
In its existing state, the discipline of international relations “has inherited a colonizer’s model of the world” (p.2), and something must be done about it. This is the claim of Charlotte Epstein and the 13 writers she has brought together in Against International Relations Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives. The volume’s originality is to urge the specialists of international relations (IR hereafter) who study the norms underwriting the international actors’ behavior to pay a greater attention to the epistemology that they endorse.

In the first chapter, Epstein sets out the book’s aims and intentions. Its ambition is simple: initiating an intellectual movement that would decolonize the study of norms, a well-established tool-kit in IR elaborated by conventional constructivists. Norms are “shared ideas, expectations and beliefs about appropriate behavior” that “give the world structure, order and stability” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 894). Like any other space of social interaction, the international sphere is bound by such norms (whether explicit or not). They make international cooperation possible, even in the absence of a coercive global power. The authors allege that the architects of the colonial project have used norms to establish their power, that this phenomenon has outlasted the colonial era, and that most scholars still fail to recognize this state of affairs.

The volume’s project is inspired by, among others, Michel Foucault’s (2009) and Judith Butler’s (1997) works on the dynamics of power that drive social norms, and on the mutually reinforcing relation between forms of knowledge and power. Epstein and her collaborators attempt to demonstrate that the current study of norms in international relations is not neutral, as it is alleged, but biased, for it stems solely from the viewpoint of Western scholars while erasing any alternative perspective. It thus fails to recognize that the so-called “universalization of norms” actually perpetuates colonial domination. If we accept this, most contemporary IR academics would be complicit in maintaining structures causing global injustices. As long as it stays this way, the field of IR will continue perpetuating the domination of Western countries over the citizens of their former colonies. The authors therefore believe that it is morally necessary to decolonize the field of IR.
Without going as far as a systematic criticism of liberalism, registering both the bad and the good it has wrought” (p.7), Epstein asserts that liberal thinking has enabled and sustained the colonial project. In this regard, she draws on the work of Uday Singh Mehta (1999), among others, who has observed that, within liberal thought processes, the line drawn between the concepts of “rationality” and “universality” is very thin. The core belief of liberalism (coming from the Enlightenment) is that reason is at the core of “human nature”, which is by essence common to all human beings. However, as this perspective does not acknowledge that “reason” has a specific meaning in Western civilization, it inevitably presents the colonized other as “irrational” or as an “abnormal subject” who has “to be gradually brought into the fold of reason” (p.9). To do so, the colonial powers have sought to spread their own norms within the colonies, notably through educational programs, dear to the founders of liberalism (such as Locke, and James and John Stuart Mill). Evidently, strategies of power drive such an intentional use of norms. For Epstein and authors she brings together, the epistemological problem lies in the fact that, historically, the IR analysts studying norms have failed to consider the relations of power existing between former colonizers and postcolonial states, despite such relations of power being instrumental to the application and propagation of international norms.

In the 1990s, post-structuralists and critical constructivists had already criticized the negligence of scholars with regards to the analysis of power relations. This book integrates those developments, and then adds to them a new conceptual layer that accounts for its originality: a postcolonial perspective. Generally speaking, postcolonial research studies the remnants of colonialism in the behavior of former colonial states, as well as the false (because impossible) neutrality of social sciences. They disagree with the linear and progressive concept of historical time which is embraced by many IR scholars. They also criticize the tyranny of reason in Western thinking, the same “reason” that is at the basis of scientific enterprise. The conventional constructivist approach, which has initiated the study of norms in IR, is also part of this movement, and is no stranger to liberalism. Epstein claims that “[l]iberalism is the banner under which conventional constructivism successfully established itself in the discipline’s mainstream, and under which it continues to be taught” (p.7).
This is where the book’s methodology begins to apply. Based on these observations, the authors distance themselves from what they refer to as the Western, liberal and “colonial” rationality. At the same time, they attempt to eschew two epistemological challenges to postcolonial studies. The first is tied to the use of “reason”. Postcolonial researchers have to find a way to make use of Western reasoning while at the same time thoroughly criticizing it. Furthermore, they should avoid universalizing when theorizing. Epstein believes that one promising solution can be found in Sartrian phenomenology, which “counter-poses embodied consciousness to abstract reason as a starting point for knowing the world” (p.8). IR researchers must first look at the subjective experiences of various actors, including those from the non-Western world. Therefore, the majority of the book’s 12 chapters offer a situated perspective on the specific and concrete cases of various post-colonial states (Congo, Nauru, Turkey, Yemen, and Zimbabwe) and overseas countries and territories (OCT hereafter: Greenland, Mayotte, and New Caledonia).

As said previously, the authors thus provide examples of strategic criticism in the hope of strengthening the vast enterprise aiming to decolonize the IR discipline. The following lines briefly outline the arguments raised in this volume.

First, Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney (Chapter 2) offer a reply to those who still defend norms constructivism, in particular Richard Price (2008). Then, the authors question a series of traditional and new concepts in political theory and IR. For instance, Anthea Vogl (Chapter 10) and Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ulrik Pram Gad (Chapter 11) interrogate the supposed universality of the concept of “state sovereignty”, which is rarely questioned by academics. The authors conclude that state sovereignty is not universal, for it is a product of modern Western thought that does not make sense for everyone (Adler-Nissen and Gad), nor is it sacrosanct, because the sovereignty of postcolonial states is infringed upon by more powerful actors looking to preserve their own interests (Vogl). Similarly, Sarah Phillips (Chapter 9) interrogates the norm of “state-monopolized violence”, which is also far from unanimous. Scholars considering it as universal cannot analyze situations in the South with accuracy. Consider, for example, Yemen: “Many Yemenis doubt that their state leaders consistently covet a monopoly on violence, believing instead that…[al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula] has been used to fight factional battles, garner external resources, or ‘tinge
[peaceful] opponents with extremism’…” (p.151, quoting Yemeni activist Baraa Shiban). In a similar vein, Vivienne Jabri (Chapter 3) challenges the IR categories of “international” and “postcolonial subjects”. She claims that the international sphere has not been created homogenously nor spontaneously, but that it results from the unilateral integration of the postcolonial world in the previously constituted society of former colonizers. She claims that the international sphere is dominated by a “colonial rationality”, according to which the postcolonial subjects are less able to self-govern and less worthy of respect. This is the condition for the ongoing incursions and dispossessions of former colonized countries’ natural resources. Drawing on Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, she calls for a “reordering the things” (p.53). Furthermore, Jabri argues that the so-called emergence of universal norms actually corresponds to the global dissemination of “Western” norms that are somehow “integrated” by the local communities.

This integration has been termed the “socialization of norms”. The very idea is criticized by Epstein (Chapter 5), who sees in it another way of infantilizing post-colonial populations. Such a perspective is also rebuked by Charmaine Chua (Chapter 6) and Arjun Chowdhury (Chapter 7), who engage more specifically with the concepts of norms “localization” and “subsidiarity” coined by Amitav Acharya (2004, 2011). They deplores, for instance, that [i] these concepts (simply put, in the former local actors are “norm-takers”, and in the latter they’re “norm rejecters and/or makers” [p.89]) overlook the agency of actors that are neither institutional nor a member of the elite, and that [ii] they fail to acknowledge the violence contained the act of imposing norms, as well as the occasional instrumentalization of the imposed norms. Chowdhury remarks and regrets that, in order to be heard, the claims of postcolonial subjects are expressed in a language rooted in the “colonial episteme”, which is the reproduction of the 19th century’s epistemic categories of tribes, castes, and so on (p.106).

Finally, the authors draw our attention to the complexity of many aspects in international relations. Chowdhury mentions the ambiguity of postcolonial identity, especially regarding the references made to pre-colonial customs, while Julia Gallagher (Chapter 4) relies on psychoanalytical theories to reflect on the complex relations between former colonizers and the formerly colonized, which combine fascination and rejection, and which serve as a basis for political authority. David Smith (Chapter 8) observes that acknowledging
the racist behaviors of other countries may allow some states to avoid fighting racism in their own politics. In a similar vein, Zeynep Gülşah Çapan and Ayse Zarakol (Chapter 12) reflect upon the fact that the current Turkish government is using post-colonial discourses to legitimate authoritarian measures.

Because the chapters alternate between solid theories and striking cases, intertwine epistemological with ethical considerations in an incisive and passionate style, reading them is as pleasant as thought-provoking. This is an excellent book that everyone involved in one way or another with international relations should consult and take inspiration from.

References


Angèle Minguet
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche
Sapienza Università di Roma
angele.minguet@gmail.com

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