

# The Validity of a Postcolonial Account of World Politics

Written by Joe Sutcliffe

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## The Validity of a Postcolonial Account of World Politics

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JOE SUTCLIFFE, JUN 23 2011

This essay will argue in favour of a Postcolonial account of world politics. It must be noted that as penetrative critiques of Eurocentric historiography can be found elsewhere, this essay begins from a position of basic acquiescence with the beliefs and ideas of the Postcolonial approach, and only a basic critique of Eurocentric conceptualisations of world politics will be offered. Whilst it is certainly true that Postcolonialism entails a 'multiplicity of perspectives, traditions, and approaches to questions of identity, culture, and power' and spans across many academic disciplines, this essay will seek to draw together the major strands of argument which bind the Postcolonial approach as a whole.[1] These will be understood as: the rehabilitation of Eastern agency and subaltern voices within history, the hybrid nature of societies and the power of identity and cultural discourses. Through critical engagement with these tenets, a set of theoretical tensions which underlie them will be highlighted. These issues within Postcolonialism can be understood as: the construction of monolithic theories when attempting to promote Eastern agency, issues of essentialism when attempting to promote civilisational hybridity, and the denigration of the material when attempting to promote localised heterogeneity. Whilst inescapably interrelated, I will engage with these debates in attempting to form a conceptualisation of my own personal position within Postcolonialism and to show how these debates inform the Idealist and Purist strains within the approach. These should not be understood as polarised absolutist positions, but as generalised broad churches within which most Postcolonial scholars could be placed on a simplified reading of their work. As such, they act as theoretical aids as opposed to concrete classifications. Whilst both Idealists and Purists are wedded to an active 'process of postcolonializing', the former views this as an ethical project – including materialist considerations and attempted ethical judgement – whilst the latter prefers relativist deconstruction, concentrating on localised discourse analysis.[2] In accepting my own Idealist slant to Postcolonialism, I will conclude by explaining how these two broad strains of Postcolonialism are both necessary to the approach, and how their interaction and continued debate increases the efficacy of Postcolonialism as a paradigm through which to attempt to understand world politics.

To begin, the first central tenet of Postcolonialism can be seen to be its quest to bring Eastern agency back into history and world politics. The paradigm focuses on bringing forward the voices of the subaltern and revealing how they have been active shapers in not only their own history, but in world history as well. It is certainly true that 'it seems entirely natural or self-evident to most of us to conflate the progressive story of world history with the Rise and Triumph of the West,' even though such a belief makes the East a 'passive bystander in the story of world historical development as well as a victim or bearer of Western power'.[3] Postcolonial theory critiques and deconstructs such a perception, offering a 'reconsideration of (colonial) history, particularly from the perspectives of those who suffered its effects, together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact'.[4] Many historians have offered studies which reveal the extent to which the colonised had agency within their own history, and were not simply passive receptors of colonial power. Indeed, Sara Berry reveals how during indirect rule, 'Africans took advantage of officials' interest in tradition to offer evidence favourable to their own interests' and often managed to gain access to productive resources.[5] In this way, we can see how 'Postcolonial theory encourages a refocusing of IR, away from the traditional domain of states, militaries, and diplomacy, toward people, identities, and resistance.'[6] Postcolonialism therefore extends the legitimate areas of study in International Relations (IR) away from simply the West, with its strong military and economic powers, and into the East and those who would usually be considered weak – and therefore nondescript – in the international system. This takes us beyond Realism and its exclusive focus on Western great powers, and also Gramscian Marxism with its more nuanced but nevertheless absolutist take on Western hegemony. The weak and subaltern voices within world politics do in fact have agency within the

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dominant Western system.

Whilst convincing, I would argue there is an obvious theoretical issue beneath this central ideal of revealing Eastern agency which begets Postcolonialism as a paradigm. This can be understood as a lack of historical depth. Postcolonialism has tended to periodise history into the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, with the colonial privileged as 'the principle of structuration in that history'.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, in its attempt to reveal Eastern agency, Postcolonialism has privileged the formal colonial period, and the lasting effects of this, as a monolithic theoretical construct which focuses and directs all Postcolonial analysis. Unfortunately, such a periodisation obscures the fact that the processes by which an identity of European exceptionalism and Eastern barbarity – conceptualised under Said's famous rubric, 'Orientalism' – were born began during the construction of a European identity, part of the process of which can be seen in the cultural encounters between the Spaniards and Amerindians.<sup>[8]</sup> That these encounters and the construction of a distinctive European identity naturalised 'the culturally peculiar path of Western development based on private property and state-formation' and began to set the 'distinction between inside and outside' reveals Orientalism before the historically infamous colonial period, and therefore must be of concern to Postcolonialism.<sup>[9]</sup> Furthermore, the quest to deconstruct such a mode of thought must surely seek to reveal Eastern agency before colonialism if it is going to effectively challenge Eurocentric historiography. The work of scholars such as Hobson, whilst not being explicitly Postcolonial, have revealed the fallaciousness of European exceptionalism by revealing how 'the diffusion of best-practice (i.e. Eastern) 'resource portfolios' through oriental globalisation was so significant that it underpinned the rise of the West'.<sup>[10]</sup> Postcolonialism must therefore move beyond the tunnel-vision it currently suffers and open up its analytical focus, especially when considering the relevance of earlier historical periods for the approach, as is revealed by Hobson.

However, a further problem of a monolithic construction of Postcolonial theory can be found here, which at times can stymie the validity of Postcolonialism. Hobson asserts that 'all the major anti-Eurocentric scholars seek to entirely discount the agency of the West,' and this surely poses a problem for Postcolonial theory.<sup>[11]</sup> Many theorists, in attempting to dodge the charge of continuing the cause of European exceptionalism, have been found guilty of elevating the historical role of the East to the complete expense of the West. Again, in attempting to draw out Eastern agency, Postcolonialism has constructed a monolithic theoretical construct, legitimating only that which is non-Western as cause for analysis. Such a position is in serious danger of advocating Eastern exceptionalism, or 'Occidentalism', a view of world history and politics no more applicable than Eurocentrism.<sup>[12]</sup> It is a mistake 'to name the impact of...anti-European thought on European thought as itself European' as to do so is simply to create a bipolarity, and to assuage that only that which is non-Western can effectively criticise the West.<sup>[13]</sup> This is despite the vehemently critical stance towards Western orientalism seen by those who are themselves of the West, and is also a somewhat supercilious criticism when considering that many of those who level such a charge are themselves the product of Western educational systems, often engaging in Postcolonial critique from within Western institutions of higher education. Therefore, if the East and West are seen to hold a 'constitutive relationship... in which the two produce and reinforce the identity of each other' and these are seen as 'key insights and concerns of postcolonial thinking' then agency must be granted to both if Postcolonialism is to hold any validity as a paradigm with which to try and understand world politics.<sup>[14]</sup>

Upon this realisation of the connection and constitutive relationship of the East and West, the next tent of Postcolonialism will be discussed; the hybrid nature of civilisations. Postcolonialism attempts to deconstruct 'orientalist binary categorisation (eg master-slave, coloniser-colonised, civilised-uncivilised, white-black), into which the 'other' is invariably incorporate' and 'seeks to preserve heterogeneity'.<sup>[15]</sup> These dichotomies of self and other are revealed to be Orientalist in holding schemas of triumphalist European historiography which 'justify imperial political economies, and their systems of laws and morals'; the perception imbued within much of the orthodox IR theory that informs world politics.<sup>[16]</sup> This is reflected in Huntington's thesis on 'The Clash of Civilisations', where he argues that 'Western civilisation is both Western and modern', and that 'non-Western civilisations have attempted to become modern without becoming Western'.<sup>[17]</sup> These beliefs in the primacy of the West as the sole bearer of modernity, and the East as an irrational and potentially dangerous entity ignore the osmotic and mutually constitutive nature of civilisations throughout history. After all, 'the creative adaptation, interpretation and transformation of Western cultural symbols and practices' in colonial societies reveals hybridisation, alongside the fact that 'colonialism irrevocably transformed the identities of those involved, on *both* sides'.<sup>[18]</sup> As such, the point is not just that the

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subalterns had agency, it is that this agency shaped the identity of the colonisers and vice versa. The dichotomies of self and other created through Orientalism can therefore be deconstructed, as no such line exists within this mutually constitutive relationship. Such an understanding of the hybridisation of identity has clear implications for orthodox IR approaches and the idea of a Huntington-esque clash of civilisations, especially when considering hybridity 'as a measure of local agency in the face of globalization'.[19]

However, an immediate problem can be seen here in regards to hybridity. If bipolarity and dichotomy in world politics is to be deconstructed and hybridity recognised, then why does Postcolonialism insist on retaining the use of East and West as units for analysis? It can be argued that using these labels is useful in order to reveal how the East has been an active historical player but retaining the dichotomy seems to reify the inherent difference between the two, as opposed to promoting hybridisation of culture. This may appear similar to previous problems with Postcolonial scholars removing agency from the West, but there is a subtle difference. Under this formulation, even if Postcolonial scholars have accepted the agency of the West throughout history, both the Eastern and Western identities become homogenised under a dichotomy of essentialist understandings of their respective agency during the discourse of cultural interaction. Indeed, some have criticised Said for 'constructing an idea of the other which is too monolithic', and in a similar vein, Bhabha and Spivak have been criticised for their 'depiction of all 'native' resistances to colonialism as 'essentialist''.[20] We can therefore see how in painting a unified identity for the colonised – and indeed for colonial resistance movements – as well as viewing Western responses to colonialism as unanimously Orientalist in its most strident sense, Postcolonialism may well be in danger of homogenising actors in both the East and West and as such, neglecting the hybridisation involved in their colonial interaction and indeed the interaction of civilisations before colonialism. Postcolonial scholars therefore need to be careful when utilising the language of East and West, as they run the danger of reifying a dichromatic and essentialist system whilst attempting to falsify it.

This brings us to the third tenet of Postcolonialism under discussion; the importance of cultural identity and the discourse-power nexus within world politics. Postcolonialism is an anti-positivist position which advocates that 'the idea that one can adjudicate between competing (empirical) claims...in an ontologically agnostic and innocent way is itself mistaken', and Orientalism can therefore be understood as an ontological lens through which many in the West perceive the world. [21] However, this Orientalist lens creates 'regimes of truth' which ensure that "'international reality" and "international existence" have remained grounded in Western institutional and discursive practices so as to reflect and affirm parochial structures of power, interest and identity'. [22] The very idea of Western exceptionalism and Orientalism are not just unfortunate perceptions which require refuting, they are reifying structural forces which help to recreate a world of western dominance. Therefore, localised forms of discourse analysis are required to break down Western dichotomies and social truths, revealing the hybridity of our supposedly essentialist and distinct societies. Such a process has serious implications for the orthodox approaches to IR which are beget by the Orientalist lens, with their insistence on essentialist material analyses which supposedly reveal the inherent and set actions of states as power maximisers. The suspicion of many Postcolonialists towards materialism is precisely because of this essentialist schema attached to their usage. The fact that China did not act imperialistically during its long reign as the leading global power reveals that such a deterministic view of IR is simply ill-founded.[23] Postcolonialism, as a critical approach, reveals how identity formation and discursive factors play a large role in affecting the actions of individual and collective actors, and therefore textual analysis is vital for an understanding of hybridity and the continuation of Orientalism.

However, a valid criticism has been levelled against Postcolonialism in this regard, pertaining that the paradigm has simply gone to bed with Post-Structuralism, and has attempted to completely remove material factors from analysis. It is certainly true that Postcolonialism owes much to Post-Structuralism, with Edward Said drawing inspiration from the works of Michel Foucault, and with the field being born mostly from literary studies and discourse analysis. Without an appreciation of material factors within analysis, the unequal power distribution of colonialism at times is almost lost. Indeed, Mamdani points out that in attempting to reveal African agency, a somewhat perverse turnaround has occurred amongst some Postcolonial scholars where 'modern imperialism is-shall I say celebrated-as the outcome of an African initiative!'. [24] Colonialism necessarily involved the material dominance of the West over the East, and whilst the constitutive nature of this interaction has been shown, Eastern actors surely cannot be elevated to the status of equal partners in the exchange during, or indeed after, colonialism. Furthermore, Postcolonialism cannot relegate itself to pure discourse analysis as 'such criticism explores the *representation* of

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colonial or postcolonial contexts but refuses any direct connection between the text and the real world'.[25] Marxist scholars have led such a charge against Postcolonialism, critiquing its post-structuralist slant as 'a conspiracy of silence about the inequalities of the neo-colonial world order'.[26] After all, 'the ability to mock power or retell history may well demonstrate the agency of the subaltern, but . . . this does little to actually change the distribution of resources domestically or globally'.[27]

This argument leads us directly to the tension within Postcolonialism between those who see a need for an active ethical project and those who argue for a more distant deconstruction. Most Postcolonial scholars would affirm to Quayson's understanding of the 'process of postcolonializing', stipulating 'the critical process by which to relate modern-day phenomena to their explicit, implicit, or even potential relations to this fraught (colonial) heritage'[28] Furthermore, most would also agree that postcolonialising involved finding 'new conceptual modes of resisting, challenging and even transforming prejudicial forms of knowledge'.[29] However the way in which such a process is perceived hinges upon the scholars responses to the debates over Eastern agency, hybridisation, and cultural and identity discourses outlined above.

The theoretical Purists can be seen to be much more wedded to a post-structuralist perspective, evidenced in their tendency to view any form of materialism with suspicion, as 'essentialism is a trap'.[30] Purists would argue that Postcolonial 'logic is not to provide truth against falsity . . . rather, its generic distinction is to question genre . . . a means to dissolve the very classifications and divisions that have produced it.'[31] Purists do not wish to be caught in essentialist traps which reify Orientalist discourses, something they accuse the advocates of more materialist analysis of doing. As such, Purists engage with very localised discourse analyses, of the Foucauldian variety, in order to reveal the 'discontinuity, heterogeneity and diversity (which) are perhaps the field's recurring markers'.[32] However, in response to the materialist criticisms above, such Purists would argue that this in fact does not divorce them from real issues of inequality. A deconstruction of Orientalist perceptions, through revealing hybridity and subaltern agency, involves a 'disruption and transformation of our epistemic and discursive universes', and these deconstructions should be seen as 'attempts to undo the generic fix of nefarious forms of authority' which through this process are revealed to be socially contingent.[33] If the Orientalist discourse is effectively deconstructed and shown to be socially contingent, then structural and material changes follow as a result of this, as 'discourses are practices that have material effects'.[34] Therefore, suspicion towards essentialism does not negate the possibilities of material transformation and Purists would argue the case against them stems from a fundamental misreading of their emphasis on discourse analysis.

However, my own perception of Postcolonialism hinges around a stronger, affirmative process of postcolonialising which attempts to 'redress current imbalances of power and resources in the pursuit of more just and equitable societies'.[35] My personal view of the inner tensions which underlie the key tenets of Postcolonialism can therefore be seen to be Idealist, advocating an ethical project of Postcolonialism. Such an approach stipulates the need to utilise Postcolonialism in dealing with material inequality more directly and forcefully. It can be seen that Idealists, such as Robert Young and Ato Quayson, tend to hold a Marxist influence. However, such an ethical project avoids the determinism and Orientalism of Marxism by undermining its Eurocentric historiography. Furthermore, by utilising localised, post-structuralist inspired discourse analysis to reveal heterogeneity and agency, as well as the hybridisation of cultures and civilisations, Idealists are capable of appreciating cultural discourses alongside and within the material contexts they are dealing with. Idealists therefore, attempt to show 'how postcolonial interventions impinge, in turn, on global power' by expanding Postcolonial analysis away from its 'radically particularised' post-structuralist form and applying it to contemporary cases of inequality.[36] If, in the process, the risk of 'being thought prescriptive and hegemonic' is run, then the loss of absolute theoretical purity is surely a worthwhile price to pay in order to engage with an activist project of challenging and altering dominant Orientalist discourses and material structures.[37] Indeed, when considering that some Purists have been so concerned with not falling into essentialism that they have counter-productively created monolithic theoretical constructs against all Western agency, then the justification of the Idealists cautious flirtations with materialism seem all the stronger.

However, I do not intend to elevate my own perception of the Postcolonial project entirely. I would argue that in order to deconstruct some of the theoretical constructs it has set itself, Postcolonialism as a whole needs to extend its historical depth and accept a more holistic appreciation that Western agency must be considered. However, one of

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the greatest tenets of Postcolonialism is in fact its methodological and disciplinary eclecticism and this actually furthers its efficacy as an approach with which to understand world politics. The divide between 'activist engagement' and 'distanced participation' can be seen to be a self-reflective relationship.[38] The Purists critique the Idealists when their counter-hegemonic analysis begins to become counter-productive in its homogenising and essentialist tendencies, whilst the Idealists negate the worst ivory tower philosophising of the Purists and force them to interact with the active project of postcolonialising. Indeed, recent times has seen an understanding that 'materialism and culturalism are not incompatible approaches' and that 'poststructuralism and materialism should become common, shared tools within postcolonial studies'.[39] It can therefore be seen that Postcolonialism as a diverse and self-critical paradigm offers great opportunities for the process of postcolonialising, and this further affirms its convincing portrayal of world politics.

In conclusion, this essay has argued in favour of a Postcolonial understanding of world politics. A basic explanation of the core theoretical tenets of Postcolonialism in the face of Orientalist perceptions of world politics have provided us with a grounding of how convincing the approach is in deconstructing these perceptions. The underlying theoretical issues surrounding these core tenets have also been explored, and some issues from which Postcolonialism could make itself more convincing as a mode of critique have been addressed. This includes the tendency to create monolithic theoretical constructs, with the need for increased historical depth and an appreciation of Western agency being revealed as necessary for a truly non-essentialist Postcolonialism. Furthermore, the problems of essentialism when dealing with the analytical tools of East and West has also been analysed, and the need for localised discourse analysis in order to preserve heterogeneity of agency and hybridity has been emphasised. It is hoped that through aiding Postcolonialism in its attempts to steer clear of essentialism and the reification of Orientalism, these considerations will have revealed an increased efficacy for the Postcolonial approach in world politics, especially in the face of its detractors. However, the tensions between Idealists and Purists – with their disagreements on the status of the material and the cultural and respective concerns over essentialisms within Postcolonialism – have been addressed not to detract from the ability of the approach to convince, but as an asset to Postcolonialism and its ability to apply itself to world politics. Whilst my personal preferences steer me closer to the Idealist mould, I would argue that nevertheless a Purist's perspective is necessary in negating the worst excesses of Idealism, as is the latter necessary in doing so for the former. Such paradigmatic vibrancy can only be a good thing for Postcolonialism and the self-critical arena that this has created means that the approach will go from strength to strength in its project of postcolonialising the dominant mode of Orientalism.

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