8

THE CENTRALITY OF RACE TO INEQUALITY ACROSS THE WORLD-SYSTEM¹

Old figurations and new reconfigurations

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Linking the increase in inequality and the reconfiguration of space

In its latest report, entitled “Time to Care,” Oxfam International (2020) pointed out, as it has done several times in the past decade, that global economic inequality is out of control. Other global organizations and academic publications have also sounded the alarm about a rapidly polarizing world. Yet until rather recently, the fact that the inequality of wealth and income had increased since the 1980s within rich countries—notably the United States and Great Britain—only spurred debates about how social inequality was “bad for growth” (*The Economist* 2012). At the same time, news of the decline of income inequality in Latin America, viewed as the world’s most unequal region for decades, increasingly made the headlines as “Gini Back in the Bottle” (*The Economist* 2012)—a pun on the Gini coefficient, a common measure for income inequality, and the hit song “Genie in a Bottle.” The fact that the unprecedented changes had suddenly rendered the United States more unequal than much of Latin America further spurred debates on inequality in rich countries (Light 2013).

However, only a few voices pointed to how the increase in inequality world-wide was contributing to a reconfiguration of space and to the shifts this reconfiguration occasioned in charting elites and underclasses across cores and peripheries of the world-system. In world-system scholarship, the capitalist world-economy that emerged in the sixteenth century with Europe’s colonial expansion into the Americas is the basic economic entity. It comprises a single division of labor in which different areas perform different economic tasks—typically, industrial production in the core, raw material production in the periphery and a mixture of the two in the semiperiphery. While the unequal division of labor ensures the steady transfer of surplus from the periphery to the core, the location of world areas

within the global division of labor shifts in time and mechanisms of surplus transfer change. The system develops as a whole in a “pattern of interplay between cyclical processes of expansion and contraction and the secular evolutionary processes that undermine the basic stability of the system” (Wallerstein 2000, 109), as competing strata, technologies, and institutions negotiate conflicting interests across the interdependent structural locations of core, periphery, and semiperiphery. Knoblauch and Löw (2020) have coined “refiguration of space” to refer to the transformation of the social order as a result of tensions and conflict between different social structures in a recent, “refigured modernity”; this represents, for world-system scholars, the very mode of functioning and underlying logic of the capitalist world-economy since the sixteenth century. Drawing on world-system scholarship, anthropologist Fernando Coronil referred to the most recent installment in this pattern of interplay as a refiguration of space, noting that

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)

It is this reconfiguration of the global landscape through the unequal mobility of the very rich across cores, peripheries, and semiperipheries—rather than a spatial refiguration towards the centrality of the semiperiphery alone—that will constitute the focus of the present chapter. Coronil’s call for a differentiated, basically intersectional analysis of inequality echoed the provocative formula that Immanuel Wallerstein used in his 1988 analysis of racism and sexism in the world-system in order to describe racialized social mobility under capitalism:

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)

In turn, in a long essay published in the *Journal of World-Systems Research* in 2017, titled “Moving Toward Theory for the 21st Century: The Centrality of Non-Western Semiperipheries to World Ethnic/Racial Inequality,” Wilma Dunaway and Don Clelland argued for decentering the analysis of global ethnic/racial inequality

that sees white supremacy as the sole cause of racism and bringing the non-Western semiperiphery² to the foreground instead. In world-system scholarship, the structural position of the semiperiphery has been credited with ensuring the survival of the capitalist world-economy since its inception—mostly because semiperipheral intermediate positions have served to placate the system's tendency towards polarization between an exploiting core and an exploited periphery. By preventing the unified opposition of the peripheral areas against the core, semiperipheries fulfilled not only a significant economic function in the capitalist world-economy but also, and first of all, the major political task of providing stability to the system, one region at a time. As Wallerstein put it in the wake of the 1970s economic crisis:

The essential difference between the semiperipheral country that is Brazil or South Africa today and the semiperipheral country that is North Korea or Czechoslovakia is probably less in the economic role each plays in the world-economy than in the political role each plays in conflicts among core countries.

(Wallerstein 1979, 75)

Drawing on this conceptualization of the semiperiphery, Dunaway and Clelland argue that future theory-building must pay particular attention to “the rise of the Asian semiperiphery, where two-fifths of the world's population is concentrated” (2017, 399). It is worth engaging at length with their arguments in order to illuminate both the benefits and the pitfalls inherent in the (over)emphasis of spatial reconfiguration more generally, and of the structural position of the semiperiphery in particular. Such overemphasis placed on shifts in the world-system hierarchy, I argue, obscures decisive dynamics—first and foremost racially mediated social and physical mobility across cores, semiperipheries, and peripheries.

The authors' starting point 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” (Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 408). The article offers 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 non-Western states. The article thus strives to decenter Eurocentric perspectives by bringing non-Western semiperipheries to the forefront of social theory and by denouncing approaches centered on race as a 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 non-Western semiperipheries exacerbate and even cause racial/ethnic inequality to be misleading. The data provided by Dunaway and Clelland 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 non-Western 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 such.

In the following, I thus want to caution against what I think are three weak links in the argument about the role of semiperipheries in the increase of racial and ethnic inequality: mistaking visibility for causation, conflating the concept of race with the reality of racism (and its many historical and geopolitical configurations), and throwing the baby (white supremacy) out with the bathwater (Western knowledge).

I will limit my comments to two aspects. The first aspect is methodological and concerns the unclear unit of analysis that underlies Dunaway and Clelland's 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: magnifying glass or methodological bottleneck?

In order to draw attention to the role of non-Western 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.

(Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 412)

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 non-Western states and that large numbers of non-Westerners 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 [gross domestic product per capita] that was 2.3 times greater than that of the United Kingdom in 1980?

(Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 412)

Answers to the questions thus formulated seem to be possible only as blatant negations of the white supremacy theory. Yet this is due to the methodological bottleneck inherent in the questions themselves: on the one hand, their focus constantly shifts from structural positions within 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 non-Western semiperipheries to cause ethnic/racial inequality, mechanisms for 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 non-white 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-economy, rather than in individual countries going through different stages of development. 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—whether 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 for 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. In this sense, they are “large scale figurations,” as Knoblauch and Löw observe, drawing on Norbert Elias’ concept (Knoblauch and Löw 2020, 265). However, they are not new but instead date back five hundred years; their current reconfiguration does not change the systemic logic behind their creation. Indeed, Wallerstein’s early engagement with the construction of race as a structural category 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)

The world-systemic lens has the advantage of a magnifying glass that puts into clear relief entanglements and interdependencies between seemingly unconnected and spatially distant areas. If we focus instead on the role of one structural location—in this case, the semiperiphery—in order to explain the functioning of phenomena such as racism and processes such as increasing inequality, which have a system-wide logic, we exchange the magnifying glass for a methodological bottleneck that prevents us from seeing both historical connections and present transformations.

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 built 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 (Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 418) 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 non-Western semiperipheries will increasingly cause and/or exacerbate most of the world’s ethnic/racial inequality in the twenty-first century. As much as 53% of the world’s wealthiest capitalists today are not Westerners, Dunaway and Clelland point out. And yet, the authors note, 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 the composition of this class.

This evidence, pointing to an unprecedented shift in the nationalities of the world’s most recent billionaires, is indeed both striking and mounting. World-system 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 twelvefold increase in their respective number of billionaires from 2006 to 2012 (Albrecht and Korzeniewicz 2018, 103). At the same time, global financial consultancies such as Arton Capital predicted that the billionaire population was going to grow nearly 80% by the year 2020, an increase of 1,700 billionaires, to which China and India were expected to contribute disproportionately (Arton Capital 2017). The newest data, which show Asia recording the fastest rise in billionaire numbers in 2019 and China alone accounting for 32 of the top 40 fastest growing high net worth cities for the period 2018–2023, seem to confirm these predictions.

Although Europe and North America remain the regions with the largest number of billionaires, 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 calculated by Oxfam, since 2015, the richest 1% have owned more wealth than the rest of the world, while the number of individuals who 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 (Hardoon 2017). For 2019, Oxfam reported that the world's billionaires, only 2,153 people had more wealth than 4.6 billion people combined (Oxfam International 2020).

Nevertheless, it is misleading to treat the (relatively and absolutely) fast-growing but still 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 is 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 and Korzeniewicz 2018, 105).

Second, 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 and 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, which is not part of the Schengen zone), and the right to reside and work anywhere in the European Union. None of these programs include strict residence requirements for their investor citizens. Investors thus use the rights they purchased as remote access to the wealth accumulated in Western core states, 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, their rising number 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 as a constructed norm; 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 and 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 the world’s airlines, IATA, ranks Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, followed by Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, and Sweden, in the top 3 passports worldwide on account of a total score of countries to which their citizens can travel visa-free (189, 188, and 187, respectively, out of a total number of countries of 219) (Henley and Partners 2019). Of these, only South Korea is a semiperipheral country. Most passport holders in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia have scores below 70, while semiperipheral mainland China has a barely slightly higher score of 74—equal to that of Lesotho, and right below that of Namibia and Thailand. This explains why EU residence permits are extremely attractive to Chinese investors, and much more so than for Hong Kong investors, who—at least at the time of writing this chapter, amid changes in Chinese policies regarding Hong Kong—have access to 152 countries on account of holding “Special Administrative Region of China” passports—a reminder of residual colonial ties. The juxtaposition of the top 5 and the bottom 5 ranks on the index—only available for the 2018 ranking, and therefore slightly different from the 2019 numbers—makes the core-periphery divide in terms of global mobility particularly apparent.

It is thus even more misleading to view the ethnic and racial diversity of billionaires from semiperipheral countries as an argument against white supremacy. A growing number of Brazilian millionaires have 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, these are strategies of eluding the ascription of citizenship to 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.

The fact that race is used as a census category in few states and whiteness is 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 (Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 448) be taken to indicate the absence of whiteness as the constructed norm and racial stratification as a reality in Asia.

First, as scholarship on Orientalism, racism, and critical whiteness has repeatedly shown, prevailing norms—whether the West, Europe, heterosexuality, or whiteness—feature as unmarked categories (Hall 2006; 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 counterparts remain 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 and Wigen 1997). 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 an adequate 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 and Wigen 1997, 37).

Second, the extent to which Asian societies are impacted by racialization as a deviance from whiteness becomes apparent, among other things, due to 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 (Haritaworn 2016). Instead, what is often labeled the “Eurasian” or “Pan-Asian” look, considered more attractive than darker skin by a large majority of men and women across Asia, is associated with racial superiority, status, and higher income. It consequently fuels a booming cosmetics industry that thrives on skin-bleaching. Accordingly, four out of ten women surveyed in Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korea use skin-whitening products, the global market for which was “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” that “reduces the world’s diverse people into two lumps that conceal massive

ethnic/racial complexity” (Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 411). When attempting to see “beyond white racists and colonists” (Dunaway and Clelland 2017, 442), however, we need to take into account that, even if not all racists are white, racism in the world-system is premised on historically constructed and 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, as well as in Europe, 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. Ella Shohat showed how European demonology prefigured colonial racism and sexism by drawing on the stock of Jewish and Muslim stereotypes “to characterize the savage, the infidel, the indigenous man as sexual omnivore and the indigenous woman as sexual object” (Shohat 2017, 333). The incorporation of the Americas into the emerging world-system entailed transforming such imperial differences into colonial ones, as well as inventing Europeaness, ethnicity, and race (Mignolo 2006; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992). Walter Mignolo points to the momentous shift operated by the translation of race into racism as part of the emergence of the capitalist world-economy by noting that:

The link between capital accumulation and a discourse of devaluation of human beings was absent in co-existing sixteenth centuries empires like the Mughal, the Ottoman, the Aztec, the Inca, the Chinese and the emerging Russian one. The complicity between political economy and political theory, based on the racialization of human beings, languages, places, cultures, memories, knowledge . . . was the “novelty” of the sixteenth century and the historical foundation of the racial colonial matrix whose logic is still at work today.

(Mignolo 2006, 18)

The coemergence of capitalism and the racial colonial matrix has provided the context for the global division of labor between cores, semiperipheries, and peripheries since the sixteenth century. 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 such ideologies neither originated with nor were enhanced by the structural position of non-Western semiperipheries. When we start paying closer attention to spatial reconfigurations in order to understand current or historical phenomena, we should therefore make sure not to gloss over the very logic according to which some of these reconfigurations took place. In the case of inequality under capitalism, as the Black Lives Matter movement has amply demonstrated in recent years, racism most certainly remains a paramount structuring principle and underlying logic.

Notes

- 1 This is a revised and expanded version of an article titled “The Centrality of Race to Inequality Across the World-System” and initially published in 2017 in the *Journal of World-Systems Research* 23 (2): 465–473. doi: 10.5195/jwsr.2017.729.
- 2 In the following, I will use Dunaway and Clelland’s spelling of “nonwestern” only in direct references to their article. For more general statements, I will employ the more common spelling “non-Western” (countries, regions, semiperipheries).

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