

Interview - Robbie Shilliam

Written by E-International Relations

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Robbie Shilliam is Professor of International Relations at Johns Hopkins University. His recent publications include *Race and the Deserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit*, and (co-edited with Olivia Rutazibwa) *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics*. He is co-editor of the book series *Kilombo: International Relations and Colonial Questions*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I'm very interested in the relationship between faith, spirituality and political theory. Some scholars have questioned whether it is possible to have a profane political theory; I want to figure out how we can theorize global politics through the cosmological premises and principles of e.g. Vodou or Rastafari. I'm also very interested in the retrieval by scholars of a plethora of political projects that come under the sign of decolonization, anti-colonialism, Third-Worldism and liberation struggles, and what these projects can tell us about our simplistic chronologies and attenuated cartographies of global politics. A lot of this work is being undertaken by members of the Global Development section of the International Studies Association (ISA), and the Colonial/Postcolonial/Decolonial working group of the British International Studies Association. Finally, I'm interested in debates over the racialization of gender and sex, and the ways in which this racialization has been resisted, subverted or ignored. Many scholars in the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies section of the ISA have led this inquiry. All the above interests intersect with the field of IR, but their intellectual provenance exceeds this field.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I bought my first academic book at 17, the day after I dropped out of college in 1987. I can't say I understood it all! The book was by the Senegalese intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop and entitled *Barbarism or Civilization: An Authentic Anthropology*. I still have it. I spent much of my twenties unemployed and DJing at clubs and sound systems. From the hip-hop artists that I followed, I learned the names of figures such as Frantz Fanon, and I bought the relevant books from charity stores whenever they appeared. All of this, though, was enwrapped in the Rastafari consciousness that pervaded the roots-reggae sound systems. Not only was this consciousness deep in historical knowledge and ethical and spiritual imperatives; its mode of reasoning was also critical, capacious, imaginative and supportive.

Going back to university in my late 20s was a positively edifying experience but also – and this is no one's fault – an alienating one. My second ever publication, on Marcus Garvey in *Review of International Studies*, started life as an essay for a Masters course. However, few faculty members at my institution were actively investigating issues to do with race, Blackness, slavery, emancipation etc. I hasten to add: no one put me off studying those themes. Nonetheless, as is human, I wanted to fit in and take part in the big discussions that surrounded me. So, for my PhD thesis I examined German philosophy (expertly introduced to me by Beate Jahn), and its crisis of *Bildung* (cultivation of character), through a framework influenced by Leon Trotsky (generously introduced to me by Justin Rosenberg).

Much of my trajectory since the submission of my PhD in 2005 has been to return to working with the traditions of

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thought that I was introduced to during my music and sound system days. Along the way I have learnt a great deal from the work of Trinidadian Marxist, CLR James, St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott and especially Jamaican sociologist and novelist, Erna Brodber. Above all, I have been most influenced by the intellectuals and intellectual traditions of the Rastafari movement and of Māori and Pasifika self-determination movements. In fact, the latter movements guided my return to the former movement. (You could say that there is a bit of unavoidable autobiography in my book *The Black Pacific*.) Anyway, I guess I could characterize this trajectory as a return to the traditions by which peoples who were never supposed to survive have managed to survive – and not just to survive, but to creatively survive in a way that has impacted upon our understanding of humanity.

You talk a lot about “decolonizing the academy” and address this in a blog post. What do you think are the biggest obstacles to decolonizing university curricula today?

Most departments are keen to introduce “diversity” via optional final year modules. It is much more of a struggle to address the elite-white-male authored and Western-situated curricula of compulsory modules and, especially, their theoretical offerings. There is a reason for this: theory is supposed to act as your window onto the universality of the human condition. Theorists rarely win research grants, but at least we can claim to know the human condition! Now suppose that, as a theorist who taught theory, you were told that your window onto this condition was provincial not universal, and that so much of the theory you taught reflected, refracted and reproduced what Sylvia Wynter identifies as the speculative image of “man” that justified so much of the violence of European colonialism.

To accept this critique would be to undermine your very vocation as a theorist – as a thinker of the “universal”. Would you retrain? Quite possibly. You might, however, seek to defend the canon (and your faux universalism) by claiming for it an irreplaceable sophistication. There is a well-worn response to this critique: “do you mean to tell us that we could understand reason without reading Kant, or that we could understand capitalism without reading Marx?” Well, palpably, yes! The world is large, and humanity is multi-lingual. But that’s not the point. Of course we can read these canonical figures. As well as others. I am not aware of anyone in the “decolonizing” movement who seriously wishes to ban white men – dead or alive – from campus.

Still, it is conceivable that we might read those canonical figures more interestingly through other marginalized figures and traditions. It might even be the case that other sources can provide us with more expansive understandings of the same issues. For instance, if given the choice to read a treatise on capitalism, or a treatise on the intersection of capitalism and colonialism, or a treatise on the intersection of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, I would read the last treatise. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t that last treatise, in principle, be more rewarding?

It makes me sigh/laugh when critics of the “decolonizing” agenda identify in it an “identity politics” – i.e. we must read black authors simply because they are black and we are black. Alternatively, I would suggest that it is the defenders of the canon who tend to practice identity politics! In fact, the vast majority of us who are invested in “decolonizing” want *more* intellectual challenge, *more* intellectual rigor, *more* reading, *more* debate, etc.

To sum up, the big stumbling block, in my opinion, is the compulsory introductory (theory) module that a) presents the rest of the world (and even one’s own society) through a provincial lens, and b) defends a theoretical canon for no fundamental reason other than to defend a provincialism through the allure of intellectual “sophistication”.

Do current projects to “decolonize” and “de-whiten” the British academy overemphasize (neo)imperialism and global hierarchies of power to the extent that its manifestation in the domestic realm is overlooked?

Not really. At least, I don’t personally know any who do so unthinkingly. That said, we might want to consider why, for instance, the majority of the most famous “decolonize” movements have taken root in elite universities – mainly the Russell Group – whilst the vast majority of Britain’s Black and Brown students attend less “prestigious” institutions. We might also want to think about the relationship between “diversity” and “equality”. Diversity is the buzzword for internationalization, meaning, competing in the global market of higher education. Equality, alternatively, references racialized, gendered and classed inequalities. That is, an “equality” agenda challenges institutions not to reproduce –

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or even inject – such inequalities but, at the least, mitigate against their deleterious effects. Currently, the British higher education sector pursues diversity to the derision of equality. As I've said, the “decolonize” movements that I know of are all aware of such issues.

Do you think bottom-up, anti-racist movements – such as Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall – are an important and sustainable means to challenging the whiteness of the academy?

I'm not sure if these movements are entirely bottom up. Which is not to diss them. In any case, “bottom-up, anti-racist movements” should not be tasked with redressing the racisms of an elite social space; they have enough pressing challenges already. I think the question is better put like this: is it possible to adequately challenge the whiteness of the academy without challenging the racialization of social inequality and life chances? To my mind the whiteness of the academy is an element within the racialization of social inequality and life chances. It's really as simple as that.

You recently edited the *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* with Olivia U. Rutazibwa which outlines alternative anti-colonial global imaginaries beyond postcolonial critique. Do you think aspects of these imaginaries can be married together to produce a non-Western/anti-colonial approach to IR?

Well, if Olivia and I didn't think so, we wouldn't have edited the book! Speaking for myself, I want to make two points. Firstly, the study of global politics per se is not exhausted by the study of empire, colonialism, race. That, to my mind, is obvious.

But secondly, scholars such as Errol Henderson, Bob Vitalis, Aaron Sampson, Edward Keene, John Hobson as well as many others have demonstrated clearly – and by now, this point should be uncontroversial – that the institutional and conceptual roots of IR as a field of study lie in the problematique of imperial administration. So rather than talking about anti-colonial approaches to IR, I would rather situate IR as a field of study predicated upon support (benign, tacit or otherwise) for and/or contestation of imperial administration, including its contemporary, mediated manifestations. In short, global politics exceeds the study of imperial administration, but the field of IR arises out of it.

Your forthcoming book *Race and the Undeserving Poor*, presents an account of the ‘white working class’ in terms of the postcolonial genealogy of British Empire. Why is the need to understand the putative emergence of the white working class so intellectually and politically imperative?

My book narrates an imperial and postcolonial history of political domination told through the moralizing discourses and rhetoric of the undeserving poor. The story pivots on the tensions of – and duplicities thrown up by – capitalism, congenitally embedded (as they have always been) in imperial and postcolonial constellations. My claim is that crucial to the defence and/or adjudication of this political order has been the racialized distinction between those deserving and undeserving of social security and welfare. The recent return of the “white working class” as a deserving constituency has to be placed within these genealogies.

The purpose of the book is to argue that the “white working class” is not a natural or neutral category of political economy. As a constituency, the “white working class” has rarely been self-authored, self-empowered or self-directed. This constituency must be apprehended principally as an elite artifact of political domination. Presently, this artifact is being mobilized through a racialized populist nationalism in order to drive forward an elite project of ruthless deregulation. Brexit is not, in any politically salient sense, about the ethics of the EU.

If those are the political stakes at play, then the intellectual stakes at play relate to the fact that “domestic” British politics is intractably “postcolonial”. This is the case even with the north/south divide. Consider the following: the first significant re-structuring of English governance to take account of its colonial possessions and ambitions provided, in 1660, for two secretaries of state. The Secretary of State for the Southern Department was responsible for the southern counties, Wales, Ireland, the American colonies, and foreign relations with the Catholic and Muslim powers of Europe; the Northern secretary was responsible for the northern counties, Scotland, and foreign relations with the Protestant powers of Europe. Of the two, the Southern secretary was the senior.

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What is the most important advice that you would give to scholars studying international politics?

Don't invest yourself in IR Theory *when it is taught as a canon*. Please note, I am not saying "don't read and contribute to theoretical debates amongst scholars in IR". Rather I am suggesting the following: if you are interested in ethics, go directly to moral philosophy and theology; if you are interested in the power of capital, go straight to political economy; if you are interested in the supremacy of the state and of empire, dive into historical sociology; if you are interested in the machinations of elites, look into political sociology and foreign policy analysis, and if you are interested in meaning and interpretation, head towards hermeneutics, literature, and anthropology. Some of these literatures might in part be situated within IR, but mostly they are not and that's fine.

I would also hope that along the way you might consider the marginalized and obfuscated sources of moral philosophy, theology, political economy, historical sociology, political sociology, foreign policy analysis, hermeneutics, literature and anthropology. I would hope that you would realize that the sources most valorized by the academy tend to be racialized, gendered, classed, nationalized and (western) Christianized. I would further hope that you might at some point consider that living knowledge traditions are as theoretical as well-worn books. And it would be fantastic if you could gather all your thoughts and arguments in the various fora of IR, as well as in other places.

I am suggesting all this because to canonize IR theory is to obfuscate the field's roots in imperial administration and to reproduce a set of concepts and narratives that are all predicated upon race, but as Toni Morrison puts it, unspeakably so. Such a canonization is therefore intellectually myopic, intellectually inadequate, and ultimately super-boring. I don't really stress about the question as to whether IR is worth saving etc. because I know a lot of excellent early career and senior scholars who frequent its fora regularly. I guess I am suggesting that our field is at its best when approached as an applied studies rather than as a pretentious discipline.