

The Rise of Ali Mazrui

Ali Mazrui arrived in the world of scholarship in the 1960s. This was when postcolonial Africa was coming into being, when the Third World was attracting special attention from the Superpowers, and when the discipline of International Relations (IR) – and other disciplines – was seriously tackling issues of concern to the Third World, including Africa. Mazrui debated the issue of international justice versus international order with prominent scholars like Hedley Bull, who was one of the best-known IR scholars in the second-half of the twentieth century. In fact, Bull recognized Mazrui as a formidable intellectual adversary. Shortly after he published his influential book *The Anarchical Society* in 1977, Bull (1978:1390) wrote:

Ali Mazrui is not only the most distinguished writer to have emerged from independent Black Africa, and the most penetrating and discriminating expositor of the ideology of the Third World, but he is also a most illuminating interpreter of the drift of world politics...[T]he issues that interest [Mazrui], the audience to whom he addresses himself, even the values he embraces, are not simply black or African or Third World, but global.

Mazrui first made a name for himself by publishing, ‘On the Concept of “We are All Africans”’ in the *American Political Science Review* in 1963. As it turned out, this was to be a landmark in the evolution and development of Ali Mazrui as a scholar. The article was one of the first major writings in that journal about postcolonial Africa written by a postcolonial African scholar. American political scientist Herbert J. Spiro (1967:91) noted: ‘Mazrui’s article identified him as a perceptive and original student of African political thought’. By publishing in the journal, Mazrui declared that he was ready to engage intellectually one of the most vibrant communities of scholars in his field. It was also significant that the article should be published in an influential journal of political science based in an increasingly influential country in the world – the United States.

Additionally, later in the decade, Mazrui (1968:69-83) published another article in another major journal, *World Politics*. The article, ‘From Social Darwinism to Current Theories of Modernization’, was significant for two reasons. It further problematized the North-South debate by introducing a cultural element to it. But the publication of the article was also indicative of how relatively more receptive the discipline had been not only to North-South issues but also to a different perspective which informs it.

Mainstream IR, of which Hedley Bull was a part, thus picked up Mazrui and engaged him because there was a concerted effort and genuine commitment to understanding international re-

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lations in all its complexities, including by explaining or evaluating what Donald Puchala (1998:135-157) described as: ‘...the significance of the embittered tone, the complex motivations, the mythological underpinnings, or the historical dynamics of North-South relations’. The relationship between Bull and Mazrui was, however, not a one-way street. According to J. D. B. Miller (1990:65-78), Mazrui, too, was a positive influence on Bull: ‘Hedley Bull’s contact with stimulating people like Ali Mazrui caused him to ask questions about the direction in which the Third World might be heading...’ Although Mazrui’s focus was, as Bull said, both Third World and global, his perspective was, and has continued to be, bottom-up. It was this postcolonial orientation in Mazrui which Bull had in mind when he described him as ‘the expositor of the ideology of the Third World’.

The Decline of Ali Mazrui

Ultimately, however, it was perhaps the same bottom-up perspective about the Third World, a perspective which, to adapt a phrase from Philip Darby (1997:11-32), not only articulates Third World dissatisfaction with its lot but also attempts to change it, that marginalized Mazrui in the IR world of the 1970s and 1980s. The external manifestations of how Mazrui’s relationship with Bull eventually soured perhaps symbolized the then emerging ‘paradigm shift’ in the mainstream discipline and the nature of its consequences. As Mazrui reminisced:

Hedley Bull thought that I carried my anti-imperialism too far at a conference in Britain, which addressed international issues in connection with American hostages held in revolutionary Iran in the late 1970s. In my speech I argued that it was a change that Americans were hostages. Most of the time the United States held much of the world hostage to what Americans regarded as their national interest. I spoke with passion and at one stage I stopped speaking in a struggle to hold back my tears and prevent a breakdown. After questions and answers Hedley Bull came to the front and said to me with a twinkle in his eye ‘You are quite mad!’(Author’s Interview with Mazrui, 29 January 2010).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a general consensus was emerging among realists and liberal IR scholars that the Third World required a different set of theories. Mainstream theory was redefining its identity as a discipline designed for ‘the study of great power behavior’ (Waltz quoted in Hosli 1998:27; Mearsheimer 2001:5), effectively closing itself off to Mazrui’s concerns. This was certainly

not the kind of IR Mazrui (1989a:469-487) had in mind when he wrote: ‘I experienced international relations as a person before I studied it professionally’. Indeed, Mazrui (2000a:276) continued to insist that: ‘...the power gap between the North and the South provides a central dynamic of world politics’. With the study of international relations thus ‘provincialized’ (Dunn 2001:1-8), it was not surprising that the stars of ‘Third World’ intellectuals like Mazrui should begin to dim in the discipline.

There is another reason why Mazrui was dropped by or became more obscure in the mainstream discipline. When Mazrui later engaged some of the core assumptions of IR theory, he rarely deployed familiar ‘theoretical’ concepts and bewildering terminologies (see, for instance, Mazrui 1976a). For instance, Mazrui (2000b:369) had observed: ‘While Muslims have failed in maintaining peace toward each other, Westerners have found it among themselves. A whole new body of literature is emerging based on the premise that “democracies do not go to war against each other”’. Mazrui was, of course, referring to Democratic Peace Theory. The relevance of Mazrui’s contributions in this period to the theoretical debates become invisible and are not therefore readily clear unless one laboriously sifts through his sizable intellectual outputs to distil a theory out of his historical analyses.

The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed the gradual marginalization of the ‘classical’ method which Hedley Bull (1966:361) defined as:

the approach to theorizing that derives from philosophy, history, and law, and that is characterized above all by explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgment and by the assumptions that if we confine ourselves to strict standards of verification and proof there is very little of significance that can be said about international relations, that general propositions about this subject must therefore derive from a scientifically imperfect process of perception or intuition.

Fact/value dichotomy became the order of the day, placing positivism on a solid ground as the dominant method of research in IR. Also as a consequence of this, Mazrui became the methodological ‘Other’ in the eyes of the mainstream scholars, who were, in Mazrui’s (1974:67-71) own words, ‘...the different shades of behaviouralists in the western world...who believe that political science ought not to include normative and value preoccupations’. In any case, one of the enduring effects of the ultimate triumph of behaviouralism in IR was the reign of

quantification and formal models and the steady marginalization of culture as an important variable in the study of international relations. But Mazrui refused to change his approach and kept relative distance from the theoretical exchanges which characterized this period, taking leave of absence from the so-called ‘inter-paradigm’ debates of the 1980s, as he apparently chose to forget the mainstream discourse, by which he was also seemingly forgotten.

It must be reiterated, in closing, that Mazrui’s relative obscurity in IR would seem to pertain also to the predominance of Anglo-Saxon, top-bottom view in the academic discipline (Waever 1998:687-727). D. S. L. Jarvis (2000:2) was therefore right in pointing out: ‘...for a discipline whose purview is ostensibly outward looking and international in scope, and at a time of ever encroaching globalization and transnationalism, International Relations has become increasingly provincial and inward looking’. But, even more specifically, it was Waever (1997:4) who brought to our attention a possible reason for the exclusion of prominent non-Western thinkers from a book he co-authored, *The Future of International Relations: Masters in the Making?* ‘...if it had not been for the relative predominance of Anglo-American IR...it would have been nice to have had a chapter on [Ali] Mazrui or [Takashi] Inoguchi’.

On Postcolonial Theory and Social Constructivism

Postcolonial theory, or postcolonialism, emerged in the mid-1980s (Zeleza 2005: 12). It can be defined as a disciplined critique of power and modernity, an articulation of the dissatisfaction of the Third World with its condition of existence; the challenge and rejection of Eurocentric narratives and exposure of what they misrepresent or erase; and the formulation of alternative narratives about the postcolony (Chowdhry and Nair 2002:26; Beier, 2002:87; Matin, 2011:359; Rita-Kiki Edozie and Peyi Soyinka-Airewele, 2010:376).

Julian Go (2013:29) says postcolonial theory is ‘a loosely coherent body of writing and thought that critiques and aims to transcend the structures supportive of Western colonialism and its legacies’. Philip Darby (1997:14) outlines the major endeavors of postcolonial theory as: ‘emphasis placed on subjectivity, the critique of modernity, the challenge to positivism and the rejection of European universalism, the rising open of the nation-state, and the commitment to the marginal’. Extracted deliberately from wide-ranging sources, the above definitions of postcolonial theory affirm, to me, one thing. It is next to impossible to point to a single work in Ali Mazrui’s scholarship spanning more than half a century in which he was not engaged in some aspect of these postcolonial undertakings. Ali Mazrui practices postcolonial theory but without, to borrow a phrase from Paul Zeleza (2005:13), ‘postcolonial theory’s obfuscatory language and inflationary rhetoric’.

But Mazrui's vast scholarship also exhibits some of the attributes of social constructivism. While social constructivism is 'broadly' accepted today in the discipline, its relevance was seriously contested until very recently (Hurd 2008:301). Social constructivism has a rich variety (see, for example, Ruggie 1998: 855-885; Zehfuss 2002; Adler 2002: 94-118; Hurd 2008:298-316). Yet, like virtually all paradigms of thought about society, social constructivism too is based on specific assumptions about the nature of social knowledge, the relationship between the knower and what is to be known, and, of course, the best way of acquiring knowledge. I maintain that social constructivist assumptions inform much of Ali Mazrui's scholarship (see, for instance, Mazrui, 2007, 1976a:399, 1967b, and 1975).

Mazrui has also occasionally articulated (or anticipated) some of the major social constructivist postulates in a language strikingly similar to that of social constructivists. For example, social constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt (1999:25) wrote in relation to the role of ideas in world affairs: 'US military power means one thing to Canada, another to Communist China'. About a decade earlier, Mazrui (1989b:162) put the same notion in this way: 'Although Brazil is much larger than Iraq, Brazil's nuclear capability would be less of a global shock than Iraqi nuclear weapons. Pakistan's explosion of nuclear device would carry with it greater fears than a successful explosion by China'. Wendt (1999:31) also unveiled the useful concept of ontological security, defining it as 'the human predisposition for a relatively stable expectation about the world around them'. Wendt (1999:48) clarified the concept thus: '...along with the need for physical security, this [predisposition] pushes human beings in a conservative homeostatic direction, and to seek out recognition of their standing from their society'. In a very different context, Mazrui (1971:48) elaborated a roughly similar idea about four decades earlier; he called it 'the sense of security afforded by the familiar'.

Social constructivism emphasizes the role of inter-subjectively shared ideas, norms and values; highlights their constitutive as well as regulative roles; and refuses to privilege structures over agents, and vice versa. Mazrui tended to explain things much more than indicating which explanations are suitable and why. And yet, a Mazrui reader could feel the presence of an organizing 'theoretical' principle in his scholarship, too, one which is rooted in social constructivism. In closing, there are three things we should keep in mind about Mazrui's constructivism: to the extent Mazrui was a constructivist, first of all, he was so by default. Mazrui has never said he is a social constructivist; his constructivism predated the emergence of this school of thought as a major paradigm in IR; and, as indicated above, his constructivism had a distinct postcolonial flavor. But before we look at Mazrui's postcolonial constructivism more closely, it may be

profitable to understand the relationship, or lack thereof, between Mazrui's scholarship and the other 'isms' in IR.

Mazrui and the Other 'isms'

Mazrui's theoretical contribution to the mainstream discipline of IR is minimal. This has partly to do with his position on 'theory'. The very notion of an all-encompassing theory is anathema to him. Mazrui is also generally unconcerned about the lack of 'theoretical' consistency in his propositions. He abhors, for example, the amoral fabric of realist theory. On one occasion, Mazrui (1976) described Machiavelli as 'the first great rationalizer of hypocrisy and false pretenses as a cornerstone of high policy in diplomacy and politics'. In his approach to theorizing, Mazrui subscribes, as I indicated already, to classical realism, as defined by Hedley Bull (1966:361). This is classical realism as method rather than as a worldview.

It is also worth noting that Mazrui escaped the influence of Hans Morgenthau's realism although the two were colleagues at the University of Chicago at one time and had interacted closely. Yet Mazrui (1980:1-20) does share some of the basic propositions of a variant of realism, such as the idea that nuclear proliferation is not necessarily inimical to global security. It must be noted, however, that Mazrui's argument about nuclear weapons is based on moral calculus rather than on the logic of deterrence. Mazrui (1980) is for total nuclear disarmament, but he is also against 'nuclear apartheid'; his advocacy of nuclear proliferation was premised on the assumption that 'a dose of the disease becomes part of the necessary cure'. As he later elaborated: 'Some degree of proliferation may shock the five principal nuclear powers out of their complacency. The proliferation would gradually convince them that this system of a few select nuclear powers cannot be long sustained. Therefore we should aim for global nuclear disarmament, universal renunciation of these evil weapons for everybody, not just for all but the five countries but for everybody' (1998:5-11). As of late, incidentally, Mazrui's position seems to be winning some following among empirical political theorists, too, such as J. David Singer (2008:256). In any case, Mazrui's advocacy against nuclear Apartheid speaks to the postcolonial impulse in him.

Mazrui has also advanced arguments which are in tune with the liberal theory of IR. Indeed, it is arguable that much of Mazrui's scholarship shows such impulse, particularly as it was articulated more fully in his most ambitious book, *World Federation of Cultures* (1976a). Like liberalism, Mazrui's theory places greater emphasis on the utility of institutions.

Mazrui parts company both with realism and liberalism in important ways such as in his view that cultural groups, flexibly defined, constitute important units of analysis of world politics and that both hierarchy and anarchy co-exist in and define the

contemporary international system. In Mazrui's framework, the state also ceases to be the primary and unitary actor in world politics. For Mazrui, in fact, nothing is far from the truth than the suggestion that postcolonial African states are 'like-units'. The state is just one of multiple players in world politics. Depending on the issue, indeed, a tribe could be a more significant unit of analysis than the state in his framework. Mazrui's reliance on different levels of analysis speaks to the constructivist impulse in him. As Ian Hurd (2008:306) has noted: '[For constructivists] for any given puzzle in international relations, there are undoubtedly important elements of the answer to be found at all levels of analysis'.

In general, it is impossible to pigeonhole Mazrui in theoretical terms, as a realist or a liberal, a fact which did not necessarily augur well for his place in IR. This is so simply because the rule of the game in North American IR became, in the words of James Der Derian (2009): 'without label, a box or a school, one does not exist'. But with his emphasis on deconstructing Eurocentrism, with his deep interest in the study of languages and their role in the 'construction of subjects', with his special attention to inter-subjectively shared ideas, norms and values, with his longstanding fascination about the issues of culture and identity formation, and with his openness about the permissiveness of normative bias in social inquiry, Mazrui's scholarship rhymes more naturally with (post-positivist) social constructivism than any other '-ism' in the mainstream discipline. But, as I elaborated above, Mazrui's constructivism has a strong postcolonial bent – giving us possibly the new paradigm of postcolonial constructivism.

Mazrui's Postcolonial Constructivism

Ali Mazrui is a postcolonial theorist par excellence. He is also a social constructivist. Unlike postcolonialism, social constructivism emerged in the West to deal with issues primarily affecting the West. If so, how could we invoke social constructivism to describe Mazrui's addressing of postcolonial concerns? How can postcolonialism and social constructivism be united in postcolonial constructivism?

Mazrui is adept at and is in favor of tearing European ideas out of their historical and cultural context and applying them to postcolonial Africa. He does not reject European ideas out of hand; he does not seek to invent for Africa a different paradigm of thought altogether if there is another alternative. Instead he often strives to domesticate and use 'foreign' ideas to deepen our understanding of the African condition. He had maintained that the best way for Africa to minimize the negative consequences of (some) Western ideas, values (and institutions) is to make them more relevant to Africa's needs. As he (Mazrui 2012) reminded us recently:

I demonstrated how Edmund Burke, J. J. Rousseau, and V. I. Lenin could be made more relevant for Africa... I applied Burke's philosophy to an African situation... I also used in an African context J-J Rousseau's philosophical distinction between the general will of all as applied to a postcolonial society. All these were efforts [to make Western ideas relevant for Africa] without necessarily disengaging from the global heritage.

Thus Mazrui downplays the Europeanism of ideas, even if he also takes issues with their (sometimes presumed) universality. He Africanizes those ideas. By doing so, Mazrui offers not only an alternative reading of Africa that is fresh but also enriches the borrowed ideas by adding a new dimension to them, and without adulterating the Africanism of his perspective in the process.

Postcolonial constructivism is thus what emerges from the cross-fertilization of Mazrui's postcolonialism and his social constructivism. Postcolonial constructivism can be simply defined as an articulation of postcolonial concerns, with a social constructivist accent; it is also a systematic interrogation of power and modernity. Methodologically, postcolonial constructivism represents a form of analysis which accommodates ethical considerations by integrating questions of justice, legitimacy and moral credibility into its concepts. In other words, empirical theory (observation) and value theory (moral judgment) are fused in postcolonial social constructivism.

Displaying a determination to unmask aspects of the 'received truth' either for the sake of knowledge (for sharpening the mind) or for transforming or, at least, influencing the course of history is one feature of postcolonial constructivism. And so is a disciplined challenge of dominant narratives, a challenge which is based on basic counter-hegemonic instincts. Apart from specific methodological and normative orientations, postcolonial constructivism has a particular interest in the role of cultural forces in world politics, the unity of the ideational and the material, the objective and the subjective, the empirical and the normative, and the local and the universal. It allows pursuit of disciplined inquiry without disciplinary restrictions and expressions of unity of opposites but without a hint of analytical contradictions.

The theory of postcolonial constructivism has a place for divergent issues and conflicting claims (see, for instance, Mazrui 1995:25; 1980). Because coherence has no special privilege in postcolonial constructivism, deviations are not systematically weeded out and paradoxes are not concealed. But how does postcolonial constructivism successfully relate contradictions in social reality without introducing outright inconsistencies to its narratives? Postcolonial constructivism accomplishes this task through several inter-related (and overlapping)

strategies, including: classification or the usage of perceptive typologies, macro-history, and multi-disciplinary and qualitative data orientation.

Classification makes it unnecessary to screen out deviant cases, opening the door wide for seemingly conflicting observations. Mazrui has a special liking and gift for classifying different concepts, events and processes in an original way. In the positivist social sciences, the necessity of classification, even its possibility, is likewise almost taken for granted. A related issue which arises is this: if classification occupies such a central place in the positivist project, and if postcolonial constructivism is anti-positivist in its orientation, then how can we resolve the apparent tension between postcolonial constructivism and positivist social science? Let me start, first, by re-stating the three reasons why I say that Mazrui's scholarship (or postcolonial constructivism) is anti-positivist. Mazrui does not believe that a knowable reality exists out there which is driven by immutable natural laws and mechanisms, that inquiry takes place through a one-way mirror in which values are prevented from influencing outcomes, and that manipulative and experimental method of inquiry is the ultimate path to knowledge. Mazrui's

scholarship is thus an assault on the foundational principles of positivism.

Postcolonial constructivism deploys macro-history in search of broad changes and patterns in social processes. When Bull (1978:1) depicted Mazrui as 'a most illuminating interpreter of the drift of world politics', he was drawing our attention to Mazrui's acute sense of macro-history; Mazrui himself had made it clear quite early on when he declared his commitment to 'the study of global trends and their moral implications' (Mazrui 1976a:xix). It was also remarkable that, despite the mutual respect each had for the other, Bull and Mazrui strongly disagreed on a macro-historical issue – international justice (Bull, 1977:74, 93-94). Postcolonial constructivists thus look for not only contradictions in social reality but also for linkages between sometimes seemingly unrelated phenomena. Macro-historical orientation in research makes the endeavor more sensitive to contrasts in social reality than micro-historical perspective as it presupposes wider knowledge and does not easily let its practitioner fall prey to absolute positions or universalist claims and aspirations. With a clear sensibility to the notion that 'social reality' is too complex, postcolonial constructivism crisscrosses disciplinary boundaries

with utmost ease. Mazrui's works show how totally unconcerned he had been about the imaginary boundaries between different disciplines (see, for instance, Mazrui 1994; 1991; 1990; 1983a; 1983b; 1976b and 1977).

With its emphasis on qualitative and historical method and with no a priori commitment to quantitative measurement and operationalization, postcolonial constructivism is also less constrained about the range of concepts it could use or the domain of data it could target. Mazrui relies most minimally on 'quantitative' data: his writings usually have no tables or graphs; they also generally lack footnotes and bibliographies. Postcolonial constructivism is not only accommodative of concepts which may not be operationalizable, it also rejects the notion that the data which is useful and reliable should come solely from empirical observation. In this sense, Mazrui is a 'transfactualist' (to borrow a useful term from Jackson (2010:36-37)) who 'holds out the possibility of going beyond the facts to grasp the deeper processes and factors that generate those facts'. Postcolonial constructivism is centered on overcoming rationalist limitations by allowing usage of data obtained through means other than observation and document analysis has

other decisive advantages such as its openness to what pre-literate societies have to offer through non-written data. Mazrui (2001:99) has explicitly rejected the assumption, as he put it, that 'thought is not thought unless it is also written'. His own writing style is testimony to the oral-written continuum.

Conclusion

More than four decades ago, John Nellis (1974:831-833) observed that Mazrui was 'frequently and severely criticized by radical social analysts who find his traditional scholarship irrelevant and his liberal principles infuriating...'. Mazrui's 'traditional scholarship' that was under attack, was one which anchored itself in the historical method, eschewed fetishism of numbers, and accepted permissiveness of normative bias in social inquiry. The issues raised by mainstream scholars in the 1970s about Mazrui's scholarship in this way closely mirrored the fundamental schism which exists today between positivism and post-positivism. Mazrui's corpus of writings and contemporary trend in IR seem to suggest that early in his career he was, in effect, breaking a new theoretical ground of social analysis, which may be called postcolonial constructivism.

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