

From the everyday to IR: In Defence of the Strategic Use of the R-word

Dr. Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, Käte Hamburg Kolleg/Center for Global Cooperation Research, Duisburg // University of Portsmouth
olivia.rutazibwa@port.ac.uk

Introduction

In 2012, John M. Hobson published his brilliant and exciting book 'The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics' in which he meticulously exposes the paternalism, Eurocentrism and racism in the thinking of the great scholars of the international since 1760.

The thinkers that feature in the book like Mill, Kant, his own ancestor Hobson, Spencer, Pearson, Lenin, Stoddard, Mackinder, Wilson, Cobden, Marx, but also the more contemporary Morgenthau, Carr, Keohane, Bull, Gramsci, Wallerstein, Cox, Cooper, Ikenberry, Kagan, Ignatieff, Fukuyama, Huntington, Krazner, Held, Nussbaum, Wheeler, Finnemoore, Rawls, Vincent, Donnell and others, collectively indeed form what is generally considered the authoritative canon on the International. Their thinking continues to be passed on as such in most IR courses today, thus making John's critical historiography all the more relevant in the present.

The importance of the wealth on information and insight in Hobson's painstakingly thorough work can hardly be overestimated, for mainstream and (postcolonial) critical scholarship alike. It is nevertheless striking how Hobson limits his framing of racism to the scientific and biological; a move which allows him to conclude that racism is no longer an appropriate framework through which to understand the scholarship after 1945. With Hitler sawing death and destruction in Europe on these grounds before and during the Second World War, and given the outcome of that war, the ideas around biologically superior and inferior races are seen – not just by Hobson – to have lost all legitimacy as a scholarly categorization and ranking of human kind.

At the same time though, he does not necessarily claim that racism and – following his definition – other forms of systematic hierarchising, exclusion and violence against particular groups of people has come to an end in everyday life. But, in line with the perceived delegitimation of scientific racism after 1945, Hobson opts for labelling the continued expressions of superiority and varied ensuing practices and thought in international relations as Eurocentrism. Given that Hobson does not deny that the societal processes of prejudices mixed with disproportionate (structural) power, continue to systematically cause discrimination, violence and death to groups of people

on the basis of certain of their qualities considered inferior or undesirable, – thus operating along similar lines and logics of scientific racism –, are still alive and well, it is all the more remarkable that he then dismisses it as a valid analytical category for the post 1945 present.

It is the contention of this essay that, precisely given the daily, structural racism that unmistakably continues to plague our societies – people literally encountering death, destruction and discrimination they would not had they been ‘white’ – it is both analytically and normatively near impossible to be at peace with the premature declaration of the end of scientific/biological racism as a prism through which to understand contemporary knowledge production on the (inter)national.

The question at hand in this commentary is not whether Eurocentrism in its varied manifestations as meticulously developed in Hobson’s book is not a valid and insightful analytical category to understand the contemporary scholarship and world, because it is. What is at stake here is how this Eurocentrism relates to the category of racism and what the consequences are when the two are presented as separate rather than one (Eurocentrism) as one of the manifestations of the other (racism).

A first question that arises from John Hobson’s analytical choice in the context of continued racist (scientific and other)¹ practices and thoughts in the everyday is: How can it be that academia would be miraculously cured from a sickness that continues to befall John, Jane, Mamadou and Mariam Doe on a daily basis? In other words, if racism, even in Hobson’s narrow scientific (related to eugenics and Darwinism) understanding of it, continues to systematically feature in everyday life, can it be that this occurs in the absence of a base for it in our contemporary scholarship?

Secondly – given that Hobson is most certainly not a lone wolf in his reluctance to deploy the racism label, or the R-word, in the present – which structural knowledge production patterns can be discerned in the contemporary debate that allow for the R-word to be so contentious or almost compulsively written out of the narrative or analysis and what existing power structure does this reluctance serve?

This commentary will focus mostly on the second question. With regard to the first one, it can overall be considered as a call for the revalorisation of the everyday in our reflexions on scholarship as well as analytical choices, rather

¹ Even though providing a precise definition of what racism is or is not, is not the aim here – the focus is rather on the normative implications of strategic definitional choices in the use or not of the racism label – broadly speaking, I understand racism as the societal processes, including systems of thought, of prejudices mixed with disproportionate (structural) power, that systematically cause discrimination, violence and death to groups of people on the basis of certain of their qualities considered inferior or undesirable. In it in this sense that I would consider Eurocentrism a manifestation of racism.

than that it will present airtight proof of the continued existence of racism in society or scholarship. Mostly because I do not think that this is the discussion to be had with Hobson's invaluable work, as it does not necessarily contest such fact, not in the least because its ethos is fundamentally anti-racist.

With regard to the second question on the power of the reluctance to use the R-word – essentially a meta-question – the commentary seeks to develop some answers by shedding a *decolonial* light on both everyday life and scholarly knowledge production practices in an attempt to transcend the individual bias in the R-debate and revalorise the historical and structural stakes at hand in that conversation.

Decoloniality as a research option or strategy, put forward among others by the likes of Walter Dignolo, Rolando Vázquez, María Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel and developed and applied in IR by scholars like Robbie Shilliam, Meera Sabaratnam, Julia Suárez-Krabbe, Branwen Gruffyd Jones (this list is by no means exhaustive) can be – very crudely – summarised in a triple call of *de-mythologising*, *de-silencing* and anti-colonially *de-colonising* our knowledge production or cultivation practices.

Concretely and in this context, these strategies – presented separately for analytical purposes but in practice very much interlinked – address the following questions: Blind spots: What part of the story is systematically left out? How are connected histories invariably fragmented or distorted? (*de-mythology*) Whose stories and experiences are systematically ignored, muted, not heard, delegitimised? In other words, who does not get the microphone, is not around the expert table, and why? (*de-silencing*) Finally, why does any of this matter, i.e. what is their relation to the colonial status quo, i.e. both their political and material significance, and how to alter this? (*de-colonising*)

So, in line with the concerns expressed in the second question, rather than a debate over facts in John Hobson's seminal work on scientific racism and Eurocentric institutionalism, this essay is an explicitly normative conversation and engagement with today's anything but new or isolated reluctance to use racism as a lens to understand the post-1945 world. The aim here is to draw attention to the fact that analytical categories, apart from imperfect attempts to render reality intelligible, are a deeply normative enterprise that implicitly or explicitly seek to render (parts of) reality *for a certain purpose*. Under scrutiny here is the extent to which R-word reluctance (dis)serves an anti-racist decolonial purpose.

Building on a vignette of the yearly racism-related debate around the figure of *Zwarte Piet* or Black Pete in contemporary Flanders, Belgium, this contribution fundamentally questions the salience of avoiding the use of the R-word in public debates and IR alike for strategic reasons and casts a light

on how it operates in maintaining a colonial status quo, and if and to what extent John Hobson's analytical choices unwillingly are a part of this.

It is important to note that a *strategic* reluctance, as showcased by John Hobson, distinguishes itself in fundamental ways from others' *fundamental* reluctance. The latter a) do not necessarily promote an anti-racist ethos and/or b) question the mere existence of racism in the contemporary world as such. John Hobson's work is not that.

In a way I challenge his, what I call here *strategic*, reluctance precisely because I see it in stark contrast with the deeply critical and anti-racist ethos at the heart of his work. Strategic reluctance in this sense is characterised by a desire to avoid ascribing delegitimised intentions, like racism, to individuals when they did not have them. The priority in such reflections is not to offend or alienate *certain* participants from the conversation on structural injustice that is nevertheless seen to be crucial to have. Analytically limiting the hated R-category to scientific or biological racism only, is one concrete manifestation of this strategic reluctance.

Vignette: innocence and racism in the *Zwarte Piet* tradition

Every year, around December 5th and 6th the Santa Claus-like figure Saint Nicolas, sails into the ports of Netherlands and Flanders from Spain to bring toys and sweets to the children.

In this Low Lands traditional, Saint Nicolas is accompanied by the figure of *Zwarte Piet* or Black Pete. This character is embodied by a small army of black-faced individuals sporting a renaissance outfit from the times Spain ruled over the region, with typical afro-wigs, feathered hats, red lipstick and hoop earrings.

Zwarte Piet's role is twofold: he – in true slave narrative style of the time – firstly functions as Saint Nicolas' help, carrying the bags with toys and distributing sweets to the kids. His second role, very much in line with the tried bogey-man trope set aside for men of African descent, is to scare children into good behaviour throughout the year. The story – passed on generationally through the many Saint Nicolas children songs – goes that Black Pete will throw the bad kids in his empty bag and/or beat them with a rod.

In recent decades he has been more benignly rebranded in the other tell-tale trope of the silly, jokey, broadly smiling black minstrel whose role it is to make children laugh.

Until recently, every child in the Netherlands and Flanders grew up with this tradition, without them or their parents linking it to anything remotely to do with racism. Not even I, a second generation Rwandan, black, Flemish kid growing up in Antwerp. Even the fact that I, when it was our turn in the last year of high school to dress up like Black Pete for the primary school kids, did not need to blacken my face, or that as an adult, every year around

December, my sister and I would have small children fearfully look at us in the street, did not stop me from embracing the collective Flemish innocence around this *Zwarte Piet* and *Sinterklaas* tradition.

Today we see this innocence being challenged. Less than five years ago a handful of people in Flanders, taking cue from activists in the Netherlands, started to point at the racist elements contained in this tradition and call for a ban or modification of the practice. This has stirred a yearly, invariably bitter yet still relatively marginal public conversation on racism in local traditions.

This Flemish attempt at a debate around the place of the figure of Black Pete in present-day Belgium and the Netherlands invariably showcases a set of biases, recurrent in most R-word debates, that illuminate the three decolonial points this commentary seeks to make on the reluctance to use racism as an analytical category: 1) the individualised bias of innocence and intentionality and intensity, 2) the bias of expertise and legitimacy, 3) the bias of the emotional and anecdotal at the expense of the structural. In what follows, the aim is to scrutinise the different ways in which also strategic reluctance, as contained in Hobson's analytical choices, unwillingly ends up reproducing similar biases or not.

One: | *De-mythology* | The individualised bias of innocence, intentionality and intensity

'How can a children's tradition be racist?'

'It was not meant to be racist – hence it is not racism.'

These utterances, and the unspoken feeling that 'if it doesn't look like something Hitler would have done, it's not racism', are some of the most recurrent objections when people have attempted to label something as racist. The Black Pete tradition context is just an example in which the element of innocence is particularly explicit.

In every-day life, an innocent children's tradition like Black Pete can never be racist. First of all, because of the clearly benign intentions of those that celebrate the tradition; secondly because of the fact that the potential representational harm done to people of African descent in such context is deemed incomparable to the horrors of the quintessential trope of racism all of us in the industrialised West grew up with: the Hitlerian moment.

The Hitlerian connotation attached to the racism label reduces it not only to a matter of good versus bad intentions, it also individualises a problem that is essentially a structural problem that operates at times through individual behaviour and powerful structures alike.

What, then, is the connection with the need to demythologise our knowledge production practices? In the context of a society that clearly bears the marks

of continued systematic exclusion and violence against people based on their appearance or affiliation, the only way these biases of individuality, innocence, intention and intensity continue to make sense to people, is through a knowledge production system, and hegemonic historiography in particular, that sustains partial, fragmented and distorted understanding of how, where and to what end racism operates. In Western Europe we have reduced it to the acts of evil, probably lunatic, men – Hitler on top – but most importantly, they are considered exceptional aberrations.

It is in this mythological context of individual responsibility, malevolence or innocence, and the disconnection between representational racist violence and mass atrocities that labelling contemporary actions, discourses or lines of thought as racist, is often seen as an impediment to constructive dialogue. A systematic individualised approach to racism through the figure of 'the evil racist', leaves us with an incapacity to have an open and constructive engagement with this system of, by definition, racialised coloniality, i.e. a matrix of power that allows for the normalisation and perpetuation extreme power inequalities, allowing for systematic dispossession, violence and even death of racialised peoples.

Whereas first and foremost features of the *fundamental* reluctance, the individuality, innocence and intentionality tropes are also embraced in strategic reluctance considerations when the use of the R-word is linked to the fear of hurting *certain* people's feelings or an impediment to a structural conversation. It is on this basis that the strategic reluctant, like John Hobson², is uncomfortable to use the category of racism as an analytical tool to study the works of contemporaries like Keohane as to not to offend them.

In his book, John Hobson showcases his anti-colonial or -racist commitment by opting for the term Eurocentric institutionalism to pinpoint in more detail what is going on in post 1945 scholarship. The point is not that this is a wrong descriptor, because it is not. What is more, there is true value in the sophisticated and detailed study of this Eurocentric institutionalism and I will surely use this analytical tool in my own work and teaching.

The question at hand in the reluctant R-word debate is how this Eurocentrism is related to racism. Why is it presented as a different category all together rather than maybe a manifestation of racism, particular to the post 1945 era?

² John's first concern, especially in his book, is of analytical nature, as he seeks to create the necessary space in which Eurocentrism can be clearly seen and discussed, something that, according to him, the blanket racism label does not allow us to do. An additional concern though, permeating his interventions (during debates and roundtables, or e.g. on the *The Disorder of Things* blog forum on his book (<https://thedisorderofthings.com/2012/10/23/eurocentrism-racism-whats-in-a-word-a-response-to-bowden-sabaratham-and-vucetic/>)), is how the people – dead or alive – featuring in his work, would view the racist label being cast on their thinking, and take offence.

If this strategic reluctance contributes to a perpetuation of the fundamental reluctant's distorted image of what racism is actually about, where does that leave our anti-racist scholarly ethos? Is it not important to further document and endlessly repeat that more than individual malevolence or lunacy, racism is the oil in the system of colonial power that makes a sustained discrimination of and violence against certain people not only possible but also invisible and acceptable? At the same time, when we speak of hurt feelings and intentionality, whose feelings are we systematically valuing more than others' in our strategic reluctance? How does this play into the colonial status quo and the expendability of certain experiences and lives? This question brings us to the second leg of this decolonial commentary on the R-debate: that of the need to more systematically consider issues of silencing.

Two: | *De-silence* | the bias of expertise

Who are the experts?

Even though the initial contestation around the Black Pete figure was launched by groups and individuals from the affected visible minority communities, the experts invited for a seat at the table in the Flemish Zwarte Piet discussion tend to invariably be members of the white male majority: historians, scholars in ethics or political representatives of 'the people'. These unlikely experts on racism are then the solely trusted agents to define what constitutes as racism and what not. Their diagnosis is too often that it is not racism because it was not intended as such, or the selected historical evidence of the tradition does not support such claims.

When visible minorities do make it around the table, it is to either talk back to these objections or to anecdotally expand on the emotional pain Zwarte Piet might cause them and their community. Even when this invitation to share the personal pain comes from a genuine place of interest and care, this particular type of interest or attempt at solidarity, unwillingly disqualifies them from being considered capable of objective overarching insights – still the key features of our conception of what good knowledge and expertise is all about.

When we try to avoid offending people in the R-word conversation by avoiding using the label – it bears the question of how we value the life and sentiments of those people systematically on the receiving end of the racism – or, if you like, Eurocentric institutionalism. What makes it so acceptable that their experiences, intentions, feelings and suffering are always subordinate to that of those that occupy positions of privilege in the colonial racist matrix of power?

It is, among others, the systematic absence of the affected people around the expert-table of the R-word debate that makes 'offending' them or hurting their feelings more acceptable than the white majority and the experts it produces.

An additional hurdle, specific to our scholarly engagements with the racism conversation, is that racism as a phenomenon is implicitly or explicitly not felt to be objective or analytical enough. And so, we bend over backwards to come up with other, more neutral and measurable concepts: inequality, discrimination, body/bio-politics, ethnocentrism, paternalism, imperialism, xenophobia, ignorance, ... without necessarily considering to whom such move might be offensive.

Can we not discern a similar bias in Hobson's work when there is more concern with offending contemporary scholarship by using the R-word as an analytical category than with the very limited engagement with minority scholars throughout the book? We can hardly blame Hobson for the absence of a thorough engagement with alternative thinkers in the time frame under consideration, as it was clearly beyond the scope of this work that seeks to take the existing canon to task. It is nevertheless important to raise this issue if we seek to further anti-racist IR scholarship. We will fall short if we stop at merely denouncing what the mainstream scholars have been doing without digging up, fomenting alternative archives and elevating them to the level of the canonical, or, better yet, getting rid of the canonical thinking all together.

It is only then, academically speaking, that offending a Keohane or Spivak will carry the same weight, but more importantly, that it will stop being the basis on which we choose to use the racism label or not. Rather than worrying about how it will be perceived by certain people, it will be the continued circumstances of coloniality and structural racism in the everyday that will be the guiding principle in how to analytically organise our study of the social and the international.

Three: | *De-colonise* | the bias of the individual over the historical/structural

What is all the fuss about?

Another previously mentioned recurring objection put forward by the fundamental-reluctants in the *Zwarte Piet* R-word debate, is the fact that the issue is not serious enough to merit so much attention. This is due to the fact that the problem is identified as one of emotions and hurt feelings about things that happened in the past, cf. slavery. The hurt is therefore seen as something that can easily be overcome if one takes into account the lack of intentionality to cause pain in the present. Again, as mentioned before, these reflections are made possible through a distorted, fragmented presentation of past wrongs and their presumed irrelevance in the present. With slavery,

racism and colonialism being formally delegitimised in the present, our mythological knowledge production system sustains the belief that the practices have then also disappeared from the present everyday. Rarely, in the Zwarte Piet debate, is the connection made with the nature of Belgium's continued engagement with its former colonies, or with the living conditions of people of African descent in Flanders: their structurally limited access to the labour, education and housing markets, their absence in representational positions of power cf. the media, teaching and politics; their over-representation in incarceration and poverty statistics.

It is important to reiterate that John Hobson's work does not showcase the same bias. His painstakingly meticulous historiography of the scholarship on the international since 1760 up until 1945 most convincingly testifies to this. The question at this point then is: why is it so important that he does away with racism as an analytical category to understand the post 1945 scholarship if he clearly showcases a solid anti-colonial and anti-racist ethos throughout?

The contention, of normative-strategic, rather than descriptive-analytical nature, of this commentary is that this is important, precisely because of the power of the Hitlerian moment – however distortedly (e.g. its exceptionality and individualised malevolence) this continues to be narrated to the masses. It is because of the presumed consensus around the unacceptability of categorising and hierarchizing peoples along racial lines, that failing to organise our analytical categories to understand structural injustices in the present, is a seriously missed opportunity in the present. This is where the ultimate legitimacy of the invocation of the label of racism lies. Not as a blanket accusation or obfuscating category that does not allow us to study the particularities of the different manifestations of these structural forms of exclusion and violence on certain groups of people (hence my genuine excitement about John Hobson's development of the Eurocentrism category and its different manifestations), but as a form of violence that has indeed been delegitimised in the Western world after the Hitlerian moment. I believe that this is an advantage that from a normative standpoint, i.e. an anti-racist, anti-colonial ethos, should be embraced more seriously and systematically in our scholarly endeavours as well.

In this reflection I have tried to fundamental question the tendency to make the R-debate about individual and group emotions, whether these are of the whitened masculinised majority or the visible minorities – it is about so much more than that; the legitimacy of its unabashed invocation lies precisely in the fact that it is about structural well-being and justice for the whole of society, something that can only be done by systematically taking the past and the past in the present seriously.

Ultimately, if we are to focus on emotions (the day that the emotions of all are considered a legitimate source of knowledge on par with ratio I would be the first to do so) and hurt feelings in this debate, it is important to start

acknowledging that we have been prioritising the emotions and hurt feeling of the wrong group of people if we are truly concerned with the colonial matrix of power.

Conclusion

Hobson, and other strategic-reluctants within and outside academia, choose to avoid the term racism or restrict it to its scientific/biological meaning, to keep the door for dialogue open. The racism label being equated (both in its deployment and reception) to a personal charge – an insult to be avoided in a constructive dialogue –, priority is given to the importance of analytical accuracy, as to not put all manifestations of structural injustice on the same R-word pile. These considerations pertain strategy, frameworks and choices we make in how we want to label reality, render it intelligible and maybe try to change it.

The same goes for people like myself and others with me, who call for the explicit use of the term racism, both within and outside the scholarship. We maybe see racism as a main category with different manifestations. The systematic exclusion of and violence against people is not restricted to the biological, yet its effects tend to be as devastating or unwanted; because we still live it on a daily basis and it somehow seems impossible to think it away or beyond it – even when denied; because (individual) bad intentions do not explain the (persistence of) the phenomenon and it seems that a structural, collective vision of it would do a better job at describing this experienced reality. As most contemporaries, thanks to the Hitlerian moment, agree that racism is something bad invoking the label could in theory save us a lot a time, which we could use to focus straight away on strategies to fight it. In our scholarly thinking. In the policies that organise our everyday.

Equally important though, is the realisation that neither of these positions is an objective rendering of reality.

Invoking decoloniality in this meta debate on the R-word has served to firmly break with the *myth* of a) a binary division between the everyday and scholarship when it comes to understanding the sustained hierarchisation of peoples; b) scientific/biological racism that has been delegitimised beyond our discourses – if at all and c) racism being about a-historical individual Hitlerian malevolence.

Secondly, it has sought to highlight the need to put the experiences and contributions of historically marginalised minorities, e.g. the perspectives of people and scholarship of colour, beyond the emotional testimonials, at the centre of such choices if we are to contribute to a radically different, anti- or non-racist IR and everyday. This desire is clearly reflected in Hobson's work, yet in the absence of – for understandable reasons in this case – a sustained engagement with minority authors combined with his concern to offend

contemporary colleagues, his strategic reluctance to use the R-word unwillingly hampers the third decolonial concern of anti-colonial decoloniality that seeks both in scholarship and practice to contribute to a radical break with the colonial matrix of power of which structural racism, perpetuated among others in canonical scholarship, is a fundamental feature.

Rather than seeking to prove that some of the post-1945 scholars featuring in Hobson's book are racist or not, the aim in this commentary has been to weigh in on the content and teleology of the R-debate. The contention is that our choices of analytical categories, more than attempts to meaningfully describe reality, are/should be embraced as deeply normative enterprises as well, more or less consciously organising that reality *for a certain purpose*.

The aim has been to break with the idea that analytical categories are merely attempts to capture an 'objective' reality out there; or can be reduced to peoples' conscious intentions. Apart from systematic devices to understand reality, they are also understood as political or ideological choices on why we seek to understand which part of reality. Informed by a decolonial approach, which highlights the need for de-mythologised, de-silenced and anti-colonially de-colonised knowledge production in the present, the essay has sought to argue that a strategic use of the R-word has an important role to play, as both a critical and analytical device in the study of IR.