The Liberal International Order as an Imposition: A Postcolonial Reading

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A simple Internet search of politics-oriented academic and public-facing outlets produces many sources showing rising anxieties in recent years about the Western-led liberal international order (LIO), its decay, the demise of its credibility, its backsliding democracy, its contenders, and the potential alternatives to it.[1] The narratives of the decline of the LIO follow what I argue can be described as cyclical, anxiety-induced perceptions of a threat to its structure and functions. Proponents of the LIO associate it closely with things such as liberal democracy, rule of law, stability, open trade, and respect for human rights. A narrative of the decline of the LIO is, therefore, a narrative of the decline of all these associated values and institutions. Perceived threats to the LIO have varied across the decades: terrorism, global financial recessions, poverty, and transnational migration; and more recently, the expansion of China's global power, Brexit, Donald Trump's election in 2016, and the COVID-19 pandemic, to name but a few.[2] These cyclical threats have always been characterized as challenges for the LIO to overcome.

This essay argues that the narrative of cyclical threat is not accurate—or at least does not tell the whole story. Such a narrative assumes that a few episodes of

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disruption and disorder have temporarily punctured an otherwise stable, functional, and resilient order.

To begin with, this narrative framing is problematic because it takes an entirely Western-centric perspective on a Western-led system. From postcolonial and Global South perspectives, the LIO can be viewed as having imposed a continuously unjust, unequal structure and a set of norms, institutions, expectations, and standards that were from the beginning designed to exclude Global South states.[3] And from the beginning, the injustices of the LIO have been challenged. From the decolonization movements across Africa to the events leading up to the Asian-African Conference held in the city of Bandung[4] in 1955, there have been many manifestations of this continuously disruptive character of the LIO as experienced by the Global South. Additionally, forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, and the New International Economic Order are all world-making initiatives that serve as alternatives to the imperial LIO.[5] Some of these events, such as decolonial movements, have earned attention from the scholarly community, while others not only remain underappreciated but also have been considered by politicians and academics alike as "unthinkable" or a "non-event."[6] From a postcolonial vantage point, the dismissal and silencing of attempts at challenging and rupturing the LIO are ways to delegitimize these concerted efforts of disobeying or dismantling the order.[7]

This essay offers a postcolonial reading of the problem with the LIO by arguing that "order," understood as command, is a cluster of imposed rules, institutions, and norms that favor Anglo-American interests and priorities at the expense of postcolonial polities in the Global South.[8] When order is viewed as an authoritative imposition, it becomes clear that it is vital to disaggregate who issues the commands (agents of the international order), who must follow them (subjects of the international order), and what the instructions are. This approach helps lay bare the fact that power relations permeate international order discussions, and it removes the illusion that, in the LIO, ideals such as justice, equality, and rights are being afforded universally and distributed equally to all peoples and polities. A postcolonial approach stresses that where there are power differentials there inevitably is a particular order, hierarchy, or priority of ideas, races, methods, and knowledge practices. This essay contends that the LIO, like any order, is subject not (only) to threat but to challenge. The structure of order itself is such that resistance is not only a possible but also a necessary part of calls for reform and justice. As such, it follows that from a postcolonial perspective, and in my

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argument here, the opposite of order is not disorder or volatility but challenge and resistance. Opposing the LIO as such is the act of looking for the agency to be free from command and exercising the ability to write the rules of the game (the international order). In the current developments of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, or BRICS; the Belt and Road Initiative; and other similar projects, we see a spirit of togetherness (in resisting the imposition of LIO) and a realization that, collectively, Global South states can challenge the exclusionary fabric of the LIO.

Problems with the Liberal International Order

The liberal international order has many problems and (therefore) many challengers. One of its most obvious problems is its uncritical and nonreflexive ideals of prosperity and equality for all humankind, especially at a time when disparities have never been more visible.[9] As stated by Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, it is "precisely because it [the LIO] puts such emphasis on politics being based on notions of equality, rights, and rationality, the LIO is seen as hypocritical by those who are discontented with it."[10] One can broadly distinguish between two categories of discontented actors: challengers contending from within the core of the order and challengers contending from outside of the core.

The latter, discontented actors on the outside, is a diverse group perceived to be revisionist actors or powers that not only have an interest in challenging the LIO but also have alternative agendas for what it should look like. Scholars studying these actors have identified how rising and revisionist powers, predominantly China, Russia, and Iran (although a longer list can include North Korea and various nonstate actors), present challenges to the LIO from the outside by offering alternative financial institutions, trade arrangements, and diplomatic blocks that do not center Western powers.[11] For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) have often been characterized as challenging the economic global governance status quo by offering alternative financing schemes for developing countries or altering the status quo partially.[12] Similarly, scholars have debated whether Russia is an opportunistic challenger of the order or a radical revisionist power, given that it simultaneously occupies a prominent role in LIO institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and G-8 and defies those institutions by acts of aggression such as violating the sovereignty of Ukraine.[13]

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Other scholars have focused on the first category of actors, arguing that some of the most pressing challenges faced by the current international order are actually coming from within.[14] Indeed, domestic politics within some of the world's most established liberal democracies are locations of such discontent. Such domestic "anxiety among those who see themselves as losers is grounded in deep discontent with politics."[15] In much the same way, G. John Ikenberry observes that "surprisingly, the retreat from liberal internationalism is coming from the very states that had been the postwar order's patrons and stakeholders."[16] Examples of challenges from within the core of the LIO include the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum to withdraw from the European Union (known as Brexit); Trump's election as U.S. president in 2016 leading to the United States walking away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership; the Paris Agreement on climate change; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO; and the rising tide of right-wing political parties across Europe.[17]

I argue that the added sense of urgency and anxiety about the deterioration of the LIO that we have seen in the last few years comes from the fact that many scholars and practitioners take these internal challenges to be more fundamental than external challenges. External challenges have always been treated as something that the LIO must band together to defeat—in those discussions, internal unity is both necessary and assumed. Internal challenges disrupt that assumption of internal unity, such that the LIO's vulnerability to internal challenges increases its vulnerability to external challenges. This concern seems all the more pressing the closer it is to the center of the LIO—dissent within its biggest proponents means more for internal and external weaknesses than internal dissent in countries that are not as powerful as the United States and a handful of its European allies. This in part accounts for the fact that the waves of right-wing populism that we observed in several European countries' elections reverberated in a much tamer way globally than the series of decisions taken by Donald Trump to further his "America First" agenda.

Power inequities among members of the LIO are thus replicated and reified when it comes to which internal threats are taken as most serious: the more powerful and the more central the LIO proponent, the more dire the challenges to the LIO from within that country seem. This hierarchy, however logical, reveals an internal contradiction in the LIO: if the LIO is to be seen as favoring equality and democracy, then the internal values of unity and equality among its members are marred not only by dissent but also by inequality in the members' importance

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and voices. That said, understanding this internal contradiction fully requires understanding that these problems are a necessary part of what order is and how it is imposed.

Order's Existential Problem: A Postcolonial Reading

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines "order" as "the way in which people or things are arranged, either in relation to one another or according to a particular characteristic."[18] This broad definition is similar to the way the concept of global order is used in the English School to describe the set of interactions among states and the range of institutions that regulate and maintain order among states.[19] A second definition of order that the dictionary offers is one where order is understood as an authoritative command—as an imposition. In this way, a call to order can comprise an authoritative warning, a punishment, or even an intervention to make sure the status quo is achieved and maintained.

A postcolonial approach would adopt the second definition of order, as it centers power relations. Order as giving a command or as an imposition does not accept the face value of the constellation or arrangement of rules, institutions, and normative glue that hold the world together. Regardless of what the intentions are, order from this standpoint of imposition is by its very definition hierarchical and laden with power differentials, as there is a clear group of rule makers and rule followers (the latter at the receiving end of the command). Consequently, the questions that follow from this concern whose rules, orders, and commands are to be followed. What actors must unquestionably obey the commands and what actors are in a position to judge behavior as either appropriate or rogue? Understanding order as a command puts front and center questions of agents, objects, and subjects of global order.

Order as a command means that the international system is embedded in hierarchies and relations of othering.[20] As postcolonial IR scholars have demonstrated, the imperial nature of the LIO (especially within the European legal framework, given Europe's long history of colonial and imperial impositions) classifies certain states and their peoples as "civilized" enough to be included in decision-making in elite institutions and others as inferior, backward, and worthy of being excluded from it.[21] With the LIO's simultaneous practices of valuing human rights, democracy, liberties, and prosperity for its proponents and relegating negative occurrences such as climate change externalities, mining exploitation, nuclear tests, and health and education deficits to the developing world, two parallel systems are created

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that must function side by side.[22] Following Fanon, therefore, one can say that the LIO operates and rests necessarily on the production of what he terms a Manichean order where the colonized, oppressed, and marginalized entities are not afforded the same rights, humanness, dignity, and agency as their self-proclaimed superior Western others, yet necessarily live side by side with them.[23] Fanon skillfully describes France's colonial Manichean order as the paradox of the distance between the colonizers, who ascribe to themselves positions of moral and intellectual superiority, and the natives, whom the colonizers talk about in zoological, animalistic language, and the geographical proximity of these groups, whereby Algiers is split into European and Arab quarters.[24] The existence of the native both as a source of labor (often for free) and as an inferior being is vital for the colonial project for Fanon, and to my understanding of the LIO.

Indeed, the othering and marginalization practices of Global South actors that are built into the LIO are what constitute its existential problem. The LIO's core ideals of rights, freedoms, and equality rest on practices that exploit, colonize, and plunder communities in the developing world. From this perspective, the international order can be understood as "constituted by a dynamic matrix of structural violence, rather than by the balance of power, regulatory institutions or normative questions which are elements within and shaped by it."[25] The LIO, as experienced by those "from below," can be viewed as perpetuating othering, violence, and oppressive world-making norms and rules. Here, disorder is not the opposite of colonial order, and violence is a constitutive element of and within the LIO, not the opposite of it. Violence and order always exist side by side, as there is no order without violence. As Meera Sabaratnam reminds us, "The racialised disposability of colonial populations was a constitutive element of international order."[26] Violence here can be viewed as an extension of order—authorized, instituted, and justified by it. Recent examples of this idea include what Zubairu Wai terms the "savage wars of peace," discussing U.S.-led interventionism in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as NATO's bombing of Libya in the name of state building and spreading democracy.[27]

Agents, Subjects, and Objects of the LIO

Understanding order as a command highlights that in the LIO, there is a set of authorities that are by definition expert, superior, developed, advanced, and/or capable of establishing the rules of the game, and therefore not subject to (legitimate) challenge. On this account, the agents of the LIO are both its core

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hegemons and its proponents, as are the institutions that they put in place to uphold the system. The objects of this order are the core actors' ideals, norms, practices, and preferences that are being diffused, encouraged, monitored, sanctioned, and other such things. Ikenberry wrote that "the unevenness of modernity's development led to the West's domination of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[28] It might be tempting to think from this phrasing, which puts the West in a passive position, that it is due to randomness or pure chance that modernity favored the West and led to its domination over the non-West. Of course, this is hardly the case.

Thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in the mid-twentieth century, explained how Europe's greed for natural resources and thirst for domination and control led to its conquest of Africa.[29] For Du Bois, it would make no sense to speak in the passive voice about the conditions that led to the West's domination. In his writing, we see that capital, wealth accumulation, and racial supremacy are the prime motivations for colonialism and violence against the other.[30] Drawing on Du Bois, Sabaratnam contends that modernity and colonialism are two sides of the same coin—one cannot be understood without the other.[31] Agents shape the norms they want to keep; sanction those deemed to be threatening; and use a variety of cultural, economic, and soft-power tools in order to maintain their central role in the system.

The subjects of the LIO, on the other hand, are actors that did not have a role in the early design of the system's architecture. This is not to say that these actors do not have agency. Rather, it is to suggest that they were not at the table when the rules of the global social contract were written. The agency of members of this group is built into their position as subjects of the order, as they are constantly evaluating their position and looking for creative ways to exert their preferences despite systemic conditions that are meant to be restrictive and punitive. To be sure, this is not to discount the fact that at various points in time, Global South states have managed to take advantage of the existing system and have used existing institutions to advance their own (sometimes revisionist) goals. An example of this can be seen in the ways in which China took advantage of the 2007–2008 financial crisis to expand its investments and increase its U.S. Treasury holdings so that it could gain more leverage over the United States. Iran cited Article 51 of the UN Charter as the legal basis for its retaliatory action toward Israel in 2024, one of many times that the revisionist power has engaged with LIO rules and norms. In expanding its trade interests, Brazil has consistently deployed

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"strategic" alliances, simultaneously taking advantage of LIO structures and working outside the LIO as suits its trade goals. Smaller states have also combined their work within and outside of the LIO. The June 2024 military conference of the United States Africa Command, or AFRICOM, held by the United States and Botswana in Gaborone will be followed by a September 2024 forum on China-Africa cooperation, where African states will take advantage of LIO resources and the resources of states that challenge the LIO. The list of states that continue to take money from LIO financial institutions despite having objections to the LIO is extensive. In other words, there are aspects of the current order that work fine for some Global South or reemerging powers (at least for a time) and other aspects that do not. So how do we understand, from a postcolonial approach, how various actors see and interact with the LIO?

Are Experiences of International Order Universal? A Contrapuntal Reading

Order-as-command is a postcolonial reading of the problem with the current international order; to further clarify how this order is experienced from below, a contrapuntal reading is necessary. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said suggests that "we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others."[32] Said contends that "there is no Archimedean point . . . no vantage outside the actuality of relationships among cultures, among unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, among us and others," and that "no one has the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating, and interpreting the world,"[33] or interpreting how the institutions, norms, and values of the international order are experienced for everyone. For him, a "contrapuntal reading"—a concept he borrows from music—is necessary because it allows us to take account of both processes: "that of imperialism and that of resistance to it. . . . [This] can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded."[34] In music, contrapuntality describes a composition that has two independent melodic lines being played simultaneously—independent yet intertwined. As Said uses the concept, contrapuntality allows us "a simultaneous awareness of both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and

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together with which) the dominating discourse acts."[35] The two stories are at once wholly independent and inextricably intertwined.

While Said conceived of contrapuntal reading as a way to understand colonialism, the concept continues to be useful and important for understanding the dynamics between the agents and subjects of the LIO. This reading illuminates a set of intertwined and overlapping narratives of events such as the Cold War, the 1970s oil crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these events were experienced differently by Western metropoles and subjects of the LIO. To illustrate, whereas the LIO discourse emphasizes ideals such as equality, dignity, and human rights, the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially COVID-19 vaccine politics, highlighted and exacerbated global inequities between wealthy and developing countries.[36] From a Global South perspective, proponents of LIO institutions (including the World Health Organization) were running a vaccine apartheid, increasing doses and overstock for some while maintaining long queues and heavy death tolls for others. If unchecked or taken for granted, discourses by WHO officials, for instance, around the indivisibility of humanity and the urgency to act together to defeat COVID-19 would obscure the injustices and inequalities that were going on in Global South communities. Contrapuntality allows us to interpret and rectify events by accepting that while the pandemic was felt universally, its consequences and the politics of access to vaccines, for instance, were not at all universally experienced.

Contrapuntal reading seeks to unsettle assumptions of universality. It should not be equated with plurality in the sense of advocating multiple perspectives for the sake of inclusivity but should instead be equated with disrupting simplistic readings of international events and history.[37] Said was not interested in making a case that multiple voices and various readings of history should be amplified. He was more interested in interrogating these voices and stories and excavating the hierarchies of knowledge and power in which they are embedded. Reading the LIO contrapuntally, therefore, enables us to evaluate, for instance, what the scramble for Africa and Europe's imperative to accumulate capital for its industrial revolution meant to both European and African entities. As explained by Walter Rodney, "When one tries to measure the effect of European slave trading on the African continent, it is essential to realize that one is measuring the effect of social violence rather than trade in any normal sense of the word."[38] Likewise, what is experienced as "civilizing" missions from the side of European powers is nothing short of the erasure of identity, religious beliefs, and the cultural roots of

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the colonized. The making of industrialized European powers cannot be read separately from the acts of savagery against the tortured, exploited, and pillaged African, Asian, and indigenous American peoples. Contrapuntality opens up a way to make sense of two more or less opposite experiences of the same events, allowing for a postcolonial reading of how the LIO is experienced from below. Staying with contrapuntality as a framework, the next section focuses on how the relations of hierarchy imposed by the LIO are experienced among and between Global South states.

Agency as the Opposite of Order

Arguments about what the absence of order means depend on how one defines order as well as on whom one understands to be the agents and subjects of the order. If order is understood as facilitating justice, stability, and *orderliness*, then the opposite of order is injustice, volatility, and chaos. The absence of order in this case, or even the potential for that scenario, is something to be kept at bay. However, when order is understood as command, or as an imposition of rules, norms, and values by a core group at the expense of the others, the absence of that command does not necessarily mean crisis. As I have argued, order-as-command assumes that violence is not the opposite of order but a *part of* it, and therefore the absence of order suggests an opening or a possibility for the absence of violence and imposition. The absence of order could also lead to the reemergence of agency for the postcolonial (or subaltern) subjects of order-as-command.

Challenging, resisting, and disobeying an unjust and discriminatory system are rational behaviors from the perspective of the marginalized. When Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about how unjust laws deserve to be disobeyed or, even more radically, suggested that they do not deserve to be called laws at all, he was suggesting that in some cases (Jim Crow as an example), systems of laws and rules are intentionally discriminatory and must be challenged.[39] Thus, when Global South states band together in solidarity to resist, challenge, and find alternative ways to organize politics in the context of the LIO, it is not an expression of chaos and volatility, it is an exercise of agency.

In the current moment, initiatives seeking alterity in global governance, such as the AIIB, the BRICS New Development Bank, and others that we see from Global South states lamenting the injustice of the LIO, find momentum in narratives of togetherness and shared experiences. These narratives recognize that despite the

significant differences among Global South states, they have in common their struggles against systemic inequalities, such as the lack of permanent representation by any state from Africa, South Asia, or South America at the United Nations Security Council or the disproportionately large share of U.S. voting power at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This kind of solidarity propels the agency of Global South states to seek and formulate alternatives.

Togetherness and the Possibility of Agency "from Below": An Empirical Examination

During the fourteenth BRICS summit, held in Beijing in June 2022, Chinese president Xi Jinping stated that the BRICS group gathered "not in a closed club or an exclusive circle, but a big family of mutual support and a partnership for win-win cooperation."[40] Xi's speech juxtaposed the BRICS group with the G-7, representing the latter as a U.S.-led space of exclusion (of Global South states) and the former as a "big family." Criticizing the LIO as an oppressive structure that at best neglects Global South actors and at worst intentionally exploits their underdevelopment is a common trope used by leaders of China, Russia, Turkey, and other rising and revisionist powers. These leaders rely on the real failures of the LIO in order to construct alternative narratives based on positive discourses of togetherness, solidarity, shared history, and common aspirations.

Discourses of solidarity and alterity, as can be seen from the fourteenth edition of the BRICS summit, emphasize shared struggles against global inequality and systemic injustice and a common history of suffering in response to Western imperialism and colonialism. These relations of sameness, based on discourses of inclusivity and positive relations instead of othering and its exclusive nature, constitute an opportunity to challenge the LIO's imposition and seek agency and authorship in writing the rules of the game.[41] Time will tell if BRICS or other similar projects of alterity will eventually lead to a reordering or whether they will remain symbolic domains of resistance that in practice are embedded in the institutions of the LIO. Regardless, as the next section will explore, these narratives of sameness and togetherness are expressions by actors "from below" of the will to continue the resistance and challenge to hegemonic orders.

Xi's criticism of the LIO at the BRICS summit is not an isolated incident but a defining feature of Chinese foreign policymaking in the Global South. To illustrate, in a recent BRI document released by the Chinese government, Beijing laments that the current global order has an "outdated governance structure,

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and imbalanced development."[42] The document promotes Xi's trillion-dollar legacy platform as "an attempt to provide an alternative solution to these issues (global governance, security, and development) as they have not been addressed effectively in isolation over long periods of time."[43] From its inception, the BRI has gestured toward a goal of rectifying or revising (at least some aspects of) the current global order. It is also possible to read Beijing's global infrastructure construction ambitions as aiming at world making. In particular, the document referenced above further states that the BRI "aims to build a new model of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation, and forge partnerships through dialogue rather than confrontation and friendship rather than alliance."[44] Here again, Chinese rhetoric is drawing a contrast between its stated vision for an inclusive global (re)ordering that emphasizes friendship, shared history, and common destiny and the current exclusive Western order.

Indeed, reemerging and revisionist powers are cautious when curating a discourse of alterity, seeking to promote narratives of inclusion, positivity, kinship, friendship, and other such qualities in their relation to other countries in the Global South.[45] An example of this can be seen in the way Beijing emphasizes its closeness to and similarity with African nations by building on a rhetoric of shared experiences of struggle against colonial powers. Chinese and African elites repeatedly indicate that their relations emphasize norms of solidarity, South-South cooperation, shared history, and shared aspirations for development. This is not unique to China-Africa relations but can be observed in India-Africa ties as well. During the India-Africa Forum Summit held in 2015, in his address, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi framed the partnership between Africa and India as going "beyond strategic concerns and economic benefits," and as one that was "formed from the emotional bonds we share and the solidarity we feel for each other."[46] Likewise, in China's first summit with Central Asian states held in the city of Xi'an in 2023, officials leaned into a similar discourse, building on a common history of rich commercial and cultural exchanges dating back to the eighth century. Invoking the ancient Silk Road and the cooperation between China and Central Asian states to revive it, Xi emphasized the significance of friendship and shared history stating that "brotherhood is more precious than any treasure."[47]

Thus, we see how the rhetorical practices of India and China, in addressing the states' relations with others from the Global South, build momentum for

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expanding their alternative paths to development on the back of relational and emotional narratives of similarity and togetherness.[48] For example, during the 2023 BRICS-Africa Outreach and BRICS Plus Dialogue held in Johannesburg, Prime Minister Modi stated that "when we use the term 'Global South,' it is not just a diplomatic term. In our shared history, we have unitedly opposed colonialism and apartheid. . . . Based on this strong historical foundation, we are giving a new shape to our modern relationships."[49]

By emphasizing that China, India, and developing states from the Global South come from the same experience of shared history and humble beginnings, reemerging powers are uniquely positioned to rally momentum to push for reforms and/or resistance to the LIO. Certainly, African leaders have invoked this shared past in order to influence their Chinese counterparts or sway Chinese policymakers in favor of African interests. Reiterating the shared struggles against Euro-American colonial and imperial practices in China and in Africa also enables Africans to acquire Chinese loans and finances because of the appeal for Beijing to be seen as the leader of the Global South (and because it undermines China's rivals in Africa to do that as well). Leaning on discourses of togetherness and invoking shared history and solidarity have improved the agency, or at least the negotiating leverage, of African states in their ties to reemerging powers. For instance, African diplomats based in Beijing lobbied the Chinese government for the launch of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) as a multilateral platform to negotiate China-Africa relations apart from LIO institutions.[50] FOCAC has successfully been held every three years since its first meeting in 2000. At the forum, foreign affairs ministers have called out the "injustice and inequality in the current international system," suggesting that they "hinder the development of the countries of the South."[51]

The expanding engagements of reemerging powers in the Global South are also giving developing states leverage in their negotiations with international financial institutions. Due to concrete investment offers from China, for example, African governments find themselves in a better negotiating position vis-à-vis the IMF or traditional lenders. For instance, Angola successfully plays up its oil and mineral trade volumes with China in order to get better terms from France's petroleum and multienergy company Total.[52]

To be sure, these discursive practices (criticizing the LIO while emphasizing solidarity, sameness, and togetherness with other Global South states) are not unique to China or India. Other rising powers, including Turkey, Russia, and Iran, also

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engage in similar behavior.[53] The use of this discourse has been criticized as mere order shuffling or order disrupting. Viewed in this way, this rhetoric does not stand to cause a permanent change to the order or provide durable alternatives but simply offers the possibility of leading these reemerging powers to gain more influence than Western actors over Global South actors. Some scholars have described the discourses of solidarity and togetherness used by these states as self-interested strategies for rising powers to take on the same exploitative and extractive roles as Western powers, a mere diversification of dependency.[54]

As stated above, whether discourses of togetherness and solidarity can in the long run prove to bring concrete alternatives in terms of global (re)ordering or if they instead represent symbolic challenges that bring limited leverage without total change, they are nonetheless mechanisms of resisting imposition in our present moment. From a postcolonial perspective, order, defined as command and imposition, stands to be resisted and challenged since it is, in essence, hierarchical. The interesting task therefore is to read what order means to different actors and polities from a contrapuntal perspective; which entities its objects, subjects, and agents are; and what the inflection points are from which resistance and challenge are generated.

Conclusion

No order lasts forever.[55] The problem *with* world order and the problem *of* world order should be disentangled. If we are speaking of the current order that dominates the structure of global politics, which is the U.S.-led liberal order, much ink has been spilt debating its many ailments over the years, as discussed above. But when discussing problems with global ordering more abstractly, regardless of which order we are referring to or who its agents, objects, and subjects are, we are talking about ordering as a process that is necessarily imposing. From this perspective, order understood as constellations of arranged and organized actors, patterns, and behaviors conceals the power differentials between the actors that shaped the order to fit their best interests and the actors that were brought into this order without their preferences or interests being taken into account. For this reason, contrapuntality is essential to reading the impacts, hierarchies, and power dynamics of global order on actors who are sitting at the periphery or margins.

While some scholars take at face value the claim that the liberal international order promotes protection of human rights, compliance with rule of law, stability,

and prosperity, when looking at it from the perspective of colonized, racialized, and marginalized peoples, it becomes clear that such benefits are not distributed equitably across peoples and polities. To be sure, this hierarchical trait of the LIO has drawn growing attention from IR scholars looking at a variety of sociological and historical concepts to help theorize the role of status, stigma, and marginalization in the scholarship on order. However, a postcolonial approach does not stop at recognizing these hierarchies as flaws within the system (or even "necessary evils"). Instead, it goes so far as to state that they are by design meant to create a Manichean system where, for marginalized entities, order and violence are inseparable from one another and that, from this vantage point, the opposite of order is the emancipation from the imposition of systemic structures and is the agency to seek alternatives.

This essay has argued that it would be shortsighted to assume that reemerging or revisionist powers such as China, India, and Russia have started challenging the liberal order only in the last decade or two, through institutions such as BRICS, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the AIIB. While we have seen in recent years an increased interest in academic scholarship investigating China's rising influence in the Global South, scholars have demonstrated that its influence did not start recently and that it is not as much a symptom of a yet-to-come change in global order as it is a signal of a decades-long transcontinental uneasiness with the current order. Contestation is indeed part of order and is a central feature of the actors experiencing order or command "from below."

Notes

[1] See G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 3 for examples on how anxieties around the end of liberal democracies are expressed.

[2] For more extensive details on many of these challenges and problems of international order, see Meera Sabaratnam and Mark Laffey, "Complex Indebtedness: Justice and the Crisis of Liberal Order," *International Affairs* 99, no. 1 (January 2023), pp. 161–80; and Christian Reus-Smit and Ayşe Zarakol, "Polymorphic Justice and the Crisis of International Order," *International Affairs* 99, no. 1 (January 2023), pp. 1–22.

[3] There are many definitions of the LIO that have been put forth. One salient definition describes the LIO as "open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law." G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 7. Another interesting conceptualization can be found in Reus-Smit and Zarakol. These authors favor using the term "post-1945 order," and define order outside of the confines of sovereign states to accommodate "large-scale configurations of political authority, which might be imperial, suzerain, heteronomous, sovereign or some combination of these." Reus-Smit and Zarakol, "Polymorphic Justice and the Crisis of International Order," p. 3.

[4] The Bandung Conference gathered Asian and African delegations to discuss the plight of the colonial order, which was resisted and fought against by several peoples from both continents. Bandung promoted anti-colonial solidarity dialogue among Africans and Asians. See Christopher Lee,

"Anti-Colonialism: Origins, Practices, and Historical Legacies," in Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 436–452.

[5] On postcolonial world making during the interwar period, see Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[6] See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

[7] See Siba N. Grovogui, "Come to Africa: A Hermeneutics of Race in International Theory," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 26, no. 4 (October–December 2001), pp. 425–48; and Sabaratnam and Laffey, "Complex Indebtedness."

[8] It goes without saying that many states within the Global South have at various times benefited from certain aspects of the LIO (especially the financial gain it offers). The point then is that despite these short-term benefits, states such as China and India have been developing their own alternative institutions and agencies that rival those of the LIO.

[9] For example, the term "vaccine apartheid" has been used to describe the injustice resulting from wealthy Global North states hoarding vaccine doses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thereby leaving hundreds of thousands of vulnerable populations deprived of access to them.

[10] Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Ayşe Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents," in "Challenges to the Liberal International Order: International Organization at 75," Special Issue 2, *International Organization* 75 (Spring 2021), pp. 611–34, at p. 615.

[11] On revisionism and the LIO, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019), pp. 7–50.

[12] See Austin Strange, "Symbols of State: Explaining Prestige Projects in the Global South," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2024); and Lina Benabdallah, "Contesting the International Order by Integrating It: The Case of China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 2019), pp. 92–108.

[13] See Anne L. Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," in "Rising Powers and the International Order," Special Issue 1, *Ethics & International Affairs* 32 (Spring 2018), pp. 45–59.

[14] See, for example, Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition"; and Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*.

[15] Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, "Struggles for Recognition," p. 618.

[16] Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, p. 2.

[17] For more on the role of the United States as a hegemon and a revisionist power, see Steve Chan, "Challenging the Liberal Order: The US Hegemon as a Revisionist Power," *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September 2021), pp. 1335–52.

[18] *Cambridge Dictionary* online, s.v. "order," dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/order.

[19] See, among others, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1977).

[20] See David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, "The Savage Smith and the Temporal Walls of Capitalism," in Beate Jahn, ed., *Classical Theory in International Relations* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 123–55; and David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, "International Relations from Below," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 663–74.

[21] See, for example, Robbie Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism, and Investigations of Global Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[22] Oumar Ba, "Constructing an International Legal Order under the Shadow of Colonialism," *Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 1 (2023), pp. 4–15.

[23] On Manicheanism, see Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp 3–4.

[24] See Alvaro Reyes, "On Fanon's Manichean Delirium," *Black Scholar* 42, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2012), pp. 13–20.

[25] Meera Sabaratnam, "Bring up the Bodies: International Order, Empire, and Re-Thinking the Great War (1914–1918) from Below," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 3 (September 2023), pp. 553–75, at p. 555.

[26] Ibid., p. 567.

[27] Zubairu Wai, "The Empire's New Clothes: Africa, Liberal Interventionism and Contemporary World Order," *Review of African Political Economy* 41, no. 142 (December 2014), pp. 483–99.

[28] Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, p. 15.

[29] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of War," *Atlantic*, May 1915, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1915/05/the-african-roots-of-war/528897/.

[30] See Adom Getachew and Jennifer Pitts, eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois: International Thought* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[31] Sabaratnam, "Bring up the Bodies."
[32] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 32.
[33] Ibid., p. 65.
[34] Ibid., p. 79.
[35] Ibid., p. 51.
[36] Stephen Brown and Morgane Rosier, "COVID-19 Vaccine Apartheid and the Failure of Global Cooperation," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 25, no. 3 (August 2023), pp. 535–54.
[37] This is also different from arguing that order is characterized by there being multiple universes, a pluriverse, or a multiplex. On the concept of a multiplex world order, see Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2017), pp. 271–85. See also Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[38] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso Books, 2018), p. 107.
[39] See Ian Hurd, "World Order from Birmingham Jail," *Ethics & International Affairs* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2024).
[40] Xi Jinping (speech, Fourteenth BRICS Summit, Beijing, June 23, 2022), cited in Xinhua, "Full Text: Remarks by President Xi Jinping at the 14th BRICS Summit," *Xinhua News*, June 23, 2022, english.news.cn/20220623/d001e1a37c0f40a8acf0e77070b8c256/c.html.
[41] For more on this concept of sameness and togetherness as it relates to South-South relations, see Lina Benabdallah, "Spanning Thousands of Miles and Years: Political Nostalgia and China's Revival of the Silk Road," *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (June 2021), pp. 294–305.
[42] "The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects" 2019, The Belt and Road Initiative, eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/86739.html
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] See Ilaria Carrozza and Lina Benabdallah, "South–South Knowledge Production and Hegemony: Searching for Africa in Chinese Theories of IR," *International Studies Review* 24, no 1 (March 2022).
[46] Narendra Modi (speech, India-Africa Forum Summit, New Delhi, October 29, 2015), cited in "India-Africa Summit: Read Full Text of PM Narendra Modi's Speech," *Times of India*, updated October 29, 2015, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-africa-summit-read-full-text-of-pm-narendra-modis-speech/articleshow/49577890.cms.
[47] Xi Jinping (speech, China-Central Asia Summit, Xi'an, May 19, 2023), cited in "Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote address at China-Central Asia Summit," *CGTN*, news.cgtn.com/news/2023-05-19/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-keynote-address-at-China-Central-Asia-Summit-1jVD8sSUGYM/index.html
[48] Chih-yu Shih and Jason Kuo, "A Relational Analysis of Exceptionalism: Connecting Liberalism with Confucian Multilateralism and Emotion," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 17, no. 3 (June 2024), pp. 242–61.
[49] Narendra Modi (remarks, BRICS-Africa Outreach and BRICS Plus Dialogue, Johannesburg, August 24, 2023), www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-statement-at-the-brics-africa-outreach-and-brics-plus-dialogue/. For more on the prime minister's speech, see "India Is Your Trusted Partner: PM Modi to African Countries," *Times of India*, August 24, 2023, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-is-your-trusted-partner-pm-modi-to-african-countries/articleshow/103026307.cms.
[50] Li Anshan, Liu Haifang, and Pan Huaqiong, *FOCAC Twelve Years Later: Achievements, Challenges and the Way Forward* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 2012).
[51] "Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 17, 2000, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/200011/t20001117_678999.html.
[52] Dramane Thiombiano and Zhengke Zhang, "The Impact of China on the Agency and Negotiating Power of African Countries: Cases of Angola and Niger," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 14, no. 1 (January 2020), pp. 1–12.
[53] See Jeffrey Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2022).
[54] Ian Taylor, *Africa Rising? BRICS—Diversifying Dependency* (Suffolk, U.K.: James Currey, 2014).
[55] John Mearsheimer posits this idea in "Bound to Fail."

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Abstract: Cracks in the liberal international order (LIO) have been occurring since its very formation. Yet, some international relations scholarship frames the narrative about imminent threats to the LIO as if such threats were new. From a postcolonial vantage point, this essay contends that mainstream theorizing about international order is problematically Eurocentric and develops a three-pronged argument. In the first place, the essay argues for understanding order as a command or as an imposition. Order as a command renders visible power disparities, injustices, and inequalities of the international order as seen by actors from below. Second, the essay leans on Edward Said's contrapuntal reading method to show that experiences of order are plural rather than singular or universal. Third, the essay argues that from a postcolonial perspective, the opposite of order is not chaos or volatility but rather agency or the authorship to be a rule maker. A full picture of order as imposition requires understanding how togetherness and sameness are modes for Global South actors to find collective unity to resist the injustices and inequalities of the LIO.

Keywords: liberal international order, postcolonialism, Global South, China, agency