

Understanding the Cycle of Super-exploitation, Dependency, and Western Scholarship: What is added to our understanding of International Political Economy when colonialism is taken seriously?

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The Study of International Political Economies (IPE) is deserving of some critical interrogation. IPE courses often cover the basics of the differences between Orthodox and Critical IPE, sometimes known instead as the British (Orthodox) and American (Critical) theories. The scholars most often cited throughout lectures and student papers in IPE courses include Robert Cox, Robert Keohane, and Robert Gilpin; all men. The sum of the key figures in the field includes six men and one white woman, all of whom focus primarily on the Global North. The ‘magnificent seven’ are key figures in the discipline, but they lack diversity both in personal and theoretical background.

This article advocates the importance of diversifying the scholars placed at the forefront of IPE. While acknowledging the intense, overpowering, and hegemonic focus within the field and the language it employs, this essay interrogates the lack of attention to Dependency Theory and the necessary linguistic changes that must be made to discussions of labour and commodities to include colonial, historical, and present human contexts of economic systems. This analysis stresses the necessity of including academic works from the Global South to respond to the Eurocentric ideals, theories, and language

dominating the field. Although the central focus of this essay is the diversification of IPE studies, the central themes of the paper ultimately expose how our foundations of understanding are rooted in colonialism, and how this has led to the cycle of ‘super-exploitation’ continuing to go unchecked. Throughout this paper “peripheral scholarship” and “core scholarship” are used interchangeably with “Global South scholarship” and “Global North scholarship.”

Unpacking the Issue

Exploring Implicit and Explicit Language

IPE thinking from the Global South has struggled to emerge through the hegemonic force of Western ideas in the social sciences that has prevailed since colonial times. In this section, the difference in language used in Western versus Global South writing provides a poignant example of this point.

In Robert Cox’s (1983) essay on understanding Gramsci’s ‘hegemony’, he uses the words ‘consistent’ when describing ideas produced by the Global North and portrays ideas from the Global South as ‘contradictory’ to these ideas. However, this language does not directly illustrate the Global North’s systematic creation of an environment where Global South ideas are cast as ‘contradictory’. This said, Cox correctly depicts the imbalance between actors within these two spheres when he writes: “elite talent from peripheral countries are condemned to

work within the structures.” (Cox, 1983, p.173) Here, a description of the “structure” is critically missing, this plays into the colonial legacy. In contrast is Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano’s language to describe these same structures, “[although] political colonialism has been eliminated... [there] continues to be colonial domination,” (Quijano, 2007, p.2). Quijano’s clear labeling of the social, political, and economic structures as Western imperialism provides historical context essential to some of IPE’s most important theories. There are clear differences in how implicit and explicit language is used to acknowledge, challenge, or uphold the exploitative roots of Western ideological hegemonies. This further illustrates the need to include perspectives from the Global South not only in exploring IPE, but also its blind spots.

Acknowledging the ‘Contradicted’ as the Ignored

Before unpacking the idea of ‘blind spots’ within IPE, it is essential to define the Core and Periphery and what this language adds to the colonial perspective. In his work on world systems theory in 1974, Wallerstein uses the terms of Core, Semi-periphery, and Periphery to categorize countries (Martinez-Vella, 2001, p.1). Wallerstein describes these categorizations: the Core, the Global North, “advanced and developed,” the exploiters; and the Periphery, the Global South, “less developed,” the exploited (Martinez-Vella, 2001, p.1). Within these castings also exist the Semiperiphery, which are countries which fall somewhere between the two extremes. Wallerstein’s

perspective of organizing global actors, along with its language, is widely present in IPE literature (see Cox (1983)).

Underpinning Wallerstein's World Systems Theory is Dependency Theory. Each of these theories have developed separately yet they share strong "complementarities between them that several authors have used the expression 'dependency/world-systems theories' (Bollen, 1983; Gulalp, 1987; Petras, 1981, cited in Ruvalcaba, 2024, p.87). While World Systems Theory features heavily in Global North dialogues, Dependency Theory is largely missing. Instead, Dependency Theory dominates within Global South scholarship.

As Martinez-Vella (2001) makes evident, Dependency Theory, a "neo-Marxist explanation of the development process" (p. 3) is primarily used in peripheral scholarship, rather than in the scholarship of the core. Authors such as Susan Strange are examples of this phenomenon, her scholarship's "original neglect of dependency tradition may seem surprising. It reflects however the eurocentric bias," (Oliviera and Kvangraven, 2023, p. 1682). Hekkeiner and Rosales (2017) describe these patterns of exclusion as a general underappreciation and inadequate recognition of the "extensive innovative thought," (p. 924) coming from, for example, Latin America. An alternative, potentially more radical, perspective is that Dependency Theory is not as popular because it is often associated not only with the cycle of dependency itself, but potential solutions to break it, such as in the work of Bolivian writer Benedicto Medinaceli (Helleiner and Rosales, 2017, p. 930). Acknowledging Latin American scholars' role in Dependency Theory and the discourse

available within peripheral scholarship is necessary to work through decolonizing IPE scholarship.

What Does Decolonizing IPE Look Like?

Within the Classroom

Oliveira and Kvangraven (2023) acknowledge the difficulty of reaching a consensus on the definition of Dependency Theory (p. 1683). This is, in part, because Dependency Theory is not a singular theory. However, this paper employs Oliveira and Kvangraven's (2023) definition: "a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another," (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 231, as cited in Oliveira and Kvangraven, 2023, p. 1970). Dependency Theory's value is that it does not see the prosperity of economies in the Periphery as singular, but instead as a critical, interdependent web of development. Therefore, its inclusion is not just necessary because of representation of varying perspectives but rather the Theory's value exists because it emerged from local perspectives, knowledge, and experience. These perspectives are not only necessary to decolonize IPE scholarship, but also for durable development to exist.

In their analysis of decolonizing IPE through the dependency theory, Oliveira and Kvangraven (2023) offer insight into what they establish as the 'blind spot' approach to IPE scholarship. In doing so, they notably point out that "in both research and teaching, issues related to decolonization such as race relations

and imperialism, are often relegated to [...] classes in the final weeks of the term,” (Dei, 2006; Mantz, 2009, cited in Oliveira and Kvangraven, 2023, p. 1679). Decolonization cannot continue to be an afterthought. The danger of doing so is the perpetuation of the deeply harmful idea of the “West and the rest,” (Oliveira & Kvangraven, 2023, p.1680). Therefore, Dependency Theory is essential to the reconstruction of decolonized IPE scholarship, which places locally situated knowledge and Theory at the forefront of the field, as opposed to a neglected afterthought.

Theory and Beyond

Although it is a step forward to reexamine neglected theories, it is more essential to look at the history of the capitalism of the global economy, one of the most significant systems, and provide necessary historical context. In this sense, one of the most striking published IPE works is Gurminder Bhambra’s *Colonial Global Economy* (2021). In this work, Bhambra argues that one of the most harmful gaps within IPE is the failure to acknowledge the significance of colonialism (Bhambra, 2021, p. 308). The author explains that “it is through the colonial process of appropriation, possession, enslavement, and extraction that the world is produced,” (Bhambra, 2021, p. 311).

Bhambra (2021) gives human historical contexts to the language used in describing the four stages of capitalism. The three most notable critiques Bhambra (2021) identifies, summarized, is the necessity of giving meaning to land, to labour, and to commodities. First, the land accumulated

necessary to the first stage of capitalism, namely capitalist expansion, was not desolate land but rather inhabited by Indigenous populations (Bhambra, 2021, p. 309). To reiterate the gravity of the situation further, millions of people had to be eliminated for this capitalist accumulation to occur. Second, in the case of labour, it is critical to acknowledge that the labour used to develop the Core was acquired through the enslavement of people within the Periphery. As is evident in the second stage of capitalism, the acceleration of production, such as with the U.S. rail system, was only made possible through the labour of indentured and chattel slaves (Bhambra, 2021, p. 313). Finally, the commodities used to trade and grow the Global North were stolen and exploited goods, highlighting the “extractive nature of the imperial states,” (Bhambra, 2021, p. 313). This historical context is necessary to understand how these realities manifest in the 21st century global economy.

The need to expand beyond ‘traditional’ discussions and materials within IPE to include scholars such as Bhambra who focus on decolonization is evident. Within groups such as the ‘magnificent seven’ their lack of critical nuance shapes the long-held beliefs on how development should be performed. Adding nuance, through the inclusion of decolonizing authors such as Bhambra, is important to make connections to economic realities today and to collaborate for a more sustainable future.

Issues Today That Demonstrate the Necessity of Decolonizing IPE

As is argued throughout this piece, giving colonial context to moments considered to be the most remarkable advancements in society and colonial histories are essential in analyzing today's global economy. As argued by Amin and Palan (1996), the importance of providing historical context to IPE to understand the present age is that “any social and economic order must be created: it is not naturally emergent or specified a priori. It is a product of human agency,” (p. 212). Continuing to disregard scholarship and theories that emerged from the Periphery will not benefit future scholarship or development but will instead hinder future innovative possibilities.

Bananas and Fashion

Conversely, the Periphery and the Core face their current challenges because of fundamental inadequacies at the foundation of historical and present growth in the Core. Cynthia Erole's (2014) work on the gendering of the banana industry, pesticide pollution and repressive regimes are directly associated with capitalist expansion (Erole, 2014, p. 208). The popularity of bananas and the success stories of top American producers (Dole, Chiquita, Del Monte) rely heavily on systemic colonial exploitation in Latin America (Erole, 2014, p. 210). The processes of acquiring land and labour described by Bhabra (2021) are evident in this industry through the United States

invasion and colonization of land necessary for plantations. Bananas are a commodity that Americans were willing to “kill for” (Erole, 2014, p. 210) people do and have died to support this industry.

Bananas are not the only industry where the Global North prospers at the cost of human suffering in the Global South. One of the most exploitative industries today is the fast fashion industry. With the Core’s immense amount of overconsumption, there has been a proliferation of ‘Made In’ labels which almost always list countries such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia. This has a direct causal link to disasters such as the Rana Plaza, one of the most severe industrial catastrophes in recent years. Overconsumption at the Core and labour exploitation in the Periphery created the conditions in which a building that contained several garment factories collapsed, resulting in the killing of 1,133 people and injuring another 2,500 (Smith, 2016, p. 9). Unfortunately, this is only one incident of unsafe workplaces and maltreatment that many garment and textiles workers face in the Periphery. These exploitative systems are complex and require ideas and solutions created with local economic and cultural histories and realities in mind.

This recurring system of extreme exploitation in the Periphery is best understood in IPE as *super-exploitation*. Emerging from the work of Ruy Mauro Marini, ‘super-exploitation’ is understood as the system of labour within the Periphery that is wholly undervalued and manipulated, especially when contrasted against what and to whom the commodity is sold for

(Burns, 2023; Oliviera and Kvangraven, 2023). Super-exploitation necessitates that “the worker and the greater society ‘accept’ their exploitation as an ‘indefectible and normal reality,’” because of historical ideological and political control (Meszaros, 1978; Alves, 2022, cited in Valencia, 2023, p. 614). As Oliviera and Kvangraven (2023) note in their work, Marini primarily associated super-exploitation with the Latin American context, particularly in relation to dynamics of race or gender. This phenomenon is exemplified by what continued to occur in the banana industry. Marini, a Brazilian scholar, had his work initially published in Spanish but it is now available in English, which is perhaps why Marini’s work has gone undiscussed in mainstream IPE. Thus, foreseeably, policies have continued to exclude discussions of super-exploitation, with the result being workers continuing to face super-exploitation that is rapidly expanding beyond the borders of South America. Marini’s exploration of ‘super-exploitation’ is applicable within the garment industry as well, as the wage to retail price ratio encourages retailers to choose peripheral countries to offshore their labour. This is in accordance with Marini’s model wherein super-exploitation is justified and practiced by the Core in the Periphery. Understanding that these systems exist in the category of super-exploitation is one step in acknowledging that they should not continue to go unchecked as a ‘normal reality.’ As well as questioning how this same ideological and political manipulation continues to exist within IPE scholarship.

Conclusion

It is essential to continue discussions on how well the work of Marini is applicable to two critical global industries, and potential future applications, to continue to decolonize language within IPE through giving human context to labour and commodities, and to fill in these blind spots. These are all critical steps in recognizing how histories of super-exploitation exist within XXIst century labour practices. Having acknowledged that there is a gap, the most effective way to begin to fill it in is to go beyond scholars and theories prevalent in the Global North. This is an overdue and necessary step in acknowledging the atrocities committed because of economic expansion at the forefront of Western IPE discourse, and to begin to address durable paths forward.

This paper explores the ways in which the global economy and IPE discourse has been organized around a colonial discourse which ignores the exploitative foundations of capitalism. Implicit and explicit language addressing colonial systems as well as Western ideological hegemony were explored to deepen the understanding that is gained when looking beyond the Core. Overall, this piece aims to stress the importance of diversifying the scholars and theories placed at the forefront of IPE, and to emphasize undervalued and ignored IPE perspectives within Latin America.

If academia is prepared to embark on this process of decolonization, Eurocentric and hegemonic ideals can be challenged, making way for scholars and theories offering critical

perspectives to analyze exploitative economic systems.

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