

Review - Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics

Written by Ananya Sharma

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ANANYA SHARMA, JUN 18 2019

Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics
Edited by Olivia U. Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam
Routledge, 2018

The discipline of International Relations has witnessed a proliferation in the engagement with post-colonialism over the progression of the discipline's trajectory (Gandhi, 1998; Young, 2001; Mmebe, 2001; Chowdhry and Nair 2004; Bhambra, 2007; Tickner and Blaney 2012; Seth 2013). The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics purports to analyse the manifold inheritances of colonial rule through accentuating the disparities in global power relations. It underscores the colonial constitutions and inflections of global order – past and present, and their manifestations across political, economic, cultural and intellectual domains. The imperial and colonial entanglements are not merely derivative but constitutive of the world. Drawing on black, decolonial, feminist, Marxist and indigenous thought, the handbook reflects and probes the metamorphosing socio-politico-economic structures of imperial legacies as historical and present exemplars of the systematic imposition of extreme inequality, exclusion and violence on a global scale and provides for alternative readings of history. The label 'postcolonial' is used as a heuristic device (p.xvii) to sensitise the readers to the all-pervasive legacies of an imperial past that continue to inform contemporary global politics. They use a 'postcolonial critique' to expand the imagined boundaries of what politics entails through pluralising the actors, issues and methods deployed to make sense of global politics.

Challenging the Normative Silos

Conventional wisdom assigned superiority and a sense of exceptionalism to Europe (Global North) and cast the Global South as an aberration, thus reifying the belief that the former developed in isolation. The corollary to this was the claim that the approaches, tools and methods of knowledge production in the west encompassed the authentic universal human experience while relegating/discrediting the rest to be less rational, scientific and objective. The authors contributing to the handbook challenge this binary by envisaging the world in terms of an interconnected space constituted by actors who exist contemporaneous to each other. The set of inquiries drawing on diverse dispositions, theoretical concepts and empirics seek to challenge the ingrained imaginary and methodological Eurocentrism.

The editors organise the thirty-five chapters around five topical thematic sections: points of departure, popular postcolonial imaginaries, struggles over the postcolonial state, struggles over land and alternative global imaginaries. The underlying thread connecting these contributions is the positing of the colonial question as fundamental to inquiry. The chapters in the first section introduce the reader to diverse, fragmented and often obfuscated points of departure into global politics. The various contributions by Mary Tuti Baker, Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, Rosalba Icaza and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni highlight the stakes at play while approaching politics around the world through the 'post-colonial' lens by unavoidably grappling with the legacies of the empire. These scholars, whose work is informed and shaped by diverse modes of inquiry, succeed in demonstrating how urgent it is to mobilise, interweave, and grapple with the international, the political, and the postcolonial in engaging social problématiques. The chapters in this section provide us with thought-provoking analyses that engage political complexities with an uncommon richness of insight toward a rethinking of politics today through indigenous futures, restructuring the world around race and gender and bringing in peripheries in narrating institutional development.

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One of the strongest points is put forth by Pinar Bilgin (p. 49-50) who challenges the universalised notion of cosmopolitan security by critiquing how the idea of cosmopolitanism flattens out the violent histories that have marked and shaped the global point of reference and continues to shape interactions between peoples in the present day.

Imagining the Postcolonial

The second section lays down the sustained Eurocentric conception of global politics that has been produced and popularised as a set of political concepts and imaginaries to the point where these have become embedded within our conceptual vocabularies as common sensical. The contemporary political lexicon around democracy, security, terrorism, migration, development, and human rights, reflects the naturalisation of euro-centric imaginaries. It is imperative to challenge the formation of these popular imaginaries and their associated normative connotations which are a testament to the deep imbrication of colonial science in shaping our understanding of the world. The authors present alternative understandings and enactments of global politics by bringing forth the diversity of human experience and emphasise hermeneutic contingency. The ideas conveyed are homologous to a series of other extant and contemporaneous contributions to the discipline (Chakravarty, 2009; Hobson, 2012). The section explores the questions of tribe, terrorism, the notion of frontier and interplay between technology and boundaries with incisive and provoking chapters by Nivi Manchanda, Swati Prasher and Emilio Disteretti. There are also contributions challenging the perceived notions of diplomacy and LGBTQ rights and the idea of development. However, while engaging with these concepts centred around western imaginaries, the authors fail to juxtapose how some of these have been replicated/adapted in the context of the global south without any resistance and how contemporary radicalisation and digital influence is rapidly shifting their meanings in the western context itself.

Unpacking the Post-colonial State

Whether 'state' is defined in terms of membership, status or even performance, it carries an already assumed conception of politics, culture, spatiality, temporality, and sociality. The state became established as the universal form of governance with independence movements gaining momentum post World War Two. The third section of the book deals with the essentially contested nature of the postcolonial state, highlighting the dualistic and contradictory pulls of protecting freedom and the right to self-determination of previously colonised peoples on the one hand and on the other hand, elites inheriting governance through rationalities passed on from colonialism. Gurminder Bhambra's chapter utilises the 'connected sociologies' (p.200) approach to argue that the modern state is constitutively colonial which has ramifications for the current migration crisis, seeking to categorise citizens from non-citizens. Desiree Poets' chapter (p.210) details how in Brazil, the state manages the rights of indigenous people by focusing on the notion of authenticity in the neoliberal context. In a similar vein, Dilar Dirik's chapter (p.225-226) deals with the demand for constructing a self-governing polity for Kurdish Peoples in the post Ottoman Middle East and the nationalist responses to such demands. Eiichi Hoshino (p.244) turns to the Okinawa islands in Japan as a case in point to illustrate the double victimisation, first through Japanese imperialism and then US occupation. The chapter demonstrates how struggles over the postcolonial state are complexly layered at local, national and global levels. In the last chapter, Calvin Xin Liu (p.256-257), seeks to account for the recent rise of nationalism in Hong Kong, as demonstrated by the Umbrella Movement in 2013. Liu highlights the struggles of being a postcolonial state by shedding light on Hong Kong's geo-cultural position between China and Britain which encouraged a sense of in-between-ness that positioned the island territories as a space of alterity rather than a site of opposition between East and West. The fissiparous identities give a new dimension to the understanding of post-colonial state and the chapters neatly tie with the larger theme of exploring the alternatives provided by the postcolonial state.

The section 'struggles over land' addresses concerns related to land as central to the calculus of global politics parsed through concerns over food sovereignty, economic dispossession, environmental degradation and even spiritual belonging. It challenges the naturalised distinction made between the material – land, bodies, resources, etc. and the representational discourse, identity and spirituality due to colonial legacies. Lehuanani Enomoto and D. Keali'i MacKenzie (p.289) probe the significant rise in sea levels caused by the global exploitation of resources and contamination of the environment in Oceania and the responses of the native community and indigenous knowledge to survive in such extreme environmental challenges.

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In a similar vein, Ajay Parasram and Lisa Tilley argue that to mitigate against planetary environmental harm, the 'protective ontologies' (p.302) maintained and cultivated by indigenous communities must be afforded their rightful guiding position at the forefront of global action. Ijahnya Christian looks into the Rastafari situation in Africa by engaging with themes of power and mobilisation, integration and resilience in the quest for formal recognition of the people who lay claim to the land grant. The last chapter in the section is a transcript of the speech delivered by Andile Mngxitama, President of Black First Land First (BLF) and former Member of the South African Parliament addressing the call for decolonisation by university students which, as #RhodesMustFall, has made a global impact. This section highlights the crisis of ruling class hegemony providing significant openings for advancing the positions of democratic organisations for shaping the future direction of reconstruction.

Imagining Alternatives

The Handbook both shapes a critical agenda for the field of post-colonial studies and at the same time provides a glimpse of what people who are doing research in the field thought was important, vital, and relevant. The last section, 'Alternative Global Imaginaries', focuses avowedly on mobilising past and present contestations over global politics to envisage alternative political projects. It challenges the familiar conceptual repertoires of IR, giving us an excellent view of the creativity with which post-colonial politics engages theoretical, methodological and political challenges of our times. L.H.M. Ling, poignantly through the story of a first-year doctoral student Wanda, questions the Hobbesian understanding of state of nature as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (p.368) by introducing the readers to a Daoist conception of global politics. Giorgio Shani (p. 377) emphasises the need for articulating the notion of post-secular conception of human security in vernacular terms which re-embeds individuals uprooted by the adverse effects of neo-liberal globalisation. Aparna Devare's (p.386) chapter draws on Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, two well-known Indian thinkers, in order to further extend the debate on dialogic cross-cultural encounters in IR by gleaning the violence inherent within the liberal kind of 'transformative' cross-cultural encounter. Rahel Kunz and Archana Thapa (p.402) utilise a collection of stories to reflect on the diverse ways in which Nepali girls and women from various social backgrounds navigate, resist and subvert complex social structures such as gender, caste, religion, marital status and ethnicity and how these have shaped their identities.

Drawing on narrative, poetry and performance art, the remaining chapters offer alternative ways of thinking and doing global politics. Alanna Lockward utilises performance art as a medium to heal the coloniality of being and thinking in the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic by emphasising the seeds of a shared humanity (p.432). In the final chapter, Denize LeDeatte narrates the story of the African violet to address Britain's hypocritical love affair with the memory of its colonial past (p.441). She argues that the arts provide a mechanism to balance the dominant narrative of academic history, which has transformed into 'academic genocide' (p.443) thus prohibiting a complete rendition of the human story that is exemplary of the Atlantic trade.

A minor critique of the edited volume is that in objecting to the universalizing categories as being euro-centric and inadequate in understanding the practices, experiences and realities of the non-European world, it ontologises the difference between the West and the East and justifies the exoticization of the East as different. In highlighting the distinctiveness of the postcolonial world, the chapters deny the universal validity of emancipatory norms such as justice, democracy and human rights, which are presumably underpinned by common universal interests shared by all human beings irrespective of culture, race, gender, sexuality, religion, or other differences.

One of the handbook's biggest strengths is its resilience in consistently challenging the disciplinary fortress of IR and opening a world of investigatory possibilities by equating post-colonial politics with global politics. Combining theoretical lineages and introducing key matters of concern, it captures the intellectual diversity and dynamism of post-colonial politics. The handbook is successful in cultivating global solidarities, building inter-connections by pursuing ethics of repair and healing and even teaching global politics differently. It presents a comprehensive and accessible overview of the diverse research themes and methodologies at the heart of the field. The authors identify and weave together the diverse strands deployed by the postcolonial critique to understand the global structures that are predicated upon and complicit in reproducing inequality, exclusion and violence. In providing a synthetic reference point, summarizing key achievements and engagements while putting forward future developments and potential fruitful lines of inquiry, the handbook is an invaluable resource for students, academics and researchers

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from a range of disciplines, particularly international relations, political science, sociology, political geography, international law, international political economy, security studies and gender studies.

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Ananya Sharma is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Ashoka University. Her research interests include decolonial thought, intellectual histories of IR and popular culture in the global south.