

Eurocentrism and the Construction of the ‘Non-West’

Written by Zeynep Gülşah Çapan

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The field of International Relations has become increasingly reflective of its Eurocentrism in the last decades (Bilgin 2016, Çapan 2016, Grovogui 2006, Sabaratnam 2013). In addressing the issue of Eurocentrism, the colonial difference continues to be reproduced through the ways in which the category of the non-West gets articulated. The manner in which the category of the ‘non-West’ functions and ‘the classification itself and the matrix within which the classification works’ (Hacking, 1999: 11) forms and transforms the ‘non-Western’ subject position that reproduces Eurocentrism. The way in which the re-articulations of the ‘non-West’ reproduce Eurocentrism will be discussed in three stages. Firstly, Eurocentrism as a system of knowledge and the spatio-temporal hierarchies through which it gets articulated will be discussed. Secondly, how these spatio-temporal hierarchies get rearticulated through the constructions and classifications of the ‘non-West’ will be elaborated upon and thirdly avenues for further interrogations will be pointed out as a way to question these spatio-temporal hierarchies.

Eurocentrism as a System of Knowledge

Eurocentrism is not a geographical question, but an epistemic one. As such, just to bring the history of colonialism and ‘non-Western’ states into IR, though a worthy effort, is insufficient (Amin 1989, Araújo and Maeso 2015). Bringing in ‘non-Western’ perspectives into IR addresses the geographical issue of focusing on European affairs (which resolves the ethnocentrism of IR) but leaves the epistemic issue (the Eurocentrism of IR) untouched. Eurocentrism is not just about writing the history of IR by drawing from examples of European history only, but also about designating, explicitly and implicitly, Europe as the origin and originator of all developments, which are considered to be central to the development of international relations. In this regard, addressing Eurocentrism in IR necessitates questioning the epistemic primacy of Europe (Bilgin 2016a, 2016b, Bhambra 2007; Go 2016). As such, approaching Eurocentrism as a system of knowledge means analysing how Europe is written in as the originator of all developments (democracy, sovereignty, human rights) and how that narrative structures the temporal and spatial hierarchies through which we understand the development of the international.

The way in which Eurocentrism as a system of knowledge gets re-articulated is through the spatio-temporal binaries that situate ‘Europe’ as a space separate from the ‘non-West’ and as temporally ahead within the story of the progressive narrative of the international. Temporally it means, situating Europe as being always ahead and spatially as a separate space. Within this temporal and spatial duality, hierarchies are assigned to the West (rational, modern, developed) and the non-West (spiritual, traditional, underdeveloped). The logic of the progressive narrative of history works to reproduce these spatio-temporal hierarchies by separating ‘Europe’ and analyzing developments (democracy, sovereignty, human rights) as if they occurred in isolation within that space without any connection with other spaces. The second step then becomes to assign a different temporality to the space of ‘Europe’ where not only have the developments (democracy, sovereignty, human rights) happened there in isolation but also happened there first and before everywhere else. Thus, within this narrative that the story of the ‘non-West’ is where the West had been and in time they will move from one side of the binary (for example being traditional) into the other (becoming modern). The constructions of the category of the non-West though aiming to break down the universalizing impulse of these spatio-temporal binaries also end up rearticulating them.

Reproducing Spatio-Temporal Hierarchies

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The construction of the 'non-West' when addressing issues of Eurocentrism continues to reproduce these temporal and spatial hierarchies in two manners. Firstly, the 'non-West' continues to be assigned the characteristics on the other side of the binary whereby it is traditional, spiritual and mystical. Thus, the characterization and binaries that constructed the colonial difference get reproduced. Secondly, the assumption that the 'non-West' is unknowable continues to situate the 'non-West' as outside of 'history' and the narrative of the international whereby developments that constitute our understanding of the international (i.e. sovereignty, human rights etc) continue to be situated as having originated in Europe.

The constructions of the categories of non-West and how it becomes re-articulated as such then not only continues to reproduce the colonial difference but also essentializes difference without bringing into discussion how that difference itself was constructed through the colonial encounter. For example, Uma Narayan discusses the categories of 'Western' and 'non-Western' feminism and argues that the categories of 'Western women' juxtaposed against 'Third World women' or Muslim women or Indian women continues another essentialism. This in turn works to frame criticism of policies that rely on 'cultural traits' as a betrayal without taking into account the different ways in which the definition of that 'cultural' trait as being tradition has been constructed (Narayan 1998). Furthermore, these designations continue to narrate the Western as the originator of all developments ascribed as being good and progressive.

The reproduction and essentializing of the colonial difference and the designation of the 'other' as unknowable has two further ramifications that reproduce the spatio-temporal hierarchies that sustain Eurocentrism as a system of knowledge. The first is that the 'non-West' entering the story of the international works to reproduce an understanding of the international as constituted by separate and bounded entities. This means that the focus of the analysis becomes the 'non-Western' nation-state which works to silence the different dynamics at work within the 'non-West' and the hegemonic discourses through which that national identity is re-produced (Biswas 2001). Secondly, it also results in not only reproducing the linear progressive narrative of the European story but also the periodizations through which that linear story is made intelligible such as the medieval/modern distinction (Halperin 2006, Davis 2008).

Search for Connections and Constructions of Difference

These issues with the continued rearticulations of the non-West through the spatio-temporal hierarchies points to two interrogations that need to be furthered. First is the search for connections and second is the interrogation with respect to the construction of the 'difference'. The first point underlines the importance of writing histories beyond the spatio-temporal hierarchies that take 'Europe' as an isolated space and in a different time ahead of everyone and everywhere else. This requires an attention to not isolating Europe as a separate space and situating it within the international that it was acting in and discussing the different interactions, entanglements and interconnections between the different spaces. This would then mean analyzing Europe and other spaces as being coeval. The works that focus on interconnections and entanglements thus aim to interrogate and go beyond these spatio-temporal hierarchies through which histories of the international have predominantly been written (for works that challenge these binary constructions and rather focus on the different connections and entanglements see, Barkawi 2017, Bilgin 2016c, Çapan 2017, Go and Lawson 2017, Grovogui 2006). The second avenue would be to further interrogate the category of the 'non-West' and the 'difference' and how it is historically and discursively constructed (Barlow 1997). This would then make visible the contingencies in these constructions and the political choices that were made enabling an understanding of how to negotiate the 'difference' beyond the binary of resistance/cooperation.

To conclude, what enables Eurocentrism as a system of knowledge to get reproduced is the rearticulations of the spatio-temporal hierarchies that take Europe as an isolated space and situate it temporally as being ahead of everyone and everywhere else. These reproductions are made possible because of the way in which the categories of the non-West is re-articulated. As such, breaking through those spatio-temporal boundaries requires not only the rewriting of histories through underlining the different ways in which events that were considered to have originated in Europe occurred in connection with other spaces but also to interrogate the formations and transformations of the Western and non-Western subject and the historical and discursive construction(s) of the 'difference'.

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