

## Contesting Territoriality in a Globalised World: A Postmodernist Perspective

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*The legacy of postmodernism is not one of success or failure but rather an ongoing process of mixed outcomes. Postmodernism's depth has made it as one of the most acclaimed discourse in the twentieth and twenty first century. A thought which remained predominantly with architecture, art, literature and music of late found its way to humanities and social sciences. Postmodernism, at its boldest, is a radical critique of all claims to truth and existence of an objective reality. This forms the core of understanding the behaviour of the modern state built on inflicting fear on the citizens and other humans to sustain as a system and finds itself with the title nation state. The metanarrative that has surrounded the world with the influence of the realist school of thought on the states tends to give a unitary approach and essentially a misleading approach to make it look like single entity and coherent. This notion is essentially fulfilled by its consciousness of the border and extensive reliability on the territorial sovereignty. The very notion of bringing the plurality as core of understanding the modern day state and contesting the metanarrative in the mainstream discourse has been the effort of postmodernism and also to understand it as a mode of discourse with the aim of opening up the international relations discourse to possibilities of political community and organization beyond the sovereign state. Though confusing and complicated, as it hits the very base of such classical notions of state and its people postmodernist interpretation is a ugly truth, incomprehensible but inevitable to live with. This paper is an attempt to understand the notions of territoriality, borders and grand claims of the states by qualifying their position though postmodernist lens.*

The theory of postmodernism came into being following the period of 'modernism' which preached the slogan of 'make it new'. Postmodernity should be seen as a cultural

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condition which willingly acknowledges that there is no single all-encompassing narrative, a narrative with exceptional rights, but a variety of localised rival intellectual and moral traditions. Just because the existence and credibility of these former grand meta-narratives are not straightforwardly evident, the allegiance to them becomes the matter of an active hermeneutical actualisation of these traditions. The theory of postmodernism is seen as anti-foundational because it seeks to challenge the traditional views on power and authority. One needs to remember it as a movement which essentially came to demystify the fixed notions already established by mainstream theories such as realism and neorealism. This leads us to an understanding that rather than creating a discourse equivalent to these metanarratives, postmodernism tries to ease it and complicate the understanding of everything. The movement can largely be credited with the forging the way for the emergence of the subfield of geopolitics within the political science community. The resulting discourse is one of perpetual questions rather than resolutions, assertions, or self-evident facts, which does not lend itself to the establishment of a grounded center, a unifying point of departure, from which a singular dominant discourse can emerge. It is often spoken in the mainstream discourse that the theory of postmodernism is stuck with criticizing anything and everything overwhelmingly but would escape from providing the alternative solution. The only best argument that can be made to rescue the postmodernists is to say that they are to give alternate discourse away from metanarratives and show different threads and shades but not to provide solution as it might not be the work of this particular theory. To be more precise, postmodernism thinks that providing solution itself will be in contradictions to what it believes and practices, there "solution" itself can be dubbed as a metanarrative and postmodernism too would fall into the trap of becoming another discourse in line. Though they can be called as escapists to an extent but one cannot question their reach and non-reachability on a particular subject that being the beauty of the line of thinking.

For understanding the postmodernist view of the notion of nation state, sovereignty and its relation to the territoriality demands for a better understanding of some basic tenets of or larger parameters under which it operates. This is extremely essential as the interpretations of postmodernists became part of the mainstream discourse in discipline such as International Relations, there were also equal claims from Marxists and other groups accusing postmodernism of bringing nothing new but as a mix of several radical theories already available. This is even true in the case of Marxists as they would claim it as a hyper version of Marxism. One Marxist thinker is often quoted by this league is that of Antonio

Gramsci, who actually contested both the pro-civil society stances of liberalism (originally Locke's) and anti-civil society stances of the Left (originally Marx's).<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that Gramsci's original position on the subject is little known. Gramsci considers the necessity to remain skeptical of powers in civil society, without ceding a liberal belief in the intrinsic merits of civil society. Gramsci shows clearly how it is possible to criticize civil society on the basis of civil society's own norms rather than the state power but he does not share with Marx's vision of abolishing civil society too. Despite many ambiguities in his definition of civil society, Gramsci makes a very important distinction between civil society and classes, on the one hand, and civil society and the state power, on the other hand. Borrowing an economic analogy, it may be said that for Gramsci, civil society provides "backward linkages" (inputs) for the state while it receives "forward linkages" (outputs) from classes. Therefore, civil society occupies a space in between class and the state.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the focus on the representation of reality, postmodernists use the analysis of discourse as their main methodology. They try to show how certain representation of reality prevails in a struggle over meaning, and how alternatives are marginalized. As the entry on discourse elaborates, one of the central problems in such an approach is the question of what constitutes discourse—is it only text in the narrow sense or does it involve a broader set of practices? Without understanding some of the basic tenets of postmodernism it would become an endless arguments and propositions in the context of contesting territoriality though postmodernist view of the nation state.

Postmodernists believe in the breaking down of the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs. This creates a divide that has been so conducive to rule, colonise and sustain power for very long time in history and in the present day world too. On the one hand it is Foucault's idea of 'micro-politics' local and issue-based that comes in the form of understanding the domestic proposition that (a) every society is composed of countless centres of power and great many institutions, and therefore (b) what is required is not a unified political party but a whole plethora of agents addressing those multiple centres of power resonates well with the very structure of the postmodern politics that have arisen in our times, especially in the form of identity politics. Thus, postmodernism believes in the subaltern i.e. the microcosm which entails details that are specific and subjective. The subaltern becomes in a way the antecedent to the metanarrative, implying that the very existence of the subaltern challenges the metanarrative since the postmodernist believes that the grand story cannot explain the subaltern which is a reality. The failure of the classical

realism and liberalism to explain the demise of the Soviet Union and thereby their inability to predict the future events in the post-cold war scenario exemplifies the postmodernist's 'micro-narrative'. Due to such a view postmodernism in essence questions the very idea of a state when the approach is applied.

It is also interesting to see that this particular tenet of postmodernism has been severely criticized by the Marxists as it dilutes the understanding of the class in society to organize, agitate and bring the rule of the proletariat as each individual would seek an identity. The vehement criticisms on postmodernism has been that most far-reaching consequence of postmodernism in practical politics has been what is called the atomisation of politics, the displacement of class politics by an amorphous entity called 'culture,' the further displacement of the politics of equality by the politics of identity, the fracture of the unity of the exploited and the oppressed into countless little oppositional claims, so that resistance seems to be everywhere but nowhere in particular.

The second tenet that has vital importance is the rejection of force for resolving disputes and the consequent codification of self-enforced rules of behavior. Many a times force is used through relaying on constructed, one sided historical claims leading the society to believe it as authentic. Having not accepted single origin for some of the problems that arise from strong historical background, postmodernism tries to come out of the traditional history and seeks to identify those ruptures where power/knowledge were contested and how one interpretation won. Crucially the aim of postmodernism is to underline that what is now accepted as truth is only one possible way of doing things, it is arbitrary, and there are feasible alternatives. Use of force is also something that is taken for granted in the society by the authority as having the sole authority to use violence is being solemnized through the so called social contract theory. Questioning these fundamentals, postmodernism seeks to recover some alternatives and repoliticize things that are taken for granted. Repoliticizing itself is an exercise that would facilitate alternatives discourse as it creates debates and discussions in the society. This is important for the fact that disputes are solved so arbitrarily in the present day State system that one would not have space to question them whatsoever.

The third important tenet needs to be discussed is the growing irrelevance of borders. This has come about both through the changing role of the state, but also through missiles, motor cars and satellites. There is an approach to understanding the concept of 'power' essential to understand the State. Rather than viewing power in terms of just large institutions such as State, it is important to see how power is exercised. Power cannot be manifest

within an entity and therein questions the Realist perspective of power, challenging the traditional discourse. There is a popular and wrong interpretation of postmodernism by equating irrelevance of borders to statelessness. This complicates the process and gives a typical notion of postmodernism being confused and demanding anarchy in the literary meaning (not the anarchy in International Relations). This problem can be demystified through the works of Ashley and Walker who aimed to challenge the neorealist discourse (Ashley 1988: 289) with the statement 'freezes the political institutions of the current world order, and renders absolute autonomy of technical rationality as the organ of social progress' as neorealism attempted to create a best-fit model of international politics which was able to accommodate the requirements for scientific validity and confronting the privileged status of sovereignty over anarchy within international relations theory. Similarly, Walker aimed to expand the discourse beyond the barriers of a fixed political identity rooted in a particular spatial/temporal composition, by challenging the way in which the notion of sovereignty is used to foster political identity as an either/or, inside/outside, here/there juxtaposition. They argue that the neorealist use of the notion of sovereignty has far reaching discursive effects beyond Waltz's assertion that sovereignty is freedom of states to make their own decisions. They assert that neorealism's use of unexamined foundational truths has several theoretical implications about the concept of the state which include: the state as a rational identity; the privileging of the state; and the creation of a closed space both discursively and physically within the discourse.

Through the use of deconstruction, international relations theory can no longer be treated as foundational, without interpreting the political problems of global collaboration. The notion of state sovereignty expresses the claim by states to exercise legitimate power within strictly delimited territorial boundaries stands in ambiguous relation to the claims about power and authority. Boundaries, by definition, constitute lines of separation or contact. In contrast to a modern geopolitical imagination dominated by state centric spatiality (bordered, sovereign, territorially delimited states) the post-modern geopolitical imagination grapples with the borderlessness, state failure, and deterritorialisation. This may occur in real or virtual space, horizontally between territories, or vertically between groups and/or individuals. This nowhere means in postmodernism that it argues for no state or no citizenship or no identity. Postmodernism essentially also trivializes the micro details in society as there are chances of everything and anything getting washed away in the popular and mainstream narratives.

The changing role of boundaries in their traditional role as barriers and preventers of communication is no longer viable. But the strategic role of land boundaries has also raised questions concerning the traditional security discourse. Postmodern IR theory have challenged the traditional realist, state-centric approaches which have taken sovereignty, territoriality and boundaries of states for granted (Luke, 1993; Shapiro and Alker, 1996). Geographers have labelled this as a territorial trap (Agnew, 1994: 53-80; Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). Territorial trap is the trap of fixed territories, while the end of "territorial absolutism" (Newman, 2003: 14-15) is the transition from a static notion of territory to one which has its own internal dynamics of change. Neither of these concepts signals an "end to territory" or a deterritorialized world.

The very notion of territorial trap is very interesting as the choice of one's birth is not there for the humans and later to claim his/her identity the spatial element in the form of states is still prevalent and will continue to be there forever as long as the human race exists. It is not always clear if the concern is about the globalization of social institutions (economy, culture), globalizing consciousness or the change in networks of human action, which display much diversity in their spatial and social content. Not all authors agree with ideas that suggest the disappearance of boundaries. For the average worker or farmer with a family, one's nation-state is a 'community of fate' and that wealth and income are not global, but instead nationally and regionally distributed between poorer and richer states and localities.

The other notion probably and quite often being attributed to the postmodern thinking is that of the concept of withering away of the boundaries, death of citizenship and also shared sovereignty. These are theoretically fascinating and fit into the mysterious agenda of globalization. At the same time they are also overstated and over imagined. The nation state by all means would continue to be the most important factor in the world but with more identity to individuals and culture. This would be a more appropriate interpretation through postmodernism, though we can't speak about it with certainty. The state is not withering away, but will remain important in international governance. Even if the meanings of sovereignty are continually changing, states will maintain their position because of their relationship to territory and population. Territorial borders are patrolled in the name of the state, which continues to represent the citizens within those borders. To speak of sovereignty is to speak of identity, both individually and collectively (in the form of a political community), by establishing the terms in which it can be defined. As applied to the construct of the state, the notion of sovereignty works to shape our understanding of what states are and what

they do by providing legitimacy, power, authority and order to political life through the definition and delineation of a very specific political community- the state (Walker 1991: 446). It is here that on the one hand we speak of blurring of borders but in reality the States are going hyper about the real demarcated borders in the form of fencing and replacing the humans through CCTVs and other sophisticated instruments to guarding the 'border'.

Many studies have dealt with issues of definition, distinguishing boundaries and borders from frontiers, boundaries from borders, borders from borderlands and political frontiers from settlement frontiers. Boundaries and borders were initially conceived as being no more than lines separating sovereign territories, while frontiers were assumed to constitute the area in proximity to the border whose internal development was affected by the existence of the line. The political frontier was differentiated from the settlement frontier, the former affected by the existence of the international boundary, the latter constituting it as uninhabited region lying within the state territory and representing the spatial margin of the state's ecumenism. Implicit in postmodern thought is therefore the notion that the transformation of socio-spatial organization into a postmodern 'hyperspace' is accompanied by the loss of boundaries, and that globalization processes threaten the particularity of places, border and territoriality. This is best explained in terms of the virtual world existing around. If there is human rights violence in Sri Lanka, an individual need not come all the way to Sri Lanka and protest but still put up his/her agitation or reservations against the actions of the Sri Lankan government from wherever they are. UNHRC resolution is passed somewhere else but the discussion is on virtual space on the topic by common man and condemning such instance does not require physical presence within a boundary in the traditional sense. This is another way of interpreting the concept of hyperspace postmodernism.

Another important tenet that needs elaboration is the concept of security based on transparency, mutual openness, interdependence and mutual vulnerability within the postmodern discourse. This concept in postmodernism has cultural roots essentially opposing the binary approach followed by the states with hyper notion of security often embezzled in the disguise of nationalism, national interest, core values and security. This discourse has stayed in the discussions for a very long time in the name of being extremely close to what is called as *realpolitik*. Needless to say, the concept of *realpolitik* is extremely important to understand the behavior of the states but not exclusive enough to write off that as the fixed character of states behavior. If the world could adopt and behave according the requirement of the situation in the name of globalization from the traditional puritan way of thinking about

states and borders and become neoliberal, then there are possibilities to demystify the notion of sacrosanct approach to the concept of security too. This is essential as in the name of security and state's survival lot of violence is inflicted on the citizens and other people living in a particular State. The States rely upon violence to constitute themselves as States and in the process, impose differentiations between the internal and external and sustain power. Following Carl Schmitt, Agamben posits sovereignty as the essence of the political. The sovereign claims the right to decide the exception. This leads, among other things, to the sovereign's right to decide who is in and who is out of a political community. By employing Agamben, these postmodern works seek to show how sovereign states, even liberal democratic ones, constitute themselves through exclusion and violence. This is the notion that has been challenged by postmodernism to pay attention to all section of the society due to the intervention of globalization. Inflicting violence becomes such habitual practice for the State that at a particular given point in time one may not be able to bring it back to normalcy at all. It is to demystify this hyper notion of security, postmodernism proposes security based on transparency, mutual openness, interdependence and mutual vulnerability.

The globalization discourse has resulted in a more complex, understanding of the multi-dimensional, and dynamic, components of territory as a mechanism through which society is bordered, ordered and controlled (Albert et al, 1999). Territorial ordering remains an essential component of human behaviour. Humans seek to control the spaces within which we live, to make them as exclusive as possible, and this is as true of the State spaces within which "our" groups practice sovereignty and political control, as it is of the municipal and neighbourhood spaces within which we attempt to influence the quality of life characteristics, as it is of our desire to control and defend our private and personal spaces.

Territory remains contested where ethnic and national groups compete for power, where they seek the implementation of self-government, where they display high levels of spatial segregation, regional concentration and territorial homogeneity, and where they continue to feel threatened by the "other" national group, such that participatory forms of power sharing are not perceived as guaranteeing them the political rights or physical safety they desire (Yiftachel, 1998). On the one hand there are notions of globalization bringing homogeneity and concept of microcosm peculiarities to feel importance of every human is positive to local community but also detrimental by trivializing everything to stretch it beyond requirement which in a way may also lead to non-functional situation on demands coming from individuals. The notion of microcosm has given identity to humans and has also challenged

the fixed notion of the state as the ultimate and exercise of power as legitimate. Agnew (1994:53-80) points out that globalization does not inevitably mean 'homogenization', but rather fragmentation.

In many cases, the increased interdependence and integration among nations have changed the meanings of state boundaries. Territories may then have different relations with each other through their border areas, along a continuum stretching from alienated border-lands through to completely integrated borderlands (Martinez, 1994). As far as the effects of interdependence and integration inside states are concerned, this means that new voices will arise to articulate their interests. Much recent research in the field of IR has concentrated on the need to identify the political identities and social groupings which have been previously effectively suppressed by the hegemony of states and the metanarratives. It is also important to note that the postmodern discourse has been greatly influenced by processes of economic globalization and information cyberspace. But beyond the shared spaces of virtual communities, territorial sharing and trans-boundary co-operation take place at the local level. While globalization may provide an important explanatory factor for some of the changes in international power relations, this is not necessarily reflected in changes in local or regional identities. Two to three generations of changed socialization messages and shared narratives may bring about a change in the way groups relate to notions of exclusive territories and local identities. But then again, they may not.

Postmodernism should not be reduced to a theory which merely offers original critiques to traditional theories. As mentioned in the beginning of this research, it has to be seen as a process, once postmodernism says it is saturated with explanations and creativity it would also become like any other metanarrative that exists in the larger body of literature. The beauty of the theory also lies in not offering solutions to the problems rather than offering different discourse as part of the genealogy of scholars of yester years, today and for the scholars of future. By stressing the notion that the creation and the understanding of knowledge are a consequence of processes of dominance and exclusionary practices, postmodernism can offer a sophisticated theory of change in world politics and the fixed notion of nation state, symbols and leaders. Rather than accepting the predominant social construction of symbols such as borders, fence and citizenship it engages in their deconstruction and shows how all meaning systems are precarious, self-defeating and only strive for closure without ever succeeding which is crucial for the body of knowledge to move further. Postmodernist theories of IR put forward the view that although there is no one true political foundation for

the study of international relations, the nature of change can be ascribed to the interaction of knowledge and power. The postmodernist emphasis on textuality, however, has led critics to find postmodernism guilty on the charge of complete nihilistic relativism. This is a prominent discourse against postmodernism which needs to be demystified as many a time postmodernism is almost painted as one appreciates anarchy in the literary sense and also disturbs the existing order. The critiques intelligently try to divulge from digging the past and fear the discourse of postmodernism through deconstruction for its power to unravel the hidden truth below the iron carpet with the intentions of keeping below forever. Postmodernism does not seek to prove with absolute certainty what it proposes, but rather to demonstrate both the uncertainty of absolutist knowledge claims and the harm they might bear to the discipline.

Contesting territoriality in a globalized world would be a novel agenda for postmodernism but with its own limitations. There is a hope that the misinterpretations or misrepresentation of postmodernism without a strong understanding of the basic tenets of the theory there are possibilities of projecting postmodernism and its proponents as believers in no order in the world politics which is not true to its spirit.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patnaik, Arun (2012) "The Contemporary Significance of Gramsci's Critique of Civil Society" Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society. Volume 15 : pp. 577-588. USA

<sup>1</sup> Femia, Op. cit., 139-40; Also, N. Bobbio, "Gramsci and the concept of civil society," in Civil Society and the State, ed. John Keane (London: Verso, 1988b), 90.

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