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## Responding to “The Greats”: A Problematic Lack of Tension

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### ABSTRACT

In his two articles ‘On the Greats and Peace’ Oliver P. Richmond outlines the long development of political theories that underpin what he calls the International Peace Architecture, or IPA. The ideas presented, he argues, have given rise to and are embodied in the institutions and practices of international security and peace. However, these ideas, institutions, and practices are, he notes, ill-suited to respond to many of the contemporary challenges to peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Together the two articles present an interesting argument, but they also suffer from a few key problems. These are primarily issues, first, of selection and exclusion (as the articles present almost wholly the ideas of white European men), and second, of inconsistency both in the ideas about how the IPA was constructed, and in ideas of how it is used. This short response outlines and explains these problems and suggests that Peace and Conflict studies, as an interdisciplinary field, is more suited to this task than IR theory alone.

### A Summary

In his two articles ‘On the Greats and Peace’ Oliver Richmond outlines the evolution of ideas in political and International Relations (IR) theory that have, over centuries, contributed to what he frames as an ‘International Peace Architecture’, or IPA. In the first part (Richmond 2023a), he sketches the development of these ideas from the ancient Greeks (in about 500 BC) through to Kant at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the second (2023b) he picks up this thread, starting with Hegel, and carries on through to contemporary developments in political and IR theory regarding conflict and peace, how these have influenced the IPA we live with today, and the ‘blockages to peace’ the IPA currently faces (2023a, p. 533).

As might be imagined, Richmond packs a lot into these articles, and they can sometimes read like a torrent of theory, poured out from the pages of history, one following the next in an unbroken line of concepts and

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compound sentences. In this sense, they are not really written for the uninitiated or the faint of heart. I do not see myself assigning these as undergraduate reading at any point in the near future. However, communicating to a general audience is clearly not what these articles are for and what they provide to the field of Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS), or, more broadly, to IR theory, is significant. What they present is a very robust review of the ideas which have, over time, become embodied in the institutions of political order through successive periods of history and, thus, have shaped how we have defined peace, in the past and present.

Again, as anyone familiar with Richmond's work may expect, this 'underlying philosophical trajectory' is not unproblematic (2023b, p. 540). In both articles it is made clear that the various 'intellectual threads' (2023a, p. 514) that have been woven together in the ongoing accretion of layers over time are internalised within and serve to legitimate the norms, structures, and institutions of the contemporary IPA, which 'draws on and is imprisoned by the Greats' (2023a, p. 495). Through the genealogy presented, it becomes clear that even the progressive tendencies in the most recent waves of PCS theory are 'based upon a legacy of thought, as well as practices, that are subject to serious ethical and methodological constraints' (2023a, p. 533). As such, even the 'local turn' with which Richmond is so commonly associated, is trapped by its intellectual inheritance. It is bounded within the theories it has inherited which form the IPA and delimit the potential responses to conflict and violence that are considered possible.

Richmond argues, near the end of the second article, therefore, that these influential thinkers, 'ancient and modern' were 'engaged in the task of bringing into being worlds that are just on, or perhaps just over, their own horizons; horizons which from today's vantage points look extremely limited, unsustainable, parochial, and often discriminatory' (2023b, p. 541). None predicted (could perhaps not have predicted) the range of contemporary problems the world faces today and so, by no malicious intent, the institutions and practices to which their ideas gave inspiration are unsuited to the task of generating peace. He then argues, however, that 'Western peace and security praxis has defended the Greats in order to prevent structural change which would lead necessarily to reordering and new priorities or hierarchies' (2023b, p. 542), thus implying some agency and hinting towards as yet unaddressed challenges.

## Some Critiques

That I generally find the argument in the articles interesting and valuable does not mean that they are without problems. Some of the most obvious problems are related to the format of the work, as genealogy, and the necessary choices and exclusions that this entails. I cannot claim to know IR theory to the depth and breadth that Richmond clearly illustrates here. However, the nature of

a genealogy itself is such that selection bias is inherent. Why, for example, does Hannah Arendt receive a total of 18 words (excluding her actual name, which appears twice) (2023b, pp. 527, 531) while the ideas of her contemporaries, such as Habermas, Rawls, or Foucault, are discussed in much more detail (relatively), over long paragraphs and hundreds of words (2023b, pp. 530–531). Why were some thinkers, such as Michael Walzer, Samuel Huntington, James C. Scott, Amartya Sen, Edward Said, or Frantz Fanon excluded entirely? I do not note these scholars to advocate for their specific ideas, but simply to note that the exclusions highlight the potential for occlusions, and in a genealogy, because the ideas included serve as the data, occlusions amount to missing data and the potential for faulty analysis.

The sheer scale of what is being reviewed here serves as some defence of any choices of selection or omission, of course. But it is also problematic because, when expertly packaged, almost any argument of this breadth can be supported. In reflecting on these articles, I was reminded of my reading of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1998) many years ago. On first reading, this was a masterwork of deep historical narrative. An imaginative reconsideration of thousands of years of history that wove together strands of biology, geography, anthropology and a half dozen other disciplines. It was awe inspiring and utterly convincing. Only years later did I read some of the critiques of the book by experts in these areas that noted the various exclusions and occlusions, thus undermining its authority (see York and Mancus 2007, Judkins *et al.* 2008). My argument is not that Richmond's two essays on 'the Greats' suffer from the same flaws, as I am not an expert in much of this theory and so cannot know. It is simply that, when we review the thinking of scholars as widely divergent as Cicero, St. Augustine, Kant, and Rawls each within a paragraph or two, we cannot help but exclude because we are seeking to include in this short space those ideas that most helpfully highlight the points we seek to emphasise in service of our own argument.

But, of course, anyone attempting what Richmond has attempted here will be open to the same charge, and more capable people than me (IR theorists, political philosophers, historians, classicists, and so on), can more ably pick apart the details of the argument. The more interesting critique, I feel, relates to the exclusion of non-European voices in the articles. This is a more subtle critique than it may initially appear. It would be easy to launch a broadside against Richmond for including, with very, very few exceptions, male scholars of European, or, later, Global North, origins in these articles. It can give the impression, falsely I believe in this case, of a dated or Eurocentric analysis; the work, perhaps, of a scholar who has failed to read the room. But this would be overly simplistic. Knowing Richmond's other work, and even if I had read only these two articles in isolation (as long as I read them in detail), it is clear that this Eurocentric review is presented for a purpose. It is presented because these are the ideas that have dominated the construction, over time, of

a Eurocentric global order; one that is exclusionary, expropriative, and hierarchical. The exclusion of non-European voices from the genealogy echoes and highlights the exclusion of non-European ideas from the theoretical armature of the IPA itself. This is Richmond's point.

But there is, nonetheless, a problem here, in that there is an inconsistency within the papers themselves between the ideas presented as contributing to the slow accretion of this theoretical construct that is then embodied in the institutions and practices of the IPA, and the theory which Richmond also presents, in patches, regarding how and why certain theories come to be incorporated or accepted into that theoretical construct. Early in the first article, for example, he says that the 'slow evolution of an ever broader and more complex IPA' has been 'driven by elites and subaltern agency in alliance with powerful actors. Rarely have subaltern, or powerful actors, succeeded alone' (2023a, p. 494). A page later he describes this theory as having 'evolved organically as a response to constantly changing types of war and violence, representing [a] loosely interwoven system of strategies, tactics, and systems, built on top of each other' (2023a, p. 495), and in more than one place he describes the IPA as having 'emerged' (2023b, p. 492). But, while this idea of the IPA as organically emerging from the interplay of the elite and the subaltern, the powerful and the marginal, seems to be what Richmond wants to evidence, the thinkers he then cites as evidence of this interplay are always European.

When he talks about how 'critical arguments' in response to 'rapidly evolving practices of war' are 'assimilated or rejected by more conservative thinking and practice' (2023b, p. 492), for example, he cites Edmund Burke and David Mitrany (2023b, p. 493). The reader is left wondering why thinkers such as W.E.B Du Bois, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, Paulo Freire or a host of other names would not have been better choices here. Richmond does argue in a number of places that the IPA has failed to incorporate the perspectives of non-European thinkers, noting, for example, the exclusion of critical, feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial thinkers (2023b, p. 497), and that other perspectives had already emerged to challenge the established ideas throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from thinkers such as Confucius, Ibn Khaldun, Gandhi, and Mazrui (2023b, p. 542). But those noted above are glossed over, there are no citations, and their critiques are not developed at all. Similarly, where the latter are listed their work is described as terrain for a potential third article in the series. But, again, there are no citations and no real development here. These thinkers are largely pushed aside.

Richmond explains this exclusion by arguing that these alternative thinkers 'have not yet established an international political order as practices' (2023b, p. 542). But this seems to contradict the theory about how the IPA has been constructed. If the IPA is a product of organic give and take, of a dialogical interaction between elite and subaltern agencies over time,

then the establishment of an international political order of practices is not only the product of theorists writing, but of how those theorists are themselves viewing and responding to the resistance and response the political orders they engender in the world generate. The articles, therefore, seem to carry an ambiguous note and a lack of clarity regarding how precisely Richmond conceives of intent and agency in the *construction of the IPA*. In the presentation of predominantly (almost entirely) European or Global North theorists, the articles seem to assign these theorists the agency to generate theory and contribute to the IPA. Due to their exclusion, the subaltern seem to be assigned a lesser role, certainly one that has less power, less agency. One of only response and reaction. This does not evidence the organic interplay Richmond has tried to present as how the IPA was constructed.

Further, there seems an ambiguity regarding intent and agency in the *use of the IPA*. In arguing first that our contemporary understandings are 'imprisoned by the Greats' (2023a, p. 495), but later that 'Western peace and security praxis has defended the Greats in order to prevent structural change' (2023b, p. 542), Richmond seems to vacillate between seeing Western actors as trapped within ideas that are 'taken as granted' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 164), on the one hand, and, on the other, as being able to work outside these ideas and to use the IPA strategically or surreptitiously for their own ends. Of course, the reality is most likely somewhere between these two poles, that agents act within structures, but also have the ability then to restructure those structures, much as Structuration Theory proposes (Giddens 1984). And this is perhaps what Richmond meant to imply. But the strong terms used ('imprisoned by' vs. 'defended') might then have needed to be softened to allow for more subtlety in the analysis and, overall, it does not seem appropriate to leave such a critical point down to interpretation.

## **A Problematic Lack of Tension**

I believe that Richmond is right that there is an IPA today which, in its norms, institutions, and practices embodies a composite of ideas about what global order and peace are. It may not be one thing, and elements of the IPA may sometimes work at cross purposes, shifting and changing over different historical periods. But, in a general sense, there is today a conceptual apparatus that shapes and structures how we approach the tasks of building peace. I also agree that the ideas that have been dominant within that apparatus over the centuries have been those proffered by European men. There is hardly anything controversial in such claims because, at least since the start of the Industrial age, it has been European men who have held much of the power and influence in IR (theory and practice). However, I also believe that those ideas have been influenced specifically by the resistance generated to them by those outside of power, and increasingly from the global

south and from post-colonial positionalities. These tensions have informed and influenced the IPA.

It is clear from both articles that Richmond is not unaware of this. However, in presenting almost wholly European male voices he does seem to underplay the extent to which the development of those voices, how those ideas change and evolve, is actually dependent on, perhaps even only possible because of, the tension that emerges as resistance is expressed, and only ever more so since the advent of colonialism. Whether intended by Richmond or not, in these articles the ideas of the IPA are problematically presented as changing over time in response largely to each other, in a discourse of white European men responding to other white European men. But while there certainly may have been some evolution purely by scholarly exchange, the ideas of these men surely shifted and changed because their ideas had been applied in a world populated by others and been found wanting. This then gave rise to uncomfortable tensions, which led to further iterations of the initial ideas.

But, problematically, the voices of thinkers who might represent these others, or descriptions of the non-verbal, non-textual acts or practices of resistance these others might have performed, are excluded from the discussion here. This is important both because it appears to assign too much power purely to ideas generated by European theorists, and because it downplays (indeed, makes invisible) the influence of others and of other forms of expression that embody this tension. The kind of organic, fluid, complexity which Richmond wants to describe as fundamental to the emergence of the IPA requires recognition of other forms of agency and intellectual expression. It requires the kind of inclusion and interdisciplinary thinking that Richmond sometimes advocates in these articles (2023b, p. 537) but does not really practice. Without incorporating other ways of thinking about the world, and the ideas of scholars who can better represent other ways of resisting, responding, and knowing the world, that are themselves embodied in forms of expression other than academic theory, works such as this risk reinscribing the very epistemic privilege that Richmond would no doubt want to avoid.

I think this raises a fundamental challenge for work that hopes to engage in interrogating and then developing the ideas that underlie our approaches to peace work, what Richmond defines as the IPA. There is a need for work like that presented in 'On the Greats and Peace', which engages in this deep discussion of theories and how they inform institutions and practice. But there is also the need to approach such questions with more breadth, more interdisciplinary thinking, and more openness to alternative epistemologies. Understanding the complex interplay between ideas and practices, between practices and responses, and between responses and new ideas, seems to require a very different kind of scholarship. It requires a scholarship that is more open to interdisciplinary and inter-epistemological tensions and more open to, or capable of exploring, the frictions between Eurocentric and other

ways of knowing. A purely IR approach seems largely unsuited for this. But it may be precisely the kind of work that PCS can pursue in the future.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Gearoid Millar** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen. His research primarily examines the local experiences of international interventions for peace, justice and development in post-conflict contexts and he has developed and promoted the use of Ethnographic Peace Research for such studies. His current research focuses on complexity in peace and conflict systems and the reorientation of peace and conflict studies to face 21st century challenges to peace.

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