

# A Review of Critical Race Theory's Critiques of Mainstream IR

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JULIA CARREIRO ROLIM, MAR 20 2021

Despite what centuries of work by white western academics have led us to believe, whether in the tradition of international relations (IR), history, philosophy, or biological sciences, race is not grounded in any given 'truth'. Race is instead socially constructed. People with shared biological, historical, and/or cultural traits are grouped together and labelled as a certain 'race' (Henderson, 2017). Such racial differentiation serves as the basis for oppressing groups of people, this is what we know today as racism. Unlike individual 'discrimination' racism, in practice, cements racialized hierarchies throughout the political world domestically and internationally (Henderson, 2017; Henderson 2015; Henderson, 2007). DuBois' concept of 'colour prejudice' is an early theoretical outline of the structural aspect of racism as it describes institutionalized power based on race (Du Bois, 1925: 442). This review will employ DuBois' concept in conjunction with the prior mentioned definitions of race and racism to identify, deconstruct, and critique the racist logics underpinning mainstream IR.

Graduate IR students are taught to associate the discipline with a handful of theories that diachronically dispute some aspect of the fundamental nature of the international system in what are called the 'great debates' (Carvalho et al., 2011; Thakur et al., 2017). The paradigms typically centred in these 'great debates' are Liberalism (and its numerous variants), Realism (and its numerous variants), and Constructivism, together they form the 'big three' and will be what this review refers to as "mainstream IR" (Hobson, 2012). I will not focus on one particular variation of realism, liberalism, or constructivism, I will, instead, identify broad theoretical assumptions that all these theories, and their sub-schools, subscribe to. Firstly, this review will outline early IR's theoretical focus on race and empire and how they have intentionally been erased from the canon. Secondly, utilizing Critical Race theory I recognize the underlying racist logics of mainstream conceptions of anarchy and sovereignty. I will then consider the implications of these conceptions on mainstream theories of the causes of international conflict. Finally, I will summarize how these racialized assumptions result in the construction of western civilization as the panacea to international conflicts.

### Colonial origins of IR theory

Before beginning our analysis, we must address the overwhelming absence of people of colour (POC) in IR, as professors, graduate students, and/or researchers, and the effects this absence has and continues to have on the construction and dissemination of knowledge in academia. The whiteness of academia creates racist bias in knowledge construction as white perspectives and ideas are represented to a larger degree than their non-white counterparts (Vitalis, 2015). Mills attributes such a racial bias to what he calls the *epistemological racial contract* (1997: 17), where whiteness is constructed as 'factual', and anything that attempts to deviate from it does not meet the standard of academic rigour. This bias permeates all levels of the political system, from individuals to domestic institutions, to international ones (Henderson, 2015). The following section will outline the historical origins of racial bias in IR and mainstream theorists' attempt to conceal it.

IR is perceived as a highly specialized field within political science that has as its focus the nature of relations between states, the origins of inter-state conflict and cooperation, and the structure and ordering principles of the international system (Ashworth, 2014). It is said that these are the specific focuses of IR due to the discipline's

# **A Review of Critical Race Theory's Critiques of Mainstream IR**

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origins from the wreck of WW1. In this creation story IR theorists are positioned as humanitarians whose interests in the relations of state arose out of a virtuous attempt to prevent carnages like those of WW1 (Carvalho et al. 2011). Despite the permanence of this myth, in reality, IR originated in the decades leading up to the war out of concerns of international conflict spurred by imperial competition and racial tensions in the colonies (Du Bois 1925, 1915; Hobson, 2012; Vitalis, 2015; Thakur et al., 2017; Ashworth, 2014). Theorists aspired to 'improve' upon political theories grounded in philosophical and historical analyses by applying scientific methodologies in order to reach ultimate political 'truths' about the international order (Ashworth, 2014; Morgenthau, 1954). This positivist trend in early international theory can be attributed to the popularisation of scientific racism, which led theorists to ground their conceptions of the international system and theories on colonial expansion on the biological 'superiority' of the white race (Anievas et al., 2015; Hobson 2012; Vitalis, 2000). Thakur et al. (2017) point to the importance of white settler colonial states as centres for theory creation and implementation, for example, South Africa's policies of Apartheid were a global inspiration for segregationist policies. Contemporary academic journals such as *Foreign Affairs* and the *RoundTable* materialised out of the tradition to promote positivist IR with colonialist aims (Anievas et al., 2015; Thakur et al., 2017). Since its inception, IR theories have moved away from their association with scientific racism, in line with the anthropological turn from biology to culture as the determining factors of race. However, much of the underlying logics linked to scientific racism have remained (Boas, 1911; Hobson, 2015).

Erasing race and empire from the IR theory canon was not accidental but highly strategic (Thompson, 2015; Vitalis, 2000; Vitalis, 2015), due to a decline in the acceptance of scientific racism and emerging taboos about overt white supremacy in the West (Mills, 1997; Vucetic, 2011). Additionally, in the interwar years, scholars thought that by obfuscating the racialized hierarchies of world politics in a pacifying move towards less discernibly racist logics of humanism and the equality of men, racial tensions could be quelled (Boas, 1911; Henderson, 2017). This idea was expanded in the post war years to a liberal world order based on humanitarian principles of equality of all men and the right to self-determination embodied in international institutions such as the UN (Hall & Hobson, 2010). Thus, began the shift from overtly white supremacist theories concerned with racial relations to theories concerned with abstracted 'structures' and 'power relations' (Henderson, 2015; Anievas et al., 2015).

Mainstream IR has also excluded a rich intellectual tradition of Black American scholars that have historically centralized race from formal IR scholarship (Vitalis, 2015). The most evident instance of such an erasure is the marginalisation of the "Howard School" scholars, a group of Black intellectuals that included W.E.B DuBois, Alain Locke, and Merze Tate, by mainstream IR scholars of their time. For example, Tate was systematically denied publishing opportunities by popular contemporary IR journals (Vitalis, 2015). The 'Howard School' of IR was concerned with critiquing the white supremacy and biological racism that permeated mainstream IR as well as developing ground-breaking theories on imperial competition, international conflict, interdependence and development (Du Bois 1925, 1915; Carvalho et al., 2011; Henderson, 2015, 2017). However, this radical theorisation of racism as an international structural problem came under fire in the context of the cold war during McCarthyism and the US struggle against communism. Black scholars were under immense pressure from mainstream journals and academics to frame racism as an internal 'domestic' problem the US needed to overcome instead of an international problem linked to American imperialism (Vitalis, 2015: 158; Doty, 1993). Unfortunately, such pressure eventually led to the decline and marginalisation of this important school from the theoretical canon of IR (Vitalis, 2015). The early and pioneering contributions of the Howard School will be discussed in the following section, with reference to the mainstream IR's assumptions about sovereignty, anarchy, and the nature of inter-state conflict.

## **Theorizing the international system of states**

Sovereignty, internally defined as state power within and over its territory and externally defined as the supremacy of the sovereign state in the international realm and the equality of sovereignty between nations (Ashworth, 2014). Sovereign states are present in all mainstream IR theories as primary actors in the international system created by the 1648 treaty of Westphalia (Ashworth, 2014; Morgenthau, 1954). In realist traditions, the sovereign power of the state trumps the power of international institutions and non-state actors in any given situation since the power of the latter is dependent upon the authority of the former (Hobson & Sharman, 2005; Waltz, 1979). Their position in the international system is taken for granted by mainstream IR so much so that they are perceived as a natural feature of the system (Ashworth, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2011; Henderson, 2015).

# A Review of Critical Race Theory's Critiques of Mainstream IR

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Classical contractarians agree that sovereignty is a prerequisite for political existence as men leave the state of nature by establishing a sovereign authority based on 'equality among men' that binds them to rules and norms, however, they conceptualize men (or people) as white (Mills, 1997). The separation of white people and POC in theories of sovereignty allows for the creation of a hierarchical society where white people are entitled to equality and depending on the theory to democratic representation. However, POC are entirely or partially excluded from these benefits (Mills, 2017). This production of racial dichotomies that grants privilege to whites above POC domestically are reproduced in the international realm (Henderson, 2015; Mills, 1997). Racist sovereignty materializes in the international realm chiefly through the lack of recognition of the sovereignty of racialized political groupings (Nisancioglu, 2019; Vitalis, 2000; Mills, 1997). Transposing a racialized hierarchical concept of state sovereignty to the international realm challenges the conception of the equality of sovereigns and fundamentally questions the anarchic nature of the international system (Carvalho et al., 2011)

The same racist processes and myths that underlie the construction of the sovereign state have also guided the theorization of anarchy in the international system, as sovereignty and anarchy are co-constitutive phenomenon (Ashworth, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2011). Anarchy is essentially a lack of formal hierarchical structure and central governing authority in the international realm; it creates a 'self-help' system in which the sovereign state is the ultimate authority and behaves egotistically (Sampson, 2002; Hobson & Sharman, 2005; Waltz 1979, Mearsheimer, 2001). Anarchy, as it is currently conceptualized in mainstream IR, is rooted in what theorists have called 'Tropical anarchy' (Sampson, 2002; Henderson, 2015). The concept originates from scientific racism's theories that those native to 'tropical' climates were generally inferior to those native to 'temperate' European climates (Hobson, 2012). The defining characteristics of 'anarchy' in mainstream IR theories and the anthropological renderings of 'primitive' pre-colonial societies in Africa have significant overlap. Both are conceptualized as decentralized systems in which units (states or people) behave egotistically according to their self-interest (Henderson, 2015; Sampson, 2002). This perception of 'anarchy' as 'primitive' is most clearly found in realism's blunt and uncompromising view of anarchy (Morgenthau, 1954; Waltz, 1979). Waltz has gone as far as to reference explicitly racist anthropologists such as Nadel, Durkheim, and his seminal *A Theory of International Politics* (1979) relies heavily on Nadel's structural-functional theory of categorizing 'primitive' societies (Sampson, 2002).

Critical race theory's poignant dissolution of anarchy and sovereignty poses a threat to mainstream IR's theories on the causes of international conflict being driven by the anarchic nature of the international system and the sovereignty of states (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). Du Bois, in his seminal works 'The African Roots of War' and 'Worlds of Colour' is among the first to develop the notion that it is not anarchy or sovereignty but imperial competition between European powers that drives international conflict, for example, it was the driver of WW1. Not only does he focus on the imperial competition but he identifies what he calls 'colour prejudice', one of the first theoretical accounts of structural racism, as the rationale for imperial competition (Du Bois, 1925). Mainstream theories fail in explaining causes of international conflict, because unlike Du Bois they do not consider the concept of race analytically and as a structural feature of the international system capable of motivating and shaping states' interests (Vitalis, 2000).

## **Conclusion: Western civilization as the 'solution' to anarchy?**

The racist history of anarchy and sovereignty are obfuscated due to the high levels of abstraction and the value-neutrality embedded in mainstream theories. However, reproducing these racialized dichotomies has political implications, most notably the diffusion and dominance of Western notions of 'civilization' in development rhetoric and relations with the 'third world' (Hall & Hobson, 2010; Hobson, 2012; Shilliam; 2008). Western civilization was and still is considered to be the pinnacle of evolution and hierarchical political system, as the preferable, and indeed only, form of civilization that should be promoted and emulated (Henderson, 2017; Hobson, 2012).

Returning to Mill's previously mentioned *epistemological racial contract*, the contract's stipulation that whiteness is privileged in all aspects of social life informs the dominance of western values and the perception of them as universal principles in the international community (Mills, 1997; Henderson, 2015). So-called 'universal' principles have been codified into our international institutions in the form of international law and what constructivists would call shared norms (Shilliam, 2008; Cox, 1981). These norms are inherently hierarchical, and work to diffuse a western (white) world order, while simultaneously serving as 'strategic' justifications for neo-imperialist expansion

# A Review of Critical Race Theory's Critiques of Mainstream IR

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under the guise of 'humanitarianism' (Vitalis, 200; Hobson, 2012, 2017).

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# A Review of Critical Race Theory's Critiques of Mainstream IR

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