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Darby/Postcolonizing the international

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**Introduction**

Phillip Darby

*We must be the change that we wish to see in the world.*
—M. K. Gandhi

The book’s title signposts the tasks it undertakes. “Postcolonizing the international” encapsulates our commitment to bring postcolonial critique directly into the province of the international. It alerts the reader that much remains to be done in the way of challenging inherited categories of thought about the relationships between different people and about the international system itself. “Working to change the way we are” expresses our hope to move beyond critique and deconstruction and to at least begin to think about how different futures might be envisaged. What is not flagged in the title is our intention to reflect back on postcolonial discourse and so reconfigure it so that it engages more productively with the politics of the contemporary international.

There is a growing awareness of the need for approaches to contemporary international life to be informed by postcolonial perspectives. The signs are all around us that established disciplinary thought is ill-equipped to grapple with the problems and dilemmas of the present, much less to offer a way forward. It is our contention that analysis must begin with the way in which the international has been parcelled up between different knowledge formations—international relations, globalization, development theory, and international political economy, to name only the most obvious. It is as if we are faced with several different versions of the international, each tending to stand on its own. Disciplinary politics, the protocols of scholarly writing, and competition for resources all work to discourage dialogue. But it is not only that the partitioning of knowledge stands in the
way of getting an overall story of the international; there is also the problem of Eu-
rocentrism and how much is missing. With the arguable exception of postcolo-
nalism, the paradigms, models, and analytical tools on offer are overwhelmingly
indebted to the historical understanding and social theorizing of the developed
world. It may be that non-European approaches will not be all that different. As
yet this remains to be established. What can be said is that when non-European
leaders and theorists have advanced alternatives, their approaches have either
been cut down or treated with disdain by the Western gatekeepers of interna-
tional order, good governance, and the conventions of the academy.

Probably more important in the longer term than the changing axes of disci-
plinary knowledge are the reverberations, increasingly manifest, of the impact of
international developments on the lives of ordinary people. Think of terrorism and
the response of the West, globalization and its discontents, external intervention in
so many forms—resulting, for example, in conspicuous consumption alongside
extreme poverty, the pull of the bright lights of the capital city, natural disasters that
may not be as natural as traditionally we have assumed. In such ways, the interna-
tional comes to inhabit the personal and the domestic spheres and declares itself in
the growth of anxiety, the wish for easy solutions, the turning to the supernatual,
the rejection of otherness, the yearning for alternative ways of living. Seldom, until
very recently, have discourses on the international concerned themselves with
manifestations of this kind.1 Partly this is because of the deeply engrained resis-
tance to entering the space of the national or taking account of everyday life, and
hence to pursuing the connectedness of the external and the internal. It also seems
that some of these occurrences have escaped notice because they are not ostensibly
political or because the way they have been understood by ordinary people is not
seen as constituting knowledge as such. In this book we ask about the meaning
and pertinence of such responses to the international, despite the fact that they can-
not be rendered in terms that satisfy the criteria of the Western academy.

To this end, we draw on the rethinking that has been taking place at the mar-
gins of disciplinary enclosures for a decade and more. There are the attempts to
free history from the universalizing pretensions of European thought, to recover
other voices and other ways of remembering and analyzing the past. There is the
deconstruction of development theory and the search for alternatives. There is
the contribution of feminist and associated thought to the role of gender and sex-
uality in articulating colonial subjectivity and then global subjectivity. Following a
trail blazed earlier by Samir Amin, the field of enquiry has been further opened
up by reexamining processes and concepts long taken to be distinctively, if not
uniquely, European. Significantly, recent research points to the part played by
Europe’s relationship with its outside in the making of both the nation-state and
the modern economy. We cannot yet be sure about the impact of such critiques and reconceptualizations. At this stage their influence on mainstream discourses about the international seems decidedly limited. We will be concerned to look at this more closely in this book and to ask why it is that radical challenge is so often neutered or simply ignored. On the other hand, it is telling that voices are now being raised, especially in the United States, calling for scholarship to be pulled into line and for funding to be cut when it fails to accord with that old shibboleth, the national interest. When postcolonialism is seen as detracting from patriotism, some progress has surely been made.

As I hope is now clear, the task of postcolonizing the international is already under way. The work of this book is to situate it more broadly and carry it further. In the context of the specific studies that structure the book, our aim is to bring together postcolonial critique in different fields—some of which might not themselves claim to be postcolonial. At the same time, we wish to reflect on how postcolonial critique might be given more purchase in its transactions with the international. Postcolonialism, we submit, should not be taken as a given. Nor should it be assumed to come already equipped to operate in different theaters and under changing terms of engagement. Postcolonialism’s widely noted fluidity is a virtue, but it is not enough that the discourse be left to wander at random or to be shaped by the cut and thrust of internal contention.

While we endorse the open-ended and catholic character of postcolonial studies, we believe there are areas and kinds of engagements that cannot be evaded. Foremost is knowledge about the international. A discourse that has as its raison d’être a critique of knowledges, and that came into being to interrogate colonial knowledge formations, cannot but confront directly and in a variety of registers the colonizing practices of the contemporary international. This necessarily involves challenging the workings of the so-called international system as well as the key discourses that undergird it. Ponder for a moment on the significance of postcolonialism’s failure to engage with disciplinary international relations—at least until recently and even now by only a handful of scholars. A study of the discipline’s role in shoring up the established order would be revealing here. To borrow a line from Kipling, “[t]hat book will be worth buying, and even more worth suppressing.” For many years the discipline has served as a sounding board for policy-makers, and through a process of trickle down it has powerfully influenced what was once called “informed” opinion in the West. More than this, in yet another illustration of Partha Chatterjee’s derivative discourse, it has traveled easily to the South. Hans Morgenthau’s ideas about power and the concept of national interest have been internationalized and even today remain required reading for students in many parts of the Third World.
It is sometimes suggested that postcolonialism is akin to a tool box, or, to change the metaphor, an arsenal of weapons, which should not be seen as fixed in place or disciplinary domain. The editors of the Institute of Postcolonial Studies' journal *Postcolonial Studies*, for instance, state: “[i]t is perhaps best thought of as a toolkit, a mere set of provisional strategies, protocols and concepts, which arise out of a certain recognition of, and approach to, difference.” Here we perhaps differ from our journal colleagues, though they go on to add that the tools get amended and reshaped according to contexts and purposes. It is our contention that the idea of tools makes little sense without some notion of tasks. There are contexts and purposes that must be addressed: jobs that simply cannot be put aside. This line of thinking fits well with—and in fact has been influenced by—David Scott’s argument that “what we need is a practice of folding these tools [he is writing specifically of the tools of the deconstruction of colonialist representation] into a new domain in which a new set of preoccupations become visible, a set of preoccupations defined not so much by the politics of epistemology as by a renewal of the theoretical question of the political.” It also goes some way toward addressing the complaint that postcolonialism seems to locate itself “everywhere and nowhere.”

In this book we locate postcolonialism firmly in the contemporary North–South relationship. Postcolonialism has traveled far from its original moorings in the relationship between colonized and colonizer—so much so that on some accounts it now constitutes a discourse on global culture or, as others would put it, a repertoire of stratagems for working against unequal power relationships generally. We have no quarrel with this expansion in the scope and methodological reach of the discourse, but here we wish to return it closer to its origins and to take up the continuing manifestations of imperial subjection that so substantially constrain the life opportunities of Third World peoples. Some may object that this formulation of our project has a dated ring to it, and that the use of terms such as the South and the Third World denotes a world that has passed. Recently, for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have joined a chorus of scholars pronouncing the end of the Third World. Along with its rhetorical siblings, the “end of ideology” and the “end of history,” the end of the Third World concedes the upper hand to the doctrines and assumptions of one world that have widespread currency today. Such manifestations of Western universalism, which proscribe categories and nomenclature of difference, depoliticize debate and fly in the face of the life experiences of people marginalized by the international political and economic system. As Mahmut Mutman crisply observes in response to *Empire*, “[t]here is a First World in the Third World, and a Third World in the First World, but the World Bank and the IMF draw the North/South boundary . . . and repro-
duce it daily.” In At the Edge of International Relations, I suggested that, while it is easy to argue against the concept of the Third World, it is hard to do without it. My view then was that it provided a conceptual trip wire against the colonizing tendencies of much dominant discourse. I see no reason to change my thinking now. Indeed, I see a tactical utility in writing about a Fourth World of the least developed, and even a Fifth World of indigenous peoples who seldom feature on Western maps of the international at all.

Linking my remarks about the twin tasks before us with the location of our inquiry, the project of the book is to work towards recasting the North–South relationship taking account of postcolonial theory. This requires bringing into discourses about the international material usually left out, drawn from the life-worlds of people on both sides of the divide. On the one side, we will emphasize the ways in which the everyday in the South has been affected by global processes and external intervention in a myriad of forms. On the other, we will ask about the significance of fears in the North of being overrun by refugees and asylum seekers and the screening out of aspects of the outside world that might threaten the enjoyment of affluence. Proceeding in this way involves disturbing received notions about what is international and what is domestic, and it means broadening established conceptions of the political. Critical to our enquiry are the categories of race and culture, both of which come from the postcolonial stable, in the senses in which we use them. So also subalternity, gender, and sexuality, which constitute discourses in their own right but have now become part of the body of postcolonial thought. Yet it is fundamental to our approach to take account of other, often older, ways of seeing that might set the limits of postcolonial reconceptualizations. The study of tropes and representations must run in parallel with a recognition of the importance of social processes. The seductions of power work not only on the side of the dominant; those who resist have their own politics of preferment. Above all, we need to engage with the claims of political economy and ask about the significance of historical materialism and the status of contemporary capitalism. Postcolonialism’s detractors have been outspoken about the discourse’s failure to face up to the role played by the economic and to settle simply for background assumptions. In this, they are right. To concede the point and to do something about it is not to put at risk the body of postcolonial thought, but to give it new and practical relevance.

It is our view that these concerns and claims are best brought together under the canopy of knowledge about the international. Questions about what counts as knowledge and what does not, about the relationship between dominant and subjugated knowledges, about the significance of the partition of academic knowledges and the gaps that result, all go to the heart of the North/South divide. In so
many instances, the sources of Western intervention in the Third World are to be found, not in knowledges about Africa or Asia, but in knowledges about European history, political theory, and social engineering. Thus a link is established between imperial occupation and the structural adjustment programs and prescriptions for good governance and privatization today.

The root of the problem about contemporary globalism is the way the international has been appropriated to stand for the experience and interests of the powerful. It follows that there is little incentive to inquire into other ways of doing and other ways of thinking. There is also what might be called the “need-not-to-know” syndrome. This is characteristic of certain kinds of thinking about international relations that revolve around geopolitics and the workings of the international system as a whole. Hence information and ideas from those on the spot, local and regional knowledges, are treated with disdain, or even suppressed, because they divert attention from the “big picture.”

Feigned ignorance lay at the heart of the Western response to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Some 800,000 people lost their lives in a systematic ritual of killing. The small international peacekeeping force was scaled down, at the very point the violence escalated, by a United Nations secretariat primarily anxious to keep the peace in its headquarters in New York. The key Western powers were intent on denying that the mass killings constituted genocide in order to avoid fulfilling their obligation to act under the 1948 Convention on Genocide. Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire, the French-Canadian commander of the UN Mission, summed up his feelings a decade after the killings by saying that, had the silverback gorillas in northwest Rwanda been threatened, the response from the developed world would have been swifter and stronger than it was, when almost a million people faced and met with “extermination.” Despite President Clinton’s claim that at the time he was unaware of the nature and extent of the terror, the problem was not a lack of knowledge. It was that there was another knowledge that was more compelling. This was the knowledge of the disaster of intervention in Somalia the year before—a knowledge that drew on a Conradian vision of the threat Africa holds for the intruder.

Paying heed to the colonizing tendencies of Western discourse and the ethical and power-related issues associated with speaking for others, the focus of our critique is directed primarily upon thought and policy in the First World. We have tried to avoid being prescriptive in any way about the approaches of Asians and Africans to the contemporary international order or about how they might respond to questions of modernity. Indeed, one of our aims in addressing these issues is to foreground the problems of writing about other cultures and to underline the need to develop procedures that speak to the positionality of a white
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overseas scholar and to facilitate collaborative exchange.\textsuperscript{12} Thirty years ago Doris Lessing observed of black society in Rhodesia (as it then was), “if you are a white writer, it is a story that you are told by others.”\textsuperscript{13} Terence Ranger has gone so far as to assert that in contemporary Africa and Asia “expatriate scholars have to accept partnership or apprenticeship as a condition of doing research at all.”\textsuperscript{14} But the situation is hardly as clear-cut as that. There are many subalterns and a range of stories that need to be told. The problem of speaking for others does not turn solely on one axis—such as race—however important. Still, it is a condition of this book that a space must be cleared for Third World peoples to think about their preferred futures, alternative or otherwise, and of how best to proceed. This is most powerfully elaborated by Edgar Ng in Chapter 6 where he argues that development programs undertaken by international nongovernmental organizations should more and more be directed to changing thinking and politicizing debate within Western societies. This also makes strategic sense, in that the levers that might work to recast the economic relationship between North and South seem mainly to be located within the West.

At this point I should state plainly that this book is politically committed to changing thinking about North–South relations and thereby to changing international practices. In this regard, we are writing not only against palpably conservative texts such as Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis\textsuperscript{15} but also those that disavow politics supposedly to tell the international “as it is.” We hold that this tradition of depoliticizing the working of the international system remains strongly entrenched in disciplinary international relations, especially in textbooks and university courses. If, as has been argued\textsuperscript{16} and we believe, postcolonialism is an ethical enterprise, there should be no pretense to some scholarly detachment. At the nub of postcolonialism lies the conviction that the story that is told makes a difference, and it is therefore incumbent on postcolonial scholars to approach their writing (and teaching) in a politically engaged way. The Institute of Postcolonial Studies is committed to attempting to fold its scholarly program into its political activism and vice versa. One of the aims of this book series is to make a difference—both within academe and outside it—by producing books that speak to difference. Such engagement seems to us all the more necessary at a time when the academy has adapted itself to the global reach of neoliberalism and, increasingly, is privileging knowledge that can be commodified and professionally applied.

As perhaps has not been sufficiently appreciated, the form of a book relates directly to the work it is able to do. We have put much thought into the structure
and style of writing of this book. Most of all, we have been concerned about how to reach out to a broad constituency of readers and about how to arrive at some accommodation between facilitating internal difference and debate while at the same time advancing agreed upon overarching themes. Of particular pertinence given our postcolonial provenance, we have tried to avoid esoteric language and to write in plain English. As far as possible we have resisted being drawn into internal debates within disciplines, which all too often might as well display a sign warning off the outsider. In the case of international relations, especially, they are also a form of staking territory. We have attempted to vary the form of contributions, thereby bringing in new source material. Throughout, we have endeavored to introduce elements of a conversation among the contributors. The idea here is to catch something of the cross-currents of thought and to personalize the narrative. When all is said and done, however, on the larger issues that determine the intellectual and political direction of the book, there is a commonality of thought and commitment.

If we have got it anywhere near right, the various essays and stories that make up this book should connect with each other without too much in the way of editorial intervention. Nonetheless, some signposting of what to expect and why might be helpful to readers. Rather than attempt to cram this into the Introduction, well removed from the later chapters, it seemed preferable to provide notes along the way. To this end, the book has been divided into three parts: framing the project; situating dissent; working with identity. Each part contains a mixture of narrative forms and is prefaced by a few pages in which I have indicated the intellectual work to be done and explained the positioning of material. One of the distinctive features of the book is that it brings together very different types of narrative, ranging from (relatively conventional) academic analyses to fiction, interviews, and autobiographical reflections. The introductory notes address the significance of the various writing styles and how they relate to the book’s content and themes. These notes also raise issues about how some of the chapters might be read, suggesting that the book offers, to those inclined so to approach it, a postcolonial experience of reading.

Notes


2. I would suggest that this is the case with Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (eds.), Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). In this otherwise admirable study, the
understanding of postcolonialism is rather pat, the critical energies of the contributors are directed to international relations, and postcolonialism escapes interrogation.


6. On this, see the comments of Ato Quayson and David Theo Goldberg in their introduction to David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (eds.), *Relocating Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. xvi–xviii. Benita Parry has some harsh words about postcolonialism being understood as whatever an author chooses to make it to mean. She takes exception to an editorial introduction to the first issue of *Postcolonial Studies* (Vol. 1, no. 1, April 1998, pp. 7–11 at p. 10), in which the editors write “‘our’ postcolonialism offers a new promiscuity. . . .” Benita Parry, “Directions and Dead Ends in Postcolonial Studies,” in *Relocating Postcolonialism*, pp. 66–81 at pp. 72–73.


12. This, we hope, will be carried forward in a collaborative project between the Institute of Postcolonial Studies and the Department of International Relations at the University of Jadavpur, Kolkata (Calcutta). For the first contribution, see Phillip Darby, Devika Goonewardene, Simon Obendorf, and Edgar Ng, “A Postcolonial International Relations?” *IPCS Occasional Paper No. 3*, Melbourne, 2003.


16. As, for instance, by Quayson and Goldberg, *Relocating Postcolonialism*, p. xii.

17. As has often enough been observed, while being a discourse about the subaltern, the language employed is frequently difficult to follow and excludes the very people it is meant to aid. In the words of one historian on the left, the literary style of many postcolonial writers “is dense with allusion, metaphor, wordplay, and sometimes, for that matter, willful obscurity.” Stephen Howe, “David Fieldhouse and “Imperialism”: Some Historiographical Revisions,” in Peter Burroughs and A. J. Stockwell (eds.), *Managing the Business of Empire: Essays in Honour of David Fieldhouse* (London and Portland, Ore.: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 213–232 at p. 214.