

Theorizing Racism

While there is no legitimate biological basis for dividing the world into racial groupings, *race* is so fundamental a sociopolitical category that it is impossible to think about any aspect of globalization without focusing on the “fatal coupling of power and difference” signified by *racism*.¹ Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies. Wherever in the world the reader encounters this essay, she will have some knowledge of racism’s everyday and extraordinary violences; she will also be sensible of the widening circulation of cultural, aesthetic, and oppositional practices that subjectively mark the difference race makes. For the purposes of this essay, political economy is primary, because so much of globalization concerns material changes in ordinary people’s capacities to make their way in the world. Therefore, by emphasizing racism, the next few pages examine how race is a modality through which political-economic globalization is lived.² A case study of the United States demonstrates how the conjuncture of globalization, legitimate-state limits, and white supremacy reorganizes and contains power through criminalization and imprisonment. These significant political practices, while devised and tested behind the sturdy curtain of racism, have broad national and global articulations—connections not impeded by racialized boundaries.³ The purpose of focusing on the United States in this essay is not to study an “average” much less “original” racism, but rather to consider how fatal couplings of power and difference in one place develop and change. Then we will consider how they connect with, are amplified by, and materially affect, modalities of globalization elsewhere.

Why should race so vex the planet? Variations in humankind can be regarded in many ways, as contemporary genetics demonstrates.⁴ However, the coupling of European colonialism’s economic imperatives—expansion, exploitation, inequality—with European modernity’s cultural emphasis on the visible⁵ produced a powerful political belief that underlies racialization. The belief can be summed up this way: What counts as difference to the eye

transparently embodies explanation for other kinds of differences, and exceptions to such embodied explanation reinforce rather than undermine dominant epistemologies of inequality.⁶ Geographers from Linnaeus forward have figured centrally in the production of race as an object to be known, in part because historically one of the discipline's motive forces has been to describe the visible world.⁷

To describe is also to produce. While any number of "first contact" texts show that in fact "all cultures are contact cultures,"⁸ the powerful concept of a hierarchy of fixed differences displaced both elite and common knowledges of an alternatively globalized world.⁹ For example, in the mid-fifteenth century, Azurara, court historian to Henry the Navigator (intellectual and financial author of Europe's African slave trade), noted how many in the first group of human cargo corralled at Lisbon strongly resembled then-contemporary Portuguese; indeed, the captives' sole shared feature was their grievously wept desire to go home.¹⁰

The triumph of hierarchy required coercive and persuasive forces to coalesce in the service of domination.¹¹ While European militarization constituted the key force that produced and maintained fatally organized couplings of power and difference, Catholic and Protestant missionaries explained and reinforced hierarchical human organization in terms of God-given ineffable processes and eternally guaranteed outcomes.¹² National academies—precursors to today's colleges and universities—codified the social world in stringently insulated disciplines which further obscured the world's interconnections.¹³

In the long, murderous twentieth century, geographers used three main frameworks to study race: environmental determinism,¹⁴ areal differentiation,¹⁵ and social construction.¹⁶ The variety of frameworks, and the fact of transition from one to another, demonstrates both how geography has been deeply implicated in the development of inequality and how critical disciplinary reconstruction at times seeks to identify and remedy the social effects of intellectual wrongs. In other words, frameworks—or "paradigms"¹⁷—are not structures that emerge with spontaneous accuracy in the context of knowledge production. Rather, they are politically and socially as well as empirically contingent and contested explanations for how things work that, once widely adopted, are difficult to disinherit.

Geographers who embraced environmental determinism sought to explain domination and subordination—power and difference in terms of groups’ relative life-chances—by reference to the allegedly formative climates and landscapes of conqueror and conquered. The framework assumed, and therefore persistently demonstrated, that inequality is a product of natural rather than sociopolitical capacities; while culture might revise, it can never fully correct.¹⁸ In this view inequality is irremediable, and thus should be exploited or erased. Examples of exploitation and erasure include US and South African apartheid, the Third Reich’s “Final Solution,” scorched-earth wars against Central American indigenous groupings, and other cleansing schemes.

As if in recognition of environmental determinism’s horrifying consequences, the second framework, areal differentiation, seized the seemingly unbiased tools of the quantitative revolution to map distributions of difference across landscapes. The areal approach featured a mild curiosity toward the political-economic origins of inequalities, by suggesting causes for certain kinds of spatial mismatches or overlays. But in the end, taking race as a given, and development as the proper project for social change, the approach described territorialized objects (people and places as if they were things) rather than socio-spatial processes (how people and places came to be organized as they are).¹⁹

Inquiry into processes shapes a prevalent critical geographical framework. Neither voluntaristic nor idealistic, social construction refuses to naturalize race, even while recognizing its socio-spatial and ideological materiality. At its relational best, the social construction approach considers how racialization is based in the (until recently) under-analyzed production of both masculinity and whiteness (foundation and byproduct of global European hegemony), and how, therefore, race and space are mutually constituted.²⁰ How do spatially specific relations of power and difference—legal, political, cultural—racialize bodies, groupings, activities, and places? Why are such relations reproducible? For example, how is it that globally dynamic interactions, organized according to liberal theories of individual sovereignty, protection, grievance, and remedy (“human rights”), reconfigure but do not dismantle planetary white male supremacy—as measured by multinational corporate ownership, effective control over finance capital, and national military killing capacity?

While the three approaches span a wide political spectrum, from racist eugenics to anti-racist multiculturalism and beyond, all, at least implicitly, share two assumptions: (1) societies are structured in dominance within and across scales; and (2) race is in some way determinate of socio-spatial location.²¹ A way to understand the first point is to think about all the components—or institutions—of a society at any scale, and then ask about differences of power within and between them. Are corporations stronger than labor unions? Do poor families rank equally with wealthy ones? Does education receive the same kind of financial and political support, or command the same attention to demands, as police or the military? Do small food producers enjoy the same protections and opportunities as agribusinesses? Are industrial pollutants and other toxic wastes spread evenly across the landscape? Do those who produce toxins pay to contain them? Are people tried in courts by juries of their peers? Having thought about these kinds of institutional relationships, turn to the second assumption: According to the society's official or common-sense classifications, how does race figure in and between the institutions?²² While this thought-experiment is only a crude cross-section, the conclusions strongly suggest that—as all the twentieth-century frameworks agree—race, while slippery, is also structural.

But what structures does race make? Let us turn the question inside out and ask how fatal couplings of power and difference might be globally represented. Any map of modernity's fundamental features—growth, industrialization, articulation, urbanization, and inequality—as measured by wealth, will also map historical-geographical racisms. Such a map is the product of rounds and rounds of globalization, five centuries' movement of people, commodities, and people *as* commodities, along with ideologies and political forms, forever commingled by terror, syncretism, truce, and sometimes love. The cumulative effects of worldwide colonialism, transatlantic slavery, Western hemisphere genocide, and postcolonial imperialism—plus ongoing opposition to these effects—appear today, on any adequate planetary map of the twenty-first century, as power-difference topographies (for example, North, South) unified by the ineluctable fatalities attending asymmetrical wealth transfers.

So far, the discussion is pitched at a general level of abstraction. Our map of contemporary globalization circulation models (GCMs) is built on the historical geographies of past GCMs and signifies underlying struggles