

How and why do historical processes and personalities become salient in the contemporary politics of identity?

Introduction

Making sense of global politics requires a close look at the individual identities of the people whom political decisions impact. The historical processes and personalities behind contemporary politics of identity allows international relations scholars to connect historical actions with demonstrated modern-day implications. This essay will be operating under the definition of historical processes and personalities as events and individuals in the historical record. Additionally, this essay defines the contemporary politics of identity as the propensity for groups of different social identities to form political ideas and programs based on their identities. However, this essay will focus mostly on the intertwinement of politics and social identity and will pay attention to how historical actions and policies have had disproportionately negative impact on those who identify with specific social groups. This essay will be devoted to how the historical process of colonialism and the historic personalities of colonizers become salient in the contemporary politics of identity through their impact on modern-day race relations. Additionally, this essay will consider why the perpetuation of colonialism, through the processes of neo-colonialism, has been affected by gendered politics and continues to further contribute to the marginalization of women. Furthermore, this essay will discuss the impact of race and gender on the scholarship of international relations, and the importance of being aware of the inherent racial and gender biases in the field.

The Historic Process of Colonialism and the Modern-Day Effects on Race Relations

Despite race being a social construct, a social fiction with real effects that cannot be deconstructed easily, modern-day race relations are still heavily influenced by historical events and systems. This essay will specifically focus on the manifestation of the impact of the historical process of colonialism on the present through the discussion of the case study of apartheid in South Africa. Additionally, this essay will discuss the impact race, and more specifically racism has had on the scholarship of international relations, and how neo-colonialism is the reason the historical process of colonialism has been so pervasive in current identity politics.

The idea of race has its roots in the historical process of colonialism, where colonizers from Western nations used theological, and “scientific” reasoning to justify the exploitation of individuals outside of Europe; primarily native individuals of North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. 16th-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan* utilized the theory of the “state of nature” to describe how those who exist without states are subject to the state of nature, which sets those individuals up for a “short and brutish” existence (Merriam 152). This theory was used by European colonizers as justification to exploit and conquer civilizations they perceived to exist in a state of nature. This coupled with the theory of biological/scientific racism that arose out of Darwinism and the Enlightenment, contributed to the view of race as a determinant of fitness for sovereignty (Harris 1709), and served as a vindication of colonialism.

These justifications of colonialism, and the historical actions taken by colonizers, have manifested in the form of many issues in global modern-day race relations and contemporary politics of identity. An example of colonialism’s long-lasting effects on the present is the impact of apartheid on South Africa. This institutionalized and systemic segregation based on racial identity was a direct effect of Dutch colonialism, and it marginalized the native population and

touted white Afrikaans citizens as intrinsically “better.” With political conflict in modern society primarily centered around interests and identity (Goldstein and Raynor 367), apartheid exemplifies how historical processes impact contemporary politics of identity, chiefly by South Africa not having a black president until 1994 (Bonnin et.al 1). The transition that occurred with the election of President Nelson Mandela in 1994 was one of empowerment and progress, however, the colonial undertones are still omnipresent in South Africa’s political system, which further displays the continuation of colonial influence (Bonnin et.al 1).

With race and racism permeating most aspects of modern society, it has also influenced scholarship on many topics, including international relations. International relations is a discipline that used to be acutely conscious of race, not necessarily in the most progressive way. This is shown by how *Foreign Affairs*, the most prominent international relations journal, used to be known as the *Journal of Race Development*. Additionally, the nexus of international relations and racism was shown through the Treaty of Versailles discussions following World War II, when Japan was invited to the conference and proposed a clause known as the Racial Equality Proposal, which was denied by the other member states (Gordon). It is important to note the intersections of race and racism with international relations. This is especially true when discussing the salient connections between historical processes, such as colonialism, and current identity politics. This is due to the importance of introspection regarding biases that could be embedded in international relations, which is the system used to study the contemporary politics of identity.

The current practice of neo-colonialism is to blame for why colonialism is such a pervasive force in modern identity politics (Campbell 38). Neo-colonialism, the interference of powerful states in the affairs of less powerful ones, is a continuation of the abuses of colonialism under the guise of foreign policy (Abbott 41). This prolongation of colonialism through neo-colonialism has

caused the negative impacts of the colonial era to continue to disrupt the lives of many civilians in developing nations, as well as to affect the current identity politics of their political climates. The colonialism that non-European countries experienced, and its continuation in the form of neo-colonialism, highlight the importance of historical processes in the contemporary politics of identity, especially through the lens of race and racism.

The Relationship of Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism and Modern-Day Politics of Gender

In Judith Butler's landmark text *Gender Trouble*, there is a discussion on the nature of gender being a social concept due to gender being a performative identity, as it is produced through repeated acts, as well as it not being something that one is, but something that one does. Due to the difficulty of the deconstruction of social norms relating to gender, the historical processes of sexism and marginalization of women still manifest in the present politics of identity, and international relations scholarship. This essay will discuss how historical sexist perspectives and gendered politics have perpetuated current neo-colonialism, as well as simultaneously serving as a key component in anticolonial nationalism, specifically pertaining to the case study of Afghani women under the Taliban regime. Additionally, this essay will address how gendered politics' perpetuation of neo-colonialism contributes to the further marginalization of women. Furthermore, this essay will consider how gender has shaped the field of international relations by affecting our modern viewpoint of international security.

The historical hierarchy of gender has delineated our global perspective of connections between gender and politics, as gender itself is a currency of power (Maharaj 50). The relationship between gender and politics has led to the perpetuation of current neo-colonialism through the present

relationship between the colonizers and the colonized through the concept that when Western nations interfere with the politics of the East it is, “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 90). This viewpoint has served as propagation for many neo-colonialist movements, such as the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan. This is shown by the Bush administration referring to the war on terror as “also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Berry 137). The symbolic use of Afghan women in the war on terror highlights how historic sexism by the United States manifests in the present through their use of Afghani women as pawns to justify and perpetuate neo-colonialism, while failing to listen to the women’s self-defined aspirations (Berry 137). That said, gender in politics has also served as an important concept to anticolonial nationalists. This is exemplified by how many anticolonial nationalists in colonized countries view that it is the man’s job to emulate the West outside the home to further develop the nation, while women are crucial in preserving historic culture and spirituality in the home (Chatterjee). This historic sexism and its manifestation in the propagation of neo-colonialism are deeply intertwined with how historical processes become conspicuous in the contemporary politics of identity through the continued marginalization of women by men in stations of political power.

Sexism and gendered politics play a vital role in the furtherance of neo-colonialism, which in turn leads to continued marginalization of women. This displays the multi-layered connections between the historic process of colonialism and the resulting politics of identity of the modern day, as shown by how colonialism reorganized the gender dynamics of colonized societies through the restructuring of family labor patterns to promote domesticity in colonized nations (Ghosh 737-748). Implementation of the promotion of domesticity allowed for the marginalization of women by discouraging them from securing education and work outside the home, from which many colonized nations are still recovering from the effects. Elevating women’s status in society through

education and work outside the home has been intricately linked with the elevation of a country's overall economic status (Anunobi 41). The colonial encouragement of domesticity, which has been furthered by neo-colonial efforts, is a crucial component of the marginalization of women in many colonized nations. Presently, this has been evinced through many studies, such as how female literacy rates have been proved to be linked to birth and infant mortality rates in colonized nations such as India (Saurabh et.al 349). These are yet more examples of how the historical process of colonialism has manifested itself in the present in the contemporary politics of identity pertaining to gender.

Additionally, the historic relationship between gender and politics is one that has imbued the scholarship of international relations, in part through its effects on the modern viewpoint of international security. This is evident through gender being studied as an instrument of war through rape, sexual violence against women, and sexualized torture being historically used as a way for the aggressor to assert dominance. In addition, gender and politics have impacted the field through the study of gender roles in war and the "sexist discrimination despite women's historical success as combatants" (Goldstein 4). Not only is gender and politics salient to the study of international relations due to the relationship between gender and the study of warfare, but it is also crucial due to how the marginalization of women in key roles (e.g., secretaries) has led to global consequences, such as secretary Fawn Hall's involvement in the Iran-Contra Affair (Enloe 4). The study of gender and war, as well as the marginalization of women in international relations, is an important topic to discuss. The presence of historic biases regarding gender within the field that is used to analyze them is an important viewpoint to discuss and of which to be aware.

Conclusion

The most important question to ask when analyzing how and why historical processes and personalities become salient in the contemporary politics of identity, is how the past manifests itself in the present. Regarding the contemporary politics of identity, especially discussing the identities of race and gender, there is no more pertinent historical process to consider than colonialism. Its long-reaching impacts on modern-day politics surrounding identity are highlighted through persistent racism, showcased by the case study of apartheid in South Africa, and pervasive sexism that has not only contributed to the current marginalization of women, but has served as justification for the continuation of colonialist tendencies of Western nations. Additionally, the analysis of internal biases regarding the identities of race and gender within the scholarship of international relations is essential to achieve a more well-rounded understanding of the saliency of historical processes on contemporary politics of identity. Arguably, deconstructing this displayed hierarchy of oppression based on race and gender – that is, historical processes and personalities of colonialism and neo-colonialism--is the most prolific contributor to the system of identity politics that we have today (Briskin 103).

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