



Race in the Capitalist World-System: Response to the Symposium Essays

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The articles assembled in this collection speak to a desperately needed debate and theoretical advancement on matters of race, national oppression, ethnicity and global capitalism. What is most intriguing about this collection is that the authors do not fear stepping into the realm of supposed heresy. They are prepared to ask tough questions and advance, in some cases, unorthodox assertions and conclusions. This, alone, makes this entire collection a must-read.

The challenge in addressing the question of race revolves around appreciating that it cannot be restricted to matters of color, superiority/inferiority or hierarchy. Race is a system created with two objectives, as well articulated by several of the authors, which include: *one, domination and exploitation for a specific population, and, two, social control*. To a great extent this latter matter of social control was not addressed directly in this collection though was implicit in several essays.

In William Robinson's introduction, he quotes the iconic Oliver Cromwell Cox as situating the construction of modern racism in the period of 1493-4. I would suggest shifting that at least one year earlier to 1492 with the successful "Reconquista" carried out by the Castilians in Spain. This was the removal of the last of the Moorish kingdoms from Iberia and the expulsion of Jews. It was in this moment, as Etienne Balibar pointed out in his volume (with Immanuel Wallerstein) *Race, Nation, Class*, that we witnessed the merging, to a great degree of Christianity and a new concept of whiteness. This construction of race was further developed in the 15th century by a combination of the Spanish and Portuguese invasion of the Western Hemisphere (and subsequent genocide, as noted by Fenelon), the slave trade in Africans, and the English subjugation of Ireland



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and, with it, the imposition of a system of racial/colonial domination on the indigenous population. It is the latter that is of particular importance in understanding the origins and development of race and racist oppression in North America (a subject going beyond the scope of this paper).

When race is only viewed in terms of superiority/inferiority it misses a larger context. The construction of race certainly helped to justify slavery, colonialism and genocide. But it also served a purpose that is equally relevant to this day: *social control*. Race identified who was inferior and superior and with that, created the zones of being and non-being referenced by Grosfoguel. But in creating those zones, i.e., in creating a relatively privileged position for a specific “race” (in most cases identified as “white”), the objective of the capitalist ruling elites was to ensure that a ‘uniform’ was made available for one segment of the population denoting the ‘army’ in which they were now enlisted. That ‘army’ served to not only suppress those in the zone of non-being but, in so doing, acted to suppress themselves. In the USA context this could be witnessed through the collapse of bond servant revolts (indentured servants) that crossed so-called racial lines by the end of the 17th century (as explored in great detail by the late Theodore Allen in his two volume work, *The Invention of the White Race*).

Of what relevance is this to the current situation? A major source of debate within this collection revolves, whether implicitly or explicitly, over the question of “global apartheid.” Dunaway and Clelland make a strong argument that the notion of “global apartheid” fails to appropriately identify the conjuncture. It would be wrong to suggest that they deny the continuing importance of race in making their argument regarding transnational capitalism. They correctly point out that racial construction today is substantially different than in the colonial and anti-colonial era. Transnational capitalism has introduced a new equation, which is the construction of a global class that is not simply the extension-through-subordination of comprador elements in the global South. The situation has become far more complicated.

Yet the question is whether the framework of “global apartheid” is useful. I would argue that it is, but only insofar as one understands it not in a 20th century context, i.e., apartheid South Africa redux. Global apartheid can be understood as the racialized subordination of supposedly un-assimilatable populations taking place in this era of global capitalism. Such racialized subordination, to again borrow from Balibar, is not exclusively or mainly defined by biological superiority/inferiority—in contrast to earlier forms of racism—but is in many respects defined by cultural compatibility, alien-ness, and the notion of relevant and irrelevant populations. If, for instance, one examines right-wing populist movements, one sees in common their identification of specific populations that are asserted to be un-assimilatable. They are allegedly incompatible with the dominant ethno-racial construct and, as a result, pose a danger. Golash-Boza and Grosfoguel speak to this in their respective essays.

Oyogoa's essay on cruise ships actually serves as a very appropriate metaphor for global capitalism and race in the explicit exploration of matters of social control. It is not just that the cruise lines are, for all intents and purposes, free of most nation-state controls, but the system that they have put into place is consistent with the centuries-old pattern of maintaining social control through the construction of a racial division of labor. In this division of labor each layer in the hierarchy comes with a particular role along with a justification or mystification, as the case may be. Oyogoa's reference to the Filipinos and the manner in which they are portrayed reminds one of the descriptions of the Black sleeping car porters who worked for the Pullman Company on the railroads in the early 20th century. They were expected to smile and be entertaining and to put up with whatever hardship, including the humiliation of being referred to as "George" instead of the use of their own name.¹

Global apartheid cannot be used as a means of suggesting anything approaching a monolithic white bloc vs. a monolithic black, yellow or brown bloc. Such was never the case and it certainly does not apply today. As William Robinson and others have pointed out, the evolution of global capitalism has meant, among other things, that the "global South" can be found in pockets in the global "North" and vice versa. It is also the case that the decline of nation-state empires has meant a transformation in imperial privilege (rather than racial privilege) such that the so-called native (white) populations in the global North find themselves facing a reduced living standard, job loss, etc., while in parts of the global South, elites-of-color are emerging who, according to the imperial/racial myth, should never supersede those in the metropolitan countries. This situation creates an ideological conflict for the native (white) populations who feel threatened by such a transformation and particularly threatened by the additional entrance into their countries of populations which are perceived to be difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate.

"Global apartheid," then, refers to the system created and imposed by global capitalism in order to structure the reorganization of the planet. This includes the creation of redundant populations, and corresponding failed states that become "reservations" for the unnecessary. Also, the rise of the semi-peripheral countries, discussed by Dunaway and Clelland, which create their own systems of racist oppression in line with the larger system of global capitalism.

The notion of global apartheid is also ironically useful in addressing some of the situations that Dunaway and Clelland point to as evidence that such a system does not exist. In a world where neoliberal globalization is the hegemonic framework, there is a fight for resources and space. The conquest of vast proportions of the planet's wealth by an ever shrinking segment of the global population means that there is much less to go around. It is in such a situation that the genocidal

¹ "George" from George Pullman, the owner of the company.

‘gene’ that exists within capitalism becomes fully activated and one witnesses the horrors of the Indonesian slaughters in East Timor or the Hutu holocaust carried out against Tutsis (and their Hutu allies) in Rwanda, to name only two. Certainly in the case of Rwanda, there was an explicit conceptualization of race as justifying the genocide, wherein the right-wing Hutu genocidiers portrayed the Tutsis as less than human.²

This collection reminds us all that race and racism, though generally associated with matters of color, were never so restricted. Islamophobia has become, in much of the global North, a socially acceptable manner in which to be racist. Islam is not only associated with those who cannot be assimilated but is associated with the ‘colored peoples’ of the world and, therefore, not to be linked with the Judeo-Christian heritage. Islamophobia is, therefore, less about religion and more about the *origins* of the religion and the segments of the planet in which this religion is largely based.

Global capitalism, and specifically transnational capital, needs populations that can be mobilized to not only advance their interests, but to serve as a safety valve in the context of the three major crises afflicting the planet: the crisis of global capitalism; the crisis of the environment; and the crisis of the legitimacy of the State. Right-wing populist forces are attempting to motivate and activate a segment of the population based on fear and irrationality in order to preserve the nation-state and to impose various forms of authoritarianism, thereby reversing the progressive victories of the 20th century. Though transnational capital is less sanguine on the preservation of the nation-state—except and insofar as it advances the interests of global capitalism—it shares with right-wing populism an interest in strengthened *authoritarian statism* (to borrow from Nicos Poulantzas) in order to ensure not simply the continuity of the system but its further evolution. “Global apartheid” holds out the hope, particularly for segments of the white populations of the global North, that there is a place for them in the brave new world of transnational capitalism.

A final thought. In 1988 I was introduced to the concept of “anti-Irish racism.” I was on a visit to Northern Ireland and Britain as part of an effort to better understand the similarities between the struggle of the Irish nationalist (Catholic) population in the north of Ireland, and that of African Americans in the United States. There was reference to this term “anti-Irish racism” which made me very uncomfortable. After all, how could there be racism against a population that was “white.”

In many respects the conquest of Ireland by the English, and their complete and total subordination of the indigenous population not only helped to define the terms of the system of racial (and later national) oppression to be instituted in North America against “people of color”. But it also provided a clue to understanding race as about various “markers,” as noted by

² Going so far as to reference them as “cockroaches.”

Grosfoguel. The Irish were declared to be an inferior race by the English, treated horribly and holding no rights that the English were bound to respect...until and unless they agreed to serve the Empire, or in the case of the United States, to serve the interests of the *white republic*. Despite the racial and national oppression imposed on the Irish, there were many of them who chose to fight to *become white*, that is, to situate themselves in their own minds and within the racial hierarchy of the dominant world bloc. If nothing else this demonstrated that the fact of oppression, no matter how vicious, in no way guarantees that the victims will seek or establish a progressive alternative. They may, like many of the victims of the Jewish Holocaust, choose to relocate—physically and/or ideologically—and ensure that while they will never be victims again...this will be done at the cost of victimizing someone else in the racial hierarchy. It is for these reasons that the debate contained in this volume is of such importance and relevance.

About the Author

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a writer and activist. He is a syndicated columnist and talk show host long active in the trade union movement and the Black Freedom Movement. He is also the co-author of *Solidarity Divided: the crisis in organized labor and a new path toward social justice*, and author of “They’re Bankrupting Us – And Twenty Other Myths about Unions. He can be followed on Twitter, Facebook and www.billfletcherjr.com.

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