

Review - Race and Racism in International Relations

Written by Roger Epp

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ROGER EPP, NOV 8 2015

Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line
Edited by Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

In the prologue to his important book, *From the Ruins of Empire*, Pankaj Mishra tells the story of how the news of the decisive Japanese defeat of the Russian navy in May 1905 “careened around a world that Western imperialists – and the invention of the telegraph – had closely knit together.” From Calcutta to Damascus to Hanoi, from Tehran to London (where Jawaharlal Nehru was a student and Sun Yat-Sen was about to set sail through the Suez Canal, to be welcomed by Arab port workers who assumed he was Japanese), the news reverberated across continents with a common message: “white men, conquerors of the world, were no longer invincible. . . . Russia’s humiliation seemed to negate the West’s racial hierarchies, mocking the European presumption to ‘civilize’ the supposedly ‘backward’ countries of Asia.” In the months that followed, students flocked to Tokyo from the Middle East and China, Indian babies were named for Japanese admirals, nationalist parties formed, and anticolonial movements hit the streets. The war’s political outcome, of course, was neither decisive nor straightforward. Over the next decades, the League of Nations in 1919 would refuse to include a reference to racial equality in its Covenant – a direct rebuff to the Japanese delegation; Japan would itself occupy much of Asia as a new imperial power; and the last vestiges of European colonial rule would not disappear until the 1960s. Nonetheless, Mishra concludes, from the standpoint of “the majority of the world’s population,” it is the long political-intellectual “awakening” of subject peoples, announced so loudly and surprisingly in 1905, rather than two world wars and the US-Soviet nuclear standoff – the preoccupation of the Anglo-American study of international relations – that represents the “central event of the last century.”[1]

The book under review here, *Race and Racism in International Relations*, has a different theoretical ambition than Mishra’s intellectual history, but it too begins in the early twentieth century. The reference in its subtitle to the “global colour line” is taken from W. E. B. Du Bois’ 1925 article in *Foreign Affairs* (originally the *Journal of Race Development*) in which he identified questions of racial hierarchy and economic exploitation as being at the heart of international politics. In 1925, this was a claim that found a place in the pages of an establishment periodical. As the editors suggest, IR as a field emerged directly out of issues related to imperialism and inter-race relations – however much those beginnings have been subsumed under other self-narratives (or “white-washed” by abstract “race-neutral” theory), and however much the discourses of colonial tutelage and scientific racism had begun to give way in mid-century to proxies such as “modernization,” “development,” and, of late, “failed states.” In that light, this volume is meant to “act as a catalyst for remembering, exposing and critically re-articulating the importance of race and racism in the field of IR” (3).

Judged by that objective, *Race and Racism* succeeds not only in complicating IR’s history and ontology – why race? – but also in demonstrating the complex promise of race as a critical, transnational theoretical lens and research agenda. The editors draw skillfully on Du Bois to ask how world order is still “constitutively . . . structured, re-structured and contested along lines of race” (7). They recollect older theories of imperialism for IR; they do not indulge the pretense that real theorizing began only with the post-structuralist turn.[2] They eschew “rhetoric” and “simple charges of complicity” (11) in favour of more nuanced analysis – and, with exceptions, the various chapters do as well. They appreciate that categories of race and racism are themselves theoretically contested, and make

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room for significant differences across chapters. Not least, they invite self-criticism in the form of two concluding chapters by eminent scholars of race from outside IR.

At the very least, this volume will unsettle what one of its contributors calls the “norm against noticing” race and racism (40), and another IR’s “aphasia” or “calculated forgetting” (47) – even where the global colour line is so apparent, say, in human migration, the textile industry, or regimes of surveillance. Its chapters pose provocative, exploratory questions. Why this neglect? Why, as John Hobson asks, could decolonization scarcely be mentioned in multiple editions of Hans Morgenthau’s *Politics among Nations* – and then as the triumph of western moral principles, not the work of colonized peoples? How are assumptions about race written imperceptibly into the field’s core concepts? What “tropical” associations linger in the contractarian idea of anarchy – an observation that Errol Henderson might have made even stronger by following the links between John Locke and his contemporary Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*? How did the idea of race emerge in the age of empire and nation-building? What do we mean by race if something beyond mere physiology: an idea, a set of norms, a construction, a process (racialization) of inscribing and projecting, a residual product or a rationalization of exploitation? If race is an idea, as Debra Thompson asks, how does racialized power persist over time? What is the relationship between race, international law, and new forms of imperialism? How is intervention racialized, as Robert Knox probes in an insightful chapter, by shifting legal doctrines that grant to some states the room to act with impunity against rivals?

Like most edited volumes, *Race and Racism* contains strong and surprising contributions as well as unfinished and thin ones. One surprise is Sankaran Krishna’s brave rereading of the Gandhian project as having been “instrumental in a particular postcolonial rendition of race and space” (139) – one that enabled Indian governments to lead the global South’s fight against apartheid and colonialism abroad but insulate caste discrimination against the Dalits from international scrutiny. As such, the chapter stands outside the tendency in much of the volume to read race and racial hierarchies on a white/non-white or a West/non-West axis.

One chapter that falls disappointingly short of the mark is Richard Seymour’s analysis of American anti-communism and struggles over segregation in the context of both the Cold War and decolonization. Indeed, this historical period is especially rich in material for thinking about race and racism in IR – notwithstanding the fact that textbooks in the 1960s scarcely mentioned civil rights, let alone Martin Luther King’s Nobel Peace Prize, or the difficult interplay between the imperatives of U.S. foreign policy (in “leading the free world”) and the internationally televised realities of police brutality, lynchings, and church bombings. While Seymour briskly covers much of the appropriate terrain, including the movement linkages between the U.S. and Africa, his argument that “white world supremacy” was the consistent goal of the American “ruling class,” from Wilsonian liberal internationalism at Versailles to the war in Vietnam, the attribution of deep motives is not sufficiently demonstrated to be convincing; nor does it always meet the editors’ commitment to nuance over slogans.

At the end of a book filled with provocations, the two concluding chapters serve an important role for readers and for the project of a critical IR that is, as David Roediger puts it, “aware of race and empire” (196). Roediger and Charles Mills register a number of judicious cautions. They ask in different ways whether the preoccupation with European imperialism, US power and the white-black colour line overwhelms other important forms of racialization and racial hierarchy, including settler colonialism in many parts of the world. (The precarious existence of large numbers of African traders in Guangzhou or the practices of Chinese enterprises in East Africa, for example, might be subjects for a successor volume.) Roediger asks whether the contemporary politics of human migration might have figured more prominently here. He wonders whether Du Bois, for all his perceptiveness, needed a more complex treatment given some of his political judgments. Mills, in turn, proposes the need for more work on the global circulation of racist ideas, and also for a history of anti-racist traditions. Together, though, even in their cautions, and especially in their identification of research to be done, they affirm the importance of inquiry into race and racism within the contemporary context of the international. The subject is as demanding as it is necessary; it invites introspection and difficult conversations – above all, in the classroom. As a point of entry, this book will serve IR ably.

Notes:

[1] Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (New York:

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Farrar, Straus & Geroux, 2012), quotations at 1, 3, 8.

[2] It is probably noteworthy that, in a book originating in the UK, only one chapter, that by John Hobson, makes any reference to Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), which it criticizes for its “benign” justification of Western imperialism. Whether that criticism is fully warranted, I was pleased to see that R. J. Vincent’s work on race and racism in that same period (and included in the same volume) gets significant mention in another chapter. Vincent was a rare and critical IR theorist with an English School pedigree who put race near the core of the subject in the 1980s.

About the author:

Roger Epp is Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He is the author of *We Are All Treaty People* (2008, The University of Alberta Press), and a contributor to *The English School Guide to International Studies* (2014, Wiley) and *System, Society & the World: Exploring the English School of International Relations* (2013, E-IR).