



PAPER

Working

Concepts of International Relations

as “Globalization of Nothing”

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Concepts of International Relations

as “Globalization of Nothing”

Paul-Erik Korvela

As Kalevi Holsti has argued, in the intellectual debates among theorists of international relations, a major axis of controversy revolves around questions of change: where, when, for what reasons, and how. Indeed, most of the great debates in the field, going back to its early years at the beginning of the twentieth century, have been implicitly arguments about change. On one end of the continuum, realists such as Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin insist that the “texture” of international relations in anarchical systems remains essentially the same regardless of historical context or of the properties of the units that constitute the system. At the other end, constructivists insist that identities, and therefore interests, are constantly redefined through social interaction. But curiously, Holsti observes, the field is largely bereft of serious analysis of the nature and sources of change.¹ It is no exaggeration to say that present discussions in social sciences tend to highlight changes of all kind. Everything changed after 9/11, it is often claimed. The world is different, threats are different, and globalization has changed everything from economy to environmental challenges.

But changes should be questioned to some extent. Our openness to novelty, fads, and appearances may seduce us to cry “change” every time something appears different from the previous day. Major events in international relations are particularly prone to be interpreted as markers of fundamental change and of novelty. The ends of major wars are notable times when hope for, and signs of a better world appear in both public and academic discourses. However, if we are to take the 1930s and the 1950s as main post-war eras, then the hopes of 1919 and 1945 would seem to

have been misplaced. Many things changed, but the often cruel “texture” of international politics was not one of them. In contrast, many people today insist that the forces of globalization are changing things for the better, bringing nations and peoples closer together, and thus undermining the traditional bases of warlike behaviour. The foundations of national power and welfare today reside in information and knowledge, not conquest of foreign territories, the establishment of empires, or creating trade monopolies. So, to some extent, things have changed and continue to do so. But the approach to globalization, for instance, quite often follows the argument that globalization is supposed to have severe consequences on states, transnational networks, and individuals, but the causal effect is usually only in one direction, from globalization to networks, states, and individuals. Reverse relationships have seldom been explored. This of course biases the analysis toward the view that everything is new.²

First of all, then, we should pay attention to the abovementioned reverse relationship. To what extent are the practices of globalization and, alas, the globalization itself, essentially a process wished and caused by the states? We often tend to think that globalization creates challenges for the states and therefore we let the impersonal forces of globalization to take the driver's seat, so to say.

We should remember, however, that the forces of globalization are not impersonal and that they are not challenging the states, but on the contrary are processes that the states have designed and aimed at. The novelty of those processes should also be questioned, as many of them are mere increases in volume or intensity of already existing practices. Those who know the history of international relations, find that there is often surprisingly small amount of novelty in any present developments of international relations, even those that are considered revolutionary or radically different. Many “changes” are in fact recourses to previous practices rather than truly novel ways of doing things.

What I find interesting is that a fair share of these

¹ Kalevi Holsti: *Taming the Sovereigns. Institutional Change in International Politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. xii

² Holsti 2004, xii-xiii, 12

changes happens in such a way that the vocabulary used for describing them undergoes very little transformation or none at all. As a result, the vocabulary and concepts of international relations are increasingly less descriptive and less prescriptive. One might even argue that the conceptual apparatus of international relations can be seen as a kind of a "globalization of nothing" in George Ritzer's terms.

Ritzer's point is that in the present world we witness an increase of "nothingness", i.e. "centrally conceived and controlled social forms that are comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content"³. He argues that the US and the world in general are increasingly characterized by hollow forms. Thus, people around the world are spending more time in non-places (shopping malls, casinos, airports), and with non-things (D & G dresses), non-people (the counter-people at Burger Kings, telemarketers) and non-services (ATM's, Amazon.com). According to Ritzer, all of the above acquires greater clarity when we realize that there is both a general something-nothing continuum and more specific subcontinua from places to non-places, things to non-things, people to non-people and from services to non-services⁴. This is not necessarily problematic in his view, as empty forms have certain advantages. The handiness of hollow forms is one of the reasons why nothingness conceived in this way has proliferated around the globe in recent years. Ritzer's point is in consumption: precisely because consumption is dominated by nothing, people's lives are similarly involved in this nothingness all around the world as consumption plays an ever-growing role even in the less developed countries. Ritzer pays attention also to political-institutional developments and points to the worldwide spread of models of the nation-state and the emergence of isomorphic forms of governance throughout the globe. He also notes the spread of democracy and alludes to Benjamin Barber's analysis of "McWorld" understood as the growth of a single political orientation⁵.

³ George Ritzer: *The Globalization of Nothing*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, California 2004, p. xi

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 76

Yet Ritzer kind of dodges one crucial aspect in his analysis of the spread of nothingness, namely language. In my opinion, it is precisely the use of non-language, concepts devoid of substantial content, that partly creates this feeling of overall vagueness. This is much more pending in the sphere of international politics than consumption, of course. However, Ritzer draws almost an opposite conclusion: "While nothing has become increasingly common in the social world, in a way it has become less and less possible to offer nothing in the intellectual world, at least in the social sciences and humanities. That is, it is harder to offer abstract concepts, devoid of content, that purport to be accurate descriptions of the social world or that claim to be scientific tools that can be used in an objective, value-free analysis of that world"⁶.

I think first of all that it should be noted here that the actual world of international politics is much less affected by research and scholarship, especially research made in social sciences and humanities, than scholars tend to believe. There are certain advantages in hollow language, and the creation of more accurate terms and concepts would limit the range of possibilities on the part of political actors. This was acutely observed by George Orwell immediately after the second world war. In 1946, Orwell argued in his famous essay "Politics and the English Language":

"The word Fascism has now no meaning except insofar as it signifies "something not desirable." The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another.

In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning".⁷

⁶ Ibid., 37

⁷ George Orwell, "Politics and The English Language", *Horizon* 13/76 (1946), pp. 252-265

It might not be an exaggeration to say that the language of international politics is in this sense essentially a non-language. There is a tendency to make distinctions between democratic and nondemocratic countries, although we do not really have an agreed definition of democracy, to begin with. Often democracy is also presented unproblematically as an achieved condition that does not need any further development. We also continue to use the term sovereignty in a rather unproblematic manner, although there are at least four different meanings to the term even in the present usage⁸, not to mention historical uses of the term. We also tend to think of the present states-system as only a developed version of the Westphalian system, in which the founding principle is state sovereignty. However, the member states of the European Union, for example, are no longer sovereign in the Westphalian sense as part of their legislation comes from the EU.

Nevertheless, we continue to use concepts like democracy, sovereignty and Westphalian system even though we do not really know what they mean.

In fact, some recent scholars, especially those who share a post-modernist orientation towards IR,

have claimed that the concepts of IR-theories are no longer valid. For R. B. J. Walker, for instance, the mainstream versions of IR theory "remain caught within the discursive horizons that express spatiotemporal configurations of another era"⁹. In these views, we are living in an era of profound change, but our way of speaking about the world (i.e. language) has not changed. We need to reconfigure our conceptual equipment and to look at the world in new ways. In other words, traditional analytic concepts act as a sort of ontological blinders rather than as aids to understanding.¹⁰

In addition to sovereignty and democracy, many other concepts have become outdated. Wars, for example, have basically vanished from the world if we stick to the modern concept of war. Of course warlike

activities have not disappeared, but the language used for describing those activities is simply outdated. In the present era of global war against terrorism¹¹ traditional ways to understand violence have become more or less obsolete. Wars are no longer declared but military operations continue to produce havoc and misery. Terrorist acts continue to kill and maim people who are not participating in a war in a traditional sense. The old Clausewitzian view of war as nothing more than a duel writ large has grown especially obsolete as "wars" demand proportionally more civilian casualties than ever before. Adriana Cavarero's book "Horrorism" is an attempt to reconceptualise contemporary violence that assumes forms unseen and unheard-of and that becomes more and more difficult to name in existing vocabulary¹². Lexical constellation revolving around contemporary conflicts partly construct those conflicts, as the practices of naming supply events with interpretative frameworks and guide public opinion. Linguistic practices thus constitute an integral part of the conflicts and in this sense terms like "war" and "terrorism" are largely bereft of any descriptive meaning and confuse the real-life situation rather than offer tools for analysing it.

"Humanitarian wars" and "war on terrorism" pose a challenge for the lexicon of modernity which reserves the label enemy for states alone and regards war as an inter-state activity. Given this obsolescence of concepts and vagueness of terms like terrorism, Cavarero coins a new term more fit for describing present practices. In my opinion, more similar "reforms of language" or of concepts should be attempted in the scholarly work on international politics.

If we follow Cavarero's argumentation we might even ask what is the role of state today, if the state

⁸ See for example S. D. Krasner: *Sovereignty. Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999.

⁹ R. B. J. Walker: *Inside/Outside. International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. x

¹⁰ Holsti 2004, 2-3

¹¹ The present "era of terrorism" is also a change that never took place. If we look at the statistics, in terms of terrorist attacks, groups making those attacks and casualties terrorism demanded, the peak season of terrorism in the world was in the latter half of 1980's. In comparison, the present world is relatively calm. Most of the world, excluding Americans, have been fighting against terrorism for decades or centuries.

¹² Adriana Cavarero: *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence*. Columbia University Press, New York 2009

cannot protect its citizens from internal or external threats. Given that it is precisely the fear of violent death in the discourse based on Thomas Hobbes's political theory that lays the foundations of the body politic and its practices, wouldn't this change to ever present possibility of unstoppable and arbitrary destruction change also the theoretical and linguistic framework of modern politics? The states cannot protect their citizens from terrorist attacks nor from counter-terrorism operations which seem to be carried on in the territory of sovereign states without notifying them, let alone asking their permission (like the killing of bin Laden in Pakistan). States can no longer maintain even their very basic functions as they can not protect their citizens from external or internal threats and consequently also their legitimacy might wither away. Consequently they might not be "states" in the same sense that we have previously used the word. It is easy too see how changes in this discourse could easily lead to more profound theoretical and practical changes.

Conclusion

While many things have changed with "globalization", language of international relations is not one of them. While many visionaries of the coming global trends, like Kishore Mahbubani, tend to underline that mere tinkering of old institutions is not enough and that we need new kind of thinking¹³, they seldom pay any attention to language. If we accept the claim of social constructivism, i.e. that our world is partly created by language, then the attempts to change it would also have to change the language. Mahbubani, for example, argues that the rather desperate clinging to sovereignty in the face of globalization needs to be forgotten and states should not try to compete of seats in international institutions like the UN security council. I would say that part of the problem is precisely the application of obsolete language. Many scholars suggest that institutions like the UN should be reformed to better match the present power constellations, but not many have suggested the

reform of language. While it is apparent that sovereignty is not what it used to be, we continue to use the concept even though we know it is not an accurate description. Similarly, we continue to use the concept of war even though wars (as state-centred armed conflict proceeding only after formal declaration) have basically vanished from the world. Democracy is a kind of fetish that is treated as an on/off condition, where states are deemed to be either democratic or not, which of course tends to forget the immense heterogeneity of different democratic regimes.

Although it is rather evident that the conceptual apparatus of IR is not keeping up with the changes in the "real world", it could be claimed that this has never been the case: employing the Western conceptual apparatus and the elevation of Western cultural values as the telos of other societies has always been misleading and tended to exclude and marginalize non-conforming ambiguities and contingencies. This has often inhibited the theorists of IR to grasp the global life as it really is: open-ended and hazardous contestation between plural possibilities and differing views. This contestation, one might say, is done (or inhibited) also on the linguistic level. To some extent, then, the issue is also about Western hegemony. The West has been powerful enough to force others to use concepts and formulations familiar to the West and suitable to its ends. This is in some sense even the very cause of certain problems of world politics. The homogenizing effect of having the nation state as the centre of political life and of the international system is inherently problematic in many Third World countries, because the ethnic, linguistic, religious etc. diversity in these countries is seen as a threat to forming a strong state. The fact that reality does not conform to the (Western) concept is paradoxically creating incentives to change reality and the process of state-formation thus often follows a path not very suitable to non-Western societies. Western values are often also seen to disseminate with democracy and free market capitalism, while this is of course not true. Kishore Mahbubani, for example, has argued that the West seems to believe that it was Western values and political system that dominated in the struggle against

¹³ See for example his two books "Can Asians Think?" and "The New Asian Hemisphere. The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East".

Soviet Union, while in fact it was the Western economic system that was far better than the Soviet one. From the hindsight, Mahbubani argues, Deng who had no illusions that Western values were the cause of Western success, was right and Gorbachev wrong¹⁴. The current era of globalization is first and foremost a globalization of Western practices and concepts, but this is not a necessary condition. A non-Western phase of globalization is also possible.

If there is a mismatch between concept and reality, it would be easier to reformulate the concept or challenge it with another concept rather than to adjust practices to the imported concept. However, many concepts of international politics remain obscure and loose enough to facilitate a wide array of practices within that single concept. Researchers studying the sociolinguistics of globalization (like J. Blommaert) have noted that often only the forms of political discourse tend to disseminate. The contents of discourses may actually not do that, and in fact occasionally the discussion is carried on in empty terms, so to say. In this sense the concepts of IR are for the most part only empty forms, and as such a non-language giving further impetus to Ritzer's thesis about "globalization of nothing".

A way to resist this non-language would consist of conceptual reformulations and creation of contesting concepts, i.e. rivaling descriptions. Techniques for this conceptual redescription have been developed since antiquity. On the other hand, the Chinese more cautious perspective to change is often well needed in the present world. Keeping in mind Zhou Enlai's famous words on the French Revolution, we should wait and see what are the real system changing and permanent changes and not to go with the flow of every possible trend. The developments related to French Revolution are only little more than two hundred years old, so it is still too early to say what is the real significance of the event, as Zhou Enlai said. Yet it is not only a passive observing of facts that is needed. Many changes can also be actively initiated and because it is obvious that language plays a crucial role in this respect, then a wise reformer of international politics would try to reform first and foremost the language used in it.

¹⁴ Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere. The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, Public Affairs, New York 2008, p. 44

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