

# Multiple Worlds of Trauma: Methodology, Eurocentrism, and the Colonial Traumatic

Written by Mateus S. Borges

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Although the idea of trauma has been explored since the 19th century in Western disciplines, and the event, experience and process that signify it refer to immemorial human conditions, such as horror and violence, discussions about trauma are recent in International Relations. Freudian psychoanalysis developed and formulated the concept of trauma, which aimed to explain and treat neurotic and hysterical cases in psychiatry and psychology. Its application in treating soldiers and victims of World War I and II contributed to the consolidation of the study of traumatic events, also turning the Holocaust into a reference and founding moment of the field (Budryte and Resende 2015, 7–8). These experiences had a strong relationship with politics by dealing with people entangled in the horror of conflicts, wars and genocides induced by imaginaries of sovereignty, nationalism, and white supremacy, leading to the introduction of the concept of trauma in IR.

The historically flexible and contested conceptualization of trauma revolves around responding to an event or experience so shocking that it cannot be assimilated, interpreted or signified by the subject in question, fleeing and challenging language and representation (Bond and Craps 2020, 4). Faced with this representational destabilization, a nonlinear temporality brings back the previously repressed trauma through memory projections, such as hallucinations. With this retrospective aspect, the traumatic, for Jenny Edkins (2003), must be seen as a phenomenon with political dimensions in constant re-articulation and dispute at the international level, mediated by and in practices of memorialization, forgetting and silencing. Thus, it relates to the sociopolitical sphere as it is not conceived apart from the space and context in which it is located, where the prevalent ideas of sovereignty and nationalism exert hegemonic effects to contain and efface the traumatic disruption.

Considering, in particular, its theoretical-conceptual development in disciplines built on the aegis of modernity and Western epistemologies, such as psychoanalysis and psychiatry, the study of trauma has demonstrated a disregard for experiences in non-Western contexts and traditions of thought (Craps 2013, 2). There is no concern with the specificity of traumas made from colonial and imperial projects of “the West”, especially Europe and the United States, assuming the universality of their conceptions, or with the complicity of Western epistemes in hiding their implication in the reproduction of such traumatic processes. The prevalence of events, such as the 9/11 terrorist attack and the Holocaust, eludes other perspectives on the violence and horror that pervade human lives, allowing for the maintenance of veiled Eurocentrism and Westernism that hide colonial traumas and subdue memory to maintain Western thought unaccountable.

In this sense, this essay seeks to discuss a series of questions guided by the idea of trauma’s ontological universality or whether we can think about the space of traumatic experience, marked by its impossibilities, as universal. Its space of nonbeing, in which subjects intertwine with inexpressibility, impossibility, and the inability to narrate, is also located contextually, geographically, and temporally. What happens when colonialism is put into questioning, moving other archives, breaking narratives, and putting the traumas that make up Western hinterlands vis-à-vis the violence in the non-West? Does the search for knowledge favour which subjects in these terms? What is ethically and methodologically possible in an investigation of colonial trauma? It is not my intention, given the scope of such work, to answer all of these questions but to outline brief notes that indicate if and where it is possible to draw the defining line(s) of trauma amidst a diversity of world stories, speeches, narratives, knowledge, and perspectives of life without

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incurring its depoliticization or/and colonization.

After this introduction, this essay is organized in the following manner: first, I trace the origins of International Relations as a disciplinary field under the auspices of colonialism and imperialism, discussing their co-constitutive relationship and the place of psychoanalysis and its founding conceptualization of trauma in colonial projects. Then, I seek ways of methodologically decolonizing this concept so that not only its creation through colonialism becomes visible, but the traumas, horror, and suffering of colonialism are also acknowledged. Finally, I expose some concluding thoughts on the matter.

## Trauma, colonialism, and IR

International Relations have a co-constitutive relationship with European colonial and imperial projects, common among Western disciplines and purposefully silenced, erased and forgotten. While Himadeep Muppidi (2006, 55) wonders if the field does not represent a “Global School of Colonialism”, Smith (1999, 59) sees such a colonialist motivation in Western sciences and knowledge in general, which, through systems and models of representation and classification, came to benefit from the colonization of indigenous peoples. The other’s vision came to be constituted only through the Westerner’s eyes, whose perspectives were based on disciplines focused, implicitly or explicitly, on the elevation of Western modes of thought to a universal position as the only possible interpretive lens. This universalism reflects a series of power relations from which ideas of inferiority, hierarchy, exclusion, and marginalization were violently introjected into non-Western societies, linking them to a project to maintain the West as the subject of (Western) modernity and its interests as dominant (Smith 1999, 47).

The Western disciplinary model led to the formation of specific epistemologies aimed at oneself, created with a self-centred intention of subjugating other forms of life, thought and knowledge that challenged its presumed universality by pointing out the multiplicity of social and political life. Through the erasure of alternatives to the colonizing modus operandi, colonized peoples were represented outside the spectrum of the possibility of science, objectified, racialized and genderized by their supposed cultural and technological backwardness, savagery and irrationality. In colonialism and imperialism, these societies became European research laboratories, their knowledge being appropriated simultaneously to their silencing, “with no life force, no humanity, no spirit of its own”, unable to contribute to the science that explores them (Smith 1999, 61). A universalism of Western disciplines is projected, supposedly responsible for the progress and modernity capable of developing the non-West through their ideational, cultural and disciplinary moulds, disregarding modern thought traditions of non-Western colonial worlds (Harding 2011, 6–9). In this sense, the legitimate standard of knowledge is reached only by subjecting to the precept that “Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and human beings” (Smith 1999, 56). Thus, Western sciences are complicit in propagating and producing ideas, paradigms, and theories about and for colonized and indigenous peoples in a hierarchical relationship of domination.

As Hill Collins (2000, 251) points out in the case of black feminist thought, there is a relation of affinity between a specific set of knowledge and the interests of its creator’s group in maintaining its position of power. This complicity becomes explicit when she mentions how the everyday experiences of black women, herself included, were thought of as non-knowledge by academic scholars, mostly white, whose hierarchical position was destabilized and opposed by the political practices of black feminists. In another context and era, but with similar dynamics, when analyzing ethnopsychiatric studies of the Algiers School, Frantz Fanon (2014, 91) described how French psychiatrists saw and, thus, conceived black North Africans: “[...] the native, big mental retard that he is, with limited higher cortical faculties, is essentially a primitive being whose life is mainly vegetative and instinctual [...]”. The psychological limitations are such, according to these doctors, that a lobotomized European and the “primitive African” even presented a “complete” resemblance (Fanon 2014, 92). By reproducing this inferiority through a racialization of science, managing to justify the superior biological traits of the white man, these psychiatrists protected the Algiers School’s position in advancing French colonialism in Algeria and, subsequently, in guaranteeing the participation of psychiatry in sharing colonial exploits.

The case of psychoanalysis and its conceptualization of trauma was no different. The non-Western space is the

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space of madness and neurosis, where the colonized's primitivism is attributed to atrophy of their psychic faculties, "[...] cultural difference is pathologized and psychic growth understood in terms of cultural/racial difference" (Loomba 2005, 118–19). The universalization of Western modernity and subjecthood is reproduced in the idea of the psyche and the Oedipus complex, whose applicability advances without considering other forms of being and subjectivities than the Western one. A Manichaean structure, then, serves to mirror the European, rational and civilized self in the primitive colonized, whose non-beingness prevents its transformation into a subject, being the product and object of colonial encounters (Khanna 2003, 6). More than merely affirming its universal character through colonialism and imperialism, the Freudian psychoanalytic subject is constituted in the colonization of difference, racialized, genderized, depoliticized and a constituent of the colonial projects in which it is involved and applied.

The notion of trauma originating in psychoanalysis imported the process of depoliticization and isolation from the sociopolitical field that its proponents had imposed on itself and its colonialist motivations. Sigmund Freud, one of the foremost exponents and formulators of such a concept, saw trauma as the phantasmatic return of the subject's repressed sexual desires during his subjectivation, as well as psychic responses to the breakage of the ego's protective barrier due to excessive external stimuli, occurring in specific events and historical contexts, such as wars (Bond and Craps 2020, 25–27). The Oedipus complex's theoretical-conceptual apparatus is inert before objectified and dehumanized peoples while presupposing its universal applicability, following the colonizing logic of mainstream Western epistemologies. Whereas its discursive construction corresponds to the interests, values and contexts of the dominant groups that conceived it, i.e., Western paradigms of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and psychology, trauma becomes "a timeless, acultural, psychobiological phenomenon" (Bond and Craps 2020, 106–107). For Stef Craps (2013, 2), trauma studies

[...] marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas.

The conceptualization of the category of traumatic brings the memory of physical, cultural, and epistemological silencing and erasure of colonialism and its effects. At the same time, non-Western knowledge and ways of life are excluded by the very violence that the concept of trauma universally attempts to explain. This process is a constituent of colonial and imperial projects, both in the epistemological sense of the destruction of other forms of thought and in that of an explanatory means and a "solution" for the madness, hysteria, and neurosis considered intrinsic to the primitive indigenous.

The introduction of trauma in International Relations followed a path similar to its original field. Important works from Jenny Edkins (2003), Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (2014), and Duncan Bell (2006) mainly engaged with experiences in Europe and the United States, even though there is a recent wave that does otherwise, for example by Jessica Aughter (2014) and Henrique Tavares Furtado (2015; 2017) regarding Rwandan and Brazilian cases respectively. In an attempt to point out the relationships between trauma, memory, politics, and prevalent concepts in the discipline, such as sovereignty, there is no questioning of the constitutive character that colonialism and imperialism have in IR and the theoretical-conceptual frameworks that trauma analysis employs. This generates an epistemological void that pushes new works towards strengthening Western knowledge and its self-acclaimed universalism.

Faced with such problems, a concern not with trauma but with traumas can contribute to the formation of epistemologies and methodologies more sensitive to world diversity, its ways of life and the political, social, cultural, and epistemic impacts of colonial and imperial adventures. Recent criticism has indicated the silencing that an idea of trauma focused on events, singular crises with well-defined temporalities and spaces, provokes concerning experiences as violent and disruptive as wars, genocides, and environmental catastrophes, but with a common, every day, and latent oppressive character (Craps 2013, 31). Racism, misogyny, LGBT-phobia, and increasingly common environmental crises are traumatic processes and structures built around the modern Western state and its oppressive, marginalizing and excluding power relations, whose vivid and continuous character is not questioned or

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addressed by trauma studies. Grada Kilomba (2010, 20) presents her notion of trauma as putting people (in her analysis, black) in a state of otherness, dehumanized, alien, and turned incompatible with the Western white male self through an unspeakable experience of embodied pain. For her,

everyday racism is not a single violent event in one's individual biography, as it is commonly believed – something that “might have happened once or twice” – but rather an accumulation of violent events that at the same time reveal a historical pattern of racial abuse involving not only the horrors of racist violence, but also the collective memories of colonial trauma.

(Kilomba 2010, 133)

Kilomba (2010) advocates a trauma perspective that frames colonialism and its racialization processes as traumatic, putting in place a decolonization project to make those who were and are objectified and dehumanized, either by racism or other forms of colonial and imperial oppression, “become subject”. By pointing out the overlapping of Western disciplines, knowledge, and epistemologies with the colonization of non-Western societies and cultures, it becomes possible to think of a decolonizing option for trauma and its development in IR. Without entering theoretical-conceptual discussions, I now turn to epistemological and methodological alternatives capable of contributing to such a project of decolonization.

## Decolonizing the traumatic

The relations between knowledge and power built by the West erase the multiplicity of experiences, cultures, and peoples existing in the world in favour of the affirmation of Anglo-European perspectives and approaches, intrinsically limited and violent for only considering themselves as possible and valid. According to Sousa and Oliveira (2018, 61), an abyss is created between the hegemonic pole's production of knowledge and that of the periphery, so profound that only the former is conceived as real, visible, and capable of undergoing validation and legitimation processes, restricted to Western standards. To break this abyssal thinking, a decolonization project that points not only to the intertwining of the colony, empire, and Western traditions of thought[1], but proposes to reclaim the multiple spaces and positions of actors hitherto excluded, forgotten, and abused is needed.

Multiplicity starts to be reconstituted *from* the colonized and non-Western peoples, not for and against them, as challenges to domination will rarely be posed by the dominating group of knowledge validation processes (Collins 2000, 253). Despite the effort to single out modernity as a Western product, there is a recognition of the specific local traits of each modern society through the construction of an epistemology of “a world of sciences”, within which the particular system of the West is situated alongside other scientific systems (Harding 2011, 9). Research problems are *reframed* from the concerns of the group in question, which “resist[s] being boxed and labeled according to categories which do not fit” (Smith 1999, 153). Thus, a conception of different traumas, temporally, geographically, and contextually situated in varied and flexible ways, can use new positionalities and ways of life, which call for adequate epistemologies and methodologies for their politics and ethics of representation, activism, and struggle[2].

To decolonize trauma, the traumatized person, people, or group must be positioned in the spectrum of oppressions and inequalities they are subjected to in their social and political life. There is a need to bring their voices back, claiming their spaces as subjects of their own stories while exposing the particularities of their experiences in the face of universalizing colonialism and imperialism. “One is the self, one is the subject, one is the describer, the author of and the authority on one's own reality” (Kilomba 2010, 145). A powerful method in this regard is to bring *testimonies* as embodied and vivid voices of the contradictions and impossibilities of trauma, capable of exposing traumatic brutality in their own inability to narrate it (Smith 1999, 144). The paradoxes of trauma, located in the interstices of the possible and the impossible, of the speakable and the unspeakable, which is “felt but not understood”, are put into play by its victims and prevent its character of rupture and indescribability from silencing them (Budryte and Resende 2015, 11). In addition, pain and horror are transmitted and better expressed, claiming the role of emotions as political means that contest the impersonal and objective epistemology of positivism. This sharing process allows the constitution of an affective circle of *remembrance* that can heal, appease, and transform the relationship of the colonized with its violent and traumatic past (Smith 1999, 146).

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Latent in such a project of decolonization, especially when considering a conception of trauma not restricted to singular events in time and space, is a concern with the lived experiences of its subjects, which Collins (2000, 257–60) brought up when presenting her black feminist epistemology. Racism, as exposed by Kilomba (2010), is a trauma experienced in everyday life, in exchanges, in practices, and in the experiences of the black and indigenous populations placed below the white by a series of epistemological moves that invalidate and dehumanize their lives as subjects. Placing narratives, customs, and day-to-day stories as symbolic representations of an alternative knowledge validation system allows generalizing and exclusionary abstractions to be avoided and, thus, the dominant disciplinary-epistemological model and its formulating groups to be contested (Collins 2000, 258–59). From this reorientation, trauma starts to be analyzed as continuous, multiple, and multifaceted oppression, and we start considering the constituent violence of Western sovereign power in its processes of racialization, oblivion, and marginalization as traumatic.

Finally, the use of standpoint methodologies returns the decolonizing process to the commitment of pointing out the specificity of the Eurocentric conception of trauma, claiming the legitimacy of other ways of thinking about traumatic experiences. According to Harding (2011, 21), “[s]tandpoint approaches can recognize the positive scientific and political value of local knowledge without falling into claims either of its absolute, universal validity and applicability or of its legitimacy by only local standards”. These epistemological-methodological apparatuses transversally permeate the decolonization of trauma proposed here by fighting Western universalism and thinking from lifeforms, cultures, and peoples traumatized by their encounters with the West through colonialism and imperialism. This way, the multiplicity excluded from the world by the Western, self-referenced and traumatizing knowledge construction system is valued.

## Concluding thoughts

Thinking about a restructuring of Western thought and, consequently, of IR that indicates and accuses the traumatic character of its constitution in colonialism and imperialism involves a proposal of decolonization capable of uncovering and breaking the silence of those whose cries have not been heard. The movement exercised by the West in favour of a universal ideal of knowledge, of life propagates that the only space of possibility for a given subject is destined for those who adapt to European and North American standards of validation and legitimacy, being a restricted and unique universality. Against this colonizing effort, post-colonial approaches try to recover the diversity of narratives, experiences, cultures, and cosmologies for a long time forgotten and erased by the imbrication of Western sciences and colonial enterprises, brutal in their politics of destruction of difference. Such a project demands epistemologies, methodologies and methods situated outside Western epistemes and from which entities dehumanized by objectivist and depoliticizing logics regain their place as subjects.

This essay was guided by the problem of establishing a limit line in conceptions of trauma by considering the specificity and multiplicity of traumatic experiences invoked in an attempt to decolonize their theoretical-conceptual apparatus, both in their original field and in IR. The potential of tracing a distinctive aspect of trauma, while helping to identify and categorize victims, is dangerous since it is marked by the impossibility of drawing a singularity in a myriad of different and unique traumatizing processes. The PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) pathologizing of trauma in the United States is an example where singular cases and wounds that were impossible to close completely were violently traversed by a series of criteria, symptoms, diagnoses, and “solutions” (Edkins 2003). There is a defining limit of trauma in undertakings with this restricted content, placed in pre-defined narratives that hide and make people forget instead of exposing and making the traumatic to be remembered. Ultimately, this constitutes a common practice of Western sovereign power and its colonizing fetish for defining and discriminating according to its shapes and models.

There is a need to propose methodologies and epistemologies that assume multiple worlds as constituent parts of what they try to explain and discuss, and life experiences, exposed in songs, practices, customs, and everyday stories, as valuable sources of research in which distinct types of trauma present themselves (Collins 2000; Harding 2011). Testimony is a helpful method of marking the embodiment of the indescribable and unspeakable pain and horror of trauma in its constitutive paradoxes, as well as of giving voice to silenced actors, such as indigenous and black peoples (Smith 1999, 144). More than breaking with Western epistemic universalism, such alternative systems

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of knowledge construction seek to establish another form of non-dichotomous relationship from which connections between multiple epistemologies are formed, according to Collins (2000, 270). I realize that, in studying trauma, such linking points can be made between non-Western ways of thinking about the psyche and trauma, and psychoanalysis, provided the latter, as Robbie Shilliam (2013, 146) suggests, is “exorcised”, taken from its colonial and imperial roots. Only this way, relationally, and differentially, do I see it as possible to think of the decolonization of traumas.

## Notes

[1] This point permeates the deconstruction of Western narratives about world history, prioritizing ideas and perspectives on the imperial and colonial origins of Western thought from the views of colonized peoples (Smith 1999, 149).

[2] An epistemology that actively involves the subject in its research and sociopolitical project while deconstructing the divisions imposed by Western traditions of thought is action research (*pesquisa-ação*), whose development and application in Brazil were analyzed by Sousa and Oliveira (2018).

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