

Review – On the Scale of the World

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ZIZHU WANG, MAY 14 2024

On the Scale of the World: The Formation of Black Anticolonial Thought

By Musab Younis

University of California Press, 2022

Recently, as Netflix's new science fiction series "3 Body Problem" captivates audiences globally, it has elegantly reminded social scientists of a profound notion: all humanity, long ensnared by the confines of sovereignty, struggles to unite in the face of anarchism—unless aliens invade the Earth. The metaphor of extraterrestrials provides humanity with a reflexive lens to understand itself, presenting a different scale to observe world politics, namely the scale of the planet. Sovereign states have traditionally been considered the main actors by the "cold-blooded" mainstream IR theorists. Regarding this, the issue of race, seen through the "colour line," has been de-problematized, leading to the persistent failure of IR to achieve genuine decolonization. Yet, if expanding our view to the universal scale of the planet, it becomes evident that the world community should be composed of individuals with equal rights, irrespective of their racial identities.

This planetary perspective, though seemingly contemporary, was articulated by Black intellectuals as early as the interwar period, a pivotal theme of Musab Younis' latest book *On the Scale of the World* which won the 2023 Sussex International Theory Prize. Through meticulous research in historical archives across 13 cities in 7 countries (p. xii), Younis endeavours to "come to terms with the idea of the world across interwar cultures of Black Atlantic internationalism and nationalism. It focuses on an archive of English- and French-language anticolonial writing produced by Black writers" including journalists, politicians, writers, poets, novelists, travellers, anticolonial militants, historians, and scholars, in France, the US, and West Africa (p.3, 6). These Black intellectuals championed a vision of the world's openness, vehemently rejecting the notion that global affairs were the exclusive realm of the white imperial elite. They "prioritized the scale of the world — not at the expense or exclusion of other scales, but in the face of the relentlessly provincializing discourses of colonial rule" (p.8).

As seen in the statement of Sussex Prize, *On the Scale of the World* "implicitly addresses nativist and culturalist charges against postcolonialism by demonstrating the consciously and intrinsically world-historical cast of Black Atlantic internationalism and nationalism." It contains five empirical chapters, discussing how interwar Black writers envisage the Nation, Structure, Whiteness, Body and Time of the world. It demonstrates the textual mechanisms by which Black International Thought has been produced and travelled 'from below,' illustrating that ideas of the global order have never merely been confined to the elite – especially white elite actors.

In particular, the book crafts a poetic and metaphorical narrative by weaving together citations from newspapers, literary works, and other documents, depicting how the political identity of the Black has been oppressed and solidified by white political discourses. It can to some extent be seen as psychoanalysis of racial discourses. Adeptly echoing the progressivist epistemological context since the 19th-century whiteness world, Younis describes how people of colour were "sealed in the past, alienated from the present, written out of the future, or seen as always slipping back to a prehistoric state" (p.4). Then, by imaging the African land "as feminized and virginal, awaiting the thrusting, masculine, reproductive power of 'the white man,'" (a newspaper view from London, p.101), the intertwined uncertainties within racial and gender issues become vividly apparent. Furthermore, when discussing how white people view the black world, Younis mentions that the whites not only scorned them as barbarians, but also feared

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that blacks would become dominant in the future and rule over whites in turn. As a result, “white peoples of the Empire were, in effect, to show a “united front” to colonise and rule the black man and “keep him in his place” (p.90). This white fear of the Black reverses the orthodox dialectical relationship between Black and White in the context of colonization, which enriches the text with layers of meaning and provides a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

In sum, this book innovatively constructs a discursive history of Black International Thought by adopting a diverse range of historical sources and focusing on everyday narratives rather than the orthodox “great thinkers” or “high politics” in IR. It contributes to reversing the current Eurocentrism in the discipline and advances the development of Global IR. Yet, the book could provide a greater challenge to the Eurocentric focus from two other perspectives. Despite exploring the profound reflections of how interwar Black intellectuals produced globality (p.8), this book lacks reflection on how they failed to move beyond the white progressivist epistemology and thus somehow reproduced whiteness ideologies on their own terms without recognizing it. First, the book indeed mentions that European colonialism “had led to the disintegration of African institutions and social forces, the suppression of African religions,” which also caused African’s “fetishization of European culture and the ludicrous spectacle of the African imitation of Europeans.” (p.92). Yet, the author does not go into further detail to answer if the Black imitation of whites led to self-colonization. The psychological syndrome of the colonized towards the colonizer was not only hateful, as Frantz Fanon stated in *The Wretched of the Earth* but also “a look of lust, a look of envy...to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed” (1963, p.39), and want to take their place – another core agenda worthy of our inquiry in future anti-colonial research (for related research, see Umoren, 2018; Blain, 2018).

Second, the book’s chosen arena of Black resistance remains geographically in the European dominions – Sierra Leone, Lagos, Nigeria, Martinique, etc. Ideally we could further trace how their doctrines contributed to anti-colonial struggles in other regions through a genuine “universal” scale. In this sense, as mentioned above, the discourse produced by Black thinkers to some extent failed to subvert the whiteness ideas of progressivism, which also diminishes their capacity to perceive the nature of the interwar global political order. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois visited Manchuria in 1936. Facing Japan’s victory over Russia in a war in 1905, Du Bois envisioned Japan as a beacon of hope for the “yellow race,” aspiring for a united front of Asian peoples against white dominance. However, the reality was starkly different when Japan, as a good student of the West, was actively colonizing many Asian countries and rationalizing its fascist agendas. During the 1930s, it withdrew from the League of Nations, declared war on China, and perpetrated the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians. Du Bois adopted a teleological racial perspective, positing that racial differences and oppression would eventually be eliminated through the solidarity of non-white races against white oppression. Yet, the question remains whether such a perspective represents a racially reductive interpretation of global politics, a subject still ripe for contemporary discussion.

About the author:

Zizhu Wang is a PhD Candidate in International Relations, University of Sussex. She focuses on History of International Thought and translingual practice especially in the late modern period. Currently, she is carrying out research on the conceptual history of the term “international” from West Europe to East Asia. She is also a freelance Sino-Japanese-English social sciences translator, represented by *Conquering Peace: from the Enlightenment to the European Union, The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought between Germany and the United States* [in Chinese, forthcoming].