



Theorists of Postcolonialism Critique on the Eurocentric understanding of 'history'

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ABSTRACT

Centuries ago, Eurocentric ideas asserted Europe's centrality in world history, positing Western civilization as the inevitable guide for humanity. However, postcolonial theorists from the late twentieth century critically challenged Eurocentrism, arguing against its biased categorization of 'others' at the margins of global history. Through key postcolonial historical writings, these scholars have deeply probed Eurocentric understandings, striving to decentralize Europe's narrative in three main fields: Subaltern studies, Orientalism, and Race. To enhance the breadth and depth of this critique, the present research employs a rigorous historical research methodology. In Subaltern studies, primary sources and oral histories are meticulously examined to recover the voices of marginalized groups, contributing to a nuanced understanding of historical events. Orientalism is scrutinized through the analysis of historical texts, artworks, and cultural artifacts, revealing the constructed nature of Eurocentric interpretations. The study of Race involves archival research and critical analysis of historical documents to trace the evolution of racial ideologies. By applying these historical research methods, this study aims to extend the postcolonial critique beyond theoretical discourse, emphasizing its engagement with historical realities obscured by Eurocentric perspectives. The research seeks to underscore the significance of a methodologically rigorous approach in reshaping historical narratives, acknowledging the integral role of non-European nations in shaping the course of history and fostering a more inclusive historiography.

Keyword: History, Eurocentric, Postcolonial, Criticism, Orientalism.

INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prevailing ideas in Europe positioned the continent as the epicenter of world history, shaping a narrative that extended beyond geographical boundaries (Kramer, 2021). Edmund Husserl's conceptualization of Europe, as articulated by Gordon (1996), transcended mere geography, defining Europe in spiritual terms to include the British dominions and the United States. This spiritual unity, characterized by shared values, activities, and institutions, fostered the belief that Europe, as the cradle of civilization, exclusively shaped humanity's historical trajectory. Hegel's assertion, echoed in 2004, further reinforced this Eurocentric perspective, suggesting that nations in the East and Africa, notably China, lacked historical significance. Despite previous challenges from nationalists and Marxists, Eurocentrism persisted, retaining the West's hegemonic status in historical narratives (Prakash, 2023).

In response to these entrenched colonial views, recent years have witnessed a significant paradigm shift through postcolonial historical writings, challenging the experiences of imperialism and colonialism (Green & Troup, 2020; Terrazas, 2023). This transformative process necessitates a revision of Eurocentric historical accounts, prompting critical examinations of Europe's perceived centrality. As Green & Troup (2020) assert, postcolonial theorists have embarked on a journey to question and deconstruct these historical imbalances. This essay seeks to explore the strategies employed in

challenging Eurocentric ideas.

The first section will delve into the efforts of historians aiming to decentralize Europe in world history. These scholars, inspired by a desire for a more inclusive historiography, have sought to dismantle the prevailing Eurocentric narratives by reevaluating historical events and perspectives beyond the confines of Western-centric interpretations. Through a methodological reorientation, these historians aim to give due recognition to the contributions and histories of non-European nations, challenging the notion of Europe as the sole protagonist in shaping global historical trajectories (Susen, 2020).

Subsequently, attention will be directed to three key areas explored by postcolonial theorists—Subaltern studies, Orientalism, and Race—as pivotal avenues to contest the Eurocentric understanding of history (Lindner, 2022). These interdisciplinary approaches represent a concerted effort to unveil the intricacies of historical bias and challenge the ingrained notion of Western superiority. Postcolonial theorists, within these domains, critically examine historical sources, narratives, and cultural representations to dismantle Eurocentric constructs and establish a more equitable and diverse historical narrative.

Within this context, the essay aims to contribute novelty by delineating the evolving strategies employed in challenging and reshaping historical perspectives, integrating robust historical research methods. The multifaceted nature of this challenge, spanning both historical methodology and theoretical frameworks, underscores the dynamic nature of the discourse. By interrogating Eurocentric ideas from diverse angles, scholars and theorists engage in a methodological reexamination within the field of historical research, delving into archives, primary sources, and oral histories to uncover marginalized narratives and counter Eurocentric biases. Through meticulous analysis and critical engagement with historical documents, postcolonial researchers contribute not only to theoretical discussions but also to the empirical exploration of historical truths, solidifying the link between theory and practice. This methodological approach serves as a crucial bridge, allowing for a more comprehensive deconstruction of Eurocentric historical narratives and reinforcing the empirical foundations for a more inclusive historiography, recognizing the integral role played by non-European nations in shaping the course of human civilization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Decentralisation of Europe in World History

Postcolonial theorists have employed a significant strategy in challenging the Eurocentric understanding of history, primarily through a reexamination of historical narratives authored by European historians. This approach stems from the belief that Eurocentrism constitutes an ideological perspective on history Dirlik in Bilgin (2019). The Eurocentric view, as articulated by Mazrui (2009), is characterized by Euro-heroism, attributing most historical achievements to Europeans, and Euro-exclusivity, a tendency to prioritize European history over a more global perspective. Mazrui highlights the disproportionate attention given to European history, with examples such as Eurocentric histories of philosophers favoring Aristotle over figures like Avicenna (Mazrui, 2009). This critique reveals the ingrained bias in Eurocentric historical accounts, where the Eurocentric lens distorts the true diversity of global historical contributions.

Burke (2005) contributes to this discourse by addressing the Eurocentric perspective on the rise of European civilization, where he notes a tendency to consider European achievements as the sole driving force in historical triumphs. This Eurocentric viewpoint, dividing history from ancient Greece to the Industrial Revolution, overlooks the contributions of other civilizations, particularly the Islamic World (Burke, 2005). In response to this Eurocentric bias, various scholars have endeavored to decenter European history. Black (2021) is one such example, where he extensively discusses civilizations like the Polynesians, Eskimos, Ottoman Empire, and Spartans, emphasizing their achievements and challenging the Eurocentric narrative (Burke, 2005; Samuel, 2016)

However, criticisms of Eurocentrism persist, as exemplified by William McNeill's (2009) 'The Rise of the West.' McNeill's depiction of four major civilizations over 2000 years, with Western Europe drawing ahead from 1500 AD onwards, has faced critique for its Eurocentric perspective, particularly for giving minimal attention to the histories of the Americas and Africa south of the Sahara (McNeill,

2009). Edward Said, in 'Orientalism,' adds depth to the discussion by analyzing Balfour's speech on Egypt (Said, 1979). Balfour's assertion that "England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows" reflects the Eurocentric idea of Western superiority, emphasizing the intertwined nature of knowledge and dominance (Gifford, 2019; Said, 1979).

The collective arguments put forth by postcolonial theorists highlight the deeply ingrained Eurocentric perspectives that have historically shaped European ideas about the rest of the world. Rooted in a colonial perspective, these ideas were not merely intellectual constructs but were intimately connected to the power dynamics of the time, where European nations held dominion over vast territories and peoples (Patel, 2022). The Eurocentric lens, as examined by scholars like Dirlik, Mazrui, and Burke, reveals a historical narrative that prioritized European achievements, marginalized the contributions of other civilizations, and fostered a sense of superiority.

Dirlik in Bilgin (2019) assertion that Eurocentrism is an ideological perspective on history sets the stage for understanding how historical narratives have been constructed to serve specific interests. This ideological lens allowed Europeans to project themselves as the central actors in the unfolding drama of world history. The examination of Eurocentrism by Mazrui (2009) further dissects the mechanisms through which this perspective manifests, with Euro-heroism attributing most historical achievements to Europeans and Euro-exclusivity narrowing the focus on European history at the expense of a more comprehensive global narrative. Mazrui's (2009) examples, such as the biased treatment of philosophers in Eurocentric histories, shed light on the subtle ways in which Eurocentrism permeates historical accounts.

Burke's (Burke, 2005) exploration of the rise of European civilization adds another layer to the Eurocentric narrative, emphasizing how historical triumphs have been framed in a way that sidelines the contributions of other civilizations, notably the Islamic World. This historical framework, dividing history into a linear progression from ancient Greece to the Industrial Revolution, reinforces the Eurocentric perspective that places Europe at the forefront of human achievement.

The efforts to decenter Eurocentric perspectives, as exemplified by scholars like Jeremy Black, signify a crucial turning point in historiography. Jeremy Black 'A Short History of War' stands out as a seminal work that challenges the Eurocentric narrative by acknowledging the civilizations of Polynesians, Eskimos, the Ottoman Empire, and Spartans. By highlighting the achievements of these diverse societies, Jeremy Black seeks to counterbalance the Eurocentric bias and foster a more inclusive understanding of historical development (Black, 2021).

However, the critique does not end with Jeremy Black. Scholars like William McNeill, despite attempting to provide a more balanced view in 'The Rise of the West,' face criticism for perpetuating Eurocentrism (McNeill, 1990). McNeill's (1990) depiction of the rise of Western Europe from 1500 AD onwards, while acknowledging some balance among civilizations, still draws attention to the Eurocentric lens that diminishes the histories of the Americas and Africa south of the Sahara.

Edward Said's (1979) exploration of Eurocentrism in 'Orientalism,' particularly through the analysis of Balfour's speech on Egypt, underscores how knowledge and dominance are intricately linked. Balfour's assumption that "England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows" encapsulates the Eurocentric idea that the West is central to all historical achievements (Landry, 2013). Said's work serves as a poignant reminder that Eurocentrism is not confined to historical narratives alone but extends to broader perspectives on global relations.

In this broader context, the ongoing critique of Eurocentric perspectives becomes a vital undertaking (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The efforts to decenter Eurocentrism underscore the necessity of a more inclusive and accurate understanding of global history. This ongoing reevaluation involves dismantling entrenched biases, reexamining historical narratives, and giving due recognition to the diverse contributions of civilizations beyond the Eurocentric framework. As scholars continue to challenge and redefine historical perspectives, they contribute to the ongoing process of cultivating a historiography that transcends Eurocentrism, offering a more equitable portrayal of human achievements and historical developments across the globe. Ultimately, the journey towards a more inclusive understanding of global history demands a continuous commitment to critical examination, openness to diverse perspectives, and a recognition of the complexities that have shaped our shared human story.

Areas of decentralisation, Subaltern studies, Orientalism, and Race

Since the 1980s, postcolonialism has developed a kind of writing which attempts to reshape the relationships between western and non-western countries and intends to re-examine the Western perspective with regard to the rest of the world. According to Young (2020), this means the need to turn the world upside down, or looking from the other side of the photograph. The aim of postcolonial theorists when they stand against Eurocentrism is to assert that other nations than Western countries have a role in history, and they were inside history. One of attempts in this field is 'Subaltern Studies'. Subaltern studies began in 1982 as an intervention in South Asian historiography, and developed into a vigorous postcolonial critique. These studies have challenged the existing historical scholarship related to South Asia and various nations in Africa and Latin America (Prakash, 2023). This term derived from Antonio Gramsci's writings. His book *On the Margins of History; history of subaltern social groups* refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, race, gender, language and culture, and was used to signify the centrality of dominated relationships in history (Prakash, 2023). As Gunn points out, they also used Marxist theory about history in the form of 'history from below'. (Gunn, 2006, 166) This project was established by a group of Bengali Marxist intellectuals. Their main focus is on South-Asian historiography. They criticised the existing nationalist historiography of India and the Cambridge School of Historiography both of which only talk about the history of elites. They used the Marxist theory of 'history from below' to allow those voices that were marginalised in the dominant historiography to emerge. (Gunn, 2006, 167) Accordingly, before subaltern studies emerged, the writing of Eastern history just included elites and not the majority of people. Therefore what they viewed as the wrong representation of Indian history made them to start rewrite their history. Spivak is one of those theorists who discussed the problem of representation when history is written from the perspective and assumption of the West or the colonizing power. She gives an example of Indian history which had been written by its imperial masters in the form of the 'British Empire'. She wants to distinguish between truth and fiction in such histories. So her aim was to work against such imperialist representations of history by writing new narratives about the Third World and how it created itself rather than how it has been represented by imperialist powers. (Young, 2003, 158-159) This might be called the deconstruction of what has been constructed before. So they challenged elitism in historiography, especially in terms of European perspectives with regard to the East.

More broadly in connection with the East, Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is essential. As Moosavinia et al. have mentioned, *Orientalism*, from Said's perspective, is affiliated with a representation of the Occident in which it has the upper hand when it comes to defining the silent and weak other. (Moosavina et al., 2011, 1/2, 103) According to Gunn (2014), Said mentioned that *Orientalism* is the product of Western knowledge which defines 'the East' as other. Moreover, the East is culturally subordinate to the West. Gunn (2014) gives some examples of the Western attitude toward others. For instance, he says that in Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Arabia was commonly a natural asylum for heretical outlaws and Mohammed was a cunning apostate. On the other hand, in the Twentieth Century one scholar said that Islam is really no more than a second-order Arian heresy. Said offers another example of European perspectives on Mohammed and his religion (Said, 1979). Said cited d'Herbelot's work on Orient 'Bibliothèque orientale' which stated that Mohammedan is a Christian imitation of the true religion (Said, 1979). These claims suggest that Eurocentrism may not believe, or may not accept, 'good things' if it is outside its culture or its borders. In other words, if something comes from outside, it cannot be affirmed, or it may not have true existence. He talks about the process of conversion. This idea demonstrates the view that the Orient has been always like some aspect of the West. For instance, to some of the German Romantics, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian pantheism (Said, 1979). According to Said (1979), to Westerners, the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from what it is into something else. He returns to European perspectives on Islam, and said that Islam was counted as outsider against which stood the whole of European civilisation. Thus, he intends to challenge those stereotypes of Europeans towards the Oriental world and Islam.

One of those fields with regard to which postcolonial theorists criticized Eurocentrism, was the idea of race. This contains the idea that European people were more intelligent than others in history, and they were the best, because of their racial origins. One of those figures who discussed the idea of race was Catherine Hall. According to Gunn (2014), Hall's work is a good example of how to write a

new history of empire informed by postcolonial criticism. Gunn demonstrates that Hall's work is significant with regard to the question of 'race'. The study discusses Nineteenth Century English colonies and those who tried to stand against slavery, and tries to demolish stereotypes about black people, especially in connection with their rights to be treated as human (Gunn, 2014). One such postcolonial theorist is Franz Fanon, who writes about race and the identity of the black man. According to Fanon in Gibson (2017), despite the universalism of man, there is some discrimination between humans based on their colour. This means that the white man is counted better than the black just because of colour differences. Fanon said that black men are human, and just because they are black this does not mean that they are less intelligent than 'we' are (Moore-Gilbert et al., 2014). Moreover, he destroyed two time-schemes in which the historicity of the human is thought (Moore-Gilbert et al., 2014). Also, the idea that the black individual is 'belatedness' just because he or she is a black, or because he or she is only opposite to the framing of the white man, he rejects these stereotypes of the black man (Moore-Gilbert et al., 2014). Gordon discusses Fanon's idea about the existence of the black man. He demonstrates that, according to Fanon, the black man is a human being like everybody else, and he cited Fanon's statement 'I feel, I see, that it is not a new man who enters, but a new type of man' which means being a thing, being as 'you' are, being-in-itself (Gordon, 1996). According to Fanon in Gordon (1996), who was one of the most prominent theorists in postcolonial studies, the black man just wanted to be a man to come to a world that was everybody else's world and to build it together. This was to reject the idea that the white man is central and just he can build (Gibson, 2017). Colour could not be a barrier to making history or playing a role in history. So the black man does exist and the idea that the white may be cleverer because of his skin colour has been challenged by postcolonial theorists.

CONCLUSION

The idea of relative truth could be crucial for postcolonialist theorists because, through this new conception of truth, they have begun to question what had previously been seen as truth from a European perspective. Truth is relative is a Foucauldian term and, according to this definition; there may not be a pure truth. According to Foucault, everything or every aspect has its own discourse. Whichever nation has its own history, and if their history has not yet been written, it may be because of the problem with the European perspective about the idea of truth. They might not believe something which does not fit in with their definition of the truth, or they may not be able to believe 'other's' history. Postcolonial theorists have tried to avoid Eurocentrism in two ways and to criticize some of the existing ideas about world history and the existence of other nations in history. First they tried to avoid just talking about European history, and counting it as a centre of world history. Moreover, European powers possessed power and knowledge which together make them assume that the Western culture is superior to other cultures. There are some areas in which postcolonial theorists have challenged the Eurocentric understanding of history. Subaltern studies focus on rejecting previous thinking on South East Asian and Indian history, Orientalism examines some of the stereotypes about the history of the East in general, and especially the Islamic world. Moreover, rejecting European racism has been discussed by some theorists and they have sought to assert the idea of universal man, which means that all human beings are equal. So postcolonialism has brought new ways of thinking about the history of the world, and has partly corrected some 'wrong' ideas with regard to the European perspective towards the rest of the world.

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