

# Neoclassical Realism, Global International Relations, and the unheard echoes of Realist practices from the South

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## Abstract

Neoclassical Realism popularised by including context into a structuralised worldview. However, far from a novelty, Global South scholars have been promoting similar Realist course corrections, reducing parsimony, and increasing explanation. This article compares Ayoob's Subaltern Realism, Escudé's Peripheral Realism, and Yan's Moral Realism, showcasing how originality is displayed via hybridisation, mimicry, and denationalisation of ideas. There are two complementary goals: first, stress similarities and differences between these strands and Neoclassical Realism and, second, challenge the ongoing project of subsuming Realism to the Global International Relations agenda through Neoclassical Realism, as it has yet failed to incorporate these Global South ideas. I argue that acknowledging that these theories can promote core–periphery dialogue and instigate progress within the canon is essential for any Global North scholar interested in a 'globalized Realism'. Finally, socioeconomic asymmetries and interdisciplinarity are central to building a Global International Relations Realism as well as recognising the persistent inequalities within International Relations knowledge production.

## Keywords

Global IR, Global South, homegrown theories, Neoclassical Realism, Realism

## Introduction

Neoclassical Realism (NCR) gained popularity by doing something scholars have long been craving: including history and particularities into a Realist worldview in which the anarchical international system drives interstate relations (Kitchen, 2010; Lobell et al., 2009; Meibauer et al., 2021). Today, NCR is a diverse analytical umbrella for Realist authors that complements a systemic framework with unit-level variables to differentiate actors, historicise and contextualise their actions, and enable space for agency despite pressures from anarchy (Foulon and Meibauer, 2020; Vasileiadis, 2023). Initiated by

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Global North scholars, NCR is quickly spreading to the Global South as an efficient tool to understand foreign policy decision-making, grand strategy change, and other international relations phenomena (Cerioli, 2023; Cha, 2000; Gelot and Welz, 2018; Şahin, 2020). Moreover, NCR has also been promoted as a venue to globalise Realism (Buzan and Acharya, 2019; Foulon and Meibauer, 2020), expanding its analytical horizons and contributing to the development of global questions and perspectives. In other words, a venue to board Realism in the train of pluralising and diversifying the International Relations (IR) discipline (Acharya, 2014; Alejandro et al., 2017; Bilgin, 2015; Blaney and Tickner, 2017; Shani, 2008).

However, if one looks closer, there are noticeable similarities between NCR and ideas previously developed by other Realist scholars in the Global South that employed home-grown theorisation. Subaltern Realism (Ayoob, 1998, 2002), Peripheral Realism (Escudé, 1992, 1998) and Moral Realism (Yan, 2019) – respectively, from the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia – are also course corrections that reduce mainstream Neorealist parsimony within the Realist canon to include particularities that increase explanative value. This article stresses the importance of proactive learning from these adjectivised Realisms to keep advancing the NCR agenda, particularly if it wants to promote itself as part of the Global IR (GIR) initiative. In this article, I demonstrate how these approaches have adapted the Realist tradition to the realities of the Global South via practices such as hybridity, mimicry, and denationalisation of ideas. Nevertheless, despite their originality, applicability, and popularity within their regions of origin, these theories have been mostly overlooked within the IR mainstream and have failed to travel from the periphery to the centre of knowledge production. Facing the reasons for this selective exclusion and seeking ways of overcoming it is essential for NCR to engage with GIR in the first place.

Like NCR, these three Global South's Realisms have rejected law-like generalisations and focused on local and contextual particularities to explain international behaviour – but, differently from NCR, they have seldom crossed their origin borders. I argue that such selectivity originates from an inherent inequality in how knowledge is produced and consumed globally. Suppose the IR disciplinary field is a moving body constantly improving itself to explain the world better. In that case, it is easy to imagine that theoretical traditions are continuously adapted as they travel from one situation to another. One could expect that this would create a circular process of learning and progressing, in which different schools would reassess, evaluate, and dialogue with these adaptations, moving the discipline forward. Nevertheless, the field's practices reflect global power asymmetries: ideas produced in the Global North are quickly heard worldwide, but those from the Global South tend to be muted when attempting to cross their borders. This way, course corrections like NCR – as necessary as they are – are sold as entirely innovative. However, for those proactively listening, the silencing of the Southern homegrown theories can be deafening.

Many scholars have been acting to reduce such silences, detecting, mapping, and examining how international politics has been thought of differently worldwide (Acharya, 2011; Alejandro, 2019; Alejandro et al., 2017; Ersel and Biltekin, 2018; Hurrell, 2016; Sabaratnam, 2011). Among those is the GIR initiative, which aims to reform the discipline and its main paradigms via pluralisation, diversity, and inclusion, making inquiries that reflect the world's intricate power diffusion and its many social-economic and political changes (Acharya, 2014; Gelardi, 2020). In an exciting contribution, Foulon and Meibauer (2020) argued that NCR has the paradigmatic flexibility to subsume the Realist tradition into GIR, reducing its own Western biases by exploring cases from the Global

South. Building on that, this article argues that NCR must first seek proactively how Realism has adapted in different parts of the Global South, exploring what it can learn from these homegrown theories and then adjusting its own analytical lens. That will demand authors to first recognise their own blindness to what is produced outside the Western centre of knowledge and then start a two-way dialogue with them. If that does not happen, it is most probable that NCR's success in globalising Realism will be persistently challenged.

To make such arguments, this article is structured as follows. First, I present a discussion on the sociology of IR to illustrate how the field's practices reflect global power asymmetries. Here, I discuss how the strategies of hybridisation, mimicry, and denationalisation of ideas show originality, promote core-periphery interaction, and instigate a critique within Western canons. Then, I present the three strands of Realism (Subaltern, Peripheral, and Moral), examining how they engage with hegemonic knowledge. In the third section, I compare these approaches while pinpointing their similarities with NCR. Finally, in the fourth section, I return to the GIR agenda to question what can be learned from these three Realisms from the South concerning globalising the canon through NCR.

## **Global IR and homegrown theorisation**

The GIR initiative is, in essence, part of a sociology of IR conversation that reflects on how, where, and by whom knowledge is being produced and reproduced (Bueger, 2012; Grenier, 2015). This discussion has exposed the unequal social, institutional, historical, and political contexts in which the disciplinary field has developed, illustrating how IR's structure and practices mostly reflect the same asymmetries between the Global North (the knowledge production centre) and the Global South (the periphery). Here, we can understand a disciplinary field as a knowledge complex that unifies and regulates an academic community studying similar phenomena, defining its norms, practices, and scope. Thus, it enables the formation of societal entities (in this case, a diverse set of academics interested in international affairs) by establishing organisational narratives and institutional devices for teaching, building scholarship, writing, and theorising (Corry, 2022).

In these spaces, ideas are written about an observed phenomenon and read by other scholars who discuss, agree or dispute them, moving the discipline as a living body. Nevertheless, the economic, political, and cultural unevenness between different societies marks the discipline's development. Not everyone has the same means to be published and read, nor does every phenomenon provoke an equal level of academic curiosity. Most importantly, what is considered worth studying and by whom is constantly shaped and reshaped by power relations and interests inside and outside academia, as no science is done in a vacuum. In other words, scholarship emerges intertwined with broader societal contexts and political agendas (Grenier, 2015). Thus, and unsurprisingly, the bulk of the Social Sciences have been constructed by those with the most material, political, and institutional means (Wallerstein, 2000). Scholars in the Global North have primarily determined what is essential knowledge in IR, whereas those in the Global South have been mostly relegated to the role of consuming – not making – theories and concepts.

Here, it is important to stress that not all scholars who spotlight these biases subscribe to the GIR initiative. Global International Relations, a new section within the International Studies Association since 2022, has a reformist agenda, seeking ways to subsume virtually all disciplinary paradigms and traditions to a genuinely diverse and

plural conversation about global phenomena. However, many authors are sceptical about the possibility of pluralising paradigms such as Realism and Liberalism as they emerged in a highly colonialist intellectual context (Berenskötter, 2018; Hobson, 2012; Sabaratnam, 2011). For them, there is an unresolvable contradiction between being critical of the Western character of the discipline and, at the same time, seeing validity in some mainstream concepts and theories *just* due to their utility (Shani, 2008). From their perspective, reforming IR by adding non-Western knowledge and cases would not be enough to challenge the discipline's inherent imbalance.

While taking stock of this substantial critique, this article subscribes to GIR reformism, seeing the encouragement to incorporate new voices, actors, and experiences into theory-building as a practical way forward that goes beyond pinpointing pitfalls to offer solutions for overcoming them. GIR's primary goal is to amend distortions between what is presented as universal knowledge and what is confined as local particularities. The mainstream literature has shown significant gaps in explaining geopolitical, securitarian, and economic patterns outside the Global North (Acharya, 2011; Neuman, 1998). Moreover, most theories present themselves as applicable everywhere despite being based on specific experiences from Europe or the United States (Buzan and Acharya, 2019; Fonseca, 2019). The idea that the West's experience is universalising led many to accept that theorising in non-Western regions is irrelevant and that these scholars are just emulators, discrediting them of intellectual agency (Bilgin, 2008). Thus, de-westernising or globalising IR means challenging this universalisation, reminding us that all theories are done within a particular historical and geopolitical context (Chakrabarty, 2000; Hutchings, 2011).

Moreover, Acharya (2011) notes that the existence of a Global South idea – here, a metaphor for the underprivileged countries in a highly unequal socioeconomic structure – does not mean there is one homogeneous scholarship outside the West or that philosophical traditions are the same in the rest of the world. In fact, there are many different approaches from the peripheries which need to be brought to the centre of disciplinary discussions as a way to reduce its original Western parochialism (Acharya, 2014; Bilgin, 2008). Following this, Wæver and Tickner (2009) set an agenda for mapping how IR is done worldwide, and concluded that, while most scholars replicate mainstream knowledge, they do it by adaptation and modification. This way, exploring how scholars change and combine different theories and concepts initially produced in the North reveals their intellectual agency and originality, as well as how world politics are thought of differently in many parts of the world.

Under this perspective, globalising IR would mean encountering the approaches at the margins of disciplinary production and understanding why and under which conditions they emerged (Fonseca, 2019). Therefore, the question is not necessarily why there is no Global Southern IR but why what is being produced there does not arrive at the centre. As Gelardi (2020) put it, the question is how to make the local global. Then, what is needed is a more robust interconnection between the many IR communities and their different understandings of world politics. This suggests advancing the discipline by inclusion, recalibration, and reimagination, embracing dialogue between various scholars and promoting academic power diffusion.

For that to happen, this discussion must recognise the socioeconomic and institutional inequalities permeating the type and amount of knowledge that flows between the North and the South. As Turton and Freire (2016) assess, the so-called periphery has been assigned to a consumer role for too long, perceived as unable to produce original

knowledge. Yet, theorisation is rarely done in a vacuum, and ideas do not emerge independent of previous knowledge – they tend to occur because of this knowledge. Not surprisingly, many Global South scholars and students engage with ideas produced in the centre, adapting and shaping them according to their experiences, philosophies, and worldviews (Bilgin, 2008; Kuru, 2018; Tickner, 2003). This engagement indicates originality, not copy-paste behaviour. Therefore, taking part in the GIR initiative – especially if we are located in the Global North – should drive us to look for practices of theorising in its many forms: brand-new, adapted, or borrowed.

Homegrown theories can either build on a local philosophical standpoint to produce new concepts or draw on local data or experience to revise existing ideas (Azdinli and Biltekin, 2018). Of course, scholars can also detach themselves from the mainstream and choose not to engage with the mainstream for many valid reasons – that is precisely what the critics of GIR's reformism propose. Nevertheless, considering the situations in which they engage with hegemonic knowledge production by adaptation, they do it to make the original idea comprehensible or suitable to other cases. In this sense, the idea travels from its original place of knowledge to other locations, and, in this process, scholars on the receiving end identify its limitations and make modifications to expand its application range (Bilgin, 2008).

These homegrown, similar-yet-different theories are the product of one or more of the following strategies: hybridity, mimicry, or denationalisation of ideas (Bhabha, 1984; Turton and Freire, 2016). Hybridity comes from the postcolonial notion that, in a context of unequal cultural exchange, non-hegemonic actors negotiate their space through dialogue and resistance, trying to insert themselves in the mainstream via a hybrid mix of acceptance and modification. Mimicry consists of a more concealed act of subscribing to one mainstream tradition to criticise some of its characteristics from within – sometimes even through mocking or irony. Finally, the denationalisation of ideas is the logic that, when theories travel, they should not carry a passport that limits their application. Instead, they should be ready to be recontextualised and reinterpreted in the new setting they landed.

According to Ersel and Biltekin (2018), all major IR theories were once homegrown in the sense that they were produced in a particular limited context and, in some way or another, they reflect this experience, as no theory is immune to some level of parochialism. After a text is published, it begins a process that the authors do not necessarily have much control over: people will read, debate, and proceed to apply or not these ideas in their work. If the text cannot be transmitted to different readers and then to other cases, this text will eventually be doomed to isolation, ceasing the process. Therefore, hybridisation, mimicry, and denationalisation of ideas enable authors from/in the periphery of knowledge production to simultaneously engage with this process and expose loopholes or parochialisms within the initial theorisation. Consequently, their 'homegrownness' is, by nature, critical.

Gunther Hellmann (2003) uses the German notion of *aufheben* to explain dialogue and synthesis processes that have defined the IR disciplinary field, arguing that scholars tend to preserve what is valuable and abandon what is no longer suitable to elevate the sophistication level of a theoretical tradition. While some are critical of this practice and call attention to the risk of conceptual, methodological, or paradigmatic incoherence (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013; Reus-Smit, 2013), others have argued that this tension for transformation is at the core of the theoretical enterprise (Dunne et al., 2013; Sterling-Folker, 2009a). Traditions are negotiated across time and space, mutating according to the intellectual demands of a scholarly community (Alejandro et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the level of inequality between the centre and the periphery of knowledge production means that the *aufheben* process has been segmented: Global South homegrown theories often face gatekeeping, not being able to contribute to the disciplinary dialogue and the theory progression. For these reasons and intending to challenge these gatekeepers, the next section examines three Global South Realisms and outlines their central arguments.

## Realism in the Global South: Subaltern, Peripheral, and Moral Realism

It is possible to say that Realism is a tradition that not only successfully travelled everywhere but also produced many homegrown approaches (Sterling-Folker, 2009a). There is not only one Realism but many Realisms that vary in methods, arguments, epistemologies, and objects of study – such as Classical Realism (Morgenthau, 1946), Defensive Realism (Waltz, 1979), Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer, 2001), Gilpin Realism (Gilpin, 1981), and NCR (Rose, 1998). As Smith (2019) argues, this variance stands as a testament to Realism's transient rather than timeless wisdom. However, many mainstream Realist scholars ignore this inherent transience, taking their Western bias tendencies as universal and struggling to accept their own 'homegrownness'. As such, they fail to recognise that their own strand of Realism was produced by the need to adapt an original idea to a particular context or experience.

For example, Stephan Walt's (1987) *The Origins of Alliance* is nothing less than an adjustment of Neorealism's balance of power when applied to the Middle East, where threats matter as much as power in the balancing act. Similarly, NCR corrects the Realist course by integrating domestic factors into its analysis to explain why states can act differently to similar systemic inputs. In a closer look, NCR is not a single perspective but an analytical umbrella in which multiple authors interact simultaneously via collaboration, competition, and criticism, not coalescing into a single argument or procedural guidelines (Meibauer et al., 2021). Nevertheless, while these two strands are mentioned in most theory textbooks, and the mainstream recognises their main authors, other Realist course corrections, such as Subaltern, Peripheral, and Moral, are mostly disregarded. This divergence results from their emergence in the periphery of knowledge production rather than any content or quality issue. In the following subsections, I review these three Global Southern Realisms, showing that what they correct and how is too similar to what NCR proposes to be kept unnoticed.

### Subaltern Realism

Let us start in the Middle East. Mohammed Ayob (1998, 2002) developed Subaltern Realism by focusing on how power and wealth inequalities are present in constructing and reproducing knowledge within IR. His theory aims to break the Western monopoly within theory-making, encouraging the enlargement of observed phenomena and including local perspectives to reduce knowledge imbalance within the discipline. It criticises mainstream IR for its lack of pluralisation and inability to recognise that the experiences and interests of the West are not universal truths everywhere. Ayob rejects law-like generalisations and insists on bringing context to mainstream theories as, in his view, parsimony perpetuates inequality.

Nevertheless, Ayob is not interested in detaching himself from the discipline's core. He argues that most IR theories have successfully explained several aspects of the

international system, such as its self-help tendencies, the centrality of the state, and the constant search for survival. Neither is he assimilating to the mainstream, as he pinpoints weaknesses within the hegemonic discourse. For him, Western-based IR theories cannot explain how states that emerged after decolonisation are essentially different from the Westphalian state. He presents a gradualist understanding of state-building by arguing that most 'Third World' countries have not yet reached the Western development levels and are struggling with interlinked domestic and external conflicts that cannot be analytically separated. Moreover, the status of being 'in development' makes these countries much more dependent on foreign interference and vulnerable to geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts. Thus, economic asymmetries, domestic instabilities, and unequal levels of interdependency among parts conditioned international behaviour for these countries – much more than any balance of power.

Hence, Ayoob is engaging with the Realist hegemonic discourse while challenging a central analytical notion by recognising that states, still being the main actors in IR, have different levels of development that must be accounted for. As developing states are neither economically affluent nor socially cohesive, they are often impacted by separatist movements, external political penetration, intra-group violence, transnational irredentist identities, and more. Thus, integrating these experiences into theory-building should 'redefine the very notion of security dilemma by marking it primarily a domestic rather than an interstate phenomenon' (Ayoob, 2002: 35). In his view, IR's disciplinary function is to explain international behaviour and interstate conflicts; if theories like Neorealism or Neoliberalism keep ignoring domestic sources of threats and tensions that lead to conflicts and wars, they will continue to be insufficient to explain phenomena outside the West.

His solution is investigating the internal dynamics without abandoning a Realist understanding of the structure and its self-help impositions. Subaltern Realism is built on (1) insights from Classic Realism, (2) Historical Sociology literature on state formation, and (3) normative ideas about the international society from the English School. For the author, this eclectic combination enables the observation of the intrinsic links between international power distribution and domestic orders, as well as the unequal economic interdependency between the haves and the have-nots. Hence, Subaltern Realism is more flexible in explaining different realities within the international system, being part of the Realist tradition without subsuming to universalism or scientism.

Subaltern Realism does not come without critiques; for example, it does not offer a methodology or engage with metatheoretical matters of internal coherence. Most importantly, it has a problematic view of socioeconomic development, which resembles much-criticised linear approaches within Political Economy in which the end goal of developing states is to become like the European industrialised economies. Finally, employing the term 'Third World' in a post-Cold War context or saying that the domestic context of these states 'resembles that of the late medieval and early modern period in Europe' (Ayoob, 2002: 42) may partially explain why Subaltern Realism has not caught up in other Global South regions. That does not mean, however, that the value of this theory should be taken for granted.

### *Peripheral Realism*

Departing to Latin America, we find Carlos Escudé's (1992, 1998) Peripheral Realism, which aims at putting Realism more in touch with the reality of developing countries like Brazil and Argentina. Peripheral Realism is a theory that attempts to correct some logical flaws of classical and structural Realism, which render them unsuitable for

understanding peripheral countries' role in the international system (Escudé, 1992). Therefore, like Ayoob, Escudé also employs hybrid and mimetic strategies to engage with mainstream Realism while including different experiences from non-Western countries that expose the canon's original shortcomings. Since his 1992 book, Escudé's work has been taught and cited throughout the continent as an authentic IR theoretical endeavour (Tickner, 2003).

Escudé focuses on explaining why the policy of poorer or weaker states diverges from those of Great Powers. Like Ayoob, he is critical of the mainstream's attempt towards universalism, arguing that experiences vary worldwide. While subscribing to the logic that states act to protect and promote national interests, he argues that those conflate with socioeconomic development in these countries. In fact, he says that social-economic development is 'the very definition of the national interest' in many parts of the world (Escudé, 1997: 6), being foreign policymaking intrinsically tied to economic growth demands in poorer countries. This way, he sees it as unrealistic to separate foreign policy making – and to whom it serves – from development in the context of highly global inequality. Thus, in his view, those *thinking* IR should also propose pathways to improve a country's international development, insertion, and position. In other words, theory-making should have both explanative and normative goals. Peripheral Realism is presented as a lens to comprehend countries' international behaviour and as a foreign policy strategy to be followed by countries outside the West. This normative character can be seen as mimetic as it taunts Neorealism's blindness to the massive levels of inequality between countries when defining the state's motivations.

Moreover, Escudé presents a particular view on how power is distributed in the international system. While he agrees there is no superior power above the state level, he argues that the power unevenness (regarding capacities) among countries is so high that it makes the international system hierarchical. As a result, leaders in poorer states establish dependent ties with Great Powers to promote development, access technology, and guarantee their survival, which, consequently, restrains or coerces their own international action. Therefore, the high socioeconomic asymmetry between states creates a new dilemma: any sought for total autonomy implies challenging dominant powers and, thus, sacrificing social-economic development and even rule stability – something David (1991) already stressed when exploring regime stability and the role of international pressure on domestic political survival in the 'Third World'. Hence, for Escudé, states should be aware of their peripheral position, concentrate on the economy and avoid too risky international confrontations.

There is a return to Classic Realist ideas here, mainly to Thucydides' 'stronger do what they can, weaker suffer what they must' logic. Escudé argues that there is an imperfect proto-hierarchy in which states can be rule-makers, rule-takers, or rebel states – the last being those without the power to forge systemic rules but still defying them at their citizens' cost (Schenoni and Escudé, 2016). Escudé argues that different state-society relations, political regimes, culture, ideology, and elite perceptions orient how a state defines its national interests within this proto-hierarchy. This way, his approach calls for a more complex understanding of the state's internal dynamics and how it mobilises resources to pursue goals.

Despite the emphasis on domestic politics, Escudé asserts his theory is in the realm of Realism due to the focus on the state as the analytical unity, the essentiality of survival for building national interests, and the emphasis on power as the primary condition for action. Nevertheless, he proposes a more nuanced approach that tackles the dilemma produced

by the absence of total autonomy. It rearranges Realism's preferences, in which (1) differences between political structures are acknowledged, (2) economic development is stressed, and (3) a hierarchic nature within North-South relations is recognised. These points push Peripheral Realism away from Neorealism but not from the Realist tradition *per se*.

### *Moral Realism*

Finally, turning to Asia, Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism differs from the other two authors as he does not refer to regional countries that diverge from Western experiences due to socioeconomic inequalities. Instead, Yan focuses on China to develop an 'approach to understanding a major power's behaviour when morality is a contributing factor to its leadership's strategic preferences' (Yan, 2019: 7). He aims to explain why and how some rising states can become hegemonies while others cannot and how these hegemonies are structurally sustained throughout time. Yan is evidently influential in Chinese politics and is becoming the most cited Chinese political scientist in the West. His writings aim to emphasise the predominance of political variables over material factors in defining a country's strength while, at the same time, working as a sort of policy guideline for power politics (Trigkas, 2020).

Unlike Ayoob and Escudé, Yan worries about the problems an excessive culturalist turn (as opposed to the universalist consensus) can cause the IR discipline. He is critical of attempts to construct regionally bounded theories, instead arguing for new ways of reinterpreting traditional canons via contextualisation of what is going on outside the West. Therefore, Yan puts himself as critical to the current state of mainstream IR because it displays parochial, Western, rather than global concepts and theories. At the same time, he argues that an improved IR theory should not reject parsimony entirely. For him, IR theories should aim at some level of universalism, or they can return to the Political Science toolbox. Thus, in his Moral Realism, Yan adopts the strategy of denationalisation of ideas, in which theories should be adapted to travel beyond their original case study and be reinterpreted and recontextualised. He argues that creating common assumptions and knowledge rather than diversified arguments about specific cases is critical for disciplinary progress.

Yan is particularly drawn to Classical Realists such as Morgenthau and Kennan as he focuses on the relationship between leadership and power, seeing morality from an instrumental perspective. He is interested in the process of defining international preferences, stressing that public moral codes influence leaders on how national interests should be achieved – thus altering a country's international behaviour. Moral Realism works normatively because it 'attributes the success of a rising state to its political leadership that adopts foreign policy according to universal moral codes' (Yan, 2019: 14). While he discusses China's emergence as a superpower and contrasts its leadership type with the United States, Yan stresses that the approach can be used for any case of rising or declining powers – in a sense, maintaining parsimony if within a historically defined context.

His approach is presented as part of the Realist canon because (1) the international system is perceived to be anarchic, (2) power is crucial to understanding the action within the system, and (3) there is a pessimist understanding of world politics, which tends towards competition, not cooperation between states. However, different from Neorealism, political leadership is the core independent variable for Moral Realism; the cause of shifts within international relations lies in a leader's abilities rather than a

country's material force. For Yan, state capability can be divided into four elements – politics, military, economy, and culture – being politics an operational element and the other three resource elements. A country's successful emergency is, for Moral Realism, a case in which a leader combines public moral codes with the right reforms to produce optimal outcomes.

This agency focus raises questions of until which point can we consider Moral Realism indeed a theory within the Realist canon. In itself, the rise of power is a systemic and relational change – thus, it cannot be explained without a discussion about systemic power distribution. This way, Moral Realism may be better fitted only as a grand strategy theory amidst the Realist canon. Trigkas (2020: 960) agrees, saying that 'a state rising because it is exercising moral realism (appropriate domestic reform and humane authority abroad) seems to be a skeletal manual on grand strategy built on an optimal strategic moral conduct'. This discussion, however, I chose to leave it open in this article.

Finally, another question can be made concerning standards of theory building. Yan's work does not hide away its prescriptive function for rising powers. There is much scepticism about Yan's possible links with Chinese politics and how his ideas have influenced and, most importantly, being influenced by the country's ambitions in terms of diplomacy, power, and global reach. Some scholars criticise many Chinese IR theories from a knowledge-power nexus, in the sense that they are produced to legitimise the country's growing power or at least to not be critical of it (Acharya, 2011). Nevertheless, one can argue that most IR theories are centred on a country's experience that often reflects political ambitions of aggrandisement and dominance – especially Realism due to its focus on power and competition. It is undeniable that Neorealism emerged in a context where its ideas, concepts, and definitions were helpful to the US power projection.

Indeed, there is a revolving door between discipline and political practice that is worth stressing and should not be taken for granted. Yan argues that we can only produce a more complex understanding of our reality by recognising the political and historical contexts in which theories are made. Thus, he rejects a total epistemological detachment during the theory-building process. Yet, the critical issue of Yan's contribution possibly being undermined by his political agenda remains. This can reduce Moral Realism's capacity to increment the Realist tradition, as some of Yan's ambitions are not driven – at least not only – by discovering social regularities. However, this discussion is outside the scope of this article, which focuses, instead, on the similarities of these Realist course corrections with the NCR's agenda.

## **Comparing the Realist course corrections**

Instead of debunking the Realist tradition, Moral, Peripheral, and Subaltern Realisms argue that the tradition brings crucial knowledge about the international system and intra-state relations. They do not reject ideas such as self-help, anarchy or security dilemma nor say that states are not international politics' main actors. Nevertheless, they are critical to the Western parochialism that permeates the canon. Ayooob and Escudé are adamant in their critique that trying to fit IR into universalist practices curtails the discipline's explanative potential. They argue that excessive parsimony within the disciplinary field only perpetuates knowledge inequality within the scholarly, as traditional theories based on the Global North's experiences do not reflect the Global South's realities.

For Ayoob and Escudé, Realism should be more historically and contextually bound and ditch generalising temptations. Interestingly enough, Yan arrives at a similar conclusion from an opposite starting point. He argues against the proliferation of overly regionally-bound theories, proposing adapting already existing ideas via historical context and denationalisation. Similarly, NCR reinvigorates the Realist research programme by including domestic particularities and abandoning hard positivist ambitions, increasing explanatory value by reducing parsimony (Meibauer, 2023). That enables knowledge to be more in line with the current – and shifting – reality. Most NCR authors subscribe to a soft positivist ontology, maintaining a healthy scepticism towards seeking universal truths about the social world (Meibauer, 2020; Ripsman et al., 2016). Instead, they search for partial, context-bounded generalisations across objects and test them via case-study analysis and process tracing. By default, these detailed case studies demand theoretically informed narratives and historical evidence – just like the Realisms from the Global South described.

There are similarities concerning investigating a more complex idea of the state. Escudé, Ayoob, and Yan borrow from Classical Realists to argue that states differ from one another, and because of that, international behaviour also varies. They call for opening the black box of the state, exploring how political leaders, culture, identity, and state-society relations influence international relations. Like them, NCR adds unit-level factors as intervening variables to explain how these elements limit state action, shaping how a state mobilises resources, defines objectives, and creates meaning for policymaking. Interestingly, Schenoni and Escudé (2016: 3) also detected this similarity by arguing that Peripheral Realism was a ‘pioneer of Neoclassical Realism’ for introducing domestic variables into the analysis.

While the discussion concerning which and how many intervening variables should be included (state-society relations, strategic culture, interest groups, domestic ideologies, extraction capacities, cognitive filters, among others) remains an ongoing discussion among NCR scholars (Foulon, 2015; Götz, 2021; Vasileiadis, 2023), what is clear is that these elements are added because the actors rely on perception to comprehend their reality (Lobell et al., 2016; Rathbun, 2008). NCR agrees with Neorealism that the balance of power drives intra-state relations but diverges when operationalising power and grasping how inputs from the system translate into state action. While the distribution of power is the same for everybody, actors behave according to what they distinguish as an input – this is why it is so important to look into the domestic factors influencing how the states perceive things. As individuals compose the state, interpretation and power mobilisation always depend on human error (Christensen, 1996; Meibauer, 2020). This way, ambiguous environments, different ambitions, identities, elite competition, and personal mindsets impact decision-making.

Hence, in NCR, the system’s anarchical condition is only a permissive factor conveying opportunities and threats rather than the sole causal force of international politics. Due to anarchy’s indeterminacy, it is up to leaders to interpret how permissive or restrictive the systemic environment is (Lobell et al., 2009). This idea of permissiveness enables a convergence between the NCR, the Subaltern, and the Peripheral strands. The system is considered hierarchical due to high socioeconomic asymmetries in the two Global South’s strands. It is not that the system is no longer characterised by self-help or that a superior authority regulating behaviour has emerged. Instead, the circumstances of underdevelopment, dependency, and economic inequality determine action for a country not in a privileged position. The logic that actors can perceive systemic

inputs (constraints and opportunities) differently allows this ‘sensation’ of a hierarchy in anarchical conditions: global uneven development is so massive that it stratifies states into haves and have-nots, shaping their scope for international action although their sovereignty is primarily untouched.

Nevertheless, NCR scholars would have to pay much more attention to economic conditions and consider the long-standing international division of labour and its effect on foreign policy and grand strategy. For Escudé and Ayoob, socioeconomic asymmetries are not a factor influencing behaviour – but conditioning it. Thus, that could not be an intervening variable; it should be part of the independent. Some NCR scholars return to the Classic Realists to problematise and contextualise power within the structural framework (Rathbun, 2008; Schmidt, 2007). These authors reject conceptualisations of power based on one or a few indicators and provide a detailed conceptualisation of power that incorporates many material and non-material components. Grasping power as something divisible, composed of different fungible and non-fungible resources, would enable NCR scholars to continue their dialogue with Subaltern or Peripheral Realism by integrating uneven global development as part of their independent variable.

Moreover, all the strands explored here agree that systemic inputs do not automatically translate into outputs, as Neorealism predicts. Interestingly, NCR mimetically distinguishes between national power and state power, the latter being the power that can be brought to bear to pursue international goals. In short, not all available national resources can be mobilised for international politics whenever a government sees fit (Taliaferro, 2009; Kitchen, 2010). This idea is very close to Escudé’s argument about state-societal foreign policy limitations and aligns also with Yan’s claim for a more nuanced understanding of statecraft. Yan (2019: 192) underscores leadership capabilities as an operational factor that capitalises on the other power resources to bring change. Likewise, Wohlforth (1993) and Schweller (1998) explore the nature of the state unit and how leaders can capitalise on resources for political interests, exploring how Janus-faced foreign policy can be: foreign policy boost domestic politics and vice versa.

Therefore, the four strands of Realism considered here are comparable course corrections aiming at making the tradition – which today is often wrongly conflated only with Neorealism – more in touch with reality, explaining things as they are, not how they ought to be. They all showcase a pessimistic view of world politics in which security dilemma, self-help tendencies, and competition instead of cooperation dominate. Moreover, the system has no superior authority beyond the state level, instigating many sources of threat that constrain states’ choices of action. Hence, they speak about similar things despite their different languages and starting points. Therefore, there is a fruitful space for dialogue and learning between these strands ready to be harvested.

### **Can Realism globalise?**

This final question returns to Foulon and Meibauer’s (2020) proposal that NCR is an efficient pathway for globalising IR due to its flexible analytical boundaries. For GIR proponents, Realism, like any other IR tradition, supposedly can also pass through a process of pluralisation (Buzan and Acharya, 2019). Undoubtedly, Realism – especially in its Neorealist form – accumulates criticism for marginalising thinking from outside the West (Chakrabarty, 2000; Schmidt, 2014). Neorealism claims validity across space, time, and culture, thus dismissing differences while failing to historicise and contextualise its objects of study (Hobson, 2012). Many critics argue that this Western bias is so ingrained

that linking it with GIR ideals is pointless (Shani, 2008). One cannot forget that Realism is primarily developed in a mighty US American academy that works in ways that perpetuate the inequality in how we produce and consume knowledge (Biersteker, 2009; Hurrell, 2016). However, as I showed here, concepts associated with Realism are employed repeatedly in different parts of the Global South. Thus, it is indeed worth questioning if the tradition can globalise. What looks odd, however, is that NCR would be presented as the best venue for such an endeavour without referring to the Subaltern and Peripheral strands – which emerged before NCR became fashionable.

The three Global South Realisms agree on two central points: (1) historical evidence and contextualisation must replace parsimony for more explanative value and (2) one should open the state's black box to grasp how domestic variables influence the decision-making process in international politics. In essence, these strands claim more analytical nuance in contrast to the universalising tendency within mainstream IR theorisation. Thus, when NCR eventually makes the same claim, it is not as innovative as one may initially think.

To Foulon and Meibauer (2020), NCR permits hybrid interpretations of reality, expanding Realism's analytical horizons and contributing to developing genuinely global questions, concepts, and perspectives. While that is primarily true, authors like Escudé and Ayoob have already consolidated similar ideas earlier. Still, those did not travel to the centre due to the inequalities within our knowledge production structure. Interestingly, while Yan calls his theory Moral Realism, others often frame him as an NCR scholar – almost like an autophagic move in which one Realist strand engulfs and incorporates the other. Yes, NCR bridges the spatial (the domestic and the international levels), the cognitive (between matter and ideas), and the temporal (between the present and future) divides within Realism (Foulon, 2015: 636). However, due to its inability or unwillingness to access the knowledge produced outside the centre, it has failed to recognise that this move has already been made inside its own canon, just outside the centre. How can it be Global IR if it does not bridge the divide between the centre and periphery?

The comparison between the theoretical strands also makes a case for interdisciplinarity – especially if NCR wants to be genuinely globalised. GIR instigates a two-way conversation with Area Studies in which specialised scholars from different backgrounds can teach, learn, and expand their knowledge boundaries (Buzan and Acharya, 2019; Hurrell, 2020). Usually, the dialogue between IR and Area Studies has been eristic or hierarchical instead of reflexive and transformative, in the sense that the first looks at the other for empirical data but not for knowledge *per se* (Aris, 2020). Nevertheless, the appropriate intervening variable selection should primarily depend on grasping the history of a case and building a proper literature review of a phenomenon (Ripsman et al., 2016). The best way to do that is by becoming familiarised with the knowledge produced by/for the specific case rather than fitting the case into a predetermined list of variables. Thus, interacting and learning from Area Studies – often rooted in other Social Sciences – will be necessary for globalising Realism and making it more in tune with non-Western countries.

A more controversial challenge coming from Escudé and Ayoob is the awareness of an international hierarchy due to economic asymmetries. Colonialism, imperialism, and the expansion of increasingly exclusionary global capitalism have led to different types of state formation, state-society relations, and interstate interactions. Despite the promises of globalisation, the divergence between countries has been increasing since the 1970s, making global uneven development one of the most persistent characteristics of the international system (Agnew, 2001; Anievas and Matin, 2016; Sheppard, 2012). Promises for

technological interchanges, growth rates convergence and overall improvement of life quality did not concretise, and the world continues to show significant differences in levels of socioeconomic welfare. These divergences are not only on the vertical level (Global North vs Global South) but horizontal (among Global South countries) and subnational, further differentiating urban centres from peripheries and rural areas. Many scholars of the Global South automatically reject mainstream Realism because they realise that the cannon, too centred in great power politics, underestimates the political and societal consequences of global uneven development.

As mentioned, for Escudé and Ayoob, economics cannot be relegated to yet another intervening variable – it needs to be part of the independent variable as it conditions how states relate among themselves and behave in the international system. The condition of being economically dependent on more powerful actors affects how a country perceives threats and opportunities. Moreover, a country's relative economic weight has a crucial impact not only on its capabilities to exercise regional control or leadership but also on others due to the relational nature of the space in which states interact. One way of tackling this perception of hierarchy within anarchy is by including economic factors within a more dynamic, contingent, and multidimensional operationalisation of the international system. While some NCR scholars have discussed economic issues as intervening variables (Brawley, 2010; Sterling-Folker, 2009b), exploring economic asymmetries as part of the independent variable is still underdeveloped. Hence, intensifying the intellectual interchange between Realism, International Political Economy, and Development Studies seems an essential step forward.

Finally, this discussion brings us to an issue of ontology within the paradigm. NCR has frequently been presented as a 'theory of mistakes' (Juneau, 2023; Rathbun, 2008) because it explains why states do not behave as Neorealism would expect. Under this justification, including the domestic variables is only necessary to explain how the states poorly interpret structural signals, leading to over- or under-balancing. In this logic, NCR analysis would be unnecessary if states interpreted the inputs correctly; there would not be any residual variance. Here, there is a crossroads for NCR scholars: those who subscribe to the idea of the 'theory of mistakes' cannot, ontologically, also subscribe to GIR. For GIR, pluralism and diversity are the essential end goals of de-parochialising the discipline. Conversely, under the 'theory of mistakes' view diversity serves as a way to explain the cases in which expected universalism does not occur: parochialism is not, therefore, recognised as a problematic issue to be tackled. In their turn, what motivated Escudé, Ayoob, and Yan to engage with Realism via hybridisation, mimicry, and denationalisation of ideas was precisely exposing the preposterousness of universalist worldviews in theorising international phenomena. For them, the mistake is to imagine that all actors would behave equally for the same reasons across time, space, and cultures. In this sense, Subaltern, Peripheral, and Moral Realism are closer to the GIR agenda than any 'theory of mistakes' will ever be.

In conclusion, this article is optimistic about globalising Realism through NCR, as long as authors taking this route are willing to search for the voices they have not been hearing. This engagement will demand further attention to interdisciplinarity, social economic asymmetries, and, most importantly, proactive listening. Of course, this is not a task for all NCR scholars and does not need to be. Indeed, NCR is not a concrete, stabilised and absolutely distinctive approach but an analytical umbrella in which the theorisation mode is still interactive and emergent (Meibauer et al., 2020). Subcommunities among self-identified NCR scholars are slowly being shaped based on different ambitions

and case selection, reflexiveness levels, prioritisation or not of midrange theorisation, metatheoretical debates, empirically driven questions, and epistemological commitments. This diversity in itself is welcomed by the GIR initiative. However, globalisation can also be done via a revival of Subaltern or Peripheral Realism, bringing their ideas into the mainstream, learning from them, pinpointing their shortcomings, negotiating and moving the tradition forward. However, this will depend on the proactive breaking down (from the inside out) of the knowledge-producing barriers that hamper the travel of ideas from the South to the North.

## Conclusion

The criticism towards the IR's Western bias is by now well established (Barasuol et al., 2022). Among those aiming at reforming IR, Acharya gained ground by proposing the inclusion of Global South's voices, ideas, and subjects to promote academic plurality and diversity throughout the discipline. Within the Realism tradition, NCR has been timidly presented as a possible venue for this globalisation initiative. This exercise would make Realism – a very multifaced tradition in itself, despite what its critics may howl – more in touch with reality in the Global South. Under this view, NCR could overcome the Realist tendency to marginalise non-Western ideas and cases by opening space to question the immaterial and material elements that influence, coerce, and motivate actors in different places and conjunctures.

This article subscribes to this idea. Nevertheless, it has challenged the originality of the argument, saying that what NCR is doing has been done by other Realists in the Global South via homegrown theorisation. Moreover, it has pinpointed what NCR can learn from Subaltern Realism, Peripheral Realism, and Moral Realism if it intends to succeed in this goal of globalising itself. Like NCR, these three strands of Realism have challenged the lack of historicisation of Neorealism and replaced parsimony with different levels of particularism. While Moral Realism diverges the most when compared with NCR and its political association raises several eyebrows concerning theorising social events, Escudé's and Ayooob's ideas can be seen as NCR's predecessors as they add domestic variables to structural frameworks that do not abandon security dilemma, self-help or state centrality. These similarities support the goal of globalising NCR, indicating that its course corrections have grounds to flourish in Latin America and the Middle East.

However, these approaches expose one significant dissatisfaction among Global South scholars concerning the Realist paradigm that NCR has mostly ignored: the undervaluation of economic factors and the often unfamiliarity with global uneven development. While Ayooob and Escudé do not reference one another, they are very similar in their critique towards the asymmetrical distribution of economic power among nations and how it conditions international behaviour in what they define as the periphery. Not tackling these issues on both the unit and the systemic level can halt NCR's longevity as a popular theory in the Global South. Therefore, this article calls for more interdisciplinarity exchange between IR and International Political Economy, Development Studies and Area Studies to further advance how socioeconomic asymmetries can be integrated into the NCR explanative logic.

A final point relates to the self-reflexive turn this GIR initiative demands. Why do Realist scholars not seek to grasp what Realism *is* in the Global South? For a GIR project to emerge inside a still very Westernised group of scholars as NCR, scholars must consider their own parochialism and biases, questioning which voices and experiences they

are not reading and why. Most importantly, they must proactively seek what has been already produced elsewhere and engage in a two-way dialogue, never forgetting that the disciplinary field is permeated by power structures that stand in the way of pluralism. In other words, if we want to contribute to the progress of IR towards that direction, we must first acknowledge the voices and agencies not being heard and interact with them. For that matter, it is mostly up to the authors in the North to proactively seek venues that open the space for those speaking in the South to be *globally* listened to.

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