

8

globalizing privilege

Bob Pease*

Much of the recognition of privilege and oppression is framed within a taken-for-granted, geographically bordered sovereign state (Fraser 2008). Working for social justice, all too often, addresses only citizens within national borders, with little consideration given to the way in which privilege within those geographical boundaries is likely to impact on those outside of them. Just as there is growing recognition among some progressive social movements that injustice must be targeted across national borders, so, too, the recognition of privilege must be understood within an international or global frame.

Schwalbe (2002) notes that non-Western, foreign university students in North America tend to know more about the United States than most North American students. This is because non-Western students' lives are shaped by the policies of the United States government and the diffusion of North American cultural hegemony, whereas North American students do not have the same need to understand the policies of their own government or those of non-Western countries. The reality is that most Westerners are simply unaware of the impact of the West on non-Western countries (Bonnett 2004; Gray and Coates 2008). Like most of my contemporaries, I grew up in ignorance of the privileges associated with my geo-political position.

* Pease, Bob. "Globalizing Privilege," pp. 41–49 in *Undoing Privilege: Unearned Advantage in a Divided World*, by Bob Pease. Copyright 2010 by Zed Books. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

In my lifestyle, my professional practice and my political work, unwittingly I perpetuated a Eurocentric vision of the world.

The Idea of the West*

To understand global privilege, it is necessary to interrogate the concept of ‘the West’, which has been presented as an ideal model of progress for all countries in the world. Developments in the West are seen as flowing down to inspire traditional societies along similar routes of progress (Slater 2004).

Modernisation is a concept used to describe the growing gap between the industrialised countries of the West and the impoverishment of the non-West (R. Marks 2002). The premise is that all countries of the world should adopt the values that informed the rise of the West. This belief in the superiority of Western values and rationality is what constitutes the myth of Eurocentrism, which Marks argues is no more than an ideology that distorts the truth and masks Western global dominance. In fact, the greatest power that the West has is not its economic and technological supremacy, but its power to define what is progress and ultimately what it means to be human (Sardar 1999a).

While Western culture portrays itself as the only culture that is capable of engaging in a reflexive critique of its own accomplishments (Slater 2004), there is very little indication of reflections about the premises of Western superiority. On the contrary, Western dominance is sustained by what Slater refers to as ‘imperial knowledge’. By this, he means a belief in the need to intervene in other ‘less-advanced’ societies, a belief in the legitimacy of imposing Western values on non-Western societies and a belief that non-Western cultures are inferior and consequently that their rights can be legitimately denied. Thus Western supremacy requires the silencing of non-Western cultures and demonstrates no interest in learning from these cultures.

* Mohanty (2004) notes that terms like West and East and North and global South focus on countries in the northern and southern hemispheres; they do not totally capture the divisions between affluence and deprivation. Jolly (2008) further argues that these geographical terms tend to dehistoricise and naturalise inequalities between nations. Kothari (in Harcourt 2007) believes that these terms have become meaningless because there is growing affluence in some parts of the South and extensive deprivation and disadvantage in parts of the North. Notwithstanding these inequalities within countries, it is still meaningful to use these terms to analyse institutionalised inequalities in wealth and power between nations.

Of course, it is understandable that the West will view history from a European perspective. This ethnocentrism would not be such a problem if the West accepted that it was simply **one** of many ethnocentric views of the world. However, it is the claim of the West's universal applicability of its culture to the rest of the world that constitutes it as Eurocentrism. Western countries refuse to acknowledge that their claimed superiority is based on their values and their biased perceptions of the past. Rather, they claim to base their superiority on scholarship and scientific evidence (R. Marks 2002).

A number of writers have challenged the view that the West pioneered the modern world, arguing that the West and East have been historically interconnected. In this view, the East has played an important role in the development of Western civilisation (Blaut 1993; Gran 1996; Hobson 2004). R. Marks (2002) provides an alternative historical account of the origins of the Western world and demonstrates how the West was able to present itself as progressive, while constructing Asia, Africa and Latin America as backward. Hobson (2004) also illustrates how many so-called Western concepts have Eastern origins. Similarly, Narayan (2000) challenges the view that concepts such as human rights, democracy and equality are Western. Hence, it is not simply a matter of imposing Western values on to non-Western cultures, but rather the propagation of the myth that these concepts have solely Western origins that reinforces Western supremacy.

If Western supremacy is to be challenged, it is necessary to question the rational and scientific premises of modernisation and technological development. Sardar (1999a) believes that such challenges must come from the non-West, as they formulate and advocate new concepts. This does not imply uncritical acceptance of all that comes out of the non-West. However, there will need to be a capacity on the part of the West to engage with and respect determinations that are different from their own.

If the gap between the wealthy and poorest nations of the world is to be eliminated, a move beyond Eurocentric understanding of the modern world is needed. This means endeavouring to get outside Western ways of knowing and acknowledging that such ways of knowing are Eurocentric.

Moving Beyond Eurocentrism

Essentially, Eurocentrism involves the belief that Europeans are superior to non-Europeans. Blaut (1993) refers to it as 'the colonizer's model of the

world' because it is premised on the view that European civilisation has superior qualities associated with race and culture compared with non-Western cultures. Western culture is also predominantly white culture. While the dimensions of white privilege are explored in Chapter 6, it is necessary to establish here that there is a direct link between Western expansion in the world and the concept of whiteness. Thus there is a close connection between Western global dominance and white cultural influences (Shorne 1999).

While all countries that constitute the West are capitalist, there is a need to mask this historical and culturally specific formation to avoid any suggestion of alternatives. Thus the West is presented as the best of all possible worlds. The economic development of the West must then be portrayed as a transhistorical social formation based upon eternal truths and instrumental rationality (Amin 1989). Dominant ideologies in the West legitimate capitalist societies as the only possible form of economic and political relations. Eurocentrism then grows out of colonial domination and provides a legitimisation of inequalities between nations (Gheverghese et al. 1990).

Amin (1989) refers to Eurocentrism as a form of prejudice that distorts theoretical understanding. However, Western social sciences are so embedded within Eurocentric assumptions that most social scientists are unaware of their European bias. Eurocentrism underlies all social science disciplines, including history (Gran 1996); sociology (Connell 2007); psychology (Naidoo 1996); social work (Midgley 1983); urban theory (McGee 1995) and geography (Blaut 1993). To challenge Eurocentrism is to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin all Western social science disciplines.

Blaut (1993) raises questions about the term 'Eurocentrism' because it implies a form of prejudiced attitudes. If that is so, then it can be eliminated through enlightened thought. However, Eurocentrism functions not just as a matter of attitudes, but rather is founded on beliefs informed by scholarship and science and it purports to be based on scientific and empirical evidence. If this is so, then it is validated as a form of truth about the world. Highly educated and supposedly unprejudiced Europeans are consequently not likely to critically interrogate the assumptions underpinning it.

Non-Western intellectuals have also been influenced by Eurocentrism. They are encouraged to borrow theoretical constructs and categories that have value in Western societies and relate them to their own context where

their value may be questionable (Gheverghese et al. 1990). This raises difficult and complex issues when progressive Westerners encounter these developments. In 1998, I was a member of a small Australian delegation to an Asia and Pacific Social Work Conference in Beijing that was to launch the first social work course in China. As someone who was committed to local knowledge and culturally grounded social work practice, I supported efforts by Chinese academics to develop their own conceptual frameworks for social work theory and practice. However, a number of leading Chinese academics who founded the course had undertaken their PhDs in North America and adapted North American models of social work and psychology to the Chinese situation. I found myself in the uncomfortable position of promoting local knowledge that went against the views of some Chinese delegates who had cognitively adopted North American models of theory and practice.

A more inclusive form of world history requires recognition that Eurocentric world views are only appropriate to understanding the West as a historical and cultural construct. A non-Eurocentric history involves developing a more holistic understanding of global issues. Western social science understandings of the non-West requires decolonising practices and locally based scholarship (Gray and Coates 2008).

Orientalism: Constructing the Non-West

One of the most significant early challenges to Eurocentrism was Edward Said's *Orientalism*, first published in 1978. Orientalism is 'a body of ideas, beliefs, clichés or learning about the East' (Said 2003:205). It forms the basis of representations of the Orient in Western consciousness. However, it is not simply a body of knowledge about non-Western societies. Rather, it involves an ideological construction of the Orient that is mythical and transhistorical. It further presents characteristics of the East as immutable and in opposition to the West (Amin 1989) and proclaims the inherent superiority of the West over the East (Hobson 2004).

Thus Orientalism goes beyond the disciplines and practices associated with the study of oriental societies. It involves an epistemological and ontological approach, which sets up a polarised division between the Orient and the West (Turner 1994). The West is portrayed as productive, hard-working, mature, honest and progressive and the East is constructed as the opposite of these values. Said (2003) demonstrates how this process

of ‘othering’ maintains unequal power relations throughout the world and provides the legitimation for Europe to ‘manage’ the Orient.

Through Orientalism, the West perpetuates its dominance over the non-West by attributing essences to both the Orient and the Occident. Orientalism becomes a colonialist method of subjugation because it legitimates colonialist interventions (Sardar 1999b). Twenty-five years after the first edition of his book, Said (2003) argued that his analysis still holds true. Orientalism fuelled the anti-Islam views that were propagated under the presidential administration of George Bush in North America. While the West continues to be appropriated by neo-liberal capitalism that supports military interventions into non-Western countries, anti-Western sentiment will continue to influence the rise of radical Islamism (Bonnett 2004).

Although Said’s work has been criticised by some as an anti-Western polemic, it does not set out to portray the West as evil. However, some have argued that in response to the debates about Orientalism, a form of Occidentalism arose where everything to do with the West was subjected to critique. Turner (1994) says, for example, that it is inappropriate to regard all Western analyses of the Orient as negative. Otherwise, all Indigenous and non-Western frameworks would have to be accepted as legitimate. This may, in some cases, promote political conservatism and equally distorted and prejudiced views of the West.

Said is also accused of portraying the West as monolithic and unchanging (Sardar 1999b). If all Western intellectuals are Orientalist, then does that mean that there is no progressive thought in the West? There were and are counter-hegemonic intellectuals in the West who were opposed to colonialism and who resisted imperialism and ethnocentrism (McLeod 2000). Paranjape (1993) makes the point that it is important to acknowledge that the West is a divided entity and not a monolith. It is ideologically and ethically divided in relation to the global South. Hence, it is possible to forge alliances with progressive groups within the West to promote more socially just relations.

The Poverty of Development

A number of development writers have noted that after more than thirty years of development programmes and foreign aid, the poorest countries of the world are worse off than they were before Western interventions (Verhelst 1990; Escobar 1995; Tucker 1999; Munck 1999). Esteva (in Harcourt

2007) has noted that in 1960, the rich countries had twenty times the wealth of the poor countries. Twenty years later, following development interventions, they were forty-six times richer. Today the gap is even wider. Given these outcomes, one must ask whether the dominant model of Western development is part of the problem. This is especially so in the context of espoused individualistic and capitalist accumulative principles rather than redistributive and justice-based principles.

White European men wrote the history of development and established the foundations of truth that are universalised for all (Munck 1999). As early as the 1970s, critics of development were identifying the Eurocentric assumptions underpinning modernisation and Westernisation and how these interventions had increased the dependency of non-Western nations on the West. Not only had they failed to improve the living conditions of those in the non-West, they had actually intensified the poverty and hardship faced by the masses in these nations.

Peet and Hartwick (1999: 1) posit that development 'is a founding belief of the modern world'. While Western affluence was propagated as a dream for all, the reality was that it was only achievable for a few. Tucker (1999: 1) defines development as 'a process whereby other peoples are dominated and their destinies are shaped according to an essentially Western way of conceiving and perceiving the world'. Thus in this view development is connected to imperialism where developed countries impose their control over non-Western countries. This control operates not just in terms of economic processes, but also in relation to cultural meanings about the nature of the world. Tucker challenges the view of development as a natural and transcultural process, arguing that it is premised upon Western myths. Modernisation theories of development invalidate the cultures of traditional societies and impose a Western model of progress upon them whereby the imitation of the Western model of development is presented as the only solution to the growing gap between the wealthy and poorest countries of the world. Tucker points out that slavery, genocide and colonialism have all been legitimated under the guise of progress.

The challenge to those in the West to become aware of their Eurocentrism and their monocultural prejudice is not new (Verhelst 1990). However, it would appear that many NGOs that claim to be in solidarity with the people of the non-West have failed to heed this challenge. This may be due in part to the fact that development has become an industry. People are educated and credentialed at universities to work in the development

sector. Thus development practitioners establish comfortable and well-paid careers. Horn (in Harcourt 2007) says that there is a tension between unpaid, mass-based social movements for social justice and the salaried end of the development sector.

In the last few years, a number of publications have documented the experiences of Western development workers who went to non-Western countries to ‘help’, only to discover that what they had to offer was not what was needed. Subsequently, as they developed awareness of their own assumptions and the assumptions of the programmes they were embedded within, they wrote about the failures of dominant models of development (Danaher 2001; Bouler 2003; Goudge 2003; Bolten 2008). Danaher (2001) reflects on how he was once told by a grassroots activist in Africa that, while it was appreciated that he came there because he wanted to help, if he really wanted to help, he could do more by going back to his own country and working to change government and corporate policies which supported undemocratic leaders in non-Western countries.

There is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of foreign aid and whether it is allocated fairly. For many years, anti-development writers have been arguing that foreign aid entrenches the privilege of wealthy groups. However, at the time of writing, Peter Singer had just published a book arguing why people in affluent countries should donate money to aid agencies to fight world poverty (Singer 2009). He provides a compelling moral argument to persuade affluent people that they should not purchase luxury goods once their basic living costs have been met, but should instead donate excess money to save lives in non-Western countries. In contrast, Moyo (2009) argues that foreign aid to Africa has increased corruption and despotism and done nothing to address poverty.

Easterly (2007) has challenged the utopian agenda of trying to use aid to eliminate poverty and change political systems. He argues that the best aid can do is to improve the lives of the poor in practical and material ways. Like many development economists, Easterly seems to regard the problem of aid as having more to do with problems in social engineering rather than with corporate globalisation. Chang (2007), in contrast, argues that the rich countries, in alliance with the IMF and the World Bank, use aid to force developing countries to develop neo-liberal policies in their own countries.

Goudge (2003) argues that foreign aid not only fails to help the non-West, but also that it falsely creates the impression that the West is doing

something when it is not. An alternative to aid is to change the international trading system to benefit poorer countries. Held and Kaya (2007), for example, point out that agricultural subsidies provided in rich countries are ten times the total amount of aid given to Africa. Thus a number of writers have argued that changing the agricultural subsidies given to farmers in rich countries to supplement their income would provide more concrete benefits to poor countries (Milanovic 2007).

Furthermore, Gronemeyer (1995) asks people to reflect upon their responses if they knew someone was coming to their home with the expressed purpose of doing them some good. Citing Thoreau, she suggests that one would run for their life in case some of the good was done to them. Gronemeyer demonstrates how the concept of 'helping' the non-West has become an instrument of power with its own self-justification. Goudge (2003) distinguishes between specific forms of help that are requested and help that is imposed on others using Western theories and methodologies.

Shiva (1993) observes that whenever countries in the North intervene in the lives of people in the South, their interventions are premised upon a notion of superiority, usually legitimated on the notion of the 'white man's burden'. If the crisis in the South were to be overcome, it would require a decolonisation of the North whereby its Eurocentric assumptions and internalised dominance were critically interrogated.

The argument here is that as important as it is to be aware of the exploitative role of the IMF and the World Bank and the interventionist policies of Western governments, people must also engage in the more painful step of acknowledging their own personal Western privilege (Goudge 2003). How do the individual actions of Westerners reproduce global inequalities? Goudge argues that the more individuals in the West gain benefits from the exploitation of poorer nations, the greater their responsibility for doing something about it. The ecological argument is 'live simply so that others can simply live.'