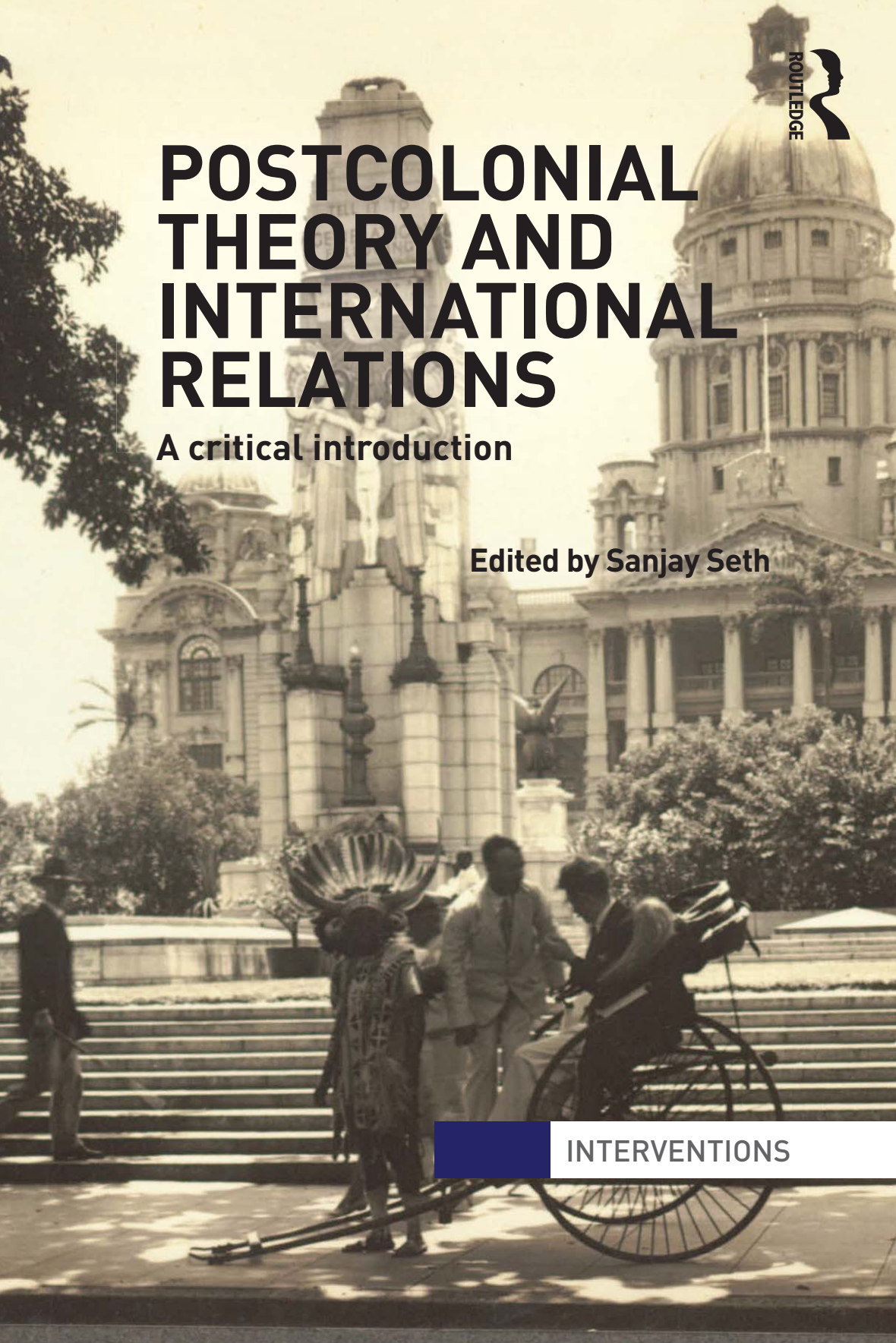

ROUTLEDGE

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A critical introduction

Edited by Sanjay Seth

INTERVENTIONS

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Sanjay Seth is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for Postcolonial Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has published extensively on postcolonialism, social and political theory, and modern Indian history and is a founding co-editor of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* (1998–present).

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Introduction

Sanjay Seth

The title of this book, *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations*, requires explanation. What is 'postcolonial theory'? Does 'international relations' refer to relations between states and nations, war, diplomacy and so on, or to the discipline which takes these matters as its object? Does the 'and' in the title suggest that 'postcolonial theory' is being 'applied' to better understand the international arena, or does it signal that postcolonial theory is being employed to engage and critique the discipline of International Relations?

The purpose of this introduction is to address these questions, to explain why this volume is divided into two parts, and to introduce the essays which comprise it. I will not begin by providing a definition of postcolonial theory,[1] because such a definition cannot be summarily provided in an introduction; the reader will gain a sense of this from reading the essays. I will, however, commence by seeking to clear possible misconceptions, by specifying what postcolonial theory is not; doing so will also provide the beginnings of an understanding of what postcolonial theory is, and what possibilities an engagement with it might afford the scholar of international relations.

The 'post' in postcolonial theory does not signify the period or era 'after' colonialism came to an end, but rather signifies the entire historical period after the beginnings of colonialism. It is of course impossible to assign a precise date to such epochal changes but, if pressed, one would be forced to nominate 1492; it is first with the 'discovery' and subsequent conquest of the Americas, and later the European conquest of large parts of Asia, Africa and other parts of the world that, in Stuart Hall's words, 'different temporalities and histories have been irrevocably and violently yoked together.'[2] The historical and theoretical claim signalled by the 'post' in postcolonialism, as I explain in greater detail in the first essay of this volume, is thus not that we are in the era after colonialism, with the implication that it now belongs to the past but, on the contrary, that the world has been decisively shaped by colonialism, and that one cannot even begin to understand the contemporary situation if this fact is not acknowledged, taken into account, and explored in all its ramifications.

Second, postcolonial theory is not an attempt to elaborate a theory of the world as it would look from the vantage point of the Third World or developing world or

the global South. It is certainly true that the intellectual genealogy of postcolonial theory includes anti-colonial nationalism and anti-imperialism in its various forms (including the thoughts of Frantz Fanon, Mao, Fidel Castro and others), and more generally, that the critical, political and ethical energies that fuel postcolonialism have much to do with anti-imperialism and Third Worldism.[3] But while postcolonial theory draws upon and is politically allied with anti-imperialism, it is not simply the continuation, and contemporary version, of this. This is in part because postcolonialism is critical of all 'essentialisms', that is, of all approaches which take national and ethnic identities for granted, by assuming them to be 'fixed', 'natural' or 'primordial' – and this includes the essentialist claims of anti-colonial nationalisms and Third Worldism.[4] If the world as we know it is the product of the violent and coercive linking together of different histories within the same temporality, then there are no 'pure' identities: 'Europe' or 'the West', and Asia or Africa or the 'non-West', were historically constituted, each defining the other. Thus while postcolonialism is indebted to anti-colonial nationalism, it is also critical of the essentializing claims of nationalisms; while it is keenly aware of the fact that some nations are more sovereign than others, it seeks to deconstruct sovereignty, not simply to advocate equal sovereignties; and while it draws attention to the many ways in which the inequalities which characterize our world have helped produce poverty and suffering, it also casts a critical eye upon the discourses of 'development', 'modernization' and 'catching-up'.

These are epistemological issues, and they bring me to the third and final misconception that needs to be avoided. Postcolonial theory is not an attempt to foster a 'non-Western IR'. The discipline of IR, as has often been observed, is principally an Anglo-American affair, with a strong base in Europe. A non-Western IR would thus be a welcome development: a plurality of voices in the discipline, actually reflecting the plurality of voices in the world that the discipline seeks to describe and comprehend, would be a very good thing indeed. But postcolonialism is not that thing.

A non-Western IR would still be IR; it would mobilize the concepts and categories of IR (state, national interest, sovereignty and the like) but now from the viewpoint of the poor and weak nations of the world, or of the emergent but not yet hegemonic powers. Such a development would, as I say, be welcome: but the ambitions of postcolonial theory are other, and go further. Postcolonial theory has at its heart an epistemological concern, namely to question the universality of the categories of modern social scientific thought, and of the disciplines into which it is divided; it is an epistemological challenge to, and critique of, existing disciplines, including IR. For the insistence upon the centrality of colonialism in the making of the modern world has, as its theoretical correlate, a call for rethinking the categories through which we have hitherto narrated and understood that history. The categories of civil society, state, nation, sovereignty, individual, subjectivity, development and so on, emerged in the course of seeking to think through and understand a particular slice of history, that of the region of the world we now know as 'Europe'. These categories are not necessarily universal ones, to be found anywhere and everywhere: postcolonial theory is in part a project to

'explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity.'[5]

The above remarks, on the meaning of postcolonial theory, also serve to clarify the answer to the second question posed at the beginning of this introduction: this book is about both international relations and the discipline of International Relations. To write about war, international political economy and the other topics covered here cannot be done without also engaging the discipline which takes these topics as its specific subject matter, and without indicating why and how it is necessary to go 'beyond' such treatments. While some of the essays place the emphasis more on international relations as a field for investigation, and others on International Relations as a discipline, they are all concerned with both, and this is not the axis along which the book is divided into two parts. This division instead registers the fact that some essays are principally concerned with critique, with showing why the dominant accounts and understandings of the international are deficient, and why a postcolonial 'take' on it is necessary; while others seek to provide, or perform, a postcolonial interpretation of the international. Hence the two parts of this volume, 'Critique' and 'Performance'. All but one of the essays were specially written for this book, and were commissioned from scholars whose work is well known in the field, as well as younger scholars whose work has made an impact in International Relations, postcolonial theory, or both.

The essays

The first essay seeks to outline the three core elements of any postcolonial critique of the discipline of IR. Seth contests the dominant account of the emergence of international society, which sees it as a European invention which then radiated outwards, until it came to encompass the world. Drawing attention to the fact that the events privileged in this account of the emergence of the present international order, such as the Peace of Augsburg and the settlement of Westphalia, roughly coincide with the subjugation of the Americas, the rise of the slave trade, and the founding of the British and Dutch East India Companies, Seth asks whether it is plausible to think that these latter processes did not significantly shape the development of the international order. His answer, of course, is that any satisfactory account of the emergence of the modern international system cannot be the story 'of how an international society that developed in the West radiated outwards, but rather needs to explore the ways in which international society was shaped by the interaction between Europe and those it colonized'. He further argues that not only is the historical account of the emergence of international society deeply Eurocentric, so also is its understanding and explanation of the functioning of that international society. In one influential account, the modern international order is the first to acknowledge that the world's peoples are irreducibly heterogeneous, and that their differences cannot be 'ranked' such that some are deemed superior to others. This being so, the question confronting this international system was how to respect differences, while formulating rules that

allowed for the interactions, including conflicts, which are also a feature of international society: rules that needed to be immune from the accusation that they favoured one set of peoples, and their values, over others. The principles of equal state sovereignty, self-determination and non-intervention are the solution to this puzzle in this account, because they are merely procedural 'form', and not substantial values or commitments. Against this, Seth argues that international law, diplomacy, and the very idea of state sovereignty are not mere neutral 'form', but in fact work to reinforce the dominance of some nations over others.

The third element in Seth's critique concerns epistemology; specifically, the idea that knowing is a representational act or process: postcolonial theory, he suggests, 'has been especially sensitive to the role of knowledge not simply as a "mirror" which represents the "real", but as a potent force for shaping what is "out there", and has been especially attentive to the many circumstances in which knowledges born in Europe are inadequate to their non-European object.' Applied to the international domain, this sensitivity can lead to the recognition that much of what IR takes as axiomatic – including the idea that there are states and nations, and that these pursue 'their' interests' – are not facts of the world that IR recognizes, but rather contingent, and contested stabilizations of meanings. The contingency and instability of these stabilizations is especially apparent in the international domain – more so, usually, than in the sphere of 'domestic' politics; and Seth concludes that the problem with IR, the discipline that takes the international as its object, is that it naturalizes and obscures this contingency and these contestations, rather than illuminating them.

John Hobson calls the conventional and widely accepted account of the emergence of sovereignty and the modern system of states the 'Eurocentric big bang theory of world politics'. This theory has a number of recensions, but all of these assume that modern sovereignty emerged in Europe and was then exported to the rest of the world, and thus that 'it is an autonomous and self-constituting Europe that we must exclusively focus upon if we are to tease out the origins of modern sovereignty'. It is this theory – through repetition, it has assumed the status of an axiom – that Hobson challenges, through a detailed historical account of the crucial role played by 'the East', and by the 'discovery' of the New World, in the emergence of modern sovereign states. Hobson shows that it is not that the sovereign state came first, and was then globalized, but rather that globalization was a necessary precondition for the rise of sovereignty; that the globalization which made the emergence of sovereignty possible was an 'Oriental globalization', centred around trade routes that had Muslim West Asia and China as their fulcrum, with the small continent of Europe connected to, but a relatively minor player in, this globalized system; and that these connections gave Europe access to material, technological and intellectual resources which proved critical to the emergence of sovereign states in Europe. In this account, sovereignty, instead of being the consequence of Europe's 'unique' or 'exceptional' economic, cultural and intellectual attributes, is rather the historical outcome of a globalizing process that includes what we have learned to call the West, the East, and (the conquest of) the New World, with the East playing the leading role. The importance of this

lies not, of course, in according the non-Western world due 'credit' for founding institutions, practices and a system which arguably are of dubious value, but rather in the fact that a Eurocentric (mis)understanding of the past has as its correlate a misunderstanding of the character and functioning of the present: 'only by bringing the wider global context and the relations between civilizations into focus can we properly understand the sovereign state in particular, and world politics in general.' Hobson's important essay is thus at once and simultaneously a necessary preliminary to, as well as an important element in, enabling us to understand and practise the study of globalization differently.

Branwen Gruffydd Jones's essay begins with a striking paradox: 'the eighteenth century, the historical moment of the birth of political economy as a branch of knowledge, was also the historical moment when the economies of Britain and France were fundamentally enmeshed in the transatlantic economic system based on the slave trade and slave-labour', and yet classical political economy had very little to say about the connection between transatlantic slavery and the emergence and subsequent development of capitalist modernity. Drawing upon a body of work mostly produced by Caribbean, African and African American scholars, Gruffydd Jones shows that the transatlantic slave trade was of critical importance to the development of industry and capitalism in Europe, including the emergence of modern forms of credit and financial institutions. Why, then, was this fact not adequately registered, let alone explored, in classical political economy? Gruffydd Jones shows that this was in part because political economy took the national economy as its basic unit of analysis, thus occluding international linkages and systemic connections from its analytic frame. Just as John Hobson insists that we cannot properly account for the emergence of modern structures and practices of sovereignty by taking the nation or even Europe as our basic unit of analysis, so Gruffydd Jones shows that we cannot begin to account for the role slavery played in the emergence of the capitalist modern without regarding the global economy as 'a complex, integrated entity', rather than as a sum of national economies.

The fact that classical political economy failed, for the most part, to adopt such an approach, and instead took the national economy as its point of departure, was itself due to a deeper reason: a philosophy of history which assumed a linear conception of historical time in which societies 'progressed' from savagery to civilization, and which further assumed that the past was 'dead', and had no direct influence on the present. Against this, Gruffydd Jones argues for a different historical imagination, one for which the essential features of the era of translatlantic slavery 'constitute forms which have continued to develop, which remain embedded ever more strongly in our own present', and belong 'firmly within the history of our own present global condition'. To rethink the importance of slavery in the making of the global capitalist economy is not just a matter of correcting the historical record, but requires that we rethink the foundational assumptions of political economy, root and branch. The development of an international political economy (IPE) adequate to its subject matter requires not simply addition and correction, but critique; the problem is not simply one of inadequate knowledge,

but of the politics of knowledge. Gruffydd Jones ends with a judgment that is shared by all the essays in this volume: 'To acknowledge and take seriously the centrality of colonialism to world history and the modern condition is to question the underlying assumptions, imaginations and epistemologies of disciplinary forms which have ignored, overlooked or forgotten colonialism; it is to question the politics of social inquiry and disciplinary formation.'

Just as Hobson and Gruffydd Jones unpack the history behind the emergence of the modern world system, Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess seek to bring to light one of the most important, if usually unacknowledged, intellectual assumptions that governs the practice, and sometimes the study, of international politics and war.

As is well known, while there has been a scrupulous and agonized counting of the war dead of the 'coalition of the willing' – those willing, that is, to invade Iraq in an illegal and immoral war – there is no equivalent counting of the Iraqi dead. In the absence of any serious effort to keep track of Iraqis killed and maimed, there are only estimates – estimates that vary widely. Nor is the case of Iraq in any way an exception; it has been a consistent if usually undeclared feature of international politics that the lives of non-Western peoples have been assumed to be less valuable than those of Westerners. 'The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner … Life is cheap in the Orient.' Beginning with this quote from the commander of American forces in Vietnam, Christine Helliwell and Barry Hindess enquire into the intellectual presuppositions that undergird and enable this presumption, one which can constantly be seen at work in international politics and war, even if it is not often articulated with the forthrightness of General Westmoreland. What makes it possible, even unremarkable, to think this otherwise extraordinary thought? Helliwell and Hindess show that the answer lies in a combination of two ideas, both of which have deep roots in Western intellectual traditions. The first they label, borrowing a phrase from the anthropologist Johannes Fabian, the 'denial of coevalness' – the idea that some peoples who are very much our contemporaries (for how else could we wage war on them?) nonetheless are in some sense relics of a past (they are 'backward', 'underdeveloped', 'medieval' and so on) who have survived into the present. The second idea or presupposition is that 'the individual' is a figure who first becomes fully visible in the present, in the Western modern. When the latter idea is made to map onto the former, it results in the conclusion that societies and peoples who belong to the past, even if they inhabit the present, are not composed of individual subjects, and are not 'like us'; they are swarms, mobs and crowds, not individuals. Lacking full individuation, they do not value life as we do, and our estimation of the value of their lives, consequently, also cannot be equated to the value 'we' attach to our own. Non-Western lives, in short, are worth less than ours: indeed, are cheap. No one can seriously doubt that this unstated presumption governs global politics and conflict; the evidence lies not only in Iraq and Vietnam, but also in Afghanistan, Pakistan – indeed, anywhere outside of the charmed circle of wealthy, mostly Western countries.

The study of war and peace is often thought to constitute the core of international relations; war, then, is an apposite topic for the first of the essays that comprise Part II of this volume, essays which seek to show how a postcolonial rereading of international relations can lead to new insights. Tarak Barkawi argues that 'postcolonial critique helps us see war and armed forces anew, phenomena whose meaning and significance both traditional and critical scholars have all too often taken for granted.' How so? The study of war in IR, Barkawi argues, is invariably subordinated to the study of security and strategy, and it is, for the most part, states that seek security and pursue strategies. Thus, treating war as a moment or aspect of security studies reinforces IR's 'nation-state ontology of the world', a world always already divided into discrete, bounded units. By contrast, the 'relational ontology' which is at the heart of postcolonial theory – exemplified by 'its insistence that the modern world was formed in and through imperial encounters', and thus that the colonizer and colonized each shaped the other – is more appropriate for the study of war. For, in an argumentative reversal which is characteristic of many of the essays in this volume, Barkawi contends that it is not simply that war is one of the consequences of a world divided into discrete units, but that war has helped produce a world divided into discrete states; that it is never simply a confrontation between nations or ethnic groups, but rather one of the chief historical means by which identities and states have been made and remade. That is why, even where they result in victory for one side, wars leave none of the participants unchanged: World War II, for instance, 'consumed one world order and spat out another'.

Like capitalism, bureaucracy and other major processes that have shaped the modern, war and the military are inherently transnational, and thus attending to colonial armies, to the wars in French Indochina or British India (note the complication of state units here) and to 'small wars' between imperial powers and irregular forces is not principally a matter of rectifying the neglect of the non-Western world, but rather a way of better understanding war and the military as such, and of accounting for the role of war and armies in the making of the modern. Barkawi's original and stimulating essay not only demonstrates the fecundity of postcolonial theory to one of the prime subjects of IR; in doing so it also makes a point that is a fundamental and recurring one in this volume, namely, that bringing the West and the non-West into the same analytical frame is important not principally as a way of attending to the non-West, but because it is a prerequisite to an adequate understanding of the global and the international. As Barkawi elegantly puts it, 'As always with the postcolonial, the journey out to the periphery helps understand better the metropole.'

Various essays in this book challenge the historical centrality accorded to Europe in most accounts of modernity, and this usually leads them to, or is accompanied by, re-examination and critique of the disciplinary configurations through which knowledge of the modern world is produced. Siba Grovogui's essay addresses the assumed moral centrality of the west. Grovogui shows that this centrality takes the specific form of ascribing universality to moral categories which in fact bear the mark of their parochial histories. In contesting this ascription,

Grovogui ranges widely – from Hegel to Hannah Arendt and others, and from the civil and political rights of Jews to the civil rights movement of black Americans in the 1950s and 1960s – to show that the texts and categories which liberal understandings of justice and morality draw upon do not escape the historical and cultural circumstances of their production, including, and perhaps especially, the importance of racial assumptions and racial thinking to these historical and cultural circumstances. 'Philosophers cannot jump over their own historical and empirical shadow', as Grovogui puts it, and neither can philosophy do so. The empirical tinge or thread of particularity is always woven into the texture of abstract moral judgment, and thus liberal notions of justice and morality invariably have a racial tincture, for the simple reason that their 'historical and empirical shadow' was one in which race played a large part. Grovogui examines, as one of his examples or 'cases', Arendt's disapproving judgment on the use of Federal troops to compel the integration of a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. Arendt acknowledged the oppression suffered by black Americans, but felt that in this case 'the most important constitutional question was whether citizens or persons could freely decide to enter into associations of their own liking without government interference mandating the inclusion of everyone, regardless of the ends of such associations.' This abstract argument is perfectly reasonable, *provided* one ignores the ways in which the freedom of association of citizens Arendt defends and elaborates is one that was racialized from the beginnings of the American republic, when slaves were counted as three-fifths of a man, and no part of a citizen. That is, Arendt's understanding of 'freedom', that allegedly universal desire and moral fact, 'is envisaged strictly from the perspective of the historical freemen: the original subjects of the American Revolution – white men augmented by white women and generations of white immigrants.' An important consequence follows from the critical reading offered by Grovogui: the 'civil rights movement' of black Americans should not be seen as a struggle to 'extend' civil rights to those who had not been brought within their purview, but rather is best seen as 'a practice of freedom aiming to redefine freedom itself within new moral, political and institutional political boundaries'. Grovogui's essay thus forwards a powerful argument for a recognition of the inescapabilty of historicity and culture to morality, with the conclusion that what we should be seeking is not a better universality, one which has fully purified itself of empirical/historical contaminants, but rather constantly self-critical, expansive notions of freedom and justice that are subject to negotiation and redefinition.

IR takes the nation-state as the constitutive and given unit of the discipline, but the nation is anything but given; it is not a brute ontological fact but rather an artefact, produced rather than found. It is an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's influential description of it,[6] or in Sankaran Krishna's characterization, 'an emotive structure of belonging, a mental landscape as much as it is a demarcated territory on a physical planet'. The novel, Krishna observes, is more or less coeval with the nation, and has been one of the important forms through which nations have been imagined, represented and produced; conversely, the study of literature has the potential to 'enhance and enrich our understanding' of

the nation. But more than this – because the nation is produced and not given, its unity is never assured and unproblematic. It is imagined in different ways, and thus approaching the given, unitary nation presumed by IR through the medium of literature may also 'enable us to stop regarding nations as things or entities that are already known to us, and instead regard them as fractal (in the sense of constantly changing and indeterminate) mindscapes.' Krishna wagers that a careful reading of literature will illuminate things about the nation that the discipline of IR, and indeed the social sciences more generally, cannot, and this wager forms the point of departure for a highly original and methodologically innovative essay.

'The postcolonial condition', writes Krishna, 'produces selves that are not satisfied and sovereign, but split and rest uneasily with themselves and their milieu. The postcolonial nation is a serrated – not smooth – space, led and represented by middle classes but not inclusive of vast numbers of society who are strangers to what one might call … the "culture of imperialism".' That is, the postcolonial nation, because of the vast disparities which usually characterize it – disparities not only of wealth, but of culture, broadly conceived – is perhaps especially differentially imagined, and cleft. Krishna provides close and sensitive readings of three novels in English by the Indian authors Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, novels which in their different ways vividly capture, by representing and performing, the postcolonial nation as one that is 'alienated from itself, and [is] a site for the production of melancholic incompleteness'.

The point is not simply that there is a vast social and cultural gap between the middle class elites and the subaltern classes – a divide that the social sciences can more or less register and thematize – but that this divide serves to produce another, now *within* the middle class, national-citizen subject. The success of anti-colonial independence struggles gave the lie to the colonizer's claim that colonized peoples were not yet ready to be independent, that they required a period in the waiting room of history, under Western tutelage, until they could join the mainstream of history. These struggles were waged in the name of self-identical peoples, the sort of unified nation which IR presumes. However, the failure of the second of these claims, exemplified by the failure of the elites to establish hegemony over the subaltern classes and establish a unified culture, also meant a partial failure of the first claim; these elites remain painfully aware that political independence notwithstanding, they are still not fully part of the mainstream of history. The modernity they desire is still elsewhere, and far from inhabiting the modern and cosmopolitan, their lives involve a 'continuous negotiation between inside and outside, home and world, east and west, nation and international, provincial and cosmopolitan'; the characters in these novels are, in Krishna's elegiac description of them, 'injured selves oscillating between the home and the world, the national and the international, vainly looking for that moment when they could go through the looking-glass, and finally reunite with the split-self looking back at them.' These sensitive readings point to a more complicated and interesting understanding of the nation, less a given object or