Overcoming Empire's Seduction: Decolonizing International Relations

The post in post-colonial theory does not refer to the end of colonial and imperial practices, for their mentalities, structures, and injustices persist today. Rather, post-colonial approaches expose the complicated relationship between IR and issues of culture, identity, and power, through a critical view of how the discipline and its foundational assumptions have been shaped by imperial, racialized ways of thinking and its intersection with gender and asymmetries of power. I examine the challenges that post-colonial theorizing presents to many 'key' features of the discipline, ranging from its ontological assumptions of rationalism, humanism and universalism, to the framework of the 'nation-state' acting as a unit of analysis and seen to be constituent of the international system. The praxis of post-colonial theory turns to IR as a normative discourse, one which is implicated in perpetuating and defending numerous neo-imperial and post-colonial structures of power. In doing so, it continues to marginalize and misrepresent numerous perspectives, cultures and people. Many dominant discourses in IR theory and its practice, notably surrounding international security and conflict, are predicated on select visions of 'modernity' or concepts of the 'social' which are neither natural nor determinate. Post-colonial approaches therefore seek to de-obscure and demystify the political vision and underlying hierarchies of international politics and IR itself. Finally, I pre-empt criticisms of post-colonial approaches as theoretically plausible but practically impoverished, by suggesting an alternative research paradigm and political practice suited to the pursuit of justice which better reflects the concerns of representation, marginalization and hierarchy that these approaches highlight.

Post-colonial theory offers new ways to approach power and its relation with self-determination and knowledge, moving away from a state-centric view of 'anarchy vs. order' by viewing power as intertwined with questions of political subjectivity and identity. Dominant truths and discourses shape what mainstream theorists view to be 'knowledge' surrounding power as an objective law of states' calculated, often amoral self-interest. Structural realists attempt to "systematize realism… on the basis of a 'third image' perspective", where the "nature of world politics as an anarchic realm is assumed", as Keohane writes.[1] For Waltz, international structures exist within anarchy, and therefore are defined "not by all of the actors that flourish within them, but by the major ones" – it's its capabilities that come to matter.[2] However, there are problematic implications when IR teleologically emphasizes very particular forms of statecraft and power. Realists' constant genealogical references to Thucydides ('The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must'[3]) creates a binary of a strong Self and weak Other, where the former defines the 'rules of the game' that the latter must comply with or otherwise be destroyed or converted.[4] Despite liberal institutions like the UN presenting ideals of fair representation, democracy, free speech and the rule of law, post-colonial theorists are critical of how they reproduce neoliberal frameworks and hypermasculine competition, at the expense of representing marginalized populations. Representatives of differing juridico-political and ethical traditions "may speak but cannot be heard on *their own terms*."[5] Consider the treatment of Iraq in the UN from 2001-2003, where exchanges between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Iraqi Representative to the UN, Mohammed Aldouri. The binary of a 'Bad Iraq', an uncooperative actor whose very sovereignty violated international law, saw its guilt presumed, while the US portrayed itself as embodying international law, being more empowered to safeguard Iraq's own people, the region, and the world at large, both in terms of justice as security. These international forums, despite the formal equality of states, continue to embody a deep inequality. However, post-colonial theorists do not emphasize the difference in 'capabilities' as the main cause, but rather the dominance of liberal Anglo-American views within these organizations. Aldouri's 'detailed and technical' rebuttals of Powell belie how Iraq, and similarly

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located actors in the international system, lacked any "alternative normative *discourse* to discourse what he recognized … that the US allegations were pretexts to war."[6]

Post-colonial theory also prompts a serious reconsideration of the concept of security. Owens begins with a re-examination of the concept of 'the social' and 'society', understanding it "in the context of a specific historical constellation" which developed after (rather than organically and alongside) "the rise of territorial states".[7] Her argument is too complex to reproduce in full, but her contention that the nation-state is a "distinctively modern and bureaucratic social form of household"[8] using social means to patriarchally govern 'home' and overseas populations is convincing, when looking at 'military' forms of governance and counterinsurgency by liberal states. As the American *Counterinsurgency* (COIN) *Field Manual* states: "COIN can be characterized as armed social work. It includes attempts to redress basic social and political problems while being shot at. This makes civil-military operations a central COIN activity … one means of restructuring the environment to displace the enemy from it."[9] Colonial historians have long focused on how violence and force were often used to make overseas populations 'governable', but this insight can be applied to the 'population-centric' US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Post-colonial theorists focus on how the 'Otherness' of the target population is racialized and constructed. American policy depicting Iraq as a 'tri-national state' of Kurds, Sunni and Shia, made sectarian and ethnic divides and 'factionalism' the most salient, essentialized quality of Iraq. Yet Nir Rosen argues that the very forms of protection and violence identified as 'factional' was the product of Iraqis "adapting to the American view of Iraq as a collection of sects and trying to fit into the political system the Americans were building around that idea".[10] When no weapons of mass destruction could be found, ethnographic knowledge could be deployed to persuade the population to accept a "tautological logic … counterinsurgency rule reduces counterinsurgency violence", yet it was counterinsurgency operations that in many senses reduced humans, especially women, to subjects governed by necessity, undifferentiated "objects of social administration, rather than political subjects with ideas of justice and freedom of their own."[11]

The institution of peacekeeping itself also perpetuates a neo-colonial relationship, even if the UN and its agencies help protect individuals from the violence of conflict. A world order is perpetuated which is "on the whole . . . de-historicized, leaving in place an old colonial script in which the West saves hapless refugees from their fates".[12] Peacekeepers themselves in many cases reproduced the racialized, gendered divisions they were embedded in onto the populations they were supposed to 'protect'. Consider the Aboriginal Canadian peacekeeper who rationalized his killing of a Somali teenager in 1993: "The white man feared the Indian. So too will the black man."[13] Two orders of "racialized hypermasculinity" are at work here. Military governance on the pretext of COIN, and UN peacekeeping operations in some sense represent a "state of exception" to conventional governance, where normal legal frameworks are suspended, lawful forms of conduct are irrelevant (or relieved of huge scrutiny) and coercion is at the forefront of domestic order. Yet they represent distinctly *international* forms of order too, in the sense of multinational, foreign, technocratic interventions that significantly impact present and future political rule. Liberal, rationalist values that are often uncritically upheld and applied become "rationalizations of [Western] hegemony disguised as universal humanism … self-serving misrepresentations of reason, solidarity and the common good"[14] imbuing more 'enlightened', rational entities with a mandate to speak and act on behalf of others. Post-colonial theory therefore emphasizes the neo-imperial thinking underlying COIN and peacekeeping, contra liberal theories that see the promotion of liberal values and practices in post-conflict situations as engendering peace and 'self-representation', or realist scepticism that power and capability underlie such operations, which ignores the dimension of race and gender.

The rationalist, individualist premises behind state behaviour within IR, as well as mainstream academics' confidence in the universalism of the discipline and its theories, are argued by post-colonial theorists to privilege both European frameworks and history in positing timeless, essential features in the states and societies it studies.[15] In turn this has led to anxieties of cultural conflict and clash. For instance, consider how the nation-state has become universalized as an "ideal cultural-political form of collective identity",[16] where political rule is coterminous with nationhood. The right to self-determination is enshrined in the UN Charter, a foundational document in international law,[17] and the universalistic, normative effects on international politics is evident in how globalising discourses and 'bottom-up' aspirations and political demands for sovereignty are articulated through the nation-state. In international relations' theory, the nation-state has ontological primary,[18] as the 'unitary' and 'rational' actor of neorealism, or the

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referent which is 'to be secured' in security studies. Rather than the usual critiques of realism that point out the proliferation of non-state actors or supranational organizations and their effects on global interaction, post-colonial approaches examine how the nation-state is a particular and contingent historical institution. IR theorists have also imbued this imagined political community within an anarchical 'state of nature' with unspoken expectations, namely that it should be "rational, industrial, democratic", and as Biswas is most critical of, "secular".[19] Yet this discourse of the nation-state mutually reinforces problematic narratives in IR of 'civilizational conflict'. As Said observes, 'modern', 'rational' and 'humanist' forms of truth and knowledge are thought of as 'longstanding' traditions, but were not collaboratively produced. Rather, they arose out of 'imperial' theorizing that was inaccessible (in a discursive sense) and reductionist (in how it projected 'essentialised' qualities onto 'othered' populations).[20] Orientalist discourses posit separate, unequal, hierarchical types of 'civilization', as Huntington (in)famously argues, with their boundaries to be maintained via the assertion of 'Western' values. The political rationality and instrumental goals of Islamists are overlooked and delegitimized, in favour of emphasizing 'moral intolerance', hostility to a monolithic 'West' (an expansive referent nations can imagine themselves to be in, and therefore be under threat), and 'Islamic fundamentalism, a binary that suggests an unbridgeable gulf between 'terrorists' and the 'civilized world'. Yet culture is neither fixed nor immutable, but a construction from power relations and historical encounters, and racialized interpretations. Furthermore, no single 'Islamic' culture exists, and to expose how some 'truths' in IR are construction rather than natural, fixed facts therefore requires engaging with differing 'rationalities' and viewpoints to understand how they have been marginalized within hegemonic narratives.[21]

Conclusion

Post-colonial theory challenges the validity of ideas and 'knowledge' about former colonial societies and the international order at large, but has often been accused of merely being deconstructive at the expense of a material or practical focus. I wish to conclude not with a summary of my arguments thus far, but by highlighting a few steps IR has taken (and should continue) to counter dominant discourses. Some postcolonial theorists have advocated the "political necessity of taking a stand, of *strategically* essentializing a position from the perspective of those who were and are victimized and continue to suffer".[22] Moyo has argued that transitional justice cannot proceed in a wholly liberal form while fulfilling its goals of the rule of law, democratization, and reconciliation, due to structural injustices surrounding postcolonial land conflicts that international law, with a corrective and retributive focus, is ill-equipped to deal with. Understanding how land distribution in Zimbabwe and South Africa largely follows the structures of former settler colonies and their unjust expropriations reminds us how "most postcolonial states are a creation of colonialism and as such are still grappling with issues of nationbuilding".[23] Post-colonial ideas of 'mimicry'[24] surrounding dominant discourse provides a potential recourse, in adopting 'western' notions of rule and law to be used to assert postcolonial agency while maintaining the framework of 'international law'. Zimbabwe's land reform from 1980-99 and South Africa's experiences illustrate efforts to combine western liberal market-based approaches with an adapted notion of a 'market', and the recognition of collective rights to property help further overcome the individualist assumptions of international law. Post-colonial approaches also expose how the histories and concept of indigenous people have been overlooked in projects of state-making, calling into question "whose voices may speak meaningfully in disciplinary IR".[25] Although Indigenous Americans are stateless, their situation differs qualitatively from Palestinian and Kurds, whose marginalization is more visible and whose proposed political solutions better cohere with ideas of the nation-state. Indigenous people are spatially embedded in existing territorial states, and political frameworks negotiating their relationship with ex-colonial states largely stem from treaties negotiated under extremely asymmetric power relations. Theorists have begun to incorporate them into IR studies, recognizing that their invisibility reflects the incomplete process of decolonization, assumptions of state power as monopolistic renders their political functioning and external relations indeterminate, and an IR discipline ontologically committed to a particular vision of the relation between individual, state and nation is unable to account for the fundamentally different ethical, cognitive and cosmological outlook of indigenous societies.[26]

What next, then, for IR? Agathangelou & Ling have called for an approach of 'worldism' as an alternative paradigm to world politics. Beginning with the subaltern and other worlds, IR should recognize how ordinary people already inhabit "many worlds", emphasizing the "agency of all to participate in the making of their multiple worlds through multi- and trans-subjectivities, forming a community of syncretic growth, learning and co-transformation".[27] Although such an abstract, even literary (their book concludes with a play, a reimagining of *Othello*), critical, and

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ambiguous social ontology may seem less applicable or grounded than traditional IR approaches, it is precisely the hegemonic binary of a Self vs. Other and other dominant imaginaries which has proved so dangerous in contemporary IR theory and practices. Overcoming the "seductions of empire"[28] remains an ongoing project.

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Notes

[1] Keohane 1993: 192, quoted in Agathangelou & Ling 2009.

[2] Waltz 1979: 93

[3] Of course, this line is from the Melian Dialogues. As an undergraduate I can attest to the commonplace quoting from Thucydides at introductory lectures, and as an internet user following various foreign policy practitioners (Singaporean or otherwise) I can attest to how it can be repeated *ad nauseum.*

[4] Agathangelou & Ling 2009: 15

[5] Ibid: 21

[6] Ibid: 24

[7]   Owens 2015: 9

[8]   Ibid

[9]   Quoted in Owens 2015: 26

[10] Quoted in Owens 2015: 263

[11] Owens 2015: 265, 271

[12] Mallkii, quoted in Agathangelou & Ling 2009: 39

[13] Quoted in Agathangelou & Ling 2009: 39

[14] Grovogui 2013: 252, "*Postcolonialism*", in Dunne. et al

[15] Grovogui 2013: 248

[16] Biswas 2002b: 184

[17] UN Charter, Chapter I.

[18] Biswas 2002b: 177

[19] Biswas 2002a: 185, "*Secularism and Orientalism in IR*", in Chowdhury & Nair ed.

[20] Said 1978: 7

[21] Beier 2002: 102, *"Beyond hegemonic state(ment)s of nature: indigenous knowledge and non-state possibilities in international relations"*, in Chowdhury & Nair ed.

[22] Quoted in Chowdhury & Nair 2002: 25

[23] Moyo 2015: 78

[24] This has been argued most notably by Homi Bhabha, and for a time advocated by Spivak.

[25] Beier 2002: 83

[26] Beier 2002: 103

[27] Agathangelou & Ling 2009: 144

[28] Ibid: 137