

Dialectical Insights for Global IR: Forum on *Snapshots from Home*

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Abstract

This contribution to a symposium on Karin Fierke's 2022 book, *Snapshots from Home*, reflects on the dialectical aspects of her analysis, her contribution to Global IR, and the implications of her work for the field of International Relations.

Keywords

Asian philosophy, dialectics, global IR, IR theory

Karin Fierke's *Snapshots from Home* was occasioned by the experience of lockdown, a chance to break away from routine to reflect on the nature of our subject, International Relations. It is an erudite, insightful, original, and provocative book. Fierke (2022) identifies linkages between quantum theory and Eastern philosophical and religious traditions, a connection that some of the leading developers of quantum theory (Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg) made themselves. Like both quantum theory and philosophical traditions from outside the Western world, the book is difficult to access at the outset, but once engaged, it is well worth the effort. More attention is devoted to the contributions of the Eastern traditions than to quantum theory. The parallels are there, but they are often just that, parallels that indicate broad similarities between the two.

Fierke builds upon and extends the pioneering insights of the late Lily Ling on the utility of drawing upon Asian philosophical traditions for our subject, International Relations. She encourages us to go beyond the standard ("narrow") view of self-interest as a singular focus to consider more compassionate possibilities such as the idea that the egoistic self can be seen "from the perspective of the relational self (Fierke 2022: p. 68)." Like Nicholas Onuf, she also observes that humans are participants in the creation of the world (Fierke 2022: p. 133), arguing that we are engaged in creating reality, rather than determined by it.

Snapshots is fundamentally anti-positivist and rejects the conventional pursuit of causality in favor of emergence. The book contains many elements of dialectical

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approaches, draws extensively on Eastern philosophy, and has much to contribute to Global International Relations (IR).

Dialectical elements

Much of the work is broadly consonant with dialectical approaches or understandings of our subject: constant change (impermanence), interrelatedness, constitutive relationships, and the idea that contradiction can be a generative force (emergence). Given her emphasis on impermanence and motion, change is the norm for Fierke, not the exception. She argues that we live in a universe of impermanence, change, and radical uncertainty. For her, strategy is ultimately concerned with navigating that universe.

All phenomena lack an independent identity, and everything is relational (Fierke 2022: p. 72). Interrelatedness is pervasive, and there is no such thing as an independent, self-contained existence. She argues that both Sun Tzu and Gandhi developed relational strategies for action, whether it concerned war or the undermining of British imperialism. The agent structure problem is not a problem for Fierke, since agency and structure are deeply infused with each other. She is also attentive to the deep entanglement of past, present, and future.

Contradiction is central to dialectical thinking, just as it is for both quantum theory and Eastern philosophical traditions. For Fierke, contradiction is source of actions and change. It is a generative force, rather than a disruptive one. She argues that mutually implicated oppositions are often the underlying dynamic of change, describing opposites as complements, rather than logical contradictions. She observes that Zhongyong dialectics share a family resemblance with the Hegelian and Marxist dialectic, but they emphasize harmony and balance, rather than struggle. Opposites are interdependent and complementary, “co-evolving to a new synthesis through dynamic processes that continually maintain, adjust, and manage complex and fluid human relations so as to reach the ideal state of harmony.” (Qin 2016: 41). The interdependence and reversibility of opposites is analogous to the dialectical insight that recessive tendencies can become nascent, or emergent phenomena. Polar opposites generate not only contradiction, but dynamic potential (Fierke 2022: p. 115).

Fierke pays attention to context, but her concept of contextual settings does not delve deeply into different aspects of context (geographical, historical, or inter-textual). There is also surprisingly little attention given to History throughout the book. It comes in belatedly, in the final snapshot, as memory, or structural habits (of racism, in the case of George Floyd).

She contends that there is a dialectical relationship between seen and unseen, insightfully arguing that Gandhi’s actions (boycotts, the Salt march) were ways to reveal the unseen structural violence of British imperialism. He was thus able to reveal the hidden threads of suffering.

Global IR

This is a timely text for the development of global IR. Fierke organizes her book around six snapshots taken from different vantage points. She argues that mindfulness can lead to self-reflection, as a way to transcend parochialism, and that it is important to bring

different perspectives into conversation (Fierke 2022: p. 132). She views the world as a richly diverse tapestry, but humbly observes that none of us can see from everywhere at once. Deference and respect for difference are crucial ingredients in the construction of “home” she discusses in her concluding chapter.

Multi-perspectivism is central to Global IR. Fierke is deeply attentive to the fact that positionality leads to blind spots (*lacunae*) that make it difficult to see a complete picture of “reality.” As a result, her objective is to see differently, adopting an apparatus that will facilitate seeing blind spots. Reality exists in its entirety or wholeness, but it is beyond our ability to perceive from our different unitary vantage points alone, which will always be incomplete. Thus, we need a multi-dimensional, multi-perspectivist approach. For Fierke, “Reality depends on the perspective from which the world is viewed” (Fierke 2022: p. 347). Navigating uncertainty requires an ability to see both sides of a dialectical totality, including the hidden, that is often obscured by the illusions of good that states attach to themselves. Gandhi’s strategy of self-reform involved seeing “reality” from a different angle, something that was also central to his mode of action.

The Newtonian-inspired world remains part of the subject matter for Fierke, but rather than giving it primacy, the Western enlightenment is viewed as but “one conventional construction among others” (Fierke 2022: p. 91). This is similar to Acharya’s assertion that the West and its theoretical IR frameworks remain an integral part of global IR, but only as a part of our subject, not equated with it.

Fierke criticizes Global IR as bogged down by an inability to see the science/culture relationship in anything other than mutually exclusive terms, but she does not consider attention to discussions of diversity of conceptions of science by some advocates of Global IR, such as the late Hayward Alker. This suggests that rather than stressing the opposition of science and culture, we should expand the space for the discussion of the meaning of “science” itself.

Implications for IR

Snapshots from Home suggests a great many productive implications for the analysis of international relations. It also opens space for a radical and provocative reconsideration of issues. Fierke implies that a Buddhist framework could serve as a justification for humanitarian intervention. “Buddhist practice seeks to deconstruct the self, at which point the suffering of others becomes one’s own suffering as well” (Fierke 2022: p. 86). If, however, the intention of the action can be framed as motivated by compassion or to relieve suffering, could it also be used to justify killing? Can wars of civilizing mission be justified, or humanitarian interventions, or even Russia’s invasion of Ukraine? One would seem to need other contextual factors to take into consideration. What kind of ethics or moral guidance can Fierke’s exploration of Asian traditions provide? The conclusion is somewhat vague in this regard, but I have a sense that she could illuminate this, given her substantial immersion in and deep knowledge of Asian philosophical traditions.

One of the great strengths of the work is the moral urgency it brings to considerations of the global environment and the place of humans in nature. Fierke contends that humans and their relationship to nature must be transformed from one of mastery, domination,

exploitation, and control to one of living in harmony, with acknowledgement of the Anthropocene era and the limits to growth. She effectively draws on the Daoist insight that humans arise within nature, rather than standing above and outside of it (Fierke 2022: p. 131). Our home is in nature and our house is burning down, given the neglect of our impact on the environment. As a result, as she forcefully argues, ontological primacy of humans over nature needs to be challenged. In order to restore a balance with nature, we need to negotiate the universe (a crowded cosmos) without causing harm—in contrast to the pursuit of modernity. We also need to recognize that the idea of control of nature can also go hand in hand with political domination of people.

Her work also has implications for our approaches to research and analysis. She draws analogies to art as being concerned with the particular and science with generalities. Rather than choosing between one or the other, Fierke recommends what she terms “artsience.” The deep entanglement associated with yinyang has implications for the integration of qualitative research of the particular and quantitative research in pursuit of generalities.

Fierke is also attuned to the inseparability of observer and the observed. Here is where her work draws most directly on insights from quantum theory. She argues that Gandhi was a participant observer in the sense that he participated in the transformation of his subject (analogous to quantum concerns about the influence of the scientist on their experiments). Gandhi, as a part, was deeply implicated in the whole and was able to transform it through his individual actions and general approach. Gandhi’s focus on self-reform preceded his extension to re-formation (ultimately the termination) of British colonial rule on the subcontinent.

Following her reflections on Sun Tzu and the art of war, Fierke offers an interesting reflection on the parallels to war in responses to COVID. She invokes the war metaphor, and contrasts policy responses in different parts of the world. Although I tend to be skeptical of applications of the war metaphor for other challenges, Fierke instructively describes COVID as a war with nature. This gives her insights not only into different state strategies, but also to how the global lockdown produced a temporary restoration of balance, generated greater appreciation of nature, and identified the human place within it. The strong individualism in the West (and focus on the differentiated self) is blamed for its excessive number of COVID deaths, in stark contrast to Asian cultural acceptance of masks and willingness to consider the implications of one’s actions for the community of others.

From a Daoist perspective, Fierke views the US and China as mutually implicated rather than mutually exclusive and inherently competitive. Her alternative approach to China is to consider not whether it will succeed the US as a global hegemon, but to imagine the entanglement and interrelationships between the US and China as an alternative basis for thinking about world order.

More broadly, when she briefly takes up consideration of theoretical approaches in International Relations scholarship, Fierke emphasizes the individualist assumptions underpinning the dominant neoliberal and neo-realist approaches to IR. In general terms, she calls for a reimagining of the relationship between the ego-self and the relational self.

Conclusion

Fierke concludes her impressive book with an assessment of how her exploration of Eastern philosophical approaches has facilitated her ability to reveal or to see the unseen: environmental degradation, inequality, pandemics, and racism. While it is not entirely clear that her analysis is needed for the identification of these issues, she makes a convincing case that it is needed for their remedy. The second section of her book on yinyang provides some guidance, such as the importance of being attuned to one's environment and the skills needed to navigate the potentials of a contextual situation (such as being able to win a war without fighting a war). Fierke also emphasizes the reactions against globalization, a revived nostalgic nationalism (particularly in the UK and US), and concerns about the current scale of individual displacement and growing pressures global migration. *Snapshots from Home* expresses more of an attitude to take, rather than a reference manual, for our subject. It is a timely and insightful contribution that provides us not only with a compelling case for multi-perspectivism, but also a broader vocabulary for developing a genuinely global IR.

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