

Is the International System Racist?

Written by Katie Lockwood

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KATIE LOCKWOOD, MAR 3 2019

The international system is demonstrably racist. In order to unpack the implications of this, it is necessary to first examine what is meant by 'racism'. This essay follows Vitalis (2000: 338) in defining racism as 'an institution: a set of practices and rules that sustain a particular kind of ascriptive hierarchy or system of privilege and inequality'. This is made manifest in the nature of the global economy, the international use of force, and supposed 'humanitarian' norms. Importantly, race is not a neutral or objective classification, but a social construct forged by power (Castles, 2000: 166).

The international system is socially constructed (Wendt, 1992: 395), meaning that how we conceptualise the social world has huge implications for reality. Consequently, if perceptions of global politics are filtered through an artificial civilised/uncivilised dichotomy, it will become real, manifesting in the foreign policy decisions of the actors who shape the system. Therefore race does not have to be a biological fact to be a social reality (Castles, 2000: 167) – the system can be 'racist' without 'race' being objectively real. While racist structures are of central importance, this essay is not seeking to deny the agency of the Global South. Structure is not the all-pervading determinant of behaviour, and the Subaltern always has some agency (Giddens, 1984: 16), but their chances and choices are necessarily delimited in a racist international system. This essay shall adopt a historical perspective in order to expose the continued salience of race in international politics. The role of discourse is also given central importance due to the intimate connection between discourse, knowledge and power (Abrahamsen, 2003: 199-200). In order to demonstrate the racist nature of the international system, this essay shall first depict how racism underwrites the global economy. The influence of race shall then be examined in the context of nuclear weapons, the asylum process, and humanitarian intervention. Finally, the racial construction of terrorism will demonstrate that the international system is racist.

The entrenched inequality of the global political economy is predicated upon racism. Until historical wrongs are rectified via reparations (Plessis, 2003: 645), the Global South will continue to be unable to overcome its subjugation, and the global economy's racist past will continue to cast a shadow on the future. The continued disparity between rich and poor is no accident: the Global North actively perpetuates its advantage. Despite the myth of sovereign equality in international law, the Global South's sovereignty is undermined by its continued economic dependence (Nkrumah, 1968: ix). Rich states are *citizens* of the international community whereas poor states are *subjects*. For example, the Global North was able to rig the system to its advantage through instituting the 'Grand Bargain' in 1994 (Roberts and Parks, 2007: 52). The Global South accepted the Agreement on Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs) in 1994, crystallising their position within the international division of labour, and stifling their emergent upward mobility (Roberts and Parks, 2007: 52).

Some may object that although the structure of the global economy is unfair, it is not *racist*, as this would further require inequality to be justified in racial terms. However, this essay holds that sensitivity to history exposes the racialised colonial foundations of the contemporary international division of labour (Jones, 2008: 924). The racialised discourses propagated by colonialism sustain the assumption that the Global South is somehow naturally destined to be a mere passive exporter of raw materials. This discourse has permeated the International Monetary Fund (IMF), manifesting in its recommendations that Ghana concentrate on the production of gold and cocoa beans as in colonial times (Kampfner, 2001). Some may object to this focus on the external causes of underdevelopment (Rawls, 1999: 108), arguing that poverty is primarily the product of poor internal choices such as Mozambique's accumulation of

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vast debts (Plank, 1993: 428), or Nigeria's corruption (Albin-Lackey, 2007). While an important point, colonialism is actually the root cause of these supposed 'internal' problems. Corruption and poor governance partly spring from colonial policies which undermined traditional belief systems and forms of social organisation necessary for good governance (Trebilcock and Prado, 2011: 254). Colonial 'divide and rule' spawned civil wars which continue to undermine development: the civil war in Burundi (1993-2005), for example, grew out of Belgium's strategy of recruiting the Tutsi to govern the Hutus (Marshall, 2016: 128). While these underlying maladies go uncompensated, aid will continue to merely treat the symptom, not the problem.

International financial institutions reflect the normative fabric of the international community (Boniface, 2002: 366), and therefore embody its racism. This is evident in the 'structural adjustment' programmes peddled by the World Bank and IMF during the 1980s, demanding loan recipients to liberalise and privatise their economies in accordance with strict budget discipline (Abouharb and Cingranelli, 2007: 3). The results were disastrous, failing to promote economic growth, and forcing developing nations to implement economic policies favourable to the hegemon underwriting the financial institutions (Plank, 1993: 417). Such neoliberal logic has since re-emerged through the new 'Good Governance' norm, which assumes underdevelopment to be the product of domestic political and economic environments, and so seeks to educate these states to create the preconditions for development (Gallagher, 2014: 333). Plank (1993: 428) makes a persuasive case that IMF policy is not racist, but driven by a misguided faith in economic orthodoxy. The Bretton Woods institutions were established to facilitate *European* post-war recovery, therefore infantilising the colonisers as much as the colonised (Schifferes, 2008). While initially persuasive, this challenge fails to appreciate the changes the global economy has experienced since the end of the Bretton Woods system which has made 'late development' far less obtainable (Roberts and Parks, 2007: 48) – the initial post-war manifestation of the World Bank and IMF cannot be paralleled with their contemporary manifestations. The 'neutral' economic language of international financial institutions harbours unacknowledged racist ideas. The 'Good Governance' norm promotes a paternalistic narrative reminiscent of the 'white man's burden' of the colonial era (Henderson, 2013: 72), constructing a child-like Global South that needs to be educated by the firm parental hand of the West. Racism constructs an Us/Other dialectic which distances the Western donor from the non-white recipient, making the horrifying human costs of economic fundamentalism less disturbing. In practice, the policy of 'full cost recovery' in Ghana means forcing people to pay for the essentials of life including water – a resource widely assumed to be a right, and publicly subsidised in the developed world (Kampfner, 2001). International racism means the subaltern experience is woefully ignored. Racism makes this destitution appear natural rather than the product of international choices, legitimising the human costs of neoliberal reforms primarily designed to advance the economic interests of the dominant powers in the system.

Racism is unavoidably bound up with the production of knowledge, and constructs the legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy dominating discussion of nuclear weapons. Some scholars hold that irresponsible non-Western states with nuclear weapons represent an objective threat to international order (Sagan, 1994: 68). They claim that this is not an irrational racist fear, but a recognition of the facts. However, it is the position of this essay that these 'facts' are socially constructed, based on a false 'Orientalist' (Said, 2003: 4) characterisation of the Self as rational and responsible, and the Other as irrational and irresponsible. This Orientalism is exemplified in the way North Korea is continually othered in Western media. False accounts of Kim Jong Un having his uncle fed to dogs were unquestioningly reproduced by outlets such as Fox News (DeMarche, 2015), creating a caricature of Oriental despotism. Such Orientalist narratives create fear that deterrence will not work on 'barbaric' non-Western regimes, when in reality the logic of nuclear weapons will compel non-Western leaders to act much like their Western counterparts, as all fundamentally wish to survive (Waltz, 2012: 4). This erroneous presentation is useful to the West, as it conditions acceptance of the existing 'nuclear apartheid' (Gusterson, 1999: 113) which is conducive to Western interests. Orientalism means that a single North Korean nuclear weapon is presented as an existential threat to the international community, whereas hundreds of US nuclear weapons are not (Wendt, 1992: 397). As Cox (1981: 128) rightfully asserts, 'theory is always *for* someone, and *for* some purpose' – racism constructs reality to the benefit of the West. The West defines its interests as synonymous with those of the international community, silencing legitimate concerns of non-Western states. For example, Kim Jong Un's logical reasons for seeking nuclear weapons are silenced by Western media, with MSNBC propagating the false psychological narrative that he is simply a 'madman' (Al Jazeera, 2017). Such erroneous analysis filters into the subconscious of Western leaders, heightening distrust, undermining faith in negotiated solutions, and increasing the risk of fatal miscalculations (Al Jazeera, 2017).

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Historical narratives of oriental barbarism intersect with contemporary concerns surrounding nuclear weapons, thereby determining America's overreaction to allegations that Iraq had developed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (McQueeney, 2014: 299). Western populations willingly swallowed this justification for the use of force, suggesting that contrary to the contention of democratic peace thesis (Kant, 2017: 7), democracy is not always a constraint on belligerence as irrational, racist logic subverts people's perceptions of their real interests. Racism produces irrational international actors, driving dangerous behaviour in the international system.

Racism further manifests itself in the modern asylum regime, in which a 'white refugee elite' (Colic-Peisker, 2005: 620) receive superior treatment due to racial prejudice. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 14(1) stipulates that 'everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution' (UN.org, 1948), recognising the obligations conferred by our common humanity. However, despite this de jure assertion that this right applies to 'everyone', the sympathy of the developed world is de facto racially limited. Indeed, only in 1967 was the temporal restriction in the UDHR removed: 'everyone' initially meant only Europeans, demonstrating that racially neutral language can disguise racial bias (Mayblin, 2017: 148). Disparity between the treatment of white and non-white refugees persists. In the 1990s, UNHCR-allocated aid was 11 times greater for (predominantly white) Balkan refugees than for those from (predominantly non-white) African countries (Farwell, 2001: 67). Australia was prepared to expand its quota of refugees on account of the plight of Bosnians (Colic-Peisker, 2005: 616), but continued a policy condemned as nonrefoulement in relation to non-white asylum-seekers (Odutayo, 2016: 368). The suffering of Bosnians, people 'like us' in the Australian imagination, provoked a powerful impetus for action. Whereas violence in a European country was seen as horrific and unusual, violence in Africa is perceived as unfortunate but natural, precluding such a dynamic response to the consequent refugees (Balaji, 2011: 53). Some may object that concerns surrounding asylum-seekers are not racist, but numerical anxieties about the sheer number of applicants, and the capacity of the Global North to accommodate them. However, as Buzan (1997: 18) convincingly demonstrates, the definition of 'too many' refugees is socially constructed, and varies between countries. People of the Global North perceive their 'imagined communities' as white (Colic-Peisker, 2005: 632), and therefore non-white asylum-seekers are constructed as an existential threat to these communities, whereas white refugees are viewed as assimilable. The securitisation of non-white refugees leads to the promotion of policies designed to keep those in need out of Europe at all costs. For example, Germany's Africa Commissioner recently appealed for foreign powers to acquire land in Africa in order to stem the flow of migration to Europe (BBC, 2018). This is 'hipster colonialism' (Nyabola, 2018), and demonstrates how the socially constructed 'refugee crisis' is underwritten by racism and paternalist neo-colonial logic.

The historic notion of the 'white man's burden' (Kipling, 2018) underwrites humanitarian intervention and the emerging norm of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Humanitarian interventions are invariably the product of mixed motives (ICISS, 2001: 36). However, that is not to say that interventions are simply ruthless self-interested endeavours shrouded in a humanitarian façade – instead underlying racial presumptions cause self-interest to be fused with humanitarian concern in the minds of statesmen, legitimising action in a manner akin to that which justified colonial expansion. Indeed, arguably the reason the R2P norm has been so smoothly accepted into international law is because it correlates with the historic logic of the 'civilising mission' (Knox, 2015: 176). Humanitarian intervention superimposes a simplistic civilised/uncivilised dichotomy onto international relations, fostering the paternalistic image of passive victims who have to be saved from the barbarism of their own despotic culture by an enlightened Western patron (Mutua, 2001: 229). Orientalism frames Western perceptions of international events, and justifies interventions. For example, the 2011 Libya intervention was articulated as a battle between helpless Libyan civilians and the despotic Gaddafi, rather than the civil war of Libyans against Libyans which existed on the ground (Forte, 2012: 43). The West unquestioningly swallowed the rebels' false narrative that those supporting Gaddafi were black African mercenaries because it correlated with their underlying perception of a racial hierarchy which makes such African 'savagery' expected (Forte, 2012: 209). The reality of R2P also represents a racialised double standard: whereas a potential massacre in Benghazi inspired a global outcry, the actual genocide of black Libyans by the rebel forces in Libya went uncontested (Forte, 2012: 227). R2P also threatens the traditional definition of inviolable sovereignty, something which worries ex-colonies who see it as a façade for neo-colonialism (Thakur, 2011: 71). Indeed, R2P worryingly revives the colonial origins of international law, demarcating a distinction between civilised democratic states entitled to full sovereignty as members of the international community, and aggressive authoritarian states undeserving of full sovereignty and therefore barred from the global society (Anghie, 2005: 51).

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Here again, the West presents its interests as synonymous with those of the international community, marginalising the concerns of the Global South. International law's racist past has yet to be thoroughly expunged, and has been rearticulated through the R2P discourse. The international system is therefore still underpinned by racism.

Since 11 September 2001, the international agenda has become to be dominated by terrorism. It is the position of this essay that the fixation on terrorism is not an objective response to global events, but socially constructed, resting upon old Orientalist narratives and racialised Islamophobia (McQueeney, 2014: 297). Race underwrites the word 'terrorist' in Western discourse, explaining why the media dropped the terrorist label when it was revealed that the Oklahoma bomber was a white male (McQueeney, 2014: 304). Therefore the standard definition of a terrorist, someone who uses 'the threat of violence and the use of fear to coerce, persuade, and gain public attention' (NACCJSG, 1976), does not tell the full story, as it neglects the salience of race. This racialised definition has served to criminalise black manhood in much of Africa and the Middle East (Patel, 2017: 2). While the 9/11 attacks objectively occurred, their meaning is culturally situated. Whereas 9/11 was shocking for the West, for many in the Global South Al Qaeda did not throw the first stone, but retaliated in an ongoing battle between North and South (McQueeney, 2014: 303). The disturbed Western consciousness reverted to historic Orientalist narratives in order to make sense of these events, and then used its power to impose its racialised understanding onto the international system, dividing the world into a civilised 'Us' and barbaric 'Them'. Though the majority of terror victims are in reality Muslims (NCTC, 2012), this is not the perception manufactured by Western media, which instead fosters an Us/Them dialectic (Little, 2016: 13), securitising the Orient, and creating public hysteria. Threat perception is therefore not objective as some would suggest, but exaggerated by historic narratives which depict the Orient as cruel, cunning and dominated by religious fanaticism (Said, 2003: 4). This perception has material implications, manufacturing popular consent for the War on Terror. Western media actively constructs a racialised Other, falsely framing Muslims and Arabs as passive supporters of terrorism, and their deaths as unproblematic collateral damage. Therefore while nearly 3,000 victims of 9/11 inspired mass mourning (BBC, 2011), approximately 220,000 civilian deaths resulting from the West's War on Terror inspire no such emotional response (McQueeney, 2014: 297). Race is thereby a legitimising discourse, serving to make war more palatable for civilian populations. While the world remains dominated by a racialised 'clash of civilisations' (Huntington, 1993: 22) narrative superimposed by the West, the international system can be characterised as racist.

When taken together, these factors serve to demonstrate that the international system is racist. To misquote Orwell (2000: 97), under contemporary international law, all states are equal, but some states are more equal than others. This inequality is grounded in the historical legacy of white supremacy, and continues to provide a legitimising discourse which enforces adherence to this unequal status quo. This essay has demonstrated how racism infiltrates the minds of statesmen, conditioning their responses to humanitarian suffering, refugees, and the nuclear ambitions of the Global South. The economic disparity between North and South is naturalised through racial discourses, precluding a recognition of the deeply unjust historical foundations of the present system which demands reparation. While the world is viewed by powerful actors through a racialised lens, their policies will continue to shape the world in this racialised image, as seen with the War on Terror. This conclusively demonstrates the racist character of the contemporary international system.

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