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## Race, culture, and economics: an example from North-South trade relations

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### ABSTRACT

This essay refines the understanding of culture and race – with operational and temporal dynamics – to explain North-South trade outcomes. Following traditions in economic sociology and anthropology, culture is presented as a toolkit of values. The recent rise of racism and xenophobia as values associated with populism can be traced to cultural toolkits that have sedimented histories. The cultural unsettledness of the present times has brought these values to fore. The blindspots in political economy ignored the cultural embeddedness of interests and values as they evolve through time, and therefore missed both the examination of important outcomes and their historical roots. The paper provides an empirical example from racialized values embedded in the history of North-South trade relations.

### KEYWORDS

Culture; blindspots; international political economy; north-south relations; trade; racism; populism; economic nationalism

‘To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it also means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization’.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008, pp. 1–2)

The convergence of racialized discourses and populism in current politics in Western countries seeks to assign a civilizational core to a set of ‘White’ people. In the United States, Donald Trump has called Mexican immigrants ‘rapists’, lumped Central America and Africa as ‘shithole’ countries, attributed the killings of White farmers in South Africa to a racist conspiracy theory, and repeatedly called COVID-19 a Chinese virus despite protests (Wikipedia, n.d.). The metaphors invite parallels in history such as Nazism when Europe debated racism within its borders. The term racism as originally conceived applied to *judenrein*, the Nazi extermination project (Rattansi, 2007, p. 4). However, as Aimé Césaire’s (2001, p. 36) noted in his 1950 classic *Discourse on Colonialism*: ‘He [Hitler] applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa’. Similarly, Donald

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Trump is explicit in articulating a racism whose values have a long history but, as this essay shows, were latent in North-South trade relations. Racism is not new but the discipline of international relations is finally beginning to understand its meanings and implications.

The blindspots of economics and international political economy lie in calculating interests and preferences that are devoid of history or culture, which socialize human beings and their institutions to a core set of values. While culturally informed interests and identities have become central to international relations through the constructivist paradigm, culture needs further theorization for its internal dynamics and in relation to race, which remains a marginal issue. This is slowly changing, especially after the election of President Donald Trump in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Racism and its manifestation in a benign language of paternalism are examined as cultural values in this essay: racist values assign an inferior position to groups of people, regardless of gender, to actively discriminate against them. Linked to racist values, paternalism is an infantilizing discourse that assigns a caretaker or donor role to the dominant, ostensibly to look after the marginalized or distressed. Poet Rudyard Kipling's colourful phrase 'White Man's burden' evokes both racism and paternalism. The cultural roots of racialized interest formation in this essay demonstrate how the post-colonial world was variably affixed in inferior positions and discriminated against. The current populist and racist ideologies reveal 'cultural anxieties' but only to the extent that as the developing world finds a voice, it once again calls to question the implicit racist or paternalistic understandings that form the underbelly of North-South trade relations. Best and Paterson (2010, p. 11) note in a recent exploration of cultural political economy that '[F]ear, in this instance, is the fear by the privileged and the dominant precisely of those they dominate and construct as backward and "irrational" to legitimize their dominance'.

This essay's contribution lies in refining the understanding of culture as played out through racism – with operational and temporal dynamics – to explain political economy outcomes with an empirical example from North-South trade relations. Two steps are important to make the cultural explanation work. First, we must be able to explain conceptually and empirically what we mean by culture. This paper operationalizes culture as a toolkit of values, therefore making cultures malleable and dynamic, unlike identitarian explanations that provide a political or politicised explanation of a static identity (Sen, 2006; Singh, 2020). Values are weights, importance, or rank given to some things or issues, and manifested through rituals, symbols, social interactions and stratifications, and (in economic conduct) prices. The essay examines racist values and provides an empirical example of the values implicit in international trade involving North-South interactions. Second, we must be able to explain the temporal elements that connect with past cultural values with those mobilized in the present. In other words, while there are a set of values that can be identified as racial or paternalistic, the discourses vary through time.

More broadly the paper contributes to a dynamic theory of racialized cultural interest formation and change. The next section historicizes cultural interests and values and applies them to the social construction of racism. The empirical section thereafter shows how these values are played out in North-South trade relations.<sup>2</sup> The focus does not permit a full discussion for taking a position on the body of scholarship arguing that notions of culture are always imbricated with those of race (Lentin, 2005; Wolf et al., 1994). Nevertheless, the essay confirms the view that

racism does provide a ‘dominant civilizational schematic’ for understanding international interactions for ranking ‘external barbarians’ and ‘internal others’ (Wolf et al., 1994, p. 3). A set of values with racial origins in the colonial era underlie North-South trade relations that have ranked the post-colonial world in an inferior position and prevented the benefits of international trade through discriminatory trade measures which operationalize the underlying values.

## Interests and values

Political economy analyses often present a thin understanding of cultural values in interest formation or, importantly for this essay, the way they are mobilized to discriminate against groups of actors. This blindspot works against recognizing the underlying stimuli for stable or changing values including racist values that can take on various manifestations through time. Not only does international political economy then offer partial explanations of outcomes, it also elides over cultural contradictions that can often co-exist with strategic conduct as, for example, in a liberal internationalist order that embodied racialized practices. Constructivist accounts in international relations describe well the rise and fall of cultural norms and in the last decade a literature on norm contestation has proliferated detailing how opposing norms may be resolved.<sup>3</sup> Cultural contradictions, the stuff of everyday anthropology, are still not examined in international relations: they do not fit the calculations of utility among rational choice theorists, and their non-linearity does not fit the models of global governance posed among constructivists.

A thick description of culture explaining the way it shapes human interests is necessary and needs to allow for change while being sufficiently differentiated to enable cultural stratifications. The notion of cultures as repertoires or toolkits satisfies these conditions. Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) write that cultural repertoires allow people to make sense of the world around them while providing a guide to action through valuations for courses of action. For example, people may accept that climate change is taking place but may be culturally constrained from taking action through social or institutional pressures, therefore seeming to indicate that they do not believe in climate change. Swidler (1986) presents culture as a ‘toolkit’ that consists of ‘diverse often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories and guides to action’ (p. 277). This tool kit provides the public meaning of culture: the meanings are almost always contested but they are also shared across groups. As such they explain ‘internal variations and external overlap of beliefs, values and meanings’ (Patten, 2011, p. 742). This is consistent with anthropological traditions that view culture as meaning-making (Geertz, 1973) but the notion of repertoires and toolkits allows for operationalization.

Culture can be conceptualized as set of options with values attached to them (Kymlicka, 1995). Values are constituted through experience and socialization and further the work of reproducing cultures. Culture is thus constitutive, but also contingent as it works through other socio-economic processes to shape outcomes (Best & Paterson, 2010, p. 12). Thinking of culture as a toolkit of values, shaped both through material and socialization conditions, frees one of the straightjacket of a static culture or an identitarian one where culture becomes coterminous with factors such as race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, class, or nationality. An extreme version is a set of highly negative values associated with a culture. An early modern

example comes from the Spanish conquest as represented in the Valladolid debates (1550–1551): humanist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda argued that ‘Indians’ were savages; Bartolome de las Casas viewed them as human and, therefore, capable of being civilized through conversion to Christianity. Recent statements from the extreme right bring to fore the latest iteration of these views. In May 2018, President Donald Trump referred to refugees and undocumented migrants as follows: ‘These aren’t people. They are animals’. Audiotapes released in July 2019 document conversations between Ronald Reagan and then President Richard Nixon wherein Reagan calls Africans ‘monkeys’, ‘cannibals’ and ‘uncomfortable wearing shoes’ while Nixon laughs (*The New York Times*, 2019).

Racist values are cultural values. It is important to trace their historicity to understand how they have been constructed over time. Although the term racism only came about in the 1930s, classifications developed earlier among colonizing European powers that deemed some set of people (identified as a ‘race’) to be inferior. Adam Smith makes these charges against the Irish, while evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin regarded colonial subjects as inferior whom he regarded as barbarians (Shipman, 2002, p. 19). Paternalism paralleled these moves: John Locke, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill pioneered ideas that would make the colonies civilized (Mehta, 1999). Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* captures the intellectual discourses that ‘othered’ the colonized, assigning them irrationality and barbarism, while Europeans assumed for themselves rationality and civilization.

It is important to examine how these racialized blindspots influenced the study of political science and international affairs. Vitalis (2015) writes that the origins of American political science were in colonial governance. For these scholars ‘hierarchy was natural, it was biologically rooted, and it could be made sense of best by such concepts as higher and lower races, natural and historic races, savagery and civilization, and the like’ (Vitalis, 2015, p. 929). Henderson (2013, p. 72) writes that international relations originated from ‘interracial relations’. The influential journal *Foreign Affairs* was known as *Journal of Race Development* between 1910 and 1919, (and *Journal of International Relations* between 1919 and 22). Colonial tropes continued to inform inter-war social science and policy. Cordell Hull, famous for his dictums on commerce and possibilities for peace, writes very little on the colonies in his memoirs (1948). Aaronson (1996, p. 13) calls him ‘a good old boy’ while Meyers (2012) notes that Hull subscribed to the right of Europeans to colonize weaker peoples.

Post-war international relations literature is an odd creature. It pretended colonial racism was now history. Instead post-war realists concentrated on nation-states while liberals concentrate on varying degrees of reciprocity among economic actors. The values were about power and hierarchy among realists and exchange among liberals. Historians such as Eric Mazower (2009) have now exhumed the causes of this burial; post-war international institutions continued the racism of the empire by other means: ‘A democratic imperial order had been preserved, thanks to the formation of the UN, even as fascist militarism had been defeated. The world of civilizing inferior races, and keeping them in order, could continue’ (p. 21). Mazower meticulously documents the racists and racist values that informed the creation of post-war international institutions. Duncan Bell (2013) describes ‘the extent to which racism, and in particular white supremacism, continued to permeate and shape practices and conceptualizations of global politics after 1945 and into

our present time' (p. 2). For Hobson (2012), racism became subliminal in the study of International Relations: the focus became Western relations, North-South relations were neglected though there was an occasional outburst of 'colonial-racist guilt syndrome'.<sup>4</sup> Doty (1993) writes of 'racial codes' that 'have facilitated the rearticulation of racism disguised with ostensibly non-racist rhetoric' (p. 453).<sup>5</sup> In general, sociologist Douglas (1986) notes that seemingly stable preferences in well-established institutions disguise the underlying processes through which institutions arise, in turn facilitating stable preferences.

Two additional points can be made about the way cultures shape interests through time. First, new cultural values can arise while old ones can get die or, in other circumstances, get resurrected. Second, cultural toolkits can break down. It can be argued that the current mixture of racist and populist values provides a coherent narrative to leaders and social groups for dealing with anxieties of globalization which can include job losses, demographic changes in neighborhoods, or introduction of new ideas and culture mores over social media. Swidler (2001) writes that settled and unsettled cultures constrain or expand their toolkits differently: settled cultures have an expansive toolkit, unsettled cultures find it hard to adapt to a series of new values or circumstances and turn to simplifying ideologies. Mythologizing history to speak to hypothetically constructed times when life was simpler, easier, and glorious is another type of boundary work (Barthes, 1972; Said, 1979; Shipman, 2002). In unsettled times, individuals can reach within their toolkits to operationalize historical cultural values that rank-order difference and inferiority of sets of people. Immigrants can be then viewed as a cultural threat rather than a result of push and pull factors (Omelaniuk, 2017; Walters, 2010). Rosenberg (2019) shows that despite the threat perception in places such as Western Europe and North America, majority black states send far less migrants than other regions. The model compares actual migrant flows against a counterfactual of racially blind flows. The current populist debates in Western Europe – including the Brexit vote or the growing strength of far-right anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe – must, therefore be examined against this perceived rather than actual threat. In general, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) find that European attitudes toward immigrants in Europe are not related to their economic or material standing. Empirical models continue to link the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump to racist values (Mutz, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

To summarize the discussion so far, thick descriptions of culture present them as 'remarkably enduring' but also as 'flexible, resilient and able to change' (Nolan, 2001, p. 25). The notion of cultural values drawn from a cultural repertoire or toolkit satisfies these dynamic conditions. Cultural repertoires can break down – especially under strain from flows of ideas, people, products, and technologies – and political entrepreneurs benefit most in these circumstances through simplifying ideologies that especially appeal to a set of people perceiving themselves to be victims of these flows. The latter condition facilitates populist politics. Like identity politics, simplistic ideologies, to extend Amartya Sen's analysis (2006), offer 'a solitarist illusion' that miniaturizes human being on a singular cultural dimension or a narrow set of values.

### **North-South trade relations – an empirical example**

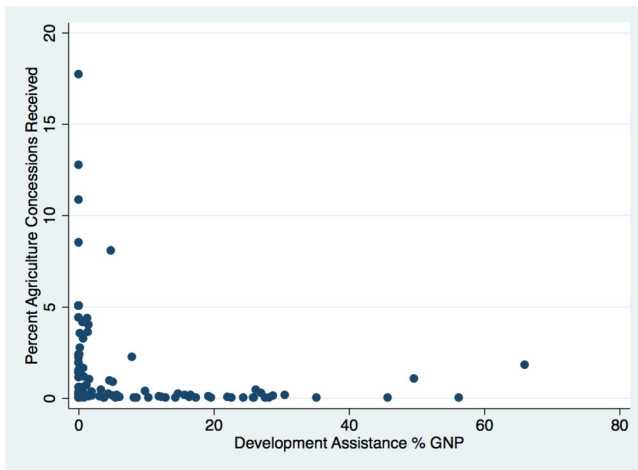
The remainder of this essay provides an empirical example from the latent racism of North-South trade relations in the post-colonial era. The example illustrates

both the persistence and variation in cultural values associated with racism. At the creation of General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the colonial countries were expected to remain primary commodity producers and their attempts to gain protections for their infant industries were rebuffed (Irwin et al., 2008). Their agriculture and manufacturing exports also faced protections for decades while developed countries lectured them on opening markets. In the current era, high-tech exports from India or manufactured ones from China have met with a racist backlash in the western world.

The myth of North-South trade policy is that the North went beyond trade reciprocity to be benevolent toward the developing world. A brief narrative of North-South trade history brings up an alternative chronology (based on Singh, 2017). The Tories viewed the system of imperial preferences, that formed the backbone of North-South relations in the immediate post-war trade as a continuation of empire: both the meaning of the term 'imperial preferences' and their regulative character assigned the colonies to an inferior position, as recipients of a largesse they never wanted (Irwin et al., 2008). Herbert Feis (1946, p. 661), a trade advisor to Hoover and Roosevelt administrations, called imperial preferences 'a zollverein for the empire'. Developing world negotiators argued, instead, for infant-industry protections, drawing from Keynesian and Soviet Planning models in which many of them were trained. They could not prevail in the negotiations leading up to the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade.

The developing world faced higher tariffs if they added value to these commodities (a process that came to be known as tariff differentials) (Balassa, 1965; Curzon, 1965; General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), 1958; Grubel & Johnson, 1967). The moves toward a European Economic Community starting in the 1950s were accurately perceived in the developed world as presaging further restrictions on developing world's exports, especially in agriculture. As early as 1961, countries such as Nigeria called for an elimination of the system of imperial preferences, which they viewed as unethical and inefficient (Curzon, 1965; Hudec, 1987; Zartman, 1971). Instead of market access, the developed world provided foreign aid. This paternalism made 'rich countries exhortations to foreign trade sound hypocritical' (Curzon, 1965, p. 225).

The creation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in 1964 is often portrayed in international relations as a response to developing world's interests. UNCTAD is also linked to bloc diplomacy from the developing world (the G77 Group) in obtaining the Generalized System of Preferences, enshrined in GATT in 1971 (Narlikar, 2003). The history is nuanced and complicated. Through creating an alternative forum for its interests, the developing world coalesced to apply pressures on the GATT system: 'although it did not seem so at the time, developing countries actually used the UNCTAD threat with a great deal of caution and patience' (Hudec, 1987, p. 40). Developing countries agriculture exports faced increasing restrictions. In 1961, the Multi Fibre Arrangement system did the same for textile exports. Led by Argentinian economist Raúl Prebisch, who helped create UNCTAD, the developing world advocacy shifted toward a broad carve out for preferences although there was also opposition within the developing world, given the experience of imperial preferences. Western Europe listened but United States was a reluctant partner. The developed countries met at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1970s and agreed to



**Figure 1.** Percentage agriculture concessions received and official development assistance as percentage of GNP at GATT's Uruguay Round of trade negotiations (1986–94).

limited preferential access. Dos Santos et al. (2005, p. 648) notes 'their agreement sabotaged the creation of significant GSP schemes, giving developed countries 'loose commitments with strong escape provisions' rather than "strong commitments with loose escape provisions"'. GSP came into being in 1971 and subsequently the Enabling Clause of the 1979 Tokyo Round agreement from GATT enshrined it as special and differential treatment (SDT).

GSP's policy of creating carveouts for the developing world paralleled similar moves for minorities in developed world in social policy. GSP strengthened the rhetoric of paternalism regarding it 'as a favor to the poor – a form of international charity that places developing countries in the position of supplicants' (Erb, 1974, p. 93). The impact of GSP on developing world exports was minimal and made many countries inefficient producers (Bagwell & Staiger, 2002). Hudec (1987, p. 116) writes that GSP was a 'tool used to win friends and punish enemies'. Meier (1980) notes that the developed countries granted these preferences 'begrudgingly'. Karsenty and Laird (1987) showed that GSP exports to the 'donor' countries were only two percent higher than what they would have been without the preferences. Economists from the developing world decried the Faustian bargain: 'Instead of demanding and receiving crumbs from the rich man's table, such as GSP and a permanent status of inferiority under the 'special and differential' treatment clause, had they participated fully, vigorously, and on equal terms with the developed countries in the GATT and had they adopted an outward-oriented development strategy, they could have achieved far faster and better growth' (Srinivasan, 1998, p. 27).

Starting with the Uruguay Round of trade talks through GATT (1986–94), the developing world gained access to negotiations through its collective advocacy, and sought trade concessions for markets in the Global North in return for opening their own. They received a few reciprocal trade concessions but were also internally divided and many members sought further SDT privileges. The grand bargain of the Uruguay Round was that the developing world received concessions in agriculture in return for its agreement on high tech issues such as services and intellectual



**Table 1.** Characterization of sentiment toward trading partners in USTR press releases 1982–93.

	Paternalistic	Favorable	Unfavorable	Mixed	Neutral	Total
Total	710	234	291	129	98	1462
Non OECD	662	92	134	38	40	966
OECD	19	86	133	58	40	336
CEES	25	18	8	9	3	63
All World	4	38	16	24	15	97

Source: Author's content analysis of United States Trade Representative Press Releases (1982-93) obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request.

property. This is not true. The almost perfect hyperbola in [Figure 1](#) shows that countries which received foreign aid did not receive reciprocal concessions in agriculture, one of the chief sources of comparative advantage for the developing world. In other words, unilateral handouts – in the form of SDT and foreign aid – rather than reciprocal trade concessions were the dominant values of North-South trade.

Further, while trade concessions were denied, the developing countries were targets of a highly paternalistic and patronizing discourse. My analysis of 13 years of USTR press releases summarized in [Table 1](#) shows that 93 percent (or 662 of 710) of the total paternalistic references from the USTR were toward the developing world (Singh, 2017). These paternalistic references included critiques of market conditions in the developing world, and exhortations to them to open their markets. These were not 'neoliberal' policies for various reasons. First, the paternalistic rhetoric about markets was not applied on similar issues toward the developed north protectionism. Second, as shown above, this was sweet and manipulative talk, one in which the developing world would never be allowed to export its own products freely to the developed world. A typical statement of such paternalism is the following pertaining in this case to the announcement of the signing of the bilateral investment treaty (BIT) with Bangladesh on 12 March 1986 in which USTR Clayton Yeutter is quoted: 'Developing countries such as Bangladesh, which recognize the importance of direct investment to their long-term economic development plans, now are taking actions to attract such investment. I hope that more countries follow the leadership Bangladesh has shown'. The United States was not opening its market agriculture exports or textiles without quotas.

A 1992 statement on Andean Trade Preferences Act notes: 'The ATPA fulfills the U.S. commitment to improve access to the U.S. market for exports from the Andean nations. It is designed to help the beneficiary nations encourage their people to export legitimate products instead of illicit drugs. The United States supports the strong efforts of the Government of Ecuador to combat drug trafficking and to modernize its economy'.

Quantitative models presented in Singh (2017) also demonstrate that paternalistic strength in the developed world was strongly correlated to the lack of concession in agriculture, manufacturing, services, and intellectual property to the developing world at the Uruguay Round. Open racism resulted in places where market access was allowed. India's success in services and outsourcing led to a racist and populist backlash (Oh & Banjo, 2012; Waldman, 2004). *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported the human angle: 'many Indian call-center workers say they regularly face particular abuse from Americans, whose tantrums are sometimes racist and often inspired by anger over outsourcing' (McPhate, 2005).

Intellectual property rights practices resulted in countries being labelled as ‘pirates’ and ‘thieves’. At a regional level, Skonieczny (2001) content analysis of the news reports and images about NAFTA shows that the U.S. Congress’s vote in the 1990s depended on Mexico being discursively constructed as inferior. When Costa Rica could export a miniscule amount of sugar following the DR-CAFTA negotiations with the U.S., the Congressional vote on the treaty passed with only two votes to spare (217–215). Historically, the value-chain of sugar, from slavery plantations to the current manipulations of the sugar industry in the United States, epitomizes the marginalization of the developing world with racially infused sweet talk (Friend, 1963; Mintz, 1985). As is well-known, developing world’s advocacy for market access in agriculture led to no-agreement and a failure to finish the multi-lateral Doha Round of trade in the present century.

This brief history of North-South trade liberates us from thinking that the United States or the Global North has treated the developing world in its political economy with equality or in accordance with liberal principles of market access and exchange. The core-periphery model also breaks down in these analyses along racial lines. Whether the developing world produces sugar or it produces high-tech services or intellectual properties, their products are not being allowed into the global North, thereby making us question the premise that the core capitalist economies continued to forge deep links of exploitation with the periphery in the post-colonial era. In fact, while these links do exist, they are marginal as evidenced, for example, in the declining share of more than 75 least developed countries in world trade (static at about 0.5 percent of world trade since the 1980s).

## Concluding analysis

The story of North-South trade relations features continuities of racist and paternalistic values. The marginalization of the Global South from reciprocal international trade intensified over time, even as developing world advocacy for equality increased. Despite this marginalization, many developing countries garnered heavy trade volumes (if not reciprocal trade concessions) and became influential players in the global trading order mostly through domestic industrial or services diversification and strategic tactics at international negotiations (Odell, 2000; Singh, 2017). ASEAN as a region stands out as an example. Individual countries include Chile and Costa Rica, and large ones such as China and India. Despite the racist critiques, India’s position in services trade, including outsourcing has strengthened, not weakened. The populist backlash against trade, to the extent that it also reflects North-South trade relations needs some two contexts: (1) historically the United States was successful in heavily gaining, not losing, from its international trade; (2) Trump’s racism against the Global South reveals a racist values toolkit resurrected to deflect cultural anxieties about the rising power of minorities within the United States or the competition from heretofore marginalized peoples in the global economy. Therefore, a cultural narrative that dehumanizes them assures some core set of people that the marginalized are powerless.

The cultural blindspots in IPE missed the rise of populism and the attendant racism and xenophobia. The liberal versions posit benefits for the developing world and minorities without recognizing the structural barriers – in this case cultural and racist – that prevents them from fully participating. The radical version sees

the developing world integrated and exploited through ‘neoliberalism’ whereas, at least in trade as shown in this essay, the developing world has been kept in the margins. Highlighting blindspots in both set of analyses rescues historical patterns and contingency of human interactions. Post war trade institutions embodied racist values and carried cultural contradictions. Their visibility in the current era makes it hard to ignore blindspots.

## Notes

1. The annual convention theme at the 2015 American Political Science Association was ‘Diversities Reconsidered’. Not a single panel or paper was presented on race in any of the sections associated with international relations.
2. While this article mostly attends to populist political economies in North-South trade relations, racism has a global presence from Bolsanaro’s ‘Christian’ views of Brazil to Modi’s ‘Hindu’ views of India. The paper’s thesis on mobilization of cultural toolkits and repertoires can be applied to other global examples.
3. Classic contributions include Onuf (1989), Finnemore (1996), Keck and Sikkink (1998), and Wendt (1999). For the norm contestation literature, see Wiener (2008) and Niemann and Schillinger (2017).
4. See Sajed (2016) for a useful introduction to a forum on the extent to which Hobson’s notion of Eurocentric institutionalism in the post-war era was a racist institutionalism.
5. Critical accounts also examine racism (see Anievas et al. 2014; Chowdhry & Nair 2013; Persaud & Walker 2001) but race is often secondary to materialist or class-based explanations in these analyses.

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