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Postcolonial nationalism and the global right

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ABSTRACT

How can postcolonial critique address the use and abuse of the anti-colonial in contemporary reactionary and ultranationalist projects in the Global Easts and South? Building on the literature on amalgams of authoritarianism, social conservatism, and racial nationalism beyond the Western core, especially the emergent scholarship on the rise of the digital far right, I reflect on the ways in which postcolonial critique can help us think about the multifaceted relationships between postcolonial identity and the global right. First, postcolonial nationalism is a prevalent strategy employed by authoritarian and conservative actors who mobilize subaltern identity in a US/Western dominated world to legitimate reactionary politics. Secondly, while illiberal movements that appropriate the anti-colonial rhetoric purport to challenge the moral geography underpinning the liberal international order, they reproduce its essentializing, hierarchical, and racialized logics in reversing its value judgement. Thirdly, the rise of the digital far right in the Global Easts and South provides a particularly productive lens through which to explore the transnationality of contemporary formulations of racism, anti-feminism, Islamophobia, and the "culture war" discourses. I conclude by suggesting that attending to the role of postcolonial nationalism in global reactionary movements has wider implications for both postcolonial critique and the study of right-wing politics in general, including in the Western core.

1. Introduction

Mainstream scholarship on the far, extreme, and radical right does not pay adequate attention to developments in the Global Easts[1] and South, which constitute an integral part of the global resurgence of the right (Doval and Souroujon, 2021; Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maria, 2023). I use the term "global right" here not to suggest a unified international movement, but to signify locally specific amalgams of authoritarianism, social conservatism, and racial nationalism, which are shaped by global structures and characterized by transnational convergences and connections (Graff, Kapur and Walters, 2019; Nicholas and Agius, 2017). For a recent example, *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Rydgren, 2018) confines its empirical chapters to case studies on Europe, the United States, Japan, Australia, and Israel. As Leidig and Bayarri (2022:1) have noted, case studies outside of these "traditional" regions are often either neglected or not recognized as "constituting the same phenomenon". This neglect can be attributed to, among others, a persistent Eurocentrism in Anglophone academic knowledge production and an institutionalist bias towards electoral politics – while disregarding forms of radical right movements, discourses, and sensibilities operating beyond formal milieus of party politics.

Building on a growing body of literature on the resurgence of the right outside the Western core, especially with regard to the emergence of the digital far right across different national contexts, this critical review essay reflects on the ways in which postcolonial critique as a mode of analysis that prioritizes the perspective of global relationalities could help us think about the instrumentalization of postcolonial identity in contemporary reactionary movements. It is therefore concerned with how postcolonial critique could address the use and abuse of anti-colonial rhetoric in far right and ultranationalist projects in the Global Easts and South. I begin by clarifying my approach to the idea of postcolonial nationalism, highlighting that its formations must be understood within the entanglements of the postcolonial nation with global material, discursive, and normative power structures. The essay then provides a set of analytical observations on the role of postcolonial nationalism in right-wing discourses and mobilizations. First, it is a prevalent political strategy through which authoritarian and conservative actors in peripheral and semi-peripheral settings mobilize subaltern identity in a Western/US dominated world to legitimate reactionary politics. Secondly, I argue that while conservative backlashes purport to

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[1] Following Müller (2020), I use the Global Easts as "a liminal space in-between North and South" marked by semi-peripherality or semi-alterity in relation to the hegemonic West. I use the term in the plural to highlight the heterogeneous forms of Eastness. See also Lim (2022) on victimhood nationalism in the Global Easts.

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revolt against the "moral geographies" underpinning the hegemonic liberal order (Koch, 2019), they reproduce its essentializing, hierarchical, and racialized logics while simply reversing the value judgement. Thirdly, the rise of the digital far right in the Easts and South provides a particularly productive opportunity to look into the transnationality of the contemporary formations of racism, anti-feminism, Islamophobia, and "culture wars". The essay concludes by suggesting that rethinking the relationship between postcolonial identity and contemporary reactionary movements has wider implications for both postcolonial critique and the study of right-wing politics in general.

2. Postcolonial nationalism and its global relationalities

I use postcolonial nationalism to refer to the production, consumption, and mobilization of narratives of national identity capitalizing on victimhood or subalternity, articulated through a (post-)colonial relationality to the site of the hegemonic in material, normative, and epistemological terms, often designated as the international, the West, or the European. Postcolonial national identity is articulated *in relation to* what is constructed as hegemonic, through for example claims to difference (indigeneity), autonomy (free from Western dominance), sameness (as in the discourse of Westernization and catch-up modernization), and the combination thereof. This approach means that the operation of postcolonial nationalism is not limited to formerly colonized states. As Kaul (2019, 6) suggests, the postcolonial refers not to the sequential "aftermath of being colonized", but rather the "significance of inhabiting a global present" shaped by persistent colonial legacies and hierarchical structures. While the production of postcolonial national identity draws on historical experiences of subjugation and understandings of asymmetrical power relations in the present, the ways in which historical memories and contemporary imaginaries are constructed and invoked to engender specific visions of the national self and its others are contingent. Postcolonial nationalism is neither inherently emancipatory nor oppressive, but rather intersected with and instrumentalized by different political projects across diverse national contexts, which are conditioned by their relative positionings within global capitalism and the international order.

The postcolonial nationalist discourse both resists and internalizes Eurocentric hierarchies, and relatedly, both rejects and identifies with images of "the West" (Sakai 1997). Through what Gani conceptualizes as a strategy of "transferral", the postcolonial state may "extend the imperialist civilizational hierarchy downwards" (2021:5) to create Orientalized others within itself and perform a proximity to the colonizer. In his discussion of Russia's postcolonial identity, Morozov (2015) locates it at the interface between the subaltern (defined by Russia's material peripherality and normative dependence on the Western core) and the imperial (with regards to its own imperialist order). China's victimhood nationalism both denounces Western hegemony through a constant reactivation of collective memories of national humiliation and reproduces a colonial temporality underpinned by a hierarchization and temporalization of difference around binaries such as the advanced and the backward (Meinhof, 2017; Zhang, 2022). Similarly, Kaul shows that in the project of "postcolonial neoliberal nationalism" in India, the image of the West is employed to both mediate "desires to emulate capitalist imperial metropolitan fantasies" and buttress revanchist nationalism by calling into the present past colonial memories (2019:14).

The ways in which claims of postcolonial national identity intersect with authoritarian, conservative, and ethnonationalist politics and neoliberal economic strategies have been well documented. As Bhabha (1994:9) notes, the dangers of fixing and fetishizing identities through inventing a "celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present" lie within the desire to assert indigenous cultural traditions. In East Asia, the ideology of postcolonial developmentalism during the Cold War subjugates the "hyperfeminized society" to the "patriarchal family-state-economy", justifying the developmental state and hypermasculine capitalist competition through the discourse of national recovery, independence, and catch-up industrialization (Ling, 2001:118–22). However, any consideration of these projects in specific national contexts must take into account the global conditions that generate postcoloniality and the co-constitutive relationship between localized and international structures. In mutually reinforcing ways, whilst Orientalist discourses in the metropole associate essentialized peoples and places with "backwardness" or "illiberalism", postcolonial authoritarianism reproduces repressive, gendered, and raced structures of the colonial state to "flee from internalized stigmas" (Gani, 2021:10). One of the key insights of the postcolonial critique is refusing to view categories such as the Global North and South, core and periphery, the hegemonic and the subaltern through a framework of binary opposition. It instead calls attention to entanglement, relationalities, and paradoxes that co-produce identities assigned to seemingly opposed political spheres.

3. Contemporary reactionary movements and liberal moral geography

Bringing postcolonial critique into discussions of the global right at the current conjuncture is instrumental in two ways. First, it brings into focus postcolonial nationalism as a prevalent political strategy used by right-wing actors in the Global Easts and South to legitimate authoritarian, conservative, and ethnonationalist projects through mobilizing subaltern identities and anti-colonial or anti-imperialist rhetoric. Authoritarian leaders in countries such as Russia, Turkey, and China routinely use criticisms of Western dominance and liberal hypocrisy as a pretext for justifying domestic oppression and their own imperialist pursuits (Morozov, 2015; Çapan and Zarakol, 2017). In the Philippines, Duterte's invocation of anti-colonial nationalism has not only helped him win over "ideologically diverse coalitions" as the country navigates the terrain of inter-imperialist rivalry, but also equipped him with responses to Western criticisms of illiberalism and human rights abuses during his presidency (Nair, 2023; Regilme, 2021). Anti-feminist and homophobic mobilizations in postcolonial settings have long sought to discredit gender equality and LGBTQ movements by equating them to Westernness or coloniality. Conditioned by a semi-alterity to the hegemonic West, conservatives in Central and Eastern Europe present themselves as simultaneously victims to ideologies of the "Western liberal elites" and defenders of "true" European values. Korolczuk and Graff (2018) note that "anti-gender" organizations in Poland employ an anti-colonial frame to reject "gender ideology" as being imposed on them by "Western elites" and imagine Poland as a saviour of "traditional values" and "the West" itself. Similarly, Hungary's far-right leader Viktor Orbán has claimed that adopting what he calls "Western European liberalism" would mean "spiritual suicide" for Central Europeans[2] and that "the West has moved to Central Europe".[3]

Anti-feminists and misogynists in India, China, and Turkey invoke a more straightforward politics of difference in their association of feminism with Western influence (Lodhia, 2014; Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Huang 2022). Anti-feminist discourses in these "emerging powers" represent their respective construction of "traditional" values as threatened by the influence of "Western feminism", which have a religious dimension in Turkey and India and a pronounced geopolitical dimension in the Chinese context. Amidst heightened geopolitical tensions between China and "the West", the anti-feminist backlash frames feminists as agents of "foreign hostile forces" and antagonistic social movements as an ideological threat to the Chinese regime (Huang 2022; Huang, 2023). Common to these developments is a renewed energy of misogynistic

[2] Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, 18 September 2017. Available at: https://2015–2022.miniszterelnok.hu/the-soros-plan-must-be-opposed/.

[3] Diplomacy & Trade, July 23, 2022. Available at https://dteurope.com/politics/orban-the-west-has-moved-to-central-europe/.

nationalism in pushing back against feminist challenges to gender hierarchies and norms through resorting to anxieties of the masculinized nation and framing feminism as anti-national (see also Kaul, 2021). From a different perspective on gender and state power in postcolonial regimes, Diazcontextualizes Duterte's "masculinist decolonial ideology" within a longer, transpacific history of "women's subjectification under Philippine authoritarianism" and its claims for postcolonial sovereignty (Diaz, 2019: 695). Diaz shows that in sanctioning gendered violence at home and denouncing violence against Filipina women abroad, Duterte uses women as a mechanism for projecting narrow conceptions of postcolonial national autonomy even though women remain "marginalized within the structures of the nation" (2019: 697).

Secondly, the postcolonial critique, which prioritizes an analysis of global relationalities, invites us to attend to the complex relationship between reactionary movements in the (semi-)periphery and the liberal orders they purport to challenge. As Narkowicz and Ginelli (2021) have argued, the right's abuse of the anti-colonial should not discourage us from engaging with the criticisms of the inequalities embedded in the liberal project, exemplified by the politics of EU enlargement. They note that the Council of Europe responded to the rise of illiberalism in Poland and Hungary by announcing moves to proceed against these countries for violations of "European values". Popular discontent with the hierarchies reflected in the conditional membership of post-socialist countries, who have to "prove their European civilizational credentials", have helped consolidate the popularity of the right (Narkowicz and Ginelli, 2021). Scholars have also identified structural factors in global political economy, such as the forms of violence produced by neoliberal globalization (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2022) and processes of global capitalist transformation (Chacko and Jayasuriya, 2018), as contributing to the rise of right-wing nationalism and illiberal politics in Asia and elsewhere. While it is indispensable to situate these developments within the tensions and inequalities exacerbated by market globalization, for the purpose of this essay I would like to underscore here the hierarchical assumptions underpinning the moral geographies of the liberal international order and how their discontent can be used for reactionary mobilizations.

In the simplest sense of the term, a moral geography implies the idea that certain ideas, people, and practices "belong in certain spaces" (Cresswell, 2005). The liberal imaginary of global space involves a particular mode of spatial–temporal representation, whereby the evolving norms including democracy, human rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights, are mapped onto discrete national territories, which are also temporally placed on a linear trajectory of progress (Koch, 2019; Rao, 2020). This is epitomized by the indices and maps that rank nation-states against these universalized norms and divide them into democratic/autocratic and liberal/illiberal categories. Noting the rather recent inclusion of queer rights into the markers of liberal modernity, Puar (2013:336) uses the concept of homonationalism to capture how tolerance for queer subjects has become a "barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated". The co-optation of LGBTQ movements into the "national order of things" is reflective of the state's co-optation of human rights politics in general, which as globalized discourses and practices are imbued with various forms of hierarchies. In his discussion of the transnational politics of homophobia in Uganda, Rao (2020) shows how colour-coded maps representing the degree of queer tolerance/intolerance of nation-states offer a spatialization of hegemonic linear time. Not only are national spaces imagined as discrete and homogeneous, and certain places are essentialized as backward, illiberal, or uncivilized, but also are they understood as belonging to the past of the "most advanced parts of the world" and on the way to eventually becoming them (2020:37–38).

The claims that equate feminism, homosexuality, or democracy to Westernness as an attempt of invalidation reproduce the homonationalist, essentialist, and dualistic logics of liberal moral geography while simply reversing its value judgement. They continue to operate on the assumption of homogenous national spaces (and the idea of the West) which disregards temporal processes and interconnected histories (Bhambra, 2014), including the criminalization of homosexuality in colonial laws and how imperial encounters shape historical developments in both core and periphery. Subscribing to the same imaginary of linear time, opponents to progressive movements often argue that the norms are "too advanced" for the developmental stage of the nation (Zhang, 2020), while human rights activists also mobilize the spatial–temporal representation to demand changes that would break the country away from the stigmatized illiberal time–space (Rao, 2020:39). There is therefore an "always/already international-ness" (Slootmaeckers and Bosia, 2023:13), or constitutive global relationality, to discourses of human rights, democracy, and liberalism in the (semi-) periphery. Right-wing ruling elites take advantage of the discontent with liberal hierarchies to shift attention away from domestic tensions and weaponize victimhood identity, which can be reinvigorated by racialized othering at the international level, to elicit support for oppressive practices towards marginalized groups from within, including women, gender and sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities.

4. The rise of the digital far right

The emergent scholarship on the diverse, amorphous, and transnationally connected mediascape of the digital far right beyond Western contexts, in countries such as India, Brazil, Iran, and China (Leidig and Bayarri, 2022; Ooryad, 2023; Zhang, 2020; Yang and Fang 2023), provides a particularly productive lens through which to reflect on processes of global entanglements beyond fixed geopolitical dichotomies such as democratic/authoritarian and North/South. Despite their amorphousness, a corollary of decentralized digital culture, and nationally specific configurations, these discursive communities typically comprise the (global) misogynistic manosphere, Islamophobia (in non-Muslim-majority countries), the alt-right discourse of "culture wars", formulations of racism and racial nationalism, and other hate-saturated expressions of microfacism (Bratich, 2022). The racial discourse in "non-white" geographies has the ability to reproduce "racialized hierarchies informed by global whiteness" (Christian, 2019:180) by positioning the national racial identity in proximity to whiteness and against globally and nationally inferiorized groups.

The transnational circulation of memes/tropes and the convergence of narrative patterns, such as the gendered and racialized anxieties about demographic changes (Gokariksel, Neubert, Smith, 2019) is a distinctive feature of the digital far right. Alt-right memes and tropes originating elsewhere are translated, circulated, and recreated in "the rising Farsi manosphere" (Ooryad, 2023) and the anti-*baizuo* discourse on Chinese social media.[4] While both Iranian and Chinese social media is subject to restrictive political censorship, members of the Farsi manosphere who are "digital soldiers against the West" disseminate "Western-originated" white supremacist videos to stoke misogynistic and queerphobic sentiments (Ooryad, 2023); and anti-*baizuo* nationalists in China reproduce the far-right narratives about the West being destroyed by immigration and political correctness as a cautionary tale to support *their* visions of racist, Islamophobic, and anti-feminist politics. What Horsti (2017) identifies as a central trope of global digital Islamophobia, that of the predatory Muslim male and the victimized white woman, is pervasive in Islamophobic discourses in India and China (Frydenlund and Leidig, 2022; Yang and Fang, 2023). Mirroring the trends elsewhere, the surge of Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism reinforces the racial nationalism of the majority group by inciting gendered demographic anxieties about "Islamization" and the

[4] *Baizuo* (literally translated as white left) is an internet neologism that functions as a rhetoric device similar to SJW, political correctness, or "woke". While the term originated on Chinese social media, it has also entered the lexicon of the international alt-right. See e.g. Zhang (2020); Peng and Sun (2022); Yang and Fang (2023).

influence of Islamic culture, termed "pan-halalization" (*fan qingzhenhua*) in the Chinese context.[5]

It is worth briefly comparing the construction of postcolonial identity in Hindutva and the anti-*baizuo* discourse in digital China. As Leidig and Bayarri (2022) demonstrate, online narratives of the Indian far-right construct a postcolonial national identity through claims about "indigeneity" and "authenticity" that emphasize difference from the secular Western modernity. The postcolonial relationality produced in the anti-*baizuo* discourse as well as the mainstream techno-nationalism online, however, is less concerned with cultural authenticity than Chinese victimhood in the US/Western-dominated international order and national pride for techno-economic progress. Through what I have called an anti-Western Eurocentrism elsewhere, right-wing nationalists reproduce Eurocentric ideas of modernity and development, perceive China as having "outwested the west" (Lindtner, 2020), and view the latter – in agreement with the Western far right – as being undermined by ethnocultural diversity and a leftist culture of "political correctness" or "wokeness". The difference nonetheless should not be overstated. Imaginaries of an economic superpower and neoliberal desires are integral to the "postcolonial neoliberal nationalism" in India (Kaul, 2019; Leidig and Bayarri, 2022), and claims about culture and tradition (for example, hard work and perseverance could be framed as characteristics of Chinese culture) are also employed in an opportunistic fashion in the anti-*baizuo* and techno-nationalist discourse in China.

The diverse figurations of the digital far right and the myriad forms of postcolonial identity produced or instrumentalized therein illustrate transnational connections, convergences, and the co-constitutive relationship between localized and international structures. Their analysis therefore should attend to the "mediatic conditions of a global conjuncture of exclusionary politics" (Udupa, Gagliardone, and Hervik, 2021, p. 2) and challenges the methodological nationalism that exceptionalizes certain national contexts (those marked by authoritarian regimes) as isolated from global linkages.

5. The "anti-colonial right" and the "authoritarian left"

Ours is a time in which sections of the right and the left increasingly share the same language. As the right appropriate the anti-colonial frame and ostensibly Marxist analysis[6] to legitimize oppressive politics, some of the self-described anti-imperialists in both the West and elsewhere fetishize the state ideologies of countries they believe to be opponents to US imperialism. It is of no surprise that the Russian far-right philosopher Aleksandr Dugin (2020), who enjoys some popularity among white nationalists in Western societies, criticizes Eurocentrism and speaks of "multipolarity" and "decolonization" to his audiences in India and China. Krishnan (2023) pertinently points out that members of both Hindu-supremacist groups and the Indian left have deployed the language of multipolarity, and that part of the left has amplified the fiction that authoritarianism and rival imperialist ambitions are a form of "anti-imperialist democratization" of global politics.

Whilst certain self-described Marxists fantasize China as a socialist alternative to global capitalism (Lanza, 2021), right-wing nationalists in China see the prioritization of market competitions over welfare provision or labour protection as key to China's techno-economic growth. Despite the revival of the slogan of common prosperity, the official discourse continues to criticize "egalitarianism" and "welfarism", all while grassroots Marxist groups and labour activist organizations are cracked down upon (Hung, 2023). The neoliberal authoritarianism and racial nativism in China offer neither an alternative nor an exception to interconnected global processes. In the meantime, some Chinese intellectuals associated with leftist or postcolonial traditions have been comfortable with developing their critique of capitalism and neoliberalism into blatant defenses of state power and nationalism (Han, 2021; Chen, 2022). As Lin has argued, these academic discourses within and beyond China produce merely "spectacles of postcoloniality" rather than "genuinely decolonized representations" of spaces outside of the Western core (Lin, 2022: 12). Spectacularized postcoloniality continues to assume simplistic relations of domination and resistance between the "West" and the "non-West", glosses over the violence of the postcolonial state, dismisses various forms of resistance against it, and ultimately converges with the right in using anti-colonial rhetoric to justify repressive practices and exclusionary national identity.

6. Conclusion

In this essay I have suggested some ways to think about the role of postcolonial nationalism in the resurgence of the right in the Global Easts and South. These include the use of postcolonial nationalism as a strategy to legitimize authoritarian-conservative-ethnonationalist politics, the intricate relationship between liberal moral geography and the reactionary movements purporting to challenge it, and the interconnected worlds of the digital far right. Proposing postcolonial nationalism as a potentially productive perspective from which to study the dynamics of the global right by no means suggests that its configurations and operations remain the same across vastly different national contexts in the Easts and South, which differ in political regimes, economic development, and structural powers. Rather, it is meant to offer a lens from which researchers might investigate and compare the specific ways in which victimhood identity and discontent with the contradictions of liberal ordering are mobilized to shore up support for reactionary movements. This research agenda has wider implications for both postcolonial critique and the study of the transnational and global aspects of right-wing politics.

For postcolonial critique, the contemporary abuse of the anti-colonial in far-right and ultranationalist projects reminds us once again of the dangers of fetishizing nativist ideologies and thinking of geopolitical macro-categories such as North/South and West/non-West as opposing political spheres. Said's warning from 40 years ago remains relevant today as ever: one cannot respond to "the tyrannical conjuncture of colonial power with scholarly Orientalism simply by proposing an alliance between nativist sentiment buttressed some variety of native ideology to combat them" (Said, 1985:103). As Rao has reminded us more recently (2020: 9), if "postcolonial critique is to continue to remain meaningful in the contemporary world… [i]t must be attentive to shifts in power, including those that enable formerly colonised states to become colonial in their own rights". For the study of the global right, considering the historical entanglement of nationalism with neoliberalism and authoritarianism in postcolonial contexts may question the newness of the so-called "populist" backlash against globalization in the Western core. Many have pointed out that the far right or the "fascist temptation" is not external to liberalism (Cooper, 2021; Mondon and Winter, 2020) and right-wing nationalism and neoliberalism are not antinomies (Hendrikse, 2018; Kiely, 2021). When we turn to the global trajectories of neoliberalism in the "rest of the world", it becomes clear that they have long been overlapped with histories of postcolonial authoritarianism and nationalism (Watson, 2021). Moreover, the employment of victimhood narratives and the appropriation of the anti-colonial rhetoric are also characteristic of right-wing discourses

[5] Digital Islamophobia in both countries cannot be considered in isolation from state-sponsored practices and discourses, including the institutional support for Islamophobia from the ruling party in India and the Chinese state's persecution of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities (Bakali and Hafez, 2022). However, examinations of anti-Muslim racism in online and grassroots communities reveal wider social processes of racialization and othering.

[6] This is exemplified by the argument that identity-based struggles only benefit the elites and are detrimental to the interest of the "working class". The neoliberalization of social justice movements is sometimes invoked to delegitimate social justice agendas themselves. On the racialization of the working class, see Mondon and Winter (2019).

in former colonial powers (Al-Ghazzi 2021). Another venue for future research would be to explore commonalities, differences, and interconnections in these developments across contexts that are marked by varying relationships with colonialism and are differently positioned within global power structures.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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