



The Centrality of Race to Inequality Across the World-System

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“While the gap between rich and poor nations—as well as between the rich and the poor—is widening everywhere, global wealth is concentrating in fewer hands, and these few include those of subaltern elites. In this reconfigured global landscape, the “rich” cannot be identified exclusively with metropolitan nations; nor can the “poor” be identified exclusively with the Third and Second Worlds. The closer worldwide interconnection of ruling sectors and the marginalization of subordinate majorities has undermined the cohesiveness of these geopolitical units. [...] The social tensions resulting from these processes often lead to a racialization of social conflict and the rise of ethnicities” (Coronil 2000: 361).

“Some groups can be mobile in the ranking system; some groups can disappear or combine with others; while others break apart and new ones are born. But there are always some who are “niggers.” If there are no Blacks or too few to play the role, one can invent “white niggers.”” (Wallerstein 2000: 350).



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The starting point of Wilma Dunaway and Don Clelland's article is the observation that "more of the share of the world wealth that once accumulated in the core and in the European semiperiphery is now being appropriated by nonwestern semiperipheries" (2017: 11). The article offers a wealth of much-needed empirical evidence against the recurrent catching-up development rhetoric that World Bank reports often derive from undifferentiated data on population size and economic growth in low income countries. It also makes a strong case for a more differentiated analysis of hierarchies of oppression that would account for the diverse ethnic make-up of the transnational capitalist class as much as for the actions of nonwestern states. The article thus intends to decenter Eurocentric perspectives by bringing nonwestern semiperipheries to the forefront of social theory and by denouncing approaches centered on race as universalization of Western knowledge. To this end, Dunaway and Clelland strongly emphasize the visibility of semiperipheries, yet underplay and even explicitly argue against the importance of white supremacy for an understanding of global inequality. While I agree, and have previously argued myself, that closer attention should be paid to semiperipheries in terms of their transformative potential, I consider the claim that nonwestern semiperipheries exacerbate and even cause racial/ethnic inequality misleading. The data provided in the article do speak to the role of semiperipheries more generally (Western and non-Western) in lending stability to the system by replicating, mirroring and disseminating racialized mechanisms of endless accumulation of capital at different levels in the structural hierarchy; yet this does not amount to the nonwestern semiperipheries' ability to overturn the racializing logic on which endless accumulation has been premised since the emergence of the modern/colonial world-system, and should not be mistaken for it. In the following, I thus want to caution against what I think are three weak links in the authors' argument: mistaking visibility for causation, conflating the concept of race with the reality of racism (and its many historical and geopolitical configurations), as well as throwing the baby (white supremacy) out with the bathwater (Western knowledge).

I will limit my comments to two aspects. The first one is methodological and concerns the unclear unit of analysis that underlies the authors' claim for the centrality of non-Western semiperipheries to ethnic/racial inequality. The second aspect is more substantive and targets the relationship between racism and the emergence, functioning, and reproduction of the modern/colonial world-system.

The Unit of Analysis

In order to draw attention to the role of nonwestern semiperipheries in causing and exacerbating ethnic/racial inequality, Dunaway and Clelland observe that "greater wealth accumulation has not been accompanied by an end to ethnic/racial oppression in the core, nor has ascent to semiperipheral status led to less ethnic/racial exploitation in nonwestern societies" (2017: 15).

South Africa is mentioned as an example where the dismantling of white rule has even led to a Black elite oppressing a Black majority. Together with the fact that the richest countries now include many nonwestern states and that large numbers of nonwesterners have joined the capitalist class in recent decades, this is viewed as evidence against a global apartheid thesis — according to which white supremacy dictates the terms and amount of wealth accumulation: “[...] why did “white supremacy” not operate to prevent ‘nonwhite’ interlopers from accumulating wealth between 1980 and 2015 that this racial dualism reserves to “western” countries? [...] Why did “coloredness” not prevent seven Third World countries from achieving GDPpc that was 2.3 times greater than that of the United Kingdom in 1980?” (2017: 14).

Answers to the questions thus formulated seem to be possible only as blatant negations of the white supremacy thesis. Yet this is due to the methodological bottleneck inherent in the questions themselves: on the one hand, their focus constantly shifts from structural positions in the world-system (core, semiperiphery) to national units (societies, countries) to regional constructs (the West, Eastern Europe, the Third World); on the other hand, these units seem to operate on their own, rather than as parts of the capitalist world-economy. For nonwestern semiperipheries to cause ethnic/racial inequality, mechanisms of the production and reproduction of difference would need to be available there that are unavailable elsewhere in the world-system, and that are somehow confined to that particular location. For South Africa to experience the dismantling of exploitation and segregation of the nonwhite majority after the end of apartheid, racism would need to have worked there independently of the racism built in the exploitative logic of the capitalist world-economy. Yet the very contribution of world-systems analysis to understanding global inequality consists in viewing capitalism as operating at the level of the entire world-system, rather than in individual countries going through different stages. Shifting the unit of analysis from the nation-state to the world as a whole makes it possible to view inequalities as intrinsic to the world-economy, their increase in the *longue durée* as part of a secular trend, and their eventual disappearance as premised on a fundamental transformation of the entire world-system, not just individual units — be they countries, regions, or semiperipheries. If we are to understand the ways in which racism produces ethnic and racial inequality in the world-system today, the unit of analysis of the questions we ask has to be the world-system as well. The so-called West is only “white,” the allegedly post-Socialist Europe “white, but not quite” and the former Third World “colored” in relation to each other and in a world-system premised on a constructed notion of whiteness as the norm. Indeed, Wallerstein’s early engagement with race in the African context does justice to both the systemic logic and the local fluctuations that operate to maintain white supremacy:

“Race is, in the contemporary world, the only international status group category. It has replaced religion, which played that role since at least the eighth century AD. Rank in this system, rather than colour, determines membership in the status group. Thus, in Trinidad, there can be a 'Black Power' movement, directed against an all-Black government, on the grounds that this government functions as an ally of North American imperialism. Thus, Quebec separatists can call themselves the 'White Niggers' of North America. Thus, Pan-Africanism can include white-skinned Arabs of North Africa, but exclude white-skinned Afrikaners of South Africa. Thus, Cyprus and Yugoslavia can be invited to tricontinental conferences (Asia, Africa and Latin America) but Israel and Japan are excluded” (Wallerstein 1979: 180).

Race In The Modern/Colonial World-System

However, Dunaway and Clelland further clarify their strong disavowal of white supremacy as an explanatory factor for racial/ethnic inequality. They argue that, while ethnicization and racism are structured into the dynamics of the world-system, they operate at multiple levels across the structural positions of core, semiperiphery, and periphery, rather than as a racial dualism that pinpoints “whites” as the only perpetrators of ethnic and racial inequality (19f.) across all tiers. They thus take the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the transnational capitalist class in the past decades as a particularly strong indication of the ways in which nonwestern semiperipheries will increasingly cause and/or exacerbate most of the world’s ethnic/racial inequality in the 21st century. As much as 53 percent of the world’s wealthiest capitalists today are not Westerners, Dunaway and Clelland point out, and yet globally visible outlets, such as Oxfam’s 2016 report on the concentration of wealth in the hands of ever fewer billionaires, disregard this momentous change in this class’ composition.

The evidence pointing to an unprecedented shift in the nationalities of the world’s most recent billionaires is indeed both striking and mounting. World-systems scholars found that the number of billionaires in middle-income countries tripled in just six years despite the 2008 recession, with Brazil, Hong Kong, and India registering a twofold, Russia almost a threefold, and China a staggering twelve-fold increase in their respective number of billionaires from 2006 to 2012 (Albrecht/Korzeniewicz 2018: 103). At the same time, global financial consultancies such as Arton Capital predict that the billionaire population is going to grow nearly 80% by the year 2020, an increase of 1,700 billionaires, to which China and India are expected to contribute disproportionately (Arton Capital 2017). Such trends clearly render the Asian semiperiphery more

visible with respect to its impact on global inequality — but they are neither caused nor exacerbated by the semiperiphery. Rather, they provide further evidence of the world-system's increasing polarization into an ultra-rich transnational class and an increasingly impoverished 99%: As Oxfam has calculated, since 2015, the richest 1% have owned more wealth than the rest of the world, while the number of individuals that held the same wealth as the bottom half of humanity has rapidly decreased from 388 in 2010 to 62 in 2016 and to only 8 in 2017 (Oxfam 2017).

It is therefore misleading to treat the (relatively and absolutely) fast-growing, but nonetheless relatively small group of non-Western billionaires as an indicator of changes in the role of the semiperiphery as a whole. First, because even between 2006 and 2012, the period of the fastest increase in the number of ultra-rich non-Westerners for which there are data, the odds of becoming a millionaire were still twice as high for citizens of high-income countries than for citizens of middle-income countries that qualify as semiperipheries (Albrecht/Korzeniewicz 2018: 105). Second, because a large number of the semiperiphery's billionaires is made up of non-residents who either already have a second citizenship in a core country or are in the market for one, which is what makes them more interesting for global financial consultancies in the near future than they already are. The same financial recession that marked the shift towards more non-Western capitalists becoming billionaires after 2008 also saw the proliferation of investor residence and citizenship programs throughout the European semiperiphery (Western and non-Western). It thus became possible to acquire a European Union residence permit or a second citizenship with a sizeable investment in real estate or government bonds (Boatcă 2016).

The main beneficiaries of such programs, implemented since 2010 in Hungary, Cyprus, Malta, Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Spain, and Portugal have been Chinese, Russian, but also Lebanese and Egyptian investors who thus obtain the right of visa-free travel to core countries, the citizenship of a Schengen-zone state (except in the case of Bulgaria) and the right to reside and work anywhere in the European Union. None of these programs include strict residence requirements for their investor citizens, who thus use the rights they purchased as remote access to the wealth accumulated in Western core states and shielded from the majority of the world's population through Western core states' enforcement of borders, visa regimes, and citizenships. As summed up by Arton Capital: "With more and more wealth being created in Asia, yet demand for residence in European territories being so high, this trend of UHNW [ultra high net worth] individuals seeking global citizenship will undoubtedly continue to grow" (Arton Capital 2017). The boom in the number of non-Western capitalists seeking the advantages of residence and citizenship in the U.S. and Europe is therefore hardly a challenge to core dominance or white supremacy. Rather, it points to the paramount role that race continues to play for a global stratification in which the "premium citizenships" of core Western states highly correlate with

whiteness; and to which only very wealthy non-whites have recently gained access through the commodification of rights in semiperipheral states that share a visa-free travel zone with core Western states. For wealthy non-Westerners, investment residence and citizenship of Western states constitute global social mobility as well as a means of “buying into” whiteness. The European Union is the historic heir to Western colonial states (Böröcz/Sarkar 2005) whose wealth accumulation has been highly premised on a racialized division of labor and a structurally unequal distribution of resources to those racialized as non-White. The Henley & Partners Visa Restriction Index, produced by a private British consultancy in cooperation with the trade association for world’s airlines, IATA, ranks Germany number one on account of a total score of 176 countries to which their citizens can travel visa-free (out of a maximum score of 219, the number of world’s sovereign states). Sweden ranks second at 175, followed closely by Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain, and the US, which all give their citizens visa-free access to 174 countries worldwide. Most passport holders in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia have scores below 50, while mainland China has a slightly higher score of 51 — similar to India’s at 53, but below Ghana’s, Morocco’s, and Indonesia’s (Henley & Partners 2017). This explains why EU residence permits are extremely attractive to Chinese investors, and much more so than for Hong Kong investors, who have access to 152 countries on account of having a “Special Administrative Region of China” passport — a reminder of residual colonial ties.

It is thus even more misleading to view the ethnic and racial diversity of billionaires from semiperipheral countries as an argument against white supremacy. The growing number of Brazilian millionaires has increasingly sought either a U.S. green card, the investor citizenship of a Caribbean country still part of the Commonwealth, or European citizenship through descent from a European ancestor as a means of translating material wealth into global social mobility (Fellet 2016). Such capital-facilitated moves up the citizenship ladder are themselves ways of buying into whiteness, or what, in the context of racial inequalities in Brazil has been referred to as “whitening with money” (Hasenbalg 2005). At the global level, they are strategies of eluding the ascription of citizenship of one’s place of birth. As such, they belie the experience of the great majority of transnational labor migrants, for whom international migration in search of upward economic mobility entails the risk of downward racial mobility through reclassification as non-white.

That race is used as a census category in few states and whiteness seldom chosen as a means of self-identification, as Dunaway and Clelland observe, should not deceive us into denying the processes of racialization being replicated throughout the structural positions of the world-system. Nor should the fact that the word “race” does not exist in a majority of the dialects of Asian semiperipheries (p. 58) be taken to indicate the absence of whiteness as the norm and racial stratification as a reality in Asia:

First, as scholarship on Orientalism, racism, and critical whiteness has repeatedly shown, prevailing norms — whether it is the West, Europe, heterosexuality, or whiteness — feature as unmarked categories (Hall 1992, Todorova 2005). Their normative character becomes visible through the simultaneous construction of difference — of the Orient as the non-West, of Eastern Europe as lesser Europe, of homosexuality as non-heterosexuality, and of blackness as non-whiteness. All deviant categories thus constructed require naming, while their unmarked counterpart remains unnamed, unqualified, or unstressed. The label of “Europe” always includes both Western Europe and its white populations, but Eastern Europe needs to be specifically mentioned in order to be included in the term, while Black Europe needs to be argued, defended, and explained. In this context, the fact that the European East is often portrayed as “semi-Oriental” or “somehow Asian” not only serves to sanction Western Europe’s position as the norm, but also to legitimate the — geographically untenable — continental division between Europe and Asia (Lewis/Wigen 1996). The vast regional inequalities and trade imbalances that Dunaway and Clelland observe in Asia are undeniable, yet they only prove that Asia as a whole is not a unit of analysis, but a racialized, Orientalist construct. As critical geographers have long pointed out, the very fact that regional commonalities in Asia made it impossible to pinpoint an “Asian identity” is precisely what “has allowed Europeans to see the disproportionate diversity of the Asian “continent” as a challenge *for Asian civilization*, rather than as a challenge to their own system of geographical classification” (Lewis/Wigen 1996: 37).

Second, the extent to which Asian societies are impacted by racialization as deviance from whiteness becomes apparent, among other things, in the fact that economies — as well as politics — of beauty have consistently privileged whiteness in ways that reinforce and reproduce colonial patterns of racialization despite the absence of explicit references to whiteness (see Haritaworn 2012). Instead, what is often labeled the “Eurasian” or “Pan-Asian” look that is considered more attractive than darker skin by a large majority of men and women across Asia and associated with racial superiority, status, and higher income, fuels a booming cosmetics industry that thrives on skin-bleaching. Accordingly, 4 out of 10 women surveyed in Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korea use skin-whitening products, the global market for which is “projected to reach \$19.8 billion by 2018, driven by the growing desire for light-coloured skin among both men and women primarily from the Asian, African and Middle East regions” (Pe 2016).

Does all of the above amount to evidence for the existence of the “global racial dualism” that Dunaway and Clelland seek to disprove? Not necessarily. It certainly is not evidence for a “fixed racial axis of the world-economy” which “reduces the world’s diverse people into two lumps that conceal massive ethnic/racial complexity” (2017: 13). When attempting to see “beyond white racists and colonists” (2017: 46), we however need to take into account that, even if not all racists

are white, racism in the world-system is premised on colonially enforced whiteness. In this context, whiteness is just as much a geopolitical category as it is a racial designation. The modern/colonial world-system piggybacked on previous forms of xenophobia and discrimination and incorporated them as part of the logic of endless accumulation just as it incorporated older regimes of labor control, such as slavery, serfdom, and tenancy. In ancient China, India, and Japan, fair skin implied wealth and nobility, while darker skin signaled work in the field (Pe 2016). In Europe, medieval Christendom offered an entire apparatus of otherness formed by unmarried and learned women, heretics, Jews, and Muslims, that prefigured colonial racism and sexism (Shohat 2017). The incorporation of the Americas into the emerging world-system entailed transforming such imperial differences into colonial ones, as well as inventing Europeanness, ethnicity, and race (Quijano/Wallerstein 1992, Mignolo 2006). Semiperipheries today are therefore (still) competing within a capitalist world-economy based on racism and inequality and their strategies are imbricated with nationalist, fascist, and racist ideologies recurrent throughout the system, but they neither originated with nor were enhanced by the structural position of nonwestern semiperipheries.

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Disclosure Statement

Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledge section of the article's text. Otherwise, author has indicated that she has no conflict of interests upon submission of the article to the journal.

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