

## Africa, Race, and World Order

### OPINION

By William Minter

*"The failure to acknowledge race as a fundamental feature of today's unequal world order remains a striking weakness of radical as well as conventional analyses of that order. Current global and national socioeconomic hierarchies are not mere residues of a bygone era of primitive accumulation. Just as it should be inconceivable to address the past, present, and future of American society without giving central attention to the role of African American struggles, so analyzing and addressing 21st-century structures of global inequality requires giving central attention to Africa."*

As readers are aware, AfricaFocus features reposted material published recently, with the editor's own comments limited to a short introduction. This week is an exception, in that the article reposted (and quoted in the paragraph above) is one that I wrote more than a decade ago. I was led to reread it while trying to reflect on the many recent events reminding all of us of the unequal values given to human lives in today's world order, both between and within countries and continents. These inequalities are shaped by race, place, class, gender, and multiple other factors. But they are also molded by a long history that systematically makes the African continent, those who live there, and those who come from there particularly vulnerable.

In my view, the connection between global and African realities is most directly apparent in the realm of issues such as climate change, migration, and the unequal flows of economic resources, which are regularly featured in AfricaFocus. But how these structural stresses affect the highly visible terrain of political conflict, violence, and human rights varies enormously in its particularities by country. General narratives, including that sketched in this essay, are always inadequate, and in many respects subjective. But today's date (May 25, Africa Day) is also an appropriate one to turn to more general reflections. I am convinced that the basic points made in this essay still hold true and hope it may be of interest to many AfricaFocus readers.

For two publications in which I have attempted to address the global/African connections with respect to the issue of migration, see the background paper "African Migration, Global Inequalities, and Human Rights: Connecting the Dots," 2011 (<http://www.africafocus.org/editor/nai-migration.php>), written for the Nordic Africa Institute, and the short pamphlet "Migration and Global Justice: From Africa to the United States" 2008 (<http://www.africafocus.org/editor/afsc0804.pdf>), written for the American Friends Service Committee.

An earlier related essay on "Global Apartheid", by Salih Booker and William Minter, appeared in The Nation in 2001 (<http://www.thenation.com/article/global-apartheid>).

Links to additional publications available on-line can be found at <http://www.africafocus.org/editor.php> - **Editor's Note**

### Invisible Hierarchies: Africa, Race, and Continuities in the World Order

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#### Abstract

The failure to acknowledge race as a fundamental feature of today's unequal world order remains a striking weakness of radical as well as conventional analyses of that order. Current global and national socioeconomic hierarchies are not mere residues of a bygone era of primitive accumulation. Just as it should be inconceivable to address the past, present, and future of American society without giving central attention to the role of African American struggles, so analyzing and addressing 21st-century structures of global inequality requires giving central attention to Africa.

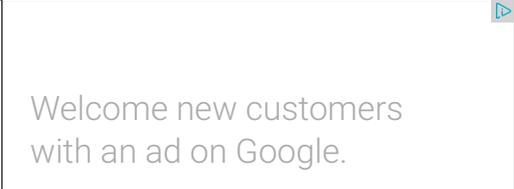
#### Text

"We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade, and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences. -- Declaration of the World Conference Against Racism, Durban, South Africa, September 8, 2001

Coming only days before September 11, this acknowledgment by world governments of the legal premise of the reparations movement gained little media attention. The 62-page declaration and program of action, already undermined by a last-minute U. S. withdrawal from the conference, faded into obscurity even more rapidly than the conclusions of other global conferences that have proliferated in recent decades. In any case, the commitments made in Durban to repair the consequences of racism were even vaguer than most such conference commitments, such as new pledges to finance development adopted by consensus at the Monterrey poverty summit in March 2002.

Yet the failure to acknowledge race as a fundamental feature of today's unequal world order is not confined to Bush administration unilateralists or international diplomats crafting new compromise language for promises destined to be betrayed. With some notable

exceptions, such as Winant, 2001 and Marable, 2004, authors of the vast array of commentaries on globalization and even of the more recent crop of writings about empire treat race only in passing -- if they mention it at all. Such reticence about race applies not only to advocates of the Washington Consensus of free-market fundamentalism and to cheerleaders for U. S. empire, but also to more critical analysts of a variety of persuasions from center to left.



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The end of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994 marked the demise of racial discrimination as explicit state policy, just as the mid-1960s victories of the civil rights movement in the United States had marked the end of the Jim Crow system of segregation in the U. S. south. But the persistence of de facto racial inequality into the 21st century is pervasive in both nations, as well as globally. Its relative invisibility in public commentary and analysis must be considered a fundamental feature of the current moment requiring explanation.

### *21st Century Color Lines*

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) and other analysts, focusing on the current U. S. racial order, have posited an ideology of "color-blind racism," which allows for continuation of racial inequality while firmly rejecting overt racial distinctions or discrimination. One of the key components of this ideology is to deny the link between past and present, so that people regardless of their background are seen as starting on a level playing field. This assumption fits well with the companion ideology stressing the virtues of the neutral market, which all are presumed to approach with similar possibilities of success. Such an ideology gains credibility from the visible success of individuals from the subordinate group, which does in the case of race mark a break with earlier ideologies of rigid discrimination. With successful individuals in the foreground, and even celebrated as illustrating diversity, it becomes easier to view continuing structural inequality as relatively unimportant, or even to dismiss it altogether. Persistent poverty or other disadvantages can conveniently be attributed entirely to individual defects, and seen as unrelated to past or present discrimination.

The dominant ideology thus diverts attention from the structural bases of persistent and rising inequality. Contrary views are portrayed as divisive promotion of class warfare or racial hostility. Meanwhile, progressive forces have failed to forge a persuasive counter-perspective integrating both race and class that similarly facilitates united opposition to the dominant order. Recently Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres have argued that race is like a miner's canary, with damage to minority communities signaling the damaging structural hierarchies permeating the society (Guinier and Torres, 2002). They further argue that racial mobilization, combined with openness to wider coalition-building, must be a fundamental component of progressive action in the United States. Many others have made similar arguments, while documenting the persistence of racial inequality, in unemployment, incarceration, denial of voting rights, and other arenas. Yet it is no secret that progressive forces have had little success in implementing such strategies on more than a fragmentary local basis.

Building a progressive U. S. internationalism that acknowledges the impact of race, both internally and globally, is an even more intimidating challenge than that on the domestic front. The growing impact of immigration also makes such issues unavoidable in other industrialized countries as well. The much-celebrated demonstrations in Seattle and similar anti-corporate globalization events have been notable for their failure to make such connections, despite efforts to do so by many of the activist groups involved (Martinez, 2000). Despite trans-Atlantic contacts made at the World Conference against Racism, even for most supporters the U. S. reparations movement retains an almost exclusive domestic focus, rather than a campaign situated within the context of damages done to the African continent as well. Despite overwhelming opposition among Black Americans to Bush's war in Iraq, and efforts by groups such as Black Voices for Peace, the anti-war movement has generally been unable to make connections with broader opposition to domestic and global inequality.

Neither the conceptual nor practical solutions to this impasse are easy to discern. But surely one prerequisite is for progressive analysts to acknowledge that W. E. B. Du Bois's prediction that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line applies to the new century as well. Such continuity must surely count among the deep structures still characterizing the world today.

This is not to deny the significance of recent changes, whether the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar geostrategic order, the accelerating velocity of global communication, the triumph symbolized by Nelson Mandela's election in 1994, or the globalization of threats of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Nevertheless, both the visible and real global hierarchies, whether measured in terms of economic power and privilege, human security, or access to effective political rights, show a close correlation with the order established by the centuries of slavery, conquest, and colonial rule.

To the extent that the gatherings of the World Social Forum in Brazil and India do prefigure another possible world vision, it is still a world in which one continent -- Africa -- is strikingly underrepresented. [as of writing of this article in 2005] Speculation about the rise of new forces to global prominence to challenge U. S. hegemony center on the advance of Asia, including China and India as well as Japan. The potential weight of the Asian continent, with more than half of the estimated world population of some 6.4 billion, is clearly linked to sheer numbers as well as to the structure of the world system. But the profound gap between Africa (some 870 million people) and less populous continents such as Europe (729 million), North America (509 million) and South America (367 million) is easily visible in any compilation of comparative statistics of development, from life expectancy to gross national product to vulnerability to the AIDS pandemic.

The point here is neither to rehearse such familiar statistics nor to call for continent-based quotas in reflections about the current state of the world. Rather, it is to suggest that the Guinier-Torres analogy of the miner's canary applies globally as well as in the United States. Just as it should be inconceivable to address the past, present, and future of American society without giving central attention to the role of African American struggles, so analyzing and addressing the structures of global inequality requires giving central attention to Africa.

The mechanisms responsible for creating and maintaining such inequality are not unique to Africa, but their effects are most starkly visible there. That is why Africa figures prominently on the agenda of international institutions, from the World Bank to the panoply of specialized UN agencies. The fact that Africa nevertheless remains marginal to public debate across the political spectrum outside the continent is an indicator of the absence of a global social contract and of the current weakness of movements to establish a world order based on principles other than market values.

Within the United States, as Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro convincingly showed in their landmark book *Black Wealth, White Wealth* (1995), inheritance remains a central mechanism in perpetuating racial inequality, even when there is significant upward mobility in jobs and income for some. On a global scale, the common-sense case for the lasting effect on the current global hierarchy of centuries of primitive accumulation of wealth by violence is so obvious that it seems incredible that it is not generally acknowledged, whether or not one argues that there should be a statute of limitations on responsibility for repairing the damage. Yet in fact such causal links are commonly dismissed as irrelevant "ancient history" or simply ignored by policy-makers and scholars alike. The debate opened up by such classic works as Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) has yet to be integrated into current reflections about globalization and empire.

### *Global Apartheid*

Certainly there is much that is new about the current moment in Africa, as elsewhere in the world. The end of the Cold War removed the primary strategic imperative for outside subsidies to African regimes. The AIDS pandemic, which in the 1980s was largely confined to central Africa, has swept through much of the continent, reversing previous advances in raising life expectancy. It now threatens almost every sector of economy and society. Few African cities now lack multiple internet cafes, and the growth of mobile phone use is the most rapid anywhere. Although the trend is less well studied than in the Caribbean or Latin America, the dispersion of new African immigrants throughout the world has made remittances a central feature of survival for many African communities and a major component of many national economies. Each of these trends, it could be argued, is a sign of deep structural change as well as a feature of the current moment.

Nevertheless, continuities with previous periods and reinforcement of long-established structures are equally striking. As recently summarized in an article analyzing the causes of increasing world inequality (Wade, 2004), the statistics on recent inequality trends are much disputed. Results vary widely with the measures and data used. But what evidence there is for structural advance in the global South comes almost entirely from trends in China and India. At a structural level, despite such blips as a modest increase in U. S. textile imports from several African countries as a result of tariff concessions in the U.S.-Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, the role of African countries in the world economy is still overwhelmingly that of suppliers of primary commodities, as has been the case since colonial conquest over a century ago. The dynamics of world markets are of course different for different commodities ranging from coffee and cotton to oil and gold. But not even South Africa has managed to find a sustainable strategy to emulate the East Asian competitive challenges to the established G-7 economic powers.

Despite multiple shifts in terminology and emphasis, moreover, neither reformist African governments nor stronger critics of the Washington Consensus among African activists and scholars have succeeded in altering the course of the international financial institutions that have insisted on putting macroeconomic adjustment and trade liberalization above all else. The World Bank and the IMF have indeed forfeited any credibility with both African and international civil society. But alternative agendas for "sustainable development" and "human development," despite endorsement by multilateral agencies, global conferences, and even dissenting voices within the World Bank, have lost ground to market fundamentalism in practice.

While the first decades of African independence saw significant advances in health and education, subsequent decades have instead seen an overall pattern of decline. Disparities such as these were and are reinforced not only by economic structures such as commodity markets and the accumulation of capital controlled by the capitalist classes of rich countries, but also by continuities of political influence. The victories of greater autonomy won by anti-colonial struggles were eroded first by the Cold War and the continued influence of ex-colonial powers. Regardless of the political ideology of post-colonial leaders, the model of the colonial state remained the dominant guide to the exercise of power. And in response to the economic crises of the 1980s and the 1990s, African states lost more and more influence to the directing hand of the World Bank and clubs of creditors/donors.

While contemporary critics of globalization lament the loss of autonomy of national states, in Africa the empirical evidence for such an earlier golden age is weak indeed. Whether for the first wave of independent states in the 1960s, or for those winning power in the 1970s and 1980s after armed struggles, the period of hope and popular mobilization was quickly cut short. The entry of a free South Africa onto the African scene in the last decade has significantly changed the context for continental cooperation, and many see the African Union as an arena for both wider public debate and action on some of the continent's crises. But whether one attributes Pretoria's compromises to pragmatism or to class interests, it would be difficult to argue that the vision of African renaissance has won much leverage for Africa in institutions deciding global policies affecting the continent.

Debates on the causes of this reality, and on how to find a path ahead that avoids both Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism, are complex. But surely it is necessary to go beyond national arenas or the failure of particular leaders and to include analysis of the lack of democracy in global institutions that have relatively more weight in Africa than almost anywhere else in the world. To counter growing global inequality requires state action on a scale equivalent to the global mechanisms that reinforce that inequality.

Multilateral institutions dealing with almost every conceivable issue have in fact proliferated in parallel with economic globalization. There has also been significant involvement by a burgeoning "international civil society," ranging from nongovernmental organizations in the global North to activist groups in both North and South. The impact at the level of ideas has been significant. But it is also the case that the more influential the institution, the more likely its effective governance is effectively controlled by representatives of rich, predominantly white, countries.

Whether or not one uses the term "global apartheid" (Booker and Minter, 2001), any short-hand description of the global order at the dawn of the 21st century must somehow acknowledge the double standards implicit in an international system of global minority rule, based on the entrenched assumption that some human lives are more valuable than others based on the accident of place and race of birth. The tragedy of 9/11 and the war on Iraq is not only the direct damage inflicted by those events, but also the reinforcement given to

diversion of attention from the global holocaust of the AIDS pandemic and parallel threats to human security.

It would be a mistake to see this tacit acceptance of the differential value of human life as simply a cultural or ideological epiphenomenon less worthy of analysis than the "hard" structures of global political economy, geostrategic competition, or preemptive militarism. Long-term rationality, even from the point of view of the more farsighted guardians of global capitalism, may dictate attention to the range of global crises that have their most severe impact in Africa (see, for example, the report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/wcsdsg>). Seemingly race-neutral goals such as poverty alleviation and other noble objectives may win approval in conference after conference.

But just as national divisions are not only conceptual but embedded in laws distinguishing citizens and non-citizens, so the assumptions of racial and cultural hierarchy are embedded in the political discourse and practices that reinforce global apartheid.

Making "another world possible" requires analyses and strategies for political mobilization that do not evade this stubborn legacy from the past.

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