



# Race in IR: toward empirical study

Bianca Freeman<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 26 September 2023 / Published online: 9 November 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

Errol Henderson writes “the banality of white supremacy, more than the democratic peace thesis, is probably ‘the closest thing to an empirical law in world politics.’” Such a view is likely shared by IR scholars that study race as kindred systems of hierarchy. By comparison, the collective field is now “noticing” its long silence on the subject. Renewed calls to mainstream race have come with an unsettling admission: the “norm against noticing” was not by mistake but an epistemic devotion to a set of intuitions that exclude the agency of a global majority. In our silence—inadvertent or otherwise—we forgo a more accurate account of outcomes where race is theoretically important or even banal as Henderson deciphers. What is made clear by his contribution is that we can and should change course. My response to Henderson seeks to reinforce the argument for a positivist approach to race in world politics—both its promises and challenges.

**Keywords** Race · Racism · International relations · IR · Empirical research

Errol Henderson writes “the banality of white supremacy, more than the democratic peace thesis, is probably ‘the closest thing to an empirical law in world politics.’” Such a view is likely shared by IR scholars that study race as kindred systems of hierarchy. By comparison, the collective field is now “noticing” its long silence on the subject. Renewed calls to mainstream race have come with an unsettling admission: the “norm against noticing” was not by mistake but an epistemic devotion to a set of intuitions that exclude the agency of a global majority. In our silence—inadvertent or otherwise—we forgo a more accurate account of outcomes where race is theoretically important or even banal as Henderson deciphers. What is made clear by his contribution is that we can and should change course.

“Racism and Global War in World Politics” comes on the heels of a kind of disciplinary reckoning. Recall the recent swell of social movements against anti-Black police violence and anti-Asian hate crimes. These events and similar campaigns for

---

✉ Bianca Freeman  
bfreeman@ucsd.edu

<sup>1</sup> UC San Diego, San Diego, USA



racial justice summoned new attention by majority communities to the systemic racism faced by minority groups across the globe. The backdrop of COVID-19 and far-right political activity seemed to only heighten an uneasy awareness of race and its constitutive nature in our social, interconnected world. In parallel fashion, IR was not spared from embracing a measure of introspection. Here, I do not wish to neglect the pendulum whereby this shift toward noticing has occurred. *When* and *how* race *has* or *has not* been “seen” throughout the discipline’s development is extensively and thoughtfully contextualized by Henderson and other colleagues. Instead, I hope to use this forum in dialogue with Henderson and in attempt to address the present moment. The dilemma of race—or rather, our construction of IR as the study of politics “above” race—is a glass half full. In my view, we have an opportunity to understand international relations in a more earnest way that is itself also global.

Today, I think some scholars are now more persuaded to contemplate the effects of race on interstate interaction. Particularly encouraging is the potential of a positivist turn on this front. Budding empirical work is challenging “race-neutral” conceptualizations of common determinants in our models, a step that can advance ongoing efforts to unmask patterns of order. On this score, Henderson enjoins his readers to overturn the field’s silence by building careful theory that centers the role of white supremacy in world politics. Using war as the case, Henderson shows us just how salient racism has been to the specter of international conflict and its most destructive outcomes.

Before embarking on a selective discussion of Henderson’s arguments and themes, his opening critique of IR is worth noting up front. A careful indignation is closely entwined with his empirical study of war. Contention with the norm against noticing is overt and unequivocal. He denies us the comfort of assuming that our silence is passive. Rather, the under-theorization of race in IR is as obvious as it is peculiar, especially given the role of white supremacy in Hitler’s rise to power as the proximate cause of World War II. Henderson’s frustrations do not stop at IR theory, however. Indeed, an omission of race is inextricably linked to the profession from which the norm inheres. There is a notion that the products of an institution are somehow set apart from the environments that produced them. This cognitive dissonance Henderson describes can be perceived in our own amnesia about race despite what we know about its application as an orienting worldview in the formation of the early field. Equally telling is the mid-century work by Howard School scholars that counterpoised this dissonance in IR. They unmasked white supremacy in the field’s holdover assumptions about the social world. On the study of war, the forebears of this critique identified race as an ordering principle. Henderson does similarly by inviting his readers to carefully reassess major world wars as outcomes that vary by the intensity of racial imperialism.

By my read, perhaps most significant is Henderson’s point of departure. He resolves to forsake further convincing about the norm against noticing. This is healthy, to be sure. It seems the field is now more or less aware of its silence. Bizarre and inordinate evidentiary demands or other forms of dismissal can be painful reminders that the norm is yet active and difficult to surmount by design. However, we can respond to the norm against noticing by *noticing* race—not just



its absence—in the literature. I believe that one promising strategy involves a shift beyond critique and toward empirical study. This is the general thrust of Henderson’s contribution. He does frame it somewhat differently though. Henderson appears to promote positivism as another tool for epistemological retrieval and anti-racist critique. While empirical and critical inquiries typically bear distinct methodologies and goals, they can both add value to our understanding of race in IR. Importantly, Henderson shows us how they can also complement one another.

I do not wish to speak for anyone else, nor is it wise to do so. At great risk of overgeneralizing, I offer these thoughts as broad speculations about IR. My own experiences doubtless influence my view on where the norm against noticing stands and how to overcome it. Moreover, my particular training has afforded me the intellectual space and support to develop intuitions that *see* race in the world. This support is not afforded everywhere. Like any other scholar in the IR community, my life and identity also shape my intuitions which, in turn, guide my theoretical suppositions. In what follows, it is clear that I engage Henderson’s contribution through the lens of my own reflections and work on race and international security. I also follow with a few critiques or how I would do things differently. Ultimately, my intervention seeks to reinforce the argument for a positivist approach to race in world politics—both its promises and challenges.

## Where is the theory?

Henderson seeks to demonstrate a more general association between racial imperialism and global war. Yet, the heart of his contention is a critique of the norm against noticing racism in our theories of war. It is true that prominent mainstream IR scholarship could have produced serious examination of the role of white supremacy in modern wars. Henderson shows us that IR theory yoked “strange bedfellows” on the subject of imperialism and World War I wherein race was both an available and sound thesis upon which to draw. For Du Bois, as outlined by his *Foreign Affairs* essay in 1925, white racism melded the interests of the European bourgeoisie and proletariat in a mutually reinforcing pursuit of domination in Africa and Asia. The Great War resulted from disputes among the major powers over imperial acquisitions constructed along a global color line.

Du Bois was not the only one who theorized imperialism and war. Yet, his most likely interlocutors (or who should have been) ignored the race dimension. In fact, Du Bois’ thesis was ignored altogether. Henderson’s review of prominent IR “paradigms” across time reveals just how comprehensive the race-bound tunnel vision of the field was, even on imperialism and its relationship with war. Having taken similar stock of theory on race in IR in my own work, it is clear that we have long been equipped for serious (empirical) inquiry into outcomes we suspect are racialized in world politics. Personal intuitions and experiences shape the propositions we find most attractive and worth testing. Still, a reasonable assertion can be made that



race and racism are unavoidable when seeking to understand patterns in an unequal global order.

Despite a proliferation of theory and analysis during the Cold War, most did not integrate white supremacy into their models. Explanations for bargaining failure between states did not even consider racism as a competing or complementary alternative. In the words of Waltz, cited by Henderson, Africa is “kind of a blank spot.” And if the IR canon did pay attention to race, it was typically by flirting with or even embracing the notion of anarchy as “the primitive”—equating the resulting state of nature with actors outside the European core.<sup>1</sup> This was often done tacitly, stripping the study of world politics of any outward sign of race or racism. When it came to war, scholars almost ironically rendered African societies violent yet incapable of participating in strategic interaction under the shadow of a seemingly imminent World War III. Instead, non-white actors were racialized as lacking “consciousness and competence,” thus, making them appear irrelevant to a theory of war and IR in general (more on this later).

### Toward empirical study

Henderson rightly directs our attention to and then, crucially, *beyond* the epistemic silence of the early discipline and *toward* race as IR theory. He does not broach this task without help. Nor, as he states, is his interpretation of war novel (it is intentionally derivative of secondary sources). Rather, Henderson walks us through seminal Howard School contributions on the role of racial imperialism in global war. In doing so, he elaborates several concepts and claims that I believe are important for theorizing race in interstate interaction. First, race is a social construct devoid of any biological or anthropological basis. It categorizes humans according to contrived differences that are themselves nearly always made hierarchical. It is from race that modern relations were established and one’s relationship to power, defined. Howard School architect Alain Locke gives us this highly social concept upon which he develops theory to explain war. For Locke, race was “the pivot [of] global economic and political domination.” Race became and did whatever imperial actors wanted it to.

At this time, “theories” of race were created to help justify direct (and indirect) rule over those deemed racially inferior. Western imperial orders defined their racial superiority in terms of white supremacy, thus, constructing a racial antipode, *black*, as the most “debased, materially and intellectually,” in the global system. Race and the application of its interior hierarchies underpinned the imperialist projects over which bargaining between global powers escalated or outright failed.

Henderson examines the *Asiento dos Negros* just prior to the Imperial Age as an illustrative case. The asiento system featured elaborate interactive racial and

<sup>1</sup> Sampson, Aaron Beers. “Tropical anarchy: Waltz, Wendt, and the way we imagine international politics.” *Alternatives* 27, no. 4 (2002): 429-457.



contractual hierarchies whereby the “Great Powers” of the era simultaneously granted and contested the other’s access to enslaved Africans, the naval capacity to transport them, and the compensation to evade import duties on them (smuggling). Asiento licensing only heightened anxieties over colonial political economy and the zero-sum view of commercial disputes. It effectively situated slave labor at the heart of the “trade interest,” defense of the British and Spanish possessions, and the eventual entry of France into a series of battles resulting in the War of the Austrian Succession.

Henderson takes much more care in building and drawing out the nuance of this qualitative account. From it, we can see that racial imperialism was not of little consequence. Black slave labor (in dispute) was an important source of future bargaining power. Therefore, imperial states were less inclined to credibly commit to *not* exploit such newfound power based on concessions made by their imperial rivals seeking to avoid war in the present—hence, the formation of the asiento or the *division* of slave labor. Race *made* the object over which actors entered into these disputes. It also justified the asiento as an acceptable deal among possible deals preferred to war. Imperial appetites for racial slavery, impossible to satiate, ultimately demanded that these bargains fail.

Henderson also reminds us that racism is a “variable phenomenon” that is neither inevitable nor automatic, but changing over time in response to the political, social, and economic world. As such, his engagement with the theses of Locke and Du Bois on racial imperialism informs us that racism, though readily applied to non-whites, was no less useful employed against fellow whites. For example, WWI was an intra-racial contest between Europeans wherein simultaneous claims to standard bearer of white civilization were made. The British Empire, dominant in the Anglo-Saxon hierarchy, provoked challengers both in imitation of and reaction to its racial imperialism. The war essentially commenced a “balancing of imperialisms” wherein rivalry among “Britons” and “Germans” would determine a global (racial) leadership that only one could assume. Henderson ties these points together: “since race is a social construct reflective of power relations, then its employment in modern imperialism, which is based in power differentials, allows imperialists to construct classifications of superior and inferior as racial designations...those previously classified as racially *similar* may be deemed racially *dissimilar*.” When we take racial hierarchy into account, the ways that states *racialize* and *are racialized* pursuant of their interests and positions in world politics become clearer. Race can be projected out and weaponized, racial “others” constructed and racial affinities manufactured.<sup>2</sup> The combination of Henderson’s vignettes on violent interaction between states illustrates such options.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hor, Amoz JY. “NATO was founded to protect ‘civilized’ people. That means White,” *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/11/nato-ukraine-refugees-whiteness/>



## Race and war: theoretical and methodological opportunities and challenges

Henderson leads us into a few possibilities and issues on the theory and research design front. In addition to Howard School tradition, he reconsiders paradigmatic thinking on the question of race in IR. For Henderson, the apparent prominence of racial imperialism suggests something more than a state-level factor. Racism could reflect a more “international” process, like the socialization mechanism that some neorealists describe. The conduct of modern interstate relations—constrained and homogenized by the global system—occurs among different peoples and societies of the world. Thus, socialization through balance of power politics implies an inherently racial process *among* states.

A conscious shift to neoliberalism may suggest that racism is actually an international regime of shared norms and institutions, implying a system-level variable. Some scholars have developed this multi-dimensional construct, like Vitalis on racism as a liberal international institution and Lake on international hierarchy as the interaction between racial inequality, principles, and law.<sup>3</sup> New quantitative work on international organizations (IO) examines racism through institutional membership patterns.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, my research program assembles theoretical propositions about racism in the application and enforcement of international law and intervention. As I allude throughout, I employ a hierarchy framework to navigate my own questions about how race shapes interstate interaction. Given the transnational arc of the largest racial projects in history, a theory of race in international politics, from which we can draw reasonable inference, makes sense and is very possible.

One potential limitation of Henderson’s approach is the very construct of race. Throughout the essay, racial imperialism appears to be the empirical focus. However, the theoretical construct—that is, the abstract concept or set of higher and lower order concepts—chosen to explain global war is not necessarily clear nor concise. Along with racial imperialism, Henderson simultaneously presents additional concepts, including white supremacy, white racism, and racism among others. Some of these could be used interchangeably while others may overlap partially. Do each of these concepts of race constitute the construct of racial imperialism in this study? Theoretical constructs, let alone racial imperialism, are difficult to define operationally. A construct of race will need to clarify both what it does and does not capture.

Moreover, its operational definition—how racial imperialism will be measured—is not obvious. Given the construct used, racial imperialism could be somewhat of an abstract entity. Therefore, we need a proxy. I acknowledge that Henderson seems to identify the “salience of racism in a state’s foreign policy leading up to, or in the conduct of war” as the measure. He states that it is the, “commonsense standard of reasonableness” to be considered in the absence of causal inference. However, is salience a measurable representation of racial imperialism, i.e. the independent variable?

<sup>3</sup> Vitalis, Robert. “The graceful and generous liberal gesture: Making racism invisible in American international relations.” *Millennium* 29, no. 2 (2000): 331-356; Lake, David A. “Laws and norms in the making of international hierarchies.” *Hierarchies in world politics* 144 (2017): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Lipsy, Phillip Y., and Jiajia Zhou. “Institutional Racism in International Relations.” *Available at SSRN* (2022).



Or, is it the construct itself? Does salience imply intensity? Or, does it capture some other quality of importance and noticeability? How do we know when racial imperialism is salient to an interstate interaction, even anecdotally? What does the continuum of salience look like? What are extreme cases on either end? Understanding what salience means, how its quantity varies, and how it can be operationalized will be useful. It is worth noting that extreme caution is required when attempting to operationalize a racial construct, especially to avoid essentializing racial difference. Ultimately, elucidating these elements of race—how it is conceptualized on the theoretical plane and how it is measured on the observational plane—will allow for a more seamless transition between steps in the practice of empirical research.

Constructing a design for cross-national studies on race comes armed with its own problems. On the question of war, it is difficult to disentangle racial difference from a conflict of interest. Does race compel states with no underlying dispute into war? Do two states avoid war because they deem each other racially “similar” or because they had no conflict of interest? Are there cases in which an enemy is racialized yet not antagonized? Indeed, we may not observe many of these particular cases. Can race translate into a conflict of interest that in turn translates into an interaction between enemies? Henderson frames racial imperialism as the object over which bargains between empires escalated, even among racially similar states. However, this approach only explores one quadrant or set of possible cases wherein racial difference and war can arise. It is not enough to look at the level of racism in a state’s foreign policies. Instead, we need to learn if perceptions of racial difference are analytically prior to the conflicts of interest that surfaced. Again, this is hard to really know. An (experimental) research design should vary perceived threat independent of race in addition to managing other issues of measurement, aggregation, and causation.<sup>5</sup>

Moving forward, the study of race in IR would benefit from inquiry into the contemporary patterns we observe. While a theory of racial imperialism in the direct colonial sense is useful for understanding its historical association with global war, we can also identify its modern concepts for theorizing world politics today. This is especially pertinent in a time when overt racism is less accepted socially or legible institutionally. It is by other means, including the omission of race itself, that patterns of racial exclusion are preserved in practice. Henderson inadvertently emphasizes one these: the projection of incapacity onto racial others. International intervention, for example, may be at least implicitly premised on the belief that non-white majority communities are deficient and in need of assistance or corrective action.<sup>6</sup> On the related subject of war and other crises, inflated threat perception of racial others is another mechanism through which race conditions how states interpret the other’s behavior and encounter perceived challenges to the status quo.<sup>7</sup> These notions of deficiency

<sup>5</sup> Freeman, Bianca, D. G. Kim, and David A. Lake. “Race in International Relations: Beyond the ‘Norm Against Noticing.’” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 175-196.

<sup>6</sup> Freeman, Bianca. “Racial Hierarchy and Jurisdiction in U.S. Status of Forces Agreements.” *Security Studies*, (2023) Forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Búzás, Zoltán I. “The color of threat: Race, threat perception, and the demise of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902–1923).” *Security Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 573-606; Kim, Daegyong. *Anti-Asian Racism and the Racial Politics of US-China Great Power Rivalry*. University of California, San Diego, 2022.



and hostility, though seemingly contradictory, are two sides of the same coin in the great power relations we observe. Racial norms are also always contested. Therefore, resistance to racial hierarchy is another transnational pattern worth investigating.<sup>8</sup>

Henderson nudges us to focus on race and its various contortions for a more grounded understanding of war and interstate interaction generally. I concur. In an unequal global order, I doubt we can fully understand world politics without it. Like the Howard School and critical traditions since, an empirical literature on race in IR can deliver a deeper understanding of international competition and conflict.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

---

<sup>8</sup> Getachew, Adom. "The limits of sovereignty as responsibility." *Constellations* 26.2 (2019): 225-240.

