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Critical perspectives on internationalization in higher education: commercialization, global citizenship, or postcolonial imperialism?

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ABSTRACT

We explore the literature on internationalization in higher education and distinguish between the mainstream and radical approaches to critical scholarship. We argue that the mainstream approach continues to steer internationalization towards socially progressive and equitable aims, while growing concerns have surfaced especially with regard to its commercialization. We focus on the postcolonial approach and suggest that it has inherent limitations stemming from its roots in a ‘modern global/colonial imaginary’ based on an outdated bipolar or unipolar, rather than multipolar, view of geopolitics. In the analysis of higher education, this perspective fails to recognize contemporary forms of colonialism and, in contrast to other strands of critical scholarship, neglects the shifting nature of geopolitics and the various forms and locations of colonialism. Consequently, we argue that the postcolonial approach becomes myopic, as it tends to be West-centric, selectively critical and denies local agency. Moreover, it falls short in explaining the motives behind internationalization in diverse contexts. Therefore, we argue for a plurality of critical approaches, widely applied, to gain a comprehensive understanding of internationalization on a global scale.

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Introduction

Internationalization, particularly through student mobility, has a long history in higher education (HE). This practice gained prominence during the Cold War, when schemes like Fulbright were used by the rival powers to promote their respective political ideologies (Rizvi, 2011). However, in the post-Cold War era, internationalization has grown exponentially, and has assumed a pivotal role within universities. Consequently, it has emerged as a key thematic area of study within the field of HE (de Wit, 2002; Tight, 2022). For much of this contemporary history, which has been defined by its increasingly commercial nature (Rizvi, 2022), internationalization has paradoxically been portrayed as a broadly positive intervention, with humanitarian and cosmopolitan associations

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(Bamberger et al., 2019). While recent reviews indicate that those associations persist, the field is becoming more critically oriented with greater emphasis on power relations, inequalities, and social responsibility (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). This shift towards greater criticality is linked to calls for change by those disillusioned with the dominance of neoliberal and commercialized approaches – and by critical scholars employing postcolonial theories. With few notable exceptions (e.g. Mulvey, 2022), little research has investigated this critical turn. We analyze that turn to understand its development, core tenets, major concerns, and to assess its usefulness for analyzing the shifting nature of and multiple motives for internationalization across the globe. We further consider its ability to provide a corrective to critiques of the foundational literature of the 1990s-2010s.

We adopt Mulvey's (2022) distinction between two major strands of critical scholarship: 1) 'mainstream' approaches, and 2), 'radical' approaches. We argue that both strands have, for different reasons, significant limitations. Specifically, the mainstream strand aims to steer internationalization away from its commercial orientation but does not represent a significant departure from the tenets of previous scholarship. The radical strand of scholarship comprises a diverse range of perspectives that employ various philosophical viewpoints (e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2011; Larsen, 2016; Lomer, 2017; Rizvi, 2007; Shields, 2019). We focus specifically on the growing and influential genre of postcolonial scholarship that is constructed around a 'modern/colonial imaginary.' While we acknowledge the significant contributions made by this scholarship, particularly in understanding the legacies of European colonialism, we also identify inherent limitations in its framing. Specifically, it tends to reflect an occidental form of Western bias and exceptionalism (Buruma & Margalit, 2004), be selectively and ahistorically applied, take liberal political values for granted, obscure agency, and deny the increasingly complex and multi-polar nature of contemporary international higher education (see Glass & Cruz, 2022). These problems are especially evident in scholarship on HE. In contrast, scholars in other fields that have long been critical of Western hegemony (e.g. Callahan, 2008; Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Perkins, 2016) have increasingly recognized the imperial ambitions of non-Western nations. Mignolo (2011) analyses what he terms 'the hegemonic struggle for the control of the colonial matrix of power (p. 180)' and identifies five possible future trajectories: re-Westernization, de-Westernization, the reorientation of the left, the decolonial option, and the spiritual option. He focuses on the first two trajectories and argues:

'The struggle is no longer between East and West but between two major projects: re-Westernization (which is Obama's mission and the concern of those in the United States who feel that they are losing their grasp on world leadership - that is, that the control of the colonial matrix is getting out of hand) and de-Westernization (the trajectory mainly being led by East Asia [China, Japan] and seconded by Southeast Asia - Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia' (Mignolo, 2011, p. 180).

That analysis was in 2011, before Xi Jinping's ascendancy to power and his declaration of the China Dream as the national vision to ensure the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.' Building on Mignolo's (2011) perspective, we contend that postcolonial scholarship, when examining internationalization in HE, tends to emphasize decolonization and re-Westernization, thereby neglecting the following crucial aspects: the dynamic nature

of geopolitics, the importance of de-Westernization, and a comprehensive understanding of colonialism across diverse contexts. To illustrate our argument, we primarily draw on examples from China; however, we consider our argument to have broader relevance and applicability.

1990s – 2010s: foundations of the field

Despite its historic roots, ‘internationalization’ emerged into the lexicon of education in the 1990s closely linked to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent rise of global (American) capitalism. Internationalization was viewed as highly reactive to and dependent on globalization, which was portrayed as an exogenous, dominant, negative force that promoted homogenization, westernization and was closely connected to the rise of ‘neoliberalism.’ Internationalization in HE was portrayed as a way to combat the nefarious impacts of globalization (Altbach, 2004) and associated with positive ideas of world connectivity and its humanistic possibilities, especially mutual understanding, diversity, intercultural awareness, global citizenship, and tolerance (Bamberger et al., 2019). Subsequent studies have portrayed this as a false dichotomy, demonstrating the extent to which progressive neoliberalism is entangled in key features of internationalization (Bamberger et al., 2019). However, the foundational literature promoted an enduring association of internationalization with positive notions of global connectivity.

Early studies of internationalization focused on defining the field and institutional practices; authors were concentrated in North America and Europe (Bedenlier et al., 2018; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022) and the established history of the field was written mainly by Anglo-European scholars (e.g. de Wit, 2002; Scott, 1998). Major HE professional associations actively engaged with internationalization, portraying it as promoting intercultural learning and global competencies (Deuel, 2021) and a professional community emerged committed to and dependent on the normative tenets of the movement. The focus on practice by ‘scholar-practitioners’ (Streitwieser & Ogden, 2016), engendered scholarship that bred description and normative prescription (e.g. recommendations for policy and practice, often arguing for greater integration of internationalization across the university). This culminated in the call for ‘comprehensive internationalization’ (Hudzik, 2011) with a focus on mapping different manifestations and rationales of internationalization, particularly at the institutional level. In this foundational period, many of the still-dominant typologies and definitions of internationalization (e.g. Knight, 2004, 2014) emerged, which assumed it was beneficial to institutions, individuals and nations. Bedenlier et al. (2018) review ‘revealed that research in the field has been largely Anglo-Saxon and Western European driven, in content as well as in disseminating a certain understanding of internationalization’ (p. 128).

Scholarship inevitably reflected the salient issues of scholar-practitioners in these regions, particularly the emphasis on student mobility (e.g. the challenges associated with it, best practices in recruitment and support, institutional strategies to support it). Other manifestations of internationalization, particularly internationalization at home and beyond these regions, were marginalized. The focus on globalization, and the dominance of countries which embraced free-trade, democratic governance, academic freedom, and university autonomy also marginalized the role of the state (Tröhler, 2022). This only emerged as a possible problem in the 2010s, when rising nationalisms and populism in the

West could no longer be ignored, and with the rise of China, and other authoritarian nations, in internationalization studies. In 2019, prior to COVID-19, China and Russia were the third and seventh top destinations of international students (Project Atlas, 2020) and along with Malaysia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates they were amongst the fastest growing destinations (Nous, 2016). In 2020, 63% of all international students studied in non-Anglophone nations (UNESCO Institute of Statistics UIS, 2023).

The rationales for internationalization were mapped as academic, political, economic and socio-cultural (Knight, 2004) and major shifts were identified over the years, from colonial formations (Scott, 1998) to humanitarian ideas associated with peace and reconciliation in the post-war period, to a development agenda associated with political motives during the Cold War, and increasingly with a focus on its commercial returns (de Wit, 2002; Knight, 2015). While this Western historical perspective has been challenged (Bamberger, 2020; Schoole, 2006), and particularly its emphasis on ‘glory days’ (Stein, 2021), it has prevailed and is only gradually being re-written. The increasing focus on a commercial rationale has fueled the growth of internationalization, which has been portrayed as a defining characteristic of HE globally (Chankseliani, 2018).

Yet, this same commercial rationale, which has driven its growth, has been decried by those who viewed it as the root of internationalization’s negative consequences (e.g. elitism and exacerbating inequalities) and aligned themselves with the humanistic view of its purposes, and its potential to combat the negative aspects of globalization (e.g. de Wit, 2013; Knight, 2014). Broadly, this humanitarian approach emphasizes cooperation over competition, fosters collaborative and communal approaches, and is associated with democracy and consensus building while simultaneously downplaying ethnic, national, and religious links in favor of a shared humanity (Bamberger et al., 2019). Despite several decades of scholarship suggesting that internationalization in practice was driven by economic and commercial motives, it maintained a strong connection to more humanitarian rationales. This tension eventually created existential dissonance in the field, resulting in the lament that internationalization had lost its way, was being hollowed out of its humanitarian mission and was in need of re-direction (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Knight, 2014); indeed, Brandenburg and de Wit’s (2011) provocative paper entitled ‘The End of Internationalization’ argued that ‘internationalization’ may not exist unless harnessed to humanitarian purposes, suggesting that it was necessarily defined by those purposes. Thus, after two decades of scholarship which indicated that internationalization was falling short of its humanitarian mission, scholars in the field advocated a more critical reimagining of the field.

The critical turn (2010s – 2020s)

Mulvey (2022) identifies a range of critical scholarship on internationalization based on diverse philosophical and epistemological perspectives. He claims that the critical turn includes two strands: the mainstream and radical; within the latter, we focus on the postcolonial approach. Using Mulvey’s (2022) distinction we analyze these below.

Mainstream approaches

In response to the critiques of the early phases of internationalization outlined above, an extensive literature developed which critiques the negative influences of neoliberalism and globalization on the humanitarian potential of internationalization. Mulvey (2022) argues that the mainstream approach encompasses ‘... more limited calls for adjustments to existing policies and moves away from instrumentalism and viewing of internationalization as a zero-sum competition ...’ (p. 2417). In this way, it offers a soft critique of internationalization. Several foci associated with these approaches have emerged: *globalizing internationalization*; increasing *inclusion and access*; and harnessing internationalization to create *global common goods*.

The shift towards *globalizing internationalization* focuses on describing its forms across nation states (e.g. Bulut-Sahin & Kondakci, 2022; de Wit et al., 2017; Thondhlana et al., 2021). While authors are still mainly from the West, there is an increasing diversity of authors, with concentrations emerging in China, Hong Kong, and Japan (Tight, 2022). However, much of this scholarship has the same tendencies identified in the foundational period by Kehm (2011): it employs structural/functional typologies, is descriptive, normative and practitioner oriented. The result is the marginalization of other perspectives that may be more apt in diverse contexts, and the globalization of dominant, Anglo-European perspectives instead of the enrichment of the literature with counter cases.

Internationalization studies initially focused on the institutional level but there has been a shift towards *inclusion and access*, which has focused on students, academic staff, and marginalized populations. The result is a concern for ‘student voice’ and a recasting of student mobility as ‘self-formation’ (Bamberger, 2020; Deuel, 2022; Marginson, 2014). This has sometimes served to hide important political/structural concerns and the role of the state, thus undermining claims to be part of a critical approach. Closely related to the issues of inclusion and access, has been the increased focus on all students and on internationalizing the curriculum, viewed as superseding the ‘internationalization at home’ (IaH) category (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened this impulse, prompting Rizvi (2022) to argue that HE professionals are scrambling to reinvent internationalization and de Wit and Altbach (2021) to suggest that a ‘new phase’ of internationalization may be commencing as student mobility (and the income they contribute) slows.

Finally, there has been increasing scholarship around *global common goods* and prescribing how internationalization can work to extend its benefits beyond the student body, giving rise to the notion of ‘internationalization for society’ (Jones et al., 2021; Leask & de Gayardon, 2021). This perspective aligns closely with efforts to link internationalization with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Ramaswamy et al., 2021). Given the economic ‘roots’ of contemporary internationalization, this mirrors the OECD’s ‘humanitarian turn’ (Elfert, 2023; Kim, 2022; Li & Auld, 2020) where the language of global wellbeing and humanitarianism is harnessed to promote the centrality of human capital and neoliberalism. These calls for internationalization for society’s benefit essentially view it as a tool to address these global challenges, as long as it is comprehensively incorporated throughout institutions and their missions/visions (Hunter et al., 2022).

These themes represent an extension of the mainstream foundational literature in the field, as they advocate for internationalization to serve benevolent aims. Key professional and academic institutions are aligned with this approach and while some progress has been made that relates to previous critiques of the field, much has remained unchanged, most notably: 1) description and depoliticization; 2) advocacy for internationalization and its deep association with positive forms of human connectivity. In tandem new concerns have surfaced around the globalization of Western typologies, histories, and viewpoints to the detriment of a diverse analytic tapestry; and the dearth of scholarship on authoritarian contexts.

'Radical' postcolonial approaches

Alongside the mainstream approach, a more radical strand has grown and incorporates a variety of approaches based on a diverse range of philosophical positions and world-views (e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2011; Larsen, 2016; Lomer, 2017; Rizvi, 2007; Shields, 2019). We focus on the increasingly influential approach that relies on postcolonial theory and argues for the need to address uneven power relations, epistemological domination by the West (e.g. Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Blanco Ramirez, 2014; Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022) and 'problematizes the overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to internationalization in higher education' (Stein, 2021, 1771). This approach argues that internationalization is positioned within a social imaginary, which began in the West at the dawn of European colonialism and has become the dominant global social imaginary (Stein, 2017b; Stein et al., 2016). Such a 'modern/colonial global imaginary', portrays the 'West' and its derivatives as not only a geographic or political entity, but principally as a 'metanarrative [which] naturalizes a Western/European standpoint and corresponding set of colonial and capitalist social relations, projecting a local (Western/European) perspective as a global design' (Pashby et al., 2020, p. 146). Some scholars employing postcolonial approaches prefer the terms Global North/Global South, while imbuing them with similar meaning: De Sousa Santos employs the term 'Global South' to refer to 'those located on the side of the "abyssal line" – a metaphorical and invisible division that separates metropolitan societies from colonial territories' (Leal et al., 2022, p. 242). Scholars often vacillate between these terms as we shall demonstrate.

Drawing on this 'modern/colonial global imaginary,' Guo et al. (2022) analyze internationalization of Chinese HE and argue that it is a function of Western colonialism and call for de-Westernizing internationalization and 'reclaiming indigenous Chinese epistemology, language and culture' (p. 436). Johnstone and Lee (2022) analyze international education policy in Canada and argue that 'the internationalization of education which is hosted by Western nations, positions English language and Western education as globally superior, and perpetuates the imperial formations of inequality, hierarchization of difference and unequal rule' (p. 1). Employing postcolonial theory, they further argue '... that the race to recruit the best and the brightest to support the knowledge economies of the west has become a site to maintain imperial whiteness supremacy concealed in neo-liberal rhetoric while (re)producing the disparity between the global north and south, and between the global west and east' (Ibid). Leal et al. (2022) analyzing internationalization from and for the 'Global South,' argue that it is necessary to understand the university as 'an institution historically managed by [local, colonized] actors

susceptible to Western beliefs' and that the 'South' should be understood as a '... field of epistemic challenges, where knowledge is built in the struggles of oppressed and excluded subjects against the injustices caused by [Western] capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy' (p. 247).

Thus, the core analytic themes of the postcolonial approach to internationalization are those of appropriation, coercion, dominance of the other along with racist undertones. It is based in capital accumulation and the appropriation of resources by the Global North from the Global South (or West from the East) and argues that such an enduring 'modern/colonial global imaginary' continues to support capitalist social relations, to normalize liberal Western notions of politics, governance, and knowledge, and to normalize a racialized hierarchy of existence (Leal et al., 2022; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017). Consequently, the analysis is selectively radical, as it ignores the potential of contemporary forms of colonialism, such as that perpetrated by nations promoting other metanarratives and forms of internal colonialism. Internationalization is situated within a global system of domination and oppression, designed to serve Western interests, while acknowledging and subsequently ignoring other social imaginaries. This situates the 'modern/colonial' imaginary as the global imaginary, achieved through continual '... processes of colonization, settlement, enslavement, imperialization, exploitation, and other forms of subjugation, [in which] the West imposed its particular imaginary across the planet in an effort to disrupt, damage, displace, and even destroy other imaginaries' (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017, p. 176).

Through the metanarrative of the 'modern/colonial global imaginary', the postcolonial approach sees internationalization specifically, and higher education generally, as rooted in and integral to the colonial past and present of Western dominance. Reforms of current practices may result in the continuing reproduction of these harms, and to ensure more just practices requires recognizing historical and continuing harms perpetrated by the colonial West and personal complicity in global injustice. Issues of representation, recognition and complicity are paramount. Stein (2017a) advocates for '... critical self-reflexivity about our shared but unevenly distributed vulnerability and complicity in violent and unsustainable systems and structures ... rather than channeling all energies into transforming existing institutions ...' (p. 22). Furthermore, Stein (2016) argues that '... the immediate search for practical action and answers can also foreclose difficult but necessary conversations and questions that have no easy resolution (n.p.),' and associates action with replicating colonial relations and harm. Thus, action is delayed in favor of reflection, critique, recognition of others and of our own complicity in harm.

This approach is part of a broader postcolonial turn in the social sciences, which has made important contributions to raising awareness around racism in HE (e.g. Suspitsyna & Shalka, 2019); issues of land appropriation from indigenous peoples (Stein, 2020); and epistemic 'violence' (Bhandal, 2018; Stein, 2017b). It has effectively revealed inequalities, discrimination, past and contemporary wrongs associated with different aspects of internationalization (França et al., 2018; Majee & Ress, 2018). One of the significant ways it has made a valuable contribution is by challenging the unquestioned notion of internationalization as an inherently positive force, which Lee (2017) describes as the 'false halo of internationalization,' suggesting that it should not be pursued at all costs. Furthermore, it may promote a greater sense of reflexivity and critical thinking among practitioners engaged in internationalization.

Mulvey (2022) critiques the postcolonial approach to internationalization and the closely related post-development approach, which questions the power relations around 'development' and ultimately rejects it on the basis it perpetuates unequal power relations (see Beck, 2021). Mulvey (2022) argues that the focus on and fear of recreating Western dominance, exploitation, and violence – and the absence of attempts to consider alternative approaches, leads to the demoralization of practitioners from the West. This demoralization hinders their potential to contribute towards positive change, resulting in inaction, stasis and the perpetuation of the status quo. He further claims that the focus on recognition, complicity and representation gives universities 'a pass' to implement only tokenistic changes and distracts from issues of social distribution, which he argues provide considerable improvements in an imperfect world. This is an important critique; however, it is primarily concerned with issues of advocacy and action/inaction. We argue that the limitations of the postcolonial approach extend beyond inaction and supporting the status quo.

The limitations of the postcolonial approach

We identify three interconnected limitations of the postcolonial approach, which are evident in its analysis of internationalization, namely: *Western exceptionalism*, *selective criticality*; and *denial of local agency*.

The postcolonial focus on Western hegemony often combines a reverse form of *Western exceptionalism* with Occidentalism, promoting the West as inherently a more morally corrupt actor than those elsewhere. This distinction facilitates its portrayal as culpable for the continued malaise in other contexts around the world, long after colonial powers have retreated, and local authorities have taken control. Ahmad (1992) argues with reference to India that postcolonialists can hold colonialism 'responsible not only for its own cruelties but, conveniently, for ours too' (Ahmad, 1992, p. 286). That logic is illustrated by Nandy (1983) who, whilst critical of Hindu nationalism, blames this ultimately on the colonialist Western project of spreading 'modern structures' - including the nation-state – into 'the barbaric world' and calls for the writing of 'mythographic' histories of those subordinated by colonialism. This approach transforms scholarship into a polemical dogma, rather than a pursuit of understanding and explanation. Its import in internationalization, is that a priori theoretical positions are taken, even in the face of empirical realities, which should trouble their normative position, and Western colonialism is affirmed. For example, Jing, Ghosh and Liu's (2022) study of Canadian international branch campuses [IBCs] in China and Kuwait, aims to investigate whether the two cases promote the harms of neocolonialism and if so, how this differs across national contexts. The study takes a neocolonial perspective in which IBCs are established by the Global North in the Global South and 'reinforce the hegemonic influence of the Global North' (Shams & Huisman, 2012, as cited in Jing et al. 2022, p. 2). Empirically, the study indicates significant local agency 'by resisting Western liberal ideologies and teaching contents irrelevant to the local context (Jing et al., 2022, p. 1).' A manager in an IBC in China remarked:

'Foreign instructors should conduct self-censorship when talking about topics such as the political system in China, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and

the status of Taiwan. They should not make any anti-Chinese or anti-communism comments or remarks to split the country according to the laws in China. We have written this rule in their contracts. If they fail to do so, we will dismiss them immediately' (Jing et al., 2022, p. 9).

The study thus indicates that the Chinese government was both in a position of control and was also heavily involved in the introduction of 'Western education to enhance the education system's competitiveness in the recent years' (Du, 2020, as cited in Jing et al., 2022, p. 12). Such a study is rare for its portrayal of significant agency at the national, institutional, and individual levels. However, instead of revisiting the neocolonial presumption of IBCs, and the aptness of such a lens, the authors broadly confirm the continuing practice of Western colonialism in IBCs.

Western exceptionalism is evident in the tendency of internationalization scholarship towards *selective criticality*, which focusses on the West and avoids critical analysis of non-Western actors. This provides a 'free pass' for actors outside of the West for their historical and continued actions – both physical and epistemic; and it distorts our thinking about contemporary issues of internationalization globally. It is a metanarrative which serves to promote state narratives, portraying all non-Western nations as victims of Western colonialism and patronage, whilst ignoring their own pursuit of imperial ambitions.

In contrast to this focus on the West, there is a relative dearth of critical scholarship that analyzes how nation-states such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia operationalize internationalization and the 'violence' associated with it, including their methods of monitoring students studying overseas (see Han & Tong, 2021). This dearth of critical scholarship partly results from the greater limits on academic freedom in authoritarian states, where critique is discouraged or illegal, and the tendency of postcolonial scholarship to focus its critiques on the malevolent West. For example, Guo et al. (2022) argue that the internationalization of HE in China is a Western colonial imposition, while remaining silent on the significant control which the PRC exerts over the governance of its universities. Moreover, the CCP for many years encouraged the import of Western scholars, students, forms of knowledge and scientific organization to spur its economic and development plans. The authors further state that internationalization has become a key indicator of 'world-class universities', the implication being that China is under a neocolonial imposition of Western standards. However, they fail to acknowledge the role of the PRC in defining this term through its globally influential Shanghai ranking and its distinct approaches to creating 'world class universities.' The decision of many Chinese universities to withdraw from the Shanghai ranking, illustrates local agency and control. Nevertheless, Guo et al. (2022) call

for an approach to internationalization that aims to de-Westernize the ideological underpinnings of colonial relations of rule, especially in terms of its privileging of Eurocentric thought and education and Eurocentrism as normative processes of knowledge production, and to value Chinese language and epistemology (p. 437).

Such a call suggests that Western universities are responsible for undermining local languages (cf. Mongolian and Tibetan) and knowledges and that national governments are helpless in this onslaught.

Similarly, in his analysis of global higher education, Marginson (2022) describes it as a ‘Hobbesian global space’ which ‘is ordered by an Anglo-American hegemony, manifest in neo-liberal economics, cultural and linguistic homogeneity, and White Supremacy in continuity with colonialism’ (p. 492). In contrast he argues that the Chinese concept of *Tianxia*¹ (‘all under heaven’) provides the basis for ‘larger imaginings’ of globality’ (Marginson, 2022, p. 512). In a similar vein Shahjahan and Edwards (2022) argue that global HE needs to be viewed as an attempt to promote the pursuit of a vision of ‘whiteness’; Xu (2023) confirms that in her analysis of the marketing materials of an IBC in China. The former case illustrates how postcolonial scholarship is selectively radical: it adopts a critical and political perspective when focusing on the West but eschews criticism of authoritarian regimes in favor of more normative, cultural, and mystical perspectives. This selectivity is also evident in the vocabularies postcolonial scholarship employs to analyze internationalization in HE; that of the West is primarily described through the vocabulary employed above (white supremacy, colonialism, imperialism and hegemony). In contrast, China’s strategy for internationalization is often portrayed through the vocabulary of Confucianism, *Tianxia*, soft power, international influence, and national development and competitiveness (e.g. Hong, 2020; J. Li, 2018; Lo & Pan, 2016; Mok & Ong, 2014; Wang, 2014; Zheng & Kapoor, 2021). This strategy mirrors and normalizes that of the CCP, which has since 2012 discursively constructed its ideology in cultural terms and promoted what Shapiro (2004) terms ‘cultural governance,’ a process described by Chen (2023) with reference to Confucianism, as the ‘culturalisation of politics.’ The result is that culture and its associated scholarship is harnessed to serve domestic political ends (Tröhler, 2023). Callahan (2008) comments with regard to *Tianxia*:

‘... it blurs the conceptual boundaries between empire and globalism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Hence rather than guide us toward a post-hegemonic world order, *Tianxia* presents a new hegemony where imperial China’s hierarchical governance is updated for the twenty-first century’ (p. 749).

With pressure in Chinese universities from the state to publish in prestigious (often Western) outlets, which demand criticality in research, a postcolonial critique that concentrates on Western coercion is a safe course of action in authoritarian regimes, which promote the belief that colonialism, ‘racism and cultural prejudice are distinctively “Western” pathologies’ (Vickers, 2020, p. 180). The overall result is an obfuscation of understanding of internationalization around the world.

The import of this selective criticality in the postcolonial approach, is the erosion of liberal political values and traditions, such as free speech and tolerance of diversity, and the privileging of sanctioned viewpoints and discourses. The tendency to remain silent on non-Western authoritarianism is vividly illustrated by Baehr (2022), who traces the impact on academia in Hong Kong of the National Security Law (NSL) imposed by the PRC in 2020, which effectively curtailed academic autonomy, free speech and most of civil society. He explains that critical scholarship is now constrained by the NSL only if it focuses on the local context:

Post-colonial studies, a staple of departments of English, Chinese, and cultural studies [in HK], will continue its denunciation of Western ‘Orientalist’ prejudices, another harmless

area, as the CCP heartily concurs with all anti-occidental sentiment . . . political tyranny will always be somewhere else and Hong Kong's distinctiveness *terra incognita* (Baehr, 2022, p. 236).

His claim was evident in two conferences in 2022 and 2023 held at Hong Kong universities that focused on the topics of student agency and the possibilities of HE in the Greater Bay Area, both sponsored in conjunction with prominent HE research centers in the West. The agendas avoided any mention of the draconian effects of the NSL, which now defines the context within which student agency and HE is operating (Vickers & Morris, 2022). This illustrates how prestigious Western HE institutions condone and normalize such depoliticization and helps to explain why there is a dearth of critical research on internationalization in authoritarian states. The result of this selective criticality is that it tends to take for granted the liberal political values that provide the foundations for the very existence of critical scholarship, namely the rights of the individual and freedom of speech. It also dovetails with other elements of the postcolonial approach which undermine the normative tenets of academic scholarship, threaten academic freedom and critical scholarship. These elements include several aspects, namely: the tendency to prioritize scholarly work based on identity politics and positionality (Vickers, 2020); the inclination to adopt *ad personam* responses to criticisms of postcolonial scholarship (see Stein et al., 2020); the expansion of 'repressive tolerance' (Marcuse, 1965) through measures like deplatforming; and a tendency to engage in ahistorical analyses which ignore the *longue durée* of colonial empires (e.g., Mongol, Ottoman, Japanese and Russian).

As Frenkel and Shenhav (2006) argue, the postcolonial approach does reveal inequalities and uneven power relations, however, it has a tendency to impose binaries of oppressed/oppressor, along reductionist identity categories which avoids consideration of local politics, histories, and agency in ways which ignore peoples lived experiences (Auld & Jensen, 2022; Tsing, 2005). Similarly, Lewin (1985) argues a focus on colonial histories/relations risks overlooking important local factors which he argues 'are by far the most important influences on educational policy . . .' and that external influences which precipitated education reform are rarely 'in the absence of domestic pressures of a far stronger kind, which have been reinforced but not determined by exogenous inputs' (p. 120). The associated critique of postcolonial analysis – that it *denies local agency* and is patronizing – is longstanding and recently argued by Táíwò (2022). He critiques the decolonization movement, arguing that the 'decolonizers' are infantilizing and imposing values on African scholars and scholarship. Specifically, the 'decolonizers' only recognize African agency when it aligns with their prescribed notions of suitable African self-determination. He views the decolonization movement as undermining African agency and as an impediment to scholarship on and in Africa.

There is a considerable literature about the disconnect and agentic translation of policy across contexts: internationalization practices and policies are framed and interpreted differently by actors (e.g. policy makers, academic staff, students) across levels (e.g. national, institutional) and over time (see Bamberger & Kim, 2022). For example, national initiatives to bring Palestinian Arabs from East Jerusalem (PAfEJ) into Israeli HE, using the infrastructure of internationalization, were intended to 'integrate' the

population into Israeli society and decrease inter-group violence. However, at the institutional level, this initiative was interpreted by educators as a way to foster critical reflection among students on their situation and multiple identities (Bamberger et al., 2021).

We suggest that postcolonial scholarship in its analysis of HE is rooted in the past and has failed to recognize the shifting nature of geopolitics and understand colonialism in all its forms and locations. The focus on a ‘modern/colonial global imaginary’ propagated by the West and the legacies of its colonialism on the East/Global South, eschews other explanatory lenses and analyses of non-Western colonial powers. The result is that it tends to ignore the experience of those affected by non-western nations with imperial ambitions. For example, at the national level state sponsored (ethno) nationalisms, some designed to promote imperial ambitions, are a key goal of internationalization policies in Japan, China, South Korea, India, and Turkey (Hammond, 2016; Moon, 2016; Tsuneyoshi, 2018).

Within nations, scholars have also demonstrated the extent to which state sponsored internationalization efforts in Hong Kong and East Jerusalem (Bamberger et al., 2021) support forms of *internal* colonialism. Calvert (2001) argues that ‘... internal colonisation parallels in all important respects external colonisation, characterised as it is by settlement; extension of political control; relations of superordination/subordination; implied or actual use of coercion (p. 53).’ These conditions now prevail in Hong Kong since the introduction of the NSL (Vickers, 2023) and include internationalization policies in HE. Hong Kong students are categorized as international students, encouraged and funded to study in the PRC, and provided with a curriculum designed to suppress local identity, instill patriotic values and allegiance to the state.

Through these examples we illuminate the inherent limitations of postcolonial analyses of internationalization. We suggest that the postcolonial approach is applied selectively, and that many of its central features reflect Western bias and exceptionalism, take for granted liberal political values, and obscure agency. This paradoxical Western framing of internationalization cannot provide a basis to explain the nature and motives in many nations in which the ‘modern/colonial global imaginary’ is not the organizing frame of internationalization.

Conclusion

The commercialization of internationalization in HE, coupled with globalization and the influence of neoliberalism in the post-Cold War era, has generated demands for change and reorientation, leading to a ‘critical turn.’ We provide an analysis of this and its two major strands of scholarship. We explore the critical turn to understand its development, core tenets, major concerns, and to critically assess its usefulness in understanding and analyzing the complexities of internationalization. We further consider its ability to provide a corrective to the foundational literature.

We began with an analysis of the development of internationalization in HE, emphasizing the catalysts for a critical turn. While recognizing that a range of critical responses have emerged, we identify and focus on two major strands of scholarship: 1) the mainstream approach and 2) the postcolonial approach within the radical strand. We argue that both have, for different reasons, significant

problems. Specifically, we argue that the mainstream critical approaches continue to steer internationalization towards more socially progressive and equitable aims, and that many of the same issues are present, namely: description, depoliticization and advocacy. Meanwhile new concerns have emerged, particularly around the globalization of Western frameworks and the dearth of scholarship on authoritarian contexts. Within the radical strand we focus on the approach which adopts a postcolonial lens and acknowledge its contributions to the field, most notably, challenging the ‘unconditional good’ of internationalization and stressing a political perspective. However, we argue that it promotes stalemate and stasis, reflects Western bias and exceptionalism, takes for granted liberal political values, obscures agency, and through its selective application, distorts understanding of internationalization in the world.

We further suggest that the postcolonial approach has difficulties explaining the nature of and motives for internationalization in many nations. This difficulty stems from the reliance of the postcolonial approach on the ‘modern/colonial global imaginary,’ which adopts a bipolar view of geopolitics (Turner, 2009), which does not serve as the organizing frame in an increasingly multipolar geopolitical context (Glass & Cruz, 2022). While methodological nationalism has been a longstanding critique of comparative education (Guevara, 2022), the focus on internationalization as a manifestation of globalization has shifted attention away from the role of the state. This has limited our understanding of how diverse states actively harness HE more broadly, and internationalization in particular, to perpetuate national identities and state projects. The focus on globalization has likewise obscured understanding of how and under what conditions dominant national visions may become imperial – or ‘global’ (Tröhler, 2023).

Following Mignolo (2011) and Perkins (2016) we suggest that postcolonial analyses of HE need to avoid a near exclusive focus on the West and recognize the changing nature of geopolitics, including the rise of China, and the consequent acceleration of colonial trajectories other than re-Westernization, most notably de-Westernization. Following Frenkel and Shenhav (2006), we also suggest that the limitations of Orientalism and Occidentalism should be acknowledged and supplemented with approaches which recognize nuance, local agency, politics, power relations, history, and the reciprocal effects of interactions between various local/global actors. Such approaches may provide greater scope for understanding both the trajectories of contemporary colonization and their impact on internationalization globally. With renewed calls for change in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing populisms-nationalisms, the urgency of climate change, and predictions for new forms of internationalization on the horizon (e.g. Beck, 2021; de Wit & Altbach, 2021) we may be on the cusp of a new direction in scholarship and practice.

Note

1. The prominence of *Tianxia* in mainstream discourse can be attributed to Zhao Tingyang, a distinguished philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences,

who, in 2005, authored the bestselling book *The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution*.

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