“Emancipation without agenda? — The recovery of non-Western subjecthood and its implications for the study of world politics”

Report on the round table event organised by the School of Government and Society, Thursday, 14th of May 2015; written by Philipp Lottholz

This discussion assembled scholars from different fields and of diverse regional expertise to present the different forms of non-Western subjecthood that they identify or envisage in order to discuss the possibility and constellations of non-Western subjecthood and corresponding forms of agency. The event thus made an attempt to link recent theoretical debates about a ‘post-Western’ IR with insights from other disciplines to show how post-colonial agency operates both within the framework of the international state system, but also appears in more diffuse and less obvious ways that serve to challenge and re-shape this system.

Speakers:
Chair:
Dr Jonathan Fisher, International Development Department (IDD), in place of Dr Robbie Shilliam, Queen Mary University London

Panellists:
Dr Marco Vieira, Department of Politics and International Studies (POLSIS), University of Birmingham
Dr Olivia Rutazibwa, School of Languages and Area Studies, University of Portsmouth
Dr Vidya Kumar, Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham
Prof Mustapha Kamal Pasha, Chair in International Politics, Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University

With a relatively high number of both staff and students from across the School of Government and Society, as well as external visitors, attending, the round table on the topic of non-Western subjecthood attracted a lot of attention on a Thursday in the middle of the exam term. The two scholars from Birmingham, Dr Vidya Kumar (Birmingham Law School) and Dr Marco Vieira (POLSIS), were joined by external speakers from the universities of Portsmouth (Olivia Rutazibwa) and Aberystwyth (Prof Mustapha Kamal Pasha, former head of the Global Development Section, International Studies Association). The line-up was rounded up by IDD’s Dr Jonathan Fisher, who volunteered to chair the very rich and wide-ranging discussion.

A few introductory words, including acknowledgements of the School of Government and Society which fully funded the event, were addressed to the audience by Philipp Lottholz, PhD student at IDD. Having proposed the event and executed most of its organization, Philipp pointed out the relevance of the round table topic for social inquiry both within and beyond the discipline of IR. He also explained how the discussion of questions about non-Western subjecthood and agency are a crucial next step in a debate where the Eurocentric and racist biases of IR, political science and other disciplines have been exposed in significant ways (mostly by John M Hobson’s recent work) but implications for world politics and the future research agendas and action plans are unclear.

The first speaker, Dr Marco Vieira introduced an alternative vision for the discipline of IR by discussing the way in which the concept of ‘ontological security’ was useful to understand the international system and how it can help to theorise non-Western subjecthood, in particular. He thus first explained how ontological security provides an intuitive angle for understanding the behaviour of state and non-state actors, as it entails the idea that the latter ‘need to have an understanding of who (or what) they are’. Making reference to the works of Jennifer Mitzon, Anthony Giddens and Jacques Lacan, he argued that subjecthood should generally be understood to be constituted through historically contingent processes of negotiation, rather than through fixed and rigid boundaries between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The ‘identity markers’ habitually used in IR research and beyond should thus be subjected to a thorough analysis of the challenges posed by pre-colonial alternatives to Western modernity and, secondly, as to how such challenges have been historically overcome in the processes of formation and consolidation of categories that are taken for granted nowadays. Dr Vieira
specifically argued that ‘all white all male’ panels on conferences may be an undesirable example of
global hegemonic structures, but that such classifications would also require further detailed analysis
of the experiences of identity formation that single participants may have undergone. This
comprehensive contribution was rounded up by arguing for an outright anti-essentialist approach
following the work of Homi Bhabha, which would inquire the processes of hybridisation and
permanent (re-) negotiation of identity throughout time.

The next speaker on the panel was Dr Olivia Rutazibwa, who added an interesting perspective by
explaining how her previous research on the EU’s ethical foreign policy in Africa and her own
experiences from growing up as a second generation Rwandan in Belgium inform her own ‘de-colonial’
research strategy. She particularly mentioned the non-Western subjection, anti-colonial to varying
degrees, in the phenomena her research was focusing on. These included the autonomous recovery
of Somaliland, whose home-grown peacebuilding process in the 90s received much less international
attention that that in neighbouring Somalia; the concept of Agaciro (self-worth) playing a major role in
the post-genocide reconstruction of Rwanda; and the radical claims for emancipation formulated by
the Black Power movement in the US in the 1960s and 70s. Based on these examples, and drawing on
an essay she has published in the Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, she introduced the three
main action steps of her ‘decolonial’ approach:

1) De-mythologise, which concerns ontology: the need to rethink how international relations
have predominantly been perceived, thought of and taught. She pointed at its Eurocentric
nature, its mythological elements and the fragmentised and compartmentalised nature of the
way most IR issues have been treated. A case in point touched on Development
studies in particular by focusing on the study of the origin of affluence and poverty as well
as ethical foreign policy in a Global North – Global South context.

2) De-silence, which concerns epistemology: this entails a consciousness about one’s
positionality, the ‘what are the limits of what we can know’ (from a western positionality
e.g.) – question as well as the ‘who gets to speak’ and ‘who gets listened to’ queries.
Picking up Dr Vieira’s point, she specified that this would also mean inquiring the
differences among an ‘all white all male’ panel rather than condemning such a
phenomenon as such.

3) (Anti-colonially) Decolonise - this entails normativity: firmly choosing to bring the focus to
the material effects of systematic discrimination and oppression in a global/local context
back in the post/decolonial knowledge production enterprise. This could mean to abandon
too much self-referentiality and preoccupation with issues within the Western, academic
world, but ask for implications beyond the confines within which discussions about post-
colonial agendas are usually conducted.

The very illuminating contribution from Dr Vidya Kumar (Birmingham Law School) gave insight into
the traces and manifestations of non-Western subjection in International Law, especially in historical
debates about the jurisdiction of semi- and non-sovereign colonies in the late 19th and early 20th
century. Her current work examines the relationship between revolution and international law and she
is comparing how non-Western revolutionary subjects are treated vis-à-vis Western revolutionary
subjects (specifically the 1965 Rhodesian Revolution). In her paper, she argued that the dominant
Westphalian understanding and historical account of international law does not formally recognise a
distinction between Western and non-Western subjects. Rather, the traditional account of the
formation and origin of subjects (and international legal personality) in international law rests on the
fundamental distinction between States and non-States. Non-Western subjection in international law
then tends mostly to be framed as a discussion of semi- or non-sovereign status of colonies,
mandates, overseas territories; that is, as a discussion of entities who lack or have lacked the formal
indicia of statehood or international legal personality (e.g. Palestine). Further, she suggested that
non-Western subjection in international law is occluded by international law’s insistence on the
sovereign equality between states. Consequently, any discussion underscoring inequalities, disparities
or differences between the non-West and West are viewed as falling outside the “proper” framework
of international law. Dr Kumar noted that international law as a discipline posits itself as universal in
reach, eternal in nature, and apolitical in its aims and authorship, and is often ahistorical before the
1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Western and Non-Western subjects are thus governed as equals, without
prejudice as long as both are configured in the form of a State.

Notwithstanding this, she noted that this traditional account of subjection in international law has
recently become unsettled. One counterpoint to the dominant Westphalian account of subjection in
international law has been put forward by a group of scholars who offer “Third World Approaches to
International Law” (TWAIL). These scholars - who include *inter alia* Anthony Anghie, Vasuki Nesiah, B S Chimni, Sundhya Pahuja and many more - have explored how the colonial encounter is fundamentally connected to the nature, aims and objectives of international law, as well as to its doctrines and operation (past and present). These TWAIL scholars, together with other international law historians such as Liliana Obregón and Arnulf Becker Lorca – who work on Latin American Approaches to International Law (LAIL) - have produced groundbreaking works of scholarship on the impact of both the colonial legacy and the event of decolonisation on international law. Furthermore, these scholars, along with many who focus upon European international legal history - the most prominent being Martti Koskenniemi - trace the legal justifications for colonialism, dispossession, human rights and the conquest of indigenous peoples and non-Western subjects in international law to the very origins of international law, reaching back as far as the 15th century. Consequently, international law now has numerous varied voices discussing the non-Western subject (there are three generations of TWAIL scholars alone), and it should be only a matter of time before these accounts will – and must - be incorporated into mainstream textbooks and courses on the subject.

After this presentation had widened the spectrum into a perspective that genuinely reached beyond the scope of IR and political science questions, Prof Mustapha Kamal Pasha, a major contributor to recent debates on ‘post-Western IR’ and specialist in questions about the emergence of ‘Islamic nihilism’ as a symptom of late modern global capitalism, rounded up the debate with a few succinct comments. He opened with an observation of the inherent problem that political theory is already so complicit with Eurocentrism and colonialism that the self-centredness of IR as a discipline has to be ended in order to make a serious discussion about post-colonial subjecthood happen at all. With politics in its original understanding as peaceful struggle and accommodation of different interests having vanished from the international arena, it would be time to tackle the different issues from a truly inter-disciplinary perspective. He further identified the key issues that are worth following up in conceptualising an agenda of non-Western agency. First, the question would be whether a question of non-Western subjecthood would be a question of sovereignty. While Prof Pasha opined in the positive on this question, his further remarks would relativise this standpoint. Second, discussions about post-colonial agendas both in academia and ‘real world’ politics would face an insurmountable issue: ‘emancipation’, often invoked as a core concern and benchmark in formulating goals and also used in the title of this event, could neither be separated from the Enlightenment and civilisation projects it was implicated in, nor from the teleology of redemption inherent in this concept. Prof Pasha thus called for the ‘emancipation of emancipation’ in order to disconnect the concept from the colonial and civilising legacies, within which it appears to be inevitably entrapped. This slightly circular point about ‘neutralising’ core concepts seemed to illustrate the limits that language seems to pose to exercises in post- and de-colonial thinking in a very exemplary way.

With a third remark, Prof Pasha reinforced the point made about the necessity to challenge the use of categories and the processes of their normalisation, especially with regard to the obligatory curriculum IR theory. The latter would contribute to the unconscious construction of the ‘self and other’ much more than it encouraged people to contest and reflect on these exact processes (as does the article under this title published by Iver Neumann in 1996). This final contribution was concluded with the observation that an attachment to categories originating from Western thought was still prevailing, for instance in the self-representation of non-Western agencies. Further, the multiplicity of the West, the different narratives constituting and re-negotiating this very broad marker, as well as the silences and contradictions within the West warranted, according to Prof Pasha, a critical inquiry into its fluid nature.

The questions from the very engaged audience encouraged the speakers to specify what they meant by the different ideas and strategies they had put forward in their initial presentations. Dr Vieira, for instance, admitted that querying identity markers did not mean to abandon categories used in the usual IR or political analysis all along, but that it would require challenging the homogeneity habitually attributed to international society (community). Phenomena like the non-alignment movement, or the contestation of Western dominance in international affairs at the Bandung conference in 1955 setting the foundation for it, were considerable examples of expressions of non-Western subjecthood and agency in a period that is usually conceived in terms of the dominance of Western powers and the beginning of the Cold War. Olivia Rutazibwa expressed her agreement with Prof Pasha’s remarks by saying that merely abandoning any binary thinking would be a ‘too easy’ solution and that the ‘West’ as ‘hegemonic category’ was still ‘analytically useful’. The way forward would rather lie in giving a material and historical sense to the objects in focus, and accordingly to their (non-) Western-ness. Her
example case of Somaliland was very striking on this account: here, the statebuilding process had indeed represented an autonomous, ‘home-grown’ recovery from conflict (in the absence of a UN/American intervention). But the incorporation of many concepts and ideas usually perceived as ‘Western’, such as a bi-cameral political system that counter-balanced the influence of entrenched clan structures and the successful organisation of democratic elections prior to the more extensive support of the ‘international community’ since 2000, poses fundamental questions on the nature of ‘mimicry’, highly relevant in this discussion. What motivated people in Somaliland to choose and implement such concepts and design their institutions in part after a Western model which usually gets criticised for its incompatibility with non-Western values? Is it in such context even useful to speak of the institutions of liberal market democracy as a Western (or non-Western) concept?

Vidya Kumar supported this point of view and explained how she preferred to focus on ‘representations of the West’, which could be discussed through a more empirical perspective. She states that in Law, where the West (i.e Western countries) was the only object of study, bringing in views on the non-West was very beneficial as it widened the horizons of inquiry. Terms operating with such categories should thus not be understood as offences, but still scrutinised as to the power that resides within them and the institutions and people with vested interests that work to maintain these categories. Prof Pasha refined this perspective with a list of different registers within which the category ‘West’ was to be understood, among which he enumerated cultural, political and historical notions. ‘The West’ would thus apparently produce a certain homogeneity through the grammar of modernity that people, however unwittingly, attached to it, a grammar that would be universal and interchangeable with other ways of seeing the world. This aspect was further discussed in an exchange between Dr Rutazibwa and one attendee from the audience, who inquired about the strategic approach with which governments of, especially ‘matured’ – i.e. more (economically) developed – countries in the global South were refusing to take over responsibility in questions about international intervention and conflict resolution, defining such things as ‘a role of the West’ (UAE and other golf states were named as examples). Dr Rutazibwa qualified this behaviour to Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’, which once again illustrated the multi-faceted and contingent way in which categories like ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ are used alongside other markers in international politics. The round table was closed by Philipp Lottholz, who concluded that certain categories and markers need not be abandoned in entirety, but that it is rather a critical reflexivity that social inquiry should be based on in light of the anti-essentialist stance espoused some panellists, which appeared radical but not illegitimate. He further highlighted the fact that the discussion at this event had merely been able to flag up a few aspects and entry points that an inter-disciplinary approach at understanding non-Western subjecthood may develop and enhance over years to come. The round table would thus be a first of many steps to follow.

The organizers would like to thank all panellists and guests who attended the event. For further information about follow-up events please contact Philipp Lottholz (PhD candidate, International Development Department): pxl167@bham.ac.uk

Speaker biographies:

Dr Marco Vieira’s current research draws from the notion of ontological security (security of the self) to understand the individual and collective behaviour of post-colonial (Southern) emerging powers. He is also interested in the role -and resilience- of South-South institutions such as the NAM, the G77 and most recently the IBSA Dialogue forum as sources of ontological security to their members. Marco is the co-author of The South in World Politics, Palgrave, 2010, and the author of several peer-reviewed articles. He is currently working on a new book project titled: Narratives of Emergence: Brazil, India, South Africa and Ontological Security.

Dr Olivia Rutazibwa’s research looks into the possibility of self-determination and agency in a context of western-led ethical foreign policies and international relations permeated by the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) that fundamentally altered the international understanding of sovereignty. She thus develops a decolonial critique of the Wilsonian approach to liberal international theory and its applications in intervention and statebuilding practices by inquiring local understandings of politics and society. Recent publications include articles in the Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, Ethical Perspectives and Journal of Contemporary European Studies.
**Dr Vidya Kumar** is interested in the meaning and treatment of revolutions in international law. She explores this and other issues by drawing on the different fields of philosophy of law, constitutional law, and public international law. She is currently working on a monograph titled *International Law and Revolution: Theory, History and Adjudication* and a member of the Postcolonial Birmingham Research Network.

**Prof Mustapha Kamal Pasha** is doing research in the field of Post-Western IR and draws on decolonial thought, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, critical theory, and classical political economy. His current book project, *Islamic Nihilism*, interrogates the structure of modernity as it confronts particular constellations of transcendental commitment in the Islamic Cultural Zones (ICZs), where traditional politics give way to new, unanticipated forms of political action, including violence and sectarianism. He has further edited and co-edited multiple volumes and is a member of several editorial boards of major journals, including the *American Political Science Review, International Political Sociology, Critical Studies of Security* and *Globalizations*.

**Dr Jonathan Fisher**’s research is focused on the relationship between Western aid donors and developing states. Within this he is particularly interested in how donors ‘construct’ perceptions of foreign governments and key concepts (eg ‘fragile state’) in international development. He is also interested in the extent to which these ‘knowledge construction’ processes are influenced by external actors and bureaucratic structures as well as by policy-makers themselves.

**Dr Robbie Shilliam** is one of the major contributors to recent debates on non-Western approaches in IR and beyond. He edited the volume *International Relations and Non-Western Thoughts: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity* and authored *The Black Pacific: Anticolonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*, in which he inquires the commonalities of African and Maori anti-colonial struggles and their importance for decolonial projects on the global level, as well as conventional understandings of them. Robbie is co-convener of the British International Studies Association’s Colonial/Postcolonial/Decolonial working group and a member of the International Advisory Board of the Transnational Decolonial Institute.

**Philipp Lottholz** is a PhD candidate at the International Development Department, University of Birmingham, where he acquired a MSc in 2012. His doctoral research inquires the contestation, rejection and hybridisation of the Western ‘liberal peace’ imaginary in the discourses and practices of statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan and asks whether these give rise to a post-liberal form of governance in Central Asia. Philipp’s research interests include peace and conflict studies, political sociology, international political economy, and post-Socialist/post-Soviet studies and post- and de-colonial IR.