

Assess the Relation Between Postcolonial and Feminist Approaches to Theorising International Politics

Through respective analytical lenses of race and gender, postcolonialism and feminism critiques inquire into the epistemological and ontological foundations of positivist conventional IR. They contest its monolithic, limited empiricism that excludes certain societal groups and thus hinders international political equality and direct us to forgo false assumptions of universalism that sustain rationalist methodologies and causalities through "scientific" pursuit. Instead, they offer new ways of understanding world politics through sociological and interpretive means that allow for "truth" inclusive to all.

This essay will begin by outlining postcolonial and feminist critique and the relationship through race and gender in international politics. It will then assess relations between the disciplines through examination of the socially and culturally constructed characteristics of knowledge, global hierarchy, economy and international security. Finally, it will conclude by arguing that postcolonial and feminist critical theories constitute separate but aligned postpositivist challenges to the established absolutism through which conventional modes of international relations (IR) claim to know and make sense the world.

Postcolonialism and feminism seek to fill the theoretical gaps in positivist IR theory which they consider incomplete and fail to represent the full reality of the international system. Conventional IR approaches give ontological priority to anarchy and state sovereignty in the international system, and are therefore concerned with the well-being of the state as its unitary value. They further presuppose an historical geography as conceived through the Western (Anglo-American-European) experience and portray this fixed, limited view as universal. Not only is this misleading, but the ahistorical footing of positivism denies itself the basic theoretical logic of perspective. It therefore reproduces the world in its own image and is resistant to change. But Robert Cox emphasises that theory cannot exist without perspective which must "derive from a position of time and space" (Cox in Ayoob, 2002: 30). Theory without perspective nullifies objectivity and conceals an ideological bent. Postpositivism aims to redress this.

Because conventional IR is selective in the history and knowledge it reproduces, postcolonialism and feminism theorists focus objective inquiry through social relations, which is fluid, localised and inclusionary of a complete political universe. They seek emancipation for the subaltern and women (collectively: "Others")

through re-historising international politics in order to reclaim knowledge and agency. Postcolonialism asks profound ethical questions of Western IR which erased the human and political experience of (formerly) colonised peoples in its false portrayal of the colonial power experience as universal. The international order of Enlightenment thinkers, Hobbes, Locke and Kant — who opined that, “humanity achieves its greatest perfection with the white race” (Kant in Barkawi & Laffey, 2006: 332) — was Eurocentric and racist, yet continues to be embraced by IR as the natural state of things. Conceptually, while postcolonialism accepts Realist notions of reason and universalism, it seeks participatory authorship for the politically marginalised. It sees the resuscitation of distinct peripheral cultures, literatures, histories and philosophies previously erased or de-valued as the means to fulfil truth and transform the international order to achieve authentic universal peace and justice. Feminism strives to understand the subordination of women by challenging the legitimacy of the ahistorical and asocial theory building of IR. It seeks to reinstall women in global politics by re-historising socially constructed characteristics of gender to empower women through knowledge. Although feminism is often considered idealist, it considers Kantian ideals of justice and peace to be problematic. The structural rationality of Kant (who was opposed to women’s education lest it hinder the progress of men) was “defined by the identifying experience of elite men as paradigmatic of human beings as a whole” (Tickner, 1997: 616). Instead, feminism views structured thought as masculinised gender-neutral assumptions of humanity that marginalise women’s function in global politics. Like postcolonialism, feminism seeks to understand the subordination of Others through knowledge, because knowledge is not value neutral and therefore has political consequences.

To free oneself from the powerful hold of mainstream IR’s subjective reproduction of history and its real world political effects, is to extricate oneself from the limits of its nation-state thinking and view the world with the objectivity of an outsider. Accordingly, postcolonial and most feminist thinkers eschew solidarity to nation-state to adopt modes of hermeneutic knowledge generation from an “exilic global posture” (Biswas, 2007: 128). From this unbound orientation, postcolonialists are able to access direct peripheral experience to form a broader, borderless understanding of things as they currently are, and how they historically came to be. This fuller, contextualised accommodation of global truths demystifies the “naturalness” of mainstream IR ontology. But, rather than displacing it entirely, postcolonialism uses its knowledge to re-universalise the classical cultural archive in order to conduce a simultaneous awareness of intertwined and overlapping histories and experiences that can then foster pluralistic global realities (Said, 1993: 18). Equally, feminists find themselves on the outside looking in and attempt to reclaim women as subjects of history and politics.