



The moral aporia of race in international relations

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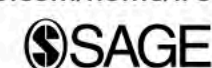
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Abstract

Drawing on recent scholarship on race, post-colonialism, and ethics in the field of international relations, I return to the ‘first debate’ in the field regarding realism versus liberalism to highlight how racialized international political practices a century ago shaped theoretical assumptions, deferrals, and absences in ways that continued to resonate throughout the century. In reviewing several prominent periods of the past 100 years, I argue that (a) a powerful, ongoing moral aporia regarding race has marked the practice of international politics and the study of international relations over the century, despite important challenges and (b) it is critically important for the field as a whole to confront both the aporia and these challenges to understand its own moral precarity and to dent ongoing racialized injustices.

Keywords

aporia, colonialism, international politics, international relations, morality, race, racism

Introduction: the aporia of (hidden) conviction¹

My simple task in this contribution is to address and analyze morality in international relations (IR) over the past 100 years. I say ‘simple’, because the review process has poked a number of conceptual bears that each comprise layers and layers of assumptions about theories of international relations and practices of international politics (IP). Thoroughly investigating processes of socialization and resocialization in the field or discipline, and also providing openings to potentially new ontologies cannot be tackled in a single article, especially one that, according to the editors’ instructions, should make ‘big statements about critical themes’.

Thus, I begin with a return, to what Yosef Lapid famously labeled the ‘first debate’² of 100 years ago, to ground my argument that the practice of IP has not fully grasped its own moral aporia regarding race, racialized conquest, and inequality, nor have the theories that arose in close companionship to this practice. I employ ‘international politics’ or

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IP to refer to practice, including policy, and 'international relations' or IR to refer to scholarship in the field. Regarding both, my focus is on IP and IR as practiced by actors and scholars in major powers of the global north, or west, not because they represent the sum total of either theory or practice, but because they have generally defined both for readers in numerous IR journals, including this one. I understand international political practice and international relations scholarship to be tightly interconnected, with scholarship mostly reacting to but also occasionally shaping practice. Moreover, over time theorists and practitioners have sometimes overlapped or changed places in government, the private sector, foundations, and non-profits. As a result, moral issues that implicate practice cannot exclude scholarship, and vice versa.

This 'first debate', regarding realism versus idealism/utopianism, brought differing views about morality in IP and IR to the forefront. This debate continues to shape theory and practice in the present, even though it oversimplified numerous and complex issues.³ It also took place during a peak period of European and North American colonialism, that is, the point at which colonialism in much of the world was consolidated while anti-colonial movements and independence struggles were gaining steam. Most self-described realists favored maintaining their respective imperial statuses, although liberals inscribed racialized hierarchies by establishing 'mandates' through the League of Nations for non-white peoples. Although this period was also one of full-fledged anti-imperialist sentiment, self-described 'progressives' in the great powers still frequently divided along racialized lines, and even early feminist thinkers demonstrated an equivocal stance vis-à-vis race.⁴ As the century continued, theorizing about the Cold War and the virtues of capitalism versus communism became predominant. Far from resolving questions of race, however, this focus relied on developmentalist assumptions that drew on previous racialized categories without resolving their contradictions, arguably overshadowing theorizing about the implications of massive decolonization around the world from the 1940s into the 1970s and beyond. Hence, the excavation of racialized assumptions in theory and practice was deferred. During the post-Cold War period, much of the attention to conflict and poverty re-racialized inequality by promoting a form of liberal humanitarianism that critics charge with enacting a 'white saviour complex'.⁵ In the post-9/11/2001 era, racialization has become partially refocused to bring Orientalist stereotypes (once again) center-stage as a politics of fear, epitomized by the Islamophobia engendered by the war on terror.

The idea of morality encompasses an articulation of 'right' (vs. wrong) action, and a conceptualization of the kind of agent who engages in it. As Kimberly Hutchings points out, concepts of 'morality' and 'ethics' are often used interchangeably, and form part of 'the broad category of the "normative," encompassing not only the rights and wrongs of interactions between individuals and collectives but also the structures that enable and constrain action'.⁶ The concept of aporia indicates a contradiction that is irresolvable. A moral aporia regarding race begs the question of whether, and if so why and how, ideas about morality in IP and IR contain racialized contradictions that become impossible to resolve, at least in the contexts of extant frameworks.⁷ I do not assert that questions of race and racialization present the only moral aporia in IP and IR, and certainly an intersectional analysis of race/gender/class, and so on, is necessary to excavate fully IR and IP's moral contradictions.⁸ But I do assert that racialized constructions and imaginaries

have plagued both the field and the practice of IP over the past 100 years, breeding sometimes explicit and other times implicit assumptions of non-white and non-European/North American inferiority that manage to sweep into their orbit peoples and forms of knowledge that emanate from other political, economic, cultural, religious, and social systems.

It is necessary to (re)state at the outset that race, like other identity markers, is a social construction rather than an objective category: Its modern manifestations were constructed and solidified in tandem with European expansion (territorial, economic, cultural) throughout the world. Seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers, including John Locke and Immanuel Kant, formulated hierarchies of racial difference between Europeans and others, upon which scientists like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach built theories of alleged biologically determined racial superiority and inferiority.⁹ Nevertheless, as Thomas McCarthy points out, "'race" was never *purely* a biological construction'. Rather:

It always comprised congeries of elements, including not only other 'material' factors such as geographical origin and genealogical descent, but also a shifting array of 'mental' characteristics such as cognitive ability and moral character, as well as a mobile host of cultural and behavioral traits.¹⁰

This shifting array became normalized, combining with theories of eugenics by the late nineteenth century to lend the construction of race an allegedly scientific cast. By the beginning of the early twentieth century, the 100-year period addressed by this Special Issue, racialized assumptions about global power and practice had become reified. This is why race, colonialism, and imperialism should be understood as intersecting components of 'developmental schemes, in which designated groups have been represented as not only racially distinct but also as occupying different stages of development', which in turn inscribe 'various forms of hierarchical relations'.¹¹ 'Race' is therefore a slippery thing, constructed of ephemeral materials. On the one hand, it is socially constructed of multiple elements that do not always appear to be present in IR theories and practices; on the other hand its attendant assumptions about superior power and forms of 'civilisation' have produced astoundingly violent consequences against people who are racialized in specific ways. Prominent social theorist and political scientist Achille Mbembe, for example, pulls no punches in reflecting on how the moral aporia regarding race in IR and IP has affected non-white peoples over several centuries:

By reducing the body and the living being to matters of appearance, skin, and color, by granting skin and color the status of fiction based on biology, the Euro-American world in particular has made blackness and race two sides of a single coin, two sides of a codified madness. Race, operating over the past centuries as a foundational category that is at once material and phantasmic, has been at the root of catastrophe, the cause of extraordinary psychic devastation and of innumerable crimes and massacres.¹²

At the heart of the moral aporia regarding race in IR and IP lies the continuation of developmentalist assumptions that result from this phantasm in both theory and practice, and their naturalization in concepts of deductive theory and rational, as well as ethical,