


# ARTICLES

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## CONTRIBUTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS FROM A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE: A CRITICAL REVIEW

*Contribuições dos negócios internacionais a partir de uma perspectiva pós-colonial: uma revisão crítica*

*Aportes de los negocios internacionales desde una perspectiva poscolonial: una revisión crítica*

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### ABSTRACT

The mainstream literature on international business has played a key role in an asymmetric international process by prioritizing hegemonic power and dominance of developed countries. Practices of this Imperialism, especially by multinational companies, are traditionally rooted in colonial legacies. This article reviews the theoretical and empirical research on international business from the critical perspective of post-colonialism. The findings show that multinational enterprises possess advantages over their host country, suggesting further traces of dominance between colonizers and former colonies. Specifically, findings show that topics around language, slavery, control mechanisms, imperialism, and capitalism are dominant in the field of international business, suggesting a strong effect of historical colonialism on international business activities. The critical analysis grounded on post-colonial and international business perspectives draw attention to some neglected, if not untouched, strands with substantial gaps in the prevalent knowledge, opening new avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** International Business, multinationals, colonialism, post-colonialism, postcolonial theory.

### RESUMO

A literatura dominante sobre negócios internacionais tem desempenhado um papel fundamental em um processo internacional assimétrico ao priorizar o poder hegemônico e o domínio dos países desenvolvidos. As práticas desse imperialismo, especialmente por empresas multinacionais, estão tradicionalmente arraigadas em legados coloniais. Este artigo, portanto, tem como objetivo revisar a pesquisa teórica e empírica sobre negócios internacionais sob a perspectiva crítica do pós-colonialismo. Os resultados mostram que as empresas multinacionais possuem vantagens sobre o país anfitrião, sugerindo, ainda, traços de domínio entre colonizadores e ex-colônias. Especificamente, os resultados mostram que tópicos sobre linguagem, escravidão, mecanismos de controle e imperialismo e capitalismo são dominantes no campo dos negócios internacionais, sugerindo um forte efeito do colonialismo histórico nas atividades comerciais internacionais. A análise crítica fundamentada em perspectivas pós-coloniais e de negócios internacionais chama a atenção para algumas vertentes negligenciadas, senão intocadas, com lacunas substanciais no conhecimento prevalente, abrindo novos caminhos para pesquisas futuras.

**Palavras-chave:** Negócios internacionais, multinacionais, colonialismo, pós-colonialismo, teoria pós-colonial.

### RESUMEN

La literatura dominante sobre negocios internacionales ha jugado un papel clave en un proceso internacional asimétrico al priorizar el poder hegemónico y el dominio de los países desarrollados. Las prácticas de este imperialismo, especialmente por parte de empresas multinacionales, están tradicionalmente arraigadas en legados coloniales. Este artículo, por lo tanto, tiene como objetivo revisar la investigación teórica y empírica sobre los negocios internacionales desde la perspectiva crítica del poscolonialismo. Los hallazgos muestran que las empresas multinacionales poseen ventajas sobre su país anfitrión, lo que sugiere más rastros de dominio entre los colonizadores y las excolonias. Especificamente, los hallazgos muestran que los temas relacionados con el idioma, la esclavitud, los mecanismos de control, el imperialismo y el capitalismo son dominantes en el campo de los negocios internacionales, lo que sugiere un fuerte efecto del colonialismo histórico en las actividades comerciales internacionales. El análisis crítico basado en las perspectivas poscoloniales y de negocios internacionales llama la atención sobre algunos aspectos descuidados, si no intactos, con brechas sustanciales en el conocimiento predominante, abriendo nuevas vías para futuras investigaciones.

**Palabras clave:** Negocios Internacionales, multinacionales, colonialismo, poscolonialismo, teoría poscolonial.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in International Business (IB) studies as a distinct field to understand multinational corporations' (MNCs) international activities (Meyer, 2017; Yeganeh, 2020). A large number of IB scholars have examined the determinants of cross-border activities, location attractiveness, firm-specific ownership advantages and firm-specific capabilities, the Uppsala approach, and advantages of the firm in a specific host country (Buckley & Casson, 1976; Dunning, 1988; Hymer, 1960; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Further, mainstream IB literature has often prioritized MNCs' activity and performance across different host countries (Buckley, 2021), while studies have argued that emerging economies show institutional issues (Jacob et al., 2022; Peng, 2003) that may undermine their activities.

Accordingly, the field of IB was originally developed based on the behavior of firms from developed countries, especially the United States and European countries (Guedes & Faria, 2010). Thus, mainstream IB studies provide the necessary conditions to domesticate local practices and “cultures” and introduce/transfer “global” theories and knowledge (Ibarra-Colado et al., 2010). This enables the expansion of the neo-imperial space through the dominant theory of globalization and thus quickly accelerates the world to the stage of global homogeneity (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Fatehi & Taasobshirazi, 2020). The field of IB gained new momentum in 2000 when studies on critical perspectives started to discuss the universal logic within IB studies stressing views of different countries, cultures, and values (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001; Cairns, 2019).

There is an understanding that the scientific progress in the field – such as the emergence of the journal *Critical Perspectives on International Business (CPoIB)* – paved the way for relevant critical studies on IB (e.g., Roberts & Dörrenbächer, 2012) to gain strength, quantity, and geographical amplitude against the mainstream theory of IB. These critical studies have argued that research on IB contributes to reinforcing and perpetuating the dominance of developed countries over those still in development but without meaningful consideration of the broad social and economic impacts of their activities (Cairns, 2019). Nevertheless, research still lacks interest and extension in confronting externalities from MNCs' activities, especially in emerging economies, largely explored in the face of their colonial tied with imperial nations (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Glaister et al., 2020; Meouloud et al., 2019; Sayed & Agndal, 2022).

Despite all efforts and the contributions of previous research (e.g., Roberts & Dörrenbächer, 2012, 2014), less emphasis has been placed on the relationship between IB activity and postcolonialism. Thus, the mainstream IB studies remain unclear and lack the objectivity to address how IB and MNCs' activities are closely tied to the past colonial landscape. To address this gap, this article reviews the theoretical and empirical research on IB from the critical perspective of postcolonialism. By selecting the fields of IB and postcolonialism (Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019; Westwood & Jack, 2007), we extended the analysis to clarify IB studies' contributions by proposing a review and future research agenda. Our motivation stems from the observation that most IB studies rely on broad discussions originating from

the internationalization process (Buckley, 2021), while historical specificities on the process of MNCs' expansion tied to colonialism remain largely underexplored.

Some contributions are noteworthy. By adopting a postcolonial perspective, we explicitly consider the role of modern IB activity and review the contributions of IB from a critical perspective. Our research contributes to critical IB studies as critical literature is getting ripe to push this field to the next level (e.g., Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019; Roberts & Dörrenbächer, 2012, 2014). The critical literature on IB is still in its youth, marking a significant step in the long-delayed emergence of critical studies as alternative perspectives on the new global order (Murphy, 2006). We contribute to the field with a critical analysis under the post-colonialism lens to identify the main contributions of IB in a modern and globalized economy. We add to past studies (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Westwood & Jack, 2007), critically reviewing the IB literature to untangle how this field is tied to postcolonial legacies (Glaister et al., 2020). Distinctively, we respond to a call for IB studies providing critical analyses (Buckley, 2021). Against this backdrop, the IB literature still lacks criticism and fuller understanding. We believe that a critical review helps fill this gap, accelerating research in the field of IB. We advance the IB literature by considering the postcolonialism lens to clarify and provide new insights for further studies.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Critical studies include different research groups and theories that offer and share their discursive features (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). The roots of critical perspective started in the 1920s by a group of unorthodox German Marxists who formed the Frankfurt School and significantly influenced Western thought, mainly considering philosophical themes. Critical studies provide an intellectual counterforce to orthodox social theories, which legitimize the technocratic administration of the modern and advanced industrial society (Adler et al., 2007). Furthermore, Adler et al. (2007) and Mandiola (2010) argue that the role of critical perspective is not targeted at poor management but at the business system and forms of management, allowing their perpetuation.

Traditionally, critical studies on the field of IB return to critiques of bureaucracy and capitalism with the premise that these structures exert power and control on the process and work relations perpetuating and legitimizing current forms of society – capitalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and productivity (Adler et al., 2007; Fatehi & Taasobshirazi, 2020). Unsurprisingly, several lines of research in critical studies have emerged, resulting in a diffuse and multifaceted field that, like many other scientific fields, presents inconsistencies. The definition of what is critical in IB studies has been a subject of considerable debate, resulting in difficulty in synthesizing the literature and defining what is truly critical (see Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019). Thus, we conceive that it is not possible to stress all the literature in all kinds of critical studies in a single research.

Therefore, it is important to define the boundaries of analysis and appropriate “critical” terminology in this research. Consistent with the definition of other studies (see Adler et al., 2007; Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019), we note that IB can be critically discussed considering a postcolonial perspective (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Westwood & Jack, 2007). By doing so, we prefer to be more inclusive in defining what is critical as there is much to gain from focusing on a relatively small constellation of factors in IB from a postcolonial perspective. Therefore, postcolonialism is consistent with our objective as the IB activities are strongly related to historical events such as colonialism (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Glaister et al., 2020).

## RESEARCH METHODS

For the critical literature review, the approach adopted for selecting the scientific literature allowed us to capture relevant studies on two streams: the classical field of critical studies on IB and specific journal outlets. First, we searched for articles in the fields of business economics and management based on a common set of keywords – “colonial” or “postcolonial” or “neo-colonial” and “imperialism” or “neo-imperialism” (e.g., Adler et al., 2007; Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014; Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019). Second, we selected the “international business” term for all search fields to identify articles addressing any type of IB research.

We retrieved articles from the Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-Expanded), Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), and Emerging Sources Citation Index – ESCI (contains relevant journals, such as the *CPoIB*) from the Web of Science Core Collection from the first date available in the search engine to March 31, 2022. It is worth noting that there are specific journals oriented to critical studies on the field of IB, such as “*CPoIB*,” which is a high-quality peer-reviewed journal with a comprehensive list of the most important articles on critical studies in the field of IB (Cairns, 2019). The other scientific search engines were recognized for their highest coverage, rigor, reliability, high-impact factors, and international recognition in all scientific domains.

The search results were imported into the Mendeley reference manager to organize each article that might be overlooked using another method. The application of the criteria provided us with 6,570 articles. All ambiguities were removed. For standardization and to maintain the quality of the analysis, we considered only double-blind peer-reviewed articles written in English (excluding chapters and books, symposiums, and proceeding articles). Further, articles not pertinent to the field of IB or any pre-selected keywords were excluded. A review of the full text allowed us to exclude other articles that were out of coherency with the objective. After screening pertinent articles, the sample yielded 49 articles (theoretical and empirical studies). Table 1 shows the list of articles.

**Table 1.** Synthesis of related IB studies and postcolonialism

Authors(s)	Journal	Key points/main findings
Banerjee and Linstead (2001)	Organization	The emergence of a global culture marks the transformation to a culture of consumption, in which successful management of diversity effectively perpetuates global colonialism.
Cairns (2005)	CPoIB	Exposes challenges exemplars of “good” management practice from the managerial literature through engagement with a range of discipline-specific texts.
French and Wokutch (2005)	Business Ethics Quarterly	Child workers in the shoe industry are integrated into the global order. Efforts to end this work have been frustrated by locals; Americans see it as hazardous conceptions, while locals see it as a benign activity.
Daye (2009)	Journal of Business Ethics	MNCs in Fiji should conduct their business in ways that genuinely add economic value, avoid doing social harm.
Kaplinsky and Morris (2009)	European Journal of Development Research	Sub-Saharan African countries should maximize the opportunities by adopting a similarly integrated and focused response to Chinese investors who seek to draw on natural resources.
Westwood and Jack (2007)	CPoIB	It finds the field is currently imprisoned within a limited and limiting paradigmatic and institutional location.
Faria et al. (2010)	CPoIB	The interdisciplinary dialogue goes beyond borders established by the “center” and imposed on subalterns. This might be taken as a particular way of putting into practice a decolonial Latin perspective.
Guedes and Faria (2010)	CPoIB	Critique from a universal perspective that does not differentiate IB and IM in the Anglo-American literature is important but constrains the appraisal of national and regional.
Ibarra-Colado et al. (2010)	CPoIB	Introduce Latin perspectives to break down the universalistic point of view of CMS, introducing a “pluriversalistic” geopolitical position to consider alternate projects to neoliberal globalization.
Mandiola (2010)	CPoIB	Proposes a new articulation of the liberation concept as a resistance response facing a new form of oppression within current Latin affairs.
McKenna (2011)	Organization	The discourse of (neo)colonialism in the construction of the Other within the context of a view of China and India as developing and progressing, albeit North American leaders condemn their exploitative social and economic systems.
Roberts and Dörrenbächer (2012)	CPoIB	Taking stock of recent reflections on the future of IB is useful in determining possible topics for future contributions to <i>CPoIB</i> .
Selmier and Oh (2012)	Business Horizons	Language in international business shows a hierarchy, with English the most inexpensive among major trade languages.
Boussebaa and Morgan (2014)	CPoIB	There is a lack of “criticality” in context/power research and lack of attention to the neo-imperial character of MNCs with specific regard to their management and organization.

Continue

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Authors(s)	Journal	Key points/main findings
Boussebaa et al. (2014)	Journal of International Business Studies	Corporate Englishization does not merely overcome or, conversely, worsen transnational communication problems; it also (re)produces colonial-style power relations between the “Anglo-sphere” and the “Rest”.
Geppert and Dörrenbächer (2014)	International Journal of Management Reviews	It is necessary a more micro-political perspective and focusing on the micro-foundations of power relations in MNCs.
Aguilera et al. (2017)	Journal of World Business	Latin America is generating new ideas that contribute to a better understanding of how the home country shapes the behavior of firms.
Barnard et al. (2017)	Management and Organization Review	Firms in Africa face challenges (i.e., extreme conditions) and opportunities (laboratory for modifying current theories).
Boussebaa and Brown (2017)	Organization Studies	Englishization is a process of normalization, surveillance, and conformist identity work, serving as a tool to discipline local selves in line with the imperative of international competitiveness.
Liou and Rao-Nicholson (2017)	International Business Review	Colonial ties have a negative impact on the long-term operating performance of South African acquirers.
Meyer (2017)	Multinational Business Review	Two sets of concerns of the anti-globalization movement: the unequal distribution of the benefits of globalization and emergent constraints on national sovereignty.
Michailova et al. (2017)	Global Strategy Journal	Ethnocentrism can exist in IB and is necessary to rethink ethnocentrism in IB and show implications for global strategy research.
Mol et al. (2017)	Global Strategy Journal	Africa received limited attention in the past and now offers an opportunity to challenge existing theories.
Stevens and Newenham-Kahindi (2017)	Global Strategy Journal	Home-country legitimacy with the host country is in affecting Chinese MNCs in East Africa in the face of the political risk.
Abdelrehim et al. (2018)	Business History	There is a persistence of colonial modes of organization after decolonization in South Asia.
Abugre (2018)	CPoIB	Rent and resource-seeking used by MNCs are central to “manufactured” risks, and this negatively creates an impact on post-independent Africa.
Adams et al. (2018)	CPoIB	Risks (i.e., language, culture from MNCs) arising from business practices that rent and resource-seeking strategies used by MNCs negatively impact post-independent Africa.

Continue

**Table 1.** Synthesis of related IB studies and postcolonialism

Authors(s)	Journal	Key points/main findings
Alcaraz and Salamanca (2018)	Review of International Business and Strategy	International migration that goes from the EU and North America to the Latin region is related to the firms' internationalization and their location.
Stringer and Michailova (2018)	Multinational Business Review	Modern slavery in GVCs is a complex challenge to MNCs' governance, opening routes that enable modern slavery.
Wanderley and Celano (2018)	CPoIB	There is a postcolonial relationship between Brazilian MNC as the holder of power of resources in Bolivia, even though Brazil never colonized Bolivia.
Reyes et al. (2019)	Multinational Business Review	While foreign firms are cautious of spillover to host country firms, the OFDI within Latin America shows a historical dependence on commodities and natural resources.
Burmester et al. (2019)	CpoIB	Modern slavery is a multi-level governance challenge. Understanding the MNCs' different roles in governance may contribute to reducing the incidence of modern slavery.
Cairns (2019)	CPoIB	The author supports IB research and activity that is underpinned by thinking to inform action for the good of society at large.
Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard (2019)	CPoIB	Critical IB research can be broken into five main topics: positioning critical IB research, postcolonial IB studies, effects of IB activities, financialization and the global financial crisis and "Black IB" and corporate social responsibility.
Meouloud et al. (2019)	Management and Organization Review	Francophone African firms' internationalizing first to France, a lingering influence of colonial ties.
Fatehi and Taasoobshirazi (2020)	Thunderbird International Business Review	Modern economic and financial problems of capitalism made it very clear that unbridled capitalism may not produce the proclaimed prosperity.
Glaister et al. (2020)	Management International Review	Prior colonial ties are positively related to IFDI from colonizers to former colonies.
Sayed and Agndal (2020)	Culture and Organization	Socio-ideological and technocratic mechanisms of control allow subsidiary workers to elevate status while still cementing their role as dominated in the global hierarchy, silencing any resistance.
Storgaard et al. (2020)	Organization Studies	Neocolonialism is a means through which identity is worked on at MNC headquarters.
Osei et al. (2020)	CPoIB	Colonial ties have limited influence on the flow of FDI to Ghana, despite the institutional legacies between colonizers and colonies.

Continue

**Table 1.** Synthesis of related IB studies and postcolonialism

Concludes

Authors(s)	Journal	Key points/main findings
Yeganeh (2020)	CPoIB	Large MNCs aggravate the rising economic inequality in different ways, contributing to social and financial instability.
Boussebaa (2021)	CPoIB	Cross-cultural management and culture-sensitive studies of IB almost exclusively focused on cultural differences, whereas little attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of corporate-driven cultural globalization.
Das (2021)	CPoIB	Acquirers from China pursue strategic asset-seeking, creeping, and control-seeking acquisitions during the pandemic and pre-pandemic.
Dörrenbächer et al. (2021)	CPoIB	Offers contributions of three clusters, "re-reading the crisis," "crisis protectionism," and "firm strategies during the pandemic".
Konara and Wei (2021)	International Marketing Review	Language has a negative effect on subsidiary performance, while cultural distance on performance becomes stronger when the language difference is smaller (i.e., English).
Iwashita (2022)	International Business Review	MNCs need to use the parent country's language not only because of ethnicity but also by their post-colonial views.
Jacob et al. (2022)	European Management Review	MNCs from developed countries strategically manage their institutional context.
Sayed and Agndal (2022)	CPoIB	Provided three tools of neo-colonial control based on information systems adopted by offshore outsourcing of R&D work.
Robb and Michailova (2023)	Review of International Business and Strategy	Identified four MNC narratives and three approaches to responding to modern slavery.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

## RESULTS

### Contributions of International Business from a postcolonialism perspective

The traditional IB theory is supported by the internationalization theory (Hymer, 1960; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977) and the eclectic paradigm (Dunning, 1998), both considering ownership-specific or firm-specific advantages (Buckley, 1988, 2021). In response to the speech of a globalized and homogeneous world without polarities, several scholars (e.g., Banerjee & Linstead, 2001; Cairns, 2005; Faria et al., 2010) have recognized that these forms of business perpetuate colonialism practices. Colonialism is a historical perspective (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014), understood as the contemporary global system of hegemonic economic power under late capitalism based on a



heavily proactive and aggressive form of strategy to exploit natural resources from other locations (Westwood & Jack, 2007). For example, the first dated records of this practice by MNCs were registered by the British East Indian Company from Dutch and Portuguese traders who built their networks in Asia (Meyer, 2017).

Accordingly, the hegemonic discourse of globalization replicates several forms of colonialism since the ruling élite highly manages it, including political homogenization and favoritism for MNCs on local benefits, incorporating these élites into global structures and excluding and marginalizing ethnic groups (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001). To date, long colonial traditions and their structures of domination continue to reverberate in profound cultural and material ways. Thus, we organize four main specific categories based on the analysis to discuss their contributions to IB studies under the postcolonialism perspective, which form the structure of this section.

## Language

Language and colonialism are core topics in IB studies. Generally, researchers explored the language ties between colony and colonizer as language can play a strong influence over the colony. Language and colony ties among the countries help explain OFDI to other locations (Alcaraz & Salamanca, 2018). For example, Adams et al. (2017) identified that MNCs' language and culture of risk, based on their rent-seeking and resource-seeking strategies, negatively impact post-independent Africa.

Analyzing firms from Francophone Africa, Meouloud et al. (2019) concluded that firms from all former colonies follow an internationalization trajectory shaped by the source (colonizer), serving as a lingering influence of colonial ties. Based on the “corporate Englishization” of Indian call centers, Boussebaa et al. (2014) discovered that corporations reproduce colonial-style power relations between the “Anglo-sphere” (i.e., English-speaking nations) and the “Rest.” Accordingly, Englishization is a process of normalization, surveillance work that serves to discipline local selves as an imperative order of international competitiveness (e.g., Boussebaa & Brown, 2017).

Iwashita (2022) showed that MNCs have a high need to use the parent country's language not only because of ethnicity but also because of their post-colonial views. This leads us to argue that, overall, MNCs try to impose their language in other locations, especially when it comes to the English language. For example, African workers handle several languages, including the “imposed” language at work (Abugre, 2018). In this sense, language differences could have a negative effect on subsidiary performance (Konara & Wei, 2021). In fact, the English language shows a hierarchy and, at its very best, is the most inexpensive among trade languages (Selmier & Oh, 2012).

Overall, language is very influential in business practices. Today, colonialism traces endure across countries. However, our understanding is still rather limited about its domination, such as “Englishization” in emerging economies over native languages. Some studies focused on language as a determinant in MNCs' activities. Nonetheless, some of the effects of language on human behavior still have to be researched in more detail. Critically, this arguably results

in severe impacts on societies. We thus believe that part of this issue refers to MNCs and the prevalence of a dominating language in the globalization process.

## Slavery

Other scholars focus on the relationship between slavery and MNCs. By its very nature, slavery is a historical aberration (Burmester et al., 2019). Several emerging economies still show a large scar of the savage colonization perpetrated by the Empires.

Over the years, studies continue to show how companies in emerging economies show labor conditions analogous to slavery and how MNCs heavily explore the material resources of colonies (Boussebaa & Morgan, 2014). For example, the rise of child labor exploded, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wuilbercq, 2021). Western European countries have benefitted much from Africa since slavery times, heavily exploiting people (Stevens & Newenham-Kahindi, 2017) and natural resources, such as gold and silver, from Latin America (Aguilera et al., 2017). Nowadays, many MNCs are accused of aiding child labor in Congo to work in cobalt mining for lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles for the elite. This is only the tip of the iceberg of the dark remnants of colonialism.

Further, Stringer and Michailova (2018) explain that modern slavery can creep into, persist, and thrive in MNCs' global value chains (GVCs) due to country institutional failures, which are inherently complex challenges faced by MNCs' governance. The history repeats in other countries (e.g., Brazil), and child slavery can be found in many industries, especially shoes, which are closely integrated into the global order (French & Wokutch, 2005). Critically, emerging economies have a weak institutional development (e.g., weak regulatory system) (Peng, 2003), and such institutional failures do not exempt MNCs from exploring or acquiring resources from enslavement.

As noted, modern slavery occurs in many ways within the process of globalization and expansion of MNCs across countries (Robb & Michailova, 2023). To illustrate, after lawsuits and media pressures, Nestlé increased attention to the cocoa plan program, with efforts that include the slave-free cocoa registration "cocoa plan." Indeed, Nestlé was one of the first MNCs to undertake efforts to address the issue. Nevertheless, this endeavor is financed by consumers, who pay a tax to fund their engagement in the policy-making process (Burmester et al., 2019). Overall, the research work in this area is relatively robust. Critically, we conceive that the shadows of slavery persist in many ways in modern society, especially those indirectly conducted by MNCs.

## Mechanisms of control

The pace of internationalization and control of subsidiaries is another behavior shaped by colonialism. Overall, MNC headquarters (the colonizer) shape the identity of the subsidiaries (the colonized) (Storgaard et al., 2020). Wanderley and Celano (2018) found a postcolonial relationship

between Brazilian headquarters in Bolivia, albeit Brazil never colonized Bolivia. Similar behavior is found in India by service firms. [Sayed and Agndal \(2020\)](#) highlight the ambivalent nature of the global firm, suggesting that global service firms provide the opportunity for periphery units to become equal to central ones, with coercive and universalizing routines. This is a direct clue that Western MNCs play a role in cultural globalization ([Boussebaa, 2021](#)).

Accordingly, such behavior is questioned by [Geppert and Dörrenbächer \(2014\)](#) as the rules of the game or “who sets them and how far are key subsidiary actors involved in this process.” This is because the internal legitimacy of MNCs’ subsidiaries tends to prioritize socio-cultural bridging strategies alongside the intra-MNCs network due to the effects of external changes ([Jacob et al., 2022](#)). Specifically, studies further emphasize the use of neo-colonial control tools, such as information systems (IS). For example, IS can control and shape relationships, allowing remote and real-time surveillance of Indian contract research organizations in the pharmaceutical industry ([Sayed & Agndal, 2022](#)).

The control mechanisms rooted in society bring remembrances of colonialism. Nevertheless, many are invisible, and it is still difficult to determine how they occur in practice. They resonate with a modern image of colonization in which the physical presence is no longer required to control individuals. Overall, we argue that various aspects of control mechanisms are linked between MNCs and their subsidiaries.

## Imperialism and capitalism

Several scholars have looked at how capitalism from imperial nations impacted IB activity. [Fatehi and Taasobshirazi \(2020\)](#) explain that the end of communism has altered the nature of rivalry among big powers and has changed it from military-political to economic-political war. [Westwood and Jack \(2007\)](#) criticize the USA as a neo-colonial power, not only due to the colonial rule based on military conquest and physical occupation of nations but due to its economic, cultural, and political power exerting considerable influence on other societies. It seems reasonable to argue that capitalist supremacy has remained the only viable option for managing the economy. Nevertheless, unbridled capitalism may not produce the liberal plan’s proclaimed prosperity ([Fatehi & Taasobshirazi, 2020](#)).

Recently we have seen a contrasting movement, the Russian colonialism or the Russian empire and the war in Ukraine. This event triggered a more modern and polite war among imperial nations, such as the capital war, to pressure MNCs to retaliate, impose sanctions and boycott Russia. To illustrate, after operating since 1990 and as a symbol of the iron curtain’s downfall, McDonald’s left Russia on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Nevertheless, this has not impeded Russia from opening its own “McDonald’s,” the fast food chain “*Vkusno i tochka*” (Delicious, full stop) Therefore, we observe the old Russia’s “war against Western neo-colonialism,” a past fire that does not extinguish.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep-seated colonial legacies and racist remarks in Africa ([Dörrenbächer et al., 2021](#)). For example, [Dörrenbächer et al. \(2021, p. 9\)](#) explained

that, in April 2020, two French doctors ([Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Loch](#)) in a TV discussion about Covid-19 trials in Europe and Australia reproduced the statement to use Africa as a testing lab for the West. The doctors pointed out that COVID vaccines should be tested first in Africa “where there are no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation”. Critically, we complement this racist practice from Empire nations as Africa was never a priority by the largest pharmaceutical MNCs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, strong racist behavior emerged from developed countries and their doubts about the quality of vaccines produced by developing economies (e.g., India and China). Therefore, the uncoordinated approach resulted in the pandemic lasting longer than it would if we had tackled it together ([Dörrenbächer et al., 2021](#)).

As noted, this last postcolonial aspect concerns the power of imperialism and capitalism over other nations. Thus, colonialism is a model of empire adopted and replicated by several Nations. That said, there is still a large dispute over world-hegemonic power. In this context, MNCs are omnipresent with broad dominance across nations, which may accelerate the conflicting power disputes among the strongest nations.

## DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With globalization, MNCs contributed to changing the international business landscape ([Johanson & Vahlne, 1977](#), [Dunning, 1998](#)). Nevertheless, colonialism persisted over time and even may have grown. Empirical evidence suggests that prior colonial ties are positively related to inward FDI from colonizers to former colonies in Africa ([Glaister et al., 2020](#)). By examining the historical relationship between Ghana (i.e., former colony) and the UK (i.e., former colonizer), [Osei et al. \(2020\)](#) identified that some remnants of the UK companies from colonial days are still actively operating in Ghana. Complementary, [Liou and Rao-Nicholson \(2017\)](#) documented that the performance of South African firms after acquisition can improve benefitting from the colonization history, mitigating the institutional distance. In sum, colonialism still plays a major role in shaping African business.

Further, [Yeganeh \(2020\)](#) points out that MNCs dominate the global economic scenario and benefit from their resources to develop sophisticated competitive advantages against smaller rivals and profits to the detriment of local workers. For example, even though MNCs clearly contributed to the economy of Fiji, [Daye \(2009\)](#) explains that firms are not likely to initiate actions that will benefit the country in the short term. The author alerts that there are institutional circumstances from colonialism in Fiji, and governments should pressure MNCs to alleviate social inequalities (e.g., adequate wages) as universalistic and abstract codes of conduct from MNCs are not efficient in all cases. We conceive that the lack of clarity in vague codes may trigger a path for modern slavery in emerging countries, especially by GVCs governed by MNCs ([Stringer & Michailova, 2018](#)).

Moreover, MNCs are still concerned about their local advantages. Reyes et al. (2019) showed that while foreign firms are cautious of the spillover effect to host country firms, the outward FDI within Latin America shows a historical dependence on natural resources from the region. While the former aims for global competitiveness and market share, the latter is based on resources. Boussebaa and Morgan (2014) argue that there is still room for exploration of the history of MNCs and the imperial enterprise of yesteryear, including the role of material resources of colonies and in shaping the institutional frameworks of colonies. This is noteworthy because even countries without historical post-colonial ties, such as China (McKenna, 2011), are bearing the Imperial position of colonizer, considering a long campaign to explore natural resources and labor in Africa (Kaplinsky & Morris, 2009). For example, China took advantage of the pandemic economic downturn and the pre-pandemic period adopting strategic asset-seeking and control-seeking acquisitions (Das, 2021).

A rich body of literature on critical IB studies has been mapping the research on the field of IB, providing relevant insights (e.g., Dörrenbächer & Gammelgaard, 2019; Roberts & Dörrenbächer, 2012, 2014). Through the critical literature review, our research contributes by offering some potential research avenues. We highlight a few of the most promising streams and insights, providing some additional directions pertaining to the four discussed topics. Our recommendations focus on what is still inconsistent and what deserves further exploration and debate.

Regarding studies on emerging economies, Africa is growing very fast as a laboratory (see Mol et al., 2017). Besides the challenges (i.e., extreme conditions in African countries), the region offers great opportunities to push forward the current theories as colonialism still heavily persists and influences the way of doing business between many acquired firms in the region (Barnard et al., 2017). Such behavior needs investigation related to MNCs and their ethnocentrism overburdened by domination, power, coordination, and efficiency (Michailova et al., 2017) as colonial modes of organization and ethnocentrism take time to change (Abdelrehim et al., 2018). This opens interesting avenues of research to investigate how past colonial ties influence the way of doing business in other countries with a legacy of colonialism. Specifically, Glaister et al. (2020) argued that the length of the colonial period and the time that passed after the country's independence must be considered to understand the colonization effects. Thus, the timeline since colonies gained independence may help researchers to assess specific contingencies of FDI in Africa and further compare with different colonial legacies in other locations (e.g., India and Latin American countries).

Furthermore, we know little about how European countries differ in the use of power to maintain ties with their former colonies. For example, Latin America faced strong European colonialism influencing the MNCs' foreign expansion to this region (Aguilera et al., 2017). Indeed, there are a number of European countries that heavily explored many countries, imbuing and influencing their languages, norms, laws, and culture. As illustrated by Boussebaa (2021), it is necessary to examine not only the impact of cultural differences but also how corporate globalization shapes and constructs norms, practices, and identities on a transnational scale.

To date, we find little research considering why colonizers (e.g., British, Portuguese, Spanish, and French colonies) show path dependence and resilience to maintain business activities with former colonies. Therefore, it is necessary to understand why some European nations have difficulty weaning off their colonial interests.

In addition, we find little research focused on control mechanisms (Storgaard et al., 2020; Wanderley & Celano, 2018). Future research should analyze the neocolonial mechanisms of domination from MNCs' headquarters and subsidiaries and their consequences on management activity in host countries. Future research should examine the role of SI in reproducing historical patterns of dominance (Sayed & Agndal, 2022) as an invisible source of control. We recommend that future research develop in-depth interviews (Iwashita, 2022) with employees and supervisors of MNEs from different nationalities located in countries with colonial history, which may reveal new insights. Finally, an intriguing question for future research is to evaluate if control mechanisms are different in developing economies with and without colonial legacies.

Furthermore, there needs to be a more careful linkage between language and colonial ties in the IB literature. For example, research at the firm and country level still adds language and colonial variables in an ad hoc manner (Konara & Wei, 2021; Reyes et al., 2019). It is also relevant to address the impact of another specific language on business activity, going further Englishization. For qualitative studies, we suggest that scholars should pay more attention to the globalization of language (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001). Boussebaa et al. (2014) raise a set of questions and open up an important avenue for scholars interested in the role of language in IB, which still provides fruitful debates for postcolonial and IB studies.

Another important avenue for research relies on how GVCs can become a breeding ground for modern slavery (Robb & Michailova, 2023; Stringer & Michailova, 2018). We argue that using the postcolonial perspective could bring interesting insights into how slavery grows in time by GVCs. Then, it is necessary to contest the legitimacy of MNCs and identify their rightful purpose in many different aspects (Cairns, 2019). Indeed, numerous research opportunities remain, such as COVID-19 and IB as a (post)colonial process of domination (see Dörrenbächer et al., 2021). The priority of vaccines across Imperial nations and the skepticism of Chinese and Indian vaccines is a topic of analysis that is worth investigating. The “anti-vaxxer” mandates from Imperial nations and how they impact IB should lead to promising discussion. Finally, military forces have not vanished (Fatehi & Taasobshirazi, 2020), and Russia's colonial war and its further implications for IB studies warrant debate in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Through a critical literature review, this article sought to synthesize theoretical and empirical research on IB from the critical perspective of postcolonialism. Although the IB theories have carried out respectable efforts, we critically highlighted the literature to expose the dark side of IB practices. Based on our analysis, we provided clues that IB activity is tied to

historical colonial behaviors from past centuries, such as natural resource-seeking, human exploitation, and the exercise of imperialism from North America and European countries over developing economies.

Notably, MNCs have contributed to international activity. However, we found MNCs may take advantage in less developed countries, supporting, even in an indirect manner, slavery activities, especially child labor. Another suggested colonial traces persisted, such as Englishization, as a common tool of power and language domination. We also observed that MNCs and subsidiaries are connected in a rather extensive way to their past colonial ties, providing modern mechanisms of control. Another relevant topic emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, clearly showing the power of imperialism and discrimination against vaccines from emerging economies, exposing further colonial marks from a not-so-distant past.

Finally, our research is not free of limitations. It is worth noting that a critical review faces considerable methodological challenges as it is not possible to search and find the entire related literature. This opens a path for future studies to consider other research methods and sophisticated analyses. Embodied in these issues, we hope scholars build up new thoughts and implications on IB literature.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nádia Campos Pereira Bruhn: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Supervision, Visualization, Validation.

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