

Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought

Written by Evan Ritli

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EVAN RITLI, MAY 2 2013

Reflecting on Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought in the Study of World Affairs

The academic study of world affairs has traditionally been left to experts of the Euro-American discipline of International Relations. Although claiming to provide a truly global account, these experts have framed, explained and critiqued world affairs almost exclusively from within the cultural framework of modernism. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion surrounding two questions of significant importance which arise from this fact: what limitations are placed on the study of world affairs by the strict adherence to modernism that is the norm within International Relations, and how can these limitations be overcome?

While all 'post-modern' discourses in some way seek to address these questions, the growing discourse of postcolonialism is arguably the most suited to this task as it is directly concerned with the ontologies and epistemologies of those that lie outside the 'modern' world. Though not traditionally applied to world affairs, postcolonialism has allowed non-modern accounts of International Relations to be developed and taken seriously. Thus, to address the questions outlined above this paper will examine the contribution and significance of postcolonialism to contemporary International Relations.

This paper will begin by providing a brief history of postcolonialism and by positioning postcolonialism in relation to the dominant accounts of world affairs used in contemporary International Relations. It will then examine how and why postcolonial theorists critique mainstream International Relations. Finally, it will analyse the methods postcolonial theorists use to create their own accounts of world affairs and how these accounts differ from the International Relations accounts they critique. It will argue that although postcolonialism is itself a product of modernity, postcolonial discourse highlights the limitations of strict modernist thought by emphasising the diversity of experience and knowledge that exists outside of modernity and by asserting the validity of non-modern ways of knowing and being. By prioritizing these non-modern ways of knowing and being, postcolonial theorists provide International Relations with a framework for including a diverse range of perspectives, experiences and ideas in its analyses of world affairs. This framework can, and should, be used to overcome the limits placed on the study of world affairs by International Relations' disciplinary adherence to modernism.

Providing a thorough history of the development of postcolonialism is well beyond the scope of this paper, however a knowledge of the pivotal moments in postcolonialism's development is useful for understanding postcolonialism's contribution to the study of world affairs. Postcolonialism first developed as an analytical language used in the study of literature. As Phillip Darby explains,

"in this first phase, the discourse was essentially a comparative study of Commonwealth literature which then broadened out to consider Third World literature as a whole." [1]

From this point postcolonialism was significantly developed by Edward Said's ground breaking text 'Orientalism' [2] which

Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought

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“brought together the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci to challenge the authority of Western knowledge.”[3]

The study of colonial discourse developed by Said later combined with the work of a group of social historians in India known as the ‘Subaltern Group’ in their attempts to write a social history of India from the perspective of India’s most marginalized. In this way

“the study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said’s... blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for.”[4]

The discourse developed by the Subaltern Group and other postcolonial theorists finally began to be applied to the study of world affairs in the 1990s as a way of filling the large gaps in International Relations theory that had been made glaringly obvious by the end of the Cold War.[5]

It is important to note that although postcolonialism is often discussed as if it is a single, unified theory, this is simply not the case. As Robert Young highlights, “at one level there is no single entity called ‘postcolonial theory’.”[6] Postcolonialism is unlike most contemporary accounts of world affairs in that it is neither derived from the work of a single philosopher nor subscribes to an overarching contention. In this sense it is closer to feminism or socialism rather than Marxism or neo-liberalism. Rather than providing a social scientific theory aimed at predicting behaviour or an outcome, postcolonialism is about

“the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures.”[7]

Postcolonialism should be thought of as comprising a “set of perspectives, which are juxtaposed against one another, on occasion contradictorily.”[8] The diversity of perspectives and ideas covered by ‘postcolonial theory’ has even led some postcolonial theorists to critique the use of the term ‘postcolonial’. After all, as Anne McClintock asks,

“can most of the world’s countries be said, in any meaningful or theoretically rigorous sense, to share a single ‘common past’, or a single ‘common condition’, called the ‘post-colonial condition’, or ‘post-coloniality?’”[9]

Although the diversity of ideas, experiences and arguments expressed by postcolonialists may present a challenge to understanding exactly how ‘postcolonial theory’ can be applied to International Relations, it is also the strength of the postcolonial tradition. This point can be made clearer by comparing and contrasting postcolonialism with mainstream International Relations theories. As has already been suggested, the discipline of International Relations is firmly rooted in modernism. This is not to say that its main theories and traditions are all the same; indeed they differ greatly in terms of their assumptions regarding human nature and their views on human nurturing practices. Rather, this is to suggest that they all share in common their basis in the cultural context of modernism.[10] This cultural context is characterized by its prioritization of contemporary rationalism and “the use of reason as an end in itself *en masse*.”[11] Furthermore, modernism’s prioritization of reason entails a rationalist epistemology and, with it, an objectifying ontology.[12] As modernism has become the hegemonic cultural context in the world today, these ways of knowing and being have become dominant over others, evidenced by the fact that all mainstream accounts of world affairs subscribe to and further articulate modernist thought.

The consequence of this has been that the contributions of those who are perceived as not subscribing to modernist norms have been, and continue to be, marginalized and peripheralized. Significantly, since modernism is historically a Western, or ‘Euro-American’ cultural context, it has been the views of those who are non-Western that have been marginalized. It is from this point that postcolonial tradition becomes of utmost importance to International Relations. In stark contrast to the dominant accounts of world affairs provided by International Relations theories, postcolonialism lies outside of the modernist project. Therefore unlike the accounts of realism, internationalism, Marxism, liberalism and the like, postcolonialism is not characterized by contemporary rationalism and does not necessarily subscribe to modernist epistemologies and ontologies. Rather, postcolonialism asserts and prioritizes ontologies and epistemologies that have been overlooked and marginalized by modernism and thus by the discipline

Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought

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of International Relations. It is from their position outside of the modernist project that postcolonialists critique International Relations, and in doing so highlight the limitations placed on International Relations by its adherence to modernism.

Since International Relations is in the most part modernist, and modernism “excludes any form of understanding deemed non-rationalistic”,^[13] postcolonial theorists argue that International Relations too often excludes the actions, contributions and experiences of the ‘Third World’. Postcolonial theorists argue that this is a significant weakness in the study of world affairs which in the past has resulted in the discipline failing to predict important events such as the rapid process of decolonization that occurred through the 50s and 60s and the end of the Cold War.^[14] They critique International Relations for being Western-centric and preoccupied with Great Powers despite the fact the vast majority of states in the world today are non-Western and are certainly not Great Powers. Subsequently, postcolonialists argue that as a discipline International Relations needs to move beyond its colonial mindset which is based on the assumption that the world is divided up between Great Powers and that it is the interactions between these Powers that shape world affairs. In short, International Relations scholars needs to acknowledge that the majority of the world is now postcolonial and that most ‘international relationships’ are now between postcolonial states.

Postcolonialism also critiques the analytical frameworks used by International Relations scholars to study world affairs. As discussed above, postcolonialism originated in the study of literature and social history. These areas of study focus on the stories and personal experiences of people, and postcolonialism today retains this focus. When applied to world affairs, postcolonialism is therefore at odds with mainstream International Relations, which focuses on the state rather than people. Postcolonialists argue that it is people, not states, that shape world affairs. Postcolonialism therefore, critiques International Relations by arguing that the discipline’s analytical framework, in particular the concept of the state, is ineffective for analysing world affairs. Postcolonialists argue further, that the state is a product of modernism’s objectifying ontology and is a reified and codified unit that does not adequately represent the diversity of experiences and views that exist outside of modernity. As Sanjay Seth argues, in reality the world is

“far too varied to be coded and represented in the form of nation and state...and cannot be adequately represented through the existing categories of Western thought.”^[15]

Since “postcolonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being”^[16]and sees the use of the state as an analytical unit being detrimental to the fulfilment of this right, postcolonial theorists critique International Relations for its continued focus on the state.

Of course, postcolonialists do not simply just critique International Relations, they also contribute to the discipline by providing their own accounts of world affairs. It is in this way that postcolonialists demonstrate how the limitations of modernism they have highlighted can be overcome in the study of world affairs. That being said, it is impossible to provide a summary of a generic ‘postcolonial account of world affairs’, as one simply does not exist. After all, as has been made clear, postcolonialism is not a single theory, but a diverse collection of ideas and experiences. However a greater understanding of what, in general, a postcolonial account of world affairs may look like may be reached by examining some of the methods utilised by postcolonial theorists in their studies. Although these methods intentionally vary widely, Crossley and Tikly highlight how

“at the most general level... [they] share a common commitment to reconsider the colonial encounter and its continuing impact from the perspective of formerly colonized countries, regions and peoples.”^[17]

Since postcolonialism lies outside of the modernist project it does not always subscribe to the epistemology of rationalism. As a result when analysing world affairs postcolonial theorists often use methods which may be perceived as unconventional or even ‘unacademic’ to traditional International Relations scholars. These methods are used intentionally to ensure that non-modernist, non-Western perspectives, such as those from the peoples of former colonies, can be heard. After all, as Robert Young explains, postcolonialism

Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought

Written by Evan Ritli

“starts from the premise that those in the West, both within and outside the academy, should take such other knowledges, other perspectives, as seriously as those of the West.”[18]

Perhaps the most unique method employed by postcolonial theorists in their accounts of world affairs is the use of stories and fiction. This method developed from postcolonialism's origins in literature studies and has been applied by postcolonial theorists to the study of world affairs. Postcolonialists see the telling of stories, whether it be through literature, song, poetry, or orally, as containing subjective knowledge that is essential for understanding both the impact of world affairs on individuals and the impact of individuals on world affairs. Importantly, it also provides an insight in the day-to-day reality of world affairs that is often overlooked by conventional International Relations accounts. As Christine Sylvester argues, fiction

“can weave stories about producers for international markets, consumers of international products, travellers, migrants, or refugees, employees of embassies or businesses catering to tourists”,

thus providing an insight in to this important, yet overlooked, aspect world affairs.[19] Along with the analysis of stories, postcolonial theorists often conduct interviews and fieldwork with individuals to discover their experiences and perspectives of world affairs. Unlike other International Relations scholars however, postcolonial theorists are not interested in the lives of the world leaders and the elite. Rather postcolonial theorists work with the marginalized and peripheralized, those “that have rarely if ever been considered salient to the discipline [of International Relations].”[20] As with the study of fiction, this method provides an insight in to how world affairs shape the day to day to lives of individuals and how their activities shape world affairs.

Although postcolonialism lies outside the modernist project, and uses methods eschewed by those within the modernist project, it is important to note that postcolonial theorists often use the language of modernism in order to have their voices heard and to engage in debate. This is generally done by expressing postcolonialism through the language of modernist auto-critiques such as postmodernism and poststructuralism. In doing so postcolonial theorists can articulate themselves in discourses that “modernists can engage with, even if they are ones they subsequently dismiss.”[21] These discourses have subsequently gone on to shape postcolonialism as a discourse itself. As Philip Darby argues,

“in postcolonialism's most recent movement, postmodernism has been the dominant influence and it pervades almost all aspects of the discourse.”[22]

It is important to acknowledge that postcolonial theorists may revert to modernist discourses despite their attempts to avoid doing so and may potentially be unaware that this is in fact what they are doing. The relationship between postcolonial researchers, their 'subjects', and modernist discourses has itself been questioned and problematized by postcolonial theorists. This was most famously done by Gayatri Spivak in her ground breaking postcolonial work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. [23] Here Spivak questioned the ability of the most marginalized and peripheralized peoples, the 'subaltern', to speak without what they say being forced into frameworks of knowing and being that are not their own.

Taking into consideration postcolonial critiques of International Relations, the methods used by postcolonial theorists to develop their own accounts of world affairs, and the discourses used by postcolonial theorists to express these accounts, a sense of how, in general, postcolonialism can be used to help overcome the limitations of modernism can be developed. Asserting the importance of the experiences of the non-Western, non-modernist individual, postcolonialism provides accounts of world affairs from the bottom-up, rather than the top-down. It emphasises

“subjectivity, the critique of modernity, the challenge to positivism and the rejection of European universalism, the prising open of the nation-state and the commitment to the marginal.”[24]

Although there may be a common emphasis shared by most postcolonial accounts of world affairs, the diversity of experiences, knowledge, and ideas present in these accounts cannot be stressed enough. After all, it is the validity of this diversity that postcolonial theorists strive to have recognised. The framework that postcolonial theorists have

Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought

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developed to engage with diverse ideas, experiences, ways of knowing and ways of being, is postcolonialism's greatest offering to International Relations.

Since its development as a modern academic discipline, International Relations has been dominated by only a handful of different accounts of world affairs. These dominant accounts have all been firmly rooted in modernity and have consequently marginalized non-modernist accounts of world affairs. As this paper has shown, postcolonialism sits outside of the modernist project and asserts the validity of non-modernist, non-Western ways of knowing and being. Postcolonial theorists critique International Relations by arguing that its dominant frameworks and accounts do not acknowledge the fact that the world is now largely a postcolonial one and subsequently fail to provide an accurate account of world affairs. In order to create their own accounts of world affairs, postcolonial theorists stress the importance of non-modernist knowledge and use methods often eschewed by modernists. As a result, postcolonialism provides a framework for analysis that embraces diversity. This framework highlights the impact world affairs have on the marginalized, peripheralized, postcolonial world and, perhaps more importantly, the impact the postcolonial world has on world affairs.

To many, especially the marginalized, the insights of postcolonialism may seem obvious. Nevertheless, they remain too often either ignored or altogether denied in academia today. If the social sciences and humanities are to provide an accurate analysis of world affairs, they must overcome the limitations placed on them by the cultural hegemony of modernism. In order to do this a concerted effort must be made by students of International Relations, and indeed students of all social sciences and humanities, to engage, as postcolonialists do, with 'non-modern' thought in a serious and meaningful way.

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Postcolonialism and the Reassertion of 'Non-Modern' Thought

Written by Evan Ritli

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About the author:

Evan Ritli is a Juris Doctor student at Monash Law School. He holds a Master of International Relations from the University of Melbourne, and a BA (Hons) in International Studies from RMIT University. His research interests include IR theory, International Law, Human Rights, Colonialism/Postcolonialism, and Religion.