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The Dominance of American Approaches in International Relations*

'A Big Power Such as the United States...'

There is none like it. Here, in a nutshell, we have the whole problem. There is hardly any scholarly text or general treatise on International Relations, trying to be as objective, sober, unbiased and clear-mindedly neutral as possible towards its subject (the relations between by now more than 150 nation-states and the so-called international system formed by them) where we would not find that innocuous little phrase `a big power such as the United States'. It implies normality, a rational approach, equidistance, a neutral assessment of the general laws and rules of politics, and yet we all know that there is no other such power. Everybody knows that the second so-called superpower, the USSR, is a superpower remotely comparable to the United States only in terms of its military capacity and, upon closer examination, not even here. And there is certainly, for the forseeable future at least, no `third superpower' emerging anywhere, let alone in existence. Neither Western Europe nor China, India or Japan, each `big' in a certain way, can qualify let alone aspire to such rank and status. At first sight the innocent sounding modesty and self-belittlement of the `such as' qualification, to be found, as I said, in scholarly textbooks as weil as in high-level, policy-orientated analyses of the foreign affairs offices (hut certainly also in journalistic columns) contains the very problem and challenge we are trying to deal with. What are the consequences and the implications of this terminology? It follows from it that the rules, the generalisations, the political laws deduced from, or associated with, this one nation and its political behaviour appear as universal, as scientifically sound and proven, as natural and normal, and yet, they describe or apply to this one country only; they are its laws and its rules of legitimate behaviour. It is the uniqueness of the United States, the

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unprecedented and, above all, unrivalled concentration of economic, military and, not least, ideological power in one country which characterises the enormous disequilibrium of international politics. The term `unprecedented', however, needs an historical qualification: Spain in the sixteenth, the Netherlands in the seventeenth and, most of all, Great Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were equally without any serious rivals on the international stage, at least with regard to their will and designs to hegemonise world politics (which only one other great power during the large part of these centuries, Imperial China, did not have). However, in terms of capacities at least, considering the present very real threat of bringing the whole game of power-play to a final and suicidal end, these former `leading powers' were inferior to the present hegemon.

In discussing the state of the discipline of International Relations, rather than world politics itself, we are obviously dealing only with a minor, probably even only a marginal aspect of the overall problem and phenomenon of the hegemony of one `actor' on the world stage. On the other hand, if we think this one problem through, we might gain more general insights and a better, more differentiated view of the complexity of the issue of hegemony than from a global, politicoeconomic assessment of US power and predominance.

What then is `the problem' when reflecting un the academic discipline of' International Relations? In the last analysis we would have to rethink the nature of scholarship in general and the function and purpose of Ehe social sciences in particular: who are we scholars, what are we doing, why are we doing it, whom do we serve? Obviously, these arc questions that cannot be dealt with in a brief and simple way, yet we cannot avoid them. It should not be an intellectual luxury to reflect upon the nature and function of scholarship which has become, in modern times, such an enormous enterprise, absorbing so much energy. employing so many tens of thousands of people (intellectuals) organised in large institutions and international networks, demanding that society at large provide it with funds and resources at the expense of other possible investments. How can we justify that? What is the purpose of our work? If we look back into the history of the social sciences, it is both obvious, as well as complex in the details, that the systematic efforts at knowledge acquisition made by societies are always the reaction to given serious problems that need to be understood in order to be solved. Institutionally, it was once priests, wise men or philosophers who were given privileges in order to analyse, to explain and to suggest solutions that arose

within or between societies. The quest for explanations of social phenomena arose from a desire for the maintenance or the reconstruction of social order. Today it is largely universities which have become entrusted with the performance of this seemingly necessary function. Let us, in brief, call it `problem solving' or, - to use the term more familiar to international relationists, `conflict resolution'.

At the same time priests, wise men, philosophers - and consequently, the academic intelligentsia as well - have a further commitment to something as ambitious and vital as the search for truth. In order not to get lost in the epistemological labyrinth of defining `truth', let me quickly replace this with another, less evocative yet sufficiently multidimensional conception of the undertaking: scholarship is committed to enlightenment, to emancipation, to the search and presentation of knowledge that might enable society at large to become the master of its destiny. What does this mean? It means that knowledge about society and its conflicts enables man, `the people', to learn about the causes and effects of public actions, about the purposes and mechanisms of power wielded by those who rule and govern, about ways and means of solving social conflicts in the least damaging and harmful manner. By its very nature, the search for conflict resolution through the systematic discovery of truth is essentially dialectic: its aims at the maintenance or reconstruction of social stability and order, and it is driven beyond that narrow scope by its critical commitments when seeking root causes of conflicts. Socrates was condemned to death when bis critical, questioning approach was seen (quite rightly) as undermining the privileged position of Athens's ruling classes although he aimed to be `the teacher of man', and to achieve man's emancipation through reason. The history of (Western) social thought has produced and reproduced time and again this dialectic of truth as conflict resolution and truth as subversion of the powers that be: it has had its great martyrs (from Thomas More to Rosa Luxemburg), it has its great success stories (Enlightenment, with the American and French Revolutions as historic achievements), but also the permanent struggle of thousands of unknown academics torn between an expected commitment to serve those who play the tune and a commitment to the moral imperatives of telling undesired truths as they see it. We have to live with this, and we would be well advised to suspect that public success of academic work might have been achieved at the expense of the critical dimensions of the search for truth which, by definition, is subversive and transcends existing paradigms of order and stability.

These all too brief and synthetic remarks are necessary in order to give a proper perspective to the more modest task of discussing the state of International Relations and the problem of an alleged American intellectual hegemony over it. I think the problem lies somewhat deeper than in seeing this empirically relatively easily demonstrated dominance as yet another manifestation of `American imperialism', as a corollary to US economic and military power in the world arena. There is more to it than that. The problem of International Relations being torn between big-power rationalisation and the raising of critical, transcending questions has to be recognised in the discipline since it is being institutionalised and practised through research and teaching wherever we are. Let me start with what is, to my mind, a correct observation by Fred Halliday who, when reviewing two recent books on our discipline (one British and one American) talked about the `apparently weak impact of the discipline upon contemporary academic and intellectual culture.. . Few cognate disciplines seem to take note of what occurs in International Relations. . . In the wider intellectual culture, the names and controversies of International Relations have far less diffusion and recognition than the debates and personalities of economics or sociology, philosophy or psychology'. Why is this so? Halliday sees a basic fault in the fact that the discipline, because of something that one might call an `inferiority complex' about the `hard sciences' and the natural sciences in particular, had given in to becoming more and more empirical, quantitative, ahistorical, even mathematical; a tendency that is certainly strong, maybe even prevalent in the social sciences in general. `The sooner International Relations can emancipate itself from the myths of empiricism, and the feckless taxonomies thrown up by its enthusiasts, the quicker it will be able to realise its own theoretical potential'. I will return to this point later.

The real explanation of why International Relations, even though strong and growing in quantitative terms, unsurpassed in the size and international participation of its conferences, overwhelming in the papers, books and magazines it produces, is nevertheless so weak and stale, so barren and intellectually boring seems to lie in ä different direction which Halliday indicates by saying: `Practitioners of International Relations acquire wider intellectual reputations only when they cross the portals of state power. . .'. It is what one might call `the Kissinger syndrome': the secret, never or only rarely openly admitted ambition of the members of this particular branch of the academic community to be accepted by or adopted into the

real world of policy making, to gain access to the inner halls of power. Here we touch upon something that is specifically American in the sense of an American tradition and understanding of Political Science, and upon something that is more academic to the discipline of International Relations at large.

From its very beginning, even as far back as the foundation of the American republic, a science of politics was seen as a necessary and integral part in the education of a democratic public. Quite differently from Western Europe, and for very obvious or at least well-known reasons, American democracy could evolve without the obstacles of *ancien regimes,* of feudal institutions, of aristocratic classes and structures to be overcome by force or slowly transformed and dissolved as was the case in Europe. If there was anything like `political education' as a programme in European societies, it developed and was practiced as an 'oppositional project' on the margins or `from the bottom' of society by radical political groups and parties, notably by and within the socialist parties. Not so in the United States, where `civic education' was a major concern of the `centre', of the establishment, of the enlightened elites who wanted and needed an educated public able to vote and participate on the basis of sound, balanced judgements and not on the basis of emotions or narrow class interests; not the least concern was the integration of people with a large variety of national and ethnic backgrounds. Thus there was a vested interest in the creation of a `political science' (even though not yet under this name, of course) that served the function of political or civic education. The later emergence of a Political Science discipline had, therefore, always a practical, educational, institutional orientation. Its purpose was not, as tended to be the case in Europe, to educate the masses to fight for their rights and for `more democracy' or even for a `new (socialist) society', but quite the contrary: to make people accept the results of the American revolution, to teach them the value of the constitution given to them by the Founding Fathers, to make them identify with and `love' their country and its institutions. Consequently (and these are obviously very broad and crude generalisations), to be a Political Science teacher or even professor and also to shoulder the responsibilities of political power was- not seen as a contradiction. On the contrary, it would be the fulfilment of one's academic and intellectual profession. In Woodrow Wilson the United States had, in fact, a renowned Political Science professor in the highest office. And, in reverse, it is to this day not at all unusual for former government officials to finish their

public lives as teachers of `government' in colleges or as prominent researchers in renowned academic or quasi-academic institutions. What I called the `Kissinger syndrome' is therefore not at all new. It is rather a mainstream phenomenon in American political culture. This is a relatively unique phenomenon (relatively, because there are similarities in Italy, for example, where quite a few members of the governing elite come from academic professions and keep these ties even while in office). The `critical dimension' of the social sciences, its subversive, status-quo-transcending commitment to social change, to radical innovations and/or to underprivileged classes of society is, crudely put, rather underdeveloped in the US. This is even more true of the later offspring of Political Science, International Relations.

International Relations as a new discipline came into being in the United States as a government initiative, an effort not only to enhance research on the origins of international conflicts and their solutions for the benefit of those in charge of international politics, but also to train qualified diplomatic and analytically knowledgeable personnel at the higher and middle level of government departments concerned with the outside world. The view that the conduct of foreign policy was something too complex and remote for the ordinary citizen to have a balanced and knowledgeable opinion on, has a long tradition in the practice of governments and dating back certainly to long before the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here was, and is, a realm that should and must be protected from `democracy', from `the people', the *'arcanum imperii',* the occasional rhetoric of `open covenants openly arrived at' notwithstanding. Certainly the centrepiece of foreign policy, military and security matters, should not be made subject to the whims and the emotions of a fluctuating and narrowly provincial `public opinion', presumably more interested in bread-and-butter issues than in expensive grand designs or the complex and sophisticated games of international diplomacy. There is thus a built-in logic for international relationists, whether in the United States or elsewhere, leading them to be government- and power-oriented, to do research that is policy-oriented and to train young people for future government positions, rather than to be critical and committed to questioning the existing order or the `national interests' of their respective states. With such a `negative' attitude and orientation they would not even get a job, to say the least.

I indicated that the discipline of International Relations came into existence on the initiative of interested governments who followed

the US example. The history of this discipline tells us something about its character and function, to be sure a function that can be - and, I think, should be - changed, but which must be understood particularly for the purposes of the topic of `The Dominance of the American Approaches'. Roughly speaking, the discipline as a systematic and purposeful scholarly enterprise was born as a side product of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. In its immediate aftermath the American Council on Foreign Relations, the British Royal Institute of International Affairs and others were founded, by-passing the more rigid, conservative university institutions and aiming specifically at analysing the causes of the breakdown of the pre-war order for the explicit purpose of learning from it for the future. In fact, however, the solution was believed to have been found already with the creation of the League of Nations: that is, it was international law and an embryonic organisation of the sovereign nation states in the form of a `states' parliament' which was seen as the guarantee for international peace. We know now that it was not, and the lesson was heeded after the next world war in institutionalising the hegemony of the so-called major powers within a universal assembly of nation states. This meant, in effect, the institutionalisation of US hegemony, with a secondary and regionally limited role conceded to the Soviet Union and its smaller `empire'. During these important formative years we observe the second and now serious foundation of International Relations as an academic discipline, where the United States, with an infinitely more flexible system of higher education, took the lead in that direction. The American initiatives were propelled by the dramatic need for qualified diplomatic and other politico-economic personnel for the post-war tasks awaiting the newly born `superpower': the creation and consolidation of an international order in its own image, the `free world'.

This is the political background, the framework for the emergence of the discipline, for teaching and writing about International Relations: it meant, in effect, teaching and writing about US foreign policy or at least about the reconstruction of a United States-led world order. This bias was its birthmark - or, more pointedly, it was the very reason for its creation. The critique, the denunciation of American dominance in this particular field is, therefore, immanent: it states nothing but the obvious. It was and remained an American discipline not only because of the aforementioned flexibility of the American university system which allowed it to adopt this newcomer and give it a proper place next to the older faculties and departments

(one need only look at the often successful resistance of European academic institutions to accept even the much less controversial and much older field of Political Science as a legitimate discipline); its success was also a function of the resources made available to it. If (West) Germany is typical of Western Europe, then it took until the mid-1960s for the first chairs in International Relations to be created (a country like Italy has still hardly more than three or four of them). By that time International Relations was, as we all know, already an academic community in its own right with dozens of specialised journals, hundreds of chairs, dozens of departments, regular large conferences and professional organisations in the United States, with marginal appendices of non-American participants as the poor relations on the backbenches. Not until the 1970s did European academic planners realise that they would have to make an effort as well if they did not want to remain hopelessly behind. The European initiatives were motivated largely by the realisation that they, too, needed qualified personnel to make their voices heard in world politics. This need was felt particularly in the increasingly important area of `security', of arms control negotiations and strategic thinking, the language and terminology of which had to be learned. The language was English, of course, or rather American English. What could be more natural and obvious than to send students to the United States to learn from the Big Brother, to study and translate American hooks. Not the least advantage was (and is) that they were infinitely richer in terms of empirical data, often based on first-hand experience in extra-European (and extra-American of course) regions of the world.

To repeat, this was by definition and intent policy-oriented research and scholarship. But did it contain that other crucial dimension of the commitment to truth, the transcending critical faculty? Was it aiming at the transcendence of the government-service function toward the higher, the only ultimately dignifying orientation of emancipation? This would have meant, concretely speaking, the emancipation from a US or Free World national interest perspective. It is not by chance that the scholars involved in the protest movement of those years came from so many disciplines and fields of study, but rarely from Political Science and hardly at all from International Relations. It would be wrong to interpret the abstinence of the International Relation community from getting involved (concerning Vietnam) as a sign of its greater intellectual maturity and its commitment to a more rational, *realpolitik* understanding as opposed to the emotional idealism of poorly informed and poorly

qualified non-experts. It shows, rather, that International Relations had never really been a strictly academic, independent, critical scholarly enterprise. And it still is not. It should give us something to think about, how little if at all this discipline has been affected by the Vietnam experience; how little if at all the enormous losses of lives and the destruction of the social and ecological fabric of a small and distant culture by American power have made an impact an the orientation and the self-conscience of the large community of international relationists. Hardly anybody has seen the need for a critical reassessment of the categories, the paradigms and the socio-political functions of this particular field of scholarship. Just as in public political consciousness at large, `Vietnam' has been forgotten. It has been reduced, at best, to another case study for empirical analysis. The search for theory has not been disturbed by it. We, and they go an as academically aloof as ever.

This aloofness should be interpreted within the framework of the historical educational function of American Political Science as indicated earlier: to provide a rationale for, and legitimacy to, the working and the work of government and governments, to make people understand and accept, rather than criticise and reject. The seemingly sterile, formalised, rigidly sober and dispassionate debates about concepts and approaches, about patterns and variables, systems and hypotheses, levels and frameworks of analysis, are all implicitly designed to be variations of one theme: `a big power such as the United States'. One might disapprove of a particular policy, a particular decision, but basically American foreign policy is to appear as normal, reasonable, legitimate by the objective standards of the international behaviour of any state. `Since Morgenthau', writes K.J. Holsti (i.e., since the 1950s), `the essential questions to be explored, the emphasis an recurrence and generalisation, the assumption of all-encompassing theory, and the underlying model of a world of independent nation-states have remained, for the most part, unaltered'.[1] This is still true today: a world of independent nation states of which the US is just one out of more than 150.

This, then, is the Great Lie of American International Relations: the seductive search for a theory that can qualify as `scientific' by positivistic standards, a theory above and aloof from history and political economy, a theory valid for the relations between state actors at any time and any place, irrespective of the size, dimension, ideological profile and overall position of given states in the international system. It has led to the production of a set

[1] K.J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis,* 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

of categories, paradigms and parameters which make the United States as *the* world power disappear behind the smokescreen of a seemingly scholarly and objective academic language. I call this search for a general theory `seductive' because it plays upon the hidden dream of discovering, eventually, some law equivalent to the law of gravity, some formula similar to Einstein's theory of relativity. It is the dream, of a value-free discipline, modelled after the natural sciences and not forced to come to terms, critically, with the unique and frightening accumulation of power in conjunction with the world mission of the United States of America. That central problem and concern of most non-American scholars and observers is relegated to the realm of opinion, but is not part of the work of scholars in the field of International Relations theory. In K.J. Holsti's words: 'Contemporary theory... guides research into specific phenomena, problems, or processes, and avoids explanations at a high level of generality.' It avoids not only explanations: it avoids, paradoxically, dealing with and facing American international politics. There are more books written on American foreign policy than can be counted, let alone read, including solid ones, critical ones but also, of course, poor and superficial ones. Yet these do not spring from explicit theoretical foundations, and they are not being produced by those engaged in the formulation, testing and reformulation of hypotheses aiming at a better, more scholarly and thus a critical understanding of the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. US International Relations theoreticians have contributed very little indeed to foreign policy analysis in general and to the analysis of the United States in particular. They have left this important and crucial task to the political generalists, to journalists or to men with political ambitions. The products of the latter should not be judged by the standards of scholarship or academic-intellectual achievements; they are written for the day and will be forgotten as soon as they have been discussed by their peers and the restricted circle of foreign policy intellectuals. I agree with the recent assessment on `Progress in the Study of International Conflict' by Simowitz and Price who state that in fact the theoreticians themselves often confuse hypothesis-building and classifications with theory: `most hypotheses tested in international relations research are not logical consequences of some theory', and consequently they `have not yielded much progress over the past thirty years' yet there `continues to be a proliferation of studies seeking to uncover additional empirical generalizations'[2] [2]. The more this search continues, as a sort of self-propelling and self-generating

[2] Roslyn L. Simowitz and Barry L. Price, `Progress in the Study of International Conflict: A Methodological Critique', *Journal of Peace Research (Vol. 23,* No. 1, 1986)

activity, the more elusive are the results: `we appear to have more "facts" than we can account for' and `we lack any sense of direction regarding the road in which our search should be, heading'. In short, judging by standards of scholarship and the purpose of scientific knowledge as a problem-solving social activity, International Relations as practised in the United States is largely a misdirected failure. It is certainly not directly responsible for the `clear and present danger' the United States presents today in the international arena, but it shares a good deal of the responsibility by not contributing to a critical perspective, transcending the present in the emancipatory tradition and through the truth-seeking function of academia.

What is largely absent in American International Relations theory is the realisation that such theory has to be historical: not in the sense of, again, hypothesis testing based on historical data, but in the sense of a historical understanding and conceptualisation of the international system and of the emergence of the United States as a hegemonic power, as *the* hegemonic power today. There is no neat formula for this and the search for it is bound to fail. But a theory based upon history, working with historical categories (not historical data), interpreting the structures of the present in the light of the past requires also a creative incorporation and learning from the thinking about politics on the part of the great political philosophers of the past as our contemporaries. By acting as if nobody has ever seriously and systematically thought about the great problems of conflict and co-operation, of war and peace, of wealth and deprivation, of order and justice in the relations between societies and states, the theory of International Relations is impoverished and becomes reduced to research techniques void of content and perspective. It becomes blind to the rich intellectual and analytical heritage not only of our Western past but of other cultures as well. The result is a tendency to identify International Relations theory with the rationalisation and legitimation of US power and interests. It contributes to the destruction of this discipline as an intellectually stimulating enterprise, undermines its problem-solving function and its role as a critical instrument of change for a better world.