
Racial Hierarchies Globalized: From Colonialism to Informal Empire

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ABSTRACT

Modern society projects a belief that humanity is in a post-racial age (Goldberg 2016). However, many events of the 21st century across the world, such as Black Lives Matter and the genocide in Gaza, contradict this. What causes such a disjunction between the supposed post-racial belief, compared to the reality shown through the lived experience of continued domination? We posit this stems from issues of empires engineering control strategies and tactics since the emergence of modern civilization. The societal construction of stratification between oppressor and oppressed persists by perpetuating worldwide systemic subjugation via power-based hierarchies. Our macro theoretical framework seeks to explain that the process through which the system of racial inequality became globalized is still fueled by the evolution of formal empire into a more informal, and therefore less perceptible, version of dominance. Ideology based on a ‘rule of colonial difference’ (Chatterjee 1993) has created an insistent racial hierarchy stemming from modes of oppression through stratification by categories, with other pivotal variations of hierarchies around the globe continuing through the ages in various forms of class-type systems. The current actions of informal empire to maintain a ‘global apartheid’ (Besteman 2019) has been deeply successful under tactics of ‘liberal white supremacy’ (Beeman 2022), ‘racial liberalism’ (Abrego and Villalpando 2021) and psychological warfare (Osgood 2008). This framework focuses on the U.S. as an imperial force through its legacy as a settler-colonial state and hegemonic world power.

INTRODUCTION

Through the ages, struggles for power and domination have plagued humankind. Those in power have persistently advanced the form through which hierarchical domination is executed, by enforcing stratification of differences through societal constructs, such as race, ethnicity, caste, and class. These societal constructs employ power to mask stratification, as if it is a natural phenomenon of humanity. However, stratification does not naturally occur but is a form of systemic exploitation, often

using stigmatization to reinforce hierarchy by asserting the norms of dominant forces throughout the entire globe. The contention for this theoretical framework is that the practice currently known as globalization is a project engineered by empire and that this model is the focal point at which empire, informal empire, and race intersect. The expansion of hierarchies through globalization has two phases: the first involves colonialism, where the stratification of humans by race through a rule of difference (Chatterjee 1993) is central to the facilitation of empire; the second involves the ways more informal methods of imperialism utilize knowledge production to facilitate domination within a post-colonial globalized society including liberal white supremacy (Beeman 2022), racial liberalism (Abrego and Villalpando 2021), and what we argue are forms of psychological warfare. Additionally, the sociological theory of world-systems (Wallerstein 1974) analyzes the way capitalism has had massive effects worldwide as it has become a global system. Both phases perpetuate social norms that maintain human-enforced roles of oppressor and oppressed, mainly through racial hierarchies that establish those who can approximate whiteness as superior while stigmatizing Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) as inferior.

This theoretical framework will emphasize the empiric forces pioneered by the United States in the form of ideological globalization. The U.S. is an illustration of a state apparatus positioning itself as the main global power through domination techniques which have encoded racial hierarchies into standard societal practices. The U.S. empire was able to establish itself as the richest nation and world superpower within its first two hundred years of nationhood (Gonzalez 2022:378), a feat which no other nation, “whether in ancient or modern times, ever saw its influence spread so far or determined the thoughts and actions of so many people around the world as our nation does today.” This success was largely due to the endless American quest to realize “Manifest Destiny” (2022:378) through subjugating others, specifically targeting Indigenous and Latin Americans as well as enslaving Africans, and subsequently claiming as much territory as possible. As further noted by Juan Gonzalez (2022:378), “that expansion transformed the entire hemisphere into an economic satellite and sphere of influence of the United States.” Therefore,

the U.S. empire is the primary perpetrator of world domination through white supremacist racial inequality and capitalism on a global scale.

EVOLUTIONS OF EMPIRE: ENGINEERED HIERARCHIES

The rise and decline of empires are important in understanding how structures of domination function. Historically, the origins of empire (Darwin 2008) coincided with the emergence of modern civilization and the state – or a society with organized political elements – where it continues to function essentially as people ruling over other people. Empires are defined by their hierarchical structure utilizing conquest to occupy foreign lands and reinforcing marked disparities between the occupied and occupiers. According to sociologist Julian Go (2020:83), “Empire, definitionally, requires the management, regulation, or even eradication of alterity; the imperial episteme was born from a near feverish obsession over civilizational, cultural, racial, ethnic, and sexual difference.” This stratification positions one society to dominate another as a separate entity. Sociologist George Steinmetz (2014) notes that the various evolutions of societal hierarchies in history are derivative forms of empire. As civilization evolved under more intricate social structures, the practice of empire developed further through the state as a more complex territorially expansive organization with more elaborate structures of power. Imperialism – the process of enforcing empire – is where changes in social structures are most visible. When looking at how these structures of domination evolve, a noticeable change emerges in the recounting of Western European history where previous imperial strategies of exercising control over societies transform into our modern understanding of colonialism.

Class Society with Global Dimensions

The two phases of globalization – empiric colonization and informal empire – both have a class structure as the basis for structural domination to facilitate other modes of control. Economic domination is just one aspect of empire (Heinrich 2012:13), where colonialism is a specific form of control with historically distinct processes. The products of colonial labor took on global dimensions, with the first iteration involving the

continents of the Americas, Africa, and Europe. The Transatlantic slave trade was a major factor that gave rise to a global capitalist society in these continents, where labor production outside Europe was being transformed into capital and shipped back to Europe (2012:17). This imperial transformation of society into a global economy of empire came to be known as globalization.

Globalization and the State

Globalization can be defined as the expansion of capitalist society into the global production of capital in a world market and results from the constantly evolving imperial structures of domination. To better understand this form of empire, one must understand its relationship to the state. Steinmetz (2014:80) explains that empire “can be pictured as a solar system in which the colonized peripheries circulate around the metropolitan core,” and that these “planets in this imperial solar system also all possess states of their own.” In essence, the state acts simultaneously as both the mother country in which the resources and capital produced by labor production are sent, as well as the colonies themselves. These colonial states are either directly ruled by the metropole or are given autonomy to some extent as a form of indirect rule “by proxy through indigenous elites” (2014:81). The world-systems perspective created by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) frames the “global periphery as being condemned to produce raw materials for processing by the core” (Steinmetz 2014:87).

GLOBALIZATION PHASE 1: EMPIRE AND COLONIALISM

The pretext for globalization is colonialism, a recent practice of formal empire. A defining feature of colonialism (Steinmetz 2014:79) “involves the arrogation of sovereignty by a conquering power.” Settler-colonialism is the unwarranted territorial conquest over an indigenous people by a conquering metropole followed by their presumptuous claim of supreme power in the new land (2014:79), as well as the transformation of the society through the implementation of power structures that situate the conquered population as inferior to their colonizers in “legal, administrative, social, cultural, and/or biological terms.” This practice was the driving force in the formation of what is now

known as the United States, through the seizure of land and subjugation of the Indigenous peoples. The era of formal colonial domination marked a paradigm shift in how empire functions, defined by the transformation of labor production and control into a global economy based on a system of converting resources and labor production into capital and the inception of the idea of race as a power structure.

Rule of Difference

Historian Partha Chatterjee (1993) developed the term a ‘rule of difference’ to explain the construction (Steinmetz 2014:80) where “All colonial states divide their subjects into different tribal or racial groups in an effort to enhance control, but at the same time the colonized are subsumed by the colonial state under a single, overarching category.” The rule of difference enforces superiority and inferiority of stratification by creating a hierarchy among people with resources unequally distributed. Colonizing practices used in the establishment of the U.S. included the aforementioned relegation of Indigenous people to reservations as well as the Transatlantic slave trade enslaving African people against their will as hard laborers. Such tactics of power and domination focus on conquering people by destabilizing sources of community support practices through redirecting reliance of needs being met solely under those who have seized control.

The Invention of Race

The stratification of humans through the societal construction of race was fueled by Eurocentric capitalism colonizing the globe to increase power domination. Sociologist Anibal Quijano (2021:533) states explicitly that one of the fundamental characteristics of globalization is “the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race.” This shift produced a control axis (2000:533-534) that socially stratified people from power based on a purported biological factor of race intersecting with class-based labor roles. The use of the race concept created an immediately identifiable hierarchy with skin tone as a signifier of power. This proved an effective distinction (2000:535), allowing race to become “the fundamental

criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society's structure of power." Since the conception of race began under the globalization force of capitalism, class-based labor roles were strongly linked to the visual appearance of skin tone due to the strength of the power domination occurring. This meant that even though race and class are not mutually dependent, the circumstances under which racism and capitalism developed did create a division of labor (2000:536) that systemically reinforced inferiority of race. As capitalism gained control of labor under globalization, the race-class association was further strengthened through white colonizers establishing paid labor as exclusive to their own race while assigning colonized races unpaid labor (2000:539) in the forms of serfdom for Indigenous populations and slavery for Africans who were sold as part of the slave trade.

Eurocentric Colonialism Erasure of Cultures

The establishment of colonial capitalism served to strip diverse people groups with a multitude of cultural varieties into singular racial identities with strong negative associations. In the span of just three hundred years (2000:551-552), the "Aztecs, Mayas, Chimus, Aymaras, Incas, Chibchas, and so on. . . had become . . . Indians" while "the people forcefully brought from Africa as slaves: Ashantis, Yorubas, Zulus, Congos, Bacongos, and others . . . were Negroes or blacks." By overriding unique cultural identities, the power of colonial empire set the standard for what was considered modern and what was considered outdated through a rule of difference. This has continued into the practices of informal empire, where the concept of the Global South reinforces Eurocentrism through setting a status quo of idealistic modernity, which stigmatizes any cultures that deviate from the achievement of capitalistic profits. This marked distinction between the valued behavior of whiteness and the stigmatization of supposed negatively deviant non-white cultures further serves the adjusted narrative of white supremacy.

Approximation of Whiteness and Eugenics

As time went on, descendants of what became known as mixed-race relationships were often able to approximate

whiteness due to the external presentation of their genetic phenotype. An example of this was in Latin America, through the documentation of mestizos during the colonial American period (Quijano 2000:536), most notably that “the more ‘whitened’ among the mestizos of Black women and Spanish or Portuguese had an opportunity to work. But they were late in legitimizing their new roles, since their mothers were slaves.” The existence of mestizos with genetic phenotypes creating a stratification of visual appearance from dark to light reinforced the errant belief of division by race being a natural phenomenon. This led to the pseudo-scientific practices of eugenics producing new excuses for the societal construction of race as a natural factor of genetic attributes, particularly to justify the subjugation of those with darker skin tones. In fact, in the U.S., the serfdom of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans (2000:550) were “deliberately established and organized as a commodity in order to produce goods for the world market and to serve the purposes and needs of capitalism.”

Although colonial rule, and therefore formal empire, has technically ended, both the process of global capital production through globalization and stratification through racism have persisted in modern times under more informal modes of imperialism. Colonial empires were essentially dismantled upon reaching the twentieth century (Go 2020:87), but the “U.S. empire maintained colonial relations with Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam, for instance; and around the world, formal empire dissipated only to give way to new forms of imperial domination.”

GLOBALIZATION PHASE 2: INFORMAL EMPIRE

According to environmentalists and economists Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster (2012:13), the process of decolonization was seen as inevitable for colonial empire. To adapt to such radically new conditions of a postcolonial globalized society, preparations were made for the transition from formal controls of empire to “informal imperialism,” or “imperialism without colonies.” This mode of empire (Steinmetz 2014:84-85) is referred to as “informal nonterritorial empire” in which “international control is exercised through military, economic, and

other means, but there is no conquest or permanent seizure of political sovereignty and therefore no possibility of systematically enforcing a rule of difference.” Informal empire is deemed such because this form uses more subtle methods and technologies as employed by a state-organization that wishes to dominate another, instead of utilizing outright physical occupation to replace local sovereign powers, effectively acting as a disguised form of dominance. The abundance of U.S. military bases globally is one example of subliminal dominance, posited as universal allyship but these bases can easily become a way for the U.S. government to subdue any activity deemed as uprisings. Additionally, in the pursuit of globalization, the U.S. government has utilized tools (Steinmetz 2014:85) such as: “manipulated market exchanges, extraterritoriality arrangements, black sites and extraordinary rendition, drone strikes, and unequal military alliances and status of forces agreements.”

Controlling the Narrative through Capitalism

The U.S. empire has been the prime example of informal modes of control (Magdoff and Foster 2012:11) which is understood as the “continuous reality of economic expansion in modern times.” The economic domination within the world market and the changing landscape of the global economy was marked by the emergence of multinational corporations. Informal imperialism then functions (2012:15) as not only occurring “through the policies of states but also through the actions of corporations and the mechanisms of trade finance and investment.” This involved class structures both within countries of the periphery (Prebisch 1950) and the core imperial metropolises dominating them. These actions of multinational corporations (Magdoff and Foster 2012:15) included “the nurturing of local collaborators or comprador elements in the dependent societies.” The installation of puppet regime dictatorships within these peripheral countries rich in resources and cheap labor was done so to secure imperial interests of capital accumulation.

Freedom and the American Dream

Capitalism ignores societal needs in favor of being profit-oriented (Heinrich 2004:18), which creates major power

differentials among citizens, pointing to the informal empiric practices of enforced hierarchy. This is an example of control by manipulation: a subtle method that seeks to make individuals comply with domination through non-coercive means. Once the emancipation of Americans who were enslaved was successful (Quijano 2000:567), “freedom was not a transformation of labor relations, but a reason to substitute slaves with immigrant workers from other countries.” This shift lures immigrants to the U.S. through the attractive ideal of achieving economic and familial freedom via the ‘American Dream’ based on the social belief that hard work leads to upward mobilization. The U.S. investment in capitalism has manufactured the narrative that one can pull themselves up by their bootstraps to achieve wealth and power. However, this American Dream is not universally accessible or genuinely attainable due to the maintained rule of difference through systemic racism. A major “problem with the American Dream,” as it plays out in reality (Abdurraqib 2022:184), “is that it manifests itself in different times and places and ways for different people, depending on any number of identity factors.” White supremacist practices baked into the inception of the U.S. only serve to reinforce the inequality of power domination through the informal imperial practice of approximation to whiteness.

The true nature of coercion occurring under capitalism in the form of workforce reliance is disguised by those in power:

The obscene transfers of wealth over the past forty years from ... bottom to a privileged few at the top – and from much of the Global South to financial elites in the West – were all excused as the natural evolution of the market, when, in fact, they are products of unparalleled greed by those who dominate and direct the market. (Gonzalez 2022:382)

The stratification maintained by capitalists owning the means of production prevents workers from truly being in control of their own survival. Instead, workers are manipulated into accepting that alienation of the self from one’s work production is a norm within society, causing most to believe that the low wages paid are the true worth of their labor. Stratification of wages is even more pronounced through the white supremacist enforcement of racial

domination further devaluing those who cannot approximate whiteness. Even the U.S. empire outsourcing work to other countries under the supposed efficiency of cost savings is an exploitative labor practice (Benjamin 2019:29) that paradoxically reinforces “indispensable disposability of those whose labor enables innovation . . . [failing] to account for the social costs of a technology in which global forms of racism, caste, class, sex, and gender exploitation are the nuts and bolts of development.”

Western Exceptionalism and Liberal White Supremacy

The concept of ‘Western exceptionalism’ is a repeated rhetoric the U.S. government has utilized to further its covert empire, attempting to disguise systemic practices of white supremacy that continue to employ a rule of difference as a means of unquestioned control through repeatedly asserting the standard of freedom. Yet, the supposed free market that the U.S. promises through capitalism is controlled by exploitive elements that employ a modern form of stratified subjugation. The explicit forms of racial hierarchy established during colonial rule became unprofitable as racism began to be formally recognized, to a certain extent, due to evolving social mores. Race began to function through more indirect forms of empire within a new set of ideas such as ‘liberal white supremacy’ (Beeman 2022). This concept refers to the belief that the ideas and institutionalization of freedom, human rights, and democracy originate in Western cultures and philosophies and suggests a moral superiority of Western societies. The latter part of this idea implies that the system of government based on these ideas and institutions can self-correct and self-perfect itself. In other words, it is the idea of ‘a few bad apples’ within a system of government as opposed to the reality where governments are perpetuating institutionalized structures of control such as racism.

Racial Liberalism and Neoliberal Multiculturalism

As the Cold War began after World War II, the U.S. government utilized its recognition and condemnation of racism to justify informal expansion of its empire. Latin American Studies scholars Leisy Abrego and Alejandro Villalpando (2021:51) refer to this period of U.S. government policy as ‘racial

liberalism,' in which the goal was to "mask racialized inequities by promoting the idea of an 'abstract equality' predicated on market-driven individualism and the promise of inclusion into the national project." Racialized individuals have had to adapt to capitalist and individualistic modes of thinking and production as a prerequisite for being formally considered full citizens in the U.S. Race was still an essential factor in facilitating class structures, although class dimensions are less readily perceivable, while capitalism evolved into its contemporary framework of neoliberalism. The end of the Cold War marked another necessity for empire to adapt its informal modes of control to a globalized society without the perceived global threat that communism assumed. With communism considered under control, one method informal imperialism utilized to maintain its power structures was to combine racial liberalism and neoliberalism into what scholar Jodi Melamed established in 2006 as the model of 'neoliberal multiculturalism.' This was due to the U.S. government no "longer relying on an abstract sense of equality across race, the transnational capitalist regime [U.S. informal empire] now required nation-states, businesses, and key social institutions to include multiculturalism as a policy goal" (2021:52). The idea of multiculturalism here refers to a "generalized mainstream understanding that progress requires a (usually superficial) centering of race," but only so far as to acknowledge and celebrate the cultures of BIPOC if they are willing to adapt to capitalist and individualistic modes of labor production. Such initiatives of multiculturalism as a matter of policy by the U.S. government revolved around ideas of diversity as well as using metrics to measure one's social status outside of race based on one's work performance. The fallacy, however, is that because the power structures of race did not end with colonialism but instead proved more durable and merely adapted to the social mores of the environment, an imbalance of power still existed in these neoliberal modes of social control. The goal of neoliberal multiculturalism was to obscure "the ways global capitalist expansion in fact exacerbates and amplifies racialized inequity, the way it reproduces precarity and mobility for racialized groups" (2021:52). A historical example of this was in Central America, where, for the first time, Indigenous peoples and cultures were

formally recognized by their respective governments as a matter of policy. The end of civil wars in Central America was marked by neoliberal multiculturalism through calls for peace and nationwide initiatives to respect and celebrate historically oppressed groups, including Indigenous and Black Central Americans. These initiatives failed to address the structural imbalances of power that were facilitating the struggles of these groups, as is the nature of this ideology (2021:52), to promote “cultural acceptance of Indigenous and other racialized communities while materially advancing their political and economic marginalization.” This ideology, as a matter of policy, can also be considered a form of psychological warfare.

Psychological Warfare

The strategy of psychological warfare utilizes globalized interactions, which are colonial in origin, to still retain the same imbalance of power between post-colonial third-world countries and “imperial centers” (Magdoff and Foster 2012:18). The origins of psychological warfare as a matter of policy for U.S. empire came about during President Eisenhower’s administration at the beginning of the Cold War. Eisenhower’s understanding of the success of psychological warfare as a military tactic during World War II (Osgood 2008:47) led him to conclude that “the battle for hearts and minds was one of the most critical dimensions of the Cold War struggle.” This is best understood within a globalized society (Abrego and Villalpando 2021:52) as a “fight to secure the United States’ ability to continue to extract wealth transnationally.” Alongside this new strategy of establishing and maintaining global hegemony came the necessity of implementing the idea of plausible deniability that Eisenhower and other succeeding administrations would only internally acknowledge during and after the Cold War. Magdoff and Foster (2012:9) contend that “the existence of an American empire is no secret. It is widely, even universally, recognized in most parts of the world, though traditionally denied by the powers that be in the United States.” This plausible deniability, or formal denial of existence, implies the tactic of control through psychological warfare by manipulating peoples’ understanding of how a globalized

postcolonial society functions by obfuscating any discussion of empires existing after the period of decolonization.

Utilization of Globalization for Knowledge Production

One effective method of psychological warfare was knowledge production. During the Cold War, the U.S. empire utilized knowledge production as a technology of control. The goal of knowledge production as psychological warfare was to maintain control of a country's political, cultural, and economic landscape within the U.S. sphere of influence to ensure U.S. interests in that country. This strategy employs an informal and covert network (Simpson 1996:60) involving U.S. intelligence agencies, philanthropic organizations, and university programs. U.S. scholars are sent to universities in countries of the Global South to teach the local scholars the methods of particular programs, such as social sciences and communication studies, to inject Western capitalist modes of thinking into the academia of these universities. Knowledge production utilized the mechanisms of globalization channeled through already established global communication networks originating during the era of formal empire. One of the most prominent historical examples of this network was of the Ford Foundation in Indonesia (Parmar 2014:148), where "Ford intervened in and intellectually penetrated Indonesia principally because of its economic resources and strategic position as well as its political-ideological attraction to communism and socialism and desire to carve out a specifically Indonesian path to development."

Knowledge production as utilizing information to promote a particular interest was also conducted in developing countries by U.S. intelligence agencies through covert and overt propaganda campaigns utilizing films, images, and leaflets, amongst other tactics. In this case it promoted Western capitalist values while demonizing communist and socialist ideals in peripheral countries the U.S. empire deemed particularly vulnerable to communist influence. A historical example of this is when the U.S. Information Agency carried out propaganda campaigns where U.S. anti-communist operations were most prominent in Southeast Asia "to reach rural areas where communications were poor, trucks labeled 'USIS' brought

loudspeakers, film projectors, and movie screens to show propaganda films to villagers” and “teams of operatives traveled by boats and jeeps to bring leaflets, posters, magazines, and books to the countryside” (Osgood 2008:120-121).

CONCLUSION

Though it has morphed in appearance over the ages, the societal construction of empire persists in its present form through projects of stratification and globalization continuing to engineer structures of power. Historically, stratification played a crucial role in the first phase of globalization by colonialism perpetuating empire through a rule of difference allowing dynamics of control to stem from the Eurocentric invention of race. A self-sustaining system of domination spread worldwide by equating power access with approximation to whiteness through the visible marker of skin tone. As modernization forced formal empire to adapt the way it manifested, informal empire ushered in the second phase of globalization. The U.S. used capitalism and systemic racism to establish a narrative of Western exceptionalism by way of liberal white supremacy, racial liberalism, neoliberal multiculturalism, and psychological warfare. All of these forms of propaganda supporting the U.S. government on its rise to the forefront of global power fuel the social norms calculated to maintain roles of oppressor and oppressed at global, national, and even subnational scales. Psychological warfare was a key to convincing the world that society had moved beyond empire and colonization into a supposedly more advanced, post-racial global civilization.

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Taryn Bates (She/Her) enrolled during the Fall 2023 semester in the cross-listed course *Knowledge, Power, Community, and University* under sociology professor Wai Kit Choi, PhD., who prompted this piece. Joining forces with classmate Rubén, the pair co-wrote a piece for publication in CSF and to present with a panel at Cal State LA's 9th Annual Social Theory Symposium.

Rubén Huerta (He/Him/El) is graduating in 2024 with a B.A. in Latin American Studies from Cal State LA and is proud to have made the Dean's List for Fall 2023 under the College of Natural and Social Sciences. For the Spring 2024 semester, he has taken part in playing intramural soccer. His other passions include composing original tracks as a music producer which he curates into his DJ sets. In Fall 2023, the LAS Department advised Rubén to enroll in Dr. Wai Kit Choi's cross-listed course *Knowledge, Power, Community, and University*. In preparation for both publication in CSF and panel at Cal State LA's 9th Annual Social Theory Symposium, he worked alongside Taryn to synthesize their perspectives into a joint theoretical framework.