Preface: New Racial Studies and Global Raciality

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Right-Wing Racism

The evidence for this is not obscure. Right-wing regimes have taken power in much of the global North and West, drawing a great deal of their political support from racial resentment: of immigrants and refugees; of Muslims and Africans most generally. In the global East and South, there are also resurgent racial conflicts, or their near cousin ethnonational conflict,
with powerful if not always explicit racial dimensions: Consider Burma, Indonesia, Philippines, India. . . and that is not a complete list.¹ Inclusive and democratic political reforms—especially those aimed at assisting immigrants, but also those aimed at overcoming traditional patterns of racial inequality and injustice—have been shelved and in some cases explicitly reversed. In the rhetoric of such new reactionary leaders as Donald Trump, some familiar neo-fascist tropes have surfaced: “The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive,” Trump declaimed at the G20 summit meeting in Warsaw on July 6, 2017.

Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?

(Thrush and Davis 2017)

We can easily find parallel appeals in Mein Kampf and other fascist writings. The elevation of “the West” celebrates and conflates the white nationalisms of the USA and Europe, setting them apart from the “others . . . those who would subvert and destroy” civilization itself—are located outside those borders, wherein the darker nations are the source of uncertainty and fear (Prashad 2008; Goldberg 2008). Indeed, it is those dark representatives of the others now dwelling among “us,” and even on the verge of rendering us a minority in our own countries, who pose the greatest threat.

To be sure, Trump’s menacing rhetoric is not identical to that of other leading racial reactionaries around the world—Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism, Vladimir Putin’s “great Russian” chauvinism, Marine Le Pen’s French nationalism, and Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” version of Han nationalism—all vary greatly in their particular equations of race and nation. Nor are these variations all synchronic: historically, reactionary regimes have identified their threatening “others” as many different groups. Yet the parallels and continuities remain striking: for Hitler’s Jewish threat, we can read today’s Muslim threat. (Not that anti-semitism has vanished from the scene either; far from it.)

According to the perspectives presented in this book, the real menace is the opposite. Of course, it is not the “others,” but reactionary nationalism, which has extreme racism at its core, that has seized power in many countries. The threat that these reactionary (and racist) nationalisms pose to social inclusion, political democracy, and economic equality is immense. The danger is severe. In every country in Europe, and in many other places,
there are movements calling for ethnic cleansing and even genocide. In the USA, these movements have entered the government, where they exercise significant influence on the Trump administration and the Republican Party, once the party of Lincoln. Racist violence is increasing in frequency and ferocity, and has found a home both in the USA and around the world: in everyday life as in collective action; on the internet; and in what Jameson called the “political unconscious.”

Resistance
Just as these convergences and similarities among various patterns of racial reaction exist across time and space, so too do patterns of resistance. Resistance is generally democratic and non-violent, but not always. It demonstrates broad connections, alliances, and continuity; of course, anti-racist movements also have significant variations, notably by country and composition. To name just a few components of the global opposition that is taking shape to confront resurgent racial reaction, consider the following propositions:

- The anti-imperial and anti-colonial movements that triumphed after World War II whose profound legacy lives on. Anti-imperialism was generally anti-racist (there are a few exceptions); it was after all the struggle of the global South and East against the North and West of Europe and the United States. Anti-imperialist movements were linked to revolutionary struggles for “national liberation” that acquired global influence. They established anti-racist consciousness as a wide-ranging social force, affecting not only people of color but also whites (who also have a color, by the way), and seeking to shift social norms and political parameters in a democratic and inclusive direction. Although the post-World War II anti-racist upsurge did not supplant the endemic white supremacy of the old “age of empire,” it did weaken it and subject it to a new level of resistance and delegitimization. The deepest anathema to the currently ascendant reactionary movements is the post-World War II global anti-racist upsurge, and most of its allies and supporters.

- Anti-imperialism operated not only on the peripheries of empire, but also in the metropoles, notably in the USA and Western Europe. Long-established anti-racist movements and anti-war activities acquired new coherence in alliance with anti-imperial struggle, and worked to profoundly reshape global and national politics. The US civil rights and black power movements, and their allies in other anti-racist movements—the new left, “second-wave” feminism, and gay liberation—all had a profound
and lasting impact, not only in the USA but also globally. In many ways they changed the very shape of politics, linking it to everyday life and “identity” in enduring ways.

- Indeed, this range of movements for inclusion, democratization, social justice, and equality proceeded to merge over time, beginning in the late 20th century, and continuing—not without hiccups—into the present. The term “intersectionality” most closely describes this complex process of movement synthesis.4

- To be sure, these syntheses and affinities were not new to the post-World War II era; they had profound diachronic elements and extensive histories. For centuries, anti-racist and anti-colonial political projects have united activists and theorists in periphery and metropole. In this regard, consider slave revolts and abolitionism, indigenous struggles and insurgencies, and the long-term resistance to apartheid.5

- Finally, although this brief inventory must remain incomplete and cursory, we must note that in certain ways the perception of the racist right is perversely correct: yes, white people are not a majority, certainly not on a world scale and sometimes not even in their “home” countries. Although for centuries the USA has been the epitome of a “white man’s country,” it now faces the prospect of becoming a “majority-minority” society in which whites will be merely another racial minority, albeit the largest. Earlier panics about this were more explicit: “the rising tide of color,” the “passing of the great race” (Stoddard 1920; Grant 1916). Thus, the Thatcherite fear of being “swamped” by people of color is not merely a specter in such settler nations as South Africa or Israel-Palestine, but also exists in the metropole itself.6

In short, we must develop the capacity for democracy, inclusion, and equality on a global scale, or expect genocidal race wars. We must do so or expect the exclusion, expulsion, and apartheid the racist right wants to create. That is the real threat to “civilization” itself, a concept which must be seen in global and multiracial terms, not as something we possess as yet (as Trump would have it), but as a goal that we must still achieve: inclusive democracy. Arguably, our very survival as a species depends on attaining that higher level of civilization.

The Age of Empire is Not Over

*Global Raciality: Empire, PostColoniality, DeColoniality* raises the question of race and empire as political-economic and sociocultural matters and as core elements of democracy. But, most centrally, it draws attention to the crisis of race and racism itself. The articles presented
here interrogate the processes and practices of empire, the aftermaths of empire, and the undoing (or refusal) of empire. By drawing attention to the centrality of race and racism, by probing the enormous variations and equally large parallels that exist among racial phenomena and racist practices, and by looking at anti-racist resistance, this book shows how race and racism have made and unmade the modern world.

To be sure, empires are not over. The phrase “age of empire” refers to various epochs in modern world history, notably the period from the 15th century onward when European empires first encircled and began to pil lage the globe. But it has also been applied to the 18th and 19th centuries when these great predatory systems culminated and began to decline.

So, what was the age of empire exactly? When imperialism generated the mass slaughter and global disruption of World War I, when it required the adjustments made at Versailles in 1919, that certainly was not the end of the age of empire, even though the Versailles conference concerned itself very publically (and hypocritically) with the “right of national self-determination.” When World War II ended in 1945, leading to the worldwide revolutionary and reform struggles that finally undid European and US imperialism—largely in the 1960s—was that the end of empire? A great deal of social scientific and historical literature has claimed as much. Yet, in more recent years we have seen a large number of imperial wars, notably in the Middle East, central/South Asia, and Africa. Not only have multina tional, external empires continued to operate, but also internal empires have hardly ceased to exist. As Native Americans, indigenous people around the world, Palestinians, and certain European peoples can attest (in Catalunya, Scotland, the former Yugoslavia, and the former Soviet Central Asia, among others), race and empire still underwrite each other in the 21st century. The US maintains military bases in some 140 countries as of this writing; while some of these are in “white countries”—such as Australia and Germany—or “honorary white” countries—such as Japan and South Korea—the majority of the countries so occupied by US imperial forces are in Africa and Asia.

From the dawn of the modern world to the complex conflicts of the 21st century, there has always been at least some recognition of the importance of race and racism in shaping (and enabling) imperial power arrangements. For centuries the racial dimension of empire, the racist framework of imperial power, was largely taken for granted, and often rationalized on religious or scientific grounds. Resistance to imperial rule has always been violently suppressed. We can see this not only in the history of slave revolt, but also in the many moving histories of everyday racial resistance that we now possess.7

Today we talk of the racial state, but as Moon-Kie Jung (2015) reminds us, we should be discussing the empire state in our approaches to race and
modernity. The racial dimensions of the US empire state only became a central preoccupation for social theory after World War II, driven by what I have discussed elsewhere as the “racial break” that occurred during and after that war. From the perspective of the present, it is often difficult to understand how the many earlier historical crises of empire were not perceived as symptomatic of the contradictions of race and racism. Abolitionism, Haiti, the US Civil War, the 19th-century destruction of the Iberian empires, the rise and consolidation of fascism, the “race war” dimensions of World War II, and the decades-long process of decolonization that followed it, were all explained principally in terms of the perceived social problems of their time, which all received more attention than race itself: the development of modern capitalism, the onset of periodic economic crises, and recurrent inter-imperialist rivalries.

But after World War II and the great anti-colonial upsurge that it generated, there was a tendency to see imperialism too as finished, an artifact of an earlier age, a system due for unwinding as a new period of global development dawned. The “age of empire” was being replaced by a proliferation of independent nations, a global contest among “spheres of influence” (notably in the Cold War), and by the rise of a global South and global East whose growing importance confronted, if not entirely eclipsed, the previously unquestioned dominance of the West and North.

Theory, social analysis, and political strategy, we are frequently reminded, are driven by actual events on the ground. War, movements, and crises give rise to new understandings. Postcolonial theory, obviously enough, emerged from the breakdown of empire, the failure of counterinsurgency almost everywhere it was tried, and the development of independent nations in what was soon called the third world. These countries, often crisis-ridden and impoverished, driven into new indebtedness by their previous masters, and subject to various forms of corporate and first world brigandage, were hardly success stories, despite their occasional achievements against overwhelming odds. But their situations and actions did generate important insights into post-World War II global power structures.

Once direct and generally militarized occupation by an imperial state was removed, what forms of rule, what political technologies would be available to third-world states and to third-world movements? Many contributions in this book address this question. Here I will merely note that racial power—racism and anti-racism as well—remained present and central, both internally to many postcolonial countries, and externally in terms of the very global system we have been discussing: the three worlds of global West, East, and South.

In this framework, the first world (the global North, aka the “free world”), was the white sector, the regime headquarters for white supremacy
on a world level. Despite the presence of substantial populations of color and people of southern or eastern ancestry, this was still the most prosperous sphere, “space” not merely geographical, but also sociocultural, the “homeland” of the world system. The second world, the communist countries, occupied the border of a white–non white world in respect to racial status. While subject to their own internal racial dynamics, the internal “red racisms” (Law 2012) operating in these countries were generally less atrocious than the sometimes genocidal practices of the first world, although there were exceptions (notably Cambodia). In the third world, the subaltern world, the postcolonial world (Mbembe 2001), racial theory developed apace, sometimes outstripping its first-world iterations. The concept of subalternity, with its built-in “otherness,” is a good example. Developed in India, starting in the 1960s, it has diffused through the social sciences and cultural studies to Latin America, Africa, and Black America. Numerous other currents could be cited, for example Caribbean-based theories (C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon), pan-Africanist currents (Du Bois, Fanon again, Nkrumah, Rodney, and Cabral), and others. So postcolonial theory is about race and racism. No big news there. This book, does, however, explore particular cases (India, Burma, Native America) in revealing ways.

Decoloniality, a less familiar concept, refers to sociopolitical formations that are at least partly “outside the box” of colonialism or postcolonialism. This theme encompasses the experiences of various formally colonized peoples in refusing the imperial yoke, especially but not only indigenous groups around the world. Decoloniality includes resistance, of course, but also goes beyond that to explore how people and communities have maintained alternative (say racial/ethnic/national) formations. Decoloniality comprises organizations and movements that countered occupation and fostered independence and autonomy; and it includes those “arts of resistance” (Scott 1990) that, rather than succumbing to imperial power, have both subverted it and located themselves outside it.

Decolonial practices and theoretical approaches have a good deal to teach all those who seek emancipatory and radical democratic transformation—or social justice-oriented revolution—in its various definitions. Foremost among its lessons is that of “power-from-the-people,” the reliance, both explicit and implicit, on self-government, in the most expansive sense of the term. In some ways verging on anarchist understandings, the decoloniality concept and the theory it anchors are unique because of their groundings in other traditions, often venerable (indigenous, pre-colonial, racially “othered,” religiously anathematized . . .), and in other concepts of authority and power, which may or may not involve a “state.” The best decolonial work does not venerate either “infrapolitics” or systems of authority that
are not-western and not-modern but draws on them to provide alternative theoretical frames that, in the West, are dismissed as naturalistic and theological; while selectively incorporating themes often seen (not entirely correctly) as “western,” notably feminism and LGBT studies. The book before you includes accounts of that sort of work.

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Toward the Anti-Racist Future

As this text goes into production, global turmoil has perhaps reached a higher level than at any time since the great Cold War crises. A sustained epoch is coming to a close: the end of the post-World War II era will lead to new global cleavages and great power alignments and conflicts. It will certainly refigure shapes of everyday politics and culture, national politics, and the global mode of production. Indeed, those transformations are well underway already.

World War II effectively ended the old European empires and left the USA as the last standing imperial power. Never hesitant to invade and occupy, the USA now spreads its drone wings over the entire world, operating the proliferate military bases already mentioned, and seeking to exercise its combined corporate and military might more than any imperial power in the history of the planet. For awhile the successes of the civil rights movement, and of its various spinoffs such as the anti-Vietnam war and second-wave feminist movements, seemed to mute US aggression and to extend the hope of peace and progress to the “darker nations” (Prashad 2008), at home as well as abroad. Those days ended domestically in the 1970s as corporate predation escalated, and the remaining inclusive, democratic, and social democratic policies began to be pruned away. They ended internationally when the “Vietnam syndrome”—which had supposedly restrained US military interventionism—lost all meaning in the two Gulf Wars.

The brief fall and subsequent rise of US structural racism and imperialism also teaches important lessons: the “global superpower” is now a reality show, rather than a reality. Prostrate and trussed by its many Lilliputian opponents at home and abroad, the US Gulliver looks on in helpless dismay as its adversaries dig in. The “sole remaining superpower” is beleaguered by perpetual wars in the Middle East and South Asia; by unrest, not only in the postcolonies but also in the other “developed” countries and its new BRIC rivals; and by revitalized anti-racist, immigrant rights, feminist and LGBT movements in the “homeland.” The rise of rightwing populist reaction, not only in the form of Trump and “Make America Great Again,” but also in the exhumation of the Ku Klux Klan, Christian Dominionism,
and the embrace of neoliberalism and precarity governance, all serve to indicate the centrality and toxicity of racism as the empire enters its decadent phase, and as the USA, at least, ceases to be a majority white country.

There are reasons to be hopeful. Those resistance movements may not be so Lilliputian after all. Despite the resurgence of racial reaction, despite Trump, Modi, le Pen, Erdoğan, Viktor Orban, Michel Temer, and many other leaders linked to the exercise of violent and repressive power across the board, democratic resistance, egalitarian race consciousness and anti-racism in general have not been defeated. Led by the US black movement (as always), by immigrants and refugee rights movements around the world, by indigenous resistance (a particular source of decolonial practice and theory), and by women, notably women of color, the defense of democracy and sometimes even democratic offensives have consolidated in many ways. LGBT rights, while far from achieved around the world, have lodged significant triumphs. Women continue to hold up half the sky. Anti-racism has become “common sense” in many places, all around the world.

While still uncertain, especially theoretically, about how best to confront the beast of racism that menaces an ever-increasing number of people on behalf of an ever-decreasing and privileged few, the resistance is present and growing. That is what new racial studies is all about. Welcome to this important volume.

Notes

1. In Burma the persecution of the Rohingya; in Indonesia the rise of Islamism; in India the Hindutva political ascendancy under Modi; in the Philippines, the violent authoritarianism of Duterte, with its assault on the lower classes and non-Catholics. Many other examples could be cited.
2. “Second world” (that is, communist) countries have a mixed historical record on the matter of racism/anti-racism. They frequently supported national liberation/anti-colonial insurgencies and movements in the global South and East, seeing them as tactical allies against the capitalist powers. Where this was problematic for the USSR or China, however, support was withdrawn. Internally, relations with ethnonational minorities and movements—which, as noted, overlaps with racial “others” in many ways—have been more problematic. See Law 2012; Wallerstein 1973; Dikotter, ed. 1997.
3. The significance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s April 4, 1967 speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time To Break Silence,” in consolidating this link cannot be overestimated (King 1967).
4. The US origins of race/gender intersectionality lie in 19th-century abolitionism; race/gender/class intersections also have an immense “prehistory.” It was not until the 1990s, though, that these currents were explicitly theorized under the term “intersectionality,” coined by Crenshaw (1991) and elaborated by Collins and Bilge (2016 [2000]).
5. Although officially promulgated as a state racial doctrine only after 1948, apartheid’s formal declaration that year was merely the culmination of centuries of European colonialism in South Africa.
6. Of course, the USA also epitomizes settler colonialism.
8. W.E.B. Du Bois created the framework for this analysis with his magisterial study of the US Civil War and Reconstruction (1997 [1935]).
9. Racial genocide, assault on racially/ethnonationally-defined peoples, “ethnic cleansing” programs, and so on, are dimensions of genocide that are often associated with the attempted appropriation of resources on a mass scale (Weitz 2015 [2003]; Snyder 2015).

10. I mean no disparagement to the revolutionary slogan “power to the people,” associated with the Black Panther Party among other movement groups. Clearly that demand seeks to recapture or return authority (and indeed power in the Weberian sense) to those who have been deprived of it by despotic means. “Power from” more closely resembles subaltern theoretical approaches, which emphasize the “infrapolitical” dimensions of power, in which ostensibly dominated people retain control of their lives in numerous ways—though obviously not in every way—because they act and interact beneath the grasp, outside the grasp, of oppressive regimes. A long theoretical tradition addresses this complex of issues; consider the development of thinking from Ranajit Guha to James C. Scott to Robin D.G. Kelley on this theme. The difference between those approaches and decolonial framings lies in the latter’s externality to colonial and postcolonial rule.

11. In this regard consider Abdullah Öcalan’s recent work, collected in Ocalan 2017.

12. The use of this term, adopted after the 9/11 attacks but in a deeper way an import from Nazi Germany (heimat) has never ceased to offend.

References


King, Martin Luther Jr. “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” Speech given at Riverside Church, New York City, October 4, 1967; youtube.com/watch?v=OC1Ru2p8Ofu


