

**Forum Review for *Global Race War*, by Alexander Barder  
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After many years on the margins of International Relations, the study of race and racism has moved center stage. The original works of postcolonial IR scholars have generated a growing body of literature that allows us to evaluate the racialized organization of world politics.<sup>i</sup> And not a moment too soon. Overt white supremacy has gone mainstream across North America and Europe. Elected officials such as former US President Donald Trump have legitimated violence against racial egalitarian social movements while denying equal rights to people of color, immigrants, and refugees. Far-right white supremacy is also transnational: reactionaries have built their own network of like-minded supporters by appealing to a “Western” civilizational identity threatened by non-white peoples from the East and Global South. Scholars of race and racism can help us make sense of these developments. Rather than assume that racism is a novel threat to modern liberal institutions, they can demonstrate racism has historically informed Western international thought and has perpetuated white domination up to the present day.

Alexander Barder takes up this challenge with his new book. Barder is uniquely suited to investigating the dynamics of violence and hierarchy. His previous work examined how repertoires of violence developed by empires to govern their peripheries are often deployed at home against internal “enemies.”<sup>ii</sup> In *Global Race War*, Barder demonstrates how racial hierarchies structure the modern international order and constitute mass violence to preserve and extend it. He builds upon Du Bois’ arguments regarding the global color line to demonstrate how white intellectuals and policymakers have historically constructed international order as a hierarchy of races. What emerges is the “global racial imaginary,” or the ideological mapping of dominant and subordinate relationships linking peoples together based on the racialization of perceived differences (12-13). Barder illustrates how the global racial imaginary generates an alternative ontology for international relations. The international system is organized not by states in anarchy but instead as an anti-Black hierarchy that privileges “white” Europeans as agents of civilized progress capable of reason and political autonomy. Peoples of color are assumed to be incapable of self-organization, and this apparent deficiency renders them subject to European warfare for the preservation of “humanity.”

*Global Race War* complements the existing literature focusing on the history of racism in international thought. Recent scholarship has shown how Eurocentric discourses have persistently structured generally accepted ideas about race among Western intellectuals and academics<sup>iii</sup> (see Brian C. Schmidt’s<sup>iv</sup> writing for the initial foray into this aspect of disciplinary

history). Barder builds upon this research by focusing specifically on how scientific racism, or the specious belief that peoples of different races are essentially different on the basis of biology and environmental adaptation, creates the ideological foundation for both social exclusion and mass violence in the service of racial purity.

Barder argues that race war becomes operative when subordinate peoples engage in violent resistance to racial hierarchy or are perceived as impeding progress. As whites naturalize racial hierarchies, subaltern demands for equality are interpreted as a destabilizing political force that poses an existential threat to their identity and racial stratification. Europeans respond to such resistance with attempts at racial extermination in overseas wars or on settler colonial frontiers. By illustrating how race war is constitutive of modern governance arrangements, he incorporates Frank Wilderson's *Afropessimism*<sup>v</sup> and Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*<sup>vi</sup> into our contemporary discussions about international order. War is not simply a product of the structure of the international system (per structural realists) or a rational instrument of state policy (per Clausewitz) but sustains and constitutes white supremacy itself. In this way, Barder updates Foucault's discussion of racism and race war to account for much more than the biopolitical organization of life within the state.<sup>vii</sup> Instead, he shows how race and racism are global phenomena that enable Western modernity through unrestrained mass violence against racialized Others.

The book extends these critical analyses of race into IR across nine chapters. Its historical analysis begins with the European racialization of West Africans to justify the Atlantic slave trade and delegitimation of the Haitian Revolution. Once enslaved Haitians revolt against French slavery and claim Black sovereignty, they undermine the very foundation of the white supremacist order. Haitians' violent insistence upon equality is interpreted by French officials as a threat to European civilization and outside the conventions of war, and in turn, they respond with a genocidal campaign to reassert the global racial imaginary (36). The European memory of the Haitian Revolution thereby serves as the foundation for future invocations of race war to preserve global dominance. Early 20th Century historian Lothrop Stoddard invokes Haiti as evidence of the inevitability of conflict between races (68). Barder illustrates how Stoddard's arguments (along with those of US naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan and US President Theodore Roosevelt) are developed in the context of Anglo-American anxieties about the entrance of Asian and African peoples into international society and the threat they posed to the Eurocentric international order.

Barder further demonstrates how both US and German observers interpret the 1915 Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire in racialized terms. Their reliance on Orientalist discourses that racialized Turkish identity allowed them to understand the genocide as an inevitable product of racial tensions (101-102). The same imaginary informed German grand strategy in World War II and its invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Operation Barbarossa was not just the Nazi response to the distribution of power in the international system. Instead, it was a racial war against the perceived internal and external enemies of Judaism and Bolshevism, which functioned as biological and environmental threats to the German race rather than simply

German sovereignty. By connecting the origins of the Nazis' genocidal violence to racial stratification, Barder deepens Césaire's initial analysis of fascism's colonial origins.<sup>viii</sup>

A significant contribution involves Barder's analysis of US foreign policy history. By analyzing US settler colonialism through the lens of the global racial imaginary, Barder demonstrates how the construction of a nation-state outside of Europe was predicated upon the extermination of supposedly "savage" indigenous groups with whom no coexistence was possible. Once the racialized dimension of US state formation is established, Barder demonstrates how overseas US expansion is a mere extension of the same white supremacist vision of the world. Hence, the United States relies on the same racial assumptions to justify the violent suppression of Filipino insurgents during its post-1898 occupation of the Philippines (91).

This context informs Barder's criticism of mainstream narratives of US hegemony and the creation of a "rules-based" international order.<sup>ix</sup> His examination of the mid-20th Century establishment of US hegemony in East Asia illustrates how these same racist assumptions also constituted US interventions in Korea and Vietnam. In both cases, Asian peoples were classified as uncivilized or semi-human, incapable of modern rational thought and thus susceptible to communism (171-175). In the case of Korea, these assumptions built upon Japanese ideas about local inferiorities, indicating that World War II merely replaced one empire with another rather than establish truly horizontal governance arrangements that limited US coercive power. Although critiques of G. John Ikenberry's work are nowadays commonplace, Barder provides a richer historical perspective by situating his discussion within the long history US domination over non-white peoples.

The book's final two chapters on the War on Terror and the white racial backlash to multiculturalism demonstrates the value of Barder's historical analysis. He draws out the intellectual foundations of the racialization of Muslims as well as the genocidal fantasies of far-right fictional texts such as *The Turner Diaries*. Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, which posited that peoples of different civilizational identities were doomed to existential conflict, can thus be contextualized by the reactionary literature of this period.<sup>x</sup> This discourse suggests the need for both militarized vigilance against Islam abroad as well as opposition to miscegenation and the dilution of the United States' Anglo-Saxon culture. Again, Barder's historical analysis offers a distinct payoff here. It allows him to link Huntington's argument to Lothrop Stoddard's of almost a hundred years earlier (196). Most importantly, it demonstrates how the white supremacist nationalism of the contemporary far-right has an extensive ideological heritage that manifests as a program of violent annihilation when white domination is called into question

*Global Race War* is undoubtedly a bleak text, one that points to the enduring strength of racial hierarchy. Indeed, the notion that white supremacy and anti-Black violence cannot be undone is a core theme of Wilderson's *Afropessimism* that is often subject to criticism. However, Barder offers a more complicated argument. He argues that tracing the intellectual development of the global racial imaginary is necessary to developing an alternative vision of both US society and world politics that is conducive to pluralism, hybridity, and equality (20). Barder's discussion

of Black radical critiques of both US domestic racism and the Vietnam War illustrates this point (175-182). By framing the Civil Rights and antiwar movements as the same struggle against Western imperialism and colonization, Black activists of the 1960s indicate how only emancipatory anti-imperial values practiced at home and abroad can enable an egalitarian relationship between the United States and the world. The suggestion is that white US citizens can support the dismantling of white supremacy, but they cannot fall back on the moral innocence implied by US exceptionalism or teleological faith in liberal progress. Instead, supporting radical Black resistance against racism, empire, and colonialism is the only path toward redeeming “America’s own spiritual fate” (181).

Another aspect of Barder’s book warrants further elaboration. As John Hobson indicates in *The Eurocentric Conception in World Politics*, the discursive pro-imperial complement of scientific racism is Eurocentric paternalism, or the notion that Western societies possess a civilizing mission to raise up non-Western peoples to modern standards. Paternalism is certainly relevant to Barder’s examination of the global racial imaginary. For example, the US intervention in Vietnam is inspired by the domino theory of Communist expansion as well as modernization theory. Not only was the United States waging a brutal counterinsurgency and conventional war during the conflict, but it also sought to build a South Vietnamese state and foster socioeconomic development on the model of the West. Both the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan share the same paternalist impulse - they aimed to realize Fukuyama’s “end of history” by transplanting liberalism in West and Central Asia as a means of changing those regions’ political and cultural dynamics.

These racialized discourses – paternalism and scientific racism – correspond to different visions of international order. One suggests a universal but Eurocentric set of governance arrangements, while the other imagines a world of multiple international orders governed by distinct civilizational groupings, each struggling for dominance over each other. Barder’s work demonstrates that when Western nations fear the loss of their dominant position within a universal order, they abandon paternalism for scientific racism. But the ways in which both discourses co-exist within specific politico-military conflicts deserves greater scholarly attention. This kind of analysis can help us understand how (for example) racialization unfolds during the US occupation of Japan, after the race war of World War II formally ends. A detailed analysis of the dynamics of racialization can help us investigate how US policymakers perpetuate racial hierarchies despite their supposed anti-imperial remaking of international order.

Overall, Barder’s *Global Race War* is an important contribution to IR’s understanding of global racial hierarchy. It will be an important text for both graduate and undergraduate syllabi. For the latter, instructors might pair it with Spencer Ackerman’s *Reign of Terror*,<sup>xi</sup> a journalistic account of how the militarized US response to 9/11 was profoundly shaped by its white supremacist identity and effectively paved the way for the white grievances of Donald Trump and the contemporary Republican Party. Together, these texts can illustrate how contemporary US warfare and racialized identities are mutually reinforcing.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, see Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam, *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Routledge, 2014). On the broader postcolonial tradition, see Olivia U. Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam, *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (Routledge, 2018). For an undergraduate introduction to questions about race as well as gender in IR, see Randolph Persaud and Alina Sajed, *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Routledge, 2018). This work builds on a two-decade body of scholarship originating in postcolonial IR theory. See Sankaran Krishna, "Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations," *Alternatives* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 2001): 401–24. Chowdhry Geeta and Sheila Nair, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (Routledge, 2003); Siba N'Zatioula Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (U of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>ii</sup> Alexander D. Barder, *Empire Within: International Hierarchy and Its Imperial Laboratories of Governance* (Routledge, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Cornell University Press, 2015). Jessica Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

<sup>iv</sup> Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (SUNY Press, 1996). See also David Long and Brian C. Schmidt, *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (SUNY Press, 2006).

<sup>v</sup> Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

<sup>vi</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>vii</sup> Michel Foucault and François Ewald, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>viii</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (NYU Press, 2001).

<sup>ix</sup> For example, see G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>x</sup> For a brief yet equally critical analysis of Huntington, see Paul Musgrave, "The Grim Fantasia of a Civilizational War," *Cato Unbound*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2017/02/08/paul-musgrave/grim-fantasia-civilizational-war>.

<sup>xi</sup> Spencer Ackerman, *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump* (Penguin, 2021).