

International Relations Is Not Post Postcolonialism in the Twenty-First Century

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There have always been debates regarding which theory yields the most accurate, legitimate, or helpful analysis in international relations. One such theory is postcolonialism, a relatively new field, garnering international attention and popularity late in the twentieth century. Postcolonialism is extremely useful in understanding twenty-first-century international politics by revealing how colonial histories contribute to existing discursive constructions of national identity, affecting how different states are treated and their standing in the global system. Yet, what makes postcolonialism so helpful and relevant in understanding modern politics is its potential to work with other theories. In this paper, I will analyze how postcolonial theory can be applied in conjunction with Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory (1976) to reveal distinctive and invaluable insights into 21st-century politics, which would otherwise go undetected by other theories alone. This is best exemplified through an examination of the Rana Plaza collapse because there is a direct connection in how the past economic exploitation of the nation has contributed to a colonial discursive identity which then in turn continues to hide the same unequal economic parameters which continues to exploit them.

The Rise of Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism, as a theory, is often seen as emerging in the early 1980s with scholar Edward Said. In his book *Orientalism*, Said (1978) asserts that the concept of 'the Orient,' referring to the western conception of society outside of the West, was created as a contradistinction to 'the Occident,' or the western world. He traces how colonial and western forces have built unequal and binary identities between the West and the rest of the world in order to secure a global hierarchy that benefits the West. In fact, the modern international system itself is a product of the colonial interactions that took place over the last five centuries. Therefore, any international system analysis without this insight would be incomplete (Seth, 2011; Krishna, 2008). Postcolonialism operates mainly through the study of discourse in order to understand how it is used to construct identity, which replicates, sustains, and produces colonial stereotypes and structures (Burney, 2012a; Gandhi, 1998; Nayar, 2010).

Because of its emphasis on discourse and its refusal to take structures like anarchy as given, postcolonialism more closely resembles critical theories in international relations. In this way, postcolonialism endeavors to dismantle what is accepted as natural but also offers a unique "epistemological perspective that enriches our understanding of existing global dynamics" (Biswas, 2016, p. 234). It challenges these given structures and attempts to critique them through historical analysis (Seth, 2011; Sabaratnam, 2019). It recognizes that historical interactions, specifically between colonial Europe and those colonized, have created abusive relationships and systems today (Seth, 2012; Gandhi, 1998; Sabaratnam, 2019). Furthermore, postcolonialism attempts to reveal and address issues with the system itself to better the world by making it more equal and just and to introduce counter-narratives to predominantly western understandings of history and current events (Biswas, 2016; Chowdhry and Nair, 2002; Zvobgo and Loken, 2020).

Postcolonialism is an essential and helpful lens through which to analyze international politics in the twenty-first century. It can reveal wounds not only from the economic exploitation of non-western countries by western ones but also showcases the consequences of the narratives which arose and continue to emerge from the power imbalance

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(Biswas, 2016). It can be used in critiquing subjects within almost all, if not all, academic disciplines, which showcases its importance and usefulness (Burney, 2012b; Chowdhry and Nair, 2002). However, postcolonialism is not without its weaknesses. Nayar (2010) argues that postcolonialism situates itself too often in the past and has not adapted to be able to generate significant critical analysis regarding new forms of imperialism through avenues such as technological advancement, globalization, and other more modern innovations.

While the above critique of postcolonialism may limit its analysis in some situations, it does not have to function alone. Postcolonialism has the ability to work in accordance with other theories in analyzing phenomena. It can work well in conjunction with different approaches, resulting in more extensive analysis and augmentation of existing theories. So, while postcolonialism offers essential insights on its own through the study of discursive constructions of identity and structures, this will not always be enough to fully understand events in international politics. In the case of Bangladesh, there is much postcolonialism can reveal, but there are also areas where it becomes limited.

Bangladesh is often depicted as a problematic, troubled child incapable of establishing safe and prosperous policies because of its underdevelopment. Rahman (2014) wrote that it was the “internal structural problems and lack of adequate domestic policy” that “open the door to external forces for whom Bangladesh’s vulnerability represents an economic advantage” (p. 24). This confirms Shilliam’s (2019) analysis that countries and peoples who are considered ‘traditional’ are seen to function worse than modern and developed countries. This is also placing blame on Bangladesh while ignoring a history of deprivation. This example also demonstrates how identifying this discursive construction of Bangladesh’s identity is helpful. Still, a more comprehensive understanding of Bangladesh requires a historical account of its economic dispossession as well.

The economic exploitation of Bangladesh does not begin with the creation of its garment industry but with the start of its colonial history (Rahman, 2014). Bangladesh was colonized by the British empire in the eighteenth century and was occupied until 1947. From 1947 until 1971, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan. While both West and East Pakistan were producers of raw materials during this time, much of the gains garnered through this production were allocated to West Pakistan, causing a widening gap between their economies and resources (Rahman, 2014). When Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan, there were no garment factories in the new country. However, a quick “globalizing apparel industry provided their country with an opportunity to capitalize on a resource that the labor-intensive industry needed,” which was low-wage workers (Enloe, 2014, p. 247).

The economic exploitation that Bangladesh continues to face now is not separate from its colonial origin. By combining postcolonial and world systems theory approaches, the postcolonial analysis may be connected more strongly to current acts of manipulation and exploitation. Then it can illustrate how rhetorical and economic hierarchies continue to drain and negatively affect Bangladesh.

Applying World Systems Theory

Western countries, corporations, and media tend to cast industrial disasters in ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped’ countries as a tragic yet necessary phase in capitalist development, which other ‘developed’ countries have long since passed (Siddiqi, 2015). Yet, this linear understanding of economic development is another myth constructed by the nations in power to justify the continued financial exploitation of formerly colonized states. World systems theory disrupts this linear modernization timeline by presenting an alternative reading of the global economic system.

World systems theory recognizes the global system as an international flow of resources, capital, and labor where nation-states fall into one of three categories: core, semi-periphery, or periphery. The core states are wealthy and produce high-consumption goods using raw materials imported from the periphery and semi-periphery states. The periphery exports cheap labor and raw materials to the core. Sometimes the periphery and the semi-periphery may export labor and material surpluses and import them to produce consumer goods (Wallerstein, 1976). In this model, the core states are considered developed and advanced while the less developed are the periphery; the states in the semi-periphery may fluctuate between levels of ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ (Chirot, Daniel, and Hall, 1982). This global hierarchy did not occur naturally. Instead, Wallerstein proposes that, as an economic system, “capitalism has always operated by way of a profoundly unequal and asymmetrical hierarchical structure” (Aguirre

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Rojas, 2016, p. 16). This capitalist, colonial world system continues to function by exporting raw materials and cheap labor from formerly colonized states.

While world systems theory may aid in explaining how the balance of international influence and power has been established through economic domination, it lacks a focus outside the capital. This is where postcolonialism will be applied to broaden the reach of the analysis. Postcolonialism exposes “the nature of the subjugation and oppression of the postcolonial” by deconstructing different forms of discourse and media, such as imagery, art, etc. (Burney, 2012b, p. 47). Therefore, in applying both postcolonialism and world systems theory to Bangladesh, one can reveal the discursive mechanisms which attempt to hide and naturalize this cyclical system of capital extraction and economic subjugation.

Discourse Before the Rana Plaza Collapse

In 2013, a garment production factory called Rana Plaza collapsed, killing 1129 Bangladeshi workers. They produced clothes for mainly European and North American brands, such as Disney, Walmart, Gap, and Tommy Hilfiger (Enloe, 2014). The average pay at the time was approximately 37 dollars per month for eleven hours of work per day, six days a week (Enloe, 2014). After the tragedy, international brands attempted to appease ethical consumers concerned about the workers’ safety and rights but continued to pursue the lowest-cost garment manufacturers around the globe. Postcolonialism aids in revealing how colonial influences and dispossession coincide with both direct and indirect discursive productions of Bangladesh. World systems theory can then make relevant the historical economic exploitation experienced by Bangladesh by explaining how it still occurs.

Before the Rana Plaza collapse, newspapers like the New York Times appreciated the growing garment industry in Bangladesh because it created jobs. Spotlights were placed on the families who were grateful to have found work in the factories even though it was well known the wages were meager (Bajaj, 2010). One article published in 2010 by the New York Times admired Bangladesh for becoming more competitive in the global market as industries such as textiles and garments shifted from China to Bangladesh because of the low costs and wages (Bajaj, 2010). It even mentions how because “business has been so good,” companies have had to build larger buildings, stories high, which are “planted with row after row of sewing machines” (Bajaj, 2010, para. 4). This description portrays the growing factories as a sign of advancement in ‘developing’ Bangladesh as compared to the disgusted disbelief which would mark coverage of plants like these after Rana Plaza. Furthermore, the only concern mentioned in these articles regarding Bangladesh is how the government would strengthen infrastructure and other manufacturing issues so as to keep up with global demand and continue being competitive in the global market (Bajaj, 2010). Using discourse that celebrates these factories attempts to reinforce the economic world system.

As the demand for garment exports began to transfer from China to Bangladesh, the conversation continued to revolve mainly around the concept of global competition and not why the shift occurred, which was because of cheap labor. When garment factories moved from China to cheaper countries, China was described as “losing work to countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia” because of the attempt to raise wages (Barboza, 2010). This insinuates that countries with the cheapest labor and, thus, the most competitive are the winners. Since China decided to raise factory workers’ wages, they were at fault for losing partnerships with large brands that did not want to pay more for the products. This rhetoric praises Bangladesh for increasing its industries and generating more exports, even though it comes at the cost of low wages and the mistreatment of the laborers. Additionally, it confirms that, in order to compete in the current world system, nations must produce as cheaply as possible at the cost of their people.

A report, which did recognize China’s loss, did so from the perspective of the exporters and factory owners, seeming to defend the decision not to raise wages because “profit margins are already razor-thin, and raising prices could hurt business” (Barboza, 2010, para. 23). It then continues to tout how economists believe that wage increases like those in China in 2010, despite still being very low, would be felt throughout the global economy and thus would result in “driving up the prices of goods,” very much making the wage increase seem like a net negative for the world (Barboza, 2010, para. 2). Postcolonial analysis identifies how the low wages in Bangladesh are justified due to it being a ‘developing’ country. This helps hide what world systems theory identifies: how this competitive market is

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really an affirmation of Bangladesh as a periphery state that continues to export cheap labor and materials for little return.

Discourse After the Rana Plaza Collapse

After the collapse of the Rana Plaza, news coverage shifted the narrative from fruitful global competition to moral high grounds and national deficiencies. It seemed that both global news coverage and academic examinations implied that the collapse was due to systemic ineptitude and a lack of national accountability and functionality in Bangladesh. This narrative painted the Rana Plaza incident as an inevitability completely due to the primitive and disorganized nature of Bangladesh rather than as a result of both a lack of government oversight and high demand from corporations who required low cost of production.

Several reports on the Rana Plaza collapse focused on the faults of the Bangladesh government and its private sector while softly identifying Western corporations' lack of advocacy for under-protected laborers (Campbell, 2013; Yardley, 2013; The Editorial Board, 2013). In only faulting western companies for demanding unions, they absolve them of any other guilt and ignore their role in global demand at low costs. Even though many corporations and states decried the treatment of the Bangladesh garment workers after the collapse, the lack of confrontation with the global economic system which functions on cheap labor proves that there is a more honest belief beneath the rhetoric which is that "the Western...is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world's resources," and that this opinion is baked into the world system which dispenses of periphery states for the gain of the core (Said, 1978, p. 108). It is only when tragedy strikes that promises of unions, charities, and higher pay come into the conversation.

While the placement of blame on the Bangladesh government's lack of accountability and protection may be justified, there was a distinct lack of discussion of the role international corporations played or the demand they created. This is evidenced by CNN which wrote that "Bangladeshis will have to acknowledge the rude reality that it wasn't just a cracked building; the deaths were as much a result of a cracked system" (Ahmed and Lakhani, 2013a, para. 28). Even articles which seemed to be the most critical of the western corporations, which outsource to Bangladesh, did so without critiquing the neoliberal economic system. In "Another Preventable Tragedy in Bangladesh," the New York Times editorial board (2013) described how the collapse could have been prevented with strong unions and that corporations like Walmart and the Gap should advocate for this. Other articles mention the necessity of low wages to attract companies and that factories should simply raise wages and implement unions (Manik and Yardley, 2013). Unions, benefits, and wages are exactly why corporations fled China and entered Bangladesh. The peripheral states are popular for production because of the cheap labor. To say that unions would have prevented the collapse is a gross oversight of the very system which demanded and rewarded cheap labor. These articles illustrate an attempt to naturalize this world system so as to force responsibility on nations outside the core.

Even in academic sources, the Rana Plaza collapse is described as an "accident," which "conveyed an unfortunate message that garment workers have compromised their well-being by working in adverse working conditions" (Rahman, 2014, p. 130). This representation portrays both Bangladesh and the factory workers as irresponsible, careless, and ignorant, reinforcing a colonial stereotype of a less civilized society that foolishly chooses to be taken advantage of because it does not know better. Additionally, in framing the collapse as a result of a purposeful choice by the garment workers, Rahman places all liability on the country and the people. Again, this ignores the world system which created and continues to demand cheap labor through neoliberal policy decisions, as the World Trade Organization's removal of the Multi Fibre Agreement in 2005, praised at the time of the decision, which made it much easier for corporations to find, demand and use low-cost contractors in countries like Bangladesh (Enloe, 2014). The owners of the garment factories were pushing to produce such a large amount as quickly as possible to fulfill and maintain their contracts with mainly European and North American companies (Enloe, 2014). This tension between the narrative of a 'developing,' corrupt and ineffective Bangladesh and the economic exploitive world system which created and desired the devaluation of labor in poor countries is further evidenced by an article from CNN.

A month after the collapse, CNN released an article titled "Inside a Bangladesh garment factory that plays by the rules." It begins by asking the reader to disregard what they think they may know about factories in Bangladesh which are filled with "grimy, sweaty, children sitting in dimly lit, sweltering rooms sewing shirts" (Ahmed and Lakhani,

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2013b, para. 2). A comparison is created between a medium sized factory which has long breaks, daycare, medicine, and maternity leave and “the problem children,” which are “the many, many factories that have mushroomed in and around Dhaka,” (Ahmed and Lakhani, 2013b, para. 14). Firstly, this article blatantly infantilizes Bangladesh by comparing certain populations to unruly children in an incredibly paternalistic way. Secondly, this article implies that to play by “the rules,” factories should have high wages and full benefits for their employees despite previous praise given to Bangladesh before the collapse for doing the exact opposite in order to compete in the global market. CNN implies that the rules include full benefits and better pay for laborers. Still, the reality is that the rules are created by a worldwide system of capital that requires and praises the production of cheap and abundant exports. It was this world system that contributed to the Rana Plaza collapse. The discursive narrative that the collapse was wholly the result of government ineptitude and underdevelopment was politically motivated and attempts to keep natural this world system which exhausts poor and often formerly colonized states.

The postcolonial theory reveals how western discourse often portrays colonizer and colonized states in terms of opposing binaries wherein colonizers are depicted as civilized, progressive, and developed, and the previously colonized are presented as the opposite or uncivilized, primitive and undeveloped (Gandhi, 1998). The Rana Plaza collapse further evidences this in the way western media rendered the collapse a product of government ineptitude and underdevelopment instead of a product of a global economic system that demands low-cost production to compete. World systems theory furthers this analysis by exposing how richer countries and large corporations desire the lowest-cost production despite that, meaning low wages, poor benefits, and possible mistreatment. Only after events like Rana Plaza are there both pleas or sympathetic statements regarding the treatment of workers as well as a reproach of ‘developing’ countries that compete in the same system that richer countries control and benefit from.

Conclusions

Using both postcolonialism and world systems theory to understand the causes, motivations, and actors in the Rana Plaza collapse allows for a more nuanced and informed understanding of the phenomenon. World systems theory makes postcolonial analysis all the more relevant in the 21st century by showcasing how the resource extraction by core states has not ceased but rather continues today with the exploitation of periphery states like Bangladesh. Postcolonialism then can best illuminate how discourse from core states and western companies has attempted to naturalize this economic system by blaming Bangladesh for allowing low-wage jobs, thereby insinuating that Bangladesh is not ‘developing’ or competing in the right way. Not only can analyzing colonial history explain the current system of low-wage labor from developing countries such as Bangladesh, but it can also reveal the discursive ways in which western powers, such as the U.S. in this case, use rhetoric to tell the narrative and sustain existing colonial identities. Additionally, this tandem team of postcolonialism and world systems theory may be further applied to other cases like the Rana Plaza collapse, such as the Bhopal Disaster in India in 1984, the textile factory fire in Pakistan in 2012, and the Wing Star Shoe Plant collapse in Cambodia 2013. In all these instances, a connection can be made from their colonial past to their discursive identities and existing industrial sectors. In all these situations, postcolonialism, when applied to world systems theory, can help uncover how both the unequal and hierarchical global systems and discursive constitutions of national identities have been implemented in order to maintain the global hierarchy during incidents that may challenge it.

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