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Article

# Rethinking Totality in International Relations: Coloniality, Continental Genealogy, and Planetary Relationality

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## Abstract

This article argues that the fragmentation of International Relations (IR) theory is not only a problem of competing schools, but a deeper ontological dispute over social totality. Realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, critical theory, post-structuralism, Global IR, and decolonial approaches each assume a different image of world order and of the human subject. Through conceptual genealogy and critical reconstruction, the article revisits Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Dussel, Quijano, Mariátegui, Zavaleta Mercado, Wynter, Said, Glissant, Wallerstein, and postcolonial IR. It proposes heterogeneous relational totality as a way beyond both closed systemic determinism and pure fragmentation. This framework rethinks power, agency, temporality, recognition, and emancipation through coloniality, planetary interdependence, and relational human existence.

**Keywords:** international relations; social totality; coloniality; continental philosophy; decolonial theory; Global IR; philosophical anthropology; planetary relationality

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## Introduction

International Relations (IR) often presents itself as a discipline of paradigms: realism, liberalism, constructivism, critical theory, post-structuralism, feminism, Global IR, and decolonial thought. This familiar map is useful, but it also masks a deeper philosophical problem. Behind every IR theory stands a view of social totality: an image of how the world hangs together, who counts as a political subject, what kind of history matters, and what forms of power become visible or invisible. Realism imagines totality through anarchy and sovereign survival; liberal institutionalism through rules, markets, institutions, and rights; constructivism through norms and intersubjective meanings; Marxian and critical approaches through capitalist structure and historical contradiction; post-structuralism through discourse, boundary, and contingency; and decolonial approaches through coloniality, race, epistemic hierarchy, and the unfinished violence of modernity (Ashley, 1984; Cox, 1981; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999; Walker, 1993; Quijano, 2000; Acharya, 2014).

The central claim of this article is that IR's theoretical fragmentation reflects a deeper unresolved tension concerning social totality. Is global politics a coherent system, as neorealism, world-systems theory, and some versions of historical materialism suggest? Or is it a field of radical multiplicity, as post-structuralist, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches often insist? The article refuses this binary. It argues that totality must be reconstructed as heterogeneous, relational, and planetary. Heterogeneity means that world politics is made of unevenly connected histories, economies, cultures, sovereignties, and epistemologies. Relationality means that no actor, state, institution, or identity exists in isolation from relations of power, memory, exchange, violence, recognition, and dependency. Planetaryity means that world order cannot be reduced to European modernity, the sovereign state system, or the capitalist economy alone; it must also include colonial difference,

ecological interdependence, racial hierarchy, indigenous worlds, migrant lives, and forms of knowledge excluded from the formal archive of IR (Glissant, 1997; Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; Chowdhury, 2026a; Fúnez-Flores, 2025).

The article develops this argument through an encounter between Continental philosophy, postcolonial and decolonial critique, and IR theory. Kant and Hegel gave modern political thought powerful visions of universal reason, cosmopolitan order, recognition, and the state, yet these visions also helped stabilize a hierarchy between Europe and its others (Eze, 1997; Hegel, 1991; Kant, 1991, 2006). Marx and Lukács shifted the problem of totality from Spirit to capital, class, labor, and reification, but their frameworks still carried tensions around colonial difference and non-linear histories (Lukács, 1971, 1978; Marx, 1973, 1976). Wallerstein made global capitalism visible as a world-system, but his model has been criticized for giving insufficient attention to coloniality, race, and epistemic violence (Wallerstein, 1974; Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). Dussel, Quijano, Mariátegui, Zavaleta Mercado, Wynter, Said, and Glissant reopen the category of totality from the standpoint of exteriority, coloniality, layered societies, representation, opacity, and planetary relation (Dussel, 1985; Mariátegui, 1971; Quijano, 2007, 2024; Said, 1983; Wynter, 2003; Zavaleta Mercado, 2011).

The contribution of the article is threefold. First, it clarifies how IR theories rest upon implicit metaphysical and anthropological assumptions rather than only empirical or policy disagreements. Second, it shows that the idea of totality has never been philosophically neutral; it carries histories of Europe, empire, race, labor, sovereignty, and disciplinary knowledge. Third, it proposes heterogeneous relational totality as a conceptual framework for IR. This framework does not abandon structure, but it also does not accept a closed system. It treats world politics as a conflictual field where capitalist totality, coloniality of power, sovereign order, epistemic hierarchy, and lived multiplicity coexist in asymmetrical relation. In this sense, the article is written as a conceptual journal article, not as a historical survey alone. It aims to offer a usable theoretical vocabulary for debates on Global IR, postcolonial IR, decoloniality, international political theory, and the philosophical anthropology of world politics (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Grosfoguel, 1996; Hobson, 2012; Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004; Krishna, 2001; Seth, 2013; Shilliam, 2011; Vitalis, 2015).

## Five Key Term Definitions

Social totality refers to the structured yet contested whole through which social relations become intelligible. In classical Continental thought, totality often appears as Spirit, state, capital, or historical structure; in this article it is redefined as heterogeneous, relational, and planetary rather than closed or homogeneous (Hegel, 1977; Lukács, 1971; Marx, 1976; Glissant, 1997).

Coloniality means the continuing organization of power, knowledge, being, race, and labor after formal colonial rule. It is not the same as colonialism, because it names the deep structure through which modernity continues to produce hierarchies of human value, political recognition, and epistemic authority (Quijano, 2000, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Heterogeneous relational totality is the article's main concept. It means that world politics is connected, but not in one smooth or unified form. Different temporalities, sovereignties, economies, racial orders, epistemologies, and community worlds overlap without dissolving into a single universal story (Mariátegui, 1971; Zavaleta Mercado, 1986, 2011; Bhambra, 2014; Fúnez-Flores, 2025).

Philosophical anthropology of IR refers to the hidden image of the human assumed by IR theories. Neorealism often assumes a security-seeking actor, liberalism a rights-bearing and rational subject, Marxism a classed subject, constructivism a norm-making subject, and decolonial theory a colonized, resistant, and relational subject (Waltz, 1979; Linklater, 1998; Wendt, 1999; Fanon, 1963; Wynter, 2003).

Planetary relationality names a way of thinking global politics beyond both Eurocentric universalism and fragmented localism. It foregrounds relation, opacity, ecological interdependence, migration, indigenous knowledge, and shared vulnerability without erasing difference (Glissant, 1997; Escobar, 2018; Chowdhury et al., 2023; Chowdhury, 2026b).

## Methodology

This article uses a qualitative conceptual methodology built around genealogy, critical interpretive reading, and theoretical reconstruction. It does not treat theory as a set of detachable concepts to be applied to IR from outside. Rather, it reads theory as a historically situated practice through which the world is imagined, ordered, and made knowable. The method follows four steps. First, it traces the genealogy of social totality in Continental philosophy by reading Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Lukács as thinkers whose concepts of reason, state, capital, history, and totality continue to shape IR's hidden assumptions. Second, it reads canonical IR theory as a field of competing ontologies rather than only competing explanations. Waltz's neorealism, Wendt's constructivism, Cox's historical materialism, Ashley's post-structural critique, Walker's inside/outside problem, Rosenberg's critique of civil society, and Linklater's ethical community are examined as different answers to the problem of world order (Ashley, 1984; Cox, 1981; Linklater, 1998; Rosenberg, 1994; Walker, 1993; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999).

Third, the article introduces postcolonial and decolonial critique as a corrective to the Eurocentric limits of classical totality. This stage brings Dussel's exteriority, Quijano's coloniality of power, Mariátegui's non-linear social formation, Zavaleta Mercado's abigarrado, Wynter's critique of Man, Fanon's colonized subject, Said's worldliness, Glissant's relation, and Global IR into one analytical conversation (Dussel, 1985; Fanon, 1967; Glissant, 1997; Mariátegui, 1971; Quijano, 2024; Said, 1983; Wynter, 2003; Zavaleta Mercado, 2011; Acharya & Buzan, 2019). Fourth, the article reconstructs the concept of totality as heterogeneous, relational, and planetary. This reconstruction is not a neutral synthesis. It is a critical act that asks what kind of world becomes visible when the sovereign state, capitalist world economy, colonial matrix of power, epistemic injustice, and relational community are read together rather than separately (Fricker, 2007; Grovogui, 1996; Hobson, 2012; Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004; Krishna, 2001; Chowdhury et al., 2022).

The corpus of the article is theoretical and interpretive. It includes classical Continental texts, critical IR texts, Global IR interventions, postcolonial and decolonial theory, and the author's own work on reciprocity, indigenous gnoseology, Ubuntu, photovoice, oral morality, and reciprocal methodology (Chowdhury, 2023, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d; Chowdhury et al., 2022, 2023, 2024). The use of these works is not self-referential decoration. It grounds the article's final claim that IR requires not merely a new theory of the international but a relational theory of knowing, being, and acting in the world. Such a method is compatible with critical discourse analysis and genealogy, but it remains primarily conceptual. Its validity lies in coherence, interpretive depth, citation discipline, and the ability to reorganize an existing theoretical debate into a clearer problem-field.

## IR Fragmentation and the Hidden Problem of Totality

The conventional story of IR theory is usually told as a sequence of debates: idealism versus realism, traditionalism versus behavioralism, neorealism versus neoliberalism, positivism versus post-positivism, and Western IR versus Global IR. This story is useful, but it turns a deeper ontological dispute into a disciplinary history. The deeper question is this: what is the world that IR theory claims to explain? For Waltz, the world is an anarchic system in which units behave under structural constraint; for Wendt, it is an intersubjective order shaped by shared ideas; for Cox, it is a historical configuration of social forces, states, and world orders; for Ashley, it is a field where neorealist reason reduces political life into a narrow technical logic; for Walker, the international is produced through the boundary between inside and outside (Ashley, 1984; Cox, 1981; Walker, 1993; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999). These are not merely analytical preferences. They are rival images of social totality.

The realism of Waltz remains one of the clearest examples of a closed systemic totality. Its strength is analytical discipline: it explains repetition, constraint, and survival under anarchy. Its limitation is that it empties the world of history, race, coloniality, gender, and lived difference. Ashley's critique of neorealism was therefore not simply a critique of one theory; it was a critique of

a form of knowledge that mistakes abstraction for universality (Ashley, 1984). Feminist and postcolonial IR extended this critique by showing that the supposedly neutral categories of security, sovereignty, rationality, and order often carry masculinist and colonial assumptions (Agathangelou & Ling, 2004; Tickner, 1997; Grovogui, 1996; Krishna, 2001; Vitalis, 2015). If the system is defined before the marginalized enter theory, then their historical experience can only appear as exception, case study, or moral concern.

Liberal and constructivist approaches widened the field but did not fully solve the problem. Liberal institutionalism gave more attention to institutions, cooperation, and legal norms, while constructivism gave stronger attention to intersubjective meaning and identity formation. Yet both approaches often leave untouched the colonial formation of the institutions, norms, and identities they analyze. Wendt's social theory of international politics famously insists that anarchy is what states make of it, but the question remains: which states, whose histories, and whose humanity are already recognized before the making begins (Wendt, 1999)? Inayatullah and Blaney (2004) showed that IR has long struggled with difference because the discipline imagines difference as a problem to be managed rather than as a constitutive feature of world politics. Postcolonial IR, Global IR, and decolonial theory therefore push the debate further: the problem is not only that IR excluded some voices, but that its basic architecture was formed through colonial difference (Acharya, 2014; Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Hobson, 2012; Seth, 2011; Shilliam, 2011).

The hidden issue is totality. Some IR theories fear fragmentation and seek order through system, state, institution, market, or norm. Others fear domination and seek freedom through plurality, contingency, opacity, and difference. Both concerns are valid. A theory without structure cannot explain durable inequality, imperial hierarchy, capitalism, and militarized power. A theory without multiplicity cannot hear the voices of colonized, indigenous, migrant, racialized, gendered, and stateless communities. The task is therefore not to choose between totality and difference, but to rethink totality itself. This article calls that rethinking heterogeneous relational totality. It is a structured field, but its structure is uneven; it is a world order, but its world is not one; it is relational, but its relations are often violent, racialized, unequal, and epistemically unjust (Fricker, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

## Continental Genealogies of Totality

Kant offers one of the major philosophical sources of modern IR's universalist imagination. In *Perpetual Peace*, he imagines a juridical and cosmopolitan order in which reason, republicanism, federation, and hospitality can gradually discipline war and move humanity toward a lawful condition (Kant, 1991). This vision remains important for liberal international theory, international law, and cosmopolitan ethics. Yet Kant's political writings cannot be separated from his anthropology. The same philosophical system that speaks of universal reason also classifies human capacities through racial and civilizational hierarchies (Eze, 1997; Kant, 2006). This contradiction matters for IR because it shows how universalist order can carry an exclusionary image of the human. The universal subject appears as rational, autonomous, and European-coded, while others are placed at varying distances from full moral and political maturity.

Hegel radicalizes totality by making history itself a dialectical process. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*, recognition, ethical life, and the state become central to the realization of freedom (Hegel, 1977, 1991). Hegel's power lies in seeing social life as historical, mediated, and structured by contradiction. However, Hegel's historical geography also places Europe at the center of world spirit and often treats non-European worlds as outside or behind world history. This Hegelian inheritance enters IR through the privilege given to the modern sovereign state, historical progress, recognition, and the assumption that political maturity culminates in a particular state form. The state becomes not only an institution but a philosophical image of completed social being.

Marx breaks with Hegel's idealism by grounding totality in production, labor, class, and capital. In the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, capitalism becomes a historically specific social totality that

reorganizes life through value, commodity exchange, accumulation, exploitation, and crisis (Marx, 1973, 1976). Marx's framework is crucial for IR because it shows that the international cannot be understood only as relations among states. It is also structured by capital, labor, imperial expansion, uneven development, and global dependency. Yet Marxian approaches have often been read through a linear developmental model in which societies are placed on a path from precapitalist to capitalist to socialist forms. This can obscure the layered and colonial character of global modernity (Anievas & Nisancioglu, 2015; Bhambra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2000; Teschke, 2003).

Lukács makes totality into a methodological principle. For Lukács, reification fragments social life; capitalist society appears as a collection of objects, institutions, and facts, while its deeper relations remain hidden. The standpoint of totality is therefore required to understand and overcome reification (Lukács, 1971, 1978). This is powerful for IR because the discipline often fragments world politics into state behavior, institutions, norms, security, development, migration, environment, and human rights. Yet these fields are connected. Arms, borders, labor, racialization, climate vulnerability, debt, extraction, and knowledge production are not separate worlds. However, Lukács's totality also requires decolonial repair. The standpoint of the proletariat alone cannot exhaust the standpoints of the colonized, enslaved, indigenous, racialized, stateless, displaced, or epistemically silenced (Fanon, 1963; Wynter, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

This Continental genealogy teaches two lessons. First, totality is indispensable because world politics is not a random collection of events. Structures matter: capitalism, sovereignty, race, institutions, discourse, law, and knowledge shape life before individuals enter political action. Second, classical totalities are dangerous when they present European history as the history of humanity. Kantian universalism, Hegelian statehood, Marxian development, and Lukácsian class totality all offer important tools, but each requires decolonial displacement. The question for IR is therefore not whether totality should be used, but whose world, whose subject, whose history, and whose suffering are allowed to shape the totality.

## From World-System to Coloniality

World-systems analysis is one of IR's strongest structural approaches to totality. Wallerstein's account of the modern world-system identifies capitalism as a long historical formation organized through core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Wallerstein, 1974). Its power lies in refusing the idea that poor countries are simply delayed versions of rich countries. Development and underdevelopment are relational. The prosperity of the core and the vulnerability of the periphery emerge from the same historical system. This insight remains crucial for contemporary debates on global inequality, migration, climate injustice, supply chains, and unequal development.

Yet world-systems analysis has limits. It can make economic structure too dominant and understate the autonomous force of race, gender, coloniality, knowledge, culture, and representation. Grosfoguel (2007) argues that decolonial thought must go beyond political-economy paradigms because modernity is not only capitalist; it is also racial, patriarchal, epistemic, linguistic, religious, and civilizational. Quijano's coloniality of power makes this point even more forcefully. Coloniality names the racial classification of the world's population and the organization of labor, authority, gender, subjectivity, and knowledge around that classification (Quijano, 2000, 2007, 2024). It is therefore not a cultural addition to capitalism. It is constitutive of the modern world.

Dussel's philosophy of liberation helps explain why classical totality must be opened from the underside. For Dussel, modern totality closes itself by negating exteriority. The Other is included as object, victim, labor, colony, data, or problem, but not as a source of ethical and epistemic authority (Dussel, 1985). This argument has direct implications for IR. The international order speaks of law, sovereignty, development, security, and humanitarianism, yet it often recognizes colonized and formerly colonized peoples only through categories produced by the dominant order itself. Anghie's analysis of sovereignty and international law confirms that colonial confrontation was not peripheral to international law; it helped produce the very doctrine of sovereignty (Anghie, 2005). Grosfoguel's

work on Africans and sovereignty similarly shows how race and self-determination were unevenly distributed in international legal and political thought (Grovogui, 1996).

Postcolonial IR has made this colonial foundation visible. Hobson (2012) reconstructs the Eurocentric conception of world politics across Western international theory. Krishna (2001) shows how race and amnesia shape the education of IR. Vitalis (2015) demonstrates that race was not outside the birth of American IR; it was central to its institutional formation. Barkawi and Laffey (2006) argue that security studies misrecognizes the Global South by treating it as an object of disorder rather than as historically central to war, security, and empire. Muppidi (2012) traces how colonial signs travel through the language and practice of IR. Seth (2011, 2013) and Shilliam (2011) show that postcolonial and non-Western thought do not merely add new cases; they alter the theoretical meaning of international relations itself.

This shift from world-system to coloniality allows totality to be retained but transformed. The world is structured, but the structure is not economic alone. It is a colonial-capitalist-racial-epistemic formation. It produces not only unequal exchange but unequal humanity. Fanon (1963, 1967) shows that colonial violence enters the body, psyche, language, and zone of being. Wynter (2003) extends this critique by arguing that modernity overrepresents one genre of the human, Man, as if it were the human itself. Maldonado-Torres (2007) names this as coloniality of being. The implication for IR is profound: the discipline must ask not only how states behave, but how the world order decides who becomes fully human, partially human, failed, backward, illegal, tribal, migrant, refugee, indigenous, or disposable.

## Heterogeneity, Relation, and the Planetary

Decolonial thought does not only criticize Eurocentric totality; it also offers resources for reconstructing it. Mariátegui's *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* refuses the mechanical transfer of European Marxism into Latin America. He reads indigenous communal life, land, economy, and colonial history as part of a specific social formation that cannot be reduced to a European sequence of stages (Mariátegui, 1971). Zavaleta Mercado develops this insight through the idea of *lo abigarrado*, often understood as a variegated or layered social formation in which different temporalities, forms of authority, modes of production, and collective identities coexist in conflict (Zavaleta Mercado, 1986, 2011). This is highly relevant for IR because world politics is not a single synchronized modernity. It is a layered field of empires, nation-states, indigenous territories, financial systems, religious communities, border regimes, ecological zones, digital infrastructures, and displaced populations.

Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* provides another crucial move. Totality is not synthesis, closure, or absorption. It can be relation. Glissant's *totalité-monde* does not erase opacity; it allows beings, cultures, and histories to enter relation without becoming transparent to domination (Glissant, 1997). This is a powerful correction to both Eurocentric universalism and shallow multiculturalism. For IR, relation means that no state, region, culture, or civilization exists alone, but opacity means that relation does not give the powerful the right to fully know, classify, manage, or translate others. This is why decolonization cannot be reduced to metaphor, inclusion, or diversity rhetoric (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Relation requires ethical restraint, epistemic humility, and material repair.

The idea of planetary relationality also connects with Global IR. Acharya (2014) calls for a Global IR that recognizes regional worlds, plural histories, and non-Western contributions without abandoning common analytical conversation. Acharya and Buzan (2019) similarly challenge the discipline to rethink its centenary through wider historical origins and global participation. However, Global IR must avoid becoming only a wider shelf of voices inside an unchanged disciplinary house. Agathangelou and Ling (2004) famously described the house of IR as a space structured by family power politics and worldism. The house cannot simply invite new guests; its architecture must be changed. A heterogeneous relational totality offers one way to change that architecture because it makes coloniality, relation, and plurality foundational rather than supplementary.

The author's own work on indigenous gnoseology, reciprocity, Ubuntu, oral moral-legal worlds, photovoice, and reciprocal methodology further supports this movement from abstract totality to relational knowing. Voice and photovoice among Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia show that migrant worlds are not passive data fields but third spaces of agency, reciprocity, vulnerability, and situated knowledge (Chowdhury, 2023). Indigenous gnoseology reframes knowledge beyond narrow epistemology by foregrounding oral traditions, ethical knowing, and community-grounded truth (Chowdhury, 2026a). Reciprocal methodology challenges procedural ethics by arguing that ethics must be internal to method, not merely an external approval process (Chowdhury, 2026b). Decolonizing theatre studies in Bangladesh further shows that performance can be reciprocal knowledge rather than a cultural object for academic extraction (Chowdhury, 2026c). The Rakhain healing cosmos shows that oral forms can be moral and legal, not simply folkloric or premodern (Chowdhury, 2026d). Together with Ubuntu and commoning ethics, these works locate world politics in relational human life, not only in statecraft or economic system (Chowdhury et al., 2022, 2023, 2024).

This is why the proposed totality is planetary rather than merely international. The international often begins with states; the planetary begins with entangled life. The international often asks how units interact; the planetary asks how life-worlds are co-constituted through land, sea, labor, memory, violence, law, migration, climate, and knowledge. Escobar's work on pluriversal design strengthens this point by insisting that many worlds can coexist without being forced into one developmental template (Escobar, 2018). Bhambra's connected sociologies and Chakrabarty's provincialization of Europe similarly challenge social theory to treat Europe not as the universal subject of history but as one provincial and connected formation among others (Bhambra, 2014; Chakrabarty, 2000).

## Toward a Philosophical Anthropology of IR

Every IR theory carries an anthropology. This does not mean every IR theory explicitly discusses human nature. It means that every theory assumes a certain kind of subject who acts, suffers, knows, chooses, resists, calculates, recognizes, or becomes governed. The realist subject is often a survival-oriented sovereign actor projected onto the state. The liberal subject is a rights-bearing and interest-bearing individual whose freedom is secured through institutions, law, and markets. The constructivist subject is a norm-making and identity-forming actor. The Marxian subject is classed, exploited, and historically situated in relations of production. The Foucauldian subject is disciplined and produced through power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977). The postcolonial subject is positioned within representation, hybridity, subalternity, and colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994; Chatterjee, 1993; Said, 1983). The decolonial subject is marked by coloniality of power, being, and knowledge, but also by resistance, exteriority, and alternative worlds (Dussel, 1985; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Wynter, 2003).

The problem is that mainstream IR often universalizes one narrow anthropology while treating others as empirical variation. Kantian moral anthropology, Hegelian state-centered recognition, liberal rights, and rational actor models all assume a subject who can enter law, market, sovereignty, and public reason in a recognizable form. But many subjects of world politics are encountered through border detention, refugee camps, development projects, counterinsurgency, racial policing, extractive labor, climate vulnerability, humanitarian administration, and epistemic dismissal. Their humanity is not denied only by violence; it is also reorganized by categories. They become migrant labor, refugee flow, tribal community, security risk, failed citizen, indigenous stakeholder, or vulnerable beneficiary. Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice helps clarify this process: people can be wronged specifically as knowers when their testimony, concepts, and interpretive resources are diminished by power (Fricker, 2007).

A philosophical anthropology of IR must therefore begin with the human as relational, situated, historical, and unequally recognized. It must not begin with abstract Man. Wynter's critique is decisive here because she shows that the figure of Man has been overrepresented as if it were the human itself (Wynter, 2003). Decolonial IR must move from Man to humans-in-relation, from



sovereign abstraction to embodied life, and from linear progress to layered histories. This does not mean abandoning universal ethical concern. It means refusing a universalism that secretly carries a provincial subject. A stronger universalism must be built through relation, dignity, exteriority, and the recognition of multiple epistemic worlds.

This anthropological reconstruction also changes the meaning of agency. Agency is not only sovereign decision, institutional bargaining, norm entrepreneurship, or revolutionary class consciousness. It may also be oral memory, care, refusal, ritual, migration, embodied performance, community survival, reciprocal obligation, and the maintenance of dignity under domination. Chowdhury's work on reciprocity and indigenous gnoseology helps widen this point: social knowledge is not produced only by formal institutions or written theory; it can be produced through oral traditions, collective ethics, performance, healing worlds, photovoice, and community relations (Chowdhury, 2023, 2026a, 2026c, 2026d; Chowdhury et al., 2022). For IR, this means that agency must be sought not only in diplomatic archives and state decisions but in the practices through which communities sustain life under world-historical pressure.

## Discussion: What Heterogeneous Relational Totality Changes

The proposed framework changes four major debates in IR: power, agency, temporality, and emancipation. First, power can no longer be reduced to military capability, institutional authority, economic control, or discourse alone. Power is relationally layered. It appears as coercion, accumulation, law, norm, racial classification, gender hierarchy, border regime, development expertise, knowledge production, and representational authority. Realism sees force; liberalism sees institutions; constructivism sees norms; Marxism sees class and capital; post-structuralism sees discourse; decolonial theory sees coloniality. Heterogeneous relational totality does not discard any of these. It asks how they operate together in uneven ways (Ashley, 1984; Cox, 1981; Doty, 1996; Quijano, 2000; Wallerstein, 1974; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1999).

Second, agency becomes plural and historically situated. The agent of IR is not only the state, the institution, the market actor, or the rational individual. It can be a colonized people, a migrant community, an indigenous knowledge holder, a feminist movement, a racialized intellectual tradition, or a local community negotiating global pressure. Tickner's feminist critique, Agathangelou and Ling's worldism, Grovogui's race-sensitive reading of sovereignty, and Acharya's Global IR all push toward this expanded agency (Acharya, 2014; Agathangelou & Ling, 2004; Grovogui, 1996; Tickner, 1997). However, the framework also warns that agency should not be romanticized. Oppressed communities act under constraint, debt, militarization, racial suspicion, ecological danger, and institutional silence. Agency is real, but it is unequal.

Third, temporality changes. Mainstream IR often treats history as background or as a sequence of events leading to the modern state system. Decolonial and connected histories show that multiple times coexist: colonial time, capitalist time, indigenous time, religious time, ecological time, legal time, revolutionary time, and the suspended time of refugees and stateless people (Bhambra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2000; Chatterjee, 1993; Zavaleta Mercado, 2011). Buzan and Lawson's account of the global transformation also reminds IR that modern international order cannot be separated from industrialization, rational state-building, and ideologies of progress (Buzan & Lawson, 2015). A heterogeneous totality therefore rejects both timeless anarchy and linear modernization. It reads the world as a layered temporal field.

Fourth, emancipation changes. Classical critical theory often imagines emancipation as the overcoming of domination through reason, class struggle, communicative ethics, or post-Westphalian community (Cox, 1981; Linklater, 1998; Lukács, 1971). Decolonial thought insists that emancipation must also confront coloniality, epistemicide, racialization, and the imposed overrepresentation of Man (Dussel, 1985; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Wynter, 2003). Glissant adds that emancipation cannot require transparency into the other; opacity is also a condition of freedom (Glissant, 1997). Tuck and Yang (2012) warn that decolonization cannot be turned into a metaphor for general improvement. The article therefore defines emancipation as

relational repair, not merely institutional reform or inclusion. It must include material justice, epistemic justice, dignity, land, memory, and the right of communities to remain partially opaque to dominant systems of classification.

The framework also has implications for method. IR cannot simply add decolonial theory to its existing method as a new literature review. The method must change. A relational method asks how theory is produced, who is cited, who becomes data, who is translated, who is excluded, and who benefits from knowledge production. This aligns with reciprocal methodology, which treats ethics as part of knowledge-making rather than as an administrative step (Chowdhury, 2026b; Chowdhury et al., 2024). It also aligns with indigenous gnoseology, which widens the idea of knowledge beyond epistemology narrowly understood (Chowdhury, 2026a). For journal-based IR scholarship, this means more than citing non-Western authors. It requires changing the unit of analysis, the language of evidence, the ethics of representation, and the imagination of the world.

## Analytical Model

The article's model can be summarized in three movements. The first movement is diagnostic: IR fragmentation is read as a conflict among rival images of totality. The second movement is genealogical: those images are traced to Continental, liberal, Marxian, post-structural, postcolonial, and decolonial sources. The third movement is reconstructive: totality is redefined as heterogeneous, relational, and planetary. This model is not meant to replace existing IR theories with one master theory. It is meant to provide a meta-theoretical grammar through which IR scholars can compare theories without hiding their ontological and anthropological assumptions.

Movement	Main question	Major sources	IR implication
Diagnostic	Why is IR fragmented?	Waltz, Wendt, Cox, Ashley, Walker, Tickner	Paradigms become rival images of social totality.
Genealogical	Where do these images come from?	Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Wallerstein	IR inherits Continental and modern assumptions about state, history, capital, and human subjectivity.
Decolonial	What has classical totality excluded?	Dussel, Quijano, Fanon, Wynter, Said, Glissant, Grovogui	Coloniality, race, representation, and epistemic hierarchy become constitutive, not peripheral.
Reconstructive	How can totality be rethought?	Mariátegui, Zavaleta, Bhambra, Acharya, Chowdhury, Fúnez-Flores	World politics is read as heterogeneous, relational, and planetary.

The model also clarifies why totality must be kept. Without totality, IR risks becoming a collection of isolated case studies, discourses, identities, and local narratives. Such fragmentation can be ethically attractive because it resists domination, but it can also make systemic power harder to name. At the same time, totality must be transformed. Without heterogeneity, totality becomes

imperial, developmentalist, Eurocentric, or economically reductive. Heterogeneous relational totality therefore works as a disciplined middle path: it keeps structure while refusing closure; it keeps relation while defending opacity; it keeps planetary scale while respecting local worlds; it keeps critique while avoiding pure negation.

For empirical IR research, this model suggests different questions. Instead of asking only how states respond to anarchy, it asks how state behavior is shaped by colonial memory, racialized hierarchy, capitalist dependency, institutional norms, and local worlds. Instead of asking only how institutions solve cooperation problems, it asks whose forms of knowledge and humanity institutions recognize. Instead of asking only how norms spread, it asks which norms travel as universal and which knowledges are treated as local. Instead of asking only how resistance emerges, it asks how communities sustain relational life before resistance becomes visible to theory. This makes the model useful for studies of migration, refugees, indigenous politics, climate justice, development, security, global health, and international law.

## Conclusions

This article has argued that IR's theoretical fragmentation is not merely a problem of too many paradigms. It is a symptom of a deeper unresolved question: how should the world be imagined as a totality? Realism answers through anarchy and survival; liberalism through institutions and law; constructivism through norms and intersubjective meanings; Marxian theory through capitalism and class; world-systems analysis through core and periphery; post-structuralism through discourse and boundary; postcolonial and decolonial approaches through empire, coloniality, race, epistemic violence, and the unfinished struggle over the human. Each theory sees something important, but each becomes limited when its image of the world becomes the world itself.

The article has therefore proposed heterogeneous relational totality as a way forward. This concept keeps the analytical strength of structural thinking while refusing closed system, Eurocentric universalism, and pure fragmentation. It draws from Continental genealogy, decolonial critique, Global IR, postcolonial theory, world-systems analysis, and reciprocal methodology. It asks IR to rethink not only world order but the human image hidden inside world order. A truly critical IR cannot begin with the sovereign state alone, nor with capital alone, nor with discourse alone. It must begin with relational humans living inside layered histories of sovereignty, coloniality, capitalism, ecology, race, gender, knowledge, memory, and struggle.

The final implication is simple but demanding. IR needs a new philosophical anthropology. It must move beyond the rational sovereign actor, the liberal rights-bearer, the abstract citizen, the class subject, and the colonized object as separate theoretical figures. It must think the human as relational, unequal, situated, wounded, resistant, and epistemically creative. Such an anthropology does not weaken IR's analytical rigor. It deepens it. By rethinking social totality as heterogeneous, relational, and planetary, IR can better confront the realities of coloniality, migration, statelessness, ecological crisis, racial hierarchy, epistemic injustice, and global inequality. The task is not to abandon totality, but to decolonize, pluralize, and humanize it.

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