

History, race and the pitfalls of ideal normative theorising

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As an exercise for undergraduate admissions interviews, normative thought experiments can help teenagers with little to no historical knowledge attempt to answer some limited questions about global inequality. But, to use Jeanne Morefield's words in Duncan Bell's new edited volume, is a 'six-person-in-a-lifeboat thought experiment' adequate to answer questions as 'deeply structural, historical, and power-ridden as global poverty and resource distribution' (187)? In Anglo-American analytic political theory, the answer is a qualified yes. Global justice is addressed precisely through the terms of abstract normative theory, framed as a debate on the origins and degree to which citizens living in 'wealthy' or 'affluent' countries in the 'global North' have moral obligations towards people suffering from poverty and human rights abuses in 'poor' countries of the 'global South'. As developed from the 1970s and exemplified in the work of Charles Beitz, John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, Henry Shue, and Martha Nussbaum, the terms of global justice theory are normative, universal, individualist, and often thought experimental.

The problems with normative global justice literature are generally well known in wider critical political theory. For Charles W. Mills, normative global justice theory is flawed because it necessarily abstracts 'away from the empirical' as part of a 'general sanitization of the racist historical record' (112). This literature sidesteps awkward questions related to the bloody history and legacies of imperialism on contemporary patterns of global wealth inequality. For Robert Nichols, any meaningful references to imperialism and empire in global justice literature are 'peripheral, marginal, defensive' (231). Indeed, this literature *necessarily* marginalizes 'the historically accurate mapping of the past' (Mills 112). This non-relation to the history and politics of empire and race is necessary to sustain the broadly liberal theoretical framework of global justice theory, the clear analytic distinctions between 'affluent' and 'poor' countries, domestic and foreign, Global North and South. To include a proper reckoning of colonial and racist history would surely lead the analytic categories of global justice theory to implode.

Generations of critical historical political and international theorists rejected ideal normative theorizing. The major intervention of Duncan Bell's important new edited volume, *Empire, Race and Global Justice*, is to understandings of the historical and political context in which abstract moral theorizing became the dominant mode for engaging with global justice in Anglo-American academe. Why, at this historical moment of the 1970s, did some liberal political philosophers in Britain and the United States adopt largely ahistorical and universalist approaches to global justice and racial injustice/reparations? With this volume, and the wider work of its contributors, we learn that ahistorical and universalist approaches to global justice were adopted precisely in order to deflect more radical contemporary demands for a transformation of global political and economic relations.¹ The 1970s was a period of deep post-colonial contestation around global economic and political inequality, of growing debate on how to properly address the legacies of colonialism and white supremacy, and of powerful ideas and proposals for 'world making after empire', including a New International Economic

¹ Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018)

Order.² Premised on the continuing legacies of imperial and racial domination, these demands were *historically* oriented conceptions of justice and internationalism.³

Imperial history and racial hierarchy were necessarily excised from political philosophizing on global inequality to obscure, ignore, and refuse direct intellectual engagement with the accounts of global justice articulated by those living in colonized or formerly colonized territories. For example, Katrina Forrester's essay charts in detail how the heated question of reparations for slavery in the United States 'was transformed from one of anti-colonialism and material compensation... to one of humanitarian transitional justice and reconciliation, synonymous with a sometimes depoliticized and often individualized repair' (51). Similarly, Samuel Moyn offers an intellectual history of the 1970s rise of contemporary liberal philosophies of human rights, particularly Henry Shue's work *Basic Rights*. Shue's influential book, writes Moyn, was 'premised on a tragic moral outlook in which the permanence of evil required those who cared about good to seek a simple minimum of protection' (61). Just as anti-neocolonial activists and intellectuals were demanding a reckoning with imperialism's continued legacies, politics was reduced to applied ethics.

Situating the methodological commitments of Anglo-American analytic political theory as a reaction to the demands of anti- and post-colonial movements invites us to examine the history of other fields of abstract theorizing. As Sundhya Pahuja's essay notes, during the 1970s we also 'see race gradually disappear as an axis of analysis from international legal and institutional accounts of inequality' (76). Clearly, the erasure of history and race is not limited to analytic political theories of global justice, but also extends to the post-World War II field of International Relations (IR).⁴ Morefield suggests that global justice literature 'provides succor to a school of liberal internationalism that is interventionist, presentist, crisis-driven, and imperialist in all but name' (186). Kimberley Hutchings suggests that Anglophone just war theory replays colonial and neocolonial imaginaries. More generally, as Sankaran Krishna wrote over twenty years ago, 'the discipline of international relations [after 1945] was and is predicated on a systematic politics of forgetting, a wilful amnesia, on the question of race... IR discourse's... fetishization of abstraction is premised on a desire to escape history, to efface the violence, genocide, and theft that marked the encounter between the rest and the West in the post-Columbia era'.⁵

We still await an intellectual history of the 1970s rise of abstract theorizing in the academic field of American IR, the rise to dominance of neorealism and neoliberalism, comparable to the new histories of global justice theory and human rights. Such an intellectual history is even more urgent considering the recent decline of 'grand theory' wars in IR, and the concomitant new ascendancy of hypothesis-testing. A great deal of American and now much European IR is much closer in method and approach to comparative and quantitative political science than the wide ranging, if not always very good, historical and theoretical approaches

² Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019); Vanessa Ogle, 'State Rights against Private Capital: The "New International Economic Order" and the Struggle over Aid, Trade, and Foreign Investment, 1962-1980', *Humanity*, Vol.5 no.2 (2014), pp.211-234

³ For one account see Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London; Verso, 2012)

⁴ The field of international relations was openly and directly concerned with racial questions in the first half of the twentieth century. Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015)

⁵ Sankaran Krishna, 'Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 26, no.4 (2001), p.401. Meera Sabaratnam, 'Is IR Theory White? Racialised Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 49, no.1 (2020), pp.3-31

of ‘pluralist’ IR.⁶ Just as postcolonial, feminist, and other critical and more genuinely historical approaches to international relations gained a stronger foothold in the field, and have grown in depth and sophistication, we see liberal international theory refusing serious engagement with alternative theoretical accounts, let alone historical literature, and verifying itself through ever more sophisticated data collection and methodological techniques.

The overwhelming conclusion of *Empire, Race and Global Justice*, writes Duncan Bell is that ‘the demotion of history... led political theory badly astray’ (17). However, this volume is also reconstructive, attempting to model how contemporary political theorists could/should reckon with global justice. One approach Bell suggests is for political theorists to seek inspiration from the ‘counter-canon of global justice, a disparate range of thinkers who provide alternative ways of seeing the world and a repertoire of theoretical and conceptual resources to think through questions of global order’ (12). Those mentioned are DuBois, Fanon, Locke, Tate, Bunche, Cambral, (Aimé) Césaire, Padmore, James, (Marcus) Garvey, Hall, Lorde, Robinson, hooks, Said, Mohanty, Mbembe, and Mills. In the volume itself, the most sustained engagement with this counter-canon is an all-male cast of the more familiar names. Inés Valdez uses DuBois to explore a different ‘cosmopolitan orientation’ centering on transnational alliances in struggles against racial injustice. Margaret Kohn suggests that Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* can be read as a ‘nuanced version of standpoint theory’ (168). Morefield turns to Said for resources to help defy ‘the tendency to ignore the agency and history’ of those at whom global justice theorists ‘aim both their ideal moral theories and their foreign policy recommendations’ (210). However, Catherine Lu and Robert Nichols point to a powerful alternative intellectual tradition of indigenous thought and practice on the legacies and deep injustices of settler colonialism, including forcible incorporation into modern state forms and the denial of full self-determination of transboundary indigenous peoples.

This is a wonderful book, a compelling read, with consistently excellent essays, another important cross-disciplinary intervention led by Duncan Bell.⁷ I make only two criticisms. One is the claim that ‘critical philosophers of race’ have largely focused on domestic forms of domination and ‘tended not to engage in systematic discussion of global justice’ (Bell 11). This seems wrong and in tension with the main empirical foundation of the volume, the fact that numerous thinkers during and since the 1970s, including in the United States, insisted on transnational solidarity among people of African descent, including reparations and more radical political and economic transformations of world politics. Many contemporary theorists and historians of global racial hierarchy work as or on thinkers deeply interested in global justice.⁸ Second, if political and international theorists seek inspiration from the existing counter-canon of global justice, then they might look beyond the all-male cast of thinkers in this volume, important though they are. Thinking solely of Black diasporic thinkers, we could consider Anna Julia Cooper, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, Susanne Roussy Césaire, Shirley Graham DuBois, Claudia Jones, Jessie Faucet, Jane Nardal, Una Marson,

⁶ For an early diagnosis and lament that realism is no longer the centre of IR theory attention see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, ‘Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing is Bad for International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.19, no.3 (2013), pp.427-457.

⁷ Also see Duncan Bell (ed.) *Political Theory and Architecture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

⁸ For a sampling see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London: Routledge, 1999); Cornell West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (New York: Haymarket, 2016); Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones, *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For more historical work see Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012)

Elsanda Robeson, Pauli Murray, Mary Church Terrell, Edith Sampson, Jeanne Vialle, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Zora Neale Hurston. Among the most powerful and important contemporary research literatures in intellectual history today is the history of Black women's internationalism, a field centrally concerned with the political and ethical legacies of empire, and its hierarchies of gender, class, and race.⁹

⁹ Gregg Andrews, *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle* (Columbia, 2011); Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945–1995* (Chicago, 2011); Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Mrs. Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York, 2000); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York, 2011); Barbara Ransby, *Elsanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven, 2014); Imaobong Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Berkeley, 2018); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, 2018); Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill, eds., *To Turn the World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana, 2019); Sarah Dunstan and Patricia Owens, 'Claudia Jones, International Thinker', *Modern Intellectual History* (2021) 1-24; Patricia Owens, Katharina Rietzler, Kimberly Hutchings, Sarah C. Dundan (eds.) *Women's International Thought: Towards a New Canon* (Cambridge, forthcoming).