



The Last Shall Be First *Postcolonialism and Critical Security Studies: A Review of the Literature*

John P. Hayes

ABSTRACT

In contemporary international relations (IR), dominant representations and discourses of global security follow an epistemological consensus that privileges political realism. Following a brief overview of poststructuralism and traditional IR theory, this paper draws upon seminal works central to the development of the literature of postcolonial security studies. This literature review exemplifies how conflicts of liberation and decolonization of the late twentieth century have at times been misconstrued in traditional IR scholarship as proxy conflicts of the Cold War, an assumption that is symptomatic of eurocentrism and political realism. This paper puts the central themes from select seminal works of postcolonial theory into discussion with each other to emphasize that, while theorists diverge in respect to certain normative conclusions, taken together, they contribute to a robust critique of eurocentric scholarship. This paper concludes by suggesting that triangulating poststructural and postcolonial theories with traditional IR scholarship is effective in achieving a holistic critical analysis in relation to security studies.

KEYWORDS: *Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism, International Relations, Security Studies, Political Realism, Subaltern*

John P. Hayes is a Master's student in the Department of Political Science at York University. He holds a Bachelor of Arts Honours from the University of British Columbia in Latin American Studies with a specialization in Mexican Social Movements.

Introduction

Small wars and intrastate conflicts are often manifestations of historically constituted struggles of decolonization against imperialism. The traditional approach to security studies has been as a narrow subset within international relations (IR) which privileges political realism, a school of thought suggesting that states are rigid, fixed entities, and that the object of security is to be centered upon military confrontation between states (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 4). However, a critical analysis of IR discourse shows that this is far from true. On the international stage, nation states are valued in relation to one another, which sustains imbalanced levels of diplomatic influence. Such valuation produces, as Foucault would say, regimes of truth that ultimately normalize balances of political power between states, which in turn informs non-political structural manifestations of social inequality (Campbell, 1999; Jones et. al, 2011; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015). A review of key ideas within poststructuralism will clarify that in security studies, meanings behind interstate and intrastate conflicts are consequences of long-standing relationships between “the self” and “the other” via imposed interpretations by eurocentric scholarship.

As an extension of the critical discourse of security studies, postcolonial theorists are instrumental in subverting the narrative and positioning the global south at the epistemological centre of inquiry. Postcolonialism challenges the historical record and denies the presumption that intellectual inquiry into the state of global affairs is a western preoccupation. In this way, postcolonial critique transcends even the subversive nature of poststructuralism. To borrow Fanon’s words, history is an historical process: “in the period of decolonization the colonized masses thumb their noses at these very [white] values, shower them with insults and vomit them up” (Fanon, 1961, p. 8). This paper highlights several of those voices and visits their main ideas, which I argue enrich the discipline of critical security studies. For historical context, this paper will briefly touch upon how conflicts of liberation and decolonization of the twentieth century have been misconstrued in traditional IR scholarship as proxy conflicts of the Cold War, an assumption that is symptomatic of both eurocentrism and the dominance of political realism. I will put the central themes from each theorist into discussion with each other to emphasize how, taken together, they contribute to a robust critique of eurocentric scholarship. By doing so, I argue that triangulating poststructuralism, postcolonial theories, and finally traditional IR scholarship is effective in achieving a holistic critical analysis of security studies.

What is wrong with traditional international relations?

Before engaging with postcolonial security studies directly, it must be established how problematic discourses and epistemological assumptions surrounding global security and state diplomacy dominates the wider discipline of IR. Poststructuralism is a very useful theoretical framework

to perform discourse analysis and to understand the political implications that such discourses have on IR, both as a subject of academic inquiry along with the actual quotidian processes of states interacting or “relating” to each other internationally (Campbell, 1999, p. 17). Poststructuralism is often a term that is contested and rejected by the very social and political theorists that developed the theoretical tradition to begin with. For example, while Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida never categorized their work as poststructuralist, these scholars were interested in examining underlying meanings in language and representation of almost every facet of social life, with a particular interest in how language transcends institutions and other organized structures of social power as the ultimate determinant of control (Jones et. al, 2011, p. 126). Power, in this sense, can be understood not by “who”, but by “how” control is exercised over a population at the local, state, or international level (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 76). The notion of “cutting off the king’s head” is to reject looking to specific regimes or persons of power that wield influence over state security (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015, p. 79). Instead, poststructural approaches to IR focus on a critical analysis of the way in which notions of threat or danger are constructed and ultimately reproduced to establish dominant discourses. By doing so, the focus of inquiry shifts from preoccupations over who is in power to examining how simplistic discourses and binaries like “security” vs. “insecurity” or “freedom” vs. “terrorism” dictate government policy. In broader IR, the legitimacy of western powers (such as the United States and their closest European allies) and supranational institutions of liberal internationalism (such as the United Nations and the World Bank) are the *de facto* normative authorities, meaning these powers determine how security and politics should be assessed. At the diplomatic level, western liberal democratic states are assumed to be the barometers of what is morally and ethically permissible for how states can act. This is exemplary of what poststructuralists have come to define as a dominant regime of truth in IR.

As previously stated, the focus of traditional IR privileges political realism and focuses on security as a linear binary between “secure” and “insecure”, interstate conflict, and policies of containment of external manifestations of danger (other states). For example, the Cold War has been framed as universal and fixed, thus defining a historical period of international conflict as embodying antagonism between two superpowers. Mohammed Ayoob (1997) states that there is a realism “hangover” in strategic studies that permeates security studies (1997, p. 138), and that even in a post-Cold War world, scholars are inclined to trace third world intrastate conflicts back to superpower rivalries. In the literature of security studies, empirical works concerning conflicts occurring in the global south are interspersed with statements that suggest diplomatic ventriloquism by executive branches of larger state powers located in the global north. Such conclusions often lack robust connections to regionally sensitive political, ethnic, religious, and economic contexts, especially in cases of decolonization, which sometimes takes generations to fulfill.

Arguably, decolonization is never a fully complete process (Fanon, 1961). Even in contexts as clear as a national process of decolonization, for example both Guatemala (Galeano, 1973) and Algeria (Fanon, 1961) in the 1950s, armed struggles have nonetheless been articulated as being mere theatres of conflict for the existential battle between East and West (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015). David Campbell (1999, p. 16) advances an epistemological objection to this rigid identity of the international system, saying that “the objectification and externalization of danger that are central to contemporary assessments of security and politics in the post-cold war era need to be understood as the effects of political practices...historicizing our understanding of the Cold War is to reconceptualise and reinterpret United States foreign policy.” In other words, what the body of literature takes for granted is based in foundational knowledge about security and politics. Traditional knowledge is neither fixed nor based in objective reality, but rather reflects a deliberate calculus of political practices and narratives that shape how we interpret external threats and therefore conform to a predetermined nexus between knowledge and power (Campbell, 1999, 17; Carrington 2007, 1). However, the nexus itself is understood to be objective in the stream of traditional IR, seen in the seminal writings of such security studies theorists as Stephen Walt (1991). Walt (1991, p. 222) claims that positivism and objectivity is central to security studies scholarship, meaning any scholarly assertion must be verifiable by the scientific method and free from bias of the researcher. In regards to militarism and global conflicts, the traditional realist proponents of security studies aim to accumulate empirical knowledge, publish findings using the traditional standards of academic methodology, and decry normative or politically committed scholarship.

Frantz Fanon (1961), a postcolonial theorist, offers important empiricism in his work that challenges western academe by focusing on how the agency of the non-western “other” is co-opted and disempowered in IR discourse. It is in this way that Fanon is proving how traditional security studies does not in fact uphold the objective and positivist assertions such as those of Stephen Walt. The representations of the colonized subject in itself asserts a fundamental bias. For example, in interactions with the foreign press during Fanon’s involvement in the Algerian independence struggle against the French, he noted “nationalist leaders know that international opinion is forged solely by the western press...for the colonized subject, objectivity is always directed against him” (1961, p. 37). Barkawi and Laffey (2006) note similar cases wherein non-western persons occupying roles of military prowess are denied the same objective agency in discussions of military interest, such as strategy and tact. In “The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies,” Barkawi and Laffey show the case study of American and British naval officers as being considered to uphold objective principles of naval combat, whereas a Japanese admiral cannot divorce their subjective national context from their theoretical discussion of strategy. Such discourses, to Barkawi and Laffey, are “standard orientalist maneuvering” (2006, p. 336) and habitually repeated in IR literature. These

attitudes rob the non-western specialist, tactician, or technocrat of claims to rational objectivism while also upholding robust eurocentric interpretations of the “self” against the foreign “other”. It is not coincidental that this condition of “othering” the non-western strategist in matters of security, military doctrine, and international politics mirrors the realm of scholarship as well. Postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon are deemed overtly normative in their scholarship and perhaps unworthy of the designation of “objectivity,” a designation so many European scholars aspire to become associated with in their research.

Barkawi and Laffey pick up on the theme of eurocentrism within security studies through a plethora of empirical case studies. They find that the erasure of agency by states in the global south not only privileges western discourse, but also sets a “liberal ethical barometer”, similar to the presupposed legitimacy of western states by traditional IR that was visited in the introduction of this article. Such judgement requires an “oriental despot”, or non-western tyrant, to maintain a historiographical moral high ground and attempts to keep the proponents of western liberalism on the “right” side of history (2006, p. 341). In the case of the Allied forces against Nazi Germany’s horrors of the Holocaust, “an imagined geography is invoked which displaces the sin of western civilization onto an intrusive non-European other in our midst...Germany, that quintessentially European society, somehow becomes not Western” (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 341). Similar associations of non-Western ideology are invoked in the historical memory of Soviet Communism; regardless of the reality that, like Nazism, Sovietism is derived from Enlightenment thought (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006, p. 342), the 17th century European philosophical movement that promoted intellectual inquiries based on the scientific method and the promotion of the separation of church and state in favour of new fraternal organizations. In the case of Sovietism, the institutionalization of dialectical materialism under the rule of Joseph Stalin displays their interpretation of Marxism as an evolutionary process towards complete communism. Nazism extended eugenics, a scientifically ludicrous justification for selecting what the Nazi regime determined to be the most genetically desirable traits to establish the Aryan nation, and thus legitimize their campaign of racial extermination under the guise of scientific positivism. Given the rather disastrous effects of both Stalinism and Nazism, the historical record has depicted these political periods in Europe as somehow non-western anomalies, despite the clear ideological proximity to earlier Enlightenment ideals.

Further, Barkawi and Laffey display how eurocentric historiography, or how the West has written and interpreted history, defines conflicts with multiple geographical theatres in narrow time frames. For example, WWII is almost always defined to be 1939-1945, despite the years preceding 1939 wherein Imperial Japan conquered most of Southeast Asia, Italy’s Mussolini attempted to invade Ethiopia, and Spain’s Franco conducted military operations to annex parts of North Africa. In the

case of The Cold War as being defined as 1945-1991, this time period denies the historical reality of the United States interventionism during their fight against Soviet communism, which resulted in the Guatemalan civil war stretching well into the 1990s. Controlling the chronology obscures the fact that many of the conflicts falling under these umbrella terms of international war raged on well before or after the timeframes. Said cases are brief examples among many highlighting the rife eurocentrism that defines the nexus between security and politics in traditional IR.

Shifting contours of imperialism

On the topic of decolonization, IR scholarship has narrowed many such conflicts of the latter decades of the 20th century as proxy wars of the Cold War period. As David Campbell asserts, even revisionist historians and antifoundational scholars fall into the epistemological trappings of political realism (1999, 21). By subscribing to the orthodox interpretations of the genesis of the Cold War, they are employing the same vocabulary and metanarratives that they seek to distance themselves from (1999, p. 20). Traditional IR scholarship is written in broad strokes of generality, with subscriptions to realist notions of underlying causes of conflict, and reductionist arguments rooted in facile, Western derived dichotomies. Edward Said (1978) situates such reductionism within his exploration of Orientalism, and the objectification of the “other” as a commodified object of inquiry by western scholars (1978, p. 72). This, according to Said, is achieved via a “process of lexicographical and institutional consolidation that creates a discursive identity of the orient as unequal with the West” (1978, p. 156). Beyond academe, the “othering” of the non-European world manifests itself starkly in the current political sphere of the international system. “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which outs the westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (Said, 1978, p. 7). Just as the Japanese admiral was denied the western accolade of objectivity, the American and British naval officers are deemed meritorious under the current regime of truth that dominates IR scholarship and empirical investigations in security studies.

In his work on the spectre of U.S. imperialism throughout Latin America, Eduardo Galeano (1973), a Marxist, positions some of Said’s central ideas of Orientalism within a wider empirical framework of political economy rather than explicit investigations into cultural appropriation or exoticization of “the other”. Galeano draws upon the centuries’ long history of Spanish colonization, U.S. imperialism, and state underdevelopment as the motors driving armed struggle in multiple contemporary Latin American contexts. *Open veins of Latin America* empirically displays that the historically constituted nature of such foreign hegemony within the region is not only a lust for resources and exploitable labour, but also a result of reproducing narratives of Latin America as a “natural appendage” of the United States (1973, p. 107). In this way, Galeano invokes the definition

of hegemony that Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci defined in his famous *Prison Notebooks*, which considers hegemony to be the way in which ideologies operate to manipulate one's worldview (Jones et. al, 2011, p. 52). Beyond the basic Marxist premise that class antagonism is the precursor to all social conflict, hegemony in the Gramscian sense views class conflict under capitalism to be a struggle highlighting the domination of cultural norms and values. Beyond economics, social inequality is ideologically self-sustained under capitalism by permeating the social consciousness across many boundaries of social organization, not only class (Jones et. al, 2011, 52). In this way, counter-hegemonic narratives appear in many of the postcolonial works in discussion in this paper, and arguably underpins the tradition of postcolonial theory as a whole.

Galeano identifies moral and race based rationalities underpinning U.S. interventionism, which reproduces the subordination of Spanish colonialism under an entirely different political context (1973, p. 106). In fact, the Eugenics movement that the Nazis adapted in the 1930s had already been in widespread application in the United States for decades as a central element of racial segregation and the structural violence of Jim Crow laws in the American South. The condition of imperialism in Latin America morphed, changing from a system of direct-rule colonialism to independent republican states controlled by white oligarchs of Spanish descent, making their governing institutions in the image of nascent U.S. democracy. As the new republics emerged, imperialism took on a neocolonial disposition, operating upon the interests of foreign capital and U.S. hemispheric strategy. The way in which orientalist attitudes persisted within a neocolonial framework reproduced power relations in Latin America in a way that is central to Said's thesis: the oriental and occidental dichotomy is a result of fundamental western ontologies (1978, p. 2). Thus, Orientalism as a category sustains Western material civilization and culture (Said, 1978). In Latin America, like elsewhere, when insurgencies emerge and challenge whatever socioeconomic and political order of the day might be administered by state agents and supranational apparatuses of liberal internationalism, they are met with bloodshed, coups, and campaigns of slander that reinforce oriental despotism and realist notions of external threats to security. Galeano provides numerous Latin American examples across the 19th and 20th centuries, namely the U.S. backed installation of a military dictatorship in Guatemala in 1954.

Through empirical offerings from Campbell, Fanon, Galeano, and Barkawi and Laffey, a pattern emerges wherein struggles of decolonization are reinterpreted in traditional security and IR studies to render conflicts of decolonization as microcosms of larger existential struggles between universalized dichotomies, whether it is the U.S. against the U.S.S.R., Capitalism against Communism, freedom against terror, and so on. Reducing such historically constituted conflicts to mere microcosms within the narrative of a western imposed binary is dehumanizing and an extremely reductionist

understanding of global security. However, understanding this imposition illuminates the need for postcolonial and subaltern studies of the international system.

The vitality of subaltern perspectives

I now turn to the way in which postcolonial theorists are reclaiming the historiographical record from which they have been excluded, within the burgeoning discipline of subaltern studies. The term subaltern refers to any person or group of inferior position within a society, whether by race, ethnicity, faith, class, or gender (Reed, 2012, p. 562), and is derived, like hegemony, from Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. In the context of decolonization, subaltern groups encapsulate people considered to struggle for a voice in the postcolonial nation-state or simply a person without social mobility (Spivak 1999, 28). Representation, meaning who exactly is speaking within subaltern scholarship, is essential in making a break from western scholarship. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) in his essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, makes the important point that the subject of representation is a highly revealing component of discourse control. In western academe: “the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-and-trade” (Spivak 1999, p.28), thus mirroring and reinforcing the hegemonic behaviour of international politics. Spivak reconfirms Campbell’s (1999) assertion that even antifoundational leftist scholars fall into the epistemological trappings of political realism, employing the same vocabulary and metanarratives that they seek to distance themselves from (1999, p. 20). This appropriative control exists regardless of the western scholar’s moral position on the groups in question. Arguably, the title of subaltern studies in itself is a blanket statement that obscures the discussions, diversity, and antagonisms that exist within the theoretical discussions between such voices.

Within the critical security studies literature, one effective means of capturing the scope of subaltern perspectives is on a continuum. On one end theorists are revolutionizing and dismantling the epistemological assumptions of IR scholarship. On the other end there are neorealists of the global south who are calling for an inversion of the pre-existing framework to place states in the global south at the center of traditional IR perspectives. While this paper employs a poststructuralist lens to highlight the limitations of such dichotomous logics, certain binaries endure in the postcolonial literature with good reason. For example, Fanon suggests that decolonization is the interaction of “two congenitally antagonistic forces”-the colonized under violent exploitation by the colonist, whom derives their wealth from the colonial system” (1961, p. 2). Therefore, liberation is derived from the acknowledgement of such dichotomies as inherently true to the colonial condition. From Fanon’s perspective: “decolonization...transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity” (1961, p. 2). In this way, Fanon draws upon facets of neorealism,

notably representations of the “self” and the “other,” but in a manner that rejects the notion that such binary assumptions belong only to western schools of thought. It is the very process of reclamation of such binaries originally imposed by the colonizer, or, “the spectator crushed to a nonessential state” (1961, p. 2) that creates a new social condition. It is not a return to a precolonial ideal, but rather the emergence of an entirely new consciousness, where liberation, struggle, and transformation strikes at the core of postcolonial political realism, or, “a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity” (Fanon, 1961, p. 2). It is in this way that realism often remains integral to such cases of struggle against colonialism and imperialism, and renders David Campbell’s (1999) critique of political realism empirically useful, but in certain empirical contexts, unsubstantiated.

Beyond Fanon’s viewpoint, which is directly informed by his participation in Algerian independence, there are other theorists of subaltern studies and postcolonial security studies who affirm the central features of political realism. For example, Ayoob (1997) suggests that states of the global south cannot afford to stop looking for statehood in a postcolonial context, given the centrality of states within the international system. Despite Ayoob’s rejection of threats as being inherently external to the state, his definition of security still places the role of upholding public security within the hands of the state (1997, p. 129). As so many of the state making activities in the global south are concerned with internal security, national capacity building in the form of robust governing institutions is paramount. In other words, incomplete processes of state formation in nascent independent states are the catalyst for violent armed conflict. Due to the realism “hangover” (Ayoob, 1997, p. 138) in security studies, which is attributed to the cold war, there is still a central role that realism occupies in the literature. However, Ayoob cautions against extrapolating other realms of human life to become controlled by the security appendages of a state, for example the economy, health care, or the environment. Unless such topics directly affect political outcomes, they are to remain distinct, or else risk further social control and cooptation by the state.

Conclusion

The continuum of postcolonial perspectives that have been explored, while limited in certain respects to epistemological concerns, is effective in showing the variance in outlooks within critical security studies. Poststructural analyses contribute invaluable critiques of the mainstream literature and highlight the problematic assumptions that are made within security studies. Recent poststructuralists, notably David Campbell (1999), also employ divergent theoretical approaches that seek to blur rigid academic distinctions between IR, political philosophy, sociology, and security studies (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015). There are however, empirical limitations to the application of poststructural critiques in relation to postcolonial and subaltern perspectives. Many struggles of decolonization have been in contexts of fierce nationalism and have fostered a new political consciousness that are

in line with realist interpretations of the international system. Franz Fanon's experience in Algeria, for example, exemplifies this. Understanding the range of postcolonial scholarship exhibits how each theorist thinks, or might think, about the discussions and representations of security and politics in academic literature. In the empirical offerings from Fanon (1961) and Galeano (1973) there is a unifying element in the postcolonial literature that, in some respects, undermines poststructural critique: despite a sustained pattern of internally-oriented conflicts in struggles of decolonization, there is a historically constituted, external notion of threat: the colonizer. While the mechanisms of colonialist control and quotidian practices of imperialist maneuvering have indeed evolved, the relevance of Said's (1978) occidental over orientalist dichotomy endures. New pressures from familiar adversaries face societies of the global south, who have gained sovereignty through violent struggle and decolonization. In this way, the concept of security now in an era of the "globalization of contingency" that Campbell (1999) discusses in relation to the modern world order, and espoused by liberal internationalism, is not only relevant for larger powers concerned with the shifting frontiers of conflict. Contingency also illuminates the permanent condition of subaltern perspectives; however, it inverts the power dynamics from an international system centered on the global north to be focused on the global south. For the subaltern realist perspective, the external threat of contingency is the occidental. The hand of empire extends ever pervasively over their domains.

References

- Ayoob, M. (1997) Defining security: A subaltern realist perspective. In K. Krause & M. C. Williams (Eds.) *Critical Security Studies, Concepts and Cases* (pp.121-145). London, UK: University College London Press.
- Barkawi, T., & Laffey, M. (2006). The postcolonial moment in security studies. *Review of International Studies*, 32(2), 329-352.
- Campbell, D. (1999). *Writing security: US foreign policy and the politics of identity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Carrington, K., Hogg, R., & Máximo, S. (2016). Southern criminology, *British Journal of Criminology*, 56(1), 1-20.
- Fanon, F. (1961). *The wretched of the earth*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Galeano, E. (1973). *Open veins of Latin America: Five centuries of the pillage of a continent*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Jones, P., Bradbury, L., & Le Boutillier, S. (2011). *Introducing social theory* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Peoples, C., & Vaughan-Williams, N. (2015). *Critical security studies: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Reed, J.P. (2012). Theorist of subaltern subjectivity: Antonio gramsci, popular beliefs, political passion, and reciprocal learning. *Critical Sociology*, 39(4), 561-591.
- Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (2006) Can the subaltern speak? In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, & H. Tiffin (Eds.). *The post-colonial studies reader* (2nd ed.) (pp. 28-37). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Walt, S. (1991). The renaissance of security studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 35(2), 211-239.