The racial state

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The concept of a “racial state” both draws upon and challenges the official lexicon of Western political theory. In the conventional genealogy that traces Western political thought’s intellectual origins to ancient Greece, theorizations of the state can be found from the start. Plato and Aristotle offer us a range of characterizations, both descriptive and normative (good/bad), most of which are still in use today: monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy. Of course, the exclusions taken for granted in the premodern period mean that there was no pretense that the state was anything but a minoritarian institution. Women, slaves, and foreigners were not even conceivably full members of the Athenian polis, while patricians and plebeians in the early Roman Republic were sharply demarcated in status and rights. So, the state in the classical world was not bound by popular democratic will, if the demos are conceived of inclusively. Nor, of course, would medieval monarchies place on the same scale of political consideration the interests and demands of the feudal nobility and the humble serf. It was government of the people, but certainly not by and for any but a small privileged segment of them.

It is really only with the advent of liberal modernity, then, that the crucial transition from the world of ascriptive status and hierarchy to the world of contract and consent begins, and even then the transition is very partial. As exemplified most clearly in social contract theory’s 1650-1800 “golden age” (Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan, 1651; John Locke: Two Treatises of Government, 1689; Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Social Contract, 1762; Immanuel Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals, 1797), democratic government—albeit heavily qualified—was now to be the new norm. Even Hobbes’s endorsement of absolutism rests not on traditionalist hierarchical premises but modernist egalitarian ones: it is by popular contractarian consent and fear of others’ non-compliance that the mighty Leviathan is brought into existence. And for his successors, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, the contract metaphor would be used to justify “egalitarian” (as in white male, though sometimes just propertied white male) rule, whether in the constitutionalist commonwealth, the direct democracy of the “general will,” or the republican Rechtsstaat. It is against this background of advertised but unrealized universalism—a polity consensually based on the equal rights of all “men”—that the indictment as actually exclusionary of a state pretending to be representative thereby gains its demystificatory force. Thus, the accusation, the political exposé, that the supposedly inclusive liberal democratic state is really a bourgeois state/a patriarchal state/a racial state (Goldberg, 2002; MacKinnon, 1989; Macpherson, 2011; Miliband, 2009; Mills, 1997; Pateman, 1988).
By comparison with the extensive Marxist literature, though, the “racial” state is comparatively under-investigated and under-theorized. I suggest that the two crucial questions for us are the following: (1) Conceptualization: what is a racial state? How should it be essentially characterized? (2) Periodization and Scope: when do racial states come into existence and what is their scope?

Conceptualization

The conceptualization of the racial state will obviously be determined by competing conceptions of race, racism, and what kinds of policies essentially constitute racial governance. Consider, as an ostensive starting point and useful foil, historians Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann’s well-known study of Nazi Germany, *The Racial State* (1991), in which they declare (p. 23) that “the Third Reich became the first state in world history whose dogma and practice was racism.” On this analysis, the racial state is virtually unique. Thus, there is no problem of under-theorization except perhaps as lack of investigation of this particular regime’s racist workings. Yet a decade earlier, historian George Fredrickson’s *White Supremacy* (1981), a detailed comparativist treatment of the United States and South Africa, had concluded (p. xii) that both nations should be regarded as “Herrenvolk societ[ies] in which people of color … [were] treated as permanent aliens or outsiders.” This certainly sounds like a “racial state” characterization and indeed, more recently, James Whitman’s *Hitler’s American Model* (2017, p. 7, 5, 160) reveals that the Nazis used American Jim Crow legislation as their juridical model for the anti-Semitic 1935 Nuremberg Laws. The two countries’ “shared commitment to white supremacy” made the United States at the time “the innovative world leader in the creation of racist law” and thus “the natural first place to turn for anybody in the business of planning a ‘race state.’”

So, while the Third Reich is undoubtedly demarcated in various ways, for example by the modern “industrial” character of its horrific racial genocidal program, it would still be theoretically mistaken to make it the sole member of the category. The real defining characteristic, I suggest, is systemic racial subordination (that may be manifest in policies other than genocide, for example racial slavery, expropriation, or colonial forced labor), and on this basis, let us attempt a more conceptual approach to the question.

To begin with, the idea of a racial state presupposes, at a minimum, the intersubjective belief in races, Rs, in the society in question. It could be, however, that only one race, R, is deemed to exist in the given society. So, a racial state, in the sense of a state privileging R1s over R2s, is not possible: if some people are advantaged over others, it cannot be on “racial” grounds. At least two Rs, R1s and R2s, need to exist, though there could be more, R3s and R4s. But again, this condition is necessary rather than sufficient, for it could be that no race is currently discriminated against, nor is there any legacy of previous discrimination that has shaped the overall social structure in a way that unfairly benefits, say, the RXs.

Obviously, then, what is required is (1) the existence of at least two races, R1 and R2, in the society in question, and (2) the differential privileging of the R1s over the R2s, whether in terms of ongoing patterns of system-wide transactional discrimination or structural disadvantaging or both, on the basis, (3), whether exclusively, or at least significantly, of R-membership. The last stipulation is necessary to eliminate situations where, through accidental correlation, the privileging/disadvantaging of the respective Rs is not based on race but on some other identity they happen to have, for example their being simultaneously Q1s and Q2s (such as members of dominant and subordinate classes), or possessors of some other set of intersectional traits that, by happenstance, has produced this particular outcome of overlap.
with R-identity. So, R-membership has to play some appropriate causal role for the characterization to be apt.

Now “state” is ambiguous between nation-state (that is, the polity as a whole) and a particular complex of apparatuses of government/governance (that is, the state as a ruling entity). To be sure, depending on one’s background theory of sociopolitical causation, the line between the two may be drawn in radically different places. Contrast, for example, the classic Marxist view of the “bourgeois” state as a centralized organ of ruling-class power with the more centered Foucauldian vision of power as “capillary,” permeating the social order as a whole. But bracket these differences. Then a “racial state” could refer both broadly to the society in general (cf. class society for Marxism, patriarchy/patriarchal society for feminism) and to the governing apparatus of that society (cf. the “bourgeois” state as a variety of class state, and the “patriarchal” state as a variety of gender state). In general, we would expect them to be in sync, that is, a racial polity privileging R1s over R2s would be governed by an apparatus reproducing that privileging. But just as Marxism envisaged a transitional “socialist” state (classically, if unhappily, termed “the dictatorship of the proletariat”) whose mission it would be to dismantle the capitalist class order and prepare the groundwork for “communism,” a classless order, so one could imagine the term “racial state” also being applied to a racially reformist state apparatus trying in the name of R2 emancipation to end R1 domination. This would then be a politically transformative “racial state,” one seeking to undermine illicit inherited R1 racial advantage and the social-structural hegemony of the R1 racial ancien régime in the larger nation-state.

Ideally, of course, the goal would be a society of racial equality and justice, where race, R, is no longer linked with unfair advantage and disadvantage, or even disappears altogether. But it could transpire that the actual outcome is a new kind of racial rule, in which the R2s now oppress the R1s. Needless to say, this has precisely been the fear that has historically haunted the actual white-dominant orders of modernity: the regional terror ignited across the slaveholding Caribbean and the Americas by the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution; the panic at the prospect of “Negro Rule” in postbellum 1865-77 Reconstruction in the United States; the 1980s’ warning that an ANC (African National Congress) “terrorist” victory in apartheid South Africa would lead to a bloodbath of whites. The contemporary version is the fearmongering in white nationalist, alt-right, and neo-Nazi circles about the prospect of “white genocide” and being “replaced” by people of color and/or Jews.

So, the four key ideas—as illustrated in the homologous notions of a bourgeois or patriarchal state—are system-wide differential group advantage that is causally linked to differential group power and is morally unjust. That is, one or more races, R1 … will be differentially and unfairly privileged vis-à-vis one or more other races, R2, R3 … and this privileging will be the result of coordinated action on the part of some subset of R1 … to institutionalize structures, policies, and practices that have this effect, and/or to resist the dismantling of these structures, policies, and practices once they have been established.

For the “racial state” characterization to be apropos, then, such privileging has to be systemic, not a matter of isolated individual occurrences, or particular flawed social institutions, and either actively created and maintained by the pertinent state agencies, or not challenged and corrected by these agencies (for example in patterns of individual, group, and corporate action) when such intervention would seem to be called for on grounds of racial equity and the norm of governmental protection of people’s legitimate interests. “Privileging” is being conceived of in a very broad way that can encompass economic benefit, political input, cultural influence, juridical status, moral standing, and many others. Without such differential R1 advantage, it would be odd to speak of a racial state, since state power would not be
invidiously serving R1 interests. On the other hand, without the exercise of differential R1 power in creating and maintaining the social order, it would likewise generally be odd to speak of a racial state, since in this case, by hypothesis, that order arose from and is being perpetuated by other causes. But the crucial point is that by norms of racial moral equality the advantage is somehow morally unjust, involving invidious discrimination and/or the perpetuation of the legacy of past invidious discrimination against the subordinated race(s). (It is necessary to specify “invidious” since policies of corrective racial justice—for example, affirmative action and reparations—will arguably also require racial discrimination, in the sense of demarcating members of some R group for special treatment over other Rs in ameliorative public policy.) Thus, all four elements are required. While for racists, a racial state is a praiseworthy sociopolitical institution (assuming it favors them), from a non-racist perspective it is, of course, one to be condemned, so the phrase is a pejorative one (with the possible exception noted earlier).

The point of putting things in this very abstract way has been to try to get at the essence of a racial state without being tied down to specific historical manifestations. In other words, one wants a conceptualization broad enough that it can accommodate not only (what I will claim are) the many different varieties of actually existing and historically existent racial states, but possible future incarnations not yet anticipated. It needs to be borne in mind, for example, that the R1s need not be white. Because of the actual history of European domination in modernity, it has been natural—to the extent that there has been literature in this area—to focus on racial states that privilege whites, or at least a subset of the population counted as such. The racial state has generally been the white state, the white-supremacist state. But there is no necessity about this. If race has a premodern history (see discussion below), whether in the West or elsewhere, then racial states in which some other group counted as the dominant R1s might have existed, not just in the West, but for example in Asia, or Africa, or the Americas. And in possible future worlds, whether evolving from our own timeline or alternative timelines, other racial states might privilege particular non-white groups ruling over other non-white groups, or, as mentioned, even over whites.

Periodization and scope

Let us now turn to the linked questions of periodization and scope. As emphasized, the racial state cannot exist without race in some sense. But what sense is that exactly? Class and gender are uncontroversial social categories and social realities, taken for granted as legitimate by sociological theory. But race is different, given its dominant biologistic conceptualization in modernity. In fact, should we even still be working with such a category?

Appropriately enough, this issue—the correct “metaphysics” of race—has been investigated in greatest detail by philosophy, in what has come to be called “critical philosophy of race.” Five basic anti-racist metaphysical positions have been demarcated. (1) Realism/biologism/naturalism: biological races do indeed exist after all, though not as “racially” determined by this biology in their behavior and not ranked in the cognitive/characterological/spiritual hierarchies assumed by classic racist thought but positioned as equals (Spencer, 2018a, 2018b). (2) Eliminativism: races exist in no sense, neither as biological nor social entities (Appiah, 1992). (3) Anti-eliminativist social constructionism: races do not exist biologically, but they do exist as social constructs (Haslanger, 2012). (4) Hybrid unified social-naturalism: races exist in a unitary way as entities both socially constructed and naturally based (Kitcher, 2012). (5) Hybrid bifurcated social-naturalism: races exist as both biological and social entities, not necessarily coincident with each other, so that one’s biological race could be different from
one’s social race (Hardimon, 2017). For example, by the American “one-drop rule” for determining blackness, many black Americans are “socially” black while being “biologically” largely white (Davis, 1991).

Now it might initially seem that any given metaphysical position automatically determines the periodization of racial states. But I would claim that this is not actually so, since for our purposes what counts is the intersubjectivist uptake of “races” as socially significant entities: race as a central category of self- and other-identification. Thus, even if realism is correct, what will matter is not the mere existence of race (since by hypothesis it has no significant causal power), but people’s (largely fictive) beliefs about race and their actions based on those beliefs, which might long postdate the evolution of biological race. On the other hand, even if eliminativism is correct, people could still believe there are races and on that basis create, through custom, institutional policy, ideology, value judgment, behavioral pattern, legal prescription and proscription, structural positioning, etc., racialized social groups, which would effectively be “races” for our political purposes (Blum, 2010). Even for realism and eliminativism, then, it is social endorsement and social causality that are ultimately crucial, as they obviously are for social constructionism and social–naturalism in its two versions. Sociality is thus the key element throughout, whether in literally making race or at least in creating entities believed to be races (racialized social groups) or in making (pre-existing biological) race intersubjectively salient. In this respect—counterintuitively—the politics (the racialization of the polity) may be independent of the metaphysics. Racial states could exist even if actual races did not (“races” would just be racialized social groups), and races could exist (as biological entities) without there being racial states organized around them.

The crucial prerequisite for the creation of a racial state, then, will be the existence of “social” race, and “race” should henceforth be read that way. After World War II, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and with the acceleration of the global decolonial movement, “scientific” biological racism (natural hierarchy) had been largely discredited in mainstream academic circles (Barkan, 1992). So, the important question became: when in the West did social race become intersubjectively recognized/constructed? (I will focus on the West, since it is here that race has been most thoroughly researched, not—as emphasized above—because I am ruling out the possibility of racial states in the pre-colonial non-Western world.) As David Theo Goldberg asks in his book The Racial State (2002), what is the “time” of racial states? Two main competing “times” of “social” race would develop in the postwar literature, a majority “short periodization” view (race as modern) and a minority “long periodization” view (race as ancient). More recently, they have been joined by a compromise third position that sees race as originating in the medieval period.

On the short periodization, the emergence of race dates back only to early modernity. George Fredrickson (2015) and others (Hannaford, 1996) argue that while, of course, you have ethnocentrism, religious bigotries, and xenophobia in the ancient and medieval worlds, race does not appear till later. Hence the racial state, if it exists, would have to be modern; there is no premodern (social) race and so no premodern racial state. The influential work of black classicist Frank Snowden, Jr., for example, declared this to be a period “before color prejudice” (Snowden, Jr., 1970; Snowden, Jr., 1983). In this spirit, Goldberg (2002) confidently asserts that the “time” of racial states is modernity.

But a cohort of revisionist classicists (Eliav–Feldon et al., 2009; Isaac, 2004; McCoskey, 2012) has for the past decade and a half contended that race can indeed be found in the ancient world, once “race” is de-linked from familiar definitions in terms of color and continental origins (that is, the usual polychrome cast of white Europeans, black Africans, red Amerindians, brown and yellow Asians). In fact, a crucial premise of their argument is that
defenders of the short periodization have defined “race” in a question-begging way, essentially requiring that all varieties of race need to conform to the modern kind. But this makes the periodization of race a matter of definitional truth rather than empirical discovery. No wonder, then, that with this tacit stipulation, race turns out to be distinctively modern. As Benjamin Isaac insists in his The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity (2004), a starting point for such a debate must be a non-tendentious conception, that can be accepted by all reasonable parties to the discussion, one that does not presuppose the desired conclusion.

Further complicating the picture, some scholars are now claiming that on such a conception, the correct dating actually turns out to be premodern but medieval, as announced in the contrasting title of Geraldine Heng’s recent book: The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages (2018). Debra Higgs Strickland’s Saracens, Demons, & Jews (2003) had earlier argued that in the iconography of medieval Christendom’s “monstrous races” (inherited from Pliny the Elder’s Natural History) we find a bestiary of grotesques that groups together the clearly nonhuman—one-legged Scioptods, dog-headed Cynocephali, headless Blemmyae—with more familiar enemies of the faith—sinister Jews, threatening Saracens, invading Mongols, diabolical Ethiopians—thereby raising questions about the latter’s equal humanity. Heng (2018) adds “Skærlings” (Native Americans) and Romani to the list, and concludes, contra the conventional narrative, that on this evidence we can indeed speak of medieval race. Indeed, she goes further to claim—in a second book published next year, England and the Jews: How Religion and Violence Created the First Racial State in the West (Heng, 2019)—that it is actually in medieval England’s treatment of its Jewish population that we find the first example in the West of the racial state (see also Heng [2018, ch. 2]). So, this is obviously a very different storyline from the orthodox one.

The most important neighboring concept from which race would have to be demarcated is, of course, ethnicity. Whereas “race” would in the post-World War II period become a controversial category, “ethnicity” is far more respectable, without the theoretical baggage “race” is standardly taken to have. Hence the recommendation to simply drop “race” in favor of “ethnicity.” Moreover, given the centrality of ethnocentrism to human, or maybe more generally hominin, history, the idea of an ethno-state—the polity of the tribe, writ large and institutionalized—is already well-established, and indeed of resurgent applicability, with the ominous development across the globe in recent years of an illiberal exclusionary right-wing nationalism. Michael Hanchard’s The Spectre of Race (2018), for example, makes the case that the ancient Athenian polis, proudly claimed as the political fountainhead of the Western democratic political tradition, was itself an ethno-state, so that modern instantiations of this pattern in countries like Britain, France, and the United States, far from betraying the classical lineage, are in fact affirming it.

But short periodization scholars would retort that the link between present and past can be affirmed without blurring the crucial differences between ethnicity and race. Race is indeed distinctively modern, and we should not dilute its peculiar specificities by sloppy theoretical generalizations that gloss over the discontinuities between radically different historical epochs.

Yet the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the two is, ironically enough, manifest in the coinage by Goldberg himself of the term ethnorace, a recognition of their frequent reciprocal conceptual osmosis through a permeable boundary. If the shorthand contrast has traditionally been ethnicity/ethnocentrism as culture/cultural prejudice versus race/racism as imputed biology/biological determinism, the formal recognition of “cultural racism” as a possibility blurs this once clear-cut opposition. Moreover, while cultural racism (originally termed the “new” racism) is generally taken to be the variety of racism that only becomes hegemonic in the postwar epoch, long periodization scholars would insist that it is actually
the modal variety in the history of racism. “Scientific” biological racism is the outlier, only a century and a half or two in duration: late eighteenth century to mid-twentieth century. Before and after, it is cultural racism (sometimes fused with theological racism, the appeal to supernatural causation) that held/holds sway. (However, the rise of the alt-right has stimulated a rebirth of old-fashioned biological racism [Saini, 2019], so this situation may change in coming years.)

The issue should thus be regarded as the subject of an ongoing scholarly debate rather than a resolved one. In addition, apart from uncertainty in determining the “time” of race, controversy also besets the conceptualization of a racial state, as indicated in the preceding section. Fredrickson (2015, 100-3), for example, draws another important contrast, that between what he calls “overtly racist regimes” (e.g., the U.S. South under Jim Crow, Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa) and “racialized societies” (e.g., the U.S. North, Latin America, the colonial world).

The crucial demarcators of the former are: (1) an official racist ideology (2) racial “purity” as an ideal (3) mandatory de jure segregation (4) prohibitions on the political activity (voting, holding public office) of the subordinated race(s) and (5) deliberate impoverishment of the subordinated race(s). So, should we limit the “racial state” designation to such societies? Obviously, while more expansive than Burleigh and Wippermann’s (1991) view, much of the modern world would still be excluded on this conception.

How to decide? In large measure, the division of opinion here tracks rival political commitments. What are conventionally characterized as “radical” scholars—sympathetic, for example, to Marxism, post-structuralism, or postcolonial theory—are generally more open than mainstream theorists to endorsing a more inclusive conception. For them, the reluctance of mainstream liberal sociopolitical scholars to recognize the broad applicability of the concept is merely another manifestation of the general postwar Western whitewashing of the historical record of Western colonial racial domination. (Indeed, another of Whitman’s [2017, p. 8, 36, 51, 141] startling revelations is that for the Nazis, the runner-up candidate model for juridical racial exclusion was the British Empire.) From this perspective, the “overtly racist” vs. “racialized” distinction is secondary to the question of the existence or not of the systemic structural advantaging of whites (R1s), and it is this feature that the proposed conceptualization in the first section was meant to capture. Racialized societies would then actually be the fundamental category, with overt and non-overt variants then being different species of the larger genus. In fact, a case can be made that—at least for non-genocidal states, where the subordinated R-population continues to exist—a system of racial domination that does not present itself as such, characterized by de facto rather than formal R1 privileging, may well be more stable and enduring than an overtly racist one.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s classic Racial Formation in the United States, for example, now in its third edition (Omi and Winant, 2015), had argued from its original 1986 version that we should see the U.S. as a whole, not just the U.S. South, as a “racial state” (ch. 5), given its constitution on the basis of racial domination, even if the mechanisms of domination evolve over time. Earlier statements of this position, if not always focusing specifically and in a detailed way on the theorization of the state as such, can be found in such “radical” texts as Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton’s 1967 (1992) Black Power, the book that first introduced the concept of “institutional racism.” Then of course we have the longstanding black American radical tradition, going back to the nineteenth century, such as the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (1996) and his predecessors, and diagnosing white supremacy as the actual system of government in the United States, no matter what its liberal pretensions. Or, more generally, the global nineteenth-
twentieth-century anti-colonial tradition, of which Frantz Fanon’s 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005), with its vision of a planet divided between dominant and subordinate races, is perhaps the most famous example. So, it is important to appreciate that the “racial state” characterization has a history in global oppositional (“underground”) activist anti-racist scholarship that long predates tentative mainstream admission of the validity of the concept. Insofar as the modern state presides over—initiating, facilitating, consolidating—Euro-colonial and Euro-imperial and Euro-settler rule, including racial slavery, it can be contended that it is ineluctably formed as a racial state, given that rulers and ruled are constituted of differentially racialized populations, and remains such insofar as this legacy is not dismantled in the “postcolonial”/”post-civil rights” epoch (Goldberg, 2002; Mills, 1997).

Finally, some specific examples. On the broader conception, the modern racial state is created in relation to the gradual establishment of a pan-European “whiteness” (Bacchetta, Maira, and Winant, 2019; Lake and Reynolds, 2008; Winant, 2001; Wolfe, 2016), though of course more fine-grained internal distinctions need to be registered between colonial rule, as in large parts of Africa (Mamdani, 2018), and white settler colonialism, for example in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa (Cavanaugh and Veracini, 2017; Coulthard, 2014; Pateman, 2007), not to mention between the “Anglosphere,” the globally hegemonic Anglo-American empire (Vucetic, 2011; Atkinson, 2017) and the other competing Euro-empires. Detailed in-depth studies of particular racial states, synchronically and diachronically, have already been undertaken, most notably of the United States (Bateeman, Katzenelson, and Lapinski, 2018; Jung, Vargas, and Bonilla-Silva, 2011; King, 2007; Omi and Winant, 2015), and the significance there of a juridical “whiteness” (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Davis, 1991; López, 2006), sometimes in comparison with South Africa (Fredrickson, 1981), and also Brazil (Marx, 1998), or with Canada and Australia (Pateman, 2007; Vickers and Isaac, 2012), or Canada and Great Britain (Thompson, 2016). Latin American nations have traditionally represented themselves as racial democracies characterized by an inclusionary *mestizaje* rather than the segregationist white supremacy of the United States. But a growing body of work over the past few decades has undermined this self-serving set of illusions, documenting the long history of Afro-Latin and Indo-Latin oppression, the role (contra official denials) of the Latin state and the legal system in this subordination, and the ways in which the structure of “pigmentocracies” safeguards a subtler form of white domination (Andrews, 2004; Dixon and Johnson, 2019; Hernández, 2013; Telles, 2014). By contrast, Australia’s history of unabashed and overt racism against both its indigenous population and would-be Asian immigrants made it harder from the start to sustain such myths, given the explicit advertised ideal of a “White Australia” (Hage, 2000; Carey and McLisky, 2009; Atkinson, 2017; Maddison, 2019).

The Western European nations themselves, despite being the headquarters of empire and Atlantic slavery, and the original source of modern (and perhaps premodern) racial theory, would in the postwar period begin to erase their role in establishing this global racial system. In some cases (as in “republican” France) the very legitimacy of race as a social category was denied—in fact, it was deleted from the constitution in 2018—let alone “white supremacy” as a defensible overarching characterization. In Britain, however, with its long black activist history, this amnesia was contested from the beginning (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 2016; Gilroy, 2002), while a newly emergent body of revisionist scholarship on global race and global “whiteness” has begun to challenge this exculpatory whitewashing in other European nations also (Garner, 2007; McEachrane, 2014; Fleming, 2017; Hund, 2017; *Modern Italy*, Nov. 2018). Racism’s inconsistency with official communist ideology, not to mention the difficulties of access
to accurate data, originally shielded these nations (when they existed) from the desirable investigative scrutiny, but research is beginning to be done here as well (Law, 2012; Sawyer, 2010). Finally, race has seemed to many scholars to be an obviously non-illuminating category by comparison with religion in trying to understand the Middle East and its conflicts. But Bakan and Abu-Laban (2019) argue for its importance, both locally and in relation to global power dynamics, thereby possibly opening up a new paradigm of inquiry for the region.

It can be appreciated, then, how dramatically our pictures of Western history, and our corresponding conceptual framings, would have to change if the “racial state” categorization is academically vindicated even just for the modern period alone. And if race can be shown to be premodern, some medieval states might count also, as Heng (2019) contends. But if Hanchard’s (2018) ethno-state analysis of ancient Athens is brought into dialogue with Isaac’s (2004) recommended revisionist re-reading of “race,” then the backdating of the concept would have to be even more far-reaching. The racial state would indeed go back to Western antiquity, and perhaps be coeval with the development of the West itself. (Though as earlier emphasized, the transition to modernity would still be of revolutionary significance in its globalization through European expansionism of the Euro/white racial state, as against more localized and heterogeneous premodern racial states.) It would mean that the inherited taxonomy cited at the beginning of this entry would at a minimum have to be radically supplemented with the concept of racial polities, rule not just by oligarchies, monarchs, the people, or dictators, but racial groups. Race would have to be centered as determinant of the West’s trajectory from the start, with all the sweeping repercussions (across multiple disciplines) such a rethinking of that trajectory would imply. In both the descriptive realm studied by the social sciences (the sociopolitical) and the normative realm analyzed by ethics and political philosophy (social justice, national and global: see Bell, 2019), conventional analyses would therefore need drastic reconsideration and re-evaluation. The intellectual and political stakes are thus very high indeed.

References


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