Purpose of Practicing International Theory: Analytical Essay

Robert Cox (1981) provides the essay's incentive and foundation with the statement, 'theory is always for someone and some purpose '. This call to critical theory within International Relations challenges the governing constituents of, what Cox terms, 'problem-solving' theories. These direct theorists to concentrate on and provide resolution to issues that arise amongst institutions as a result of structural modification, and not inherently. The degree of reification and generalisation with problem-solving theories prompts Cox to reiterate the anachronistic statement that theory cannot be value-free nor 'divorced from a standpoint in time and space '; it will continuously be contingent on and derived from spatio-temporal variables. Instead of consistent reification by theorists throughout the centuries, Cox suggests that theory should aim to scrutinise the canon which perpetuates certain axioms and apparatuses as objective and natural. An example of this is racism and the concept of race. Postcolonial theory shifts the partialities of international theory, but it is unable to eradicate it. Instead, it is perpetuated, albeit in a different canon.

Due to limited scope, this essay will focus on the colonial and post-colonial dimensions that have cultivated and are continuing to shape International Theory. The aim of this paper is three-fold. The first section of this essay will examine the role of colonialism in shaping International Theory and convey the purpose for which colonial thought shaped how International Theory was practiced. The second section will discuss postcolonial theory in light of International Theory's colonial canon, and for who and what International Theory is now practiced. The third section evaluates the limits of Postcolonialism in International Theory. This essay will critically assess the shift in International Theory's purpose and whether the rise of critical theory, most significantly Postcolonialism, has given weight to objectivity within International Theory.

Firstly, the canonical framework of International Theory is contingent upon two elements: abstractions, made to isolate knowledge from its colonial and violent acquisition; and redemption, to cultivate the view that decolonisation is complete, and that racism is obsolete. The purpose of developing International Theory on these bases is to regulate the legitimacy of the universalisation of Western thought. Francisco Vitoria is regarded as one of the founding fathers of International Legal Theory, and his work influenced a school of Spanish Scholasticism that established, and made licit, the occupation of the Americas and the suppression of the Indigenous movements . In order to legitimise their presence, an ontological revision was needed, and here emerged the European Self and the non-European Other, and this was to be perpetually standardised in International Theory. The non-European Other, such as that of the Indigenous people of the Americas, faced 'metaphysical representations' to classify them as 'backwards', 'savage' or 'ignorant', 'crucial to the structure of international law' and theory. What is now being seen as colonialism, was, by Vitoria's ideological reinforcement, in their eyes, a humanitarian endeavour and a responsibility of the Christian man . The colonial legacy of International Theory centred around the axiom of 'jus gentium' (law of nations), and the ontology of 'man'. This was done in order to understand who could be subjugated, and how the nations could advance, backed by and legitimised by Christian theology.

Hugo Grotius, however, seeks to discuss International Theory and law without the Christian

utilitarianism of Vitoria. For Grotius, the Christian reasoning behind law and colonialism was irrational. By removing this soteriological element, he views law and theory as normative, a human responsibility. Grotius attempt to reject ecclesiastical authority and, subsequently, depictions of humans as ‘children in need of a guardian ’ did very little to delegitimise the presence of European colonialists in non-European grounds, and only enhanced the humanitarian rhetoric that governed colonialism and International Theory. This is because it perpetuates the narrative of an anarchic structure, which men being responsible for the writing of the law, it’s legislation and execution. Without defined morality, this leaves a large lacuna that colonialists fill with self-serving interests, or indeed as Vitoria did, with ecclesiastical authority. Without the soteriological and ecclesiastical element, colonialism would persist, but on grounds that would reflect its true inherent nature, and not under the guise of humanitarianism. By embarking solely on the assumption of jus naturale (natural law), the colonialists become ‘agents of natural law ’ and the colonised are recognised as embodying characteristics that violate jus naturale. It is clear, in light of this deduction, that race is not a neutral concept, and is contingent on those with power to construct it . This doesn’t just mean that racism was at the helm of International Theory, but also, that colonialism was justified through a racialised framework, despite efforts to de-theologise axioms of IR.

Whilst one could argue that Western International Theory doesn’t exist as a monolith with a linear endeavour to justify colonialism through racism; such violent metaphysical frameworks came about despite the intentions of ideologues, chiefly because of their predecessors ‘monopolising the idiom of global civil society ’. The shortcomings of Grotius in shunning Christian utilitarianism, and subsequently colonialism as a religious duty, is that, despite efforts, the dichotomy between Christian and non-Christian, or European and non-European, had already been naturalised as a cultural hierarchy. Epistemological incommensurability means that employment of Orientalist vocabulary solidified the racialised framework. And Grotius did not condone this in his writings. But, most importantly, he also did not condemn it. Consequently, International Theory must confront the ‘cultural insularity that prompts critique in the first place ’ and this is done through an intellectual investment to understanding race outside of the Occidental lens. Otherwise, such studies, predominantly Orientalism, are a tokenistic opportunity for self-reflection.

Secondly, postcolonial theory is a neologism, in ‘search for alternatives to the discourses of the colonial era ’, nurtured by the experiences of racism, colonialism, and ideological apparatuses that have sought to subjugate the Other. The alternatives to the colonial discourse of International Theory have been essential to the rise of self-determination, the recognition of state sovereignty, and the recognition of institutionalised racism within neo-colonialism, International Economy, IMF, the World Bank, NGOs and the academic curriculum of universities.

As founding fathers of postcolonial theory, Franz Fanon and Edward Said demarcate criticisms of the colonial canon of International Theory and attempt to deparochialise the Western framework through epistemic disobedience . They do this through the ‘shunning of monological gestures ’ that have dominated International Theory and has applied absolutism to concepts that are inherently relativistic. In subverting this monological discourse, Postcolonialists seek to expand International Theory from the Oriental lens. Fanon calls out Christianity as an instrument of subjugation and associates the Church with systematic racism. The evangelisation seen in Vitoria and Spanish Scholasticism is an example of its symbiosis with colonisation. It provided legitimacy to the violence of colonialists through soteriology and delegitimised the responding

violence of the colonised through racialised markers, furthering the ‘civilising mission ’. As a result, ‘decolonisation is the veritable creation of new men ’ where violence is one of catharsis and de-theologisation.

The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent uproar of the Black Lives Matter movement is emblematic of this. The targeting and toppling of statues, of slave traders: such as Edward Colston; and vandalism of Churches are extensions of decolonisation, a tumultuous and long process that sees, not only physical and overt transformations but also a psycho-social revolution as a response to the demolition of indigenous knowledge . As a result of the protests, Oxford University announced that they will decolonise the curriculum by ‘integrating race and gender questions into topics ’ and ‘ensure substantial representation of a diverse range of voices’. The anti-colonial and anti-racist consciousness amongst university students has kindled campaigns to challenge the falsity of the narrative that colonialism and racism are unprecedented, but in reality, they are ongoing. In conveying the subaltern experiences of those subjugated by Eurocentrism, Postcolonialists establish a dialogue that draws great attention away from the racialised lens through a holistic reconfiguration.

Similarly, Said notes the Eurocentrism of International Theory and the perpetuation of violence between the Occident and Orient through clandestine neo-colonial means, such as subversion, metaphysical representations and viewing the Orient through the Western canon. Said labels this ‘Orientalism’, a ‘way of coming to terms with the Orient ’ and a looking glass for the Occident to cultivate an image of itself through labelling its antithetical counterpart as uncivilized and ‘inscrutable ’. Such categorisations are the commodities of the idiosyncratic experiences of Orientalists, overwhelmingly value-laden, by ideologues and for neo-colonial purposes, but ostensibly universal and supposedly for purposes of objectivity and realism.

Postcolonialists in International Theory aims to deparochialise the concept of race. To do so, it is necessary to ‘displace a hyperreal Europe from the centre toward which all historical imagination currently gravitates ’. This conveys the brutally monolithic structure of International Theory’s metaphysical framework of race which displaces the multivocity of civilisations, Europeans included. Said touches upon this by saying that ‘the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism’ but in a passing comment states that ‘nobody is likely to imagine a field symmetrical to [Orientalism] called Occidentalism’. Yet, this is a serious shortcoming of Said. An anti-West narrative has risen amongst the theorists of Postcolonialism and ‘white old men’ are targeted and held as accountable for the crimes of their predecessors. To what extent is this regressive in light of identity politics? Said is right in saying that the two fields will not be symmetrical, and one can deduce that the latter remains intangible, undefined and absent on the classification level. Arguably, this is due to Postcolonialism’s influence in diverting International Theory’s lens from being shaped by the Occident, to being focused on the Occident.

Thirdly, a postcolonial International Theory may be for the colonised and for the purpose of decolonisation, but alarming anti-West discourses have emerged amongst postcolonial theorists. Avishai Margalit and Ian Buruma’s refer to Occidentalism as a ‘dehumanising picture of the West painted by its enemies ’. The question here is: to what extent is criticism of Postcolonialism also counter-Occidentalism? Certainly not to a great degree, as Postcolonialism, like other International Theories, is pluralistic, with different ontologies and epistemes in regard to race. It could be argued that Postcolonialism, perhaps unintentionally, paves the way for alliances such as the ‘Confucian-Islamic connection that has emerged to

challenge Western interests, values and power ’. From this emerges another ‘othering’, with the West/Occident being viewed uniformly as colonial, soulless, mechanical and hedonistic.

Postcolonialism, instead of eradicating it for all, reiterates a racialised view. For this reason, one could argue that an aspect of postcolonial International Theory is practiced for Occidentalists for the purpose of reparations and obfuscation of what should be considered universal. This absolute epistemic over-hall is dangerous. It is a hasty rejection of even the valid contributions of the West out of animosity and acrimony. However, it has to be said, that this facet of Postcolonialism exists in extremes. Nevertheless, it’s negation and disregard by Said remains a serious shortcoming in postcolonial International Theory; as we can observe in the destruction of statues that were, in fact, abolitionists, such as Matthias Baldwin: a notable and polemical critique of the U.S. Civil War, who fought for thirty years for the emancipation of slaves. His statue was defaced with the word ‘coloniz.

For postcolonial International Theory to be practiced for the benefits of all civilisations and for the purpose of increased consciousness, battling racialised frameworks and institutionalised racism, decolonisation must first come about through pedagogy and the academic curriculum. Firstly, by establishing a dialogical engagement of European and non-European thought; secondly, through an immanent-reconstruction paradigm and verstehen as advocated by Leigh Jenco; thirdly, through the eradication of Orientalist language that is employed by anti-Orientalists themselves. The first decolonises the mind and regulates multivocity. The issue here is whether the study of non-Western thought will perpetuate tokenism and implemented for reasons of inclusivity only and not scholastic merit. The second encourages scholars to immerse themselves in non-Western political thought and cultural experiences and languages. By doing so, they can fully understand and view non-Western thought in a way that eradicates a western vantage point. This is impractical, time-consuming and unethical, and is contingent on the idea that one can eliminate an unconscious bias. The third may also be unfeasible but is vital to decolonising the mind. An examination and reformation of linguistic employment in discussing race will aid in the reconstruction of ontologies before one attends to epistemic disobedience.

In conclusion, prior to the rise of Postcolonialism, International Theory was dominated by the problem-solving discourse, that did not target the source of issues but sought to modify structural changes that posed disputes. An example of this was Grotius’ attempt to resolve the problem of Christian utilitarianism, but without targeting the concept of race in anything other than within the Western framework, colonialism was widespread and made licit. This essay contends that an epistemic over-hall is not enough. Ontologies need to be challenged.

Further research is needed as this essay speculates to what degree Postcolonialism is regressive, as a result of identity politics. The employment of the anti-West narrative and terminology that demarcates global civil society into fragments creates the same rigidity and essentialism that Postcolonialists have sought to eradicate from International Theory. Moreover, the symbiosis of the anti-Colonial rhetoric with being anti-West gives leverage to cultural relativism. Whilst this is beneficial in challenging universalism, it also establishes an anti-foundationalism that leads to anomie, uncertainty and political correctness. For this reason, postcolonial International Theory needs to determine what the optimal level of decolonisation is