

Essay

How Racism Shaped, Shapes, And Will Shape Modern States and Capitalism: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The economic theory background of both the IR and IPE literature lacks to implement in their explanations the crucial role of racial attitudes and conceptions. In this paper, I will briefly review the current state-of-the-art on modern state and capitalism formation in the IR and IPE scholarship from a racial viewpoint. This paper also revisits the critiques against Eurocentrism, which ignores the structured racial disparities present in contemporary institutions and interactions. After introducing the topic, I first evaluate the difficulties in locating an appropriate conceptualisation of “racism” in the literature. After that, I focus on the arguments that adopt race and racism to explain modern-state formation. Then, I implement the theories that explained how capitalism was born thanks to racial expropriation and exploitation of European colonies. Finally, I conclude that racism aided to determine the current global system and institutionalise Western ideas and concepts as superior. Thus, researchers must discover and implement a midpoint between the competing biases of exaggerating and disregarding racial and colonial heritages, to develop a thorough understanding of the political and economic world system.

Keywords: racism, critical theory, racial history, racial capitalism, international relations, international political economy

Introduction

Since the first article by Strange (1970), International Political Economy (IPE) has evolved as a bridge between economic studies and international relations (IR). In the following years, IPE developed a dominant paradigm, the Open Economy Politics (OEP), which transformed the subject into a “normal science” (Rickard, 2021) in which previous discoveries are the starting point for successive knowledge (Lake, 2009). However, as pointed out by Broz *et al.* (2021) and Rickard (2021), the economic theory background of the OEP lacks to implement the role of race¹ in the individuals’ and states’ decisions of foreign economic policies – the choices on trade, capital, exchange rate, and immigration policies (Bearce, 2021). Indeed, race identification – especially in the form of self-recognition of the affiliation in a particular social group excluded from the same benefits as the other social groups – might shape or alter the preferences of different actors regarding their threat and security perceptions (Zvobgo and Loken, 2020), thus modifying government attitudes toward several policies. For instance, periods of economic adversity shift whites’ perception of immigrants, increasing their despise against them (Alesina *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, although many scholars argue that people have more complex rationales than the ones assumed by formal or rational models,² IPE analyses usually neglect to account for the colonial and racial legacies that influence the asymmetrical international relations and negotiations between states and between countries and other international financial or economic organisations (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2015; Koechlin, 2018; LeBaron *et al.*, 2021).

However, recent research is attempting to resolve this issue (e.g., Barder, 2017),³ since current scholars are acknowledging that racial identities shape and determine international regimes, particularly in the economic area (Saull, 2018), like on the topic of structural inequalities (Peterson, 2021) or austerity policies (Ali and Whitham, 2020). For some scholars, the problem of IR Theory after World War II – and social sciences more in general – is not its racial bias, since it can predict the capacity of non-Western societies to improve, but its Eurocentrism (Henderson, 2013; Donahue

¹ See also: Kayatekin (2009), Grosfoguel (2011), and Icaza (2015).

² On the topic of anomalies in human rationality and relevant critiques, see: Hafner-Burton *et al.* (2017) and Gigerenzer (2018).

³ Barder (2017) analyses three books: Anievas *et al.* (2014), Shilliam (2015), and Vitalis (2015).

and Kalyan, 2015; Sajed, 2016; Mantz, 2019) which ignores the structured racial disparities present in institutions and interactions (Tickner, 2015). Specifically, these authors emphasise that almost all social theories can predict the ability of diverse social groups to improve or to evolve from their current situation, avoiding the racial bias of seeing only particular groups worthy or capable to develop. The problem, therefore, is that transformations in different non-Western societies are often compared and assessed based on Western values and criteria as a direct consequence of political and intellectual Eurocentrism. By contrast, other scholars assert that the prominent paradigms in IR are orientated by racist principles (Henderson, 2013), especially in the concept of anarchy (Sampson, 2002). More specifically, Sampson (2002, p. 429) reasoned that the way international anarchy is described by IR theorists, like Waltz and Wendt, derives from a conception of anarchy that connects the absence of a central international authority with the “image of primitive society popularised by British social anthropologists during the 1930s and 1940s”. Parallely, other academics complained about the absence of theorisation of racism as a force or institution in global political affairs (Doty, 1993; Vitalis, 2000), or the reluctance to use the word “racism” (the R-word) to portray post-war political science (Rutazibwa, 2016). Indeed, IR exhibited an antipathy to intricated and scholastically contested concepts such as race (Krishna, 2001; Persuad and Walker, 2001),⁴ despite its importance in shaping the current world system when ethnicity was translated into a national ideology (Le Melle, 2009).

Firstly, although I appreciate the effort made by constructivism to implement the study of roles and identities in IPE and IR (e.g., Checkel, 1998; Adler-Nissen, 2016), I agree with Sampson (2002) that also this paradigm is “racialised” in its core contents, despite less than other ontologies. Indeed, constructivism tried to separate itself from different racial biases, sometimes questioning the foundations of our knowledge and its background, while other paradigms remained entrenched in their racist conceptions like neorealism with its “African primitivism” and Marxism with the normalisation of “a Eurocentric teleology of economic development for the world” (Henderson,

⁴ However, it is necessary to underline that Persuad and Walker (2001) contributed to developing a racial explanation for the current world system and how it operates, arguing that race and racism were the main drivers for global political development. Further, I also underline earlier contributions on the relationship between race and IR, like Vincent (1982).

2013, p. 88). Zvobgo and Loken (2020) also contended that realism and liberalism developed their theorisations mostly on Eurocentric and racist conceptions while constructivism better, but rarely, acknowledged the importance of race. Therefore, this analysis will focus on the literature based on the causal relationships between racism, colonialism, politics, and capitalism. I will not concentrate on the racial hierarchies entrenched in IPE and IR scholarships paradigms and historiography themselves, as other authors instead focused on (e.g., Krishna, 2001; Sampson, 2002; Barder, 2017; Sabaratnam, 2020). Instead, I will adopt the strategy of Bhambra (2021) and Peterson (2021), who respectively reconstructed the history of European states and capitalism based on race and colonialism. During this process, I will also implement other hypotheses reasoned by different academics on the role of race and racism in explaining world history. The first section is dedicated to a correct definition of race, a milestone for every research. Conceptualisation is “the process of selecting the term by which some collection of things should be known” (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 144). Thus, without it, this article could not select or analyse the contributions proposed by other authors on racism as an explanation of the political and economic world history. After that, I describe the racial history of state formation and how the Western form of state has become the only form of government accepted in the international system. Successively, I illustrate the racial history of capitalism and the pivotal role of racist behaviours in establishing the current global market economy. I will also outline the implications that not only the implementation of racial variables but also their control could have in the study of IPE and political science more generally. Finally, I conclude by arguing for the need for these concepts inside the literature to seek a more comprehensive understanding of current global dynamics.

The Problematic Definition of Racism

Defining race and racism is not an easy assignment. However, both scholars and this article cannot correctly identify and analyse the racial biases and influences in world history and their current effects without a clear definition. Further, with a correct and proper description of the concept under investigation, this article can create a base for further analytical and empirical research on the topic. Many scholars have characterised the concepts of race and racism in different terms, even

though IR was born as a field studying “interracial relations” (Henderson, 2013).⁵ One common aspect of the current literature is the refusal of biological interpretation of racism based on phenotypes (Hall, 2000). The repudiation of biological explanations has led the way for cultural and socio-historical explications, which focus on inherited and behavioural attributes connected with historically specified groups or populations (Le Melle, 2009; Selod, 2016). This process creates a “common sense” of stereotypes and generalisations (Seymour, 2010) or a social relation of oppression (Camfield, 2016; Müller-Uri and Opratko, 2016), in what someone now calls “cultural racism” because “judgement[s] used primarily *cultural* criteria to define a *racial* group” (Rattansi, 2020, p. 55; emphasis in original). For instance, for Saull (2018), one of such categories or groups is white people. Indeed nowadays, whiteness is not only a set of boundaries but, more rigorously, is composed of the social and cultural attitudinal qualities related to being white, although these characteristics are rarely made explicit by other actors (Lake, 2016; Saull, 2018).

On the other hand, as argued by Camfield (2016) and Tilley and Shilliam (2018), racism is usually an involuntary act, typically constituted by political decisions and policies, which unequally distributes profits and losses between population groups differentiated, ordered, or classified by race, and frequently sustaining already existing racialised social tiers. Indeed, Omi and Winant (2014) expressed race as characteristics and stereotypes attached to some identities but in a “nebulous, indeterminate, and flexible” way (Cainkar and Selod, 2018, p. 170). Seymour (2010) also articulated a similar dynamic conception in which “racist ideologies are continually constructed and reconstructed with a variety of elements of national, regional, religious, sectional and class stereotypes”. Moreover, the process of racialisation is spreading in Western societies, attributing racial meanings to other groups or social practices (Cainkar and Selod, 2018), like in the case of

⁵ For instance, between its foundation in 1910 and 1919, the first name of the now notorious IR journal “Foreign Affairs” was “Journal of Race Development” (Zvobgo and Loken, 2020). Further, the purpose of the journal was to “discover, not how weaker races may best be exploited, but how they may best be helped by the stronger” (Blakeslee, 1910, p. 1), demonstrating that the first American academic journal of international affairs was designed to study the interracial relations between the stronger Western race and the other weaker races in the world.

Islamophobia (Ali and Whitham, 2020).⁶ Indeed, many authors argue that race is context-specific, both in terms of time and geography, and that we need to study each race's attributes separately and not as a unicum (Garner and Selod, 2015; Cainkar and Selod, 2018). Overall, racism is characterised by the simultaneously conscious and unconscious labelling process or asymmetrical treatment of social groups due to their differences. This summary definition is pivotal in understanding what we are looking for during this article and what other authors tried to explain in their papers. Indeed, all the globalised and racialised structures originate in the process of European colonialism and its modern historiography (Camfield, 2016).⁷ Therefore, the following sections will assess how the labelling or the unequal treatment of social groups due to their diversity (i.e., racism) affected and influenced the formation of the modern form of state and the instauration of global capitalism.

Is Racism a Valuable Variable to Understand World Politics?

The Racial History of State-Formation

Theories about how the modern state originated proliferate in the literature (e.g., Carneiro, 1970; Tilly, 1993; Alonso, 1994; Abramson, 2017). However, as argued by Peterson (2021, p. 292), many theories do not account for “the history, scale and complexity of racial logics operating today”, even though the instauration of dominant hierarchical stratifications through slavery, coercion, and regulation is considered one of the fundamental features in early states-making (Scott, 2017). From the various intergenerational effects of the consolidation of hierarchical rules, there was racism, firstly interpreted as the stigmatisation of Outsiders (Peterson, 2014; 2021).⁸ After early states, religions aided politics to implement racial attitudes and prejudices in modern states (Pasha, 2017),

⁶ It is interesting to note that some authors argue that most research on Islamophobia is itself a form of racialisation since it studies all Muslims as uniform, flattering their distinctive identities (e.g., Holloway, 2016).

⁷ For instance, Mantz (2019) categorised different forms of racism and “coloniality”. This literature review concentrates on the formats necessary to establish the nation-state and capitalism. However, other topics are contaminated by racial values too, such as the development or the acceptance of knowledge. For more: Baker (2012); Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013); Sabaratnam (2013).

⁸ However, the same author also notes that this hierarchical-racial attitude was a necessary but not sufficient condition for a successful state-making process since it must occur concomitantly with resource accumulation, sexually procreative actions, and ideological legitimation (Peterson, 2021).

while using ethnocultural representations in shaping the subsequent capitalist relations (Peterson, 2010). Further, not only racial and brutal practices were essential for the state-making process, but they also instituted – as a set of rules or practices (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Martin and Simmons, 1998; Diermeier and Krehbiel, 2003) – the current world order based on the Westphalian conception of state and nation (Anievas *et al.*, 2014; Conversi, 2016). Indeed, Europeans started to combine notions of race and nation (Balibar, 1991; Vucetic, 2013) or the ideas of race and class (Wallerstein, 1991) as a template for group determination and social partition. Therefore, the racialisation process of other cultures as “inferior” was necessary to legitimise both Europe’s development and institutionalisation of the modern state model and its colonial dominance (Clausi, 2020; Peterson, 2021).

However, this process of ranking the European form of state and interests as the only acceptable and recognised form of governmental institution has deeply influenced contemporary politics, notably when expressed by populism or anti-immigration stances. For instance, Milanovic (2013; 2015) documented that your life expectations are based on the country where you are born, thus giving incentives to people in the Third World to migrate and creating increased racism and anti-immigration ideologies in the developed world. Indeed, the effort to achieve racial equality was pivotal for the appearance and development of democracies around both the Western and not Western world (Persuad, 2001). Quijano (2000) and Grosfoguel (2011) argued that there is still present a global racial hierarchy that favours Western people, with Occidental states’ domination based on institutionalised colonial administrations that extract resources from the periphery based on coercion and past legacies (Wallerstein, 1974). Indeed, each country’s role inside the global economy was decided by a “minor accident” that derives from the state’s geography and history (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 403). However, history and geography alone cannot explain the partition of the world in core countries, periphery, and semi-periphery. Thus, Wallerstein (1974) contended that this initial geo-historical advantage was accentuated and institutionalised by the world-market forces of the new form of capitalism slowly imposed by the core colonialist countries. As shown in Figure 1 – imported from Our World in Data (2022) –, all the selected countries improved their

economic freedom score calculated by the Fraser Institute.⁹ In this instance, the Economic Freedom Score is a good proxy for evaluating the diffusion of capitalism in colonial countries. Indeed, the score calculates the index based on the size of the government, legal assurance over property rights, monetary variables, freedom to trade, and types of state regulation (Fraser Institute, 2018).

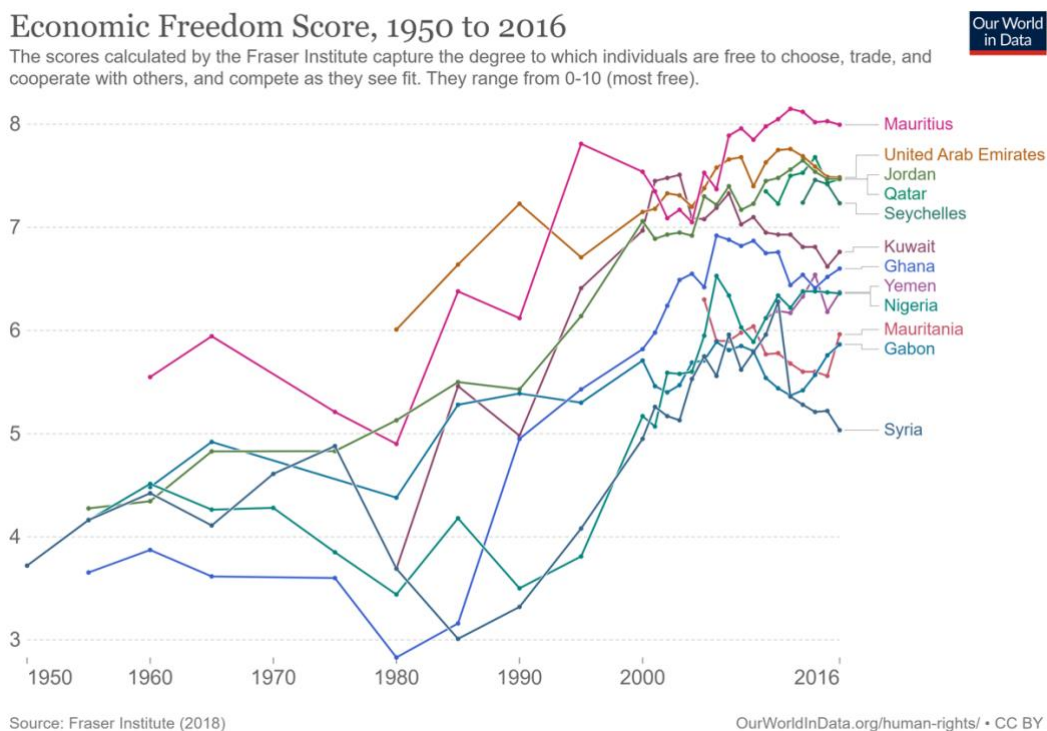


Figure 1: Economic Freedom Score, 1950-2016

Moreover, without understanding these hierarchies, political scientists cannot validly explain why Third World elites try to mimic or adapt to current (Western) political and economic structures,

⁹ Further, to avoid selection bias, I selected the three largest and smallest economies in Africa and the Middle East in terms of GDP per capita. Therefore, despite their differences in terms of economic progress and political institutions – between them, there are three democracies (Ghana, Mauritius, and Seychelles), three partly free regimes (Kuwait, Mauritania, and Nigeria), and six not free states (Gabon, Jordan, Qatar, UAE, Syria, and Yemen) based on Freedom House (2021) – the findings are coherent with the assumption of this paper that the global system and its market forces are institutionalising the capitalist economy as the only form acceptable and successful. However, I am perfectly aware that this is only a crude representation and, besides, further studies could better assess how this phenomenon affects the present and future economic global relations.

losing their civilisations in exchange for “development” (Mignolo, 2008; Brand and Wissen, 2012), usually adopting authoritarianism as a “shortcut” for economic progress and growth (Whitehead, 2002; Fossati, 2013). Finally, there is thought-provoking literature arguing about how racial sentiment by Western countries is interfering with the development of states and economies in developing countries under the justification of “war on terror” (Hilal, 2016; Rana, 2016; Khalil, 2016), correlated with the adoption of repetitive narratives of colonialism and Western ideologies (Grosfoguel, 2012; Vieira, 2021). Racial studies are probably not the principal or unique way to understand world history and politics, and we must be full precautionous in not overemphasising the impact of racism (Persuad and Walker, 2001). However, it is essential to insert them into the state-analysis modelling to avoid biased results.

The Racial History of Capitalism-Formation

Many theories interpret colonialism and capitalism as two parallel yet distinct phenomena despite their numerous connections and interactions (Bhambra, 2021). Indeed, capitalism is “a history of plunder, exploitation, and dispossession [...] of awesome technological change, abundance, inequality, and crisis” (Koechlin, 2018, p. 438). Initially, at the beginning of capitalism – between the 16th and 18th centuries – Europeans started to conquer new territories not with a process of “discovery” but with the practice of imperial subjugation (Greer, 2012),¹⁰ appropriating and commodifying foreign lands (Anghie, 2006)¹¹ and, thus, creating a process of property formation in the new colonial territories (Nichols, 2018) and converting nature and humans in exploitable resources (Tindall, 2016). Therefore, without the process of racial expropriation and exploitation of colonies – and its subsequent legitimisation (Miller, 2010) – capitalism could never have accumulated the resources required to establish and develop itself (Fenelon, 2016; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018).

¹⁰ For Persuad and Walker (2001, p. 375), colonisation was not the “discovery of the New World but the remarking of that world in the image of the conquerors”.

¹¹ Indeed, Anghie (2006) argues that international law was created and institutionalised by Western countries in an effort to legitimise the typical practices of colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, international law continues to “systematically disempower and subordinate the people of the Third World” (Anghie, 2006, p. 750). For more: Yasuaki (2000) and Chimni (2004).

Most of the first British territorial conquests were accomplished by private companies. Indeed, those territories were transferred to the state authority (enforced by military personnel or other mercenaries) only at a later stage, finally creating a new economy based for the first time on real estate (Park, 2016).¹² Therefore, imperial states started to intervene in the newly established capitalist economies by building infrastructures financed and supplied by their colonies (Bhambra, 2021). Thus, empires adopted a continuous “colonial drain” that aided to establish their capital investments and white settlement around the globe (Habib, 1975; Nielsen, 2020). In this way, by capitalising on colonial lands and legitimising this process in what was the “White Man’s Burden” racial ideology (Giddings, 1898; Hawtrey, 1950), empires (especially the British one) developed global industrial capitalism. Indeed, during the 20th century, European societies began to merge concepts of race and nation, especially during the implementation of welfare state economies. For Peterson (2021, p. 295), there was an “imbrication of race and nation”, better described by Vucetic (2013, p. 28) as the “twin forms [i.e., race and nation] of group identification and social division”. This practice aided colonial empires to defend their world dominance and legitimising the inequalities in the share of the benefits and resources allocated through racialised taxation and welfare law (Peterson, 2021). Therefore, Western countries merged their racist behaviours with the denigration of the outsider, synthesised in a nationalistic approach where the European-civilised race was superior to the others. However, both the welfare states and the costs of war were paid by the colonial drain, accentuating a practice already in operation, and causing economic sufferings in colonies, such in India (Mukherjee, 1990; Paiva Abreu, 2017), only for the national economic benefits of the motherland (Themelis, 2019).

For this reason, recently authors are speaking about “raced markets” with a racial ordering of the world’s inhabitants (Quijano, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2011; Tilley and Shilliam, 2018) since “the markets that have emerged and are emerging are not instruments of capitalist rationality then distorted by the entry of competing dynamics and irrationalities. The markets take their modern forms as raced” (Roediger, 2018, p. 531), with Western countries at the centre of the international capitalist system

¹² Park (2016) argues that the different interpretations of money and land between colonists and natives created the possibility for colonialism to prosper in America, eliminating previous forms of trade, negotiation, and economy. For more: Priest (2006).

(Gruffydd-Jones, 2008; Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren, 2016). Although the process of globalisation and decolonisation has freed states from their colonial drain, there are two leading relationships derived from the racial-colonial ruling worthy of studying by IPE. Firstly, ex-empires repeatedly act without caring for the Westphalian principle of non-intervention, arguing for a “right to have rights” in ex-colonies, and unconsciously encouraging authoritarian regimes based on the fear of “white replacement” (Bhambra, 2021, p. 318). Therefore, racial-colonial heritage not only promotes less democratic countries – with all the relative consequences for the international economy (e.g., Olson, 1993; Boix and Svobik, 2013; Shin, 2017) – but it also enables developed countries to manipulate Third World’s policies based on their historical relations. Secondly, ex-empires also possess economic leverage on their former colonies, institutionalised inside international law and institutions that give them an unfair advantage (Bledsoe *et al.*, 2019). These constraints often prevent developing countries to develop their utility-maximisers policies, with further consequences for the global economy.

Overall, the concept of race is not only lasting, but it is also pivotal in explaining the present structure of power and resource distribution inside the capitalistic world (Dirlik, 2002; Tilley and Shilliam, 2018). Indeed, colonialism and racism developed hierarchical frameworks for arranging the world that still endure today (Quijano, 2007; Tilley and Shilliam, 2018). Therefore, only an analysis of global capitalism with the lens of race and coloniality¹³ can aid us to understand its history, present effects, and future trends (Grosfoguel, 2011; Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren, 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude, racism can be considered as a variable that should be accounted and studied more thoroughly in international studies.¹⁴ Historically, racism aided not only to establish the current

¹³ In this respect, coloniality is different from colonialism. Indeed, coloniality is today’s legacy of colonialism, characterised as a type of domination by Western countries, cultures, and ideas in every human subject (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2008; Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren, 2016).

¹⁴ Indeed, more “domestic” political and social sciences are currently expanding their theorisation on the domestic effects of racial attitudes and ideologies, trying to explain how non-racial factors affect racism and, on the opposite, how racial behaviour and traditions influence non-racial political factors. For instance, explanations based on race are common in studies of welfare state (e.g., Vasquez, 2012; Garner, 2016; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018).

global system but to also institutionalise Western ideas and concepts as superior (Gruffydd-Jones, 2008; Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren, 2016). Nowadays, more studies contend that European political, economic, and philosophical or cultural systems have replaced or relegated other non-Western models following colonisation (Dirlik, 2002; Ross, 2017).

This new interpretation enables researchers to enhance and expand the present theorisation in the IR and IPE literature and develop new hypotheses, assumptions, and notions that might create a reliable framework for further studies (Mantz, 2019). Indeed, this new perspective can aid to reveal hidden legacies in world politics that only racial studies can disclose (Tickner, 2015; Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren, 2016). Sefa Dei (2016) and Mantz (2019) affirmed that race and colonialism are relegated as secondary elements in IPE analyses and academic curricula. For instance, many economists unproblematically promote Western models in the Third World, neglecting that Western countries could economically develop and grow thanks to historical, colonial resource extraction (Gradin, 2016; Koechlin, 2018).

However, new authors started to confront this racial problem, and maybe we are assisting to a turning point. General “economism” – defined as apolitical, amoral economics based on classical theories (Childers, 2009; Mantz, 2019) which neglects racism from economics studies (Giroux, 2003; Wright, 2012) – might be replaced by a more context-dependent interpretation of global politics and economy where racial variables are rightfully interpreted in various geographical and cultural locations (Figueroa-Helland and Lindgren, 2016; Mantz, 2019). Overall, IPE suffers an analytical deficiency that needs a general scholarly correction, not by arguing for a new dominant paradigm inside the literature but by fighting the fear of the R-word. Dirlik (2002, p. 429) claimed that “preoccupation with colonialism and its legacies makes for an exaggerated view of the hold of the past over contemporary realities, and an obliviousness to the reconfiguration of past legacies by contemporary restructurations of power – especially changes in the practices of capitalism and the nation-state”. Therefore, the next generation of research must discover and learn a fair compromise between the opposed tendencies of overexaggerating and neglecting racial and colonial heritages in order to develop a complete understanding of the world system.

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