

Postcolonialism

Written by Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Dana Gold

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This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

Postcolonialism focuses its critique on the inequality between states or regions, as opposed to classes. The effects of colonialism are still felt in many regions of the world today as local populations continue to deal with the challenges created and left behind by the former colonial powers. Postcolonialism's origins can be traced to the Cold War period when much international activity centred around decolonisation and the ambition to undo the legacies of European imperialism. With the independence movements of the twentieth century, the peoples of the Global South rebelled 'against the false belief that providence created some to be menials of others' (Nkrumah 1963, ix). Central to postcolonial scholarship is the idea that the prejudices, biases, ideas and understandings that made colonialism possible in the first place did not disappear overnight with the granting of independence to former colonies. For centuries, Europeans believed they were best placed to rule the world, as was outlined in Chapter three. While they may have been forced to renounce most of their territorial claims, Western states are far from treating the former colonies as their equals – despite what the principle of sovereignty asserts. Postcolonial theory offers a way to identify these 'neocolonial' practices that create and then reproduce global inequalities.

For postcolonial scholars, an important endeavour is to highlight the colonial legacies that created current inequalities and the neocolonial power structures that reproduce them. Take, for example, a dominant image in the West of the continent of Africa as a place in need of financial aid, a moral burden, a drain on resources. Yet, Africa is also a place of great wealth and resources that have consistently been extracted (taken) by outsiders. Underlining the postcolonial critique further, while they may no longer be under direct colonial control, two-thirds of the world's poor live in states that are rich in natural resources. One of the main reasons for this is that cash crops and valuable minerals are still extracted and exported to the Global North – now by transnational corporations instead of colonial governments. Struggling economies of the Global South compete to attract transnational corporations for the employment and revenues they will bring. Yet in order to do so, they join a 'race to the bottom', pitting countries against one another for who can offer the lowest taxes and cheapest labour and thus the greatest profits.

A pivotal work in postcolonialism is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) which explores how representations in poetry, literature, philosophy and political theory of the 'Orient' – predominantly North Africa, the Middle East and Asia – constructed it as a place waiting for Western exploration and domination. Said documented how the East was constructed by the West as an exotic and enchanting place, full of religious fanaticism, despotic leaders, irrational men and beautiful but oppressed women who could not speak for themselves. It was represented in a way that always implied an unfavourable comparison to the West, which was assumed to be a place of rationality and reason, Christianity and secularism, democracy and enlightenment. Said argued that these representations became dominant and it became almost impossible to think or speak outside of them.

Text adapted from McGlinchey, Stephen (2022) *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

For much more on postcolonialism and other theories, you can download the free textbook, *International Relations Theory*.

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Below is a collection of freely accessible multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of postcolonialism to International Relations.

Getting started with postcolonialism

Engaging with postcolonial theory and related debates

Introducing Postcolonialism in International Relations Theory – article

The United Nations and Postcolonial Privilege: International Responses to the Arab Spring – article

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