Reading Race in Africa and the Middle East

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Abstract

This article discusses the temporal and geographic expansion of racial frameworks in historical and social scientific scholarship in Africa and the Middle East. After discussing the important distinction made by the sociologist Loïc Wacquant between what he calls "folk" and analytical notions of race, the article then argues that race is an appropriate analytic model for understanding some of the internal dynamics within the societies of these regions. Examples of recent scholarship on the regions which uses an analytic model of race are then critically explored.

Keywords: race, racism, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan

As a graduate student, I spent two year living in Cairo, Egypt, studying Arabic, and then two and a half years living (mostly) in the northern Malian town of Timbuktu. In both places, I thought that I recognized instances of explicit racism. In Cairo, my "black" Sudanese roommates and friends were subject to open harassment in the streets involving racial (and racist) language. In Timbuktu, many people used racial categories (rather than local ethnolinguistic groupings) to explain a recently concluded civil war in northern Mali (1990-1995) that had pitted "ethnically" Tuareg and Arab rebels against the Malian army. The deliberate killing of civilians by the Malian army (and by rebel and pro-government militias) during this conflict was organized and discursively justified in explicitly racial (and racist) terms. Among the victims of the racialized extrajudicial killings carried out by the Malian army against Arab and Tuareg civilians living in Timbuktu in June 1994 was the then-director of the government archive and research center where I came to be based, Sidi Amar Ould Ely.[1]

The use of the analytic language of race to describe these situations came more easily to me as a North American-trained historian than it did for many intellectuals in Egypt and Mali for whom race is a Western idea that

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1 Sidi Amar Ould Ely was arrested and killed on June 13, 1994 by the Malian army (Amnesty International, "Mali: Ethnic conflict and killing of civilians," 21 September 1994).

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cannot properly explain these Egyptian and Malian practices. The disagreement was not about the facts of the harassment and violence, but about how to characterize them. Using the term "race" in these contexts seemed inappropriate to many of my interlocutors who felt it represented the imposition of an American concept (and reality) on a place with a different history. I often sought to convey my ideas (while speaking Arabic) by using the Arabic word for racism – *ʿunṣuriya*. In both Egypt and Mali, this provoked strong push back and sometimes the suggestion that I was guilty of racism myself for having the temerity of raising the issue. Even years later when I gave the research center in Timbuktu a copy of my dissertation (written in English) about a history of racial ideas and practices in the West African Sahel, the archivist was keen to contest the fact that the English word "race" appeared in the title. Was I imposing an American vernacular concept of race on a place for which this made no analytic sense? Or was the refusal of my interlocutors to countenance an analytical model of race a way for them to deflect the uncomfortable implications of this interpretative model for their own societies? These, of course, are not mutually exclusive possibilities.

Race is a big word. It is commonly – and rightly – associated with modern European imperial projects, including in Africa and the Middle East. This legacy – and its continuing reality in organizing the world that we live in – means that we must continue to interrogate how race works in these ways, in Africa and the Middle East, but also in Europe and North America. However, it seems to me that we know this history fairly well, even if there is more to learn. Whether from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) or Valentin Mudimbe's *Invention of Africa* (1988); whether Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* (1988) or John and Jean Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991; 1997), we have internalized the story of the ways in which race was an instrument – perhaps the essential instrument – in the imposition of imperial rule and Western dominance over much of the world. Even where there is less unanimity, such as on how to understand more contemporary European and North American forms of so-called "color-blind" or "cultural" racism, debate is more animated at a popular political level than among academics, who overwhelmingly accept these as mechanisms for reproducing racial inequality and guaranteeing the gains of centuries of white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Balibar 1991).

The problem is not with the story told by this literature, or its many derivatives; clearly race has been a central feature of western modernity in its imperial form. The problem is that this story is made to explain too much. And in so doing, it cuts off questions which are important at different levels of politics, scales of relationships, and history. Insisting on a uniquely Western genealogy of race denies the possibility of finding other lineages of racial ideas and practices that do not emanate from the imperial scientific West. Happily, there is a growing body of scholarship that has sought to compli-

cate—if not displace—this established story. We might site Frank Dikötter's *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (1992) as one of the most important early works that helped to provide a model of how to write a history of race outside of Western contexts. Dikötter took the sociologist Michael Banton's (1987) typologies of racial thought in the West and used them to organize his treatment of race in Chinese history. De-linked from the Western context found in Banton's work, Dikötter was able to show how such a typology helped to make sense of Chinese uses of race over time. Since Dikötter, scholars have sought to uncover racial histories in India, Africa, the Islamic Middle East, indigenous North America, the Ancient Mediterranean and in pre-modern Europe (Dikötter 2011).

The temporal and geographic expansion of racial frameworks in historical and social scientific scholarship deserves fuller examination. Above all, for scholars working in pre-modern or non-Western fields, the choice of race as an analytic framework is almost always deliberate and self-conscious, requiring justification because it often runs against prevailing conventions in those sub-fields. This reflexivity is a common feature in this scholarship, which is not the case in fields for which race is largely a matter of academic common sense. Too often scholars of the US, for example, point to the most obvious racial terms in their sources without really interrogating what these words, or the social and political processes tied to them, actually were meant to accomplish. One might even suggest that working on race in non-Western contexts can lead to a more sophisticated and theoretically grounded understanding of race than scholarship based on contexts in which the presence and salience of race as a social force is taken for granted. This is to reject, and turn on its head, the complaint that the purportedly Western idea of race is applied unthinkingly to contexts for which it does not belong.

By now, there is a common critique of the use of the analytical category of race in non-Western contexts, which implies a mistaken blurring of emic and etic categories on the part of scholars. As Frederick Cooper has argued,

> Many key terms in the interpretive social sciences and history – race, nation, ethnicity, citizenship, democracy, class, community, and tradition, for example – are at once categories of social and political practice and categories of social and political analysis. By categories of practice, we mean, following Bourdieu, something akin to what others have called native or folk or lay categories. These are categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysis. (2005, p. 62)

The interplay between categories of social and political practice and those of social and political analysis seems to be especially clear in the United States. According to the sociologist Loïc Wacquant, academic work on race consistently confuses what he calls "folk" and analytical notions of race,

accepting as tools of analysis what are in fact the "reified products of the ethnoracial struggles of the past." (1997, p. 222). This confusion is intrinsic to the category of race because from its inception, science and common sense have mixed. "The result of this ongoing traffic between folk and analytical concepts is that the history of racial domination is inscribed in the scientific unconscious of our disciplines…" (Wacquant 1997, pp. 222-3).

The story is actually more complicated – and dynamic – than this. In Pierre Bourdieu's critique of subnationalist discourse in southern France, he argued that the conflation of lay and analytic categories not only result in inaccurate descriptions of objective reality, but also can help to bring that representation to life.

> The confusion surrounding debates concerning the notion of region and, more generally, of "ethnic group" or "ethnicity" (scientific euphemisms that have been substituted for the notion of "race" which is none the less still present in actual practice) stems in part from the fact that the desire to submit to logical criticism the categories of common sense – emblems or stigmata – and to substitute for the practical principles of everyday judgment the logically controlled and empirically based criteria of science, leads one to forget that practical classifications are always subordinated to practical functions and oriented towards the production of social effects. One also tends to forget that the practical representations that are the most exposed to scientific criticism (for example, the statements made by regionalist militants about the unity of the Occitan language) may contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate, in other words, the objective reality to which the objectivist critique refers them in order to show their delusions or incoherence (1994, p. 220).

It is the anxiety around the social effects of the "between folk and analytical concepts" that provokes the strongest reaction. In a world in which American scholarship is almost hegemonic by its sheer size and the resources which support it, race will be a more and more important category used in a variety of settings. Bourdieu suggests that this will have its own social effects, shaping the objective reality as local activists adopt the language of race in their own political struggles. As such, American ideas about race will increasingly shape the world in its image.

Bourdieu and Wacquant thought that they saw an especially clear instance of this in the American political scientist Michael Hanchard's *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (1994), on Brazilian black consciousness movements. In a virulent critique, they accused it of being an egregious example of an American-trained scholar imposing his own highly ethnocentric model of race where it did not belong. Hanchard, they wrote, "makes the particular history of the US Civil Rights Movement into the universal standard for the struggle of all

groups oppressed on grounds of colour (or caste)." Furthermore, "From being an analytic tool, the concept of racism becomes a mere instrument of accusation; under the guise of science, it is the logic of the trial which asserts itself" (1999: 44-5). Yet, it might be that what was even more galling than Hanchard's analysis was what he described, viz., the fact that many marginal groups in societies like Brazil have sought to use explicitly racial language, often drawn from American examples, in their local politics. This is precisely what Hanchard's book is about: black Brazilian adoptions of American black political rhetoric. To critique this kind of scholarship – or to find it a problem that Black Brazilians have chosen to represent their struggles using terms taken from elsewhere – is surely a refusal to acknowledge the choices made by subaltern intellectuals in how they represent and position themselves vis-à-vis other emancipatory struggles (French 2000). It is a failure to recognize the difficulty of subalternized minorities in carving out what Gyenendra Pandey calls "a sequestered domain of an autonomous 'culture'" (Pandey 2013, p. 53).

The logic of this kind of accusation is quite widespread, even modular. At its core it is an argument about cultural authenticity; if racial ideas are borrowed, they are somehow inauthentic and inorganic, when held by the wrong people. But claims about the authenticity of a culture usually flow from a certain position of power, which is precisely what subaltern intellectuals refuse in rejecting their position in it. As Pandey writes:

> In the case of dominant as well as oppositional discourses, the proclamation of difference (in the former case, usually also a declaration of otherness) flows from a certain political position and perspective. Plainly, the difference articulated in the Dalit, black, or women's movement is not that of an already available culture or identity – the culture or identity of women, ex-Untouchables, or people of African descent. What is involved rather is the enunciation of difference… The facet of resistance, the 'foreign accent' and 'respectful distance', found here is not the resistance of another culture. It is instead the resistance of a different politics, the call for a differently imagined future (2013, p. 56).

Seen from this perspective, the argument by Bourdieu and Wacquant is a refusal to recognize the possibility of the political choice made by black Brazilian activists.

One can see versions of this critique around a number of racial issues in contemporary African and the Middle Eastern studies. Mahmood Mamdani (2009), for example, has made a wide-ranging critique of the ways in which the Darfur conflict (which became a serious humanitarian crisis beginning in 2003) was politicized in the United States using the language of race. Mamdani argued that the use of race misrepresents the historical

and social reality of Western Sudan. He traces what he claims was a misapplied racial framework developed by colonial officials and writers to explain the human geography and history of Sudan. He then critiques Sudanese nationalist historiography for retaining these racial categories. But even if we accept Mamdani's premise (which, it must be said, is a very dubious historical argument), we are still left with the logical fallacy of Mamdani's confusion of the genealogy of racial categories with the uses of race as the fundamental organizing principle of colonial and postcolonial Sudan itself. In other words, Mamdani has tried to argue that because race was constructed by British colonial administers, or that identity formation as "Arab" or otherwise was contingent, any manifestations of race in Darfur or elsewhere in contemporary Sudan are not really race. He seems to have an idea of race based on an ideal-typical form of pure endogamous groupings represented in genealogies of descent and migration, and once he finds this wanting in the history of Sudan, proclaims race not to be present. What this appears to imply is that we should characterize any manifestation of race in popular consciousness, political speech, government action or propensity for state violence against certain groups, as false consciousness. And indeed, defenders of the government of Sudan often accused activists from Darfur of being the real racists themselves for raising the issue of race in their political struggle. Mamdani has subjected the rebel leadership and activists from Darfur to the accusation of using inaccurate and inauthentic categories in their analysis of their own predicament. This is not only reactionary, but also absurd.

A related example is the reception of anti-slavery activists in Mauritania, Mali and Niger, who are often accused of using the "Western" language of human rights, race and abolitionism in ways that don't reflect the reality of the post-slavery societies that they live in, or the Islamic legal culture to which they meant to adhere (McDougall 2010). A number of studies have shown that one of the strategies for social mobility followed by descendants of slaves in societies along the West African Sahel was to attempt to achieve respectability within the larger slaveholder society. Descendants of slaves put special importance on memorizing the Qur'an in the Futa Jallon region of Guinea in the 1970s and struggled to be able to take the honorific title of "ceerno", which had previously been limited to successful noble students (Botte 1990). Likewise, among the Haalpulaar in Mauritania in the 1990s, descendants of slaves were more likely to send their children to Qur'anic schools than people descended from people of free social status, who increasingly preferred secular state schools. Islamic education was important to former slaves because they believed it would help to negate their slave identity (Kamara 2000). We can think of these cause as efforts by descendants of slaves to claim full "Muslim citizenship" within the Islamic framework dominant in these societies.

Some activists from Mauritania have also adopted more global languages of international human rights and racial oppression to their politics. With the founding of an organization called El-Hor in 1978 to fight for the interests of the so-called *haratin*, the "black" Hasaniyya Arabic-speaking stratum of people presumed to be descended from slaves in Mauritania (and Morocco), there emerged a highly contested form of politics which made active use of race to mobilize support. As I have argued elsewhere (Hall 2011), the history of racial markers for "blackness" being used to indicate social inferiority and slave status can be traced back as far as the seventeenth century in this region. The word *haratin* is itself a racial label, with a direct semantic relationship to blackness. Chouki El Hamel has argued that the word *hartani* – the singular form of the collective noun *haratin* – is derived from the Berber word *ahardan*, which is connected to dark skin color. Other terms such as *gnawa*, or *isouqqiyn* used in southern Morocco to identify "blacks" more or less interchangeably with the term *haratin*, also have etymologies connecting them to blackness (2002, pp. 38-9; 2013 pp. 110-11). More than one scholar has traced the perceived relationship between blackness and former slave status that has followed the *haratin* in their different struggles for a place in post-emancipation Mauritania and Morocco (Ruf 1998; Brhane 1997; Ensel 1999; El Hamel 2013).

Yet the authenticity of the politics of "black" Mauritanians has often been called into question in critiques of different leaders and their choices of rhetoric around slavery and race. Much as the political activists from Darfur chose to articulate their analysis in terms of racial oppression, hoping to attract sympathy from international actors (Prunier 2005, p. 77), anti-slavery activists made similar calculations about the need for international support. There is nothing illegitimate about such a move, especially when the dominant culture (and its international academic spokespeople) refuse to acknowledge the continuing effects of racialized slavery on contemporary life. Nor is such a strategy new. As Pandey argues, both black and white abolitionists in the nineteenth-century United States made extensive use of the comparative vocabulary of Indian caste in their critiques of race relations. Likewise, the "foremost Dalit intellectuals repeatedly invoked the black experience in their articulation of the Dalit struggle. Jyotirao Phule in the late nineteenth century and B.R. Ambedhar in the twentieth, to take two of the most prominent examples, translated the terms from the Anglo-American abolitionists' idiom" (Pandey 2013, p. 6).

It is important to emphasize that invoking race is just one among other analytic and political categories for the kind of activism pursued by "black" Mauritanians. Other non-racial – or even anti-racial – arguments that seek, for example, to make subaltern arguments about how to read Islamic texts work in much the same way, subject to critiques of inauthenticity. The activism of Biram Dah Abeid, who staged a public burning of pages that

referred to slavery in Islamic jurisprudential sources in April 2012 in a suburb of Nouakchott, Mauritania, is especially instructive. For his troubles, Biram was arrested and tried for the crime of "violating the Islamic values of the Mauritanian people", although he was later released from prison after four months of detention. (He has subsequently been imprisoned two more times for his activism). In 2008, Biram had founded an anti-slavery organization called *Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie* (*IRA-Mauritanie*). The reason that his actions were so inflammatory was because it turned the attention of anti-slavery activism in Mauritania directly at the Islamic intellectual tradition as the source of the continued ideological justification of slavery. By burning canonical works of Maliki jurisprudence, Biram was indicting that whole intellectual tradition of West African Islam as tainted by slavery.

But Biram claimed that he was not denouncing Islam. On the contrary, he said that it was an act that demonstrated the importance of the Islamic intellectual tradition for the continuing problem of slavery and its legacies in the region. According to Biram, his actions were meant as a denunciation of false interpretations of Islam that legitimize slavery, whereas true Islam condemns it. But to get to this position, one has to reject much of the edifice of Islamic legal authority and methodology, and instead argue from the point of view of a more abstract, even universal, set of principles. For example, one descendent of slaves named Mbareck ould Mahmoud, who opened his own mosque in Nouakchott, issued a religious opinion (fatwa) in 2009 in which he argued that slavery is illegal in Islam:

> The Islamic state freed people from slavery and from oppression and it is because of that that slaves of the unfaithful took refuge there and asked for protection, but not so that the [Islamic] state could enslave them. This is what the Prophet and his prestigious companions created. Islam has defended the oppressed and even the unfaithful enslaved illegally… So, how then can a Muslim enslave his Muslim brother? The Prophet said, "Every Muslim is sacred to the Muslim: his blood, his property, his honor." (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013, p. 262)

This is not the structure or method of traditional Maliki jurisprudence. The threat that such an interpretation posed to those educated in the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence is clear because it is a complete rejection of their authority. Both Biram and Mbareck ould Mahmoud insist that Islam means justice and protection from oppression for all Muslims, and as such, represents the complete antithesis of slavery. These claims represent political choices, challenging the dominant traditional structure of knowledge in Mauritania. But they are no less authentic for this.

Any sophisticated understanding of the role of race in Africa and the Middle East must distinguish between those practices and discourse which can

be fruitfully analyzed by invoking race, and those that cannot be. So while the history of slavery and post slavery in both North Africa and the West African Sahel is clearly racialized in many respects, this is not necessarily the case in other parts of these regions. Mauritania and Morocco are different from Ghana and Turkey, for example, despite the importance of slavery in each country. In Mauritania and Morocco race has worked to reproduce the social inferiority of people defined as black, naturalizing the relationship between slavery and blackness. This continues to have important consequences in these countries today. The legacies of slavery in Ghana and Turkey are significant, but the much weaker role of race in defining enslaveability and marking post slavery social inferiority in those countries is an important contrast. Likewise, political language and identity are never stable and uniform even among racially-defined groups. As Marta Scaglioni (2018) has shown in her work of black Tunisians, the invocation of race in political activism by one group of black Tunisians does not necessarily appeal to others. Urban middle class black Tunisians in Tunis have become very comfortable borrowing the language of racial oppression from the wider global black struggles, whereas poor rural black Tunisians in the south of the country reject such politics.

But the bigger problem is not that scholars are now finding race in inappropriate places, but that they deny clear cases where race is at work. Incidents of highly racialized violence in Sudan, Rwanda, Zanzibar, and Mali, for example, are often explained away as something else, either because of dubious origins in European colonial discourse or because racism is not deemed to be responsible for violent acts which can be explained by other means. This is especially clear in the literature published in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. If racism is, by definition, a way of defining human difference as natural and unequal, then it is difficult to interpret the history of Rwanda without recourse to race. From pre-colonial times through colonialism, and throughout the postcolonial period, power in Rwanda has been structured and contested along racial categories of Tutsi and Hutu. Much of the literature attributes the emergence of racialized identities in the postcolonial period to the transmission of colonial theories about the Tutsis as a distinct and naturally superior "Hamitic" race by the means of colonial education. Mahmood Mamdani's book on Rwanda does this. Although Mamdani acknowledges the racial framework of the violence between Tutsis and Hutus in Rwandan history, he dismisses it as a kind of false consciousness based on borrowed European racial ideas (2001, p. 190). Others downplay the importance of race in the genocide, notably the political scientist Scott Strauss (2006), who conducted interviews with people imprisoned under suspicion of participating in the violence. He found that these prisoners did not invoke racial hatred as motivations for their actions to a sufficient degree for him to consider it a major cause of the genocide. This scholarship

draws its inspiration from Christopher Browning's (1992) work on the German perpetrators of the holocaust, which locates the violence not in ideas, but in social pressures.

By contrast, the very best work on racial violence and racialized nationalism in Africa tries to work out the empirical logics of race in the acts of violence themselves and the various ways in which race was harnessed to the performance of political struggles (cf. Glassman 2011; Brennan 2012). Rather than explain race away, its recurrent role suggests that it has been successfully articulated to other social and political forces, which means that we need to understand how race can play a central role in explaining bigger things. To do this is to focus attention on understanding how race works in Middle Eastern and African contexts, rather than trying to explain it away. One of the things that consistently causes problems in thinking about race in the Middle East and Africa is the vexing question of origins. It is as if finding the originary moment of a social or intellectual phenomenon somehow absolves every subsequent use. Such an approach also assumes that there is a broad continuity between the original introduction of the idea and all developments after that. It seems to me that we must push ourselves to resist the search for origins, and instead try to think about how race works in the particular contexts in which we find it. The most interesting work on race in Africa and the Middle East, at least in my eyes, are those studies which seek to unravel the complex interplay of ideas and practices around race that have multiple authors, borrow from Western and non-Western sources alike, which constitute the ground for important political struggles across the world.

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