



Is Racism Global?

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I have only a short contribution to make. I offer praise to Dunaway and Clelland for taking on this important subject; especially for those of us in the United States who need to have a more comparative, more global and historical perspective on race and racism. But I am far from convinced by their argument.

The title question, “Is Racism Global?” answers itself. Speaking of historical perspectives, it is important to grasp that the onset of modernity and the global European empires, the rise of capitalism, AKA the modern world system, was a centuries-long process. A good Wallersteinian would recognize this. The creation of the modern world system was also a racist project. Wallerstein’s project avowedly builds on Marx, including Marx’s analysis in *Capital I* of “primitive accumulation.”

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation (Marx 1967: 351).



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For Marx, primitive accumulation via empire was as basic to the rise of capitalism as was the enclosure movement. Empire was racialized by every ruling power, every “mother” country. Empire was a gendered enterprise too (Federici 2004); this is an important matter that I cannot address now, but that will not come as news to engaged scholars.

We know a lot today about how empire and metropole, core and periphery, influenced each other (Cooper and Stoler 1997). Techniques for recruiting and exploiting labor, for managing settlement and displacement of natives and peasants, for augmenting the encroachment of capitalism in the hinterlands (see also Luxemburg, 2003 [1913])—these are also Wallerstein’s themes. Just as metropolitan capitalism learned from peripheral capitalism to characterize the English (and French, and Portuguese, etc.) lower classes as “lazy” and hypersexualized, so too did it introduce racial ideology into the metropole. This was hardly difficult, since enslaved and colonized subjects flowed back to London, Lisbon, Paris, and elsewhere along with the primary commodities they produced. Since racial slavery was the primary source of imperial wealth, racial ideology too flowed around the world. Wallerstein, who personally knew Fanon, Cabral, Rodney, and many other anti-colonial and revolutionary theorists/practitioners, is hardly unaware of this. As he and Balibar point out

Racism - a true “total social phenomenon” inscribes itself in practices (forms of violence, contempt, intolerance, humiliation and exploitation), in discourses and representations which are so many intellectual elaborations of the phantasm of prophylaxis or segregation (the need to purify the social body, to preserve 'one's own' or 'our' identity from all forms of mixing, interbreeding or invasion) and which are articulated around stigmata of otherness (name, skin color, religious practices) [Balibar and Wallerstein, 2011, 17-18].

This brings us to modern times. Racial theory today recognizes both (1) the instability and flexibility of racial categories, and (2) the deep social structural dimensions of race and racism. To grasp the global dynamics of racism, you have to wrap your head around those two ideas. It’s not so different from thinking about gender, or class for that matter. The modern world system framework is built on race as much as on class (and gender). That framework has necessarily varied over time, just as the meaning of racial has varied over time.

Therefore it is unsatisfactory to dismiss raciality as a source of identity, stratification, or conflict, in the semiperiphery or anywhere else. Let us recall the epic of empire in the semiperiphery, say in South Asia. Let us remember how that huge sector of the world was labeled

as the home of wogs and kaffirs. Consider the racial *geography* of empire. Does it leave anyone out?

But wait! my colleagues tell me. Sometimes slavery, peonage, and other forms of superexploitation has existed within racially homogeneous groups, and even within ethnically homogeneous groups. *Slavery doesn't have to be racial.*

That is true. There are many cases in which slavery wasn't racial, especially in the pre-capitalist world but also sometimes in the modern world system (Kolchin 2009). But in most cases, wherever mass recruitment of labor is taking place, wherever superexploitation is occurring, wherever there is a comprehensive system of domination, racial dynamics will also be present. In the US for example, prisoners classified as white early in their sentences tend to get reclassified as black or brown as their time in prison gets longer (Penner and Saperstein 2012). The periphery has now properly been redesignated the "postcolony," and operates as a racially demarcated zone of precarity, under a permanent "state of exception" (Mbembe 2001; Agamben 2005). In the semiperiphery too, in contemporary India, for example in contemporary India, we have the case of the Dalit, who draw on the image of the Black Panther, who travelled *en masse* to Durban to take part in the 2001 UN World Conference on Racism, and who have equated caste oppression to racism, following their great leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Pinto 2001; Prashad 2000; Maitland forthcoming).¹

Some argue, as Dunaway and Clelland do, that religious differences (i.e. ethnically-/culturally-defined group and individual identities) are not racial. But are there not racial elements embedded in Hindu views (and treatment) of Muslims in India, and in Pakistani and Bangladeshi treatment of Hindus as well? The list could go on across Asia: Indonesia, Philippines, Korea, Myanmar, China too. Indeed it could with ease encompass the whole semiperiphery: the BRIC countries etc. Of course there would be immense variations: from Singapore to South Africa, from India to Brazil. Yet *nowhere* in this picture would racism be absent.

So very soon we find ourselves dealing with Islamophobia and anti-semitism as racial projects (to use Omi's and my term).² Why? Because these patterns of stratification and exclusion also contain "racial elements." By this term I mean the *corporealization*, the *phenotypification*, of "difference," both individual- and group-based. This invocation of the body, this dimension of corporeal rule that is characteristic of every form of racism, can be understood as the core act of *social construction* that shapes race in the modern world. For (much) more on racial formation, see Omi and Winant 2015.

¹ See also the "Dalit Panthers Manifesto" (Joshi, ed. 1986).

² On the question of anti-Semitism as racism, see Fredrickson 2015, Mosse 1997.

In this sense of a simultaneously flexible and structural construct, race and racism are everywhere, and variable everywhere. This is why the question “Is Racism Global?” answers itself. Race and racism are not excrescences on the capitalist system; they are constitutive of that system. Race is not a mere phenomenon of the past; race cannot be characterized as absent, as having been transcended, or as having been eclipsed by ethnicity. Not globally, not regionally, not locally.... To argue for its absence, to dismiss race, is to “erase” it, as the common phrase goes. To their credit, while reducing (inordinately in my view) the spectrum of social relations in which they say race figures, Dunaway and Clelland do not dismiss the concept entirely. They do not entirely reduce race to ethnicity (i.e. cultural difference, “ethnic boundary-making,” a la Wimmer and others) (Wimmer 2013). But many scholars today still pursue intellectual (and perforce political) projects of *racial reductionism*, as was true in the past as well. Race is not “real,” they argue. Race is an exception, they claim, to a social order built on rational choice. It is a manifestation of class; it is a cultural/ethnic phenomenon; it is tool of nation state-building. But it is not real. It is not really there. It is absent. Such claims, whether wishful thinking or ideological, persist in the present. But they are no more true now than they were in earlier times.

Despite the enormous vicissitudes that demarcate and distinguish national conditions, historical developments, roles in the international market, political tendencies, and cultural norms, racial differences often operate as they did in centuries past: as a way of restricting the economic mobility, political access, and indeed life itself,³ not just of racially subordinated groups, but of all those at the bottom end of the system of social stratification.

About the Author

Howard Winant is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the co-author of *Racial Formation in the United States* (3rd ed. 2015); *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (2011); *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (2004); and *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (1994), among other works.

Disclosure Statement

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³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore memorably defined racism as “...the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore 2007).

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