

Decolonizing International Relations

Written by Sankaran Krishna

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SANKARAN KRISHNA, OCT 8 2012

To decolonize a narrative is, at minimum, to expose the role colonialism had in its construction and through that awareness enhance its future development in ways that are non-colonized. Most modern disciplines have disciplinary practices, objects of study, and interpretations that are inseparable from colonialism. For example, in Anthropology, distinctions between 'primitive' and 'advanced' societies, and the prerogative of the latter to understand and describe the former scientifically and truthfully went unquestioned in the heyday of colonialism.

Yet, after two world wars, the rising tide of anti-colonial nationalism across three continents (Asia, Africa and Latin America), and the growing refusal of those who were the objects of its inquiry to recognize themselves in its descriptions, a decolonized Anthropology could no longer be delayed, even as significant numbers of scholars resisted such an effort. One could chart a similar trajectory – with varying degree of success- in disciplines such as History, Sociology, Political Science, Economics and others as the 20th century unfolded. The realization that power and knowledge were inextricably intertwined, and that 'western' descriptions of the non-west were never innocent of their own political, economic and other interests in those spaces, gradually worked their way towards a still incomplete and ongoing process of decolonization of these disciplines.

For a variety of reasons, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has been extraordinarily resistant to a decolonizing impulse. Firstly, IR emerged within the United States, a society that is ferociously amnesiac about its own (domestic) history as a settler-colony and an (external) history as a colonizer in Latin America, the Pacific Islands, the Far East, etc. The US has instead emphasized its post-colonial status in that it broke away from Britain in the late 18th century and (intermittently) supported the decolonization efforts of third world countries seeking independence from England, France or Japan. This assiduous forgetting of the genocide (of Native Americans) and slavery (of Africans exported to the New World) central to the founding of the United States has carried over into the quintessentially American discipline of IR which often talks of the relations between nations as if they were ahistorical entities which suddenly emerged – all identical and sovereign- sometime in the middle of the 20th century.

Second, emerging as it did in the interregnum between two horrific world wars, IR has always focused on explaining the conditions that lead to war and ways to prevent it. This has produced an obsession with issues of national security, and especially of the need to avoid 'irresponsible' policy or idealism that could lower one's guard and create the conditions for war. 'Historical' issues such as colonialism were deemed less relevant and priority accorded to a 'presentism' that continuously focused on threats to national security and opportunities to enhance national interests.

In other words, IR discourse is predominantly a prose of counter-insurgency: it is governed by a methodological nationalism that it is designed at every turn to avert all threats to statist sovereignty. And thirdly, IR has sought to construct itself in the image of a scientific discipline, one that aims to uncover the invariant laws that govern relations between nations. This emphasis on achieving a universal science applicable in all situations has meant that IR has a strong preference for abstract theory at the expense of historical contexts and specificity.

The upshot of this is a discipline that has (a) a reigning taboo against analyses that deploy history, especially of colonial conquest and neocolonial exploitation, to understand contemporary inequalities and actions by those outside the imperium, (b) a fetish for quantitative analyses that compress complex social and political phenomena into eviscerated numbers, (c) reduced socially sentient human beings into selfish rational utility maximizers, (d) valued problem-solving theory (under the guise of policy relevance) over critical or genealogical theory, (e) an inability to

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think or imagine non-national ways of being, and (f) a hyper-masculine tetchiness and insecurity regarding gender, androgyny, queer identity or sexuality. Undergirding all this is the consistent elision of themes such as the five-centuries-long theft of land, racism, slavery, genocide and colonialism that have produced the highly unequal global order of our time.

Decolonizing such a discipline – based as it is on a powerful set of repressions and amnesias regarding its own founding- is no easy task. We could begin by posing a few questions regarding our practice of IR in its mainstream variety: what is the relationship between our techniques of abstraction (the fetish for placeless and context-less theory) and the disappearance of issues of race, genocide and colonialism from our field of study? Must international relations always reduce to *international* relations, that is, relations between sovereign entities called nation-states? Can we not counter IR's statist discourse, the prose of counter-insurgency, with the poetry of non-national ways of being? Why is it that, after we have exercised our taboos against historical-qualitative analyses and for policy relevance and conceptual rigor, we find ourselves in a discipline obsessed with combating terrorism, securing sovereignty, sealing borders, maximizing utility, and winning the games that nations ostensibly play? How do these obsessions, written from a locus of enunciation that is white, western and privileged, sound to someone who is dark, non-western and underprivileged?

Posing such questions is an important and critical step towards decolonizing the discipline. Just as important however is to go beyond critique and simply “do decolonial IR.” By ‘doing’ decolonial IR, I mean, at minimum, the following:

(a) emplacing every contemporary context and issue in the field of international relations in a genealogical context that asks how did this current state of affairs come to be. This involves examining the intertwined histories that produced this moment in time and space.

(b) Listening to the voices, stories, narratives, social sciences and other literatures of people from outside the mainstream and regarding them at least as equals in their capacity to understand and change our worlds.

(c) Teaching International Relations in ways that do not revere a canon but rather open up that canon for contestation and deconstruction, and to ask questions such as “Are canons universal or are they understandings of complex worlds from a particular standpoint that make a political claim to such an omniscient status?”

(d) Choosing topics to research and work that are truly global in their purview, that do not just assume that national belonging is the only way to be.

And (e) recognizing that the world becomes legible to us through a variety of modes of understanding – there is nothing to suggest that a quantitative or putatively logically rigorous mode of apperception is superior to those embedded in different idioms and using different sensibilities.

Ultimately, decolonizing IR is the responsibility of all who inhabit this discipline. It is not the special provenance of those from specific continents, or races, or genders or orientations or whatever. A colonized IR demeans and diminishes all of us; decolonizing the discipline is an ongoing and never-to-be-completed critical questioning of our everyday practices and logics of interpretation.

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