

Thinking postcolonially about the Middle East: Two moments of anti-Eurocentric critique

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Summary

Present day insecurities in the Middle East are invariably analysed in light of the colonial past. Yet, Eurocentrism, which is a by-product of the coloniser's orientalist gaze toward the non-European world, continues to shape our understanding of regional dynamics. This paper suggests that thinking postcolonially about the Middle East has two moments of anti-Eurocentric critique. Often-times, attempts at thinking postcolonially about the Middle East remain content with the first moment (admitting the ills of colonialism) and not realise the second moment (studying the Middle East as the 'constitutive outside' of 'Europe', thereby acknowledging mutually constitutive relations). The first section of the paper introduces the notion of thinking postcolonially about the international. Next, I distinguish between what I term as 'two moments of anti-Eurocentric critique' and illustrate the difference by looking at the figures of the English traveller and author Gertrude Bell, a.k.a. 'the woman who made Iraq', and Iraqi architect Dame Zaha Hadid who embodied the Middle East as a 'constitutive outside' of Europe.

Key Words

Middle East, postcolonial, Eurocentrism, Gertrude Bell, Zaha Hadid

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Analysis:

Introduction

Present day insecurities in the Middle East are invariably analysed in light of the colonial past. Indeed, the Middle East comes across as an ‘apparent’ case to think postcolonially about. Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*, one of the founding texts of postcolonial studies, highlighted the ways in which the colonisers shaped this part of the world, not only through guns and bombs but also words and images. In this book and other works, Said meticulously showed how representations of the Middle East have rendered the Middle East in/secure. For, orientalist representations do not only warrant colonising practices but also help to constitute ‘the Orient’, shaping self-understandings and practices of people as ‘orientals’. Insecurities tied up with orientalism are sometimes understood as limited to the age of colonialism. However, insofar as such representations have conditioned the self-understandings and practices of those caught up in the dynamics of colonialism, the insecurities that they shaped (and were shaped by) cannot be overlooked.

There are very few self-consciously critical works on the Middle East that do not begin with a nod to Said. In such works, present day insecurities in the Middle East are invariably analysed in light of the colonial past. However, thinking postcolonially about the Middle East is not limited to that nod to Said or a cursory acknowledgement of the ills of colonialism. This is partly because thinking postcolonially is pertinent not only for the colonised but all those who were directly or indirectly tied up with the process of colonisation (the colonised, the colonisers and those who narrowly escaped being colonised but had to live with insecurities tied up with colonisation). It is also because Eurocentrism, a by-product of the coloniser’s orientalist gaze toward non-European ‘others’, continues to shape our understanding of world politics through its internalisation by myriad actors in ‘Europe’ and beyond. Eurocentrism is a consciousness, a way of thinking about world history by way of putting a particular idea of ‘Europe’ at the centre and drawing an unbroken line from Ancient Greece to the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution without acknowledging relations of give-and-take, learning and mutual constitution with the world beyond (Amin, 1989). As such, Eurocentrism is known to plague some anti-Eurocentric critics as well (Wallerstein, 1997).

Thinking postcolonially about the Middle East has two moments of anti-Eurocentric critique. Oftentimes, attempts at thinking postcolonially remain content with the first moment (acknowledging the ills of colonialism) and do not realise the second one (studying the ‘Middle East’ as ‘constitutive outside’ of ‘Europe’). The first section clarifies what I understand by thinking postcolonially about the international. Next, I distinguish between two moments of anti-Eurocentric critique, and illustrate the difference by looking at the figures of the English traveller and author Gertrude Bell, a.k.a. ‘the wom-

an who made Iraq', and the Iraqi architect Dame Zaha Hadid who embodied the 'Middle East' as a 'constitutive outside' of 'Europe'.

Thinking postcolonially about the international

Following Stuart Hall, I understand postcolonialism as a 're-staged narrative' on world history. For Hall (1996: 249), colonialism '[signifies] the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonisation and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the 'outer face', the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492'. Insofar as colonialism 'refers to a specific historical moment' *as well as* 'a way of staging or narrating history', postcolonial studies re-stages this narrative by de-centring the coloniser and looking at the experiences and perspectives of the colonised as the 'constitutive outside' of modernity. Then, thinking postcolonially is already about the international, although postcolonial studies scholarship does not always take forms that are instantly recognisable to students of world politics.

A key concept in thinking postcolonially about the international is the 'constitutive outside', understood as the ideas and experiences of those who have shaped 'us' even as 'we' are not aware of and/or acknowledge what 'we' owe each other.¹ As such, 'constitutive outside' highlights a contradiction that is central to thinking postcolonially about the international: that others' ideas and experiences have shaped world politics and yet these contributions and contestations have not been acknowledged explicitly in scholarly studies on the international (Ahluwalia, 2005).

Consider the relationship between continental post-structural thought and postcolonial studies. Postcolonial scholars are sometimes criticised for their debts to post-structural thought (Dirlik, 1994). There indeed are strong links between the two. However such links are not one- but bi- (if not multi-) directional, suggested Pal Ahluwalia (2005: 138) when he asked:

Is it merely coincidental...that some of the most profound contemporary French theorists who have challenged the very precepts of modernity as defined by the Enlightenment tradition have been deeply affected in some way by France's African colonial project? Isn't it plausible that the questions which have become too much a part of the post-structuralist canon—otherness, difference, irony, mimicry, parody, the lamenting of modernity and the deconstruction of grand narratives of European culture arising out of the Enlightenment tradition—are possible because of their post-colonial connection?

The colonial roots of continental post-structural thought are overlooked by those who criticise post-structuralism on grounds of Eurocentrism and those who criticise post-

colonial studies for their derivativeness. Yet, inquiring into the postcolonial Africa as the ‘constitutive outside’ of coloniser France allows moving beyond anti-Eurocentric and/or orientalist name-calling and engage more deeply about what thinking thinking postcolonially entails. As Ahluwalia noted, this is not a contradiction to be resolved but to be acknowledged and thought through. Those who are ‘outside’ need to be recognised as such without explaining away the differences or subsuming ‘their’ identity. Yet the ways in which ‘others’ have contributed to making us who ‘we’ are also need acknowledging by becoming aware of co-constitutive relations.

Two moments of anti-Eurocentric critique about the Middle East: Gertrude Bell and Zaha Hadid

Oftentimes, thinking postcolonially about the Middle East begins by reflecting on the agency of European colonisers and twentieth century US interventionism in shaping contemporary insecurities in the Middle East. Indeed, the ‘Middle East’ as a term and as a spatial construct is a colonial legacy. The term ‘Middle East’ was offered in the late nineteenth century when thinking about the security of the British Empire’s route to India. Throughout the twentieth century, a variety of external actors adopted the term ‘Middle East’ while the spatial construct to which it referred kept moving in line with their security interests (Bilgin, 2000).

Furthermore, boundaries in many parts of the Middle East were shaped by the European colonisers, as we are reminded by the contemporary debates on ‘Sykes-Picot’. Since ISIS brought down the Syria-Iraq border in the areas under its control and declared it ‘the end of Sykes-Picot’ (2014), this secret wartime deal between Britain and France (1916) has come to symbolise the ills caused by colonialism in the Middle East. If it was not for British Sir Mark Sykes and French François Georges-Picot’s secret wartime deal that overlooked the aspirations of the local peoples, it is suggested, things would be otherwise in the Middle East. Be that as it may, such efforts that highlight the agency of Sykes and Picot in shaping contemporary insecurities in the Middle East do not suffice as ‘we’ remain content with the first moment of anti-Eurocentric critique (Bilgin, 2016).

A prime example of the first moment of anti-Eurocentric critique is the myths surrounding Gertrude Bell (1868-1926), popularly known as ‘the woman who made Iraq’ (Hitchens, 2007). Bell was an English traveller and author who journeyed to the Arabian peninsula during World War I and explored its history and peoples by making use of the opportunities offered by the colonial practices of the British Empire. Bell learned the local languages, gathered information (including intelligence at times) and wrote multiple books about this part of the world. She is credited for “[contributing] to the construction of the Iraqi state in 1921, as well as the National Museum of Iraq”.² Hence the

agency attributed to Bell in the shaping of Iraq (notwithstanding the availability of historical evidence to the contrary) and the symbolism accorded to her name in the first moment of anti-Eurocentric critique.

As with anti-Eurocentric critique that focuses on the Sykes-Picot agreement, such emphasis on the agency of Bell overlooks the legacy of a century-long history of security governance in this part of the world. Put differently, it is not only those people who drew the borders but also those who have shaped security governance inside and across those borders throughout the twentieth century whose practices need scrutinising (Bilgin, 2016). Hence the second moment of anti-Eurocentric critique.

The second moment of anti-Eurocentric critique considers the co-constitutive relationship between the coloniser and the colonised and adopts a historical perspective (as opposed to bracketing the twentieth century, see above). This involves considering the 'Middle East' as a 'constitutive outside' of 'Europe'. Such considerations entail acknowledging the colonial past and present (Gregory, 2004) *and* studying the ways in which the relationship between 'Europe' and the 'Middle East' has been constitutive of not only the latter but also the former. Where prevalent representations of the Middle East emphasise the mark the former has left on the latter, colonisation has shaped both 'Europe' and the 'Middle East'. Yet, even those otherwise self-consciously critical approaches to the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised do not always avoid what Said characterised as an 'asymmetrical' approach. Said wrote:

The asymmetry is striking. In one instance, we assume that the better part of history in colonial territories was a function of the imperial intervention; in the others, there is an equally obstinate assumption that colonial undertakings were marginal and perhaps even eccentric to the central activities of the great metropolitan cultures (Said, 1993: 35).

More often than not 'we' are accustomed to seeing the traces of the 'European' in the 'Middle East' but not the other way around. For Said, however, it was imperative to study both. He asked:

Who in India or Algeria today can confidently separate out the British or French component of the past from the present actualities, and who in Britain and France can draw a clear circle around British London and French Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those imperial cities? (Said, 1993: 15).

Over the years, such asymmetry has produced anti-Eurocentric critiques of continental thought (see above) and an underestimation of the contributions of the 'Middle East'—other than in oil, coffee, rugs and spices, that is. Considering the life and accomplishments of the Iraqi architect Dame Zaha Hadid (1950-2016) underscores the need for the

second moment of anti-Eurocentric critique where the Middle East is analysed as a 'constitutive outside' of Europe. To clarify, let me outline key moments in her life and career.

Hadid was born in Iraq in 1950. Her father was a member of the National Democratic Party of Iraq which (closed down after the Ba'ath coup in 1963). Hadid came of age at a time where families of a certain class and/or persuasion in the Arab world were firmly committed to women's entry into various professions. Her family gave Hadid a significant degree of freedom in following her passions. Her mother taught her how to draw. She was sent to a Catholic girls' school in Baghdad to be trained with a mix of Iraqi and international students. As she was getting ready to follow her brothers for higher education in Britain in 1968, Iraq was thrown into political turmoil. Hadid went to the American University in Beirut instead. Finding engineering departments too male dominated, she chose mathematics. It was not in the early 1970s when she moved to London to study at the Architectural Association (AA) that Hadid committed to architecture full time.

Hadid is widely considered to be one of the most talented and visionary architects (a.k.a. starchitects) of recent decades. She is the first person to win the prestigious Stirling prize two years in a row 2010 and 2011. She is also the first woman to win Britain's RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) medal and an even bigger one, which is considered to be the greatest honour in architecture, the Pritzker prize (2004). She is widely respected by her peers as having imagined natural contours and curves even before the advances in computer technology allowed them to be drawn and developments in construction technology managed their realisation.

Before her untimely death in 2016, Hadid won and built projects in more countries than her peers. The one exception seems to be central London where she did not have a single project—not counting the spectacular aquatics centre of the London Olympics or 'the mind zone' of the Millennium dome, both in the Greenwich area. Overall, Hadid seems to have had a harder time in getting projects built in Britain at a time when Iraq wars made the headlines in 1991 and 2003. It was between these two wars that Hadid won the Millennium Commission's competition to build an opera house in Cardiff. To the horror of her peers, her project was rejected twice (after she won the second competition that was set up following the first rejection). Undoubtedly, a combination of factors tied up with Welsh devolution also played a role. However, the reason offered by the politician Rhodri Morgan (who went on to become First Minister of Wales in 2000) was telling. The project 'looked too much like the shrine in Mecca', Rhodri Morgan said and warned about 'the likelihood of a fatwa to be issued on the building' (Hadid 2016). It is impossible to know how it is that Hadid's design looked like 'the shrine in Mecca' to Morgan, or whether such sentiments resonated with others in Wales. What is

significant for our purposes here is that his words were uttered in a discursive economy that is Eurocentric insofar as Morgan was not able to recognise Hadid as ‘constitutive outside’ of Britain, portraying her as a threatening (Muslim) other instead.

Hadid embodied the ‘constitutive outside’ of Britain insofar as she was an ‘outsider’ who was born and trained in the Middle East but also an insider who was trained by Catholic nuns in Baghdad, international faculty at the American University in Beirut and the Architectural Association in London. She was a naturalised British citizen who received a CBE three years after the Cardiff opera house incident and a DBE (Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire) ten years after that. Put differently, Hadid was a product of both a postcolonial Iraq that was undergoing significant transformation as part of decolonisation, *and* a postimperial Britain that *both* trained *and* fed off the talents of the best and the brightest in the former colonies and the Commonwealth.

Conclusion

From the very moment ISIS brought up the Sykes-Picot agreement in 2014, anti-Eurocentric critique about the Middle East has come to focus on the ills caused by colonialism. Consequently, Gertrude Bell as ‘the woman who made Iraq’ has come to make the headlines as the critics adopted an anti-Eurocentric approach to the affairs of the Middle East. This paper suggested that the eventuality that ‘we’ have been conditioned to think about Gertrude Bell and not Zaha Hadid when thinking about the affairs of the Middle East says more about ‘our’ Eurocentric predilections than anything else. Where Hadid embodied the Middle East as the ‘constitutive outside’ of ‘Europe’, myths about Bell underscored European agency in the shaping of contemporary Middle Eastern insecurities while overlooking the latter’s contributions to the former. Understanding how Hadid embodied the ‘Middle East’ as ‘Europe’s’ ‘constitutive outside’ calls on the students of the region to go through *both* moments of anti-Eurocentric critique, and study mutually constitutive relations between ‘Europe’ and the ‘Middle East’.

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Endnotes

¹ In anti-Eurocentric criticism, 'us' refers to 'Europe' and 'others' to 'non-Europeans'. While ethnocentrism is not unique 'Europe', Eurocentrism as a consciousness has shaped the study of world politics in a way that other '-isms' have not.

² <http://www.biography.com/people/gertrude-bell-21149695> (accessed 10 June 2016).