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Decolonizing international business

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Structured Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this viewpoint is to encourage scholars of international business (IB) to engage with the "decolonizing the university" project and reflect on what decolonizing might mean for IB research and education. The paper also argues that it is particularly important for IB scholars to join the decolonizing project given the field's main object of study – the MNE – has been central to colonialism.

Design/methodology/approach – An essay style is adopted to introduce the decolonizing project to IB and to explain why and how this scholarly field might benefit from engaging with it. As part of that, the paper calls upon IB scholars to work on decolonizing the field and to do so by not only interrogating its knowledge claims but also broadening the scope of its research so it can address the theme of neo-colonialism.

Findings – The paper reveals the conspicuous absence of IB scholars from the decolonizing project and situates such absence within a long-standing indifference within IB to the issue of colonialism.

Originality/value – It is hoped that this paper will stimulate reflection on IB's absence from the decolonizing project and assist scholars to develop an understanding of the project's rationale and underlying literature. It is also hoped that the paper will open dialogue within IB about how this field might be decolonized and help scholars engage meaningfully with other disciplines as they do so.

Social implications – In learning about and engaging with the decolonizing project, IB scholars will be able to not only enrich IB theory and education but also help to tackle one of the grand challenges facing the modern world society, namely social inequality and injustice rooted in colonialism.

Keywords – Colonialism, decolonizing, education, multinationals, neo-colonialism, West-centrism

Introduction

The past few years have seen a renewed and fast-growing interest in "decolonizing" the university (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2017; Janssen, 2019). Informed by postcolonial/decolonial scholarship and given new impetus by various events on the African continent and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, this project further highlights the importance of acknowledging and working to undo colonial legacies in higher education and society more broadly. The humanities and social sciences have been in the vanguard of this development, but other parts of the system have become increasingly active too – including business schools. The workshops on "decolonizing the business school" and "decolonizing business schools in Africa" organized by the UK-based Bayes Business School in 2020 and the African Academy of Management in 2021, respectively, are just a few examples.[1]

In this paper, my aim is to encourage scholars of international business (IB) to engage with this decolonizing project. In contrast with other disciplines across the humanities and social sciences where decolonizing is subject of considerable debate, the field of IB has been remarkably silent on the issue. Yet, there is no a priori reason why that should be the case. Indeed, I argue that it is especially important that IB actively contributes to, if not take a leading role in, the decolonizing project given that the field's primary object of study – the multinational enterprise (MNE) – has been central to colonialism. I urge IB scholars to join this important, cross-disciplinary project and to do so with the aim of not only advancing IB

[1] Details on these workshops can be found here: https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/faculties-and-research/centres/cre/events and https://www.africaacademyofmanagement.org/africa-academy-management-afam-2021-online-webinar-series

theory but also helping to tackle one of the grand challenges facing the modern world society, namely social inequality and injustice rooted in colonialism.[2]

The purpose of this essay, thus, is twofold. My first objective is provocative and explanatory. I hope to, firstly, show that IB has thus far been oblivious to the decolonizing project and, secondly, offer an introduction to this project. It is my hope that this will stimulate reflection on the reasons behind IB's lack of awareness or concern for the decolonizing project and assist scholars to develop an understanding of this project's rationale and underlying literature. My second objective is more programmatic. I hope to open a dialogue within IB about the relevance of the decolonizing project for this field and, to that end, highlight some issues towards which IB scholars might direct their attention. More specifically, I will argue that decolonizing IB will require not only interrogating some of its knowledge claims but also broadening the scope of its research so it can address the theme of neo-colonialism.

Prior to doing that, however, I should be clear that my contribution is mainly directed at the mainstream IB community.[3] By "mainstream", I mean to refer to the community of scholars researching themes considered part of "core" IB and typically approaching such themes rather uncritically while also excluding certain themes from the field or relegating them to its periphery.[4] As I hope to show in this essay, mainstream IB scholars are yet to acknowledge, let alone, meaningfully engage with the decolonizing project; and it is my hope that this essay

[2] In making this call, my paper may also be viewed as adding a voice to the growing chorus of scholars calling upon mainstream IB to re-orient itself towards the study of pressing societal problems (e.g., Buckley et al., 2017; Cairns and Roberts, 2011; Dörrenbächer et al., 2021; Kolk, 2016; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2014).

[3] Scholars publishing in *Critical Perspectives on International Business* will not be strangers to the decolonizing project and, indeed, some have made useful initial contributions towards it (see e.g., Alcadipani and Faria, 2014; Boussebaa, 2021; Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014; Westwood, 2006; Westwood and Jack, 2007). Relevant contributions have also been published in general management journals (more on this below).

[4] For an outline of "core IB" research areas, see e.g., Buckley (2002) and Buckley et al. (2017). For an explanation of what being "critical" means in the field of management, see e.g., Adler et al. (2007) and Alvesson and Willmott (1992). See also Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard (2019) for a discussion of some differences between mainstream and critical IB research.

will begin to change that. For the sake of parsimony, I will hereafter refer to mainstream IB as simply "IB".

The essay proceeds in three parts. In the first, I reveal the conspicuous absence of IB from the decolonizing project, and I also situate this absence within a long-standing indifference among IB scholars to the issue of colonialism. In the second part, I provide an overview of the decolonizing project, clarifying its origins, rationale and key theoretical contributions. Finally, I present a more normative argument about the need to decolonize IB and how IB scholars might begin to work towards addressing that need. The goal here is not to prescribe a set of quick fix "how to decolonize IB" solutions but rather to encourage scholarly reflection and dialogue on what "decolonizing" might mean for IB research and education.

Silence in the field of IB

The field of IB has been conspicuously absent from the "decolonizing the university" debate. Illustrating this is, for instance, the extremely low turnout of IB scholars at a large virtual workshop on "Decolonizing the Business School Curriculum" in 2021.[5] Over 500 people registered for the event from a range of management sub-disciplines, testifying to the high level of interest in decolonizing within business schools, but IB was barely represented. A mere twenty academics registered under the banner of "IB" and fewer attended on the day. Of those who attended, very few had a demonstrably "mainstream" IB profile. Other sub-disciplines such as accounting/finance, corporate social responsibility, entrepreneurship, leadership/organizational behaviour, and marketing were much more strongly represented.

[5] This workshop took place online and was hosted by Bayes Business School's ETHOS Centre for Responsible Enterprise together with the CRIS Research Center at Royal Holloway University of London. I took part in this workshop and discussed registration and attendance figures with the organizers. More details on the workshop can be found here: https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/faculties-and-research/centres/cre/events

IB's absence from the decolonizing project can also be seen in the dearth of relevant publications in core IB journals. The last few years have seen a surge in publications engaging with the decolonizing project across the social sciences, including (albeit to a much lesser extent) management, but the same cannot be said of IB.[6] Likewise, discussions of the place of IB in business school education (e.g., Kwok et al., 2022) appear to have failed to notice or respond to the various calls across to decolonize the curriculum. It is not unfair to say that IB has overlooked, if not shunned, the decolonizing call and its various forms engagement.

This situation is, perhaps, unsurprising given that IB has generally shown little, if any, interest in the issue of colonialism, its legacies and its new incarnations. A close reading of the various overviews and agenda-setting reviews of IB research published over the years in the core IB journals shows that very clearly (see e.g., Buckley, 2002; Buckley et al., 2017; Michailova and Mustaffa, 2012; Mukherjee et al., 2021; Oesterle and Wolf, 2011). Unsurprisingly, IB has also largely failed to engage with and learn from the substantial body of scholarship – in management and the wider social sciences – concerned with the study of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

For instance, research published in core IB journals has been oblivious to postcolonial theory (aka "postcolonial studies" or simply "postcolonialism"), i.e., the large body of writing in the humanities and social sciences concerned with the cultural and epistemic aspects of colonialism and its legacies. This was pointed out in 2018 in a book review (published in the

[6] In the field of management, recent publications engaging with the decolonizing project include general calls to decolonize business schools (e.g., Banerjee, Rodriguez and Dar, 2020; Kelly and Hrenyk, 2020), initial reflections on the need to decolonize management theory (Banerjee, 2022) and management journals (Barros and Alcadipani, 2022), short dialogues on what decolonization might mean for subspecialties such as CSR (e.g., Banerjee and Berrier-Lucas, 2022), a special issue on decolonizing management knowledge (Jammulamadaka et al, 2021) and a few in-depth explorations of particular subfields of management such as entrepreneurship (Woods et al., 2022) and scholarship concerned with the study of professional service firms (Boussebaa, 2022).

Journal of International Management) which noted that the "*Journal of International Business Studies* […] has thus far published only *one* paper informed by postcolonial theory […] and the other major IB journals do not fare much better" (Boussebaa, 2018: 196, original emphasis). At the time of writing the present essay (2023), IB continues to disregard postcolonial theory (but see Mahadevan and Moore, 2023, for a rare exception in the last few years). This is despite the deeply transformative impact which postcolonial theory has had on the social sciences over the last four decades and, to a much lesser extent, general management and organization studies in the last two decades.

The relatively young *Critical Perspectives on International Business* (CPoIB) has put considerable effort into addressing this void in IB – initially through special issues aimed at developing a postcolonial interrogative in the field (see Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Westwood, 2006; Westwood and Jack, 2007) and, later, by publishing papers addressing specific areas of IB scholarship (e.g., Boussebaa, 2021; Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014; Ristolainen, Outila and Piekkari, 2023). The journal has also contributed to giving voice to communities marginalized by IB theory and practice (see e.g., Alcadipani and Faria, 2014; Prasad and Durepos, 2016). However, IB appears to have failed to notice this body of work. Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard's (2019) citation analysis provides empirical evidence to that effect, showing how papers published in CPoIB (including those informed by postcolonial theory) are rarely, if ever, cited in research published core IB journals.

In this context, it is unsurprising that IB scholars have not sought to engage with the decolonizing project. This situation is also part of a more general lack of attention to societal questions within IB. It is no secret, albeit rarely questioned, that IB has been, in the main, concerned with corporate-centric questions and the strategic-organizational concerns of MNE

managers. This is again an issue which CPoIB has pointed out and sought to address over the years but, as Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard's (2019) analysis shows, the response in mainstream IB has been tepid. The growing body of IB research focused on issues of corporate social responsibility (for a review, see e.g., Kolk, 2016) and recent calls by mainstream IB scholars to redirect the field towards "grand challenges" (e.g., Buckley et al., 2017) are encouraging in that respect, but they are yet to crystallize into a core aspect of IB (see also Dörrenbächer et al., 2021). Importantly, they are yet to engage with the decolonizing project.

All the same, it is fair to say that the decolonizing project has not registered on IB's radar, or perhaps it has but IB scholars have chosen to be silent bystanders. This is likely to be a difficult position to maintain over time, and I strongly encourage IB scholars to begin reflecting on what "decolonizing" might mean for IB research and education. To do that effectively, however, first requires understanding the decolonizing project. I provide a brief overview in what follows.

The decolonizing project: a brief overview

What does "decolonizing" in the university context mean? And indeed, why should academics be debating and engaging in decolonizing today given that much of the world has already been decolonized? Most territories that were once colonies of colonial empires have now gained their independence and (arguably) become autonomous, self-governing nation-states. As of 2022, only 17 territories remain colonies – or in the language of the United Nations, "non-self-governing territories" (United Nations, 2022). Why, then, engage in decolonizing today and what may be the place of universities be in this respect?

This question is a complex one and has indeed been subject of much debate over the past decades, with renewed attention being given to it in recent years (see e.g., Bhambra et al., 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2017; Janssen, 2019). A first step towards clarity is to consider the key message carried by the decolonizing project, namely that decolonization remains unfinished business. Colonial empires were undone in the 20th century, but colonialism nevertheless continues to affect societies across the globe. This is perhaps most obvious in the fact that some autonomous states are the product of settler colonialism (e.g., Australia, Canada, USA) and indigenous populations therein continue to be subject to injustices of occupation and dispossession. For these populations, colonialism is not necessarily a thing of the past and may indeed be experienced as a very contemporary reality (see e.g., Veracini, 2015).

The present-day influence of colonialism may also be seen in the profoundly unequal exchange relations that continue to characterize the modern world economy and the related appropriation by the so-called "global North" of labour and resources from the "global South" (see e.g., Hickel et al., 2022; Suwandi, 2019). The concept of "neo-colonialism", which first appeared in the 1950s when European empires were crumbling and the USA seeking control over the newly independent states, was put forward precisely to capture, explain and challenge the persistence of these unequal North-South relations post-independence (more on this below).

The decolonizing project within universities in effect seeks to sensitise us to, challenge and, ultimately, help undo this reality and, in so doing, create a more equitable and just world society.[7] Here, it is important to note, that the university is itself seen as being implicated in

[7] This is of course in line with the United Nations' efforts to eradicate colonialism across the globe.

the persistence of colonial relations in the postcolonial era; and a key part of the decolonializing project seeks to challenge and address such complicity. This project has a long history, starting with efforts in the second half of the 20th century in former colonies to, for example, promote the use of indigenous tongues in home-grown universities in order to replace the colonisers' languages which had been imposed during European colonial rule (see e.g., Mamdani, 2019). In recent years, these efforts have been given fresh impetus following the "Rhodes Must Fall!" protest at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.[8] The protest quickly spread to other universities in South Africa and elsewhere in the world and ignited a renewed interest in decolonizing the university – in former colonies but also in former colonial powers themselves (see e.g., Bhambra et al., 2018).[9]

The literature underpinning this decolonizing project is vast, highly complex and includes a variety of theoretical traditions from diverse geographical perspectives and temporal contexts. The two most influential theoretical traditions are those known as "postcolonialism" (aka "postcolonial theory" or "postcolonial studies") and "decoloniality" (or decolonial theory). The former is rooted in the work of literary and cultural critic Edward Said and, coming after him, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and it has mainly been focused on colonialism from the perspective of the Middle East and South Asia. The latter finds its origins in the work of scholars writing from the perspective of Latin America, notably sociologist Anibal Quijano and philosopher Walter D. Mignolo.

This essay is, of course, not the place to provide a detailed discussion of the huge literatures that exist on these two traditions – useful reviews of postcolonial theory can be found in, e.g., Go (2016) and of decolonial scholarship in, e.g., Mignolo and Walsh (2018). Suffice to say

[8] Led by a group of students, this called for a statue of the 19th imperialist Cecil Rhodes to be taken down.
[9] Other recent examples include the rebranding of UK-based Cass Business School as Bayes Business School and the University of Glasgow's project on how it benefited from the proceeds of slavery.

that the two traditions, notwithstanding their different intellectual origins and remits, ultimately converge on the understanding that the colonial period which started with the "discovery" of the Americas in 1492 continues to shape the world in profound ways and that knowledge plays a critical role in that process. More specifically, the two traditions offer, I would argue, three key theoretical contributions that, in my view, lie at the core of the decolonizing project within universities.

The first is the challenging of the assumed universality of Western knowledge. Postcolonial/decolonial scholars have shown how much of Western thought is, as Bhambra (2014) puts it, "based on a claim to universality at the same time as it elides its own particularity, and how this claim is sustained through the exercise of material power in the world." A related contribution – perhaps best articulated in the work of Said (1978) whose influence on the decolonizing project has been extensive – has been to show how universalism elides the voices of those located outside the West while also speaking about the non-West in ways which tend to represent the "Other" as a problematic or inferior deviation from Western "universals". A further contribution, perhaps most clearly expressed in the decolonial tradition, has been an effort to not only deconstruct Western knowledge but also seek to recover histories, perspectives and forms of knowledge that were suppressed in the formal period of colonialism, and which continue to be made invisible in the postcolonial era.

These contributions have also led to critiques of, and efforts to, transform university curricula.[10] Indeed, since the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign in 2015, campaigns and calls to "decolonize the curriculum" have proliferated, not least in former European colonial powers

[10] The literature on decolonising the university curriculum is vast, some of which can be accessed at https://www.cass.city.ac.uk/facul ties and-resea rch/centr es/cre.

and the USA where student bodies include many students with roots in former colonies.[11] Such efforts have sought to broaden curricula, so they are more inclusive of cultures, histories and knowledges originating outside the West. They have also sought to promote a deeper awareness of the role of colonialism in the marking of the world economy and contemporary unequal North-South relations.[12] Here, then, the postcolonial/decolonial theoretical contributions discussed above have been mobilized towards the development of a more inclusive curriculum and one able to speak about colonialism and its legacies.

Postcolonial/decolonial contributions have thus far had relatively limited impact on the field of management studies, but important efforts have been made since the early 2000s to change that (see e.g., Prasad, 2003; 2015). Here, organizational scholars have been, perhaps, most active. Among other things, they have produced a rich stream of research exposing false universalisms in management knowledge and challenging tendencies to marginalize or devalue non-Western cultures and institutions in articles, books and textbooks discussing "other" cultures (e.g., Ailon, 2008; Boussebaa, 2022; Fougère and Moulettes, 2012; Jack and Westwood, 2009: Nkomo, 2011).[13] Organizational scholars have also done much to help recover the voices of the "Other" through research conducted from non-Western (aka "indigenous") perspectives (see e.g., contributions in Alcadipani et al., 2012, and Prasad, 2012) and to develop decolonial research methodologies (e.g., Girei, 2017) and forms of management education (e.g., Kothiyal et al., 2018; Woods et al., 2022). They have also

[11] One example is "*Why is My Curriculum White?*" campaign run by the National Union of Students (NUS) in the UK.

[12] Universities have been broadly receptive to such demands, and many have put the task of "decolonizing the curriculum" on their strategic agenda – although some have questioned whether this initiative may be driven less by ethical and/or intellectual imperatives than by market concerns (Gopal, 2021).

[13] In recent years, this body of work has begun to significantly influence more mainstream management studies (see e.g., Bothello et al., 2019; Filatotchev et al., 2020; Smith and Kaminishi, 2020; Vaara et al., 2019). Several studies have also deployed postcolonial/decolonial theory to critically examine processes of knowledge and practice transfer between the global North and the global South – inside MNEs and more generally (e.g., Alcadipani and Caldas, 2012; Boussebaa, Sturdy and Morgan, 2014; Boussebaa, Sinha and Gabriel, 2014; Fernando, 2021; Srinivas, 2008; Yousfi, 2014).

started to challenge "the obscuring or de-thematizing of neo-colonialism in the study of (transnational) organizations" (Boussebaa, 2022: 3), a point to which I return later.

Curiously, however, as I showed in the previous section, the decolonizing project has not registered on IB's radar. This is despite some relevant work being published in an IB journal, namely *Critical Perspectives on International Business* (e.g., Alcadipani and Faria, 2014; Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Boussebaa, 2012; Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014; Westwood, 2006; Westwood and Jack, 2007). Yet, as noted already, there is no *a priori* reason why IB should exempt itself from participating in the decolonizing project and subjecting its own research and education to postcolonial/decolonial critique. Indeed, I argue that it is incumbent on IB scholars to take such a project seriously. I elaborate on this argument in what follows.

Decolonizing IB

What does the decolonizing project imply for the field of IB? Does IB's absence from this project mean it is not relevant to this field? Does IB *not* need decolonizing? That is a question I encourage the IB community to begin reflecting on. The fact that a growing body of scholars across the social sciences are taking the decolonizing project seriously suggests it may be difficult for IB to exempt itself. Indeed, the argument can be made that the IB community should be a particularly active, if not leading, contributor to this project given that IB's core object of study – the MNE – has been central to colonialism.

Here, I am not just referring to the critical role played by MNEs in creating the bygone European colonial empires[14] or the more recent American MNEs that contributed to passing the imperial baton to the USA (e.g., the United Fruits Company) or the various European

[14] One example is the infamous English (later British) *East India Company* which was central to the rise and expansion of the British empire. For a discussion of this company in the field of management, see e.g., Clegg (2017).

MNEs which sought to adapt to the decolonization transition of the mid-20th century.[15] I am also referring to the critical role played by MNEs in perpetuating colonial relations in the ostensibly "postcolonial" world economy, a point to which I return below.

This relationship between the MNE and colonialism – past and present – suggests that IB, perhaps more than any other discipline, may not only have much to learn from the decolonizing project but also much to do towards it. Indeed, it would not be inappropriate to suggest that continuing to be absent from this project might imply complicity (intentional or otherwise). What, then, is IB to do? The question is, of course, a challenging one and I do not claim to have a full answer; and indeed, one aim of this paper is to call upon the IB community to reflect on that very question. That said, several suggestions can be put forward here.

A first step is to acknowledge the absence of IB from the decolonizing project and realize that such absence is problematic – for the reasons already outlined. My hope is that, in having identified such an absence, this essay will have helped in making that first step. The second step is then to think about what specifically IB might do to contribute to the decolonizing project within its own disciplinary boundaries and more generally. There are likely to be many possibilities here, and at this juncture I can suggest two broad areas requiring special attention.

Interrogating IB knowledge

As discussed above, a core task of the decolonizing project is to critically examine the knowledge which universities produce and how it may be mediated by relations of power

[15] For a recent discussion of European MNEs operating in Africa during the decolonization period, see e.g., Decker (2022)

rooted in colonialism. Little has been done to advance that task in IB, but the organizational studies referred to above provide some useful initial insights. Among other things, they have critiqued so-called "universal" management theory and exposed how the "cross-cultural" variant of such theory tends to marginalise or devalue the global South. IB has much to learn from this work given the role of culture is now "an important element in international business theorizing and empirical studies" (Buckley, 2002: 369).

Clearly, IB's attention to culture has somewhat helped in addressing the myth of universalism in the field, not least thanks to the work of Geert Hofstede and early critiques of US-centrism in management science (e.g., Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991). The cross-cultural contribution in IB has also been significantly enriched by comparative institutionalist research (see e.g., Boussebaa and Morgan, 2008; Edwards and Ferner, 2004; Geppert et al., 2003; Jackson and Deeg, 2008; Morgan et al., 2001), although it has been argued that such research remains somewhat on the fringes of IB (Rana and Morgan, 2019). Today, it is also well understood in IB that greater attention needs to be paid to non-Western contexts (see e.g., Tung, 2022).

Indeed, IB, perhaps more than any other subfield of management, has had no choice but to look beyond the West given its empirical focus has, until recently, mostly been on Western MNEs and that these have a significant presence outside the West. Moreover, from a postcolonial/decolonial perspective, one might add that the interest in looking outside the West is congruent with Western neo-colonialism, an issue I return to below. Added to that is the rise of MNEs in the so-called "emerging markets", notably China and India, a development that has led to further interest in the non-West within IB. This is indeed why the last decade has seen a growing interest among IB scholars to engage with the somewhat separate body of (mostly) Asia-focused management scholarship seeking to develop

"indigenous knowledge" outside the West (for a discussion of this work from an IB perspective, see e.g., Meyer, 2006, 2013).[16]

One might speculate here that the pursuit of "indigenous knowledge" in IB may have been informed by postcolonial/decolonial contributions but without due credit being given to the latter – and this may indeed be symptomatic of the citation issue raised earlier in relation to *Critical Perspectives on International Business*. Indeed, the indigenous turn in IB has tended to abstract the notion of "indigeneity" from its colonial/neo-colonial context, in effect reducing it to the depoliticized idea of the foreign "local" context which has long been integral to IB scholarship. These issues aside, it must be recognized that IB has not been unresponsive to the problem of inappropriate universalism in the field, and indeed one might argue generic management theory may have something to learn from IB here.

That said, IB's position on the problem of universalism has been somewhat incoherent. On the one hand, the field carries within it, as noted above, a rich tradition of "cross-cultural" and "comparative" research and a growing body of "indigenous" studies. On the other hand, much of the field continues, in many cases, to present Western IB theory as though it were devoid of contextuality, i.e., as through it were universal.

Moreover, as organizational scholars have shown, studies of culture upon which IB theorising often draws (not least Geert Hofstede's classic *Culture's Consequences*) and IB textbooks discussing cultural differences tend to essentialize and "other" non-Western contexts (see Ailon, 2008; Fougère and Moulettes, 2012; Jack and Westwood, 2009). Thus, while the cultural/institutional turn in IB may have helped to challenge the assumption of universalism

[16] This work is often published outside core IB journals in journals such as the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* and *Management Organization Review* – see e.g., Tsui (2004) and Tsui (2006).

in this field, it has done little to tackle the associated problem of "orientalism" (Said, 1978). Indeed, a recent contribution from the field of organization studies has shown that research deploying the concept of "institutional voids" – a concept used extensively in IB – routinely essentialize and other non-Western contexts (Bothello et al., 2019).

The decolonizing project invites us to not only give attention to the non-West and study its various cultures/institutions but also to recognize and integrate within our theoretical frameworks and pedagogical materials three key learnings: first, that there is no such thing as theory that is devoid of contextuality and, relatedly, that "context" is to be found not just "over there" in the non-West but also over here "at home"; second, that *all* contexts are somewhat peculiar and incomplete, including Western ones; and third, that studying non-Western cultures/institutions uncritically can result in, as Bothello et al. (2019: 1500) put it, "a pejorative and counterproductive portrayal of non-Western economies as institutionally inferior. [… thereby reproducing the teleological assumption that] non-Western countries 'evolve' towards more Western-style institutions – albeit with some local flavour" (see also Boussebaa, 2022; Filatotchev et al., 2020). I encourage IB scholars to reflect on these insights and explore ways of incorporating them into their theoretical work and teaching.

The IB community would also do well to reflect on the purpose of its efforts to go "beyond the West". Is it merely a case of pursuing an endless accumulation of knowledge in the name of science and theory development? Is it to explore issues facing Western MNEs and their managers with a view to providing knowledge deemed "relevant" by corporate power? My close reading of the IB literature reveals it is a bit of both, and not without incoherence. The decolonizing project invites us to pursue a different aim – that of global equality and justice. From this perspective, challenging IB's West-centrism only makes sense if it serves the

purpose of reducing the epistemic harm done by West-centric scholarship. In this sense, future research on the non-West would benefit greatly from the postcolonial/decolonial insights discussed above.

Studying neo-colonialism

Decolonizing IB by subjecting its knowledge to postcolonial/decolonial critique and by seeking to give voice to the "indigenous" realities being suppressed by "universal" theory is important, and here IB has a long way to go given its lack of engagement with the decolonizing project. That said, I argue that decolonizing the field will also require making the issue of neo-colonialism a part of core IB research areas. Neo-colonialism has long and complex history. The key reference here is Nkrumah (1965). For Nkrumah, a leading voice in the major period of decolonization that took place in the 1960s, formal colonialism was coming to end but foreign powers were continuing to interfere in the affairs of the newly independent states. He defined the problem as follows: "The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is the subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (Nkrumah, 1965: ix). The "outside" included not only former European colonial powers but also the USA, which Nkrumah considered to be "[f]oremost among the neo-colonialists" (Nkrumah, 1965: 237).

Nkrumah's analysis offers rich insights into the workings of neo-colonialism. Among other things he discussed the continuing exploitation of the labour and resources of former colonies by Western MNEs; the use of economic aid to secure continued market access to former colonies; Western support towards the removal of indigenous leaders deemed uncollaborative; and the building of military bases to protect Western MNE investments. What Nkrumah was

outlining was in effect the continuation of colonialism after decolonization, albeit without direct political control. Nkrumah also mentioned the role of certain indigenous leaders in this new form of colonialism. Rather than putting local economies at the service of the newly independent nations, these leaders would simply become local representatives of Western interests. In this way, the "formally" independent countries would remain controlled and exploited from the outside but without the "naked colonialism" (Nkrumah, 1965: 237) of the past.

The concept of neo-colonialism was further developed throughout the late 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Amin, 1971; Rodney, 1973) and has received new scholarly attention in recent years in the social sciences (see e.g., Borrel et al., 2021; Langan, 2018). It has also received some, albeit limited, attention in the field of management (see Boussebaa, 2024; Boussebaa et al., 2012; Jackson, 2012; Malik et al., 2021; Mir and Mir, 2009). A key aspect of neo-colonialism today has been efforts to introduce "neoliberal" reforms to former colonies via pressures exercised by the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Among other things, such reforms have included loans conditional on former colonies opening their economies to Western MNEs.

Contributing significantly to these efforts have also been Western (mainly Anglo-American) professional service firms such as McKinsey and the Big Four accounting firms (Boussebaa, 2015, 2023; Boussebaa and Faulconbridge, 2019; Mazzucato and Collington, 2023). These firms have helped to implement neoliberal reforms on the ground while also working in concert with Western industry lobbies and the WTO to shape the global institutional framework enabling "free trade" and facilitating MNE investments. One example is the case of the "Big Four" accounting firms. Supported by the WTO, these firms have used international trade agreements to create a global market for their services and, in so doing,

helped to put together legal arrangements that can "trump domestic laws to the disadvantage of developing nations by pre-empting laws designed to protect indigenous accounting industries, and by instituting transparency rules [… that give Western accounting firms] access to and a voice in the rulemaking deliberations of smaller nations" (Arnold, 2015: 323).

The field of IB has given little attention to this neo-colonial reality (but see Boussebaa, 2021; Boussebaa et al., 2014). As noted earlier, IB has effectively excluded the issue of colonialism/neo-colonialism from its research agendas and from its contributions to the business school curriculum. A few papers published in core IB journals have recently appeared that do have colonialism as an important analytical dimension (e.g., Andreu and Lavoratori, 2022; Caussat, 2021; Glaister et al., 2020; Osei et al., 2020), but these treat the issue merely as a *contextual variable* affecting flows of FDI and MNE location choices rather than a *societal challenge* to be addressed.

In many ways, this is symptomatic of the field's West-centrism – for West-centrism means not only assuming the universality of Western thought and "othering" non-Western contexts but also occluding the reality of neo-colonialism in the production of knowledge (Boussebaa, 2022). Focusing on management research concerned with global professional service firms, Boussebaa (2002) argues that sanitised accounts of globalization in such research in effect serve to occlude neo-colonialism and the role played in it by these firms (see also Boussebaa, 2023). The same argument could be made with specific reference to IB, where the study of MNEs has generally tended to say much about the positive nature of these organizations but little about the "'dark side' of MNE-state relations" (Eden and Lenway, 2001: 383).

Decolonizing IB will thus require not only research and teaching that can challenge the field's inappropriate universalisms and related processes of "othering" but also studies of the role of MNEs in perpetuating colonial relations in the so-called "postcolonial" era – and indeed of the role of IB scholars in occluding such relations. As part of that, research is also needed on processes of indigenous collaboration but also of resistance. The resurgence of China and India as major economies and the related emergence of large MNEs therein is telling in that regard. These cases demonstrate that, whilst some formerly colonized territories may be, to varying degrees, directed from the outside, others have been able to resist the full weight of neo-colonialism.

In pursuing these issues, IB might also usefully explore the role of emerging-market MNEs in neo-colonialism. Rising powers such a China, India and Turkey have been expanding their geopolitical ambitions and gradually edging out Western powers in former colonies. This has given rise to a growing body of media articles and scholarly research maintaining that the former may be engaged in neo-colonialism (see e.g., Langan, 2018). In particular, China has been singled out and questions have been raised about whether its "growing trade, aid, and investment in Africa is anything like a new form of neocolonialism" (Bergesen, 2013: 300). In this context, one might reasonably ask how MNEs headquartered outside the West may themselves be implicated in neo-colonialism. IB would do well to also explore this theme.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to bring the decolonizing project to the attention of IB. I have shown that while other disciplines (inside and outside business schools) are actively seeking to make sense of this project and what it might mean for different areas of scholarship and education, IB has chosen to be a silent bystander. I have also argued that there is good reason

to think IB should join the debate, not least the fact that its main object of study (the MNE) has been central to colonialism. Furthermore, I have discussed ways in which IB might engage in the debate. I have argued for the need to not only critically examine IB's knowledge claims but also broaden the scope of its research so it can address neo-colonialism as a grand societal challenge.

In closing, it is also important to highlight that there is more to "decolonizing" than an intellectual dimension – the institutional infrastructure supporting the knowledge we produce also requires attention. One recurrent theme in IB (and indeed management studies more broadly) is that overcoming West-centrism will require greater "geographical diversity" in journal editorial teams and review boards (see e.g., Tung, 2022). This is indeed important but perhaps even more important is the need to ensure that "diversity of thought" is maximized. More specifically, postcolonial/decolonial thought would need including in the field's theoretical repertoire. For that to happen, however, IB journals and other infrastructural components of the field would need to include academics with an interest in, and expertise on, colonialism/neo-colonialism. IB's absence from the decolonizing project suggests there is a long way to go in that regard, and I hope my contribution in this paper will help to catalyse the journey.

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