

Universal Values, Coercive Modernity, and the Postcolonial Dilemma: Rethinking Democracy and Human Rights between Modernism and Its Critics

This essay has been prepared solely as a writing sample for the purpose of exploring a possible research topic. It should therefore not be regarded as a formal academic endeavour, but rather as a personal reflection.

Introduction

This essay examines the historical and conceptual tension between the universalist claims of modern political values and the power relations through which such values have often been articulated, institutionalized, and imposed. Starting from a broadly world-systems perspective, it argues that the interventionist logic historically associated with imperial “civilizing missions” has not disappeared. Rather, it has been reconfigured through more contemporary idioms such as development, sustainability, democratization, pluralism, human rights, and state-building.

The central claim is not that democracy, human rights, or equality are merely ideological disguises for domination. Nor is it that postcolonial critiques of Western universalism should be dismissed as relativist or politically irresponsible. Instead, this essay argues that both modernist universalism and postmodern/postcolonial critique are insufficient when taken in isolation. Universal values are neither pure expressions of neutral reason nor simply products of colonial violence. They are historically constructed, institutionally embedded, and often coercively enforced; yet they may still retain normative and emancipatory significance.

The difficulty, therefore, lies in developing an intermediate position: one that recognizes the historical violence and asymmetries embedded in modernity without abandoning the political language of rights, democracy, and freedom to authoritarian regimes that instrumentalize anti-Western rhetoric for domestic consolidation.

From Civilizing Mission to Liberal Interventionism

From the nineteenth century onward, imperial powers frequently justified intervention in non-European societies through the language of civilization. The “civilizing mission” was framed as a moral and historical responsibility: European empires claimed to bring religion, law, order, education, and political rationality to societies deemed backward or incapable of governing themselves. In the first waves of colonial expansion, this mission often carried explicitly religious and evangelical overtones. Later, especially in the twentieth century and more sharply after the Cold War, similar interventionist logics were translated into secular and institutional vocabularies: legal reform, democratization, humanitarian intervention, development assistance, failed-state reconstruction, and good governance.

In this sense, the nineteenth-century civilizing mission has not simply vanished. It has survived by changing its language. The older vocabulary of Christianity, civilization, and empire has been partially replaced by the seemingly neutral language of development, sustainability, pluralism, institutional reform, and human rights. The contemporary academy and policy world of the Western hemisphere often deploy these concepts as universal goods. Yet they may also serve as mechanisms through which core states penetrate, reshape, or discipline the legal and political systems of peripheral and semi-peripheral societies.

This is particularly visible in debates around failed states and humanitarian intervention. After the Cold War, the United States and its allies increasingly framed intervention not as imperial conquest but as the stabilization of legal and institutional orders. The object of intervention was no longer simply territory; it was the domestic architecture of governance itself. Law, administration, civil society, minority rights, and constitutional design became sites of external influence.

Turkey, the European Union, and the Politics of Normative Power

The case of Turkey's relationship with the European Union offers a particularly revealing example of this dynamic. During the early years of the Justice and Development Party, especially in what is often referred to as the party's "first decade," Turkey undertook significant reforms in the context of EU accession and harmonization. These reforms included legal, institutional, and political changes that were widely interpreted as democratizing steps. They also coincided with a broader intellectual and political climate in which segments of the liberal-left intelligentsia formed a temporary alliance with advocates of "moderate Islam" against what was described as military tutelage.

During this period, Turkey began to confront aspects of its own troubled political history in ways that had previously been marginal or politically impossible. Debates on military guardianship, minority rights, state violence, and the homogenizing impulses of early republican nationalism became more visible. In this sense, EU conditionality functioned not merely as an external imposition but also as a domestic opportunity structure. It enabled certain actors within Turkey to challenge older authoritarian and nationalist paradigms.

Yet this process also raises difficult questions. To what extent were these reforms expressions of domestic democratization, and to what extent were they shaped by an asymmetrical relationship with a normative European center? The EU has often presented its accession criteria as universal standards: democracy, rule of law, minority protection, gender equality, and human rights. However, these standards are never articulated outside power relations. They are embedded in institutional hierarchies, geopolitical interests, and a historically unequal relationship between Europe and its others.

The Turkish case therefore illustrates the broader paradox of liberal interventionism and normative power. On the one hand, external pressure may help weaken authoritarian structures and expand rights. On the other hand, the very language of reform may reproduce an older civilizational hierarchy in which Europe appears as the teacher and non-European societies as pupils in need of correction.

Modern Nation-Building and Selective Critique

The critique of Turkish modernization is often framed through the language of self-orientalization. Early republican reforms are sometimes described as the attempt of an “Eastern” society to deny its own essence by importing Western institutions, clothing, legal codes, and cultural norms. The replacement of the fez and turban with the hat, the adoption of European legal models, and the reform of language and education are frequently cited as examples of this process.

Yet such critiques can become analytically misleading when they treat Turkey as an exceptional case. Many post-Ottoman states, including Balkan and Eastern European societies, underwent similar processes of linguistic standardization, bureaucratic centralization, secularization, and national homogenization. Indeed, the modern nation-state as such emerged through these mechanisms. The standardization of language, the creation of national education systems, the regulation of dress and public conduct, and the centralization of legal authority were not uniquely Turkish phenomena. They were central features of modern state formation across Europe and beyond.

This raises a crucial question: why are some modernizing projects criticized as artificial, derivative, or self-orientalizing, while others are incorporated into the standard history of national development? Liberal critiques of nation-building, modernization, and institutional coercion do not fall equally on all societies. Some states are allowed to narrate their violent processes of centralization as the birth of the modern nation; others are read as imitative, belated, or pathological.

The category of “the West” is therefore unstable. If Turkey imported Western institutions, from which West did it import them? Was democracy imported from ancient Athens? From Britain? From France? From Protestant Northern Europe? From postwar liberal Europe? These are not merely historical questions. They expose the constructed character of the West as a discourse.

Which West? Democracy as a Retrospective Construction

The common narrative that democracy originated in ancient Greece and was then transmitted through Western civilization into the modern world is historically problematic. The direct democracy of Athens, in which a limited body of male citizens participated in deliberation, bears little resemblance to modern mass democracy, in which millions of citizens vote through representative institutions within bureaucratic nation-states.

Modern democracy is not simply the continuation of the agora. It is better understood as a relatively recent institutional formation, emerging over the last two centuries through capitalism, trade, bureaucratic state-building, Protestant political cultures, class conflict, and representative institutions. Its history is discontinuous, contested, and regionally uneven.

Even within Europe, democracy did not develop uniformly. The liberal-parliamentary experience of Britain cannot easily be equated with Francoist Spain, military dictatorship in Greece, or authoritarian regimes in other parts of the continent. While Churchill could leave

office through electoral defeat, Franco ruled through dictatorship. While the student movements of 1968 called for democratic transformation in Western Europe, Greece was under military rule. The question, then, is not simply whether Turkey imported democracy from “the West,” but which West is being invoked and who has the authority to define it.

From a constructivist perspective, “the West” may be understood as a discursive alliance rather than a fixed civilizational entity. Inclusion in or exclusion from this alliance is not determined solely by geography, religion, culture, or institutional history. Latin America, despite its Christian and European colonial heritage, is not always treated as part of the civilized West. The Balkans occupy an ambiguous position, often imagined as Europe’s threshold or internal other. Turkey’s location within or outside this discursive formation is likewise not a matter of essence, but of power.

In this sense, the history of democracy is not an uninterrupted story beginning with Socrates or the Athenian polis. It is a narrative written retrospectively, often by those with the institutional power to define the genealogy of modern political values.

Universal Values and Institutional Violence

The debate over democracy, human rights, equality, and freedom must therefore confront two interrelated claims.

First, such values do not exist in nature as self-evident objects. They are constructed through institutions, practices, legal norms, and political struggles. Democracy is not simply an abstract moral principle; it is organized through constitutions, electoral systems, parties, courts, police forces, bureaucracies, and international institutions.

Second, these institutional frameworks are not created without coercion. Modernization and institutionalization are deeply entangled with state violence. This does not mean that modern institutions are reducible to violence, but it does mean that their formation cannot be understood apart from coercive power.

A Schumpeterian perspective is useful here. Concepts such as democracy, liberty, and equality can be understood as products of institutionalized competition among elites, rather than as transparent expressions of popular will. Similarly, the “free market” has never been simply free. In nineteenth-century England, legal and disciplinary mechanisms shaped the laboring population and helped produce the conditions of industrial capitalism. What later appeared as the freedom to work was partly constituted through coercive policies that compelled people into wage labor.

Freedom itself is not given by nature. Its boundaries are drawn, enforced, and stabilized by the state. Liberal societies define freedom through law, policing, schooling, borders, and citizenship regimes. A state may welcome refugees under the slogan “Refugees Welcome,” yet the same state may swiftly deport a refugee who violates its legal order. Likewise, education may be defended in Rousseauian terms as a condition of positive freedom: ignorance imprisons, knowledge liberates. Yet compulsory schooling is also backed by

sanction. Parents cannot simply refuse to send their children to school without legal consequences.

The point is not to reject freedom, education, or rights. Rather, it is to show that modern values become real only through institutions, and institutions are never detached from coercive authority.

Modernity, Positivism, and the Colonial Structure of Knowledge

This critique also extends to the epistemological foundations of modernity. Modernism offered a powerful language of construction, institutional order, rationalization, progress, and universality. Positivism, in particular, presented itself as a neutral scientific method for understanding society and history. Yet from a poststructuralist and Foucauldian perspective, knowledge is never entirely separate from power. The categories through which societies are studied, governed, reformed, and ranked are themselves historically produced.

A Graeberian line of critique may suggest that the supposedly secular and scientific worldview of positivism retains certain Christian temporal assumptions. The linear organization of history into stages, periods, and progressive movement resembles older Christian philosophies of history, even when articulated in secular terms. Modern social science often transformed theological time into developmental time: societies were placed along a path from tradition to modernity, backwardness to progress, irrationality to rational administration.

This is where postcolonial critique becomes indispensable. It reveals how universal values and scientific categories have often been entangled with empire, colonialism, racial hierarchy, and civilizational ranking. Modernity's claim to universality was not made from nowhere. It was articulated from specific locations of power.

The Postcolonial Dilemma

Postcolonial critique rightly challenges the arrogance of universalist modernism. It shows that values such as civilization, progress, democracy, and human rights have historically been used to justify domination. However, this critique also generates a serious political dilemma.

If every universal claim is treated as merely an instrument of Western domination, authoritarian regimes can appropriate anti-colonial language to shield themselves from criticism. A government may withdraw from an international convention on violence against women by claiming that it refuses to learn civilization from the West. A leader overseeing environmental destruction may reject climate agreements by denouncing the hypocrisy of former colonial powers. A state may justify repression, patriarchy, censorship, or ecological devastation by saying: "We will not take lessons from imperialists."

Such arguments are politically effective because they contain a partial truth. Western states and institutions have indeed acted hypocritically. Industrialized countries did build their wealth through colonial extraction, carbon-intensive development, and violent modernization. It is therefore not unreasonable for postcolonial societies to object to being disciplined by those who historically benefited from the very practices now being condemned.

Yet the partial truth of this critique does not make authoritarian appropriation legitimate. The fact that human rights discourse has been entangled with empire does not mean that women's rights, democratic accountability, minority protections, or environmental obligations should be abandoned. The fact that universal values are historically constructed does not mean that they are normatively meaningless.

Toward an Intermediate Position

The task, then, is to think beyond the binary opposition between modernist universalism and postmodern relativism. Modernism gave us the language of institutions, construction, universality, and political transformation. Postmodern and postcolonial critiques exposed the violence, exclusion, and Eurocentrism embedded in that language. Both insights are necessary; neither is sufficient on its own.

An intermediate position must begin from the recognition that values such as human rights and democracy are historically produced, institutionally mediated, and power-laden. They should not be treated as neutral truths floating above history. However, neither should they be dismissed as nothing more than colonial inventions. Their historical impurity does not exhaust their political potential.

Such a position would allow us to criticize the imperial and coercive uses of universal values while still defending those values against authoritarian manipulation. It would also allow us to ask more precise questions: Who defines universality? Through which institutions? Under what conditions? With what forms of coercion? For whose benefit? And with what possibilities of contestation from below?

Conclusion

The central argument of this essay is that democracy, human rights, equality, and freedom must be understood as historically constructed values embedded in relations of power. Their modern forms emerged through processes of state-building, capitalism, imperialism, legal coercion, and institutional struggle. They have often been imposed through asymmetrical relations between core and peripheral societies. In this respect, postcolonial critique is not merely useful but necessary.

Yet critique alone is insufficient. When the critique of Western universalism becomes a blanket rejection of universal values, it risks enabling authoritarian regimes that use anti-colonial rhetoric to legitimize repression. The challenge is therefore not to choose between universalism and critique, but to reconstruct the language of universal values after critique.

Human rights and democracy are neither pure colonial instruments nor innocent universal ideals beyond history. They are contested political formations. Their meaning is produced through struggle, and their future depends on whether they can be detached from hegemonic civilizational narratives without being surrendered to relativism or authoritarianism. What is needed is not a return to naïve modernism, but a more reflexive universalism: one that acknowledges its own historical violence while preserving the emancipatory force of its claims.

