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Challenging the Global Apartheid Model: A World-Systems Analysis

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Abstract

Using world-system concept, this essay challenges the popular racial bifurcation of the world between whites and peoples of color.

Keywords: Racism, Transnational Capitalism, Global Apartheid



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“The problem of the 21st century,” contends Manning Marable (2009: 1), “is the problem of *global apartheid*” because the racist logic of the white master race still exists. According to Ali Mazrui, global apartheid is driven by “pan-Europeanism” and western-controlled transnational capitalism, two processes that have intensified since the end of the Cold War (2007: 96, 98). This world bifurcation is supposedly grounded in *white supremacy* which is defined to be “a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources. . . and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Ansley 1997: 592). In other words, the capitalist world-system is conceptualized as a global divide between “whiteness” and “coloredness.”

From the perspective of world-systems analysis, the global apartheid model is deeply flawed. Indeed, this model is particularly orientalist (Said 1978) because it “herd[s] people under falsely unifying rubrics” by “invent[ing] collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are quite diverse” (Said 2003:18). The capitalist world-system is framed as “the troubled relationship between the white European world and the world of those defined by whites as the ‘dark others.’” Thus, the global apartheid model is preoccupied with the study of “the racial categorization of some people as ‘white’ and superior, while others are categorized as ‘not white’ and as eminently different and inferior” (Vera and Feagin 2007: 1, 5). On the one hand, all the world’s peoples are homogenized under two broad categories that treat all whites as though they enjoy the same degree of supremacy and all dark others as though there are no ethnic or class differences among them. On the other hand, European countries are not characterized by the white racial solidarity that this model suggests. Indeed, each of these countries has a history of oppressing white ethnic minorities. To complicate matters, the model lumps whites of Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Central Asia and Latin America with the peoples of color. To muddy the waters further, the wealthiest core of the modern world-system is defined as European to the exclusion of Japan, which has its own history of international imperialism and exploitation of ethnic groups.

A False Duality that Eliminates the Middle

One of the worst flaws of the global apartheid model is its fictitious bifurcation of the capitalist world-system into a western colonizing core and a nonwestern colonized periphery. Absent from this model is an important third tier of countries, the *semiperiphery*, identified by world-systems analysts as an important intermediate position between the core and periphery. The semiperipheries are crucial to the study of race and ethnicity in the modern world-system in several ways. First, semiperipheries are exploited by the core, but they, in turn, exploit poorer countries. Indeed, the worldwide process of “expropriation of surplus value” is a structural relationship in

which “the *middle tier* both participates in the exploitation of the *lower tier* and is exploited by the *upper tier* (Geschwender and Levine 1994: 80). Semiperipheral elites act in their own behalf to drain surpluses from peripheries through *subimperialism* which is “akin to the global dominance of an imperial power but at a subsystemic level” (Shaw 1979: 348-51). When they act in a subimperialist fashion, semiperipheries often employ strategies that target, marginalize and oppress ethnic minorities. The most common form of subimperialism is not the application of military force, but rather the routine operation of global value chains that exploit ethnic communities.

Second, several semiperipheries have exhibited higher growth rates than the core since the 1980s, and they often achieve that economic development through national agendas that target and exploit ethnic communities within their own countries. Semiperipheral agriculture and industrialization are grounded in intense exploitation of ethnic minorities to secure low-paid and unpaid labor for national export agendas (Clelland 2014).

Third, semiperipheries now host a majority of the world’s population and most of the world’s diverse array of ethnic groups. In addition, Southern semiperipheries are magnets for transnational migration. Twenty-five countries were the destinations for two-thirds of the world’s transnational migrants in 2013. Sixteen of those destination countries were Southern semiperipheries. Migration into the South accounts for more than 44 percent of transnational labor migrants and nearly 82 percent of refugees, and the vast majority of this migration is to Southern semiperipheries.¹ As a result, semiperipheral states are just as involved in regulating migration flows and restricting citizenship rights as western core countries. Reactionary politics, xenophobia and discrimination against “foreign aliens” are routinely documented in Southern semiperipheries. The United Nations World Value Survey (1981-2014) indicates that there is far greater racial/ethnic intolerance of immigrants in these Southern semiperipheries than in the western core.²

Fourth, we should state an obvious point that is usually ignored by western scholars of race/ethnicity. The numbers of peoples impacted by semiperipheral ethnic exploitation and forced displacement far exceeds the incidence of racial discrimination in western core countries. Much like the European core, semiperipheral states construct legal definitions of ethnic minorities in order to target them for marginalization and exploitation in relation to domestic and foreign development agendas. Every semiperipheral country has its own marginalized ethnic communities that are treated like internal peripheries. In 2011, forced displacements were concentrated in the

¹ Analysis of International Organization of Migration (2014).

² Analysis of World Value Survey databases, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

world's semiperipheries where the lands of ethnic minorities were reallocated to large export producers.³

Finally, some semiperipheries (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, and South Africa) are significant exporters of arms to areas of the world in which ethnic conflicts are occurring.

Ethnic Complexities of the Transnational Capitalist Class

We agree with Robinson (2014: 64) that “the principal contradiction on a world scale is one of class” because the world-system is choreographed by transnationalized capitalists who seek to exploit racial and ethnic minorities to expropriate wealth, not to construct “white supremacy.” Despite core economic dominance of the world-system, there are “multiple poles of intensive accumulation. . . that are magnets for transnational investors” (Robinson 2014: 64). Global business investment now flows increasingly from South to North and South to South. Indeed, Southern firms now account for one-third of world FDI flows (*The Economist* 2011). Clearly, these Southern capitalists are neither “core” nor “white” in the sense of the global apartheid model, but they do share the pro-capitalist class interests of core capitalists.

Outside the western core, those who directly exploit workers are capitalists of the same color, but not usually of the same ethnicity, as workers. These extractors of economic surplus are the elites of the semiperiphery who act in their own behalf and as compradors to foreign capital. Compradors are the capitalists and state elites who do the hard work for their transnational class. They make production possible through strategies to capture labor and resources from ethnic communities. One task of these dark capitalists is to drain economic surplus from cheap labor and from the natural resources in ethnic communities. Through support action from state elites, ethnic minorities are subject to super-exploitation. The most common form is not military imperialism, but the routine operation of commodity chains that feed off of the cheap labor and ecological resources of ethnic communities.

One indicator of the important role of semiperipheries is the changing ethnic composition of the transnational capitalist class. In 1956, the US accounted for 84 percent of the Global 500 list of the world's largest corporations. Over the last two decades, the number of Southern semiperipheries with such corporations more than doubled, indicating that the ethnic diversity within this group is widening to every region of the world. By 2014, nearly half the world's largest corporations were based in nonwestern semiperipheries.⁴

³ Analysis of UNHCR (2012, map, p. 2).

⁴ Analysis of Forbes (2014).

There is another empirical indicator we can employ to measure the growing ethnic complexity of the transnational capitalist class. Since 2000, the numbers of wealthy billionaires have expanded faster in Southern semiperipheries than in western countries or Japan. More than half the world's wealthiest capitalists reside in 51 countries that the global apartheid model places outside the white core. China, India and Russia have more billionaires than the combined total for all western core countries except the United States. Brazil has more billionaires than France, Canada, or Australia. South Korea and Turkey have more billionaires than Australia or Italy.⁵

Each of the nonwestern countries represented among the lists of billionaires and largest corporations has a history of incorporating and exploiting ethnic minorities. It is crucial to realize that semiperipheral capitalists and nonwestern state elites are not innocent bystanders of the globalized economic processes that sustain world inequality. Top executives of nonwestern corporations, billionaires, and many state elites form the transnational capitalist class fractions in their own countries. They service core capitalists and are complicit in creating and sustaining the inequalities of the world-system. In other words, they represent a fraction within the transnational capitalist class that is necessary to the global neoliberal project. But they are based on the "exploited" side of the global apartheid divide where this model claims such capitalists do not exist.

Conclusion

We have challenged the stereotype of "white capitalism" by emphasizing the important roles of semiperipheries, transnational capitalists and nonwestern states in ethnic conflict, exploitation and repression. We have *not* reduced race/racism to a black/white dichotomy. Indeed, we have strongly argued against that mistake. Nor have we argued that race/racism no longer have any relevance. What we do contend is that race and racism are western concepts that are not automatically applicable everywhere in the world, most especially when the semiperiphery and nonwestern states are omitted from analysis. As we move into the 21st century, semiperipheries will increasingly exploit and repress ethnic groups in ways that parallel past western colonialism.

We are not equipped with adequate theories to help us analyze those phenomena because we cannot simply pick up existing theories of race in the West and force them upon those situations. Nor can we generalize claims of racial discrimination to entire nonwestern populations, like the global apartheid model does. In every Southern country, transnational capitalists are complicit in the exploitation of ethnic territories. To make our point, we shift the conceptual frame to reflect the nonwestern realities of the world-system. In western sociology of race, those who are

⁵ Analysis of Hurun Research Institute (2015).

most privileged are white while peoples of color are the exploited. What theory will we use if China becomes the world hegemon and expands its exploitation of the world's racial and ethnic groups? Until we have a body of theory that can address such questions *without* ethnocentrism and orientalism, we will not be prepared to analyze race and ethnicity in the 21st century world-system.

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