

## THE DECOLONIAL TURN: NEW CHALLENGES TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS TRADITIONS

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### Abstract

*International Relations emerged as a discipline in the aftermath of World War I to avert destructive events through the systemic study of interstate relations. The mainstream IR reflected Eurocentric discourse that viewed the world from the prism of the western colonial powers. This paper reviews relevant literature to examine the decolonial turn in IR and its challenges to established traditions of the discipline. It is a critical reflection of a scholar from the South trying to understand Eurocentricity in a discipline that claims to be international. The research concludes that the decolonial turn in IR is challenging the basic foundations of the discipline and underscores the need for a change in the parameters of discussion around the principles and assumptions underlying the knowledge production system of the IR discipline.*

**Keywords:** *Colonial Matrix of Power, Decolonial Thinking, Coloniality of Knowledge, Eurocentrism*

### Introduction

A turn within an academic discipline is a metaphor for a cognitive disturbance within the discipline's traditional framework. It re-evaluates the traditions of the field by providing new perspectives. Due to their novel method of self-reflection, certain academic turns receive more acceptance than others. The decolonial turn is a widespread phenomenon that calls for the decolonization of university institutions and cultures, including the curriculum.<sup>1</sup> It emphasizes that IR originated in the global North and hardly talks about the global south contribution. As a

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<sup>1</sup> Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quinn, "The "Decolonial Turn": What Does it Mean for Academic Staff Development," *Education as Change* Volume 21, Number. 1 (2017): 32.

corollary, local non-Western knowledge, despite its relevance and applicability, does not find a place in the curriculum because the near-universal embrace of Western knowledge generates a perception of “a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge, by extension, of superior and inferior individuals.”<sup>2</sup> The decolonial turn does not create new knowledge power structures but establishes a trans-epistemological discourse between Northern and Southern epistemologies.<sup>3</sup>

IR as a discipline has undergone introspection since the advent of the ‘Critical Turn’.<sup>4</sup> The decolonial turn identifies ‘Eurocentrism’ as an outcome of imperialism and colonialism as the foundational base of the discipline. Decolonialists challenged the discipline’s dominant narratives, theoretical underpinnings, and historical origins that originally was rooted in power and domination. The turn purports that IR origins do not lie in an idyllic desire to prevent future wars and encourage global peace by systematically studying international politics. Instead, the discipline was conceived to manage the issue of race relations between the ‘White’ and the ‘Coloured races’, which was the world’s most significant problem in the early 20th century.<sup>5</sup> They accused the mainstream IR scholarship for the promotion of systematic international relations scholarship predated World War-1 to preserve imperialism and racial hierarchies in international politics.<sup>6</sup> The decolonial thinkers believe that rationalist turn in IR only worked to maintain the Western hegemony and imperialism and had paid no or less to the race and suppression issues in the discipline.

The paper is structured into three interconnected parts, followed by logical appropriateness. It begins with a discussion of decolonial thinking and significant concepts that form the backbone and underlie the foundational claims of decolonial perspectives. The turn contests the non-neutral character of Eurocentric political and social explanation and views the European colonial and imperial empires as the central issue. The turn, distinct from other critical approaches that tend to remain within the Eurocentric paradigm, endeavours to shift the discipline’s locus of enunciation away from Europe by unveiling the imperial and colonial legacies permeated in the discipline’s traditional concepts, theories, and language of inquiry. Following the elaboration of the decolonial turn in IR, the article highlights the challenges posed by the decennial turn to the

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<sup>2</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 214.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Gallien, “A Decolonial Turn in the Humanities,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 40 (2020): 28–58.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Leysens, “The ‘Critical Turn’ in International Relations,” In *The Critical Theory of Robert W. Cox* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 89–114.

<sup>5</sup> Lord Lugard, “Colonial Administration,” *Economica* 41 (1933): 249.

<sup>6</sup> David E. Long and Brian C. Schmidt, ed. *Imperialism and Internationalism In the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 6.

established traditions of the discipline. They criticize and contest the 'Eurocentrism' and the prevailing hegemonic discipline's 'Westphalian narrative'. The paper concludes that the decolonial turn in IR has not only challenged the discipline's foundational essence by augmenting with a new direction, a step towards liberation.

## Decolonial Thinking

Decolonial thinkers criticise Western-centric knowledge rather than explaining the phenomenon. This leads to thinking that finds traces of imperialism and colonialism in the modern world. Decolonial thinking is a topical subject that emerged within the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) group - a combined initiative of Latin American intellectuals, having a history of around 200 years and since last decade, studied in the Anglo-American university. The Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP) or Coloniality explains the pervasiveness of colonialism's enduring control patterns that how it has impacted the culture, labour, intersubjective connections, and knowledge production of the oppressed colonized people.<sup>7</sup> Further, the pushing factor of its advancement was the response to the Western influence in the political and economic systems of newly independent nations that came into being after WW II due to the decolonization drive.<sup>8</sup>

Quijano conceptualized the CMP while participating in the South American dependence theory discussion<sup>9</sup> during the 1960s-1970s.<sup>10</sup> While Mignolo conceptualized the CMP as the masked effects or the uglier side of modernity that reinforced European or Western Philosophy.<sup>11</sup> To them, to understand the decolonial turn needs to understand the 'decolonial attitude'; a willingness to take multiple perspectives, especially of those

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007):243.

<sup>8</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 219.

<sup>9</sup> The dependency theory purports that developing nations in the Third World, notably South America, were forced to become structurally reliant within a global centre-periphery logic. It showed how underdevelopment in Latin America was accomplished by exploiting their natural resources, to benefit the Western world. Dependency theory served as the foundation for the idea of coloniality in this context. Noah De Lissovoy, and ROF Bailón, "Coloniality: Key Dimensions and Critical Implications," in *Keywords in Radical Philosophy and Education - Common Concepts for Contemporary Movements* (2019), 85-86.

<sup>10</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 449-514.

<sup>11</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (United States: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3 & 9.

whose very identity of being has been put into question and whose contributions are dismissed as trivial or irrelevant.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, to comprehend decolonialism, we need to understand the linkages between privilege and oppression.<sup>13</sup>

Coloniality, according to Schöpf, is the subjugation of subordinates' culture, political, and economic domains.<sup>14</sup> They view the 'Eurocentric' knowledge production as the promotion of domination on the one hand, and exploitation based on racial, sexual, gender, and socioeconomic status on the other hand, having its roots in modernity and colonialism. Quijano appealed to historical and social codes to identify the negative effects of modernity. Decolonial thinking is a broad spectrum of intellectual work and analytic effort to comprehend and understand the logic of coloniality entrenched in the philosophy of Latin America, dependency theory, the theology of liberation, critical theory, and the post-positivist approaches such as post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and feminism who explore new dimensions to the production of knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The decolonial thinkers intellectually converge on the problematization of coloniality combined with a set of shared epistemic assumptions. It discerns Western hegemony in the socio-economic domain, production of knowledge, and intellectual thought and how it shaped their colonial/racial experience. Cetshwayo states that coloniality has permeated every aspect of social life, where the world has been mapped and divided into limits and borders, and people's mobility has been restricted. Identities and belonging have been politicized, in which outsiders and insiders have become permanent adversaries across the world.<sup>16</sup> CMP/coloniality has three strands: coloniality of 'power', 'knowledge,' and 'being,' which are discernible in political structures, knowledge production, academic standards, contemporary literature, cultural tendencies, individuals' common sense, aspirations, etc.

Decolonial thinkers use the modernity/coloniality dyad - the master narrative of world history that masks the oppressive aspects of

<sup>12</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 262.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine E. Walsh, "The Decolonial for - Resurgence, Shifts and Movements," in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 17.

<sup>14</sup> S. Caroline Schöpf, "The Coloniality of Global Knowledge Production: Theorizing the Mechanisms of Academic Dependency," *Social Transformations: Journal of the Global South* 8, no. 2 (2020): 12.

<sup>15</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, and Arturo Escobar, eds. *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Cetshwayo Zindabazwe Mabhena, "On the Colonial Matrix of Power," *The Sunday News*, August 6, 2017, <https://www.sundaynews.co.zw/on-the-colonial-matrix-of-power/>.

colonialism or modernity,<sup>17</sup> to describe the control mechanisms to maintain hegemony following the advent of colonialism in 1492.<sup>18</sup> The rhetoric purports that salvation, progress, civilization, modernization, development, democracy, and having more assets would lead to happiness and redemption. To colonialists, the discourse is self-serving as by considering it a collective good it allows them to conceal and repress what does not fit the imagination and desires. Further, it legitimizes oppressors' actions that guarantee the well-being and interests of Europeans to monopolize and universalize European/Western modes of thought, to exclude and exploit others through contemporary authority. Moreover, it assists in confronting issues common to all former European colonies.<sup>19</sup>

Coloniality of knowledge unveils the imperial and colonial legacies prevalent within academic scholarship and calls attention to the production, spread, and replication of Eurocentric knowledge at the global level.<sup>20</sup> Nurtured through CMP; these legacies are primarily epistemic, structural, and normative. Owing to its enduring implications, the coloniality of knowledge is the principal component of CMP that transforms colonial people into casualties of the coloniality of being. Coloniality of knowledge is the embedded distortions and biases in academic dominant knowledge production caused by the primacy of the West/Global north legacies.<sup>21</sup> Coloniality of knowledge simultaneously operates on multiple fronts - first, it exterminates other forms of knowledge; second, it either subsumes or replaces the exterminated knowledge with Eurocentric knowledge; and lastly, it constructs Eurocentric knowledge as an authentic, unbiased knowledge system posing it as a civilizing project. In addition, this kind of knowledge ensures that all western atrocities remain cloaked, and all thoughts are shaped and

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<sup>17</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "The Conceptual Triad - Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality," in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 139.

<sup>18</sup> Modernity and coloniality are distinct notions conjoined to form the modernity/coloniality dyad. The line in "modernity/coloniality" makes them mutually inclusive, like both sides of a coin. According to the concept, the rhetoric of modernity promotes Western civilisation by glorifying its victories while suppressing coloniality, the darker side of modernity. Walter D. Mignolo, and Madina V Tlostanova, "Theorizing From the Borders: Shifting to Geo-and Body-Politics of Knowledge," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (2006): 208.

<sup>19</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "The Conceptual Triad - Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality."

<sup>20</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (United States: Duke University Press, 2011), 189.

<sup>21</sup> Caroline M. Schöpf, "The Coloniality of Global Knowledge Production: Theorizing the Mechanisms of Academic Dependency," *Social Transformations: Journal of the Global South* 8, no. 2 (2020): 6.

remain convinced by its good intentions.<sup>22</sup>

The concept of 'colonial or imperial difference' is crafted by proclaiming anything European as a superior and exemplary model to be followed while rendering others to a subservient status.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Western values, ethics, and norms act as a force of cognitive colonization of the global South,<sup>24</sup> realized through the knowledge paradigm that sanctions Western courses, the supremacy of English as the mode of learning, and the excessive desire for international rankings and Western certification.<sup>25</sup> The education paradigm, as per Grosfoguel, represents the intersection of coloniality and the epistemic ego-politics of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it contributes to academic imperialism by privileging Western epistemology over other modes of knowing.<sup>27</sup> Coloniality of knowledge is discernible through its effects, as schematically laid out in Figure 1.

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<sup>22</sup> Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "Introduction: International Relations, Eurocentrism, and Imperialism," In *Decolonizing International Relations*, ed. Branwen Gruffydd Jones (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006).

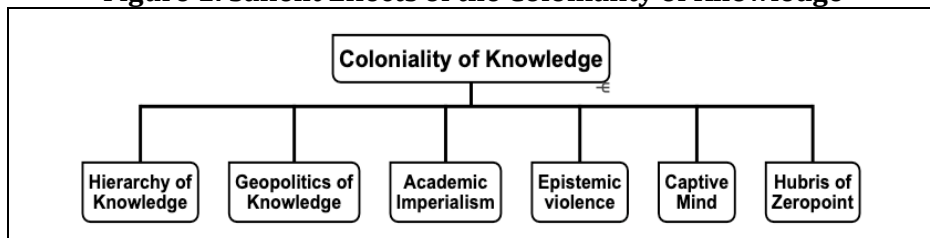
<sup>23</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, "World-Systems Analysis in the Context of Transmodernity, Border Thinking, and Global Coloniality," by Fernand Braudel Center, Research Foundation of State University of New York (2006): 167–87.

<sup>24</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1–38.

<sup>25</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Globalisation and the Geopolitics of Knowledge the Role of Humanities in the Corporate University," in *The American-Style University At Large*, ed. Kathryn L. Kleypas, and James I. McDougall (Maryland: McDougall Lexington Books, 2012); Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/sexism and the Four Genocides/epistemicides of the Long 16th Century," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (2013) : 73–90.

<sup>26</sup> Grosfoguel defines "ego-politics of knowledge" as the prejudice that promotes Westernized knowledge production as impartial, fair, and universal while relegating non-Western knowledge produced on the basis of socio-political location, lived experience, and social interactions as inferior and unscientific.; *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Globalisation and the Geopolitics of Knowledge, the Role of Humanities in the Corporate University," In *The American-Style University at Large*, ed. Kathryn L. Kleypas, and James I. McDougall, (United States: Lexington Books, 2012):3 – 39.

**Figure 1: Salient Effects of the Coloniality of Knowledge**

Source: Compiled by the Author

A hierarchy of knowledge is created by side-lining, suppressing, or invalidating other epistemes resulting in the erosion of the views from the global South.<sup>28</sup> The 'rhetoric of modernity' builds hierarchies, and its pervasiveness makes it difficult to imagine a society where epistemic diversity is acknowledged and valued,<sup>29</sup> what Gatsheni described as 'epistemicide,' 'linguicide,' 'culturicide,' and 'alienation'.<sup>30,31</sup> The geopolitics of knowledge describes the notion that information is anchored in a particular geopolitical environment from which it continues to disperse. While revealing the epistemological privilege of the West, the concept concurrently marginalizes and obscures other epistemes.<sup>32</sup>

Recognizing the relationship between power, knowledge, and social identities, it discerns Western knowledge hegemony that relegates other forms of knowledge and thoughts as 'folklore'.<sup>33</sup> The geopolitics of knowledge prioritize Western knowledge systems as global and unquestionably applicable in all settings,<sup>34</sup> thereby historically allowing

<sup>28</sup> Lauri Jokinen, "Giving and Receiving, or Denying Knowledge? Aspects of Knowledge Production in Development Studies Seen Through a Perspective of Decoloniality," diss. (Sweden: Lunds University, 2014), 1-44.

<sup>29</sup> Castro-Gómez Santiago, "The Missing Chapter of Empire," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 444.

<sup>30</sup> Epistemicide is the elimination of existing endogenous knowledge; linguicide is the decimation of surviving local languages and replacing them with foreign languages, and culturicide eradicates cultural practices and the formation of cultural imperialism. Finally, alienation is the removal of indigenous people, either in the physical or cognitive sense, from their territory.

<sup>31</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Cognitive Empire, Politics of Knowledge and African Intellectual Productions: Reflections on Struggles for Epistemic Freedom and Resurgence of Decolonisation in the Twenty-First Century," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 5 (2021): 5.

<sup>32</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 129.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Walsh, "Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge: Decolonial Thought and Cultural Studies 'Others' in the Andes," *Cultural Studies* 21:2-3 (2007): 225.

<sup>34</sup> Riyad A. Shahjahan, and Clara Morgan, "Global Competition, Coloniality, and the Geopolitics of Knowledge in Higher Education," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37:1 (2016): 95.

for the subjugation, subordination, and dismissal of other forms of frames, knowledge, topics, and thinkers.<sup>35</sup>

Flowing the geopolitics of knowledge, academic or intellectual imperialism is the ascendancy or command of one group of individuals in their realm of thought by another group.<sup>36</sup> For example, it implies Western scholars' extraction of stories (raw data) from the formerly colonized regions and then assigning meanings to them without any participation of the locals.<sup>37</sup> It generates a tutelage presumption that Westerners know more about everything than other people, thus generating a consensus that proper understanding only originates from the West which keeps the global South dependent academically.<sup>38</sup> Also, this academic dependency keeps the South's mind captive - an uncreative, unoriginal, and imprisoned one that is alienated and oblivious to the critical issues of the local society.<sup>39</sup>

Academically, the Epistemic violence originates from the hegemonic dismissal and erasing of non-European perspectives, specifically those formulated by the subaltern.<sup>40</sup> It erases the past and convinces the subalterns that they have nothing to offer the 'modern' world, so they must instinctively conform to the 'enlightened' colonialists, absorb their knowledge and viewpoints, and live on the periphery of their society as second-class citizens. This type of violence also legitimizes and enshrines practices of power<sup>41</sup> known as the 'zero-point epistemology' or 'zero-point hubris', which claims to be universal and superior to other ways of knowing.<sup>42</sup> Castro-Gómez explains it as - a moment when Europeans installed themselves above God as the sole arbiters of

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<sup>35</sup> Catherine Walsh, "Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge: Decolonial Thought and Cultural Studies 'Others' in the Andes," *Cultural Studies* 21:2-3 (2007): 224.

<sup>36</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, "Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1 (2000): 24.

<sup>37</sup> Caroline M. Schöpf, "The Coloniality of Global Knowledge Production: Theorizing the Mechanisms of Academic Dependency," *Social Transformations: Journal of the Global South* 8, no. 2 (2020): 9.

<sup>38</sup> Syed Farid Alatas, "Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 51, no. 6 (2003): 603.

<sup>39</sup> Syed Hussein, "Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1 (2000): 37.

<sup>40</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1988), 271-313.

<sup>41</sup> Savo Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dismantling Epistemic Violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa," *Transformation in Higher Education* 1 (2016): 4.

<sup>42</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 4.



knowledge and truth, thereby achieving epistemological hegemony.<sup>43</sup> The Enlightenment's replacement of 'religious theology,' and 'Theo-politics of knowledge' with secular 'ego-logy and ego-politics of knowledge' provides more support for the phenomenon.<sup>44</sup> The pervasiveness and ingress of the colonality of knowledge can be ascertained by its success in persuading colonized people to think like those in the hegemonic locations.<sup>45</sup>

Europe thus becomes a subject and object of inquiry as an architect and arbiter of the method and an epitome of progress. Europe's theoretical formulations and analytical methods take the driving seat in providing explanation and interpretation, placing Eurocentric knowledge at the centre of social analysis. Europe's political systems and cultural practices are the bearers of a universal reason, i.e. the enlightenment that maps out the ideal course of all human history. Quijano believes that Eurocentrism is created by the perspective of knowledge that produced intellectual conceptualization of modernity and knowledge that provided a strict account of the character of the universal standard of power: colonial/modern, capitalist, and Euro-centred.<sup>46</sup>

Analytically separating the East and West, Eurocentrism portrays the West as the repository of purely virtuous and progressive properties sanctioning it to pioneer progressiveness in world politics and to civilize and/or eliminate the barbarians and savages living in the South.

It appeals to a timeless notion of global politics and economic progress, summed up by Chakrabarty by highlighting "first the West and then elsewhere" or Hobson as 'first the West, then the Rest'.<sup>47</sup> Thus, Global racial and ethnic hierarchies are reflected in and reinforced by the Eurocentric knowledge system.<sup>48</sup> It constructed, in the words of Edward Said, a universal consensus about the Europeans' right to be the superior race with a primary duty to extend beyond its realm and govern the other inferior people who need to be subjugated and directed by Europeans.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Castro-Gómez Santiago, "The Missing Chapter of Empire," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 428-48.

<sup>44</sup> Walter D Mignolo, and Madina V Tlostanova, "Theorizing From the Borders: Shifting to Geo-and Body-Politics of Knowledge," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (2006): 206.

<sup>45</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," *Cultural studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 213.

<sup>46</sup> Anibal Quijano, and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South Volume 1, Issue 3* (2000): 533-80.

<sup>47</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7; John M Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory 1760-2010*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Said, "Secular Interpretation, the Geographical Element, and the Methodology of Imperialism," In *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and*

The most significant kind of injustice, Eurocentrism committed, was the censorship of the ideas of others, determining what was reasonable and not, what to be published, and whose work to be scaled as passed or failed that entails the story of intellectual imperialism to protect and prevail their domination.<sup>50</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Eurocentrism blended itself into what many scholars have described as the ‘even more virulent geo-cultural form’ of Americentrism.<sup>51</sup> Although the two have crucial differences and affinities, both cultural formations have been underwritten and propelled by the coloniality of power. A hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge has been created as a result of Eurocentrism and Americentrism, which in turn has stratified superior and inferior individuals all across the globe.

### The Decolonial Turn in IR

The decolonial turn in IR, adhering to the reflectivist’s strands and a better understanding of the world, highlights that IR history, traditional concepts, theories, and language of analysis are permeated with imperialist and colonialist legacies.<sup>52</sup> Reflectivists argue that individual behaviour – such as beliefs, opinions, values, and reasons, instead of a priori commitment to scientific principles, plays in making sense of the world of politics. They also prioritize interpretive methods, i.e., qualitative, discursive, or historical, over systemic scientific methods in their inquiries. Decolonialists contest the non-neutral character of Eurocentric knowledge. They seek to expose the real essence of coloniality by exposing the rhetoric of modernity to liberate the formerly colonized regions of the world.<sup>53</sup> They also acknowledge the importance of comprehending social meanings, language, and ideas.<sup>54</sup>

Contrary to the positivists’ argument that the social world can be studied similarly to nature, Decolonial thinkers insist that the social world

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Postcolonial Displacements, ed. by Gyan Prakash, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 21 – 39.

<sup>50</sup> Siphamandla Zondi, “Decolonising International Relations and Its Theory: A Critical Conceptual Meditation,” *Politikon* 45, no. 1 (2018): 16–31.

<sup>51</sup> Derek Gregory, Ron Johnston, Geraldine Pratt, Michael J. Watts, and Sarah Whatmore, *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 221.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander E. Davis, Thakur Vineet, and Vale Peter, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 145.

<sup>53</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, (Duke University Press, 2011): 6.

<sup>54</sup> Milja Kurki, and Colin Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” In *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 20.

consists of ideas and concepts that need interpretation and understanding. To Meera, it comprises three different strands of thinking. First, it introduced a novel way of thinking about the issues challenging IR rather than a particular theory. The next strand recovers the previously colonized as a subject of discipline by focussing on the history, ideas, and practices of formerly colonized people to address the issue of their omission in disciplinary narratives and investigate alternative political alternatives that may be recognized within them. The third strand analytically reviews the traditional issues of world politics through decolonial thinking.<sup>55</sup> Decolonial thinking demonstrates that the discipline's European expertise inadequately addresses questions of race and empire in international politics. Further, they emphasize the selective amnesia in IR about its racial and colonial origins and have paid insufficient attention to these concerns.<sup>56</sup>

Decoloniality is embedded with layers of theoretical engagement, especially with the questions of ontology, epistemology, normative, or ethical concerns.<sup>57</sup> At the ontological level, it concerns the nature of the IR system, that is, who and what is being investigated. It argues that IR overemphasizes states primarily focusing on Western powers' interaction globally. The turn further draws attention to the selective use of history, in which the influence of colonialism and imperialism on the current world remains concealed. It also seeks to comprehend global politics by considering colonialism and imperialism as a construct that affects and moulds the international system.

At the epistemological level, it rejects the premise that knowledge is neutral or objective. It contends that academics communicate their perspectives by the imperial social order. It highlights the radicalized and racist assumptions of famous Western Philosophers, who view non-white people as backward or uncivilized while considering white Europeans as

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<sup>55</sup> Meera Sabaratnam, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches," In the *Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. by John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 160 – 176.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 163; Jones Branwen Gruffydd "Introduction: International Relations, Eurocentrism, and Imperialism," In *Decolonizing International Relations*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers):1 – 19.; Julian Saurin, "International Relations as the Imperial Illusion; or, the Need to Decolonize IR," In *Decolonizing International Relations*, ed. by Branwen Gruffydd Jones, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 26.

<sup>57</sup> Meera Sabaratnam, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches," In *the Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, ed. by John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 161.

the epitome of humanity.<sup>58</sup> In addition, they emphasize understanding the world from the viewpoint of people who are disempowered or dispossessed by coloniality.

While contending in the ethical or normative sphere, they assert that power systems built via colonialism and imperialism tend to elevate Western ideals and, in turn, Western governments and people as essentially more important, valuable, and relevant than non-Westerners. These power systems are labelled unequal and racist due to their propensity to generate mindsets of superiority, entitlement, indifference, and hypocrisy against the non-West and thus challenging the dominant narratives driven by the West.

## Decolonial Challenges to IR Discipline

IR has its understanding of the concepts like 'traditions' and 'concepts' that form the discipline's foundational framework, where the former is defined as a broad conception essential for the development of sound arguments and robust reasoning', while the latter, is understood as a long-established, repeatedly practiced social and cultural standard or a style of thinking typical of the general populace whose official source cannot be validated.<sup>59</sup> Both are used to critique, analyse, and reflect on events or ideas. Concepts are often unclear, complex, and ambiguous,<sup>60</sup> but scholars in this tradition endow them with meaning to interpret the social world. They are either normative<sup>61</sup> or descriptive<sup>62</sup> and, at times, imbued with more worth and ideological importance than they deserve or that subsequent scholars are aware of. Thus, concepts are value-laden constructed ideas that advocate for specific patterns of behaviour, making it difficult to differentiate them from the moral, intellectual, and ideological beliefs of those who support them. In contrast, traditions are

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<sup>58</sup> The decolonial turn is apprehensive about employing a lexicon to construct social hierarchy. Mawuna Koutonin, writing on the distinction between expats and immigrants, argues that the human migration vocabulary includes hierarchical phrases designed to elevate white people above the rest of us; Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, "Why Are White People Expats When the Rest of Us Are Immigrants," *The Guardian* 13, no. 05 (2015).

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics and International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 224.

<sup>60</sup> M. Neil Browne, Stuart M. Keeley, and Mary Vasudeva, *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, (New York: Pearson, 2018), 104.

<sup>61</sup> Values are moral principles but occasionally appear as normative political ideas, for instance, "liberty," "rights," "justice," "equality," or "tolerance," that needs to be attained.

<sup>62</sup> Descriptive or positive concepts refer to 'facts' that presumably have an objective and demonstrable existence; they are concerned with what is. In this sense, descriptive notions are objectified or reified and considered as such rather than cognitive instruments.

ideas or stories that people generally accept as historically correct but find challenging to verify since they are handed down through the generations. As concepts and traditions are constructed notions, it is essential to know the reason for their creation, whether for historical or practical reasons, to interpret what they mean.<sup>63</sup>

IR concepts and traditions are long-standing social and cultural norms<sup>64</sup> that started with the Westphalian narrative and were solidified by the great debates in IR and the classical theoretical traditions of international political thinking and Western philosophy, as depicted in Figure - 2.

**Figure 2: IR Discipline's Framework**



Source: Compiled by the Authors.

Realism, liberalism, and International Society are the main theoretical traditions schools of the discipline.<sup>65</sup> IR thinking also

<sup>63</sup> Renée Jeffery, "Tradition as Invention: The Traditions and the History of Ideas in International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2005): 57-84.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics and International Relations*.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 32.

corresponds to present events and is inspired by academic disciplines such as philosophy, history, law, sociology, and economics. The decolonial turn in IR states that the discipline's framework, including self-proclaimed history narrated through established traditions, is founded on Western philosophy that works within Eurocentric episteme, an outcome of CMP. The turn attempts to go deep into the historical context to break free from CMP, paving the way for other modes of seeing, thinking, doing, and existence in the world.<sup>66</sup>

By thinking and doing so, the turn challenges the very foundation of the discipline. It identifies the importance of questioning the foundation of Western ontology and examines the epistemological traditions from which the edifice of Eurocentric IR narratives has been constructed.<sup>67</sup> As mentioned previously, Eurocentrism promotes the West as the reservoir of everything good and progressive, making it an ideal to which the rest of the world should aspire. Texts within the IR discipline follow this theme and carry the Eurocentric bias forward. Several scholars have discussed the effects of Eurocentrism on the discipline.<sup>68</sup>

According to the Decolonial viewpoint, Eurocentrism does not represent a geographical position but operates on an epistemological, ontological, and methodological level. It creates a social stratification of humankind and division of labour through different means to promote the belief that there is only one source of universal values and knowledge which Mignolo coined as the 'Western code'.<sup>69</sup> The decolonial turn's criticism of Eurocentrism challenges the IR discipline's framework (See figure 2). They believed that eurocentrism as an analytical framework is insufficient to conceptualize and interpret the world thoroughly by taking European history, theoretical concepts, traditions, IR founding fathers, and examples to explain international relations. Zondi argues that 'scholars from the global North, especially white men, are said to have control over the discipline'.

According to Decolonialists, Eurocentrism acts like a citadel to preserve the dominance of the Western code in the discipline where the West has remained the central player in IR. It was the architect of modern international organizations, such as the League of Nations, the UN, and many others. However, despite the West's widespread role in establishing

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<sup>66</sup> Catherine Walsh, and Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction," In *on Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, ed. by Walter D. Mignolo, and Catherine E. Walsh, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018):1-12, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "The Conceptual Triad - Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality."

<sup>68</sup> Zeynep Gulsah Capan, "Decolonising International Relations?", *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2016): 1. and Hobson John M., *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*.

<sup>69</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

IR as a vibrant discipline, the 'West as a concept' is seldom discussed and thus lacks the theoretical foundation required to appreciate the complexity of the term adequately.<sup>70</sup> IR discipline, with its state-centric approach and level of analysis, remains disabled to analyse the West. Consequently, the West as a concept remains obscured from IR theory.<sup>71</sup> This creates an interesting situation of the most prominent and dominant player remaining away from the gaze of ordinary scholars while performing an enduring hegemonic function in the discipline.

The Eurocentrism of IR is also vividly visible in the discipline's consensus on the Westphalian narrative, which holds that the two bilateral treaties signed in 1648 constitute the beginning of international relations. The traditional depiction of Westphalian history asserts that it established the state with territorial sovereignty as the foundation of the modern state system by publicly recognizing a system of sovereign states imbued with legal egalitarianism, sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal matters of other states, thereby ushering in the modern age.<sup>72</sup>

However, several revisionist academics have rejected this narrative, insisting that attributing the progress of the idea of state sovereignty to the Treaty of Westphalia is primarily based on imaginary history,<sup>73</sup> what they named as 'Westphalian common sense of the discipline, and a 'foundational myth'.<sup>74</sup> The narrative adds to the exceptionalism that stresses the European/ Western order and lifts its thoughts and principles in IR scholarship by emphasizing that European empires dealt with their issues through cultural or contractual development. In contrast, non-Europeans lacked this virtue and astuteness. They remained in disorder until European states permitted them to join the international system – upon achieving 'civilizational

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<sup>70</sup> The "West" has intellectual and geographical connotations, referring to a group of liberal, capitalist nations. Earlier during the Cold War, the notion of the West coexisted as the antithesis of the Third World and, in this sense, represented the world's prosperous, industrialised, and developed civilisation. Thus the "West" carried different and wide-ranging meanings to different audiences according to the context of the usage.

<sup>71</sup> Jacinta O'Hagan, *Conceptualizing the West in International Relations Thought: From Spengler to Said* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 9.

<sup>72</sup> Turan Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 193–217.

<sup>73</sup> Andreas Osiander, "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth," *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (2001): 268.

<sup>74</sup> Sandra Halperin, "International Relations Theory and the Hegemony 5 Western Conceptions of (Modernity)" In *Decolonizing International Relations*, ed. by Ranwen Gruffydd Jones (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006),45.

norms' through a protracted colonial period.<sup>75</sup>

The Westphalian narrative thus allowed scholars to invent a normative hierarchy where Western states construct norms, ideologies, and organizations of international Society, and non-Western states lack these until they are socialized into the norms, regulations, and institutions of the international community. Interesting to note that the Westphalian narrative was a constructed thought developed by German historiographers and expropriated by international jurists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>76</sup> The narrative contrasted the Napoleonic imperial vision and led to incorrect diagnoses of contemporary international relations.<sup>77</sup>

As Vitalis stated that 'generations of IR specialists are unaware that the disciplinary history and its praxis are under the sway of foundational myths'.<sup>78</sup> This is because, according to Ringmar, as a university-level subject, IR is often taught with scanty historical depth.<sup>79</sup> Once placed next to the discipline's selective amnesia concerning imperialism, which is still on the periphery of IR treatises, the Westphalian narrative subtly expunges the history of imperialism from the theoretical and substantive concerns.<sup>80</sup>

Decolonial scholars argue that the discipline was designed to preserve the race and social stratification of the Europeans and the pre-eminence of powerful countries. Contesting the idyllic origin of discipline, as per the Aberystwyth narrative, to be motivated by the assumption that the 'scientific study of international politics' would assist in avoiding wars and promoting world peace. The Decolonial thinkers, on the other hand, blame the Westphalian narrative for concealing the discipline's discriminatory origins,<sup>81</sup> as once Car described that IR for 'English-speaking countries' is simply a study about "managing the world from

<sup>75</sup> John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>76</sup> The English School academics renewed the story of Westphalia's centrality during the 1960s - 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s, with the cultural movement in international relations studies, constructivists introduced the Westphalian narrative to the literature on international norms.

<sup>77</sup> Turan Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 193–217.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics - the Birth of American International Relations*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>79</sup> Erik Ringmar, *History of International Relations: A Non-European Perspective*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Branwen Gruffydd Jones, "Introduction: International Relations, Eurocentrism, and Imperialism," 9.

<sup>81</sup> Meera Sabaratnam, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches," 174. Alexander E. Davis, Vineet Thakur, and Peter Vale, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations*, (London: Pluto Press, 2020) 13.



positions of strength, and in essence, IR discipline and its praxis are a rationalization for the exercise of power by the dominant nations over the weak”.<sup>82</sup>

By emphasizing the link between imperialism and the origins of IR, the decolonial approach has challenged the narrative that IR began with the efforts of the idealists to scientifically study international affairs after WW I. They argued that after the war, the discipline was premised on race and empire instead of peace and war.<sup>83</sup> DuBois prophesied that “the major issue of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be the relation of the darker to the lighter (coloured) races of men and called it the ‘colour line,’ which initiated the competing perspectives on the best way to maintain Caucasian (white) hegemony.”<sup>84</sup> To support the Decolonialists claim, Mahan, stated that “*maintaining white superiority is the fundamental objective of IR.*”<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, a study conducted in 1916, mentioned that “splitting humankind on a graded scale, ranging from barbaric to civilized, is the fundamental reality of human history. It expected superior civilized races (white) to take on the burden of cultivating the riches of the ‘tropics’, which may result in significant battles between ‘civilized’ governments.”<sup>86</sup> During those times, IR was truly called ‘interracial relations.’<sup>87</sup>

A criticism of the knowledge ecology grounded on European experiences is another example of a challenge to the long-held norms of the discipline. Western philosophy served as an epistemic framework that sustained the system of meanings and significance by which a group understands and evaluates its individual and collective life.<sup>88</sup> Decolonialists contend that the speaking subject is always concealed in Western philosophy that is to say that the Western philosophy generated a myth about truthful universal knowledge because it disentangles the

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<sup>82</sup> In introduction by Michael Cox in Carr, Edward Hallett, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: Reissued with a New Preface from Michael Cox*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 29.

<sup>83</sup> Alexander E. Davis, Alexander E., Vineet Thakur, and Peter Vale, *The Imperial Discipline: Race and the Founding of International Relations*, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Vitalis, “Beyond Practitioner Histories of International Relations,” In *What's the Point of International Relations*, ed. by Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson, (London, New York: Routledge, 2017): 99.

<sup>85</sup> Craig N. Murphy, “Relocating the Point of IR in Understanding Industrial-Age Global Problems,” In *What's the Point of International Relations*, ed. by Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson, (London, New York: Routledge, 2017): 76.

<sup>86</sup> Philip Henry Kerr, “Political Relations Between Advanced and Backward Peoples,” In *An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1916): 154 .

<sup>87</sup> Errol A. Henderson, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2013): 72.

<sup>88</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, “Overcoming the Epistemic Injustice of Colonialism,” *Global Policy* 4, no. 4 (2013): 416.

speaker's ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual identities from their epistemic place within the institutions of colonial authority and knowledge.<sup>89</sup>

IR theories and concepts were developed under the pretext of Europe's renaissance, enlightenment, and industrial age. IR's disciplinary concepts, theoretical moorings, and meaning were reshaped to take on new flavours and modalities during the transition from one period to another.<sup>90</sup> According to Henderson, "white racism gained legitimacy from Western philosophy and later on developed different but overlapping and mutually reinforcing rationalizations based first on religion, then biology, and finally anthropology."<sup>91</sup>

D. Hume (1953), 'the Enlightenment philosopher, in support of white racism, wrote that "there never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white.... In so many countries and ages, such a uniform and constant difference could not happen if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men".<sup>92</sup> IR rationalists' theories carried the 'Eurocentric approach', except for Marxism and constructivism challenged the conventional wisdom, though they relied on a Eurocentric epistemological framework to depart and differentiate themselves from the former conventionalists.<sup>93</sup> However, the Decolonialists rejected the Eurocentric perspective of history which placed Europe at the centre while omitting the non-Eurocentric historical views.<sup>94</sup>

Navnita Behera, domineered the mainstream IR on the ground of its 'epistemological inadequacy' to cope with religion especially considering the return of religion to international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. IR rationalist traditions are believed to only function within the dichotomy of 'secular nation-states' against 'irrational' groups, nations, and civilizations thus fomenting conflict with non-European entities. Further, these theories claim that IR is based on the idea that the world would become progressively areligious, in which the irrationality of Islamic nations seems archaic and out of place in a contemporary secular

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<sup>89</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," 211–23.

<sup>90</sup> Torbjorn Knutsen, *L. A History of International Relations Theory*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>91</sup> Errol A. Henderson, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory."

<sup>92</sup> Ibram X Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, (New York: One World, 2019), 21.

<sup>93</sup> Siphamandla Zondi, "Decolonising International Relations and Its Theory: A Critical Conceptual Meditation," *Politikon* 45, no. 1 (2018): 16–31, 21.

<sup>94</sup> Pinar Bilgin, "How to Remedy Eurocentrism in IR? A Complement and a Challenge for the Global Transformation," *International Theory* 8, no. 3 (2016): 494.

national-state framework.<sup>95</sup> Decolonialists thus challenge Western philosophy and argues it provided the essential arguments that normalized epistemic violence and injustice associated inflicted by European empires against the oppressed [neo]colonized people.

## **Conclusion**

The decolonial turn, as a reflexive approach, employs the colonial matrix of power, particularly the coloniality of knowledge. It reveals that Eurocentrism is embedded in knowledge production and encourages one to actively seek to ignore, dismiss, distort, and deny data, subjectivities, world senses, and ways of looking at life from a non-European lens. Further, de-colonialists argue that IR scholarship, since its inception, has remained disabled to fully consider the experiences and perspectives of non-Western countries and communities and has instead reinforced hegemonic power structures. It also questions the universality of the discipline's Eurocentric knowledge without addressing the underlying assumptions sanctioning imperial and colonial ambitions.

Similarly, they put a question mark on the discipline's birth, growth, and advancement as described in the classic international relations debates by focusing on the role of colonialism, imperialism, and racism in the discipline. The turn signifies rethinking and re-evaluating IR's dominant concepts, theories, and methodologies in promoting more inclusive and diverse ways of understanding global politics. The colonial matrix of power explains the continuance of uneven power relations between the Global North and South by highlighting the continued influence of colonialism on modern global politics.

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<sup>95</sup> Joao Pontes Nogueira, "Inequality," In *International Relations from the Global South*, ed. by Karen Smith Arlene B. Tickner, (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 240–58.

