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Race and research agendas

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Abstract  In this afterword I consider a set of questions related to the research agendas of race in International Relations. What are our narratives of race and racism? Whom do we follow in order to tell the tale: the masters or the enslaved—the humanitarians or the ‘sufferers’? And which tale confesses the episteme—the scientifically valid study—of race?

[Antigua] was settled by human rubbish from Europe, who used enslaved but noble and exalted human beings from Africa (all masters of every stripe are rubbish, and all slaves of every stripe are noble and exalted; there can be no question about this) to satisfy their desire for wealth and power, to feel better about their own miserable existence, so that they could be less lonely and empty—a European disease . . . Of course, the whole thing is, once you cease to be a master . . . you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings. (Kincaid 1988, 80–81)

Jamaica Kincaid suggests that abolition and emancipation are bittersweet affairs. For the enslaved, freedom furnishes one with a human being that nevertheless awaits a meaningful personhood. Out of slavery the master fares better, redeeming his human being from being human rubbish. Kincaid’s suggestion is insightful. After all, abolition had a vibrant nineteenth-century afterlife (see Miers 1998). White abolitionists enthusiastically allowed their humanitarianism to colonize Africa so that God’s chosen could sanctify themselves through the act of saving the natives from their selves. Meanwhile, William Wilberforce et al, convinced that slaves were human biologically yet lacked the social and cultural competencies of humanity, looked on fascinated at the experiment of self-government in Haiti (Geggus 1985). From this point onwards all future failings would be attributed to the epidermis, not the colonial relation. Presently, argues Kincaid, the landscapes of the old Caribbean plantations have been consumed by a white tourist gaze that has once again disavowed the living legacies of enslavement and colonization and denied meaningful personhood to Caribbean peoples. What remains of these places and peoples is only an ‘unreal’, picture-book beauty (Kincaid 1988, 77–79).

In this afterword I would like to consider a set of questions related to the research agendas of race. What are our narratives of race and racism? Whom do we follow in order to tell the tale: the masters or the enslaved—the humanitarians
or the ‘sufferers’? Which tale confesses the episteme—the scientifically valid study—of race?

The 1950–1951 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ‘statements on race’ answered such questions in favour of the master’s narrative. Announcing a new era in human understanding after the terrors of war and irrationalities of genocide, the main purpose of the statements was to separate the ‘biological fact’ of race from its ‘social myth’ (Montagu 1972, 10). The biological fact in and of itself was rendered harmless, pertaining only to ‘physical and physiological’ classifications. Thus genetic inheritance, it was affirmed, could have no bearing on mental or cultural competencies and capabilities (Montagu 1972, 12, 145). Conversely, the social myth of race was considered extremely dangerous in that it rendered cultural difference as biological, thus sundering the ‘unity of mankind’ (Montagu 1972, 11). This myth had to be dispensed with; hence ethnicity—as a social/cultural classifier—was proposed as a preferable classificatory regime to that of race. Ethnicity, after all, had not been tainted with supremacist hierarchy and could signify instead non-hierarchical diversity (Montagu 1972, 9; Lentin 2005, 385).

Although the scientists who collectively produced the statements on race were by no means all white, the majority hailed from Western academies. And the particular kind of anti-racism evident in UNESCO’s statements had already been formulated by famous Western anthropologists such as Franz Boas. They had sought to undermine scientific racism on its own grounds, that is, by proving the unscientific nature of the social myth of race. And this endeavour required debunking racialized identities—that which confessed their legal and natural inequality—as myth not fact. However, as part of this manoeuvre these identities had to be subsumed under a harmless social science of ethnic categorization. While this move redeemed white identities, it depoliticized the meanings of the sufferers’ cultural complexes and complexions, extricated them from inherited hierarchies of power and thus segregated them from the inherited and living struggles against (post-/neo-)masters. In short, as Alana Lentin (2005, 383–384) puts it, the effect of the statements was to separate race from politics. But I would like to add to this point a further provocation: that the episteme of race announced by UNESCO allowed no place for the ongoing story of the sufferers and their epistemic and practical strategies for meaningful re-humanization and reclamation of personhoods. Instead, the UNESCO research agenda on race and racism promoted a science that enabled the master to sweep away his rubbish and redeem his humanity.

Nevertheless, as Perrin Selcer (2012, 175) notes, care should be taken in assuming that the 1950–1951 statements were primarily focused upon scientific racism and the Shoah. Just as important was the fact that the colonial subjects of European empires had paid the blood sacrifice for keeping Europe free of Nazism, as had African-American troops, and yet racialized rule had survived the end of the war at home and abroad. While no nation post-war could dispute the

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1 I use this Anglo-Caribbean term to refer to those whose ancestors suffered slavery and colonization and who, in their present socio-economic and psychological state, still suffer from the legacies of that. For more context, see Bogues (2009).

2 On the intellectual politics regarding the two statements of 1950 and 1951 see Selcer (2012).
judgement upon Nazism, it was a different matter with European colonialism and Jim Crow. Hence, prudence dictated that the living and ongoing struggles against racial rule would not appear in the 1950–1951 statements. But this modus vivendi was broken in 1967 when certain newly independent states entering into the United Nations (UN) system, and buoyed by the global ideological confluence of liberation struggle, Black Power and civil rights, impelled UNESCO to revisit the race question.

The fourth UNESCO statement on race once more denied any biological origin to the social problem of race. However, this time the seedbed of racial discrimination was traced explicitly to the global legacies of slavery and colonial rule, as well as to anti-Semitism (Montagu 1972, 159). Moreover, the 1967 statement acknowledged anti-colonial struggles to be the mechanism for ‘eliminating the scourge of racism’ while also decrying the way in which ‘ethnic groups’ inhabiting Western countries were pressured to give up their cultural identity in order to assimilate (Montagu 1972, 159, 163). While the term ‘ethnicity’ was still used, the interlocutory intent of the 1967 statement was far less to redeem the master’s humanity for his past crimes, and much more to valorize the sufferers’ ongoing struggles for re-humanization and re-personalization (often against the same master cultures and societies). Therefore, unlike its earlier articulations, the 1967 statement acknowledged that racialization had never been a passive project, a technology that moulded a blank object. And in this respect the hermeneutic of the 1967 statement allowed a number of considerations to enter the research agenda that were excluded from the 1950–1951 statements.

In order to flesh out these considerations I confess to using a particular departure point (as will already be evident), namely, the legacies of the struggles against enslavement by Africans in the Americas. Colonialism never moved into blank spaces, and slavery never, phenomenologically speaking, created slaves—that is, empty bodies. Concomitantly, the master has never been the only scientist; the sufferers have always had their own sciences, despite the fact that sometimes they have also practised the science of the master at a professional level. Moreover, I do not say any of this romantically; I do not attribute a natural nobility or goodness to the very diverse and often clashing sciences of the sufferers. But sciences they nevertheless had, and have. Sciences that keep particular parts of their stories, being and practices unspoken, hidden and camouflaged from the master even as he dominates (or evacuates) their meanings in the public sphere; and sciences that allow the brunt of racial rule to be at least partially transmogrified into a creative force wherein identification processes mobilize the European constructs of race in order to redeem extant personhoods and cultural complexes and complexions under the sign, precisely, of race.

Occasionally, these sciences reveal themselves in the public spaces of the master through visible insurrections that are aesthetic at the same time as they are directly political. The master’s science can only conjure slaves or incompetent humans; yet even the master’s bards can occasionally sense that there is something at work other than brute resistance. Witness, for example, Wordsworth’s sonnet to Toussaint L’Ouverture, one of the famed leaders of the Haitian Revolution: ‘Thou hast left behind Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies; there’s not a breathing of the common wind that will forget thee; thou hast great allies.’ But, most importantly, the sciences of the sufferers require us to consider that there might be, in the words of Artwell Cain (2012), not just one
‘blackness’—the tool of the master—but also a blackness otherwise, one that ‘seeks to reconstruct through knowledge of self an individual and a collective identification with others carrying similar markers while fostering a sense of togetherness geared at liberating humanity’.

In this respect, we should remember (as the 1967 UNESCO statement intonates) that Black Power has never been simply an atavistic expression of ressentiment against White Power and that it is much more a cutting-edge science of re-humanization and re-personalization through blackness. For example, Winston Trew (2010) testifies that the anti-racist science of Black Power activism in 1970s Britain did not operate through a narrow ‘identity politics’ agenda but rather according to the principle that one was ‘Black for a cause, not just because’. Concomitantly, the slogan of the iconic Oakland Black Panther Party was ‘Power to the People’, and not ‘Power to the Black People’. These creative valences inherent in the aesthetics of Black Power (broadly conceived) facilitated their global spread (see Slate 2012). Worldwide, Black Power stitched—in an unseemly fashion—artists and activists from both master and sufferer cultures and complexions into an unprecedented tapestry of protest.3

This other science of blackness is important not just for its nobility and heroism, but far more so for its hermeneutics and their attendant cognitive, aesthetic and political practices.4 True, the fourth UNESCO statement on race marks the zenith of the Third World project before its political defeat in the 1970s (see in general Prashad 2007). Nevertheless, the sciences of the sufferers that ultimately supported this project have genealogies that prefigure, pre-empt and succeed temporal defeat (see Pasha 2012; see also Grovogui 2006). And yet, all the same, these sciences continue to be disavowed, excluded or re-forgotten in the Western academy’s research agenda on race.

In keeping with the 1950–1951 UNESCO statements on race, the current agenda is predominantly framed through two key thematic of contestation: the separation of the biological and social facts of race (re-animated recently due to the science of bio-engineering (El-Haj 2007)), and the horizontalization/depoliticization of race into ethnicity. In philosophies of race the two thematic contestations are much more likely to interact, while the majority of critical work in the humanities and social sciences has engaged primarily with the second. With especial regard to this work, I suggest that there remains a consistent implied preference for the master’s science to set the epistemic grounds of debate, propelled, moreover, by a particular anti-racism that is obsessed with the question of whether the master can clean up his own rubbish and make good. And this preference is structural, not individual.

Take, for instance, the case of critical race studies, which has recently been flooded with ‘whiteness studies’. Initially designed as a political intervention to abolish white privilege (see Roediger 1994), such studies now tend to fixate whiteness as the dominant cultural complex and complexion to be explored (for some thoughts see Hook 2011). Or consider how poststructural and postcolonial approaches—genealogies in general—have increasingly interrogated colonial rule

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4 On this point see Simon Gikandi’s (2002) critique of Paul Gilroy humanism.
and liberation struggles through the hollowed-out post-humanist subject of the
subaltern, conceived as an effect or trace of the master’s power (for a critique see
Shilliam forthcoming; see also Arthur 2010; Robinson 1993). It is important to
acknowledge that historical materialist scholarship has consistently thrown up
exceptions to these preferences (for example, Rodney 1990); however, in their key
bastions historical materialist scholars remain unwilling to rethink the Eurocentric
points of departure that allow for provincial assumptions about the causal
relationship between capitalism, colonialism and race (Mills 2003; Mignolo 2000;
Bhambra 2011).

I acknowledge that, in and of themselves, all these approaches and
investigations are necessary and valuable, both intellectually and politically.
Indeed, my argument above is in part dependent upon them, although I
qualify this dependence with another acknowledgement that these resources
can be mined just as well from the sciences of the sufferers (Dussel 1985, 4).
But my main point is that this research agenda is dominated by one story—
what the master does unto the sufferers—and addressed to one politics—can
the master redeem the detritus of his humanity? What of the sufferers and
their stories and politics? Are they merely fragments of raw data? Or do they
have an epistemic part to play in the research agenda on race and racism?

The insightful contributions to this special issue confirm (once more) the
unavoidability of race and racism when engaging with the issues and
methodologies of international relations (IR). After reading this collection, one
is left with a number of interlocking impressions: IR disavows its intellectual debts
accrued from the colonial study of ‘primitive’ political systems; furthermore, the
racial differences cultivated by slavery and colonialism are demonstrated to be
central to the very formation of modern social and political thought; in the
twentieth and twenty-first centuries, principles of racial difference still inform
debates on democratization and good governance, likewise the meaning of self-
determination and citizenship, so too the attempts by imperial rivals to legalize
military intervention; indeed, because our semantic universes are so deeply
racialized, race remains a—perhaps the—global idea of our age. In sum, these
contributions confirm that it is impossible to think past or to run away from race
and racism in IR. But what agendas do they invoke?

Taken as a whole, the critique of this collection of essays is in the first place
addressed to the master. The collection clearly identifies what rubbish of the
master remains to be cleaned up, and there is a strong, if sometimes implicit,
indictment of masters for failing to honour the gift of humanity bestowed upon
them. Yet alongside this agenda appear other openings, albeit more prominent in
some essays than in others. In these openings the master’s science is not just
critiqued but also found to be inadequate; perhaps to be replaced with another
agenda? In any case, here other narratives flash into the imagination, prompting
intellectual and political questions that are not obsessed with the master’s
humanity but rather are concerned with a redeemed humanity and meaningful
personhood forged by sufferers in the very maelstrom of racial rule and racism
(Sartre 2001). These agendas entangle. The collection therefore provokes in me
these final thoughts about the future research agenda of race and racism in IR.
Should we be willing and able to travel the continents of race without using a
tourist’s gaze? Do sober and critical lenses exist only to see the master?
Conversely, must the sufferers always appear to inhabit an unreal world?
Notes on contributor

Robbie Shilliam is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Queen Mary, University of London. He publishes widely on issues to do with race, colonialism and international relations. He is the author of *The black Pacific: anticolonial struggles and oceanic connections* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, forthcoming) and editor of *International relations and non-Western thoughts: imperialism, colonialism and investigations of global modernity* (Routledge, 2010). Email: r.shilliam@qmul.ac.uk

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