



Journal *SINERGI* 1 (July) (2021) 199 - 203  
ISSN 2805-4520



## BOOK REVIEW / *ULASAN BUKU*

*Decolonizing International Relations* by Branwen Gruffydd Jones, Publisher:  
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006, 288 pp. ISBN: 9780742540248

*“Decolonization is a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” —Linda Tuhiwai Smith<sup>1</sup>*

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This important volume, edited by Branwen Gruffydd Jones, is a compilation of critical *International Relations* (IR) scholarship. The origin of the book goes back to a 2003 International Studies Association (ISA) conference titled *IR and the Rest of the World*. Based on a panel of papers presented there, and a subsequent workshop held (in 2005) to fine tune concepts, this collection of essays represents a critical evaluation of the academic discipline of IR. There are nine chapters to this volume, divided into three parts. Together with a powerful introduction and conclusion, they unpack the discipline’s biases, and expose its theoretical designs that perpetuate a Eurocentric notion of the international system.

Essentially, the book exposes the Euro-American foundations of the IR discipline, which are grounded in the history of Europe. To this end, the Introduction aptly begins with a quotation from the decolonial intellectual, Edward Said. “We are at a point when we can no longer ignore the empires and the imperial context in our studies” is the quote that sets the tone for the discussions throughout this volume (Said cited in Jones 2006: 5). The theme throughout the book centres on the idea of Eurocentrism, which exposes a style of IR thinking that is deconstructed by all the contributors. The specific themes addressed in the chapters highlight Eurocentrism, imperialism, racism, hegemony, modernity, pedagogy and good governance, within the context of world order.

Eurocentrism is a European style of thought in which the assessment and evaluation of non-European societies is shaped by one’s own cultural assumptions and biases. The phenomenon is an offshoot of ethnocentrism, which is the belief that one’s own ethnic group or society is superior to others. Eurocentrism in IR

is reflected in how the category of “non-West” gets articulated, and its assigned place in world order. The essays in this book reveal why Eurocentrism in IR exists, how the category functions in the global matrix of hierarchy among states, and how the notion of cultural and historical superiority is represented by material power, international law and global hegemony. The authors in their various chapters present their analysis of world order, critiquing the Eurocentric bias in IR.

The main theme that flows through all chapters is this—that modern IR, which projects itself as a field that employs epistemological and ontological tools to define and maintain world “order”, in reality reflects the narrow characteristic of Eurocentric history. According to the authors, IR is defined by theoretical approaches that expose coloniality, by using specific hierarchical language as a form of domination over non-Western peoples.

The opening sentence to Julian Saurin’s Chapter One reads “If imperialism, expressed primarily as colonialism, was the foundation of world order in the nineteenth century and before, so international or interstate relations became the foundation of world order in the twentieth century” (Saurin, chapter 1: 23).

Therefore, this book should be an essential text in IR courses around the world, as it emphasises the need to decolonise knowledge in international law, political economy, the politics of knowledge production, postcolonialism, strategy, security, international and regional historiography, and comparative politics. Also, it is a necessary volume because it legitimises the interdisciplinary ethos of IR. It would reflect the true nature of what it legitimately means to be “international”, and how the premise for world order should be set.

For example, in most of the universities of Southeast Asia today, the academic discipline of IR is largely Eurocentric in approach. As Gruffydd Jones writes in her Introduction, “... the majority of literature in the discipline of IR is written by and about only some of the peoples of the world—predominantly Americans and Europeans. IR remains guilty of forgetting and detracting from the thought and acts of not only the people of Africa but also ‘the rest’ of the non-Western world” (Jones 2006: 2). However, there are encouraging indications that many university IR departments and research institutes outside the West are making the transition to decolonise IR research and pedagogy. This positive trend could be enhanced by, and would greatly benefit from, the discussions in Gruffydd Jones’ volume.

The editor and contributors are from diverse academic backgrounds. There could be more gender balance (there are nine contributors, of whom only two are female). However, this hardly detracts from the quality of the entries, notwithstanding the poignant introductory and concluding analyses presented by the editor herself.

Since the publication of Gruffydd Jones' volume in 2006, the discipline of IR has evolved to include more critical publications which are transforming the field in new directions. First, there has been a proliferation of IR departments and programmes in universities outside the Western hemisphere. China, India, Turkey, Brazil, Singapore and Indonesia have established significant niches. Following the trajectory of other social science disciplines, particularly anthropology and sociology, IR scholars have begun to think about the issue of relevance or applicability of the field to non-Western contexts. Part of the reason may be due to challenges that China, as a formidable Asian power, currently pose to Western powers, as well as the drain on resources due to "putting out fires" in regions such as the African continent, Latin America and most of the Middle East. A combination of awe, trepidation and fear among European and American society would awaken a certain consciousness in them, to re-evaluate "what makes the non-West tick".

However, a more plausible explanation would be the persistent conditions of a less-than-satisfactory world order and a yearning for more peaceful coexistence among humanity. As much as IR's foundation is an enduring quest for universal peace, there has been a huge gap between theorising how this can be achieved, and the real conditions on the ground, since 1919 (when IR was conceived as a systematic academic discipline).

Sandra Halperin addresses the critical questions of why we must decolonise IR theory, and how to do it. The theme in her chapter relates to how Europeans erroneously interpret their own history, which in turn reproduces a distorted view of their role in it. Halperin rightfully claims that "because European history remains fundamental to our understanding of the contemporary world, 'decolonising' *International Relations* (IR) theory requires that we not only 'bring in the rest of the world' but also 'bring in' a more accurate account of how Europe itself developed" (Halperin, chapter 2: 43).

In the section titled 'Myths of the Industrial Revolution and Modern European Development', Halperin presents a refreshing interpretation of European industrialisation and democratisation. She begins the section with the assumptions of many scholars, who claim that the separation of Europe from the non-European world began in the sixteenth-century, i.e., the age of colonialism; that the technological, scientific and intellectual transformations of eighteenth-century Europe further contributed to this division between "developed" and "third world". Halperin argues, though, that none of these events marked the decisive period of European advance, "and that, in fact, European economic and political history diverged decisively from that of the rest of the world only after 1945" (Halperin, chapter 2: 50). She also refutes the ideas of historians such as Arnold Toynbee, who claimed that the industrial revolution was a radical break with the past (Fores 1981).

Therefore, decolonising, for Halperin involves a global reorientation in how history is used as a tool for knowledge production. Among the social sciences, IR has relied most heavily on history, but in order to universalise IR concepts and theories, mainstream IR needs to dispense with established myths. This is to facilitate a more accurate and inclusive interpretation of world order (Halperin, chapter 2: 57).

Mustapha Kamal Pasha's chapter discusses "the cultural turn" and the "growing critical awareness of the question of identity in IR" (Pasha, chapter 3: 65). In his chapter "Liberalism, Islam, and International Relations", Pasha focuses his discussion on securitisation, post-9/11. IR, according to Pasha, was re-defined, within a milieu of "alternative voices" simultaneously rejecting the growing systemic hegemony that characterised a world order bent on wiping out terrorism. Pasha's main thesis is that IR personifies the career of "spatially determinate social forces in relation to perceived and actual Otherness" (Pasha, chapter 3: 67). Essentially, the IR discipline during the era of the War Against Terror policy in the West, was defined by Western fears, generalisations and ethno-racist patterns of discrimination and classification. These attitudes framed what was propagated as a natural order of things, a superior, legitimate and liberal-modernist imagination. A certain consciousness of Islam in geopolitics was central to IR and Western identity after the events of 9/11. Due to the brutal nature of the terrorist attacks, what followed in terms of how Islam, as an ideology, belief system and cultural form of identity was securitised, is unacceptable.

In chapter four, Sankaran Krishna addresses the fact that IR has paid little attention to race, colonialism and imperialism, yet, it was born of a devastating imperial (and world) war, characterising the field as distinctly "us" versus "them". Krishna's chapter discusses in detail, these contradictions, accusing IR of its strategy of containment (a term coined by Frederic Jameson) and "amnesia" (Krishna, chapter 4: 93; Horne 1988). An interesting argument in this chapter is the tendency for scholars of IR to prioritise a state-centric picture of the international. What Krishna termed "sovereignist abstraction" has its own agenda. Simply, the loss of lives during encounters between states and non-sovereign entities (e.g. what is currently happening in several civil wars in the Middle East and Africa) is of no consequence. The strategy of containment is a form of domination, in that it is an act of suppressing the unthinkable, and justifying it because it "lies beyond boundaries".

The next few chapters of the volume cover similar themes which reveal the biased nature of mainstream IR. Alison Ayers' take on African political historiography, Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui's discussion on a postcolonial human rights discourse and B. S. Chimni's ideal visions of the "other" sum up their arguments for a more comprehensive and alternative approach to comprehending world order. N'Zatioula

Grovogui's discussion on the theory of the interstate system asserts that imperial ideology has defined the discipline since its inception. Alison Ayer's chapter targets nineteenth-century Africa, where the uncovering of African histories by Eurocentric scholars routinely blurred the lines between context and process. She writes, "In seeking to understand Africa through analogies, mainstream Africanists have been unable to analyse or explain the concrete historical condition of neo-colonial Africa" (Ayers, chapter 7: 158). Her thesis is that Hegel's logic of historical development in the West had been transplanted (process) to African historiography. However, understanding Africa would not be possible if its indigenous histories were silenced in an attempt to prioritise the logic of Western narratives which cannot be contextualised.

As was mentioned in the beginning paragraphs of this review, Gruffydd Jones' edited volume is a valuable source for IR departments in the Global South, in general, and in Malaysia, in particular. Alternative approaches to IR theory are a necessary development in that it should present a more accurate view of the systemic realities recognised by the other social science disciplines. An integrated approach to theorising the injustices at the international level is vital during this challenging period of geopolitical developments.

#### **NOTE**

1. Linda Tuhiwai Te Rina Smith is a professor of indigenous education at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. The daughter of Hirini Moko Mead, she affiliates to the Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou iwi.

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