Race, Modernity and the Reshaping of the British World, 1750-1930

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Abstract:
Conceptions of ‘race’ did not exist in the modern sense until the late eighteenth century. However, little over a century later, racial discourses were ubiquitous in the British World. The article argues that the rise of the notion of ‘race’ during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century was due to the development and application of Enlightenment thinking, and the mechanisms of nation-state building. As such, racial discourses and racialisation as a process of othering and inclusion are tied fundamentally to our understanding of what makes the modern world ‘modern.’ This article seeks to explore the origins and discursive career of the idea of ‘race’ to explain its continued purchase in the ‘modern’ British World and the fundamental inequalities entrenched in the creation of nation-states. It thus questions whether alternative conceptions of modernity, outside of the British World and Enlightenment thought, are needed to challenge both violent and institutional racial othering and racism.

This article has three sections, chronologically arranged. The first section examines the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century discursive career of race as it informed and was informed by Enlightenment thinking and specific legal changes in the wake of emancipation. This section charts racial discourse as it emerged centrally in new ways of distinguishing between insiders and outsiders. The second section considers nineteenth-century settler colonialism in Australia. Here, exclusionary race-based migration policies built upon racialised ideas of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ within a wider imperial context. The formation of the new Australian state through these policies ensured that the emergent category of ‘whiteness’ was crucial to the state-building process. The final section of the article then returns to Britain. It explores how twentieth-century British domestic policies of emigration and welfarism were rooted in racialised understandings of the nation, formed through colonial experiences and the scientific legacy of the Enlightenment.
Introduction

Late eighteenth-century abolitionists had a problem: in an age of scientific discovery, they needed more than just moral claims to justify the end of slavery. Objective, irreproachable, scientific facts would need to be applied to their cause, to argue that slavery and blackness were, in fact, not synonymous terms.

To make their case, abolitionists including Olaudah Equiano turned to the work of John Mitchell. In 1744, Mitchell had published *An Essay upon the Causes of the Different Colours of People in Different Climates* in the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions* (Delbourgo 2012). In his work, he drew upon painters’ ideas about how colour changed, and combined this with Isaac Newton’s early eighteenth-century study of optics. As a result, he claimed the density of skin itself determined skin colour and lighter skin could darken in the right climate. Abolitionists were thus able to use Mitchell’s work to de-essentialise the very notion of blackness, legitimated by the scientific authority of Newton himself (Delbourgo 2012).

However, in abolitionists’ usage of Mitchell, the contradictory implications of his essay were brushed aside. Whilst Mitchell suggested that white skin could darken, dark skin could not lighten. Thus, the condition of blackness was a permanent one and could be achieved through the degeneration of whiteness. Similarly, Mitchell’s focus on skin density led to an account of how darker skin was much tougher and able to withstand harsher treatment. Although not explicitly stated, the implications of Mitchell’s argument followed that those with darker skin had a greater capacity for hard labour – or, in other words, were more suited to slavery (Delbourgo 2012). Thus, even within the same work, race was not a fixed or uncontested concept. Different narratives and competing implications could be drawn out to support opposing claims about the nature of race, depending on the context.

The work of both Equiano and Mitchell and reflect the eighteenth-century introduction of a modern conception of race, that claimed to be based in new, scientific forms of knowledge. In the nineteenth century, these overlapping and contradictory racial narratives would be globalised through the expansion of empire. Towards the end of the century, the new forms of racialised
knowledge and administration would be brought home to the metropole through the ‘interiorisation of the exterior’ (Wolfe 2001). Through this, race became central to the bureaucratic infrastructures of modern nation-states. Not only was this racialised knowledge crucial to imperial administration, but it was a racial capitalism, linked to the continued legacy of the slave trade, that fuelled and was fuelled by Europe’s nineteenth-century imperial expansion (Manjapra 2019). However, there is no simple narrative of the development of racial discourses. Longstanding ideas about race did not disappear but were instead transformed, and, most importantly for this article, both quietly and violently, institutionalised.

This article will chart the career of racial discourses to demonstrate the relationship between race, modernity and the formation of modern nation-states within the British World. In doing so, it contributes to wider historiographical discussions surrounding race and modernity, as highlighted in the work of those such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Fanon. This article will argue that, race is, indeed, endemic to Western conceptions of modernity. As such, this article has three sections, more or less chronologically arranged. The first section examines the eighteenth-century discursive career of race as it informed and was informed by Enlightenment thinking and specific legal changes in the wake of emancipation. In particular, this section charts racial discourse as it emerged centrally in new ways of distinguishing between insiders and outsiders (Wolfe 2001). The second section considers settler colonialism in Australia - particularly how exclusionary race-based migration policies within a wider imperial context were key to the formation of a new state. The final section of the article then returns to Britain to explore how twentieth-century British domestic policies of emigration and welfarism were rooted in racialized understandings of nation and state.

Thus, in earlier eras, differences between peoples and forms of othering did exist, but it is only in the modern world that we see that race and racialisation became the operative markers for who was in, and who was out.

**Enlightenment Thought and Slavery**

The late eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth are generally agreed to be a turning point in the history of race as a concept (Salesa 2012). This was when new Enlightenment ways
of thinking energised a longer conversation about human difference. Indeed, as Damon Salesa highlights, long-standing ideas about race could now be turned into scientific fact (Salesa 2012). It was through new forms of scientific knowledge that claimed to be both rational and empirical that made labelling insiders and outsiders seemingly measurable and thus, concrete.

Racial discourses were deeply entwined with Enlightenment ideas, as race placed the human body itself at the heart of the emergent liberal political theory and classificatory natural sciences (Wolfe, 2002). Enlightenment scholars such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Johann Gottfried von Herder all explicitly discussed the concept of ‘race’ (Wolfe 2002). Indeed, Kant’s philosophy was crucially informed by the new sciences of geography and anthropology and their focus on human variation (Faull 1995). Whilst Vesalius had noticed variation in anatomy among humans as early as 1542, it was not until Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s 1775 *De Generis Humanae Varietate* that these differences were more empirically studied and laid out (Salesa 2012). With Blumenbach’s work, the classificatory natural sciences could now be applied to humans themselves.

Whilst discussion surrounding the relationship between physical appearance and human difference was not new, the meaning of the term ‘race’ was, before these decades, one associated far more with ‘lineage’, than certain racial ‘types’ or categories (Salesa 2012). However, with the growth of empire in the eighteenth century and the interaction of Western Europeans with indigenous peoples, a language of race began to inform understandings the differences between peoples, including who was ‘naturally’ fit to rule, and who was ‘naturally’ predisposed to be ruled over (Wolfe 2002). Combined with an expansion in scientific knowledge and discovery, scholars ought to explain and define these new encounters and experiences, leading to new disciplines such as anthropology. Wolfe claims that it was in this Enlightenment moment that race became crucial, as it was an idea that could combine the two key strands of Enlightenment thought – the rise of natural science and the “political rhetoric of the rights of man,” seen in the work of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson (Wolfe 2002). In this sense, race could both be essentialised through scientific study, and used to cast judgement on man’s capacity; scientific facts that claimed to be concrete could be combined with moral claims about a group’s cognitive, social and physical capacities – and therefore, the political rights they were entitled to.
This new set of conversations about appearance and political rights did not yet amount to racialisation as we might recognise it today. Wolfe makes a useful distinction between race as a concept, and the political usage of the concept to produce racial subjects (Wolfe 2002). Whilst the late-eighteenth-century saw new forms of knowledge production introduce the conception of some form of examinable ‘race’ being a key marker of human difference, the continued institution of slavery meant this was not the only marker. However, the fact that the vast majority of slaves were overwhelmingly labelled as ‘black’, meant that an association between blackness and slavery developed. This was a powerful association, and despite the abolition of slavery in the British Empire from 1833, it remained. More significantly, by removing the legal division between slave and master through emancipation, the question of difference came to rest solely on race (Hall 2014).

Although the association between blackness and the subordination of slavery did not go uncontested, as seen through the earlier mentioned work of Olaudah Equiano, it is important to note that abolition itself reinforced this association. Across the British empire, emancipation began in 1833 with the Slavery Abolition Act. It was followed by a period of ‘apprenticeship’ from 1834 to 1838 in which slave owners were compensated for the impending loss of slaves, through continued free slave labour. The tale, however, did not end there. To compensate all slave owners the £20 million that the government valued the 800,000 slaves as worth, the British Government took out a loan – one which was only repaid in full with interest in 2015 (Manjapra 2019). Through the continued payment of this debt, the British state continued to “repeatedly re-legitimate” this payment and the action of financially valuing “living, dead and absent” people, as merely property (Manjapra 2019:47). In this sense, emancipation ensured the institutionalisation of racism by the British state itself.

Furthermore, Manjapra argues that emancipation did not lead to the end of British racial capitalism, but instead marked the “redeployment and enhancement” of it (Manjapra 2019:30). Whilst Manjapra recognises emancipation as “an important moment in the consolidation of liberal statecraft” this was directly because of, not despite, the way in which the state used its “necropower” to convert the dead into surplus value (Manjapra 2019:30). Here, “necropower” refers to the British liberal imperial state’s violent ability to destroy and obliterate bodies and societies, and its subsequent ownership of this destruction through juridical and financial means –
ownership that was then used to generate profit. Throughout the 1830s and the rest of the nineteenth century, as the British state expanded its reach through population science and improvement in education and public health, this was combined with “necropolitical ventures in warmongering, occupation, extraction, dispossession, and the terrorization of conquered peoples,” (Manjapra 2019: 30). This violence was not separate to Enlightenment liberal ideals, but rather was fundamentally tied to them. Racialised violence was rooted at their very core. Thus, the expansion of empire was a ruthless, violent act, financed through the obliteration of ‘black’ communities, that directly contributed to ‘modern’ intellectual, financial, and industrial progress in the British centre.

As the nineteenth century progressed, growing capitalist trade networks and imperial formations ensured boundaries between interior and exterior were increasingly blurred. Simultaneously, the discussion of such boundaries became rhetorically central to the growth of settler-colonies and their transformations into independent states. Such states were in theory predicated upon a certain universality and equality between citizens, and, as such, a certain homogeneity (Haddad 2008). Whilst European nations often had shared history, language and culture to call upon in the formation of national identity, settler colonies did not. For many, ‘whiteness’ was the only political identity that could create any unification. As such, the rise of nation-states at the frontier was inherently tied to understandings about race – understandings that would eventually re-shape the metropole itself.

White Australia and Race at the Frontier

In June 1888, Josiah Royce, an American philosopher, arrived in Melbourne from Boston. His ship was not the only one to arrive from abroad that month. A few weeks earlier, the *Afghan* and *Burumbeet* had sailed in, carrying several hundred Chinese passengers, with most returning home after visiting relatives in China. None were allowed to land. The government of Victoria had declared by executive decision that no passenger from China was to enter the state, regardless of their ability to pay the imposed poll tax, ownership of British naturalisation papers or the length of time they had lived in Australia. Instead, the arrival of the ships was seen as a sign of the Chinese invasion – a threat to the Australian national project (Lake and Reynolds 2008).
Josiah Royce, in contrast, could land. Having lived in California, where fears of Chinese immigration had similarly led to increasingly hostile treatment and immigration laws, Royce was well aware of the Chinese question. Indeed, he was at great pains to condemn racial prejudice, asking, “Has not the American agitation against the Chinese been on the whole rather disgraceful to our intelligence? Are not the best of us even now ashamed of it?” (Lake and Reynolds 2008). For Royce, however, Australia was a different matter. Australia was not an established nation like the United States but instead was still in the process of national formation. And for Royce, successful national formation crucially relied upon racial homogeneity. Whilst liberal capitalists disagreed – citing the importance of the free movement of labour and Chinese workers to economic development – Royce’s view was the one that triumphed, embedded in the very creation of the Australian state. For, in 1901, the Commonwealth of Australia’s first parliament expelled from the new state over two thousand Pacific Islanders and soon implemented stringent immigration laws restricting the arrival and presence of ‘non-whites’ (Lake and Reynolds 2008).

The state process of institutionalising insiders and outsiders took on a new immediacy on the frontier. Through the expansion of empire and creation of settler-colonies, in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, as in Australia, these new conceptions of race and difference played out on a world stage. Indeed, they were reshaped because of these encounters. Unlike in the metropole, where this racialised ‘other’ could be seen as geographically distant, on the frontier this other was internal. Furthermore, the white migrant community consisted of people from all over Europe, with varying languages, customs and cultures. In this sense, the concept of a ‘white’ race creating a group of legitimate insiders was a key component in bringing together disparate peoples into a single community.

Once again, human difference was cached in the language of race. Through the claiming of the frontier land, colonists suddenly had to contend with the people who had occupied it. However, the figure of the internal other was further complicated by the issue of sex and miscegenation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the initial phase of the elimination of indigenous populations had largely drawn to a close, with the growing mixed-race population instead seen as a threat to the integrity of the nation. To draw concrete boundaries between ‘white’ and ‘non-white’, the natural sciences stemming from Enlightenment thought were once again the answer. In Australia, degrees of miscegenation were categorised into ‘half-castes’, ‘quadroons’ and ‘octoroos’, with
any smaller amount of indigenous heritage deemed irrelevant (Wolfe 2001). Thus, three
generations were enough to eliminate any trace of indigenous heritage – simply a new form of
elimination, reliant on growing understandings of blood and genetics.

Race was not only understood through interactions with indigenous populations, as Australian
fears surrounding Chinese immigration show. Whilst the occupation of Australia immediately
internalised an indigenous other, it also created external territorial borders. These borders were
thus something that needed to be reinforced and defended. In 1896, legislation in the Australian
state of New South Wales banned people of ‘any coloured race’ from immigrating, regardless of
whether or not they were a British subject (Lake and Reynolds 2008). Similarly, the 1902
Australian Commonwealth Franchise Act finally gave the vote to white women, but denied it to
indigenous Australians or any people from ‘Asia, Africa or the Islands of the Pacific except New
Zealand’ (Lake and Reynolds 2008). These laws erased any differences in language, culture and
religion, among others, between peoples deemed ‘non-white’ or ‘coloured’, creating a single
global division, in which ‘whiteness’ was prized above all else – even British citizenship. The case
of Australia thus brings to the fore the internal tensions of ideas about race within empire. Whilst
British imperial policy, affirmed in the 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act, claimed
anyone born within the British Empire could claim British nationality, this universal subjecthood
was very much divided in practice (Paul 1997). Practical inequalities of race triumphed over
universalist claims – much as with the work of abolitionists earlier in the century.

Practical considerations of imperial control and foreign relations also exerted pressures. The
international reaction to Australia’s immigration laws was mixed. Whilst New Zealand similarly
introduced a literacy test in 1907 to restrict immigration, and in 1923 Canada introduced the
Immigration Restriction Act which allowed the Minister of Immigration to refuse entry at will,
India and Japan protested the laws (Lake and Reynolds 2008). The issue of Indian opposition was
especially significant, as Britain’s response was complicated by the fact that India remained part
of its empire at the time. As such, these pieces of legislation and the complicated responses to it
reveal the lack of any unified, coherent imperial racial policy. Indeed, within an imperial context,
racial discourses were not shaped by a single nation, but rather a new, modern international global
system in which states and peoples interacted. Thus, immigration laws were key as the creation of
policed borders and standards of citizenship were very much tied to the process of nation-building itself.

As such, state-building almost occurred from the outside in, placing frontier states at the heart of this story. In this sense, state-building becomes a uniquely modern phenomenon, tied to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whilst conceptions of race had been developed through imperial encounters, and spread globally through the expansion of empire, they were consolidated and institutionalised through the development of the nation-state. Likewise, the creation of the nation-state was a self-consciously modern project. In the words of Bill Schwarz, the project’s aim was that “the chaos of diversity was to be transformed into a nation marked by homogenous structures of space and time,” (Schwarz 2011:128). In Australia, this can be seen through the development of infrastructure and communications technology parallel to the development of political autonomy, and claims of ‘taming’ the frontier. Railways connecting the developing nation were the fast-growing industry between 1860 and 1890, and by 1872 telegraph links with Britain were set up. These all allowed the vast territory to become interconnected and unified. As mentioned earlier, Australia was also unified through a conception of shared ‘whiteness’. As a nation made up of immigrants, there was no national history to be called upon to unite the new population. Instead, ‘whiteness’ became a unifying political identity for this varied group of people, whose allegiance and loyalty was not necessarily tied to any Australian state, but rather their immediate localities and states, or, indeed, the region they had emigrated from.

As Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds highlight, discourses surrounding race and whiteness were simultaneously national and global. Whilst they relied upon an international understanding of a global community of ‘whiteness’, this could only be preserved and solidified through immigration laws at a national level. This legislative racism was in some ways a necessary tendency of the modern nation-states, as any claim to national legitimacy relied upon the creation of a fictive community of ‘the people’ to represent, and thus, communities that were not represented. As such, Etienne Balibar seems correct to argue that all equality is simply with respect to nationality (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). Salesa takes this further, seeing the centrality of race to state-making not as a mere tendency, but as the “organising principle” of statecraft (Salesa 2012). This was indeed the view espoused by Josiah Royce, and echoed in the policies of White
Australia, as those on the frontier grappled with encounters with the increasingly internal racialised ‘other’.

There is one final key issue of race and the frontier that must be mentioned: its violence. Whilst race could be considered a scientific question, or, as with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, examined through a rational calculus of the benefits of creating a marginalised group of people, the continued impact of the idea of race is directly linked to its emotional impact (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). Race is an emotionally-charged, violent discourse, not just some passionless exercise of labelling (Wolfe 2002). To assert control over Australian territory, tens of thousands of indigenous peoples were killed. Thousands more were raped, beaten or abducted (Schwartz 2011). This imposition of ‘white’ authority and a clear racial hierarchy by the settlers was not a natural process, but, instead, one constructed through horrific violence and brutality, unable to be justified through any ‘rational’ logic. Indeed, even as settlers claimed to be civilising Australia, this was achieved through acts of barbarism. As such, as Schwarz highlights, it is not possible to contrast a civilised metropole against violent, barbarous colonies, but instead, the barbaric impulses of civilisation must be understood, and how this was indeed crucial to shaping ‘modern’ institutions and practices (Schwartz 2011). The two were merely part of the same tale.

Similarly, race, as it was understood and utilised in the settler-colonies, cannot be separated from the metropole. Whilst the case of Australia highlights the imposition of simultaneous racial and territorial boundaries to the extreme, notions of ‘Britishness’ did the same in the metropole. Likewise, as Australia was utilising racial understandings of difference to construct a new nation within a racist imperial order, the twentieth century was also a period of formation for the British state, as it attempted to chart a path through the decline of empire, and rise of welfarism.

Race, Welfare and the Metropole

Notions of ‘whiteness’ were not only crucial on the peripheries. In the very centre of empire, by the early twentieth century, the idea had great currency. Through attempts to encourage emigration to white settler-colonies following the end of World War I, the British government aimed to retain its world-wide standing and influence through the creation of a transnational ‘white’ community. However, although this may have been the aim, as such policies interacted with popular
understandings and discourses surrounding nationhood, subjecthood and race, the effects of emigration were far more complex.

Similarly, the British state’s welfare policies of the twentieth century largely stemmed from and relied upon racialised scientific knowledge. As Richard Soloway claims, “eugenics was a biological way of thinking about social, economic, political and cultural change” and “gave scientific credibility . . . to . . . prejudices, anxieties, and fears” amongst white, middle and upper-class Britons (Soloway 1990:xviii). Whilst there was never a single or stable eugenicist ideology, eugenicist ideas were instead harnessed to justify and promote a range of beliefs, one of which was the need for a welfare state (Bland and Hall 2010). In the early twentieth century, then, welfarism and increased state intervention in policies of reproduction were inherently linked to eugenic assumptions and science, and this legacy continues to this day.

These governmental policies did not exist in a vacuum – the twentieth century saw the most visible manifestations of popular agency and challenges to predominant elite British conceptions of race and modernity, with the growth of a transnational Black community and demands of self-rule from colonies. As such, discourses of race and modernity became increasingly contested, fragmented and re-shaped in new, yet still pervasive, ways.

For the British government in London at the turn of the century, those who lived within the British empire “were British subjects first and local citizens second,” (Paul 1997:11). However, as seen with the nation-building project in Australia, and the restrictive immigration laws for which British nationality was no protection, this was a flawed assumption. Similarly, this general assumption concealed an internal tension at the heart of British subjecthood and nationality: the issue of race. It is here that the work of Kathleen Paul is very useful (Paul 1997). Paul charts how, whilst a formal international community of ‘Britishness’ could be established based upon imperial control, informally, British national identity, as imagined by the British elite, included only white subjects (Paul 1997).

The conflation between whiteness and Britishness can be seen through the state policing of internal ‘others’, such as the 1925 Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seaman) Order. This order forced undocumented Black seaman to register as Aliens, even though many were Black British subjects – a fact that the Home Office knew and chose to ignore (Tabili 1994). Much as with the Australian immigration laws earlier in the century, this legal shift can be considered a form of
bureaucratic racial violence, designed to strip rights from Black citizens.¹ Furthermore, this order created a false projection of race or right to British nationality as being a static fact. During the World War I, less than ten years before the 1925 legislation, Arab and Adenese sailors, often from the Ottoman Empire, were encouraged to join the British sea force, and “somewhat indiscriminately provided with British documents,” with the British state also explicitly encouraging Black seamen to join the navy in return for British nationality (Tabili 1994:70). In 1917, the same Home Office who drafted and policed the 1925 legislation, even went so far as to chastise police in South Shields for arresting Arab sailors as aliens, arguing such sailors rarely had the correct documents to prove their nationality, and, as such, should be left alone (Tabili 1994). As such, conceptions of internal ‘others’ relied upon changing military, political and economic situations, as opposed to any intrinsic, static values and assumptions.

The twentieth-century British state’s assumption of the connection between ‘whiteness’ and ‘Britishness’ was further shown through the British government policy of encouraging the emigration of ‘British stock’ to the colonies in the early twentieth century. This demonstrated the British government’s unwavering belief in the triumph of a collective identity of Britishness, closely associated with ‘whiteness’, to remain static in the face of local, competing identity claims. As such, the aim of the British government in the inter-war period was to retain global influence through emigration to the colonies and Commonwealth nations, beginning with the 1922 Empire Settlement Act (Paul 1997). In the first decade of the Act’s operation, close to half a million British residents emigrated, costing the government over six million pounds (Paul 1997). This was a uniquely inter- and post-war effort, as Britain sought to prevent the further loss of international power and prestige. Whereas in the nineteenth century, state-sponsored emigration had been restricted to criminals, to improve society, by the mid-twentieth, it was seen as a necessary cost to ensure continued British global influence. As such, these modern emigration policies relied upon a scientific understanding that treated race as an objective, static fact, not as a socially contingent discourse, to be constantly re-shaped. Indeed, the growth of population science and studies of global demographics – often framed as studies of the dangers of uncontrolled demographic growth among ‘non-white’ ‘races’ – further led to questions of migration centring around peoples with

simple, unchangeable, racial identities, and thus associated worth (Bashford 2014). It was this logic that thus underpinned emigration policies, making a global community of ‘whiteness’ a desirable, or even possible, thing to imagine.

Scientific understandings of race did not only underpin emigration; the origins of the modern welfare state in Britain can also be closely tied to this. The 1911 National Insurance Act, the cornerstone of early twentieth-century ‘modern’ Liberal reform, was a clear response to fears of national racial degradation (Shilliam 2018). Not only was ‘whiteness’ threatened on the frontier, but its fragility could be revealed at home through the weakness of the British working classes. In this sense, the early twentieth century became a key turning point in the integration of the working class into an elite conception of ‘white’ British identity. The inability to source sufficient healthy troops for the Boer War and the findings of the 1904 Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, led to fears surrounding the decline of white British stock (Shilliam 2018). Thus, government intervention was needed to ensure the continued health and longevity of both the white race and Britain’s imperial strength. It is crucial to note that the perceived need for ‘whiteness’ amongst the working class was fundamentally tied to imperial war concerns and brutal colonial repression. In this sense, ‘whiteness’ itself became a tool for violent imperial control.

Violent institutional control was also reflected in the rise of eugenics. In the early twentieth century, eugenicist ideas developed during the later nineteenth century became institutionalised, aided by the development of new techniques of knowledge-production, such as the census and the study of statistics (Salesa 2012). It was the science of eugenics which claimed to be able to solve the problem revealed by the poor health of the working classes during the Boer War. Thus, the fear of insiders becoming racialised outsiders, or ‘others’ once more came into play. Fears rooted in colonial encounters at the frontier and peripheries were transported to the metropole, to shape an understanding of ‘whiteness’ that was only to be understood through what it was not. Whereas Australian settlers could be portrayed as bold defenders of the white race, those in the metropole could only anxiously attempt to slow the impending racial degeneration. Paradoxically, it was the very claimed superiority of ‘whiteness’ that made it so vulnerable.

Such government policies were not the only factors shaping racial understandings. The agents in this narrative and race and modernity were not only ‘white’ elites, but, increasingly in the twentieth century, ‘black’ populations themselves. This is not to say that ‘black’ populations in
Britain were a twentieth-century phenomenon. As early as 1764, as many as 20,000 people from Africa or the Caribbean, or their decedents, lived in London (Qureshi 2004). However, the mobilisation of ‘blackness’ as a positive, transnational political identity was a development of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, a response to the globalisation of ‘whiteness’. Much as how Schwarz argued that whiteness was simultaneously national and global, Kennetta Hammond Perry suggests that people of African descent were forced to navigate a “diasporic Black word that was at once internationally oriented and constituted by nationally specific conditions of race,” (Perry 2014:658). From the late nineteenth century, this led to the growth of Black internationalism and the Pan-African movement, as well as the Pan-Islamist movement, which demanded the very rights of freedom and self-determination first constituted through Enlightenment thought (Younis 2017). Indeed, the twentieth century saw Britain struggle to contain and communicate with alternative claims to modernity. Much of the argument for decolonisation relied upon the very same frameworks of knowledge of slavery and colonisation itself; colonial populations were claiming to be modern and civilised, to have achieved equal status to white Britain, and it was for this reason that independence should be granted (Chatterjee 1993). Thus, whilst the twentieth century saw challenges to a racialised global order, the essentialisation of race itself and the modern forms of understanding this produced – articulated through Enlightenment thought and ideals, and government policies of emigration and welfarism – meant that race remained very much endemic to ideas of modernity.

**Conclusion**

The international system as we know it is based upon the co-existence of nation-states. However, most, if not all, of these states have been shaped by empire. Similarly, the original ideals of the international system as shown through the founding of the United Nations – sovereignty, equality, and independence – owe much to Enlightenment philosophy and discourses surrounding the rights of man. Furthermore, how we understand the scientific basis of the world we inhabit also stems from this Enlightenment moment.

Fundamentally, neither this scientific knowledge production, conception of universal rights or system of nation-states can be considered separate from their roles in constructing, and interacting
with, racial discourse. Likewise, as discussed earlier, the very capitalism that built this global system is inherently racial. Our very understanding of a global community of humanity remains bifurcated into ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ – itself a legacy of colonialism and racialisation. The universalism that legitimates the international state system is fundamentally reliant upon a racist hierarchy to ensure its economic arm remains viable (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991). This is not to say that any hegemonic racial discourse ever existed, or that discourses subscribe to any laid out and controlled plan. Instead, conceptions of race became the key marker of human differentiation over the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century, due to these ideas and institutions. As such, racial discourses and racialisation as a process of othering and inclusion are tied fundamentally to our understanding of what makes the modern world truly ‘modern.’ It is in this sense that perhaps it is modernity itself that cannot escape ‘race’. Answers may need to be found then, in alternative conceptions of modernity beyond the British World.

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