

Why Race Matters: Examining 'Terrorism' Through Race in International Relations

Written by Amal Abu-Bakare

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AMAL ABU-BAKARE, MAY 9 2017

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903:16)

In present studies of international affairs, it is almost impossible if not cruel to overlook how acts of terrorism, the politically motivated effort to change the status quo through violence and subversion, continue to dominate discourses of international politics and diversely affect peoples of the international community (Kilcullen, 2005). Such incidences of power and conflict require scholars to further explore people-focused means of political inquiry, as on a daily basis, news of new violent acts of terror makes us increasingly aware that violence does not discriminate. Anyone is capable of becoming its victim. This essay maintains that as academics, policymakers and people, we need to humanise, meaning to personify and make personal, how we observe terrorism and terror.

It is acknowledged that such words hold fresh wounds, as citizens of the United Kingdom continue to mourn the loss of safety and security felt within their borders, existing in the aftermath of the most recent Westminster attack. On March 22, Khalid Masood, aged 52, killed four pedestrians and injured around 50 others, as he drove through Westminster Bridge. Masood then crashed his vehicle into the barriers of Parliament Yard before entering through the gate to the Palace of Westminster, where he fatally knifed unarmed PC Keith Palmer.

This story is emotive, triggering, and tragic for all people, and we continue to struggle to conceptualise how to move forward, together, in solidarity with one another amidst such heart wrenching times. Yet, for the international community, this was not the only terrorism story that made headlines that week. Just two days before the Westminster attack, in the United States, James Harris Jackson drove two hours to the Chelsea neighbourhood of New York, and fatally stabbed Timothy Caughman, a 66-year old man, with a 26-inch sword. When Jackson turned himself in to police two days later, in his confession, he stated that he had killed Caughman because he was black, in an effort to deter inter-racial relationships.

In the interviews that followed, Jackson said that, in retrospect, he would have preferred to kill “a young thug” or “a successful older black man... These younger guys that put white girls on the wrong path”. Jackson additionally complained about popular culture, saying that on television, “it’s like every other commercial in the past few years has a mixed-race couple in it....The white race is being eroded... No one cares about you”. Jackson said he envisaged that if white women witnessed his actions, they might be discouraged, or in his words, they might say, “Well, if that guy feels so strongly about it, maybe I shouldn’t do it.”

Why this story matters to international politics, why this incident of racially motivated violence is important, is because on March 28th, 2017, Jackson, in addition to hate crimes indictments, was formally charged with terrorism in court. For possibly the first time, since the awful event that was the 2015 Charleston church shooting, links between white supremacy and terrorism have been made in mainstream political discourse. However, this time, unlike perpetrator Dylan Roof who was not charged, Jackson has been legally identified as a ‘terrorist’ for a racially motivated attack conducted with a political agenda. Masood in the context of Islamic-extremism and Jackson, in the context of racism, are both now, within the eyes of the law, perpetrators of terrorism. In North America, this has led to mass contestation over the label of ‘terrorist’, but within academia this contestation has importantly brought attention to the significance

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of race to global politics, and the disciplines that study global politics, like that of International Relations (IR).

As a field of inquiry focusing on the scholarly pursuit of knowledge about the international-its politics, history, and events- within IR, the study of race has been a controversial pursuit (Abu-Bakare, 2017). As a term with numerous interpretations, in academia, race is generally understood to refer to the hierarchical adjudication of human competencies through the categorising and essentialising of group attributes (Shilliam, 2016). IR scholars who write on race represent a growing area of academic inquiry focused on examining international politics through racialisation—the representational process whereby political consequence is ascribed to biological (generally phenotypical) human features (Anthias & Yuval Davis, 1992).

It is important to acknowledge that the term racialisation is different from 'racism'. Racism describes a power relationship. It describes interpretations of the idea of race, whether they be positive or negative, and the types of discrimination that flow from these interpretations (Garner, 2010). Racialisation also describes a power relationship, however, it refers to "a set of characteristics or behaviours... used to explain social and cultural difference, and to naturalise social exclusions" (Goldberg, 1993: 151). Racialisation differs from racism, in how it describes a process, an exercise of ascribing racial identities to socio-political practices, including that of terrorism (Garner, 2010).

Paraphrasing race scholar Steve Garner (2010:19), the concept of racialisation is premised on the idea that the object of analysis should not be the idea of 'race' itself, but instead be, "the process by which it [race] becomes meaningful in a particular context". Therefore, IR academics writing on racialisation call attention to how prevailing structures of race shape international politics, subsequently supporting and reproducing "an unjust stratified global order" (Anievas, Manchanda, & Shilliam, 2015:3). Scholars writing on racialisation also raise attention to how, similar to the term 'terrorism', almost all definitions of race are contested. They also raise attention to how it is continuously debated as to whether other cultural forms of human exclusion, predicated on the basis of religion, nationality, linguistic practices, etc., may also be considered forms of 'racism' and discussed as 'racial' matters (Carr, & Haynes, 2013). What is generally agreed upon by academics is that racism is the result of socially and politically inclined race-thinking, and that to be classed as such, racism must involve discourses of 'difference' that are predicated on an implied 'natural' weakness and/or strength because of a person's real or anticipated genealogical descent (Razack, 2007; Wieviorka, 1997).

It is important to acknowledge that despite present international contestation over racial issues in mainstream popular culture, whether it be the Westminster and Chelsea attacks or protests over police violence towards racialised communities in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France; whether it be the ongoing debates over the Muslim Ban invoked by US President Donald Trump; whether it be the Quebec massacre at a Mosque in Canada; or whether it be the continued British discontent directed at Syrian Refugees and British migrants, discussions of race within IR are not new.

As far back as the early twentieth-century, theorists such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois wrote on race-relations, using concepts like that of the 'colour line' seen at the beginning of this essay. In his 1903 publication *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois examined his own surroundings in post-civil war America in an effort to explain global politics. Additional race writing authors include Frantz Fanon, particularly his acclaimed *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979). Though Said does not discuss race explicitly like Fanon, in *Orientalism* the racialisation of the Arab body is discussed in-depth.

Most recently, the edited work of Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam, (2015) entitled *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line*, provides a broad window of perspective for examining the discipline of IR itself, providing a reminder of the discipline's own racialised origins. This includes their reminder of the normative part that scientific racism, and European and North American colonialism/imperialism once played in the establishment of IR as a discipline, and of how policy administrators and academics through IR have historically worked together to police 'darker nations' of the Global South. Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam (2015) also remind readers that accredited IR-based journals like *Foreign Affairs*, were once titled *The Journal of Race Development*, making a case both for how far we have come, and for how far we still need to go.

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Importantly, incidences like the Westminster and Chelsea attacks, have allowed for the study of race within IR to be further enriched by real everyday experiences of racial violence. It has encouraged academics from diverse backgrounds such as sociology, post-colonialism, feminism, anthropology, English literature, law, and history, to continue to invoke political discussions of racial order. The diverse responses of race-writing academics to contemporary politics demonstrate how race, gender, religion, and class, continue to interact and operate on multiple levels. This intersection allows for multiple sites of oppression to both exist in international politics and be connected across borders, waters, and communities (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

For instance, when examining international contestation over Jackson's terrorism verdict, we see transnational links being made between racially motivated acts of terror within North America and the United Kingdom. CNN's recent opinion piece by Sherrilyn Ifill entitled *Call white supremacist violence by its name: Terrorism*, has received over a thousand comments, where commentators suggest that CNN's choice to publish such writing demonstrates both a narrative of political correctness and a "pushing of leftist ideology". Some readers outright condemn what they argue to be the misuse of 'terrorism' as a 'mere label'. These same commentators maintain that if the term terrorism can be used for 'white supremacists', it should also be applied to Black Lives Matter protestors as well.

Such statements are contestable. They indicate that despite Jackson's indictment, it may still be too soon to expect the general public to process Timothy Caughman's murder and to respond reflectively. They also demonstrate that it may even be too soon to expect political commentators to address public contestation over Jackson's terrorism charges. Considering the recent and closely related indictment of Charleston shooter Dylan Roof, it is highly significant and disconcerting that the murder of Timothy Caughman still remains largely unacknowledged by key policymakers such as US president Donald Trump.

Similar to the case of Jackson, the racial and politically motivated intentions of Dylan Roof were clear; the intent of his actions was to create terror. Dylan Roof had chosen to drive two hours to Charleston to commit his crime (he told police, this was because the city is historic to the black community). Like Jackson, Roof also had a motive, "retaliation for perceived offenses against the white race". As stated within his trial exposé in *The New Yorker*, Roof discussed "the call to arms", the hope that his attack would agitate others, worsen race relations, increase racial tensions and lead to a race war". In a moving speech, former celebrity Daily Show host Jon Stewart, called Dylan Roof a 'terrorist'. However, neither former president Barrack Obama nor the courts that sentenced Roof to death by lethal injection this past January, ever legally recognized him as such.

Alarmingly, across the Atlantic, at the beginning of this year, an unnamed seventeen-year-old from West Yorkshire was found guilty of constructing an explosive device by a jury in the United Kingdom. The agenda he held was similar to that of both Jackson's and Roof's. The teen maintained that his actions were inspired by the murder of pro-immigrant MP Jo-Cox and by the perpetrator Thomas Mair, and were also part of an ongoing 'race war'. The teen even called the deceased MP a 'race traitor'. Despite his statements and confirmed neo-Nazi political affiliations, the teen was ordered to receive intensive counselling from a de-radicalisation expert and was acquitted of the preparation of terrorist acts. This was so even though the acquitting judge acknowledged that the teen continued to express extreme views. Had he been convicted of terrorist acts, he would have received "a substantial custodial sentence".

Such terrorist rulings are important to analysts of racial world ordering, not in their verdict or outcome, but in how the media and state institutions treat terrorism pursued by white and/or non-Muslim-identifying 'terrorists'. Though the Westminster attack is relatively new, in past incidences of domestic terrorism perpetrated by 'Islamic extremists', we have seen numerous evidence of mental health issues, histories of drug-addiction, and cases of extremism involving vulnerable children/adolescents. Such realisations have led to both a public and academic questioning of whether certain conditions can or should prevent us from categorising the actions of some political extremists as that of wilful and rationally performed acts of terror. For Dylan Roof, Thomas Mair, and the aforementioned unnamed teen, their provocations were sympathised as being linked to such conditions. Accordingly, their terrorist actions were designated as 'non-political' and therefore 'non-terrorist'. The public has noted these double standards as well. Social media memes continue to circulate, where the 'lone wolf' classification of terrorism granted to these actors, is cartoonishly asserted to be of a racialised endeavour, where 'white' perpetrators of terror are able to be pardoned

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due to their 'emotional issues', while 'terrorists' of colour are not.

As stated previously, in academic discussions of racial bias and terror, such revelations are not new. The bias against the Arab and/or the 'Muslim' (referencing Muslim as a racial term), and their popularly conceived 'natural readiness' to perpetrate violence has been noted by Frantz Fanon (1952:91) who writes the following:

Many times I have been stopped in broad daylight by policemen who mistook me for an Arab; when they discovered my origins, they were obsequious in their apologies; "Of course we know that a Martinican is quite different from an Arab." I always protested violently, but I was always told, "You don't know them."

For academics of race, the alleged unwillingness by state actors and media to unequivocally label a phenotypically white person as a 'terrorist' is historically connected to the global institutionalisation of 'white supremacy'. Here, it is important to differentiate between the definition of white supremacy in racial theorising, versus the definition as it is popularly understood in relation to the social label of being a 'white supremacist'. This social label was easily given to James Harris Jackson and Dylan Roof. It alludes to a racist ideology premised upon an extremist belief in 'white' people being genetically superior. However, in the context of theorising on race, the term white supremacy refers to structural and hegemonic conditions of world politics which uphold white privilege: "the differential treatment and socio-political advantages accrued to white/European persons due to their assumed transparent competence and humanity" (Shilliam, 2016: 293).

Unlike the popular understanding of white supremacy, this academic term describes a *systemic* state of being. By systemic it is meant that white supremacy is not a physical or material reality, though there is physical and/or factual evidence to support its validity (i.e. structural dis/advantages in pay, access to higher education, length in prison sentences, and of course terrorism indictment). White supremacy is also *contextual*. The historic circumstances in which different ethno-cultural groups get to be 'white', and therefore exist at or near the top of the racial hierarchy, changes over time and space (such as the Irish in the 1960s and the Italians in the late 19th century, or the Jewish people in the 21st century). What remains historically and empirically consistent is that it is those with darker skin who cannot ever fully reap the advantages of privilege, though they may still contribute to white-supremacy themselves. You do not have to be 'white' to uphold white supremacy.

In this sense, 'whiteness' is more than colour. Whiteness is an opportunity of social and political positioning, that those designated as ethnic/racial minorities cannot and have not attained equally, despite societal progress, and global efforts at racial-equality. Even with the historic existence of a 'black' president in the famously racially-segregated society that was the United States, visible minorities throughout the Western hemisphere continue to face violence and oppression as a result of racialised notions. Such notions include a subconscious/conscious belief that 'they' (blacks, Muslims, refugees, indigenous peoples, and so forth) are still not fully like 'us' and as a result of their inferior natures, religions, and cultures "they are likely to erupt into violence against us" (Razack, 2007:57).

This essay ends on a reflective note, with the question of 'where do considerations of race leave us in relation to discussions of terrorism and international politics?' As people continue to try and make sense of the world around them, it is critical that any answer to this query must remain relatively open. Also, it is critical that as we answer this question, as this essay has hopefully demonstrated, we need to look more closely at how different people are impacted by terrorism. We again, need to humanise and personify, how we observe terror. Through the study of race in international politics, we can uphold the personhood, the lived experience, of actors involved in terrorism, examining them and their actions through a complicated people-focused analytical lens. Using race as an analytical lens to examine how individuals and the state respond to incidents of terrorism is crucial. It provides important opportunities for academics and those they inform to shatter misconceptions about terrorism and more importantly, about people whom they fear or do not understand. It illuminates the continuing impact and importance of social-historic legacies of colonialism and slavery. It allows for a discussion of contemporary events to occur in ways that are informative. It makes these discussions inclusive for all peoples who are able to help and willing to understand one another during these difficult times.

For terrorism to be truly confronted, the Westminster attack and the murder of Timothy Caughman must be examined

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and mourned together. Within international politics, all marginalised voices should be heard and made clear in our discussions of terrorism and how to counter it in the future. Our responses to both of these acts of terror must be cognisant of race and racism, so that we may all equitably overcome these moments of fear together.

**the usage of (' ') demarcates academically/popularly contested terms and labels*

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