



8 Postcolonial approaches to global politics

Image 8.1 The inside of a US Air Force aircraft. This plane transported more than 700 Afghans out of Kabul during the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. © Photo by Air Mobility Command Public Affairs.

Learning objectives

- Acquire a basic understanding of postcolonial approaches to IR, especially the postcolonial deconstruction of established IR narratives as inherently Eurocentrism
- Consider the extent to which the international system today remains fundamentally colonial in terms of its structure and functioning
- Reflect on some of the criticisms that have been made of postcolonial perspectives, particularly from more materialist standpoints

The impact of the colonial past on International Relations today

In the summer of 2021, the military forces of the United States and its allies withdrew from Afghanistan, bringing an end to a twenty-year occupation of the country. The US had originally invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 to destroy the Taliban, a militant Islamist organization implicated in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Two decades later, however, the Taliban once again controlled much of Afghanistan, compelling Western forces to beat a hasty, humiliating, and chaotic retreat. This played out most memorably at Kabul Airport, where terrified Afghans risked their lives in an attempt to escape the country. Western media and politicians wrung their hands over the fact that twenty years of occupation and investment had failed to bring stability to Afghanistan. More critical observers, however, suggested that history was repeating itself in the harrowing scenes from Kabul Airport. Indeed, the West's flight from Afghanistan in 2021 was only the latest chapter in a long tradition of imperial entanglement in the country, from the first British expedition in 1838 up until the Soviet invasion of 1979. Afghans have been fighting (and expelling) European armies for some two hundred years.

Why have countries from the 'Global North' repeatedly tried to occupy and control parts of the 'Global South' – such as Afghanistan – over the course of recent centuries? On what basis does the West consider itself justified in defining 'liberal democracy' as a superior and universal system of government which can and should be imposed on 'non-Western' nations such as Afghanistan – with violence, if necessary? In recent decades, in the field of International Relations, such critical questions around the historical role of the West in the international system have been most purposefully posed by scholars adhering to postcolonial approaches. This chapter provides an introduction to and evaluation of such approaches. It delineates the intellectual origins of postcolonial IR, as well as the key claims made by its adherents, and the criticisms made by its detractors.

The first section briefly lays out the historical development of postcolonial approaches to IR and establishes their fundamental principles. The following three sections expand on some of postcolonial IR's core argumentative and analytical points. The second section examines postcolonialism's claim that the mainstream, 'Western' study of IR is founded on a set of essentially Eurocentric and colonial assumptions, the third section surveys alternative, postcolonial readings of the historical development of the international system, and the

fourth section elaborates on the claim that the contemporary international system remains basically colonial in its structure and logic. The final two sections focus in turn on some of the latest developments in postcolonial approaches to IR, and on some of the criticisms it has sustained.

Origins and basic principles of postcolonial approaches

As we have already seen elsewhere in this book, the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of new, 'post-positivist' theories in the social sciences. Such theories question the degree to which human beings are able to objectively perceive the external world, and particularly the social world of human relationships, emphasizing instead the constructed or discursive aspects of these perceptions. In the field of IR, the end of the 1980s provided post-positivist theories with a gilt-edged opportunity to gain a foothold within the discipline, because established approaches had manifestly failed to predict or explain the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc.

Postcolonialism was one school of thought among this wave of newly invigorated post-positivist approaches to IR. The origins of this approach lie in the work of prominent 20th-century intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon, all of whom were personally shaped by colonialism. These figures offered powerful critiques of Western colonialism, and of Western perceptions and constructions of the non-Western world. Their work inspired later generations of intellectuals, especially in the fields of Literature and Linguistics, who were determined to set the historical phenomenon of colonialism at the front and centre of their scholarship. Prominent examples of this second generation of postcolonial thinkers included a group of mainly Indian academics organized around the journal *Subaltern Studies*, as well as numerous South American thinkers who championed the concept of 'decoloniality'. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the analytical tools developed by such scholars were increasingly applied to the field of International Relations.

The diverse origins of the thinkers denoted in the preceding paragraph indicate that there is no such thing as a unified postcolonial theory of IR. Nonetheless, postcolonial IR is underpinned by a foundational conviction: that the historical phenomenon of colonialism – that is, European empire building from the 15th century onwards – is key to understanding the contemporary international system. Indeed, the term 'postcolonial' is not intended to 'denote a time period after colonialism'. On the contrary, it 'indicates how colonial ideas and practices continue to shape the world in unequal and exclusionary ways' (Teo and Wynne-Hughes, 2020: 5). Unless we place colonialism at the very centre of our analysis of IR, our understanding will be distorted, incomplete, or inadequate. The implications of this are clear. If we aim to make sense of, for example, the US occupation of and withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Syrian Civil War, the war between Israel and Hamas, the recently discontinued French military presence in Mali, or China's growing influence in Africa, then we must first recognize the centrality of 500 years of European colonialism in creating the international system in which these events are transpiring, and we must analyse the decisive ramifications of this history for contemporary developments.

Another key point shared by all postcolonial accounts of International Relations consists in a thoroughgoing critique of the normative assumptions which underpin mainstream 'Western' approaches to IR. From a postcolonial perspective, theories such as realism or liberal institutionalism are based on certain (usually unspoken and unacknowledged) 'Eurocentric' assumptions about how the world works and about the historical development of the modern international system. Conversely, postcolonial categories of, for example, race or racism play little to no role in mainstream IR, which upholds a 'norm against noticing' that postcolonial approaches endeavour to highlight and critique (see Freeman et al., 2022). This 'deconstructive' aspect of postcolonial approaches to IR is more fully delineated in the second section of this chapter.

Key concept

Colonialism

Merriam-Webster defines colonialism as the 'domination of a people or area by a foreign state or nation'. In the context of contemporary postcolonial approaches to IR, scholars generally use the term 'colonialism' to define a specific historical period during which European nations colonized much of the non-European world. This period began in roughly the 15th century, with Spanish and Portuguese conquests in Africa and America. It continued throughout the following centuries, with (particularly) British, French, and Dutch expansion, mainly across Asia, Oceania, and North America. European colonialism peaked at the beginning of the 19th century, reaching its apotheosis in the late-19th-century 'scramble for Africa', whereby the European powers established formal 'protectorates' across broad swathes of the African continent. Figure 8.1 shows the extent to which much of the earth's surface was colonized at some point during this 400-year period by the European powers. By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Europeans had colonized around 80 per cent of the globe.

However, the apex of colonialism also signalled its (nominal) end. The two World Wars proved devastating to the wealth and influence of the European powers, while also stimulating movements for national independence within the colonies themselves. In the second half of the 20th century, a rapid process of decolonization occurred. Europeans withdrew from their colonies and a plethora of new states declared their independence. In some regions, the break-up of the European empires proved particularly catastrophic. In the Middle East, for example, the French and British colonial powers hastily and arbitrarily divided their empires into new states after the First World War. But as such states gained independence after World War II, it soon became apparent that the European 'lines in the sand' bore little relation to the religious or ethnic makeup of the region. The consequences of this and similar such processes of 'decolonization' remain with us to this day – which is one reason why postcolonial scholars tend to doubt that formal decolonization substantially changed much in the power relations between the colonizers and the colonized.

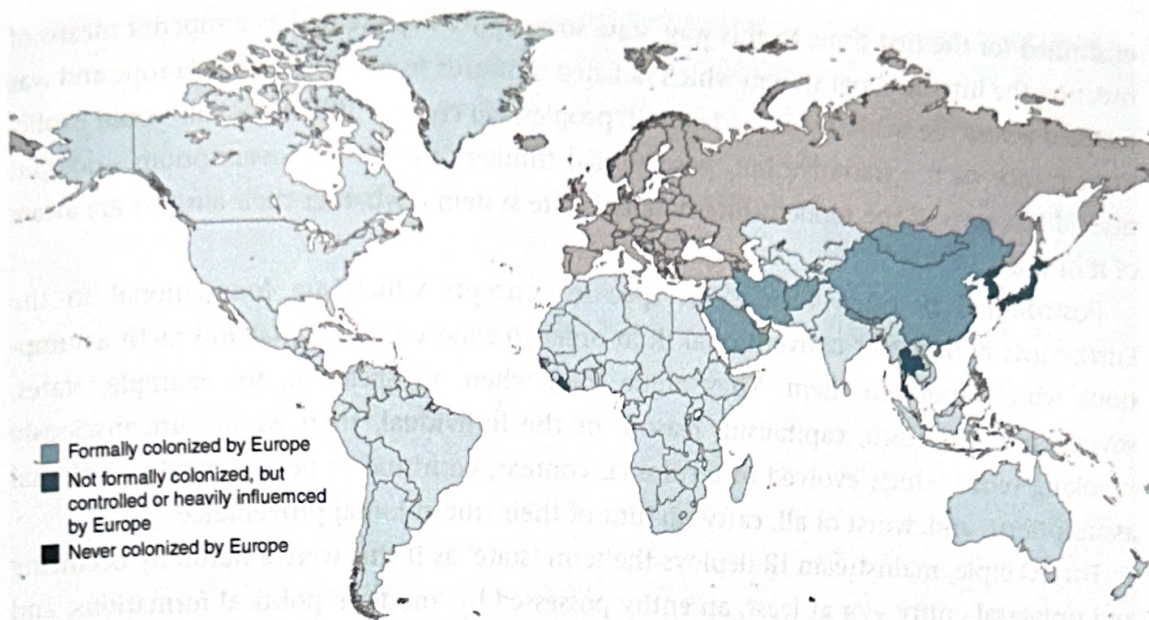


Figure 8.1 Countries that were under European control at some point between 1500 and 1945. All but five countries have been under European control, they are: Japan, North and South Korea, Thailand and Liberia.

Source: Created using Mapchart.net under a CC BY-SA 4.0 Deed license

The Eurocentrism of International Relations

A central thrust of postcolonial IR lies in a searching deconstruction and critique of 'established', positivist IR theories. These approaches bill themselves as value-neutral, objectively empirical, and universally applicable tools for accurately analysing the workings of the international system. Much postcolonial scholarship in IR has held that such theories are, in fact, essentially 'Western' ideologies, the intellectual roots of which lie in long (and frequently repressed) histories of Western colonialism and racism (see, for example, Shilliam, 2020; Vitalis 2015). Indeed, from a postcolonial perspective, it is no coincidence that the first chair in IR was established in 1919, at a point in time when colonialism was at its absolute height (Gruffydd Jones, 2006). Nor is it a coincidence that much of the profession remains white and male (Rutazibwa 2020).

Postcolonial scholars contend that mainstream 'Western' IR is based on a highly Eurocentric narrative of world history (for example Hobson, 2012). This theory comprises an – often unarticulated or implicit – story of the development of the modern state system which, according to postcolonial scholars, underpins much mainstream IR scholarship. The narrative holds that most of the features we associate with modernity – science, secularization, industrialization, democracy, the rights of the individual, the state, sovereignty – originated solely, and in a self-contained way, in Western Europe from the 15th century. Modernity was thus a 'European achievement'. In the field of IR, this uniquely European spirit of modernity culminated in 1648 in the Peace of Westphalia, whereby the principle of state sovereignty is said to have been

enshrined for the first time. In this way, state sovereignty is presented as a superior means of ordering the international system which radiated outwards from a pioneering Europe and was adopted across the world by 'less advanced' peoples. No credible IR scholar still would explicitly advance such a narrative but, postcolonial thinkers allege, such assumptions underpin myriad accounts of the modern international state system – whether their authors are aware of it or not.

Postcolonial IR often focuses on specific concepts which are foundational to the Eurocentric narrative of conventional IR in order to expose the colonial and racist assumptions which underpin them. They argue that, when we speak of, for example, states, sovereignty, liberalism, capitalism, reason, or the individual, then we are unconsciously invoking terms which evolved in a colonial context, continue to be informed by colonial assumptions, and, worst of all, carry no hint of their true colonial provenance.

For example, mainstream IR deploys the term 'state' as if this were a naturally occurring and universal entity – or at least, an entity possessed by 'modern' political formations, and certainly an entity worth aspiring towards. By contrast, postcolonial critics argue that the concept of a 'state', as a particular set of 'rational' institutions which exercise 'sovereignty' over particular peoples in a particular territory, is a specifically European vision of political order which came into being – not coincidentally – at a time when Europeans were beginning to colonize the world (Seth, 2013). According to postcolonial authors, Eurocentric concepts such as 'the sovereign state' are inextricably infused with (Western) notions of domination and violence, have been used to deride alternative, non-European forms of political organization, and continue to be deployed in order to perpetuate European dominance of the international system. After all, in the post-Westphalian period, state sovereignty is defined as conferring on the state the authority to use force as legitimate violence.

Theories in action

The state as a 'Eurocentric' concept

Since the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011, the small Middle Eastern state of Yemen has been embroiled in a devastating civil war. One important party to this conflict is the terrorist organization al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a descendant of the same group which attacked the United States on September 11 2001. From a Western perspective, the problem presented by AQAP is relatively clear cut. One of the most powerful norms in Western IR comprises the idea that states exercise a monopoly on violence within the territories they control. This is assumed to be a basic, 'naturally occurring' law of IR and state formation. From such a perspective, AQAP represents a violent non-state actor which the Yemeni state must destroy in order to maintain its 'monopoly on violence', and thus to even qualify as a 'state'. Western voices advocate highly repressive counterterrorism strategies in Yemen designed to achieve precisely this end.

For postcolonial critics, however, the Yemeni case shows how problematic and misleading this norm around the 'state monopoly of violence' can be in a non-Western context. They argue that, from the perspective of ordinary Yemenis, the boundary between state and non-state actors is not as clear cut as Western discourses insist that it should be. In Yemen, 'al-Qa'ida is widely seen as a pliable entity, sometimes serving the interests of powerful 'players' [...] and, at times, exercising little independent agency' (Philips 2017). In short, AQAP is both antagonistic to the Yemeni state and deeply embroiled in established state structures. From a postcolonial perspective, this ambivalence is typical of how power is organized in the Arab world. The Yemeni case thus calls into question dominant Western norms and their appropriateness for understanding non-Western contexts. By extension, it also challenges Western state-building and counter-terrorism strategies which are based on an imposition of this purportedly 'universal' norm to a region with a radically different understanding of organized political authority.

Discussion

- Imagine that you are a constructivist author. How would you make sense of the phenomenon of AQAP? What kind of solutions would you suggest to Yemeni officials in dealing with such an organization?
- Would it benefit 'ordinary Yemenis' if the Yemeni state exercised a total monopoly on violence over Yemeni territory? Do you think that this ideal of statehood is desirable and worth aspiring towards, or it could it hold negative consequences for the people of Yemen?

Postcolonial readings of modern history

Postcolonial scholars have offered alternative models of modern history and the evolution of the international state system to that posited by the kind of Eurocentric narrative sketched out above. Some postcolonial accounts retain a basically positive impression of modernity, democracy, and liberalism, while attempting to relativise or minimize the overwhelming importance that has traditionally been accorded to Europe regarding the historical development of former colonies. They have argued instead that 'modernization' was not an exclusively 'European' process which was then exported to the rest of the world, but that it transpired on a global scale, with Europe but one node in a broader network of burgeoning modernization. John M. Hobson, for example, has contended that, by the 15th century, Europe was but a 'little Christian continent that constituted a small promontory off the edge of an Asian-led global economy [...] [Europe] received not just trade but all manner of Eastern resource portfolios that were subsequently assimilated into the sovereign state-formation process' (Hobson, 2013: 36).

According to this reading, Europe was fortunately positioned to integrate ideas and phenomena which were pioneered in Africa and Asia, and which found expression in the principles of Westphalia. 'Modernization', 'democratization', 'industrialization', and the

development of the 'modern international state system' thus resulted from complex, global dynamics which, contrary to the orthodox narrative, cannot be considered specifically or even primarily European.

In a similar vein, postcolonial scholars have questioned the apparent singularity of certain European developments, such as the French and American Revolutions, which mainstream IR scholars have generally considered foundational to modernity and the rise of the democratic state. They have pointed to a rich history of emancipatory and revolutionary thought and movements emanating from the Global South which mainstream IR has systematically ignored. These include the Haitian Revolution of 1791, an anti-colonial revolt of former slaves which effectively expelled a European power from the island. The leaders of this revolution formulated a set of anti-colonial revolutionary principles which, postcolonial authors suggest, not only complemented but extended beyond the purely political, 'liberal' values of the French Revolution (Charles, 2020). The Haitian Revolution stood for a far-reaching programme of cultural and economic democratization which could be considered as central to modern emancipatory politics as anything which occurred in 18th-century France or the United States. In much the same way, postcolonial scholars have pointed to non-European thinkers such as the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), whose writings on the development of the international state system were, they argue, as visionary as anything advanced by the doyens of Western IR theory such as Kant or Hobbes but who has not been accorded a place in the Eurocentric curricula of IR courses at Western (and non-Western) universities (Chimni, 2006).

By foregrounding 'non-Western' events and thinkers, postcolonial analyses have served to relativise the European role in the development of modernity and of the modern international state system, and thus challenge the Eurocentric nature of much mainstream Western IR thinking. However, other postcolonial scholars have gone beyond this relativising function to offer a much darker view of modernization. They have suggested that Europe was indeed a forerunner in modernization and industrialization – but precisely because Europe colonized and brutally exploited much of the globe. European processes of modernization and state formation were thus pioneering, but they resulted from a parasitic process, paid for by the blood and treasure of colonized non-European peoples, and made possible only because of the unique aggressiveness and exploitativeness of Europeans (Bhambra, 2021). From this perspective, the narrative of Europe's heroic role in modernization can only be preserved by repressing this history of colonial plunder and atrocity from consciousness (and from the IR curriculum).

Theories in action

Postcolonialism and China's foreign policy

Since his ascension to power in 2012, Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, has been central to the promotion of Chinese nationalism and a more

confrontational foreign policy with the West. Throughout this period, Xi has made repeated reference to China's 'humiliation' at the hands of the West during the 19th century, when China was 'gradually reduced by foreign powers to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society' (see Xi Jinping, 2021). The key pillar of Western (and, chiefly, British) colonial policy in China during this period was the opium trade, whereby the British trafficked opium to China in return for massive profits. Attempts by Chinese leaders to end the opium trade resulted in a series of 'Opium Wars' with Western powers, most of which ended in Chinese defeat and further subjugation. According to Xi, China's 19th-century humiliation and subjection to the predations of the West justifies a more aggressive foreign policy in the 21st century.

Discussion

- How might a postcolonial author explain contemporary Chinese foreign policy with reference to the colonial past? Could – and should – Western nations draw on an understanding of China's past sufferings in order to develop a more conciliatory foreign policy?
- Would a realist author lay the same emphasis on China's historical experiences in explaining China's contemporary foreign policy? Why/why not? What might a realist emphasize instead?



Figure 8.2 A contemporary cartoonist depicts Britain's aggressive sale of opium in China during the 19th century. (Source: Daumier-Register.org)

The world is still colonial

Postcolonial thinkers contend that the international system continues to be structured into a hierarchy which was first established by European imperialism in the 15th century. The 'West' dominates its former colonies, much as it did during 500 years of formal colonialism. In the past, however, the colonizers legitimated their interventions into and control over

their imperial 'possessions' through the use of gunboats, slave ships, and doctrines such as 'free trade' or the 'white man's burden' (that is, the idea that white people, by virtue of their inherent superiority, are compelled to 'assume responsibility' for 'inferior races'). Today, postcolonial authors argue, former colonizers achieve the same effect through neo-colonialism, seen through the use of 'liberal' international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, and the deployment of concepts such as 'development' and 'good governance' (Kapoor, 2008).

Broadly speaking, the term 'development' relates to the idea that societies follow a positive, 'normative' path of 'progress' in the direction of enhanced living standards, liberal democracy, and economic modernization. According to this argument, the 'proper' path of modernization was pioneered by Europe, and the 'deficits' of non-developed countries need to be overcome through the same processes of modernization and industrialization enacted by Western Europe from the 19th century. On a more concrete level, international institutions such as the UN, the IMF, or the World Bank deploy the concept of 'development' when it comes to, for example, the allocation of financial aid. However, postcolonial authors argue that the concept of 'development' is basically colonial in origin, and that it comes disturbingly close to the narratives – such as the 'white man's burden' – which underpinned centuries of formal European imperialism. Furthermore, they argue, the concept continues to be used to consolidate Western dominance over its former colonies.

As one example, Timothy Mitchell (2002) has argued that international institutions and donors have consistently invoked 'development' in order to intervene in the Egyptian economy. He argues that these interventions are presented in 'technocratic' terms, with 'international' (i.e. Western-dominated) organizations appearing as 'neutral' entities providing 'expert knowledge'. According to Mitchell, such interventions are frequently divorced from any appreciation or understanding of Egypt's colonial history, and deeply implicated in maintaining or shoring up contemporary (postcolonial) Egyptian power structures. In this way, 'development' is deployed as a tool to justify an intervention into a former European colony, serving to consolidate the same clientelist social and political structures which the West itself established during decolonization.

Closely related to the concept of 'development' is the term 'good governance'. This term – ostensibly – denotes the way in which public institutions operate in a given society. It serves to describe (and, indeed, to judge) 'the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented' by public institutions (Sheng, 2009). According to some postcolonial thinkers, however, 'good governance' is a neo-colonial term. Antony Anghie (2006) has argued that the evolution of the concept of 'good governance' can be traced as far back as the 16th century – the dawn of European colonialism – and that it has repeatedly been used to justify Western incursions into the Global South. Though it has shed the overtly racist connotations of the colonial era, the concept of 'good governance' remains rooted in the idea that Western standards of political organization are 'superior', that non-Western countries have considerable difficulty in measuring up to these standards, and that, under certain circumstances, it might be necessary for the West to intervene in order to ensure that 'good governance' standards are upheld (Fasakin, 2021).

Other contributions have shown how certain key concepts of Western 'liberal' IR theory are applied unevenly by the West in ways which echo, and indeed perpetuate, the relationships of the colonial period. 'International law', for example, is widely perceived as a global, universal system of legal regulations which are applied impartially by disinterested bodies such as the United Nations. Postcolonial authors have argued that, historically, 'international law' has been applied differently in instances which deal with Westerners and non-Westerners, and that this continues to be the case. One example of this is 'property rights'. James Thuo Gathii (2022) has exposed a long history whereby colonizers simply ignored the property rights of colonial populations, confiscating and appropriating their property as and when it suited them. He traces this tradition to 21st-century Iraq. After the US invasion and occupation in 2003, the US and its allies unilaterally privatized much of Iraq's infrastructure and resources – which proved enormously beneficial to Western multinational corporations. From this perspective, the colonial tradition of plundering the Global South is alive and well – though it is now carried out according to ostensibly 'liberal' economic principles.

IR theory in film

Blood Diamond and the continued plundering of the Global South

Blood Diamond, a 2006 political action thriller directed by Edward Zwick, and starring Djimon Hounsou, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Jennifer Connelly, vividly depicts the chaos, violence, and corruption that European colonialists left in their wake in some of the areas they colonized. In this case, the background is provided by Sierra Leone, a republic constructed by the British during the 18th and 19th centuries – with little regard to the real ethnic or religious make-up of the region. This indifference partly explains why, some 30 years after gaining formal independence, Sierra Leone was plunged into a brutal civil war which raged for around a decade.

Blood Diamond takes place in 1999, some three years before the end of the conflict. Hounsou plays Solomon Vandy, the movie's protagonist, a fisherman caught up in vicious fighting between government forces and local warlords. Vandy is captured, interned, and his son is forcefully recruited as a child soldier by a local militia. But he has one trump card; he manages to find and hide an enormous – and enormously valuable – pink diamond which is desperately desired by many of the movie's central characters. These include the warring militias, as well as corrupt mining magnates, and the sinister Colonel Coetzee, a former officer of South Africa's apartheid-era army. They also include Archer, DiCaprio's character, an amoral Rhodesian mercenary who agrees to help Vandy find his son in exchange for the diamond. At the close of the film, the cold-blooded Archer has a change of heart, ultimately sacrificing his life so that Vandy and his son can be reunited, and so that the idealistic Western journalist Maddy Bowen (played by Jennifer Connelly) can expose the corrupt business and political interests behind the conflict in the region.

The film contains many postcolonial themes. It indicates how a European power tried to impose its model of statehood on a largely artificial political entity – Sierra Leone – and how

(Continued)

this model collapsed into violence and chaos without an external force to hold it together. It highlights the fragility of the European state model in a former colony, as the government struggles to impose order in the face of warlords and powerful local magnates who contest its monopoly on force. The presence of brutal apartheid-era Afrikaner soldiers, and their battle with local warlords for Africa's natural resources and wealth, conjures the ghosts of colonialism, as Europeans and their descendants continue to meddle in the affairs of the continent. The ultimate losers are individuals such as Solomon Vandy and his son. Tellingly, much of the demand for blood diamonds – and thus the source of the conflict in the movie – continues to emanate from the elites of the colonizing countries, which indicates the perpetuation of colonial structures and relationships, despite the formal end of colonialism.

The film thus offers what might be considered a liberal-internationalist impugment of postcolonialism. Indeed, *Blood Diamond* is a North American movie, made predominantly for audiences in the Global North. From a more critical perspective, however, it might be significant that, at the end of the movie, Archer dies so that Vandy might live and escape. Ultimately, the (white) Archer sacrifices himself for the (black) Vandy. In this way, Europeans (or their descendants) remain the heroes of the story, and they still have the power to determine the fates of their former colonial subjects. The Europeans must exit the stage (in the form of decolonization or, in the case of Archer, by dying) so that their former colonies might flourish. But, in the end, the power to determine events remains firmly in European hands – and despite Archer's apparent amorality, in the end, he does the 'right thing'.

Discussion

- Would you agree that *Blood Diamond* shows the problems of trying to impose a European model of statehood on the former colonies? Or is continued violence in such regions proof that, if anything, stronger states are needed to exercise a 'monopoly of violence' over their territories?

Overall, postcolonial authors have contended that the contemporary international state system continues to be structured around the power relationships which were established during the 500 years of formal colonialism. The key difference now is that, whereas the West once stressed its 'civilizing mission' in order to justify and perpetuate such power relationships, the 'imperial' powers of the postcolonial era draw on the concepts and institutions of international liberalism, such as 'development', 'good governance', 'international law', the UN, and the IMF.

Theories in action

'Development', 'good governance', and international institutions

In the late 1950s, a number of South American countries obtained sizeable loans from the IMF. These countries had robust state sectors and relatively advanced social welfare

programmes. The IMF appeared as a 'neutral' institution, committed to scientifically defined notions of 'economic development' and 'good governance'. According to some authors, however, the IMF worked hand-in-glove with Western governments, and it was committed to the implementation of neoliberal political and economic agendas in the debtor states (see, for example, Teivainen, 1999). This tension developed into a crisis during the 1980s, when it became apparent that several South American states were unable to repay their debts – largely because the US Federal Reserve dramatically decided to raise interest rates. As the debt on existing loans began to rise, continued loans were made conditional on South American states' acceptance of extensive programmes of economic liberalization and austerity. This, IMF officials insisted, would put South American countries on the correct path of 'development'. In practice, however, it entailed dramatic cuts to social spending, abolition of price controls, and privatization of state-owned companies – in many cases, to the benefit of Western investors. It also meant Western support for non-democratic elements (such as military dictatorships) which agreed to implement such measures in the face of popular dissatisfaction.

Discussion

- The US was not a major colonial power, while most South American states gained formal independence during the 19th century. Is it thus defensible to use the term 'postcolonial' to characterize the relationship between the US, the IMF, and the South American debtor states during the 1980s? Why do you think some IR scholars have indeed argued that 'postcoloniality' is a useful lens for viewing this case study? Do you agree with them?

Recent directions in postcolonial approaches

As the preceding sections have suggested, postcolonial IR focuses on questions around knowledge, language, discourses, identities – in short, 'how we see (and talk about) the world'. And as already mentioned, postcolonialism bears a heavy debt to the postmodernist and constructivist approaches which gained ground in the social sciences from the 1980s. One of these approaches was poststructuralism. In recent years, postcolonial scholars have drawn more explicitly on poststructuralist insights, and particularly on the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, in order to sharpen their analyses of IR.

Recent contributions to postcolonial IR have centred on poststructuralist concepts such as 'norms' and 'governmentalities'. Foucault used such concepts to explain why modern power structures do not necessarily need violence or repression to maintain their authority. Instead, they inculcate their subjects with norms – ideological values, and standards of appropriate and expected behaviour – to ensure that individuals and institutions effectively police themselves. Postcolonial IR scholars have recently argued that the norms which structure the international system are rooted in a tradition of Western liberalism which has dominated much of the globe since the beginning of the colonial project, and especially

since the mid-19th century. Postcolonial states are clearly on the losing end of this system, but they nonetheless continue to conform to its values, because they have been fully inculcated with Western norms such as 'statehood', 'sovereignty', and 'economic rationality'. Crucially, such disciplinary work is not carried out by propaganda ministries or secret police forces, but by conventional 'value forming' institutions such as the education system, the media, and even public museums or school textbooks. For example, postcolonial scholars have suggested that international schools produce 'international subjects' imbued with a particular 'Western liberal and Anglocentric' value system. These international schools frequently educate the future leaders of postcolonial states, imbuing them with the ideology of Western liberalism, and thereby ensuring the maintenance of colonial-era inequalities and power relations (Wynne-Hughes and Pswarayi, 2020).

Other recent trends in postcolonial IR point towards a burgeoning tradition of postcolonial feminism. To some extent, postcolonialism and feminism have common origins in the application of postmodernist, constructivist approaches to IR which rose to prominence in the 1980s. They also share an emancipatory, activist stance. However, these two traditions have not always had the easiest relationship. Postcolonial scholars criticized an apparently white, Western, liberal underpinning of some feminist theories, while feminists urged postcolonial scholars to acknowledge the 'gendered nature' of power imbalances in the international arena (Parashar, 2016). In more recent years, however, the 'natural alliance' of postcolonial and feminist approaches has come increasingly to the fore and borne scholarly fruit, with one noted intellectual suggesting that postcolonial feminism has the potential to 'revive' the study of IR (Chakraborty, 2017).

Postcolonial-feminist IR builds on Edward Said's observation in *Orientalism* that the imperial project is basically 'masculinist', with the colonizers conceived as 'rational', 'dominant', and 'thrusting', and the colonized as 'sensual', 'emotional', 'exotic', and basically feminine (Said, 1978). This carries over into the contemporary international system, where the 'masculine' West continues to 'act upon' its 'passive', 'feminine' former colonies. Above all, postcolonial feminism focuses on the plight of the women of the former colonies. This group is disadvantaged by its status as a former colonized demographic, and it is subjected to discrimination and oppression by the (male-dominated) nationalist movements which assumed control of the colonies after the Europeans departed. Postcolonial feminism thus emphasizes the 'doubly disadvantaged' position of 'the colonized's colonized' – the women of the Global South – while pointing the finger at both the former colonizers and the current 'masculinist' (and incipiently imperialist) leaderships of some former colonies, such as India or Brazil. As one postcolonial feminist author has recently argued, the policies of nationalist leaders such as Narendra Modi betray a 'strong continuity' to 'the strategies of the former British colonial rulers' (Souvlis and Bhattacharya, 2016).

Criticisms of postcolonial approaches

Critiques of postcolonial approaches have queried the focus on the history of European colonialism as the primary explanatory factor in the workings of the contemporary international system. Realist authors, for example, reject the postcolonial argument that the state is



Image 8.2 India's Narendra Modi, seen here with Russian President Vladimir Putin, represents nationalist forces of the Global South which advance highly conservative gender policies

Source: Photo by YashSD on Shutterstock

a 'Western' invention which has been imposed on the Global South. Realists point to the existence of states in places (such as ancient Persia, Japan, and China) which predated and were wholly untouched by 'European' notions of state formation, much less by colonialism. Moreover, realists allege, these states have tended to behave according to the kind of egoistic, self-protective, expansionist principles ascribed to them by realist theory. Non-Western powers such as the Ottoman Empire or Imperial Japan showed little compunction about practising their own forms of colonial domination and subjugation, for example. According to this reading, states appear as naturally occurring phenomena which behave according to a transhistorical logic of power. This undercuts postcolonialism's claim about the historically constructed, imposed, European character of the modern state.

Liberal authors, meanwhile, tend to defend the 'Western', 'liberal' tradition in the face of postcolonial indictments. One notorious and extreme example of this came in 2004, with the publication of *Empire* by the British historian Niall Ferguson. Though Ferguson is generally considered a conservative author, his attempt to construct a 'balance sheet' of colonial rule ultimately comprised a defence of the record of 'Western liberalism' in the colonies. While accepting that European colonialism was characterized by 'excesses' and atrocities, Ferguson also argued that it had brought significant benefits to many colonized societies, especially in the form of technological or 'cultural' progress. This thesis was widely criticized, and Ferguson was accused of dramatically underplaying the brutality of European rule.

Less sensationalist liberal accounts have heavily called into question the postcolonial critique of 'development' theory as neo-imperialism. Liberal and social-democratic commentators argue that the Western model of economic 'modernization' is indeed a worthy object of aspiration, and that it remains the best means of lifting millions of people out of poverty, illiteracy, and early mortality (Elsenhans, 2021). According to this reading, postcolonialism's indictment of 'development theory' represents an unforgivable neglect of the true material interests of the

Global South. Christine Sylvester has pointedly suggested that, though Western approaches 'do not tend to listen to subalterns', postcolonial studies 'do not tend to concern themselves with whether the subaltern is eating' (1999: 703). Postcolonial authors respond that colonial exploitation was precisely what enabled the European powers to modernize.

Marxist critiques, meanwhile, query postcolonialism's focus on immaterial factors such as identities and narratives at the expense of material and economic factors. For Marxists, the real keys to understanding international relations are the predations of global capitalism, and the consequent, profoundly uneven distributions of wealth and resources. Recent Marxist accounts posit the existence of a 'transnational capitalist class' which is not bound to any particular state or territory, and which cannot be meaningfully conceptualized in terms of nationality (Robinson, 2010). US, European, Indian, South American, Chinese, and African capitalists collaborate and organize their economic interests on a global scale. This can benefit the rising middle classes of the Global South, just as it can harm skilled labour in Europe or the US – or, indeed, in the Global South. Either way, recent Marxist accounts of 'globalization' indicate that the history of European colonialism is no reliable guide to understanding the pattern of contemporary global inequalities and the machinations of capitalism – which are the true drivers of developments in the international system.

Realist, liberal, and Marxist critiques of postcolonialism obviously evince considerable differences. Arguably, however, all three might be usefully considered defences of positivism, in the face of postcolonialism's radical claim that concepts such as 'rationality', 'objective truth', or 'empiricism' are racist and imperialist constructs. This positivist rejection of postcolonialism was put most forcefully by Vivek Chibber in his book *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* (2013). Chibber mounted a spirited defence of 'Enlightenment values', of science, rationality, and empirical inquiry, arguing that such values are not 'Eurocentric', but universal and fully applicable to non-Western societies. By rejecting 'reason' as 'Eurocentric' and celebrating the indigenous values and cultures of the Global South, Chibber argues, postcolonialism unwittingly engages in a kind of 'reverse Orientalism', whereby a fundamental and insurmountable cultural difference between 'Occident' and 'Orient' is preserved (though, of course, with the positive and negative poles of this dichotomy reversed).

Overall, criticisms of postcolonial approaches have frequently been made from a positivist perspective which charges postcolonialism with neglecting the material dimensions of geopolitics and global inequality. In addition, the attempt to re-interpret complex histories to fit into a postcolonial framework, for example the origins of the Israel–Palestine conflict, has been criticized by many scholars as much too simple. From this viewpoint, the postcolonial focus on immaterial factors such as epistemologies and identities, and the elevation of colonial history as the key causative factor in the contemporary international system, merely serves to obscure the true driving forces in IR.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that, though it would be erroneous to speak of a unified postcolonial theory, postcolonial approaches to IR are united by their emphasis on the central importance of colonialism to the contemporary international state system. According to

postcolonial authors, it is impossible to make sense of IR in the 21st century unless we foreground an awareness of the history of colonialism. More broadly, postcolonial approaches to IR advance an epistemological critique of the knowledge categories and narratives which have historically structured the discipline. According to postcolonial thinkers, central concepts of IR such as 'the state' and 'sovereignty' are not, in fact, universal, 'naturally occurring', 'value free' features of the international system. In fact, such concepts are specifically Western in provenance, and they came into being at a time when the West was rapaciously colonizing the world. These are colonial concepts, founded in a basic belief in Western superiority, which the West continues to use in order to exert control over its former colonies. Postcolonial authors aim to expose the colonial genealogy of the knowledge categories which, in their view, maintain the basically colonial structure of the world, even in the absence of formal colonialism.

Test your understanding

- Do you agree with the postcolonial assertion that the state is a historically constructed and Eurocentric concept? Or is there something historically 'normal' and common to all societies about the process of state formation? What historical examples would you point to in support of your case?
- What current conflicts and problems in the international system could be considered 'colonial' in origin? How has the history of colonialism contributed to, or indeed created, these problems?
- If we accept a postcolonial reading of IR, then what are the implications for international institutions? Do organizations such as the UN or EU have a historic responsibility to correct or atone for some of the legacies of colonialism? How might this be achieved?

Core literature

Chibber, V. (2013) *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. London: Verso.

Vivek Chibber offers a (broadly Marxist) critique of postcolonial theory by defending the 'values of the enlightenment' – of rational, empirical inquiry and criticism. He argues that these values are universal, rather than specifically Western, and that postcolonial theory essentially establishes a kind of 'reverse orientalism'.

Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Fanon was a French-speaking Afro-Caribbean communist, activist, and psychiatrist. In this book, he argued that colonialism was responsible for a basic split in the psyche of the colonized, that even the victims of colonialism had been induced to associate 'whiteness' and 'Europeanness' with 'goodness' and 'virtue'.

Gruffydd Jones, B. (Ed.) (2006), *Decolonizing International Relations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

This is a collection of essays by noted postcolonial scholars which offers a targeted critique of established schools of IR theory, and aims to uncover the colonial assumptions which underpin theories such as realism or liberal internationalism.

Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

Perhaps the founding text of postcolonial theories, Said exposed the European and colonial construction of 'the orient' as a site of irrationality, femininity, sensuality, cruelty, and mystery which had to be 'mastered' by the West.

Teivainen, T. (1999) 'Globalization of economic surveillance: The International Monetary Fund as modern priest', *Passages*, 1 (1): 84–116.

Teivainen's article shows how, in many areas of the Global South, the formal structures of European empire were replaced by the ostensibly 'neutral' institutions of the liberal international order.