

# POST COLONIALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY: ETHICS, KNOWLEDGE AND ORIENTALISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorisinde Sömürge Sonrası: Etik, Bilgi ve Oryantalizm

**ÖZ:** Scot'a (1999) göre, postkolonyalizmin eleştirel yapılandırmacı bir yönü vardır. Yani hâlihazırda var olan normların anlaşılması düzlemlerinde yalnızca yakınsaklık noktaları aramaz. Postkolonyalizm, insan toplumlarının gidişatına ilişkin koşullu ve empatik anlayışlara dayalı yeni siyaset biçimleri üretmeyi amaçlar. Bu anlamda postkolonyalizm, kolonyalizmden sonra bir etik ve politik olasılıklar duygusu taşır. Eşitlikçilik, sosyal adalet ve dayanışma ahlakını destekler. Kendi makullüğüne ve dürüstlüğüne inanmaktadır (Scott, 1999). Postkolonyalizm, uluslararası toplumun diğer üyelerine karşı sorumlulukları ve görevleri vardır. Postkolonyalizm, aslında, küresel endişe sorunları üzerinde işlevsel bir anlaşmaya varmak amacıyla çeşitli siyasi oluşumlar arasında müzakere ve çekişmeye dayanan farklı bir evrensellik türünü arzular. Bu tür bir evrensellik, kendinden emin öznelerin evrensel buyruklarından kaynaklanan bir evrensellikten farklıdır. Bu bağlamda, postkolonyalizm, siyasette iç, ulusal ve uluslararası alanlar arasında ayırım yapmayan tutarlı pozisyonlar sürdürmektedir. Uluslararası örnekte, postkolonyalizm, hegemonik güçlerin post-kolonyal devletleri uluslararası sistemin karar alma süreçlerine entegre etmedeki başarısızlığının farkındadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Uluslararası ilişkiler, Politik teori, Sömürge sonrası, Etik, Bilgi

**ABSTRACT:** For Scot (1999), postcolonialism has a critical constructionist dimension; that is, it does not merely seek out points of convergence on planes of understanding of already-existing norms. Postcolonialism aspires to produce new forms of politics based on contingent and empathetic understandings of the trajectories of human societies. In this sense, postcolonialism conveys a sense of ethical and political possibilities after colonialism. It favors an ethos of egalitarianism, social justice, and solidarity. It has faith in its own reasonableness and decency (Scott, 1999). Postcolonialism is also certain of its responsibility and duty toward other members of the international community. Postcolonialism, in fact, aspires to a different kind of universalism, one based on deliberation and contestation among diverse political entities, with the aim of reaching functional agreement on questions of global concern. This kind of universalism differs from one resulting from universal injunctions by self-assured subjects. In these regards, postcolonialism maintains consistent positions on politics that do not distinguish between the domestic, national, and international spheres. In the international instance, postcolonialism is mindful of the failure of hegemonic powers to integrate post-colonial states into the decision-making processes of the international system.

**Keywords:** International relations, Political theory, postcolonialism, Ethics, Knowledge

## Introduction

Before we define and describe what postcolonialism is, first of all, it is important to articulate what it is not. Postcolonial theory is such a broad and diverse collection of ideas that in order to clarify its core, it is necessary to brush away the misconceptions and misunderstandings from the periphery in order to set the boundaries. Some scholars may argue that, "postcolonialism is simply a lens through which we study literature for colonized countries or postcolonial treatments (Chinua Achebe, 2009). These problems include, however aren't restrained to, problems of identity, culture, politics, and economics.

Seth, Sanjay (2011) in his introduction to "Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction"—a collection of essays critiquing IR from a postcolonial perspective, defines postcolonialism as "not an attempt to elaborate a theory of the world as it would look from the vantage point of the Third World or developing world or the global South," (Sanjay Seth, 2011: 12). He goes on to say that it is also "not an attempt to foster a 'non-Western IR'. Explaining that postcolonialism endeavors to go beyond such narrow concerns to tackle much broader epistemological issues such as questioning "the

universality of the categories of modern social scientific thought” (Sanjay Seth, 2011: *ibid*), and challenging and critiquing current disciplines, of which international relations is one.

Siba N. Grovogui (2013) in the postcolonialism chapter of the textbook “International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity,” he uses the term “to introduce a multiplicity of perspectives, traditions, and approaches to questions of identity, culture, and power,” identifying multiple origins of such thought, including Asia, Africa, Latin America, Australia, , and the ‘New World’.<sup>1</sup> He highlights the aspirations of postcolonialism to “participate in the creation of ‘truths’ a privilege so long denied to the non-Western world (Grovogui, 2013: 248).

As such, postcolonialism challenges a number of rationalist, humanist, and Universalist views, particularly those that claim the implicit superiority of European forms of reason, morals, and law. It also applies local histories and culture to modern categories of signification and “rejects ‘native essentialism’, or the idea that natives bore essential and timeless features” (Grovogui, 2013: 247). On the other hand, L.H.M. Ling’s “Postcolonial International Relations” provides an excellent framework for this kind of interstitial learning through a dialogic understanding of international relations. She criticizes the discipline of international relations as reflecting a (neo) realist world view “where rationality equates with a cost-benefit calculus of ‘ordered preferences’ in an anarchic world filled with ever-competing, ever-power-mongering states,” (Ling, 2002). For Ling (2002), is in the aftermath of imperialism, ideally unfolding postcolonially “from the interstices of power, where ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ collide, overlap, and contradict.” (Ling, 2002:132). However, John M. Hobson presents just such a critique in his essay “The Other Side of the Westphalian Frontier,” the chapter that follows Seth’s essay in “Postcolonial Theory and International Relations: A Critical Introduction” (the first and the second chapter). He asked as question what he refers to as the “Eurocentric big bang theory,”<sup>4</sup> (which posits that the “big bang of modernity [exploded] within Europe in 1648” and was “exported to the East through imperialism and proto- globalization,” arguing instead that the European international order “can best be understood through the ‘dialogue of civilizations’...the diffusion of Eastern ‘resource portfolios’ (ideas, institutions, and technologies) that traversed across the Oriental global economy to be assimilated by the Europeans” in their formulations of the Westphalian international order.

Grovogui (2013) highlight the insufficiencies of current international norms as means to international justice. The second is to illustrate the postcolonial ambition to undo the legacies of European imperialism (when Europe unilaterally projected power abroad) and colonialism (or settlement and rule over others) in order to transform the international order and associated notions of community, society, and morality.

There are four sections in his paper. The First part explores the prospect of international morality and ethics in postcolonialism (Fanon 1968; Césaire, 2000; Said, 1978; Ashcroft et al. 1989; Chatterjee 1986). In This section he touches upon Kantian notions of international morality and pacific union under republicanism. The Second part discusses Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as one stream of postcolonial discussions of political subjectivity and identity (Bhabha, 1994; Anzaldúa, 1987; Moreiras, 2001), followed by a discussion of power and international legitimacy.

### **Postcolonialism and ethics**

Postcolonialism, international order and Society are always associated in political economy terms with specific kinds of violence (Hulme, 1992; Cheyfitz, 1997). Thus this association is not new; nor does it imply that one should give up on the idea of global orders. In the first instance, postcolonial critics find inspirations from a vast community of ecclesiastic, ethical, and moral thinkers worldwide who believed in the idea of common society of ‘brotherhood’ but expressed misgivings about the methods chosen by Europe to bring it about. Beginning with the conquest of the Americas, upon Christopher Columbus’s ‘discovery’, Friars Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de las Casas initiated the first protests against the treatment of native populations (Galeano, 1985: 57-84; Grovogui, 2013).

In another instance, postcolonialism is cognizant that protests by the likes of Las Casas, although significant, did not prevent modern European imperialism, colonization, and colonialism. It also acknowledges that the institutions of modern European empires, settlements, and colonies laid the foundations for what our discipline calls alternatively international order, community, and/or society. In short, the coming together of the world as a single unit is one of the hallmarks of the modernity instigated by Europe. Postcolonialism perceives an irony in this event where others might not (Grovogui, 2013).

As Argued by Grovogui (2013) in any case, postcolonialism does not take it for granted that the received world is pre-ordained and given by force of nature: the world cannot be unmade but its base institutions and systems of value and interest can be refashioned to reflect today's communities. In this regard too, postcolonialism has antecedents in revolts and revolutions by slave and colonial populations that sought justice in their particular locales by rejecting the moral, legal, and cultural foundations of their enslavement (Grovogui, 2013: 249).

### **Postcolonialism and the Production of Knowledge**

According to Grovogui (2013), postcolonialism today holds the motives and intentions of advocates of global institutions and systems of values separate from discussions of the systems of truths, values, and institutions that must shape the international or global order. Beginning with 'truths', postcolonialism notes that knowledge, or what is said to be, is never a full account of events. Gaps between what is said to have happened and what actually happened can be understood frequently by examining how imperial and colonial structures shaped such institutions as academic research.

Talal Asad (1983) and Said (1978), this enterprise was not a collaborative undertaking that involved 'natives' in the conceptions and implementation of its objectives. The knowledge resulting from 'observations' of and about 'natives' was neither constitutively native knowledge nor based on native concerns. Finally, imperial knowledge was not universally accessible to natives. Not even the most dedicated metropolitan observers could make up for the political and economic processes that left vast majorities of colonial populations in abject poverty and illiteracy (Talal, 1983; Said, 1978).

However, Postcolonialism disputes the validity of ideas and commonplaces that figure authoritatively in academic and public discourses as 'expert knowledges' about the former colonial expanses. These ideas and commonplaces include notions of the inherence of labour, property, enterprise and capacity in race, culture, and the environment—which once served as justifications of imperialism and its distribution of value (Cohn, 1996).

Some also argue that, in postcolonialism, there are dispute propositions by rationalists and critical theorists that Western methods, particularly rationalism and humanism, suffice as context for critiques of imperialism and colonialism and, by this token, offer the way to comfort and salvation for others (Césaire, 2000; James and DuBois, 1989). Furthermore, there is somewhat called 'obstinacy' in the belief that the West has sole responsibility for charting the course of human history (Prakash, 1999). Others noted the postcolonialism as skeptical of the prevailing rationalities and historical justifications of empire (Chakrabarty, 2000). Even related representations of the ends of imperialism and colonialism are self-serving (Prakash, 1999).

To summarize, as argued by Dirks (2001), finally, postcolonialism is suspicious of colonial ethnography and its accounts of cultures, rituals, and their significations. More often than not, the social structures and rituals 'discovered' by colonial ethnographers reflected their own 'castes of mind' which were frequently at odds with what existed (Dirks, 2001). Others noted there was a deep racism in colonial understandings; this was deeply steeped in alternate forms of natural history and/or scientific racism which divided humanity into races, ethnic groups, heathens, and barbarians (Bensmaia, 2003).

### **Postcolonialism and Orientalism**

In the literature, postcolonialism has been associated with the study of identities and cultures. If you look it, you will see that this is because the concept brings to mind such works as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978); Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (1987); Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986); Homi Bhaba's *The Location of Culture* (1994); Bill Ashcroft et al.'s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989); and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). All these Authors and their texts have equivalencies in the French, Spanish, and Chinese speaking worlds.

Collectively, they have generated and supported scholarly genres and journals, including *Subaltern Studies*, *Presence Africaine*, and more recently *Nepantla*. Yet, contrary to what has been charged (Hopkins, 1997; Todorov, 1997), the postcolonial attention to identity and culture is neither chauvinism nor an endorsement of essentialism—the idea that identities and culture have their own essential features which are impermeable to those of others.

In Africa, for instance, few postcolonial theorists would use the idea of nation without a degree of dread. This is because the colonial populations that now form African 'nations' cannot be said to be linguistically or culturally coherent entities outside of a European frame of reference. Frequently, African states brought together under the umbrella of the nation are groups that speak different languages and that a mere century ago lived in separate political spaces under their own rules.

The processes of self-invention and self-determination produced real effects in these contexts, for instance, they allowed formerly colonial populations, such as tribes in Africa, to divest themselves of colonial subjectivity in favour of new institutions, including nations. It follows that, in these contexts, notions of authenticity, indigeneity, and the like are embraced anew but not for their prior implications which suggested inherent and fixed qualities. They are embraced because they give historical credibility or legitimacy to political or ethical projects on account of authorship (Warrrior, 1997; Memmi, 1965).

Postcolonialism acknowledges the possibilities, that is, dangers and opportunities, contained in these rapid transformations in identity and culture particularly with respect to historical Western views of 'natives' as the modern 'barbarians'. To illustrate these points, let's return to Said's most celebrated and controversial book, *Orientalism*. The title describes its object as a phenomenon born of Europe's dominance of the world, including the Middle East.

According to Said, Orientalism is not simply the space called the Orient because it is situated east of Europe. Rather, Orientalism is a technique of power based in language and processes of translation of the identities, cultures, and religion of the Middle East. Through these techniques, European (and Western) intellectuals and public officers created a mythical space that only partially bore resemblance to the place it described. Through readings of English texts, Said illustrates how colonial representations of the (formerly) colonized are institutionalized as instruments and/or features of cultural dominance. Accordingly, Orientalist texts have material existence that can be detected in the context of actual strategies of textual production.<sup>6</sup>

The major critique of postcolonialism to Western tradition

Scott (1999) surmises that, postcolonial examinations of reason, history, and culture are necessary steps to re-envisioning the future (Scott, 1999). For him, postcolonialism forwards omitted or devalued *ways of knowing* and their base-practices, or institutions, as possible expressions of valid moral concerns and, therefore, as the basis for valid formulations of value and interest. The postcolonial approach to knowledge upholds the principle of coexistence while rejecting erroneous ideas. In the first instance, postcolonialism recognizes the intrinsic merits of Western attempts and the intellectual prowess of the iconic figures that stand behind them— from Herodotus to Machiavelli, Kant, and beyond (Scott, *ibid*).

Most of the postcolonial readers take Western iconic texts with degrees of irony—and depressing. For example Immanuel Kant, for instance. Kant has been recently lauded by an assortment of institutionalists who praise his republican ideas as foundation for a plausible democratic peace in a pacific union under cosmopolitan law (Doyle, 1997; Russett, 1993).

Postcolonialism does not scorn such praises, but asks questions about the logic of an international order founded upon Kant's ideas. Specifically, they always return to gaps in Kant's representations of the eighteenth century and the implications of such gaps for the validity of his theory. This 'return' to the source then serves as metaphor and a point of criticism for today's institutionalists who would change the present world without due attention to its complexity and the diverse stakes involved in change. Irrespective of whether they hold that Kant was racist like many of his contemporaries, postcolonial scholars generally take issue with today's readings of Kant.

There are more complex arguments that cannot be observed in this paper, but imagine, if you will, writing about moral commands, ethics, and pacific union. Imagine that you live in an era when slavery was both the reality and the most potent metaphor for the absence of liberty (Trouillot, 1995).

There are great postcolonial suspicions about Kant's moral imperatives. From one perspective, Kant's account of the picturesque denigrates prior enactments of 'pacific union' in places beyond Europe well before the birth of European enlightenment. When imperialism transformed colonial landscapes, the picturesque was more like an assemblage of scenes of intended (unintended) crimes. The picturesque quickly lost its luster and reveals itself as an imperial cartography in which the cosmopolitan sentiment

of empathy (or colonial trusteeship) is inserted into a politics of repression, and expropriation through broken treaties and violence. This conclusion raises question about Kant's ethical and aesthetic concepts.

For Gorovogui (2013), postcolonialism draws three conclusions:

The first is that it is not sufficient for theorists to simply embrace categories such as international order, international society, and international ethics. Because these concepts recall the era of European expansion and colonialism, they are not devoid of political effects. In fact, they exude a colonial anthropology in which a mythical righteous West poses as teacher for others, regardless of the context and purpose of engagement and the nature of behavior.

Second, there is a double movement in Western moral thought involving presence (when European authorship matters to the legitimacy and purpose of discourse) and erasure (when European identity is necessarily concealed). For instance, the proposition that human rights are a universal value depends on a de-emphasis of their Western origins and the invocation of human rights by victims' groups throughout the world. On the other hand, when Western intellectuals and politicians need to underscore European superiority and 'duty' or 'right to lead', they stress that 'human rights' are civilizational markers of the West.

Third, postcolonialism nonetheless embraces reason, universalism, and pragmatism. However, postcolonialism expands the meaning of these categories and remains skeptical of institutional narratives maintaining their objectivity or neutrality. These disciplinary narratives exude the sort of colonial hubris that mistakes one's 'desire' for 'reality' and one's own aspiration for universalism. Indeed, the related disciplinary perspectives are unable to speak to the world as a whole.

They are the product of the kind of intellectual and moral presumptuousness that continues to lead to unpredictable (and at times dangerous) adventures disguised as liberation (like the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq) or humanitarian interventions (for instance in Somalia) (Gorovogui, 2013: 252).

## **Conclusion**

Apart from what Scott (1999), explores, the paper concludes, postcolonialism has a critical constructionist dimension; that is, it does not merely seek out points of convergence on planes of understanding of already-existing norms. Moreover, Postcolonialism aspires to produce new forms of politics based on contingent and empathetic understandings of the trajectories of human societies. In this sense, postcolonialism conveys a sense of ethical and political possibilities after colonialism. It favors an ethos of egalitarianism, social justice, and solidarity. It has faith in its own reasonableness and decency.

Postcolonialism is also certain of its responsibility and duty toward other members of the international community. Postcolonialism, in fact, aspires to a different kind of universalism, one based on deliberation and contestation among diverse political entities, with the aim of reaching functional agreement on questions of global concern. This kind of universalism differs from one resulting from universal injunctions by self-assured subjects. In these regards, postcolonialism maintains consistent positions on politics that do not distinguish between the domestic, national, and international spheres. In the international instance, postcolonialism is mindful of the failure of hegemonic powers to integrate post-colonial states into the decision-making processes of the international system.

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