

Do Postcolonial Approaches Explain World Politics Better than Other IR Theories?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/06/26/do-postcolonial-approaches-explain-world-politics-better-than-other-ir-theories/>

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Assessing which approaches provide a better explanation of world politics is a task that goes beyond a simple comparison of theories, for it necessitates an interrogation of the very idea of what world politics is and the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin it. To ascertain which approaches offer the better explanation of world politics, this essay will first examine traditional theories of international relations (IR) and how their core concepts leave much to be desired in explaining the nuances and variety of world politics. It will then assess how postcolonial approaches conceive of world politics, the complexities of their relationship to other critical theories such as poststructuralism and Marxism, and the need for a decolonial epistemology and ontology of politics that emerges from non-Western thought, drawing on the work of Latin American theorists as an example. This will lead to the conclusion that postcolonial approaches offer a more holistic and nuanced explanation of world politics than most IR theories, but that it would be misplaced to describe them as “better”.

To begin, it is important to grasp what is meant by postcolonial approaches. As the plural implies, there is not one coherent postcolonial theory. Rather postcolonialism in IR is a “multiplicity of perspectives, traditions, and approaches to questions of identity, culture, and power,” which share a common concern with the discourses and practices of colonialism and imperialism, and how these continue to manifest themselves in world politics and intersect with questions of race, gender, and class (Grovoqui, 2013: 248; Sylvester, 2017: 175; Chowdry and Nair, 2004: 3). The huge variety in colonial experience across different regions of the globe is reflected in the different types of postcolonialisms that emerge from these experiences (Shilliam, 2011: 17), but a key focus for all of them is demonstrating how IR remains Eurocentric in both theory and practice, being “produced by and for the West” (Acharya and Buzan, 2007: 288). To counter this, postcolonial approaches introduce a type of IR that is more attentive to difference, that “provincialises Europe” and its claims to the universal, and that shifts ontological focus to issues such as culture, race, and everyday life or new concepts that emerge from non-Western thinking (Tickner and Blaney, 2012: 2; Chakrabarty, 2000: 3-4; Darby, 2004: 30).

Core concepts from a non-core perspective

IR as a field tends to position itself as beginning after the First World War as an exercise to better understand the international sphere and to prevent the recurrence of another such event, with liberalism and later realism establishing themselves as IR’s founding theories. Broadly speaking, realism is a theory which is concerned with the exercise of power by sovereign states in an anarchical system which tends towards conflict, while liberalism is conversely interested in how rational actors can work together to minimise this risk (Kurki and Wight, 2013: 16-17). Although this conception of IR creates a beginning point which obscures continuities between the pre- and post-1914 worlds, the endurance of these theories and their proximity to power mean that it is important to engage them in critique to assess what they elevate and what they obscure in their explanations of world politics (Hobson, 2012: 15). Moreover, by dealing with the epistemological and ontological foundations of realism and liberalism, the critiques can be expanded to other IR theories that share them, such as certain forms of constructivism or the English School. This section will first identify the Eurocentric epistemological underpinning of core concepts, such as the anarchical nature of the international system, and then consider how European thought’s temporal emphasis obscures the spatial dimensions of IR axioms like the state.

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The Eurocentrism of key IR concepts such as the anarchical nature of the international system can be identified by applying the postcolonial thought of Edward Said. His foundational work *Orientalism* demonstrates how the West came to be knowable to itself by creating knowledge about an 'inferior' East, developing binary oppositions in which the West was always superior (Said, 1978: 3). This process was made possible through positional power relations; the Orient was Orientalised because it "could be" (Said, 1978: 5-6). Recognising the "mutual constitution" of the European and non-European worlds that Said identified has become a mainstay of postcolonial IR and thinking about world politics, and can be used to show why it is problematic to think of the international system as anarchical (Barwaki and Laffey, 2006: 330). International anarchy is a key concept in realism and liberalism, which for realists explains "the striking sameness" of world politics over time (Waltz, 1979: 66). This conception is based on a contrast between domestic political systems, where the state is the ultimate arbiter of disputes and monopolises legitimate force (Walker, 1993: 93). These ideas have their roots in a long tradition of European political thinking, from the social contract theorists to Max Weber. Particularly influential in realism, the work of Thomas Hobbes justifies the need for a strong sovereign state by famously contrasting the alternative in the "state of nature" as a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Leviathan, Pt. 1, Ch. XIII, para. 9).

However, postcolonial critique has questioned this conception on two fronts. Firstly, it challenges the idea that the international system is an anarchical system of sovereign states. It becomes clear that the international system is embedded within hierarchical power relations when considering the subversion of international legal norms like state sovereignty or the undermining of institutions like the African Union by powerful states, such as during the Western intervention in Libya (Grovgoui, 2013: 256-7). Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, the very concept of the "state of nature" which supports the realist framework is mired in the colonial experience. It was developed through the European encounter with the societies of the Americas or Africa, which were deemed savage and outside the realm of the political due to their unfamiliarity (Beier, 2004: 82; Pagden, 2003: 181). Not only is the role of indigenous peoples in constituting European knowledge obscured, but this erasure is perpetuated by these theories which offer "a very limited ontological terrain" for understanding the political, especially for groups that fit uncomfortably into the nation-state system (Beier, 2004: 84). Non-Europeans are thus utilised to create knowledge about the European self, which is then elevated to a universally applicable theory, whilst the non-European experiences of these systems and structures are simultaneously excluded or negated in a doubly enforced silence. Recognising the role of non-Europeans in creating modernity thus identifies the relationship between modernity and colonialism as constitutive rather than sequential (Escobar, 2007: 185).

It is also important to understand how the ontological phenomena of IR were created and how they are judged according to a specific set of Eurocentric criteria. The state is a perfect example of this. It is reified in realist thought as the central unit of world politics, yet its application in more liberal concepts regarding "development" or "modernisation" is perhaps more interesting from a postcolonial perspective, for it demonstrates the insidiousness of Eurocentric discourses even in practices that may be well intentioned. An examination of the trajectory of liberal thought displays its Eurocentric tendencies; Grovgoui (2013: 251) identifies how Immanuel Kant's concept of "perpetual peace", the source of much liberal thought in IR, is blind to the violence of the "pacific union", whilst even the title of Fukuyama's (1992) work *The End of History and the Last Man* aptly demonstrates the sentiment that the only permissible vision of the world is a Western one. Jahn (2005: 198) also targets Kant in her assessment but goes a step further by suggesting that current liberal IR thought is more indebted to the empirical, and overtly racist, liberalism of John Stuart Mill. Jahn (2005: 201-202) reinvigorates the "imperialism of free trade" thesis by Gallagher and Robinson (1953) for the present day, showing how economics and liberal ideology enable conflict and neoimperialism by granting the rights of sovereignty and non-intervention only to those which it deems have met its criteria of democracy. The "quasi" or "failed" states are judged by how well they uphold the European trappings of politics exported to them through the violent processes of colonisation and decolonisation, ignoring the process of negotiation through which these concepts are applied and experienced across the diverse spaces of the postcolonial world (Tickner, 2003: 315- 6).

Postcolonial approaches demonstrate that a more nuanced understanding of the state can be achieved by tempering this temporal emphasis of European thought with a more spatial awareness of the diversity of world politics. The idea of "progress" was central to justifying imperialism and embodied a linear, teleological unfolding of history along European lines, with those who did not conform left in the "waiting room of history" (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8). Yet

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reconceptualising this non-conformity challenges the linear account. Take the influential idea of hybridity developed by Homi Bhabha (1994: 37), “where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other” challenges expectations and understandings of the political. Approaching states with this framework demonstrates how institutions in the postcolonial world are moulded according to local needs rather than to a proscribed formula that delineates “progress”. Recognising this allows for a more holistic and sensitive understanding of world politics than labels such as “failed” or “quasi” permit and also appreciates the agency of non-European peoples and how they claim the right to the political in the context of the postcolonial state and international sphere (Jabri, 2013: 6). These postcolonial approaches challenge the supposed timeline of “development” and “modernisation” by proclaiming their own version of statehood that is not wrong but simply different.

From the postcolonial to the decolonial

Postcolonial approaches can offer a convincing assessment of why traditional IR theories are mired in Eurocentrism that hinders their ability to explain world politics, yet it is also necessary to assess what postcolonial approaches propose as an alternative. In doing so, it is important to note the contradictions that exist between different postcolonial approaches and draw attention to efforts to overcome these contradictions through the creation of a decolonial epistemology and ontology from the canon of non-Western thought. From an ontological perspective, some postcolonial writers seek to shift the focus of world politics to topics such as culture (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 16), race (Doty, 1993: 445), and everyday life (Darby, 2004: 30), the influence of which have been obscured by prescriptive theories about what constitutes the political. For example, when culture is discussed at all by traditional theories, this is done in a Eurocentric way, such as the English School’s conception of the international as horizontal rather than hierarchical, or by equating cultures and civilisations with nation-states (Seth, 2011: 175, 178). Moreover, the tendency to essentialise cultures, as identified by Said, is still starkly apparent in works such as Samuel Huntington’s (1997) *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Rather, postcolonial approaches use culture to emphasise the concept of difference in the international sphere against the totalising tendencies of most IR theories. For example, Inayatullah and Blaney argue that by recognising that others “have alternative narratives of what we call “modernization” or “civilization”, we might have predicted the humiliation, anger, and violent response to what are seen as colonizing projects” (2004: 17) with regards to the attacks on the World Trade Centre.

However, the pervasive nature of Eurocentric terms in the language used to discuss the political means it can be difficult to break through traditional ontological categories. For example, Ansems de Vries et al. (2017: 91) seek to move to a discussion of struggles for mobility rather than fall back on tropes such as citizenship or security in critical migration studies. This issue highlights the limits of poststructuralism, which refutes the possibility of overarching theories and neutral knowledge, and its emphasis on deconstruction (Edkins, 2007: 88). While this position can complement postcolonial approaches, Sajed (2012: 143) notes that, ironically, poststructuralism is blind to its own historicity and the importance of the Algerian experience of colonisation and decolonisation in providing the intellectual stimuli for its theorists. Moreover, Krishna’s (1993: 399) critique that postmodernism’s preoccupation with representation means losing the “physicalistic sense of violence” seems equally applicable to the textuality of deconstructionism, which in offering an internal critique of the West may simply serve to exclude or subsume non-Western voices or romanticise a radical non-West of resistance, once again stifling the agency of non-Western peoples (Sajed, 2012: 162; Jabri, 2013: 8). How, then, can postcolonial approaches move past the poststructuralism of figures like Said and Bhabhi to a conception of world politics that is not modern, but decolonial? Ansems de Vries and Tazzioli (in Ansems de Vries et al., 2017: 93) may provide a solution in their interpretation of fracturing, which seeks to disrupt binaries by moving past the concepts provided by modernity and challenging the modern preoccupation with completeness or coherence. This is elaborated by Vazquez (in Ansems de Vries et al., 2017: 98-99), who identifies how cracks in the system of modernity and coloniality are allowing for alternative political configurations, such as “autonomia” and “comunalidad” exercised by Mexican groups like the Zapatistas or Oaxacan indigenous communities. Such concepts go beyond fracturing, which is still indebted to poststructuralism, towards the development of a truly decolonial political ontology.

Returning, however, for a moment to Krishna’s comments about physicality directs focus to another approach to world politics which has been influential in postcolonialism: Marxism. Concerned as it is with materialism, the strength

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of a Marxist approach to the colonial experience is that it can render clear the brutal reality of colonial exploitation and oppression, as so vividly described in the work of Frantz Fanon as “that atmosphere of violence, that violence which is just under the skin” (1961: 55). Although drawing on Marx to a great effect, Fanon (1961: 31) also recognises that his analysis requires stretching to fit the colonial problem. The postcolonial critique of Marxism, however, goes deeper than a slight stretching. Lenin (1917), in his seminal explication of the traditional Marxist position, referred to imperialism as the “highest stage of capitalism”. Yet what this returns to is the critique of modernity and its linear and teleological conception of time; a criticism which Marxism is particularly prone to, given its stadial conception of the path to communism. The work of Matin (2011: 366) has sought to mitigate this effect, however, by reviving Trotsky’s concept of “uneven and combined development” as a Marxist analysis of world politics that is attentive to alterity. It seeks to “redeem the universal” for postcolonial approaches by embedding heterogeneity within it (Matin, 2011: 268). Despite offering a compelling argument for a workable fusion of Marxism and postcolonialism, the concept of “uneven and combined development” is nonetheless rooted in the political writings of European modernity, and thus unable to provide a truly decolonial vision of world politics.

Although unable to shed its modern roots, Matin’s work does raise the question of what role the universal does have in postcolonial approaches, and whether universality is a requirement of a satisfactory explanation of world politics. Given the problematic legacies of both poststructuralism and Marxism, such a universality would require a decolonial logic. This is not intellectual isolationism for the sake of it, but rather a critical step in overcoming the intellectual legacy of colonialism. Theorists such as Shilliam (2011: 23) recognise the impossibility of drawing a truly postcolonial conception of the political from the canon of Western thought. In the words of Mignolo, “the limit of Western philosophy is the border where the colonial difference emerges” (2002: 66) and a space for local histories opens up. Drawing on the work of Latin American theorists Quijano and Dussel, Mignolo (2002: 70, 90-1) elaborates a subaltern epistemology of “diversality as a universal project” which “redeems the universal” in a way Matin’s conception could not. For it is not that other peoples have no concept of the universal – take, for example, the Andean cosmivision (Tucker, 2018: 218). Rather, the mistake is to presume that one version is better or able to overrule others. As stated by Quijano, it is not necessary “to reject the whole idea of totality in order to divest oneself of the ideas and images with which it was elaborated within European colonial/modernity” (quoted in Ansems de Vries et al., 2017: 104). Instead, these different visions can be accommodated and appreciated for their alterity in a shift from the universal to the pluriversal in our explanations of world politics, without losing the dimension of power that emerges from the colonial difference (Rojas, 2016: 370; Escobar, 2017: 189). A decolonial explanation of world politics is therefore more holistic, accommodating of difference, and attentive to the power relations embedded in IR, both in practice and theory. It is also important to note that the emergence of such a form of IR does necessarily not mean we should discount the value of postcolonial approaches. What matters is that, when poststructuralism or Marxism are used, theorists always remain attentive to how these theories themselves may be informed by or perpetuate colonial practices and seek to overcome these tendencies and transcend the limits of a Western frame of reference (Sajed 2012: 163).

Conclusion: the paucity of ‘better’

It seems appropriate to conclude by commenting on why it would be futile to attempt to provide a justification for why postcolonial approaches offer a “better” explanation of world politics in comparison to other IR theories. The analysis has shown that traditional IR theories, and even critical theories such as poststructuralism and Marxism, operate within the limitations of an epistemology that is inherently Eurocentric and attached to a vision of world politics that is excessively temporal, with ontological categories that reflect this point of view. Even when the European vision of modernity is criticised from within, this criticism is prone to falling back on these same categories in order to do so. Instead, a decolonial epistemology can create space for a universal that incorporates rather than excludes difference, while ontological concepts derived from this epistemology and the non-Western experience can elaborate a vision of world politics that is more holistic and nuanced. Yet to say that such an explanation is “better” seems to negate the very purpose of postcolonial approaches to IR; to draw attention to the hierarchies embedded in the international sphere through the past and ongoing practices and discourses of colonialism and imperialism. Describing these approaches as “better” merely engages in the same tendency towards hierarchy, binaries, and reductionism critiqued in other approaches. It is for this reason that this essay has argued strongly for the importance of postcolonial approaches to explaining world politics but refuses to reduce these attributes to a better or worse

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distinction. Suffice it to say that postcolonial approaches encourage an understanding of *world* politics that truly merits the name.

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