

# Decolonising Structural Realist Understandings of Latin America

Written by John de Bhal

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### What are the Implications and Limitations of Structural Realist Understandings of Latin America?

Although colonial powers no longer physically occupy the lands of the formerly-colonised, colonial ways of thinking still occupy the minds of many. Traditional theoretical approaches to international relations (IR) demonstrate this by systematically excluding some people, times and places from their understandings of the world, despite claiming that their accounts of international politics are objective. To exemplify this, students and scholars alike must ask where the formerly-colonised location commonly known as 'Latin America' is situated in international politics. Using one of the most polemic theoretical paradigms in international relations – structural realism – as my gateway of analysis, I interrogate how Latin America has been pushed to the margins of international relations.

To show the exclusionary tendencies of structural realism, I will forward a postcolonial ethos. Postcolonialism critiques Western and Eurocentric models of international politics, affirming that these models may not be suitable for the people of formerly-colonised nations because they uphold particular Western values that privilege Europe and the West, while marginalising those in the Global South (Grovoqui 2013: 247-248; Salter 2010: 130). Additionally, 'postcolonialism aspires to participate in the creation of "truths", based on distinct modes of signification and forms of knowledge that advance justice' (Grovoqui 2013: 248). While deconstructing structural realism through this postcolonial lens, I will aim to expose the limits of a theory which claims to present its understanding of the world in a manner that is 'neutral' and 'value-free'. As this paper will demonstrate, describing the world objectively is fundamentally impossible in the field of international relations and any sort of grand narratives will inevitably advantage, disadvantage as well as include and exclude (Bleiker 2001: 518; Cox 1981: 128). Thus, I will demonstrate the limits of a theory that has not been able or willing to recognise its own biases and limits. Furthermore, writing as a white, Australian male, I do not claim to write from a colonial position. However, I am a 'Latin Americanist' (Taylor 2012: 387) and from my position of power and privilege I aim to expose the possibilities of emancipation and decolonialism in reference to Latin America.

My main argument is that Latin America is marginalised by structural realism because structural realism's understanding of the world is 'colonial'. By this, I mean that structural realism naturalises, universalises, upholds and reflects particular Western values and experiences, which are by no means suitable for all times, places or people; especially those that reside in Latin America.

I will inevitably simplify and generalise when referring to Latin America. While this means that to some extent I am guilty of doing what I criticise structural realism for, my aim is to open the door to Latin American scholars to emancipate their own people and places as opposed to engage a complex and sophisticated history in such a short paper. Thus, my main goal is to open up the possibilities for emancipation as opposed to emancipate the people and continent of Latin America.

This paper proceeds in three main sections. First of all, I outline the particular understanding of structural realism that I will take as my point of analysis in order to lay the foundations for my inquiry. Secondly, I will contrast structural realism's understanding of the world with the 'critical' approaches I intend to use in order to show the theoretical

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limits and disprove the universal validity that structural realism awards itself. In doing so, I will show that structural realism is just an interpretation of the world and is by no means an objective account of international politics. Additionally, in this section I will also outline the decolonial ethos that I intend to espouse in the following section. Thirdly, I will argue how structural realism holds the 'West' and its experiences and understandings of the world as superior by examining: (1) how structural realism considers Western forms and ways of knowing to be superior to 'other' ways of knowing in reference to the European invention known as the 'state', (2) and how structural realism has little relevance to those in Latin America by engaging with Edward Said's travelling theory.

## Structural Realism

Structural realism is undoubtedly one of the most influential theoretical paradigms in the discipline of international relations (Agathangelou and Ling 2004: 49; Wæver 2013: 320). The theory's custodians are known to be controversial. These scholars are known to examine issues in IR such as the onset of interstate war (see Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1959), the relevance of international organisations and institutions in shaping state behaviour (see Mearsheimer 1994), the balance of power (see Walt 1983, 1985), the use of force (see Walt 1991), uncertainty in international politics (see Jervis 1976; Waltz 1959), as well as nuclear deterrence (Sagan and Waltz 1995). As a result, structural realism is well-known, well established and most importantly, influential, in all facets of the field of international relations.

Structural realism has a number of interpretations. Its custodians have been known to disagree with each other as well, with the most famous dispute between the offensive structural realists and the defensive structural realists who disagree about how much power states should pursue (Mearsheimer 2012: 83-84). This aside, I will use a particular understanding of structural realism that ignores this distinction. The interpretation of structural realism used in this paper is borrowed from one of the paradigm's most influential, controversial and well-known authors: John Mearsheimer. Although Mearsheimer (2001: 29, 2013: 81-82) is a self-confessed offensive structural realist, the particular understanding of his theory that I use will omit the offensive-defensive divide. Furthermore, I use Mearsheimer as my exemplar because Mearsheimer is one of the most emblematic, celebrated and outspoken structural realists having written numerous textbook chapters as well as having a long list of published journal articles (Mearsheimer 2012; Wæver 2012: 320). As a result, it is likely that any student or scholar in international politics has come across Mearsheimer's work within the structural realist tradition. Furthermore, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer 2001) is the most recent emblematic text dedicated to a structural realist theory of international politics. Not only does Mearsheimer have the ability to affect the more 'scholarly' and academic international relations scholars, but also those outside the discipline. Mearsheimer has published his work on numerous websites and in newspapers as well (University of Chicago 2014). Even in these forums, Mearsheimer displays a clear structural realist disposition. Thus, Mearsheimer has the potential to shape and guide not only how scholars of international relations engage with the field, but also how those outside the discipline think about world politics.

The structural realist understanding of the world that I interrogate is borrowed from five assumptions about the nature of international politics. As Mearsheimer purports, 'sound theories are based on sound assumptions' (2001: 30). Furthermore, Mearsheimer also informs his reader that 'explanatory power is the ultimate criterion for assessing theories' (2001: 30), although as I reveal in the following section, this is by no means an objective or legitimate assertion (Enloe 1996: 188). Structural realism relies on the following five assumptions about the nature of international politics:

1. Great powers are the main actors in an international system that is 'anarchic', meaning that there is no higher authority above states.
2. All states possess some sort of military capability.
3. States can never be sure of the intentions of other states. This can often be referred to as the security dilemma, as defensive military build-ups can be perceived as offensive.
4. The principal goal of states is survival.

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5. States are unitary rational actors; their internal make-up is irrelevant. Although they are rational, they often miscalculate and make mistakes.

(Mearsheimer 2001: 30-31, 2013: 79)

Mearsheimer also affirms that 'each of these five assumptions is a reasonably accurate representation of an important aspect of life in the international system' (2001: 30). But despite these assumptions being 'realistic' or 'reasonably accurate' there are some tensions within this depiction of international politics. In fact, these tensions lay the foundations of my analysis.

First of all, the 'international system' and in turn the 'units' that make up this 'system' have some sort of historical origin. The state is of particular importance because it is mentioned in all five of Mearsheimer's assumptions about the international system. But the state is a Western way of coming to terms with the world: it has its origins in Europe and was exported to the continent of Latin America (Taylor 2012: 387). Although the international relations discipline may depict this to be the case, the state is by no means a 'natural' or objective way of looking at world politics (Ashley 1981: 238; Taylor 2012: 387). Still, Mearsheimer never recognises the Western origins of the state and instead assumes it is a 'given'.

Secondly, why have structural realists not engaged more directly with Latin American politics and states? Mearsheimer asserts that 'all states are influenced by this logic' (2001: 35) – the logic which he sets out within his five assumptions about the nature of world politics. But it also shows that when one 'travels' with structural realism – away from European great powers and the US, structural realism loses some of its explanatory power. Drawing off Said's 'travelling theory', I will examine why structural realism does so and in the process expose its unconfessed Eurocentric tendencies. Most importantly, Latin America's voice has been taken away. Although Mearsheimer never seriously engages practices of colonial-imperialism or colonialism per se, his theory only does so in reference to 'Great Power Politics'. As a result, Latin America and its deeply complex history is silenced. Not only is this the case, but colonial practices are also legitimised by Mearsheimer's theory because practices of coloniality and imperialism are justified within the narratives of 'great power politics'. In this sense, Latin America is just a commodity in a world dominated by great powers. But why is this the case when even structural realism claims to be an 'accurate representation' (Mearsheimer 2001: 30) of international politics?

These tensions lay the foundation of my analysis in the third section of this paper. They are of such importance because of structural realism's belief that it is an accurate depiction of how international politics functions for all times and for all places. But any self-professedly objective, grand, universal explanation is fundamentally impossible in international relations, simply because the world is too complex to encompass in five concise assumptions (Bleiker 2001: 510). However, not only can theories describe and explain the world, sometimes they construct the reality they appear to describe (Said 1978: 94).

## Critical Theories, Problem-Solving Theory, and Anti-Colonialism

Despite structural realism's claims that its knowledge is neutral and objective, this is simply impossible in a field like international politics. To start, aiming to be 'value-free' is a value in itself. Secondly, any theoretical approach or any sort of understanding of history is simply an interpretation of the world (Bleiker 2009: 18). Due to the interpretive nature of theories, inevitably theory will always privilege some and disadvantage others regardless of how 'objective' the researcher hopes to be (Cox 1981: 128). This is because international politics is so complex that a theory can only explain and/or describe a small amount of what actually occurs (Bleiker 2001: 521). What is often termed 'critical' theory exposes this.

Robert Cox (1981: 128-129) has famously articulated that there are two types of theories in international politics: problem-solving theory and critical theory. The former understands 'the world as a set of ready-made facts awaiting discovery through the application of scientific methodology, with the perception of these 'facts' being quite independent of the social framework in which perception takes place' (Hoffman 1987: 233). As David Campbell puts it, problem-solving theories are of the belief that 'the world comprises [of] objects; the existence of which is

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independent of ideas or beliefs about them' (1992: 4). Structural realism falls into the category of problem-solving theory. By contrast, critical theory is explicitly normative and calls into question traditional ways of describing the world as it does not see this world as inevitable or unchangeable, instead concerning itself with the possibilities of change and the realisation of a better and more just world (Cox 1981: 129; Hoffman 1987: 233). This distinction is key to my argument.

By using the critical theory known as 'postcolonialism', I aim to expose the colonial and Eurocentric tendencies of structural realism. To reiterate what I outlined postcolonialism to be earlier in this paper, postcolonialism is a critique of Western and Eurocentric models of international politics, affirming that these models may not be suitable for the people of formerly-colonised nations because they reflect particular Western values and experiences that privilege Europe and the West, while marginalising those in the Global South (Grosvogui 2013: 247-248; Salter 2010: 130). Additionally, 'postcolonialism aspires to participate in the creation of "truths", based on distinct modes of signification and forms of knowledge that advance justice' (Grosvogui 2013: 248).

With this postcolonial attitude in mind, I will show how particular dominant understandings and discourses often do not describe 'givens', but construct a world in which some are made silent and invisible (Said 1978: 94). By claiming that knowledge is neutral and scientific, these understandings of the world are further legitimised as 'correct'. I aim to highlight how structural realism constructs Latin America in a manner that is marginalising, and dispel the grand narrative that structural realism claims to be.

## Structural Realism's Fixation with the 'West'

Structural realism, without even acknowledging it, takes the West and Western ways of knowing as legitimate and superior to 'the other' and 'other' ways of knowing. In doing so it engages in coloniality. Coloniality and colonialism are not synonymous. As Castro-Gomez and Martin outline, '*colonialism* refers to a historical period... [whereas] *coloniality* references a technology of power that persists today, founded on the "knowledge of the other"' (2002: 276). In this respect, coloniality is a process of maintaining the West and its ways of knowing as superior and marginalising the 'other' (Castro-Gomez and Martin 2002: 276; Spivak 1988: 66). Structural realism engages in coloniality through the use of a largely Western and European interpretation of history and Western ways of knowing and interpreting the world. In the process there is little acknowledgement of where these processes, institutions or interpretations originated. In short, structural realism is uncritical of the foundations on which it is operating. Through my deconstruction of structural realism, I examine: firstly, the Western understanding of international politics that structural realism holds; and secondly, how structural realism is not a good 'traveller' – that its validity and explanatory power weakens the further one applies it from the West. Due to the complexity and sophistication of structural realism and Mearsheimer's understanding of the theory, simplifications will inevitably be made although I do not endeavour to misrepresent or do injustice to this intricate theory.

## *The 'European' State and the Hierarchy-Producing Anarchic International System*

'We' have been led to believe that the key 'players' in the game of international relations are states (Agathangelou and Ling 2004: 49; Ashley 1988: 227; Ashley and Walker 1990: 261). We are led to believe that these states operate in a system that is anarchical (Ashley 1988: 227; Mearsheimer 2001: 30). Even the version of structural realism I am using affirms this: all five assumptions demonstrate that the only important players in international politics are states. This is the power of structural realism and other traditional theories of international relations: they construct the field and define common sense, as well as what is acceptable and 'normal' in international relations theorising (Ashley and Walker 1990: 261; Bleiker 2001: 516; Taylor 2012: 387). This is vital because dominant forms of knowledge and common sense inform political outcomes and actions (Smith 1996: 13). Theories like realism and liberalism, in both their classical and neo-forms, some types of constructivism, and English School interpretations of world politics all take states as their ontologically primitive units (Taylor 2012: 387). This does not have to be the case. Theoretical approaches to international relations can theorise from the margins of IR and conceive the world and the international 'as if people mattered' (Ashley and Walker 1990: 261; Taylor 2012: 390). But conceiving of international politics in terms of states is particularly colonial.

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The state has a particular history and a particular point of inception. Nevertheless, structural realism never recognises that the state came out of a particular social process in a particular region of the world (Taylor 2012: 387). On the contrary, there is an assumption that this is the only way that international politics can be conceived (Ashley and Walker 1990: 261). While there is debate around how and when the state and what is termed by structural realism 'the international system' came into being, there is unanimous agreement that the concept of the state was invented somewhere in Europe (Spruyt 1994; Tilly 1992). Traditionally, and in almost all IR problem-solving theories, this is how scholars have conceived of the world: in terms of states. It seems that this is the common-sense understanding of international politics (Smith 1996: 13).

This is coloniality at work. Traditional IR theories and structural realism have taken this European institution as ontologically superior. This type of knowledge has been so systematically reproduced that often the subjective value of choosing the state as ontologically superior has been accepted as common place (Ashley 1988: 227; Bleiker 2001: 516; Smith 1996: 13). Ashley and Walker have affirmed that this type of reproduction of knowledge 'work[s] to impose and fix ways of knowing and doing that shall be recognised as natural and necessary' (1990: 261). Regardless of how critical they are of structural realism, the aforementioned traditional ways of conceiving of international relations are guilty of this as well; in fact, they perpetuate this type of knowledge. The birth of the state in Europe and the state as a European invention means that structural realism values this European way of accessing the world as far superior than how those in the 'Third World' may know and access the world (Taylor 2012: 388).

In contrast to structural realist depictions of international politics, which claim that 'the world comprises [of] objects; the existence of which is independent of ideas or beliefs about them' (Campbell 1992: 4), Latin American international relations scholarship has been known to theorise 'as if people mattered' (Taylor 2012: 390), and also by fundamentally criticising Western models of understanding the world. This demonstrates that states are by no means a natural, nor the only way to theorise international politics. In this respect, structural realism universalises the very Western concept of the state and applies it to places where it may not be the 'natural' understanding of international politics. This in itself represses both the subaltern and what can be considered Latin American ways of knowing and accessing international politics.

The naturalisation of the state denies the practices of colonialism that brought the concept of the state and the nation-state to Latin America. It does so through the ahistorical and fixed nature of structural realism's five assumptions. In the process it denies the oppressive imperial and colonial practices that brought the state to Latin America. Instead, it assumes the state has always been there. In this respect, the 'other' – the colonial and from my personal understanding, the voices of Latin America – is unable to represent itself; it must be represented (Spivak 1988: 66).

Structural realism does not allow Latin America to speak; instead great powers speak for it. The first assumption of Mearsheimer's theory demonstrates this:

*Great powers* are the main actors in an international system that is 'anarchic', meaning that there is no higher authority above states (Mearsheimer 2001: 30, 2013: 79)

This statement in itself is rather ironic. Anarchy is the opposite of hierarchy, but asserting that *great powers* are the main actors in an anarchical international system in itself creates hierarchy (Enloe 1996: 186). This particular hierarchy is the marginalisation of some, and the privileging of others. In this case, it is the privileging of great powers and the marginalisation of anything or anyone else. Additionally, the historical analysis used by Mearsheimer to validate his theory in Chapters 3 to 9 in his book show that the 'great powers' of the past few centuries are all Western states: whether they be European or North American. This in itself creates hierarchy because the relations, history and culture of states that are not great powers are fundamentally excluded and silenced. Thus, although the concept of anarchy is central to structural realist claims surrounding international politics, anarchy also perpetuates hierarchy through silencing and marginalisation. By placing so much emphasis on the concept of anarchy, a reader can often ignore how hierarchy is produced through this understanding of international politics (Enloe 1996: 187). This seems rather contradictory for a theory that claims to interpret and explain international politics 'as-it-really-is' (Bleiker 2001: 510).

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As mentioned, Mearsheimer uses history to legitimise his theory of international politics. But this historical analysis follows a colonial way of thinking because it maintains the West as the subject. Spivak (1988: 66) in one of the founding postcolonial texts recognises that the maintenance of the West as a subject is one of the most colonial acts possible in scholarship because it reinforces Western ways of thinking as superior over the way that the 'other' thinks and conceives of the world. Mearsheimer's historical analysis does exactly this. The validation of his theory uses five historical examples of great powers in competition to dominate the international system in a quest for hegemony. Almost all the great powers used in Mearsheimer's historical analysis – Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States – all reside in a particular geographic location depending on how one's map is orientated and, as I have referred to it before, it is generally known as the West. Furthermore, a theory that takes almost all of its historical case studies from Western experiences and epochs in which colonialism was ripe and at its peak means that the theory by its very nature is colonial. So when Mearsheimer states that his assumptions depict 'a reasonably accurate representation of an important aspect of life in the international system' (2001: 30), the 'international system' that he refers to is the international system that Western states reside in. However this is never acknowledged. Instead structural realism is universalised and applied to all times and all places by its custodians, but it is rooted in and reflects Western experiences, and ways of knowing; this is by no means suitable for Latin America. This becomes evident when structural realism 'travels' away from its point of inception, its Eurocentric tendencies become far more obvious.

## *Structural Realism – The Bad Traveller*

Structural realism, as the subheading of this section suggests, is a bad traveller. In drawing off the work of postcolonial scholar Edward Said, I aim to demonstrate that structural realism loses its explanatory and analytical validity as it travels – through both time and from its point of inception. In doing so, I hope to further demonstrate structural realism's reflection that Western experiences and understandings of the world are held as superior and universal. Said's theory, known as travelling theory, has received no serious engagement in the field of international relations as it was originally conceived in the field of literary theory (Salter 2010: 134). In short, the theory's purpose is to recognise that what is more important than theory 'is the critical recognition that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, [and/or] predicting all the situations in which it might be useful' (Said 1983: 240). I engage with this theme because I want to show that this North American theory is by no means suitable for Latin America because it upholds and reflects particular Western experiences.

Mearsheimer universalises the logic of structural realism and the aforementioned bedrock five assumptions about the nature of international politics. Mearsheimer articulates that 'all states are influenced by this logic' (2001: 35); the logic of the aforementioned five assumptions about the nature of international politics. But structural realists have never seriously engaged Latin America without references to great power politics. By this I mean that when structural realists do involve Latin America and Latin American states in their analysis, there is a great power involved in their analysis. This perpetuates the belief that the people and states of Latin America are only deemed important in reference to the great power narrative that Mearsheimer constructs (Enloe 1996: 188). Given that there are no great powers that physically occupy any land mass in the location known as Latin America, structural realism loses its explanatory power when it is applied to Latin America without reference to a non-Latin American great power. Thus, as structural realism travels geographically away from its point of inception, its validity is drained (Said 2000: 436). Nevertheless, structural realism's lack of explanatory power should be expected when travelling geographically. All the case studies used by Mearsheimer to validate his theory are rooted in a particular interpretation of history, which revolves only around European and American experiences. It should not be expected that structural realism — which I have shown is highly reflective of Western experiences — has any real resonance in Latin America when a great power is not involved.

Geographic travel is not the only type of travel that humbles structural realism. Time also reduces the theory's analytical potency. Not only is structural realism a theory rooted in a history that is geographically located in Europe, but also a theory that is rooted within a particular epoch. Said has addressed the ability of theories to time travel as well:

The first time a human experience is recorded and then given a theoretical formulation, its force comes from being

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directly connected to and organically provoked by real historical circumstances. Later versions of the theory cannot replicate its original power because the situation has quieted down and changed. (2000: 436)

Thus, not only is structural realism a product of European history, but also a product of only a few moments in history. The theory is largely contingent on these moments for its validity and legitimacy. Although one might argue that the theoretical assumptions espoused by structural realism are potent because they have historical reach from 1812 to 2001, it is important to recognise that Mearsheimer's theory is supported only by five historically contingent moments which are derived from a particular Western account of history and is by no means a comprehensive account of international politics.

Through briefly drawing off Edward Said's travelling theory, I have attempted to demonstrate how structural realism's analytical and explanatory capacities diminish as they travel through time and away from North America and Europe. This is evident because structural realism only acknowledges Latin America and its accompanying political structures in reference to the Western great power narrative that it creates. In this sense, the West and its experiences are given precedence and superiority although these values may not resonate in Latin America.

## Conclusion

I have argued that Latin America is marginalised by structural realism because structural realism's understanding of the world is 'colonial'. By this, I mean that structural realism naturalises, universalises, upholds and reflects particular Western values and experiences, which are by no means suitable for all times, places or people; especially those that reside in a place called Latin America.

My argument has been substantiated in three main sections. First of all, I outlined the particular understanding of structural realism that I took as my point of analysis in order to lay the foundations of my inquiry. Secondly, I contrasted structural realism's understanding of the world with the 'critical' approaches I used in order to show the theoretical limits and disprove the universal validity that structural realism gives itself. In doing so, I established that structural realism is just an interpretation of the world and is by no means universally validating. In this section I also outlined the postcolonial ethos that I espoused in the following section. Thirdly, I argued how structural realism holds the 'West' as well as its experiences and understandings of the world as superior, which I showed through a critique of the Western model of knowing employed by Mearsheimer, and the application of Edward Said's 'travelling theory'. In the process I demonstrated how Latin America is systematically silenced.

My contribution is significant because it opens up the possibilities to emancipate Latin America. Additionally, although realism has often been the site of extreme criticism in international politics, I have aimed to criticise the structural version of this theory in a different light. By exposing the colonial tendencies of this theory I hope to have exposed how structural realism advantages some and disadvantages others despite claiming that its explanation of international politics is realistic and value-neutral. My contribution has by no means revolved around the scathing of structural realism but rather, for structural realism to 'take on a new critical consciousness – towards both itself and other theories' (Mandaville 2003: 121).

While the historical epoch of colonialism is over, processes of coloniality are not. International relations scholars must remember that one thing must still be decolonised: the mind.

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