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Disarming norms: postcolonial agency and the constitution of the international

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The aim of this article is to provide a postcolonial reading of norms in international politics. Focusing specifically on the question of postcolonial agency, the article argues that the constructivist literature provides a distinctive spatial and temporal ordering of the 'international' that on the one hand can be seen to attribute agency to the postcolonial subject, while on the other can easily be interpreted as denying a presence for this subject. An alternative reading suggests that postcolonial agency is not only constituted by the international and its normative construction, but is also constituting, having the capacity to variously subvert and transform, but within limits. While some constructivist thinkers, primary among them being Christian Reus-Smit, recognise the normative order of the international as historically contested terrain, and where such contestation testifies to the role of the postcolonial world, how this role is articulated, and in what terms it is understood pose distinct challenges for understandings of agency and the constitution of the international. Focusing on Homi Bhabha and Franz Fanon, the article looks to how postcolonial thought can be mobilised to respond to this challenge, and to point to an alternative conception of the transformative potential of postcolonial agency. The turn to Bhabha and Fanon reveals such potential in both discursive and material terms so that where Bhabha can be said to frame agency and the terrain of the international in hybrid ideational terms,

complementing Reus-Smit's understanding of what can be termed the 'postcolonial international', Fanon's more radical materialist ontology envisages agency in terms of embodied presence. This mobilisation of postcolonial thought provides the theoretical tools for conceptualising postcolonial subjectivity and articulations of agency in relation to the international and its constitution.

Keywords: postcolonial subject; postcolonial agency; the international; norms; constructivism

The ideational construction of the international is conventionally attributed to the West, from the expansion of the modern state as a form of political organisation and recognition, to the institutions and practices of a neoliberal international political economy, to internationally recognised and instituted standards of individual rights. A number of constructivist scholars highlight the dynamic feature of norms and the role that norms play in constituting the international system as a structured realm of meaning that agents recursively draw upon and, under certain conditions, reconstitute (Kratochwill 1989; Onuf 1989; Wendt 1999). The normative structuration⁶⁰ of the international has, from the dawn of modernity to the present, been scripted in accordance with discursive frames of reference the origins of which are located in the European Enlightenment and the socio-political struggles and philosophical discourses that gave it meaning (Toulmin 1992).

At the same time, European modernity, as argued by authors such as Chatterjee (1993), Chakrabarty (1992, 2000), Mignolo (2000), and Dussel (1998), is enabled and indeed constituted by an expansive and dispossessive imperative that comes to associate modernity with coloniality. The institutions of modernity, the expansion of the international system of states, and a capitalist global political economy, emerge from this dual and intimately related context of 'coloniality/modernity' (Mignolo 2000) whereupon the postcolonial subject of politics emerges in the aftermath of the Second World War and subsequent struggles for decolonisation. Running through this context and providing it legitimising force is what Dussel refers to as the 'myth of origin' that connects 'Eurocentrism with the concomitant "fallacy of developmentalism"' where 'the path of Europe's modern development must be followed unilaterally by every other culture' (Dussel 1993, 67–68).

⁶⁰ The term 'structuration' suggests a dynamism in relation to structure, one that derives from the mutually constitutive relationship between structure and agency (see, especially, Giddens (1984)). Giddens is a formative influence on constructivist thought in International Relations (see, e.g., Wendt 1999).

This developmental perspective informs understandings of the ‘expansion’ of ‘international society’ to use Bull and Watson’s title of what is now a seminal collection of essays (Bull and Watson 1984). The crucial step identified by Bull and Watson, that of ‘expansion’, precisely provides a spatial and a temporal understanding of what Bull referred to as ‘international society’, a terrain of ‘common interests and common values’ that help shape relations between states bound with a ‘common set of rules’.⁶¹ The curiosity for Bull, Watson, and others in the above collection, one that also informs contemporary engagements with what we can refer to as ‘the international’ was and continues to be how such a normative grounding can become manifest in the diverse and multicultural context constitutive of International Relations. For Bull, the authorship of the rules of the game originates in Europe and expands ever outwards to incorporate and include the postcolonial world as it emerges onto the terrain of the international after decolonisation. There is here a linear trajectory, of both space and time, wherein the postcolonial is incorporated and joins in, albeit somewhat late. At the same time, Bull recognises, in his essay ‘The revolt against the West’, the aporetic position of what he refers to as the ‘non-European’ world, one where this world seeks to change the rules of international society; for example, in relation to racism and the struggle against Apartheid, or in relation to the international political economy, while at the same time valuing their accession to an ‘international society’ the rules of which were authored in Europe. What is significant in the present context is Bull’s ambivalent reading of the role of the non-European in the constitution of international society; on the one hand presenting a ‘dangerous’⁶² heterogeneity that could potentially threaten international society, and on the other, one that he saw as largely conforming to the given (European) order of things. This ambivalence aside, Bull and Watson’s engagement with the question of the expansion of international society sets in train a theoretical curiosity about agency and the normative structuration of the international in the postcolonial context. Specifically, it calls for an engagement at once with both a constructivist reading of norms that has an interest in postcolonial agency *and* postcolonial thought, wherein questions of postcolonial subjectivity and agency might be problematised. This is the remit of the article.

⁶¹ Bull’s *Anarchical Society* sets the conceptual limits whereby the ‘system of states’ might also be conceived as a normatively structured system, one where relations are regulated by rules that are meaningful to its constituent parts (see Bull 1977).

⁶² See, for example, Stanley Hoffman (1986) on Bull’s understanding of the revolt against the West and its implications for the constitution of international society. As Edward Keene (2002) highlights, Bull’s argument was that the ‘revolt’ was not ‘subversive’ of the international order.

The question of how the ‘postcolonial subject’⁶³ can make claims to the international, can be a ‘player’ in the practices that constitute the international and its normative framing is one that continues to occupy the postcolonial critique in international theory.⁶⁴ When the international is so Eurocentrically over-determined historically, can there be any potential for postcolonial agency that is not captured in the ‘fallacy of developmentalism’ that Dussel describes? To answer this question requires an appreciation of the distinctiveness of the postcolonial condition and the subject positions that this condition generates. It also requires a distinction between subjectivity and agency, a distinction that understands the former as produced and constituted in and through matrices of discourse and power, while the latter emerges from this constitution, so that the enactment of agency draws from this constitutive backdrop, and is indeed variously enabled and constrained by it. Enquiring into postcolonial agency and the constitution of the international requires both an appreciation of postcolonial subjectivity as one that emerges in the contingencies of the postcolonial international and a recognition at the same time of the postcolonial subject as having the potential to reconstitute the international. The challenge for an international theory that takes the postcolonial subject seriously is to unravel this potentiality.

⁶³ I use the term ‘postcolonial subject’ to designate the historic specificity of the colonial experience, and subsequent anti-colonial struggles. While there is clearly much diversity in the historic experiences of the colonised, the colonial encounter as such can be considered to be constitutive of the colonised and of the postcolonial subject. Using the term ‘subject’ points to a move away from rationalist understandings and towards those that, following Michel Foucault (1982), see the subject as emerging from and constituted by the discourses and practices of contingent social relations. While ‘subjectivity’ and ‘agency’ are closely related, the two terms should not be confused. The constituted subject may come to articulate agency or the ‘capacity to make a difference’ (Giddens 1979). On the understanding of subjectivity I am using here, see, for example, Butler (1995, 45–47). On ‘postcolonial subjectivity’, see Jabri (2013). For an alternative, Lacanian, reading of ‘the subject’, see Epstein (2011).

⁶⁴ The remit of postcolonial theory in International Relations has focused on providing a critique of the Western, and specifically European, origins of the structuring principles that constitute the international; namely, the state, the international order, and international law. The conceptualisations and methodologies of the discipline limit understanding to a Eurocentric perspective that is taken to be universally applicable, thereby variously enacting the exclusion of the non-Western world while representing this world from the vantage-point of the European. For the postcolonial critique in International Relations, see, for example, Grovogui (1996) with a focus on ‘sovereignty’, Inayatullah and Blaney (2004) with a focus on international political economy, and Muppidi (2004, 2005) with a focus on globalisation and global governance. For postcolonial perspectives that investigate the discourses on specific issues in international politics, see, for example, in relation to security, Barkawi and Laffey (2006); in relation to the democratic peace, Muppidi (2001); in relation to war and interventionist practices, Barkawi (2006) and Jabri (2007a). For one of the most powerful critiques, indeed indictments, of ‘dialogical’ perspectives in International Relations, see Pasha (2011).

The constructivist, and particularly the ‘norms’ literature, might appear at first hand to be particularly well suited to conceptualise postcolonial agency. The distinctly empirical methodology of this perspective, its focus on the practices of situated agents, and their capacities not only to negotiate the terrain of norms internationally, but also to transform this terrain provides a framework through which we might understand the transformative potential of differently situated actors in the international system. That agency can be articulated through norms such as human rights or environmental protection bears testimony to the mutually constitutive relationship between articulations of agency and the normative structure of the international (see, e.g., Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Concepts such as ‘diffusion’, ‘cascade’, ‘incorporation’ suggest what we might understand as a spatio-temporal ideational agency within an ever dynamic and yet relatively stable discursive framing of the international. For Martha Finnemore, this discursive framing cannot be defined in terms of an immutable ‘World Culture’, but is rather a product of contestation. In arguing against institutionalist models that assume global consensus, Finnemore (1996, 343–44) suggests that ‘focusing more closely on process would draw attention to the contradictions among normative claims and force institutionalists to rethink both the specification of world culture and its likely effects’. Significantly, Finnemore calls for a distinctly political understanding of norms, one that reveals the contestations and power relations that affect the process of normative claim-making. Such a political understanding places the lens on the contingencies of international life, and the differential enablements and constraints that generate the hierarchies of the international order.⁶⁵

The hierarchical positioning of states internationally clearly impacts on agency, specifically in the normative constitution of the international. How such agency is articulated becomes a crucial question in understanding the contributions of the postcolonial world, specifically in authoring the rules that render the international and the limits it sets meaningful. Christian Reus-Smit (2011, 2013)⁶⁶ starts with a baseline of norms, specifically, ‘individual rights’, to reveal postcolonial agency in what he refers to as the ‘expansion’ of the international system in the period of decolonisation. Reus-Smit is interested in

⁶⁵ Such hierarchies are not just manifest in practices, but are also present in the history of international political theory. See, especially, Hobson (2012) and the collection of essays in Jones (2006) and Shilliam (2011).

⁶⁶ My engagement with Christian Reus-Smit derives from his interest in the processes through which the postcolonial world comes to be participant in the normative constitution of the international. While there are clearly other authors who provide historical sociologies of the colonial and postcolonial international, Keene and Hobson, being primary examples, nevertheless, Reus-Smit provides a distinctive articulation of a constructivist position on the expansion of the international system and the place of the postcolonial world therein.

the transformation of the international system from imperial domination to the spread and acceptance of the sovereign state as an alternative form of rule. He is distinctly critical of Bull-inspired English School perspectives that rely on 'socialisation' to explain the 'expansion' of international society. His alternative argument, as shown below, suggests that 'the making' of the international system emerges through contestation driven primarily by struggles for individual rights. This is the discursive formation that, for Reus-Smit, underpins postcolonial agency in the expansion of the international system. My argument here is that for Reus-Smit, postcolonial agency derives from modes of articulation already scripted elsewhere, namely the West, so that even where the distinctive 'interests' of the colonised are brought into the frame, the terms through which these are understood seem to pre-determine the agency of the postcolonial subject. At issue here is not so much the historical record as to how, where, and when postcolonial states sought to assert their presence internationally. Rather, at stake is the conceptualisation and theorisation of the postcolonial presence in relation to the international. The following section unravels Reus-Smit's argument and then reveals how it might be reinforced by an engagement with postcolonial thought.

With this second task in mind, the article moves towards two defining figures in postcolonial social and political thought, namely Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, to provide an alternative conceptualisation of postcolonial agency, one that specifically addresses the question of how such agency relates to the constitution of the international and its transformations. Where Homi Bhabha provides an ontology of the postcolonial subject that reveals how an always already constituted subject can have the capacity to articulate agency through the trope of hybrid discursive formations, Franz Fanon's ontology takes us beyond the discursive and onto material terrain; specifically the material embodiment of the postcolonial subject.⁶⁷ I want to suggest that Bhabha's conceptual schema provides the ontological grounds that can enable Reus-Smit to indeed move beyond a teleological understanding of history, while Fanon, through the inspirational voice for Bhabha, nevertheless, provides a more radical ontology, one where the international comes face to face with the embodied postcolonial subject.

⁶⁷ As will be explained later in this article, Fanon's materiality is based on his understanding of the subject in coloniality and postcoloniality as an embodied being who is at once constituted in power relations and yet is capable of escaping their constitutive potential. This is not to be confused with historical materialism or the materialism of the dependency school, where scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank provide a materialist understanding of the capitalist global political economy as a structure of domination. While Fanon fully understands the implications of a global capitalist order and its complicity in colonial dispossession, his lens is distinctly placed on the postcolonial subject and how this subject's materiality is itself constituted by, while at the same time, exceeding material and discursive structures of domination.

Pre-scripting the international

Reus-Smit identifies five ‘great waves of expansion’ that transformed what was a European system into a globalised ‘universal, multicultural, and multi-regional system of sovereign states’ (Reus-Smit (2011, 207). From the Peace of Westphalia, to the independence of Latin America, the Versaille settlement, the post-1945 decolonisation, to the collapse of the Soviet Union, all suggest the struggles of subject peoples for individual rights and against the hierarchical distribution of entitlements that define imperial domination. As Reus-Smit states, ‘Before subject peoples could be receptive to the sovereign state as an institutional alternative, they had to have an interest in institutional change – they had to have reached the limits of “voice” within empire’ (Reus-Smit 2011, 215). Once these limits are reached, once subject peoples can no longer be persuaded to support an imperial order, once they reach a point beyond the toleration of the inequalities that define imperial domination, they articulate agency through a claim to individual rights and, having succeeded in their ‘exit’ from empire, they proceed to support the claims of other, similarly subject peoples.

In forming his argument against the diffusionist or even the incorporationist wings of the norms literature, and in a statement that links directly into a postcolonial discourse, Reus-Smit suggests:

The struggles for rights that undermined Europe’s colonial empires in the twentieth century began in colonial societies but ‘migrated’ after 1945 into the emerging human rights fora of the United Nations, where postcolonial states reconstituted the right to self-determination by grafting it to emergent human rights norms’ (Reus-Smit 2011, 219).⁶⁸

There is here a rejection of a linear developmental narrative, recognising the complex intersections of discourses that were manifest in a melding of imported and local knowledge systems in the colonial context, and a ‘grafting’ of two sets of norms in the postcolonial international context. The agency of the colonised and the postcolonial is clearly apparent and is understood in distinct ideational terms. At the same time, the articulation of such agency is framed by a pre-scripted discursive formation that does not reveal the distinctiveness of postcolonial subjectivity and how this subjectivity relates to the constitution of the postcolonial international.

The scripting of global politics in terms that subsume the postcolonial world confers agency, and hence authorship and legitimacy to the West,

⁶⁸ Reus-Smit is here referring to Eisenstadt (1987).

thereby generating a conceptual schema that is not only inadequate to the task of understanding the international, but one that is framed in universalist *and* normative terms.⁶⁹ The challenge is to write the postcolonial into the international without subsuming the postcolonial subject into a pre-scripted and prescribed normative order, the limits of which are authored by the West. Importantly, Reus-Smit's narrative points to the agency articulated by postcolonial states in relation to self-determination and in the normative constitution of the 'liberal' international order. To use Bull's terms, while such moments may have constituted 'revolts', they were not subversive or even transformative of the international system as such. The challenge of identifying postcolonial agency in the constitution of the international therefore remains.

In seeking to theorise the question of postcolonial agency and the normative constitution of the international, I take seriously the postcolonial charge of the dangers of a Eurocentric discourse that takes Europe as the source of theory and the rest of the world as its empirical domain.⁷⁰ Such a hierarchical construction would be all too apparent and is indeed so in much of the Eurocentric literature in International Relations. The point here is to theorise the postcolonial subject of politics from a theoretical base that is distinctly of the postcolonial, one that understands the presence of the colonial legacy in the subject who speaks and articulates agency. I argue below that Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha (with the latter much indebted, of course, to the former) are two theorists we can claim in seeking to understand postcolonial agency and the normative constitution of the international. Both theorists enable us to locate the postcolonial subject in a relational and hence inter-subjective setting, so that the 'international' is always already implicated in the constitution of the postcolonial self. As we will see in what follows, the postcolonial subject of politics has a tense relationship with the 'international', however, it is this tension that makes possible the emergence and potentiality of postcolonial agency in the constitution of the international and its historic transformation. This potentiality derives, as will be argued below, from the very presence of the postcolonial onto the terrain of the international.

⁶⁹ See in a previous series of articles deriving from the ISA workshop on 'norms', Inayatullah and Blaney, 'The Dark Heart of Kindness: The Social Construction of Deflection', which focuses on theories of ethics in International Relations.

⁷⁰ For the search for 'non-Western' perspectives on the international, and indeed ones that reveal the 'multiple modernities' of contingent settings and their implications for theorising international politics, see, for example, Paolini (1999), Chan *et al.* (2001), Jones (2006), Acharya (2011), Acharya and Buzan (2011), and Shilliam (2011). The Eurocentric 'bias' in international political theory can also be found in 'critical' and specifically poststructural social and political theory and its implications in International Relations (see Jabri 2007b; Sajed 2012).

Who writes the normative order of the international

The discursive presence of the postcolonial: Homi Bhabha

For the postcolonial scholar, as seen above, the international order is always already pre-determined, pre-scripted by the deep sedimentations of a colonial legacy so powerful that it enacts the anamnesis complicit in persistent representations of the West as legislator of righteous conduct. To unravel this discursive hegemony is not to suggest an oppositional order, for this in itself assumes a Huntingtonian ‘clash of civilisations’ perspective, even where, and unlike Huntington himself, there is recognition of blurred cultural, or civilisational, boundaries. Rather, such unravelling suggests that the emergence of a new vocabulary or a new architecture is made possible and becomes meaningful in relation to what exists; the existing base the foundations of which remain unstable. Homi Bhabha (1994, 25) refers to overcoming, in the language of critique, ‘the given grounds of opposition’ in order to create a ‘space of translation: a place of hybridity’ that comes to construct ‘a political object that is new’. Bhabha, somewhat controversially, wishes to move away from conceiving of colonial history and the postcolonial condition in antagonist terms, thereby exploring the potentials of what emerges from processes discursive interaction.

When the postcolonial subject gains access to the international, this is no mere continuity in a colonial relationship, but should be understood as formative of ‘new’ terrain, wherein change relates at once to the international and the postcolonial subject of politics. To reveal hybrid, interstitial sites wherein the boundaries of normative orders are not so easily determined is hence to place the lens on the instability of those boundaries, the interventions that render them so, and the potential of new formations emerging to constitute the normative ordering of the international. If the postcolonial subject is considered a site of hybridity, then this subject’s articulations of agency might be seen as exactly deriving from an essentially hybrid grammar, and one that exceeds the sum total of its constitutive elements. A manifestation of postcolonial agency might then be seen in the creation of hybrid sites wherein existing codifications are rendered unstable, insecure, and open potentially to disruptive and interruptive readings. Using Homi Bhabha’s ontology in relation to the postcolonial international, we might suggest that postcolonial agency enacts not simply an instrumental grafting of one norm with another that can then mobilise support internationally. Rather, the hybridity of discursive formations, the very intersection of the colonial and the indigenous or the postcolonial discourse of self-determination and wider global discourses of human rights might be said to enact a destabilising, disruption to the normative structuring, first, of the colonial order and, second, of the international.

This destabilising moment in the constitution of 'hybrid' discursive formations might be said to derive, following Bhabha, from created spaces that are neither of one nor the other. For Bhabha (1994, 244), in the post-colonial encounter with modernity, we are forced to 'introduce the question of subaltern agency, into the question of modernity: what is this "now" of modernity? Who defines this present from which we speak?'. We might suggest that the international is not just a product of modernity, but its defining symbol. Yet, the international, like the modern that produced it, is fragile terrain, subject to what Bhabha refers to as the 'interruptive temporality of the sign of the present' (Bhabha 1994, 245).

The international, if understood through Bhabha's ontology, is itself a site of hybridity, constituted through practices enacted by hybrid or 'split' subjects, to use Bhabha's terms. The agentic articulations of these subjects are themselves products of the intersections of discourses and interpretative schemes that are never settled as such, but remain vulnerable to a potentially destabilising, disruptive reading. Agency might hence be read as the capacity to disrupt settled norms, to exactly constitute them as potential sites of hybridity. This would be a more radical reading of the implications of Homi Bhabha's ontology, and one that moves well beyond Bhabha's confinement of his analyses to cultural articulations.

If this more radical reading of Bhabha's ontology is a possibility, then postcolonial agency is not simply about the disruption of the normative order of the international, but also about the production of the international as an essentially hybrid site wherein the 'in-between' of cultures is instantiated at the intersection of discursive practices. What is not clear from Bhabha is how the postcolonial subject interjects into a terrain that is already pre-determined, one the limits of which are already drawn. The postcolonial subject is constituted within these limits and articulations of agency can only be meaningful in relation to these limits. When post-colonial leaders, in the aftermath of independence, sought to nationalise the resources of which they had been dispossessed in the colonial period, they did so, as Antony Anghie (2004) has shown, through juridical contestation framed in terms of national sovereignty. The international and its limits always already constitute the postcolonial subject. Is it therefore possible to conceptualise a subjectivity that exceeds the pre-determinations of the international, and hence a subjectivity that can indeed create the 'new'; beyond the normative ordering of the international? What is of interest here is that the moment wherein postcolonial leaders interjected into the discursive space, that is 'national sovereignty', they enacted a destabilisation of the concept for the former colonial powers who contested these 'new' applications. In the 'grafting' of self-determination with individual human rights that Reus-Smit describes as contributing to the post-1945

international system of states, what is taking place is not the mere addition of one discourse with another, but a 'reinscription' and a 'negotiation' wherein the very presence of the postcolonial transforms the international into a postcolonial international, one where any colonising move would from henceforth be a matter for contestation.

One reading of the encounter between the international and the postcolonial subject is to argue, with Franz Fanon, and indeed through Homi Bhabha's suggestive reading of Fanon, for the 'negativity'⁷¹ of the postcolonial subject of (international) politics. The 'new' in Fanon's terms points not to the new that is manifest in hybridity with limits, but to the 'excess' of the subject that remains uncaptured within the limits of discursive practices. We might therefore, following Fanon's ontology, argue that the encounter between the structure of norms and the postcolonial subject is one that does not normalise the postcolonial subject in some pedagogic fashion, for the excess that remains uncaptured is what promises the potentiality of an agency that can generate the scene envisaged by Bhabha. Where Bhabha can provide the conceptualisation that enables a postcolonial disruption of the given order of things, so that we can imagine a re-articulation of formative concepts constitutive of the international, what remains unclear is how the agency to interject is instantiated.

As I highlight at the outset, the crucial intellectual move in postcolonial thought, and one that owes a debt to poststructural thought, is to distinguish between subjectivity and agency (Jabri 2013). It is this move that enables an understanding of how the subject constituted in matrices of discourse and power emerges to articulate agency in contingent social and political settings. It is this understanding that steers theory away from preconceived constructs that pre-determine the subject – constructs such as 'individual rights'. Bhabha's answer, as emphasised by Ilan Kapoor (2003), comes in the recognition that we cannot conceptualise 'agency' without subjectivity, and the latter refers to the formation of the subject in matrices of discourse and power. The subject is hence constituted in discursive formations and it is through such constitution that agency can be articulated. As highlighted by Kapoor (2003, 564), what Bhabha enables is not simply the creation of hybrid discourses, but a form of agency that creates what Bhabha refers to as 'supplemental space', that shifts the terms of discourse

⁷¹ Homi Bhabha (1994, 238) refers to Fanon's 'negativity' as refusing the 'Hegelian–Marxist dialectical schema whereby the black man is part of a transcendental sublation: a minor term in a dialectic that will emerge into a more equitable universality. Fanon, I believe, suggests another time, another space'. Fanon's negativity might hence be conceptualised in terms of 'non-identity', deriving from his reliance on psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics. For an extensive reading of negativity in modern political thought, see Coole (2000).

beyond the already determined. How does the postcolonial subject enact the interjection that might generate such a supplemental space? How is it that the subject can shift the terms of discourse so that this subject can indeed create the ‘new’? How does the postcolonial subject enact what I am referring to as the moment of interjection into the space of (international) politics. Fanon provides some indication of how we might move our ontology of the postcolonial subject towards answering this question. It is indeed the spectre of Fanon that continues to haunt the colonial order and its contemporary articulations through the vehicle of ‘norms’.

Material presence and the postcolonial international: Frantz Fanon

The above discussion has, through an engagement with Bhabha, indicated that the postcolonial international is a hybrid space of potentialities that cannot be reduced to either conformity or subversion. Bhabha’s discourse is, however, too focused on cultural difference, or the ‘enunciations’ of culture, to provide an explanation of how it is that the presence of the postcolonial subject can reconstitute the international. Fanon provides the radical interpretation of the subjectivity of the colonised and the postcolonial that gives us an indication of how presence as such, or interjection onto the space of the international, has constitutive potentiality. Fanon’s corpus of writing is exactly focused on the colonised as subject of politics, providing an understanding that defies uniformity and even identity. The subjectivity of the colonised, for Fanon, could not simply be reduced to a unidimensional nationalist identity, though the oppositional structure defining the coloniser/colonised relationship remains central to his analysis of the colonial encounter. At the same time, Fanon is all too aware of the imprint of colonial power and colonial violence on the subjectivity of the colonised to be satisfied with the suggestion that the agency of the colonised and the postcolonial might derive from the ‘indigenisation’ or the grafting of norms as a negotiation strategy.

What are the key conceptualisations that Fanon provides that may contribute to our understanding of postcolonial subjectivity and articulations of agency specifically in the normative constitution of the international? Can he be easily located within the dual formulation that, as seen above, Hedley Bull provides: conforming or subversive? The answer to this question is not as self-evident as might appear to be the case from Fanon’s analytics of anti-colonial violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*, or indeed from the many readings of Fanon in the literature. When read through Albert Memmi’s interpretation, we see a more complex and troubled Fanon, in many ways a hybrid figure torn between the world of the colonised and the coloniser. Indeed his intellectual tools, from Marx and Hegel

to Freud and psychoanalytic practice, are so clearly of European modernity that even when he conceives of the ‘new man’ that emerges through the anti-colonial struggle, the ‘new’ is not so easily defined.⁷²

What I want to argue here is that the ambiguity in Fanon does not detract from the potentials of reading his analytics not, as in Memmi, or indeed Bull, through the empirical record of what the ‘Third World’ has or has not achieved, but rather through an engagement with what Fanon’s concepts and ontologies suggest or indeed make possible. I want to argue that two elements stand out in Fanon’s writings that have profound implications for our understanding of the agentic potentials of postcolonial subjectivity. The first relates to Fanon’s materiality, not simply Marxist, but profoundly corporeal. The second relates to his understanding of ‘independence’. Both, I have argued, are suggestive of the constitutive significance of interjection into the space of the international, so that the very presence of the post-colonial subject in international politics and international institutions is profoundly transformative, not in the immediacy of change, but in a historical trajectory wherein the very existence of the ‘other’ on the terrain of the international functions as both a constraining and an enabling force. At core in Fanon’s thinking is the material phenomenology of the antagonism that defines the coloniser/colonised relationship. While this antagonism might be read to define the subjectivity of the colonised,⁷³ it cannot be seen as fully capturing a subjectivity that comes to be articulated first in the material corporeality of the anti-colonial struggle, and then through the realisation of agency at the moment of ‘independence’. This, however, is not a ‘a nauseating mimicry’ (Fanon 1967, 251) – a description

⁷² Albert Memmi’s devastating interpretation of Fanon, and one that seems to question Fanon’s revolutionary (or ‘subversive’) credentials, is nowhere more clearly elaborated than in the following statement: ‘Much could be said of the new man that Fanon hoped and wished for. He thought he saw him emerging out of the Third World. What were the characteristics of this totally new man in this totally new world? Are we still in politics or in a dream? We find that the Third World must not only discover the solution to its own social and political misery but also offer itself as a model to the world. This is part of Fanon’s tendency to engage in messianic prophesying. His idea of the new man is inspiring, that is true, but there is no indication that such a man is emerging not that the Third World is investing an original social structure’ (Memmi 1973, 36–37).

⁷³ For Benita Parry (1987), Bhabha’s reading of Fanon undervalues or even ‘obscures’ the latter’s focus on the coloniser/colonised relationship as one of an ‘opposition’ that produces the subject who seeks liberation. My claim here is that Bhabha’s understanding of Fanon in terms of ‘negativity’, far from being an undervaluing or an obscuring move is, rather, suggestive of temporal and spatial articulations of a moment to come, one that exceeds the contingencies of linguistic representation. Bhabha’s reading enables what we might understand as an ‘interruptive’ Fanon, one that asserts presence. For a discussion of the contested readings of Fanon, and one that highlights the ambivalences in Fanon himself, see Gates (1991).

he could apply to the normative discourse in International Relations and its assumption that its terms can apply to all – which would instantiate a sublation of the colonised into a historicity authored in Europe, but is, or should be, about ‘independence’. However, this is

not a word which can be used as an exorcism, but an indispensable condition for the existence of men and women who are truly liberated, in other words who are truly masters of all the material means which make possible the radical transformation of society (Fanon 1967, 250).

National independence does not constitute a final moment of liberation, but rather a setting in motion or an emergence that is always in process. What does this mean for our understanding of the postcolonial international and the constitutive role of the postcolonial world therein? The point I seek to emphasise here is that the very presence, indeed the visibility, of the postcolonial subject onto the terrain of the international is itself a constitutive moment, subversive through and through, not necessarily in the sense of changing the international order beyond recognition, but rather, one that has the potential to re-define the normative ordering of the international. Just as Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* places the racialised subject under the lens so that we might read the international as such in terms of its racialised hierarchies, so too his *Wretched of the Earth* places the lens on the postcolonial subject, one who, irrespective of the diversities of the postcolonial world, carries the historical moment of the colonial encounter in the present, so that we read the international constitutively in terms of ‘self-determination’.

The point here is not, as intimated earlier, to place the postcolonial subject in-between conformity and ‘subversion’ in relation to the international, but rather to think through what the postcolonial international means in terms of the discourses and practices that are at once both constituted by its continuities and constituting. The constitutive potentiality that I have highlighted through Fanon suggests that the very presence of the postcolonial subject is always already subversive. To understand the constitutive potential of postcolonial presence is to investigate such moments historically, to reveal the intersection of discourses, but more profoundly, the discursive and material interjections into the spaces of the international, including codifications that legislate the limits of the international order.

Conclusion

The aim in this article has been to instantiate a postcolonial interjection into the ‘norms’ literature in International Relations. The underlying premise

throughout is that for such an interjection to be effective as a research agenda it must provide an ontological understanding of what I have referred to as the postcolonial subject and this subject's capacity to articulate agency in relation to the international. This ontology is not rationalist, but constitutive, so that the subject both emerges in articulation, but is at the same time constituted in and through the discourses and practices of contingent relations. In this sense, the postcolonial subject is constituted by the terrain of the international and the structures that, from the dawn of modernity to the present, have conferred it distinctive meaning, namely the structures that define the limits of political authority and the relationship of such authority to a transnational terrain of the market and of the movement and interactions of peoples and money. If the inequalities of the normative ordering of the international can be understood, then the differential enablements and constraints of these structural continuities and their transformations must be taken into account. The question, as highlighted above, is whether the postcolonial world has instantiated transformative agency in the normative constitution of the international. As seen from the discussion provided above, where Hedley Bull seeks to place the role of what he refers as the Third World between conformity and subversion, arguing that the expansion of the international system into this world did not fundamentally change it, Reus-Smit provides a substantial indicator of the specific role that the postcolonial world had in the expansion of the international system. The 'grafting' of the postcolonial norm of 'self-determination' to individual human rights is seen as a historically significant moment in the expansion of the international.

The 'international', I have argued above, is the distinctive space that constitutes the emergent postcolonial world and is itself subject to transformation through the very presence of this world. The postcolonial subject is hence not external to the international but always already of it. In the postcolonial encounter with the international, the subject of post-coloniality remains burdened with the weight of the colonial legacy, even as this subject struggles against its continuing manifestations. The aporia, or generative contradiction that defines the postcolonial international is exactly constitutive of the postcolonial subject and this subject's capacity to create the 'new'. We might hence conduct empirical research on the post-colonial state and its capacities not only to design a counter-hegemonic discourse, but to signify the international as a hybrid site the instabilities and vulnerabilities of which might variously be exposed, negotiated, and redrawn.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ See, for example, Muppidi (2001) for an insightful analysis of the Indian government's construction of the democracy–security nexus, wherein India challenges expectations drawn from democratic peace theory.

Drawing on Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon, I have provided two inter-related but at the same time alternative ontologies of the postcolonial subject of politics and hence postcolonial agency. Bhabha's ontology points to the postcolonial as 'split subject', of the here and the elsewhere, the past and present, the coloniser and colonised, so that the agency attributed to the postcolonial subject derives from the subject's in-between location. This is a conceptualisation that rejects an oppositional framing of normative practices, but a mutually constitutive one wherein the postcolonial and the international meet. As was argued earlier, this formulation of Bhabha's ontology is amenable to the idea that the postcolonial subject has historically articulated agency in the normative constitution of the international through 'grafting', to use Reus-Smit, a postcolonial agenda onto existing international norms, thereby instantiating transformation. Hybrid subjectivity comes to be implicated in the constitution of the international as a distinctly hybrid site, one that can indeed be contested, negotiated, and even re-designed.

Bhabha's subject enunciates a discourse the boundaries of which are distinctly permeable, so that the international as such might be conceptualised as a meeting place of communicative practices the terms of which emerge through the contingencies of negotiation. In seeking to shift postcolonial theory beyond the oppositional framework of coloniser/colonised, Bhabha might be said to lose sight of the defining conflict that generated resistance against colonial power and its continuing presence in postcolonial life. Bhabha's ontology of the postcolonial subject remains vulnerable to co-optation and subsumption, so that what remains unclear is how agency emerges in relation to the limits of hybridity. If, for example, we consider the normative ordering of the international in terms of discursive hegemony, what would constitute a counter-hegemonic move in a communicative structure that is purportedly rendered unstable through hybridisation? While Bhabha is useful in pointing to how postcolonial agency is articulated through drawing on and constituting norms as hybrid sites of negotiation and even disruption, how such articulations can have the potential to escape 'normalisation' remains a question.

Invoking Fanon's 'negativity', a more radical reading of the potentiality of postcolonial agency does not see the encounter between the postcolonial and the international in terms of 'normalisation'. The postcolonial subject of politics interjects, materialises presence onto the space of the political, and the space of the international, and in so doing is at once both constituted and reconstitutes this space. Tracing the postcolonial subject from the anti-colonial struggles of the past to the contestations of the present, what we see revealed is not a linear narrative, but rather the co-constitutive presence of past and present, so that the moment of emergence is at once also a moment of constitution-making, the struggle for political community

and its design. Traces of the past re-emerge in the present as the postcolonial subject asserts presence in the temporal and spatial configurations of late modernity. We might claim that where Bhabha's subject asserts discursive presence and through such can, as shown by Reus-Smit, instantiate material effects, Fanon's subject is always already material, so that this subject's presence on the terrain of the international, indeed visible presence, comes to historically reconstitute the international as a location of contestation where colonisation, expropriation, or other practices based on racialised hierarchies cannot go unhindered or uncontested. In relation to discursive formations that come to constitute 'knowledge', furthermore, we might suggest, along with others,⁷⁵ that the material presence of the postcolonial subject on the terrain of the international instantiates a 'provincialisation' of claims that the international as such emerges in Europe and expands to the rest of the world.

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⁷⁵ See, for example, Sabaratnam (2011) for an excellent discussion of 'decolonising' strategies in social and political theory.

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