

---

# Decolonizing Western Political Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

**Charles W. Mills**

Northwestern University, USA

The past few decades have seen a wave of decolonization in the Western academy.

Across a wide array of disciplines—anthropology, cultural studies, education, geography, history, international relations, law, above all, perhaps, literature—we have witnessed at least the beginnings (and sometimes much more) of a self-conscious rethinking and reorientation of the subject in the light of its past complicity, direct or indirect, with the colonial project. The critical scrutiny of the origins and evolution of the discipline in question; the examination of its overarching narratives, key assumptions, hegemonic frameworks, defining texts; the seeking out of the oppositional voices of traditionally excluded others; and the felt imperative of revisioning and restructuring it in the light of its problematic past, have been a common feature in a range of subjects. But the rate of progress has not been uniform. I want to suggest that in Western political philosophy in particular, the decolonizing enterprise has a long way to go, indeed in some respects has barely begun. In political *theory*—the theory wing of political science—much has been done, but political *philosophy*—the work done by philosophers—lags significantly and seriously behind.

Consider the standard Anglo-American narrative, which can be found in any introductory textbook or encyclopedia entry. After a glorious, two thousand-plus-years history of grand theory, Western political philosophy fell into the doldrums by the late nineteenth century, and approached its final demise by the middle of the twentieth century. More than one article of the time actually pronounced it dead, the victim jointly of noncognitivism in ethics and non-dissensus in the world. (This world, it will be appreciated, was a pretty small one.) Insofar as political philosophy was focused on normative matters, there were no normative claims to be made that achieved propositional status, just disguised commands and emotive utterances. But in any case, with the 1950s’ “end of ideology,” and the discrediting of “totalitarianisms” of the left and the right, all was so obviously well with the postwar liberal-democratic Western world that no grand reconstructive normative claims really needed to be made in the first place. The revived traditional Anglo conception of philosophy as humble “underlaborer,” the Wittgensteinian view of philosophy as a tool that “leaves everything as it is,” diminished the discipline’s role to a kind of housecleaning. Thus in his editor’s introduction to a 1967 Oxford anthology on political philosophy, Anthony Quinton suggests that the works of the “great tradition” are, by contemporary standards, “methodologically very impure.” The proper subject of philosophy is “conceptual reasonings,” which are a second-order “classifying and analyzing [of] the terms, statements and arguments of the substantive,

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay was first presented as a paper at the “Political Modernity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” conference at the University of Barcelona, Feb. 20-22, 2012, sponsored by the TRAMOD (Trajectories of Modernity: Comparing Non-European and European Varieties) Research Project. I would like to thank the European Commission for funding, and Gerard Rosich and Peter Wagner both

for the invitation and for their comments on the original draft, which have undoubtedly significantly improved it. Another version of this essay was published in *New Political Science*: Charles W. Mills, “Decolonizing Western Political Philosophy,” *New Political Science* 37, no.1. (2015), 1-24.

first-order disciplines.”<sup>2</sup> Political philosophy would then just be the application of these principles to political affairs, which meant the transfer to political science of social-scientific factual/descriptive matters, and the deportation to the degraded realm of “ideology” of prescriptive recommendations about “ideal ends.” It followed that the classic texts that defined the tradition were, ironically, “too all-inclusive to count as works of political philosophy, strictly so-called.”<sup>3</sup> (Unfortunately, it was necessary to destroy the tradition in order to save it . . .) Bidding farewell to the sweeping holistic visions of the past, political philosophy proper had become a modest matter of linguistic analysis, such as how “sovereignty” or “authority” should be parsed.

A sign of this change in the way the subject is conceived has been the apparent petering-out of the great tradition. Surveys of the history of political thought either come to an end with Marx and Mill in the mid-nineteenth century or they wind up with apologetic chapters on the major ideological movements of the most recent period . . . Analytic philosophers have paid little attention to those problems of political theory that do fall within their recognized field of interest . . . It has been widely held, indeed, that there really is no such subject as political philosophy apart from the negative business of revealing the conceptual errors and methodological misunderstandings of those who have addressed themselves in a very general way to political issues . . . A solid testimony to the width of this conviction has been the near-unanimity with which analytic philosophers have, until very recently,

avoided the subject altogether. Of course the great tradition of political thought remains an important object of study in its own right. But to study its members is only marginally to continue the work they were doing.<sup>4</sup>

From this standpoint, then, political philosophy proper was restricted to second-order conceptual analysis (and there was little interest in doing even that), ruling out any substantive normative claims about the reordering of society. No wonder, given this unpromising diagnosis, that the opening sentence of the very first essay in Quinton’s collection, John Plamenatz’s “The Use of Political Theory” (1960), begins by reporting the widespread judgment that “the subject is dead or sadly diminished in importance.”<sup>5</sup>

**Rawls revived social contract theory in an explicitly hypothetical form, eliminating any lingering aroma of ur-anthropology by making it a “device of representation” for getting at principles of justice for the “basic structure” of society.**

What a change we have seen in the intervening half a century! Today analytic political philosophy is one of the healthiest subsections of the discipline, with numerous articles, books, journals, reference companions, conferences and guidebooks dedicated to its themes, and the ambit of its concern not merely *not* shrinking at “ideological” pronouncements

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Quinton, Introduction to *Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Quinton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Quinton, *Political Philosophy*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Quinton, *Political Philosophy*, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> John Plamenatz, “The Use of Political Theory,” in *Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Quinton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1967), 19.

about the polity as a whole, but indeed boldly extending them to the entire planet. It is, of course, John Rawls's 1971 *A Theory of Justice* that is normally given the credit for this Lazarus-like resurrection, though Brian Barry's earlier 1965 *Political Argument* sometimes gets a nod also.<sup>6</sup> Rawls revived social contract theory in an explicitly hypothetical form, eliminating any lingering aroma of ur-anthropology by making it a "device of representation" for getting at principles of justice for the "basic structure" of society. In the process, he showed Anglo-American skeptics that "grand theory" in political philosophy was indeed still possible, that substantive moral claims could be given a rationalist cognitivist foundation—politically constructivist if not metaphysically moral realist—and that the resources of economics and rational choice theory could be drawn upon in an exciting synthesis of ethics and social science. What would have been classified by Quinton as "methodological impurity" and "ideology" in 1967 were embraced only a few years later by a book that saw itself as a respectable part of the analytic Anglo-American tradition.

Four decades on, Rawls's text has been translated into more than 30 languages, and *A Theory of Justice* and his later work are the subject of a vast secondary literature whose indexing would constitute a book in itself.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, apart from reviving both Anglo-American political philosophy and social contract theory, Rawls reoriented the field, so that the adjudication of social justice rather than the justification of political obligation became the main point of the subject. The battlefield of debate was thus competing normative perspectives on justice, whether utilitarians counterattacking Rawls to defend their theory against his criticisms, libertarians arguing for

Lockean entitlements and property rights that precluded Rawlsian social-democratic redistribution, egalitarians seeking to push Rawls further to the left, or communitarians trying to exorcise the ghostly and disembodied individuals they found in Rawls's contractarian cast of characters. Correspondingly, with the discrediting of second-order *hauteur* about the appropriate purview of the subject, the tradition itself gained a renewed significance as a source of first-order theoretical (not just "ideological") insight as against mere antiquarian study. Contemporary work is thus informed by and in a lively dialogue with the work of the past.

For political theorists in other traditions equally legitimately designated "Western," of course, this narrative is a tendentious one. From their perspective, no dramatic 1970s deathbed resurrection of political philosophy was necessary because only a very narrow Anglo-analytic conception of the field had been on its deathbed in the first place (and whose consummation was, in any case, perhaps more devoutly to be wished than mourned!). Certainly for the Marxist tradition, the dismissal as mere "ideology" in Quinton's sense— or perhaps as mere hackwork not creatively developing historical materialism—of texts by Marx's successors from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century onward such as Labriola, Plekhanov, Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Althusser et al. would, for them, have just confirmed the *parti pris* essence of a bourgeois political categorization masquerading as a neutral and apolitical assessment. Grand theory was indeed still being produced—it was just that it was saying things mainstream right-wing liberal theory didn't want to hear. Moreover, apart from the Western (the

<sup>6</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), x; Percy B. Lehning, *John Rawls: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

“West” here as the “North”) Marxist tradition, one would also have to take into account the work of Sartre, who, though not a political philosopher, developed a philosophical position with political implications, as well as frequently intervening directly in the debates of the day, for example in the 1950s controversies about Soviet repression and the exact nature of the Soviet state, or in his militant stance against the Algerian War and his subsequent anti-colonial activism. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, has a claim to be considered the most important feminist text of the twentieth century, and thus a landmark in feminist political philosophy.<sup>8</sup> In the United States, John Dewey’s socially and politically engaged pragmatism, so influential in the 1920s-40s, was not to be ignored, nor, in quite a different key, the postwar writings of the German exile Hannah Arendt. So the Anglo-analytic picture is a misleading one, a testimony to a particular narrow vision of the field rather than a comprehensive assessment. And though Marxism in its classical form may now be dead or severely diminished both as an intellectual and a political force, along with existentialism, the critical theory that takes its inspiration in significant measure from Marxism is, in the work of Habermas, Honneth, and many others, today thriving as, of course, is the challenge to

orthodox conceptions of the polity and political power in the work of Foucault and Derrida.

Whether in the Anglo-American or the Continental branches, then, the grand Western tradition is alive and well. But my claim would be, as emphasized at the start, that this resurrection

**This resurrection (if the need for and fact of a resurrection is conceded) has not been accompanied by the systematic post-colonial, anti-colonial rethinking of the subject to be found in other branches of the academy.**

(if the need for and fact of a resurrection is conceded) has not been accompanied by the systematic post-colonial, anti-colonial rethinking of the subject to be found in other branches of the academy. Yet in bodies of thought like Marxism and specific theorists like (in very different ways) Arendt, Sartre, and Foucault, or, going back to earlier

elements in the liberal tradition, what Jonathan Israel calls the “radical Enlightenment” of Diderot, Raynal, and the *Encyclopédistes*,<sup>9</sup> it is not merely that resources for anti-colonial critiques can be found but that they have in fact already been made. The longstanding existence of an oppositional strain of anti-imperial political theory authored by thinkers of the West themselves, that has been both drawn upon and contested by those forcibly incorporated into the West, must also be recognized and brought back to the discipline’s self-conscious awareness. Many of these subversive contestations have themselves likewise been forgotten, so that the tradition seems more monolithically imperial than it actually is,<sup>10</sup> and these hegemonic assumptions, unchallenged, continue to shape the debates of the present, especially given the

<sup>8</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1952).

<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan I. Israel’s massive three-volume study: *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the*

*Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

collapse of “Third Worldism” and the attempts to find alternatives to incorporation into the capitalist world-system. In this article, I want to identify and argue for the reconsideration of some of the key framings of the field as legacies of the colonial heritage that need to be rejected, so it can be constituted on a new basis.

## Redressing the Exclusions of the Canon

To begin with the most obvious point: the tradition continues to be conceived of exclusively or largely as a monologue coming from the European West, the white West, with little or no thought being given to the possible need to consider the replies to these diktats from the West’s nonwhite “Others”—or, indeed, whether the very geography of the “West” may need to be remapped. Again, it is the standard reference work that is most useful for illustrating this point, since it is here that we are being given the official cartography of the field.

Consider, for example, Blackwell’s *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, which originally appeared as a single volume in 1993, and was later expanded and re-issued in two volumes in 2007.<sup>11</sup> At nearly 900 pages in a small font, it contains 55 chapters: nine “Disciplinary Contributions,” eight “Major Ideologies,” and thirty-eight “Special Topics.” Philip Pettit’s essay, “Analytical Philosophy,” opens the “Disciplinary Contributions” section and sets the theoretical stage for the Anglo-American account. Writing a quarter-century after Quinton, Pettit basically repeats Quinton’s white and Eurocentric picture of the field, asserting that from the late nineteenth century to the

1950s, “political philosophy ceased to be an area of active exploration . . . there was little or nothing of significance published in political philosophy.”<sup>12</sup> Now this is, of course, precisely the period in which the anti-colonial movement across the world is gathering momentum, and in the post-bellum United States black activists are beginning the long battle (still not complete) to make their country live up to the promise of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. But for Pettit, none of the texts produced by these global political struggles—work by people like Martí, Gandhi, Douglass, Sun Yat-Sen, Garvey, Du Bois, Fanon—merit inclusion, whether because they are insufficiently analytic, non-Western, or simply unworthy of the designation of political philosophy.

Nor is it just a matter of narrow analytic philosophers with an unjustifiably restrictive conception of the discipline, however. The succeeding essay by David West, “Continental Philosophy,” is only marginally better.<sup>13</sup> For the same time period that is Pettit’s reference point (late nineteenth century onwards), West ranges over the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse); Habermasian discourse ethics; existentialism (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus); Heidegger and Saussure; Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida; and Lyotard and postmodernism. Here at least there is a brief mention of the nonwhite world, with some references to Sartre’s and Camus’s conflicting positions on the Algerian War. But the challenge to the Marxism and critical theory of the global North posed by the theorists of the global South, the anti-imperialist problematic and its possible reshaping of the cartography of

<sup>11</sup> Philip Pettit, “Analytical Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (vol. 2), ed. Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas Pogge (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Pettit, “Analytical Philosophy,” 6.

<sup>13</sup> David West, “Continental Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (vol. 2), ed. Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas Pogge (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

the political, the issues of race and ethnicity and how they might affect a conceptualization foundationally based on classes and class struggle, the alternate periodization offered to the European postmodern by the temporality of the non-European postcolonial, the notion of a distinctively black existentialism that would make the “absurdity” of white domination and the “dread” and “anguish” it produced theoretically central, are not discussed. Postcolonial theory itself (Said, Spivak, Bhabha) gets only a single sentence.

So neither from the Anglo-American nor the Continental viewpoint do global Euro-domination and the resistance to it figure as important themes. Unsurprisingly, then, nowhere in the 55 essays and nearly 900 pages of the text is there any sustained discussion of race, racism, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, or the political struggles against them, let alone any chapter (whether under “Disciplinary Contributions,” “Major Ideologies,” or “Special Topics”) dedicated to the subject. We are being given a construction of the canon that limits the issues and figures of political philosophy to the writings of Western political theorists (the West as the world), and not even any of those writings that are auto-critical in solidarity with the non-Western world.

Similarly, Steven Cahn’s huge collection for Oxford (a massive 1200 pages), *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy*, informs us in Cahn’s preface: “Here in one volume are the major writings from nearly 2,500 years of political philosophy.”<sup>14</sup> But

<sup>14</sup> See the preface to *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) ed. Steven M. Cahn (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), vii.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine the Berber of North Africa is included, but assuming that race only comes into existence with

the only person of color included in the writings of the modern period is Martin Luther King, Jr., who is confined to the appendix.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the canonical blue-covered Cambridge series, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, whose aim it was<sup>16</sup> to provide the definitive editions, with the appropriate scholarly apparatus, of “all the core texts in the Western political

tradition,” reached as far into the twentieth century as Gramsci, comprising about 110 volumes, but did not include a single non-white author. So the line-up of Western political thinkers is coextensive with the line-up of global political thinkers (Cahn), the line-up of Western political thinkers is a white one (Cahn, Cambridge), and the systemic critique of the West is generally denied “political” status.

Such a boundary policing is doubly problematic. In the first place, even if there were no political relationship between the West and the rest of the world, it defies credibility to think that over this period of thousands of years, no non-Western thinker could have produced anything worthy of political study. But in the second place, of course, it raises the question of how we are defining our terms. From modernity up to the mid-twentieth century what we know as the “West” was a series of empires that, by the beginnings of the twentieth century, jointly occupied most of the planet. So from the modern period onwards to the second half of the twentieth century, Western political rule gradually extends over, and is contested by,

modernity, he would not have counted as being a person of color in this period, which was raceless.

<sup>16</sup> Apparently (personal communication) the funding for the project ran out.

**So neither from the Anglo-American nor the Continental viewpoint do global Euro-domination and the resistance to it figure as important themes.**

people who, at least in this juridical sense, are part of the West, if rarely given substantively (and often not even nominally) equal rights within it. The oppositional political texts they produce are to that extent “Western” also, and can be excluded only at the cost of admitting that the

the official framing of the United States as a nation born out of an anti-colonial struggle, and committed to opposition to European imperialism in the Western hemisphere, obfuscates the nation’s own intra-continental imperial expansion, its manifest colonial destiny

**The rethinking of modernity requires us to explore its dark side, and how very differently it is experienced by those denied its promise.**

canon is constructed primarily of the rationalizers of the existing order, not its opponents. (If, pre-Rawls, the central question for political philosophy has historically been the justification for political obligation, think how radically this question must be rethought for those who never gave actual consent to being incorporated into the *polis* in the first place. If, post-Rawls, the central question for political philosophy has become the justice or injustice of the “basic structure” of the *polis*, think how radically this question must be rethought for those whose non-consent completely undercuts the contractarian underpinnings of contemporary distributive justice theory, demanding instead that rectificatory justice should be our focus.) Marcus Garvey and Mahatma Gandhi, by virtue of being Jamaican and Indian, were subjects of the British Empire; Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, by virtue of being Martinican, were citizens of overseas France. In that sense, these are “Western” political theorists, engaged in debate with the Western polity imposed on them, even if one-sidedly so, and getting no or little response.

Moreover, apart from work from the overseas territories of the colonial empires, we also need to consider the *domestic* empire of the United States. Critics have long pointed out that

to swallow the land of the indigenous nations on the North American continent itself. Black nationalism, the political ideology distinctive to the diasporic black tradition, conceptualizes black Americans as a black nation subordinated by the white one, raising questions, especially in its pan-Africanist variant, about global Euro-domination. But even when variants of “white” ideologies are being advocated—black liberalism, black conservatism, black Marxism—the radical difference introduced by racial subordination would still justify their representative inclusion (as with white feminism, which also comes in a range of variants, some drawing on male-created originals, and which *is* included in the Blackwell text). In the work of David Walker, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin and many others, we find an alternative political vision, the ghettoized black city in the shadows challenging the shining white city on the hill.<sup>17</sup> The growing body of work on these writers is not merely seeking to establish their importance as thinkers but to reclaim them *as* political theorists, representatives of an emergent black tradition of what has been called “Afro-modern political thought” that includes anti-slavery, anti-Jim Crow, and anti-imperialism.<sup>18</sup> The segregation of the official canon is itself the manifestation in

<sup>17</sup> Stephen H. Marshall, *The City on the Hill from Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

political philosophy of the “global color-line” that, at the start of the twentieth century, Du Bois pointed out in the world.<sup>19</sup> That a century after he wrote this philosophical color-line still exists is perhaps the clearest testimony to the unreconstructed nature of the discipline, its failure to acknowledge its historical formation as a body of theory increasingly influenced (in the modern period) by the colonial experience. The rethinking of modernity requires us to explore its dark side, and how very differently it is experienced by those denied its promise, by those subjected, in different ways, to the moral-political hierarchies, anti-egalitarian ideologies, and “absolutist” regimes putatively demolished by the American and French Revolutions but actually maintained or re-established on a racial basis.<sup>20</sup>

### **Acknowledging the Imperial and Racial Dimensions of the Canon (While Recognizing its Apostates)**

What we have to do, then, is to expand the current vocabulary of Western political philosophy to admit colonial and imperial domination as themselves political systems, not merely national but global, and centrally constituted by race.

For political philosophy, the central political unit of the modern period is the nation-state, which, in the Anglo-American field over the past forty years, has primarily been conceptualized, following Rawls, as the contractarian nation-state. So whether one is located in the former colonizing polities, or the Euro-settler states created by European expansionism, this concept is supposed to constitute the common political

framework within which debates about political philosophy are supposed to take place. But such a concept cannot capture the crucial difference between those polities which were the rulers and those which were the ruled, nor the distinct histories of colonizers and colonized, settlers and indigenous, free and enslaved, in the colonial world. To ignore this history and this set of central political divisions in the name of an abstraction ostensibly innocent only serves to guarantee that the experience of the white political subject, whether Europeans at home or Europeans abroad, will be made the standard-bearer of political modernity itself. It is to erase a history of domination which needs to be formally recognized as *itself* political and leaving a political legacy that can only be properly addressed through being acknowledged at the abstract conceptual level *at which philosophy operates*.

I suggest that political philosophy needs to draw here on the growing body of oppositional work in International Relations (IR) that is challenging the Westphalian narrative. In the introduction to her edited collection, *Decolonizing International Relations*, Branwen Gruffydd Jones summarizes this challenge:

The modern discipline of IR and its twentieth-century trajectory is presented to the newcomer in a huge number of textbooks and compilations. What is remarkably *absent* from IR’s self-presentation . . . is awareness of its colonial and imperial roots and context . . . Imperialism is characterized by relations, doctrines, and practices of exclusion; imperialism is the very antithesis of universal international recognition . . . The architects of IR’s self-construction not only have ignored the

<sup>19</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of European Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

imperial context of the discipline's modern origins but also have self-consciously located IR's heritage or canon in classical European thought from ancient Greece through to the Enlightenment—

Thucydides, Machiavelli, Bodin, Grotius, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and so on. These thinkers lived during the context of, and in

part helped to legitimize, European violence against non-European peoples through conquest, enslavement, slave trade, colonization, dispossession, and extermination over more than five centuries . . . The history of modern international relations is widely accepted to be rooted in the European state system, which was born at the Peace of Westphalia . . . For most of the world, it is arguably the history of the colonial state and political economy rather than European sovereignty and liberal democracy that is central to understanding modern international relations . . . To the extent that political institutions and norms of liberal democracy and sovereignty did emerge, slowly and partially, in Western Europe in the centuries after Westphalia, these developments unfolded during the same centuries as European expansion, slave trade, and formal colonial occupation and rule of most of the world. That such very different forms of political and international interaction took place during the same period in time is not a coincidence, and they cannot be understood in isolation.<sup>21</sup>

**Colonial rule is also racial rule,  
a system that is not merely  
intra-national but international,  
and rationalized by political  
philosophy itself.**

The Westphalian narrative is, of course, central to the post-Rawlsian literature, with its vocabulary of well-ordered societies, burdened societies, and outlaw states.<sup>22</sup> But the political

and economic interrelations that shaped the two poles of the international order in this period, exploitative relations enabling Western democracies today to position themselves as

presumptively far closer to the “well-ordered” ideal than the so-called “burdened” and “outlaw” states, are not only not examined, but conceptually blocked by a framing that denies their historic and current interconnectedness. This “isolation,” this conceptual and causal quarantining, pre-empts the question of whether the most flagrant outlaw states may not once have been (or may even still be?) the Western democracies themselves, and whether this outlawry might conceivably have had some contributory role in creating the “burdens” faced by the nations of the South today. Thus the bracketing-out of empire even in the putatively empirical discipline of IR results—in the political philosophy that, though not empirical, presupposes its picture of the world—in a foreclosing of the investigation of crucial questions relevant to global justice and governance.

In her recent *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker argues that the absence of hermeneutical tools in a particular discourse is itself a distinctive kind of injustice, leaving the subordinated without the materials to conceptualize and theorize about their situation.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the

<sup>21</sup> See: “Introduction: International Relations, Eurocentrism, and Imperialism,” in *Decolonizing International Relations*, ed. Branwen Gruffydd Jones (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 2-4.

<sup>22</sup> John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples, with “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007).

difference here is that an anti-colonial and anti-racist tradition does already exist, so it is not at all that one is starting from zero. But the refusal of entry into the legitimized realm of political philosophy of this body of thought is a cognitive

a century behind us (if it is behind us) which is already in danger of being forgotten. It would provide a conceptual space, a theoretical location, in which these complementary exclusions could be addressed.

**The aspiration to the timeless and universal then rationalizes an idealized form of abstraction which, through its obfuscation of the distinctive political experience of people of color in modernity, makes the representative political individual European.**

handicap nonetheless, at least for the purposes of contesting dominant framings. The *non-naming* of this political system in current Western political philosophical discourse in a sense names it out of existence, deprives us of the cognitive resources to analyze it, or even (legitimately) to *talk* about it, given the way the field is currently structured and framed. One feels oneself out of court, out of bounds, transgressing the rules of the discipline. So there is a double mystification, which in complementary conceptual operations jointly obliterates the colonial past. It is not merely a matter of the non-inclusion of the anti-colonial and anti-racist voices of people of color (or the anti-colonial and anti-racist texts of white progressives), but also the sanitization, the deracialization, of the (generally) imperial political views of the officially included and canonized European theorists. Anti-colonial opponents are not recognized, and the grounds that would justify their recognition are removed through omitting or marginalizing—but in either case failing to make theoretically central to the debate—the (generally) pro-colonial dimension of the theories of the officially recognized thinkers. The formal inclusion in the lexicon of political philosophy of colonial rule as a system of domination would retrieve a history less than

Moreover, such a recognition would also require taking race seriously, conceptualizing it as a line of moral demarcation that—in contradiction to the official narrative of modernity—differentiates the status of “persons” and “sub-persons” and ultimately justifies their political demarcation and differentiation also, within structures of both formal and informal political rule. Western political philosophy’s current disingenuous disavowal of its racist past seeks to erase the fact that in the classic colonial period race was the marker of biological and/or cultural superiority/inferiority. Colonial rule is also racial rule, a system that is not merely intra-national but international, and rationalized by political philosophy itself. Instead, according to the standard narrative, the acknowledgment of the moral equality of persons is supposed to be the baseline for modern political theories. Thus in his introduction to political philosophy, Will Kymlicka tells us that: “the idea that each person matters equally is at the heart of all plausible [modern] political theories.”<sup>24</sup> Philip Pettit echoes the judgment in the Blackwell essay cited at the start: “all plausible modern political theories have in mind the same ultimate value, equality ... every theory claims to treat all

<sup>24</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1990), 5.

individuals as equals.”<sup>25</sup> Paul Kelly says the same thing: “Equality . . . is a peculiarly modern value” linked with “the idea of the modern individual emerg[ing] as a distinct bearer of ethical significance.”<sup>26</sup> So we are being offered a periodization, to be found in other areas of philosophy also, in which there are three main epochs—ancient, medieval, modern—which chronologically map a normative progression by which the moral inequality and ascriptive hierarchy of the ancient and medieval worlds, of pre-modernity, are triumphantly replaced by the equality and individualism of the modern. The idea is that while modernity gives rise to a variety of political ideologies, they all have in common as a normative starting-point the moral equality of persons. Fascism will then be represented as a political outlier, a deviation from the Western tradition. Racism, if mentioned at all, will not be represented as a political ideology at all, but psychologized, turned into a personal moral failing.

But the problem is that this orthodox narrative, this story of normative equalization, is *false*. It is *not* the case that nonwhites were generally seen as equal, morally, legally, and politically. For a more accurate account, we need to turn instead to Jean-Paul Sartre, who writes in his famous preface to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*: “there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism . . . On the other side of the ocean there was a race of less-than-humans.”<sup>27</sup> Personhood needs to be recognized as a technical term, a term of art, whose defining characteristics are generally so devised as to make whiteness a prerequisite for personhood. Nonwhites fall under an array of alternative categories—“savages,” “barbarians,”

“natives”—whose common feature is generally their normative inequality. These are not people in the full sense of the word, and as such they are not entitled to the full schedule of rights and protections of Europeans. So it means that in the dominant political ideologies of modernity we have an internal racial structuring, a color-coding, by virtue of which different moral, legal, and political rules are prescribed for these different populations. An ontological bifurcation runs through most modern Western moral-political thought, giving rise to what Edmund Burke once famously called “a geographical morality,”<sup>28</sup> a racially partitioned set of norms.

More than three decades ago, in his *Toward the Final Solution*, George Mosse indicted the failure of his scholarly contemporaries “to integrate the study of racism within [their] study of the modern history of Europe,” and urged that they should “examin[e] racism with the same attention that [they] have given to socialism, liberalism, or conservatism,” since it was “the most widespread ideology of the time.”<sup>29</sup> As noted at the beginning, much has been done in other fields since then to remedy this failure, but political philosophy remains delinquent. Thomas McCarthy begins his recent *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* with the observation that: “In mainstream political philosophy, the history of European racism, with its vast implications for the theory and practice of modern liberalism, has long remained on the margins.” Despite the fact that race relations “are contemporaneous with, and deeply implicated with, Western modernity from the first voyages of ‘discovery’ to present-day neocolonialism,” and that in this global context “racial classification would have a strong claim to being

<sup>25</sup> Pettit, “Analytical Philosophy,” 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Kelly, *Liberalism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface, to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1968), 26.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>29</sup> George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 236, 231.

the most significant” of what Rawls categorizes as the “morally arbitrary facts about individuals and groups” determining actual “legal and political standing,” the rethinking of Western political philosophy to take the shaping reality of race into account “has only recently begun.”<sup>30</sup>

McCarthy’s own book is a valuable contribution to this enterprise, as is the recently-translated blistering exposé by the Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*.<sup>31</sup> But such work remains very much the exception. It is political scientists rather than political philosophers who have been most prominent in this revisionist project: Barbara Arneil’s *John Locke and America*, Uday Singh Mehta’s *Liberalism and Empire*, Jennifer Pitts’s *A Turn to Empire*, James Tully’s *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, and others.<sup>32</sup> The danger is that such revisionist work will be seen as conceptually irrelevant to the discipline, not judged to require any remapping of the *philosophical* terrain itself. The peculiar pretensions of philosophy must be remembered here. The abstraction from the empirical which is its defining feature is generally taken to justify the ignoring of such real-world “deviations,” since the important thing is the concepts employed. The aspiration to the timeless and universal then rationalizes an idealized form of abstraction which, through its obfuscation of the distinctive political experience of people of color in modernity, makes the representative political individual European. Whiteness as racelessness becomes abstractness becomes philosophical representativeness.

What is required is a philosophical rethinking of the conceptual topography of the maps of political modernity that would both bring out the racialized dimension of concepts putatively colorless and all-inclusive and redraw that topography itself to make explicit its relation to the non-European world. Personhood itself, far from being an uncontroversial normative baseline for humanity in general, as the Kymlicka, Pettit, and Kelly quotes suggest, is contested from the start. The 1550-51 Valladolid Debate between Sepulveda and Las Casas on the humanity of the Amerindian population needs to be seen as a pivotal episode in establishing the social ontology of modernity, as do the later disputes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries about the standing within the human order of Africans and Native Australians, and the 1919 refusal by the Anglo-Saxon nations at the post-World War I Versailles Conference to accept the Japanese delegation’s proposal to incorporate a racial equality clause into the League of Nations’ Covenant.<sup>33</sup> No less than the contestation of feudal ascriptive hierarchy by the bourgeois revolutions and their famous texts, these battles for racial equality, and the conflicting claims of racist versus anti-racist ideologies, are ideologically and politically central to the making and remaking of the modern world, and need to be categorically located as such. Vitoria’s and Grotius’s views of Native Americans and their implications for the normative foundations of international law and judgments of sovereignty; Hobbes’s ferocious state-of-nature-as-a-state-of-war and its link with

<sup>30</sup> Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23-25.

<sup>31</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York, NY: Verso, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago,

IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*; James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, ed. Jacob T. Levy with Iris Marion Young (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 12.

Native Americans; Locke's non-industrious Amerindians, who are not living up to the divine imperative to go out and appropriate the world, thereby adding value to it; Kant's racial hierarchies and their implications for his view of personhood and the philosophy of history; Hegel's Eurocentric cartography of *Geist*, which makes it clear that the World-Spirit is a white spirit; Mill's exclusion of "barbarians" from the scope of his anti-paternalist "harm principle," and recommendation of "despotism" for them—the philosophical implications of these assumptions and conceptual framings about

**My claim will be that his framework forecloses any discussion of the colonial and racial past and present, and, as a consequence, fundamentally mis-orient what should be our normative priorities.**

humanity are not highlighted and elaborated as they should be. But neither is the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist oppositional tradition (hedged and Eurocentric as it too often was) of the West: the *Encyclopédistes'* denunciation of empire, Burke's indictment of British rule in India, Marxism's location of primitive capitalist accumulation in Amerindian expropriation and African slavery, Hannah Arendt's "boomerang thesis" linking the Nazi Holocaust to the colonial genocides, and Sartre's anti-colonial writings. Decolonizing Western political philosophy will require an acknowledgment of the transcontinental dimension of the thought of Western political theorists, the general complicity of the tradition with the colonial project, and the existence of opposing voices within that tradition. Such central categories as personhood,

society, sovereignty, obligation, property, civilization, the rule of law, were all historically operationalized by different rules for Europeans and populations of color, and the white political subject cannot stand in racelessly for the global political subject of modernity.

## Exposing the Coloniality of Rawls's Socio-Political Assumptions

At this point, I now want to turn from the general to a specific case: John Rawls.

My justification for using Rawls as an example is, as emphasized at the start, that he is routinely given the credit for reviving Anglo-American political philosophy, and can be seen as the central figure of the contemporary Anglo-American tradition. In the assessment of former Rawls student, Samuel Freeman, his most prominent interpreter and commentator, Rawls is "a world-historical thinker," "the preeminent theorist of justice in the modern era," "the foremost political philosopher of the twentieth century, and . . . one of the great political philosophers of all time."<sup>34</sup> Though it would obviously be wrong to generalize from Rawls to Western political philosophy as a whole, his influence on contemporary Western political philosophy has been huge, and, with *A Theory of Justice* having been translated into more than thirty languages, and liberalism seemingly globally triumphant over its Marxist challenger, it is spreading around the world. So as an illustration of my general point, I want to demonstrate the coloniality of Rawls's socio-political and normative assumptions. This may well seem a surprising aim considering that Rawls does not talk about colonialism at all. But that is, in part, my very point—that a philosophical framework can incorporate such presuppositions

<sup>34</sup> Freeman, *Rawls*, xvi, xvii, x.

even in the absence of explicit declaration. My focus here will not be on the by now very familiar and famous two principles of justice, or the transition from comprehensive to political liberalism, but with his framing assumptions about societies and their global context, and what is supposed to be the most illuminating way to think about social justice. My claim will be that his framework forecloses any discussion of the colonial and racial past and present, and, as a consequence, fundamentally mis-orient what should be our normative priorities.<sup>35</sup> Two of Rawls's stipulations are central: the way he suggests we should think of society and a supposedly unexceptionable simplifying assumption he makes about societies' mutual isolation. Neither is politically innocent.

In the opening pages of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls says we should think of society as "a cooperative venture for mutual advantage," which, though "typically marked by a conflict as well as by an identity of interests," is nonetheless regulated by rules "designed to advance the good of those taking part in it."<sup>36</sup> He also states that "for the time being," he will be conceiving of society "as a closed system isolated from other societies."<sup>37</sup> The point is this: *from such a theoretical starting-point, it is impossible to arrive at a colonial society and a colonial world.* It is not that theorists do not

routinely and legitimately make simplifying assumptions about the phenomenon they are trying to understand. This is what any model of reality requires. But assumptions like these are so directly contrary to reality, so centrally distortional of the essential defining features of the phenomenon in question, that they guarantee that a theoretical grasp of it will never be achieved. Past the hunting-and-gathering stage, or even including it if the claims of some feminist anthropologists about an inequitable sexual division of labor are vindicated, *all* societies have been

**To assume that a slave society or a European colonial outpost or a white settler state is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage is not to make a simplifying assumption for theoretical purposes, but to repudiate theorizing them altogether.**

oppressive in one way or another, whether on axes of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, or race.<sup>38</sup> So this fact alone would be enough to discredit the notion that a society is illuminatingly to be conceptualized as a consensual and jointly beneficial affair. But particularly in the modern period for which the "contract" model is supposed to be most appropriate, the shaping of colonial societies will *centrally* be done through force, and not merely force but external force. It is not remotely a matter of domestic consent, but of foreign coercion, whether through colonial conquest and rule or expropriative and usually genocidal white settlement.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, this political relationship affects those at the other end also, in the sense that the colonizing power and its citizenry are themselves shaped by these

<sup>35</sup> See, for a more detailed critique, Charles W. Mills, "Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XLVII (2009): 161-84.

<sup>36</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Carole Pateman, "The Settler Contract," in *Contract and Domination*, ed. Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007); A. Dirk Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2008).

relations of domination and exploitation. It is not just an exploitative transfer of wealth and resources that is involved, but the transformation of moral psychology, the birth of “whiteness” as a social category and its formation in relation to the nonwhites across the ocean (or locally), and its implications, as just discussed in the previous section, for conceptions of the self, socio-political frameworks, international law, and so forth.

These realities cannot be accommodated within a Rawlsian framework as so stipulated. It is not merely that Rawls, contingently, does not talk about colonialism, but that his foundational assumptions rule out such a world. How could a model world of largely self-sufficient societies, conceived of as cooperative ventures for mutual advantage and choosing whether to interact with one another or not, possibly serve to map an actual world consisting of Western powers trans-oceanically establishing and dominating exploited colonial territories that are part of their global empires? These are different realities, different worlds. To assume that a slave society or a European colonial outpost or a white settler state is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage is not to make a simplifying assumption for theoretical purposes, but to repudiate theorizing them altogether, since you have assumed away the most fundamental and glaring fact about such societies, viz. that they are systems of oppression. You cannot, by a series of minor adjustments, then get closer to social reality afterwards; rather, you have given up on mapping social reality at all.

Now the natural objection at this stage will be that I have committed the elementary error of

confusing the normative with the descriptive. Rawls, I will be told, meant an *ideal* rather than an actual society (“an *ideal* society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage”).<sup>40</sup> But to begin with, I am not alone in this reading. In one of the very first critical expositions of *A Theory of Justice*, Robert Paul Wolff’s *Understanding Rawls*,<sup>41</sup> he also construes Rawls’s language descriptively, and points out the problematic nature of such a formulation:

[I]f we define the state in terms of its characteristic end or purpose [advancing the good], we shall be forced to conclude that seemingly political associations that fail to pursue that end are not merely bad states but are not states at all . . . The natural inference to draw from this definition is that the antebellum South, for example, could not be considered a *society* . . . [I]t would surely have been wiser for [Rawls] to employ a definition that would permit him to treat such human groupings [unjust societies] as societies . . . [I]t is natural to assume that [Rawls] had some good reason for building a notion of cooperative advancement of the good into his definition of society. But I confess I do not see it.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Charles Beitz takes Rawls (following Hume) to be giving us a “model of society as a cooperative venture,” which, as such, “unnecessarily narrow[s] the description of these circumstances.”<sup>43</sup> Thomas Pogge, like Beitz a former Rawls student, makes a comparable judgment in his *Realizing Rawls*: “This explication seems narrow, for there are surely many

<sup>40</sup> The following draws on my exchange on this point with Adam Swift; see “Symposium: *Contract and Domination* by Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 3 (Oct. 2008), 260-62.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Paul Wolff, *Understanding Rawls: A Reconstruction and Critique of A Theory of Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>42</sup> Wolff, *Understanding Rawls*, 78-79.

<sup>43</sup> Charles R. Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 130-31.

historical societies (standardly so-called) whose rules fail either to be designed for mutual advantage or to be recognized as binding by all participants.”<sup>44</sup> He adds in a footnote: “I think Rawls is here defining what a society *is*. Were he already making assumptions about what a society ought to be, I would not need to object to this passage.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, Samuel Freeman’s massive *Rawls*, cited earlier, states: “Basically [Rawls] conceives of society in terms of social cooperation, which he regards as productive and mutually beneficial, and which involves an idea of reciprocity or fair terms,” later adding, in the glossary at the back, “Rawls regards society as a fair system of social cooperation.”<sup>46</sup>

For all four philosophers, then, including three former Rawls students, the characterization is indeed meant descriptively. But setting aside the argument from the authority of secondary sources, there is also (and more importantly) the argument from the text itself. It is difficult to make sense of what Rawls goes on to say if “society” is to be read as “ideal society,” since he then introduces the further category of a “well-ordered society.” But if we are *already* in the realm of the ideal, how could there be conceptual room left for further idealization? We would then, weirdly, have the following categories: societies in general, real and hypothetical (and thus presumably including oppressive societies); ideal societies, non-oppressive cooperative ventures, as a subset of societies in general, real and hypothetical; and then well-ordered societies, as a subset of ideal societies (somehow ideally ideal, as against merely ideal). This is odd enough, but it gets more peculiar. Rawls then informs us that: “Existing societies are of course seldom well-ordered in this sense, for what is just and unjust is usually in dispute.”<sup>47</sup> How are we to read this use of “society”? Is it society-as-ideal-society?

But how could it be? There *are* no ideal societies on the face of the planet! It is currently a category with no real instantiations. And so there are no well-ordered societies either, that ideal ideal subset of the merely ideal. So Rawls has to be using the term here in its everyday sense, society-as-actual-society, which would mean either that he meant it that way all along, or that he has switched without warning from the (putative) idealized, Rawlsian term-of-art sense to the conventional sense. But by standard Gricean “conversational implicature,” one does not make a claim weaker than the facts allow. If the city is suffering a heat wave and the temperature outside is over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, we do not say: “It must be at least 60 degrees outside!” So this suggests that Rawls really believes that existing societies are in general cooperative ventures, if few can be categorized as well-ordered, since otherwise the natural thing for him to have said would be that “Existing societies are of course not cooperative ventures for mutual advantage, and so, *a fortiori*, are not well-ordered.”

Thus we face a dilemma: either Rawls is using “society” in a perverse idiosyncratic way or he was massively ignorant of basic societal realities. But in either case, prescriptions for social justice based on such a conception of society or on such a sociology are going to be problematic to apply in the actual world. I think that the most charitable reading (though even it ultimately fails) is to assume that Rawls really had the modern Western democracies in mind when he spoke of “societies.” These are the societies that come closest to fitting the contract model, which he is trying to update for his theory. Pre-modern feudal and slave societies, modern non-Western dictatorships, clearly do not meet the criterion of genuinely being cooperative ventures, and so are

<sup>44</sup> Thomas W. Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>45</sup> Pogge, *Realizing Rawls*, 20, n. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Freeman, *Rawls*, 106, 483.

<sup>47</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 5.

not “societies” in the sense he means. Such a reading does not require comprehensive global historical illiteracy on Rawls’s part, just the kind of Eurocentric and androcentric historical illiteracy typical of his time (admittedly global in its own way). Moreover, this interpretation would be consistent with the later explicit announcement, in the 1980s’ essays and in the 1993 *Political Liberalism*, that *A Theory of Justice*’s seeming generality of normative reference was mistaken, and that he was really articulating a theory for the Western nations, drawing on ideas implicit within the Western tradition.

But the problem is, of course, that apart from the feminist critique of Western patriarchy, and the racial subordination of people of color (Amerindian expropriation and genocide, African slavery) in the Western (alleged) democracy of which he was a citizen—which motivated Pierre van den Berghe’s famous alternative characterization of “*Herrenvolk* democracy”—this conception of society and of social justice excludes the formerly colonized nations from the scope of his principles of justice. Uncontroversially historically characterized by structural oppression, they presumably do not meet the bar for being “cooperative ventures” and thus do not count as “societies” proper of the appropriate normative Western kind. Apart from the absurdity of a theory of social justice that prescind from dealing with structural social injustice—just stop for a second and think about the bizarreness of that—this partitioned normative cartography severs the very historic connections between “the West and the Rest” that are responsible for the latter’s “non-cooperative” nature in the first place! In their introduction to their edited *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, Jacob Levy and Iris Marion Young point out how Rawls’s framing of these issues, which projects backwards into the past a national isolation completely untrue to the

actual international history, is part of a larger pattern of mystification (starting to change only recently) in contemporary political theory:

Modernity—the centuries since 1500—has been at once the era of the European state and the era of the European empires . . . From 1500 through 1950, very nearly all of the inhabited world came under the power of one or another European state, or a European-derived settler state . . . Even if the age of European empires is broken into many discrete events, there are *many* such events . . . that would rank among the largest-scale conquests in human history. And these events include a substantial share of the greatest political evils ever committed. Yet all of this seemed, for many years, tangential to the story of modernity familiar to political theorists and philosophers.<sup>48</sup>

Formal decolonization enabled an amnesia about the colonial past and an ignoring of the neo-colonial present, problematic enough in political theory, but even worse in political philosophy:

By the time of the revitalization of Anglophone political philosophy with the publication of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, decolonization had reshaped the political map. The world was, juridically, almost completely a world of sovereign and formally equal states. And the great debates projected back through modern intellectual history were fundamentally debates about the internal governance of such states . . . Colonial and imperial relations—relations between metropolitan states and their conquered colonies and territories—figured approximately not at all . . . Contractarianism [in particular] treats life outside the state—the kind of state we can recognize as the

<sup>48</sup> Levy and Young, *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, xi-xii.

modern European Weberian state—as prepolitical and extrapolitical, outside the core concerns of political philosophy . . . [S]ocial contract theory came more and more to be understood as relevant to the politics of one, self-contained and well-defined, state. If the first great work of social contract theory was Grotius’ *Rights of War and Peace* and the last was *Theory of Justice*, the contrast could hardly be more stark. The earlier work is nearly *all about* interpolity relations including imperial relations; the latter takes as the point of departure for political philosophy a self-governing society closed off from the rest of the world, unaffected by it and not affecting it. And Rawlsian questions (or the questions of his libertarian or communitarian critics) were projected backward through time.<sup>49</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, nowhere in any of Rawls’s five directly authored books (or the two lecture collections) is there any mention of Native Americans, the Atlantic Slave Trade, European colonialism and imperialism, the genocide of indigenous populations, or the reality of systemic Euro-domination on a global scale.<sup>50</sup> These people, these histories, simply cannot be accommodated by the official contract narrative. The “colonial” character of Rawls’s work and the vast, polyglot secondary literature of Rawlsianism is manifest not in racist representations of people of color, but in the simple fact that this whole body of thought takes as a starting-point what, in the period of modernity for which the contract is supposed to be most appropriate, is only true (to the extent that it is true) for the Euro-population, and for the Euro-population conceptually abstracted out of their political relations of domination over populations of color. Denying the past and present relations of colonialism and neocolonialism, which have created both, Rawls

offers us a vision of autarkical polities whose respective levels of development are the result not of a transnational and intra-national (for the

**Unsurprisingly, then, nowhere in any of Rawls’s five directly authored books (or the two lecture collections) is there any mention of Native Americans, the Atlantic Slave Trade, European colonialism and imperialism, the genocide of indigenous populations, or the reality of systemic Euro-domination on a global scale.**

United States) system of extraction and exploitation, not of *empire*, but of different national cultures and traditions. The societies of the West get to be “cooperative ventures,” covered by the norms of justice; the societies of the Rest fall into the outer darkness, normatively registering only as “burdened societies” and “outlaw states.” Thus by the very conceptual framing of his theory, he launders colonialism and imperialism, whitewashing them out of his dikaiological framework. It is the viewpoint of the metropole, the colonizer, the white settler—the viewpoint of colonial racial privilege in a nominally post-colonial epoch, its coloniality manifesting itself not in a crude *endorsement* of colonialism (that would obviously be inappropriate for the postwar world) but, far more effectively, in a total aprioristic *conceptual exclusion* of such issues that—by ensuring they never even make it on to the agenda—in effect denies their existence, thereby naturalizing and firewalling colonial and white racial privilege from normative scrutiny and political challenge.

<sup>49</sup> Levy and Young, *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, xii–xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Mills, “Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls.”

How can you critique what—through the lenses of the theory—you cannot even see?

## Exposing the Coloniality of Rawls's Normative Assumptions

And that brings us naturally to justice. As noted, one of Rawls's central achievements in his resurrection of Anglo-American political philosophy was the shifting of the primary concern of the field from the question of our obligation to the state to the question of social justice. But whether pre- or post-Rawls, the colonial shaping of the terms of the debate continues to be manifest. Those subordinated by the Western empires would obviously have had a very different perspective on the question of their political obligations to the state. But we never get to hear their voices: the presumption is always that the state is legitimate, non-oppressive, consensual, so that the distinctive Euro-experience of the political can be unproblematically adopted as a general framework by others. What I would contend is that in the thematic shift from political obligation to social justice, we find a comparable entrenching of the perspective of the colonially privileged.

Consider the many different branches and sub-branches of philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, aesthetics, existentialism, phenomenology, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, etc. Of all of these different areas, it is obviously normative theory that provides the clearest and most direct entry point for the challenge to socio-political systems. Questions of the morally normative—right and wrong, just and unjust—have the potential to raise *frontally* the issue of the moral legitimacy of the existing order, especially when the justice of the “basic structure” has overtly and officially been made the explicit subject of a newly renascent political philosophy. Moreover,

in terms of timing, this announced recasting of the central theme of the sub-discipline takes place at a period (1970s) when global decolonization has been under way for more than two decades, and the black civil rights movement in the United States, mainstream and non-mainstream, has been building in strength since the 1950s. So it is precisely now, one would think, that a philosophical discourse on justice, with the backing of Ivy League academic authority, would be most useful in casting in respectable form these deep challenges, national and global, to the postwar racial system, and thus assisting the debate on how best to dismantle the structures of white power and privilege inherited from the old colonial order.

**Above all, here is a book about using a temporary veil of ignorance to block access to facts that may bias one's judgment in which a permanent veil of ignorance is dropped over the facts of colonial and racial domination.**

The remarkable thing about Rawls's apparatus is the way it shuts all of these questions down. The book is now so familiar to all of us that it requires a cognitive effort to see it anew, as if one is encountering it for the first time. But try to imagine that one is doing so. Here is a 600-page book on social justice (in its 1971 first edition incarnation) in which *no answers are given about the correction of the injustices of the past*. Here is a book by an American, writing in the Anglo-American tradition, that resurrects Anglo-American political philosophy—in which the

wrongs of the Anglosphere,<sup>51</sup> the British and the American Empires, both external and domestic, *receive no attention whatsoever*. Here is a book by a citizen of the Western democracy in which racial injustice (Amerindian expropriation and genocide, African slavery and subsequent Jim Crow) has been more salient than any other kind, in which *racial justice as a theme is conceptually excluded by its very meta-normative framework*. Above all, here is a book about using a temporary veil of ignorance to block access to facts that may bias one's judgment in which a permanent veil of ignorance is dropped over the facts of colonial and racial domination, *which make no appearance over the course of its 600 pages*. As with a definition of society that defines structural oppression away, Rawlsian ideal theory reconceives justice so that its most obvious function—correcting injustices—is not just deferred to a tomorrow that never comes, but deferred to a tomorrow that *can never* come.

Recall what, for Rawls, ideal theory is: the determination of “the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society,” “what a perfectly just society would be like.”<sup>52</sup> So ideal theory is not just normative theory, which of course you necessarily need to be passing judgments about social justice. Ideal theory is the theory of justice for a perfectly just society. Issues of “compensatory justice” then fall under non-ideal theory rather than ideal theory. But we need to start with ideal theory, Rawls claims, since “it provides . . . the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems [of non-ideal theory].”<sup>53</sup> The ideally just society is then somehow supposed to

provide a normative target for us that will serve to adjudicate matters of non-ideal theory.

Now the problem is not merely that for the remaining three decades of his life, Rawls never explained how the transition from ideal theory to non-ideal theory as compensatory justice was to be made. (In the book in which he does talk at greatest length about non-ideal theory, *The Law of Peoples*, it is not with respect to compensatory justice, but the aforementioned “burdened societies” and “outlaw states.”<sup>54</sup>) The problem is that given his normative starting-point, the transition *cannot* be made. To begin with, if you are serious about using “cooperative venture” as a conceptual filter for the social scope of your theory of justice, then societies characterized by coercion, by deep structural oppression, are eliminated in advance. So precisely where a theory of justice is most needed it is most lacking! But setting this (non-trivial) problem aside, it is difficult to see how a perfectly just society can constitute a normative target for deeply oppressive societies. When serious breaches of justice are involved, like genocide, slavery, and mass indigenous expropriation, an ideally just society in the Rawlsian sense will be unattainable because there is no way that the most well-meaning corrective measures (apologies, Holocaust Museums, financial settlements) will be able to bring about a social order morally equivalent to one where no such measures are necessary because no injustice was committed in the first place. The wrongfully dead cannot be restored to life, the suffering that has taken place cannot be historically erased, the legacy cannot be dematerialized even if rectification serves to

---

<sup>51</sup> See Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Like Gruffydd Jones, Vucetic points out that “In an effort to forget its racist past, IR [International Relations] turned race into a ‘taboo.’” But the reality is that “the origins of [the] Anglosphere are racial,” “a hierarchy made up of the core and mostly white Self on the one hand and on the other

the peripheral and overwhelmingly nonwhite Other”: 7, 3, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

palliate the legacy somewhat. A perfectly just society would really have to be one with *no* history of deep injustice, since for any candidate with such a history, we could always (as with the

*at this very time that a meta-normative framework for conceptualizing justice is put forward that has the effect of obliterating the past, marginalizing race, and taking off the table the issue of rectificatory justice, including racial*

**The failure to make racial justice central to the political philosophy of a former white settler state—or indeed all the other white settler states in the Anglosphere (not just the United States, but also Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand)—the failure to make racial justice central to the political philosophy of the former colonial nations—itsself testifies to its colonial character.**

ontological argument) imagine a superior society in which the injustice had not occurred in the first place. Instead, given the actual real-world history, what we have to make do with is a sub-optimal normative target that corrects injustices as best we can. But such a target cannot be founded on ideal theory in the Rawlsian sense—it is just too metaphysically remote from the actual world to be useful. The rectificatory ideal is necessarily going to be different from the ideal ideal.

My claim would be that the displacement to the margins of Rawls's normative concern of the issue of compensatory racial justice, with all its distinctive problems—and the similar distancing in his disciples, commentators, and most of his critics—is itself one of the most clear-cut manifestations of the ongoing colonial nature of Western political philosophy. At the very time when the focus of the discipline is shifted from political obligation to social justice, at the very time when the colonial system is being terminated (at least formally) and racism is being repudiated (at least officially, and in its biologicistic incarnation), at the very time when people of color are emerging as global players and challenging the existing order as actors and thinkers, at the very time when philosophers of color are beginning to arrive in the white academy, having previously been excluded—*it is*

*justice.* My claim is not, of course, that Rawls consciously and deliberately, in conspiracy with others, set out to design a philosophical framework that had these intellectual consequences. My claim is rather one about the sociology of belief, about the workings of group ideologies and group perspectives, of what seems “right” and what seems “wrong” to particular epistemological communities, of questions you want to explore and questions you want to stay away from—in sum, the patterns of majoritarian group cognition influencing one as a member of a racially privileged white community inhabiting a white social and intellectual lifeworld, and how that world establishes epistemic and normative horizons for you, and makes certain lines of theoretical development more “natural” and attractive than others.

Note also that this non-discussion of racial justice in the justice literature is all the more striking because it is not as if the concept is unheard of elsewhere. It is not like gay justice or queer theory, where—the love that (originally) dared not speak its name—these subjects were generally taboo, their advocates risking not merely personal ostracism but, in some cases, legal penalties. Rather, racial justice was explicitly the banner under which the black American civil rights movement marched and in reference to which the anti-colonial struggle was often

prosecuted. So this concept was already available in the public sphere to be appropriated. It did not need conceptual innovation to be discovered or political courage to be publicly articulated. The failure to make racial justice central to the political philosophy of a former white settler state—or indeed all the other white settler states in the Anglosphere (not just the United States, but also Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand)—the failure to make racial justice central to the political philosophy of the former colonial nations—itsself testifies to its colonial character.

Moreover, as this listing indicates, the lacuna is not merely national but global. Rawls himself was reluctant to apply his principles globally, on the grounds that there was no transnational “basic structure,” and in addition, as earlier mentioned, that the level of development of individual countries was a function of their peculiar cultures and national traditions. Both these claims were, of course, deeply problematic, ignoring the network of organizations that regulated global activities and the power relationships established by the legacy of colonialism, and basically putting forward a version of the culture of poverty writ large, on a planetary scale, to explain different levels of development. But others have rejected his diffidence, and sought to issue prescriptions for global justice. As a result of approaches both Rawlsian and non-Rawlsian, global justice is now one of the central themes of contemporary political philosophy, with a large and ever-

growing literature on the theme. Yet a striking feature of this body of thought is its almost complete marginalization of the colonial history. The contenders in the debate will be egalitarianism, cosmopolitanism, the difference principle, positive rights, and so forth. But the idea that the West owes rectificatory justice to the rest of the planet because of its benefit from centuries of colonial and racial exploitation will rarely be raised.<sup>55</sup> Thomas

**Rectificatory justice opens the question of where the bodies are buried and seeks to raise the dead, and these are not issues the West wants to talk about.**

Pogge, for example, who is perhaps the most prominent theorist to rely on negative rights-violations in his arguments, does mention this history briefly, but focuses more on recent global organizations and structures, and says little about race.<sup>56</sup> The global justice debate in the Western academy is largely disconnected from the global justice debate in the real world—the various attempts to hold the West accountable, for example in the various United Nations Conferences Against Racism, which have generally been boycotted by the Western nations.

Thus there is a politics of amnesia at both the philosophical level and the official public policy level. Moreover, it affects not just official representations, or non-representations, of the general structural subordination of colonialism and slavery, but even specific events. The best-known example is the Belgian Government’s refusal to take responsibility for, or educate its citizens about, the genocide of ten million people under King Leopold II.<sup>57</sup> But the French failure to prosecute anyone for the by now publicly-

<sup>55</sup> For a welcome recent exception, see Daniel Butt, *Rectifying International Injustice: Principles of Compensation and Restitution Between Nations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (Malden MA; Polity, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

admitted atrocities of the Algerian War,<sup>58</sup> the German foot-dragging on reparations to the descendants of the survivors of the Herero and Nama *Vernichtungsbefehl*,<sup>59</sup> the British non-response until very recently to the revelations of

**What is called for, then, is a rethinking of Western political philosophy which will . . . “provincialize Europe,” locating it as a particular part of the globe rather than the center of the globe.**

the atrocities and tortures of their war of counter-insurgency in Kenya,<sup>60</sup> the mass killings of Italy’s colonial wars in Libya and Ethiopia,<sup>61</sup> and the continuing American refusal to apologize for slavery<sup>62</sup>—all these are evidence of a refusal to confront, or even admit, the colonial past and the way it has shaped the present. Rectificatory justice opens the question of where the bodies are buried and seeks to raise the dead, and these are not issues the West wants to talk about. Far better to retreat into an ideal theory where the hypothetical is the only modality that speaks and the actual non-ideal past is necessarily silenced.

## Towards a Dialogue of Equals

What is called for, then, is a rethinking of Western political philosophy which will, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s famous phrase, “provincialize Europe,” locating it as a particular part of the globe rather than the center of the globe, whose dialogue with the rest of the world has, however, as a result of imperial hegemony, been more like a monologue, drowning out the voices of others.<sup>63</sup>

A revisionist history needs to be undertaken, which will not only recognize alternative non-Western political traditions, both outside and inside the West (thus redrawing the “West”), but make central how the *non-recognition* of the equality of others has, from modernity onwards, distorted the West’s own descriptive mapping of and prescriptive recommendations for the local and incipiently global polities it has constructed. Such a history would, inter alia, seek to recover and conscientiously engage with the epistemological and normative resistance, both internal and external, that the project of Euro-domination has always encountered. The rethinking of familiar categories in the light of their imperial genealogy, the admission of new categories that illuminate structures of domination not registered in the official lexicon, the complicating of standard narratives, would open up the cognitive field of the discipline’s current self-conception so as to make possible a *genuine* self-knowledge that current

<sup>58</sup> Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> Jeremy Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide of the Hereros: Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers* (Rochester, NY: UCT Press/James Currey, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2005). As I was revising this paper in summer 2013, news came of a British settlement of £19.9 million pounds for 5, 228 survivors.

<sup>61</sup> *Italian Colonialism*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: On Reparations for Slavery, Jim Crow, and Their Legacies*, ed. Michael T. Martin and Marilyn Yaquinto (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>63</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

---

orthodoxies—given the need to evade the past—preclude. In this revised framework, a real dialogue of equals could take place that would better be able to address and begin the remedying of the legacy of the Euro-polity, thereby giving the appropriate respect and justice to the “non-political” Others upon whom for hundreds of years it has historically been imposed.

*Charles W. Mills is John Evans Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy at Northwestern University. He works in the general area of oppositional political theory, with a particular focus on race. He is the author of numerous journal articles and book chapters, and five books: The Racial Contract (1997); Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race (1998); From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism (2003); Contract and Domination (with Carole Pateman) (2007); and Radical Theory, Caribbean Reality: Race, Class and Social Domination (2010). His latest book, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, is Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism.*