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IR 437: Postcolonial Perspectives in International Relations

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**In what ways do postcolonial perspectives on contemporary international politics differ from those of Marxist and neo-Marxist theories?**

Postcolonial theories arguably are a product of revolutionary Marxism, along with a number of other axes such as “the national liberation movements of the 1960s and tricontinentalism.”<sup>1</sup> Despite working on similar issues and concerns, the tradition of heterogeneous Marxist thought and postcolonial studies are allegedly dismissing each other’s research and engaging in oversimplification and trivialization in this longstanding dispute. In fact, both schools of thought share a commitment to critique Western liberalism and modernity, and to address such subjects as imperialism, racism, and subalternity. However, as Ilan Kapoor correctly emphasized, “what one party sees as significant, the other construes as problematic.”<sup>2</sup> In this context, Marxism is charged with indelibly Eurocentric, complicit ideas focusing primarily on socio-economic aspects of imperialism and, in its approach to texts, vulgarly reductionist and totalizing. Postcolonial studies, in turn, are viewed as complicit with imperialism in poststructuralist and cultural framework, and its approach to texts, irredeemably dematerializing and ahistorical. Importantly, however, what makes the analysis of ontological and epistemological differences of the two schools problematic is their internal heterogeneity. It could be argued that there is no such thing as a single Marxist theory of underdevelopment or imperialism. Based on this perspective, the paper explores how various approaches under the label of Marxism and postcolonial theory address fundamental issues of international politics. Specifically, this paper will focus on the schools’ interpretation of causes and historical reasons for imperialism, their aftermath and their presence, as well as the question of uneven development. A detailed examination of Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives will provide a sense of the divergence and refinement within each school

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<sup>1</sup> Young, R. (2001). "Chapter 5: Postcolonialism" from Young, Robert, *Postcolonialism : an historical introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 60

<sup>2</sup> Kapoor, I. (2008). "Chapter 1: Capitalism, culture, agency: dependency versus postcolonial theory" in Kapoor, I. *The postcolonial politics of development*, p. 10

setting an accurate ground for comparison with postcolonialism. While tracing differences in the languages and concepts developed by the two paradigms to articulate core issues, the paper calls for a systemic attempt on both sides to understand the connections between orientalism and capitalism as mutually justifying constructs of European imperialism

The complex roots of capitalist imperialism were examined extensively in the Marxist intellectual tradition, however, as effectively pointed out by Gabriel Palma, “it is precisely in this area of Marxist thought that we find the widest divergences between the writings of Marx and Engels and those of many contemporary Marxists.”<sup>3</sup> The main theorists of imperialism to a certain degree shared a believe that monopoly was the outcome of the uninterrupted operation of free markets, however, the scholars interpreted the questions of necessity, inevitability and viability of capitalist expansion drastically differently or even contrary to one another. In the writings of Marx and Engels, the analysis of the expansion of capitalist economies towards the “periphery” is mostly concerned with India and China, however later they address the questions of the development of the left in Russia. While examining the core driving force behind the need of capitalism to expand, Marx distinguishes between the subjective incentive and its objective historical results. He argues that “this expansion makes it possible to expand the scale of production, to lower the costs of raw materials and of the products needed to maintain and reproduce the labour force at home, and thus to increase the surplus by helping to preserve the low organic composition of capital.”<sup>4</sup> Importantly, despite the fact that he acknowledged the brutality and dehumanizing character of the European expansion, he contended that it is a necessary step for the development of the backward societies.

At the same time, he never questioned political and economic possibility for these societies to adopt higher forms of development of productive forces maintaining that “irrespective of its origins, capitalism once implanted in a society will develop in a

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<sup>3</sup> Palma, G. (1981). “Dependency and Development: A Critical Overview” in Seers, D. *Dependency theory: a critical reassessment*, London: Pinter, p. 21

<sup>4</sup> Marx, K. (1894). *Capital, Vol. III*. London: Penguin Group, Part One

certain way generating both objective wealth and poverty.”<sup>5</sup> In this context, it is crucial to emphasize Marx’s hostility towards the modes of production within non-European societies, which was primarily based on the philosopher’s assumption that feudalism and peasantry due to their unchanging nature present a threat to socialism. While describing the backward nations as “barbarians,” “semi-barbarians,” and the “East” in the *Communist Manifesto*, in their later work called *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx and Engels went further in advocating for disintegration and destabilization of Asiatic societies through “the penetration of European capitalism as the only way of leading such societies towards higher stages of development.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Marxism’s essentialist and Orientalist discourse is unveiled. Samman provides a powerful postcolonial critique claiming that “the more orthodox variants of Marxist thought tend to see cultural identity as “pre-capitalist,” belonging to a primitive, feudal mentality that has not evolved and caught up with the modern mode of global capital production.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the philosopher’s understanding of history is a linear and progressive one that does not acknowledge the possibility of a different transition to socialism and, in general, non-European traditional structures’ capability to establish equally advanced modes of production that would be essentially different from capitalist and industrial societies.

Unlike Marx who did not explicitly provide a concrete analysis of the factors generating the expansion of capitalism, both Hobson and Lenin focused on detailed and profound study of imperialism “which appeared to be the most significant economic-political phenomenon of the time.”<sup>8</sup> By making colonialism their focal point, Hobson and Lenin equated imperialism and colonialism exploring mainly the questions of formal annexation and control of foreign territories. While attempting to provide a systemic explanation to monopolization and expansion of capitalism, Hobson suggested that there

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<sup>5</sup> Palma, G. (1981). “Dependency and Development: A Critical Overview” in Seers, D. *Dependency theory: a critical reassessment*, London: Pinter, p. 26

<sup>6</sup> Marx, K. (1859). *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Abington: Routledge, p. 21

<sup>7</sup> Samman, K. & Al-Zo’by, M. (2008). *Islam and the Orientalist world-system (Political economy of the world-system annuals)*. Paradigm Publishers, p. 8

<sup>8</sup> O’Connor, J. (1991). “The Meaning of Economic Imperialism” in Little, R. & Smith, Michael, eds., *Perspectives on world politics*. London: Routledge, p. 279

was no necessary correlation between capitalism and imperialism and argued that “colonialism is the reflection of the unfulfilled promise of liberal democracy.”<sup>9</sup> He asserts that “inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income in Britain dampened the consumption power of the British working classes” which in turn made it necessary for capitalists to seek profitable investment abroad in the “economically underexploited continents.”<sup>10</sup> Lenin agreed with Hobson that the prime cause of capital exports was the vast increase in the supply of capital in the metropolitan countries while suggesting that it was monopoly that generated the exhaustion of domestic outlets for the absorption of surplus capital making it “urgent for the state to gain control of additional economic territory so that surplus capital reserves could be suitably placed.”<sup>11</sup>

While, for Hobson, the imperialist conquest could terminate when the British working class achieved more political and economic power through redistribution of wealth, for Lenin, any society which facilitated such shifts towards alleviation of poverty would not be capitalist and, therefore, he maintained that “national capitalist monopolies had no alternative but to search beyond their own borders for outlets for their surplus capital reserves.”<sup>12</sup> In Lenin’s thought, imperialism was a stage of capitalist development, which despite its “progressive” nature “hindered the industrialization of colonies” (Seers, p. 38). Moreover, although he follows Marx in arguing that capitalist development is politically necessary and economically feasible, based on his analysis of the Russian case, Lenin concludes that “the development of capitalism in backward nations is not simply a process of distraction and replacement of pre-capitalist structures, but a more complex process of interplay between internal and external structures.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Lenin contended that after decolonization the bourgeoisie of the backward regions would be able to complete the industrial revolution and modernize their countries by establishing a more favorable relationship with the advanced societies. However, neo-Marxist thinkers have questioned the feasibility itself of capitalist

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<sup>9</sup> Hobson, J.A. (2005). *Imperialism: A Study*. New York: Cosimo

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 29

<sup>11</sup> Linklater, A. (1990). *Beyond realism and Marxism: critical theory and international relations*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 78

<sup>12</sup> Lenin. (1916). *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, pp. 71-76

<sup>13</sup> Palma, G. (1981). “Dependency and Development: A Critical Overview” in Seers, D. *Dependency theory: a critical reassessment*, London: Pinter, p. 33

development and industrialization in the periphery. They contended that although political imperialism terminated after the Second World War, imperialism continued its influence on all aspects of world politics, specifically the development of the periphery. The Latin American School of dependency theorists emerged partially in response to the claims advanced by liberal modernization theory in the 1950s. Different approaches in dependency analysis can be distinguished but I cannot provide a detailed classification here due to space constraints. The scholars of this school contended that any analysis of different levels of development needs to incorporate a critical evaluation of “the formation of the capitalist system” and “alliances between the advanced capitalist countries and pre-capitalist domestic elites.”<sup>14</sup> Andre Frank claimed that the economic growth of the West would not have occurred but for overseas expansion, which established, from the fifteenth century onwards a periphery, “the underdevelopment of which is generated by the very same historical process.”<sup>15</sup> While raising crucial questions about the persistence of parasitic and exploitative relations that had been established between the core and periphery during colonialism, Frank holds that there is “no real possibility of development within the system.”<sup>16</sup>

These criticisms of modernization theory extend to Marxist tradition that assumes that the overseas expansion of capitalism would enable the periphery to industrialize. Frank claimed that all sectors and regions of the periphery facilitated preservation of the dependent status within the global system of exchange relations. In his critique of the Leninist approach, the scholar referred to the historical evidence, which indicated that “instead of promoting economic and political autonomy, the bourgeoisie in the periphery perpetuated the classical pattern of trade in which the periphery exported primary commodities to the core and imported the luxury items which were desired by members of the locally dominant class.”<sup>17</sup> This argument led Frank to the conclusion that the only

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<sup>14</sup> Linklater, A. (1990). *Beyond realism and Marxism: critical theory and international relations*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 102

<sup>15</sup> Kapoor, I. (2008). "Chapter 1: Capitalism, culture, agency: dependency versus postcolonial theory" in Kapoor, I. *The postcolonial politics of development*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 3

<sup>16</sup> Frank, A.G. (1967). *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil*. New York: Monthly Review Press, p. 11

<sup>17</sup> Linklater, A. (1990). *Beyond realism and Marxism: critical theory and international relations*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p.

political solution for peripheral development is a socialist revolution and withdrawal from the world economy, which classical Marxists would consider a disastrous step.

Relying on Frank's pyramid of unequal exchange relations stretching from the periphery to the core, Galtung continued the new-Marxist line of thought about the persistence of imperial power relations in decolonized world. The scholar illustrated that "imperialism is a structural relationship between strong centers and weak peripheries, which exists both within the states and the world as a whole."<sup>18</sup> Importantly, unlike the previous approaches, Galtung's analysis does not presuppose any primacy of economic structures and focuses on the significance of political, cultural, communicative and social dimensions of imperialism. This approach to imperialism is to a certain extent in conformity with the postcolonial theories' attempt to address socio-cultural and political complexities of the imperial system at the local level.

Importantly, the world-systems perspective can also be seen as inherently conscious of the Marxist and neo-Marxist Orientalist representation of the world. Wallerstein's account of the origins, reproduction and possible transformation of world inequality is not only concerned with the crucial characteristics of the regions (periphery, semi-periphery and core) and the means by which they are connected to the world economy, but primarily with illustrating that "within the constitution of the modern world systems an "outside," external, pre-existing civilization that is destined to articulate other, more modern civilizations can no longer be posited to exist."<sup>19</sup> Similar to postcolonial theories, the world-systems analysis demonstrates that these civilizations are dialogically and discursively formed within the very same system. Furthermore, the scholar challenges the Marxist assumption about the progressive nature of capitalist development and suggests many world systems through all of historical time and space.<sup>20</sup>

As the previous paragraph illustrated, some traditions of neo-Marxist thought while adhering to the classical Marxist economic and material framework of analysis of imperialism, have incorporated the study of discursive and cultural dimensions as well.

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<sup>18</sup> Banks, M. "A Structural Theory of Imperialism – Ten Years Later." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 9 (3), p. 3

<sup>19</sup> Samman, K. & Al-Zo'by, M. (2008). *Islam and the Orientalist world-system (Political economy of the world-system annuals)*. Paradigm Publishers, p. 9

<sup>20</sup> Wallerstein, I. (1993). "World System Versus World-Systems: A Critique" in Gils, B & Frank, A. *The world system: five hundred years or five thousand?* London, Routledge, p. 294

Postcolonialism further advanced a more representational evaluation of imperialism with its attempts to transcend the assumption that ideology or the Orientalist discourse was constructed simply for legitimization of economic expansion and domination. By creating an immense body of literature on the other, the West “reordered the world through forms of knowledge reworked from their entanglement in long-standing coercive power relations.”<sup>21</sup> According to the postcolonial theorists, the acknowledgement of “the relationship of power and domination embedded in the Orientalist discourse” paves the way for a more complex and fully-fledged understanding of imperialism.<sup>22</sup> Edward Said correctly argues that the significance of ideology was dismissed by Hobson, Lenin and other theorists of imperialism and was ascribed to mostly economic and political processes. In this context, postcolonial scholars emphasized the role of culture (academic, literary and popular) in the operation of imperialism.

Drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, Said articulates “undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism that lay at the hearth of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion.”<sup>23</sup> He continues this line of thought by showing how European representations of the East reflected the will to “control, manipulate and even to incorporate what is a manifestly different world.”<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Orientalism as the construct of this cultural process is seen by the postcolonial scholars as if not “the origin and cause then at least the vital, informing, and invigorating counterpoint to the economic and political machinery that stands at the center of imperialism.”<sup>25</sup> While postcolonial theorists are often accused of omitting the role of global capitalism in their analysis of imperialism, Said’s, Bhabha’s and, especially, Spivak’s writings have indicated the scholars’ effort to find a non-reductionist way of linking cultural and discursive politics of imperialism with the effects of global capitalism. I believe that both the Marxist tradition of thought and the postcolonial theories need to adopt a holistic approach to the

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<sup>21</sup> Young, R. (2001). "Chapter 5: Postcolonialism" in Young, R. *Postcolonialism : an historical introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p, 11

<sup>22</sup> Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism*. Penguin classics. London, Penguin, p. 12

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 221

<sup>24</sup> Kapoor, I. (2008). "Chapter 1: Capitalism, culture, agency: dependency versus postcolonial theory" in Kapoor, I. *The postcolonial politics of development*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 4

<sup>25</sup> Samman, K. & Al-Zo‘by, M. (2008). *Islam and the Orientalist world-system (Political economy of the world-system annuals)*. Paradigm Publishers, p. 13

study of imperialism since, as correctly emphasized by Said, both capitalism and orientalism were and are still at work in imperial formations. What remains to be explained, however, is whether there is a causal relationship between the two factors.

Regarding the question of uneven development, postcolonial theory explicitly positions itself in opposition to the violent injustice of disparity in levels of material well-being of the different peoples of the world. Unlike Frank's pessimist conclusions about the possibility of peripheral development in the capitalist world, many postcolonial theorists have argued that development "while problematic still contains elements of optimism that are vital to progressive politics."<sup>26</sup> (McEwan, p. 19). While not neglecting the idea of development outright, postcolonialism proceeds with the criticism of the Marxist monolithic approach to modernization suggesting the necessity of a greater diversity of ideology, discourses and policies of development. However, it remains unclear how this alternative, more "cultural" approaches to development are to be advanced in the state-centric world system that continues its homogenizing policies and sees cultural complexity as an obstacle to "sustainable development."

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<sup>26</sup> McEwan, C. (2009). "Chapter 3: Postcolonial theory and development" in McEwan, C. *Postcolonialism and development*. London: Routledge, p. 19