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The Unique and the Universal in International Studies Theories from the Global South

Michael H. Allen

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It is well recognized that theoretical production in International Studies (IS) is dominated by scholarship from North America, Europe, and Oceania, particularly its English-speaking spaces. Even the critical scholarship that addresses this hegemony, emanates in large part from the same spaces.¹ One challenge, therefore, is to widen the scope of the sources of theoretical production to make the concepts and insights about global challenges as global as the subject matter.

One hindrance to this widening could be on the supply side. The economic sociology of knowledge production could be such that the limited numbers of eligible scholars and practitioners in the regions of the Global South are needed for teaching and administration in universities of modernizing countries, and for the staffing and advising of governmental institutions.² This leaves many of them with little time and energy to reflect and write out the

¹ See for example, Ilaria Carrozza and Lina Benabdallah, “South-South Knowledge Production and Hegemony: Searching for Africa in Chinese Theories of IR,” *International Studies Review* 24 (2022): <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab063>.

² On the structural challenges for academic and public policy production particularly in Africa, see Stephen Chan, *African Political Thought: An Intellectual History of the Quest for Freedom*, (London: Hurst Publishing, 2021), particularly chapter 10.

implications and lessons of the political and foreign-relations events that they observe and respond to with such creativity, and reflexive, but unsurfaced theoretical hunches. Many think and do transnational and globally significant actions, but do not write theory. In such cases we can look to speeches and memoirs of retired leaders of government, transnational social movements, or international organizations for both stories of events, and reflections on causes and implications. These too, can add to the global archive of theory.

Another problem could be the failure of import-substitution in knowledge production. The frameworks that Global South scholars and practitioners use in their gallant efforts to make sense of the world might be poorly adapted or irrelevant applications of supposedly universal concepts drawn from western approaches. If the universities that trained them were legacies of colonial education, and their inherited texts and procedures were not sufficiently challenged and revised in the post-independence years, then they might be applying at best creolized versions of western concepts in incoherent attempts to build national discourses, cultures, modernization strategies, and foreign policies. Even if discourses are decolonizing, the generational lag might account for the gaps in contributions to the global archive. It takes time to recognize the weaknesses of inherited paradigms, process the anomalies with lived experience, and find or formulate new departures or new syntheses. Meanwhile, the business of maintaining a university, governing a state, keeping peace in a troubled region, or finding the liquidity to pay for life-saving imports, must somehow be done.

Therefore, the volume and content of theoretical production from scholars and practitioners in the Global South can usefully be placed in context of the real challenges of identity-formation, liberation, security, institutional cohesion and reproduction, and economic development that they have faced. Some moments and challenges produce more theory than

others. Regional sources might reflect regional rhythms, where similar challenges across different regions produce rhyming theoretical responses, but at different times.

But what is the point of globalizing the archive of International Studies theories? Theory arises out of the need to describe and explain or understand lived experience, and to devise normative and programmatic responses to its challenges. Agents create or borrow ideas that help with those explanatory, normative, and practical challenges. The archives for sharing and borrowing can be limited by problems of supply already alluded to. But on the demand side in the Global North and elsewhere, the archives can be limited by lack of knowledge about, or confidence in the conceptual productions of others, especially if they are not published in outlets that are easily recognized as Political Science or International Relations. Echoes of empire might suggest explicitly or implicitly that stories and data, like raw materials, are harvested from the Global South, but explanations and interpretations come from the Global North.

We have seen much scholarship in the North that claims to explain global processes in universal terms, but much less from the South that explains global processes, including dynamics in the North, in similar terms. Hegemony in IS scholarship means that the North theorizes, and the South does case studies. In contrast, a globalized archive means that all regions have access to both common and unique experiences, and together debate towards the best explanations and courses of action.

Thus, the project of globalizing the archive is both political and practical. It is political in the obvious sense of the need to recognize the conceptual contributions to International Studies from all corners of the world. It is practical because accounts and explanations of experiences can be made globally available to agents anywhere who face similar categories of challenges to

ones that have been met or anticipated before, or who together or apart, face similar contemporary challenges. Good theory should travel well.

This essay revisits two select contributions from the Global South to International Studies theory and brings them into conversation with each other. The two are Cheikh Anta Diop and Walter Rodney. The goal is to illustrate how their relevant ideas might be applied cross-regionally in both South and North to explain universal dynamics as they play out in unique confluences of factors in time and place.

Diop: Histories of Civilization

The Senegalese polymath, Cheikh Anta Diop, was perhaps best known for his contribution to the restoration and advancement of knowledge of the African origins of civilization, and for his Pan-African activism inspired by that knowledge.³ But equally important, were his contributions of concepts and an approach to the study of the elements and dynamics of civilizations everywhere.⁴ How then, might his ideas help us in thinking about contemporary global civilization?

³ See Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1976).

⁴ Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi, ed. Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn de Jager (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991). This was an early example of theorizing about the world, beginning from one's own position. In this case Diop wrote from the African context. Others were later to build on this idea of a universal gaze from multiple geographic and cultural viewpoints. See for example, Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (2014): 647–59.

Diop invites us to consider civilization as layered patterns of geography, production, trade, and warfare informed by technology, as well as social structures, and institutions that are informed by gendered divisions of labor, ethics, and aesthetics. Civilizations grew out of local families, tribes, and clans that formed from particular ways of living in physical environments.

Broadly speaking, matrilineal cultures formed in the context of settled agriculture, while patrilineal cultures formed in nomadic economies. The gendered organization of power in the respective cultures was largely reflected in their norms and ethics of lineage and identity, property, and conduct in war.⁵ This is not to say that movements from hunting and gathering to nomadism, to settled agriculture, then metallurgy and long-distance transportation and trade did not occur in any one culture. Rather, that the softwares of different civilizations got programmed in different ways by their gendered origins. These influenced their usages of tools, weapons, and means of transportation, even when they were no longer only nomadic or agricultural. It is the distinct lineages of customs, ethics, and aesthetics in the African context that Diop argued could be a basis for Pan-African solidarity.

Thus, Diop's Pan-Africanism derived from his theory and historiography, and it is the latter that are universally applicable. Diop himself applied this anthropological analysis cross-regionally, showing for example, similarities between familial, trading, and conflict patterns in historically nomadic and patrilineal cultures in Africa, Asia, and Europe. He did similar cross-regional analyses of matrilineal cultures that had begun in settled agriculture.

Diop also applied the foregoing elements of analysis to the evolution of civilizations, that is, the long-term metamorphoses of familial, economic, institutional, and normative reproduction over large trans-regional spaces of trading, notional contact, and warfare. He showed that in the

⁵ See Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*, chapters 5–7.

movement from hunter-gatherers to empires, states emerged at typical moments of social complexity and geographical reach. The need to protect territory, production, and property however conceived, drove conflict between classes within states, as well as war and diplomacy between states. In a sense, civilizations are clusters or successions of empires that share mutually influencing forms of state and diplomacy, technologies of production and war, cosmological concepts, and mathematical systems. Some also share language patterns, borrowed words, and writing systems.

As a historian, Diop outlined the movement of the big footprint of civilization from origins in what is now Sub-Saharan Africa, down the Nile basin to Egypt and Mesopotamia, and around to the Greek and Roman spaces of later centuries.⁶ What emerges is a moving picture of rising and declining centers of civilization, where new centers arise from what used to be satellites. Along the way, Diop offers the beginnings of theory to address several subtending puzzles. Among these are: how are identities formed among large numbers of people over large areas; when and how do identities form around physical appearance, or language, or occupation; how do racial or ethnic identities intersect with, or contradict class formation; what leads to attempts at revolutions, and why do they succeed or fail; and the big question, why do centers of civilization decline and fail?⁷

These questions and elements of analysis travel well because they can be used, for example, in the analysis of past Mayan, Inca, and Aztec civilizations in the Americas, or Han and Khmer civilizations in Asia. They can also be used in the historical analysis of industrial empires in Europe, their rivalries and shifting centers of hegemonic power in the nineteenth and twentieth

⁶ Ibid., chapters 4 and 16.

⁷ Ibid., chapters 8–10.

centuries. Writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Diop had begun to apply these concepts both to comparative histories of ancient civilizations, and to the critique of colonial historiography and the political economic sociology of post-colonial Africa.

But, as we confront the contemporary complexities of global neo-liberal civilization, Diop's work reminds us that its dynamics and evolution depend on intersecting geographical factors, gendered divisions of power and understandings of ethics, class formations, socially constructed racial and ethnic identities, varying forms of state and public international authority, and technological changes in tools and their usage. This archive of concepts leads us to look for ways in which new technologies redistribute power in production, trade and military capability; at how gendered and racial imaginaries create and undermine solidarity, and with that, class and state power; at how distance and means of travel and communication shape regional sub-variants of global civilization; and how forms of state evolve in response to regional and worldwide challenges of security, population movements, environmental disruptions, and social inequalities. As dynamics of unequal trade, failing modernization strategies, civil wars, and climate change push new flows of migrants and refugees, they produce new ethnic mixtures in host countries and fresh waves of racial and ethnic hostility. So, for example, Diop's hypotheses on the percentages of ethnic minorities that trigger hostility, could be very useful today.

Walter Rodney: Dialectics of Development

Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, like Diop, focused his research on the history of Africa. His earliest work centered on West Africa, but Rodney taught for some years in universities in East Africa before returning to the Caribbean. He framed empirical accounts of the encounters among

African trading states, and between them and European trading companies and their sponsoring states, in terms of the concept of development.

Rodney used the idea of development as an organizing concept in the explanation of social change.⁸ To him, development is the reproduction of the economic and social relations of individuals, families, clans, and nations in their physical, ideational, and institutional environments. His assumption was that these living units steadily sought to improve their capacities to thrive in their environments. Such improvements were iterative and dialectical, where humans crafted tools and devised new patterns of social and political organization in order to improve their lives. In this way, older modes of production evolved into newer ones. Development of individuals, families, or nations could fail or underperform if they did not invent new tools or production methods, or failed to learn appropriate lessons by reflection, example, or experience. Failure could also come about if the physical or conceptual environments were hostile. When the normal dialectics of unit and environment is disrupted, the capacity of the social unit to apply knowledge, creativity, and power is also diminished. Where a diminished person or people encounter more developed trading counterparts or adversaries in conflict, the more developed party is likely to thrive at their expense. The reproduction of unequal exchange becomes the new environment that develops the stronger and under-develops the weaker, especially if the weaker party cannot exercise agency in other relationships that do not involve the stronger party.

This dynamic was at the root of Rodney's diagnosis of the effects of European exchanges with African peoples in coastal trade, then colonization and resource extraction. The eventual

⁸ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972), chapter 1.

closing of other options by war and cultural hegemony, meant that African societies came to be enclosed within systems of unequal exchange in trade, investment, and governance that were controlled by rival but cooperating European states and firms.

Before the colonial era, the social organization of production and governance, together with the norms and customs for interpreting social life, shaped the collaborations and conflicts between clans and classes. Thus, in pre-colonial Africa, as in other parts of the world, development was following a typical path of movement from lower to higher levels of production, and progressions from hunting and gathering to metal-using states, as Diop also had shown.⁹ Trade as well as wars of rivalry and expansion were typical among these modes of production. Variations on protocols of conduct in war, trade obligations, and treatment of captives were to be found across these state systems. Unfortunately, for some trading states such as Dahomey and Ashanti, and eventually for Africa as a whole, trade in people became part of the trade in other commodities. The dynamics of these exchanges not only robbed traded people of their lives and potential, it also triggered the weakening of African productive, creative, and technological promise, while stimulating that for European cities and their settlements in the Americas, plus East and Southern Africa.¹⁰

Two levels of concepts come from Rodney's work: development as reproduced relationships that evolve to improve productive efficiency and institutional sophistication; and a macro-system of world trade and political power dominated by Europe and the United States.

⁹ Ibid., chapters 2–3; see also Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*, chapter 8.

¹⁰ Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago would have agreed with both Rodney and Diop that the encounters of extraction, exploitation, and unequal trade between Africa, Europe, and the Americas stimulated the cities of Europe in financial complexity and industrial output. See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949).

The latter is associated with Dependency Theory which for a time informed academic research and diplomacy in much of the Global South. However, the micro-concept of development as a dialectical principle in relationships of economic and symbolic production is what seems more useful to contemporary critical thought, once large transnational systems of relationships are re-imagined in light of the metamorphoses of neo-liberal capitalism.

This micro-concept invites two related questions about the past and present. The first is, what are the whole units or networks of relationships to be developed in any context: individuals, families or clans, nations, or countries? Rodney developed his analysis within a Dependency framework that assumed that it is countries that develop and under-develop. But his universal micro-concept or paradigm points more precisely to modes of production, rather than countries, as the historical unit. This also invites a focus on the agents, such as states, firms, banks, civic bodies, and mass movements as the shapers of global networks of relationships, rather than on pre-set world structures that prescribe the actions of agents, as was found in World Systems Theory.¹¹ In Rodney's primary logic, it is agents whose actions in relationships tell structures how to form and change, whereas in his secondary logic as applied in Dependency Theory, it is world structures that, once formed, tell agents how to modernize. The latter would not allow us to explain the modernizations within countries that were once "under-developed," like China. In contrast, his primary logic can take us to periods before colonization and to periods during and after neoliberalism.

The second question derives from the first: might not given social units such as national societies or global industries enclose dynamics of unequal exchange or unequal reward from

¹¹ World System Theory was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

shared work? This focus would help explain class formation and eventually empire-building throughout the civilizations that Diop described, as well as the dynamics of the trans-regional exchanges that developed Europe and underdeveloped Africa and other regions up until today. Thus, technological and productive advancements might persistently force us to ask: “who benefits and at whose expense?” If achievements on any continent were the product of exploitation, then global political-economy has mostly been about conflict and collaboration among rival exploiters within regional and trans-regional circuits of goods, ideas, and capital.¹² Their geographical advantages, forms of state, and styles of diplomacy and war vary, but their relative successes at pillage, extraction, manufacture, logistics and communications, and re-investment would determine the emergence and submergence of particular imperial networks. This analysis is still pertinent today because it describes the collaborative rivalry among global firms and supply chains within interlocking industries, together with the rivalry among states in both North and South to attract capital, modernize infrastructure, and foster growth in domestic employment and consumption. In this game of competitive extraction and accumulation, some elites in both North and South gain considerably, and many workers, marginalized and indigenous people in both North and South lose in quality of life.

¹² Later scholars have built on this view of the history of trans-regional and world political economy. See for example, Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989), though Abu-Lughod omits the African portions of the intersecting circuits of trade in the thirteenth century. See also, Sandra Halperin, *Re-Envisioning Global Development: A Horizontal Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2013), who also points to a transregional dynamic of exchange, innovation, and state formation as being more historically potent than national transformations within defined borders.

This also helps us understand the shifting footprints of civilization as Diop outlined it, where old centers decline, and new ones emerge. The geographical base of the game moves, so that now it heavily includes Asian centers of capital, such as China, Japan, and South Korea. On the surface it appears that these new centers are developing. Deeper criticism in light of Rodney's root notion of development, suggests that they are modernizing by joining an older game rather than changing it. There might be variations in style, technology, and governance of capitalism, but it is still the story of the evolution of a mode of production, not a transformation of the relationships that enable equitable human outcomes from trans-national collaboration. Other such centers of extraction and unequal exchange are forming in Nigeria, South Africa, and Rwanda to name a few. The global circle of capital is widening and more cities around the world appear to be modern, but the old pathologies that Rodney criticized in the Africa-Europe frame are only being disguised, not overcome.

Implications for Contemporary Globalization

The foregoing engagement of Rodney and Diop raises the further question for today's global patterns. What if in most cases, the boundaries of transnational economic and social reproduction are not enclosed within the territorial states into which the world has been divided since Westphalia, colonization, and formal decolonization? Can what we call "countries" develop, even the ones whose cities are at the apices of globalized accumulation? Might the historic patterns of colonization and imperialism not have globalized the class formations in which some social forces develop, and others under-develop, trans-nationally across both North and South? If this is happening in the Global North as it has clearly been happening in the Global South, might this help explain, for example, the post-war migrations from rural Britain and the British empire

to urban England, and the more recent migrations to Europe and North America along the pressure gradients of wealth and poverty? It turns out that it was not Europe that created empires, but empires that created and are still creating Europe and the United States. In a similar manner, neoliberal globalization is modernizing the emerging cities, while all together are in relationships of unequal exchange with workers, small farmers, indigenous populations, and non-human species in all countries, including such classes in the Global North. Capital and goods are moving globally, but so are poor and displaced people, thus disrupting prior imaginaries of identity and polity in both North and South.¹³

Ex-colonizers are caught in a global net of their own making. Even the resulting urgencies of climate change, urban decay, rural poverty, and loss of identity and purpose, do not energize or inform politics within countries enough to break out of the net. Instead, they produce incoherent political and cultural responses in racial and ethnic hostilities, frustrations with complexity, and passionate discourses that are suspicious of science and democratic order. Diop would say that global civilization is in crisis. Rodney's concept would help us explain the sources of that crisis.

¹³ Much of the work produced by Saskia Sassen draws on a similar template to that of Diop, Rodney, Abu-Lughod and Halperin, where she describes and explains the dynamics of dominance, extraction, expulsion, and migration to cities all over the world. The processes involved have negative social, environmental, and political effects on both hinterlands and cities, where some cities are poor and overcrowded with poor infrastructure, while others are global metropolises with multi-ethnic migrant populations and reactive and exclusionary institutions and voting blocs. See for example, Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2014).

Both Diop and Rodney offered paradigmatic micro-concepts which they used to generate macro-analyses of and prescriptions for large human systems: Pan-Africanism and Dependency Theory respectively. International Relations theory has moved beyond those macro-analyses, but the universal micro-concepts are still paradigmatic for contemporary dynamics in both North and South. Their ideas provide context for analyzing the possibilities for the exercise of agency by people in different positions in contemporary regional and global networks of collaboration and conflict. In the case of states, this contextualization provides one element of the analysis of possibilities in foreign policy. To be sure, structural location in the dynamics of rivalry and unequal exchange is only one dimension of capacity to act. Others include worldviews and ideologies, creativity, bargaining skills, and institutional support for informed decision-making.¹⁴ These elements of global and regional dynamics are illuminated in a range of derivative or puzzle-solving theories, the review of which is beyond the scope of this essay.¹⁵

¹⁴ Other work demonstrates how several elements of political agency, in addition to positions in large political-economic networks, shape the evolution of modernization efforts in industries and countries. See Michael H. Allen, *Democracy and Modernity in Southern Africa: Development or Deformity?* (Ithaca, NY: Institute for African Development Occasional Paper Series No. 17., Cornell University, 2018).

¹⁵ These derivative or puzzle-solving theories are informed by deeper paradigmatic concepts that provide the normal assumptions of a discipline. The concern here has been with paradigmatic or critical theory ideas from the archive of Global South thought. On the distinction between critical IR theory and puzzle-solving theory, such as bargaining and decision-making in foreign policy, see Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond international Relations Theory" in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Conclusion

If Diop offers the big picture of evolving civilizations, plus hypotheses on triggers of conflict at local points within global structures, Rodney offers the elemental dialectics that produce the modal and structural transformations of those regional and global systems.

These two selections from the archive of ideas of the Global South have given us ways to describe and explain patterns of collaboration and conflict that have shaped and still shape regional and global transformations of power, creativity, and discourse. This synthesis can inform and integrate research and policy across specific sub-fields of International Studies, such as War, Peace, and Interstate Orders, Environmental Studies, and Migration Studies. The conversations enabled by the two theoretical systems can generate questions for research and ideas for action in any region or territory of the globalized world economy. They can energize self-understanding in Africa and Europe, East and South Asia, or North and South America. We do not have to be satisfied with theorizing in the North and extracting case studies in the South.