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Hidden in plain sight: racism in international relations theory

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Abstract This article addresses the centrality of racism in international relations (IR) theory; specifically, in realism and liberalism, two of the most prominent paradigms of IR. It examines the extent to which these major paradigms of world politics are oriented by racist—primarily, white supremacist—precepts that inhere within their foundational construct, namely, anarchy. I maintain that due to the centrality of anarchy—and other racially infused constructs—within these prominent paradigms, white supremacist precepts are not only nominally associated with the origins of the field, but have an enduring impact on IR theory and influence contemporary theses ranging from neorealist conceptions of the global system to liberal democratic peace claims, and constructivist theses as well.

Introduction

This article addresses the centrality of racism in international relations (IR) theory; specifically, in realism and liberalism, two of the most prominent paradigms of IR. It examines the extent to which these major paradigms of world politics are oriented by racist—primarily, white supremacist—precepts that inhere within their foundational construct, namely, anarchy. I maintain that due to the centrality of anarchy—and other racially infused constructs—within these prominent paradigms, white supremacist precepts are not only nominally associated with the origins of the field, but have an enduring impact on IR theory and influence contemporary theses ranging from neorealist conceptions of the global system to liberal democratic peace claims, and constructivist theses as well. The article proceeds in several sections. First, I briefly review the centrality of white supremacism in the origins of IR as an academic field of study. Second, I discuss the role of white supremacism in the foundational constructs of IR theory; namely, the social contract theses that inform IR scholars’ conception of anarchy, which is the starting point for most paradigms of world politics. I maintain that social contract theses that are often cast as ‘race-neutral’ actually suggest one type of relations for white people and their institutions and states, and another for nonwhite people and their institutions and states. This discourse provided the point of departure for subsequent IR theorizing among realists, liberals and constructivists on the relations among states in the global system. Therefore, third, I discuss how realism, liberalism and constructivism derive their notions of anarchy from social contract theses that are based in a racist dualism that dichotomizes humanity and the relations of states composed of different
peoples. Before turning to this broader discussion, let's consider the manner in which racism influences IR, in general.

The study of race and racism in IR

Racism is the belief in, practice, and policy of domination based on the specious concept of race (Henderson 2007). It is not simply bigotry or prejudice, but beliefs, practices and policies reflective of and supported by institutional power, primarily state power. For more than a century, social scientists, in general, have maintained that race and racism are among the most important factors in world politics. Prominent anti-racist scholars such as WEB Du Bois (1961 [1903], 23) acknowledged at the outset of the last century that ‘the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa in America and the islands of the sea’. Less appreciated today is the centrality of race and racism to the core theorists of the incipient academic field of IR. Their early works were firmly situated in the prominent social Darwinist evolutionary theses of the day which assumed a hierarchy of races dominated by white Europeans and their major diasporic offshoots in the Americas, Australia and South Africa, with nonwhites occupying subordinate positions and none lower than blacks. A white supremacist evolutionary teleology informed the domestic and international policies of major Western states and rationalized their policies of white racial domination epitomized in slavery, imperial conquest, colonization and genocide. In this conception, whites were assumed to be favoured by God and biologically distinct from nonwhites. Uniquely among the races, whites were assumed to possess civilization while nonwhites were assumed to occupy a lower stage of development characterized as either barbarism or savagery. Further, it was assumed that in order to climb the evolutionary ladder to achieve civilization and its attendant culture, nonwhites would have to be tutored by whites who would—often magnanimously—assume this ‘white man’s burden’ so that the lesser races might rise above their barbarism and savagery. The lesser races were assumed to be not only biologically inferior to whites, but in a state of almost perpetual conflict; therefore, the ‘civilizing mission’ of those who would take up the ‘white man’s burden’ could be imposed by force. This orientation not only rationalized enslavement, imperial conquest, colonization and genocide but also provided an intellectual rationale to justify these pursuits. To the extent that the racial hierarchy guided the international politics of the predominately white states in their interaction with other polities, the IR of the time was more accurately ‘interracial relations’ (Du Bois 1915; Lauren 1988). Thus, it’s not surprising that the early works that gave rise to the modern academic field of IR focused squarely on race as its main axis of enquiry.

For example, in An introduction to the study of international relations, Kerr argued that ‘one of the most fundamental facts in human history’ is that ‘[m]ankind is divided into a graduated scale’ (1916, 142) ranging from the civilized to the barbarian, which necessitated the colonization of the latter by the former (1916, 163). Giddings (1898) viewed the ‘governing’ of ‘the inferior races of mankind’ as the duty of the civilized and drew on Kidd’s The control of the tropics (1898, 15), which admonished superior races to assume their responsibility to cultivate the
riches of the ‘tropics’. The competition for these resources could lead to major wars among ‘civilized’ states, as Hobson, Angell and Lenin would famously argue. In fact, Du Bois (1915) had argued in ‘The African roots of the war’, prior to publication of Lenin’s more famous tract, *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism*, that World War I was largely the result of disputes over imperial acquisitions which fused the interests of bourgeoisie and proletariat in European states in a mutually reinforcing pursuit of racist and economic domination of African and Asian nations. One brief aside: although Du Bois had published this argument prior to Lenin’s more famous pamphlet, it is rarely anthologized or even mentioned in contemporary IR textbooks, readers, or the discussion of imperialism—much less the origins of World War I.

Earlier, Reinsch (1900, 9), whom Schmidt (1998, 75) maintains ‘must be considered one of the founding figures of the field of international relations’, noted in what may be considered the first monograph in the field of IR, *World politics at the end of the nineteenth century* (Reinsch 1900), that ‘national imperialism’ was transforming the landscape of international relations as states attempted ‘to increase the resources of the national state through the absorption or exploitation of undeveloped regions and inferior races’ without ‘impos[ing] political control upon highly civilized nations’ (1900, 14). Olson and Groom (1991, 47) note that Reinsch’s work ‘suggests that the discipline of international relations had its real beginnings in studies of imperialism’; and studies of imperialism at the time were firmly grounded in racist assumptions of white supremacy. Moreover, Reinsch’s (1905a, 154–155) ‘The Negro race and European civilization’ concurred with prominent anthropometric arguments that there were physiological differences between the brains of blacks and those of whites, such that for the former ‘organic development of the faculties seem to cease at puberty’; however, he also opined that the development capacity of blacks could be facilitated under white tutelage, which ‘amounted to an American variant of what British colonial reformers would come to call the policy of “indirect rule”’ (Vitalis 2010, 932). In fact, Reinsch’s *Colonial government* (1902) and *Colonial administration* (1905b) placed him among the leading experts on colonial administration as well. In the 1920s, Buell’s (1929) *International relations*, which Vitalis (2000, 353) describes as ‘the most important US textbook’ of the decade, ‘opens with the classic trope of the discipline, a man on the moon looking down upon an earth divided “into different hues”’.

The centrality of race to the incipient field of IR is evident in the genealogy of one of the most popular journals in international affairs, *Foreign Affairs*. *Foreign Affairs* became the house organ of the Council on Foreign Relations in 1922 after changing its name from the *Journal of International Relations*, as it had been named since 1919; but from 1910 to 1919 the publication was known as the *Journal of Race Development* (Iriye 1997, 67). Reeves (2004, 26) notes that ‘the move from race to international relations would seem to represent both a qualitative and quantitative change in subject matter, yet, to the journal editors, the change was, obviously, less dramatic’ given that ‘Volume 10, the *Journal of International Relations*, simply followed on from where Volume 9, the *Journal of Race Development*, left off’. For her ‘the choices of the journal’s title tells us something of what early IR scholars considered the subject of international relations to be about’ (2004, 26). Following Vitalis, Blatt (2004, 707) views the *Journal of Race Development* as central to a corpus of scholarship at the turn of the twentieth
century that placed race at the centre of the study of world politics through its association with a ‘racialized and biological understanding of “development”’. Subsequent scholarship in the incipient field of IR retained a focus on race and white racial supremacy; and in the interwar era it often projected, rationalized and echoed alarmist sentiments that augured a race war that would result from the teeming masses of nonwhite peoples who were becomingly increasingly assertive (that is, ‘race conscious’). Figures on demographic growth in the colonial world were brought to bear to justify the growing fear of ‘race war’ during the interwar period and focused attention away from the genocidal schemes of the emerging fascist regimes in Europe. For example, Spengler’s *Decline of the West* and Stoddard’s *The rising tide of color against white world supremacy* heightened the sense of impending inter-racial warfare between the white West and its colonized darker minions—or, in fact, any of the ‘lesser races’ that were assumed to have a ‘natural’ place in the hierarchy of races below white Europeans and their racial kin. One result was that ‘every Western setback’ from the defeat of Russia by the Japanese in 1905 to the Turkish defeat of the Greeks in 1923 ‘was a direct boost to anti-white consciousness’ and augured greater conflicts to come (Furedi 1998, 58). For example, one of the most influential British IR scholars, Zimmern (1926, 82), noted at the time that the defeat of Russia by Japan in 1905 was ‘the most important historical event which has happened or is likely to happen, in our lifetime; the victory of a non-white people over a white people’. Nevertheless, given a concern about fomenting ‘race war’, a view emerged that ‘public displays of white racial superiority had become dangerous since they invited an explosion of racial resentment’ (Furedi 1998, 79). For the most part, ‘this was an approach that self-consciously ignored the fundamental question of racial oppression and focused its concern on the etiquette of race relations’ (1998, 79). In effect, it was the intellectual rationalization of the separate but equal doctrine of apartheid or Jim Crow, as ‘[t]he new racial pragmatism presented itself as an alternative to racial supremacist philosophy’ (1998, 93) and even promoted, at times, notions of cultural relativism. Actually, cultural relativism was quite compatible with white supremacist tenets, and its ascendance in academia and policy circles simply represented the most recent morphing of white supremacist discourse.

The justification for white racism had progressed through several distinct but often overlapping and at times mutually reinforcing rationalizations rooted initially in theology, then biology and subsequently in anthropology. The religious and biological justifications of white supremacy are well known. Boas is credited with evolving the academic discourse of race away from biology and towards anthropology and in so doing ushering in an era of cultural relativism and

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1 These sentiments were echoed in the arguments of prominent cultural relativists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, and they also resonated in the arguments of such prominent political scientists as Burgess and such sociologists as Parks. For example, Furedi (1998, 93) points out that ‘Malinowski was as scathing of Nordic supremacist theories as he was of ideas of race equality’. Malinowski rationalized support for the ‘colour bar’ in his ‘A plea for an effective colour bar’ in 1931. Burgess proffered a white supremacist hierarchy of races in his *The foundations of political science*. Park’s social contact thesis portended racial conflict as a result of contact between races.

2 On racial formation and re-formation, see Omi and Winant (1996). For a critique of the mystification of white supremacism in racial formation theses, see Henderson (2007, 340–343).
modern anthropological analyses of race. Boas (1911) challenged anthropometric ‘evidence’ of correspondence between cranial capacity of peoples of different races and intelligence, and prevailing genetic arguments of racial heredity. For example, he noted that immigrants to the United States (US) who had undergone years of American socialization evinced cultural characteristics approximating those of other Americans. Arguing against social Darwinism, he rejected the notion of a hierarchy of culture and argued instead that all peoples have cultures that reflect their own beliefs, values and practices and that are internally valid and should be evaluated on their own terms and not in relation to some cultural hierarchy. This perspective undermined the assumed scientific legitimacy of white supremacism based on notions of white cultural superiority and ushered in the discourse of cultural relativism in social science. Less well known is the contribution to racial discourse of the first African American Rhodes Scholar, Alain Locke, who accepted much of the Boasian perspective on culture—thus he rejected the view that culture was determined by race, but argued against the anthropological view of race—and aspects of Boas’s cultural relativism as well—and suggested instead that race was mainly a sociological construct.

In the first of his series of five lectures at Howard University in 1916, entitled ‘The theoretical and scientific conceptions of race’, he argued that anthropology had not isolated any permanent or static features of race. For Locke (1992 [1916], 11), ‘when the modern man talks about race[,] he is not talking about the anthropological or biological idea at all. [He is really talking about the historical record of success or failure of] an ethnic group’ but ‘these groups, from the point of view of anthropology, are ethnic fictions’. Interestingly, he notes that ‘This does not mean that they do not exist[,] but it can be shown [that these groups do] not have as [permanent] designations those very factors upon which they pride themselves.’ That is, ‘They have neither purity of [blood] nor purity of type’; instead, ‘They are the products of countless intermingleings of types[,] and they are the results of infinite crossings of types’ and ‘maintain in name only this fetish of biological [purity]’ (1992 [1916], 11).

On its face, Locke’s contention seems to be that of Boas; however, while Boas rejected biological renderings of race in favour of anthropological ones, he, nonetheless, opined that some elements of race might be rooted in heredity. This understanding led Boas to propose racial intermarriage as a prescription for the eradication of US racism. Locke disagreed. He insisted that there was neither a biological nor an anthropological basis for race; and in this way transcended Boas’s conceptualization of cultural relativism and laid the basis for his ‘critical relativism’. That is, even as the scientific understanding of race progressed under Boas’s influence from biological definitions to anthropological ones, Locke (1992, 10) further argued that ‘[e]ven the anthropological factors are variable, and pseudo-scientific, except for purposes of descriptive classification’; therefore ‘there are no static factors of race at all’ (1992, 10). As Stewart (1992, xxiv) notes, for Locke, race was sociological. It ‘was simply another word for a social or national group that shared a common history or culture and occupied a geographical region’; but ‘as applied to social and ethnic groups’ race ‘has no meaning at all beyond that sense of kind, that sense of kith and kin’; it is ‘an ethnic fiction’. For Locke, to the extent that a person has a race ‘he has inherited either a favorable or an unfavorable social heredity, which unfortunately is [typically] ascribed to factors which have not produced [it,] factors which will in no way determine either the period of those
inequalities or their eradication’ (1992, 12). Through this conceptualization, Locke
‘was standing racialist theories of culture on their heads: rather than particular races
creating Culture, it was culture—social, political, and economic processes—that
produced racial character’ (1992, xxv). Locke had removed race from its biological
and anthropological moorings and placed it ‘squarely on a cultural foundation’;
fundamentally, race was sociological—or, in today’s language, a ‘social construct’.
Locke’s contributions are as prescient and profound as they are ignored in
contemporary scholarship on racism in IR and political science, in general, and in
sociology, anthropology and philosophy as well.

To be sure, Locke’s arguments from his Howard University lectures of 1914–1916
got unpublished in his lifetime, therefore the inattention of scholars to his
sociological thesis of race is to some extent understandable; however, even within
the ostensible mainstream of IR scholarship in the interwar era, there was the
little-recognized—and rarely cited—analysis of race in domestic and inter-
national affairs of political scientist and future Nobel Laureate, Ralph Bunche
(1936). In his A world view of race he eschewed the alarmist tendencies of the day
and—informed in part by Locke’s earlier arguments—offered a sober analysis of
racism in world politics which focused on the non-scientific basis of race and the
often greater salience of class in ostensibly ‘racial’ conflicts; and in so doing
anticipated much of the postwar scholarship—including post-Cold-War scholar-
ship—on racism in world politics.

Engagement in World War II against the Nazi regime compelled Western elites
to disassociate themselves at least superficially from the doctrine of the regime
that the West had defeated. Nevertheless, Du Bois (1987 [1946], 23) raised the
hypocrisy of Western condemnation of Nazi atrocities in light of the Western
nations’ practices in their colonies and asserted that ‘there was no Nazi atrocity—
concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or
ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which the Christian civilization of Europe had
not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name
of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world’. Subsequently,
the international order would not substantively alter the racial status quo even as it
promoted racial equality in major international institutions such as the United
Nations (UN), while continuing to countenance the subjugation of billions of
nonwhite people by the imperialist powers who were the victors of World War II.
The anti-colonial struggle in the third world would challenge this status quo and
issues of race and racism were increasingly examined in the postwar era to
address the decline of empires. Nevertheless, the postwar rise of ‘area studies’
situated many such analyses of race within the context of comparative politics
(or in the study of the domestic politics of individual states) and outside of IR,
such that even in such a prominent IR text as Politics among nations Hans
Morgenthau (1985 [1948], 369), one of the most influential IR scholars of the
twentieth century, could refer to ‘the politically empty spaces of Africa and Asia’.

To be sure, race and racism are not only foundational to the field of IR but were
seminal to the development of the field given their centrality in the conduct of
international affairs. For example, near the end of the Cold War, Lauren (1988, 4)
acknowledged that

The first global attempt to speak of equality focused upon race. The first human
rights provisions in the United Nations Charter were placed there because of race.
The first international challenge to a country’s claim of domestic jurisdiction and exclusive treatment of its own citizens centered upon race. The international convention with the greatest number of signatories is that on race. Within the United Nations, more resolutions deal with race than any other subject. And certainly one of the most long-standing and frustrating problems in the United Nations is that of race. Nearly one hundred eighty governments, for example, recently went as far as to conclude that racial discrimination and racism still represent the most serious problems for the world today.

Persaud and Walker (2001, 374) add that ‘the significance of race [in IR] goes much beyond various multilateral and other diplomatic achievements’ because ‘race has been a fundamental force in the very making of the modern world system and in the representations and explanations of how that system emerged and how it works’. For Persaud (2001, 116) ‘race … has been at the center of gravity for a substantial part of the modern world system’.

The centrality of race and racism in the foundations of IR and their enduring impact on world affairs towards the end of the millennium contrasts with the relative dearth of mainstream scholarship on the subject in IR. For example, Doty’s (1998, 136) survey of mainstream journals in IR for the period of 1945–1993 (World Politics, International Studies Quarterly, International Organization, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Review of International Studies) ‘revealed only one article with the word race in the title, four with the term minorities and 13 with the term ethnicity’. Given that at its inception IR focused heavily on issues of race and racism, the marginalization of race and racism in mainstream IR journals (and textbooks) begs the question of what accounts for the apparent disparity? Doty (1998, 145) argues that ‘the dominant understandings of theory and explanation in International Relations’ preclude conceptualizations of ‘complex issues/concepts such as race’ and result in their marginalization or force them ‘into constraining modes of conceptualization and explanation’. For Krishna (2001, 401), the complexity is related less to the issue of racism than to the methodological orientations that often privilege abstract theorizing over historical analyses, which allows IR theorists to whitewash the historical content of global affairs, especially ‘the violence, genocide, and theft that marked the encounter between the rest and the West in the post-Columbian era’. Ignoring the role of racism facilitates this whitewash. He adds that ‘abstraction, usually presented as the desire of the discipline to engage in theory-building rather than in descriptive or historical analysis, is a screen that simultaneously rationalizes and elides the details of these encounters. By encouraging students to display their virtuosity in abstraction the discipline brackets questions of theft of land, violence, and slavery—the three processes that have historically underlain the unequal global order we now find ourselves in’ (Krishna 2001, 401–402). Further, ‘overattention’ on the part of scholars to issues related to racism in IR ‘is disciplined by professional practices that work as taboo’ and may label such orientations as ‘too historical or descriptive’ and label such students as ‘not adequately theoretical’ and ‘lacking in intellectual rigor’ (Krishna 2001, 402). Moreover, where the impact of race and racism is analysed, insufficient attention is paid to the relevance of struggles related to race and racism to basic conceptions of fundamental issues in world politics such as power, war, freedom or democracy. For example, Persaud (2001, 116) maintains that ‘what needs to be underlined is that the struggle for racial equality has been fundamental to the emergence of democracy as a whole, not just for the colored world’ (2001, 116).
Persaud and Walker (2001, 374) claim that race has not been ignored in IR as much as it ‘has been given the epistemological status of silence’. This silence is linked by Maclean (1981, 110) to ‘invisibility’, which ‘refers to the removal (not necessarily through conscious action) from a field of enquiry, either concrete aspects of social relations, or of certain forms of thought about them’. Vitalis (2000) also acknowledges a ‘norm against noticing’ white racism throughout mainstream IR discourse (also see Depelchin 2005). Each of these processes perpetuates the racist assumptions embedded in the foundations of IR theory where they serve as the ‘priors’ of the main propositions. These assumptions may be exposed by tracing the racist claims that inform IR theory. This approach is different from that undertaken in most studies of racism in IR, which usually focus on one of four approaches: (1) examinations of the impact of non-racial factors on racial outcomes, such as the geographical studies of Linnaeus and the physical anthropological works of Blumenbach and Kant, which attempted to determine the extent to which environmental and climatic factors led to the creation of different races; (2) examinations of the impact of racial outcomes on non-racial factors, such as studies of the effects of racial stratification on domestic outcomes (for example, development or democracy), or the impact of racial differences on the likelihood of violence within or between states (for example, Deutsch 1970; Shepherd and LeMelle 1970); (3) examinations of the impact of racist practices on the IR of states and non-state actors, such as studies of diplomatic historians on racist practices such as international slavery, imperial conquest, colonialism, genocide, apartheid, occupation, or racial discrimination, among single states, several states, or international organizations (for example, Elkins 2004; Hochschild 1998; Tinker 1977; Vincent 1982; Winant 2001); and (4) examinations of the impact of racist ideology on the IR of states and non-state actors, such as studies on the impact of racism on foreign policy (for example, Hunt 1987; Lauren 1988; Anderson 2003), imperialism (for example, Rodney 1974), state-making (for example, Cell 1982; Fredrickson 1982; Mamdani 1996; Marx 1998), diasporization (Harris 1982; Walters 1993) or international war (Dower 1986).

While studies utilizing each of these approaches have contributed to our understanding of the role of racism in world politics, they have largely ignored the issue of primary concern to us here: how racism informs the major paradigms of IR theory such as realism and liberalism. Racism informs IR theory mainly through its influence on the empirical, ethical and epistemological assumptions that undergird its paradigms. These assumptions operate individually and in combination. For example, racist empirical assumptions bifurcate humanity on the basis of race and determine our view of what/whom we study and how we study it/them—privileging the experiences of ‘superior’ peoples and their societies and institutions. These assumptions also lead us to privilege ethical orientations of the ‘superior’ peoples which justify their privileged status. In such a context, epistemological assumptions that reflect and reinforce the racist dualism are more likely to become ascendant, and ‘knowledge’ that supports the racist dichotomy—both the privileged position of the racial hegemon and the

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3 Research on the social construction of racial identity also falls within this category although its focus is on the role of the social rather than the physical environment in the construction of racial categories (for example, Winant 2001).

4 Exceptions include Vitalis (2000) and Henderson (1995; 2007)
underprivileged position of the racial subaltern—is more likely to be viewed as valid. Such knowledge drawn from the empirical domain becomes legitimized through ethical justifications that ‘naturalize’ the racial hierarchy. In this way, the separate dimensions often reinforce each other.

Whether or not the empirical, ethical and epistemological assumptions operate singly or in combination, it is important to demonstrate the role of these assumptions in IR theory today, especially given that mainstream IR also provides prominent critiques of racism. Ignoring these critiques would misrepresent the degree of racism in the field and disregard the challenge to racist discourse within IR from IR theorists themselves. For example, few IR scholars openly embrace a racist ontology that assumes for whites a higher order of being than for nonwhites. Moreover, racist ethical assumptions usually receive the opprobrium they deserve in present IR discourse. Racist epistemological assumptions are largely challenged by the prevalence in IR theory of the view that our ‘knowledge’ of world politics usually requires us to have something approximating evidence to determine the accuracy of rival truth claims. Finally, racist empirical assumptions are checked by the dominant view in IR that our theses should be broadly applicable across states and societies and should be substantiated by cross-national and cross-temporal tests. But the sanguine view of the propensity of IR literature to check racist assumptions, or to generate non-racist theoretical discourse for the field, begs a fuller exploration of how ethical, epistemological and empirical assumptions underlie prominent theses in IR. The main sources of these racist assumptions that inform our present IR discourse are the primary theoretical constructs of most IR theory: the state of nature, the social contract and the conception of anarchy that derives from them.

The racial contract as the basis of the social contract

International relations theory takes as its point of departure the state of nature and the social contract, given that these constructs reflect and inform IR scholars’ conceptions of anarchy, which is widely perceived as the key variable that differentiates international politics from domestic politics. Anarchy is ‘the Rosetta Stone of International Relations’ (Lipson 1984, 22) and provides the conceptual linchpin upon which the major paradigms of IR rest. Our conceptualization of anarchy in IR theory derives from the insights of social contract theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant, whose characterization of the state of nature, which is the hypothetical condition characterized by human interaction prior to the establishment of society, was adopted by IR theorists to conceptualize the global system. But Charles Mills (1997) insists that the social contract that is the focus of each of these theorists is embedded in a broader ‘racial contract’. Unlike

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5 There are exceptions: The Helsinki Sanomat international edition (12 August 2004) reports that Tatu Vanhanen, former professor of political science at the University of Tampere in Finland (and father of Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen), who studies the role of democratization among African states, caused a stir when he insinuated that evolution has made Europeans and North Americans more intelligent than Africans. He argued that African poverty is largely a result of the low IQ of Africans as compared with Europeans. Similar racist arguments are found in the strain of sociobiology and biopolitics that focuses on international affairs.
the social contract, which presumably proposes a singular homogeneous
humanity from which civil society will emerge, the racial contract established a
heterogeneous humanity hierarchically arranged and reflecting a fundamental
dualism demarcated by race. This racial dualism inherent in social contract theses
was passed on to the IR theory that drew from them; and it persists today in the
paradigms that rest on their assumptions.

For example, realism, the dominant paradigm in IR, roots its conception of
anarchy in the Hobbesian view of the state of nature. Hobbes’s state of nature is
depicted famously as a ‘warre of all against all’ wherein life is ‘nasty, brutish, and
short’. Mills argues that on one level Hobbes’s depiction may seem ‘non-racist’
and ‘equally applicable to everybody’; however, he asks us to consider Hobbes’s
view that ‘there was never such a time, nor condition of warre as this’, nor was this
condition ever the general state of humankind throughout the world (Mills 1997,
64–65). Nevertheless, Hobbes asserts that ‘there are many places, where they live
so now,’ for example ‘the savage people in many places of America’ (Mills 1997,
64–65). Mills finds Hobbes’s assertion ironic insofar as ‘a nonwhite people, indeed
the very nonwhite people upon whose land his fellow Europeans were then
encroaching, is his only real-life example of people in a state of nature’ (Mills 1997,
65). Hobbes continues that ‘“though there had never been any time, wherein
particular men were in a condition of warre one against another,” there is “in all
times” a state of “continuall jealousies” between kings and persons of sovereign
authority’. Mills challenges, ‘How could it simultaneously be the case that “there
had never been” any such literal state-of-nature war, when in the previous
paragraph he had just said that some were living like that now?’ (1997, 65).

Mills states that ‘this minor mystery can be cleared up once we recognize that
there is a tacit racial logic in the text: the literal state of nature is reserved for
nonwhites; for whites the state of nature is hypothetical’ (1997, 65–66). Herein lays
the dualism that Mills argues inheres in social contract theses: there is one set of
assumptions for whites and another for nonwhites. Mills asserts that for Hobbes

...to what might happen in the absence of a ruling sovereign. But
really we know that whites are too rational to allow this to happen to them. So the
most notorious state of nature in the contractarian literature—the bestial war of all
against all—is really a nonwhite figure, a racial object lesson for the more rational
whites, whose superior grasp of natural law (here in its prudential rather than
altruistic version) will enable them to take the necessary steps to avoid it and not to
behave as ‘savages’. (Mills 1997, 66)

Mills views Hobbes as a transitional figure ‘caught between feudal absolutism
and the rise of parliamentarianism, who uses the contract now classically
associated with the emergence of liberalism to defend absolutism’; but he
contends that Hobbes is transitional in another way given that ‘in mid-
seventeenth century Britain the imperial project was not yet so fully developed
that the intellectual apparatus of racial subordination had been completely
elaborated’ (1997, 66). In such a context, ‘Hobbes remains enough of a racial
egalitarian that, while singling out Native Americans for his real-life example, he
suggests that without a sovereign even Europeans could descend to their state, and
that the absolutist government appropriate for nonwhites could also be
appropriate for whites’ (1997, 66). For Mills, ‘the uproar that greeted his work can be seen as attributable at least in part to this moral/political suggestion. The spread of colonialism would consolidate an intellectual world in which this bestial state of nature would be reserved for nonwhite savages, to be despotic government, while civil Europeans would enjoy the benefits of liberal parliamentarianism. The Racial Contract began to rewrite the social contract’ (Mills 1997, 66–67, emphasis in original). Such an orientation would be more clearly articulated in the work of John Locke, which envisions a state of nature that stands in contrast to that of Hobbes and is, in fact, quite civil.

For Mills (1997, 67), Locke’s state of nature is ‘moralized’ and ‘normatively regulated by traditional (altruistic, nonprudential) natural law’ and is one in which both private property and money exist. He notes that ‘Locke famously argues that God gave the world “to the use of the Industrious and Rational,” which qualities were indicated by labor. So while industrious and rational Englishmen were toiling away at home, in America, by contrast, one found “wild woods and uncultivated wast[e] . . . left to Nature” by the idle Indians’ (1997, 67). Failing to add value to the land through ‘industrious and rational’ production, Native Americans secure only non-property rights to the land, ‘thereby rendering their territories normatively open for seizure once those who have long since left the state of nature (Europeans) encounter them’ (1997, 67). In this way, Locke provided a normative rationalization for ‘white civilization’s conquest of America’ as well as ‘other white settler states’ (1997, 67).

Locke’s dualism is applicable to slavery as well. Mills notes that ‘in the Second Treatise, Locke defends slavery resulting from a just war, for example, a defensive war against aggression’, but while ‘Locke explicitly opposes hereditary slavery and the enslavement of wives and children’, he ‘had investments in the slave-trading Royal Africa Company and earlier assisted in writing the slave constitution of Carolina’. Mills concludes that ‘one could argue that the Racial Contract manifests itself here in an astonishing inconsistency, which could be resolved by the supposition that Locke saw blacks as not fully human and thus as subject to a different set of normative rules. Or perhaps the same Lockean moral logic that covered Native Americans can be extended to blacks also. They weren’t appropriating their home continent of Africa; they’re not rational; they can be enslaved’ (1997, 67–68).

Turning to Rousseau, Mills asserts that his conceptualization seems even less racialized than Hobbes’s or Locke’s given that it is peopled by the ‘noble savage’. In Rousseau’s Discourse on inequality it seems clear that everyone regardless of race had been in the state of nature (and therefore, had been ‘savage’); nevertheless, Mills points out that ‘a careful reading of the text reveals, once again, crucial racial distinctions’. His main point is that ‘the only natural savages cited are nonwhite savages, examples of European savages being restricted to reports of feral children raised by wolves and bears, child-rearing practices (we are told) comparable to those of Hottentots and Caribs. (Europeans are so intrinsically civilized that it takes upbringing by animals to turn them into savages)’ (1997, 68). He adds that ‘for Europe, savagery is in the dim distant past’, since Europe had long since developed expertise in metallurgy and agriculture, which Rousseau argues gave rise to the advanced civilization of Europe over other regions. ‘But Rousseau’, Mills adds ‘was writing more than two hundred years after the European encounter with the great Aztec and Inca empires; wasn’t there at least a little
metallurgy and agriculture in evidence there? Apparently not: “Both metallurgy and agriculture were unknown to the savages of America, who have always therefore remained savages.” So even what might initially seem to be a more open environmental determinism, which would open the door to racial egalitarianism rather than racial hierarchy, degenerates into massive historical amnesia and factual misrepresentation, driven by the presupposition of the Racial Contract’ (1997, 69). Mills major point is that, ‘even if some of Rousseau’s nonwhite savages are “noble,” physically and psychologically healthier than the Europeans of the degraded and corrupt society produced by the real-life bogus contract, they are still savages. So they are primitive beings who are not actually part of civil society, barely raised above animals, without language’ (1997, 60). It is necessary to leave the state of nature in order to become ‘fully human moral agents, beings capable of justice’ (1997, 69). Therefore, Rousseau’s ‘praise for nonwhite savages is a limited paternalistic praise, tantamount to admiration for healthy animals, in no way to be taken to imply their equality, let alone superiority, to the civilized European of the ideal polity. The underlying racial dichotomization and hierarchy of civilized and savage remains quite clear’ (1997, 69).

The racist dualism of the theses of the social contract theorists informed IR discourse on anarchy, which drew on their conceptions of the state of nature. Mills contends that Kant’s conceptualization of the social contract is in some ways the best illustration of the racial contract and its centrality to social contract theses as they inform IR theory. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Eze, which traces the racist claims that are both implicit and explicit in Kant’s writings, he argues that the orthodox view of Kant as the faithful father of ethical philosophy is ‘radically misleading’, such that ‘the nature of Kantian “persons” and the Kantian “contract” must really be rethought’. This conceptualization subsumes his major theoretical arguments from his notions of the state of nature to his conception of ‘republican peace’, which is viewed widely as prefiguring the democratic peace thesis (1997, 70). For example, according to Kant, blacks are inferior to whites. He is clear that ‘so fundamental is the difference between these two races of man (whites and Negroes), and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color’ (Kant 1960, 111). For Kant ‘talent’ was an “essential,” natural ingredient for aptitude in higher rational and moral achievement and talent was unequally distributed across races, whites possessing the greatest ‘gift’ of talent and blacks largely lacking it (Eze 1995, 227). In his Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view, Kant argues that whites occupy the highest position in his ‘racial rational and moral order’, ‘followed by the “yellow,” the “black,” and then the “red”’ and this rank reflected their relative ‘capacity to realize reason and rational–moral perfectibility through education’ (Eze 1995, 218). Therefore, ‘it cannot … be argued that skin color for Kant was merely a physical characteristic’; it was rather ‘evidence of an unchanging and unchangeable moral quality’ (Eze 1995, 218–219). Mills (1997, 71) agrees that, ‘in complete opposition to the image of his work that has come down to us and is standardly taught in introductory ethics courses, full personhood for Kant is actually dependent on race’.

In Kant’s (1960, 113) Observations of the feeling of the beautiful and sublime, he affirms that ‘this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid’. He adds that ‘the Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling’ (Kant 1960, 110). For Kant they are incapable of achieving the level of rationality required of moral agents. Negroes ‘can be
educated but only as servants (slaves), that is they allow themselves to be trained’ (Eze 1995, 215). Such training does not require reason but only repetition. Cognitive inabilities of blacks require of their masters a stern disposition and informed instruction Kant does not hesitate to supply in providing guidance on the proper method of punishment for blacks: ‘Kant “advises us to use a split bamboo cane instead of a whip, so that the ‘negro’ will suffer a great deal of pains (because of the ‘negro’s’ thick skin, he would not be racked with sufficient agonies through a whip) but without dying.” To beat “the Negro” efficiently therefore requires “a cane but it has to be a split one, so that the cane will cause wounds large enough that prevent suppuration underneath the ‘negro’s’ thick skin”’ (Eze 1995, 215). Neugebauer (1990, 264) agrees that Kant’s advice to use a split bamboo cane instead of a whip was intended to ensure that the slave suffered—‘because of the “negro’s” thick skin, he would not be racked with sufficient agonies through a whip’—without actually dying. Only if the black person is not fully human can one reconcile this instruction with Kant’s imperative that we always treat humanity whether in our own person or that of any other, never simply as a means, but always as an end as well. Blacks do not meet the minimal requirements for moral agency and thus of personhood for Kant; personhood, for Kant, is circumscribed by his white supremacism.

Nevertheless, prominent democratic peace advocates such as Ray (1995, 3) insists that Kant provides ‘an important symbolic as well as substantive source of inspiration for advocates of the democratic peace proposition’. For Doyle (1997, 302), Kant’s thesis ‘lays a special claim to what world politics is and can be: a state of peace’, and it ‘claims a special property right in what shapes the politics of Liberal states—liberty and democracy’. Russett (1993, 4) is even more adoring of Kant’s ‘republican constitutionalism’, which he asserts is ‘compatible with basic contemporary understandings of democracy’. But Kant’s ethical and political theory is unequivocally racist: it excises whole swaths of humanity from its processes. The republicanism Kant espouses—in contrast to Russett’s claims—is quite a distance from democracy popularly conceived: it is a Herrenvolk democracy for whites that provides for ‘perpetual peace’. Mills explains that ‘the embarrassing fact for the white West (which doubtless explains its concealment) is that their most important moral theorist of the past three hundred years is also the foundational theorist in the modern period of the division between Herrenvolk and Untermenschen, persons and subpersons, upon which Nazi theory would later draw. Modern moral theory and modern racial theory have the same father’ (1997, 72, emphasis in original).

Mainstream IR theory, in general, and the democratic peace literature, in particular, are silent on this aspect of Kant’s writing and its implications for his ‘perpetual peace’. Similarly, constructivist arguments such as proffered by Wendt ignore this aspect of Kantian thought which should inform their understanding of a ‘Kantian’ state of nature that they insist is oriented towards amicable relations among states and peoples. Even realist counterarguments to the Kantian claims of liberal and constructivist neo-Kantians rarely evoke Kant’s racism as a factor undermining his thesis.

What should be clear is that the social contract theses that underlie prominent conceptions of the global anarchy in which world politics is situated for many realists, idealists/liberals, constructivists and some Marxists suggest a racist dualism that rests on a fundamental dichotomy with respect to the emergence of
society and, thus, the conduct of social affairs for whites, who are constructed as developmentally superior, and blacks, who are constructed as developmentally inferior. Having discussed briefly the racist dualism in prominent conceptions of the state of nature derived from Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Kant, in the next section I discuss how the racism that inheres in the social contract theses became central to the theses of IR theorists who drew on them to devise the paradigms that continue to orient the field.

Anarchy and world politics: the tropical roots of IR theory

A racist conceptualization of anarchy became the centrepiece of the major paradigms of world politics: realism and liberalism/idealism, and their recent offshoot, constructivism. Today, realism is the dominant paradigm in world politics; or, specifically, neorealism, which rests on Waltz’s revision of the traditional realism of Schuman and Morgenthau. Neorealism asserts that the international system is anarchic and that states are the dominant actors. The anarchic structure of the system mandates a self-help orientation among the states because absent an authority above them, individual states must ensure their own security. In such a system, security is the basic objective of states and power is essential to achieving state aims and resisting those of others. Realists argue that states seek to maximize their power to ensure their security; but the security dilemma ensures that, ironically, each state’s pursuit of its own security leads ultimately to its greater insecurity. Balance of power practices become essential in this conflict-laden global system in which power—especially military power—is the ultimate arbiter of conflicts of interest. Liberalism (or idealism)—the paradigmatic counterpoise of realism—is similarly grounded in a preoccupation with anarchy. Idealists accept the view that the global system is anarchic and that anarchy could lead to security dilemmas, balance of power politics, and interstate war, but, unlike realists, they do not accept that these are the inevitable outcomes of international interactions. Grounded in the Enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of the individual, they transferred their view of domestic politics to the international realm and argued that conflict and wars were largely a result of ‘bad’ institutions, such as autocratic regimes, and that by democratizing regimes, facilitating international commerce and encouraging international institutions, international cooperation would ensue. In this view, states are not destined to predation borne of anarchy, the persistent pursuit of power, and the security dilemma, as realists maintain. Instead, the spread of democracy, liberal international trade policies, and international law should allow states to overcome the security dilemma and cooperate with each other. Foreign policy is assumed to reflect domestic policy such that states that are peaceful domestically (for example, democracies) are more likely to be peaceful abroad and those that are more violent domestically (for example, autocracies) are more likely to be violent abroad.

One of the key idealists of the twentieth century, who is also viewed as one of the progenitors of the field of IR, was Woodrow Wilson (Ray 1995, 7). But the view that Wilson—especially Wilson of the post-1918 period—established IR is more received wisdom than actual fact, obfuscating less salutary but more significant factors leading to the field’s emergence. As noted above, at its birth IR was
concerned with issues of anarchy and power; however, this anarchy was largely assumed to inhere in the ‘primitive’ polities of the ‘inferior’ races—primarily in the tropical domains of what we’d now consider the ‘third world’. At the same time, the relevant power was that wielded by the ‘civilized’ white race through their ‘modern’ states. The mechanism of ‘efficient’ and ‘rational’ colonial administration, many early IR theorists maintained, could insure that ‘anarchy’ did not spread to the ‘modern’ world and lead to violence among the major (white) powers. So the concerns among realists and idealists with anarchy are grounded in a racist discourse that is concerned with the obligations of superior peoples to impose order on the anarchic domains of inferior peoples in order to prevent the chaos presumed to be endemic in the latter from spilling over into the former’s territories or self-proclaimed spheres of interest. Similarly, the realist and idealist concern with power was grounded in a racist discourse concerned largely with the power of whites to control the tropics, subjugate its people, steal its resources and superimpose themselves through colonial administration. Therefore, the roots of realism—the dominant paradigm in world politics—are grounded in a rationalization of the construction of a hierarchical racial order to be imposed upon the anarchy allegedly arising from the tropics, which begged for rational colonial administration from whites. It is little more than an intellectual justification for colonialism and imperialism in the guise of the ‘white man’s burden’. Also, the roots of idealism are found less in idealized versions of classical liberal precepts regarding the perfectibility of humanity, the primacy of ‘God-given’ individual rights, and the spread of democracy, free trade and the rule of law, than with the imposition of a white racist order on indigenous peoples throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Given the imperative for ‘progress’ and ‘development’ and the view that the unspoiled lands were not being sufficiently exploited by the indigenous peoples, realists and idealists agreed that the incentive for imperialist conquest could lead to conflict among whites; therefore, a rational distribution of territory and its appropriate administration by colonial agencies was necessary. Realists and idealists disagreed on the implications of the global system for the interaction of white peoples and their states and political institutions, but often they accepted or justified the subjugation of nonwhites by whites. In this way they found congruence in their policy recommendations for the domestic and international spheres at least in this regard: they supported white racial domination through racial discrimination against nonwhite minorities at home and white imperialism through racial domination of nonwhite polities abroad. Nowhere were these racist policies more evident than in Africa—and in the treatment of the racial minorities of the African diaspora in Western Europe and the Americas.

While realism and idealism converge on a white supremacist logic that has been evident since the establishment of the field of IR, I maintain that not only was this racism present at the creation of the field, but it continues to inform the major paradigms, primarily—though not uniquely—through their conceptions of anarchy. For example, Sampson (2002, 429) argues that ‘the discourse of international politics employs a particular conception of anarchy—tropical anarchy—that portrays the international system as “primitive”’. This ‘tropical anarchy’ the social contract theorists assumed was the primeval condition of nonwhite peoples, which Kidd (1898), among many others, rationalized as a basis for Western colonialism. The anarchical world—the state of nature—was the
preserve of non-Europeans, primitive peoples. Sampson views anarchy as a ‘trope’ more than a ‘natural state of affairs’; but he is clear that ‘while scholars may define anarchy variously, the primitive images that anarchy evokes remain constant’. Not only are the paradigmatic roots of IR theory saturated by the racist stream of tropical anarchy, but Sampson is even more explicit that ‘the foundation upon which much of the discipline rests is not anarchy but rather an image of primitive society popularized by British social anthropologists during the 1930s and 1940s’ (Sampson 2002, 429). For example, Sampson argues that Waltz’s thesis on system structure derives from an obsolete, anarchic and in many ways racist conceptualization of African primitive society by anthropologist SF Nadel. Sampson (2002, 444) does not argue that Waltz’s definition of system structure—so crucial to his rendering of ‘structural realism’—borrows from Nadel, ‘but the structure Waltz employs is Nadel’s’ (emphasis in original). Waltz analogizes Nadel’s view of the structure of African primitive societies to the global structure in which international politics takes place. He adds that Waltz ‘derived all three components of his theory of international politics (ordering principles, functional differentiation, and the distribution of material capabilities) from a theory of primitive society published by Nadel in 1957’ (2002, 430); and he documents Waltz’s allusions to Nadel in his Theory of international politics (1979) as well as in prior and subsequent works.

Sampson notes that ‘[p]rimitive societies have long intrigued theorists of international politics’ but ‘[n]one of these theorists, however, challenge the categorization of systems, societies, or peoples as primitive’ (2002, 431). While since the 1960s anthropologists have ‘questioned the ‘ambiguous and inconsistent’ notion of primitive society’, the field of IR ‘continues to recycle definitions constructed nearly a century before’ (2002, 431). He explains, ‘In early anthropology and social theory, primitive systems are portrayed as decentralized, disorganized, and anarchic; modern ones are centralized, well organized, and hierarchic. Primitive societies are simple, traditional, uncivilized, premodern, and functionally undifferentiated; they resemble nonvertebrates like “polyps” or; if they are slightly segmented, “earthworms.” Modern societies, on the other hand, are complex, advanced, civilized, and functionally differentiated; they have skeletons, central nervous systems, discrete organs, and heads with the capacity to think and act rationally (unlike primitive societies, where actions are products of passionate reflexes). Primitive peoples are described as devoid of individuality, remarkable only through their homogeneity’ (2002, 431).

For Sampson, there are several ‘dangers of employing claims about a supposedly primitive society to the foundation for analysis’ (2002, 429). First, ‘primitive systems and societies are inventions that no longer serve as valid categories of classification’ (2002, 429). Second, taking an explicit focus of social anthropology, the characteristics of ‘primitive African’ social systems, and transposing them ‘into an implicit theoretical assumption’ about the structure of the global system, ‘we prejudge the nature of international politics’ (2002, 429). Third, ‘using primitive society as the starting point for scholarship creates an inescapable logic that reduces possible policy responses to a simple choice: either maintain the primitive’s status quo or civilize the world’ (2002, 429). For Sampson, Waltz’s neorealism ‘selects the first option’, and Wendt’s social constructivism ‘chooses the second’ (2002, 429). He notes that, ‘[a]t first glance, one might find it ironic that a theory “necessarily based on the great powers” and “states that
make the most difference” owes its existence to anthropological fieldwork in Africa’ (2002, 430). Beyond irony, ‘Waltz’s appropriation of a theory originally intended to help colonial administrators control primitive African societies produces an image of international politics that privileges power over progress, equilibrium over change, and preventative measures over curative ones’ (2002, 430).

The neorealist conception of system structure is generally accepted by liberal theorists, who mainly differentiate among states—particularly democratic states, which they argue have assembled a separate peace among themselves, thus overcoming the Hobbesian anarchy and replacing it with a Kantian one. It also converges with the view of neoliberal institutionalists, who largely accept the realist version of homo politicus as an egoistic, rational, expected utility maximizer while retaining the liberal focus on interstate cooperation; however, in this conceptualization cooperation is contingent not on democracy but on the actions of state and non-state actors attempting to address recurring problems of market failure (Henderson 1999; 2002). International anarchy, sovereignty and self-help regularize the behaviour of states throughout the system, interstate cooperation emerging from a homogenization process, ironically, similar to that proposed by Waltz (1979, 73–77); but, in the liberal view, cooperation ensues from a reduction in transaction costs, decreased uncertainty and the formation of institutions to reward cooperation and punish noncooperation—international regimes. Importantly, (neo)realist and (neo)liberal arguments have as their point of departure the global anarchy of Waltz, which is the tropical anarchy of ‘primitive’ African social systems.

For social constructivists the convergence with Waltz’s system structure is even more apparent. The differentiation that Waltz fails to observe in world politics is captured in Wendt’s distinction among Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian international systems. Wendt views the essential relationships among sovereigns in a Hobbesian anarchy as one of enemies, while in a Lockean anarchy it is one of rivals, and, lastly, in a Kantian anarchy it is one of friends. His most culturally evolved system, the Kantian, is one shared primarily by the Western powers, while others exist within Lockean and Hobbesian contexts. This means that only the Western states could be entrusted to transfer to the third world the requisites for a higher level of social evolution to elevate them out of their lower condition. Therefore, ‘the “burden” of structural transformation, the responsibility of “teaching” the rest of the world how to evolve, falls squarely on the shoulders of great powers. Less powerful states have little or no hope of transforming the international system on their own’ (Sampson 2002, 449). Sampson characterizes Wendt’s ‘social theory of international relations’ as ‘remarkably un-international’. He states that while Wendt chastises Waltz’s study for lacking a reference to ‘role’ in its index, Sampson counters that, ‘discounting Montezuma and the Aztecs, one might say the same of Wendt’s social theory for the entire “Third World”’ (Sampson 2002, 448–449). He adds that ‘Wendt’s text is largely an attempt to explain how Europe and the United States pulled themselves out of “nature’s realm.” It tells us how NATO and Europe evolved into complex social kinds through a process

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6 See Vitalis (2000) for a critique of racist conceptions in popular liberal academic arguments on the evolution of Western ‘humanitarian’ norms.
dubbed “cultural selection”. There is no mention of non-Western social kinds. It is not even clear whether African or Asian states could “evolve” without the help of bigger, more powerful “benefactors”” (Sampson 2002, 449).

Sampson notes that, counter to the title of Wendt’s most popular article, ‘anarchy is only what some states make of it’. In fact it is as constrained by the logic of tropical anarchy as is Waltz’s; only that where Waltz rationalizes the stasis of the status quo equilibrium (the balance of power, or, by analogy, the maintenance of Western power in the colonies), Wendt rationalizes the transformation of the status quo within limits governed by the status quo powers (Kantian social evolution, or, by analogy, the establishment of colonial administration in the colonies as a function of the ‘white man’s burden’ or mission civilisatrice). He concludes that ‘by arguing that “anarchy is what states make of it,” Wendt suggests that powerful, civilized states have the capacity to lift weaker, primitive states out of the heart of darkness and into the light of democratic peace. Thus superpowers like the United States should shoulder the global burden of civilizing international society. This reverses Waltz’s conclusions. Waltz seeks system maintenance and equilibrium. Wendt seeks transformation. Waltz privileges power over progress. Wendt suggests the opposite’ (Sampson 2002, 450). Waltz’s framework resurrects anthropology’s misrepresentation of African political systems of the 1950s and Wendt reproduces anthropological debates of the 1930s and 1940s (Sampson 2002, 451). Both paradigms converge on a notion of tropical anarchy which reinforces a racist dualism in world politics that is manifest, in turn, in prominent theses that derive from these paradigms.

Summary

Thus, it is not difficult to trace the historical and contemporary role and impact of racism in IR theory. Racism has not only informed the paradigms of world politics; it was fundamental to the conceptualization of its key theoretical touchstone: anarchy. The social contract theorists rooted their conceptualizations of the state of nature in a broader ‘racial contract’ that dichotomized humanity racially and established a white supremacist hierarchy in their foundational conceptions of society. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century IR theorists built on this racist dualism as they constructed their conception of a global anarchy and the role of ‘civilized’ whites in providing, maintaining and ensuring order within it by means of a system of international power relations among whites—or, at minimum, dominated by whites; and a system of colonial subjugation for nonwhites—or those nonwhites who failed to successfully resist their domination militarily. The impact and role of racism are manifest through the major paradigms operative today—realism, neorealism, liberalism/idealism and constructivism, mainly through their continued reliance on a racist conception of anarchy; and in the case of neorealism through its grounding in African primitivism, and in the case of Marxism in its reliance on and normalizing of a Eurocentric teleology of economic development for the world.

To be sure, the dualism at the broad theoretical level of paradigms underscores, guides and informs the more specific dichotomies at the level of theories, models and theses that are derived from these paradigms—and especially those that are applied to Africa’s political processes—and to other regions as well. In the case of
African international relations, they both contextualize and rationalize a black African primitivism juxtaposed to a white Western progressivism, a black African peculiar savagery and a white Western universalist humanity, resulting in an enduring African tribal/ethnic warfare frame of reference contrasted to an evolved Western democratic peace; in each case a static ossified ahistorical permanence contrasted to a dynamic evolving transcendence. One result is that one must endure what are considered to be ‘meaningful’ or ‘appropriate’ or even ‘incisive’ or ‘cutting-edge’ discussions of Africa’s domestic and international politics that have as their point of departure loose and often obtuse references to ‘hearts of darkness’, ‘greed versus grievance’, ‘tribal warfare’, ‘warlordism’, ‘frontiersmen’ and a litany of other metaphors that would not pass the editor’s desk at most top-tier academic journals as legitimate lenses through which to observe and examine contemporary armed conflicts in the Western world. Notably, rarely do those same journals publish work on the historical and enduring racism embedded in the major paradigms of world politics, or discuss the implications of such a condition if it is shown to obtain.

In fact, the ‘norm against noticing’ white racism is so intense that it engenders a ‘silencing’ of those who would raise it; or it ensures against publication in mainstream outlets for such work except that authors provide appropriate euphemisms for the atrocities associated with white racism—especially against blacks—or they provide the requisite ‘balance’ to emphasize the role of nonwhites in their own subjugation—as if white supremacism and the imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism and internal colonialism that it has employed against Africans, Asians, and Native Americans are somehow the responsibility of groups other than the whites who created, maintained and continue to profit from them. Thus, the racist dualism in world politics creates, in turn, a dual quandary for IR scholars and many Africanists seeking to publish in Western journals—and many non-Western ones, too—wherein white racist expectations of the appropriateness of certain lines of inquiry often limit the discourse of African politics to hollow phraseology and meaningless metaphors, while they simultaneously check informed challenges to historical and contemporary expressions, practices and institutions of white racism in academia by ensuring that such racism is rarely confronted in the major publications in IR/world politics in clear and direct terms.

Another result is that the norm against noticing white racism leaves IR scholars teaching a history of the development of IR which ignores the salience of colonialism as central to the origins of the field. That is, in continuing to teach the fiction that the field emerged following the devastation of World War I as ‘idealists’ led by Wilson and others such as Lowes Dickinson, Zimmern, Giddings and Kerr sought to provide the institutional checks on the realpolitik that was implicated in the ‘war to end all wars’, we belie the reality of the centrality of colonialism, race development and white racial supremacy to the development of the academic field of IR. Thus, our narrative creates an academic fiction that hovers outside of its own history. The presence of this narrative is a testament to the white supremacism that is a centrepiece of the field given its role in ensuring a ‘norm against noticing’ the centrality of white racism in world politics. It simultaneously silences or marginalizes perspectives that focus on the importance of white racism in the development of the field of IR/world politics, and similarly, those who would raise this as a legitimate research focus for the most sensible of reasons: it happens to be true.
Conclusion

In this article, I’ve attempted to address the centrality of racism in IR theory. I examined the extent to which realism, liberalism and constructivism are oriented by racist precepts grounded in the intellectual foundation of IR. Specifically, a racist dualism inheres within the assumptions informing the foundational construct of IR: namely, anarchy; and due to the centrality of this construct within prominent theses that draw on it, racist precepts have an enduring impact on IR theory today. In sum, a racist latticework undergirds major theoretical frameworks that inform research and policy in IR. Theses that rest on racist claims are not simply odious; they are untethered to the reality (world politics itself) that they purport to explain. Vitalis (2000) is correct that there is a ‘norm against noticing’ white supremacism in mainstream IR discourse. The failure to address it leaves IR analysts ill equipped to address accurately the intellectual history of IR, the theoretical development of the field and the prospects for theory-building in IR that will generate meaningful research and policy for the vast majority of the world’s people.

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