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Coloring Critical Security Studies

A view from the classroom

Sen, Somdeep

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Coloring Critical Security Studies: A View from the Classroom

A few years ago, during the first session of my elective, security studies course on Islamist politics in the Middle East, I went around the room and asked the students, ‘why are you taking this course?’. In their responses, the students expressed interest in topics like ‘global terrorism’, ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, ‘Muslim immigrants’, ‘radicalism among young Muslims’ and the ‘influx of Muslim refugees’. These themes were familiar, not least because they have become somewhat synonymous with mainstream academic and popular discussions of Islam and the Middle East. However, it was the response of a student of color that stood out. She announced, ‘I’m taking this course because the literature is not just white people talking about Islam’. Sensing that her statement had made some of the other (white) students visibly uncomfortable, she approached me at the end of the session and explained, ‘My family is from the Middle East and I am just tired of the Eurocentric approach to the way we are taught about the Middle East. What about the opinions of people who look like me?’

There was no mention of race or racism in the description of the course. Come to think of it, I was strategic in my reluctance to use the ‘R-word’ (Rutazibwa, 2016: 193). Knowing the contentious nature of its deployment (Rutazibwa, 2016: 192), I was worried about the optics and professional consequences of me, an early career researcher of color employed at a predominantly white department, openly pursuing racial diversity in the curriculum of a course catering to a largely white student body. Instead, I had chosen the somewhat less contentious alternative ‘Eurocentrism’ to describe the course as an opportunity for students to learn about the hierarchies and biases that animate the epistemological foundations of International Relations as a discipline. The discussions in the course were then inspired by the intellectual ethos of critical security studies and used Islamist politics as the empirical basis for deliberating how and why the Middle East came to be seen as a bastion of ‘backwardness’ and a source of insecurity (vis-a-vis the West) in global politics (Ramakrishnan, 1999; Lockman, 2004; Teti, 2007; Nayak and Malone, 2009). Students read Said’s (1979) work on the construction of the ‘Orient’ in the western imagination as a place of exotic barbarism, Collins and Glover’s (2002) assessment of the discursive politics of America’s global war on terror, Abu-Lughod’s (2013) writings on the perception of Muslim women as victims in need of saving and Anderson’s (2006) critique of American political scientists’ overwhelming focus on democratization in the Middle East. These works, among others, helped them better understand the positioned nature of knowledge production in International Relations.

Of course, often implicit in any discussion of International Relations' Eurocentrism is a recognition and critique of its imperial foundations (Ahluwalia, 2001; Shilliam, 2010; Muppidi 2012; Seth, 2013) as well as its racialized ontological and epistemological core (Persaud and Walker, 2001; Biswas, 2001; Chowdhury and Nair, 2002; Henderson, 2007). Further, as was the case in my course, this critique frequently results in a greater representation of scholars and scholarly perspectives from beyond the borders of the Euro-American academic universe (Tickner, 2003; Shani, 2008; Acharya, 2014). Yet, in announcing that her interest in the course was piqued by the number of non-white voices in the curriculum and later explaining that scholarly engagement with the Middle East needed a greater representation of the opinions of people who 'look like' her, the above-mentioned student also reminds us that race cannot be left implicit in such deliberations. Neither can it be simply interchanged with less divisive terminology that we hope would somehow address the varied ways in which race (and racism) orders the workings of the discipline. Instead, we need to recognize that race plays a central orientating role in determining how disciplinary knowledge is formulated, disseminated and encountered in the classroom. Accordingly, in this intervention, I build on the growing scholarly acknowledgement that race informs the intellectual priorities of the field of International Relations and argue that it is equally important to deliberate its impact on the way the discipline is taught and learned. To this end, I focus on the role of race in the teaching of International relations in general and critical security studies in particular, as I suggest two reparative pedagogical approaches aimed at recognizing and remedying the racialized foundation of the (sub)field.

Critical ≠ Post-Racial

In a way, critical security studies may seem well-positioned to recognize the 'central importance of race and racism' (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam, 2015: 3) in the teaching of International Relations – especially since its criticality is premised on rethinking a foundational, orientating concept (i.e. 'security') of the discipline. The scholarship affiliated with this brand security studies tends to break with realist traditions as it recognizes that the 'object of security' is not 'given and self-evident'. Instead, by deeming 'security' to be a 'derivative concept' (Williams and Krause, 1997: ix) it politicizes the discipline of International Relations and encourages us to critically deliberate 'whose security is being assumed and under what conditions' (Walker, 1997: 69) and who is being deemed as a source of insecurity. In effect, critical security studies provides for an epistemological opening wherein knowledge about the political world is found not just at the level

of 'inter-state politics'. The level of the individual is equally relevant where conceptions on emancipation, ethics and inequality are pertinent factors that determine what (in)security is and how it is experienced (Booth, 1991: 321; Booth 2005). It is then in this context that Walker suggests that a rethinking of security studies, and International Relations in general, would have to incorporate "debates about political identity" and draw insights from "literatures on...feminism and postcolonialism" (Walker, 1997: 69. For further discussion, see Enloe, 1990; Hansen, 2000; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). To this list, we could add scholarly works on race and racism in International Relations.

However, it may not be enough to simply *be* critical in our pedagogical and curricular approach. There have been several works that have sought to specify the boundaries, limits and scholarly implications of social scientific criticality (e.g. Bohman, 1999; Salter, 2013; Sayer, 1997). But I am suggesting that just because a critical approach to security studies and International Relations is meant to denote an epistemological opening, in reality it does not necessarily result in a brand of knowledge dissemination in the classroom that is able to remedy the discipline's racialized foundations. The reason for this has less to do with the intellectual veracity of critical scholarship. Instead, it has more to do with the long shadow of the racialized epistemic core of International Relations that, animated by what Du Bois termed as the 'color line', positions the perspectives and interests of 'lighter races' in the mainstream and relegates the perspectives of the 'darker...races' to the margins (Du Bois, 1903: 23). This is evident in say the contributions of Kerr (1916), Giddings (1898) and Reinsch (1900) to the formulation (and institutionalization) of the theoretical and methodological foundations of International Relations. As Henderson goes on to reveal, their works actively ventured to define the center and periphery of the discipline as they placed the west in the 'privileged position of the racial hegemon', while naturalizing the racial inferiority (and barbarity) of the non-white races (Henderson, 2013: 78-79).

This is not to argue that the non-white perspective has been entirely absent in the genesis of the International Relation. In the early years of the discipline, prominent scholars like Merze Tate, Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois, affiliated with the 'Howard school', were concerned with the relevance of race, racism and imperialism to the making of the global order (Henderson, 2017). And, while in the subsequent decades it was largely expunged from the mainstream, a still active generation of scholar "retrieved and relaunched" the "critique of race and racism" in International Relations in the 1990s (Shilliam, 2020: 153). Yet, there is a reason why this critique is rarely accorded 'center stage'

in the curriculum of International Relations courses (Krishna, 2001: 401. For further discussion, see Doty, 1993; Vitalis, 2000); and why, in 1932, International Relations scholar Merze Tate had to let go of the introductory chapter to her book ‘on theories of imperialism’ because her editor said ‘readers wouldn’t be interested’; and why Tate’s dissertation supervisor confidentially advised the Rockefeller Foundation to not fund her research since he considered ‘the history of imperial rivalries’ to be of little importance to the field of International Relations (Vitalis, 2015: 18). Critical approaches – be it in security studies or International Relations in general – are often placed in the margins of the discipline as they are seen as engaging with the disciplinary mainstream from outside-in. In comparison, the mainstream has remained as is and, despite the critique, its ‘racist precepts’ continue to define the structure, vocabulary and intellectual priorities of International Relations today (Henderson, 2013: 90). Indeed, then it is not surprising that my student noticed the ‘color line’ in the curriculum of courses on the Middle East in the 2010s. Kerr may have argued that ‘savages of Africa are immeasurably behind the Americans’ or that Indians and Egyptians ‘are definitely less advanced than the peoples of Europe today’, back in 1916 (Kerr, 1916: 142). Nonetheless, there is a continuity between the disciplinary perspectives espoused by Kerr and the manner in which my student experienced the discipline a hundred years later.

In the classroom then, we are left with the challenging task of imparting knowledge that is critical while still living in the shadow of the racialized epistemic core of the discipline. To be sure, a *critical* security studies approach to the study of Islamism in the Middle East resulted in a not-so-white course curriculum. Yet, the pervasiveness of the white supremacist intellectual assumptions of International Relations also demonstrate the need to acknowledge that the historically established ‘color line’ is still active and synonymous with the nature and purpose of the discipline. A reparative pedagogical approach has to begin by recognizing and accounting the geneology of this ‘color line’ and how it came to occupy the intellectual core of the discipline. But what is also apparent from the discussion above is that it is equally important to recognize that even a critical approach to say security studies or International Relations is affected by the whiteness or white supremacy of the disciplinary mainstream. Meaning, these racist precepts are so pervasive that critical scholarship cannot simply claim to have moved past them. Instead, a far more fruitful and reparative manner of teaching the discipline would be to accord a certain centrality to the discussion of its racialized intellectual core. And, irrespective of whether the course design and curricular approach espouses a critical outlook, students should be routinely engaged in a dialogue on the

impact of race and racism on the empirical priorities, methodological approaches and theoretical assumptions of the practitioners of the discipline.

International Relations: A positioned affair

Alongside a discussion of the color line that occupies the intellectual foundations of International Relations, a reparative approach could also be formulated in view of the multiple positionalities that shape the various ways in which disciplinary knowledge is imparted and received in the classroom. In my course, for instance, the student's experience was shaped by the extent to which she – as a person of color – felt represented in the curriculum. Some of the white students were probably uncomfortable with the insinuation that a reading list that was 'just white people talking about Islam' is somehow problematic. They may have wondered, 'are we allowed to talk about Islam, even though we are white?'. Then again, the nature of the link between positionality and the teaching or learning of International Relations is not always as expected. This was evident in the positionality of the instructor. My feeling of being marginalized within the academy as a person of color as well as my frustrations with the often-pejorative disciplinary approach to the Global South in International Relations led me to design a curriculum that would introduce students to the intellectual hierarchies and biases of the field. Nonetheless, I was also well aware of the boundaries of mainstream International Relations. As a PhD student and, at the time, as a postdoc I had been witness to various institutional practices like 'hiring, promotions and tenure decisions' as well as a disciplinary code of conduct at play regarding what counts as 'mainstream agendas' and as 'socially, culturally, economically, or politically "policy-relevant," "useful," or "impactful" research.' (Weber, 2015: 29). Rarely was the scholarly discussion of race and racism presented as an institutional or disciplinary priority. So, keen on remaining in the mainstream and finding a place *within* what Agathangelou and Ling terms as the 'House of IR' (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004), I refrained from explicitly referring to the racialized landscape of International Relations and my experience of the same.

Here we could look to a wide array of works that have argued that the process of knowledge production in the social sciences is deeply positioned. In *Stranger and Friend* Powdermaker proposed that we are a 'human instrument studying other beings and their societies' and it is only but natural that our 'biological, psychological, and social conditioning' would impact our scholarly view of the world (Powdermaker, 1966: 19). Similarly, emphasizing the inalienability of this

conditioning to our intellectual deliberations and arguing for the primacy of the ‘issue of positionality’ in scholarly work, Abu-Lughod noted that if we critically assess the ‘value, possibility, and definition of [scientific] objectivity’, rarely will we be able to disentangle who we are from what we study (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 141). In this sense, an academic text could be seen as a ‘partial truth’¹ that reflects both the empirical truth as well as the scholar’s positioned truth (Clifford, 1986: 7). That said, the dynamics in my classroom also revealed that the relationship between who we are and how we teach or learn is not always straightforward. Undoubtedly, race was at the forefront of how the student of color encountered the disciplinary knowledge imparted in the classroom. Even the visibly uncomfortable white students were made aware of their race when one of their peers uttered the phrase ‘white people talking about Islam’. A greater awareness of this aspect of who they are, may then have shaped how they experienced the course thereafter. However, in pursuit of my professional aspirations, I made a conscious effort not to utter the ‘R-word’, despite the course being an outgrowth of my racialized experience of the field. Certainly, race played a role here and the discussion of positionality remains essential to any deliberation of the racialized teaching or learning of International Relations. However, to understand what this positionality entails we need to account for not just the *who* but also *how* (i.e. under what conditions) the discipline is encountered and experienced.

With this complexity of the notion of positionality in view, a reparative pedagogical approach would, at the outset, need to acknowledge that “our research, theorizing, and interpretations” of the political world (Lake, 2016: 1112), is not an abstract exercise. On the contrary, it is a deeply positioned affair. As I have discussed earlier, the positioned nature of International Relations is evident in the way the ‘color line’ occupying its epistemic core leads to disciplinary knowledge that naturalizes ‘racialized accounts of world politics’. But these ‘racialized accounts’ are also ‘based on hierarchies of the human’ (Sabaratnam, 2020: 2). So, in part, a reparative approach should recognize that the way mainstream International Relations theorizes the world is largely an extension of the white, male lived experience and intuitive understanding of politics and society (Lake, 2016: 1113-1114). More importantly though, this recognition would grant space and validity to the efforts of non-white scholars and students to see themselves reflected in the teaching/learning of the discipline – this, even when such efforts encompass a struggle to reconcile *who* we are with *how* we are compelled to navigate the mainstream norms, practices and hierarchies of a discipline

Of course, the wider insinuation here is that study of politics in general is much less an endeavor driven towards discovering an unequivocal truth. It is more of a political exercise that is shaped by our personal orientation towards how we understand what politics is and where it occurs.

Additionally, it is important to emphasize to the students that one cannot expunge their specific, experientially formed, understanding of the political world. In fact, there is no objective understanding of the world. Instead, we should embrace the understanding of the study of politics and International Relations as a ‘contest of perspectives’ (Isaac, 2016). Every theoretical framework, methodological approach and empirical focus is then an outgrowth of a particular perspective, drawn from a particular experience of politics. In the end the struggle within the discipline is not a struggle to be more scientific. Instead, it is a struggle of individual academics to find ways to forefront what they consider the most pertinent problems that plague the world around us.

Admittedly, my propositions here run against the grain, with regard to the disciplinary norms whereby it is the ‘prestige of terming [an] academic venture as scientific’ that takes priority over its ability to display the diversity of ways in which the political world is encountered and experienced (Sen, 2018: 105). If its not scientific, Jackson notes, the assumption often is that it is erroneous. So, International Relations as a discipline, aspires to appropriate ‘the cultural prestige associated with the notion of “science”’ by posturing like the natural sciences and underlining a disciplinary commitment to ideas of ‘truth, progress [and] reason’ (Jackson, 2011: 2-3). In part, this claim to its scientific-ness is a reflection of the rise of positivism in the human sciences in general (Steinmetz, 2005: 1–57). Furthermore, the limited access to research funds (Flyvberg, 2011: 2) has led to the marginalization of research agendas focused on issues of identity and positionality – often considered not particularly conducive to generalizations – in favor of far more easily quantifiable *problematiques* that have a greater likelihood of being funded by grant-giving institutions. Of course, what this ignores is that for the social sciences, ‘it is the social that is the science’. And our task as practioners and students is to capture the variety manners in which the political world is encountered with and experienced. The questions of identity and positionality in general and race in particular therefore cannot be relegated to disciplinary margins. They should very much *in focus*, in our intellectual gaze. And, it is only when that happens can a discipline like International Relations claim to provide an inclusive perspective on politics and society (Sen, 2020a).

Postscript: Possibilities of a Non-Racist Discipline

The question remains: what would a non-racist discipline look like? It is presumptuous to think that any number of reparative pedagogical strategies would allow us to simply escape International Relations's historically entrenched racist precepts. Aijaz Ahmad once wrote, 'History is not really open to correction through a return passage to an imaginary point, centuries ago, before the colonial deformation set in'. Ahmad was of course referring to the English language and the feasibility of effacing it as an integral facet of the colonized people's identity (Ahmad, 1992: 77. For further discussion, see Sen, 2020b: 142-146). Without stretching this metaphor too far, I would argue that International Relations's racist history is not open to course correction either. But while we cannot change this history, we can choose what to do with it.

At the outset then, this requires the recognition of a foundational dilemma – namely, that racism or white supremacy is not just *an* aspect of International Relations. They characterize the very nature and purpose of the discipline. A non-racist International Relations would thus need to position itself as not just an endeavor to add a critical pillar within the existent white supremacist disciplinary structures and norms. It would need to be something else altogether. For one thing, cognizant of the racialized intellectual foundations of International Relations as it is taught today, the non-racist International Relations would look elsewhere for the intellectual building blocks of a new epistemic core. To this end, it would need to draw on a well-established (albeit, ignored and marginalized) legacy of scholarship within International Relations that has deliberated the role of racism and white supremacy in the making of the global order. However, the purpose of this scholarly legacy in the non-racist discipline is not to simply speak to the mainstream from outside-in or languish in the category of 'critical approaches' that often appears at the back end of International Relations curricula and textbooks. Instead, in a non-racist International Relations the works of, among others, Alain Locke (1992 [1916]), W.E.B. Du Bois (1903, 1915), Merze Tate (1943, 1961) as well as the more recent scholarly engagement with questions of race and racism² would be placed at the very top of the disciplinary hierarchy *as* the mainstream. Doing so would mean recognizing that these works make an indispensable contribution to the scholarly agenda of International Relations.

However, the racism of International Relations is not just a matter of its core intellectuality orientation. It is equally reflected in the material consequences of its racist precepts, evident not least in hirings, tenure decisions and grant-giving practices. All of these act as the infrastructure that

keeps up the color line and functions as a nexus of (dis)incentives that renders it professionally unwise to critique International Relations's racialized epistemic core. In contrast, in the non-racist International Relations, practitioners of the discipline would not need to fear – as I did – the optics and consequences of critiquing International Relations's racist legacy. On the contrary, such efforts would be deemed as an extension of the core purpose of the non-racist discipline. Seen together, what I propose here is the abandoning of International Relations in its current form. However, theorizing “interstate relations” (Weber, 2015: 29; For further discussion, see Wight, 1960; Cox, 1981) remains a worthwhile disciplinary agenda. And, the non-racist International Relations can make an invaluable contribution to this agenda by revealing the multiple, positioned ways in which politics is understood and experienced.

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¹ Here I am adopting Clifford's idea that ethnographic truths are partial in nature as they reflect both the realities of the field as well as the positionality of the researcher.

² I have cited these works throughout this intervention.