“And this country, the latent high school homosexual that it is, the mulatto passing for white that it is, the Neanderthal incessantly plucking its unibrow that it is, needs people like him. It needs somebody to throw baseballs at, to fag-bash, to nigger-stomp, to invade, to embargo. Anything that, like baseball, keeps a country that’s constantly preening in the mirror from actually looking in the mirror and remembering where the bodies are buried.” Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

The narrator of Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout* makes the above observation while sitting in his car with his neighbor (a former Little Rascal’s child actor named Hominy) listening to a Dodger’s game. A magical realist, unflinchingly painful yet simultaneously hilarious retelling of modern slavery, racism, popular culture, and neoliberal space in contemporary Los Angeles, *The Sellout* consistently demands that its reader abandon any nostalgic attachment they might have to the idea of America. “This country,” muses the narrator, needs its Hominies – at home and abroad – to abuse and invade and embargo precisely so it can continue to stare fawningly in the mirror at its own reflection without ever actually looking at itself, without even acknowledging its own violence.

I begin this paper with these words to illustrate my somewhat audacious claim that most global justice literature in political theory today begins from a similarly blind – and equally preening – subjective position in front of the mirror. Global justice scholars may talk broadly and with authentic concern about what “we” owe the Global South and the world’s poor but they never question the “we” itself, the bounded nature of the sovereign polity from which they speak (or believe they can transcend through moral reasoning), or imagine that this “we” may have been co-constructed historically in relation to the invaded, embargoed, and dispossessed. Whether or not these scholars think that history begins in 1971 with the publication of *A Theory of Justice* (e.g. Michael Blake) or believe sincerely that a history of colonial extraction ought to impact the global distribution of wealth (e.g. Thomas Pogge), the vast majority of global justice scholarship today is voiced in an analytical register that owes its inspiration to Rawls and that knows itself to

---

be liberal and tolerant even when “we” – or the rogue president who is not us – bash, invade, and embargo “shithole countries” abroad and black/brown/undocumented people at home. For global justice scholars, even if “we” knew where the bodies were buried, this knowledge would not impact “our” theorizing. Thus, while global justice scholarship appears to open philosophy up to the concerns of the world as it is, it simultaneously re-seals theory and politics within a sovereign shell – and a fixation with “the political” – that remains impervious to modes of criticism that interrogate the imperial shape of the world today.

By contrast, Edward Said spent much of his career destabilizing the “we” who theorizes, invades, and embargos, and he did so by privileging the unstable subject position of exile. The ultimate goal of this paper is to explore the sometimes nerve-wrackingly unresolved qualities of Said’s exilic perspective as a means of historicizing and critiquing the relentlessly enclosed subjective “we” that dominates global justice scholarship today. The first two-thirds of the paper, however, are devoted to a genealogy of the present, focusing in particular on the way borders – within the discipline, within the world – contribute to the contemporary unseeing of empire. Section One explores the emergence of the sovereign field of International Relations (IR), the apotheosis of sovereign states within IR, and the effect of this double bordering on global justice literature. Section Two focuses on the absence of postcolonialism from the conceptual world of mainstream political theory and what this absence tells us about the field’s unquestioning acceptance of sovereignty and its equally prolix fixation with an enclosed notion of “the political.” The final section examines Said’s “unhoused” mode of exilic inquiry and suggests that, in prying political theory away from sovereign notions of “the political” – or, as Said put it, “from certainty about who ‘we’ are” – it provides a powerful critical and ethical disposition from which to analyze and oppose injustice on a global scale, particularly in an era of rising xenophobia, white nationalism, and anti-immigrant violence within the world’s putatively liberal democratic states.²

Bordering The World, Bordering The Discipline

Edward Said, who died of leukemia in 2003, was one of the most astonishingly productive scholars and influential public intellectuals of the late twentieth century. He is credited with both reinvigorating the study of imperialism in the American academy and inaugurating postcolonialism as an intellectual movement following the publication of Orientalism in 1978 – a book that has become a virtual classic whose argument, as Eqbal Ahmad puts it wryly, is practically “learnt by osmosis.”3 In this text and elsewhere, Said transformed the academic study of imperialism from engagement with a fixed, historical set of facts and practices whose impact ran solely in one direction – from Western metropoles to Asian/African/Latin American sites of occupation – to the study of a “constantly expanding,” “inexorably integrative” ideological formation that buttressed domination in the past, rationalizes imperial politics in the present, and renders the impact of the former invisible on the latter.4 For Said, imperialism was/is a dynamic process that orders the world spatially and temporally through the discursive and political construction of what he famously called “imagined geographies,” forms of knowledge and cartographic commonsense that naturalize fundamental differences between the Orient and the West, the colonized and the colonizing, the developing and the developed.5 In this sense, Orientalism’s most profound innovation was its assertion that understanding how the West came to dominate the East politically requires a deeper understanding of how the West studied, imagined, quantified, described, and knew the Orient – and knew itself in relation to the Orient. Moreover, Said’s inquiry also exposed other discursive mechanisms through which imperialism and imperial knowledge order the world; by telling developmental stories about far off peoples and places and by narrowing the narrative aperture of history such that alternative accounts of colonization, pre-colonial time, and resistance simply disappear and “history” becomes the history of colonization alone.6 By this

---

4 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 8, 6.
5 Edward Said, Orientalism (Vintage, 1979), 49-72.
logic, active traces of the imperial past on the present (including the grotesque inequality of resources between the Global North and South) appear *sui generis*, untethered from a history of imperialism, slavery, settler colonialism, dispossession, and resource extraction – the natural order of things.

But Said’s influence extended far beyond *Orientalism*. The author of over a dozen books, many more articles, and numerous collections of essays, Saïd also gave countless speeches and sat for long, intensive interviews, many of which appear as collections. 1992’s *Culture and Imperialism* demonstrated Said’s growth as a scholar, showcasing in particular the increasing urgency with which he believed it was necessary to pair post-structuralist inspired accounts of imperial culture’s constitutive, disciplinary power with genealogical investigations of anti-colonial resistance. He also developed more closely wrought examinations of the way theory “travels,” sometimes from the center, to the periphery, and back again. Most importantly, in this book and other texts, Said stressed the need to cultivate a contrapuntal orientation toward history, culture, and, politics that “sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together because they are connected by imperialism.”

This orientation flows, he argued, from an “exilic” perspective that resists domination and upends univocal accounts of identity and history. As he explained in a 1994 interview:

> “If you’re an exile... you always bear within yourself a recollection of what you’ve let behind and what you can remember, and you play it against the current experience. So there’s necessarily that sense of counterpoint. And by counterpoint, I mean things that can’t be reduced to homophony... And so, multiple identity, the polyphony of many voices playing off against each other, without, as I say, the need to reconcile them, just to hold them together, is what my work is all about. More than one culture, more than one awareness, both in its negative and its positive modes.”

Scholars across fields – from cultural studies and comparative literature, to history, geography, and anthropology – have found inspiration in Said’s approach to exile and polyphony as well as his insistence on “holding” rather than “resolving” tensions. His influence can also be seen in the abundance of retrospective

---

articles and books that appear on his work every year, a “growth industry” (as Gauri Viswanathan called it in 2002) that shows no sign of abating since his untimely death.9

A scholar of astonishing breadth, Said wrote about literature, culture, ideology, music, theory, criticism, history, philosophy, and all of these at the same time, as well as dozens of books and articles on the political question of Palestine. Indeed, as a Palestinian in exile, constantly negotiating and interrogating the space between imperial history, the Palestinian present, and the global impact of America’s militarism, Said brought his interest in the politics of empire, movement, and resistance to nearly all of his writings, scholarly and popular. Throughout his career, he was one of the few American intellectuals to consistently draw attention to the struggles of the Palestinian people and the extent to which they were denied “permission to narrate” their own experiences.10 As Akeel Bilgrami notes in his loving introduction to Said’s last collection of essays, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, because of his political courage, his fight for Palestinian freedom, and his commitment to both understand domination and further resistance in his most important writing, “Edward Said’s intellectual legacy will be primarily political – not just in the popular imagination, but also perhaps in the eyes of academic research.”11

And yet, political theorists have largely ignored Said’s work, a lacuna that seems strange given not only his stature but his interest in themes that have remained of perennial fascination for theorists, themes which, for instance, continue to draw graduate students in ever larger throngs to the work of Hannah Arendt: cosmopolitanism, belonging, exile, worldliness, and a critique of sovereignty.12 When scholars of

---

11 Akeel Bilgrami’s foreword to Edward Said’s, Humanism and Democratic Criticism (Columbia University Press; 2004), ix.
political theory do turn to Said’s insights, it is usually briefly, and entirely in reference to *Orientalism* and its impact.\(^{13}\) Political theory’s studied lack of interest in Said’s thought more broadly, however, is stranger still given several new developments in the field. First, for roughly the last twenty years, increasing numbers of theorists have expressed interest in questions of empire and imperialism, a phenomenon that has accelerated substantially over the last decade but which, as I discuss below, took much longer to emerge in political theory than it did in other fields.\(^{14}\) Second, political theory – as a subdiscipline and academic endeavor – has also begun opening its doors to thinkers who have been traditionally excluded from the formal canon. This important development has led to a flowering of new work on transnational Black political thought and increasing interest in the work of scholars from Asia and Latin America, both historical and contemporary, and contributed to the emerging (not uncontroversially named) field of “comparative political theory.”\(^{15}\) Finally, the subdiscipline of political theory is becoming more interdisciplinary as growing numbers of thinkers expand their inquiries into areas formerly outside political theory’s purview (such as global history).

\(^{13}\) Wendy Brown, for instance, makes a useful turn to the conception of “imaginative geography” that Said developed in *Orientalism* for her discussion of sovereignty in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Princeton, 2010), 73-74. At the same time, she omits any reference to Said her discussion of she calls a “contrapuntal strategy” that “agitates” along political theory’s disciplinary edges in *Edgework* (Princeton, 2005). Said developed the notion of “contrapuntal” analysis in work throughout the 1980’s and articulated it most clearly in 1992’s *Culture and Imperialism*.


while more scholars engage both the potency of anticolonial thought and the political and discursive legacies of settler colonialism.16

In light of this recent interest in imperialism, non-canonical theory, and interdisciplinarity, it is a puzzle why Said has remained nearly invisible to political theorists who, when they do note his influence, usual refer quickly to *Orientalism* and then move on, as if neither Said (nor the legions of scholars who have responded to his work) wrote anything after 1978. I argue below that political theorists have been slow to engage the work of Said, in part, for the same troubling reasons the field has been slow to engage the study of imperialism and postcolonialism more generally: because of political theory’s disciplinary attachment to political science, the siloization of global power politics within IR, the fixation of IR with states rather than empires, and the way sovereignty works as a through line, stitching these modes of conceptual closure together.

To summarize: while the numbers of scholars writing about empire and imperialism has increased substantially over the last two decades, Jennifer Pitts notes in her important 2010 review essay that the subdiscipline as a whole came “slowly and late to the study of empire relative to other disciplines,” finally turning its partial attention to the topic only after America’s unilateral military action in the wake of September 11, 2001.17 Moreover, Pitts notes, “political theory for much of the 1980s and 1990s was remarkably untouched” by the “powerful theoretical and thematic developments” inspired by postcolonial theory that were taking place in comparative literature, world history, cultural studies, race and ethnic studies, art history, and anthropology. This general lack of interest in postcolonial scholarship, she continues, is particularly puzzling given that political theory “clearly has a distinct interest in aspects of


postcolonial studies’ field of analysis: the theorization of power, state formation, and community and identity, as well as the historical study of such theorizations.”\(^{18}\) And yet, despite these affinities – and despite the outsized influence of this sprawlingly diverse and lively realm of interdisciplinary scholarship and contestation on the humanities and social sciences – to this day there remains only one published edited volume devoted to the intersection of political theory and postcolonialism.\(^{19}\) The irony of this situation for political theory – a mode of inquiry often concerned with ideology, with the obfuscating qualities of rhetoric, and the horizon-opening possibilities of critique – is that postcolonialism is first and foremost, as Leela Gandhi describes it, “a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath.”\(^{20}\)

That political theory as a field has inadvertently participated in perpetuating this amnesia by ignoring postcolonialism would no doubt strike most theorists as deeply troubling.

Understanding political theory’s imperviousness to imperialism studies and postcolonialism over time, I argue, entails first taking a genealogical look at the structural scission in Political Science between IR and the other subdisciplines. Following World War Two, Political Science in North America began to organize itself around its current four subdisciplines, an act of professional hiving off that led to the confinement of scholarship concerned with politics on a global scale within the emerging field of IR, a field that, from the beginning, was closely associated with a growing number of professional think tanks populated by experts who Robert Vitalis calls “intellectual middlemen,” skilled at “getting ideas across to nonacademic audiences in Washington, New York, and points beyond.”\(^{21}\) This segregation of inquiry \textit{vis a vi} the state (between “domestic,” “comparative,” and “international”) was not always the case. Prior to the war, scholars in multiple disciplines in Europe and America had theorized broadly about politics,

\(^{18}\) Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” 213.
\(^{19}\) See Nalini Perstram (ed), Postcolonialism and Political Theory (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).
philosophy, law, history, classics, and world affairs, often moving between these realms of expertise with an ease that seems astonishing from our contemporary perspective. 22 Over the years, however, the divide between the subdisciplines of political theory and IR ossified to such an extent that eventually the two fields came to occupy what Duncan Bell describes as “parallel universes” with markedly different literatures and understandings of the very same terms (e.g. “liberalism” and “realism”). 23 Moreover, in the wake of that period of “sustained reflection about the organization of international knowledge” that Nicholas Guilhot and other have argued followed World War Two, the emerging discipline of IR began narrowing its conceptual vision around a handful of approaches aimed at legitimizing its relationship to Political Science and establishing, in Hans Morgenthau’s words, “the proper place of international relations and area studies as academic disciplines.” 24 By 1960, the distinction between political theory and IR was so obvious to Martin Wight that he breezily insisted it “requires no explanation.” 25 IR scholars, Wight argued in his influential essay, “Why Is There No International Theory?,” were interested in the “untidy fringe” of political activity taking place between states whilst political theorists were oriented toward the normative, stationary, and domesticated project of theorizing the good life within states. It was not until the late 1970’s that theorists like Richard Beitz and Henry Schue began challenging at least part of this distinction by suggesting that political theory could have something worthwhile to say about international issues like world poverty.

22 The first Professor of International Politics in the world, for instance, was an Oxford trained classicist named Alfred Zimmern. [See Morefield, Covenants Without Swords (Princeton, 2005)]. For more on the intellectual and disciplinary openness of international thought before World War Two, David Long and Peter Wilson, Thinkers of the Twenty Years Crisis (Oxford, 1995) and Ian Hall (ed) British International Thinkers from Hobbes to Namier (Palgrave, 2009).
In this sense, Wight’s observation about the methodological borders between political theory and IR reflects not just the descriptive borders between states but also the increasing dominance of sovereign borders in IR scholarship. In other words, it was during this early post-war period that founding thinkers of the discipline like Wight and Morgenthau began associating the work of IR explicitly and exclusively with the relationships between sovereign states, an assumption which remains foundational to this day. Thus, whether they are imagined by liberals as prone to cooperation, by realists as inherently drawn toward power politics, or by constructivists as responsive to international norms regimes, sovereign states remain the primary units of analysis for the majority of mainstream IR scholars today. As a field, IR continues to naturalize this orientation by prospectively narrowing the discipline’s interpretive frame to three dominant and acceptable, state-oriented approaches: realism, idealism/liberalism, and constructivism. Scholars also do this by retroactively reading the contested landscape of world history through these same, winnowing lenses. Liberals and idealists, for example, tell simplified stories that naturalize the transition to an American-led, liberal order of states after World War Two. Realists, by contrast, insert modern sovereignty into world history by, in part, locating the “security dilemma” in the writings of a selected canon of Western political philosophers, namely, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes.

The problem with this reading of both disciplinary history and the history of international politics more broadly is that it fails to account for the fact that the European and American intellectuals involved in the post-war debates following World War Two that led to the creation of the modern discipline were deeply concerned not only with states but also with the acceleration of what David Armitage refers to as the “drawn-out transition from a world of empires to a world of states.” In Armitage’s words, most of the

26 See, for instance, Anne-Marie Slaughter’s account of this transition in, The Idea That Is America (Basic Book, 2008) as well as that of John Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan (Princeton, 2011)
27 See Hans Morgenthau’s discussion of Thucydides, in particular, his insistence that the centrality of state interest “is indeed of the essence of politics and is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place.” Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 7th edition (McGraw Hill, 2005), 10.
world’s population “for most of history lived not in nation states but in empires” and imperial governance and politics remained centrally important to American and European foreign policy through the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, as Vitalis and others have demonstrated, maintaining global hierarchy, controlling non-white migration, and constructing transnational, racialized cartographies in response to anti-colonial movements, were of central concern to many of the founding thinkers of the discipline in America. And yet, despite all this, the dominant IR Weltanschauung to emerge after World War Two naturalized an international terrain comprised almost entirely of discrete sovereign states. From the beginning, this conceptual apparatus necessarily occluded not only the lingering impact of race and imperialism on world politics but contemporary forms of “informal imperialism” ranging from coercive economic practices to CIA sponsored coups.

In the North American academy, this blinkered self-understanding has resulted in a discipline grounded in what Vitalis refers to as the “two combined myths” of IR: a conviction that the United States is not and has never been an imperial power, and a belief that the discipline itself has never showed much interest in the study of race and imperialism. The strength of this willful ignorance – or as Vitalis beautifully puts it, the “norm against noticing” – enables mainstream accounts of American IR to proceed:

(a) as if this imperial history never occurred, and,
(b) as if this interest in race and imperialism had no long term impact on both the shape of American foreign policy and the intellectual object that is IR today, and
(c) as if, until Michael Doyle wrote Empires in 1986, IR scholars since the beginning of time had been completely oblivious to imperialism.


Robert Vitalis, White World Power, Black Power Politics . . .

Much of Vitalis’ book is devoted to demonstrating that not only were many of the earliest scholars of international politics (from the late nineteenth century onward) white supremacists concerned with both the
As it functions in IR, the “norm against noticing” consistently deflects attention away from the fact of imperialism in history, the imperialist concerns of the early discipline, and the existence of imperialism in contemporary American foreign policy practice today, to the point where scholars are reluctant to even to utter the word aloud. Indeed, realists, idealists, and constructivists alike prefer terms like “great power” or the even more anodyne “hegemon” to describe the military, political, and economic “primacy” of the United States.\(^{32}\) As far as the major theoretical schools of IR are concerned, world politics is and always has been (again, as we know from Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes) organized around the interests of sovereign states as they (depending upon the school of thought) cooperate with each other, strive for primacy, engage in great power politics, respond to international norms, support or subvert the international system, and/or sponsor non-state terrorism. Combined, the “norm against noticing” and the laser-like focus on sovereignty mean that even those few IR scholars who have theorized imperialism can only do so by treating it as a (largely historical) species of state power. In his important 1986 book *Empires*, for instance, Doyle defines an empire as “a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another” and imperialism as “simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.”\(^{33}\)

The problem with a state-oriented definition like Doyle’s – one that assumes imperialism is “simply the process” by which one state establishes and maintains “effective political sovereignty” over another – is that the very language of state sovereignty simplifies a process which is actually profoundly complex. Imperializing societies – in history and today – must constantly assert and reassert “differentiation and inequality among the people” they incorporate and dominate, expanding and solidifying disparities in power demographics of race and imperialism but also with exploring the way Black scholars of international politics in America actually did write critically about imperialism well into the 1950’s.\(^{32}\) For example, Richard Ned Lebow and Simon Reich’s 2014 book *Goodbye Hegemony*, lays out an excellent argument against American power that looks, for all intents and purposes, like a critique of imperialism but they refuse to say the word. Lebow and Reich, *Goodbye Hegemony* (Princeton, 2014).\(^{33}\) Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Cornell University Press, 1986), 45.
and status between both the colonizers and the colonized, and among the colonized themselves.\textsuperscript{34} As Paul Kramer puts it, imperialism isn’t merely the instrumental application of power by one state against another state. It is, rather, “a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”\textsuperscript{35} In order to sustain and expand this scalar world, imperialism – as an ideology, as a lived political practice – has to function on a number of different political, philosophical, cultural, artistic, military, architectural, geographic, and economic registers simultaneously. Intellectual approaches that want to grapple with this complexity must, necessarily, work on an interdisciplinary level and they must – as postcolonial scholarship has consistently demonstrated – be willing to engage the \textit{transnational} complexities implicit in the tangled web of connections between imperialism and the culture(s) that sustains it. Moreover, a definition of empire and imperialism that does not take into account the dense ideological and cultural assemblage necessary to rationalize and naturalize domination cannot adequately grapple with the way imperialism functions in a putatively post-imperial age. In other words, any definition of imperialism that stops at the level of “state control” – be it formal or informal – will necessarily fail to fully account for the way the very terms and institutions of contemporary international political and economic organization have been determined by former empires and great powers in such a way as to render their historic connections to imperialism invisible over time.\textsuperscript{36} Imperialism, in this contemporary context, necessarily overflows its definitional floodgates, filling up post-colonial space.


The “norm against noticing,” however, consistently slams the door on any kind of reflective
discussion by mainstream IR scholars about the relationship between state sovereignty and the long term,
complicated, cultural/political/economic power relations embedded in practices of U.S. or European
imperialism, past or present. Rather, the subjective “we” voice through which mainstream IR scholars
channel their diagnoses of world problems seem always to be emerging, like Venus, out of a fresh pool of
sovereign statehood that has never been tainted by history, imperialism, subjection, difference, pluralism,
and/or inequality. Indeed, for liberal internationalists in particular (such as John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie
Slaughter) the explicitly American “we” that analyzes, suggests, and finger-wags about shoring up the
“liberal world order” is not only untainted by historical violence but is always (and has always been) both
opposed to imperialism and deeply well-meaning even when U.S. foreign policy would suggest otherwise. For
example, in Anne-Marie Slaughter’s mind, supporting “the idea of America” as a benevolent and necessary
power without whom “nothing gets done” is more important to shoring up international stability than
acknowledging the reality of America’s often destabilizing presence in the world.37 With other liberal
internationalist, Slaughter insists the United States be judged by its intentions to expand liberalism and
democracy to the whole world – by “our continual striving to improve ourselves, to advance, to live up to
our ideals” – rather than by the actual impact of U.S. foreign policy or whether “we” ever live up to the
ideals that Slaughter extols.38 In this sense, Slaughter and her ilk tend talk about the Unites States as if were
an exuberant teenager just trying to adhere to the goodness within itself and not always getting it right. The
fact that this well intentioned teenager also happens to be the world’s only super power is ultimately
incidental to the “idea that is America.”39

That this mode of willed unseeing through sovereignty may be particularly predominant among

---

39 See David Vine, “The United States Probably Has More Military Bases Than Any Other People, Nation,
probably-has-more-foreign-military-bases-than-any-other-people-nation-or-empire-in-history/.
liberal internationalists but it reflects the methodological intuitions of mainstream IR more generally. More troubling for the purposes of this paper, however, is the fact that, despite the increasing numbers of political theorists writing about imperialism and settle colonialism, the majority of scholars of global justice – the most prominent area of inquiry within the field of political theory dedicated to the study of international issues – remain largely uninterested in noticing imperialism (past and present), race, or history in general, and almost completely unconcerned with the complex nature of the subjective position from which they theorize; that is, the liberal “we” that is meant to be both universal and closely identified with the liberal democratic states of the Global North. With very few exceptions, scholars of global justice such as Shue, Beitz, Michael Blake, Martha Nussbaum, Mathiase Risse, Simon Caney, Luis Cabrera, Joseph Carens, and David Held adhere to largely Rawlsian-inspired modes of ideal moral theorizing that have no conceptual connection to either the actual political history of imperialism or current postcolonial scholarship. Indeed, these theorists may argue among themselves about whether Rawlsian principles can be applied in a direct fashion to global politics (e.g. Beitz) or whether, as Rawls believed, they must be channeled through social groupings (e.g. Blake), but they never question the universal applicability of this theory. Michael Goodhart calls theorists associated with these two approaches “cosmopolitan” and “social” liberals and argues that, despite their differences, both schools agree liberalism can address global justice “without any particular difficulty.”40 This overall faith in liberalism is first and foremost “ideal” (insofar as it is concerned with principles and not power) and “moral” (insofar as it is concerned with identifying the conditions that can bring about justice). Indeed, the only difference between global justice scholarship today and Wight’s 1960 description of political-theory-properly-understood, is that today’s scholars have the audacity to expand the ambit for liberal theory to the whole world. In every other respect, their theories behave precisely as Wight believed political theories ought to behave in the domestic realm: as normative schemes for imagining “the good life,” largely unconcerned with the “untidy fringe” of power politics between states or in general. At

the same time, these scholars express little to no interest in the fact that liberalism – the political and philosophical tradition from which they draw such succor – is not only historically associated with European imperialism but also continues to provide the main theoretical and ideological tools by which foreign policy makers make, expand, and justify American primacy today.41

As Charles Mills points out, though global justice scholars today may employ different normative approaches, “a commonality of this literature is the virtual absence of any discussion of race and racism.” For “those from the former Third World (such as myself),” Mills continues, who are “familiar with many of the anti-colonial writings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this silence is remarkable, since the global injustice of imperialism and colonialism was classically seen…precisely as a matter of white domination over people of color.”42 Mills insists that the racial dimension of contemporary international politics is not incidental to the founding of the current world order but, rather, was “causally central and deeply consequential,” the product of 400 years of imperialism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and colonial dispossession. In addition, most global justice scholars today seem equally unaware of the fact that their particular Rawlsian-inspired approach to issues like global poverty rose to prominence in the 1970’s at precisely the same moment when more corrective form of world organization, the New International Economic Organization (NIEO), was being shut down in the United Nations by the U.S. and its European allies. According to Samuel Moyn, the theories of global justice developed in this era by Shue, Beitz, and others political philosophers “strove to provide an alternative approach to any vision that placed a history of racial and imperial domination across the globe at the heart of what a political response in the name of worldwide fairness might look like.” More importantly Moyn continues, “rather than welcoming

anticolonial self-assertion, they abjured southern agency” altogether except insofar as they acknowledged that ignoring the plight of the global poor might prompt them to acts of violence against the rich.43

The resulting situation in political theory today is thus: most critical scholars committed to analyzing the relationship between history, race, and politics, to writing deep genealogical accounts of the connections between imperial capitalism and settler colonialism, to thinking in complex ways about the circulation of power in our neoliberal era, to exploring alternative conceptions of modernity, and to engaging questions of political subjectivity from the perspective of race, class, gender, and sexuality, have entirely ceded control of “international politics” (as a field of contemporary inquiry) to ideal moral theorists. In making this observation I am not claiming that ideal moral theorists have nothing relevant or meaningful to say about justice on a global level. Carens’ work on immigration, for instance, provides a particularly timely counter-argument – from a liberal perspective – to the hostile and xenophobic voices emanating from those increasingly vocal white nationalist centers of world power.44 Rather, I argue that narrowing the scope of the field’s thinking about international politics to a perspective that largely ignores race, imperialism, history, and power means that political theorists have agreed to narrow the kinds of questions that can be asked about international politics more generally. More ominously, it also means that liberal global justice scholar knowingly or unknowingly aid and abet a form of liberal internationalist foreign policy and school of thought that acts imperially.

The next section of this paper explores further why this is the case by looking more closely at the reluctance of political theory (as a field) to engage the insights of postcolonialism. I argue that this reluctance is not merely the result of the bordering that structures the distinction between political theory and IR, nor is it simply the result of IR’s conceptual (b)ordering of the world (into domestic and

44 Joseph Carens, The Ethics of Immigration (Oxford, 2013), x. See also Carens’ argument regarding the history of liberalism, the state, and context in “Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders,” The Review of Politics, 49.2. (Spring, 1987), 265.
international politics). Rather, I believe political theory’s long term aversion to both postcolonialism and international politics it has more to do with the way this (b)ordering (between domestic and international politics) has permeated the conceptual imagination of political theory itself to the point where even critics of sovereignty can’t imagine theorizing politics without “the political.” That is, without closure.

**Bordering Theory, Bordering Subjectivity**

Along with IR, the field of political theory (as it has been formally taught in graduate schools for decades) is the product of the post-war division of Political Science into today’s professional subdisciplines. As John Gunnel has argued, when these other subdisciplines began to ossify methodologically around scientific positivism, broadly conceptual and ethical concerns about the nature of political life were hived off to the emerging subdiscipline of political theory. Thus, questions about right, justice, freedom, equality, and democracy – questions that social scientists had once broached as an integral part of analyzing politics more generally – were relegated to a safely marginalized and explicitly non-scientific subfield associated more closely with philosophy than “actually existing” politics.45 Into this emerging and sheltered realm in North America stepped a number of émigré thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Herbert Marcuse who were to wield an outsided influence on the development of the field as a mode of intellectual inquiry. According to Gunnell, these thinkers, and the evolving subdiscipline they helped coax into being, tended to construe political theory through a “tradition” of European political philosophy that “largely defined what political scientists meant by ‘political theory.’”46 They also tended to construe the intellectual practice of

---


political theorizing as primarily engaged with the emergence, contestation, and re-emergence of particular concepts over time, “a plot,” as Gunnell puts it, “containing distinct points of beginning, transformation, and, even, end.” 47 Much of political theory has thus historically focussed on a fairly fixed, abstract set of conceptual questions – e.g. What is the nature of “the political”? What are the limits of democracy? What is justice? What is the relationship between equality and freedom? This mode of theorizing in abstraction from actual analyses of power and politics was significantly reinforced after the publication of John Rawls’ Theory of Justice in 1971 which quickly gave rise to a school of thought that continues to exercise considerable influence in the subdiscipline today.

Obviously, analytical liberalism does not account for the sum total (or even the majority) of scholarship in political theory today and the field is characterized by a variety of what Adrew March has termed sometimes “mutually hostile” intellectual approaches that use the tools of critical theory, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis, feminism, critical race theory, and Marxism to analyze discourse, ideas in context, democratic practice, social movements, resistance, political organization, and the history of political thought. 48 At the end of the day, however, the canonical circle of thinkers acceptable for political theoretical inquiry stays fairly fixed around a tightly woven core of European philosophers. 49 The predominant professional hedges that internally striate the contemporary field of political theory continue to channel students and scholars in particular directions toward particular thinkers (e.g. Hannah Arendt) while discouraging them from peeking over those hedges at thinkers in other fields (e.g. Edward Said). Moreover, these internal and external borders (within political theory and around political theory) often make it difficult not just for scholars to identify non-Western thinkers and/or scholars thinking politics in other

49 This remained the case, Gunnel points out, even for theorists who have historically rejected the separation between politics and theory, thinkers like Sheldon Wolin who, in his impassioned 1969 plea to make political theory a vocation, still called upon a “tradition” of political thought, from “Plato to Marx.”
fields; it also makes it difficult for them to recognize questions these scholars ask as political and thus, as
worthy of political theoretical inquiry. The result is that even scholars of critical theory, poststructuralism,
Marxist theory, and race and gender studies – people who have dedicated their careers to expanding political
theory in critical directions – can sometimes seem surprisingly naïve about work that has already been done
on political themes by scholars in the humanities and social sciences working outside of political theory,
particularly postcolonial scholars. It also means that when these scholars actually do engage
postcolonialism, they frequently can’t identify this work as political theory. For instance, those few political
theorists who have dedicated serious attention to Said’s work almost uniformly do so by combining a
sincere appreciation for his political vision and intellectual bravery with a deep frustration at his
philosophical nomadism and his unwillingness to accept conceptual closure. They often do this by
comparing him unfavorably to recognizable canonical theorists who are more committed to the moral and
ethical resolution of politics.

This desire for conceptual closure, mirrors I believe, the desire by many political theorists for political
closure as well. This is particularly (and ironically) true when it comes to a critique of sovereignty. For
example, innumerable theorists these days are drawn to Arendt’s work in part because it provides such a
seemingly vital critique of sovereignty from within a political philosophical tradition with which they are
familiar. Arendt – who pulled no punches when she proclaimed that “if men wish to be free, it is precisely
sovereignty they must renounce” – was deeply critical of political entities that claimed the mantle of a

---

50 Again, in Edgework, Wendy Brown notes that “the work of thinking about political matters theoretically has
lately been undertaken in disciplines as far removed from each other and from political science as art history,
anthropology, rhetoric, geography, and literature.” [p. 66. (italics mine.)] In fact, scholars in these disciplines
had been thinking about politics theoretically for decades thanks, in no small part, to the work of Said.
51 Fred Dallmayr, for instance concludes his critical (nearly despairing) account of Said’s theoretical
“nomadism” and an unwillingness to embrace Adornian-inspired reconciliation with a tribute to Said’s call
for a new “paradigm for humanistic research.” [Dallmayr, “The Politics of Nonidentity,” 52.] Similarly, Joan
Cocks pays homage to Said’s well-meaning desire to speak sympathetically to both national belonging and
cosmopolitan unity but ultimately criticizes his approach for failing to square the circle between the two, to
“map out and fight for clear political alternatives to the nation-state.” [Cocks, “A New Cosmopolitanism?”,
60.]
collective political subject, arguing that domination, subjection, and sovereignty ultimately went hand in hand. This impulse toward sovereign domination, she insisted, was tied to the project of modernity and to the evisceration of the public/private distinction that made ethical life and freedom possible, a phenomenon whose apotheosis she identified with Nazi domination. One of the few theorists in the twentieth-century canon to devote any time to considerations of imperialism, Arendt’s analysis in *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* focuses on the way Europeans fine honed their tactics of totalitarian subjection in the colonized world. The scramble for Africa, she maintained, transformed the hitherto empty desire of the bourgeoisie “to have money beget money” into a reality by eliminating all the legal and ethical restraints imposed on them by European states while exporting “the state’s instruments of violence, the police, the army” into the colonized arenas of the non-West. As Karuna Mantena argues, for Arendt, the “experience of overseas empire” created a “moral vacuum” in which Nazism could flourish. Thus, new, more brutal forms of economic imperialism led to the expansion of lawless forms of racialized violence which then gave rise to what Harold Laski had described two decades earlier as “habits of imperialism,” habits that eventually blew back on the European continent in the form of Nazi genocide and total sovereign power.

Arendt’s response to what she described as the “loss of the world” is revealing, however, for two reasons that tell us a great deal not only about her politics but about the relationship of political theory to questions of sovereignty and postcolonial scholarship more generally. First, Arendt believed it was necessary to reimagine post-war politics in terms of a deeply novel engagement with the normative ideals of the Greek polis, an approach that she described as “thinking without banisters” because of its refusal to fall back on the

customary rules and ethical guidelines of moral life as prescribed by European philosophy. At the same
time, Arendt never imagined that a crisis in Europe (generated through practices of imperialism abroad)
would ever require philosophers to either reevaluate the sustaining complicity of European political theory
in the project of European imperialism or look for political-theoretical solutions/inspiration beyond Europe.
By contrast, in Discourse on Colonialism (written at roughly the same time as Origins) Aimé Césaire looked at
the same Nazi devastated landscape in Europe as Arendt, similarly described it as the logical blowback of
imperial violence, concluded that “Europe is indefensible,” and called for a wholesale re-evaluation of
European “civilization” as a legitimating ideal. Moreover, while Césaire believed that imperialism was
illustrative of Europe writ large, for Arendt, imperialism only became salient or even a problem when it
threatened to undermine Western values. As she put three years after Origins in an entry in Denktagebuch, the
“real tragedy” of imperialism was not imperialism itself but, rather, the fact that it had become the only way
for Europe to solve “national problems that had become insoluble.”

Second, Arendt’s response to the decimation of the public world in Europe was, in essence, to argue
for the recreation of “the political” (in, she argued, the ancient Greek sense) as a space that was conceptually
distinct from “the social.” The metaphors Arendt uses to describe this reconstruction are incredibly
revealing insofar as they are deeply and ironically – for a woman who believed that the privatization of the
public sphere was one of the greatest tragedies of modernity – domestic, oriented toward drawing the gaze

---

57 Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 32. See also Marta Araújo
and Silvia Rodríguez Maeso, The Contours of Eurocentrism: Race, History, and Political Texts (New York: Roman
and Littlefield, 2015), 37-39. Also, Mantena “Genealogies of Catastrophe.”
58 See Michiel Bot’s translation of this entry at http://hac.bard.edu/news/?item=14858. Other critics have
rightly pointed out Arendt’s racism (jarringly on display in Origins) and her unwillingness to paint the dots
between her sustained critique of imperialism in Origins and the analysis of race in America that she rendered
later that same decade in 1959’s “Reflections on Little Rock.” For Arendt, imperialism would remain “the
one great crime in which America was never involved.” [Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,”
Dissent, 6.1 (1959), 46. See also Patricia Owens, “Racism In the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and 'The
One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved,”’ Millennium, 45.3 (2017), 403-424.]
59 Arendt, The Human Condition, 23.
inward toward a reconstructed world which, for Arendt, was no less than “the man made home on earth.”

What made the decimation of the public sphere under the totalitarian state so obscene, she argues, was the disappearance of a space that enabled communication and politics. The strangeness of that situation, Arendt continues, “resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.” Over and over, as she calls for the revivification of the public, Arendt turns to metaphors of interiority that enclose that public even as they are meant to steer and guide: walls, tables, bannisters. Thus, Arendt’s theory is not really a theory of politics at all; it is a theory of an object called “the political.” And “the political” – like the sovereign state – is bounded and completely autonomous both from European philosophy’s imperial past, four hundred years of shared history with the Global South, and the ideas and agency of people from the colonized world whose experiences and insights might suggest different metaphors through which to imagine politics.

This tendency toward closure is evident elsewhere in other political theoretical critiques of sovereignty, particularly in the work of contemporary pluralists like William Connolly and in the academic left’s fascination with Carl Schmitt. As a phenomenon, it suggests that the field’s traditional focus on a particular roster of political thinkers asking particular questions about democracy, power, and political life, can lead political theorists to unknowingly assume conceptual blinders that privilege a bounded notion of “the political” over other visions of politics. When combined with a hesitancy to theorize politics outside or

60 Arendt, The Human Condition, 134
61 Arendt, The Human Condition, 53.
62 See, for instance, Connolly’s insistence that pluralists owe a “positional respect” for the state and its institutions. [William Connolly, Pluralism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 134]. Chantal Mouffe is both repulsed and draw to Schmitt’s work because, she argues, while Schmitt was “no democrat,” his theory of sovereignty “is a crucial one” because “the logic of democracy does indeed imply a moment of closure which is required by the very process of constituting ‘the people.’” [Chantal Mouffe, “Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy,” The Challenge of Carl Schmitt (Verso, p43).
beyond the state, between states, across states, or in non-state organizations – because that sort of thinking is the purview of IR experts and these experts assure us that the world is, and has always been, constructed of states not empires – it makes perfect sense that the field would take longer than other disciplines to decide that imperialism was worthy of its attention or anything other than a “tragedy” for Europe.

In this light, precisely because many postcolonial thinkers theorize politics in a manner that necessarily disrupts the very idea of “the political,” it also makes sense sense that their scholarship has remained inscrutable or invisible to so many political theorists for so long. This trend has contributed, again, to an odd situation where those areas within political theory who would seem most open to the insights of postcolonial scholarship have remained relatively untouched by them. The critical treatment of subjectivity – a topic that political theorists have long been interested in complicating – offers us a particularly rich example of these parallel forms of theorizing in action. Carol Pateman argues in *The Sexual Contract*, for instance, that the political subject at the core of most European political thought was historically not only presumed to be male but, also, that the social contract upon which much modern European political theory rests was conditioned by the exclusion of women from the public realm. In other words, for Pateman, gender is not merely incidental, it is necessarily *constitutive* of politics. “Sexual difference,” she argues, “is political difference” and thus “with the exception of Hobbes, the classic theorists claim that women lack the attributes and capacities of ‘individuals.’”63 Political theorists interested in critical race theory have similarly targeted the constitutive qualities of political subjectivity as worthy of inquiry. In the early 1990’s, for example, feminist legal scholar Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to refer to the overlapping ways race, class, gender, and sexuality impact the identity of women of color, an innovation that has resulted in the increasing importance of intersectionality as a vibrant site for fruitful discussion of, and

generative disagreement about, in Jennifer Nash’s words, “the messiness of subjectivity”\textsuperscript{64}

And yet, despite these fruitful investigations, few political theorists writing from a critical perspective have chosen to immerse themselves in the incredibly deep pool of scholarship about subjectivity written by postcolonial authors.\textsuperscript{65} From various fields of inquiry and different methodological perspectives, postcolonial scholars have long been fascinated by the relationship between imperialism and subjectivity, particular by the manner in which imperialist agents and their intellectual supporters (from Mill to Cecil Rhodes) imagined the subjective capacities of the colonized. Because non-white, non-Western, colonized societies were assumed by imperialists to lag behind Europeans in civilizational terms – in Mill’s words, a full-fledged theory of political liberty was not appropriate for “backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage” – it was nearly impossible for imperialists to imagine colonial subjects as citizens.\textsuperscript{66} In Partha Chatergee’s words, “the only civil society the government could recognize was theirs; colonized subjects could never be equal members.”\textsuperscript{67} As perennial children, relegated in perpetuity to what Dipesh Chakrabarty famously referred to as the “waiting room of history,” the colonized did not have subjectivity because they could only ever be subjects.\textsuperscript{68} In this sense, the anti-colonial movements of the last century can largely be understood as struggles for subjectivity and for the creation of autonomous societies able to transform subjects into citizens, into authors of politics.

But as postcolonial scholars have noted, the project of anti-colonial nationalism was complicated from the outset by the fact that the nation state itself – as a historical object and bounded form of political


\textsuperscript{65} This remains true despite the fact that, since the publication of Uday Mehta’s groundbreaking book, \textit{Liberalism and Imperialism}, increasing numbers of theorists have developed an interest in how two of the leading figures of British liberalism – John Locke and John Stuart Mill – incorporated what Mehta terms “anthropological minimums” into their political visions. Uday Mehta, \textit{Liberalism and Empire} (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 52.


\textsuperscript{67} Partha Chattergee, \textit{The Nation and Its Fragments} (Princeton, 1993), 24.

\textsuperscript{68} Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing Europe} (Princeton, 2000), 8.
organization – was pre-determined by European empires, a problem Gandhi identified in 1910’s *Hind Swaraj* when he accused his young nationalist interlocutor of wanting “English rule without the Englishman,” or “the tiger's nature, but not the tiger.”69 Postcolonial scholars are thus frequently compelled by the cultural and political complexities involved in the transformation of nation states – “imagined geopolitics” which are themselves the product of imperialism, colonialism, and Orientalist representation – into sites of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial world-making.70 There is thus, Chatterjee argues, “an inherent contradiactoriness” in anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalism “because it reasons within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power nationalist thought seeks to repudiate.”71 This means that for postcolonial scholars, the project of nation-state building, and the forms of citizenship and political subjectivities that anti-colonial nationalism brings into existence, are always complicated and often contradictory phenomena. Sovereign states in this sense are never the obvious organizational ends of a process that was always heading toward a world system composed of discrete sovereign actors, interfacing in more or less peaceful ways (as the predominant schools of IR would have us believe). Rather, the nation-state form itself remains, in key respects, the product of an Enlightenment project – attached to an imperial project – whose “reason,” as Chakrabarty might put it, “was not always self-evident to everyone” and yet whose values and inherent logic have “been made to look obvious far beyond the ground where it originated.”72 Moreover, because the vast empires they opposed held large and diverse swaths of the world in subjection, anti-colonial nationalists and the movements they created were always, simultaneously, embedded in the inward looking politics of nation-state creation (and the transformation of subject peoples into citizens) and linked to other resistance movements taking place throughout the colonized world. It was simply never the case, Said insisted in *Culture and Imperialism*, that

---

72 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p.43.
Europe’s imperial encounter with the Global South “pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.” And these organizational modes of resistance were often transnational. Thus, Said continues, imperialism as a cultural and political assemblage was always deeply fissured by the “overlapping” experiences of protest in Africa, India “and elsewhere in the peripheries,” movements that developed transnational connections to each other through which activists challenged and disassembled the relentlessly incorporative and universalizing logics of imperial governance.

For many postcolonial scholars, the outward and inward, over-determined and self-determined, nature of anti-colonial nationalism not only points toward the complex quality of postcolonial subjectivity but also ought properly to contribute to the denaturalization – the provincialization – of national identity in Europe and the “framework of knowledge” that produced it. For Said, for instance, the complexity of postcolonial subjectivity perennially points to the co-constitution of Europe and the Global-South during the period of colonialism, both in Fanon’s material sense (that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World”) but also in cultural terms. This means that for Said, the cultural archive of Europe – its literature, philosophy, art – should never be approached as the univocal efflux of one, unsullied source flowing, unaltered, into the world, touching and reshaping the inert cultures of the non-West along the way. Rather, it is important to read Western culture, he argues, “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan

73 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii.
75 Franz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 2015), 58.
history” it narrates and “those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.” Finally, for Said in particular, the complex nature of anti-colonial nationalism rendered it simultaneously essential to anti-colonial struggle and ethically fraught, even dangerous. Nationalism, he thus argued in his reflections on Fanon, “for all its obvious necessity, is also the enemy.”

In sum, in a postcolonial context, political subjectivity is overdetermined by a history not just of imperial oppression and dispossession but also by the “inherent contradictoriness” contained in the nation state as a mode of political organization and system of representation, both domestic and international. The sovereign nation state in a postcolonial context is, in essence, both a product of European imperialism, a product of the resistance against European imperialism, and a product of transnational/global networks of resistance. Moreover, approaching postcolonial subjectivity as a multivocal and transnational phenomenon problematizes not just subjectivity in a postcolonial context but subjectivity more broadly in relation to the contained nature of sovereignty and the ongoing practices of cultural, political, and economic imperialism. From this perspective, imperialism is not merely a “tragedy” for Europe but a historical and ongoing constitutive process that shapes the cultural-political worlds of both the Global North and Global South and the relationship between them. Or, as Said put it, “Western and non-Western experiences” belong together “because they are connected by imperialism.” A political theory that seeks closure in “the political” perpetuates the unseeing of these connections even as it seeks to challenge sovereignty and/or develop just approaches to global problems. Adequately grappling with sovereignty and injustice in a manner that takes postcolonial insights seriously, I argue, requires cultivating a subjectivity that is both reflective and unhoused. In a word, it requires exile.

As a Palestinian who spent the majority of his career living in New York, Edward Said was perennially fascinated, for personal and intellectual reasons, in the exilic experience, particularly in its incongruous, irreconcilable qualities. Thus, the very first sentence of his influential 1984 essay, “Reflections on Exile,” begins with the memorable line: “Exile is both strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.” Much of Said’s work on the topic is wracked by precisely this discomfort between exile as a strange, fascinating, and productive intellectual exercise and the incredibly uncomfortable, unstable, even violent qualities of the exile’s lived life. This is particularly true Said maintains, in our era. Whereas the romantic idea of exile in western literature and philosophy often focused on isolated intellectuals forced from home by political intrigue – think Cicero languishing in Thessalonica – exile today is primarily a mass phenomenon, the product of imperial and nationalist violence, ethnic cleansing, and explosions of oppressive state power. The fact that, throughout his work, Said looks straight into the desperate and despairing face of exile, sees it for what it is – often horrifying in its alienation and loss, lambasted by trauma and violence – and still insists that it is not merely compelling to think about but absolutely necessary for critical inquiry, is a testament to how strongly he believed in its illuminative power. Indeed, irreconcilableness – the opposite of closure – is precisely what makes exile so generative for critique and so necessary for political and ethical inquiry in an era of radical global injustice. He thus repeatedly draws our attention to the tensions of the exilic experience, the extent to which those living in exile bear within themselves a recollection of what has been left behind which they then play constantly against the current experience in all of its unsettling and untenable iterations. This ebbless loss, this constant friction between past and the present – between home and displacement, the memory of safety and the trauma of lived life –

---

79 Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 175. Exiles may look like Said himself (unable to return to his childhood home in Jerusalem but living a comfortable academic life on the Upper West Side) but they are more likely to resemble the Rohingya refugee, denied citizenship by Myanmar and expelled by a campaign of violence, languishing in camps in Bangladesh.
resists reconciliation at every level and renders exile both necessary and often unbearable. That Said never attempts to reconcile this discomfort, even at the risk of appearing to trivialize the actual suffering of displaced people, again speaks volumes about its importance in his thought.

Said’s refusal to square the circle between exile as a “horrendous” phenomenon and exile as a vital mode of inquiry is even reflected in the paradoxical cadence of his prose. “Reflections on Exile,” for instance, is littered with conflicting images that Said simply allows to sit cheek by jowl without apology or transition, from the refugee with the ration card in one sentence to the Urdu poet in a café in Beirut in the next. This juxtaposition is both uncomfortable and jarring and critics over the years have not only found his stubborn refusal to resolve these tensions completely maddening, they sometimes claim that this irresolution reveals a perverse, anti-political elitism. Said not only rejected this critique, he defended his methodological decision to dwell in what others regarded as “theoretical inconsistencies.” Inconsistencies – irresolvable discordances, the irritating rub between state violence and individual suffering, between mass migration and the longings of the lonely poetic soul – these are the stuff of the exilic experience, he argued. For Said, the gap between the past and the present, home and resettled life, and the inner and outer world, remain perennially unsutured for the exile, like an irritating open wound whose healing is always stymied by the “terminal loss” of one’s “native place.” Exiles are thus prone to a kind of resentment that can manifest itself through tribalism or even the “encompassing and thumping language” of nationalism. But unlike nationalism, Said continues, exile “is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being.” For the exile, life is endlessly mediated by not just distance but time and the uncertainties of memory while the present is

---


81 In his Afterword to the 1995 edition of *Orientalism*, for instance he noted that his work had, over the years, come in for some disparagement by academic audiences because of – among other things – its “theoretical inconsistencies.” Said responded by exclaiming “I am glad that it has!” [Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 339.]


84 Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 177 (emphasis mine)
constantly being undermined and defamiliarized. For the exile, “every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country” giving rise to an internal sense of counterpoint (of playing-against) that can lend itself to a critical disposition better able to resist certainty and homophony.  

Loss is the ultimate pebble in the exile’s shoe that pains with every step and, in that unsettling pain, fosters critical consciousness, making it possible to see the world as, in William Spanos’ sympathetic rendering, “a domain of questions rather than answers.”

For Said, the unhoused critical consciousness that exile makes possible is particularly adept at denaturalizing and historicizing modes of political and cultural commonsense. Specifically, he argued, the braided experiences of loss of home, distance from home, and remembrance of home, work together to reveal a present order constituted not merely by assumed filial connections between citizens/cultures and their native places but also by affiliative relations between culture and power. Said understands filiation as an attitude toward culture more generally that frames its expression as “the mere natural continuity between one generation and the next,” a continuity embodied in the particular constellation of ideas and institutions that Gramsci called “commonsense.” Scholars interested in the putative coherence of Western civilization, for instance, often imagine that civilization in filiative terms as a cultural inheritance linked directly to a particular population through modes of genealogical descent. By contrast, for Said, affiliation implies denaturalized lines of descent forged through ideology, that is, through the active and creative fusing of particular ideas with particular populations. An affiliative understanding of culture, as articulated by Said, thus assumes that the seemingly natural connection between “the West” and its civilization is sustained and

---

88 Edward Said, “Secular Criticism,” The World, the Text, and the Critic (Harvard: 1983). Along with Adorno, Foucault, and Fanon, Gramsci was one of Said’s main political-theoretical inspirations.
re-created by the intellectual work of human beings who are themselves situated within a complex web of
connections that they participate in sewing between culture and the world.89

As a whole, Said’s work models the kind of critical inquiry enabled by the exilic disposition he
championed, constantly drawing our attention to the affiliative connections between culture, power, and
imperial politics that are effectively erased by the language of culture itself. Imperialism as an ideology
works hard to sunder, in Said’s words, “that implicit network of peculiarly cultural associations between
forms, statements and other aesthetic elaborations” that make up western culture from the “institutions,
agencies, classes, and amorphous social forces” that are associated with imperial rule.90 In the imperial
imaginary, western culture circulates independently from the multiplicity of political, material, and military
linkages that tied (and continue to tie) European society since the nineteenth-century – and America since
1945 – to the colonized and formerly colonized world.91 Culture, in this context, works to “make invisible
and even ‘impossible’ the actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one
hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force on the other.”92

For Said, the experience of being torn from the seamless connection between self and homeland makes it
more possible to identify and critique affiliative connections between culture, power, and homeland more
generally. Importantly, however, because exile is “a median state, neither completely at one with the new
setting nor fully disencumbered of the old,” Said also argued that the exile’s detachment from filiative
culture (which enables insight) is never complete but, rather, “is predicated on the existence of, love for, and

---
89 Said makes this point particularly cogently in his sustained comments on the production of Eric
Auerbach’s Mimesis. Written while Auerbach was in exile in Istanbul during World War Two, without access
to his library or any intellectual interlocutors, a text usually championed as a “massive reaffirmation of the
Western cultural tradition,” Said maintains, was actually “built upon a critically important alienation from it.”
91 I use the post-World War Two benchmark to indicate the United State’s rise to global military and
political supremacy but I do not wish to discount its long settler colonial history or its pre-war history of
imperial aggression in the Pacific, the Caribbean, and Latin America.
a real bond with one’s native place.” 93 What is true of all exile, Said thus insisted, “is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.” 94 The terrible loss that inheres within the experience of exile never dulls the “real bond” a person feels for her home, but it does have the perverse effect of making all experiences seem provisional, “as if they were about to disappear.” Looking at lived life through the lens of loss – through the detached experience of someone who still feels the “sweetness” of home but who knows that the recapture of that sweetness is impossible – gives rise to a form of persistent reflection on subjectivity, a nagging mode of questioning about the relationship between the current moment and self that prompts the exile to wonder what is worth saving and what, if necessary, could be given up in a pinch. 95 It is almost as if, for Said, once one has experienced the pain of seeing filiative relationships transformed into all their complex affinities, one can never go back to a state of unseeing. It becomes less likely, he mused, for the exile to accept pat explanations of belonging that flow, seemingly without effort, from the nationalist’s “pride in one’s heritage” or a “certainty about who ‘we’ are.” 96

At its best, loss of home without loss of love of home, renders the exile trying to make sense of the world from this unstable perspective both removed enough from the immediate pull of national belonging to reflect upon it but also simultaneously aware – on a deeply instinctual level – of why and how the sentiments of homeland can be so powerful. Thus, the perspective that flows from this experience of loss does not have to be fatalism, according to Said, nor disdain for the ties that bind human beings to their local communities. Rather, being caught between worlds can lead to a kind of detached attachment, a form of unclosed consciousness that is both empathetic to feelings of untroubled connection and possessed of a nettling need to question fundamental certainties about

93 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 336.
95 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 336.
96 Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, 336
connection; about the affiliative relationship between identity, culture, and place.\(^7\) The “double perspective” which flows from the exile’s experience of seeing the world in terms of what is there and what has been left behind, impels a form of criticism that troubles commonsense narratives of belonging while retaining a deeply felt sympathy for what it means to belong. Of course, Said is aware that the experience of exile doesn’t inevitable resolve itself into this kind of critical perspective and that the sheer awfulness of living in exile can, and often does, promote seclusion and intransigence. But, he still maintained, “provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned.”\(^8\) Indeed, he felt so strongly about the illuminative capacity of exile as an alternative intellectual disposition to the relentless “we” of dominant culture that he believed even non-exiles, “lifelong members of a society,” could and should adopt the perspective of exile. Exile “in this metaphysical sense,” he continued “is restlessness, movement, being unsettled and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and alas you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.”\(^9\)

It is this feeling of discomfort – of being unsettled and unsettling others – that global justice scholars lack almost entirely. They may theorize broadly and expansively about world poverty, war and peace, and the impact of globalization but it seemingly never occurs to them to consider that the subject position from which they theorize – often nestled within the benign liberal “we” voice – is anything other than obviously, filiatively, and fixedly attached to a culture and state that require no explanation.

This sense of subjective sureness is so common to global justice scholarship that it holds true for even those cosmopolitan thinkers who emphatically reject the primacy of national affiliation and/or national

\(^7\) Said, \textit{Culture and Imperialism}, 336.
\(^9\) Said, \textit{Representations of the Intellectual}, 53. While it opens up all kinds of potentials for theorizing, there are of course, problems with Said’s insistence that members of settled societies might simply slip on the perspective of that exile as a matter of choice. As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia put it, “it is difficult to see how far the idea of metaphorocity can be taken without dissolving the concept of exile altogether.” Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, \textit{Edward Said} (Routledge, 1999), 46.
duty (in contrast to their “social” Rawlsian counterparts). These thinkers, including Beitz, Nussbaum, and Shue, each draw upon a liberal/Enlightenment language – channeled through Rawls, Kant, or the Stoics – to argue that, in Nussbaum’s words, “reason rather than patriotism or group sentiment” ought to guide moral action. Regardless of the particularities of their approaches, these thinkers generally agree that human beings who happen to live within liberal democratic states have ethical obligations to human beings in other parts of the world that transcend national boundaries and that “we” can understand the nature and extent of these obligations through appeals to reason. Questions which these scholars might thus typically ask are: what obligations do citizens in the Global North owe to citizens in the Global South? To what extent are citizens in the Global North responsible for rectifying poverty in these countries? To what extent should questions of sovereignty mitigate against the use of interventionist military force by liberal democracies in the name of human rights? What role should universal concerns for these human rights play in the construction of transnational economic policies? What particular responsibilities do developed countries have to mitigate the effects of climate change?

Over the years, debates in political theory/philosophy between cosmopolitans and their critics have tended to focus on the role of local or national communities versus universal reason in the formation of moral obligations and they almost always revolve around questions of identification. In other words, these debates are centrally concerned with the extent to which individuals within nation states can really sustain a

---


101 This is true even of cosmopolitan philosophers like Anthony Appiah who are specifically concerned with the incorporation of non-western modes of life into cosmopolitan theory and are thus committed to making “difference” a fundamental feature of that theory. Appiah’s notion of “universal plus difference,” for instance, remains largely wedded to the same logic of “incorporation” and “inclusion” that Said identified with the imperialist impulses of Enlightenment thought, impulses he believed could only be adequately addressed through an interrogation of the affiliative connections between imperialism and western culture in history. Appiah tends to confuse postcolonial criticism in general with attempts by activists in the Global South to “preserve culture” in the face of economic globalization. [Appiah, Cosmopolitanism, 106.] See also Ulrich Beck’s sympathetic, but ultimately limited and ahistorical, defense of cosmopolitanism in the context of multiculturalism and globalization. Beck, U. 2002. ‘The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies,’ Theory Culture Society 19 (1–2), 17–44
robust sense of moral and political connection to others with whom they do not identify as fellow nationals. For cosmopolitan-inspired global justice scholars, cultural and political identification with “the other” – the Global South, the “developing” world – isn’t necessary since people are capable of understanding moral obligation through reason. But for a communitarian critic like Alasdair Macintyre, this hubristic faith in reason ignores the role that identification with one’s national or local community plays in the development of moral consciousness. “The self,” Macintyre maintains, “has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities.” This critique isn’t limited to communitarians however. Conservative and liberal-multiculturalist scholars likewise focus their critiques on this question of identification. Jack Goldsmith thus argues against the idea the United States as any “cosmopolitan duty” to “take affirmative steps that would help other nations and their peoples” on the grounds that that individuals first learn their duties to others within local and national communities. Will Kymlicka similarly couches his critiques in terms of identification, arguing that scholars like David Held’s who emphasize “communities of fate” diminish the very real role that national and local communities play in fashioning people’s responses to globalization.

What most cosmopolitan theorists and their critics share, however, is a completely untroubled surety about the fixedness of the position from which they theorize or dismiss identity. In other words, cosmopolitans global justice scholars consistently ask questions about “our” ethical obligations toward “others”: non-nationals, refugees, potential victims of genocide. Critics raise concern about the extent to

---


103 In Goldsmith’s words, “cosmopolitan duty” makes little sense in a world where individuals “tend to focus their attention, energies, and altruism on members of their community (friends, family, and compatriots) with whom they identify and share a common bond.” Jack Goldsmith, “Liberal Democracy and Cosmopolitan Duty,” *Stanford Law Review*, 55.5 (2003), 1677.

104 It is absolutely true, he argues, that many of the material and political forces which shape people’s lives cut across national borders, a reality increased in an era of globalization. But, he insists, what “determines the boundaries of the ‘communities of fate’ is not the forces people are subjected to, but rather how they respond to those forces, and in particular, what sorts of collectivities they identify with when responding to those forces.”
which citizens within national communities can identify with a broader conception of humanity and the ethical obligations that flow from this identification. But whether they take identification as key to morality or not, it never occurs to Nussbaum, Beitz, and Shue or to MacIntyre, Goldsmith or Kymlicka, to question their own untroubled identification with a community of origin. None of these thinkers ever wonders whether or not the political and theoretical ground upon which they stand is solid. None of them consider what questioning the solidity of that ground might do for their theorizing. Safely situated within their communities of origin or choice, able to return home when and if they like it, these thinkers can theorize broadly – drawing upon either the Enlightenment tradition in which reason remains resolutely unencumbered by burdens of home, belonging, or feeling or the Burkean tradition which ties virtue to the “little platoons” of home – about the extent to which people who may or may not be like them can identify or not identify with a global moral community. In sum, in their arguments about what is more important – detached reason or attached community, universal theory or particular virtue – cosmopolitans and their critics both assume that their own attachments go without question and that ruminating on them can have no bearing on their theorizing.

By contrast, Said’s exilic subject begins her analysis of the world from the perspective of loss; that is, from the position that the ground upon which she stands is not the home with which she identifies, a home to which she can never return or fully occupy but for which she continues to feel deeply. This sympathetic, attached and detached perspective, necessarily doubles back on itself, generating a constant mode of questioning nestled in the fundamental question Said asks in *After the Last Sky*, a book about everyday Palestinian lives; “Do we exist? What proof do we have?”105 In other words, beginning from the place of loss, from a sense of insecurity about one’s own relationship to place and to memory, prods into being

modes of reflection that open up identity itself to contestation, a state of being Said describes in his autobiography as a sense of self wrapped around a “cluster of flowing currents.”

Because exilic critics begin from a place of instability and loss rather than closure, they are more likely to ask questions about the world that differ significantly from those of settled global justice scholars and their critics, questions that boil down to, “what do we owe to others and what enables or prohibits us from identifying with those others”? Rather, the exilic intellectual who begins from the unstable ground of wondering “do we exist? What proof do we have?” asks questions about the very nature of the “we” itself and about the affiliative connections that naturalize modes of domination between “us” and “them,” modes of domination that undergird assumptions about the West, the “international community,” and the “liberal global order.” Such a perspective, when oriented for instance, toward those problems that preoccupy global justice scholars, is thus less likely to ask “what do we owe others?” Rather, it might ask; “how, in a world framed by histories of violence and colonial dispossession, extraction, and domination, and historical connection, did we come to be who we are?” As such, it pushes the question of identification – and all the subsequent questions of distribution, justice, obligation, and intervention that flow from it – inward, backward, and outward, toward an investigation of those affiliative connections that structure the current global order with its history and contemporary practices of imperial aggression, dispossession, and resource extraction. An exilic inclination reorients the object of theoretical concern away from the shivering, starving, bomb-throwing masses of the world (“them”) toward an interrogation of how they came to be them in the context of “us” in the first place. An exilic orientation disrupts the preening in the mirror and points toward where the bodies are buried, or, in Said’s words, it sees things “not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way.”

The genealogical mode of criticism enabled by exile was, for Said, “a form of resistance” tied to the

---

postcolonial project more generally. With postcolonial theory, the provincializing edge of exilic criticism cuts through imperial amnesia by insisting, in Said’s words, that subjectivity in a postcolonial world be read not merely as the effortless expression of those “autonomous enclosures” associated with the national communities of the West but, rather, as the product of the “dynamic global environment” created by imperialism itself. Exilic criticism in this postcolonial vein suggests not only that the preening subjective position associated with the liberal democratic states of the Global North ought to be read in contrapuntal relation to the Global South, but that both be read in light of the history and current imperial practices that created and sustain the very states and peoples now claiming such attachment to a “liberal world order.”

As increasing numbers of global intellectual historians, scholars of international law, critical IR, IR realism, and the history of political thought have shown, the transition from a world of empires to a “liberal world order” was anything but ordered and liberal for the vast majority of the world’s citizens. Rather, imperial domination was woven into the fabric of the very international institutions said to constitute the backbone of today’s global system, a system global scholars rarely pause to consider. Exilic inquiry thus demands that global justice scholars devote significantly more time to unpacking the role of race in the construction of the current world order to which Mills draws our attention while reflecting on the complicity which Moyn identities between global justice as a field and the dismissal of “southern agency.” It suggests that the subjective position of “we” from which so many scholars in the academic discipline of IR, international

109 Said, Culture and Imperialism, 51. As increasing numbers of global intellectual historians, scholars of international law, critical IR, and the history of political thought have shown, the “global environment” during the period of transition from a world of empires to a still-imperial world of states
relations experts, and theorists of global justice speak, comes freighted with all of the “inherent contradictoriness” of imperial history and its furious erasure.

In Said’s mind, however, it was never enough for exilic inquiry simply to unsettle and disrupt. Rather, in his mind, inhabiting the subjective position of exile also had deeply ethical implications. And it is this orientation toward ethics that differentiates Said’s work from the postcolonial intellectual movement he inspired. While Said was deeply invested in and connected to postcolonial scholarship, he was not, as Rosi Bradioti puts it, always “very keen” on parts of the field that “nonetheless celebrated him as a foundational figure.” His disagreements with some postcolonial scholars sprang largely from what he saw as both a tendency toward inward-looking identity politics and a simultaneous tendency to allow the necessary tools of discourse analysis to end in political paralysis. By contrast, Said argued forcefully in Representations of the Intellectual that the exilic mode of proceeding through and interpreting life also entails an ethical responsibility “to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d’etre is to represent all those people and issues who are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.” This impulse frequently intersected, in his work, with the broader postcolonial imperative to, for instance, expose the affiliative connections between British imperialism, Orientalist, and Zionism in the

---

113 It is also what differentiates Said from Foucault, a scholar to whom he was deeply indebted and of whom he was deeply critical. Thus, for Said, Foucault’s obsession with discipline and lack of interest in resistance had the unfortunate effect of ultimately rendering him an apolitical “scribe of domination.” [Said, “Traveling Theory,” (1982), The Edward Said Reader (Vintage, 2000), 215.] Said’s relationship to – and critique of – Foucault and his method is obviously much more complicated than can be explored here and has inspired a great deal of comment.
historical creation of the modern state of Israel.\textsuperscript{117} For Said, however, the disruptive unsettling quality of exilic criticism must also function as “an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life” because, in disclosing the affiliative connections between culture and politics, it also opens up contemporary political horizons to “non-dominative and non-coercive modes of life and knowledge.”\textsuperscript{118}

Thus, in contrast to both the largely deconstructive impulses of some postcolonial scholarship and also to political theory’s often knee jerk desire to enclose ‘the political’ and seek reconciliation – even when it is expressed negatively, as with Adorno, as distant hope – exilic criticism is always tied, for Said, to the unreconciled demand for both disruption and transformation. In Said’s hands, an exilic critique of the historical intersection between imperial power and Orientalist culture in the founding of Israel reveals not just the way a contemporary language of statehood occludes these affiliations but also gestures toward other historical modes of coexistence and self-determination. Prior to 1948, Said argues in \textit{Freud and the Non-European}, Palestine had been “a diverse, multiracial population of many different peoples,” who were both “European and non-European.”\textsuperscript{119} His point here isn’t to romanticize pre-1948 Palestine but, rather, to insist that modes of political and cultural coexistence other than those established through the imperialist practices of twentieth-century nation-state building are not just possible but are necessary points of illumination and consideration for anyone interested in the search for “solutions” to the problems of violence and apartheid in Israel/Palestine. The “multicultural, multietnic, multireligious” history of Israel/Palestine, he argued in an influential 1999 article, “The One State Solution,” suggests that it is a “radical simplification” to think of that territory as “principally or exclusively Jewish or Arab.” “There is,” he continued, “as little historical justification for homogeneity as there is for notions of national or ethnic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{117} For just one example of this analysis at work see, Edward Said, The Question of Palestine (Vintage Books, 1992).
\item \textsuperscript{119} Edward Said, \textit{Freud and The Non-European} (Verso, 2004), 41.
\end{itemize}
and religious purity today.” In this example as in others, Said argued that cultivating a disposition toward politics situated in subjective instability opens up ethical theorizing about the world to the contested terrain of imperial history and the imperial present. This disposition rejects “the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath” (in Leela Gandhi’s words) and insists that proceeding on the basis of “abridged memory” in Israel/Palestine has only ever led, and will only ever lead, to “continued injustice, unmitigated conflict, apartheid.” At its core, the ethical impulse of exile refigures the act of theorizing justice as “a series of reflections rather than a string of assertions or affirmations.”

Global justice scholarship, by contrast, almost always begins and ends with a string of assertions and affirmations; unspoken assertions and affirmations about the “we” who theorize and ceaselessly articulated assertions and affirmations about what is best for the Global South. I conclude this essay by suggesting that, the rise of Trumpism in America, Alternative Für Deutschland in Germany, and the Brexit movement in the UK – whose uncomfortable reprisals I now personally feel in a way I could only intellectualize a month ago – all suggest that rabid xenophobia, anti-immigrant rage, and white nationalism are alive and well in the “liberal” states of the Global North. Given these realities, now might be an excellent time for global justice scholars to cease preening and begin reflecting on the relationship between the “we” who theorizes and the “we” who imperializes. For political theorists, this entails confronting the internal bordering of the discipline, the bordering of the world through IR, and the bordering within the field that draws scholars – like a centripetal force – away from postcolonialism and toward the yawning maw of “the political,” open just long enough to enable closure. An exilic disposition provides no bannisters, no reassurances, or solutions, only the possibility for transformation, a chance to look in the mirror, see, and theorize

differently. Or, in Said’s words, “only in that precarious exilic realm can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway.”