

# The Colonial History of Systemic Racism: Insights for Psychological Science

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## Abstract

The psychological study of systemic racism can benefit from the converging insights of “Black Marxism” and development economics, which illustrate how modern systemic racism is rooted in the political and economic institutions established during the historical period of European colonization. This article explores how these insights can be used to study systemic racism and challenge scientific racism in psychology by rethinking traditional research paradigms to incorporate the histories of race, class, and capitalism. Antiracism strategies that make use of these histories are also discussed, which include disrupting the psychological processes that sustain racist systems.

## Keywords

colonialism, racial capitalism, systemic racism, scientific racism

“But is not well-being more widely diffused among white folk than among yellow and black, and general intelligence more common?” True, and why? Ask the geography of Europe, the African Slave Trade, and the industrial technique of the nineteenth-century white man. Turn the thing around, and let a single tradition of culture suddenly have thrust into its hands the power to bleed the world of its brawn and wealth, and the willingness to do this, and you will have exactly what we have today, under another name and color.

—W. E. B. Du Bois,  
*Dusk of Dawn* (1940)

Eliminating racism is a priority for a growing number of psychological scientists. The most conspicuous sign of this trend is perhaps the resolution recently passed by the American Psychological Association (2021b) that called on psychologists to “expose, understand, and ultimately dismantle [systemic] racism that is operating across all levels . . . of society.” *Systemic racism* includes discriminatory racial ideology and institutions that unjustly enrich Whites while dispossessing people of color (Feagin, 2006). The current interest in dismantling systemic racism departs from psychology’s traditional focus on personal racial prejudice. In the past,

psychologists conceptualized racism as automatic bias or negative attitudes toward a racial group; racism was thought to consist of “abnormal” individual behaviors occurring within an otherwise nonracist society (American Psychological Association, 2015; Henriques et al., 1998). Psychology, a field historically concerned with the behaviors and cognitions of individuals, must now rethink its traditional disciplinary boundaries and research paradigms in order to eliminate racism at the systemic level (Grzanka & Cole, 2021; Trawalter et al., 2022).

This article explores the converging insights from two outside disciplines—development economics and “Black Marxism”—that can help psychological scientists expose, understand, and dismantle systemic racism. In the following sections, I review how researchers in the field of development economics have studied the effects of political institutions on global inequality, and I contextualize their results using *racial capitalism theory*, a theory of political economy and racial caste that developed from Black scholars’ critiques of Marxism (Melamed, 2015; Okoth, 2023; Robinson, 2000). I highlight a compelling body of empirical evidence that

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reveals the colonial origins of systemic racism. I also demonstrate how these insights can be used to challenge racism in the field of psychology and in society. This article builds on contributions from liberation psychology (Adams et al., 2015; Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020; Martín-Baró, 1994), community psychology (Albee, 1986; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), critical race theory (Salter & Adams, 2013), and recent epidemiological work on the quantitative measurement of structural racism (Adkins-Jackson et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2017; Groos et al., 2011; Hardeman et al., 2022).

### **Racial Ideology in Psychology: Scientific Racism, IQ, and Inequality**

As an institution, psychology itself has been a major source of racist ideology and discrimination (American Psychological Association, 2021a; Association of Black Psychologists, 2021; Winston, 2020). Even as a growing number of psychologists consider strategies to dismantle systemic racism in and outside of psychological science, a small but active community of researchers is engaged in the revival of race science, asserting that essential biological differences between racial groups explain many disparities in important life outcomes (Evans, 2019; Saini, 2019). Race science persists in psychology despite the broad consensus that race has no biological basis or precise scientific meaning (American Anthropological Association, 1998; American Society of Human Genetics, 2018; Fuetes et al., 2019; Helms et al., 2005), and despite warnings that “race is neither useful or scientifically valid as a measure of the structure of human genetic variation” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023, p. 103).

As in earlier eras of scientific racism in psychology, today’s race scientists are preoccupied with the relationship between race and IQ scores. The so-called hereditarian hypothesis—the assertion that genetics are a substantial cause of observed differences in average IQ scores between racial groups—has long been used to justify racial hierarchies (Cave, 2020; Guthrie, 1998) and is perhaps psychology’s most significant contribution to White supremacist ideology. The renewed claim that differences between average IQ scores reveal essential biological differences between racial groups is a major pillar of 21st century scientific racism that fuels White nationalism and right-wing extremism (Braddock et al., 2022; Evans, 2019; Harmon, 2018).

In the past, race scientists focused directly on observed differences between the average IQ scores of racial groups (e.g., *The Bell Curve*; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), but more recently, differences between national average IQ scores are offered as indirect support of the hereditarian hypothesis (e.g., *The Global Bell Curve*;

Lynn, 2008). This argument can be summarized as follows: Because IQ scores are partially heritable for individuals, differences between national average IQ scores should be interpreted as evidence of immutable biological differences between the racial groups that make up those countries (e.g., majority-Black African countries compared to majority-White European countries). Few psychologists have promoted this view more successfully than psychologist Richard Lynn, a key figure in the contemporary race science movement (American Psychological Association, 2021a; Evans, 2019; Saini, 2019; Winston, 2020).

The implications of a hereditarian view of race are “monumentally important,” according to Roberts (2011): “If race is a natural division, it is easy to dismiss the glaring differences in people’s welfare as fair and even insurmountable” (p. 5). For example, to justify disparities in welfare between rich and poor countries, Lynn and other race scientists point out that national average IQ scores are correlated with national wealth, leading them to conclude that majority White countries are wealthier because of their allegedly superior genetics (e.g., Lynn & Vanhanen, 2002; Meisenberg & Lynn, 2011). Daniele (2013) used historical data to refute this claim, though scientific critique has had little effect on the popularity of the “IQ-development hypothesis” among race scientists. The presumption of White Western countries’ biological superiority fits their conclusion that

we must accept that the world is divided into rich and poor countries and that the gap between them is partly based on genetic differences in intelligence, which will make it impossible to equalize economic conditions in different parts of the world. (Lynn & Vanhanen, 2002, p. 194)

### **Adopting Historical and Institutional Perspectives: Two Interrelated Challenges**

The IQ-development hypothesis and other instances of race science still persist because, first and foremost, racist ideas are appealing to some people regardless of their scientific veracity. However, although it would be tempting to attribute persistent scientific racism in psychology to the influence of a few “bad apples,” it is more likely that the resilience of race science reveals important epistemic-methodological limitations of traditional psychological science. I discuss two of these limitations next, which include psychology’s ahistorical orientation and psychology’s tendency to underemphasize the influence of systems and institutions on behavior. These limitations are by no means insurmountable, but they do complicate efforts to address racism in the field of psychology and in society.

First, psychology's traditional research paradigms are not well suited for studying the psychological effects of historical events (Martín-Baró, 1994; Okazaki et al., 2008; Sarason, 1978; Trawalter et al., 2020, 2022). As Bronfenbrenner (1993) observed, psychology's "ahistorical orientation" (p. 7) affects what phenomena are studied and how they are explained theoretically (Bronfenbrenner noted that life course research is one exception, though life course studies tend to focus on only one or two generations at a time; e.g., Elder, 2018). Without a deep view of the past, an ahistorical psychology will tend to theorize social inequality in ways that disadvantage oppressed peoples by attributing their subordinate position in society to either cultural difference or biological inferiority, thus "consecrating the existing order as natural" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 21). As Okazaki et al. (2008) noted, many psychological scientists "too easily ascribe the observed differences between different societies to essentialized notions of 'culture' while paying less attention to historical forces that shape these differences" (p. 90). In contrast, race scientists dismiss cultural explanations of group differences in favor of biological ones, concluding, for example, "Black-White genetic differences in [general intelligence] render the goal of full parity in either IQ or achievement unrealistic" (Gottfredson, 2005, p. 318). But in both cases, the cultural psychologist and the race scientist mistake the categories of race or nationality as "real" naturally occurring phenomena, overlooking the historical processes that produced racial categories or nation-states in the first place. It would indeed be misleading to compare two neighboring countries and attribute differences between their populations to culture or biology while ignoring the facts of those countries' histories. For example, in former colonies, the placement of territorial borders by colonizers can have profound and long-lasting consequences (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016). Similarly, whenever psychological scientists document their observations about racial group differences but stop short of explicating the historical processes that produced and reproduce racial categories (e.g., Omi & Winant, 2015), they risk unintentionally lending support to racist claims that depend on the legitimacy of "race" as an explanatory concept (Helms et al., 2005; James, 2008; Zuberi, 2000).

Second, psychology's traditional research paradigms are not well suited for understanding systemic racism, which functions primarily through institutions rather than through individuals' prejudiced attitudes and cognitive biases (Adams et al., 2008; Grzanka & Cole, 2021; Henriques et al., 1998; Salter & Adams, 2013; Trawalter et al., 2020, 2022). To be fair, psychology is not the only discipline that has yet to fully account for racism's institutional dimensions, as Feagin (2006) pointed out:

Even many social analysts who recognize the still difficult conditions faced by certain racial groups, such as contemporary discrimination against African Americans, do not assess how deep, foundational, and systemic this racial oppression has been historically and remains today. . . . Such a perspective does not take into account the well-institutionalized power and wealth hierarchy favoring whites, nor the centuries-old social reproduction processes of unjust enrichment and impoverishment that lie just beneath the surface of the recognized disharmonies. (p. 5)

Feagin (2006) further clarified, "If we are to understand the enduring systemic character of racial oppression in this country, we must look carefully at the material reality and social history of the colonial society created by the European invaders of North America" (p. 9). Understanding the institutional dimension of racism and understanding the history of racism are therefore interrelated epistemic-methodological challenges. And just as the failure to study race in its historical context legitimizes race as an explanatory concept, the failure to study racism in its institutional context "psychologizes" racial inequality, "ignores the reality of social structures and reduces all structural problems to personal problems" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 22). Fortunately, we can build on the insights of other disciplines that have long studied the historical and institutional foundations of racism in order to rethink what psychological scientists can study, and how.

### **Understanding Racial Capitalism: Insights From the Black Radical Tradition**

The term "institutional racism" was first used by Ture and Hamilton (1967) to describe systems of social, political, and economic subordination of Black Americans, which were rooted in the history of European colonization. According to their analysis, racial ideology is used to justify the enrichment of Whites through the extraction of cheap labor and resources from an economically dependent Black minority. The relationship between White and Black Americans thus mirrors the colonizer-subject dynamic that was, at the time of Ture and Hamilton's writing, the focus of revolutionary decolonization in Africa. Although colonial history is sometimes absent from discussions about institutional and systemic racism, Ture and Hamilton were clear: "institutional racism has another name: colonialism" (Ture and Hamilton, 1967, p. 5).

This early description of institutional racism is situated within a long and distinctive tradition of Black scholarship and social action (Elnaiem, 2021)—a Black

radical tradition that offers a clearer analysis of racism's systemic nature than traditional psychological perspectives, which "[do] not demand any understanding of the historical origins or contemporary manifestations of structural racism and white supremacy" (Grzanka & Cole, 2021, p. 1341). A major contribution of this Black radical tradition is the theory of *racial capitalism*,<sup>1</sup> which asserts that racial oppression has always been entangled with the capitalist system that emerged from the historical period of European colonization (Melamed, 2015; Okoth, 2023; Robinson, 2000).

The central claim of racial capitalism theory is that European colonization structured modern class relations along racial lines and that "the resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalism . . . resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over" (Du Bois, 1935, p. 30). This perspective developed from Black scholars' critique of Marx's claim that the world is divided "into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other" (Marx & Engels, 1848/1964, p. 58). According to Marx, these two opposing classes include the *ruling class* of elites, who own the means of economic production, and the class of "free" *wage laborers*, who are coerced into selling their labor to the ruling class because they have no other means of subsistence. But "Black Marxism," in contrast with classical Marxism, identifies a third class of mostly non-White *unfree, unwaged laborers* (e.g., enslaved workers, colonial subjects, undocumented workers, incarcerated workers), whose labor power and resources are acquired by the ruling class with violence rather than coercion.

Fraser (2022) used the term "two exes" to describe the distinct forms of oppression imposed on these two classes of laborers under racial capitalism: *exploitation*, in which employers pocket surplus value after wages are paid to "free" workers, and *expropriation*, in which labor and resources are stolen outright from unfree, unwaged workers. Importantly, race was historically used to decide which workers were expropriable and which were merely exploitable. As Fraser and others have pointed out, European colonizers developed a racial ideology to justify the seizure of labor and resources from enslaved and Indigenous people, who, the colonizers determined, were not White like the rights-bearing citizens that could own property and earn a wage (Du Bois, 1920; Fredrickson, 2002; King, 1968; Roberts, 2011; Williams, 1944):

There does exist a structural basis for the [capitalist] system's persistent entanglement with racial oppression. That basis resides, as we have seen, in the system's reliance on two analytically distinct but practically entwined processes of capital

accumulation, *exploitation* and *expropriation*. It is the separation of these two "exes," and their assignment to two different populations, that underpins racial oppression in capitalist society. (Fraser, 2022, p. 29)

Marx (1867/1990) also distinguished between exploitation and expropriation, though in classical Marxist theory the violent process of expropriation is assigned to the role of "primitive accumulation," that is, the process of wealth accumulation that first enriched the ruling class, dispossessed workers, and set the modern capitalist system into motion in the 16th century:

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. . . . And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work. . . . These [wage laborers] became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production. . . . And this history, the history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in blood and fire. (pp. 873–875)

In contrast with Marx, racial capitalism theory argues that "primitive accumulation" (i.e., expropriation) was not confined to the distant past but is an ongoing function of modern capitalism (Melamed, 2015). Usually reserved for people of color, the process of expropriation is still evident in the asymmetrical relationships between Western countries and their "underdeveloped" former colonies (Rodney, 1972; Wengraf, 2018), in the racist institutions that disproportionately victimize people of color (e.g., prisons, courts, and banks; Gilmore, 2007; Kades, 2001; Taylor, 2021), and in the permanent underclass of vulnerable workers that wealthy societies rely on for essential services (Oppenheimer, 1974; Zlotniski, 2006). Furthermore, the expropriation of labor and resources from people of color provides the essential "background conditions" of inequality—not between owners and workers but between "free" workers and unfree workers—without which capitalism would cease to function (Fraser, 2022). As Melamed (2015) explained, wealth and power accumulate under capitalism "by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" (p. 77), and this inequality is produced and reproduced by systemic racism. "Capitalism requires inequality," Gilmore (2022) has repeatedly observed, "and racism enshrines it" (p. 451).

Racial capitalism theory provides a useful heuristic for interpreting the glaring disparities between White, Western countries and former colonies. But to understand how these differences came about historically, I now turn to the relatively new field of development economics, which arose separately from the Black radical tradition but has provided compelling evidence to support the central claims of racial capitalism theory.

## **Understanding Global Inequality: Insights From Development Economics**

### ***Institutions, racism, and “The Wealth of Nations”***

Race science in psychology is replete with references to philosopher Adam Smith’s (1776) *The Wealth of Nations* (e.g., Christainsen, 2013; Lynn & Vanhanen, 2002; Meisenberg, 2020), yet race scientists who claim that genetically based IQ scores are the cause of global economic inequality make little use of Smith’s actual work. For example, consider the important role of political institutions in traditional economic theory. In *The Wealth of Nations* and elsewhere, Smith emphasized the crucial role of government in securing private property rights. If people do not believe their property is secure from theft or seizure, then the behavioral incentives that motivate economic productivity disappear:

The first and chief design of every system of government is to maintain justice; to prevent the members of a society from encroaching on one another’s property, or seizing what is not their own . . . to give each one the secure and peaceable possession of his own property. (Smith, 1762)

Therefore, when societies do not protect all people equally, the groups with rights secured by institutions tend to accumulate wealth and power, whereas the groups without secure rights tend to languish in a state of perpetual dispossession—not because these groups differ in ability but because they are treated unequally by society’s institutions.

In contrast with the traditional economics of Adam Smith, which is primarily concerned with free-market exchange in wealthy countries (where institutions typically protect private property rights for a majority of citizens), the relatively new field of development economics is focused on understanding inequality within and between countries (Ray & Bell, 2008; Todaro & Smith, 2020). Development economics has produced a compelling body of empirical evidence documenting how historical events shape the institutions which lead to inequality (Nunn, 2009). Notably, the field’s early

pioneering studies all analyzed the long-term effects of European colonization (Acemoglu et al., 2001, 2002; Engerman & Sokoloff, 1997, 2002; La Porta et al., 1997).

### ***Studying differences between countries: colonial expropriation and comparative national development***

Why do former European colonies differ in their levels of economic development? Why, for example, is New Zealand (a former British colony) wealthier than Jamaica (another former British colony)? In one of the early pioneering studies of development economics, Acemoglu et al. (2001) used historical data to show that the institutions established by European colonizers varied in predictable ways and that the types of institutions established in a given colony have long-lasting consequences for racial and economic inequality.<sup>2</sup> In colonies where Europeans could not settle in large numbers because of the local disease environment (e.g., Central and South America), colonizers established highly extractive institutions designed to expropriate as much wealth from local Indigenous and enslaved subjects as possible. By comparison, in areas where Europeans colonizers could settle in large numbers (e.g., North America), they established political institutions that secured their own private property rights and protected settlers from government expropriation. In both cases, European colonizers established institutions that maximized their accumulation of wealth and power. To be clear, “free” White workers in European colonies often faced harsh exploitation, but expropriation (through chattel slavery and seizure of Indigenous lands, for example) was usually reserved for the colonies’ unfree racialized population (Dubofsky & McCartin, 2017; Morgan, 1975). Importantly, Acemoglu et al. demonstrated how extractive colonial institutions that facilitated expropriation did not fundamentally change after colonies became politically independent nations. For example, former colonies that had few institutional constraints on colonial governments in 1900 had a higher risk of government expropriation a century later. In these countries with a high risk of expropriation—that is, mostly non-White countries where European colonizers did not settle in large numbers—economic development tends to be poor, even after controlling for geographic and cultural variables.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Studying differences within countries: colonial expropriation, slavery, and development in the United States***

Just as former colonies have differing levels of economic development, so too do regions within former

colonies, particularly in countries like the United States where colonial practices and institutions were not uniform. Building on the results of Acemoglu et al. (2001), Bruhn and Gallego (2012) showed that early patterns of European colonization indeed have long-term effects on the variation of economic development within countries. European colonizers established profit-maximizing institutions adapted to local conditions, which in some areas involved private property protections and diversified economies (e.g., subsistence farming and manufacturing) and in other areas involved racialized expropriation (e.g., sugar and cotton cultivation). In the United States, Bruhn and Gallego found that states with a history of colonial labor expropriation (e.g., plantation-based slave labor) tended to have colonial institutions that concentrated power among a ruling class of planter-capitalists. Today these same states continue to have less democratic political institutions and poorer economic development compared with states that did not have expropriative colonial institutions in the past.

The study by Bruhn and Gallego (2012) illustrates how racialized colonizer-subject dynamics can develop and persist not only between societies but also within them. Just as Ture and Hamilton (1967) pointed out the parallels between institutional racism and colonialism, many scholars have observed that racially segregated minority communities function essentially as colonies within nations, supplying White society with expropriable labor and resources (Blauner, 1972; Marable, 1983; Tabb, 1970). For example, nearly 60 years ago, psychologist and civil rights leader Kenneth Clark (1965) concluded, “The dark ghettos are social, political, educational, and—above all—economic colonies. Their inhabitants are subject peoples, victims of the greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt, and fear of their masters” (p. 11).

### ***Studying the psychological and health effects of colonial history: three more illustrative studies***

Since the field’s early pioneering research on the effects of European colonial institutions, development economics has matured into a theoretically diverse and methodologically sophisticated discipline focused on explaining the historical roots of global inequality (Nunn, 2009). Rather than “reinvent the wheel,” psychological scientists who want to study the origins and effects of racist institutions can incorporate many of the variables, data sources, and analytic methods from development economics into psychological studies of systemic racism.

The three studies described next and summarized in Table 1 illustrate how European colonization predicts

not only the development of political institutions and economic prosperity but also a host of other outcomes that may be of interest to psychological scientists, including measures of health (e.g., infant mortality, rate of stunted growth in children), educational achievement (e.g., literacy rate, average level of educational attainment), and identity (e.g., ethnic fractionalization). These three studies examined the legacies of Spain’s brutal forced labor system in its South American colonial mines, Britain’s colonial land revenue collection system in India, and the transatlantic African slave trade. Together they illustrate how the data and methods of development economics could be adapted to answer questions about the historical origins, institutional nature, and psychological effects of systemic racism.

First, there is the mining *mita*, the forced labor system imposed by Spain on the Indigenous communities of present-day Peru and Bolivia from the 16th century to the 19th century. Dell (2010) compared the development of communities on both sides of the *mita* boundary in Peru, which separated exempt communities from communities that were compelled to send one-seventh of their adult male population to work in Spain’s colonial silver mines. Dell found that two centuries after the colonial forced labor system was abolished, children born inside the historical *mita* boundary are more likely to have stunted growth than children born in culturally and geographically similar communities just a few kilometers away on the other side of the historical boundary line. Communities within the *mita* boundary also have lower rates of per household consumption and historically had lower academic achievement and literacy rates.

A second example illustrating the enduring effects of European colonial institutions is the land revenue collection system implemented by Britain in India between the late 18th century and mid-20th century. In some of India’s colonial districts, landlord-administrators acted as tax collector intermediaries between Britain and its Indian subjects. These landlords frequently expropriated surplus tax revenue from residents and in doing so eroded private property rights. By comparison, residents in nonlandlord districts had more secure property rights and were more protected from expropriation. Banerjee and Iyer (2005) compared the present-day development of former landlord districts with bordering nonlandlord districts, which had similar geographies and histories apart from their colonial taxation systems. They found that districts which once had expropriative colonial landlord institutions are today less economically productive than their counterparts and have poorer health and educational facilities, lower literacy rates, and higher rates of infant mortality.

**Table 1.** Illustrative Studies of Colonial History From Development Economics

Study	Units of analysis	Measures of colonial history and institutions (independent variables)	Outcomes (dependent variables)
Acemoglu et al. (2001)	Comparison of 64 former European colonies	Institutional constraints on decision-making powers of the government’s chief executive; rating of expropriation risk	GDP per capita
Bruhn & Gallego (2012)	Comparison of U.S. states (comparisons were also conducted between states/districts of 16 other former European colonies)	Authors’ classification of colonial activities as “good,” “bad,” or “ugly,” based on the interaction between the precolonial population density and the main economic activity first performed in each state by European settlers; legislative malapportionment	GDP per capita; poverty rate
Dell (2010)	Comparison of districts in southern Peru	Location of districts, either inside or outside of the historical <i>mita</i> boundary	Level of household consumption; rate of stunted growth in children; literacy rate; average level of educational attainment
Banerjee & Iyer (2005)	Comparison of districts in India	Type of colonial land revenue collection system (either with or without landlord-administrators)	Agricultural production; literacy rate; infant mortality rate
Nunn (2008)	Comparison of 52 African countries	Number of people enslaved from each country from 1400 to 1900	GDP per capita; ethnic fractionalization

Note: Original sources for historical data are cited in each study. GDP = gross domestic product.

Perhaps no historical event better illustrates the long-term consequences of European colonization and racial capitalism than the transatlantic African slave trade. By analyzing historical records, Nunn (2008) demonstrated that the African countries which are the poorest today are the ones from which the most people were enslaved—though before the transatlantic slave trade these same countries were more economically developed than the countries from which relatively fewer people were enslaved. Nunn also found that areas with larger slave trades in the past now have lower levels of community trust, leading to higher ethnic fragmentation, which independently predicts weaker political institutions, lower trust and participation in social activities, lower literacy rates, and higher infant mortality rates (Alesina et al., 2003).

Whereas the transatlantic slave trade had devastating long-term consequences for the African continent, Whites in Europe and the United States expropriated enormous profits—first from the “triangular trade,” which financed the Industrial Revolution in the West, and later from the colonial “Scramble for Africa” (Acemoglu et al., 2005; Baptist, 2014; Inikori, 2002; Williams, 1944). As one White resident of Liverpool, England, observed in 1893, “It was the capital made in the African slave trade that built some of our docks. It was the price of human flesh and blood that gave us a start” (Williams, 1944, p. 64). Or as Marx (1867/1990) summarized,

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. . . . The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there. (p. 915)

### Strategies for Dismantling Systemic Racism

In response to growing interest in systemic racism, I have reviewed two interdisciplinary perspectives to help psychological scientists examine the historical and institutional origins of racial inequality. Racial capitalism theory and a compelling body of evidence from development economics suggest that systemic racism is rooted in the historical period of European colonization, specifically in the institutions created to enrich colonizers, which varied with the patterns of European settlement and, therefore, with the racial composition of colonies. Although these

events occurred in the distant past, research in development economics also illustrates how racist institutions are resistant to change and tend to produce and reproduce racial inequality by reserving the harshest form of economic subordination—expropriation—for people of color. I conclude by describing two broad strategies for antiracist psychological science based on this analysis. These recommendations reflect the “three urgent tasks” of liberation psychology: recovering a useful history that serves the needs of oppressed people, “de-ideologizing” everyday experience (e.g., challenging assumptions about the nature of race in public and scientific discourses), and “utilizing the people’s virtues” (e.g., changing the world through solidarity with the suffering; Martín-Baró, 1994, pp. 30–31).

### ***Strategy 1: study race in the context of colonial history***

Race is a variable so often used in psychological research, usually as an independent variable or a moderator variable, that one might overlook the apparent contradiction of building scientific knowledge with a construct that has no agreed-upon scientific meaning. Yee’s (1983) puzzlement about the use of racial categories in psychological research still seems relevant 40 years later: “It is indeed a curious commentary that psychologists have allowed themselves to accept such a simple paradigm for scientific analyses and debate” (p. 17). The IQ literature is merely one example of psychology’s problem with race in research.

So much of the debate about race and IQ has focused on the nature of IQ: whether or not it is “real” (Gottfredson, 1998), how it should be measured (Gould, 1996), to what degree it is genetically determined (Turkheimer et al., 2003), if it changes (Flynn, 1987), and if it is changeable (Jensen, 1969). These debates are so well-worn that some have described them as “sterile” and unproductive, “with both sides recycling the same arguments, a history that does not speak well for hopes of scientific progress” (Winston, 2020, p. 17). It is therefore striking how often these debates about IQ neglect the meaning of race. In fact, the very existence of theoretically meaningful racial categories is often uncritically accepted, even among many opponents of hereditarian race science (this “typological thinking” error is also pervasive in genetics and genomics research; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). Helms et al. (2005) offered this assessment not just of the IQ literature but of all psychological research:

Psychologists have knowingly continued to use and interpret essentially the same single, flawed, atheoretical operational definitions of race (i.e., factitious racial categories) as if racial categories constitute both theoretical constructs and measures of immutable racial characteristics of research participants, when, in fact, they do neither. . . . A harmful consequence to society of this practice is that scores on intellectual tests, for example, are used to make decisions about selection and placement even though it is known that the test scores differentially favor or disfavor test takers assigned to one racial category rather than another. . . . Someday, some bright litigant might pose the question, “Why do racial groups (i.e., categories) differ on X behavior?” More criterion validity or test bias studies, as they have been conducted historically, will not provide answers to the question because such studies seek causation in the racial properties of dependent measures (e.g., tests) rather than in the attributes of researchers or research participants that result from the phenomena of [racial categorization].” (p. 35)

If psychological scientists truly accept that “race” is not real and that people *assigned* to factitious racial categories differ in measurable ways, it is not the racial categories that are meaningful, nor the methods of measurement, but the processes of racial categorization, and those processes should be the focus of inquiry. Instead of using race as a variable in psychological research, Helms et al. (2005) suggested that researchers replace racial categories with theory-based variables that account for the psychological effects of racial categorization, such as stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), racial identity development (Helms, 1995), and perceived discrimination (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).

Adding to these well-established theory-based variables, I have argued that psychological scientists should also study “race” in the context of colonial history. Specifically, we can use methodological tools from development economics and the interpretive framework of racial capitalism theory to better understand the root causes and myriad effects of systemic racism. The studies in Table 1 demonstrate how historical data can reveal the links between past institutions and current outcomes. They also contradict the hereditarian IQ-development hypothesis, which presumes that national average IQ scores are a primary cause of economic development. On the contrary, these studies suggest that wealth, health, and ability are all endogenous to the same historical processes of European colonization and racial capitalism. In other words, the hereditarian



argument “confuse[s] the issue by giving as causes of underdevelopment things which are really consequences” (Rodney, 1972, p. 26). If, for instance, the institutions established during European colonization can influence a contemporary outcome as genetically heritable as height (Dell, 2010), then it is quite reasonable to hypothesize that colonial history might also influence other traits and behaviors. Furthermore, many studies in development economics demonstrate how mediating variables (e.g., legal rights, availability of public goods; Dell, 2010) are tested to identify causal mechanisms that plausibly link colonial institutions to current social environments and outcomes.

Consider, for example, how the IQ literature might be reinterpreted if, instead of contesting the observed differences between factitious racial categories, we focused on the effects of colonial history, in particular the long-term effects of colonial institutions used to categorize people into races in the first place. For example, we might ask why colonial institutions established centuries ago predict many correlates of modern IQ scores, like literacy, educational attainment, and, yes, economic development. I argue this is a far more fruitful line of questioning than the familiar debates about race and IQ, which, as Helms et al. (2005) noted, tend to get stuck in repetitive debates about test bias and psychometric validity.

These questions about race and colonial history naturally evoke the question posed by Flynn’s (1987) landmark study of rapid IQ gains in 14 countries: What do IQ tests really measure? The so-called Flynn effect has puzzled researchers for decades. On the one hand, when IQ is measured at the individual level (e.g., with twin studies), the genetic causes of IQ appear strong and environmental causes appear weak.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, at the population level, average IQ scores have increased at rates much faster than can be explained by genetics, suggesting environmental causes of IQ are strong and genetic causes are weak.

It is generally accepted that people change their environments and that environments in turn change the people living in them (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Dickens and Flynn (2001) therefore proposed one explanation for the Flynn effect based on reciprocal causation between people and environments. Specifically, they suggested that an individual’s environment is influenced not only by their own IQ score but also the IQ scores of other individuals with whom they interact and that society structures these social interactions: “Therefore, if some external factor causes the IQs of some individuals to rise, this will improve the environment of others and cause their IQs to rise” (p. 347). The “social multiplier” effect Dickens and Flynn described explains how human-caused environmental

changes (e.g., institutional changes) could cause large and rapid increases in IQ scores across populations, and it explains how IQ score gains could occur at different rates across different populations with different social environments. The question, then, is what “external factor” could explain the initial boost to IQ scores?

According to Nisbett et al. (2012), “It seems likely that the ultimate cause of IQ gains is the Industrial Revolution, which produced a need for increased intellectual skills that modern societies somehow rose to meet” (p. 141). This conclusion is even more thought-provoking if we consider the Industrial Revolution in the context of colonial history. The Industrial Revolution bestowed riches upon the White industrialized world, both material and psychological, that were obtained through looting, enslavement, and murder—that “original sin,” colonial expropriation. One must not praise the English textile factory worker who “somehow rose to meet” the demands of a cognitively complex job without considering that worker’s relationship to another worker, the African laborer brutally enslaved in a former British colony, who picked the cotton that made the English textile factory possible.

Understanding the relationship between these two workers is essential for understanding the structure of the modern world and the many inequities that concern a growing number of psychological scientists. “Free” White wage laborers benefited from the violent expropriation of unfree, unwaged non-White laborers (and from the outright theft of Indigenous lands), which made possible the radical transformation of Western institutions and social environments, to include among other things “better schooling, more cognitively demanding jobs, and more cognitively demanding leisure” (Nisbett et al., 2012, p. 141). We should also consider that those same White workers often faced miserably low wages and dehumanizing exploitation in their modern industrialized jobs (Beckert, 2014); in the emerging social order of racial capitalism, they were both beneficiary and victim. The only true winners, of course, were the ruling class of owners whose profit-maximizing institutions continue to facilitate exploitation and expropriation—different forms of oppression assigned to different categories of workers—thus producing and reproducing inequality around the world.

Recovering this history is an important task for anti-racist psychological science because understanding the origins and mechanisms of oppression creates new possibilities for collective identity, resistance, and liberation (Martín-Baró, 1994). The study of colonial institutions and their persistent effects on economic development illustrate how modern systemic racism is the result of a class structure invented to justify the unjust enrichment of European colonizers, who “discovered” the

so-called New World at precisely the same historical moment they “discovered” their own Whiteness. As Berlin (1998) observed about colonial North America, “If slavery made *race*, its larger purpose was to make *class*. . . . The two were made simultaneously by the same process” (p. 5). And the “institutionalized social order” (Fraser, 2022, p. 19) birthed from this colonial system—capitalism—is implicated in virtually every form of systemic racism to date.

***Strategy 2: disrupt the psychological processes that make racial capitalism viable***

If systemic racism is indeed inextricable from the persistent “color caste” produced and reproduced by colonial institutions, then dismantling systemic racism will necessarily require the dismantling of racial capitalism. This goal may seem far beyond the scope of psychological science, but there is an important role for psychology to play in our collective liberation from racial and economic injustice. Psychological scientists are not solely responsible for dismantling the systems that produce and reproduce inequality, but “it *is* within the psychologist’s purview to intervene in the subjective processes that sustain those structures of injustice and make them viable” (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 45).

To understand how we can disrupt the psychological processes that sustain racial capitalism, I return to the inimitable work of W. E. B. Du Bois, a central figure in the Black radical tradition whose scholarship anticipated many themes of liberation psychology (Burton & Guzzo, 2020). Though trained as a historian, Du Bois had an uncanny ability to discern the psychological dimensions of sociohistorical problems. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to integrate the study of race with Marxist ideas about class struggle (Robinson, 2000; Roediger, 2017). His early formulation of racial capitalism theory first appeared in *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois, 1935), where Du Bois linked racial liberation with the emancipation of labor.

Du Bois (1935) determined that racial capitalism requires a “psychology of caste” (p. 695) in which White workers align themselves politically and psychologically with the ruling class of White elites who exploit them, not with the workers of color with whom they share many material interests. This psychology of caste is apparent in the aspirations of White workers who, Du Bois noted, often yearn not for an end to the system of economic exploitation but for a chance to “join the class of exploiters . . . to become capitalists” (pp. 17–18). Crucially, as long as White workers think of themselves primarily as Whites and not workers, the laboring classes lack the solidarity necessary to effectively

organize and resist exploitation and expropriation. In the United States, for example,

race . . . drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest. (Du Bois, 1935, p. 700)

Du Bois (1935) observed that in exchange for their racial loyalty to elites, and in compensation for their low wages, White workers receive “a public and psychological wage” (p. 700), which includes a variety of symbolic and social advantages—privileges—that reinforce their sense of racial superiority and discourage interracial labor solidarity. In other words, Du Bois determined that racial capitalism was made viable by White workers’ psychological investment in Whiteness.

Du Bois’s analysis of the “wages of Whiteness” and the connection between White racial identity and systemic racism was instrumental for the field of Whiteness studies (e.g., Baldwin, 1985; Ignatiev, 1995; Lipsitz, 1998; Morrison, 1992; Painter, 2010; Roediger, 1991, 2017), and it suggests White identity should be a principal focus of antiracist psychological science. Eliminating individual prejudice or counteracting the “hidden biases of good people” (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) is not sufficient to achieve racial and economic justice. Instead, following Du Bois’s analysis, antiracist psychological science should focus on developing strategies for promoting the class consciousness of White people, to help White wage laborers in particular see themselves as workers rather than aspiring capitalists. Developing class consciousness among White workers does not even require the elimination of personal bias; what it does require, however, is for Whites to collectively decide that the “public and psychological wage” they derive from their sense of racial superiority is not worth the great cost of their exploitation (e.g., McGhee, 2021; Metzl, 2019; Segrest, 2001). Once they achieve this critical class consciousness, White workers will discover the conditions of economic subordination they share with all working people under racial capitalism, and they will organize against their oppression not because of their moral goodness but because of their collective self-interest.

The ultimate goal, in a word, is *solidarity*—the psychological capacity for coalition building among groups who experience different forms of oppression but who nevertheless believe that “an injury to one is an injury to all.” Interracial political solidarity of this kind is a rare, fragile, and understudied phenomenon deserving

investigation from several psychological perspectives, including social identity, group behavior, and emotion and motivation (Collins, 1993; Hässler et al., 2020; Roediger, 2016). To be clear, racial capitalism is fundamentally “antirelational” (Melamed, 2015); it produces and reproduces inequalities that discourage the human connections that are needed to dismantle it. The psychological investment in Whiteness is terribly damaging to White people’s relationships, particularly (but not exclusively) their relationships with people of color, making class solidarity and racial justice all but impossible. Disrupting this process is an ambitious goal, but it is a goal that falls within the scope of psychological science. As Du Bois (1935) concluded,

The chief and only obstacle to the coming of that kingdom of economic equality which is the only logical end of work is the determination of the white world to keep the black world poor and themselves rich. A clear vision of a world without inordinate individual wealth, of capital without profit and of income based on work alone, is the path out, not only for America but for all. (pp. 706–707)

## Transparency

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## Notes

1. The term “racial capitalism” has appeared in different contexts with varying degrees of theoretical clarity (Go, 2021). I use the term here as it was introduced in Robinson’s (2000) study of the Black radical tradition and as it was more recently developed by Melamed (2015) and Fraser (2022).
2. *Why Nations Fail* (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) provides an accessible book-length introduction to the authors’ program of research on institutions and development, written for a general audience.
3. Acemoglu et al. (2001) found that latitude is not a significant predictor of economic development after accounting for institutional quality, contradicting popular hereditarian theories which propose that northern climates provided the evolutionary conditions for superior cognitive ability, which eventually led to more developed economies.
4. In fact, IQ heritability is weaker for children of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Giangrande & Turkheimer, 2022; Turkheimer et al., 2003). Nisbett et al. (2012) explained, “One interpretation of the finding that heritability of IQ is very low for lower SES individuals is that children in poverty do not get

to develop their full genetic potential” (p. 134). One could reasonably ask if the same were not also true for countries underdeveloped by European colonization.

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