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Uday Chandra ^a

^a Yale University , USA

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The Case for a Postcolonial Approach to the Study of Politics

Uday Chandra
Yale University, USA

Abstract *Postcolonialism is now an extensive body of knowledge that draws on Edward Said's Orientalism, the Subaltern Studies collective, and other critical anti-colonial scholarship. While postcolonial scholars have significantly shaped humanistic disciplines such as history, comparative literature, and anthropology, their impact on political science has been limited. The resistance to postcolonialism is strongly associated with the perpetuation of Eurocentric perspectives on ex-colonial territories. Dominant theories of democracy and civil wars, for example, remain trapped in outdated Eurocentric theory that sheds scarcely any light on postcolonial realities. The case for a postcolonial approach to the study of politics is thus stronger than ever before. Such an approach calls for a sustained engagement with specific non-Western contexts as well as an openness to anthropological, historical, and area studies knowledge about them. Decolonizing knowledge within political science, in sum, ought to be seen as part of a wider project of decentering the discipline by undermining what is seen today as "mainstream."*

Introduction

We live in uncertain times, but one of the few certainties today is the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives on formerly colonized parts of the modern world. Colonial stereotypes and social theories used to govern colonized societies now find pride of place in academic and media discourses. Consider two common-place assertions in contemporary academic writing:

- (1) Democracy requires certain material preconditions that make it difficult for poorer countries to become and remain democratic.
- (2) Civil wars occur primarily in ex-colonial territories in which the modern state has penetrated insufficiently.

Both of these assertions, which I examine below, may be linked to a venerable body of scholarship within American political science. This state of affairs is puzzling, on the one hand, because the origins of these assertions lie in Europe, not the United States. Yet, on the other hand, it is also unsurprising because the American social sciences bear the clear imprint of older European social theories of modernization, development, culture, and history.¹

¹See, for example, Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir, and Shannon Stimson (eds), *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1870* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

It would be fair to say that the post-World War II American science of politics has drawn on European precedents even as it has domesticated these in the quest for a value-free social science.² The new science of politics was, paradoxically, both American and universal. As Edward Schatz and Elena Maltseva put it,

While a variety of authors have examined non-American influences on the discipline, few would deny that it has been strikingly American and has developed particularly quickly in post-War America ... the discipline is committed to producing general knowledge that transcends the particulars of time and place, to producing knowledge that ipso facto should not be characterized as American.³

During the Cold War and its aftermath, the (re-)production of general scientific knowledge about the former colonial world has remained indispensable to American interests.⁴ As a consequence, the abstract, formal character of much American political science has tended to obscure not only the colonial origins of several of its key concepts and theories, but also its many uses in advancing American interests in the postcolonial world. This article seeks to reveal the origins and uses of mainstream American political science, critiquing dominant disciplinary views of the ex-colonial world and then making the case for a distinctly postcolonial approach to the study of politics.

A Postcolonial Perspective: What and Why?

Before critiquing mainstream political science views of the ex-colonial world, it is necessary to understand what is implied by a postcolonial perspective of politics. Postcolonialism refers, broadly, to a range of critical anti-colonial perspectives that display an awareness of the ways in which five centuries of modern European colonialism continue to shape political ideas and practices, including those concerning the production of knowledge.⁵ The origins of postcolonial scholarship lie undeniably in the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century. Figures such as M.K. Gandhi and Franz Fanon, for instance, criticized not only the injustices and violence wrought by European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, but also the intellectual bases of colonial modernity everywhere.⁶ Legitimizing truths of colonialism such as racial hierarchies and the modernization of so-called backward places were, in particular, objects of exacting analysis and criticism.

²On the origins and context of the American social sciences, especially political science as a discipline, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); see also Bernard Crick, *The American Science of Politics: Its Origin and Conditions* (London, UK: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1959).

³Edward Schatz and Elena Maltseva, "Assumed to be Universal: The Leap from Data to Knowledge in the *American Political Science Review*," *Polity* 44 (2012), pp. 446–472.

⁴See, in particular, S.M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁵For a deeper exploration of what is meant by postcolonialism, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, UK: Routledge, 1998); and Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

⁶See, for example, M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); see also Franz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Books, 1967); and *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963).

Even after the formal end of colonialism, the role of the modern state, itself a vestige of the colonial past, remains a critical target for postcolonial scholars for its elitist and authoritarian tendencies.⁷ Equally important targets are the dominant Western perceptions of ex-colonial societies, commonplace both in and outside them, with their peculiar prejudices and blindspots. A postcolonial perspective of politics is thus wedded to one or more of these strands of criticism and the search for emancipatory alternatives in the realms of knowledge and praxis.

Within Western academe, the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 is often seen as the start of a postcolonial turn, at least in the humanities and humanistic social sciences. For Said, the "relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of various degrees of a complex hegemony."⁸ Orientalism is both an ensemble of hegemonic ideas about the Orient as well as a reality that European colonizers and their successors have sought to conjure into life. Its basis is the "flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."⁹ To state, for example, that the preconditions for democracy are lacking or corruption is endemic in a particular postcolonial context is to generate "objective" scientific truths that effectively efface the causal impact of colonialism in that context. These "objective" truths about the non-West also bear an uncanny resemblance to older colonial notions of Oriental despotism and corruption.¹⁰ Accordingly, to the extent that these "truths" follow logically from the "hegemony of European ideas about the Orient ... reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness," we may justifiably count disciplines such as "economics, politics, and sociology ... [as] ideological sciences" and, hence, intrinsically "political" in form and content alike.¹¹ It is these disciplines, of course, which are the most resistant even today to the central message of Said's writings, namely, the need to decolonize knowledge concerning the non-Western world. The result is what Said termed "American Social Scientistese," a new post-World War II Orientalism in which the "trained social scientist ... 'applies' his science to the Orient, or anywhere else."¹² So long as they could "appear scientific," American political scientists would, therefore, "ignore the major problems of politics"¹³ in the postcolonial world and beyond.

Following Said, the Subaltern Studies collective significantly influenced humanistic disciplines that had welcomed the postcolonial turn marked by Said's *Orientalism*. The Subalternists, led by Ranajit Guha, drew attention to the "small voice of history:"¹⁴ poor peasants, migrants, industrial workers, indigenous

⁷ Ashis Nandy, *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2003); see also Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ For a succinct summary of these notions, see Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Study of Total Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 7, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 284, 290.

¹³ Bernard Crick, *The American Science of Politics: Its Origin and Conditions* (London, UK: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1959), p. 231.

¹⁴ Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History," in *Subaltern Studies IX* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 1–12.

peoples, and others who had suffered under colonialism and its aftermath. When in 1988 a collection of essays selected from the first five volumes of *Subaltern Studies* was published in the United States, Edward Said himself wrote the foreword to the volume.¹⁵ For Guha and his compatriots, following the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, “subaltern” groups were locked in a range of struggles against the forces of colonialism, but social scientists and historians had hitherto neglected their political agency in everyday forms of resistance as well as epochal moments of rebellion.¹⁶ Although focused originally on India, the Subalternists soon initiated South-South dialogues with scholars of Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa.¹⁷ They also made common cause with fringe political scientists studying peasant rebellions and resistance across the world, most notably James C. Scott.¹⁸ Collectively, the Subalternists and their allies sought a “radical rethinking of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and Western domination” in order to “undo the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West’s trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History.”¹⁹ In this manner, they complemented Said’s criticisms by articulating a distinctly subaltern perspective on postcolonial politics, culture, and history that would inform historical and social scientific scholarship.²⁰

Recent scholarship has extended the scope of postcolonial studies by rethinking disciplinary practices or established ways of doing history, anthropology, and literary criticism. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, has examined “the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European life-worlds.”²¹ By doing so, he questions not only our received understanding of

¹⁵ Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); see also Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Chennai, India: Orient Longman, 1996); and David Arnold, “Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 11:4 (1984), pp. 155–177.

¹⁷ See, for example, Ileana Rodríguez (ed.), *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *The American Historical Review* 99:5 (1994), pp. 1516–1545.

¹⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); see also Ben Kerkvliet, *Everyday Politics in the Philippines: Class and Status Relations in a Central Luzon Village* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99:5 (1994), p. 1475.

²⁰ Veena Das, “Subaltern as Perspective,” in *Subaltern Studies VI* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 310–324.

²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 20.

“democracy,” “state,” and “modernity,” but also of academic history writing as an intellectual and political practice.²² Both are ways of “provincializing Europe” via sustained intellectual dialogues between Europe and its historical Others. Similarly, anthropologists such as Talal Asad, Johannes Fabian, James Clifford, and George Marcus have been at the forefront of efforts to undo the lasting colonial legacies within their discipline.²³ This has meant, on the one hand, rethinking the relationship between the self and the other in ethnographic encounters,²⁴ and on the other hand, opening up new sites of fieldwork to study, say, development aid, state bureaucracies, and activist networks without being weighed down by the intellectual baggage of colonialism.²⁵ Literary scholars, too, have felt the need to shed their Eurocentric lenses to revisit their canonical texts from postcolonial perspectives.²⁶ For some, this has been an exercise in uncovering hitherto neglected aspects of classic texts, whereas for others it has been a case of re-interpreting the canon from a new theoretical vantage point.²⁷ Unlike historians, anthropologists, and literary scholars, however, political scientists have been noticeably disinterested in taking postcolonial perspectives seriously. While there are a few prominent exceptions,²⁸ the response of the overwhelming majority of the discipline has been ignorant, scornful, or both. The next section explores the implications of such disciplinary neglect, taking the study of democracy and civil wars as my two case studies.

²² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?,” *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992), pp. 1–26.

²³ Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973); see also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1986).

²⁴ James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); see also Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); and George E. Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

²⁵ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); see also Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); and Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁶ See, for example, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London, UK: Routledge, 1995); Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004).

²⁷ Two exemplary works of each kind are Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deane Williams (eds), *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁸ See, in particular, Leela Fernandes, *India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the PRC* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011).

Colonialism/Postcolonialism and Political Science

It is widely appreciated now that mainstream American political science has been impervious to humanistic and interpretive approaches. These approaches are believed to lack “rigor” and “objectivity,” keywords used for “gate-keeping . . . to control the terms of debate and to regulate what research is going to be accorded the status of science.”²⁹ As far as postcolonial approaches are concerned, these are rarely, if ever, entertained in the discipline. Until now, only a single work of contemporary political science has dared to explicitly use the term “postcolonial” in its title.³⁰ The upshot of these tendencies is, I argue, the perpetuation of colonial ideas and theories within the discipline today. Moreover, the continued salience of these ideas and theories distorts understandings of the ex-colonial world and prevents the emergence of a decolonized, engaged political science. Two case studies, drawing on the study of democracy and civil wars, elucidate my argument below.

Democracy

Post-World War II American political science, John Gunnell has argued, took “democracy” to be the defining feature of the United States and the so-called free world, and the rest of the globe came to be judged accordingly.³¹ Robert Dahl, for example, declared stridently that everyday power relations in the United States were pluralistic with myriad societal interests vying for power in a competitive political arena.³² By comparison, the new, emerging democracies in Asia and Africa were seen as built on shaky foundations, often characterized by one-party regimes, “traditional” societies in transition, and unreliable commitments to democratic government.³³ In the same vein, Selig Harrison predicted the collapse of the largest of these democratic regimes in India.³⁴ Another theorist of democracy, Barrington Moore, Jr., puzzled over the anomalous case of India while explaining different paths to modern democracy and dictatorship.³⁵ Still another stalwart, Samuel Huntington, cautioned against democracy and pushed for institutional order and stability.³⁶ More recently, the same arguments connecting

²⁹ Dvora Yanow, “Neither Rigorous Nor Objective: Interrogating Criteria for Knowledge Claims in Interpretive Science,” in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 2006), p. 68.

³⁰ James Mahoney, *Colonialism and Postcolonial Development: Spanish America in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³¹ John G. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

³² Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961).

³³ See, for example, Gabriel A. Almond and James S. Coleman (eds), *The Politics of Developing Areas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960); and Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958).

³⁴ Selig S. Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).

³⁵ Barrington Moore, Jr., *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 314–412.

³⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

democracy, modernity, and the West have been advanced using formal models and econometrics as bulwarks.³⁷

Modernity and democracy were unproblematically regarded as the province of the West. The non-Western or postcolonial world was, by contrast, imagined as its Other: rooted in the traditions of the past, socially and economically backward, and unfriendly to representative democracy. Structural-functionalist theories of society conferred scientific sanctity to these political differences between the modern West and the traditional non-West.³⁸ American foreign policy imbued the distinction with a concrete, real-world significance: as Henry Kissinger saw it, the world was essentially divided between societies that had “escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking” and those that had indeed undergone the Newtonian revolution in scientific thinking.³⁹ This Cold War distinction between the modern Western and traditional postcolonial societies, it must be noted, mapped onto an older binary between colonizer and colonized. John Stuart Mill had, for instance, excluded from his modern liberal doctrine “those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage.”⁴⁰ This developmentalist teleology, based on an ideological “denial of coevalness,”⁴¹ appeared as commonsensical to Mill as it did to his post-World War II American political science counterparts. The non-West, on this reading of the past, is forever placed in the “waiting room of history,” catching up incessantly with the modern, progressive West.⁴²

The normative and theoretical problems with such formulations of democracy are exacerbated by empirical ones. Despite the patronizing preconceptions and needless apprehensions of American political scientists, mass democracy in postcolonial societies is flourishing today in distinctive vernacular forms.⁴³

³⁷ See, for example, Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); see also Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁸ See, in particular, Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); and Talcott Parsons, *Politics and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1969); see also Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968); and David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).

³⁹ Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974), pp. 48–49.

⁴⁰ J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008 [1862]), p. 13.

⁴¹ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, pp. 25–70.

⁴² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 8.

⁴³ For illuminating theoretical discussions on this point, see Jonathan Spencer, “Post-Colonialism and the Political Imagination,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3:1 (1997), pp. 1–19; and Julia Paley (ed.), *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2008). For exemplary country specific studies of the workings of vernacular democracy, see Frederic C. Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); see also Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in Contemporary Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Harry G. West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Lucia Michelutti, *The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008).

Subaltern populations, albeit lacking the full rights of citizens, form the backbone of contemporary postcolonial democracies.⁴⁴ For instance, levels of mass political participation, from voter turnout to non-partisan forms of civic activism, are appreciably higher among over two billion South Asians⁴⁵ than in elitist democracies such as the United States where the poor are the least likely voters. Indeed, limited political participation is such a problem in American history that a much-celebrated recent manual on democracy simply omits it in order to ensure that the United States can be counted statistically as a democracy!⁴⁶ These ideological sleights of hand that obscure our conceptions of democracy make it even more important to understand how ordinary men and women experience and enact democratic politics in particular times and places, particularly in postcolonial contexts. It is in this spirit that Lisa Wedeen describes masterfully how *qat chews* in Yemen serve as sites of democratic deliberation today.⁴⁷ As Lucia Michelutti explains, “the moment democracy enters a particular historical and socio-cultural setting it becomes vernacularised, and through vernacularisation it produces new social relations and values which in turn shape ‘the political.’”⁴⁸ Without an in-depth empirical understanding of these “vernacular codes” by which democratic values and practices get internalized in the popular consciousness, we will continue to posit false, ideologically loaded dichotomies between the modern democratic West and traditional undemocratic non-West. Our normative and theoretical commitments in the study of democracy are, in other words, inseparable from our empirical knowledge of it.⁴⁹

Civil Wars

Over the past decade, civil wars have emerged as a major subfield of comparative political science because there has been a growing recognition that, in the post-World War II period, wars within states far outnumber wars between states. World Bank researchers Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler took the lead with a pioneering article on greed and grievance as competing micro-economic motivations for participation in civil wars.⁵⁰ Equally important was the rejoinder by David Laitin and James Fearon, who emphasized macro-structural factors such as rugged terrain and weak states in their explanation of why civil wars occur.⁵¹ For Fearon and Laitin, “financially, organizationally, and politically weak central govern-

⁴⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 27–80.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava, and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–25, 60–175; see also David N. Gellner (ed.), *Ethnic Activism and Civil Society in South Asia* (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications, 2009).

⁴⁶ Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development*, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, pp. 103–147.

⁴⁸ Michelutti, *The Vernacularisation of Democracy*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Lisa Wedeen, “Concepts and Commitments in the Study of Democracy,” in Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith, and Tarek Masoud (eds), *Problems and Methods in the Study of Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004), pp. 563–595.

⁵¹ David D. Laitin and James D. Fearon, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003), pp. 75–86.

ments render insurgency more feasible and attractive due to weak local policing or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices."⁵² A similar macro-level view by Stathis Kalyvas argues that "poor, nonmodernized states never penetrated their periphery effectively, thus failing to reduce the salience of local cleavages ... and leaving such cleavages as a resource for rebels to access."⁵³ Once again, therefore, we find ourselves face to face with the ideological divide between the modern West and its poor, non-modern Other. This reversion to modernization theory is almost inevitable because civil wars today occur invariably in postcolonial contexts where the sovereignty of the modern state is itself contested. But, instead of probing the empirical nature of contested sovereignty in postcolonial contexts, the American political scientist's response is to assume a lack or deficiency in order to explain the causes of civil wars. It is difficult to miss the neat parallel with studies of democracy discussed earlier.

Neo-positivist notions of "science" play a key role in blinding scholars to the ideological pre-commitments expected by mainstream American political science research on civil wars. First, the very concept of "civil wars" is intentionally vague and open to abuse. The most common definition encompasses all "armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities."⁵⁴ Political phenomena in postcolonial settings as varied as peasant revolts, social banditry, millenarian movements, wars of national liberation, social revolutions, and pogroms can all now be coded as "civil wars." While such coding obviously facilitates large-n quantitative studies of civil wars, it also invites serious concerns over "conceptual stretching" and "concept misformation."⁵⁵ The author of the definition above is well aware of these problems. He writes elsewhere: "Civil war is a naturally occurring category ... Distinguishing it from other types of conflict always involves some kind of ad-hoc or value-based judgment."⁵⁶ Such questionable coding practices are, nonetheless, commonplace, arguably because they are useful in validating ideologically predetermined hypotheses about civil wars in postcolonial contexts.

Second, although there is no statistical consensus on why civil wars occur, the dominant tendency among American political scientists is to posit structural explanations without attributing any meaningful human agency to postcolonial actors. Some political scientists, for example, have explained the causes of civil wars vis-à-vis rebels' greed for lootable wealth.⁵⁷ Other reductionist explanations

⁵² Ibid., 75–76.

⁵³ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 386.

⁵⁴ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Civil Wars," in Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 417.

⁵⁵ Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64:4 (1970), pp. 1033–1053; see also David Collier and James E. Mahon, Jr., "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 87:4 (1993), pp. 845–55. Trivially, even sibling fights would appear to fall into the same category as social revolutions!

⁵⁶ Stathis N. Kalyvas and Paul D. Kenny, "Civil Wars," in Robert A. Denemark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 2–3.

⁵⁷ For a representative sample of this literature, see Macartan Humphreys, "Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49 (2005), pp. 508–537; see also Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Claire

have privileged uneven topography,⁵⁸ ethnic differences,⁵⁹ or poverty.⁶⁰ This thicket of interpretive confusion follows from competing a priori conceptions of why civil wars occur. In each case, the distant Western observer identifies structural deficiencies, whether in postcolonial state formation, demographics or ecology, without any attempt to explain why ordinary men and women participate at all in high-risk collective action. The application of a neo-positivist notion of “science” dramatically depoliticizes a highly charged political phenomenon by reducing it to a set of structural variables. A particularly egregious variant of this problem afflicts the recent wave of interest in the “micro-foundations” of civil wars.⁶¹ Although researchers of micro-foundations probe the disjunctures between macro-level social cleavages and micro-level motivations, they are firmly committed to a reductionist analysis that regards individuals as caught between struggles for territorial control between state and state-like rebel groups. There is no scope here for understanding either subaltern agency or postcolonial state–society relations. Science, therefore, masks the perpetuation of an older colonial view of “backward” areas or peripheries as peculiarly prone to insurgency.⁶² American political science, in other words, is expected to act, much like the colonizers of yore, to restore political order and build stronger states.

There are, of course, notable exceptions that take postcolonial perspectives seriously, both in and outside the recent literature on civil wars. Some political scientists have, for example, examined the nature of subaltern agency and resistance in armed conflicts, especially in response to injustice and oppression.⁶³

Footnote 57 continued

M. Metelits, *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ See, for example, Halvard Buhaug and Päivi Lujala, “Accounting for Scale: Measuring Geography in Quantitative Studies of Civil War,” *Political Geography* 24:4 (2005), pp. 399–418; see also Nils Weidmann, “Geography as Motivation and Opportunity: Group Concentration and Ethnic Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (2009), pp. 526–543.

⁵⁹ Monica D. Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); see also Lars-Erik Cederman and L. Girardin, “Beyond Fractionalization: Mapping Ethnicity onto Nationalist Insurgencies,” *American Political Science Review* 101:1 (2007), pp. 173–185.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Lael Brainard and Derek Chollet (eds), *Too Poor for Peace? Global Poverty, Conflict, and Security in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); see also Gudrun Østby, “Polarization, Horizontal Inequalities, and Violent Civil Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45:1 (2008), pp. 143–162; and Lars-Erik Cederman, Nils B. Weidmann and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison,” *American Political Science Review* 105:3 (2011), pp. 478–495.

⁶¹ The leading work of this genre is Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. See also Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Promises and Pitfalls of an Emerging Research Program: The Microdynamics of Civil War,” in S.N. Kalyvas, I. Shapiro, and T.E. Masoud (eds), *Order, Conflict, and Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 397–421; see also Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew A. Kocher, “The Dynamics of Violence in Vietnam: An Analysis of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES),” *Journal of Peace Research*, 46:3 (2009), pp. 335–355; and Abbey Steele, “Electing Displacement: Political Cleansing in Apartadó, Columbia,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55:3 (2011), pp. 423–445.

⁶² Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, pp. 67, 136.

⁶³ See, in particular, Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); see also Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1978); James C. Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); Roger

These scholars have emphasized not only subaltern agency, but the contexts that facilitate the exercise of such agency in Western and non-Western contexts. Other political scientists, inspired by recent anthropological research on violent conflict, have focused on the social networks, cultural memories, and performative practices of protest underlying “civil wars.”⁶⁴ Their meaning-centered explanations stand out for their sensitivity to understanding the postcolonial contexts in which armed conflicts occur. Lastly, there are political scientists who have studied the colonial origins of contemporary conflicts, especially those involving ethnic rivalries and the historical marginalization of particular regions or communities.⁶⁵ These writers stress the dialectics between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, a theme conspicuous by its absence in much recent political science research on “civil wars.” Each of these three intellectual strands in the margins of the discipline, defined by their emphases on subaltern agency and resistance, meaning-centered contextual explanations, and colonial legacies on the present respectively, offer different models for studying “civil wars” today. Yet their marginal status within American political science, dominated as it is by neopositivist notions of science, means that a full-fledged postcolonial approach to the subject remains a distant dream.

Toward a Postcolonial Approach to Political Science

The preceding section demonstrated how American political science research on the postcolonial world reproduces older colonial stereotypes and theories. In this section I chart the path toward a postcolonial approach to the study of politics. Such an approach, I argue, calls for a sustained engagement with specific non-Western contexts as well as an openness to anthropological, historical, and area studies knowledge about them. A postcolonial approach can take many forms, but I highlight three possibilities here:

- (1) critiques of existing Eurocentric theories of comparative politics;
- (2) bottom-up ethnographic and historical understandings of politics in particular contexts;
- (3) re-evaluating key political concepts such as the state, democracy, nationalism, and war in the light of different non-Western experiences.

Footnote 63 continued

D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶⁴ Three recent examples are Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbours: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); see also Meghan Lynch, “When Victims Don’t Become Killers: The Effects of Local Memories of Violence in Burundi,” paper presented at the African Studies Association Annual Conference (November 2012); and Uday Chandra, “Beyond Subalternity: Land, Community, and the State in Contemporary Jharkhand,” *Contemporary South Asia* 21:1 (2013), pp. 52–61.

⁶⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); see also Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Courtney Jung, *The Moral Force of Indigenous Politics: Critical Liberalism and the Zapatistas* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The first of these postcolonial approaches expands on the previous section. The aim is to examine and deconstruct mainstream political science theories about the postcolonial world by unveiling their overt biases and blindspots. These biases and blindspots, it needs to be demonstrated, are not arbitrary, but tied to distinctly Eurocentric visions of politics and society. Such visions implicitly or explicitly privilege Western experiences over non-Western ones, deny any measure of coevalness, and recast the postcolonial as backward or underdeveloped. For instance, the study of democracy exhibited clear strains of Eurocentrism insofar as they assumed a priori that the modern West is the “natural” home of democracy and the postcolonial world throws up inchoate versions of modern Western democracy. Similarly, the contemporary study of civil wars is crippled by its Eurocentric view of postcolonial conflicts as a function of structural inadequacies such as weak states, economic backwardness, and primordial ethnic divisions.

To overcome these Eurocentric views, a second kind of postcolonial approach is warranted. The aim of this approach is to offer alternatives to mainstream political science theories via in-depth, bottom-up empirical understandings of politics in postcolonial settings. Interpretive research relying on ethnographic and/or historical methods is particularly well-suited to achieve this aim. Even statistical studies that are sensitive to contextual realities in the postcolonial world can do so. The “science” underlying political science should itself be reconsidered and revised beyond its current neo-positivist confines. Investigations of vernacular practices and experiences of democracy in countries as diverse as Mexico, Nigeria, Yemen, and India are a part of this approach. So, too, are meaning-centered explanations of why ordinary men and women in postcolonial settings participate in armed social conflicts and other risky forms of collective action.

A third kind of postcolonial approach, complementing the first two, seeks to rethink and redefine key political concepts by ridding them of their existing Eurocentric biases. The interpenetration of power and knowledge arguably leaves its deepest imprint on concepts, which are vital building blocks for social-scientific theories. What “democracy” means in India or Mexico is likely to be quite different from the United States or Canada. Difference does not, however, imply that one can be judged as inherently superior to another. The European or American experience of democracy cannot, in particular, be universalized into an abstract general model of democracy. Likewise, the notion of “civil wars” conceals a latent conviction that only strong states that can conquer their peripheries can establish a legitimate monopoly of violence within a certain territory. Whether in the Americas, Asia or Africa, this conviction is inseparable from the violence wrought by European colonialism on subject populations in its quest for political order.

Taken together, these postcolonial approaches to the study of politics call for “provincializing Europe,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued recently, so that we can avoid treating European experiences as universals. This task is simultaneously theoretical and empirical as well as intellectual and practical. As such, it supplements ongoing efforts within the United States and Europe to produce critical scholarship on racial, gender, and sexual minorities, inequalities of class and status, and the interpenetration of power and knowledge in mainstream political science. Yet postcolonial approaches, much like other critical approaches to politics such as those based on feminist theory or ethnographic methods, face a fundamental challenge: it may be possible for the disciplinary mainstream to accept a minimalist version of each approach, but a shallow epistemic pluralism

will always prevent a fuller transformation of disciplinary practices. With respect to postcolonial approaches in particular, better and more grounded empirical research in postcolonial contexts seems far more likely on the horizon than a thoroughgoing re-examination of mainstream concepts, theories, and assumptions in the discipline. To sum up, postcolonial approaches to politics constitute a radical endeavor that challenges mainstream knowledge on non-Western politics and society via sustained engagements with them, though its future in American political science, as in the case of other critical approaches explored in this volume, may well be more modest than this article hopes for.

Conclusion

This article has sought to argue for a distinctive postcolonial approach to the study of politics. My argument rests, on the one hand, on a critique of dominant Eurocentric concepts and theories within post-World War II American political science, and on the other hand, on outlining alternatives to these theories and concepts that can help decolonize the production of social-scientific knowledge on the postcolonial world. The argument acquires a fresh significance when one considers that, unlike disciplines such as history, anthropology, or literary criticism, political science has been singularly heedless to postcolonial criticism until now.

In defense of my argument, I clarified at the outset what I meant by a postcolonial approach to politics, drawing on Said's *Orientalism*, the *Subaltern Studies* collective, and other critical anti-colonial writings. Thereafter, I deconstructed mainstream political science literatures on democracy and civil wars in postcolonial contexts, highlighting how their latent assumptions and prejudices perpetuate the colonial tendency to take the Euroamerican experience as natural and universal in contrast to the inchoate articulations of modernity in the ex-colonial world. Even as I critiqued these bodies of scholarship from a postcolonial perspective, I consciously noted voices in the margins of the discipline that were, indeed, friendly to postcolonial critiques. These marginal voices, I believe, offer us the best opportunity to articulate a full-fledged postcolonial approach to the study of politics. Such an approach can take many forms, but I sketched three possibilities in particular: first, to deconstruct the Eurocentric biases and blindspots of comparative political science insofar as it concerns knowledge claims about the postcolonial world; second, to offer in-depth, bottom-up empirical alternatives to mainstream American political science research on politics in postcolonial settings; third, to redefine key political concepts so that they reflect not merely European or American experiences and practices, but those from across the postcolonial world too.

A postcolonial approach to politics is, therefore, a kind of radical intellectual practice that challenges the dominant ways of producing knowledge about the so-called developing or Third World. It is an approach that is in solidarity with other radical intellectual trends within political science that, for example, make the case for interpretive methods, critical studies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and constructivist theories of politics and society. Decolonizing knowledge within political science, in other words, ought to be seen as part of a wider project of decentering the discipline by undermining what is seen today as dominant or "mainstream." We cannot labor under the illusion that this will be an easy task.