

Racial Security: The Unobserved Threat in IR

Written by Carlo Wood

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CARLO WOOD, NOV 12 2020

Since the development of the modern state in the seventeenth century, race has directly influenced human understanding of peace and order. Racist perceptions of anarchy associated non-Western and non-white communities with savagery. In turn, a racist cycle of global knowledge upon which the international community is based has developed. Additionally, imperialistic reign over the following centuries dictated the inability for society to challenge racist ideals and norms assumed by the powers that be. Unfortunately, the concepts of race and security have run counter-intuitively in respect to human development. Using the supporting research to construct a preliminary definition of Racial Security and its implications, this essay aims to show how race has compromised the theoretical understanding of international relations in its applicability to the fields of security and strategy.

Racial security: what is it and how do we understand it?

Currently, *Racial Security* has no formal definition or framework for the advancement of human security within International Relations (IR). Not yet defined by global organizations such as the United Nations, it has historically been ignored and marginally interpreted in favour of Western global powers – the very ones who likely threaten it. Albeit a minority, some scholars are drawing attention to the importance of race and security in IR, but research remains limited.

To further analyse the effects of race within the study of IR, it is necessary to understand its complexity to define such an abstract and interdependent term. A rudimentary definition may suggest that racial security is security from the absence of racism. Racism, as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group”. Overtly, the elimination of racist activity can imply security *from* racism, but a more developed analysis is to determine what is security *in relation to* racism.

Racism is an interdependent set of activities. It can only be manifested by way of the oppressed and oppressor. Colonization, a strategy that is racist by historical record, demonstrates how racial security can expand its definition to include a white and non-white perspective in the formation of nation-states. Using Whiteness as a spatial and temporal form of organization, the surveillance and mapping of minority groups developed systematic oppression entrenched in modern state-building (Kumar and Kundnani, 2015; Sentas, 2006). The control of indigenous populations with the use of knowledge and force during European and American expansion provided white racial security primarily through economic liberties – the most legitimate tool to achieve security in accordance with international normative standards (Kumar and Kundnani, 2015). On the contrary, a non-white interpretation of racial security reverts emphasis of race and biology. By 1876, full blooded Tasmanian Aboriginal people were eradicated by European colonizers compared to the roughly 4,000 – 15,000 Aborigines who existed in 1803 (Madley, 2008). It is debatable that their intent was to commit a successful genocide, but it deserves recognition as a former and potential threat of racial security in human history, especially with crimes against humanity remaining prevalent across states that include Myanmar, Syria, China, and even the bastion of liberal democratic values, the United States.

Following the Age of Exploration from the fifteenth through to the early seventeenth century, race was primarily contextualized through a biological and anthropological lens. Dating back to early philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau, race was a distinguishable factor that served as justification for religious superiority, resource

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exploitation, and slavery (Henderson, 2013). Having race as an avenue to many sociological ideologies, there was little opportunity for critique within IR scholarship. Thus, until the legal emancipation of slaves across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, race was primarily discussed as a threat to be secured against Whiteness. Moving into the twenty-first century, global society has found itself addressing race in a manner that is less likely to be controlled but more so to be considered, as shown through mainstream media coverage of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

A brief introduction to race in IR scholarship

International Relations perpetuates racially insecure strategies through its commonly shared interpretation of anarchy (that is, a belief in no higher authority than the sovereign state) and a racially biased cycle of knowledge. The assumption that democracy can be successfully coerced onto the Global South has shown racially induced inequities over time. During the Age of Exploration, imperialism and capitalism were at their peak with Eurocentric thought defining the parameters of international discourse. Racism thereby evolved from theological to anthropological justifications in pursuit of resources, primarily in Africa (Blatt, 2018). Today, oil and mineral extraction by Western powers have left African countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, and Angola disabled by war and dysfunctional through corruption, with little infrastructure to advance education and health, the other building blocks of democratic societies (Al Jazeera, 2017).

The state of nature and national imperialism

Looking back to the philosophical antecedents of International Relations, the *state of nature* represents an earlier theologically rooted view of “anarchy” compared to its understanding in today’s structural realist version. It was used to disassociate the white Western world from its soon to be conquered counterparts and was first asserted by Thomas Hobbes. He proposed that Whites faced a hypothetical *state of nature* and non-Whites a literal one (Henderson, 2013). As demonstrated in the colonization of Native Americans, a dedication to Manifest Destiny fueled religious and economic coercion through slavery, an act framed as a gateway for the (black) Man in a state of nature to a (black) man in civilization. American political scientist and diplomat Paul S. Reinsch deemed this marriage of duty and self (the State) as *national imperialism*:

The desire to control as large a portion of the earth’s surface as their energies and opportunities permit...to increase the resources of the national state through the absorption and exploitation of undeveloped regions and inferior races (in Shepherd, 1900)

As the justification of imperialism by use of slavery grew, the perceived threat of the *state of nature* and its black embodiment became imbedded into the understanding of social contract theory. However, the racial interpretation of anarchy did not cease with Hobbes. His philosophical counterparts, Immanuel Kant, squarely placed Blacks into the *state of nature* because “so fundamental is the difference between these two races of man (whites and Negroes), and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color” (in Henderson, 2013).

Further, Dunn elaborates on the diverse African diaspora that was disregarded when marketing Africa into colonial era tropes such as a “primitive paradise”, “authentic” or “traditional”, all of which remained “unvisited by (white) man” (Dunn, 2004). While white individuals and institutions acknowledged the Black man as a savage and less than the White counterpart, the social contract, upon which democracies are built, wove itself together with what Charles Mills terms as the *racial contract*. The racial contract perpetuates beliefs of sovereignty through a hierarchy of racial dualism (Mills, 2015). The interdependence of these two contracts within international relations has not properly been examined because their relationship hinges on western democracy and white supremacy.

Cycle of knowledge

Also referred to as “methodological whiteness”, the intentional whitewashing of historical racial violence and narratives does not acknowledge the role in which race has influenced the world (Bhambra, 2017). In turn, it creates a perpetual cycle of racially triggered knowledge that serves as the foundation of IR. Henderson proposes that

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theories conceived from such knowledges have underlying empirical, ethical, and epistemological assumptions that influence people's understanding, each working individually and in combination to advance white supremacy (Henderson, 2013). Racist *ethical* assumptions elevate a "fictitious identity of Whiteness" as privileged through the exclusion of social liberties, promoted through media and advertising; areas primarily not of IR concern (Henderson, 2013; Lipsitz, 1995).

However, whether art imitates life or vice versa, racist *empirical* assumptions have given way to institutional blockages that have silenced notable voices of race in IR like Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois. In lectures to Howard University, Alain Locke rejects race as a by-product of biology and argues its clear sociological origins, a radical position in 1916 America (Henderson, 2017). The reframing of race as a social concept to be evolved within itself and beyond led to national black expression through the Harlem Renaissance. Unfortunately, these influential lectures went unpublished until after his death leaving a lapse of alternative thinking to white centric empirical knowledge. In the choosing of what and who to study, racist *epistemological* knowledge is advanced. In a recent interview, Noam Chomsky draws parallels between the language used by the United States' First Industrial Revolution and Nazi Germany. Torture and its use on slave labour camps drove and sustained the financial and merchant systems of a country that deemed itself the quintessential example of democracy (Democracy Now, 2015). Therefore, history needs to be viewed in a more critical way that does not negate the experiences of those who built the society that is subsequently cherished, an opportunity not yet been afforded to African Americans.

The recycling of racist knowledge within publications of IR has been equally covert. Termed by Persaud and Walker as "the epistemological status of silence", IR publications have not ignored race but have indirectly controlled the language and research surrounding it (Persaud and Walker, 2001). The first IR academic journal established in 1910 was the *Journal of Race Development*. Over the following two decades, the name would change to the *Journal of International Relations* (1919) and *Foreign Affairs* (1922). Articles during this transition still contributed to racist narratives of inferiority and received little counterargument primarily due to no racial representation (Zvobgo and Loken, 2020). Despite more egalitarian thinking following WWII, research and discourse remained white-washed. A survey by Roxanne Dotty found that of the five major IR journals from 1945-1993, one article used the word "race", four used "minority" and thirteen used "ethnicity" (Henderson, 2013). The result being the entire twentieth century of modern and globalized development side-stepping a non-white interpretation of race. The disconnect of Western scholarly application on African (and other Global South) countries using European theories while relying on local scholars for relevant data has been exacerbated by recent COVID-19 inequities (Bhambra et al, 2020). Such shallow methodologies enable the distribution of aid in the form of a twenty-first century rendition of manifest destiny, colloquially termed the "white savior complex". To break this racist cycle of knowledge and action, a more indigenous understanding of problems should be considered and shared in IR discourse.

Race within three leading IR theories

Although not mutually exclusive, race and religion do share a similar neglect of analysis within IR. The disassociation of religion within IR can be traced back to seventeenth century following the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War and the creation of the modern state. Some scholars and politicians considered the pre-Westphalian period as an era of violence associated with religion (even though it was also due to political rivalry). Therefore, to avoid a relapse, the avoidance of religion in IR seemed to be the most logical solution (Sandal and James, 2011). However, the following epoch of imperialism was deeply rooted in religious autonomy and racial superiority, which has compromised the development of many nations considered to be part of the Global South. Language, culture, and religion became boundaries of sovereignty as much as geographical lines, escalating inter-ethnic tensions to violence with unclear accountability. Examples of this can be seen in the Balkans of Eastern Europe, African states such as Nigeria, and South East Asian states such as Myanmar.

In the twenty-first century following 9/11, a shift of religious dialogue, parallel to race, began to serve as overarching explanations for difficult events and situations, thereby not allowing more nuanced and responsible factors such as historical racial sovereignty to be considered (Sandal and James, 2011). Faith has been a source of human conflict since the beginning of civilization, so the response of the global community when religiously-driven attacks occur tends to be deeply rooted in realist thought in order to protect the State. Saidemen suggests that this realist logic is

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challenged by minority ethnic groups, religious or not, in the ability to maintain state borders and power (Saideman, 2002). However, there have been recent occurrences that question the effectiveness of all three major paradigms of IR (realism, liberalism, constructivism) when strategizing how race and religion are boundaries no longer to be drawn on for state protection, but rather, state inclusivity.

Realism

At its core, realism and its six variations are to protect the state by any means necessary. Neorealism set forth by Kenneth Waltz suggests that states' behaviour is directed by the most advantageous choices in competition (Williams and McDonald, 2018). An example of racially charged neorealism is hinted in the relationship of China and its Muslim minority, the Uighurs. Over the past decade, reported racial control of Uighurs has included kidnappings, forced labour programs, and media suppression (Forbes, 2020). Although the Chinese government has publicly placed blame on the East Turkistan Islamic Movement for various terrorist attacks, its realist approach of targeting members of shared racial and religious demographics within its borders is questionable and promotes state sovereignty at the expense of human (and racial) security. The desire to promote assimilation of Uighur and Tibetan populations is linked to the need to be assured of territorial integration. As noted by Clarke (2018):

In Xinjiang's contemporary camps it appears that Beijing wants internees to ultimately return to 'normal' life cleansed of markers of Uyghur (and other Turkic-Muslims) distinctiveness and Otherness – such as language, religion, and cultural practice – it has come to perceive as an obstacle to the complete integration of the region. This intent is entirely consistent with President Xi Jinping's April 2014 call for Xinjiang residents of all ethnicities to identify themselves with China, the Chinese nation, its culture, and socialism with Chinese characteristics (in Dellios, 2019, p. 341)

Liberalism

Liberal thought is based on the community of law with an emphasis on democratization and integration by way of conflict resolution (Williams and McDonald, 2018). It could be argued that without a revolution or resistance, liberal thought has not positively influenced racial and religious freedom. For example, the Passion Play in the town of Oberammergau, Germany presented anti-Semitic views for centuries, even drawing Adolf Hitler as a guest twice. Not until 1984 did global criticism urging revisions precede actual changes in the early twenty-first century, making the current version its most inclusive and secular yet (AJC Global Jewish Advocacy, 2020). The ability of Oberammergau to integrate cultural and religious tradition peacefully shows the potential of parallels that can be used for other racial conflicts. Unfortunately, liberalist and realist views tend to taint any suggested definition of racial security with binary parties feeling secured or not and at some unbeknown cost.

Constructivism

Constructivist scholarship within race and religion is the most forward thinking of today. The complexities of globalized societies no longer allow us to examine security exclusively. A notable realist criticism of constructivism is the focus on power politics (Williams and McDonald, 2018). Granted, a focus on power is a focus on Whiteness which is necessary to diversify and critically engage race within IR security and strategy. In the Netherlands, using a disciplined discussion model and historical context, the long-standing tradition of dressing in black face for Christmas has been drastically challenged (National Public Radio, 2020). After years of debate peaking during the more recent BLM movement, the black-face character, Black Pete, has not be offered by any municipality to be hosted for the 2020 Christmas, leaving the tradition unchanged but also unsupported. As difficult as it has been for Dutch people, the ability to discuss race and the repercussions on their fellow humans is an example of constructivism at its best.

Recommendations

The leading three IR theories show promise, some more than others, in combating the inequities of race but remain under-criticized and poorly implemented. To combat centuries of perceived racial self-esteem within IR, the most immediate recommendation is to teach history with a holistic understanding of racial perspectives. Mills suggests that

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it is feasible to deconstruct the racial contract from the social contract in a way that is more informed, despite its founders like Immanuel Kant being blatantly racist (Mills, 2015). Universities have an obligation not to dilute race by simply according it the status of a once-off topic but should instead incorporate the intersections of race into all aspects of learning. The exchange of knowledge has been globalized due to technology, emphasizing the interdependencies of information. To educate the future generation of leaders, institutions must do the same when setting the foundation of International Relations.

Additionally, diverse representation within the professional scope of IR should be addressed. The International Studies Association (ISA) currently has no race related research or conference entity (Zvobgo and Loken, 2020). A similar concern with other major international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centre for Disease Control (CDC) is drawing attention as scholars protest racism against their research limitations and the parallel of black civilian inequities during the current pandemic (Wadman, 2020). These organizations must take proactive steps to not only increase diversity, but also increase the inclusivity of ideas, research, and expression.

Conclusion

This essay serves as additional evidence that racial security is a concept in need of further exploration. The complexities of race and its effects on state building and strategy have been sifted through white frameworks that serve it no justice. Although knowledge of International Relations is continually being challenged externally of the academic arena, much action to diversify within the discipline needs to be taken. Racial security, or lack thereof, has had lasting effects that have been intensified with the BLM movement. Neither a quick nor easy solution, it is one that requires complete participation, because by simply changing the dialogue, the cycle of knowledge upon which a community finds reason to act changes also.

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