CHAPTER 5

Fifth perspective: diversity

This final perspective ties together the previous four perspectives because of the element that unites them all: the student. Whereas the previous perspectives were related to the world around the student, students of International Studies should also be aware of their own perspectives on that world. These perspectives can be part of the students' personalities and backgrounds, but also of their academic environment. Two examples may illustrate the latter: the international classroom and the Western context of instruction.

International classroom

International Studies often attract students from diverse backgrounds, creating an 'international classroom' where students are exposed to different experiences and circumstances. Exposure to such a variety of behaviors and views may act as an eye-opener to some students, while others may find that confronting or even offending. Teachers and students must find a way to deal with this. However, it may be better not to avoid such confrontations, because this diversity offers International Studies a unique learning environment that allows such conflicts to take place on a scale that is small and presumably safe.

Western context

At Western universities, International Studies is currently most probably taught in English, using academic literature in the English language, that in most cases is also produced at Western universities. The advantage of a single academic language is that it enables international communication. A disadvantage is that the richness of academic resources available in other languages may be lost. One way to prevent that may be for International Studies students to make use of their own languages, and to master any language of their region of interest.

Another disadvantage of this situation is that the study of International Studies runs the risk of becoming Western-oriented. Indeed, Humanities scholarship at Western universities has in recent decades come under substantial criticism for two reasons. One is that Western scholarship has developed its own epistemology that may provide views of the world that are limited (because other epistemologies are neglected) or even skewed (because Western scholarship may be ill-placed to fully understand and appreciate certain non-Western ideas or behaviours).

The other criticism of Humanities scholarship at Western universities is that it may have biased tendencies towards the rest of the world. This bias, so the critics say, is the result of these Western academic institutions being rooted in colonial times. In those days, many Europeans saw themselves as the pinnacle of civilization and considered Western culture, religion and customs the measuring stick for how things should be, and everything that was different was spoken of in terms of primitive or backward. In the 1970s, it was Edward Said who drew attention to the fact that this nineteenth-century condescending and negative manner of looking at the 'Orient' had also permeated European media and literature and had not really dissipated since. This bias, which was also shown to be prevalent in scholars, became known as **Orientalism**, after the title of Said's book. The notion of Orientalism has since become a warning sign for Western scholars and much has been undertaken since to correct these views. Some critics have argued that this bias in attitude is not exclusive to Westerners; they coined the term 'Occidentalism' for prejudiced views that non-Western people may have of the West and how that may permeate their academic scholarship. However, most universities in the non-Western world are modelled on Western universities, with Western curricula, textbooks and theories that may very well continue to disseminate an Orientalist narrative (see chapter 'Postcolonialism').

Orientalism originally denoted the essentialist approach to 'the Orient' as constituting immutable and stereotyped characteristics of Arab and Asian culture and traditions. Orientalism is also used in a more general way as the imbedded bias that Westerners may have towards other parts of the world, and that also has permeated the Western academic knowledge production. It has been argued that Orientalism is not an exclusive Western attitude since similar biases to 'others' exist in other parts of the world as well.

The above illustrates how the student of International Studies may be confronted with situations in the learning environment that pose academic challenges. To address these challenges, the student must be able to work with diversity. Two types of diversity will be discussed here.

Academic diversity

In past decades it has become clear that sound research in the domain of Humanities does not only depend on good analytical and methodological skills. When academics work on topics that involve numerous cultural, religious, racial and other dimensions, their personal disposition also becomes an important

factor: does the topic sollicit affinity or aversion, or perhaps preconceived notions about it? Self-awareness of one's views, attitudes and background are therefore of paramount importance to conduct research that is academically sound. This is called **positionalit**y, a concept that requires every individual student to reflect on the manner in which they relate to the topic of research. Such reflection, however, is not an easy task when we realize that many of our preconceptions are so deeply embedded in our minds that we don't even consider them to be subjective.

The acknowledgement of one's positionality is no guarantee that we can undo it. Oftentimes we will be unable or unwilling to do so. For instance, gender equality is a non-negotiable given for some, while others will hold that the differences between man and woman are a fact of life. Better, therefore, is to recognize such personal convictions and traits for what they are, and to take them into consideration when conducting research. One way to work with any pre-set views we may have is to compensate for it by considering the views of fellow researchers. For instance, one might argue that a research project on underground rap music is best to be undertaken by students who share the age, background, and culture of those rappers. But such an **insider's perspective** could cause researchers to overlook certain aspects because they feel they are so self-evident that they are not worth considering or registering. Positionality can then be helpful, but more helpful might be to invite an **outsider's perspective**: why not call in a white middle-aged person who has little affinity with the subject but who may therefore ask the questions considered trivial by the insider? Such a diversity of views and experiences may provide a more profound understanding of the topic of study.

> The concept of **positionality** holds that students of Humanities need to reflect on their own position on the topic of research.

Positionality is not only important when researching people, but also when researching ideas, processes or texts. Imagine the Argentinian student reading Japanese literature, or the Norwegian scholar analysing South-African political speeches, or the non-believer studying religious texts. They may all run the risk of missing essential elements because they have no intimate knowledge of their topic of study. Still, their outsider's perspective may yield interesting insights. The main task for any scholar, therefore, is to have some self-awareness in their approach of such texts (positionality), and to refer to other views (diversity). Just as multidisciplinarity brings in the different views from various academic disciplines, diversity of researchers may bring different perspectives of the same issue or event.

It must be noted that the notions of the insider and outsider can be used in two ways. The *researcher* can be an insider or outsider to the people or ideas that are being researched. This is what positionality refers to. But the insider or outsider approach

can also apply to the *method of research*: does the researcher merely describe people or ideas or does the researcher follow their inner logic and epistemology. The first is called the etic approach whereby the researcher takes the position of an observing outsider who contents with observing, recording and describing. The second is called the emic approach whereby the researcher tries to capture the inside perspectives of the people or ideas under study.

In the **etic** approach the researcher takes the position of an observing outsider. In the **emic** approach the researcher tries to capture the inside perspectives of the people or ideas under study.

Diversity of views

While the student of International Studies may be aware of any bias or preconceived notions, they furthermore also need to consider any views they may encounter that are different from their own. This diversity of views may be confusing to some and interesting to others, but academically they can be used to the student's advantage when trying to understand global complexities, as the following examples may illustrate:

Geography

Our place of origin or residence determines our sense of location on the globe. That place is the center of our world and serves as the reference point when using words like 'far' and 'nearby', or 'north' or 'east'. While these terms may seem objectively descriptive, they can also be quite normative. For instance, to speak of the North and the South in the world is not only an indication of place. In the past decades, it has also referred to socioeconomic standing: the North stood for rich and developed and the South for poor and underdeveloped. Nowadays, this dichotomy has acquired

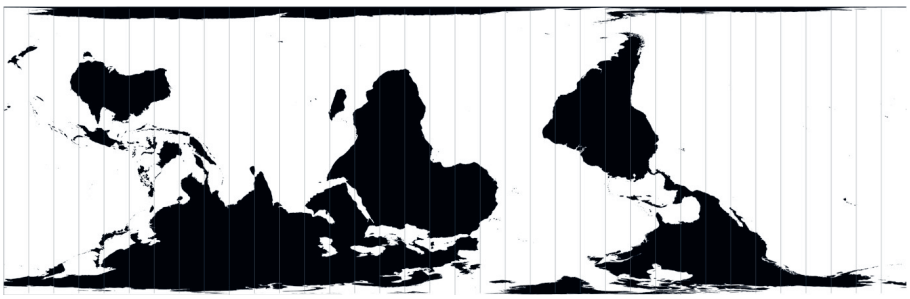

Figure I.5.1 World map

a political-historical meaning: the 'global North' stands for rich, former colonial countries that allegedly want to maintain their privileges, while the 'global South' stands for former colonies that are trying to get a place at the international table.

Generation

Generations look at the world differently: the older generations have seen things happen, the younger generations see things in the making. The stereotype would then be that the older generations are conservative ('we stick to what we know') while the younger generations are ambitious ('we need to make changes'). A famous proverb has it that 'If you're not a liberal when young, you have no heart. If you're not a conservative when old, you have no brain.' But there is more. Usually, global events which take place during one's late teens and early twenties determine one's world view: in my case, I belong to the Cold War generation, raised with fear of 'the bomb', while I see how the generations of students passing before me today are imprinted by terrorism in the 2010s, a pandemic in the 2020s, and have an overall angry desperation about climate change. These are historical imprints that determine the concerns and actions of each generation.

History

People may have radically different perceptions of the same history. What is a 'liberation' organization to one, may be a 'terrorist' organization to the other. Europeans consider the conquests of Alexander the Great and the Romans as the spread of civilization, while they perceive the conquests by Arabs and Ottomans as acts of aggression. From the perspective of the Chinese and the Mongols, the Aztecs and the Inca's, the British and the Spaniards, their conquests are seen as shows of power leading to grand civilizations, while others will perceive them as forces of destruction that obliterated entire cultures.

Social class

In my class of International Studies, I teach over 500 students whom together usually represent over fifty nationalities. An 'international classroom' indeed! But how diverse is such a class, really? They represent different cultures, and many of these students may be even bi- or multicultural, but the overall majority is middle or upper class. This is not a reproach – we are who we are – but these students need to face the fact that they represent a minority in the world and that their position in society may very well influence their view of the world.

Religion

It is tempting to judge a believer only on the merits of that person's belief thereby dissociating religion from its cultural environment (see also chapter 'Beliefs and belief systems'). But while religions may have their belief systems and epistemol-

ogies, every believer is also part of a local culture. Catholics in America, Brazil, Uganda and Korea may share the same faith but their different cultural backgrounds may affect their practices of that faith. We may view this as a form of glocalization of religions: their belief structures are global, but their local manifestations can be different, based on their cultural environment.

There are many more examples like these. Suffice it to conclude that the students of International Studies can only be successful in understanding the world 'out there' after proper self-reflection on their own cultural context 'in here'.

Further reading

Charles R. Hale, 'Introduction' in: Charles R. Hale (ed.), *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, University of California Press, 2008

Fred Halliday, '"Orientalism" and Its Critics,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1993, pp. 145-163

M. W Morris, D.A. Leung & B. Lickel, 'Views from inside and outside: Integrating Emic and Etic Insights about Culture and Justice Judgement', *Academy of Management Review*, 24(4), 1999, pp.781-796

Jeffrey Thomas Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux, Chapters 9 ('Posts') and 10 ('Differences'), *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012

Edward Said, 'Introduction' (chapter), *Orientalism*, 1979