



The master's 'outlook' shall never dismantle the master's house

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Introduction

As scholars mainly attending to (in)security and armed actors in South Asia and Central Africa, the sense of being the odd ones out at/in mainstream IR conferences and journals is familiar—a feeling that is most certainly shared by many other contributors to this forum, as well as many of its readers. The Eurocentrism of mainstream IR has been lamented in numerous texts over the last decades. Such critique has emphasized how IR lacks perspectives from, or even attention to, the Global South, and how the theoretical perspectives and tools almost exclusively are developed by the US and European-based scholars (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006). As Abrahamsen (2017, p. 126) astutely concludes when discussing the place of Africa in IR: 'IR is a profoundly Western discipline, unable to capture the historical specificity of the postcolonial African state, to perceive of difference as anything but deviance from a norm, and therefore also unable to capture the continent's globality'.

Not surprisingly, most critique of the Eurocentrism of IR focus on (a construed notion of) 'mainstream IR' and is delivered by self-proclaimed critical scholars (like ourselves). In this text, we instead seek to turn our attention to critical, or more precisely postcolonial or decolonial IR. We argue that much postcolonial/decolonial IR is doing the same as the mainstream, taking the Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-American departure point as *the* departure point of IR, thus reproducing Eurocentrism—albeit in a different manner. Within the earlier and more general (i.e. outside IR) debates within postcolonial studies, several theorists warned about the risk of postcolonial studies reproducing Eurocentrism in various ways. For instance, McClintock (1995, p. 11) warned that the field risks reproducing Eurocentrism by marking 'the world's multitudinous cultures, not positively by what distinguishes them but by a subordinate, retrospective relation to linear, European time'. Others such as Appiah (1993, p. 7) cautioned about the tendency to overstate the impact of colonialism with

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regards to culture and identity. He argued that the experience of the vast majority in African colonies was one of an ‘essentially shallow penetration by the colonizer’ and that despite the colonizers’ efforts to stigmatize traditional religious practices, people still ‘experienced the persistent power of our own cognitive and moral traditions’—thereby also emphasizing the crucial importance of class and the particular positionality of well-educated elites. Besides, postcolonial (also feminist and other critical) scholars have engaged in their own canon building, following mainstream IR practices, with little unpacking of the privileges and ‘western’ embeddedness, location and training of those who represent voice and visibility in the critical space.

We propose that the risk of reproducing Eurocentrism by overstating the power of the Global North in postcolonial studies is particularly imminent and already in progress. Firstly, the quest to expose and critique continuing neo-colonial relations and the focus on ‘western’ interventions and governance neglects IR ‘independent’ of the ‘west’. There is lack of attention to the agency of actors in the Global South as postcolonial IR tends to inflate the power and influence of the Global North as the origin of history and as all-pervasive force shaping social and political developments elsewhere, thus also attributing passivity to the Global South. Secondly, we argue that postcolonial IR has been particularly slow in recognizing and querying into changes in the global landscape during the last 20 years—such as the increasing convergence between the Global North and South and the emergence of new powers and hegemonies in the South. These Global South powers use specific vocabularies, symbolism and utterances that do not fit ‘western’ knowledge frames (Bajpai & Parashar, 2020). Attempts are made to understand India and China’s ‘rise’, such as competing hegemons, without paying attention to their self-perceptions as civilizational political entities, more than typical nation states. Ultimately, we call for more self-reflection among self-proclaimed critical postcolonial scholars (including ourselves) in which we ask serious questions about our own ‘locations’ and devote further efforts to decolonize our own minds, including how we think and write about societies at the margins of IR.

Clearly, postcolonial or decolonial perspectives within IR are vast and varied, making generalized accounts of the sub-field both unfair and unproductive. For that reason, we should emphasize that our text is mainly reflecting our experiences and readings of postcolonial IR from the perspectives of critical security, feminist and development studies.

Downplaying the agency of the Global South

One crucial goal of the various postcolonial IR scholarship is to make visible the forgotten and neglected IR subjects and highlight how these may offer alternative ways of thinking about IR. However, while parts of the post/decolonial IR put subaltern/invisible subjects at the centre of their research, much of IR focuses on ‘western’ (in particular US) foreign policy and interventions in various forms (security, military, humanitarian and development), demonstrating how ‘western’ interventions—including those involving brute force, such as the post-9/11 invasions of



Afghanistan and Iraq—are legitimated as civilizing missions to save victimized and primitive others.

Within security studies, much research has focused on the growing emphasis on notions of risk and threat in discourses on and interactions with various parts of the Global South, also outside of the Middle East. In short, much attention has been directed to exposing how—often framed in terms the language of ‘fragile’, ‘failed’ or ‘collapsed’ states—parts of the Global South are portrayed as sources of threat to global security, in turn, manifested in a range of policies and interventions (e.g. migration restrictions, increased military presence, interventions in the name of security sector reform or good governance). Many such studies—and following the approaches and logics of securitization theory—focus on the discourses and governing by Northern actors. Importantly, little attention has been paid to the various actors who are (partly) governed by these ‘western’ interventions, including how they attach meanings to and co-produce such efforts. While there clearly are exceptions (see for instance Sabaratnam, 2017; Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2017), those governed by such interventions often simply appear as props on a stage ruled by ‘western actors’.

As Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen (2018) have highlighted, the limited attention to the agency of those intervened upon risks imputing the classic colonial imagery of passivity. In addition, the often singular focus on the discourses and practices of the interveners, risks bloating the power and influence of ‘western’ actors, as these emerge as somehow inherently pervasive, powerful and effective. As such, it might contribute to reproducing the colonial idea of an ‘Other’ that only exists in relation to ‘the west’; an ‘Other’ without both history and agency. In sum, and echoing the early postcolonial fears accounted for initially, we risk to overstate the power of Europe/‘the west’ as the origin of history and as all-pervasive force shaping social and political developments elsewhere. Moreover, by constantly taking Northern policy as their point of departure, many critical studies—while certainly well-intentioned and important—remain ultimately ‘western’-centric (ibid).

A curious disinterest in changes in the global landscape

Over the last decades, changes in the global landscape are issues that mainly (except for economics) appear to be addressed within critical geography and development geography (cf. Horner & Hulme, 2017, 2019; Mawdsley, 2012, 2017). While there are very good reasons to be sceptical of the sometimes celebratory discourses on a changing world order, ‘the rise of the South’, ‘the demise of Europe’ and various policy statements, such as the declaration by the World Bank in 2016 that the World Development Indicators will no longer distinguish between developed and developing countries, it is nevertheless essential to recognize that there have been significant changes to the global landscape in recent decades.

Such changes, most often discussed within the so-called convergence or ‘converging divergence’ debates, focus on data showing an increasing convergence between Global North and South measured in a range of indicators such as GDP growth, the reclassification of many countries to middle income, the Global South growing



share of the global middle-class population, life expectancy and other health indicators, education as well as aggregate carbon emissions (see Horner & Hulme, 2017, 2019). There are clearly substantial omissions in celebratory versions of the convergence position as it tends to downplay enduring structural, institutional and normative inequalities between populations in the Global South and North. Moreover, such self-congratulatory narratives tend to obliterate the growing inequalities within many countries and the increasing heterogeneity within the Global South. For this reason, Horner and Hulme propose the term ‘converging divergence’ as a more appropriate description. However, as they argue, despite all the shortcomings with celebratory versions of the convergence argument, there is nevertheless a need to recognize that “more than at any time over the last century, the contemporary global map of development appears increasingly at odds with any idealized binary notion of a clear spatial demarcation between First and Third Worlds, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, or rich and poor, countries” (Horner & Hulme, 2017, p. 349). In the wake of such changes, we have also witnessed new migration patterns with the European labour movement to the Global South, such as Portuguese migration to Angola and Mozambique (Åkesson, 2018).

Indeed, it is hard to predict whether this will be a continuing trend in the future, given that the Covid-19 pandemic will most certainly exacerbate poverty and increase reverse migration, particularly in the Global South. Yet, in addition to the convergence trends, there is also the Agenda 2030 and the emphasis on combating climate change, which implies that development and development problems are no longer described as located in the Global South, but also in the Global North. As concluded by Horner and Hulme (2017, p. 370) Agenda 2030 and ‘(t)he challenge of climate change and environment thus puts considerable emphasis on the global North and on elite populations in terms of where some of the biggest development challenges must be tackled.’

Moreover, the global development landscape has witnessed substantial changes in recent times with the emergence of new donors and a noticeable increase in South–South cooperation. While China and the other BRICS countries tend to attract the most attention, research has emphasized the increasing importance and influence of other actors, such as Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa, Nigeria and Turkey, amongst others (see Mawdsley, 2012, 2017). This trend highlights an often ignored phenomenon of the growing global recognition for the Southern States in their role as development donors and partners, and how these countries are shaping development norms and modalities. As Mawdsley (2017, p. 111) concludes ‘the development imaginaries that once discursively overlooked and diminished Southern states as providers of development assistance can no longer be sustained. The ontological hierarchy of Northern donors and Southern recipients has been profoundly upset.’

However, as Mawdsley also points out, critical attempts—including from postcolonial scholars—to explore such changes are still rare (for some exceptions see Six, 2009 and Amar, 2012). While she makes this observation about the field of development geography, the same applies to postcolonial IR.



Concluding reflections

In this short piece we have argued that critical/postcolonial IR is in part reproducing Eurocentrism. We have highlighted how the tendency to critique by taking ‘western’ discourses and policies as the point of departure renders critical IR ultimately quite ‘western’-centric. Moreover, by failing to attend to the agency of those intervened upon by ‘western’ actors, we risk imputing classical colonial imageries of passivity and bloating the power and influence of the Global North. The risk is that we engage in Northern navel-gazing-reproducing Eurocentrism through images or fantasies of Northern or Western supremacy and, thereby, unintentionally replicate the work that we oppose.

We have also highlighted the changes in the discursive and institutional practices that structure relationships between the Global North and South. We would argue that one aspect of what we (postcolonial IR scholars) have called for—namely an undoing of distinctions between notions of a developed superior North versus an undeveloped South, has partly been materializing. However, we (postcolonial IR scholars) have seemingly displayed a quite limited curiosity and been slow in querying into changes in the global landscape. Clearly, the traditional postcolonial critique of neo-colonial relations is essential, but such efforts need to attend more to actors’ agency in the Global South. We also need to take transformations in the global landscape seriously and probe their many meanings and impact.

To address the provocation ‘is there, can there be—should there be—a geoculturally pluralistic IR?’, we respond that the ontological fragility of IR as a discipline makes ‘Eurocentrism’, the only anchor to which critical scholars have so far attached their reimaginings of the ‘global’ and discursive interventions. The Eurocentric premise not only makes the disciplinary fragility so visible, but it also becomes the only framework through which critiques and alternative discourses are shaped. While there is a good reason for the scepticism about North–South convergence and other changes in the global landscape, the immediate and reflexive dismissing of such data as simply capitalist, neo-liberal propaganda (and naming those who disagree as unfaithful) is not only curious but slightly discomforting. Why is that? Is it possible that we—as privileged postcolonial scholars based in the Global North, harbour similar fantasies (Kapoor, 2020) of domination and supremacy as those we critique?

Turning to other sites as the origins of curiosity in a genuine spirit of critical enquiry is a way of reorienting our thinking about the world, and being vigilant about our own positionality, commitment and complicity. As suggested earlier, most postcolonial IR scholars (including ourselves) are based in the Global North and write from that horizon. Merely paying attention to non-‘western’ locations as ‘case studies’ does not address the unequal knowledge production, methods, resources and dissemination practices that continue to treat Global South as passive actors (Dunia *et al.*, 2020). Not just mainstream, but also postcolonial IR, would most certainly look different if dominated by academia in the Global South. This perhaps would mean moving beyond the established canons



of critical IR, moving away from IR itself, letting it unsettle and implode. What would this implosion look like?

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