

A Critical Analysis of Power, Norms, and Anarchy in International Relations Theory: Re-examined Through a Multidimensional Framework and Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract. Core concepts in International Relations (IR) theory, such as power, norms, and anarchy, have long been focal points of academic debate, particularly within traditional realist and liberal frameworks. This study provides a critical analysis of these three core concepts. Regarding the multidimensional reconceptualization of power and its analytical framework in IR, Barnett and Duvall broke through traditional scholarly definitions, moving beyond realist theory to construct a multidimensional analytical framework based on "the types of social relations and the specificity of their effects." They categorized power into four types: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive. Concerning the challenge and reshaping of international norms by postcolonial agency, Jabri critiqued the Eurocentric bias inherent in traditional IR theory (especially constructivism), emphasizing that postcolonial states are not passive recipients but actively participate in and redefine the construction of the international order through their political practices. This reflects the postcolonial theoretical choice for revising international rules. Finally, regarding the mechanisms and strategies for achieving international cooperation under anarchy, Axelrod and Keohane, while acknowledging the anarchic nature of the international system, emphasized that cooperation is not automatic but relies on a set of international institutions and rules. They identified mutual interests, the shadow of the future, and the number of actors as key factors enabling cooperation, noting that international institutions help ensure transparency and constrain state behavior. Collectively, these studies have contributed to a "moderate" turn in IR theory.

Keywords: Multidimensional Framework of Power, Postcolonial Agency, Cooperation under Anarchy.

1. Introduction

The discipline of International Relations (IR) theory has consistently sought to interpret the complex dynamics of interstate interactions and the evolving architecture of world politics. Within this field, understanding the multifaceted manifestations of power, the contested origins and evolution of international norms, and the precarious possibility of cooperation under anarchy constitute enduring and central questions that define the very core of the discipline [1-2]. Traditional theoretical paradigms, notably realism and liberalism, have provided foundational perspectives. Realism, with its emphasis on the anarchic structure of the international system and the primacy of state survival and power maximization, offers a sobering view of international politics as a realm of perpetual competition. Liberalism, in contrast, highlights the potential for cooperation through institutions, economic interdependence, and the spread of democratic values. While these paradigms remain influential, their explanatory power is increasingly challenged when confronted with the intricate realities of a 21st-century global landscape characterized by the rise of non-state actors, digital transformation, and a shifting distribution of power.

The limitations of traditional approaches become particularly apparent when examining the core concepts under review. For instance, conventional analyses of power often narrowly focus on the coercive capacity of states—military might and economic sanctions—neglecting the more subtle, yet equally potent, operations of power through institutional arrangements, deep-seated social structures, and the production of knowledge and discourse that shapes what is considered "normal" or "legitimate." In the study of norms, mainstream constructivist and liberal theories, despite their advances, are frequently criticized for harboring a Eurocentric bias. They often narrate the diffusion

of norms as a linear process from the "West to the Rest," failing to adequately acknowledge the active, creative, and sometimes disruptive role of the non-Western world, particularly postcolonial states, in the negotiation, localization, and redefinition of global norms. As for cooperation under anarchy, while neoliberal institutionalism has convincingly revealed the importance of international regimes and rules in facilitating collaboration, discussions on the precise conditions, limitations, and preconditions for cooperation, especially in high-political domains like security where trust is scarce, require further deepening.

Previous research on these concepts, while invaluable, has often been confined within the silos of respective theoretical paradigms. Scholars of power may not fully engage with the normative debates, and analysts of norms might underplay the structural constraints of anarchy, leading to a lack of a concerted effort to examine power, norms, and anarchy within a unified analytical framework for cross-cutting insights [3]. The principal innovation of this study, therefore, lies in its aim to critically integrate insights from constructivism, postcolonial theory, and neoliberal institutionalism to reconceptualize these three core concepts in relation to one another [4-5]. We argue that a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary international relations emerges only when we appreciate how power operates through normative structures, how agency from the postcolonial world challenges and reshapes these structures, and how strategic cooperation navigates the pervasive condition of anarchy. The general research plan is structured to first deconstruct the multidimensional nature of power as proposed by Barnett and Duvall, then to examine the challenge posed by postcolonial agency to the hegemony of international norms as articulated by Jabri, and finally to analyze the key mechanisms enabling cooperation under anarchy as explored by Axelrod and Keohane. By synthesizing these critical perspectives, this paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced and "moderate" turn in IR theory that transcends traditional paradigmatic boundaries [6].

2. Power in International Politics

In the study of international relations, the notion of power has historically been anchored in realist paradigms, which Barnett and Duvall (2005) fundamentally challenged. As early as 1953, Haas observed that power, particularly the balance-of-power concept, sparks contention in global politics: some scholars view it as a foundational historical axiom, while others dismiss it as mere rhetorical leverage. Barnett and Duvall's contribution lies in their multidimensional approach, crafting an analytical schema that dissects power through the lens of social interactions and their specific impacts. They redefine power not as mere coercion but as a dynamic force operating within relational networks, categorizing it into four distinct forms: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive power.

Compulsory power transcends the realist emphasis on deliberate domination, asserting that influence can manifest without explicit intent. Institutional power operates indirectly, shaping global norms through established rules and international frameworks, a perspective echoed by Pichler (1998), who, in analyzing Morgenthau's realism, noted that political systems mirror societal structures governed by inherent human tendencies. Structural power, conversely, hinges on the social configurations that define actors' identities and capacities, a view reinforced by Hayward and Lukes (2008), who argue that power is embedded not only in interpersonal exchanges but also in the broader architectures that limit or enable agency. Productive power, meanwhile, shapes perceptions of legitimacy and possibility through discourse and knowledge production.

Rooted in constructivism and critical theory, this framework integrates realist and liberal insights while emphasizing structural and productive dimensions. It also broadens the scope to include non-state actors, such as multinational corporations, aligning with contemporary globalized and digital contexts. However, the model's abstract nature limits its practical applicability, and its focus on non-state actors, while theoretically robust, struggles to translate into real-world policy.

Barnett and Duvall's articles (2005) belong to the constructivist school and use critical theory. On the one hand, they emphasize the importance of Structural Power and Productive Power on the basis of realism and liberal institutionalism. On the other hand, critical theory emphasizes that power is not

only direct control, but also constructs reality through discourse. The concept of "Productive Power" directly draws on this view and makes it break through the limitations of traditional academic definition of power.

Barnett and Duvall's 2005 framework has significantly reshaped discourse in international relations scholarship. Its primary innovation stems from synthesizing diverse theoretical lenses—bridging realism with constructivism—to foster a balanced evolution in paradigmatic thinking. Notably, the model shifts emphasis from conventional state-centric analyses of power to the roles of emergent entities like transnational firms and online ecosystems, reflecting the demands of an interconnected, tech-driven era. Nevertheless, the approach encounters practical constraints: its conceptual abstraction renders it more suited to theoretical exploration than to actionable policymaking. While the inclusion of non-state elements enhances analytical depth, translating these insights into tangible real-world scenarios remains challenging.

3. Disarming Norms: Postcolonial Agency and the Constitution of the International

Jabri (2014) sharply critiques the entrenched Eurocentrism within conventional international relations scholarship on norms—particularly in constructivism—and the systematic neglect of agency among formerly colonized areas. She contends that nations emerging from colonial legacies do not merely comply with established global regulations; rather, they actively engage in and reshape the formation of world governance via indigenous political maneuvers and cultural approaches. This perspective underscores Jabri's advocacy for robust involvement by these states in global affairs, while resisting the hegemony of established "great powers" in international dialogue, and advocating for broader inclusivity alongside a fundamental overhaul of the global framework [9-10].

The study revolves around two pivotal ideas: "Postcolonial Theory" and "Constitution of the International." The former posits that entities from postcolonial contexts refuse to simply mimic or adhere to norms imposed by dominant actors; instead, they adapt these standards to align with their domestic priorities. For instance, India's distinctive democratic system illustrates this adaptability: democratic governance is not exclusively a Western construct but can evolve in localized forms. The latter concept highlights the inherent bias of the global order, where postcolonial actors, despite integration into a West-led structure, continue to exert limited influence due to entrenched hierarchies.

Integrating postcolonialism, constructivism, and critical theory, Jabri's (2014) work offers a fresh analytical assault. She maintains that states with colonial pasts face a critical shortfall in narrative authority when influencing worldwide standards, a deficit that demands recognition. Incorporating insights from critical theory, the analysis exposes the deeply ingrained nature of power imbalances in global systems. Adler-Nissen (2014) extends this by asserting that international norms sustain societal structures not solely via common principles but also by perpetuating inequalities through the labeling of "deviant" nations. Building on postcolonial foundations, Jabri adds that these countries, though embedded in the system, remain marginalized in effectiveness owing to their historically diminished standing in the world arena.

The paper's key advancements are twofold. First, Jabri urges a reevaluation of the geopolitical functions assigned to postcolonial polities on the world stage. As García Iommi (2020) observes, norms do not achieve permanence even upon internalization; they fluctuate with shifting global conditions. Thus, postcolonial entities must transition from passive absorbers to active architects. Second, Jabri (2014) exposes the imperial underpinnings of prevailing norms, which frequently overlook the aspirations of postcolonial societies. According to Krook and True, the spread of international norms is not a linear, unidirectional process, but controversial and dynamic. Therefore, post-colonial countries can change unfair international rules through their own efforts. At the same time, this article has some shortcomings in theoretical choice and empirical analysis of cases. The article does not provide the perspective of other postcolonial studies, which may lead to a partial

analysis of the results; In addition, the lack of empirical evidence not only increases the difficulty of reading the article, but also reduces the applicability of its views.

4. Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions

Axelrod and Keohane (1985) posit that the global arena operates in a state of anarchy, devoid of any overarching authority to impose compliance. Rather than emerging from deliberate intent, interstate collaboration hinges on established regimes and normative frameworks. Evidently, this absence of central governance breeds profound mistrust among both governmental and nongovernmental entities, thereby impeding collective endeavors. Complementing this, Billow (2010) expands the notion by framing anarchy not merely as a systemic feature but as intertwined with perceptual and interpersonal elements. Without a supreme enforcer, actors might undermine alliances via disruptive behaviors. Thus, the central inquiry here explores how nations can pursue reciprocal gains amid disorder, recognizing that collaboration does not equate to concord.

The analysis centers on three pivotal elements: Mutual Interests, Future Expectations, and Participant Scale. These determinants underpin cross-border partnerships. Mutual Interests imply that collaborative prospects hinge on aligned objectives; pervasive suspicion or rivalry renders joint action improbable. Future Expectations suggest that anticipated ongoing interactions incentivize restraint and reciprocity for sustained advantages. Participant Scale indicates that dyadic engagements are more feasible, whereas expanding involvement in multilateral settings often amplifies conflicts and coordination challenges. Consequently, global institutions play an indispensable role: they foster openness to dispel doubts and employ mechanisms to regulate conduct, with NATO serving as a prime illustration.

Positioned within neoliberal institutionalism, the piece incorporates game-theoretic lenses. It acknowledges the anarchic nature of world politics yet affirms viable pathways to synergy, spotlighting the operational vitality of transnational bodies. Game theory further illuminates how repeated interactions can yield cooperative equilibria despite structural voids.

The study's value lies in dual aspects. Primarily, it reappraises the feasibility of alliances in a leaderless environment, highlighting the critical weight of enduring ties and institutional scaffolds for global progress. By weaving in game theory, it enriches interpretive tools for IR scholarship. Conversely, its framework aligns more readily with economic domains than security ones, where heightened vulnerabilities prevail. Fearon (2018) introduces a "commitment problem" in warfare, suggesting that armed rivalries can foreclose mutual accommodations. Furthermore, neoliberal institutionalism faces internal critiques, such as Milner's (1991) contention that anarchy's impact is overstated, given existing partial hierarchies and regulatory overlays in practice.

5. Conclusion

This study has conducted a systematic critical examination of three cornerstone concepts in IR theory—power, norms, and cooperation under anarchy—through the integrative lenses of a multidimensional power framework, postcolonial critique, and neoliberal institutionalism. The analysis reveals that these concepts are not isolated pillars of IR theory but are deeply intertwined in practice. Our investigation confirms that power is far from a monolithic, coercive force as often depicted in traditional realist thought. Instead, it is a multifaceted social phenomenon that operates compulsively, institutionally, structurally, and productively, permeating various relations within international society and shaping actors' identities, interests, and the very boundaries of acceptable action.

At the level of international norms, the study demonstrates that norms are neither neutral nor universally beneficial. Their generation, dissemination, and internalization are deeply influenced by underlying global power structures, often reflecting the interests and values of dominant actors. However, a key finding, drawing on Jabri's work, is that postcolonial states are not merely passive

recipients of these norms. They possess significant agency, actively engaging in, contesting, and reshaping the normative architecture of the international order through diplomatic practices, cultural strategies, and alternative visions of world order. This challenges the linear and top-down models of norm diffusion and calls for a more pluralistic understanding of normative change.

Regarding cooperation under anarchy, the research elucidates that cooperation is not a spontaneous result of a pre-existing harmony of interests. Rather, it is a strategic outcome painstakingly achieved by actors within specific institutional environments. As Axelrod and Keohane argue, factors such as the mutuality of interests, the shadow of the future, and the number of players are critical, and international institutions play an indispensable role in ensuring transparency, reducing transaction costs, and constraining defection, thereby making cooperation possible even in the absence of a global leviathan.

However, this study also reflects on the inherent limitations of the theoretical frameworks discussed. While Barnett and Duvall's multidimensional power framework is highly insightful, its abstract and taxonomic nature poses significant challenges for operationalization and application to concrete empirical cases. The profundity of the postcolonial critique of norms, while compelling, requires further robust support from in-depth empirical case studies to strengthen its persuasiveness and to illustrate the precise mechanisms through which postcolonial agency achieves normative change. Furthermore, the theory concerning cooperation under anarchy, while powerful in explaining economic collaboration, may have differing applicability in the high-stakes security domain, where existential threats and the "security dilemma" are more acute. Moreover, as critics point out, the theory may insufficiently consider the degree to which the international system, while anarchical, is already densely institutionalized, creating a baseline of constraint that modifies the raw state of anarchy.

Therefore, future research should endeavor to bridge these gaps. Scholars should strive to apply these sophisticated theoretical frameworks to specific empirical analyses—such as global health governance, climate change negotiations, or cybersecurity regimes—to test, refine, and ground their explanatory power. Concurrently, there should be further exploration of the concrete pathways and strategies for effective participation by postcolonial states in global governance. Finally, a deeper comparative analysis of the conditions and mechanisms for overcoming anarchy and achieving substantive cooperation across different issue areas (e.g., trade versus arms control) remains a vital and promising avenue for advancing our understanding of international relations in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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