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Negotiating Normativity

Postcolonial Appropriations, Contestations, and Transformations

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Normative Legitimacy and Normative Dilemmas: Postcolonial Interventions

Nikita Dhawan, Elisabeth Fink, Johanna Leinius, and Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel

Research on colonialism as well as its impact on today's world has been at the center of critical debates throughout the last decades, contributing to major revisions of theoretical, methodological and epistemological assumptions. It has produced a wide range of research topics as well as a more nuanced understanding of the (post-) colonial[1] condition (cf. Ashcroft et al. 1989; Lewis and Mills 2003; McClintock et al. 1997; Spivak 1990). However, one of the biggest difficulties still lies in the differentiated analysis of the various operations of power, which is attentive to its complexities, yet does not refrain from the critical interrogation of supposedly "liberating" or "empowering" agendas.

Against this background, this volumes aims at analyzing the interweaving of the productive as well as limiting aspects of power by employing postcolonial-feminist research perspectives, which have proven to contribute the most to (self-)critical

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[1] Within postcolonial discourses, many terms denote hegemonic global power relations and structures of domination, such as Orient/Occident, global North/global South, First World/Third World (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2015). The contrastive pair "the West and the Rest," established by Stuart Hall (1992) is commonly referred to in scholarly literature as well. The current volume primarily employs the terms "global South/North," since this pair diverges from suggesting monolithic entities and draws attention to the "South" within the "North" and vice versa.

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approaches of postcolonial studies (cf. Lewis and Mills 2003; Mohanty 2003; Rajan and Park 2000). The specific focus of this volume lies on critically scrutinizing how power manifests itself in norms and normativity; by opening up new research perspectives that point towards the ambivalent and twofold character of normativity, we show how norms are appropriated, contested as well as transformed.

The analyses contained in this volume take a stance against restricting binaries as well as against the assumption of an allegedly all-encompassing (post-)colonial power. This introduction begins by outlining the editors' notion of norms and normativity, then portrays how normativity has been negotiated in postcolonial feminist approaches and finally elaborates on how the concepts of appropriation, contestation and transformation assist in understanding resistance and its entanglement with the multifaceted trajectories of power in a postcolonial world.

Negotiating Normativity

Different fields in the social sciences and humanities have attempted to determine how norms operate. Some have identified norms as an area of research interest precisely because they highlight social interaction and ideational influence as the foundation for cooperation and conflict. Others seek to isolate how norms function as an extension of society and/or serve material interests. Within these, it is often assumed that there is a strong correlation between people's normative beliefs and their actions and practices. The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy tells us in this regard that "a norm is a rule or a definite pattern of behavior, departure [from] which renders a person liable to censure" (Blackburn 2008: 255). Norms set principles that individuals and collectivities employ to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate values, attitudes and behaviors. Essentially, they define and regulate what is expected, required or desirable in particular circumstances. Norms evolve not only through time, but also vary between social classes and groups. What is deemed to be acceptable speech or behavior in one context may not be approved in another. As social beings, individuals learn when and where it is appropriate to say certain things or avoid certain practices. Knowledge about cultural, legal and social norms, for instance, influences one's position in society and community. Typically, this knowledge is derived through experience and education.

Individuals subscribe to norms by accepting them as reasonable and proper standards for behavior. In this sense, norms provide reasons to act, believe or feel. Indeed, almost all aspects of socio-political interactions are to a great extent norm-governed. The nature of norms, the source of their authority and the form they should take occupy center-stage in any theory of social interaction, ethics and law. Norms are accompanied by the expectation that individuals and collectivities will follow the prescribed practices, while avoiding the prohibited ones. Variance between beliefs and behavior elicits sanction and disapproval. Normativity, which refers to the regulatory function of norms, is therefore deeply linked to the operation of power. Norms do not only simply describe how the subject, society or the world

is; rather they prescribe how they should be, thereby creating obligations and duties. Moreover, they also function in a constitutive manner by representing both implicit as well as explicit standards of behavior (cf. Kardam 2004; Locher and Prügl 2001). Whereas the former finds its expression among others as social mores, expectations and/or morality, the latter appear as policies, laws and/or international agreements. Owing to their interlinked nature, norms and normativity reflect two sides of the same coin, whose relationship is characterized by a tension that is not easily resolved. Norms, for instance, also operate as an ideal against which subjects and actions are rendered legible or illegible, because they govern our interactions with others, determining whether we can recognize them and in turn be recognized by them (Butler 2004: 53; Mills 2007: 138). Deference to norms maintains one's inclusion within a particular group, while defying norms can lead to marginalization or even loss of life.

Although they might seem staid and predetermined, norms are neither monolithic nor isolated from other socio-political structures: depending on the particularities one is confronted with at any given time and place they may clash with each other in as much as they may reinforce one another (cf. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Stienstra 1999; Cortell and Davis 2000). Some norms supersede and resonate more strongly than others might. Thus, owing to their entanglements, hegemonic norms mutually reinforce each other, creating a uniform normative pattern that becomes pervasive. Through societal expectation, peer pressure, propriety and at times politics of shame, norms operate within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization. These regulatory practices produce and constrain intelligibility by structuring the socio-political and cultural worlds not just through their impact on ideas and beliefs, but also materially, in the way that they operate explicitly through institutions and daily practices producing normative subjectivities (Chambers and Carver 2008: 147). However, even as subjects are dependent upon and emerge from within normative orders, they are not fully determined by them. The contingency of norms makes room for creative political agency, even as they hinder the subject's legibility and intelligibility. This reveals the normative dilemmas we face,

> although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us, and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose. (Butler 2004: 206)

This complicates any straightforward understandings of the relation between norms, power and agency. Judith Butler's idea of "normative violence" is extremely instructive in that it outlines how the violence of particular norms determines what or who counts as an agentic subject (2008). Unlike scholars who predominantly highlight norms' enabling characteristics, Butler's focus is on the twofold capacity of norms to exert violence: On the one hand, there is the occasional and incidental violence that relates to the particular manifestation of the norm. On the other hand, the violence internal to norms by virtue of their constitutive "world-making" and "reality-conferring capacity" is outlined (Mills 2007: 140). Hegemonic norms exert violence on those bodies that violate such norms, whereas those who conform to the

norms profit. Certain forms of violence are consequently deemed as legitimate and permissible, since hegemonic norms are naturalized and appear as common sense. While Butler's reflections on norms help understand how heteronormativity is enforced, it also explains other violent gendered processes that require a norm to take hold. One need only consider that genocide in Rwanda was conceivable, because a "genocidal norm" had been instilled on large sectors of Rwandan society (see Fujii 2004). Genocide entails the targeted killing and annihilation of a group identified as 'other,' therefore this target needs to be outlined and the violence—which would otherwise be forbidden—sanctioned by an authority. Particularly in the case of Rwanda the mass participation in the genocide meant that the population had to be included into the genocidal narrative (Mageza-Barthel 2015).[2] For such atrocities occurring in the midst of any society to be condoned, widespread support and toleration has to be rallied, at the very least. This warped moral landscape, which sanctioned the most extreme form of collective violence, reflects the consequences of not contesting a heinous hegemonic norm and illustrates how the unfathomable becomes possible. Nevertheless, despite being pervasive, the genocidal norm was not all-encompassing, since crucial pockets of resistance existed (cf. Jefrevomas 1995; Prunier 1998; Hintjens 1999). Thus, norms are associated with incentives and consent that are produced and legitimized in the social, religious, economic and cultural spheres.

This discussion shifts focus from questions of the relation between sanctions and norms on two important points: Firstly, power here is not understood only negatively, as something that prohibits or represses. Rather, the power of norms is productive: it mobilizes certain subjects and practices, while delegitimizing others. Secondly, the approach above marks a shift from the liberal conceptions of the rational subject, who makes deliberate choices about which norms to conform to. Rather, norms produce subjects and bodies even as they regulate them (Dhawan 2013: 197). The notion of normative violence does not imply that norms are non-negotiable. Inversely, the negotiability of norms does not imply that norms cannot be violent and coercively implemented (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2011: 97). The subject is, thereby, caught in an ambivalent relationship to the normative structures that produce it but which it might oppose. Normativity is always vulnerable to disruption, always haunted by that which it excludes. If the normative framework only persists to the extent that it is performatively re-enacted with everyday practice, there necessarily remains the potential for disruption and re-signification (Butler 2004: 223).

To summarize: norms emerge historically in specific cultural and political contexts to provide evaluative criteria to critically assess our socio-cultural, legal and economic practices. In delimiting the contours of the social, norms are a necessary and unavoidable part of life. They are action-guiding and operate as an ideal against which practices and subjects are rendered legible within a specific framework. Normative intelligibility is thereby deeply linked to survival, whereby subjects that

[2] These were most visibly transported by such as Kangura's *Ten Hutu Commandments* that shored-up fear and hatred among Rwandans (see Taylor 1999).

fall outside hegemonic norms of recognition are vulnerable to "normative violence." This indicates the aspirational and orchestrating effects of norms as well as their regulative and coercive dimensions (Dhawan 2013: 209).

Normative orders are justified insofar as those subject to them have the possibility of intervening and transforming these orders. Postcolonialism, as a field of study, emerged as such an attempt to negotiate historical legacies of colonialism by enabling the agency of disenfranchised postcolonial subjects. It is worthwhile to clarify some key terms that are relevant when focusing on geopolitics of normative orders: The label "First World" is commonly used synonymously with "Northern countries" to refer to the so-called G7 as the group of seven "leading" industrial countries, many of whom were former colonial powers (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2015). In contrast, the "Third World" of "Southern countries" is used for the member countries of the G77, which represents a loose network of over 130 formerly colonized states. Originally, the "Third World"[3] described the non-aligned states, which during the conflict of the Cold War belonged to neither the capitalist "First" nor the communist "Second World," but positioned itself between these military blocs. When the renowned Bandung Conference took place in 1955, 29 states exclusively from Asia and Africa, adopted the term to designate themselves.[4] For the first time, countries of the "Third World" came into appearance as a third force. Among other things, they formulated the end of colonial rule in countries that had not reached their formal independence yet, and advanced the right of self-determination and peaceful cooperation as common goals. Today, however, the assertive appellation "Third World" is often used only to refer to economic "under-development," even though The Bandung Conference, also seen as the predecessor of the Non-Aligned Movement founded in 1961 in Belgrade, was an important expression of the political independence of previously colonized nation-states. Within this historical and political context, ties between African and Asian nation-states and their societal agents, who hope to overcome the negative effects of a bipolar world order by invoking multipolarity and new transnational dynamics are still marked by this foundational principle of South–South relations (Mageza-Barthel forthcoming). Postcolonialism has thus not merely replaced the term "Third World," on the contrary the concept is problematized and reflected on critically within postcolonial theory (cf. for instance Young 2001: 4).

For a postcolonial-feminist perspective, the challenge lies in re-articulating norms such as to make the claims of previously disenfranchised communities legible and intelligible. In the case of commonly-agreed upon normative frameworks, the condemnation of the discrepancies between made commitments and executed policies gives rise to demands for increasing accountability or countering impunity in the postcolonial world. Nevertheless, the capacity to challenge hegemonic norms

[3] The term, introduced in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy (1898–1990), functions as an analogy to the "third estate" of the French Revolution to describe those countries where the majority of the world's population lived but who remained powerless in global politics.

[4] Overall, the conference is regarded as the first international postcolonial conference (cf. Young 2001: 191).

presupposes an ability to negotiate one's relation to norms. This is not a call for undermining all normative claims; rather the emphasis is on the need to devise new constellations of normativity, which would enable subjects struggling for enfranchisement. Normativity can function as a site of political agency, even as the vulnerability of the subject is closely related to normative regulations. The dual nature of normativity, namely the entanglements of diverse norms as well as their impact on social realities, marks an important point of departure for theory-building and critical intervention on how normativity might be negotiated. This also entails an interrogation of the very foundations of normative critical theory.

Normative Bias and Normative Legitimacy: Postcolonial Critical Interventions

Critical theory, as a term, is itself contested and fuzzy encompassing a diverse range of theoretical perspectives and approaches. In its narrow usage, it refers to the Frankfurt School of social theory, whereas the more general usage refers to any intervention in cultural, social and political theory that questions relations of power and domination. These include feminist, queer, postcolonial and critical race theory that can all be considered different strands of critical theory (Dhawan 2014; Allen 2016).

Critical theory's practical and political aim is freedom and emancipation, while its theoretical aim is to understand the (ideal) conditions under which emancipation is possible. What is distinctive about the Frankfurt School's approach is its combination of political realism and normative political theory. Furthermore, its conception of critical subjectivity entails a self-reflexive subject that understands itself to be framed by socio-political and economic relations of power. As has recently been emphasized by scholars such as Amy Allen (2016), it is particularly surprising that the Frankfurt School, with its focus on emancipatory political struggles, has systematically abstained from engagement with theorizing processes of decolonization (ibid: xiv). It is argued that the School's shocking silence on racism, empire and anti-colonial struggles is not mere oversight. Rather, it is symptomatic of the Eurocentrism that inflects European intellectual tradition. Its dubious transhistorical claims of universality marginalize and silence other epistemologies and normative principles that diverge from and are different to the European model. Given the violence and exclusions that inform European narratives of normativity, the legitimacy of ideals like justice, rights, rule of law, sovereignty, progress, democracy and secularism, which are legacies of Enlightenment, are consequently cast in doubt.

Frankfurt School defends its lack of engagement with postcolonial studies in terms of the paucity of normative foundationalism in postcolonial scholarship (Allen 2016: xv). For normative theorists, critical theory requires norms of progress and development as forward-looking ideas of perfection and improvement, in order to be truly critical (ibid: 11). According to them, norms are moral-political imperatives that inspire more just political orders. Abandonment of these normative commitments suggests historical pessimism and a turn away from progressive politics.