

IR theory and Area Studies: a plea for displaced knowledge about international politics

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Accepted version

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IR Theory and Area Studies: a Plea for Displaced Knowledge about International Politics

Abstract: This article critically engages with the hierarchical binary between theory and area research in the study of international politics. We ask about the processes which construct and reaffirm the theory-area distinction in IR and show that the binary creates structural pressures and reinscribes hierarchies for individual scholars. We notice that IR's Euro/West-centrism is directly linked to and perpetuated by the divide that privileges IR theorizing over empirical research both on and from places outside of the West. We show how this divide has been institutionalised with the effect of producing separate but intertwined academic fields of 'IR' and 'Area Studies'. The hitherto voiced calls to overcome the divide have largely focused on the question of how to give more weight to knowledge produced about the 'non-West' in IR. This, we argue, overlooks the broader significance of the theory-area divide, which lays in the socio-instructional structures maintaining it and the concrete effects they have on researchers from the 'peripheries'. This article, therefore, aims to examine the construction of Area Studies' peripherality and rethink possible solutions. To better illustrate the intersection of epistemic politics and political economy of knowledge production, we highlight the experience of researchers from the Global East.

1. Introduction

As Stephen Chan put it twenty years ago, IR is 'a discipline which speaks partially, but which has assumed and declared universally' (Chan 2001: 77). It is fair to say that little has changed in the intervening period. Much of the knowledge produced in IR remains profoundly Eurocentric, abstracting from Western, and more precisely Anglo-American, contexts and concerns. There is a growing awareness that this is a problem for a discipline purporting to produce knowledge about 'the international' and claiming to have global relevance. There have been attempts to open up the discipline to non-Western IR theory to help 'globalize' IR and widen its scope (Tickner and Wæver 2009a, Acharya 2014c). This has included formulating IR theory 'with Chinese characteristics' (Zhang and Chang 2016, Song 2001), and efforts to enrich IR theorizing by incorporating indigenous epistemologies (Tickner 2015). However, these attempts sidestep another issue, equally relevant for the agenda to dethrone Eurocentric IR. In a discipline that is now practiced around the globe but still dominated by an anglophone core, the exclusion of academics from that majority of the world awkwardly and tellingly called the 'non-West' is a recurrent problem.¹ In recent years, the question of 'why there is no non-Western IR theory', famously asked by Acharya and Buzan, has therefore shifted to one about the absence of non-Western IR theorists (Acharya and Buzan 2007). Critics have pointed to the limited representation of scholars from the 'non-Western

periphery' in publications and conferences of the anglophone core (Hamati-Ataya 2012; Tickner and Blaney 2013). This is especially remarkable because a steadily increasing number of these scholars have been trained at universities in the core since the 1990s as part of the push to internationalize UK and US universities (Chankseliani 2018).

Much remains to be done to understand how and why socio-institutional structures reproduce these exclusions, both in the anglophone core and the non-Western periphery; but strikingly, another long-standing issue, and part of these structures, has been somewhat marginalized in current debates. This is the continuing hierarchical divide that privileges IR theorizing over empirical research on and from places outside of the Western core. It is often asserted that academics from non-Western 'peripheries' fail to engage much with IR theory and prefer empirical research (Tickner and Blaney 2013, Hamati-Ataya 2013). Often, the problem is explained as personal preferences, insufficient familiarity with the conventions of theorizing in IR, or, in some cases, the result of socio-institutional pressures in places large enough to sustain their own academic IR communities, like India, Brazil and Russia (Alejandro 2018, Kaczmarek 2020a). As we aim to show in this article, those reasons neglect the dynamics created by the institutionalization of the divide into separate but intertwined academic fields of IR and Area Studies, and the way that academics from the 'periphery' interact with both.

Eurocentric knowledge structures within IR are sustained by the privileging of theory and lack of empirical engagement with non-Western places. By neglecting this issue, current advocates for a more equitable and pluralist IR overlook a fundamental feature maintaining the exclusion of the non-West in IR's knowledge production. In arguing this, we agree with advocates for more engagement with empirical research about the 'non-West' in IR. This has been argued, mostly by Area Studies scholars, in parallel to the current debate about post-Western IR, but seems to have been largely ignored in the discipline at large. Calls to overcome the hierarchical divide have focused on how to give more weight to knowledge produced about the 'non-West' and legitimize knowledge obtained with the help of non-standard perspectives - for instance, how to speak about the Balkans authoritatively but not through the perspective of conflict and violence.ⁱⁱ These are important points, but they do not address the broader significance of the theory-area divide, which lays in the socio-institutional structures reproducing it and the concrete effects those structures have on researchers from the peripheries trying to navigate the field.ⁱⁱⁱ

Area Studies in the anglophone core are not neutral repositories of empirical knowledge, and have a long history of producing knowledge about the non-West in the geopolitical interest of Western states (Chow 2003; Sidaway 2013). But the hierarchical distinction in IR between theory and Area Studies has an even longer genealogy. From its origin in the colonial sciences, this distinction intertwined epistemological questions with a political economy of knowledge production centering the West as the hegemonic core, relegating both knowledge produced about and researchers from the ‘rest of the world’ to peripheral status (Connell 1997; Baber 2003). Since the end of the Cold War, this political economy has been evolving in response to the neoliberalization and internationalization of universities world-wide – but this, if anything, seems to have hardened the hierarchical divide. As more and more Area Studies research is conducted by researchers from the regions under study, the theory-Area Studies hierarchy in Western universities is taking on a new dimension, reflecting these structural inequalities.

This article therefore aims to examine the construction of Area Studies’ peripherality in the discipline and rethink possible solutions, with a focus on how this peripherality shapes the experience of researchers ‘from the area’. A few clarifications are necessary. Without doubt, Area Studies is not one thing. In Britain, France and Russia, its pedigree is entwined with the colonial and imperial endeavour (Tolz 2011). In the US, its history is linked to the Cold War, when Area Studies acquired a reputation for serving politics rather than producing *objective* knowledge (Hanson 2009).^{iv} To make best use of our own expertise and experiences, we focus specifically on contemporary (international) political research on the former communist countries of Europe and Central Asia – still often labelled post-Communist, or post-Socialist - within the context of British academia. While the region has diversified considerably following the Soviet collapse, in terms of knowledge production this space shares specific experiences of late entry and marginalization in a Western-centric academy. These experiences are also currently sidelined in debates about IR knowledge production, serving to illustrate IR’s selective engagement with the ‘non-West’ even as the discipline aims to globalize its scope. Through a combination of critical analysis of institutional arrangements of the discipline, material derived from participant observation of our research fields, narrative interviews with Western-trained researchers from the region conducted in 2019 and 2020^v, and the analysis of regional scholars’ work reflecting on their own career trajectories, this article explores hierarchy-building practices and the inequality of knowledge production in IR. Our focus is on the experience of Western-trained researchers, partly because these researchers tend to engage with the anglophone core and are familiar with its conventions. They therefore face lower barriers to entry than other academics from the ‘non-West’ – but, as we discuss below, they still

experience many of the same pressures that exclude researchers from the ‘non-West’ from core disciplinary debates.

We start by showing how the hierarchical dichotomy between theory and the empirical study of non-Western places in IR is not simply the result of intra-disciplinary dynamics, but rooted in a broader genealogy of the social sciences that reaches back to their colonial origins. Based on this, we explore how this particular hierarchal distinction reasserts itself in concrete research practices in present-day IR, focussing on the context of British academia. We argue that researchers’ disciplinary identities are shaped by interlinked socio-institutional processes and show how these practices reproduce inequalities in knowledge production, visible in the downgrading of knowledge about and theorizing from not only the Global South, but also the Global East (Müller 2020). Based on this, we claim that current attempts to overcome the Euro/Western-centric nature of the field, and of IR theorizing in particular, suffer from lack of attention to the distinction between theory and empirical research of the non-West. Finally, we make tentative suggestions for a field in which this hierarchical distinction may be resolved.

2. Separation and hierarchy between IR and Area Studies

The hierarchical separation between IR theory and empirical research on the ‘non-West’ has been acknowledged as a structural feature of the discipline for a long time. In their mapping of the ‘house of IR’, Anna Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling formulated a metaphorical relationship between the ‘upstairs’ land of theory and the ‘native informant servants’ of Area Studies dwelling under the stairs – a metaphor that not only captures the implicit hierarchy, but also the ambivalent institutionalization of the divide into different but not entirely distinct academic fields (Agathangelou and Ling 2004). Separation and hierarchy, but also entanglement, have been key features of the relationship between Area Studies and IR. In the anglophone world, the academic institutionalization of International Relations and of empirical research on non-Western ‘areas’, developed in conjunction after 1945, reflecting the geopolitical focus of knowledge production about the ‘international’ during the Cold War (Mitchell 2003a; Chow 2006; Sidaway 2013).

2.1. IR theory, Area Studies and the (im)possibility of dialogue

There have long been calls to address the hierarchical divide between IR theory and Area Studies – with very different visions of what this might entail. After the end of the Cold War, rationalist theorists in IR and political science called for the application of universal theoretical paradigms to

the newly accessible communist space. They effectively designated Area Studies, with their emphasis on cultural uniqueness, messy data and hermeneutic methodology, irrelevant in a time of social and political homogenization understood as inevitable Westernization (Ludden 2000; Hurrell 2020). This illustrates how Eurocentric epistemological assumptions played and indeed still play out in rationalist IR theory: by definition, ‘area knowledge’ is assumed to be unable to produce, non-parochial, universally valid and hence scientific knowledge claims. It is predicated on particularity, unlike the *universal* IR theoretical assumptions derived from Western experience and seemingly validated by the global diffusion of Western forms of modernity (Teti 2007; Hanson 2009). At the same time, Area Studies is accused of failing to fulfil its supposed core function in the disciplinary division of labour – that is, to apply IR theorizing, test its hypotheses and thereby contribute to the development of theory valid across all times and places (Rathbun 2017). Typically, the editor of a recent special issue of *International Politics* dedicated to Sino-Russian relations lamented that the topic ‘has been the subject of very little scrutiny using rigorous theory, which has obstructed hypothesis formation and evaluation’ (Yoder 2020). However, where this empirical testing has occurred, its results are often not so much taken to falsify the theory than to demonstrate the deviance of the area from a universal norm; as Morten Valbjørn pointed out with respect to another region, in many of these cases ‘it has been the Middle East rather than the theory that somehow has been considered wrong’ (Valbjørn 2017: 649).

Those who challenge this reasoning aim to reverse this hierarchical division of labour by using the particularist knowledge generated by Area Studies to help achieve a post-Western IR genuinely reflective of global diversity (Valbjørn 2004; Teti 2007; Acharya 2014a). Amitav Acharya, for example, states that the project of ‘Global IR effectively synergizes disciplinary IR (with its theoretical interests and innovations but perceived lack of empirical richness) and the area studies tradition (with its strong emphasis on field research but which is seen by its critics as atheoretical)’ (Acharya 2014a: 650). Many of these explicit calls for Area Studies to help overcome IR’s Eurocentrism share an emphasis on the cultural turn in IR as a ‘missing link’ that could bridge the gap between Area Studies and IR (Teti 2007: 134). From its inception, the cultural turn was supposed to open up the discipline epistemologically and ontologically by decentering foundational assumptions about the international, but also by creating spaces for real engagement with Otherness (Tickner and Wæver 2009b). Questions of culture and identity were a core theme from the start, and while these issues had been neglected in IR, they had long been of interest to the ‘culturalist’ Area Studies. Early on, critical strands of the cultural turn directly addressed the discipline’s Eurocentrism; but more generally the turn was also seen as a way of ‘particularizing’

the discipline epistemologically in a way that would help open it up to empirical knowledge about the non-West (Valbjørn 2004; Bilgin 2017; Reus-Smit 2018))

This, however, has not happened. The epistemological opening provided by the cultural turn has carved out space for many different forms of critical theorizing, and has laid the ground for an emerging de- and postcolonial turn centrally engaged with the production of knowledge about and from the Global South. It has succeeded in effectively challenging the hegemony of rationalist IR and pluralizing the discipline, leading to laments about its ‘fragmentation’ and the ‘end of IR theory’ (Dyvik et al. 2017). However, with some exceptions it has not fundamentally challenged the hierarchical divide between IR theorizing and Area Studies. In a recent study of citation practices, Stephen Aris found that ‘in spite of Area Studies scholarship being proclaimed as a natural dialogue partner for studying the ‘international’, most IR scholarship adopts the same dominant position and practices a similar mode of hierarchical exchange in its engagement with Area Studies’ (Aris 2020: 28). Aris notes little change between the mid-1990s and the late 2010s in a pattern where IR theorizing is less likely to cite Area Studies research than the reverse. Strikingly, critical and constructivist IR scholarship is even less likely to cite Area Studies work (Aris 2020: 18). Morten Valbjørn has recently highlighted that this hierarchical distinction remains particularly pronounced between IR and Area Studies knowledge, as opposed to other social science disciplines. He has also spoken of ‘hierarchical dialogue’ as the main model of knowledge exchange between IR and Area Studies – though Aris’ findings suggest this ‘dialogue’ remains one-directional (Valbjørn 2017; Aris 2020).

For all its important work in deconstructing and unveiling Eurocentric assumptions and engrained power structures within the discipline, at this point it appears that the cultural turn in IR has not provided the basis for a more equitable, transformative dialogue between Area Studies and IR, and neither has it challenged the privileging of theory over empirical research on the ‘non-West’. It has been argued that the anti-essentialism of much critical theorizing in IR has contributed to a strange inability to engage with different contexts, in particular the situatedness of experiences other than those of the white West (Ilostanova 2010; Tickner and Wæver 2009b: 7). Others have pointed out that assumptions about the universality of key concepts rooted in European traditions of thought continue to be projected in critical IR in spite of the epistemological commitment to particularity and situatedness (Krishna 2001; Ansems de Vries et al. 2017). Whatever the reason, the failure of much (though not all) of the cultural turn in IR to prioritize empirical research outside the core West is also a failure to engage with its own Eurocentrism (Alejandro 2018). As a result, IR

theorizing in all its forms, not just rationalist IR, tends to perform and reproduce the hierarchical binary as a central structuring divide in the discipline.

The elevated role of theory in the discipline has long been acknowledged. It has been explained as a matter of prestige and academic status seeking (Behr 2020; Kaczmarek 2020b), boundary-setting against other social science disciplines, perceived as defined by their original theoretical canon (Van der Ree 2014), or as a strategy of containment aimed at suppressing and concealing empirical questions around empire and race (Krishna 2001). These issues all matter, but none of them are sufficient conditions in themselves, or explain the concrete process of how theory acquired this hierarchical superiority in the first place. As we argue in the next section, the positioning of Area Studies as the repository of empirical knowledge about the ‘non-West’ at the bottom of a disciplinary hierarchy and theory at the top is not an outcome of IR’s ‘fetishism of abstraction’, but its condition of possibility. And yet, the idea that a reorientation towards a genuinely post-Western ‘global IR’ could spring from a dialogue between Area Studies and IR overlooks the central role of Area Studies in reproducing the hierarchical divide.

2.2. A genealogy of the theory-area divide

In their current form in anglophone universities, Area Studies emerged after 1945 as the institutionalized repository of empirical knowledge about the ‘non-West’ deemed of strategic importance for the Cold War (Mitchell 2003). Andrea Teti has pointed out how the image of Area Studies as a haven for ethnographic engagement with ‘the field’ neglects ‘important points of convergence’ with the epistemological commitments of rationalist IR theory, not least a shared empiricism (Teti 2007: 121). Pinar Bilgin, among others, talks about the ‘geopoliticization’ of Area Studies, where ‘exotic’ regions of the world elicit interest in terms of their perceived danger to the West (Bilgin 2015). As Bilgin argues, this orientalizing geopolitical gaze distorts knowledge produced about non-Western regions in ways that make it unsuitable for decentring the Eurocentric nature of IR (ibid.). This is exacerbated by the particular political economy of Area Studies fields. More than IR as a whole, they rely on state-sponsored funding that tends to fall away once threat perceptions change – amply illustrated by the retrenchment of (post-)Soviet Area Studies in the UK and US during the 1990s (Chow 2006; Klink 2013).^{vi}

Beyond this orientalizing gaze, Timothy Mitchell has argued that the hierarchical theory-area divide has a more fundamental role to play in the epistemic politics that produced the social sciences in the first place. The emergence of Area Studies as distinct fields was part and parcel of the

differentiation and specialization of the social sciences into separate disciplines during the early 20th century (Mitchell 2003). As Mitchell has argued, this epistemic division of labour was the condition of possibility of the 20th century idea of Western social science as a profoundly Eurocentric political project, underpinned by assumptions about the teleological development of world history from the traditional and particularistic – illustrated in Area Studies research – to the modern and universal (Mitchell 2003). This, in turn gestures towards an even older legacy than that explored by Mitchell. The epistemic distinction that co-produces both the theory-centrism of IR and a Western-centric ‘Area Studies’ arguably is rooted in a racialized political economy of knowledge production that reaches back to the origins of the social sciences – including IR – in colonial science (Vitalis 2012). Here, the hierarchical distinction, far from being descriptive of differences between academic fields, appears as the simple expression of the familiar colonial spatialization and temporalization that describes Europe and the West as the actualization of a universal development towards modernity, and on this basis solely capable of producing universal theory (Baber 2003). As Raewyn Connell has shown, the binary division between theory and empirical research on non-Western societies was a core part of the racialized gaze of ‘colonial science’, the co-production of (social) scientific knowledge and colonial practices of population management that is at the origin of modern IR and the social sciences as a whole (Connell 1997, 2019; Vitalis 2012). It was common for early social scientists to draw on examples of ‘primitive societies’ in the colonies to make points about the evolution of social systems in the West. At the same time, assumptions about the ‘primitive’ backward nature of non-Western societies were reproduced in actual research practices (Alatas 2003). As Baber observes, in 19th century India, ‘conceptual, theoretical work that sought to universalize its findings from particular, provincial locations was the preserve of the colonial scholars. Knowledge produced by scholars located in the colonized societies had a particular geographical referent, constituted a case study and hence had no theoretical contributions to make (...)’ (Baber 2003: 617). Even more, ‘the view that Indian scholars were incapable of engaging in theoretical inquiries was expressed many times’ (Baber 2003: 616; see also Acharya 2014b: 648). Thus, the hierarchical theory-area divide was inscribed in concrete, situated bodies – who, and from which location, was allowed to speak and was given ‘Deutungshoheit’ (sovereign agency of interpretation), to use the suggestive German term.

Tellingly, the institutionalization of Area knowledge as repository of empirical knowledge about the non-West emerged at precisely the point where these colonial entanglements vanished from view, as colonialism came to an end and its openly racist practices were rendered taboo (Connell 1997; Raj 2006). This coincides with the institutionalization of IR as a separate field with

disciplinary aspirations, underpinning Krishna's claim that 'race serves as the crucial epistemic silence around which the discipline is written' (Krishna 2001: 407). However, the erasure of these entanglements did nothing to change the political economy of knowledge production that they had produced (Connell 1997, 2019). As Van Schendel points out, 'in formerly colonised societies, members of the rapidly developing intelligentsias with international ambitions had little choice but to adapt to the area mould' (Van Schendel 2002: 648). This helped reproduce familiar patterns, now translated into the distinction between theory and area knowledge, which mapped onto an emerging global hierarchy of academic core and periphery. Within the epistemic politics of IR, this put these researchers in a position of subordination to 'the discipline', de facto 'native informers' located on the outside, excluded from central disciplinary debates around theory development (Hamati-Ataya 2011). But at the same time these structural exclusions were and continue to be present within Area Studies fields themselves. Haarotunian and Miyoshi have highlighted how the political economy of Area Studies knowledge production has continued a colonial pattern of extractivism, where 'fieldwork' (often conducted with the help of, and dependent on, local researchers) served to extract 'the raw material of pure facticity', with value added through its analytical processing in the core, 'the inside, the territory of theory and research' (Haarotunian and Miyoshi 2002: 7). As they conclude, 'Area studies, despite its arrival with decolonization, thus succeeded in reinforcing this imperial-colonial relationship by maintaining that Euro-America was the privileged site of production, in every sense of the word' (ibid.).

3. Structures perpetuating the theory-area divide

Since the end of the Cold War, the internationalization and neoliberalization (i.e. privatization, marketization and financialization) of universities has provided the broad parameters shaping the socio-institutional context of research, in the anglophone core and globally (Altbach and Teichler 2001; Shrivastava and Shrivastava 2014). This shift has not displaced long-standing structural inequalities of global knowledge production or the reproduction of the hierarchical binary between theory and area research in IR. As we discuss in this section, these processes had different effects on IR and Area Studies, but seem to have not only reproduced but highlighted the structural inequalities that researchers from the 'non-West' are exposed to (Sukarieh and Tannock 2019; Mwambari 2019). In particular, the intersection of the hierarchical distinction between IR theory and 'the Areas' with core-periphery inequalities affecting researchers from 'the Areas' remains a pronounced feature of disciplinary dynamics. In this section, we discuss the socio-institutional mechanisms that contribute to the high(er) entry barriers faced by researchers from

the Global East regarding theory production in IR in a now internationalized neoliberal academy and how this is compounded by continuing structural inequalities within Area Studies.

3.1. The Global East in an internationalized academy

In exploring these issues, we highlight the experience of researchers from a space that is currently sidelined in the emerging debate about post-Western IR, and in the discipline of IR as a whole – and yet illustrates the intersection of epistemic politics and political economy of knowledge production very well. These are the former communist countries recently described as the interstitial epistemic space of the Global East (Müller 2020), defined as ‘both a subject of research and the vast space where many academics are based’ (Trubina et al. 2020: 655). In spite of the significant differences and diverse trajectories of these countries after the Soviet collapse, they share not only the experience of ‘late entry’ into a Western-dominated global political economy of knowledge production, but are also still subject to what Mueller has called a ‘dual exclusion’, by being sidelined in current debates about the revalidation of Southern knowledge, while also not included in imaginaries of a ‘Global North’ (Mueller 2020: 3).

In many ways, the Global East could and should trouble the hierarchical binaries that map the theory-area distinction onto a North-South divide in global knowledge production. While the Western gaze on many areas of the Global South is framed by legacies of concrete colonial entanglements, the emergence of this set of diverse countries and regions as an ‘area’ in Western knowledge production – the communist space – was entirely the result of Cold War geopolitical divisions. From Central and Eastern European countries to those of Central Asia, with Russia as a non-Western former imperial centre, the region is not only highly diverse, but also has never been part of British and French colonial systems. This, and the subsequent incorporation of these places into Soviet ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ imperial spheres means that the region – and researchers from the region – were doubly removed from direct engagement with ‘the West’. This is echoed in a current Western geopolitical gaze that casts the Global East as ‘separate and distant from the world, not having much to contribute to it’ (Müller 2020: 749). It also means that in contemporary global knowledge production, the ‘global East’ has a very different starting point to that of the Middle East, Africa or Latin America, though it would be wrong to think of this just in terms of separation. During the Cold War, Marxist theorizing in the ‘Socialist Bloc’ was itself entangled in ambivalent and not always unproblematic ways with decolonization movements in the Global South, while forms of decolonial and postcolonial theorizing emerging in the Global South were entangled with developing strands in the Western core (Chari and Verdery 2009). However, for

the Western anglophone core the ‘socialist bloc’ became a passive object of ‘area’ knowledge, subject to an often orientaling gaze that drew on long-standing tropes of Eastern ‘backwardness’ (Todorova 1997).

The Soviet collapse re-defined this area around a ‘post-socialist’ label coined by Western area researchers and now perceived as orientaling by many researchers from the region (Trubina et al. 2020). It also was recast as a variant of a ‘third world’ in need of Western guidance during its inevitable transition to liberal democracy and free market capitalism (Kuus 2004). This catapulted researchers from the Global East into existing hierarchies of knowledge production, a story that became interwoven with the internationalization of academic research since 1991 and the concomitant further concentration of academic capital in the anglophone core (Demeter 2019). The collapse of institutional structures after 1991 affected universities across the region. It not only delegitimized the Marxist-Leninist framework within which all social science production had taken place, but dealt a lasting blow to scholarship that has continued to frame the intervening 30 years since the Soviet collapse. Cuts to university funding and neoliberal reforms meant low salaries and often precarious contracts, high teaching loads and limited access to research funding across the region (Timar 2004; Shadymanova and Amsler 2017). From the 1990s onwards, this has pushed generations of scholars from the Global East abroad, trained at universities in ‘core’ countries – supported, to some extent, by Western development and knowledge transfer programmes, and more recently by scholarship programmes in Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan (Chankseliani 2018). This often appeared as the only viable path to a (continued) academic career – and one already predicated on access to resources that were scarce in the region during the 1990s, for example sufficient language knowledge. Of course, many researchers in this position were eager to learn about disciplinary developments in the Western core that they had had little or no access to. But this intellectual curiosity was underpinned by economic necessity, the need to adapt to these new realities in order to survive as academics (Timar 2004). In conjunction with the redefinition of the Western geopolitical gaze on the region, this exposed researchers from the Global East to existing structural inequalities in knowledge production. In the disciplinary hierarchies of the social sciences, ‘Eastern’ knowledge is downgraded along familiar lines, expected to adopt Western theoretical framings and supply empirical data (Jehliča 2021; Trubina et al. 2020). The current blindness to the Global East in the Western academy exacerbates these exclusions, as researchers from the region may effectively be excluded from attempts to remedy inequalities by, for example, providing conference travel grants for researchers from the Global South, or including collaboration with Global South institutions in grant funding

calls. It often is at the discretion of the reviewing committee whether an applicant from Ukraine or Georgia will be regarded as ‘from the Global South’ and therefore prioritised.

3.2. Socio-institutional arrangements

It will come as no surprise that the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the large-scale culling of ‘Post-Soviet’ Studies centres in the UK (Klinke 2014). The process continues, with some of the last remaining independent centres for research on the region at the universities of Birmingham and Glasgow now reduced in staff numbers and significance or dissolved into broader subject areas in Politics and IR. This not only means a reduction in the number of active researchers in post-communist Area Studies but also makes specialised research less visible. Despite the incorporation of individual academics into disciplinary departments, the distinction between theorizing and area research remained unchallenged. This is because the divide is sustained by an array of institutional differentiations, not solely by the existence of separate IR and Area Studies departments.

In the UK, the hierarchical division is reinforced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the government-sponsored system for assessing research quality. The REF is centrally important to university rankings and therefore universities’ ability to attract fee-paying students. ‘Area Studies’ and ‘Politics and International Studies’ are separate ‘units of assessment’, but are not considered equal. Area Studies belongs to main panel D, which covers the Arts and Humanities. Politics and International Studies are in main panel C, Social Sciences.^{viii} From an IR disciplinary perspective, submissions to panel D are worth less and should be avoided, but this creates issues for submissions from Area Studies researchers in IR departments. Since Area Studies are driven by empirical research and developments on the ground, rather than by ‘significant’ theoretical debates in the discipline, they are often deemed to fall short on the REF criteria of ‘significance’ and ‘rigour’ for panel D. At the same time, submissions are by department. Empirically oriented Area Studies researchers are therefore less likely to achieve the required high rankings (3* or 4*) in departmental REF submissions or in preparatory pre-REF ‘mock rankings’, with real consequences for hiring and promotion. The objective may have been to construct an assessment that is uniform across disciplines and sensitive to disciplinary differences, but this neglects the consequences of being included in one panel rather than another in the broader political economy of the marketized British university.

In contemporary academic job applications in the UK, research outputs are evaluated in terms of their significance for the REF and the impact factor of the journal of publication. Thus, practices developed for the academic job market reinforce the significance of specific assessment metrics. This is aggravated by the growing importance of publication metrics for promotion purposes and academic prestige. The impact factor, in particular, is now often taken as a determinant of what counts as a 'leading' journal. From the charts below, it is clear that IR journals have a higher impact factor than post-Soviet Area Studies ones. Moreover, while this does not necessarily indicate a long-term trend, it is noteworthy that from 2018 to 2019 the impact factor of all the Area Studies journals considered here decreased significantly, while three out five IR journals improved.

Table 1 here

Table 2 here

In addition, IR journals usually expect their authors to contribute to theory development (Underhill 2018). For example, the Review of International Studies wants work that 'pushes the boundaries of the discipline through theoretical, conceptual and methodological innovation'.^{viii} The editors of the European Journal of International Relations signal their interest in 'empirically grounded' research that contributes to theoretical developments and reflects changes in global politics (Underhill 2018: 14). Scholars wanting to follow these guidelines, however, face practical obstacles if they also want to present extensive primary research. Word limits in many IR journals rarely permit scholars to make extended reference to interviews and fieldwork, especially when broad discussion of theory is also required.^{ix} Undoubtedly, journal guidelines are open to multiple interpretations. The phrasing of 'pushes the boundaries of the discipline through theoretical, conceptual and methodological innovation' may indicate openness to different modes of research. However, reviewers can take a narrow understanding of what theory means and what an appropriate IR topic is, and effectively practice gate-keeping. A 2018 rejection letter from a top IR journal suggested:

I am not even sure that the analysis is appropriately pitched as an IR paper, for there is little if anything here about *the implications (...) for articulations of foreign policy*; or about the extent to which alternative opinions may filter into *foreign policy (...)* I have concerns about the appropriateness of the paper for [name of a top IR journal] (...) (emphasis added)

In another recent review for a different IR journal, it was suggested that a paper proposing to draw on local concepts to understand the international relations of a region of the Global East might be restructured around discussing 'for example, the various meanings of sovereignty'.

In addition to narrow understandings of what counts as ‘IR’, reviewers may not consider a nuanced, case-based discussion of a concept equally valuable to the theorization of this concept. A detailed case-study analysis that develops a concept may be criticized for being ‘woolly’ and ‘not thick enough’ (phrases from a 2021 article review), and it may then be suggested to reframe the contribution around empirical analysis, to be resubmitted to a non-disciplinary journal. A 2020 desk rejection by a top IR journal illustrates this social practice:

This article has been *sent to the wrong journal*. The Editors understand that there is a claim of an (international?) intervention context, but the *theoretical book is missing*, and the article is *substantively about* [country of the Global East]. The motivations for *framing this as an IR piece* are insufficiently clear to the reader. The article starts with a long discussion of literature that is rather distant from IR: coevalness in anthropology. (...) *The analysis is very local and that is fine, but this does not fit in our journal*. (emphasis added)

Combining detailed empirical analysis and conceptual development within the constraints of one journal article is difficult and compromises are unavoidable – but this is not often appreciated by theory-oriented reviewers. Too often, the proverbial comments by ‘Reviewer 2’ prevent the publication of a valuable text. On the other end of the spectrum, the privileging of theory over empirical research in IR goes so far that theoretical work drawing only on secondary area and/or historical research is considered perfectly adequate as ‘empirical grounding’ for theoretical arguments, precisely because of the central role played by theoretical paradigms in the field. Buzan and Waeber’s ‘regional security complex theory’, elaborated in their book ‘Regions and Powers’ and explicitly formulated as a ‘blueprint for Area Studies’, for example, draws extensively on the secondary Area Studies literature for its empirical components (Valbjørn 2004). Altogether, this means that the ‘empirical grounding’ of theoretical arguments in IR journals can often be an afterthought, and all too often relies on selectively chosen examples that conform to the theoretical argument – whereas the nuanced discussion of a broader empirical context may well cast doubt on the certainty of many theoretical claims (Rathbun 2017).

3.3. Academic socialization and the hierarchy

This brings us to the next step of our argument. From the early stages of their research career, academics are socialized into particular professional identities and are persuaded to hold (sub)disciplinary allegiances. One example is Van der Ree’s positioning of himself in the introduction to an article about theorizing in IR: ‘Coming into IR *as a relative outsider*, having

completed a PhD in the field of Latin American Studies (LAS) (...)’ (Van der Ree, 2014: 218, emphasis added). PhD students often sheepishly proclaim that they are not well versed in IR theory if they specialize in the international politics of a specific region. Social dynamics in the discipline encourage a choice - either one ‘does’ Area Studies or IR ‘proper’. From our interviews, personal experience, as well as conversations with supervisors and PhD students, we learned that research students are often advised to make a choice early on in their careers, and to consider publishing in ‘prestigious’ journals and other professional requirements linked to the REF. Especially in light of the REF, students may be advised by well-meaning mentors against pursuing Area Studies or publishing in Area Studies journals, given a competitive job market that favours high impact factor publications. Over a longer period of time, these developments may deepen the divide. The quotations below illustrate this dynamic:

I have thought about this [the theory-area distinction] a lot because I have often been told *not* to position myself as an Area Studies scholar both at supervision and by caring mentors (...) My understanding is that the people who gave me this advice thought that if you position yourselves as Area Studies then you are basically limiting yourself, then whatever you say is only beneficial to this area and you will never become a universalist (...) IR wants to pursue universalist knowledge and Area Studies is its opposition because it is focused on a specific area. (Interviewee 2, emphasis added)

My co-supervisor advised our graduate student to develop a theory-oriented rather than area-specific research problem arguing that it would strengthen their position in case they decided to pursue a career in academia (Interviewee 4)

These socially-imprinted limitations on individual choices are compounded by dynamics specifically impacting researchers ‘from the areas’. Key journals are universally in English^x and often published in the US and UK, while major academic conferences take place in the anglophone core. It has been argued that this privileges native or near native speakers, in addition to the dominance of Anglophone academic conventions that make publishing harder for those not socialized in these traditions (Aalbers and Rossi 2009). While researchers trained in the West may not be quite as limited by this, they do face the reality of pronounced material inequalities if they choose to return to their home region. As one interviewee noted with respect to accessing publications and social networks:

The chance to study at [a university in the UK] for one year of my PhD was such a privilege: mainly because the access to books, journals, and different ways of teaching, and socialisation with peers. (...) I would say that being exposed to even more diverse

perspectives plus access to resources and access to opportunities/contacts, is so different and most valuable. I have never had the chance to feel valued and able to collaborate with people on such a scale. (Interviewee 3)

Those challenges are exacerbated by difficulties related to such mundane practice as attending IR conferences in the West. Western visa restrictions are an important barrier. Lack of funds for travelling is another. These material inequalities impede access to the resources of the ‘core’, to publications, academic networks and funding, and exacerbate relations of dependency between Western and non-Western researchers (Connell 2019; Demeter 2019). They are especially significant in the context of an imaginary geography that places knowledge produced in Western locations higher than that produced ‘elsewhere’. And in fact, where one comes from may have an effect on one’s (perceived) symbolic capital as a scholar in the discipline. As one interviewee reflected:

(...) I feel that in my case gender/geography intersected more prominently when I was starting out as an academic by making me less sure of my expertise (internalised inferiority and imposter syndrome; at times reinforced by others in the field), less vocal (I sometimes worry about the fact that I am not a native speaker). And as always coming from the fringes of the discipline has made me (more in the beginning than now) less trustful of my own knowledge. (Interviewee 3)

Another interviewee commented on the dynamics of publishing in the following way:

And here my suspicion is whether coming from [a smaller country of the Global East] automatically raises doubts – can we trust their PhD, can we trust their scholarship? When people don’t know this place, they automatically put it into the ‘weird’ category. For book publishers, it matters where you come from and what institution you represent (Interviewee 1).

While these experiences and reflections may not be shared by every researcher from the Global East, they serve as an important illustration of how a group of scholars perceives their positionality within the social institutions of IR.

3.4. Repercussions of the theory-area distinction for scholars from the Global East

Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of students from the region have completed their PhD in the West. In spite of the privileging of theory described above, they predominantly find employment as Area Studies specialists if they want an academic career in the UK. Here, they have a competitive advantage in the context of a long-term decline in university funding for language

training in Russian, let alone other languages of the Global East. Their language skills and cultural background knowledge are considered a valuable commodity in Area Studies – even as they designate them as being from a ‘place of nowhere’ for the discipline of IR (Hamati-Ataya 2012). As a result, recent decades have seen an increase in area research conducted by native language speakers at UK universities. This however is a professional identity constructed and imposed by others – reflecting the realities of a highly competitive job market, but also particular roles ascribed to researchers from the region. In the eyes of Western academia, these researchers may appear predestined to study a specific country or region that happens to be the country or region of their origin – even when their academic research interests lay elsewhere (eg. Bonnell and Breslauer 2002). This can be illustrated with an excerpt from a self-reflexive narrative piece in which a researcher describes their career trajectory:

(...) we are working on a project on unintended consequences of EU external action ... Every time I tell someone about the project, I get to hear, “Oh, so you must be writing about the EU and the Euromaidan?!” I have to explain then that I am not, in fact (...) At first, I link this common perception to my research profile, which, indeed, has a prominent Ukraine-component. As the question pops up again and again, however, I begin to wonder to what extent it reflects an assumption, seemingly held by so many fellow researchers, that I am somehow *confined* to the study of Ukraine, can and shall only generate country-specific knowledge, relevant (only) for those involved. (Burlyuk 2019: 46-47)

Some of our interviewees have experienced this dynamic taking place in informal academic settings:

In my case, my regional background has not mattered so much, since I have never really studied my regional context. In conversations, chats (informally) people usually want to talk about Russia, and then some scholars want to get into what they perceive is an ‘ethnic conflict’ between Estonia and Russian-speaking populations there. (Interviewee 3)

There are also examples of scholars who are asked to teach about their country of origin despite the fact that their research has never touched upon that country. One of our interviewees described this in the following way:

I was asked to teach about domestic developments taking place for the last three decades in [the country of the scholar’s origin]. My disciplinary background is not in Political Science but in IR, and I have never done any research related to [the country of the scholar’s origin]. (Interviewee 5)

Scholars who self-consciously aim to combine IR theoretical work with research related to a specific region, are often approached solely as ‘area experts’, especially if they also originate from that region. One interviewee became fascinated with theory during their undergraduate degree at a regional university and specifically set out to do a PhD in IR, choosing a non-regional case comparison as well as PhD supervisors who weren’t specialists on the global East. Her career opportunities in the ‘core’ have nevertheless been related to the fact that she speaks Russian (Interviewee 6). Another commented:

This is embarrassing to admit, but I really don't have all that specific regional expertise that is at times expected of me. And this is why I am always so reluctant to even call myself an area expert. That is even more intimidating than calling myself a theorist. (Interviewee 2)

The same interviewee also reflected on the absence of ‘their’ region from the list of typical IR concerns:

We think in terms of core and periphery, where Western Europe and the US are the core. The Global South is the periphery. But there is no place for Eastern Europe and there is no place for theorizing from this region. (Interviewee 2)

The socio-institutional pressures described in this section do two things at the same time: they reproduce the theory-area binary in IR and they push researchers from or located in the global East into a disciplinary identity of ‘Area Studies’ rather than ‘IR theory’, whether the issue is finding a job in a highly competitive UK job market or what and where they are able to publish. These ascriptions of scholarly identity limit what Inanna Hamati-Ataya has called the ‘space of possibilities in IR’s field of struggles’ for scholars from the Global East (Hamati-Ataya 2012: 638). They play out whether these scholars are employed in the hegemonic core or have returned to their home region. In the latter case, exclusions are reinforced by the material constraints associated with working in a region where academic institutions are often underfunded and access to scholarly material remains difficult. But even for those who find secure employment in the anglophone core and have access to research funding, these identities exclude them from shaping core IR disciplinary concerns. In a very real sense, researchers from the Global East often find themselves cast in the role of ‘native informers’, providers of empirical information – about a region currently of marginal interest to IR debates. This underpins the findings of multiple studies that scholars from the region, as well as the ‘non-West’ more generally, are under-represented in English-language IR journals (Aydinli and Mathews 2000; Tickner 2013; Kristensen 2015). Among the relatively few articles about the Global East published in anglophone IR journals, even fewer

are published by scholars originating from the region, and of these the majority are associated with Western institutions.^{xi}

4. Area Studies as way out? Thinking beyond the hierarchical binary

Of course, many scholars actively choose to be associated with Area Studies of their home region. In discussions of the place of ‘peripheral’ scholars in IR, it has been argued that this reflects alienation from the specific way in which IR theoretical debates are conducted and the feeling that the assumptions of the discipline are irrelevant to urgent concerns of non-Western world regions (Krishna 1993; Tickner 2013). In many cases, regional scholars want to focus on their own societies, not for the benefit of the anglophone core, but to be able to effect social and political change at home (Suryakuolva 2019; Tickner 2013). Whatever the motivation of individual researchers, Area Studies fields have to some extent been opened up through the growing number of postgraduates from ‘the areas’ trained in the West and the resulting increase in those able and willing to publish in English. There are now pronounced differences in publication patterns between Area Studies journals publishing IR related content and the disciplinary IR journals. English-language Area journals covering the ‘Global East’, for example, regularly publish articles authored by scholars from the region, and while editorial boards are often still dominated by academics from the anglophone core, they too are now markedly more diverse than those of disciplinary IR journals.^{xii} This matters, as editorial boards have important gatekeeping functions determining what kind of knowledge is considered legitimate and worthy of publication (Aydinli and Mathews 2000).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to interpret these changes as a new promise of Area Studies, or even a way to de-Westernize IR. This overlooks that these developments are, in the first instance, an expression of a crisis of Area Studies in the anglophone core, a reduction in funding and shrinking of fields since the end of the Cold War which have created these openings in the first place – a state of affairs perhaps particularly visible when it comes to the Global East, which has seen a sharp decline in both the US and the UK (Bonnell and Breslauer 2003; Klinke 2015). Western geopolitical imaginations continue to underpin its interest in the ‘non-West’ and research agendas are still shaped by funding priorities determined by the geopolitical gaze of Western political elites (Klinke 2015). Partly as a result, the structural pressures that have led to a greater representation of academics ‘from the areas’ in Area Studies publications also have reinforced concrete hierarchies in research relationships, especially when it comes to fieldwork. This also affects parts of the Global East. Arguably, a convergence of trends – from the underfunding of

universities in the Global South and East, the role played by state-directed research grants in Area Studies in the anglophone core, and the internationalization of universities globally – are now co-producing a renewed pattern of marginalization of researchers ‘from the areas’ (Sukarieh and Tannock 2019; Kamola 2013). These dynamics are enabled by the ready availability of Western-trained researchers familiar with the ‘right’ methodologies and research language, able to communicate and write in English, but not treated as equal partners in the research process (Mwambari 2019). As Sukarieh and Tannock argue, in the UK this had led to the outsourcing of the empirical part of development research projects to local academics – without, however, giving them a say in framing research questions or developing theoretical approaches (Sukarieh and Tannock 2019). Judith Timar has described similar dynamics in geography research in Hungary immediately after the end of the Cold War, where Hungarian geographers eager to learn from and collaborate with Western colleagues were confronted with unquestionable Western assumptions about ‘transition’ and were effectively treated as research assistants (Timar 2003). Recently, a collective of feminist scholars from Central Asia has explored the persistence of these dynamics in field research in the region.^{xiii} One of our interviewees, who has worked on funded projects with researchers from the anglophone core, reflected on their extensive experience of being the ‘local collaborator’:

Western scholars contact me for specific tasks – organize fieldwork, gather empirical data, local research (...) I had diverse experiences with co-authoring; I had very good experiences where we had a common session where we brainstormed and agreed on the approach and then divided the tasks. The western scholar also accepted my criticism...but that is very rare. More frequently, the theory comes from a western scholar and I have to align with that. There may be a little room to improve the theory, but sometimes there is no room whatsoever and I’m simply asked to contribute empirical material to strengthen the argument. (Interviewee 1)

These experiences show how the hierarchical binary between theory and empirical research is translated into concrete interactions between researchers during the research process. In these fieldwork projects, struggles over meaning take place within an embodied hierarchy underpinned by Western research funding. This political economy of knowledge production intertwines the reproduction of Eurocentric theoretical framings adapted from political science and IR theory with the marginalization of local researchers, with ‘local’ being determined by geographical location and ethnic origin rather than training. In those regions where this model is widespread, this has concrete effects, not just in fieldwork practice. For example, Western academics, and Western

framings of local issues, continue to dominate Central Asian studies, and strikingly a Central Asian author has yet to win a book prize in the field (Sultanalieva 2019). A turn to Area Studies is therefore not the panacea that can rescue IR from its own Eurocentric parochialism. As we have argued throughout this article, the existence of Area Studies as a separate field effectively reifies the hierarchical distinction between theory and empirical research and thus contributes to the structural reproduction of these hierarchies in IR.

This matters, also because of the simple but important fact that many researchers would prefer not to have to choose between such binary framings of their intellectual identities. Any reluctance to engage with theory on the part of academics outside the Western core may have more to do with the specific dynamics and content of IR theory debates than with a refusal to engage with ‘theorizing’. In our own experience, in participant observation of international conferences, and in the interviews we have conducted, scholars from across the Global East reject the hierarchical distinction in terms of their own intellectual identities. At the BASEES 2019 annual gathering, a panellist, when asked whether their paper made a contribution to IR or to Area Studies, commented that they were quite frustrated with the distinction and preferred their research to be seen as problem-led. One of our interviewees, when asked whether they would describe themselves as an Area Studies expert or a theorist of international politics, offered the following reflection: ‘I would say that I am both – I take the rich empirical context and then think big, think theoretically from it’ (Interviewee 2). Another interviewee described their approach to theory in their own research process:

to be honest I have difficulty with drawing a strict line between theory and Area Studies. I have both ambitions. I want to contribute to empirical research on the region, because there is so little research done on the region. (...) there are a lot of blind spots that need to be described and analysed before moving to theory. But I also cannot say that I am only an Area Studies person, because I’m so inspired by theory. (...) Without theory I cannot really do my empirical research. I cannot really draw the line, it’s inseparable – so I’m trying to do both. (Interviewee 1).

These researchers allude to a very different way of ‘doing theory’ than that often practiced in IR – not an ‘empirical grounding’ of theoretical discussions, but theorizing *from* primary empirical research, ‘from the ground up’, open to whatever surprises the empirical data may throw up (Agnew 2006). It is a way of doing theory that is diametrically opposed to IR’s ‘fetishism of abstraction’, maintained by the theory-area distinction. This, as highlighted earlier in the article, is a point that goes beyond the mere question of the Western-centrism of IR theory to the concrete

ways in which ‘empirical grounding’ is understood. It indicates that a more equitable discipline, genuinely open to researchers from the non-West, might be one where these forms of theorizing are validated in the same way as more abstract conceptual discussions – which would effectively mean that the hierarchical binary between theory and empirical knowledge about/from the non-West is dissolved.

5. Conclusion

The theory-area distinction in IR persists and creates particular structural pressures reinscribing hierarchies for individual scholars. This divide has roots that reach beyond IR’s disciplinary politics into the colonial origins of the social sciences. However, the gap between theory and empirical research on non-Western places, and the epistemological downgrading of empirical research other than as ‘empirical grounding’ for theory, does seem particularly pronounced in IR. Moreover, existing socio-institutional practices in IR ascribe theorists the role of guarding the boundaries of the discipline. This has specific effects on researchers originating from places designated as the domain of Area Studies in the eyes of the Western core. Researchers from the Global East, as well as those from the Global South, face potential structural exclusions as a result. This is an issue of fairness for individual researchers confronted with pressures to embrace Area Studies and the concomitant downgrading of their position in the discipline. But at the same time, it is also a significant loss for the discipline itself. Efforts to create a post-Western IR are bound to fail as long as too many researchers ‘from the Areas’ are cast in disciplinary identities that mean that their contribution can be treated as particularist knowledge irrelevant to core disciplinary debates or, at best, as empirical ‘raw material’. As long as these contributions can be ignored or selectively appropriated in the discipline, the project of a ‘Global IR’ will flounder. The addition of non-Western theoretical traditions, or the prominence of a select few non-Western scholars who speak to particular forms of IR theorizing, will not change this. What would be needed is the amplification of a plurality of contributions by the many researchers from the ‘non-West’ currently rendered invisible to the discipline because of the hierarchical distinction.

Inanna Hamati-Ataya has argued that non-Western scholars occupy a privileged epistemic position with regard to the discipline, precisely because it is a ‘peripheral, non-native one’ (Hamati-Ataya 2012: 643). Contrary to what often seems implicit in the Global IR literature, we reject the claim that people ‘from the region’ should primarily speak about their own societies. We regard it as problematic that researchers from the ‘non-West’ can be cast as predestined to focus on their place of origin, while budding researchers from the West may well choose not to pursue Area

Studies of the Global East due to the perceived marginality of this space to current disciplinary concerns in IR. Of course, this should not detract from the fact that many ‘non-Western’ researchers understand themselves to be part of an emancipatory project in which researching and writing for the societies they come from is key. That said, rather than research focus, Hamati-Ataya’s point is about researchers’ background knowledge and experiences, and the way they inevitably bring themselves into the research process. These are important considerations if scholars want to theorize from and for an empirical context – whatever this context may be – rather than taking disciplinary theory debates as their starting point (Hamati-Ataya 2012; Haraway 1988). It highlights, once again, that the issue is not about building ‘non-Western theory’, but allowing researchers to theorise from the ground up and be ‘open to surprises’ (Agnew 2006).

This gestures towards important issues beyond the scope of this article, such as current decolonial discussions of knowledge production which understand the research process itself as dialogical co-creation with those who are ‘research subjects’, with a strong emphasis on producing knowledge for, rather than from, these societies and groups (De Eguia Huerta 2020). These discussions about what – and who – research should be for connect to reflections about structural limitations of the neoliberal academy, for example the prevalence of publicly funded research published behind paywalls, inaccessible to most of the world beyond wealthy universities in the West. A related issue is that of Western researchers making their research available and accountable to those that have been ‘research subjects’ and engaging in a much more horizontal manner with local communities of researchers.^{xiv} Another aspect that we have not covered here, also because of the need to protect the identities of our interviewees, is gender. As with many other aspects of IR knowledge production, we agree that gender matters for how the repercussions of the theory-area divide play out.

There are a number of recent initiatives addressing the issues raised in this article which could lead to real change. For once, these topics are finally being addressed in the discipline and in cognate fields. Political geography scholars from the Global East have argued that inequalities in knowledge production neglect important empirical developments and their potential to inform theoretical debates (Jehlička 2021; Trubina et al. 2020). There is an emerging cross-disciplinary discussion of hierarchies facing researchers in Area Studies of the Global East, among many others (Marat and Aisalina 2021).^{xv} Within IR, those advocating reflexivity about individual knowledge production practices (Hamati-Ataya 2018) and curriculum decolonisation (Matos-Ala 2018; Koomen 2019) push us towards thinking critically about disciplinary practices that sustain

detrimental hierarchies. Some concrete initiatives have recently aimed to problematise the assumption that knowledge production from and about ‘non-Western’ places is necessarily particularist. Conferences have been dedicated to globalising Eastern Europe.^{xvi} The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs aims to make publications by Central Asian researchers more accessible, to the disciplines but also their own societies (Marat and Aisalina 2021).

These initiatives are important, but we suggest that in order to achieve lasting change the theory-area distinction in the social sciences needs to be overcome. This article has exposed some concrete practices maintaining the hierarchical distinction, some of which could be challenged by individual scholars in their role as a journal editor, reviewer or project collaborator. Publication criteria could be interpreted more widely, and a much more inclusive composition of editorial boards should become the norm for IR journals. In the UK, REF criteria downgrading empirical knowledge about the non-West should be revised. Special responsibility falls to those in gatekeeping positions, for instance journal editors and grant evaluators. The cumulative impact of these changes could erode the hierarchical divide and contribute to the transformation of the discipline into a genuinely global IR, open to those outside the ‘core West’ and speaking to issues and concerns in a variety of places. This may not be easy, given the structural pressures of the neoliberal academy that have come to reinforce hierarchical boundaries in recent years and have made horizontal, equitable dialogue between Western researchers and those from the ‘non-West’ more difficult. Isaac Kamola has suggested that before the era of the neoliberal university, post-colonial African universities were places of encounter, where networks of Marxist scholars from the West, Africa and Latin America developed dependency theory based on what they saw as the most pressing empirical issues facing the world, one of the few theories influential beyond the confines of IR (Kamola 2013). This illustrates the possibility and potential of open-ended, non-hierarchical dialogue. Perhaps something similar could be envisaged now - open, exploratory interdisciplinary workshops facilitating such dialogue, dominated by scholars from different areas outside the ‘core West’, beyond disciplinary boundaries and theoretical ‘campfires’.

This is not to deny that there are now attempts to open up IR conferences such as BISA (British International Studies Association) and ISA, which have recently strived to incorporate non-traditional formats and discussions, while ISA has facilitated conferences taking place in regions beyond Northern America. One consequence of the theoretical fragmentation of IR has been the broadening of topics and theoretical approaches at mainstream conferences. Nevertheless, these initiatives may not be enough to address real structural inequalities. Just how difficult it is to

achieve deeper change is illustrated by the missed opportunity provided by the ‘move online’ during the global pandemic to open up these conferences to the many researchers who are prevented by lack of funds or visa restrictions to travel to the West. Important organisations such as BISA failed to encourage greater participation of scholars from the non-West by lowering or waiving the conference fee for them. The online conference space remains firmly guarded and accessible only to membership- and conference fee-paying academics.

Finally, a more open approach to knowledge production and to what counts as valid and valuable knowledge in IR involves re-thinking our pedagogical practices as well as research. The onus of responsibility is on those who introduce students to the discipline and postgraduate researchers to professional habits. Here too, there exist abundant sources of inspiration and support, such as the debate about grounded theory, positionality and questions of language in relation to fieldwork (Lai 2021). The question “Does Eastern Europe exist?” can yield productive discussions among students and scholars alike (Parvulescu 2019). All this could help erode the theory-area hierarchical distinction in researching international politics and thus contribute to what Achille Mbembe has called a ‘pluriversity’, “a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue (...).” (Mbembe 2016: 37).

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ⁱ These labels are problematic – cf. our discussion of the ‘global East’ below. In the context of this article, ‘non-West’ describes disciplinary attitudes to what Inanna Hamati-Ataya has called a ‘non-place’ without legitimacy to theorize from.

ⁱⁱ ‘Within/Without: Strategies and possibilities for cultivating knowledge with the Global East’, BISA roundtable, June 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ As scholars move and their identities evolve, unambiguously defining who counts as a ‘researcher from the peripheries’ is impossible. However, without this category we are unable to shed light on inequalities in the discipline perceived by many of these researchers (if not always in individual cases).

^{iv} Research wasn’t guided only by political imperatives. Literary and historical Area Studies profited from geopolitically motivated funding. That said, IR-related Area Studies research was affected by geopolitical imperatives (Chow 2006).

^v In the interest of anonymity, we do not disclose our participants’ countries of origin. They also did not wish to reveal the countries on which they publish (which in most cases overlap). All research participants have undertaken part of their education in different sub-regions of the Global East (the Balkans, Central Asia, Central Europe), while doctoral and/or post-doctoral research has been undertaken in the UK.

^{vi} IR is currently a popular subject for fee-paying students in the anglophone ‘core’, and in the UK much of the funding for employing academics in the field is derived from student fee income.

^{vii} https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1092/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf p.91

^{viii} *Review of International Studies* webpage, [online] www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies [last accessed 11.04.2019].

^{ix} Fieldwork, widely practiced in Area Studies, is not a standard research practice in IR, though it is gaining greater recognition (Bøås and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020). In contrast, in anthropology, extended excerpts from fieldwork notes often drive the narrative of a scholarly article.

^x Language issues have relegated countries like France and Germany to the academic ‘semi-periphery’ (Baber 2003).

^{xi} Eg. last 3 years of publications in EJR, RIS, Cambridge Review of International Affairs and International Theory (JIRD has a different publication pattern also because of its scope).

^{xii} eg. Eurasian Geography and Economics, Ab Imperio, Central Asian Survey. Several online journal are published within the Global East and also publish in Slavic languages. A new journal based at George Washington University aims to publish articles in Kazakh and Kyrgyz.

^{xiii} <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/when-your-field-also-your-home-introducing-feminist-subjectivities-central-asia/>, [last accessed 20.05.2021].

^{xiv} Thanks to Erica Marat for these suggestions

^{xv} Cf. the reference in endnote xviii

^{xvi} Globalising Eastern Europe conference report: <https://basees.org/news/2021/6/18/baseeseega-conference-report-globalising-eastern-europe-leipzig-20-24-april-2021> [last accessed 25.06.2021].