

Political Science in the Afterlife of Empire: New Reckonings with Racism and Racialization

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Over the past couple of decades, political scientists have begun to take seriously the question of European imperial dominion and the racialized world order that such colonial projects of extraction, dispossession, and economic dependency produced. This is not to say that all political phenomena are racialized or that they are direct products of imperial formations. But from the postcolonial perspective, “colonization assumes the place and significance of a major, extended, and ruptural world-historical event,” as Stuart Hall argues in his essay, “When Was the Postcolonial?” (re-published in the 2021 Duke University Press volume, *Selected Writings on Marxism*, p. 302). The age of European empires marks an inflection point that has irrevocably shifted the political, economic, social, and ideological terrain upon which modern nation-states took shape and political actors of all kinds have since moved. Increasingly, political scientists, political theorists, and IR scholars today are exploring whether certain state and interstate institutions, social relations, modes of production and extraction, conflicts, ideas, and identities might be productively situated within the expanded horizon and transnational scope of the (post) colonial frame.

Many of the books reviewed in this issue pursue this line of investigation or touch on contemporary political problems posed by racism, minoritarian rule, social inequality, and the differential power relations that European empire left in its wake. While much of this scholarly work focuses on the United States, conversations about the legacies of racial slavery and empire are, of course, inherently transnational, even as such discussions must take a different, “distantiated” form in former imperial metropolises, as Catherine Hall writes in this issue’s symposium (see her review of *Yale & Slavery*). Reckoning with a racialized past and present remains an emergent problematic within political science, one that invites further inquiry, cross-disciplinary exchange, and critical reflection.

Decolonization—A Moment and a Method?

Foregrounding the legacies of racial slavery, Indigenous dispossession, and European empire tends to rewrite the commonsense historical narratives that orient the discipline of political science. For example, scholar Timothy Lewis Scarnecchia has sought to revisit the formal period of decolonization to explore how the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War collided with racialized worldviews produced by imperial rule. In *Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe: The Cold War and Decolonization, 1960–1984*—reviewed by MT Howard as part of a Critical Dialogue in this issue—Scarnecchia argues that the Cold War powers relied on “racialized notions of a ‘white state’ or ‘black state’” (p. 3-7) in shaping their diplomatic and strategic agendas towards first Rhodesia and then Zimbabwe. In doing so, Scarnecchia demonstrates that “[d]ecolonisation in Africa and the Cold War were inextricably linked” (MT Howard, this issue). In turn, Howard’s own book on *Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army* rewrites the narrative around Black soldiers in the Rhodesian Air Rifles, who served the white minority state in Rhodesia. Howard “works against many of the older biases of nationalist and patriotic history in Zimbabwe” by showing how these Black soldiers constructed an identity around loyalty to their fellow soldiers (Scarnecchia, this issue). In doing so, Howard denies that the RAR men were ideologically committed to the white supremacist Rhodesian state project and shows that crosscutting relations of identification, filiation, and political membership are always more complex than crude Manichean binaries purport them to be. Similarly, in her book, *Democracy and Time in Cuban Thought: The Elusive Present*, María de Los Angeles Torres cautions against simplified and nationalist histories, which she argues can occlude or erase differences in the pursuit of a glorified narrative of anticolonial struggle. Using Fidel Castro’s idealized status after the Cuban Revolution as an example, she argues that distorted stories about the past and overly romanticized

doi:10.1017/S1537592724002597

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visions of the future can underwrite authoritarianism as political leaders can justify illiberal policies to bring about these utopian promises (see Danielle Pilar Cleland's review, this issue).

For IR scholars and political theorists like Robbie Shilliam and Andrés Henao Castro, decolonization presents not just a specific historical moment but also a method. To tell better stories about the racialized afterlives of empire, they argue, scholars will need to do more than simply shift their object of analysis. They will have to critically reflect on the silences and blind spots that have shaped their disciplinary methods and their tacit assumptions about the political. Shilliam undertakes that very task for political science in his book, *Decolonizing Politics*, by critiquing what he sees to be the epistemological obstacles built into the discipline. Among other examples, Shilliam argues that political theory has promulgated doctrines of universal rights that were practically and ideologically curtailed by racialized ideas of the human.

Calls to decolonize the curriculum and the scholarly disciplines abound. But it isn't always clear what such demands actually require, either of teachers or of researchers. In their 2021 article for *Critical Times*, "Anticolonialism and the Decolonization of Political Theory," Karuna Mantena and Adom Getachew call upon scholars to "generat[e] political theory from and for the non-European world, that is, by imagining political theory of a truly global reach" (p. 361). Two books reviewed in this issue by Arturo Chang seek to do just that by foregrounding what Indigenous voices have to say about bordering practices and ideas of state sovereignty. In *Indigenous Peoples and Borders*, editors Sheryl Lightfoot and Elsa Stamatopoulou bring together a range of authors—many of whom are Indigenous scholars—to discuss how different Indigenous communities have contested, resisted, and re-imagined the border in the wake of colonial settlement and capitalist extraction. Doing so, they argue, helpfully decenters the state and instead makes new claims for collectivity and cultural nationhood (p. 2). In turn, in *Remapping Sovereignty*, David Myer Temin brings together North American Indigenous thinkers, including Zitkala-Ša, Vine Deloria Jr., Ella Cara Deloria, George Manuel, Howard Adams, and Lee Maracle, to show what they contribute to theorizing "contemporary political problems related to 'earth-destroying violence,' anticolonial solidarity, and international politics" (Chang Quiroz, this issue).

Expanding who counts as a source of theoretical insight is also, in part, what Andrés Henao Castro undertakes in his monograph, *The Militant Intellect: Critical Theory's Conceptual Personae*, when he reconstructs a range of examples of "militant intellects" from the Global South and Global North who opposed injustice and oppression in its myriad forms. Henao Castro juxtaposes incisive readings of canonical thinkers like Plato and Marx with

oppositional thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Saidiya Hartman, and Jordy Rosenberg to show how they each developed "conceptual personae" who worked towards "imagin[ing] a world in which the colonial, capitalist, heteronormative, and patriarchal structures have been brought to death" (p. 4; see his Critical Dialogue exchange with Malte Frøslee Ibsen, this issue). In turn, Malte Frøslee Ibsen argues that the European tradition of Critical Theory known as the Frankfurt School still has resources to offer these decolonizing discussions about global justice. He suggests that scholars today should think of critical theory as "an open-ended and intercultural platform for the critique ... of global capitalist modernity" (p. 348). Importantly, he contends that the Frankfurt School's Eurocentrism doesn't disqualify its thinkers from the practice of critique (see Ibsen's reply to Henao Castro, this issue).

Not all scholars working in postcolonial contexts agree about the value of these decolonial approaches to the study of political theory and practice. For Olúfémi Táíwò, for example, such a project totalizes what was a particular historical situation in Africa into an unchanging epistemological condition, thereby undercutting African agency and marginalizing the real contributions of postcolonial scholars, leaders, and movements (see Neil Roberts' review, this issue). In his book, *Against Decolonization*, Táíwò draws a distinction between what he calls Decolonisation₁—which refers to the political emancipation of a colony from imperial rule—and Decolonisation₂, which involves "forcing an ex-colony to foreswear" any idea, practice, or institution that "retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past" (p. 3). Táíwò is strongly opposed to Decolonisation₂, arguing that the push to "decolonize the mind" by only valuing African thinkers writing in African languages unduly marginalizes what are substantive African interventions in discussions about the continent's future. Whatever stance one takes on these debates over how to decolonize the discipline, what becomes clear is that many postcolonial and antiracist thinkers were committed to doing more than simply correcting false historical narratives or revealing the limits of Eurocentric ideals, norms, and practices. Instead, they wanted to produce new ideas about how to "achieve self-determination and world-building in the postcolony," as Neil Roberts puts it (Roberts, this issue). Doing so, in turn, requires a concrete analysis of the racialized inequalities, political formations, and hierarchical modes of citizenship that continue to condition our diverse presents.

Racism, Colonial Capitalism, and the Reproduction of Racialized Hierarchies

One of the most trenchant products of this period of European (and later American) imperial rule has been the idea of "race" itself—the proliferation of essentializing theories and practices that hierarchically differentiate

human beings into racialized “types.” As Paul Sagar explains in his *Basic Equality*, reviewed by Pablo Gilabert, “human beings are psychological essentialists” (p. 62), by which he means that they tend to understand their worlds as structured by certain “types” of beings. Such a predisposition towards psychological essentialism, in turn, becomes problematic when human beings mistake socially constructed distinctions (like gender, race, ethnicity, and class) for natural and inert differences between groups. Thinkers like Eric Williams and Oliver Cromwell Cox argued that European colonizers first developed these racial regimes of differentiation in order to guarantee an unfree and controllable labor force for their emergent plantation economies in the Americas. As Williams put it in his 1944 book, *Capitalism & Slavery*, “Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (p. 4). The wealth that was generated through the Atlantic and Pacific slave trades, the rapacious dispossession of Indigenous land, various regimes of racialized unfree labor, and imperial relations of economic dependency and extraction have built the foundations of many institutions, both public and private, in today’s Global North.

As David W. Blight and his colleagues so fruitfully explore in their book, *Yale & Slavery: A History*, the Ivy League university would not have attained its global primacy nor stockpiled its \$40-billion endowment if it had not received capital investments at key moments in its history from slaveowners or merchants whose fortunes owed to colonial trade. “The sounds, smells, blood, and agonies of the West Indian sugar mill may not have been sensed in churches on New England town greens, but their lethal combination built the pews and the high pulpits,” Blight writes (p. 56–60). Nor can Yale’s history be told without engaging with the ways that many of its presidents, scholars, and students promulgated and legitimated the racist ideologies that underwrote white supremacy, both before and after the Civil War. As Sabine Cadeau notes, *Yale & Slavery* highlights “the slippages and contradictions within the ideas of leading theologians and university leaders whose interests in philosophy, science, and politics were invariably shaped by the country’s economic dependence on slavery and the overwhelming ideological ubiquity of white supremacy” (see the symposium, this issue). Perhaps most importantly, the book presents the stories of specific enslaved people, such as Isabella and Cesar Diego, whose labor did so much to guarantee the university’s early growth, even as they were erased from popular memory and much of the archives. Blight and the Yale & Slavery Research Project have thus put together a volume that contributes significantly to a history of racial slavery and colonial dispossession in the United States, Simon Newman notes in his symposium contribution. Such a project also poses anew the reparative burdens that such institutions have accrued and how they

might discharge them in ways that would remedy ongoing racialized disparities, whether in higher education or in the community of New Haven where Yale is based. As both Sabine Cadeau and Sharon Stein point out in this issue’s symposium, simply telling better histories about Yale’s racialized past does not dismantle the racial inequalities and forms of exclusion that continue to mark its present.

Racisms and racialization are never static, but instead must be situated within the historical conjunctures in which they emerge and do political work. Political scientists and political theorists today are asked to think of racism not as a kind of epiphenomenal prejudice that is a hallmark from a less enlightened time, but instead to undertake the substantive and urgent work of studying racisms and racialized hierarchies as complex overdeterminations of social structure and ideological legitimation. This moves the scholarly gaze away from the United States (and North America more broadly) to instead explore how racialized hierarchies are being (re)made in colonial and other postcolonial contexts. For instance, in this issue, Desh Girod reviews two books focused on “how elites in Israel’s nursing sector and India’s development sector uphold global racial hierarchy, often under the guise of beneficence” (see Girod’s review). In *Unsettled Labors: Migrant Care Work in Palestine/Israel*, Rachel H. Brown explores how migrants from South and Southeast Asia have replaced Palestinian workers when it comes to caring for Israel’s elderly Jewish population because Palestinians are increasingly construed as a “security threat.” In doing so, Brown argues, Israelis often adopt a “kinship trope” (p. 29) to suggest that these migrant carers are part of the family, rather than part of an exploited, precarious, and racialized labor force. In turn, Arjun Shankar examines how Indian elites have positioned themselves as the best leaders of development efforts within the country in his book, *Brown Saviors and Their Others: Race, Caste, Labor, and the Global Politics of Help in India*. Such elite-led initiatives, however, often only work to reproduce caste and class inequality and to worsen poverty, Shankar argues.

Racisms and racialization today can be reproduced in and through a variety of institutional forms—including through unequal markets, political institutions, legal regimes and state practices of population management. In his review of Austin Sarat’s edited volume on capital punishment in the U.S. from the 1970s onwards, Jeffrey Kirchmeier contends that it remains difficult to avoid the “lingering critique of the death penalty as an arbitrary, discriminatory, and inhumane punishment that is disproportionately utilized against the poor and the racially minoritized” (see his review of *Death Penalty in Decline?*, this issue). In *Pot for Profit: Cannabis Legalization, Racial Capitalism, and the Expansion of the Carceral State*, Joseph Mello shows how the legalization of marijuana in the United States—while it promised to end the

disproportionate state surveillance and incarceration of Black men—has instead worked to reproduce racial and class inequalities in many states. As David Pozen notes in his review, “the notion that cannabis legalization would ‘function as reparations’ and ‘repair the damage that was done to communities of color by the policies of mass incarceration’” (p. 81) now looks like a pipe dream (Pozen, this issue).

And of course, as Black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis have pointed out, these racialized formations cannot be adequately grasped without seeing too how “race” is always engendered and sexualized, and how its embodied realities are shaped by interlocking matrices of power. The *Dobbs* decision—which ruled there was no right to abortion in the United States—has had a disproportionate impact on Black and Latina women—and on incarcerated women who are pregnant and who no longer have a legal right to an abortion behind bars (for a broader discussion of the politics of abortion after *Dobbs*, see Simone Caron’s review of Deborah R. McFarlane and Wendy L. Hansen’s *Regulating Abortion: The Politics of US Abortion Policy*, this issue). In turn, political scientists Kaitlin N. Sidorsky and Wendy J. Schiller show how the federal policymaking landscape has failed to protect women from disparate racial and class backgrounds from domestic violence. They point out that policies requiring police enforcement often work against women of color, rather than in the interests. As Sidorsky and Schiller note, “Structural racism in policing and judicial adjudication can produce core problems such as onerous cash bails and dual arrests for Black women who call law enforcement for help” (see Critical Dialogue exchange, this issue).

Acknowledging the differences among women is vital to what Margaret Perez Brower calls intersectional advocacy in mobilizing for policy change. Only an approach attuned to the intersecting nature of injustice and inequality will be able to mobilize the sort of coalitionary politics needed to change policy for marginalized groups and to defend those victories (see Perez Brower in a Critical Dialogue exchange, this issue). Fortunately, women today who wish to run for political office to effect such policy changes may face less sexism and misogyny than they did historically. As Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson and Neheemia Geva conclude in their edited volume, *The Image of Gender and Political Leadership: A Multinational View of Women and Leadership*, young people in the eight democratic countries studied are much more likely to judge candidates based on their political party, rather than based on their gender. (The notable exceptions here are youth surveyed in Israel, French Quebec, and Texas.) These findings seem promising, Gwynn Thomas notes in her review of the book. But the emergence of illiberal and far-right groups—as well as decentralized online networks that advocate for a return to traditional gender roles—may

undermine public support for women in leadership positions going forward.

White Identity Politics, Resurgent Authoritarian Populisms, and Minoritarian Rule

The renewed currency of white identity politics in Europe and North America poses new problems for democratic theorists and the literature on political institutions. Scholars have taken up anew the problem that W.E.B. Du Bois posed in *Black Reconstruction* ([1935] 2007) when he critiqued the “public and psychological wage” that won many white workers in the United States over to the cause of white capital (p. 573). In *The Gratifications of Whiteness*, Ella Myers contends that practices of white identification produce three advantages—whiteness-as-wage, whiteness-as-pleasure, and whiteness-as-dominion. Belonging to the white status group brings with it not just material benefits, but it also offers pleasures, comforts, forms of status, and feelings of superiority. As Jonathan Masin-Peters notes, in “Myers’s reading of Du Bois, racism is primarily the result of deliberate, active, and even pleasurable actions” (see review, this issue). Claudia Leeb, by contrast, turns back to Freudian psychoanalysis to reconstruct the appeals of white authoritarian politics today. In *Contesting the Far Right: A Psychoanalytic and Feminist Critical Theory Approach*, Leeb argues that “neoliberal capitalism creates the material and ideological bases for an unbearable tension between ... who one is and who one believes one would have to be to ... thrive,” as Nica Siegel summarizes (see her review, this issue). Far-right leaders and authoritarian parties, in Leeb’s view, attract and capture so many individuals because they can dissipate this gap between the ego and the ego ideal. And in the process, they disinherit the “superego,” thereby allowing people to repeat the violent and prejudiced attitudes they have inherited from their families, communities, and the broader social field.

Within the U.S. context, political scientists like Theda Skocpol, Rachel M. Blum, Christopher Parker, and Matt Barreto have sought to explore how these resurgent forms of white racism and xenophobia have driven the polarization of American politics. Many studies have sought to explain the rise of political constituencies like the Tea Party and pro-Trump white evangelicals (for the latter, see James L. Guth’s review, this issue). As Skocpol notes in her review of Patrick Rafail and John D. McCarthy’s *The Rise, Fall, and Influence of the Tea Party Insurgency*, the Tea Party emerged on the streets in early 2009, soon after Barack Obama took office, and demanded that the federal government adopt a strict fiscal conservatism. Rafail and McCarthy trace the impetus for this loose network of activists and groups to the Great Recession of 2008 and to the heightened “economic precarity” that it brought to many Americans, especially among older whites. But as Skocpol notes, such an explanation of the Tea Party

clashes with other research that foregrounds the “racial resentments, worry about immigrants, and support for Christian-right family rules,” which have shifted American politics to the right (Skocpol, this issue).

This grassroots politics of white resentment can have particularly damaging consequences when anti-establishment populists form coalitions with corporate and wealthy interests to undermine democratic institutions. Timothy Kuhner maintains in his review of *Big Money Unleashed* that the GOP has empowered a form of “oligarchic rule” today in the United States by appointing Supreme Court justices who have deregulated campaign finance and “constitutionally entrenched the vast political power of private wealth” (Kuhner, this issue). Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, however, indict a more general trend, blaming the

breakdown of U.S. political party infrastructure for the rise of this partisan extremism. In *The Hollow Parties: The Many Pasts and Disordered Present of American Party Politics*, they argue that both major parties have been reduced to little more than service operations during the election cycle. These institutional threats to U.S. democracy, then, should also raise warnings for liberal representative governments in (post)imperial Europe and in parts of the Global South where racially and ethnically charged authoritarian populisms are gathering strength. Racisms and racialized logics of ethnonationalist belonging may have their historical roots in imperial dominion and the colonial capitalisms that fueled it, but today they are increasingly being revived, revised, and redeployed for new political ends—posing distinctive and urgent questions for the discipline.