

Examine how the human rights issue of poverty can be analysed through the lens of International Relations

Global poverty, defined as the number of individuals who “live on less than \$2.15 per person per day at purchasing power parity” is one of the world’s most urgent concerns, affecting 9.3% of the population (The World Bank 2022). In order to decipher solutions, the examination of the International Relations (IR) theories, specifically Postcolonialism and Neoliberalism are useful in analysing and addressing the complex issue of global poverty. Postcolonialism is a useful lens to make sense of power relations in the world that play a significant role in expediting global poverty as it examines race in relation to power. This essay will investigate Postcolonialism in regard to creating solutions for poverty in India. Neoliberalism involves the study of “rules and norms states are socialised to accept by working through international institutions or regimes.” (Devetak et al. 2017, pp. 1047). To interrogate poverty in Latin America, Neoliberalism will be utilised to examine the underlying economic, social and political dynamics that contribute to poverty in order to create effective solutions.

The IR theory of Postcolonialism examines the relations between race and power. Developed as a collaborative intellectual endeavour with inputs from various academics, the Postcolonial theory was first introduced in Edward Said’s book, ‘Orientalism’ (1978) where Said argues that Orientalism can be perceived as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said 1978, pp. 10). This accentuates the binary division between the global East and West that emulates power dynamics, leading to the reinforcement of colonial domination. In relation to the issue of global poverty, Postcolonialism offers critical perspectives that play a role in alleviating poverty by contesting the underlying colonial structures embedded within colonised nations that contribute to socioeconomic inequalities. Through crystallising historical injustices and cultural hegemony that were established during colonial rule, nations are granted the capacity to apply the Postcolonial theory to understand the root causes of poverty in order to implement strategies that advocate for decolonization and the reduction of poverty. Prior to colonisation, India was one of the richest countries in the world, producing over 30% of the global GDP (Mukherjee 2010). In the words of Sashi Tharoor, India was a country “where poverty was unknown”, however, after “200 years of exploitation, expropriation and clean outright looting, this country was reduced to one of the poorest

countries by 1947” (Tharoor, 2016). In order to provide a solution to the increased poverty in India brought about by British rule, Postcolonial approaches that recognise ingrained structural inequalities were executed to lower poverty rates in India. As such, implemented with the intent to eradicate unemployment and poverty, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) 2006 is a vital employment programme that offers one hundred days of unskilled labour every year on public projects. Providing employment to over 50 million households since the scheme had been effected it was recorded that, “approximately 25 billion USD has been paid in form of salaries to rural households”, as well as, increasing the average person’s wage by 81% since 2006 (Patwardhan & Tasciotti 2022, pp. 5). However, this scheme was recorded to only be moderately effective as states with high levels of income inequality such as Bihar “still lag behind in terms of rural poverty (as high as 55% of the rural population in 2009–10)” (Reddy, Reddy & Bantilan 2014, pp. 253). Thus, through acknowledging the complex legacy of colonialism and adopting policies that strive to achieve poverty alleviation, the Postcolonial approach is clearly adopted in India as “it draws attention to the many ways in which the inequalities which characterise our world have helped produce poverty and suffering” (Seth 2012, pp. 8).

The IR theory of Neoliberalism is best defined as a school of thought that maintains an optimistic view on cooperation and acknowledges that states benefit from cooperative strategies in order to reduce conflict and competition (Keohane 1984, pp. 45). Neoliberalism approaches poverty alleviation through international cooperation and market-oriented economic policies, fostering free trade and economic liberalisation, hence motivating economic integration, and lowering the global poverty line. However, critics of Neoliberalism argue that focusing on solely market-based policies may be a leading factor to inequality as social welfare concerns are neglected as integrated and globalised economies have a higher chance of contributing to environmental degradation, exploitation and income disparities. A Neoliberalist policy implemented to improve the economic standards of Latin America was the ‘Washington Consensus’, coined in 1989 by economist John Williamson. The Washington Consensus was implemented in response to the debt crisis of the 1980s and was supported by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the US Treasury (Irwin & Ward 2021). Following the main principles of Neoliberalism, the Washington Consensus was considered a “uniformly effective mechanism for distributing scarce resources and realising economic development and growth all over the world” (Aksakal & Betul 2018, pp. 365). For example,

the Washington Consensus facilitated an increase in poverty alleviation programs “from 30 percent of total public spending in the 1980s to 51 per cent in the 1990s and 68 per cent in the 2010s” (Goldfajn et al. 2021, pp. 112), indicating the effectiveness of this strategy to create solutions for poverty. However, as the critiques of Neoliberalism accentuate concerns of social welfare that occur when only economic liberalisation is focused on, the Washington Consensus raised concerns of ineffectiveness. As the primary concern of the Washington Consensus was macroeconomic stability and trade liberalisation, economic development was overlooked. The Neoliberal reconstitution process of the Washington Consensus elicited low economic growth, “continuing poverty and rising inequalities to many countries” (Saad-Filho 2010, pp. 3). It was found that from 1950 to 1973, the real GDP faced an increase of 2.52% in Latin America, however, only grew by 0.99% in the following 30 years (Krever 2011 pp. 299). In comparison to the IR theory of Marxism that addresses social disparity as the Cuban revolution acknowledged wealth inequalities, the Washington consensus neglected income distribution and inequality, leading to stagnant GDP growth, and contributing to the poverty rate in Latin America. Consequently, in regard to creating solutions for poverty, Neoliberalism is seen as moderately effective as though in the short term the Washington Consensus aided in tackling poverty issues, the unequal wealth distribution only harmed the economy in the long run, contributing to the increased numbers of poverty in Latin America.

In culmination, global poverty is a pressing and complex issue that impacts a significant portion of the world’s population. To address this issue, the IR theories of Postcolonialism and Neoliberalism offer valuable insights and strategies for creating solutions for global poverty. Unravelling structural inequalities rooted in colonial impacts, Postcolonialism offers solutions for poverty in India. In terms of Latin America, the Neoliberalism approach aimed to foster economic growth and poverty mitigation through market-based policies.

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