential address to the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, in which he outlines the important dimensions of the GIR agenda, including pluralistic universalism; use of world history rather than just Greco-Roman, European, and US history as its foundations; incorporation of existing theories and methods; integration of regional and area studies; and eschewal of exceptionalism, and recognition of multiple forms of agency.³⁹

Since respect of diversity is the essential idea, pluralism is an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to social theory construction. Acharya expresses it clearly in his explanation of the GIR project, whose mission is to “chart a course toward a truly inclusive discipline, recognizing its multiple and diverse foundations,” because the discipline of IR “does not reflect the voices, experiences, knowledge claims, and contributions of the vast majority of the societies and states in the world, and often marginalizes those outside the core countries of the West.”⁴⁰ It requires a new understanding of universalism or universality. In contrast to the monistic universalism, Acharya proposes a pluralistic universalism as the foundation of his GIR project. As the opposite to monistic universalism, it is, using Tickner’s words, “to uncover stories about forgotten spaces that respect difference, show tolerance and compassion, and are skeptical about absolute truths.”⁴¹ For IR, it specifically encourages:

comparative studies of international systems that look past and beyond the Westphalian form, conceptualizing the nature and characteristics of a post-Western world order that might be termed as a multiplex world, expanding the study of regionalisms and regional orders beyond Eurocentric models, building synergy between disciplinary and area studies approaches, expanding our investigations into the two-way diffusion of ideas and norms, and investigating the multiple and diverse ways in which civilizations encounter each other, which includes peaceful interactions and mutual learning.⁴²

Perhaps the most profound significance of pluralism, as well as the most relevant dimension to this study, is its recognition of cultural pluralism, its encouragement of civilizational dialogues, and its respect of cultures as firm groundings for theory construction. Max Weber has described such

³⁷ Acharya and Buzan 2007, 292. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 290. ³⁹ Acharya 2014, 3. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴¹ Tickner 2011, quoted in Acharya 2014, 4. ⁴² Acharya 2014, 1.

functions of the social sciences, believing that the social sciences can be an independent system, for it differs from the natural sciences in terms of the purpose of social studies. Human beings have a special faculty, that is, their ability to create and construct meaning for the social world, or in Weber's words, "to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it *significance*,"⁴³ while matter in the physical world does not have such a capacity. In the study of the social, the most significant purpose is to understand the social meaning of human agency. Meaning belongs to the ideational domain, and therefore the social world is very much concerned with ideas and meaningful actions, i.e. practices that these ideas are embedded in and create in turn. The natural world, on the contrary, is fundamentally about matter, which exists objectively and has a homogeneous ontological status, and the study of such a world aims to find objective laws about the properties of the material. As such, explanation is the most appropriate way. Objective laws exist, identical everywhere and all the time. (Even this view is questionable today.) Human beings, as explorers, can at the best find such laws and retell them as representational knowledge. The social sciences are not alike. Subjective existence and intersubjective reflection are normal phenomena in the social world, and even "social facts" are often conscious or unconscious social constructions, subject to change all the time. Thus, in the social world, there are at least two purposes of scholarly pursuit, both to find law-like patterns of action if they exist and to understand the meaning of social subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Understanding, both as an epistemological approach and as a methodological device, is indispensable in social studies.⁴⁴ In addition, understanding itself, by definition, includes interpretation, which unavoidably involves human agency through the activation of their practical knowledge, for social facts themselves are products of social practices.⁴⁵ By definition, interpreting is multidimensional, for it depends on the human beings who do the interpreting. According to Wang Yangming (1472–1528), a Chinese philosopher in the Ming Dynasty, interpreting occurs when the knowledge in one's heart/mind and the object being observed meet and combine.⁴⁶ Different people tend to have different interpretations of the meaning in a social setting and observers and the angles of observation matter a great deal. People from different cultural or even subcultural backgrounds may understand differently the meaning of a Van Gogh, a Matisse, or a Qi Baishi,⁴⁷ for the observers have different background

⁴³ Weber 1949, 81, quoted in Ruggie 1999, 219, emphasis in original. ⁴⁴ Qin 2004.

⁴⁵ Carr 1964; Alker 1996. ⁴⁶ Wang (Yangming) 2014.

⁴⁷ A late master of traditional Chinese painting.

knowledge and different collective experiences, which lead to different ways of interaction between the painting and the observer. The dialogue itself is a process of understanding and interpretation. For such a process, there is perhaps only one correct answer in the natural world, but there are many answers in the social world, none of which can be judged as absolutely correct or wrong. Pluralism is thus the characteristic feature of social studies, and human agency, activated by practical knowledge, is the crucial factor in the construction of social theory. Nothing social is as rigorous as linear causality and no law is so neat as Newton's law of universal gravitation or Einstein's theory of relativity.

A pluralist, therefore, believes that it is perhaps justifiable for the natural sciences to claim no national or geographical borders, but that social sciences can have national boundaries, which are not purely geographical, but mainly geo-cultural. When national borders fit fairly well with cultural ones, a national label is justifiable, for it is not the national borders that matter and what really matters is culture. A Chinese IR theory, for instance, is first of all related to the Chinese culture rather than the Chinese territory, to the ideational rather than to the physical. When the so-called "non-Western IR theory" is discussed, it is more cultural than geographical. Geography matters if and only if it fits with a cultural sphere.⁴⁸ We have just discussed the importance of understanding and interpreting as epistemological and methodological devices in the social sciences, which are exactly embedded geo-culturally. Understanding is cultural, for it is based upon the practice of a particular cultural community. It is human and social in the first place and no social science is over and beyond the human. Western brides wear white at the wedding, while white is the color for funerals in China. The social meaning of color differs because of the different practices of the two cultural communities. Time and space, cultures and collective memories, and ways of thinking and doing may well lead to different ways of understanding and therefore interpreting. In other words, different cultures nurture and are nurtured by different practices over time, and practical knowledge thus produced, accumulated, and fermented, in turn, leads to different understanding of the seemingly same "objective" fact, reproducing and representing different meanings in their ideational schema. Theory as a system of ideas follows this logic, inseparable from the culture, history, language, and ways of thinking and doing of a particular community of practice. It is exactly in this way that theory is initiated in a cultural setting and always bears its birthmark.⁴⁹ Karl Marx speaks of history, saying that history is made by people, but "they do not

⁴⁸ Nisbitt 2003. ⁴⁹ Zalewski 1996.

make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found.”⁵⁰ It is also true of social theory. It is made by people, but they do not make it just as they please. People make social theory under circumstances defined by the practical knowledge embedded in their cultural communities. No matter how a social theory is created and developed, it is related with the culture of its origin and it is created by cultural humans. When we use a national label that reflects a culture to indicate its cultural birthmark, it is not only justifiable, but also most reasonable.

Pluralism thus legitimizes the production of systematic knowledge in general and of IR theories in particular outside the boundary drawn by the Western mainstream and opens the door to social theory construction in non-Western contexts and cultures.

Social Theory Construction

Having discussed the two approaches to social theory construction, we need to come back to the general definition of theory, that is, “a system of ideas.” The monist approach does not go against this definition, but limits it to a particular type of theory – the hard positivist one – and refuses to recognize other types as theory. The pluralist view also conforms to the general definition, but has a much broader and more open definition of social theory. The English School, dependency theory, feminist IR theory, and perhaps even more, are all theories if they constitute a system of ideas and a coherent scheme of knowledge. They may not have clear dependent and independent variables, may not focus on finding the causal relationships, and may not provide neat and rigorous explanations. However, they do use historical, social, and humanitarian phenomena for reflective analysis, and they do develop concepts and analytical frameworks for understanding and interpretation. In the social world, we need explanation, and we also need understanding and interpretation. In IR, different theories exist in terms of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, but if they constitute a system of ideas and are recognized as such by the academic community in general, they are theories. There is and cannot be a single set of standards for the ultimate judgment.

We insist on the general and broad definition of theory and social theory, not only because it is a widely accepted definition, but also because it cherishes an open mind for theoretical construction and stands as a fundamental opposition to discursive hegemony. It has several connotations. First, theory is about ideas, human ideas. No matter

⁵⁰ Ruggie 1999, 278.

what theory it is, it is constructed by humans through human practice. Since it is human, human agency is indispensable in theory construction and development. But human agency does not work completely as it pleases. It is conditioned, to paraphrase Marx's saying again, by circumstances directly found and immediately experienced. In IR, structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, social constructivism, dependency theory, and the English School are all human products and have been produced in relevant circumstances. As such those who have produced them are enabled and constrained by the circumstances, too. It is culture that provides the most meaningful circumstances and therefore constitutes a most ready treasure house where new ideas and concepts can be discovered. On the one hand, therefore, we need to explore the cultural resources for theory development, believing that the multiplicity of cultures facilitates production of social theory; on the other hand, we also need to remember that a social theory will always bear this cultural birthmark and absolute and complete universality is impossible.

Second, theory must be a system of ideas. Thoughts can be systematic and can also be sporadic and disparate. Spontaneous inspiration produces great poetry, but cannot by itself create social theory. A system of ideas includes clear definitions, key concepts, and logical reasoning that makes the definitions and concepts meaningful and coherent. Mainstream American positivist IR theories reflect systemized ideas, and so do the English School, dependency theory, and feminist theory. They may have very different approaches to theorizing, but they all fit into the general definition of theory. There is no reason to exclude any one of them, just as none of them can claim that positivist theory is no theory simply because they are different in ways of organizing ideas. When the question "Why is there no non-Western International Relations theory" is raised, there is no doubt that the Western mainstream IR theory plays a crucial role in gatekeeping. However, we also need to reflect seriously on one more question: "Do non-Western IR scholars consciously develop concepts, carry out conceptualization, and systemize ideas for theorization by exploring the resources of their own cultures?"

Third, there are many paths to systemize ideas and thoughts. Pluralism is the key word here, because if we use only one set of yardsticks to judge, there would be no theoretical prosperity and intellectual progress, and knowledge production and reproduction would be retarded in a homogeneous fiefdom. As Burchill and Linklater have pointed out, theory is defined not as merely being "scientific," and cannot be limited to the one function of explaining. Positivist theory of

IR is only one of many.⁵¹ The American positivist mainstream is a particular form of IR theory and cannot be taken as the theory and even more cannot be used as the standard to evaluate other theories. Theory should be in the plural form, or paraphrasing Peter Katzenstein's definition of civilizations, they should be "plural and pluralistic".⁵² Across cultural communities it is pluralistic with many theories of different background knowledges competing with and complementing one another, and within a cultural community it is plural with many theories of different types competing with and complementing one another. This is the precondition for theoretical prosperity. It is perhaps understandable that theorists wish to make their respective theory the theory. However, no matter how influential it is, no theory can ever be the theory and the development of a theory is always going through a process of debating and competing with other theories. A theory, as well as any other form of knowledge, is dead at the moment when it becomes the theory.

The insistence on the broader and more general definition has another important dimension, which is related to the concept of "worldview." When Buzan used the terms of monism and pluralism, what he had in mind was perhaps more methodological and therefore used "methodological monism" and "methodological pluralism" to indicate that the difference lies largely with the methodology.⁵³ I argue that what they reflect is much more than a mere methodological dimension. Rather they represent different worldviews. Monism is sometimes termed "naturalistic monism" to indicate the belief that the natural and social sciences follow the same logic and therefore should follow the same way of theory construction.⁵⁴ It is true that the debate started in the discussion of the two types of sciences, and it is also true that the debate in IR seems to have started from the disagreement over methodology. But for my study here it is much more than a view that "the social sciences can be built on the same model as the natural sciences."⁵⁵ More relevance lies in what may be labelled as "cultural monism," which, perhaps an extension of naturalistic monism, believes that social theory produced in one cultural community is and should be perfectly universal and valid across cultural communities, for the multiple cultures that exist in the world differ only in one thing: whether it is an advanced culture or a backward culture. The "advanced" culture represents the correct and rational, while other cultures should follow this role-model and eventually become it.

Such a view is much more than merely methodological. It is indeed a worldview. As we discussed in the previous paragraphs, monists not

⁵¹ Burchill 1996, 1. ⁵² Katzenstein 2010a. ⁵³ Buzan 2001. ⁵⁴ Ruggie 1999, 219.

⁵⁵ Nicholson 1996, 130.

only believe that the natural sciences provide the standard for all sciences, but also hold and even take it for granted that social theory created in one societal and cultural setting is universal all over the world, no matter what culture it is applied to. The underlying assumption is that reality in different cultural settings should be essentially the same, for universal theory must rest on universal reality. Even if the reality in another culture or society seems different, it should eventually become the same or it should be made the same. If we should take the monist view, especially in the second sense, then there would be indeed no other form of social theory except the hard positivist one. Thus, cultural monism has created a self-closed system with homogeneity as its goal, exclusiveness as its distinct feature, and uniform application as its belief. By definition, such a system cannot achieve lasting prosperity despite momentary magnificence, for it represses the creativeness grounded on other cultural resources.

I tend to interpret pluralism as more cultural than methodological, too. Cultural pluralism rests on a belief in the plurality of social reality. As social reality is largely constructed through human practice and as many different kinds of human practice exist in the world, there cannot be only one social reality. In other words, there are many worlds with various realities, both the terms in the plural. Berger and Luckmann hold that reality is socially constructed. "What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman."⁵⁶ Similarly, Searle argues that social reality is constructed and maintained by custom and habit, that is, by practice based upon background knowledge.⁵⁷ If this is the case, culture plays a most important role in the construction of social realities, for it is closely related to custom and habit, or to the practice of members of a particular cultural community. Monism is underpinned by the belief that there is only one reality throughout the world, across and beyond cultures and civilizations. It is exactly because of this belief that a particular set of standards for evaluating social theory is taken for the universally applicable standards. Recognition of plural realities as well as recognition of realities as social construction thus paves the way to the recognition of cultural pluralism.

A good example is Acharya's encouragement for grounding IR in world history rather than in just Greco-Roman, European, and US history.⁵⁸ The mainstream IR theory rests almost exclusively on the history of the Westphalian international system, especially its anarchic nature, without realizing that it is only one of the many international relations histories, or one of the many international relations realities that have existed in the

⁵⁶ Berger and Luckmann 1966, 3. ⁵⁷ Searle 1995. ⁵⁸ Acharya 2014, 3.

world. The dominant worldview, formed, embedded, and distilled from culture and through history, very much indicates what order is to be established. While recognizing that the Westphalian institution is made as a reality by rationalistic agents with strong individuality featured by sovereign identity, we need to see and understand that other histories may not be like it and may present different realities in relations among nations or peoples. In other words, there is no singular reality, but only plural realities. Balance of power, for example, was a Westphalian reality. But it was in fact what the agents made of it, just as Wendt's discussion of anarchy goes. The Tribute system was also a historical reality in East Asia for hundreds of years, where balance of power and anarchy were neither a reality nor a systemic feature at all, for the agents there made realities different from what has been found in the Westphalian international system. Following the advice by Berger and Luckmann on the sociology of knowledge,⁵⁹ we need to analyze how and why agents in different settings construct different realities, rather than to apply the reality of one geo-cultural space to the whole social universe. Similarly, concepts derived from the Westphalian reality are ones from a particular geo-cultural locale and may not apply to other geo-cultural settings, and, moreover, different concepts may well be derived from other cultural communities. It is also indicated by feminist IR, the reality of which differs very much from the reality of mainstream IR theory.

Pluralism not only recognizes the existence of multiple realities, but also embraces the multiple ways of perceiving the social world. Let's again use the example of the English School theory of IR. Scholars of the English School mainly turn to reflective thinking and logical reasoning, and rarely can we see in their analysis neat scientific hypotheses with the beauty and rigor of equations in physics, indicating the causal relationship between clearly defined independent and dependent variables. They seldom use mathematical modeling and quantitative statistical analysis.⁶⁰ Rather, they may well put forward an original idea or thought, design a set of key concepts, and then construct a systematically coherent framework through historical reflection and logical reasoning, discussing how the

⁵⁹ Berger and Luckmann 1966.

⁶⁰ According to Tim Dunne, the English School originated with "the fundamental questions of 'international society'" (1998, xi). He uses the term of "three preliminary articles" to describe the characteristic features of the English School, including a particular tradition of enquiry (an awareness of a body of literature, a set of central questions, and a common agenda), an interpretive approach, and a belief in the normative nature of international theory. These features are in contrast with those of American mainstream IR theories. Particularly, the second article, an interpretive approach, expresses a clear position against the scientific approach dominant in the United States. See Dunne 1998, 6–11.

international system works and what international society means. It appears indeed to some that the debate between the English School and the American mainstream is one about methodology. In fact the difference is more about how they see and understand the international relations world. While analysts in the United States were exploring the international system in every detail, English School scholars put forward and analyzed the key concept of “international society,” thus making a theory primarily around the systemization of this idea. Later on, Buzan developed Bull’s theory and focused on the evolution of international society to world society, taking into consideration the post-Cold War trend of globalization.⁶¹ The system-society debate is in fact a debate between two worldviews extended to the field of IR. The former takes the international relations world as a system with discrete and like units, which resembles a billiard table with an external force driving the billiards to interact, while the latter understands the international world as a society, with rules, norms, and values binding its members together. It is well acknowledged that the greatest contribution of the English School is its big idea of “international society,” the invention of which rests on a world perceived differently from what American IR scholars see. Without such a worldview there could have been no invention of the concept of “international society.” For me, it is this different angle for observing the world, or different worldview, rather than mere methodological dissimilarity that has made the English School.

Even greater difference can be seen between the Chinese and the Western worldviews. Monists take the natural sciences and the construction of natural theory as their model. The underlying reason is that the world out there, or the natural world, is what they explore in the pursuit of knowledge. It is undeniable that modern sciences started in the West. It is also understandable because people in the West have spent much more time and energy exploring the natural world, trying to know it and to control it. “Matter” has thus become one of the biggest words that attracts generations of talents. In other words, the worldview of Western societies is very much around the word “matter” in the natural world, which is both something to know and something to exploit. Most of the material achievements by humans have been made through the efforts based upon this worldview. Moreover, the success of the West in sciences and technologies in terms of accumulated knowledge and material achievements have led to the belief that such a success is fungible and extendable to other fields, such as the social world. Even if the social world has conspicuous differences, it should be made into something

⁶¹ Buzan 2004; Bull 1977; Vincent 1986.

similar to the natural world. Despite the protest and criticism from all the post-modernist strands, it is reasonable, although arguable, to say that this worldview focusing on the natural world and the material thereof continues to dominate.

The worldview of the Chinese is quite the opposite. It starts with the human rather than nature, focusing on the human heart/mind rather than on things and matter. It has never taken the natural world as a separate space and has never considered “matter” as what they should spend much time and energy studying. The Chinese tradition is to place more emphasis on humans rather than matter, for the decisive factor in the world, both natural and social, is human. While Westerners have tried to discover and create knowledge in the process of their exploration of nature, Chinese have paid much more attention to finding and exploiting knowledge in their own heart/mind. It is not to argue that traditionally Chinese did not pay any attention to nature, but they did understand nature in a way different from their Western counterparts. Confucianism, for example, has a profound belief that truth as well as knowledge is not out there for us to discover, but lies within us in our inner selves. As Feng Youlan (Fung Yu-lan) comments:

In another place, he [Mencius] said: “All things are already in us. Turn our attention to ourselves and find there this truth: there is no greater delight than that.” . . . Happiness and truth are in our mind. It is in our own mind, not in the external world, that we can seek for happiness and truth.⁶²

Thus Chinese may turn inward to their inner selves for knowledge and truth rather than go to the external world. Similarly, they also feel that the cultivation of the human heart/mind is the most important and most difficult work. In particular, it is far more significant than the control of the natural world. While readers may well admire Hemingway’s old man who singlehandedly struggles against the storm or sympathize with Melville’s Ahab who fights against Moby-Dick, the biggest challenge, for the Chinese, rises always from one’s own heart/mind and a profound person is one who daily examines himself and controls unhealthy desires.⁶³ Control of nature is not easy, but control of one’s heart/mind is the most difficult. Education in the West may teach more about how to

⁶² Feng 1991, 587. (Fun Yu-lan, is the spelling used for the *Selected Philosophical Writings of Fun Yu-lan* published in 1991, which includes most of his important works. The standard translation of his name is now Feng Youlan. In the following chapters, therefore, I will use Feng Youlan instead of Fung Yu-lan.)

⁶³ Confucius et al. 2014, 5. Later Confucian scholars have followed and interpreted this line of reasoning, stressing the importance of self-cultivation. Zhu Xi (1130–1200) advocated “eradicating human desires and maintain the heavenly principles,” and Wang Yangming (1472–1528) argued that the most difficult thing in the world is not to eliminate bandits in the greenwood but to “eliminate the bandits in one’s heart.”

understand nature and find natural laws, while education in traditional China was first of all the most important means to cultivate one's heart/mind. Thus this Chinese worldview is more human-based, and more introspectively oriented. It is worth exploring what big idea or ideas can be found and what social theory can be developed in a culture that focuses more on the human. This is the effort I am making throughout this book.

Conclusion

Social theory is shaped by culture. Monism holds that natural theory and social theory are of little substantial difference, for both are used to explain reality. It implies that reality is the same everywhere and that the path to explain reality should be the same. No matter where a theory is initiated, it is and should be universal in the first place and therefore culture matters little for theoretical development. By definition, it denies the role of culture, i.e. ideas, values, attitudes, perspectives, worldviews, etc., in the building of social theory. Pluralism, on the contrary, argues that the natural sciences and the social sciences are of significant difference, for the latter is not only for explanation, but also for understanding and interpreting social reality, and moreover for constructing social reality, too. If understanding and interpretation are added to the process of social theory building, culture becomes significant, for such understanding and interpretation are based on practical knowledge that is developed through generations and embedded in a particular cultural community, or that is created by and creates a cultural community. Culture, therefore, matters. Different cultures may produce different social theories.

We place emphasis on pluralism in general and cultural pluralism in particular, for in an increasingly globalizing world with more cultural communities joining in international and global affairs, the multiplicity of cultural resources may provide a rich treasure trove for the prosperity of social theory construction and intellectual dialogue. If we want to make it come true, a pluralistic approach to social theory construction is necessary. And, furthermore, it has been recognized that there is basically no non-Western IR theory, and that there exists in IR a hierarchical structure which sees a division of labor between Western scholars who theorize and non-Western scholars who provide raw data.⁶⁴ To change this situation, non-Western scholars need to consciously explore their own cultural resources for social theory construction and for the enrichment of the existing edifice of IR knowledge. Such effort is a must.

⁶⁴ Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al. 2016; Maliniak et al. 2014.