



Postcolonial Political Thought in the 21st Century: Decentering Eurocentrism and Envisioning Inclusive Paradigms

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Abstract

This study examines how postcolonial political theory can be used to reconstruct key political concepts that have been shaped by Eurocentric assumptions, with particular attention to sovereignty, legitimacy, epistemic authority, and political inclusion. It addresses the limited theoretical synthesis connecting critiques of Eurocentrism with constructive alternatives for understanding political authority and governance in diverse postcolonial contexts. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative conceptual and theoretical analysis based on a critical review of foundational and contemporary literature in postcolonial studies, political theory, and international relations. Through thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis, the study identifies four interconnected analytical findings: first, sovereignty, democracy, and legitimacy are historically situated concepts whose meanings vary across political and cultural contexts; second, colonial patterns persist in contemporary structures of knowledge production and global political authority; third, intersectional perspectives demonstrate that political agency and exclusion are shaped by the interaction of gender, race, class, and other social positions; and fourth, these insights can be synthesized into a constructive postcolonial framework centered on epistemic pluralism, relationality, plural forms of authority, and participatory governance. The analysis therefore indicates that a postcolonial approach is not limited to criticizing Eurocentric political theory but can also provide conceptual resources for developing more context-sensitive understandings of legitimacy, authority, and political participation. By connecting epistemic justice with plural political authority and inclusive participation, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to broaden political theory beyond universalizing Western frameworks and to account more adequately for diverse political experiences and knowledge traditions.

Keywords: Postcolonial Thought, Epistemic Decolonization, Eurocentrism, Sovereignty, Intersectionality, Political Pluralism

Introduction

Eurocentric political thought has long dominated political theory and practice in the twenty-first century. Foundational concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, and legitimacy, rooted in Western philosophical traditions and historical experiences, continue to shape global political discourse and institutional structures. However, this dominance obscures the historically and culturally contingent nature of these concepts by presenting

them as universal truths rather than context-specific constructs ([Tolay, 2021](#)). Consequently, alternative epistemologies, particularly those emerging from colonized and marginalized societies, have often been excluded from mainstream political theory. Postcolonial political theory has challenged the universalist assumptions of Western political thought and highlighted the epistemic marginalization of non-Western perspectives. Previous research has also shown that international authority cannot be explained solely through material power, as legitimacy, recognition, norms, institutions, and identities significantly shape the exercise of authority ([Aria, 2026](#)). In response, postcolonial political thought has emerged as a critical intellectual project challenging the hegemony of Eurocentric paradigms and advocating the recognition of diverse and contextually grounded forms of knowledge ([Spencer, 1997](#)).

Over recent decades, postcolonial political theory has evolved into a significant field of inquiry that critiques the universalist assumptions of Western political thought and highlights the epistemic marginalization of non-Western perspectives. Over recent decades, postcolonial political theory has challenged the universalist assumptions of Western thought and highlighted the epistemic marginalization of non-Western perspectives. Previous research has similarly shown how the dominance of secular Western traditions in International Relations can exclude alternative sources of political identity, power, and legitimacy ([Aria, 2026](#)). Central to this scholarship is the critique of the “coloniality of knowledge,” which refers to the enduring influence of colonial power relations in shaping the production and validation of knowledge ([Sule, 2014](#); [Grosfoguel, 2011](#)). This perspective calls for epistemic decolonization through the recovery and legitimization of indigenous, subaltern, and Global South knowledge systems.

The intellectual foundations of postcolonial thought were shaped by scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) demonstrated how Western representations of the East functioned as instruments of domination ([Rais, 2023](#)). Spivak (1988) exposed the structural silencing of marginalized voices through her question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, while Bhabha (1994) introduced the concept of hybridity to challenge rigid distinctions between colonizer and colonized ([Marandi & Shabanirad, 2015](#)). Together, these thinkers destabilized the epistemological authority of Western political knowledge and opened space for alternative forms of theorizing.

Later scholars shifted the discussion from critique toward constructive decolonization. Walter Mignolo (2002) emphasized the persistence of colonial hierarchies in global systems of knowledge and governance and advocated an “epistemology of the South” ([Mignolo & Bussmann, 2023](#)). Similarly, Achille Mbembe (2001) and Partha Chatterjee (2004) examined how colonial legacies continue to shape sovereignty, governance, and political agency. Feminist and critical race scholars further expanded the field. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013) criticized the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism, while Sylvia Wynter (2003) highlighted the racialized construction of the “human” in Western thought ([Mozumder, 2025](#)).

Recent scholarship has increasingly sought to formulate constructive alternatives rooted in non-Western intellectual traditions. Scholars such as Siba Grovogui and Robbie Shilliam draw on African, Indigenous, and Caribbean epistemologies to propose political visions based on relationality, communal authority, and epistemic plurality ([Grovogu, 2011](#)). Postcolonial analysis has also been extended to contemporary issues such as

environmental degradation, digital imperialism, and forced migration. Nevertheless, the field remains fragmented, with many contributions offering localized critiques rather than a coherent theoretical synthesis (Guudle, 2021).

This fragmentation reveals a major gap in postcolonial political theory. Although the literature has effectively challenged Eurocentric dominance, it has yet to develop a unified paradigm capable of reconstructing the foundational concepts of political theory in a systematic manner (Mahmud, 1999; Getachew & Mantena, 2021). Existing scholarship often remains primarily deconstructive, offering limited constructive alternatives for political transformation.

This article addresses that gap by examining how postcolonial political theory can articulate a coherent alternative to Eurocentric political thought while embracing epistemic diversity. Using a descriptive-analytical qualitative methodology and thematic analysis of foundational and contemporary scholarship, the study synthesizes diverse strands of postcolonial thought into a more integrated framework.

The article first critiques the assumed universality of Eurocentric political concepts and emphasizes the importance of epistemic decolonization. It then explores how colonial continuities shape contemporary global power relations and incorporates intersectional perspectives to examine the relationship between identity, political agency, and resistance. Finally, the study advances a constructive postcolonial framework grounded in pluralism, relationality, and epistemic justice, advocating participatory governance, community empowerment, and global solidarity as key principles for reimagining political theory and practice.

By integrating critical deconstruction with constructive synthesis, this study contributes to contemporary political theory by proposing a more inclusive and context-sensitive framework for political analysis and governance in an increasingly interconnected world.

Material and Method

This study employs a qualitative conceptual and theoretical research design based on a critical literature review, thematic analysis, and conceptual synthesis. The research relies exclusively on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and seminal theoretical works in postcolonial studies, political theory, and international relations. The methodological objective is to examine how postcolonial scholarship challenges Eurocentric assumptions concerning sovereignty, democracy, legitimacy, knowledge production, and political agency, and to identify the conceptual elements that can be synthesized into a constructive postcolonial political framework.

Relevant literature was identified through targeted searches of JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and SpringerLink. The search process used combinations of keywords including "postcolonial political thought," "decolonizing knowledge," "Eurocentrism in political theory," "coloniality of knowledge," "epistemic justice," "Global South epistemologies," "postcolonial sovereignty," and "intersectionality and postcolonial theory." Because the study is conceptual rather than empirical, the unit of selection consisted of scholarly texts and theoretical contributions rather than human participants or geographical cases. Sources were purposively selected according to their relevance to the research objective and their analytical contribution to debates on Eurocentrism, coloniality, epistemic diversity, political authority, intersectionality, and alternative forms of governance.

The selection criteria emphasized both foundational and contemporary scholarship. Seminal works were included because of their theoretical importance in establishing the intellectual foundations of postcolonial political thought, while recent publications were considered to reflect contemporary developments and debates. Priority was given to sources that offered substantive theoretical or analytical engagement with the study's central themes. Publications were excluded when they lacked direct relevance to the research questions, provided only descriptive accounts without analytical insight, or did not meaningfully address postcolonial, decolonial, epistemic, or political-theoretical concerns. The review primarily considered English-language publications, with particular emphasis on scholarship from the last three decades, while earlier foundational works were retained where necessary.

The selected literature was analyzed through thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis. The thematic analysis identified recurring patterns concerning the historically situated nature of sovereignty, democracy, and legitimacy; the persistence of coloniality in knowledge production and global power structures; intersectional dimensions of political agency; epistemic pluralism; relationality; plural forms of authority; and participatory governance. These themes were subsequently compared and conceptually integrated to identify their relationships and their implications for developing a constructive postcolonial political paradigm.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through comparison and cross-checking of arguments across diverse foundational and contemporary sources. Interpretations were grounded in converging evidence from multiple scholarly contributions, while significant theoretical differences were retained rather than treated as consensus. Consistency among the research objective, source-selection criteria, analytical themes, and conclusions further supported the credibility of the findings. As a conceptual study, its validity rests primarily on transparency of selection, systematic interpretation, theoretical coherence, and careful grounding of conclusions in the reviewed literature rather than on empirical generalizability.

Challenging the Universality of Eurocentric Political Concepts

At the heart of postcolonial political theory lies a critical interrogation of the widespread assumption that foundational political concepts, such as sovereignty, democracy, and legitimacy, are universally valid and applicable. These ideas, deeply rooted in Western intellectual traditions, are often treated as neutral and globally relevant frameworks. However, postcolonial scholars contend that these concepts are historically and culturally specific, shaped by colonial power dynamics and Western experiences ([Pourmokhtari, 2013](#)). This section examines how postcolonial thought problematizes these core political categories, emphasizing their situatedness and the necessity of rethinking them in light of diverse political realities. Sovereignty, conventionally regarded as the fundamental principle underpinning the modern international order, comes under intense scrutiny in postcolonial critiques. The classical Westphalian model assumes the existence of sovereign states as independent, rational actors with absolute control over their territory and populations. Yet, postcolonial contexts expose the fragmented and often contested nature of sovereignty, revealing its entanglement with colonial histories and ongoing forms of domination ([Abdulrahman & Mohammed, 2023](#)).

Achille Mbembe's concept of necro politics exemplifies this critique by demonstrating how sovereign power may operate through the regulation of life and death, rather than solely

through formal state mechanisms. This challenges the traditional notion of sovereignty as a clear-cut and universally applicable principle, highlighting instead the complex and sometimes violent expressions of power in postcolonial societies. Similarly, democracy, as conceptualized within Western liberal thought, is called into question ([Das & Sahana, 2022](#)). While liberal democracy prioritizes universal rights, rule of law, and institutionalized procedures, postcolonial scholars argue that such models inadequately capture the political practices and realities of postcolonial nations. Partha Chatterjee's exploration of the "politics of the governed" brings to light the coexistence of informal, culturally grounded political systems alongside formal democratic structures. This alternative view contests the dominant Western narrative that liberal democracy represents the singular or most legitimate form of governance, advocating for a recognition of political plurality shaped by local histories and social contexts ([Mbembé & Meintjes, 2003](#)).

The concept of legitimacy is likewise reinterpreted through a postcolonial lens. Rather than being derived solely from institutional design or legal-rational authority, legitimacy in postcolonial societies often stems from historical experiences, cultural traditions, and collective struggles against external impositions ([Cheng, 2016](#)). By questioning the universal applicability of these core political concepts, postcolonial political thought encourages a shift away from abstract, one-size-fits-all theories toward a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of political phenomena. This critical stance creates an opening for the inclusion of alternative epistemologies and ways of knowing, which will be further elaborated in the following sections ([Jauregui, 2013](#)).

Epistemic Decolonization: Recovering Marginalized Knowledge Systems

Following the critical examination of the limitations inherent in Eurocentric political concepts, the focus shifts toward the vital process of epistemic decolonization within postcolonial scholarship. After revealing the historically situated nature of dominant political ideas such as sovereignty and democracy, scholars emphasize the necessity of reclaiming and legitimizing knowledge systems that have long been sidelined or dismissed. Epistemic decolonization aims to dismantle entrenched hierarchies in the production and validation of knowledge, which have historically privileged Western modes of thought, thereby promoting a more inclusive and diverse epistemic landscape ([Aria, 2025](#)). This endeavor responds to the pervasive influence of what Walter D. Mignolo terms the "coloniality of knowledge," a framework that exposes how colonial power dynamics extend beyond political and economic domination to shape prevailing systems of knowledge production. By unmasking these persistent legacies, postcolonial thinkers contest the presumed universality and superiority of Western epistemologies, advocating instead for a pluralistic recognition of indigenous, subaltern, and other non-Western knowledge traditions as legitimate and indispensable ([Tobi, 2020](#)).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of the "epistemology of the South" illustrates this transformative shift. Santos calls for an epistemic approach that transcends the confines of Western modernity by embracing a multiplicity of knowledge forms, often rooted in relationality, communal values, and experiential realities. This perspective challenges the universal claims of Western science and philosophy, creating space for marginalized epistemologies to actively shape political and social theory ([De Sousa Santos, 2014](#)). Recovering marginalized knowledge systems involves both revisiting and critiquing the established academic canon and engaging deeply with alternative forms of knowing.

These include oral traditions, indigenous worldviews, localized political customs, and collective memories, forms historically devalued or relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse. Elevating these perspectives not only enriches the field of political inquiry but also empowers historically excluded communities by legitimizing their experiences within global conversations ([De Sousa Santos, 2018](#)).

Furthermore, epistemic decolonization reconfigures the connection between knowledge and power by highlighting epistemic justice as a fundamental component of political liberation. It insists that transforming political thought requires simultaneously democratizing the processes through which knowledge is created and disseminated ([Waninga et al., 2025](#)). This challenges the dominance of traditional academic institutions and calls for more equitable practices in knowledge exchange. Thus, epistemic decolonization functions dually as a critical interrogation of prevailing knowledge structures and as a proactive project aimed at reconstructing political theory beyond Eurocentric limits. The following sections will consider how these recovered epistemologies contribute to the development of new political paradigms and practical approaches ([Botha et al., 2021](#)).

Postcolonial Critiques of Global Power Structures and Sovereignty

Building on the earlier critiques of Eurocentric political categories and the imperative of epistemic decolonization, postcolonial scholars further challenge the prevailing global power arrangements that sustain inequality and reshape the notion of sovereignty in complex ways. Moving beyond conventional state-centered conceptions of authority, this body of work examines how both historical legacies and contemporary dynamics perpetuate colonial patterns of domination under new international frameworks. A key insight within this critique is the recognition that sovereignty, traditionally understood as supreme authority over a defined territory, is neither absolute nor static in postcolonial settings ([Seth, 2011](#)). Instead, sovereignty is better understood as a fluid and contingent concept, shaped by internal political factors as well as by external pressures exerted through global institutions and powerful states. This perspective reveals how postcolonial states' formal sovereignty is frequently compromised by economic dependence, foreign interventions, and supranational governance structures that reinforce unequal power relations reminiscent of colonial hierarchies ([Alaka, 2025](#)).

Achille Mbembe's theory of necro politics offers a particularly incisive framework for understanding these transformations. Mbembe highlights how sovereign power extends beyond formal legal authority to include the regulation of life and death, especially in postcolonial contexts characterized by systemic violence, marginalization, and exclusion. Necro politics exposes the ways in which power operates through mechanisms of abandonment and control over populations deemed disposable, thereby challenging traditional views of sovereignty as encompassing comprehensive state control ([Das & Sahana, 2022](#)).

Additionally, postcolonial critiques focus on the influence exerted by international organizations, multinational corporations, and global financial institutions in limiting the autonomy of postcolonial states. These actors often enforce economic policies and governance standards that subordinate these states to global capitalist interests and geopolitical agendas, perpetuating patterns of dependency that echo colonial domination despite the formal end of imperial rule ([Pourmokhtari, 2013](#)). This line of critique further interrogates questions of legitimacy and justice on the global stage, emphasizing the

exclusion of marginalized groups from international decision-making processes. By questioning the dominant association of sovereignty with absolute, territorially bounded statehood, postcolonial theorists advocate for more inclusive, pluralistic conceptions of political authority that better reflect the complex and uneven realities of global power relations ([Botha et al., 2021](#)).

Intersectionality in Postcolonial Political Thought: Feminist and Racial Perspectives

Building on the critique of global power and sovereignty, postcolonial political thought has increasingly embraced intersectional frameworks, particularly drawing from feminist and critical race perspectives, to provide a more layered understanding of power relations, identity, and political agency. This approach recognizes that experiences of colonialism and ongoing systems of oppression are not homogenous but are shaped by the interlocking and intersecting categories of gender, race, class, and other social identities ([Carbado et al., 2013](#)). Intersectionality thus emerges as an indispensable tool within postcolonial theory for unpacking the complexities of marginalization and resistance. Feminist scholars within postcolonial discourse challenge the universalizing tendencies of mainstream Western feminism, which often overlooks the distinct social, cultural, and historical conditions faced by women in colonized and postcolonial contexts ([Ferree, 2018](#)). Influential thinkers like Chandra Talpade Mohanty advocate for a transnational feminist perspective that centers the specific experiences of women in the Global South, highlighting how colonialism, patriarchy, and global economic systems converge to produce unique forms of oppression. This approach critiques simplistic or homogenizing portrayals of women's struggles and promotes solidarities based on acknowledging difference and complexity rather than erasing them ([George, 2020](#)).

In parallel, critical race theory contributes to postcolonial analyses by examining how Western political thought has racialized concepts of political subjectivity and belonging. Sylvia Wynter's scholarship, for instance, critiques the construction of "the human" in Western modernity as inherently racialized, effectively excluding non-European populations from full political inclusion. This racialized conception of citizenship and identity persists in global power relations today, reinforcing structures of exclusion that postcolonial theory aims to dismantle ([Kohn & McBride, 2011](#)). By integrating race, gender, and other intersecting social categories, intersectionality reveals how multiple axes of identity and oppression operate simultaneously to shape political realities. It moves beyond singular or isolated frameworks to uncover the intricate ways in which systems of domination interconnect, creating nuanced experiences of marginalization and pathways for resistance. This framework also emphasizes the necessity of building alliances among diverse marginalized groups to challenge entrenched power systems ([Shakun et al., 2024](#)). Rather than simply layering additional categories onto postcolonial critiques, intersectionality transforms political theory by contesting fundamental assumptions about identity, subject formation, and power relations. It brings to the forefront those voices and experiences that have long been marginalized or silenced, thereby enriching the epistemic pluralism advocated in earlier discussions ([Carbado et al., 2013](#)). As postcolonial theory incorporates intersectional insights, it lays the groundwork for more inclusive and dynamic political frameworks. The concluding section will address how these multiple strands converge to offer constructive alternatives that move beyond Eurocentric limitations and inspire new political imaginaries ([Rosenkranz, 2024](#)).

Constructive Alternatives: Toward a Unified Postcolonial Political Paradigm

Building on the previous critiques of Eurocentric political assumptions, the necessity of epistemic decolonization, challenges to global power hierarchies, and the integration of intersectional perspectives, postcolonial political thought increasingly turns toward the formulation of positive alternatives. This emerging project aims to weave together various critical insights into a cohesive and comprehensive political framework rooted in the epistemologies, values, and lived experiences of historically marginalized and colonized peoples ([Kerner, 2016](#)). At the core of this unified postcolonial paradigm is an emphasis on relationality, diversity, and contextual particularity, contrasting sharply with the abstract universalism characteristic of traditional Western political theories. It draws extensively from indigenous, African, Caribbean, and other Global South traditions, emphasizing community-oriented values, collective empowerment, and interdependence. This shift reframes fundamental political concepts such as authority, legitimacy, and governance around grounded realities rather than imposed universal models ([Namdeo & Sharma, 2025](#)).

A key feature of this alternative framework is the redefinition of sovereignty. Moving away from the classical Westphalian notion of sovereignty as a singular, centralized power, this paradigm embraces a more fluid and pluralistic understanding. It recognizes the coexistence of multiple forms of political authority, from customary leadership to grassroots activism—that interact and shape political life in diverse ways ([Dutta & Mazumdar, 2025](#)). Such a model challenges the dominance of state-centered paradigms and opens space for recognizing varied political expressions. Incorporating intersectionality remains integral to this approach, as it highlights how dimensions like race, gender, and class intricately influence political participation and justice. The framework advocates for political inclusion that accounts for these intersecting identities, striving for representation and empowerment of those who have historically been marginalized. This inclusive vision broadens democratic engagement and social equity ([Mares, 2022](#)).

Epistemologically, this paradigm insists on dismantling hierarchies that elevate Western rationalist knowledge above other forms. It advocates for epistemic justice by legitimizing indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and experiential insights as essential components of political understanding. Such pluralistic epistemologies enable political thought to more effectively address pressing global issues, including environmental crises, migration, and socio-economic disparities ([Seroto & Higgs, 2024](#)). Beyond theoretical innovation, this project encourages practical experimentation in governance, emphasizing participatory and community-driven models. It promotes the formation of transnational solidarities that confront and redistribute entrenched power imbalances both locally and globally. Ultimately, this unified postcolonial political paradigm offers a vibrant, integrative vision that moves beyond Eurocentric limitations. By centering marginalized epistemologies and political experiences, it lays the groundwork for new political possibilities that better reflect the complexity and diversity of our world ([Sonwane & Pradhan, 2025](#)).

Conclusion

The analysis identifies four interconnected findings concerning the potential of postcolonial political theory to broaden contemporary political thought. First, the examination of sovereignty, democracy, and legitimacy indicates that these concepts cannot be treated as universally neutral categories. Their meanings and institutional expressions are historically and culturally situated, and their application in postcolonial contexts is shaped by distinct colonial histories and political experiences. This finding suggests that political analysis requires greater attention to contextual variation rather than reliance on universalizing conceptual models. Second, the analysis identifies continuing relationships between colonial legacies and contemporary structures of knowledge production and global political authority. Formal sovereignty does not necessarily correspond to substantive political autonomy, as economic dependence, external intervention, and unequal global institutions can constrain the exercise of state authority. At the epistemic level, the continued privileging of Western knowledge over indigenous, subaltern, and Global South knowledge systems represents another dimension of these enduring hierarchies. Epistemic decolonization therefore emerges from the analysis as a necessary component of reconstructing political knowledge. Third, the analysis demonstrates that political agency and exclusion are differentiated through intersecting dimensions of identity, particularly gender, race, and class. Intersectional perspectives reveal that colonial and postcolonial power relations do not affect social groups uniformly and that meaningful political inclusion requires recognition of these differentiated experiences. This finding strengthens the case for plural forms of representation and coalition-building among historically marginalized groups. Fourth, the conceptual synthesis indicates that the critical insights of postcolonial scholarship can be brought together into a constructive framework centered on epistemic pluralism, relationality, plural political authority, and participatory governance. Rather than replacing one universal model with another, this framework accommodates multiple forms of knowledge, authority, and political participation according to social and historical context. The study therefore contributes to postcolonial political theory by connecting its deconstructive critique of Eurocentrism with a constructive set of principles for rethinking legitimacy, authority, and governance. Its principal implication is that a more inclusive political theory requires not only broader representation of marginalized experiences but also greater plurality in the sources of political knowledge and the forms through which political authority is constituted.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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