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Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations

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Abstract
This article in three parts offers the beginnings of a postcolonial critique of mainstream International Relations (IR). The first part argues that IR, where it has been interested in history at all, has misdescribed the origins and character of the contemporary international order, and that an accurate understanding of the ‘expansion of the international system’ requires attention to its colonial origins. The second part suggests that IR is deeply Eurocentric, not only in its historical account of the emergence of the modern international order, but also in its account(s) of the nature and functioning of this order. The human sciences are heirs to a tradition of knowledge which defines knowledge as a relation between a cognising, representing subject and an object, such that knowledge is always ‘of’ something out there, which exists independently of its apprehension. The third part of the article suggests that knowledges serve to constitute that which they purport to merely cognise or represent, and that IR theory serves to naturalise that which is historically produced.

Keywords
colonialism, epistemology, international relations, political theory, postcolonial theory

This is an article by someone whose interests in philosophy, Indian history and postcolonial theory make an engagement with ‘the international’ both mandatory and rewarding. But in seeking to ‘think’ the international and the global, I find that turning to the discipline of International Relations (IR) – or at any rate to the mainstream of the discipline, in which I include the English School – is not of great help, and is often a hindrance. This article is, therefore, a postcolonial critique of mainstream IR. There have been many critiques of IR – constructivist, feminist, poststructuralist and others; this journal has been one of the main fora where such intellectual dissent has been nourished. I draw
freely from such critiques, and some of the issues raised and the points argued in this article have been highlighted by others who do not write under the aegis of postcolonial theory. What is nonetheless distinctive about the critique offered here is that it seeks to systematically ‘provincialise Europe’ – in a threefold sense: it challenges the centrality accorded to Europe as the historical source and origin of the international order; it queries the universality accorded to moral and legal perspectives which reflect and reproduce the power relations characteristic of the colonial encounter, and which are thus far from being universal; and it questions the epistemological privilege accorded to an understanding of knowledge which is blind to the constitutive, and not merely representational, role of knowledge. The article does not offer a better way of ‘doing’ IR. Indeed, criticisms imply alternatives, but here I principally offer a postcolonial critique of the discipline, not a postcolonial way of practising it.

In the first part of the article I argue that mainstream IR, where it has been interested in history at all, has misdescribed the origins and character of the contemporary international order, and that an accurate understanding of the ‘expansion of the international system’ requires attention to its colonial origins. In the second part I suggest that mainstream IR is deeply Eurocentric, not only in its historical account of the emergence of the modern international order, but also in its account(s) of the nature and functioning of this order. The third part of the article addresses the human sciences as heirs to a tradition of knowledge which defines knowledge as a relation between a cognising, representing subject and an object, such that knowledge is always ‘of’ something out there, which exists independently of its apprehension. What this overlooks is that knowledges serve to constitute that which they purport to merely cognise or represent, and that IR theory serves to naturalise that which is historically produced. By the logic of my own argument, the same is true of other knowledges, such as liberal political theory; the difference is that whereas the unitary, rational individual of liberal political theory has almost assumed the status of an axiom, testifying to the success of historical processes, and of discourses (not least liberal political theory itself), in naturalising the individual, the naturalisation of the nation-state and the world order is much less secure. This is precisely what makes ‘the international’ an interesting and revealing sphere of investigation, and one that can and should be integrated into wider philosophical and ethical debates; but inasmuch as mainstream IR scholarship serves as the agent of such naturalisation, it obscures rather than illuminates what is interesting about the international.

**History**

A great deal of IR displays little interest in history, for history is unimportant if the defining feature of the international order is considered to be the transhistorical fact of ‘anarchy’. Kenneth Waltz writes that ‘the enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia’. Waltz recognises that there have been differing international systems in the course of the

1. In addition to works cited in the footnotes, I have been influenced by work by – and, in some cases, conversations with – Sankaran Krishna, Barry Hindess, Mustapha Pasha, Naeeem Inayatullah, David Blaney, Andrew Linklater, Branwen Gruffydd Jones and Mike Shapiro, amongst others.
millennia, differing according to whether their primary political units were city-states, empires or nations, but different ‘[i]nternational-political systems, like economic markets, are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintentional’. Thus, not only is history not necessary, given that the fundamental nature of international life has changed little over ‘millennia’; it would in any case be difficult to construct an intelligible account of historical change in the international arena. For Waltz, as for many other realists and neo-realists, reasoning:

starts from the premise that there are at any time a multiplicity of states and domestic societies, where the paradigmatic differences between … domestic society and [international] anarchy are not questioned but simply assimilated as part of the premise … analysts are able to conclude that modern international politics exhibits a sameness that is basic to its history. International politics appears as no more and no less than an eternal struggle of multiple sovereign states in anarchy.

There are, however, those in the discipline who, even when they see anarchy as the defining feature of the international order, are nonetheless interested in how this historically evolved, and how an order which, in their account, first developed in Europe in the early-modern period came to encompass the globe. I refer of course to the ‘English School’, which has the considerable merit of enquiring into the historical origins of the contemporary international system.

However, as I argue below, the account of the ‘expansion of international society’ offered by the English School is Eurocentric and mistaken. And if even the historically sensitive elements in mainstream IR offer a mistakenly Eurocentric account of history, then one can begin to understand why the discipline is not of much help for those from other disciplines who seek its aid to better understand the origins and workings of the international order.

Adam Watson’s detailed discussion of The Evolution of International Society partly grew out of the studies and papers of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, of which he had been a key member. It contains chapters on the state systems and empires of Sumer, Assyria, Persia, India, China and elsewhere, before arriving at an account of ‘European international society’. In Watson’s account,

4. Richard Ashley, ‘The Powers of Anarchy: Theory, Sovereignty, and the Domestication of Global Life’, in International Theory: Critical Investigations, ed. James Der Derian (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 115, emphasis in original. This is why where history does figure in IR texts, it is often little more than an illustrative device, for which purpose a paragraph or two on the Peloponnesian War and a thumbnail sketch of the Peace of Augsburg and the treaty of Westphalia take us rapidly to the modern world order. A similar history of political thought, usually featuring Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant and sometimes others, provides a genealogy to a young discipline seeking distinguished forefathers – even if it requires readings so unfettered by any sense of historical context, and so unburdened by any textual evidence, that they should make any serious scholar blush. But as Walker observes, these are not histories of political thought, but rather accounts of ‘an ahistorical repetition in which the struggles of these thinkers to make sense of the historical transformations in which they were caught are erased in favor of assertions that they all articulate essential truths about the same unchanging and usually tragic reality: the eternal game of relations between states’ – R.B.J. Walker, ‘History and Structure in the Theory of International Relations’, in International Theory, ed. Der Derian, 322.
this began to emerge around the early 16th century and was more or less formalised with the Westphalia settlement. It then spread beyond its original home, in an uncoordinated but orderly fashion: ‘the members of the European society regulated their expansion between themselves, from the first orderly partition of the transatlantic world between Spain and Portugal down to the 19th-century arrangements for Africa, Oceania and Asia which avoided the colonial wars between Europeans that had previously marked their expansion’. The spread was both necessitated and enabled by the Industrial Revolution, which gave Europe economic and technological superiority relative to other parts of the world, as well as a more general sense of superiority vis-à-vis these others. Europeans, Watson writes, ‘wanted to use their superiority to Europeanize and modernize the non-European world, to bring “progress” to it’, whether non-Europeans welcomed or disliked the Europeans, they were deeply impressed and ‘found it difficult to resist what the Europeans had to offer’. Increasing numbers of non-European rulers sought to join the European society of states, and while initially they were rebuffed, and the criteria of ‘civilisation’ was used to exclude them, eventually Europe and the US decided that ‘all other independent states should be admitted to their international society on the same terms as themselves’. Decolonisation, according to Watson, brought the undisputed dominance of European powers to an end, and a new, non-discriminatory global society came into being, albeit one which ‘inherited its organization and most of its concepts from its European predecessor’.  

Buzan and Little offer a similar, if more sophisticated (and less self-satisfied), account in *International Systems in World History*. Here, they seek to document and explore the many non-European state systems that preceded the present one, a task that they see as necessary in order to avoid ‘Eurocentricism’, something that they claim has been avoided by the English School, on whose ideas they draw. They conclude that:

the standard model [of what they term ‘American’ IR] assumes that international systems are composed of a number of units amongst which contact is direct, and processes include diplomacy, war and trade…. Its Eurocentric vision underpins most of IR theory, and makes sense for most of the modern era. But its unconscious linkage to that particular patch of history means … that it is incapable of dealing with both past and future international systems.

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5. Watson finds the collaboration of the great powers during the Boxer rebellion in China especially noteworthy. Admittedly, the great powers violated the independence of China, but they did so in the name of the international community, as the UN was later to do in other ‘chaotic areas’ – *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), 272–3.
The Eurocentrism of IR mars its understanding of past international systems and its capacity to comprehend changes that may lie in the future – but its Eurocentric assumptions ‘make sense for most of the modern era’ for there is no doubt that the existing international system, forged over the preceding few centuries, has its origins in Europe and must be understood with reference to a specifically European history. ‘The European empires can … be seen as the nursery, or mechanism, by which the political form of the modern state was transposed onto the rest of the world’, write Buzan and Little, and since ‘the modern state is a quintessentially European phenomenon … it is therefore to Europe’s story that one has to look to explain it’.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, while IR is admittedly Eurocentric in its understanding of the world, that Eurocentrism is warranted for the modern period – or as Hedley Bull and Watson had put it 16 years earlier:

> The present international political structure of the world – founded upon the division of mankind and of the earth into separate states, their acceptance of one another’s sovereignty, of principles of law regulating their coexistence and co-operation, and of diplomatic conventions facilitating their intercourse – is, at least in its most basic features, the legacy of Europe’s now vanished ascendancy. Because it was in fact Europe and not America, Asia, or Africa that first dominated and, in so doing, unified the world, it is not our perspective but the historical record itself that can be called Eurocentric.\textsuperscript{14}

What the above accounts all offer is a rather sanitised version of ‘expansion’. Watson’s analysis, for instance, is one in which the violent and bloody conquest of the Americas appears as an orderly and regulated affair because it avoided colonial wars (between Europeans, that is); one in which Europeans subordinated and ruled over other peoples because they desired profit, but also because they sought to civilise non-Europeans and bring progress to them; an account in which non-Europeans could not help but be impressed, such that they sought admission to the exclusive club of European powers; how their importuning fell on deaf ears, until eventually Europe and the US relented and decided that they should be admitted as equal members; and, the happy dénouement, one that saw a new international order come into being, but which was an extension or expansion, rather than a departure from or repudiation of, the originally European society of states. An account of a period that includes the bloody conquest of the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, the expropriation and sometimes genocide of indigenous peoples, wars of conquest, land grabs, exploitation and oppression, somehow manages to elide much of this history. It also elides the many mass struggles, violent and less violent, that constitute the history of decolonisation – a history that here has only one powerful actor, the white man, who eventually comes to see that the very principles of his club mandate inclusion rather than exclusion.

But let us not dismiss Watson’s account, or other similar if less egregious accounts of the ‘expansion of international society’, on ‘polemical’ grounds, for there are other grounds for doing so. This narrative of the expansion of political forms is modelled on the conventional account of the expansion of economic and social forms, that is, of the

\textsuperscript{13} Buzan and Little, \textit{International Systems}, 246.

spread of capitalism (or modernity). This conventional account, which informs many disciplines and is deeply ingrained in popular understandings, is one which presumes that capitalism began in Europe and later radiated outwards through trade, armies and the like. The intellectual task is, then, by definition to identify what was (or came to be) distinctive about Europe\(^\text{15}\) – what cluster of economic or religious or cultural or other characteristics, lacking in other parts of the world, enabled Europe to become, in Daniel Defert’s phrase, ‘a planetary process rather than a region of the world’.\(^\text{16}\)

For some time now, there have been alternative accounts of the development of capitalist modernity, ones in which the development of capitalism and modernity is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that long pre-dated Europe’s ascendance – and that, according to some accounts, provided the conditions for that ascendance.\(^\text{17}\) Others, also dissenting from the conventional account, have not sought a grand alternative explanation, but have rather sought to show that the ‘great divergence’ between the West and the rest happened much later than the conventional narrative would have it, and due to historical exigencies rather than any trait or cluster of traits exceptional to Europe; once meaningful comparisons are made, the factors commonly thought to be unique to European history can be seen to have been present in parts of Asia.\(^\text{18}\) What is significant for my purposes is not which, if any, of these accounts of the development and growth of capitalist modernity is accurate, but rather that the conventional account of the rise of capitalist modernity has been challenged by those who have noted that trade was not confined to inter-European trade, that the conquest of the Americas – and the influx of gold and silver which followed – was a factor in the development of capitalism in Europe, and that the supply of raw materials from the colonies, and the existence of captive colonial markets for European manufactured goods, also played a part – in short, that Europe’s relations with the world outside Europe may be relevant.

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18. See, inter alia, Pomeranz, The Great Divergence; Roy Bin Wong, China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of Western Experience (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and various works by Sanjay Subrahmanyan, including ‘Connected Histories – Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia’, Modern Asian Studies 31, no. 3 (July 1997).
The ‘expansion of international society’ narrative, which in virtually all particulars follows the conventional account of the rise and spread of capitalist modernity – first the West, then the rest – has, however, not been seriously challenged or questioned. A rare exception within IR observes: ‘At the same time that the “Westphalian system” of equally and mutually independent territorially sovereign states was taking shape, quite different colonial and imperial systems were being established beyond Europe’;¹⁹ ‘the fundamental normative principles of the colonial and imperial systems beyond Europe’ were not equality and sovereignty, but rather ‘sovereignty should be divided across national and territorial borders as required to develop commerce and to promote what Europeans and Americans saw as good government’.²⁰ Just as the period that saw the development of capitalism coincided with colonial conquest and trade, so too did the events and processes privileged in the conventional account of IR – the peace of Augsburg and the settlement of Westphalia – roughly coincide with the subjugation and settlement of the Americas, the rise of the slave trade, the founding of the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company, Macartney’s mission to the Middle Kingdom, and so on. The 19th-century heyday of this European international system is also the period of the race for colonies, the carving up of Africa and the development of political forms of rule such as mandates, paramountcy, concessions and franchises, spheres of interest and influence, protectorates, and so on. Could it really be that none of these processes significantly shaped the development of the international order – that all these events were happening ‘offstage’ and did not shape the main dramatic narrative – or is this omission the result of bad staging?²¹

An example, or parallel, might help clarify what is at issue. For a generation, feminist scholars have been pointing out that the denial of rationality, suffrage and equality to women did not only mean that they were ‘excluded’: women were, after all, very much there. This denial of political rights was not simply an exclusion that was later remedied by inclusion; rather it shaped the nature of modern political thought and modern polities. The political orders being established in the 18th and 19th centuries were decisively shaped by the fact that they did not extend political rights to women, and by the reasons why, and the mechanisms by which, such rights were denied. Or another example – the whites of urban South Africa were frequently ignorant about what happened in the black shanty towns of apartheid South Africa; indeed, they were sometimes barely aware of their existence, even if their household labour was drawn from these areas. But the shanty towns were never the concern only of those who lived there, and those who policed them; their existence was closely tied up with, and served to shape (just as they were in turn shaped by), the prosperous white suburbs whose denizens were so blissfully unaware of the existence of the shanty towns and their inhabitants.

²⁰. Keene, Beyond the Anarchical Society, 98.
²¹. Keene makes a very similar point in his discussion of Hedley Bull’s claim that the fact of European dominance means that any understanding of international society should concentrate on the emergence of a European society of states. Keene rejects this claim on the grounds that it is a non sequitur. Since ‘European dominance was primarily exercised through practices of colonialism and imperialism’, if ‘the fact of European dominance ought to dictate what our research program on order in modern world politics should be, it directs us away from the European states-system, not towards it’ – Beyond the Anarchical Society, 28, emphasis in original.
Analogously, it seems reasonable to presume, given that there was extensive contact between post-Westphalian Europe and the non-European world, and given that European colonialism operated through a diversity of often novel political forms, that all this was not unrelated to, and had some impact upon, the political forms and inter-state relations evolving in Europe. Thus, any satisfactory account of the emergence of the modern international system cannot simply chart how an international society that developed in the West radiated outwards, but rather needs to explore the ways in which international society was shaped by the interactions between Europe and those it colonised. In this regard, any satisfactory account would be a postcolonial one.

The ‘post’ in postcolonialism, let it be noted, is not a periodisation that signals the beginning of an era where colonialism is part of the past; on the contrary, it signifies the claim that conquest, colonialism and empire are not a footnote or episode in a larger story, such as that of capitalism, modernity or the expansion of international society, but are in fact a central part of that story and are constitutive of it. The ‘post’ does not mark the period after the colonial era, but rather the effects of this era in shaping the world that is ours. This world was not born out of the West having an impact upon and ‘awakening’ a dormant non-West, but out of both of these being constituted in the course of multifarious (unequal, hierarchical and usually coercive) exchanges, such that neither was left untouched. As Stuart Hall puts it:

Since the Sixteenth Century, these different temporality and histories have been irrevocably and violently yoked together…. Their grossly unequal trajectories, which formed the very ground of political antagonism and cultural resistance, have nevertheless been impossible to disentangle, conceptualise or narrate as discrete entities: though that is precisely what the dominant western historiographical tradition has often tried to do. No site, either ‘here’ or ‘there’, in its fantasied autonomy and in-difference, could develop without taking into account its significant and/or abjected others. The very notion of an autonomous, self-produced and self-identical cultural identity, like that of a self-sufficient economy or absolutely sovereign polity, had in fact to be discursively constructed in and through ‘the Other’…. The Other ceased to be a term fixed in place and time external to the system of identification and became, instead, a symbolically marked ‘constitutive outside’.22

For some decades now, a burgeoning scholarship – some of it undertaken under the sign of postcolonial theory, some not – has sought to explore the ways in which literature, sexuality, politics and political theory, science, and much else besides in the West, were affected, and sometimes decisively shaped, by colonialism and empire. The same, I suggest, needs to be done for any account of the emergence of international society.

**Culture and Theory**

Stuart Hall, whom I quoted above, goes on to write:

> colonization so refigured the terrain that, ever since, the very idea of a world of separate identities, of isolated or separable and self-sufficient cultures and economies, has been obliged

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to yield to a variety of paradigms designed to capture these different but related forms of
relationship, interconnection and discontinuity.23

Even if its historical account is suspect, IR, precisely as a function of the fact that it deals
with the globe and with ‘relations’, is well placed to be one of those paradigms. In fact,
as I argue in this section, it signally fails to be so.

IR realist and neo-realist strands of scholarship are not interested in questions of cul-
ture and culturally derived notions of what counts as morality. Since states simply exist,
and by their nature pursue their interests, or else are compelled to do so by the systemic
and structural circumstances of anarchy, the rules that govern state interaction are not
seen to have anything to do with culture. Culture belongs to disciplines other than IR. In
seeking to interrogate the place of culture and difference in mainstream IR, I therefore
once again turn to those influenced by the English School, because the English School at
least recognises that the question of culture is central to, rather than peripheral to, inter-
national politics.

Robert Jackson’s The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States makes
an eloquent argument for the achievements of international society, which he character-
ises as a covenant that recognises and respects cultural and moral diversity, while avoid-
ing many of its potentially unhappy effects. Like Bull, Watson and Buzan and Little,
Jackson regards the international order as originating in Europe and gradually becoming
globalised from the second half of the 19th century. In contrast to earlier systems, which
excluded many as ‘barbarians’, ‘savages’ and the like, this order ‘is horizontal rather than
hierarchical, inclusive rather than exclusive, and is based expressly on . . . pluralist ethics . . .
the first bona fide normative discourse that communicates with and accommodates all
the world’s cultures and civilizations: human political diversity on a global scale’.24 Here
we have an account that, even if (in my terms) it gets its history wrong, is sensitive to
difference, treating it as an inescapable fact and even as something of ethical value. The
question confronted by this new order, according to Jackson, was this: given the irreduc-
ible heterogeneity of the world’s people, but given also that these peoples interact in
numerous ways, they ‘are going to have to find some mutually intelligible and mutually
acceptable, or adequate, terms upon which they can conduct their relations. . . . These
terms must go beyond existing cultures and civilizations.’25 That is, the rules governing
their interactions must be acceptable to all, without being those ‘of’ any constituent.

This is the problem to which equal state sovereignty, self-determination and non-
intervention are the solution. These allow each constituent to choose and pursue its own
‘domestic’ way of life, while providing norms and rules for their interaction. These are
procedural rules rather than substance, mere form rather than content. In Jackson’s
words, international law and diplomatic practice allow for interaction between ‘the vari-
ous political systems of a large and highly diverse planetary population’, but do not
‘require that statespeople must necessarily share deeper assumptions regarding social
morality or political culture that are characteristic of particular civilizations, such as that

of the West, or that of East Asia, or that of the Muslim world’.26 ‘Content’ lies on the side of the individual states, each of which is different; ‘procedure’ governs their interactions, belongs to no one in particular and thus can be accepted by all.

The problem Jackson poses for relations between states or peoples is a problem as old as the 17th and 18th centuries: once people were conceived of as free individuals, each possessed of his own property, religion, desires, goals and interests, how were they to interact with each other in a public domain, amicably if possible, but with principles to regulate their interaction and resolve conflict where this was not possible? The revolutions of 1776 and 1789 resolved this dilemma by means of a distinction between form and content, substance and procedure. As Marx brilliantly demonstrated in On the Jewish Question, the private now became the locus of particularity and content, while the public and political was constituted as a domain of formal and procedural rules regulating the interaction of individuals, but devoid of any content or particularity, blind to particularities such as religion and property, and partaking of none of them. Thus, the modern political order was begun, and liberalism, the champion of this insurgent order, and its official face once it was triumphant, began its long career. However, this answer or solution was beset by problems from the beginning, and so too is the international version of it.

In the realm of what IR calls ‘domestic’ political theory, one problem was that the purely ‘procedural’ was in fact highly substantive and normative; far from being neutral, as critics pointed out, the procedural norms adopted presupposed, and thus favoured, Christian values over other values, men over women and so on.27 The development of liberal political theory has in part been a process of seeking to ‘purify’ these procedures and norms of their content. Rawlsian liberalism famously invents the ‘original position’ and the ‘veil of ignorance’ to demonstrate, upon the foundation of a few minimal presuppositions, that rational individuals would choose procedural rules that favoured no one kind of individual or substantive quality or attribute, such as race or wealth. Tellingly, in his later work, Rawls finds that even this is not neutral or procedural enough; he abjures ‘metaphysical’ in favour of ‘political’ liberalism, an increasingly thin, spare or stripped-down liberalism which seeks to avoid presuming and thus privileging even the liberal values of individualism and autonomy: for ‘so understood’, writes Rawls, ‘liberalism becomes but another sectarian doctrine’.28 But this also, I would suggest, fails, and is bound to fail, for there simply are no ‘neutral’ procedural assumptions – all presumptions, including (perhaps especially) ones about what it means to be human, to be rational and desiring, are historically and culturally produced, and are thus ‘particular’ rather than universal.29

27. For a very influential example of this sort of argument, see Carole Pateman, The Sexual Contract (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).
What is an insuperable problem for ‘domestic’ political theory is no less so for IR theory. Jackson is aware, of course, that the procedural rules he refers to do, in fact, arise from a particular historical and socio-cultural setting. International law, he writes, ‘although European in origin, has been adopted around the world’; and similarly the norms and practices of diplomacy are ‘originally European but now universal’. We have every reason, however, to doubt the ‘universality’ of international law, and to doubt that, although originally European, it was cleansed of any cultural particularities and became a neutral resource available to all. Antony Anghie finds instead that: ‘Over the centuries, international law developed a sophisticated series of technologies, doctrines, and disciplines that borrowed in important ways from the broader justifications of colonialism to address the problem of the governance of non-European peoples.’ And James Gathii persuasively argues that this legacy continues to affect the workings of international law. In any case, ‘widespread’, ‘general’ and even ‘global’ are not the same thing as ‘universal’. The ubiquity of a practice or norm tells us nothing about its origins or the circumstances under which it was adopted (or imposed). ‘Universal’ suggests not just ubiquity, but some sort of transhistorical, transcultural and/or transcendental warrant; it is no argument to suggest, as Jackson does, and as Bull and Watson do, that the acceptance of these norms/procedures by non-Western states renders these norms/procedures universal, purging them of their particularistic, Western origins, any more than the adoption of the mini-skirt by all women (or, for that matter, the burqa) would make these ‘universal’ features of womanhood.

As if recognising this, immediately after the passages above Jackson goes on to write:

What statespeople also seem to possess is a common ability to recognize the limits imposed by the circumstances under which they must operate in their conduct of foreign policy.… Statespeople can reasonably be expected to act with circumspection and prudence.… Prudence is not a European or Western virtue; it is a virtue of men and women everywhere.

This is a rather revealing argument, for it is a last-ditch recourse to a sort of neo-realism – if the arguments regarding the neutral character of international law and diplomacy fail to persuade, the ‘clincher’ is that state interactions are shaped by the limits imposed by the way things are structured, limits which are known by prudential reasoning, which is a universal attribute. Revealing, and also unconvincing. ‘Prudence’ can be thought to be a universal human attribute, just as marriage can be thought to be a universal feature of all societies, if you define it broadly enough. But in some cultures gift-giving is thought to be ‘prudent’, while in others it is more prudent to receive than to give, and so on.

Prudence is no more ‘universal’ than international law – it just sounds more universal because it is vague.

In short, the difficulties that political theory runs into when trying to equate the procedural with mere form, devoid of any particularistic content, are also encountered by international theory whenever it similarly seeks to acknowledge and yet disavow the importance of culture. In fact, this is even more of a problem for IR than for political theory. If the claimed universality of procedures or form is equally problematic for both, on the other side of the equation, the unit which is thought to be the source and bearer of content is especially problematic for IR. It seems intuitively obvious that humans are in some sense indivisible individuals, and therefore it is plausible to talk of them having desires, needs, interests and the like. In the next section of this article I will suggest that even this is only seemingly obvious, and that it is a result of a historical process that has naturalised historically produced and therefore particularistic assumptions – but it clearly will not do to assume that ‘cultures’ and ‘civilisations’ are unitary beings possessed of ‘a’ need, interest and so on. And it is even more problematic to assume, as IR does when it tries to reconcile content with form and substance with procedure, that cultures or civilisations are isomorphic with nation-states, to assume, in short, that the diversity which is here being characterised and valued is embodied or instantiated in and by the nation-state.

In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson argued that nationality was not a fact which inevitably led to the world being divided into so many nation-states, but rather that both nationality and nation were artefacts. It is a mark of the narrowing of the imaginations of us moderns that to a significant degree we have lost the capacity to imagine political community other than in the form of the nation and state. Just as for centuries after it was gone the Roman Empire continued to dominate the European imagination, so for some centuries now our imagination has been dominated by the nation-state. That is why, when the colonised resisted, they often (though by no means always) did so under the banner of nationalism, and sought their emancipation in the form of the sovereign nation-state. But since culture, civilisation, language and any of the other features which singly or in combination are invoked to define ‘a people’ never, in fact, corresponded to the nations which constitute the international order, then ‘imagining’ these in national form was always a creative, as well as a coercive, process. ‘Creative’ because a process of re-imagining was required; Hindus and Muslims, Gujaratis and Bengalis, low and high and...
high castes – the many different ways in which the people of the subcontinent had conceived of themselves – had, for instance, to start imagining themselves as Indians. Nationalism was always a pedagogic process, one which had to posit as a fact (that the people in question were a nationality) what was in reality a project designed to produce that fact. It was also coercive: inattentive and unruly pupils had to be forced to learn, and to submit, so that peasants could be transformed into Frenchmen, Uighers into Chinese, Catalans into Spaniards. Precisely because the nation was not the political form that cultural community inevitably took in modern times, older forms of identity had now to be forced into the new container that was their alleged natural repository or form. In the case of some nation-states, this was largely successful; in others, as some of the examples given above indicate, such imaginings continue to be contested, and are highly contingent and precarious.

With some exceptions – such as the analysts/advocates of conflicts between civilisations – few scholars actually believe that nation-states instantiate and represent cultures and civilisations. This is less a characterisation of how the world is than an attempt to make it thus, or say that it must, at any rate, be assumed to be thus. It is one upheld, for the most part, by the UN, which continually performs the contradiction of advocating the right to self-determination while resolutely defending the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the existing nation-states, not only from ‘external’ challenges, but also from ‘sub-nationalisms’. But this does not in any way make nation-states isomorphic with ‘peoples’ or ‘cultures’, any more than the adoption of international law and diplomacy makes these ‘neutral’ procedures.

Knowing and Being

In the preceding section I suggested that cultures/civilisations/peoples – the terms we use to connote collectivities whose constituent elements are held together by certain bonds – do not ‘map onto’ the nation-states of the world. In any case, we cannot treat collectivities, whether cultures or nations, as if they were like individuals, even by analogy. But this does not mean that individuals are natural, while cultures and nations are historical and constructed. We are accustomed to think that the social contract theorists of the 17th century awoke to the fact that men are born free, rational and equal, equipped with the capacity for willing, desiring and promising. In reality, there was often an anxiety underlying the seemingly self-assured pronouncements of these thinkers, an anxiety born of the recognition, or half-recognition, that this individual was less a premise that could be taken for granted and more something which had to be forged. In his close reading of Locke’s work, Uday Mehta finds that the liberal citizen-subject capable of the free pursuit of self-interest was not a premise of Locke’s thought, but rather something he thought had to be forged through ‘careful and detailed pedagogical crafting’. Instead of seeing Locke and liberalism as articulating the framework and institutions through which a pent-up
natural individuality finds expression, Mehta urges that we recognise that Locke and liberalism were ‘involved in constructing a particular form and venue for individuality’.

Others have also sought to show that the free, equal, rational and unitary individual presumed by the social sciences as an incontestable fact is no such thing; like the nation and state, s/he is a product of processes and discourses. The prime source for such ‘sceptical’ modes of thinking is of course Nietzsche, who in *Genealogy of Morals* and other writings argued that the individual capable of making promises, seeing in effects a consequence of the exercise of the will and feeling guilt was forged on the anvil of Greek philosophy, Christian morality and Roman law. Partly inspired by Nietzsche’s work, Foucault’s writings have in turn influenced those who have similarly sought to show how the individual was produced, including being produced by the knowledges which posited him, rather than ‘discovered’ by a knowledge which finally recognised what had always been there, waiting to be unveiled (as in Jacob Burckhardt’s classic account in which the ‘veil’ which made man ‘conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation’ finally lifted in Renaissance Italy, enabling man to recognise himself as a ‘spiritual individual’). In contrast and contestation with accounts which trace the emergence into sunlight of the individual subject who had once been shrouded in darkness (but who nonetheless had always been there, awaiting discovery), there are now accounts which trace the creation of this individual through various historical processes, including social, economic and discursive transformations.

If Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault and others have offered critiques of some of the founding presumptions and basic categories of the human sciences, calling their seeming naturalness and incontestability into question, scholars working on the non-Western world have often simply encountered their ‘empirical’ inadequacy. In his recent, magisterial book on culture and power in pre-modern India, Sheldon Pollock argues that the social sciences:

have their origins in the West in capitalism and modernity and were devised to make sense of the behaviour of power and culture under Western capitalist modernity…. These are the particulars from which larger universalizations have typically been produced, in association with the universalization of Western power under colonialism and globalization.

However, because it derives from:

a historically very peculiar, temporally very thin, and spatially very narrow slice of human history … [t]he theory developed from that history fails to help us understand, and even impedes us from seeing, what did happen elsewhere and how this might differ from what

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eventually produced the peculiar combination of culture and power in the modern world called the nation-state.42

In a similar vein, but reflecting upon the contemporary politics of the Third World, Sudipta Kaviraj observes:

The language of modern politics is astonishingly and misleadingly universal. Wherever we go in the Third World, we meet socialists, liberals, a suspiciously high number of democrats of all kinds, nationalists of all varieties, federalists and centralists. Yet, much of the time, their actual behaviour is quite substantially different from what we are led to expect by the long-established meanings of these terms in Western political and social thought. In studying Third World politics, therefore, we face … a serious mismatch between the language that describes this world, and the objects which inhabit it … not [just] single isolated ideas but entire languages seem to be composed of systematically misleading expressions.43

The conclusion to be drawn is neither that a recalcitrant reality must be forced into these categories, nor that these categories are ‘merely’ Western and must be supplemented or replaced by an Indian social science, a Chinese one and so on. Postcolonial writings, working at the junction of a keen awareness of this empirical mismatch, on the one hand, and with a receptivity to the linguistic turn and to poststructuralist insights, on the other, have been especially open to the idea that knowledges may serve to constitute the worlds that they purportedly ‘represent’, ‘mirror’, ‘render’ or ‘portray’. Thus, Timothy Mitchell argues that the distinction between real and representation, central to modern Western ways of apprehending and organising the world, and thus central to how the French and British colonisers sought to make sense of Egypt and rule it, did not make much sense to the people of Egypt, who did not inhabit a world organised around this distinction. In a similar vein, I have argued that many of the discourses that came to centre around the introduction of Western knowledge in colonial India – the complaint that Indian students were absorbing the new knowledge in their old ways, by rote learning, or the anxiety that educated Indians were in the throes of a moral crisis, ‘torn’ between their traditional beliefs and the new ideas they were exposed to at school and university – should be read less as testifying to real problems and more as indicating that certain foundational assumptions of modern knowledge could not, in fact, be assumed in India. I read these complaints and anxieties as indicating that the foundational assumptions that underlie them – that knowledge is a relation between a meaning-endowing subject and a world of disenchanted objects (which is why knowledge has to be made one’s own, and rote learning is a failure of knowledge rather than a form of it), and that morality is a matter of ‘beliefs’ held in something called the ‘mind’ (hence why Western-educated Indians were assumed to be suffering moral crisis, even though most of them seemed blissfully unaware of this fact) – did not have purchase in India. However, as the institutions and practices of colonial administration, and, not least, of modern knowledge itself, transformed life-worlds in India and Egypt, the social sciences became more adequate as

tools for ‘representing’ that changed scene. As the distinction between the real and representation became the grid organising collective life, it assumed a certain reality and now became meaningful in a way that it had not previously been; as the subject–object relation came to undergird not only pedagogy, but the spatial layout of the city and the practices of the law court and the office, some Indians became subjects who did experience morality and religion as beliefs and were now capable of being rent by the conflict between different beliefs.44

The free, equal, rational and unitary individual is not a fact of the world, the starting point of knowledge, but rather a consequence or product which has been naturalised such that it can seem to be a fact. The elements which have produced it as a fact include those knowledges and discourses which purport to simply recognise and represent the fact that they have helped to produce. It is not that the individual is real and that culture and nation are cobbled together and contingent, but rather that the former has stabilised, and the marks of its manufacture have, over time, been erased; such is not the case with state and nation, which continue to be contingent and contested, with the struggles that went into their making often still inscribed on their bodies. Liberal political theory, one could say, has had more success in naturalising the individual than mainstream IR theory has had in naturalising state, nation and the international order.

**Conclusion**

These insights are the fruit of a variety of intellectual currents, and it is certainly not my intention to ‘claim’ these for postcolonial theory alone. The critique of mainstream IR takes many versions, and I have freely and gratefully drawn upon some of these in this article. But postcolonial theory has been especially sensitive and attentive to the role of knowledge not simply as a ‘mirror’ which represents the ‘real’, but also as a potent force for shaping what is ‘out there’ – and has been especially sensitive to the many circumstances in which knowledges born in Europe are inadequate to their non-European object. In this, it should share a certain affinity with any discipline devoted to relationship, interconnection, diversity and discontinuity, such as IR. For ‘the international’ is a realm where endless and seemingly irresolvable contestations – over meanings and morals as much as resources and power – testify to the fact that few things have become so naturalised that they are not potentially subject to contestation, few presumptions so stabilised that they are not periodically destabilised. In this regard, there is something to the importance accorded to the sovereignty–anarchy distinction, even if not in the sense that mainstream IR usually draws it. In what is still one of the most illuminating texts on the subject, *Leviathan*, Hobbes shows that sovereignty is the name and form of a capacity to impose and stabilise meanings. It is always a function of strategies and tactics, struggles and conflicts, and, to that degree, is contingent and variable. This becomes especially apparent in the international realm, where no sovereignty has yet succeeded in imposing stable meanings.

For an outsider to IR such as myself, this is precisely what makes ‘the international’ especially interesting – interesting for the light it sheds on questions which are of broad political, theoretical and epistemological importance. But in my readings within the discipline, I find a great deal of IR theory is an obstacle to a recognition and exploration of this, rather than a guide to it, for it seems content to naturalise what it could problematise, and to assume that which it should deconstruct: whence the need for its critique.

**Author Biography**

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