

Review - Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations

Written by Lisa Tilley

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LISA TILLEY, APR 11 2019

Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations
Edited by Randolph B. Persaud and Alina Sajed
Routledge, 2018

In the present political epoch, it is ever more important to understand how race and gender work in our collective lives. Fascist resurgence, white supremacist terror, and international networks of hard right political movements have returned to central stage globally and the well-worn analytics of traditional IR have very little explanatory power in the face of these dynamics. The concepts, evidence, and histories we need to grasp today's complex workings of power and how these inform politics at all scales up to the international are richly accessible across a number of fields and traditions; yet still, these are rarely imported into International Relations teaching. On an everyday level, race works in relation to gender, class and sexuality to produce complex issues which are often interpreted in a dangerously reductive and binarised way as problems of race versus class, religion versus sexual diversity, women versus capital and so on. *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations*, as a whole, does not perform such binary analyses, nor does it simply 'import' debates and concepts from elsewhere. Instead, the book crafts unique and insightful approaches to security, political economy, nationalism, and IR more broadly which build upon a wealth of wider scholarship on race, gender, and culture. The whole collection is written with clarity and accessibility in mind, making it more than suitable as a teaching text from undergraduate levels onward; and yet the book is also full of original and valuable analysis, such that those already working closely with race and gender in IR will find new insights on its pages.

Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations shows how race can be approached on multiple levels in relation to the international. For example, on one level, this involves confronting how racial hierarchies inherited from the colonial era structure and order the international itself. On another level, this involves a disciplinary conversation which gets to grips with how IR, as a discipline rooted in the Journal of Race Development, is foundationally concerned with inter-racial relations, even as race as a category of analysis has been excised and resisted. The introductory chapter, by editors Persaud and Sajed, sets out a valuable survey of postcolonial thought on race and gender in relation to cognate areas within the broader landscape of thought on 'the international'. The editors' tight overviews of classic works on the colonial question, critical theory, and gender theory provide a wonderful initial orientation of the 'prophets' of postcolonial IR and how they are situated in relation to one another. Each of the nine substantive chapters then advances a combination of solid introductory essentials and original, thoughtful analysis of the themes each of the authors engage.

Aytak Akbari-Dibavar's chapter on *Gender, Race, and International Relations* makes for an exceptionally clear and insightful read. To set the tone of the analysis the author asks: "What makes [women of colour] invisible to a searching eye? What turns them into silenced and hidden figures lost in a historical trajectory?" (p.58). With these searching questions in mind, Akbari-Dibavar considers those theorists of the international who have been made absent through calculated exclusions from a whitened and masculinised central canon. The result is a thorough and extensive survey of ground-breaking feminist thinkers – hooks, Lorde, Kilomba, Spivak and others – who have consistently analysed gendered power in direct relation to racial formations. Nivi Manchanda and Leah de Haan's

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contribution on Gender, Nation, and Nationalism works to complement Akbari-Dibavar's by deepening a gendered analysis of the state and nation. Opening an IR course on gender with these two chapters would immediately steer students away from the kind of gender-first feminist analyses which sometimes serve to evacuate racial structures and dynamics, leaving us with deeply distorted conclusions.

Srdjan Vucetic and Randolph B. Persaud's clear and sharp chapter on *Race in International Relations* forwards a historical-genealogical approach to IR which centres the real histories of race and racism. The result is an indispensable and accessible overview of some of the formative historical events, like the Haitian Revolution, which should be central to IR teaching rather than being excised altogether, as they most often are. Vucetic and Persaud treat race as a "general organising category" in International Relations which is rooted firmly in "mass-scale imperial dehumanisation" (p.40) which opens up productive discussions of race and the international beyond 'prejudice' and interpersonal racism. Like many of the other chapters in this book, Vucetic and Persaud include text boxes and tables, and their typology of 'Western views of itself and others' is particularly useful for teaching purposes.

Momin Rahman's important and timely chapter, sub-titled *Intersections of sexuality, religion, and race*, centres the experience of LGBT Muslims in an analysis of the political tensions around Islam and international LGBT movements. Rahman carefully sets out how, in the present, the West is re-positioned as superior in civilizational terms as the location of LGBT rights, such that the term *homocolonialism* "accurately describes the intersecting processes and conditions in which LGBT politics is being drawn into International Relations" (p. 99). With so much at stake in the mapping of these intersecting processes, ground-up accounts of understandings of sexual diversity should always be the starting point for any analysis wishing to navigate LGBT politics within cultural networks of power. Importantly, Rahman reinforces the point that any simplistic diagnosis of conflicting positions "actually reduces the likelihood of successful global progress because it does not address the underlying causes of contemporary resistance" (p. 101). Overall, the insights of this chapter leave us more attentive to instances where LGBT rights are deployed in contemporary 'civilising missions' thus provoking resistance and ultimately undermining immanent Muslim LGBT struggles.

Space does not allow for further engagement with the other chapters; however, each brings a similar quality of insight and analysis. As testament to the combined intellect and depth of engagement of Persaud and Sajed, *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations* is a thoughtfully curated collection with input from a range of scholars whose wider work is deep and extensive. Although their research is historically-informed, these scholars speak directly to the present, which is unquestionably marked by both spectacular and banal racial and gendered violence, domination, and expropriation. Overall, Persaud & Sajed's collection adds to a growing archive which is enriching IR with critical and historically-informed readings (for example, Anievas et al 2014; Inayatullah & Blaney 2004; Rutazibwa & Shilliam 2018). In conversation with this ever-richer archive, *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations*, will be just as instructive for vibrant classroom discussions as it will be for research reference for a long time to come.

References

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