

Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5397-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8014-5669-5 (paper)

“In the first decades of the 20th century in the United States, international relations meant race relations.” With this startling sentence, Robert Vitalis begins a long journey into the history of the discipline, through an account of its biggest thinkers, its most important institutions, and its most influential publications.

Vitalis begins with a serendipitous discovery that he made some time in the early 1990s: that one of the flagship journals of international relations, *Foreign Affairs*, was once called the *Journal of Race Development*. This fact is, he notes, not recorded on the journal’s website—and remains unmentioned even in the brief (and irritated) review that the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, Gideon Rose, penned right after Vitalis’ book was published (Rose 2016).¹ It is this sort of historical amnesia (or deliberate silence?) that Vitalis seeks to correct in his 180-page rewriting of the origins of international relations, or IR. Vitalis begins by reminding readers that introductions to IR, which typically start with a grounding in the realist tradition and its stated roots in Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, is an invention of the Cold War (p.19).² This sort of history-telling centres a constructed, ideational rather than existing, institutional history of the discipline, a move that Vitalis refutes. The result is a very different origin story, which reveals “the constitutive role of imperialism and racism in bringing an academic discipline in the United States into existence” (p.x).

1 In fact, Rose flat out refuses to engage with the indictment implicit in Vitalis’ retelling of the origins of the discipline, which Vitalis explicitly lays out when he traces the inheritors of the discipline in figures like Henry Kissinger (PhD Harvard, 1954), Madeleine Albright (PhD Columbia, 1976), and Condoleezza Rice (PhD University of Denver, 1981), and in events like the intervention in Bosnia in 1993 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (p.4). Instead, Rose calls the book “interesting and important yet flawed”, especially in its “indictment of the postwar discipline of international relations, let alone its contemporary manifestation”.

2 See, for example, the entry “Political Realism in International Relations” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/> (last accessed 30 January 2018). Other introductory textbooks in international relations—and political science more generally—similarly trace the origins of the discipline back to pre-disciplinary and pre-institutional times and thinkers (e.g. Jackson and Sørensen 2012).

Vitalis argues that IR's theoretical and institutional origins are more accurately located within an overarching concern for the fate of "white nations"—or with notions of race and empire—in the late 19th century. "They wrestled with the prospect that a race war might lead to the end of the world hegemony of whites, a future that appeared to many to be in the offing" (p.1). Beginning to come together in the early 20th century, and coming into its own during the Cold War, Vitalis traces how "race" operated as the primary political unit through which the world was made sense of. He argues that "race" went on to be replaced by categories like "nation" and "state," and that the "biological myth" of "white states" gave way to the "spatial myth" of "great powers" (p.22). He ends up bringing to light a long, and disconcerting, line-up of primarily white scholars concerned with the downfall of "the world hegemony of whites".

More importantly, he digs out the hidden, even hopeful, history of black scholars whom he dubs as members of the "Howard school of international relations" (p.79-82) after the towering, D.C.-based centre of black scholarship, Howard University. According to Vitalis the black scholars he groups within this school may have disagreed on key points, but they shared "early and relentless critiques of the supposed truths of racial science and the role racism played in sustaining imperialism" (p.12). By excavating this alternate history he inadvertently gives the discipline a way out: the collected writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, Rayford Logan, and Merze Tate provide one alternate canon to begin a full-scale reconsideration and re-representation of the full breadth of intellectual and political debates taking place during the founding days of international relations. The impressive networks that many of these black scholars were involved in—with "the theoreticians of liberation and the future leaders of independent Africa" (p.12) and other formerly colonised countries including C.L.R. James, Marcus Garvey, Aime Cesaire, George Padmore, and Kwame Nkrumah—provides another, as yet unexplored, set of political thought of hierarchy and inequality, rather than anarchy and equality inherent to the realist and liberal theory that constitute most introductions to IR.

Vitalis' investigation traces the origins of the discipline through four historical periods, each marking either the extension of imperial power or challenges to it: the American conquest of Cuba, Guam, Hawaii and the Philippines (1898-World War I); the rise of anti-colonial movements in the early 20th century (the interwar years); the Great Depression, World War II, and the rapid expansion of the movements of subjugated peoples (World War II); and the beginning of the Cold War with its

newly independent, formerly colonised states and movements seeking to decolonise those territories still under imperial control (the 1950s). In each period, he focuses on a different pair of scholars: W.E.B. Du Bois and John William Burgess (1898-World War I); Alain Locke and Raymond Leslie Buell (interwar years); Ralph Bunche and Edward Mead Earle (World War II); and Rayford Logan and Harold Isaacs (the 1950s). At the very end, he also adds the illustrious career of Merze Tate, a black female scholar doubly marginalised because of her gender, who analysed the United States as an imperial power and other forms of “internationalism”, “transculturalism”, and “cosmopolitanism” through the study of missionaries and mining firms (p.163-164).

Vitalis brings attention to what many non-white students of politics, including myself, may frequently have described as the elephant in the room: namely, that many “founding fathers” of the disciplines we study were deeply concerned with the racial superiority of whites, and ongoing imperial hegemony. John William Burgess, the founder of Columbia’s Graduate School of Political Science (the first in the US to grant PhDs) and its in-house journal *Political Science Quarterly*, famously argued that American democracy was built on the “Teutonic germ” of Anglo-Saxon settlers. Though this perspective was widely shared—for example, by Thomas Jefferson—it was Burgess who, in building “the disciplinary, professional, and intellectual foundations of modern political science” (Gunnell 2004: 73 quoted in Blatt 2014: 1063), integrated it into mainstream knowledge production.³ The other scholars that Vitalis focuses on do not quite enjoy the same

3 In fact, Vitalis explains, he argued that the superior “Teutonic branch of the Aryan race”—which included “the English, French, Lombards, Scandinavians, Germans, and North Americans” (Burgess 1934: 245-255)—“had two obligations: to never surrender power to non-Teutonic elements, which meant at times excluding others from participation in political power, and to ‘carry the political civilization of the modern world into those parts of the world inhabited by unpolitical and barbaric races, i.e. they must have a colonial policy’. He added the injunction that Teutonic nations had a responsibility to civilize the uncivilized and semi-civilized ‘by any means necessary’” (p. 35). This belief remained steadfast, even as Burgess opposed President William McKinley’s imperial turn, which included the annexation of Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico.

For a more detailed analysis of the racial facets of John William Burgess’ work, see Blatt (2014). Blatt quotes from Burgess’ two-volume *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law* (Burgess 1890, 1891) where he further develops his belief in the superiority of the “Teuton” in the formation of the state: “Not all nations...are endowed with political capacity or great political impulse. Frequently the national genius expends itself in the production of language, art or religion; frequently it shows itself too feeble to bring even these to any degree of perfection. The highest talent for political organization has been exhibited by the Aryan nations, and by these unequally...Asiatic[s]...

stature as Burgess, yet they played a key role in the emergence and solidification of international relations as a separate discipline. Raymond Leslie Buell was an instructor in comparative colonial administration at Harvard when he wrote the 700-page *International Relations* (1925), where he discussed “the increasing tensions between the world’s lighter- and darker-skinned peoples” (p.55), and was the “first political scientist in the United States to do fieldwork in any of the various African colonies or in South Africa” (p.56). Though Buell was one of the few white scholars who was in regular touch with his colleagues at Howard University (including Alain Locke and Ralph Bunche), he was a confusing character with only a “moderate position in the debate on the best way to preserve white racial hegemony”; he both argued “in favour of exclusion, which the Japs didn’t like” (Buell quoted on p.60), and regularly promoted black scholars on research committees. Though now forgotten, Vitalis points out that important concepts used within international relations, like “complex interdependence”, can be traced back to Buell’s articulation of it as “the world order Caucasians constructed and the accelerated extent and pace of interactions among races” (p.57). Similar tensions are apparent in Edward Mead Earle’s and Harold Isaacs’ work (p.85-120, 121-168). In tracing the development of the discipline of international relations through Earle’s time at Princeton’s Institute of Advanced Studies, and Isaac’s time at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Vitalis tells a story of scholars who, in their attempt to keep international relations alive, shifted the language away from race and over to national security in World War II and, later, the Cold War. Though the reader is left wanting a more detailed exploration of how the language of race and empire was finally replaced by that of states, nations, and security, Vitalis provides future scholars with plenty of raw material.

The at times hidden tenacity of racial logics within the discipline today remains unexplored, but Vitalis does manage to give sufficient examples of how concerns with racial and imperial dominance continues to exist today. For example, early in his book, he points out that Samuel Huntington’s (1996) infamous *The Clash of Civilizations*⁴ “resembles the earlier, arguably more have created no real states; and the European branches manifest great differences of capacity in this respect. The Celt, for instance, has shown almost none, the Greek but little, while the Teuton really dominates the world by his superior political genius” (Burgess 1890: 3-4).

⁴ Starting life as an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis was responding to the end of the Cold War, and a proliferation of scholarship that was attempting to make sense of the new world order that had emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union (including Francis Fukuyama’s [1992] thesis on the “end of history”). In the

influential, and no less sensational *The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World Supremacy* (1920)” (p. 4) written by T. Lothrop Stoddard (PhD Harvard, 1916). In a post-9/11 era, it also makes sense to note that Stoddard also published *The New World of Islam* (1921) where he raised alarm bells about the “Mohammedan Revival” in the face of Western imperial aggression. In a later book, *The Revolt Against Civilisation: The Menace of the Under Man* (1922), he speaks about the “iron law of inequality”, a position remarkably similar to that of Huntington: the hierarchy of cultures, or peoples. Today, the words “race” and “empire” have mostly been dropped—though a wish to strengthen American empire returned, as we know, in early conversations after the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. However, Vitalis argues that it makes sense to trace how they re-emerged in another guise, e.g. with the emergence of area studies during the 1950s and 1960s. As George W. Stocking argued in *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (1968), “all that was necessary to make the adjustment to the new situation...was the substitution of a word. For ‘race’ read ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’, for ‘racial heredity’ read ‘cultural heritage’, and the change had taken place. From implicitly Lamarckian ‘racial instincts’ to an ambiguous ‘centuries of racial experience’ to a purely cultural ‘centuries of tradition’ was a fairly easy transition—especially when the notion of ‘racial instincts’ had in fact been largely based on centuries of experience and tradition” (quoted on p.133).

Against this long legacy of international relations scholarship that was obsessed with upholding white hegemony—merely switching out “white” with “Western”, “American”, or “European” as racial ideologies were debunked in the post-World War II era—Vitalis provides a dizzying introduction to show how black scholars critical of racial and imperial logics were systematically marginalised and eventually erased as international relations solidified itself into a fully fledged discipline. This study of how black scholarship was marginalised to make way for its white counterpart also serves as a primer to all the other thinking that IR could engage with. Vitalis explores the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, including *Worlds of Color* (2014), where he further unpacks his famous insight that “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line”. Today, Du Bois’s article, Huntington (1993) presented his principle idea: “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.” Huntington’s article was later turned into a book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).

Bois is one of the first historical black scholars, and among the more popular ones, to have been given his rightful place as one of the founders of modern social science, most notably with the publication of Earl Wright's (2015) *The First American School of Sociology: W.E.B Du Bois and the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory*. Within the field of IR, Vitalis notes Du Bois' long-standing challenge to the idea that hierarchy was somehow natural; instead, already in the 1890s, Du Bois explained this hierarchy "as the outcome of history, specifically, of colonial and mercantile capitalist expansion, and of the transatlantic slave trade that secured the dominance of the West" (p.26). His longstanding involvement with pan-Africanist movements around the world is investigated as one of the many positions that black scholars took as part of a wider critique of white scholarship naturalising domination.

Similarly, Vitalis explores other scholars like Alain Locke and his "framing of Harlem as part of a world movement" (p.68). In the essay "The New Negro"—re-published as the introduction to an anthology showcasing "Voices of the Harlem Renaissance" (Locke 1992)—Locke argued, says Vitalis, that Harlem, with a "population of Africans, West Indians, and African Americans that had grown from 2,000 to 200,000 in the space of a single decade, was 'the largest Negro community in the world', a 'race capital' with 'the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia'" (p.68).

Vitalis continues with the rich scholarship of Ralph Bunche and Rayford Logan. Bunche, in his *A World View of Race* (1936), rejected essentialist ideas of race to instead call for "anti-capitalist working-class solidarity as the only means to real freedom for African Americans" (p.97). Criticising the "false solution" of pan-Africanism promoted by the likes of Du Bois and George Padmore, Bunche insisted that the "'surest road toward liberation of the African masses' was the overthrow of capitalism in the metropole" (p.99). He argued that "class will some day supplant race in world affairs. Race war then will be merely a side-show to the gigantic class war which will be waged in the big tent we call the world." (Bunche quoted on p.98), though he later disowned the book and the argument. Similarly, Vitalis lays out Logan's trenchant criticism of the League of Nations' mandates regime, which during conversations to keep it alive under the Atlantic Charter he

condemned as “white supremacy, segregation, and the continued effective disfranchisement of the native peoples” (p.111).⁵

Vitalis’ book comes at a time when a new generation of scholars—including Tarak Barkawi, Robbie Shilliam, Naeem Inayatullah and Ayşe Zarakol, among others—are introducing analyses of hierarchy, or racism and empire, back into the discipline of international relations. Publications like *International Relations and Non-Western Thought*, edited by Shilliam (2011), and Zarakol’s (2010) *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* offer new and important insights into alternate canons for the study of international politics, and the consequences of racial and imperial logics today. At a time when new collectives of students and faculty are calling for the decolonisation of their disciplines, and when we are witnessing the resurgence of white and Western supremacism, this intervention is more important than ever.

⁵ The mandates regime was established under Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, and was drafted by the victors of World War I. The article dealt with “those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world”, asserting that “the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League”.

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January 2018