

# Introduction: constructing Eurocentrism and international theory as Eurocentric construct

## Introduction: international theory as defender of Western civilization

This book produces a twin-revisionist narrative of Eurocentrism and international theory. While the first narrative provides an alternative understanding of Eurocentrism/Orientalism to the reductive conception that was bequeathed by the late, pioneering Edward Said (1978/2003), the second argues that international theory, which has developed both inside and outside of the discipline of International Relations in the last quarter-millennium is, for the most part, a Eurocentric construct. Or to put it more accurately, international theory largely constructs a series of Eurocentric conceptions of world politics. I state this in the plural because I argue that Eurocentrism is a polymorphous, multivalent discourse that crystallizes in a variety of forms. And this leads on to one of my central claims: that international theory does not so much explain international politics in an objective, positivist and universalist manner but seeks, rather, to parochially celebrate and defend or promote the West as the proactive subject of, and as the highest or ideal normative referent in, world politics.

Of course, my reader will assume immediately that in portraying much of international theory as Eurocentric so I will necessarily (re)view it in an imperialist light. But one of the major claims I make in this book is that ‘Eurocentrism’ not only takes different forms, but that some of these are anti-imperialist while others are imperialist. Such a move, of course, problematizes in an immediate way Said’s inherently imperialist definition of Eurocentrism/Orientalism. Of course, I realize that breaking the Gordian Knot between Eurocentrism and imperialism would most likely be viewed within postcolonial circles as a heretical move. But, as I shall argue in this book, an anti-imperialist politics is often as politically fraught as is its so-called imperialist ‘Other’. For my claim is that the conventional binary that differentiates a Eurocentric or racist

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conception of imperialism from a *tolerant* cultural-pluralist conception of anti-imperialism often turns out to be more imaginary than real.

Accordingly, this book will speak to a variety of disciplines: to International Relations, of course, but also to those who have an interest in understanding Eurocentrism/Orientalism. For since the publication of Edward Said's seminal book, *Orientalism* in 1978, the idea and critique of Eurocentrism or Orientalism has spread right across the Social Sciences and Humanities permeating a series of conceptually-based disciplines such as Politics, Political Theory and International Relations (IR), Political Economy/International Political Economy (IPE), Political Geography, Sociology, Literary/Cultural Studies and, not least, Anthropology. And given my belief that Eurocentrism infects significant swathes of these disciplines so the need to learn more about it should be a matter of concern for such disciplinary practitioners, if not of some urgency. Nevertheless, many potential non-IR readers might still be put off from reading a book that deals with international theorists, most of whom reside within the discipline of IR.

Here, it is important to understand that I do not simply treat international theory as the pure subject of interest for it also doubles up as a vehicle, or repository, of the various Eurocentric metanarratives. In this way, then, international theory is to this book what Western literature is to Edward Said's, *Orientalism*; a book that people read even if they do not reside within cultural or literary studies. And in any case, given Said's claim that Eurocentrism has a clear link with international politics – in his case imperialism – then international theory should logically constitute the ultimate litmus test for revealing this discourse in Western academic thought. Accordingly, this book can be read by two separate audiences in two separate but complementary ways: by a non-IR readership that is interested in learning more about Eurocentrism – the multiple forms it has taken and how its architecture changes over time – and by an IR readership that is interested in understanding the Eurocentric foundations of international theory. It is also for this reason that I ask for the IR reader's forbearance at particular times given that I discuss various thinkers who are not conventionally associated with IR – for example, Karl Pearson, Benjamin Kidd, David Starr Jordan and Lothrop Stoddard.

In order to prepare the reader for the journey ahead, this chapter introduces three major areas, the first of which spells out some of the key conceptual moves that my alternative vision of Eurocentrism entails. I then deconstruct six of IR's cardinal axioms in the light of the argument made in this book, before closing the chapter by setting out my own definitions of imperialism and anti-imperialism within international theory.

### Re-visioning 'Eurocentrism' as a multivalent, promiscuous discourse

#### *Unpacking the four generic variants of 'Orientalism'*

It should be noted that the focus of Chapters 2–12 zooms in on the core properties that I outline on the right-hand side of Table 1.1. That is, each chapter reveals the specific metanarrative that underpins each international theory; the particulars of the 'standard of civilization' deployed; the degree of agency it ascribes to East and West; its position with respect to imperialism or anti-imperialism; and its particular 'sensitivity'. The key point, of course, is that my pluralistic or multivalent conception of 'Orientalism' differs from that of Said's monochromatic definition on the grounds that mine builds in a strong degree of contingency on all the key dimensions (barring the shared agreement concerning the centrality of the standard of civilization that underpins all 'Orientalist' theories).

The source of Said's double-reductive conception of Eurocentrism/Orientalism is, in the first instance, that it conflates what I call Eurocentric institutionalism with scientific racism, and then in the second conflates Orientalism with a purely imperialist politics. Of the many examples that could be used the following two seem to be as good as any. For when discussing the prevalence of Orientalism in nineteenth-century Europe, Said believes it to be 'correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was . . . a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric' (Said 1978/2003: 203–4). Or again: '[t]o say that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact' (Said 1978/2003: 39). My own alternative non-reductive conception is laid out in Table 1.2, which presents a four-field matrix that reveals the four key dimensions of 'generic' Eurocentrism that existed in the period 1760–1945.

To counter Said's double-reductive move I begin by breaking down his concept of Orientalism into two component parts – scientific racism and Eurocentric institutionalism – and then subdividing these categories into their imperialist and anti-imperialist components. Eurocentric institutionalism, which began to appear in infant form after the 'discovery' of America by the Spanish,<sup>1</sup> took off during the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and was consolidated

<sup>1</sup> See especially Jahn (2000); Inayatullah and Blaney (2004); Anghie (2005); Bowden (2009); cf. Pagden (1995).

Table 1.1 *Alternative conceptions of Orientalism/Eurocentrism*

	Said’s reductive conception of Orientalism	‘Non-reductive’ conception of Eurocentric institutionalism & scientific racism
Relationship of Orientalism and Scientific Racism	<b>Inherent</b> Racism, especially social Darwinism and Eugenics, is merely the highest expression of imperialist-Orientalism	<b>Contingent</b> Racism and Eurocentric institutionalism are analytically differentiated even if they share various overlaps
The centrality of the ‘standard of civilization’	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Agency is the monopoly of the West	<b>Inherent</b> The West has hyper-agency, the East has none	<b>Contingent</b> The West always has pioneering agency, while the East ranges from high to low levels of agency; but where these are high they are deemed to be regressive or barbaric
Propensity for imperialism	<b>Inherent</b>	<b>Contingent</b> Can be imperialist and anti-imperialist
Sensibility (Propensity for Western triumphalism)	<b>Inherent</b>	<b>Contingent</b> Racism is often highly defensive and reflects Western anxiety. Some racist thought and much of Eurocentric institutionalism exhibits Western self-confidence, if not triumphalism

during the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Reduced to its essence this discourse locates difference in institutional/cultural factors rather than genetic/biological ones. Critically, for the overwhelming part, Eurocentric

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Said (1978/2003); Amin (1989); Bernal (1991).

Table 1.2 *The four variants of generic Eurocentrism in international theory*

	Pro-imperialist	Anti-imperialist
Eurocentric institutionalism	(A) Paternalist	(B) Anti-paternalist
Scientific racism	(C) Offensive	(D) Defensive

institutionalists believed that *all* humans and *all* societies have recourse to universal reason and that *all* are capable of progressing from savagery/ barbarism into civilization. This is not, however, to say that climate and environment played no part within Eurocentric institutionalism. For some such as Friedrich List and Baron de Montesquieu, climate ultimately trumped culture and institutions. But these were very much the exceptions and to the extent that climate played a role in this genre it was at most an intervening variable.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Thus, for example, while climatic arguments hover in the very distant background of Karl Marx’s theory of history, with the claim that aridity might have played a role in creating the ‘Oriental despotic’ state in Asia, nevertheless its negative impact on economic progress could be transcended by the European civilizing mission and the delivery of progressive institutions. Georg Hegel, by contrast, is considered by some to be a climatic determinist. Undoubtedly he accorded climate far more ontological weighting than did Marx, declaring that ‘[i]n the Frigid and in the Torrid Zone the locality of World-historical peoples cannot be found. . . . The true theatre of History is therefore the temperate zone’ (Hegel 1837/2001: 97). But even here Hegel followed this statement with the immediate qualification that ‘[n]ature should not be rated too high nor too low’. List and Montesquieu were the clear exceptions. List argued that Europe was advanced because industry flourishes only in the temperate zone. Critically, while he argued that European colonization could certainly bring economic benefits to the countries of the torrid zone (List 1841/1909: ch. 22), nevertheless the effects of a tropical climate are such that those ‘which are at present dependent colonies can hardly ever liberate themselves from that condition’ (List 1841/1909: 217). Unlike in Marx’s formulation, even the benefits that were delivered to the East via the civilizing mission were ultimately insufficient to overcome the regressive grip of the torrid climate. It is also noteworthy that the argument which emphasizes the climatic origins of Oriental despotism – which was fully developed by the Marxist, Karl Wittfogel (1963) – had already emerged in the work of Montesquieu. So heavy was his emphasis on climate that at times Montesquieu draws close to morphing into a racist position (e.g., Montesquieu 1748/1900: 221–34). These exceptional cases point to the possibility that a thin interstitial (permeable) zone might well reside between Eurocentric institutionalism and scientific racism in Table 1.2.

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Nevertheless, while it is conventionally assumed that this discourse is inherently imperialist – both inside and outside postcolonial circles – I identify within it two subdivisions, one imperialist the other anti-imperialist. The former I call ‘paternalist Eurocentrism’, which awards Western societies a *pioneering agency* such that they can auto-generate or auto-develop into modernity while conversely, Eastern societies are granted *conditional agency* and are unable to auto-generate or self-develop. In this paternalist imaginary it is incumbent upon the West to engage in an imperial civilizing mission in order to deliver the necessary rational institutions to the Eastern societies so as to bring to the surface their latent reason, thereby kick-starting their progressive development into modernity.

By contrast, the anti-imperialist variant takes the form of *anti-paternalist* Eurocentrism. While much of postcolonialism assumes that Eurocentrism in general rejects the proposition that the Eastern peoples are capable of self-generation or auto-development, I claim that this particular genre argues specifically that non-European peoples will evolve naturally and spontaneously – or ‘auto-develop’ – into civilization. This entails what I call Eastern *derivative agency* wherein such societies will develop but only by following the ‘naturalized Western path’ that had been pioneered by the Europeans through their ‘exceptional institutional genius’. That is, the West remains the original pioneer of development such that its *particular* path is reified as the universal or *natural* one that the non-Western societies will automatically follow. Overall, this means not merely that there is no need for a Western civilizing mission to kick-start non-Western development, but also that imperialism is viewed as a hindrance to the developmental prospects of Eastern – as well as Western – societies.

While scientific racism places a strong degree of emphasis on genetics and biology as underpinning difference, this was often accompanied by a deep emphasis on climate and physical environment. For some, the causal pendulum of race behaviour swings towards the climatic/environmental pole, whereas for others it swings more towards the genetic pole. This multivalent archipelago of discourses was far more heterogeneous than Eurocentric institutionalism and was fractured into all sorts of subdiscourses, including Social Darwinism, Eugenics, Weismann’s germ-plasm theory, Mendelianism and, not least Lamarckianism, some of which were complementary while others conflicted.<sup>4</sup> One of the most common misconceptions of the popular

<sup>4</sup> Thus August Weismann’s germ-plasm theory, which emerged in the 1880s, rejected Lamarck’s assumption that acquired use characteristics could be passed on to subsequent

received view is that scientific racism posited the fixity or immutability of the genetic properties of the various races. While this is certainly true of Eugenics, it ignores Lamarckianism (see esp. Stocking 1982). This is vitally important to appreciate because Lamarckianism factors social practice into the mix and because it was embraced, albeit in varying degrees, by many scientific racist international theorists. It is, therefore, worth exploring a little further.

In his seminal book *Zoological Philosophy* (1809/2011) Jean-Baptiste Lamarck argued that culture and social practices were partially autonomous determinants of race behaviour, as much as genetics and environment attained a partial autonomy in shaping behaviour. Moreover, these multiple determinants of race behaviour are then transmitted to subsequent generations through acquired hereditary characteristics. Typical examples of this are found in Robert Bean's explanation of the Jewish nose, which is viewed as the hereditary product of an habitual expression of indignation; or that a workman performing manual labour develops large hands that are then inherited by the subsequent generation. And to use the most well-known example, the giraffe acquired its long neck as an hereditary characteristic of its ancestors' practice of straining to reach up into the tops of trees in order to acquire food within an arid environment. Essentially, this approach is open to the point that changes in social behaviour and social environment can, over a succession of generations, lead on to changes in hereditary characteristics.

The critical take-home point is that Lamarckianism assumes that racial characteristics are not fixed and immutable but can change, evolve and not infrequently progress over time. Thus, if 'rational' institutions can be transmitted to the backward races via the civilizing mission, so over time these can effect 'progressive' change as the ability to act rationally eventually becomes embedded within the receiving race's gene pool. No less important is the point that neo-Lamarckianism could be deployed to produce a very wide variety of conceptions of domestic and world politics incorporating

imperialists who spoke of the 'white man's burden' . . . reformers who spoke of lifting up 'the backward races' . . . Southerners who were erecting the framework of Jim Crow legislation, and . . . those who saw the progress of the Negro race in terms of the gradualism of Booker T. Washington (Stocking 1982: 253).

generations. The exact formulation was that changes in the *soma* (body tissue) did not effect the *germ plasm* (the reproductive tissue). Much later on, germ plasm was relabelled DNA. Similarly Lamarckianism was challenged around the turn of the twentieth century by the rediscovery of Mendel's laws regarding genetic heredity.



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And to this list I would add the anti-imperialism of Spencer's, as well as the violent racist-imperialism of Lester Ward's, Lamarckian social Darwinism.

Turning to scientific racism's stance on world politics I divide the literature into two generic categories – imperialist 'offensive racism' and anti-imperialist 'defensive racism'. Nevertheless, it is equally important to note that there are a large variety of positions within each of these two headlining categories. For example, taking defensive racism first, I argue that one strand is found in the likes of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner; an approach which views imperialism as serving only to undermine the natural progress that all societies will inevitably make. Crucially, then, imperialism would be a regressive step, hindering spontaneous black and yellow racial development while simultaneously leading to the 'rebarbarization of (white) civilization'. By contrast, the relativist racism of the likes of James Blair and David Starr Jordan fundamentally denied the Eastern races any developmental agency by insisting that non-white development was impossible, thereby rendering the civilizing mission as all but futile since the non-white races were simply incapable of becoming civilized. Moreover, an important strand of defensive racism emphasized the 'yellow barbaric peril' as constituting a massive existential threat to white racial supremacy, and thereby awarded the yellow and sometimes brown races extremely high levels of agency, albeit of a regressive/barbaric nature (most notably Charles Pearson and Lothrop Stoddard). All in all, the lowest common denominator of defensive racism is the belief that the white race must avoid coming into contact with the non-white races for fear of racial contamination (especially through miscegenation or blood-mixing). This meant avoiding imperialism while at the same time putting up strong barriers to non-white immigration (the conception of the 'besieged Western citadel battening down the hatches'). That is, in seeking to *distance* the white West from the non-European races so they constructed various 'racial apartheid conceptions of world politics'.

In turn defensive racism is differentiated from imperialist-racism or what I term *offensive racism*. This found its expression in racist thinkers of liberal and socialist persuasions, some of whom even went so far as to embrace some form of exterminist racist imperialism, as in for example, Lester Ward, Benjamin Kidd and Karl Pearson. Racism also found its expression in 'racist-realism' (b. 1889, d. 1945). Significantly, racist-realism was no monolith but constituted a microcosm of scientific racism given that it expressed different types of racism and thereby



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yielded multiple conceptions of imperialism. Some were anxious about the coming 'yellow peril', awarding the yellow races high levels of, albeit regressive/predatory, agency such that they posed a direct threat to white civilization and therefore required imperial containment (e.g., Halford Mackinder and Alfred Mahan). Equally, as I explain in Chapter 7, other offensive racists were not so much worried that the 'barbarians are coming!' but were gripped by extreme levels of racial anxiety that derived from their perception that the 'barbarians are already here in our midst!' (e.g., Adolf Hitler and Houston Stewart Chamberlain). In Hitler's imperialist formulation, of course, the solution was to exterminate the barbaric threat – especially the alien Jew but also the unfit white German – who served only to contaminate and thereby undermine the vitality of the Aryan race. Nevertheless, there were also those who were far less pessimistic about such threats (e.g., Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge), and in granting the Eastern races very little agency proclaimed in triumphant fashion a glorious future for the white race and its noble mission in spreading civilization across the global frontier.

To close this discussion I discern four primary variants of Orientalism or 'generic Eurocentrism' within which international theory was embedded prior to 1945, while noting important differences within each of them. Concerning the lowest common denominator, all of these variants analytically separate out East from West, purging the latter of all 'negative' features and transposing them onto the former.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the West is imbued with purely virtuous and/or progressive properties that in turn lead it to pioneer all that is progressive in world politics. Conversely, the East is always deemed to be less progressive than the pioneering West. At times the East was deemed, at worst, to be the repository of barbarous or savage regressivism that posed a threat to civilization and world order or, at best, was destined to be exterminated either by the actions of the superior civilized white race or by the 'merciful' hands of Nature. And in all cases, these variants invoke an *ahistorical* conception of world politics and of economic/political development, summarized by the trope of 'first the West and then elsewhere' (Chakrabarty 2000: esp. 4–11); or, if I may be permitted some interpretative licence here, 'first the West, then the Rest'. The one caveat of note here, though, is the point that a good number of scientific racists believed that the black and red savages would never develop even under the

<sup>5</sup> And for a deeper discussion of this see the poignant analyses in Nandy (1983) and Todorov (1984).

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‘exceptional tutelage’ of the Western Empire. For such thinkers the trope of ‘first the West, then the Rest’ becomes transformed into ‘only once, and only in the West’.

Of course, while many a reader might see little wrong with the notion of ‘first the West, then the Rest’ – for, after all, this appeals to the ‘eminently reasonable’ and ‘common-sense’ view of (Eurocentric) history – it should, however, be noted that I counter this at various points in Part III of this book with my non-Eurocentric idiom that ‘without the Rest there might be no West’. By this I am referring to the point that the West was not an early- but a late-developer, and owes its breakthrough to modernity in large, though by no means exclusive, part to the East from which it borrowed all manner of technologies, institutions and ideas throughout its long developmental period between 800 and 1800 (see also Hobson 2004, 2007, 2011b).

As far as the post-1945 era is concerned, scientific racism disappears from IR theory (even if Eugenics programmes remained a feature of the domestic politics of various countries including the United States and Scandinavia for several more decades). And manifest Eurocentrism took on a *subliminal* form during the era of decolonization and the Cold War. I differentiate ‘subliminal’ from ‘manifest’ Eurocentrism on the basis that the former reproduces many of the aspects of the latter but that its Eurocentric properties are hidden from immediate view.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for example, all *explicit* talk of imperialism is dropped, with imperialism often going by a term that dares not speak its name – as in, for example, neorealist discussions of American or British *hegemony* (see Chapter 8). Equally, *explicit* talk of ‘civilization versus barbarism’ is largely dropped in favour of its equivalent ‘sanitized’ terms: ‘modernity versus tradition’ and ‘core versus periphery’. This discourse underpins classical realism and neorealism (see Chapter 8), neoliberal institutionalism and classical pluralist English School theory (see Chapter 9), as well as much of neo-Marxism (see Chapter 10). After 1989, however, subliminal Eurocentric institutionalism recedes mainly into significant parts of critical IR theory and takes a back-seat to the revival of manifest Eurocentric institutionalism within mainstream IR theory. Thus what I call post-1989 ‘Western-realism’ goes back to the future of post-1889 imperialist racist-realism, while post-1989 ‘Western-liberalism’ returns us back to post-1830 paternalist-Eurocentrism.

<sup>6</sup> Though this distinction should not be confused with Said’s contrast between what he calls Manifest and Latent Orientalism (Said 1978/2003: ch. 3).