Review - Postcolonial Theory and International Relations

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Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: a Critical Introduction
By: Sanjay Seth (Ed.)
London: Routledge, 2012

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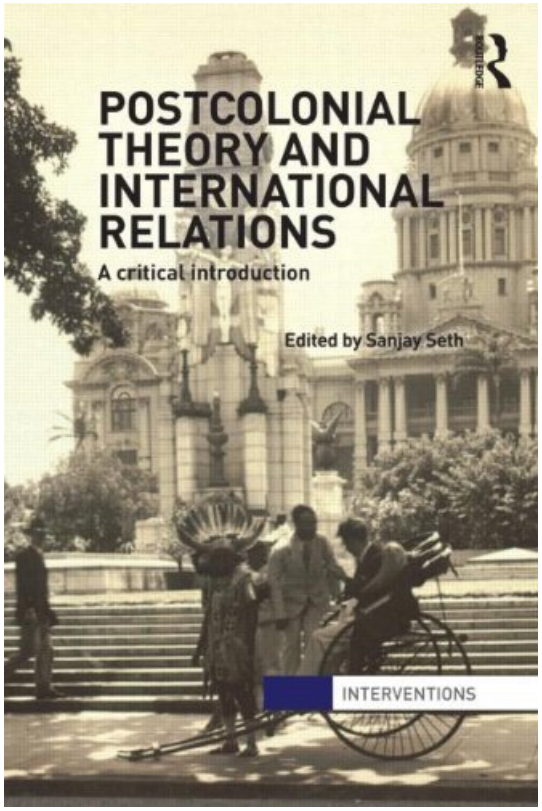

n engagement between Postcolonial Theory and International Relations and Politics has been a long time coming. It is safe to say that these are the very last fields in the Social Sciences to have been infiltrated by postcolonial perspectives. The lateness of its arrival in IR is curious. IR emerges in the post-war presumably 'anti-imperial' order in which European empires were unraveling to leave an international community of states. Understood in that way, IR should have little use for a body of scholarship that emphasizes the role that epistemological framing and knowledge construction play in the maintenance and pursuit of 19th century European imperial power; a body of scholarship that theorizes more than the military, economic or corporeal power of colonization but instead foregrounds its cultural and subjectivizing nature; and a body of scholarship that when it erupts in the late 1970s for

the first time puts the study of European empires — as a multifarious project beyond only material and geopolitical considerations — on the map of the social sciences by pointing out the myriad of ways in which the Social Sciences has been silent on the fact of empire. On the other hand, for a discipline that takes as its referent object the nature of the power in the international, the elision of 'empire' is curious, particularly since it is a political form that not only dominates the international historically, but as the scholars in Seth's edited volume rightly point out is constitutive of the international. From that perspective, the arrival of postcolonial theory, even if on the critical fringes of International Relations, is long overdue.

The scholars that appear in this volume are not the only scholars to have pursued postcolonial perspectives in international relations, Philip Darby (Darby, 2004) and Geeta Chowdhry (Chowdhry and Nair, 2002) have been voices in the wilderness, but this volume charts a course for what a continued and sustained engagement between postcolonial theory and International Relations might look like. Alongside recent critiques that postcolonial theory has entered a de-politicized humanities cul de sac there has emerged several calls for the politicization of postcolonial theory (Gopal and Lazarus, 2006, Darby, 2010). The aim of this volume is to carve out a space for postcolonial theory within International Relations and to invite its critique of the categories of modern social scientific thought into that disciplinary space. The implications of this aim move beyond the essays in this volume, I argue, and invite a conversation about the politicization of postcolonial perspectives.

The collection of essays covers a diverse range of areas in International Relations and Political Theory, from a critique of the conventional account of the historical formation of the international from Westphalia, to the failure of IPE to consider colonialism, slavery, and race; critiques of historicism and the philosophy of history that animates western political thought and imaginaries; the conventional preoccupations of IR in war and security; the implications of post-colonial literary criticism for IR assumptions about the state; and the role of Bandung conference (1955) in memorializing the international and an account of state humanitarian assistance that confounds conventional IR assumptions about state behavior.

The contributions to this volume don't all make completely novel offerings to the voluminous body of work that comprises postcolonial scholarship and iterations of some of the critiques made here have also appeared in dependency, world systems, post-development and neo/post-Marxist scholarship. They nevertheless make important contributions that have implications for the politicizing of postcolonial theory and can advance the conversation substantially. The book is framed overall by the way that IR conceptualizes the international in the same old Eurocentric and modernist model found in sociology, development studies and classical Marxism and IPE that the state, modernity and capitalism have their origins in Europe and spread outward, transforming the world in its image. Critiques of this historical model have been made repeatedly, but it is crucial first step in the politicization of postcolonial perspectives to emphasize that this assumption pertains in one of the newest disciplines in the social sciences and that, despite perpetual critique, it has not been unseated. There must be a recognition that the modes of power/knowledge that postcolonial theory so effectively identified in 19th century European empires and the emerging disciplines of the social sciences, *continue* to animate and are deeply embedded in areas of scholarship, like IR and Development studies, that have the ear of policy makers. The implication is that the power/knowledge nexus identified by post-colonial theory remains operational and intact.

Many of the essays in this volume take up the critique of the historicist model of history which has been a mainstay of postcolonial approaches (Young, 1990, McClintock, 1992). Branwen Gruffydd Jones poses the central question of elision that preoccupies post-colonial perspectives by asking why classical IPE does not address slavery and racism as central to the development of industry and capitalism in Europe. Her response to this question centres on the role that IPE reserved for the state in the system, occluding international linkages and the fact that the state, as a unit of analysis has also attached to it a particular philosophy of history that sees it as the culmination of modernity, democracy and an antidote to empire. The occlusion of the system of states from state behavior has already been made by Immanuel Wallerstein and World Systems/Dependencias (Wallerstein, 1974), the presumption that the state is somehow the moral embodiment of historical progress has also been identified by Eric Williams and CLR James (among others) (Grimshaw, 1992, Williams, 1964, Appleby et al., 1994). But embedded in the call that we "rethink the fundamental assumptions of political economy, root and branch" (p.5) is the implication that we must problematise the distinction between empire and state and overturn the inheritance of Enlightenment thinking that

says that the state is the antithesis of empire. Rethinking both IR and IPE root and branch would necessitate not only a different philosophy of history for which Jones rightfully calls, but also, from this reader's perspective, a contribution to a more general political theory of empire and staking a claim on the American empire debate.

To this end, a politically minded postcolonial incursion in International Relations would, of necessity, situate the discipline itself within the context of post-war American ascendance and would aim, if not for the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries, it would, at the very least point to the necessity of post-disciplinary empire studies. If the disciplines and their division of labour are in part responsible for the occlusions that keep scholars from making the connections that see Europe as inseparable from the international; if, as post-colonial perspectives have shown, the study of empires requires multiple disciplinary perspectives because empires impact the entire social order of both metropole and periphery; and if the US is, as many scholars now contend, a new empire or a continuation of empire (Harvey, 2003, Steinmetz, 2005, Layne and Thayer, 2007), than the most hard-hitting contribution post-colonial perspectives can make would be to theorize empire(s) as a contemporary political and social form. An endeavor now being called for within International Relations in response to the disciplinary elisions on the question of empire that studies like Jones cites (Cox, 2001).

The contribution by Helliwell and Hindess carry on this critique of the historicist philosophy of history by showing how it continues to work in the international to justify 'collateral damage' by placing less value on the lives of those on the receiving end of Western military intervention. Here again, the existence of historicism is shown to be alive and well and politically operative. Helliwell and Hindess show that the historicist philosophy of history combines also with assumptions about subjectivity, where citizens of developed Western states are presumed sovereign and individuated, where citizens in countries perceived to be somewhere in the West's developmental past are presumed to be unindividuated 'swarms' of the pre-modern and pre-political, and that it is these combined assumptions that provide the legitimating logic for the devaluation of life in the regions being targeted by Western 'nation building'. Crucial again, for politicizing post-colonial perspectives, is the fact that the very same assumptions that animated colonization continue to animate US foreign policy and multi-lateral development initiatives.

The contribution by Tarak Barkawi continues the theme of militarization and war by arguing while security is an object of study in the social sciences, war itself remains an aporia. Barkawi's contribution is relevant for post-colonial perspectives that have been critiqued for occluding violence in favour of issues of culture, discursivity and identity (Parry, 1994). There are nevertheless two linked possibilities that remain unexamined in Barkawi's contribution. The first is the role that war and violence play in colonization as pacification of populations, and that this war need not be a combat in arms but often manifests in genocidal practices designed to destroy a society's capacity to reproduce itself. And the second, is the relationship between war and empire in a more general way. Barkawi goes out of his way to illustrate that other societies and cultures have exhibited the discipline necessary for bureaucratized warfare, but in specifying that war is constitutive of the social order, he fails to make concrete the ways that war is constitutive of empire (ancient of modern, Western or 'non-Western') as a social order and political form.

Many other worthy contributions appear in this volume, but Robbie Shilliam's piece is noteworthy for confounding the dual presumptions in IR about self-interested state behavior or the democratic peace by reading the example of Guyana's donations to Haiti during the 2010 earthquake through the analysis of the gift in Anthropology's ethnographic and colonial heritage, which is then problematised through an examination of the gift in Maori cosmologies. Shilliam's essay is a critique of Western epistemologies attempt to found its understanding of the spiritual by making it profane and presuming that secular knowledge is superior knowledge. Shilliam quite deftly challenges these assumptions. What is left unexplored in Shilliam's essay are the theological and spiritual foundations of modern western thought, in particular the eschatological assumptions embedded in the historicist philosophy of history that have a Christian inheritance. Many scholars have commented that the historicism found everywhere from Marx to Weber is a simple secularization of Christian eschatology that perceives in history the working out of a theological plan leading humanity toward redemption (Collingwood, 1946, Young, 1990, Gray, 2007). If we then assume that all knowledge production, even the presumably secular and rational western, is also a cosmology, we challenge the instrumentality of western social sciences and the desire to place its world view above others and potentially, by provincializing the western christian based cosmologies that inform the social sciences as one among many, open up the terrain for a truly transformative conversations about how we live in the world.

In sum, this collection of essays is neither the first foray of postcolonial perspectives into International Relations, nor are its critiques novel for the postcolonial idiom. It is, nevertheless, an excellent point of departure for the continued politicization of postcolonial theory and if the book is wanting in any way, it is not because of the scholarly value of its contributions, but it is rather in its framing, which from this reader's perspective, needed to stress more the perseverance of patterns of thought in the disciplines of politics that resemble so much their colonial forebears and to entertain the possibility that if colonial patterns of thought persist, than possibly, so does empire. The next step in postcolonial international relations is a sustained and critical engagement with the American empire debate.

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