



Race, Racism and Development

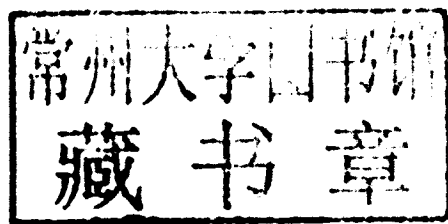
Interrogating History,
Discourse and Practice

Kalpana Wilson

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KALPANA WILSON



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About the author

KALPANA WILSON is a Fellow at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics. Her experiences teaching development studies in British universities, as well as her involvement as an activist around issues of racism and imperialism, led her to pursue the themes of this book. She has also written and researched extensively on agrarian transformation in Bihar in India, women's participation in rural labour movements and the relationships between neoliberalism, gender and concepts of agency.

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Introduction

I was in the last stages of completing this book in March 2012 when the ‘Kony 2012’ video went viral. The video and the responses it generated seemed to highlight many of the questions I had been thinking and writing about over the preceding months. Produced by the US-based NGO Invisible Children, the video was part of a campaign for the arrest of Ugandan Joseph Kony, the leader of the armed group the Lord’s Resistance Army, and his trial by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, in particular the abduction of thousands of children as soldiers. The video called for US military intervention in Central Africa to be stepped up in order to ‘Stop Kony’ and targeted young people in the global North to join a mass movement demanding this action.

Less than three weeks after being uploaded to the Internet, ‘Kony 2012’ had been viewed by more than 84 million people, and had already generated intense controversy. Many commentators highlighted the fact that the video was heavily oversimplified and referred to a situation which had since changed drastically – Kony was no longer active in Uganda, and, it was argued, resources were more urgently needed to help ex-child soldiers to rebuild their lives than for the mission of capturing him. Perhaps most tellingly, although this was less widely circulated in the mainstream media, far from being reluctant to sustain a military presence in the region as the video suggests, the US administration had ongoing military involvement and significant strategic and economic interests in the area bordering Uganda and the DRC (where Kony had now fled), not least because

of the existence of significant oil resources which are already being exploited by North American and British companies.

Meanwhile, other writers focused on the racism implicit in 'Kony 2012', which was seen as reproducing colonial narratives about Africa in which white people are constructed as having a moral obligation to intervene to rescue and 'save' black people from chaos, violence and irrationality. Although the video is ostensibly about children in Uganda, the emotional core of the film is in fact the scene in which the white American film-maker Jason Russell shows his 5-year-old son a photograph of the 'bad guy' Joseph Kony, setting up a highly racialised dichotomy between the 'evil' black man and the innocent white child who, once he understands the all-too-simple problem, can help to 'fix' it.

But these two strands of criticism – of the role of global capital in producing the US military intervention the video supports, and of the role of ideas of 'race' and of racism in shaping the video – remained largely separate. The questions I would like to pose in this context relate to the connections between the two. What is the work that ideas of 'race' do here? Can we understand 'Kony 2012' as not simply reflecting latent racism, but mobilising it, and if so, to what ends? More broadly, how do we understand the ongoing relationship between 'race' and capital on a global scale? How does racism inform and legitimise changing patterns of exploitation, exchange and accumulation? And how do these patterns, in turn, reproduce material inequalities which continue to be explained through a lens of 'race'?

In this book, which in many ways takes these questions as a starting point, I have sought to bring a critical understanding of 'race' and racism into the same frame as 'development', which I conceptualise as including not only the vast array of development organisations and initiatives but the wider processes of economic, social and political change with which these are concerned.

The period when I first began teaching development studies in London more than a decade ago coincided with a phase when anti-racist activists in Britain were rethinking the contours of racism in

the changed circumstances of the ‘War on Terror’. More than ever, it was felt to be imperative to seek to understand racism as it was experienced and confronted in Britain in the context of imperialism and the changing strategies of global capital. The changes under way had begun well before 9/11, however, with the advent of neoliberal globalisation and, from the 1990s onwards, the rise of new civilisational discourses and the construction of new ‘threats’, which were racialised in ways both novel and familiar.

With the invasion of Iraq following on rapidly from the occupation of Afghanistan, the tone of apologists for Britain’s colonial history became increasingly celebratory. Simultaneously, the notion of ‘development’ increasingly appeared in public pronouncements in the context of military intervention, combating terrorism, preventing migration and securing populations in the global North, a set of linkages which were to crystallise in the development/security paradigm according to which, as Tony Blair put it, ‘the yearning is for order and stability and if it doesn’t exist elsewhere, it is unlikely to exist here’.

In a couple of decades, ‘development’ as it was popularly understood in Britain had acquired a dramatically increased visibility and a whole range of new meanings. These meanings were embodied in the figure of the development worker – almost always the employee of an NGO, but with increasingly dense connections with northern militaries on the one hand and corporates on the other, who appeared in different guises: morally compelled to ‘take sides’ on the frontline of war zones in Africa, embedded in military intervention to protect human rights in the Middle East, and teaching people everywhere in the global South about civilisational ‘values’ like democracy, gender equality and entrepreneurialism – and they were meanings which, as I argue in this book, were always, also, implicitly about race. Yet race and racism remained an area of profound silence in development studies, a silence which was all the more weighted by the fact that experiences of learning and teaching were structured by power-laden encounters between academics, the overwhelming majority of whom, still, were white,

and a very diverse range of students, many of whom had travelled from countries in the global South to acquire the qualifications which would mark them as having the skills required to work in development.

I argue that the ideas of 'race' and of development have in fact been intimately related from their consolidation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards, but that the relationship between the two has changed significantly in different historical periods. To understand this, I suggest, we need to treat development as not simply encompassing institutions which are avowedly engaged in international development – government departments like DfID or USAID, international organisations like the World Bank, or development NGOs – even though there is so much to be said about 'race' and racism within these institutions. Rather, development should be understood more broadly as incorporating the whole complex of unequal material relationships and processes which structure engagement between the global South and the global North, as well as the primary discursive framework within which these relationships have been constructed for more than sixty years. It is therefore inextricable from the rapidly shifting and mutating operations of global capital, and should be understood in relation to concepts of imperialism, rather than, as in much development discourse, as an alternative which renders these concepts invisible.

In the process of making these connections, three recurring analytical themes have emerged. The first relates to my preoccupation with tracing the relationship between race and capital. I argue that constructions of race and racial hierarchy (explicit or implicit) are reconfigured and redeployed both in response to resistance to capital which threatens to transform radically the distribution of power and resources, and in the context of often related shifts in patterns and strategies of global capital accumulation. This is explored and elaborated, for example, in the context of the uprisings of 1857 in India and the decades that followed; in the context of resistance to neoliberal economic policies and the good governance agenda of the 1990s; and in Britain during the contemporary War on Terror.

The second theme involves exploring what the materiality of race might mean in the context of global structures of capital and processes of accumulation. Questions of the body and embodied experience, the material production of difference, and how these are shaped by racial ideologies, emerge as central from discussion of development policies and interventions such as those relating to (or impacting upon) population control, HIV, famine and malnutrition, and are elaborated further in Chapter 6 in particular.

The third theme relates to the tendency of discourses of development to appropriate and incorporate critical approaches. This has been particularly marked, I argue, since the advent of neoliberalism as the dominant model of development. The means by which elements of both postdevelopment and postcolonial critiques have been, apparently paradoxically, incorporated within neoliberal frameworks is examined at a number of points in the book. In these contexts, I reflect on the implications for the theorisation of race in development and for the politics of transnational solidarity.

Theorising race and development

If 'race' in development is an arena of silence, it is at the same time a theme that precipitates engagement with a very rich variety of work by scholars and activists. In particular, three interrelated and overlapping kinds of analytical work have inspired and informed this book: Marxist theorisation of imperialism, and in particular 'Third World' Marxism or the diverse approaches to revolutionary theory and practice which have been developed in, and with reference to, the global South (this evidently extends beyond the work of the dependency theorists usually cited in histories of development thought); analysis of 'race' and racism as it operates within North American and European social formations, much of it broadly identified with critical race theory; and scholarship which is located within the avowedly diverse and porous analytical field of postcolonial theory.

The emergence and establishment of postcolonial theory has generated a sustained critical focus on discourses of development,

the 'representations and institutional practices that structure the relationships between West and Third World' (Kapoor, 2008: xv). The deconstruction of discourses of development and their role in regulating the 'Third World', in particular through processes of construction of the 'other' by way of a series of binary oppositions and strategic silencings, has formed the basis for much contemporary critical work around development. Crucially for thinking about race, it has challenged the construction of development as a neutral, 'technical' field, making it possible to raise questions of power, difference, location and subjectivity. Not surprisingly, then, it is within a postcolonial theoretical framework that the relatively small body of existing work which directly addresses 'race' and racism in development is located.

But the postcolonial approach also leaves unanswered or even unaskable a number of questions which become particularly pressing in the context of the historical and contemporary relations between race and development. For example, precisely what kinds of material arrangements and relationships underpin and are perpetuated by the discourses that postcolonial theorists deconstruct? Is it enough to speak, as much postcolonial theory does, of the overarching category of modernity as the framework within which colonial discourses emerge, or do we need to distinguish the particular economic processes under way in different periods, and, critically, how these change and the implications of these changes? These are particularly salient questions when considering race, because the centrality of the idea of 'race' to Enlightenment thinking cannot be fully understood without foregrounding the enabling relationship between race and capital, and the accumulation from racialised slavery it allowed, which in turn made possible the establishment of European capitalism. Further, as I explore in this book, constructions of race have been repeatedly transformed, reworked or reanimated in the context of both changing strategies of capital accumulation and resistance to them. But because postcolonial approaches tend to regard all conceptions of economic development in poststructuralist terms, as metanarratives of progress, they often neglect the changes

in patterns of global capital accumulation reflected in changing models of development, such as the shift from developmentalism to neoliberalism, and their implications for race. This approach also does not encourage us to consider the visions of different kinds of development which often inform resistance to capitalist accumulation processes, so that paradoxically those engaging in this resistance may be silenced in postcolonial literature.

As well as the key influence of Fanon, postcolonial theory has drawn directly and indirectly on the work of Foucault, whose thinking also informs much current critical scholarship in development which is not avowedly postcolonial. Foucauldian concepts of discourse, power/knowledge, disciplinary power and the production of the subject are all ones that I deploy repeatedly in the chapters that follow. At the same time, in incorporating these concepts within a broad framework of Marxist political economy, I also diverge from a Foucauldian perspective in a number of key respects, in particular in relation to Foucault's conceptualisation of power as circulating and pervasive, rather than located, which characterises his later work. This notion of power has often been adopted in ways which, I have argued, preclude a consideration of the sources of power, or examining its relationship to material structures of production, exchange and accumulation in any depth. Further, Foucauldian approaches to development, as I suggest later in the book, have tended to emphasise the regulation, management and containment of populations at the expense of attention to the dynamics of extractive and exploitative processes, thus limiting the possibilities for an exploration of the changing relationship between race and capital.

This is by no means to suggest that postcolonial and Marxist thinking can be distinguished by a simple discursive/material dichotomy, or indeed that they represent mutually exclusive systems of thought. Marx's own engagement with the role of discourse in sustaining power is evident in much of his work but is most fully elaborated in *The German Ideology*, in which he argues with reference to the ruling class that 'insofar ... as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is

self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age' (Marx and Engels, 1974: 64)

Nor am I arguing here that postcolonial theorists completely neglect material relations. Although postcolonial theorists have tended to emphasise discursive continuities with the colonial period, as in other work influenced by poststructuralism, notably feminist theory, there has been a significant 'turn' to the material, particularly in relation to the body and space. This is particularly significant for discussions of race, and, as I indicate below, forms one of the elements on which I have drawn in order to explore questions of embodied difference in the context of development.

I have indicated some of the areas where the framework of postcolonial theory has seemed to me to be insufficient to address the questions of race, racism and development, even though many ideas within it are invaluable for such a project. The central aspect of this, however, is the way postcolonial ideas have proved amenable to appropriation within neoliberal approaches to development. As I have suggested, neoliberalism has shown a remarkable capacity to incorporate and transform critical ideas. I explore this in detail in the context of the response to critiques of representations of Third World women and the foregrounding of notions of women's agency and empowerment within development in Chapter 2, and elsewhere I look at how, more broadly, elements of postcolonial ideas about difference and hybridity as well as critiques of Eurocentrism have been incorporated into neoliberal development discourses such as those produced by the World Bank. This is partly made possible, I argue, by the prominence of notions of choice and of freedom within neoliberal discourses that are constructed as emancipatory narratives, primarily in relation to a state that is by definition oppressive. The specific and often fatally constrained and constraining meanings of these terms within this context, I suggest, can only be fully exposed by a political economy critique which not only establishes the shackling of these notions to the institutions of property and the

capitalist market, but demonstrates the day-to-day material effects of their operation.

Attempts to theorise 'race' and racism within a Marxist framework have, of course, had to challenge economic reductionist and essentialising interpretations of Marxism, in which lived experiences are seen as determined by the individual's relations to the means of production alone, and a consideration of, for example, racism among the white working class in countries of the global North is viewed as divisive and irrelevant. Yet, as Stuart Hall has argued, historical materialism as a method explicitly rejects this reductionism, allowing us to trace the relationship between racism and capitalism, and explore specific conjunctures of time and space in order to establish how this relationship has evolved in a variety of ways (Hall, 1986). As Hall explains in his exposition of the ideas of Gramsci, this involves 'not simply more detailed historical specification, but – as Marx himself argued – the application of new concepts and further levels of determination in addition to those pertaining to simple exploitative relations between capital and labour' (1986: 7).

Hall has argued for an analytical focus on the social formation rather than the mode of production as the framework within which historical specificities can be explored at a more particular level and the possibility of the articulation of more than one mode of production within a single social formation can be acknowledged (1986). This approach has been important for Marxist-oriented scholarship on race and racism, generating influential concepts such as Omi and Winant's racial formation (1986). But the tendency to treat the social formation as a bounded category for analysis of race, which has characterised some critical race theory in the USA, raises questions about how to address the more extensive scope of imperialism, the contemporary operations of global capital, and neoliberal globalisation, questions which come to the fore in a consideration of race in development.

While remaining attentive to the inherent mutability of racial categories, as well as the ways in which experiences of racialisation are shaped by particular histories, I am concerned here to locate the