**International Relations: Plural or Postcolonial?**

**Sanjay Seth**

Some years ago, in an introduction to a collection of essays on postcolonialism and IR, I wrote that the Anglo-American dominance of the discipline was much to be regretted, and that "a plurality of voices in the discipline, actually reflecting the plurality of voices in the world that the discipline seeks to describe and comprehend, would be a very good thing indeed" (Seth, 2013). I also went to say, however, that even a pluralized IR, inasmuch as it continued to draw upon the concepts and categories of the discipline, would not be the same as a postcolonial critique, for the ambitions of postcolonialism were other and went further, seeking to call into question the categories of modern social scientific thought (on which see Seth, 2020).

In this contribution I seek to develop this argument, suggesting that inasmuch as the homology of people, territory and state that is assumed and effected by the concept/category of 'sovereignty' is constitutive of IR, a postcolonial critique is corrosive of all forms of IR, and not simply its Anglo-American point of departure.

IR: Misdescribing the Past

The discipline of International Relations derives its raison d'etre from the 'anarchy' that is claimed to characterise the international domain. This, almost all the differing 'schools' that characterise the contemporary discipline agree, sharply differentiates this domain from what happens 'inside' states or political communities, hence requiring a separate discipline that, in recognising and being attentive to this distinguishing feature, is able to produce knowledge about the constitution and workings of 'the international'. In making this claim, as Richard Ashley pointed out long ago (Ashley 1988), IR does not disregard the 'domestic' or 'inside', but rather *presumes* it: it presumes it in the form of the sovereign, territorial state.

The presumption that the world has always consisted of sovereign territorial states in a condition of anarchy, or else that these have defined and constituted the international since the early modern period are, however, simply mistaken. For most of the history of the modern international system it was not characterized by sovereign territorial states in a condition of anarchy vis-à-vis each other, but rather by empires. This is an easily established

empirical claim: consider the following facts. Until very recently, the larger part of the world's surface and its people were ruled, directly or indirectly, by others. Moreover, the expansion of Europe which brought this about was itself undertaken not just by sovereign states, but also enabled by non-state actors, such as the East India Company, which exercised political power, established fortifications, made law and created courts, issued punishments, coined money, and engaged in diplomacy and in war (Stern 2011). And it is not just that by the latter nineteenth century a large majority of the world's peoples were ruled by others, but also that this was not a simple matter of a foreign state exercising sovereignty. For over a century, almost a quarter of the people of Britain's most important colony, and over a third of its territory, was nominally governed by its princes and Rajas. The institution of 'paramountcy' preserved the fiction, and sometimes a measure of substance, of princely sovereignty. 'Protectorates' were another form of quasi-sovereignty, stretching from West Africa and the Middle East to Indo-China, Asia and the Pacific, and involving a number of European countries. Indeed, much of Britain's West African empire was ruled in this indirect fashion, one which allowed the imperial power complete control over the external affairs of the 'protected' territory, while allowing the non-European state some sovereignty over internal matters (Grovogui, 1996; Mamdani 1996; Anghie, 2004). Those non-Western territories and peoples who escaped the direct or indirect control of the colonial powers did not thereby retain sovereignty. The practice and institution of 'extra-territoriality', whereby powerful states claimed legal jurisdiction over their own citizens (and their commercial interests) was one imposed upon many 'independent' states. This was not a minor anomaly, for extra-territoriality was institutionalised and practiced over a period of a hundred years. The Ottoman empire, Japan and China were all subjected to this intrusion in a sustained and systematic fashion, but so too were a host of others, including Tunisia, Madagascar, Samoa, Korea, Thailand and Morocco. The states claiming extra-territorial jurisdiction included not only the 'great powers' of Britain, France and the US, but also Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Spain, Switzerland and later Japan, which went from suffering extraterritoriality to claiming it in China and in occupied Korea (Kayaoglu 2010).

In short, an international order composed of states exercising a monopoly of legitimate violence (and legal jurisdiction) within their own territory has *not*- the assumptions of

International Relations notwithstanding- been the norm historically. Rather, empire was a defining feature of the world until quite recently- and more recently than is commonly remembered. The end of World War I saw the end of some *empires*, but not of empire as a political form; indeed, under the mandate system the colonies of the vanquished were redistributed to other empires and would-be empires. As World War II was drawing to an end and discussions began on the post-war world order at Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco, Jan Smuts was entrusted with drafting the preamble to the UN Charter, and "Mandates were turned into trusteeships, and colonies became dependent territories, but little seemed to change apart from words" (Mazowar 2009, 63).

The 'anomalies' enumerated above- including colonial rule, quasi-sovereignty, mandates and extraterritoriality- were not in fact anomalies or mere exceptions to the norm, for they encompassed the larger part of the world's people, and were an important and defining feature of 'the international' until very recently. The conclusion, in David Armitage's words, is inescapable: "Perhaps the most momentous but least widely understood development in modern history is the long transition from a world of empires to a world of states. Until at least the late nineteenth century, and in many places for decades after, most of the world's population lived in the territorially expansive, internally diverse, hierarchically organised political communities called empires" (Armitage 2013, 191).

The discipline of International Relations manages to ignore or elide all this, and to treat the sovereign state in a condition of anarchy as the empirical given that is presupposed in all enquiries into international politics, by subsuming the above facts (where they are acknowledged at all) in a teleology, one according to which all historical events lead to the normalisation of the contemporary world system, and all evidences to the contrary are treated as merely residual anomalies, destined to be swept away. Empires, despite their importance and duration, always appear as a way-station to, or a nursery for, the sovereign state system that is its final destination.

The world as it has been portrayed, studied and normalized by the discipline of International Relations- one of sovereign states in a condition of anarchy vis-à-vis one another- in fact only emerged as a result of decolonization, a process which transformed a world of (mostly) European states possessed of colonies into a world of sovereign states.

Why should decolonization have resulted in the globalization of the sovereign nation-state? That this would prove to be the outcome of the revolt against colonial rule would not have been obvious in the mid-nineteenth century, at the time of the Indian 'mutiny', or at the beginning of the twentieth century, which was ushered in by the Boxer Rebellion: neither of these massive anti-colonial uprisings aimed at establishing a sovereign nation-state.

**T**he answer, in short, is that the nation-state was embraced by many anti-colonial thinkers and activists because it afforded the promise of combining imitation of the state form with an embrace of national difference. This was however always a fraught enterprise, and anti-colonial nationalism was marked by a paradox or tension- a tension between anti-colonial nationalism's imitative or derivative project of founding a modern sovereign state, and its claims to do so in the name of cultural/national uniqueness and difference. If we saw in anti-colonial nationalisms only a political movement for state sovereignty, it would appear that Asian and African nationalisms are modelled upon European precedents and therefore wholly imitative. But this would be to overlook the dualism at the heart of anti-colonial nationalism; because anticolonial nationalism also posited and elaborated a distinctive national culture and new forms of community, it was not and could not be mere mimicry of Europe. Partha Chatterjee, who has written about this tension with great sensitivity and insight, argues that "the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but rather on a *difference* with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West" (Chatterjee 1993, 5). In other words, the new states of the Global South that emerged in the course of decolonization were neither born of the 'expansion of European international society', and nor were they mere replicas of their European originals. They sought instead to 'fit' non-Western lifeworlds and indigenous forms of community into the container or 'form' provided by the nation-state.

They have not always succeeded in doing so. Reflecting upon a lifetime of the anthropological study of culture, social change and nationalism in Indonesia and Morocco, Clifford Geertz, like Chatterjee, contests the presumption that postcolonial states were a mimicry of 'Euronationalism', one that affirmed a natural homology between people/culture, sovereignty and territory. In one of his last essays, Geertz wrote,

> "The diffusionist notion that the modern world was made in northern and western Europe and then seeped out like an oil slick to cover the rest of the world has obscured the fact…that rather than converging toward a single pattern those entities called countries were ordering themselves in novel ways, ways that put European conceptions, not all that secure in any case, of what a country is, and what its basis is, under increasing pressure. The genuinely radical implications of the decolonization process are only just now coming to be recognized. For better or worse, the dynamics of Western nation building are not replicated. Something else is going on" (Geertz 2000, 230-31).

That 'something else', Geertz suggested, was that the natural isomorphism between culture/people, territory and states presumed by dominant understandings was an illusion, as was increasingly becoming apparent. The new forms of community that had been imagined and given flesh in the course of the struggle against colonialism were not, as nationalists had hoped and striven for, a content that could easily be poured into the container of the nation-state. For the nation-state was not and is not an empty container into which anything can be poured; it already has a content, and it presupposes and serves to create specific connections between authority and the people, and between custom and law, and it presupposes certain forms of selfhood and community. The much commented upon failure of postcolonial nation-states to live up to their promise and to the expectations of their people has been, in part, a consequence of this tension or contradiction between the forms of community they imagined and mobilized, and the constraints imposed upon these by the form of the modern state; as Chatterjee puts it, "autonomous forms of imagination of the community were, and continue to be, overwhelmed and swamped by the history of the postcolonial state. Here lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of community, but in our surrender to old forms of the modern state" (Chatterjee 1993, 11).

The absence of any 'natural' congruence of culture, territory and political sovereignty reveals, to return to Geertz, a more general truth about *all* nation states, not only those born of anticolonial nationalism. It is a truth most clearly apparent in the case of the new states that emerged with decolonization, simply because "like Bismarck's sausages, we have seen them made…The contingencies that produced them, and that virtually everywhere contrive to maintain them, are…evident;" (Geertz 2000, 252) but the contingent and

unstable nature of this conjunction is becoming visible everywhere, and not just in the Global South. And so rather than presume (as International Relations does), that Western countries demonstrate the more-or-less normal isomorphism of culture, territory and polity, and so embody the future of those currently troubled countries that have not yet attained to the norm, Geertz wonders whether "We may come in time to see Asia and Africa's political reconstruction as contributing more to transforming Euro-America's view of social selfhood than vice versa" (Geertz 2000, 251).

For culture, territory and modern statehood do not neatly map onto each other; where they have done so, this has been a contingent and fragile outcome, and one constituting a mere blip on the historical scene, rather than the norm. If the longer term and 'genuinely radical implications of the decolonization process' prove to be a demonstration of this, rather than an affirmation of the inescapability of the nation-state, then the presumptions underpinning International Relations and the enquiries undertaken in its name will prove to be of as little value as are its accounts of the historical emergence and consolidation of the global political system. Thus if a geo-culturally pluralist IR is to contribute to a better understanding of the international, it will do so by 'breaking' with the core presuppositions of the discipline as it has hitherto been practised- else even a pluralised IR will continue to be a symptom of the historical moment that saw the sovereign territorial nation-state become a global political norm, rather than an optic into the complex forces, conjunctures and desires that made it so; and might yet unmake it**.**

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