IS THERE A GLOBAL COLOR LINE? SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

Wilma A. Dunaway & Donald A. Clelland (wdunaway@vt.edu)

As Howard Winant (1997) observes, binary conceptualizations predominate in contemporary theories of race/ethnicity. Polar binaries have routinely been coined to analyze the intersections of global capitalism and ethnic/racial inequality, including the West versus the Rest (Said 1994), the North/South divide (Therien 2010), European colonizer versus nonwestern colonized or subalterns (e.g., Memmi 1965, Spivak 1988), modern versus backward (Goldberg 2008), or centeredness versus alterity (e.g., Grillo 2007). Narrow dualisms with color inferences are commonly applied, such as “European modernity versus dark coloniality” (Mignolo 2011; cf. also Grosfoguel 2006, Goldberg 2008: 246), or “racially superior core versus inferior periphery” (Bonilla-Silva 1999). Many scholars have cast the West/Rest division as a polarization grounded in color differences. “In contrast to the West, argues Stuart Hall (1992: 288), “the ‘Other’ was the ‘dark’ side. . . the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity.” This worldwide division is posited as “the racial categorization of some people as ‘white’ and superior, while others are categorized as ‘not white’ and as eminently different and inferior’” (Vera and Feagin 2007: 1, 5). Such color demarcations are so popular that Winant (2015) feels comfortable to employ the metaphors “dark side” and “dark matter” to refer to the victims of 21st century racism.

At the 1900 annual meeting of the Negro Academy, W. E. B du Bois identified “the world problem of the 20th century” to be a global color line dividing “advanced white nations” from “the undeveloped or half-developed nations of mankind who happen to be yellow, brown or
Du Bois (2015: 137) contended that “the world problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line– the question of the relation of the advanced races of men who happened to be white to the great majority of the undeveloped or half-developed nations of mankind who happen to be yellow, brown or black.” However, this notion of a racially polarized world did not become widely popular among western academics until the late 20th century.

Overview of Global Color Line Scholarship

In the late 1970s, Gernot Kohler (1978: 264-66) introduced the concept global apartheid, which he described as a “structure of world society” in which “a minority of whites occupies the pole of affluence while a majority composed of other races occupies the pole of poverty.” After 1995, Kohler’s concept was adopted broadly. Global apartheid is the most significant problem of the 21st century, contends Manning Marable (2009).

1 Du Bois (2015: 137) contended that “the world problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line– the question of the relation of the advanced races of men who happened to be white to the great majority of the undeveloped or half-developed nations of mankind who happen to be yellow, brown or black.” Oliver Cox (1948: 322) argued that “all racial antagonisms can be traced to . . . the leading capitalist people, the white people of Europe and North America.”

2 For additional writers who supported the global apartheid thesis in the 1980s and 1990s, see Dalby (1998).

3 In addition to introducing the global apartheid thesis, Gernot Kohler was an important early theoretical contributor to the world-systems perspective (cf. Kohler 1998, 1999).

4 Patrick Bond (2004) focuses narrowly on the “global apartheid” practices of international finance entities toward South Africa. In his 2014 book, he examines how the South African government has shifted from “racial apartheid” to “class apartheid.” He contends that the transition from a white supremacist government to a Black African government has not led to a dismantling of underdevelopment and segregation of the oppressed majority. In short, a Black elite is now actively oppressing Black Africans, a notion that defies the color dualism typically employed by writers who follow the global apartheid model.
Samir Amin (2004: 6) contends that “the logic” of contemporary globalization “consists of organizing apartheid on a global scale.” In its globalized expansion, he insists, the modern world-system has “always fostered inequality between peoples. Such inequality is not the outcome of circumstances peculiar to any given country or time; it is the product of the immanent logic of capital accumulation.” The “inevitable outcome of this system,” he argues, is a worldwide structuring of racism between dominant privileged centers and marginalized, exploited peripheries. Supposedly, global apartheid has been driven by “pan-Europeanism” (Bush 2009, Marable 2009) through western-controlled transnational capitalism (Amin 2004, Bond 2004) since the end of the Cold War. This world bifurcation is supposedly grounded in white supremacy and nonwhite subordination (Dalby 1998). According to Marable (2009), global apartheid emanates from the logic and power of a white/European master race. Political scientist Titus Alexander (1996: 234) defines global apartheid to be “all aspects of minority rule in global governance through which western states separate their ‘own’ people from the world’s majority” (also cf. Bond 2004). Proponents contend that “a multinational network of policies rooted in white supremacy fuels global apartheid” (Harrison 2002: 55; also cf. Amin 2004, Bond 2004) and that “racial and cultural hierarchy are embedded in the political discourse and practices that reinforce global apartheid” (Minter 2005: 456; also cf. Mazrui 2007). Some scholar-activists point to “pan-European racism” as the worst problem created by global capitalism, and cast resistance as the struggle between “white world supremacy” and “the dark world” (Magubane 1987: 187-93, Malcolm X 1987: 130-37, Bush 2011: 58-64). Since 1990, the global apartheid argument has been applied by a broad array of interdisciplinary scholars to a wide scope of transnational problems (e.g., During 1990; Schelling 1992; Cheru 1997; Booker and Minter 2001; Kohler 2001; Harrison 2004; Amin 2004; Bond 2004; Shiva 2005; Sharma
For his views about racism as "an organizing principle" of the world-system, see Wallerstein (1979: 165-92; 2000: 3-13, 264-309, 344-54; 2003a 28, 62-85, 103-109; 2004b: 142-50; 2011: 181-83, 20417, 235-37: Balibar and Wallerstein (1991: 29-36, 71-85, 187-203). This notion has also been employed by politicians (e.g., Mbeki 2002) and international development organizations (e.g., Adebajo 2009: xxvi, 3).

Shortly before Kohler's (1978) global apartheid thesis was published, a foundational father of world-systems analysis began to integrate the notion of a global color line into his writing. Despite his conceptual innovation “the semiperiphery” (see previous discussion), Immanuel Wallerstein has employed notions about a racially polarized world-system throughout his publishing career (1972-2011). Initially, he (1972: 224) argued that races are “international status groups” that reflect “rank in the world-system” in terms of “a basic division between whites and non-whites.” Well after publication of the first two books in his world-system series (1974a, 1980), Wallerstein (1979: 165-83, 1982: 25, 1986: 156-58) reiterated the dualism he posited in 1972. In the early 1980s, he described “a basic world-wide fault line marking off relative status in the world-system as a whole. This was the 'colour line’ in which white was the ‘upper stratum” (Wallerstein 2003a: 79). In the early 1990s, he offered the historical contention that,

as concentration of core and peripheral production processes became more and more geographically disparate, ‘racial’ categories began to crystallize around certain labels. . . . What we observe is that, as the polarization increased, the number of categories became fewer and fewer. When W.E.B. Du Bois said in 1900 that ‘the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,’

---

the colors to which he was referring came down in reality to White and non-White (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 80).

In the fourth volume of his Modern World-Systems series, Wallerstein (2011: 58) “drew a clear line between Europe and the outer world, creating a basic justification for imperialism and racism.”

Embracing Wallerstein’s binary thinking, Howard Winant (1997) describes global capitalism as a “modern world racial system” that is grounded in a “centuries old pattern of white supremacy.” Despite his criticism of racial binaries, Winant (1997, 2001: 172, 134) generalized from two American countries, one African country and Europe to contend that “the world racial order evolved and gave rise to modernity, inventing and instituting white supremacy as a global norm.” White supremacy has endured over capitalist history, he insists, for it is a process that both “denigrates the other and elevates whiteness.” By relegating most of the world’s population to inferior statuses, white westerners “appropriated racial difference in the service of inequality.” Thus, he contends, the global hierarchy of “Europe and its others” became a racial fact—a “collective representation” (Winant 2001: 297-98). Perhaps influenced by Wallerstein during his doctoral training at Binghamton University, Rod Bush (2011: 45) described a global racial binary in which “the pan-European world is categorized as superior and those from the extra-European world as inferior, with Africans and indigenous people at the bottom of the social scale.”

---

A bipolar world-system of racism is also conceptualized by da Silva (2007), Zimmerman (2010), Weiner (2012), and Anievas, Manchanda and Shillam (2015).
REFERENCES


Evans, Peter, D. Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds. 1985. Bringing the State Back In. Cambridge University Press.


Foley, Tadhq and Maureen O’Connor, eds. 2006. Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire. Irish Academic Press.


----- 2001. “Gendered Global Apartheid: Interview with Dessima Williams.” World-Systems Network,


Prakash, Gyan. 1990. "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives
from Indian Historiography." Comparative Studies in Society and History 32: 328-56.


