Critical Theories of Race and Racism in World Perspective

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Race equality law in the West arises from a political contradiction. Western nations have been influenced by, and sometimes founded on, race as a grammar of governance, and race remains a powerful folk category that makes sense of group differences and organizes difference into social and political hierarchies. At the same time, every Western nation has formally renounced race as a grammar of governance and prohibited racist behavior as a matter of civil and/or criminal law.

In this introductory essay, I explore two dimensions of this fundamental contradiction: the social and the legal. At the social level, race and racism are “essentially contested” concepts, to the point that there is widespread disagreement even as to the definition of these terms. Meanwhile, however, evidence suggests that race and racism continue to pervade societies around the world despite the simultaneous vigorous denunciation of these concepts. The law reflects the contradiction as well. Because race and racism have played, and continue to play, such a pivotal role in law, policy, and social stratification, law’s commitment to racial equality is conflicted and ambiguous. As critical race theorists have argued, laws prohibiting racial discrimination or mandating racial equality often have the unexpected effect of preserving racial hierarchy.

I. Defining race and racism
Race and racism are “essentially contested” concepts for at least two reasons. First, racism is a “scavenger ideology,” which varies according to historical and sociopolitical conditions. Race began as a justification for certain kinds of economic exploitation and political domination, and thus from the very beginning it became entangled with class, nation, gender, and religion. Although certain commonalities persist, racism can manifest in various ways depending on the time, place, and social context. Second, race is a social construction whose foundations have been morally repudiated, yet which continues to carry a great deal of political and social power as a “folk category,” in part precisely because race is so deeply imbricated with other dimensions of inequality and difference. The moral stain of race creates an incentive to deny racism when it appears.

One of the persistent difficulties in exploring race and racism, and crafting anti-racist law and politics, is the protean nature of race and racism. Some scholars speak of racisms in the plural rather than the singular, recognizing that racism takes many forms depending on its spatial and temporal context. Race as a marker of human difference has close relationships to similar concepts such as “nation” and “civilization” which developed around the same time in Western history. In some times and places, race has been closely linked to religion, as in anti-Semitism and anti-Islam. As will be explored in more detail below, the idea of race also conflates physical and cultural difference, making possible some versions of racism based on pseudo-science and others based on nativism and xenophobia.
Another factor contributing to the plurality of racism is the fact that racial difference is historically and politically produced. For example, the English treated the Irish as an inferior “race” for a time, but today the difference between the English and the Irish is understood as a “national” or “ethnic” difference rather than a racial one. The apartheid regime of South Africa recognized the racial category “Coloured,” but a South African Coloured person in the United States might be considered “Black” or “Asian.” Within United States history, a number of immigrant groups, including Italians and Jews once were considered “not quite white” but today are considered “White.”

Some scholars use the verb “to racialize” rather than the noun “race,” in recognition of the plurality of racism and the changing composition of the groups that are considered races. Use of the verb form underscores the recognition that race is a social construction rather than a biological fact, a point further developed below.

A second reason why race and racism are “essentially contested” concepts is that, unlike gender, the conceptual foundations of racial difference have been morally repudiated. In the nineteenth century, at the height of race theory’s popularity, racial difference was considered to be rooted in biology. Humankind was naturally divided into “races” similar to animal species, and efforts were made to demonstrate the biological bases of these divisions. [Stephen Jay Gould] Scientific racism, however, was subsequently debunked by social scientists such as Franz Boas who argued that racial difference was purely an ideological construction with no basis in biology.
Perhaps the most important reason for the repudiation of race around the world, however, is the adoption of racial ideology by Nazi Germany, which offered the pursuit of “Aryan” purity and supremacy as justification for the attempted genocide of Roma and Jews by the Nazi state. Following World War II and the Nuremberg trials, which exposed the evils of the Nazi regime to the world, international opinion turned decisively against race and racism. Indeed, UNESCO and other international bodies issued statements formally denouncing scientific racism and declaring biological “race” to be a myth. The dismantling of colonial empires around the globe that followed World War II strengthened anti-racism, as theories of racial inferiority had been widely used to justify European colonialism and imperialism in Asia and Africa.

Finally, the “Jim Crow” regime in the United States and the apartheid regime in South Africa -- the last nation-state to openly retain racial ideology as a central mode of governance -- experienced spectacular political upheavals that received worldwide attention and contributed to the moral case against race and racism. Racial segregation in the United States was formally ended after a period of intense political upheaval known as the “civil rights movement” in the 1960s. Part of the impetus for this repudiation of racial segregation in the US was the Cold War competition between the US and the USSR, in which the US sought to portray democracy, freedom, and equality as its core ideological values. [Dudziak] The South African apartheid regime was overthrown in 1989 after a similarly violent and protracted political struggle. Both the United States and the South African racial regimes drew international attention and condemnation because of their violence and their reliance on what was now seen as a false and
morally pernicious ideology. The overthrow of these regimes in the name of democracy strengthened the international consensus against racism.

Given the essentially contested nature of race and racism, no definition of either term has been universally accepted. For the purpose of this essay, I offer the following account. A racist belief or practice is one that treats humans (with or without conscious animus or intent) as divided into immutable groups, maintained by reproduction and distinguished by physical, mental, and/or moral characteristics that affect their capacity to be governed. In racist discourse, immutable group differences are identified along two dimensions, one focused on inherent bodily difference and the other on inherent social difference. Some iterations of racism stress one dimension, some the other, and some have elements of both.

The dimension of bodily difference identifies physical markers of racial difference; primary among these is usually skin color, although other aspects of physiognomy such as hair texture and eye and nose shape may be recruited. The emphasis is on the visibility of racial difference. At the same time, race is conceived of as an “invisible” difference affecting the interior of the body and the psyche. [Wiegman] Thus racial difference is often understood to be carried in the “blood.” The notion that racial difference is carried in the body typically produces emotional and visceral reactions of attraction and disgust. Those who are racially “other” to oneself are said to smell bad; the idea of sexual relations with a racial other may be considered particularly exciting or particularly repugnant. The idea of race as carried by blood also links to the idea of ancestral memory. Thus, even “civilized-appearing” native or Black people are
thought to have the tendency to “revert” to savage behavior, given the right environmental cues.

The imagery of race and nation commonly interact through this perception of bodily difference. Because the nation is popularly imagined as a body, racial “others” may be viewed as foreign bodies – as disease agents endangering the health of the national body, or as “undigestable” elements disturbing the harmonious unity of the national body.

The instability of racial difference along the visibility/invisibility dimension often generates anxiety, especially in times and places where racial difference is especially socially and/or politically salient. The Nazi regime required Jews to wear yellow stars to magnify their visibility, despite the ideology that Jews had a distinctively visible physiognomy. A staple of American romance literature in the nineteenth century was the drama of “passing,” involving a person who appeared to be White but who was “really” Black.

The second dimension along which racial difference is manifested involves social relations rather than the body, and focuses on governance. Racial groups are characteristically organized according to evolutionary principles. Scientific racism places the “lower” races closer to the animals. Even outside scientific discourse, “dehumanization” is a popular method of asserting racial difference: the disfavored racial group is likened to animals. A common racist trope is the belief that Black Africans, for example, are closely related to apes. Even more common today, however, is a cultural evolutionary hierarchy from “savagery” to “civilization.” Within this discursive framework, some groups of humans are “backward” and others are “advanced.” The more advanced, “civilized” groups have the ability, and sometimes the moral
mandate, to govern the more backward groups, to help them “develop” and to rescue the more vulnerable among them, such as women and children. In addition, the groups that are considered “uncivilized” are likely to be suspected of crime and terrorism in the public arena, and practices of cruelty or ignorance in the home. It is said that these groups have barbaric “customs” or “cultures” that determine their behavior, and they must be disciplined or educated in order to be properly assimilated to the dominant culture.

Another variant of this social manifestation of racial difference denies the existence of a hierarchy and simply posits the existence of unbridgeable cultural gulfs between human groups. For example, the discourse of Orientalism [Said] perceives a gap between the “Eastern” mentality and the “Western” mentality. The Oriental and the Occidental cannot understand one another and cannot be governed by the same principles or institutions. No claim is necessarily made, however, about superiority or inferiority; only inherent difference is insisted upon. In some versions of racism, the racially “other” group may even be admired. For example, in the United States a common belief among Whites and Blacks is that “Asians” are naturally intelligent in a technical way; they make good engineers and computer scientists, and they are hard-working and obedient, although they lack creativity and passion.

Racism, as the assumption of inherent differences that affect the governability of human groups, requires political action. Indeed, as will be explored below, racism as a belief system emerged historically from politics, and is sustained by political and economic institutions and practices. The invocation of racial difference generally justifies one or more of a short list of
political-economic projects: extermination (genocide), exclusion (from legal or social citizenship, or geographic exclusion as in campaigns against illegal immigration), economic exploitation (as in Atlantic slavery, imperialism, and South African apartheid), and/or discipline and control in the name of assimilation or “development” (the so-called “civilizing mission” undertaken by the British and French empires in the colonies; the “separate development” projects undertaken in the southern United States and in South Africa – and, some would argue, the “good governance” project taken on by the IMF and World Bank). Moreover, action may be taken to preserve racial difference itself. South Africa and the United States, for example, developed elaborate legal and social rules preventing marriage and other forms of social interaction across racial lines. The South African state famously classified all its citizens by race and required them to carry documents with their legal racial designations at all times, as well as requiring people to live in areas designated by race.

II. A common history

Race and racism may be difficult to define, but their provenance is clear. Although xenophobia appears to be innate among humans, racism as we have defined it arose in a specific time and place -- Europe in the early sixteenth century -- and scientific racism reached its zenith in the late nineteenth century in the Americas, the United Kingdom, and Europe. Racism did not emerge as a purely academic theory; it served as a justification for European colonialism and imperialism generally, and in particular as a justification for Atlantic slavery. As George Frederickson has observed, the practices of native genocide, imperialism, and chattel slavery
needed special justification precisely because the European societies that adopted them saw themselves as Christians who believed in universal human equality under God. [Frederickson] Theories of racism explained why it was permissible to kill, enslave, and subjugate entire groups of people, to displace them from their lands, and/or to destroy their ways of living. If God, or Nature, had made certain human groups inherently unequal, then political inequality was no crime; indeed, political inequality was wise governance. In this way, race and racism began as grammars of governance.

Three large-scale political projects associated with global European domination shaped the course of race and racism in particular. One of these was settler colonialism. In North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand, Europeans displaced native populations and settled in large numbers. The indigenous peoples in these areas suffered dramatic population losses through economic marginalization, war, and disease, and became minorities in their own lands. Racism in these settler societies was primarily manifested through attempted (sometimes successful) genocide, and later through attempts at forced assimilation, which might be seen as cultural genocide. Native populations were viewed as “savages” who either were destined to die out, be killed as vermin, or who needed to abandon their original identities and merge into the dominant population in order to become “civilized.”

A second large-scale political project that shaped the course of race and racism was imperialism. In Africa and Asia, Europeans did not supplant native populations, but established political and economic control over them, imposing a global economy based on resource
extraction over the indigenous economies. Racism in these areas was primarily manifested through exclusion: the European bearers of empire imposed on the much larger native populations spatial segregation and various methods of political domination as well as labor and resource exploitation. Again, a belief in the natives’ inherent mental and moral inferiority and their inability to be self-governing citizens justified these forms of subjugation.

The third large-scale political project that shaped the course of race and racism was Atlantic slavery. The “triangle trade” between Africa, the Americas, and Europe established substantial populations of African descent in the Americas. In North America and the Caribbean, European and African intermarriage was vigorously and for the most part successfully discouraged. In South America, substantial levels of intermarriage took place, creating populations of mixed European and African descent. In North America, as European colonists gained independence from the European metropole, they adopted “White” national identities. In South America, the newly independent states went in different directions. Some South American nations, like Argentina, saw themselves as “White.” Others, most notably Brazil, came to see themselves as “racial democracies” with a mixed heritage. Finally, Haiti is unique as the first “Black” nation in the New World, established after a successful slave revolt. Racism in the Americas against African American populations largely took the form of exploitation, exclusion and assimilation, with North America tending to eschew assimilation and South America willing to tolerate or even promote it. An unintended consequence of Atlantic slavery was the emergence of a new “Black” identity in the Americas, particularly in the United States and the Caribbean. These populations would later seek to establish “pan-African” alliances with decolonized
African states.

In all of these countries, “Whiteness” as a racial designation stood for European descent and supremacy over indigenous people and captive populations. Whiteness as a national racial designation also signified membership in the “Family of Nations,” the powerful nation-states with global hegemony. In contrast, “Blackness” stood for backwardness and “Indianness” (indigenous populations in the Americas were widely referred to as “Indians” because of early European explorers’ belief upon reaching the Americas that they had reached India), savagery. While some nations sought to isolate and subjugate their Black populations and others to assimilate them through intermarriage (Puerto Rico, for example, adopted a national “whitening” project, Mexicans celebrated their “mestizo” identity, and Brazilians praised what they called their “racial democracy”), white supremacy was the unquestioned norm.

Colonialism and imperialism together produced an unintended consequence: the migration of non-White populations back to the European metropole, or into the newly independent European colonies in the Americas. Some White nations, such as France, accepted non-White migrants as citizens as long as they had sufficiently assimilated, particularly by mastering French language and high culture. Other nations, such as the United States, adopted immigration policies excluding non-Whites from citizenship. In any event, back-migration deepened the intertwining of race and nation.

From this brief history it is also plain that race and class relations are inseparable. Because economic exploitation was the whole point of imperialism and chattel slavery, racial
difference had a class dimension from the beginning: European populations exploited non-
European populations and justified this in terms of “race,” deliberately conflating political
economy with nature. As time went on, economic practices and institutions deepened and
magnified racial inequality, reproducing class divisions. The displacement of native economies
by White settler economies similarly had the overall effect of impoverishing indigenous peoples
while enriching the settlers, intensifying the relationship between race and class. To this day, the
richest nations tend to be those that identify as “White,” whereas the poorest populations are
“Black” nations and “Indian” populations engulfed by white settler societies.

At the same time, race and class are not synonymous. The Black American intellectual
W.E.B. DuBois noted that exploited White workers in the United States received the “wages of
whiteness”: their ability to feel superior to Blacks on racial grounds kept them from making
common cause with exploited Black workers, with the ultimate benefit redounding to the owners
of the means of production. Variants of this “divide and conquer” strategy have appeared in
different places and times around the globe. There have also always been individual non-Whites
who have achieved economic success, and some countries, such as the United States and Canada,
have produced a substantial Black “middle class.” Nevertheless, even such middle classes
generally are less wealthy than their White counterparts [Oliver and Shapiro].

III. Race and racism as a (denied) grammar of governance outside the state
Today, the horrors of the Nazi regime, of South African apartheid, of Atlantic slavery, of indigenous genocide, and of American segregation have sedimented world opinion that race and racism are concepts that not only rest on shaky intellectual foundations, but carry a charge of moral evil. In part because of the disreputable nature of racist ideology today, racist ideas, practices, and images are only sporadically defended by elites. More commonly, explicit racism survives as a populist ideology rather than an elite one. Implicit racism survives as “common sense,” or under the cover of less stigmatized marks of difference. Both in its explicit and implicit forms, racism is generally denied at the same time that it is employed.

Race and racism survive not only for psychological and sociological reasons, but because they continue to serve the function for which they were originally invented: justifying complex systems of economic exploitation and political domination. For instance, the intensive resource extraction and political imperialism in the colonial period left the nations of the global South poor and politically disorganized following decolonization. The technological and financial developments known as “globalization” have fostered migration of people from the poorer countries to the richer countries of the global North. These immigrants tend to be darker-skinned, to practice unfamiliar religions and customs, and to speak a different language than the population in the receiving country as well as having comparatively little wealth or political power. The stage is set for xenophobic alarm about “those people” invading “our” country, and the language of race is ready to hand. Similarly, at the elite level, the racist language of civilization and savagery readily justifies the imposition of legal and social norms and economic institutions and practices upon countries in the global South.
Race and racism are also difficult to eliminate because they are tightly interwoven with gender and sexuality. Racial identity is understood to be carried in the body and reproduced naturally through sexual relations. Specific racial identities may be “gendered:” in the United States, for example, the racial designation “Asian” is associated with femininity, whereas the racial designation “Black” is associated with masculinity. Asian women, therefore, are understood within racist discourse as unusually sexually desirable, as are Black men. This perception of Black men as hyper-masculine has prompted sexual anxiety among White men and contributed to White racial and sexual violence against Black men in particular, as in the “lynching” phenomenon in the post-Civil War American South and West. Another way in which race and racism are tightly interwoven with gender and sexuality concerns the international trade in women’s labor, including sex and care work. The income differential between the richer countries of the North and the poorer countries of the South has produced an underclass of women who perform traditionally gendered work such as providing sexual services to men, taking care of children, cleaning houses, and painting nails. In some cases these women are immigrants to the North; in other cases they are natives, and the residents of the global North are “sex tourists” or travelers in the South. In either case, because these women may have darker skin, speak a different language, follow unfamiliar cultural traditions, and/or practice a different religion than those for whom they provide services, the stage is set for justifying the dramatically unequal terms of these economic exchanges with familiar racist explanations: “they are naturally hot-blooded,” “their culture makes them good servants,” or even “their small and nimble fingers makes them ideally suited for unskilled, repetitive labor.”
A third example of the continuing usefulness of race and racism as ideologies is their ready adaptation to problems involving both public and private norm violation. It is common for a country’s racialized minorities to be identified as lawbreakers and as those at risk for forms of social dysfunction such as substance abuse and child maltreatment. In part the association stems from the intertwining of race and class; poor and desperate people may well resort to street crime and substance abuse at a disproportionate rate, and race serves as a story that preserves the legitimacy of economic inequality. At times, however, racial discrimination itself contributes to further racial inequality. In the US, for instance, African Americans are disproportionately likely to be disciplined in school, to be arrested, and to be sentenced to death for their crimes despite no meaningful difference from whites in the rates of infractions.

Ironically, moreover, the moral scandal of racism can act as a barrier against effective anti-racist policy. Because being called a racist is such an insult in most circles today, many people espousing racist beliefs and practices go out of their way to deny the charge, and the conflict devolves into an argument about whether the very accusation of racism is itself racist. A second social effect of the moral stain now carried by the accusation of racism is that racist beliefs are often unconsciously rather than consciously held. The cognitive science literature of “implicit bias” demonstrates a gap between the racial beliefs people admit to having and the beliefs that structure their perceptions and actions. A similar problem is called “white privilege” in the US: members of the dominant ethnic and racialized group seldom notice racial discrimination, although they are beneficiaries of it. They are thus encouraged to deny any
systemic injustice and to blame racialized minorities themselves for their failures, which in turn perpetuates racist beliefs.

A third social effect of the contradiction between the official repudiation of race and the persistence of racism is an unproductive -- because intractable – controversy about what racism “really” is. For example, a long-standing debate concerns whether racism must involve an individual’s conscious belief that some races are superior to others, or whether there can be such a thing as “unconscious” or “institutional” racism. In a related debate, some try to reduce racism to individual animus or hatred for people considered racially other to oneself; under this definition, people who simply prefer the company of people of their “own” race, or those who dispassionately believe that certain races have admirable (or despicable) qualities, are not racist. Another persistent contemporary controversy is whether subordination or prejudice on the basis of “culture” counts as racism, or whether to be racist one must affirm scientific racism. Although these questions are philosophically interesting, they often distract attention from the policy goal of reducing discrimination and fostering individual and group dignity.

Finally, explicit racism remains a viable strategy for individuals and groups identified with far-right political views. These individuals and groups can paint themselves as speaking a hard but necessary truth that others are too “politically incorrect” to articulate. Anxious and socio-economically insecure citizens periodically rally around calls for extirpating immigrants and imposing “law and order” in the name of “saving” their civilization, their country, or their neighborhood, and in these political mobilizations open racism is common, though controversial.
IV. Race and racism as a (denied) grammar of governance within the state

Today, racial equality is a globally-accepted legal norm, as exemplified by the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the European Racial Equality Directive. In addition to these international legal norms, domestic law in every country of the global North prohibits racial discrimination. These provisions reflect a worldwide consensus that race has no scientific basis and racism is morally wrong.

Nevertheless, the law of racial equality reflects the fundamental contradictions of race we have explored. One aspect of equality law’s dilemma is historical: many of the nations that now prohibit and punish racist practices once embraced and incorporated openly racist laws and policies. A second source of the dilemma of equality law is the social contradiction we have already noted: race and racism are simultaneously morally scandalous and politically and socially potent means of justifying inequality. Finally, although equality often calls for a substantial redistribution of economic and political power, a central function of state law is to preserve and legitimate the political, economic, and social status quo. For all these reasons, law’s relationship to racial domination is ambivalent at best.

This collection of articles and essays explores three aspects of this ambivalence. First, both international and domestic law in many countries reflect a rift between principles and
policies of “equality” and principles and policies of “sovereignty.” Thus, although racism shaped the relationship between indigenous peoples and Anglo-European settlers as well as the relationship between those settlers and peoples exploited for their labor, controversies over returning land and political and economic power to indigenous peoples are typically not understood as “equality” issues or as having any connection to racism. From the other direction, the law of anti-discrimination and racial equality is typically devoted only to ensuring equal treatment within a given region or nation-state, and does not grant the right to “peoplehood” or sovereignty to racialized minorities, who are expected to assimilate into the dominant society. As the case of Brazil suggests, this dichotomy between equality and sovereignty does not always line up with social and political demands.

Second, equality and anti-discrimination law is haunted by the problem of denial. The problem of denial has a great many effects on law and policy. First, in some countries, racism has such a moral taint that the very use of racial categories is prohibited. Given the persistence of race as a folk category and the continuing potency of racism, this prohibition has the perverse effect of allowing racism to persist unchallenged. US critical scholars have named this phenomenon “colorblindness.” A similar limitation of race equality law appears when the law defines racism in terms of conscious animus or hatred. The flaw here is that unconscious or “common sense” racism is not defined as racism at all and thus goes unchallenged. A second, related problem is the gap between “formal” and “substantive” equality frequently made possible by anti-discrimination law itself. For instance, due to the “public/private distinction” observed in both common law and civil law systems, equality law typically has little power to accomplish
economic redistribution or to influence private mechanisms of social stratification such as housing patterns and sexual and family relations. Equality law may also have limited ability to intervene in employment and educational practices. These limitations may produce a dramatic difference between the law, which proclaims complete “formal” racial equality, and the reality of persistent “substantive” inequality.

A third legal effect of denial is that state policies may adopt practices and targets that are not officially acknowledged as racialized, yet that are understood in the general population (and sometimes politicians) as directed toward minorities. For instance, the law may regulate cultural practices in lieu of regulating groups by racial category. Examples are France’s prohibition on head scarves and European attempts to regulate the travels of Roma people. Similarly, through international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, countries of the North have often energetically imposed economic and political regulations on countries of the South in the name of “development,” “good governance,” and similar concepts. Defenders of these laws and policies typically deny any racist intent or effect. However, the popular understanding of these rules reinforces racist beliefs about the inferiority of the peoples being regulated, and the material effects of these policies may be an intensification of immiseration and inequality. Similarly, equality and anti-discrimination law may powerfully reject racism, while criminal and immigration law simultaneously target racialized minorities for surveillance, investigation, punishment, and control. The result is an intensification of stereotypes that mark racialized bodies as criminal and/or as foreign invaders, and racially disproportionate levels of incarceration.
Fourth, and finally, equality and anti-discrimination law must struggle with the inherent risk of promoting the very racial divisions it seeks to abolish. Critics of affirmative action policies typically argue that quotas and other practices that seek to increase the inclusion of racialized minorities in important market and state institutions have the perverse effect of maintaining a racial “spoils system” that encourages racial balkanization. The response is that over the long term, the equality of representation that affirmative action seeks to bring about will make racial categories less potent as folk categories. If the underlying inequalities have disappeared, the need to use race as an explanation and justification for them will similarly disappear. In the short term, however, “color-conscious” state policies must acknowledge and thus reinforce racial categories while simultaneously looking forward to their extinction.

V. Conclusion

The articles and essays in this volume are diagnostic in nature: they help the reader identify and plumb the contradictions of race and racism in the contemporary era. [add]

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4. Donna Gitter, French Criminalization of Racial Employment Discrimination Compared to the Imposition of Civil Penalties in the United States (have on Hein online)


