

FORUM

Benign Hegemony

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER
University of Chicago

It is often said that the international relations (IR) scholarly community is too American-centric and needs to broaden its horizons. I disagree.

In the mid-1970s, Stanley Hoffmann called IR an “American social science.” That label was appropriate then, and it is still appropriate today especially with regard to the all important ideas and theories that dominate discourse in our discipline. This situation is not likely to change significantly anytime soon and for entirely legitimate and defensible reasons.

To be clear, the issue here is not about the makeup of the IR scholarly community as there is an abundance of scholars from outside the borders of the United States who study world politics. It is clear from just perusing the program for the International Studies Association’s annual conference that IR scholars live in a global village. This diversity—which is all for the good—is likely to grow with time as increasing numbers of young people from around the world go to college and study IR. In short, American scholars do not have great influence because of their numbers.

Nor do Americans dominate the field because the subjects that concern them are privileged over the interests of scholars from other countries. In fact, the issues that concern IR students are the same almost everywhere. Nuclear proliferation, democracy promotion, and economic interdependence—to pick just three topics among many—hardly concern the United States alone or even just the great powers. Virtually every country cares about those subjects and countless others, although they might approach them in different ways. North Korea and the United States, for example, might think differently about the virtues of nuclear proliferation, but both care greatly about the issue.

It is in the realm of methods, and especially theory, where US scholars dominate the study of IR. The analytical frameworks and causal stories that researchers from other countries employ in their work are associated in large part with American academia. For instance, the key names associated with the three most important bodies of IR theory—constructivism, liberalism, and realism—are closely tied to scholars at American universities. And the few influential IR theorists who do not teach at US universities are mostly British or are at least associated with British schools. Thus, one could argue that it is really Anglo-Saxon scholars who dominate the IR discourse.

The importance of theory for studying international politics cannot be underestimated as there is no way we can make sense of the infinitely complicated world around us without theories. The fact that the United States is home to the world’s leading theorists is what allows its IR community to control the commanding heights of the field.

The dominance of American-based scholars is reinforced by the fact that they have developed a rich variety of theories that are very useful for comprehending the politics of the international system. This means, however, there is not a lot of room for new theories or even major twists on existing theories. To be sure, this is not to say that there is *no* room for new theories, especially when it comes to middle-range theories. Plus, there is always room to refine existing theories. Still, there are limited opportunities in 2015 for scholars outside the United States—as well inside it—to develop wholly new theories. If this were 1945, the situation would be markedly different.

The extent to which American theories cast a giant shadow over the IR field is reflected in how undergraduate and graduate students outside of the United States talk and think about international politics. Wherever I speak abroad—regardless of the subject—the comments and questions from students are virtually the same ones I get when I talk on American campuses. Indeed, students inside and outside of the United States seem to read the same articles and books and for the most part employ the same concepts and arguments.

I might add that as a realist, I feel intellectually more at home in Beijing than Washington because Chinese scholars and policymakers tend to be more sympathetic to realism than their American counterparts. So, when I speak in China—where there is a deep fascination with American IR theories—I sometimes start my talks by saying, “It is good to be back among my people.” And I do not speak one word of Chinese, although I do speak the same language as my Chinese interlocutors when we talk about the basic realities of international politics.

American dominance in IR is reinforced by the fact that many talented undergraduates from around the world come to the United States for graduate training, where they are taught that the theories and methods that dominate the intellectual landscape on American campuses are essential tools for being a first-rate scholar. Most of them go on to have successful careers—often not only in the United States but also in other countries—where they purvey the ideas they learned in graduate school.

One sometimes hears the argument that there is a hegemonic discourse in IR and that the Americans who control it actively work to suppress new ideas generated by outsiders. In other words, there would be a richer and more diverse menu of IR theories were it not for American gatekeepers policing the discourse.

This claim is wrong and easy to refute. For starters, just ask yourself: where are the ideas that are being suppressed? Where is the evidence that American academics have prevented others from pushing forward new ideas about international politics? In fact, there is none. And please remember that we live in the age of the Internet, where it is almost impossible to stop new ideas—particularly good ones—from reaching a wide audience.

Beside, the scholarly world places a high premium on creating innovative arguments, especially if they challenge conventional wisdoms and even if they make prominent scholars angry. Finally, the American IR community is international and liberal at its core, which makes it hard to believe serious scholars in that world would be interested in protecting a hegemonic discourse, much less be capable of organizing to achieve that end. Even if a few scholars played politics and attempted to marginalize a novel idea they disliked, other scholars would intervene to promote and engage with it, particularly if it shed new light on an important problem.

One might argue that focusing on culture, as an explanatory variable, would allow non-Americans to offer new theories and broaden horizons within IR. For example, a number of scholars and public intellectuals have claimed that China has a Confucian culture, which they maintain has had a profound influence on its past foreign policy and will continue to do so in the future. For example, this is a key element in Henry Kissinger’s 2011 book *On China*, and it is clearly a legitimate

argument. But cultural arguments of this sort have been swishing around in American academia for decades. During the Cold War, for instance, more than a few American scholars maintained that there was a Soviet strategic culture that mattered greatly for explaining Moscow's behavior. All this is to say that cultural arguments do not offer a new way of broadening our intellectual vista in IR.

American dominance of the IR discourse is likely to diminish somewhat in the decades ahead as scholars from other countries become increasingly engaged in trying to develop new theories and refine existing ones. After all, Americans do not have a special aptitude for doing theory, and the United States has not always ruled the theoretical roost. Britain and Germany dominated intellectual discourse in IR before World War II, and US preeminence did not emerge until after 1945. Moreover, when Americans got seriously involved in IR scholarship, their theories bore a remarkable resemblance to those developed in Europe. Just think of the profound influence of Immanuel Kant and Hans Morgenthau—both Germans—on IR theory in the United States.

What this tells us is that those non-American IR scholars who become leading theorists at some future point will stand on the shoulders of American academics, much the way America's leading lights have stood on the shoulders of their European predecessors. This is the way scholarship advances.