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The Cultural Politics of Postcolonial IR: A Critique

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Abstract
The universality of social, political and economic concepts or constructs emanating from ‘the West’ has been challenged in a variety of literatures across the human sciences, and often with good reason. International Relations (IR) has been no exception and some recent scholarship has begun to address the ethnocentricity (i.e. Eurocentricity) of the discipline and its most basic assumptions. A number of IR scholars have located themselves within the genre of postcolonialism and aligned themselves against what they perceive as the inherent ethnocentricity of virtually all ‘Western’ knowledge(s) and the dynamics produced by the particular power/knowledge nexus that this entails. Drawing on aspects of the general intellectual movement known as the ‘cultural turn’, many scholars are inclined to invoke the fundamental cultural and/or historical specificity of ideas and practices as a means of delegitimating the ‘universal’ and, conversely, privileging the ‘local’ (usually ‘non-Western’). Arguably, this has created a form of cultural politics within postcolonial IR which comes across as essentially ‘anti-Western’. The paper assesses the extent to which this move frequently fails to address the power/knowledge nexus that operates within contexts designated as ‘local’ and/or ‘non-Western’. It also argues that the ‘contextual specificity’ privileged by much postcolonial scholarship is itself elided by the tendency to posit a ‘West’ against which a putative set of ‘non-Wests’ may be constructed, thus reproducing one of the most troublesome dichotomies in world politics. More generally, the paper argues that postcolonial critiques rarely examine the logic of their own epistemologies and methodologies, and where these may ultimately lead.

Introduction
The discipline of International Relations (IR) has responded to a variety of new challenges to conventional ways of thinking about the world in the post-Cold War period, taking it well beyond the debates promoted by liberal and realist thinkers that predominated throughout much of the twentieth century. Initially, however, it seemed that certain liberal ideas were in the ascendant, from Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ to George H. Bush’s ‘new world order’ and prospects for an extended zone of democratic peace along with the apparently unstoppable force of globalization understood primarily in neo-liberal economic terms. In normative international thought too, liberal universalist ideas received a boost through cosmopolitan theorizing, especially with respect to human
rights and humanitarianism more generally. But none of these ideas have gone unchallenged. A variety of responses, from conservative as well as more radical quarters, have continued to dispute the basic assumptions underpinning liberal thought. The broad anti-liberal spectrum encompasses Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ and communitarian normative theory at the more conservative end, to some versions of constructivism and feminism, postmodern or post-structural challenges and, most recently, postcolonial IR theory.¹

Anti-liberalism often entails a form of anti-universalism. In the case of much recent critical IR theory, there has been a strong tendency to invoke the fundamental cultural and/or historical specificity of ideas, institutions and practices as a means of delegitimizing the ‘universal’ while privileging the ‘local’. Furthermore, the ‘universal’ is seen as an imagined realm the centre of which is actually occupied by ‘the West’ while the ‘non-West’ is relegated to the margins. Western universalism therefore turns out to be not so universal after all, certainly not to the extent that all occupy an equal place in its embrace. One antidote is to invoke ‘culture’ (of the local, non-Western kind) as the key element in a superior epistemological and normative approach which at the same time exposes and critiques the power/knowledge nexus which underscores what turns out to be a thoroughly subjective and particular realm of knowing manifest in Western social science, the historical roots of which are generally traced to the philosophical phenomenon known as the Enlightenment and other earlier manifestations of modernity. According to a postcolonial standpoint, claims to the neutrality and universalism of knowledge has thus served to mask a thoroughgoing Eurocentricity in the social sciences generally, of which IR theory is just one product.

The concern in postcolonial IR approaches to unmask this Eurocentricity is aimed not simply at developing a superior methodological approach sensitive to the epistemological and ontological nuances arising from recognition of varying modes of meaning and interpretation produced by different cultural lenses around the world. Postcolonial IR – as with postcolonialism more generally – also claims a superior normativity, largely on the grounds that it is better able to address global injustices – injustices which have in any case been produced by the West and justified by its traditional approaches to IR. In economic terms, these injustices are usually expressed through images of the ‘North/South’ global divide – a divide which maps directly onto the West/non-West dichotomy that figures so prominently in postcolonial discourses and on which, arguably, it ultimately depends.

In this, and in other respects, postcolonialism evinces a very clear moral certainty surrounding the critique of colonial pasts and postcolonial presents. Thus postcolonialism is not simply an orientation shared by a particular group of intellectuals towards a given object of concern and interest. Arguably, it has itself acquired the characteristics of a generalizing, homogenizing, totalizing narrative which posits moral standards against which both historical and contemporary practices can be adjudged and which therefore informs a distinctive normative framework. These are supported in turn by a range of familiar binaries of which a West/non-West divide stands as the principle foundation, and on which relations of domination and subordination and/or resistance are posited.

¹ The latter group of ‘posts’ seem to offer a more radical approach, but to the extent that their anti-universalism generally relies on a form of culturalism, their apparent radicalism conceals an inherent conservatism.
Postcolonial IR’s anti-Eurocentrism is also aimed at the deeper levels of ontology and epistemology on which IR theory, as with any body of theory, ultimately rests. The weapon of choice in the struggle against Eurocentrism is, as suggested above, a form of culturalism. One critic proposes that postcolonialism, as a form of culturalism, inflates the significance of ‘culture’ in human affairs while marginalizing issues that really matter in the production of misery, including the unjust consequences of certain trade regimes, militarism and the like. He further suggests that whereas class struggle is now ‘embarrassingly passé’, the affirmation of cultural identity remains in vogue even while it gives the illusion that the ‘ethnically marginalized’ occupying the lowest socio-economic strata are actually the victims of culture wars rather than capitalist economic forces. Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmed also take postcolonial theorists to task for abandoning or at least playing down class as a category of analysis.

To these critiques we may add that postcolonial theory has a strong tendency to ignore or gloss over cases and examples involving forms of local (non-Western domination) and subordination because they do not fit its particular normative framework and may undermine some of its central claims. This particular question has sometimes been addressed in ‘subaltern’ studies which focus more specifically on class relations within former colonies. In another paper, I have mentioned a study in Pacific historiography which notes the fact that many scholars of the Pacific have been reluctant to address issues of stratification and other forms of inequality within Pacific island societies, except where ‘subalternty’ happens to coincide with anti-colonial analysis. Thus when it comes to the oppressive practices of indigenous hierarchies, or the close identification of interests and values between at least some indigenous elites and colonial officials during the colonial period, silences are much more common than critiques.

Postcolonial theory’s claims to constitute a counter-hegemonic discourse cannot therefore be taken at face value, and the same applies to postcolonial IR theory. I suggest that postcolonial approaches, while certainly contributing a great deal to the critique of (Western) colonialism and its mechanisms of oppression and control, often rely on a

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7 A similar point is made in Borofsky, ‘An Invitation’. Another important critique that rejects the way in which colonialism is often treated as monolithic is Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism’s Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.
normative framework based on overly simplistic images of oppressors and oppressed. This produces a two-dimensional view of the world which tends to evade confronting other hegemonic practices, especially those of indigenous or local elites either during the colonial period or in its aftermath. Historically, it also ignores a certain convergence of interests and values between colonizing agents and local actors which cuts sharply against the grain of postcolonial critiques focusing only domination and resistance in relationships between colonizers and colonized. This directly addresses the question posed by one scholar, alert to the potential pitfalls of postcolonial analysis, of whether there is in fact “a” colonized subject, and its binary opposite, “a” colonizer subject, about whom theories can be produced, without regard for the socio-economic class of either party?8

Finally, there is the question of ‘culture’ and the tendency of postcolonial theory to rely on this concept to counter the universalist premises of the forms of IR theory to which it stands opposed. I have mentioned already those critiques which have pointed to the privileging of cultural or ethnic identity while neglecting issues of class. At a more basic epistemological level, however, we must also question the extent to which the culture concept is itself a product of ‘Western social science’ and, if so, what this means for the defeat of Eurocentricity in IR or, indeed, in any other branch of social science. First, however, the paper sets out the basic parameters of postcolonial thought in more detail. We then examine some recent contributions to postcolonial IR and the assumptions underpinning these before considering, by way of conclusion, the task facing those who wish to transcend the Eurocentricity of any social science theory.

Postcolonialism

The term ‘postcolonial’ embraces a field of meaning that goes well beyond its literal sense in designating something that simply comes ‘after colonialism’ – assuming that colonialism is indeed over and finished. In addition to addressing the distinctive cultural, social and economic aspects of European imperialism as a historical phenomenon, Edgar and Sedgwick note that theories of ‘postcoloniality’ have been concerned with an extensive range of metaphysical, ethical, methodological and political concerns.9 Another text says that postcolonial critique emerges as the product of resistance to colonialism and imperialism, thereby identifying primarily with the subject position of anti-colonial activists.10 The ethical and political dimensions are deeply entwined with this subject position, which is evident in that postcolonial approaches to the interpretation of both past and present in the former colonial world are not simply post but strongly anticolonial. Postcolonialism thereby constitutes a form of anti-hegemonic discourse addressed not only to the interpretation of colonial history but to manifestations of neocolonialism in the contemporary period, or at least some of them. Further, virtually any anti-hegemonic discourse must by definition adopt a moral position in relation to hegemonic practices which are, by implication, wrong in some moral sense. This begs the question of the foundations on which postcolonialism’s very explicit normativity actually rests, a question we return to in due course.

Understood in the terms described above, postcolonialism as a mode of analysis could be applied to the critique of any form of colonialism (or neo-colonialism) imposed by any colonizing power in any part of the world, and in any historical period. As suggested above, however, the principle target of postcolonial critique, as it has been expounded to date, is the practice of colonialism (and neocolonialism) by Europeans (or the descendents of Europeans) and their impositions on non-European people(s). This, incidentally, excludes from the definition of postcolonial subjects the descendents of white settlers, some of whose ancestors may have rebelled against the continuation of control by the original or metropolitan colonial power, thus initiating a struggle for independence in a form similar to anticolonialism in other types of colonies and deploying similar anticolonial nationalist ideology.  

Ania Loomba’s analysis also acknowledges the problem of constructing a ‘white global culture’ against which a postcolonial world can be defined. Equally importantly, she draws attention to ‘internal fractures’ in places such as India where the experiences of tribal minority peoples since independence has been no better and, in some cases, possibly worse than at any time during the colonial period. This points to the phenomenon of ‘internal colonialism’ where less powerful groups within a state are subject to the same, or similar, mechanisms of genocide, exploitation, cultural devastation and so on as members of the majority population may have experienced at the hands of the former European colonial masters. However, the field of postcolonial studies, particularly as it is developing in IR, remains very much more attuned to categories phrased in terms of European or ‘Western’ colonialism and its subjugation, exploitation and humiliation of various ‘non-Western’ subjects.

Given that the field of postcolonial studies is often seen as far from singular and coherent, the focus on European colonialism and its negative legacies provides contemporary postcolonial studies with an essential central theme. The following extract from the introduction to the first issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies*, launched just over a decade ago, illustrates very well the general background against which the field of postcolonial studies has been constructed and to which it remains largely oriented, and the themes on which it depends for any cohesiveness that it possesses. The authors, Sanjay Seth, Leela Gandhi and Michael Dutton propose that:

Once upon a time, there were civilised peoples and uncivilised, or partially civilised … The countries of the West ruled the peoples of the non-Western world. Their political dominance had been secured … by conquest and in blood … underwritten by narratives of improvement, of the civilizing mission and the white man’s burden, which were secured in systems of knowledge which made sense of these narratives, and were, in turn, informed and shaped by them. … The ideas which inspired the struggles against colonial and neo-colonial domination were many and

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11 As Ania Loomba points out, however, the white settler populations of American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand were themselves agents of colonial rule whose subsequent cultural and economic development scarcely aligns with the experiences of colonized indigenous people who were often subject to genocidal attacks, economic exploitation, cultural decimation and political exclusion. Having said that, one could nonetheless point to the experiences of, say, the Irish, whose historical treatment at the hands of the English bears many similarities. But none of this detracts significantly from Loomba’s point about white settler populations (many of whom were in fact Irish). See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 9-10.
12 Ibid., p. 10.
varied – self-determination, liberty and equality; the invocation of indigenous ways of being in the world against a rationalized, instrumentalist and individualist western culture. … the subaltern classes who constituted the backbone of most anti-colonial struggles were not bourgeois citizens simply seeking to replicate in their lands what the West already had; and even the elites who led and sometimes misled these struggles were the products of the contradictions and juxtapositions which characterized colonial culture, and were thus seldom replicas of the European elites they challenged. … Critiques of the Enlightenment, of ‘progress’, and of the epistemological foundations of modern western thought were sometimes informed by, and struck a chord with, activists and intellectuals engaging with colonialism and its legacies. It is out of this political, cultural and intellectual conjuncture that ‘postcolonialism’ was born. …

The principal themes emphasized here – and throughout the article – are the putative distinctions made between civilized (Europeans/Westerners) and non-civilized (non-Europeans/non-Westerners); the fact that the former dominated the latter through violent coercion as well as through the application of systems of knowledge; the extent to which certain Enlightenment ideas – progress, rationality, individualism, utility, etc. – were implicit in the whole colonial project; and the notion that there are distinctive (perhaps incommensurable) indigenous ways of being and knowing. The one brief passage that sits oddly with the tenor of the essay as a whole is where ‘self-determination, liberty and equality’ are said to have underpinned the struggles against colonial domination and repression. These are very much a product Enlightenment thought which is elsewhere condemned in quite unqualified terms. This issue aside, the main point is the manner in which the essay’s themes are articulated throughout as constitutive of a dichotomy between the West and the non-West. This is also reflected in one edited collection in the postcolonial IR genre in which the contributions are said to ‘begin with the premise that imperialism constitutes a critical historical juncture in which postcolonial national identities are constructed in opposition to European ones, and come to be understood as Europes “others”; the imperialist project thus shapes the postcolonial world and the West.’ Once again, what they take as their main premise is in fact a West/non-West dichotomy.

This dichotomy – and indeed the whole approach taken by many postcolonial scholars – owes much of its currency to the work of Edward Said whose critical study of Orientalism, first published over three decades ago, provides the foundation on which subsequent approaches to postcolonialism have been constructed and which must figure in any contemporary discussion of the subject. First, we must note that the very term ‘Orientalism’ fixes not so much the location of the Orient as subject but rather the location of the subjectifying agent – the Occident (i.e. Europe). Borrowing liberally from a range of European thinkers – Gramsci and Foucault prominent among them – Said proposes that Orientalism as a historic phenomenon produced a discourse through which Europeans represented the ‘Oriental’ as an inferior, exoticized ‘Other’ against which positive, self-gratifying images of a European self were constructed. Furthermore, such representations were produced and reproduced at least partly through a range of academic

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disciplines, including anthropology, philology, archeology, literature, history and philosophy.

Said also made clear the extent to which academic knowledge itself was implicated in the colonial project, and this is what made his work so influential among a whole generation of critical scholars. Said’s claims are therefore embedded in a critique of colonialism focusing on power relations and, in particular, the linkages between power, representation and knowledge – especially academic knowledge – as wielded by Europeans in relation to a manipulated, demonized and exploited Oriental subject. These are precisely the themes taken up and amplified in the analysis of Seth, Gandhi and Dutton and in numerous other postcolonial works.

One question that is prompted by Said’s approach – and that of most other contemporary postcolonial theorists is: why just focus on European imperialism? Why not extend the critique by examining other important historical cases, such as the Ottoman, Moghul or Chinese empires, to name just a few relatively recent ones? Indeed, if we extended the study through time and space we would find dozens of examples from the Sumerian, Egyptian, Mali, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian empires to the Mongols, the Khmer, the Burmese and the Japanese through to those of the Mesoamerican and Andean regions. Surely this would produce a less Euro-centred (Euro-fixated?) and therefore fuller account and understanding of the phenomenon of imperialism and its mechanisms of domination and repression as manifest in different times and places.

As far as the study of contemporary international politics is concerned, there is a fairly clear-cut answer. While other forms of colonialism practiced by a variety of other agents certainly affected large parts of the world over a considerable period of time, European colonialism changed the entire world in ways that other forms of colonialism did not. Furthermore, the effects of the European empires are the most immediate and clearly felt in the present generation. The current international economy is a legacy of European imperial expansion over several centuries, as is the dominance of capitalism which has driven the phenomenon of globalization and which underscores the quest for modernization. Even those countries which have rejected capitalism have generally done so in favour of some form of socialism – another European ideology which has been extremely influential in the formerly colonized world. The globalization of the European state system is a direct product of European colonization and the process of decolonization which created new sovereign states in the image of European states. Even those few places that were not directly colonized by one or another of the European powers – Turkey, Thailand and Tonga for instance – have been brought into this system. Last and not least, European systems of knowledge as manifest in virtually all the disciplines taught in universities, which are themselves also based on what was originally a European institutional model, dominate the international higher education sector.

In short, European colonialism has been one of the most powerful structural forces in the modern period, in many ways creating a world in the image of Europe. And to the extent that other parts of the world do not (yet) reflect this image, or reflect it only partly, they are often considered ‘underdeveloped’. There are therefore good reasons

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18 But noting that the European Union has begun a process of reformulating sovereignty, citizenship and other features of the state system that have served as a universal model.
why postcolonial analysis should concern itself with the legacies of European or Western imperialism and colonialism, the body of ideas which supported it, and its ongoing effects. Having said that, imperialism and colonialism, and the depredations associated with their practices, are scarcely unique to Europeans. Nor are Europeans (either past or present) singularly wicked in devising systems of domination and subordination involving ideas of racial superiority and other chauvinistic attitudes which functioned as convenient myths legitimating colonial practices. To suggest otherwise in fact leads straight back into racist categories of explanation, often dressed up in culturalist garb.

Beyond these considerations, it must also be noted that not all Europeans deployed images of non-European ‘Others’ simply as a negative contrast by virtue of which they could pile admiration upon themselves. This has not prevented many scholars, Said included, from producing rather simplistic and selective readings of European (or Western) political and social thought which, to the extent that it can be taken as a whole at all, is highly complex, pluralistic and contains within it numerous conflicting strands of thought on the themes of sameness and difference, self and other, and the just and unjust use of social, political and economic power.\(^\text{19}\) Furthermore, at various class levels Europeans and non-Europeans alike have at times seen the self in the other, a message that comes through in David Cannadine’s analysis of ‘Ornamentalism’\(^\text{20}\) as well as in the writings of at least some indigenous elites.\(^\text{21}\)

Given that IR theory arises from European or Western social and political thought, it is equally pluralistic, although it is frequently depicted – again in quite simplistic terms – as being dominated either by realism alone or by an intellectual tussle between liberalism and realism for much of the twentieth century. It is certainly the case that what goes under the general rubric of critical IR theory has been constructed in opposition to a complex of realist and liberal ideas and assumptions that is sometimes labeled ‘rationalist’. Even so, ‘Western IR theory’, especially when set alongside a concept of ‘non-Western IR theory’ (despite doubts as to whether the latter actually exists) is usually discussed in terms which see it as a whole, just as ‘Western political theory’ more generally is frequently taken as constituting a whole.\(^\text{22}\)

Postcolonialism in IR certainly sets its critical sights on the broadest possible generalized target, encompassing the entire range of IR theories and approaches which, to the extent that they are irredeemably European or ‘Western’, are all equally tainted in one way or another with Western epistemological and/or ontological assumptions. The next section explores some of these themes by reference to some recent works in IR theory that fall within the postcolonial genre either by explicit self-identification or by virtue of their principle line of argument.

**Postcolonial Approaches to the Study of IR**


\(^{22}\) See, for example, Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is There no Non-Western International Relations Theory: An Introduction’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2007.
In its most general terms, postcolonial IR offers a critique of the way in which traditional approaches to IR, to the extent that they embody a dominant knowledge of the world, reinforce existing power relations in international practice. This is very often linked to a distinct normative position which, broadly speaking, takes up issues of global inequality and injustice, notably on behalf of the global South which is seen as having become more and more peripheralized in the post-Cold War period with the ‘global infatuation with neo-liberal economics.’

Here it is evident that the postcolonial critique of knowledge/power in IR combines epistemological and normative elements which are closely intertwined.

With respect to the epistemological elements, Arlene Tickner argues that: ‘As a social practice, IR constitutes a space in which certain understandings of the world dominate others, specific interests are privileged over others, and practices of power and domination acquire a normalized form’. All this is underscored by an unbridled ethnocentrism in the way in which IR has been constructed as a field of knowledge and therefore as a mechanism of power and domination. Furthermore, knowledge produced about Third World countries is produced mainly by ‘core’ scholars while those from the Third World scholars ‘are hard-pressed to get around the gate-keepers of knowledge’.

This kind of critique is considered in Acharya and Buzan’s study of why there is no non-Western IR theory, although they do not do so from a postcolonial standpoint. They do, however, note the indisputable origins of IR theory in Western philosophy, political theory and/or history. They also highlight the Eurocentric framing of world history which is woven throughout IR theory. Taken together, these factors suggest that IR theory ‘is almost the ideology of a Western state system that has been imposed, with varying degrees of success, on the rest of the world.’

The problem of Eurocentricity is addressed in particularly robust terms in Agathangelou and Ling’s article on the ‘The House of IR’. It accuses traditional IR of a ‘wilful arrogance’ is its basic assumptions about the state of nature, anarchy and power politics, responsibility for which is lain at the feet of the hybrid beast, ‘realism-liberalism’, which stands accused of producing ‘abstract, ahistorical conceptions of the state, the market, and the individual’ which are in turn said to be bound by particular cultural expressions – ‘Western, white, male’. Non-traditional IR approaches come in for their share of criticism too. Agathangelou and Ling see an obvious ethnocentrism in Western feminist approaches which are criticized for seeing the problems of women all over the world only through the eyes of a Western female self, as well as for ultimately preserving the cultural norms on which rests their own privileged and indeed masculinized positions as well-paid white women. The same critique is applied to most versions of Marxism, Critical Theory, constructivism and postmodernism. Although the

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25 Ibid., p. 301. No evidence is actually produced to support this claim, but it does accord with commonplace understandings of Third World disadvantage.
28 Ibid., pp. 24-25
29 Ibid., p. 26. Despite the reference to ‘cultural expressions’ one might well ask whether these observations are in fact phrased in explicit racialist terms.
latter is said to be anti-Eurocentric, it nonetheless relies, along with the other critical approaches, on ‘Western intellectual traditions, concepts and methods’. With respect to security studies, Barkawi and Laffey mount a postcolonial critique of the Eurocentri’ character of security studies as well as IR more generally with its emphasis on great power conflicts. The inference is that this simply will not do in the contemporary period when threats have taken on a very different form and where Western powers face an “existential threat” from a transnational terrorist network enterprise rather than from states organized along traditional lines. Further, to the extent that security studies derives its core categories and assumptions about world politics from a particular understanding of European experience it has produced ‘a distorted analysis of Europe and it place in world politics.” One of the mores interesting questions they raise is this: If security studies as presently constituted is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, why is this a problem? Their answer is basically that it distorts one’s understanding of the broader picture of world politics, the nature of security threats, and issues concerning agency, morality, objectivity and so on. This is all very well, they say, if we want to side with the strong, but if we want to support and defend the weak, then it will not do. Once again, a strong normative standpoint is evident. Further, they concede in the end that liberal humanitarian institutions may be the best bet for achieving these aims. Again, this seems to be a variation on idealism in world politics and does not really move out of the realm of ‘Western IR theory’.

As with Seth et al’s analysis, most postcolonial IR theory attributes the intellectual crimes perpetrated through Eurocentricity or Western-ness to ‘Enlightenment knowledge’ as manifest in the principles of rationality, progress and the ultimate universality of ‘truth’. What then, are the alternatives? Agathangelou and Ling commend an alternative approach to IR – ‘worldism’ – which they claim to be free of the taint of ethnocentric, ahistorical modes of theorizing. Worldism is said to embrace five ‘epistemological commitments’: intersubjectivity, agency, identity, critical syncretic engagement and accountability. The proposal is strongly idealist, although the authors don’t use this term. But they do quite clearly express a desire to make the world a better place, or rather to make the different worlds that people experience into better places. The overall argument is ultimately a moral one, and the tone of the piece is certainly highly moralistic – they are able to represent ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in no uncertain terms. But there is no exposition of the criteria on which notions of good/evil, right/wrong, just/unjust are based. This begs in turn the question of whether their own moral standpoint rests on an implicit universalist foundation, or is it in some way culturally specific? This brings us to the question of the ‘culturalist’ approach/position adopted in many postcolonial critiques, evident, among other things, in the frequent invocation of specificity in terms of the historical and/or cultural contexts in which theories are produced.

In the same article discussed above, Tickner says that “different cultures” ask different questions about their environment due to their respective worldviews and the varying places that they occupy in the world.” While noting that there are power

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30 Ibid., p. 28.
32 Ibid., p.
33 Ibid., p. 42.
34 Ibid., p. 303.
differentials within as well as between ‘cultures’ which sanction or make invisible different kinds of knowledge, she nonetheless makes numerous references to the cultural and/or historical specificity of knowledge, and indeed her argument depends on the invocation of specificity accompanied by a number of generalizations about Western and non-Western ideas, theories, epistemologies and so on. In the end Tickner talks about an ‘intellectual crisis’ in IR and the need to incorporate ‘third world thinking’ into the discipline, and points out that to the extent that this occurs in postcolonial scholarship, it occurs in the work of scholars located in the West rather than in the Third World itself. This seems to contradict the logic of her earlier argument that the gatekeepers of knowledge tend to keep out ‘Third World’ knowledge. The question this begs is whether a scholar who writes on the Third World and its problems from within the ‘Western academy’ and/or in Western journals or who is actually a ‘Westerner’ can claim to be a spokesperson for ‘Third World thinking’. This raises the further question of whether there is, or can be, any escape from the Eurocentrism which most postcolonial IR scholarship seems to take as a central problem on epistemological, ontological, methodological and normative grounds.

**Beyond Eurocentrism?**

In asking whether IR (and social science more generally) can move beyond Eurocentrism, it may be helpful to reflect further on why it is that IR is so Eurocentric. Taking Barkawi and Laffey’s study of Eurocentricity in security studies as a starting point, but without simply denouncing it immediately as a serious and wilful distortion of the world of international relations, we should simply ask whether how it came to be, as a matter of historiographical fact, that traditional European security studies have focused so much on great power conflicts. The reasons seem fairly obvious. First, for Europeans (i.e. those people who actually live in Europe), such conflicts have been at the heart of their security problems for a very long time. Two world wars in the 20th century, mostly fought out on European soil, devastated the continent and killed upwards of 100 million people. It therefore hardly seems surprising that traditional IR and security studies, which developed in Europe and North America in direct response to such events, have been concerned with, and have constructed theories around, such events. If it is now time to rethink security studies in response to a changing world, that’s another matter, and of course we can scarcely disagree with the proposition that the world has changed a great deal in the last sixty years or so and that security studies and other branches of IR will invariably change with it. These changes include the development of other centres of power in world politics outside ‘the West’ and it is clearly not only important to recognize this rather obvious fact, but to recognize that other ways of knowing and seeing will come into play accordingly.

Barkawi and Laffey argue that understanding security relations ‘now requires that we discard Eurocentric assumptions about the world and how it works.’ Implicit in this suggestion is a belief that ethnocentricity (in this case, taking the specific form of Eurocentricity), can actually be transcended. The culturalist logic on which postcolonialism is based, however, insists that because all knowledge is culturally and/or historically specific and invariably attuned to the contextual particularities of time, place

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36 Barkawi and Laffey, ‘The Postcolonial Moment’, p. 333
and circumstance, then it is simply not possible to transcend all ‘centricities’ and occupy
a ‘view from nowhere’. Why, then, should we be surprised that European history, and
European security studies based on historical understanding of Europe, as written by
(some) Europeans, is Eurocentric. Of course it is. It’s rather like accusing Confucianism
of being Sinocentric. But that still leaves unanswered the question of why postcolonial
theorists think they are capable of transcending their own positions in time and place –
their own cultural spaces (which are so often located in ‘the West’ and in an inescapably
Eurocentric university system anyway) – to propose what amounts to a set of normative
claims about global justice that is no less universal in its scope and assumptions than the
approaches which they critique.

This raises a few questions about the very concept of culture on which so much of
postcolonial theorizing and assumptions rest, and the normative thrust it projects in so far
as it not only demands that our theoretical practices support a more just, equitable world
order (as a universal principle) but that we nurture at the same time a respect for different
‘cultures’ and therefore for cultural differences. Few would disagree that it is important to
understand that different people see the world from different perspectives – or what many
people would say different ‘cultural’ perspectives rather than simply a Eurocentric (or
Westcentric) perspective. For practitioners and policy makers concerned with global
politics there are very good pragmatic (if not instrumental) reasons for doing this.
Postcolonial theorists may also endorse at least some pragmatic reasons, but are more
likely to value respect for cultural difference for normative reasons. However, there is no
escaping the fact that the very idea of culture on which all this is based, including the all-
important normative assumptions, is itself a construct developed in European political and
social thought and emerging towards the end of the nineteenth century in European and
North American anthropology.

Those who invoke the concept of culture in critiquing Eurocentrism, universalism,
and so on, usually fail to recognise or acknowledge that it is itself ‘culturally constructed’
from an equally ‘Eurocentric’ perspective, as are the concepts of ethnocentrism and even
Eurocentrism on which postcolonial critiques are founded. The critique of Eurocentrism
in postcolonial studies offers no way out of this and therefore no transcendence of
Eurocentrism itself. Nor can it provide a means of transcending the West/non-West
dichotomy. Indeed, postcolonialism is founded on this dichotomy and depends on its
continuation for its own existence as a category of critique. So rather than deconstructing
it, postcolonialism tends strongly to reinforcing it, although often in an inverted form so
that the non-West is romanticized as much of the West is demonized. There is certainly
plenty in this entity called the West’ that deserves the most trenchant critiques, but
buying into the West/non-West dichotomy we risks over-simplifying too many problems
and their possible solutions, especially when it is overlaid by a simple North/South global
economic divide where issues of wealth and poverty, justice and injustice are too easily
aligned with one category or the other. For those with genuine normative concerns about
matters of wealth and poverty there is so much more to the equation which requires less
postcolonial analysis of the kind which focuses on issues of cultural identity and perhaps
more on matters of political economy, and which attends as much to concentrations of

37 A problem addressed at a much greater level of sophistication in Thomas Nagel, The View From
Nowhere, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989. Nagel argues for a position that allows a measure of
detachment from the local and particular but which does not claim to be fully objective.
38 See Lawson, Culture and Context.
wealth, privilege and power in the global South as it does to the concentrations of poverty there.\footnote{The \textit{World Wealth Report 2009} indicates that the highest concentration of High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs) is in the US, Japan is second, Germany third, China fourth and the UK fifth. No simple North/South divide there. Further, the Asia-Pacific region is predicted to surpass North America by 2013. See Capgemini and Merril Lynch Global Wealth Management, \textit{World Wealth Report 2009}, PDF accessible at http://www.capgemini.com/industries/financial/solutions/wealth/worldwealthreport/ accessed 7/7/2009.}

The world is certainly moving on, and if traditional IR theory is in danger of being left behind, postcolonial IR may not even get off the starting blocks if it cannot move beyond the simplistic dichotomies on which it has so far depended and start paying more attention to the fact that while Eurocentricity (or any form of ethnocentricity) is a problem requiring a great deal more reflexivity in theorizing than has so far been the case, it probably matters little to those whose oppression and poverty may now be due to the political economy of internal colonialism and exploitation by local elites only too happy to embrace the neo-liberal paradigm for their own advantage.