

The making of racialized subjects: Practices, history, struggles

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Security Dialogue

2021, Vol. 52(S) 107–114

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DOI: 10.1177/09670106211024423

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Introduction

Stuart Hall's (2017: 31) famous claim that 'race is a sliding signifier' highlights the difficulties of theorizing race as such and of mobilizing race as an analytics for grasping unequal power relations. Interrogating the structures of racism and the mutations of racial capitalism is key for any analysis that is deemed to be 'critical'. The partial neglect of race in critical security studies has recently triggered a vivid debate within the discipline (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020; Rao and Pierce, 2006). International relations and critical security studies, the argument goes, have been complicit in conceiving securitization as an 'ahistorical abstraction' (Amin-Khan, 2012: 1595) and in eliding racial formations (Gray and Franck, 2019). Questioning the 'methodological whiteness' (Bhambra, 2017) at play in international politics, scholars have pointed to the epistemic colonialism (Baaz and Verweijen, 2018) that underpins securitization theory.¹ In this intervention, I sketch forward-looking methodological pathways for developing an analytical sensibility towards racialized security practices.

In order to do so, I take migration as an analytical lens for investigating the mutual entanglements between securitization and racialization, and I focus on the heterogeneous racializing bordering mechanisms that underpin the production of hierarchies of lives – both among migrants as well as between 'migrants'² and 'citizens'. More precisely, I tackle racializing bordering mechanisms from three vantage points, looking at them as heterogeneous biopolitical tactics, as racializing practices (that change over time), and in the context of the struggles that take place over them. Migration pushes us to engage with the colonial legacies of Europe and, at the same time, with recursive racializing processes: racialization is at the very core of the policies and laws through which some people are turned into 'migrants' and governed accordingly (De Genova, 2018; Khosravi, 2010). Indeed, the socio-legal production of 'migrants' is a constitutively racializing process: 'since ideas of "race" closely and easily articulate with ideas of "nationhood," racism is – and has historically been – central to the construction of the figure of "the migrant"' (Schweppe and Sharma, 2015: 2).

My intervention advances two related methodological and epistemic pathways. First, it foregrounds heterogeneous biopolitical technologies connected but not limited to security and humanitarianism, and warns against the dehistoricization of migrants and refugees. Second, going beyond

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an exclusive focus on representation and discourses, it draws attention to racializing administrative and legal practices. In the conclusion, I draw attention to anti-racist struggles and coalitions, arguing that a political reading of racialized security practices should start from that. Indeed, engaging with the partial neglect of race in international relations ‘is more than simply a matter of talking about race’ (Gupta and Virdee, 2018: 1748). Nor should an insight into racialization be incorporated just as a corrective to the Eurocentrism of critical security studies. Here, I mobilize racialization as a referent to scrutinize recursive security practices and, at the same time, to shed light on the history of anti-racist transversal struggles.

Security, humanitarianism and heterogeneous racial biopolitics

In ‘The Perverse Politics of Four-Letter Words’, Claudia Aradau (2004) has shown how trafficked women are the object of an ambivalent representation, whereby they are treated as both ‘risky subjects’ and ‘subjects at risk’. She highlights how ‘a humanitarian discourse . . . can be appropriated within a securitizing discourse where migrants, boat people, asylum-seekers or trafficked women are integrated in a continuum of danger’ (Aradau, 2004: 252). Even if neither race nor racialization are directly addressed in that piece, the twofold analytics of ‘risky subjects’ and ‘subjects at risk’ enables us to come to grips with the constitutive intertwining of racializing processes and security–humanitarian assemblages. Indeed, racialization is constitutive of the hierarchies of lives that underpin humanitarian rationales (Ticktin, 2011). As part of such rationales, migrants are not crafted as ‘threats’; rather, they are racialized as subjects to be rescued.

The politics of rescue in the Mediterranean shows how racializing processes are enacted at the intersection of securitization and humanitarianism. In this regard, it is noteworthy that since 2013 few naval operations have been deployed in the Mediterranean with the specific purpose of ‘saving lives’ at sea, as was the case with the Mare Nostrum operation, or ‘fighting smugglers and irregular migration’, as with EUNAVFOR Med/Operation Sophia. Migrants are deemed to be nothing but (black) bodies to be saved, and the political debate on migrants’ deaths has been characterized by a ‘race to the bottom’ – that is, by disputes over whether there is a moral duty to rescue all migrants, whether it is feasible to attempt to do so, and whether or not they should be allowed to disembark in Europe (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2019). As part of the military–humanitarian operations conducted in the Mediterranean, migration containment has been enacted through a twofold move: on the one hand, migrants have been racialized into black bodies to be rescued; on the other, the disruption of migrant journeys has been enforced as a way of protecting migrants from smugglers. Therefore, migrants and refugees are not only crafted as both threats and victims: they have also been turned into subjects to be rescued from the smugglers.

On close analysis, ‘protection’ appears as synonymous with rescuing – taking migrants out of the water and eventually disembarking them – while the chances of obtaining refugee status, and thus of becoming a subject with rights, are increasingly hampered through political and legal measures. In order to explore how racialized mechanisms are enacted, we need to take into account heterogeneous biopolitical tactics. An insight into the racialization of some people as ‘migrants’ brings to the fore political technologies of governing, containing and subjugating that cannot be fully captured by the logics of ‘care and control’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

Indeed, we need to consider how rationales other than just those of securitization and humanitarian protection are also mobilized jointly – as became clearly visible, for instance, with the emergence of Covid-19. On 7 April 2020, Italy closed its ports to non-Italian ships in order to prevent migrants from disembarking on Italian territory. The decision to do so was taken amid the Covid-19 crisis and justified on the basis that migrants could not disembark as Italy has become an ‘unsafe port’ and could not guarantee them medical and social protection. On this occasion, then, migrants

were crafted neither as threats nor as subjects of pity and bodies to be rescued; instead, the Italian government shaped its narrative in medical terms: migrants' lives, the argument went, should not be put at risk and could not be protected at this time. That is, migrants were prevented from landing and preventively excluded from becoming refugees as Europe was turned into an unsafe space. Similarly, on the Greek islands of Lesbos, Samos and Chios, migrants and refugees were subjected to a differential and protracted lockdown inside the migration hotspots, while restrictions for the rest of the population were lifted much earlier. The protracted confinement in the hotspots was justified by the Greek authorities as a measure for protecting both migrants and citizens from the risk of catching Covid-19. In sum, migrants were confined at sea or in hotspots in the name of their own protection. In other words, during the Covid-19 crisis, the security–humanitarian rationale has been inflected along the lines of a 'contain to protect' logic.

What does it mean to use 'racialization' as an analytics for critically engaging with migration governmentality? In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye (2014: 3) moves away from an understanding of racialization in biological terms and defines it as the 'conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans'. These degrees of human and less-than-human are particularly visible in the politics of non-rescue in the Mediterranean. However, the governing of migration is characterized by a multiplication of hierarchies and racialized differences among migrants themselves, and this requires bringing into the analysis the mundane administrative, legal and police practices enacted by states and non-state actors (Bigo and McCluskey, 2018). In other words, an insight into the production of degrees of humanity and of less-than-humans should be complemented with a more nuanced understanding of the differential racialized hold exercised over migrants' lives. In this regard, I borrow from feminist scholar Jasbir Puar the argument that racialized biopolitics is put in place through measures that injure populations without letting them die. Puar invites us to shift attention from an exclusive focus on life and death and from the well-known Foucaultian formula of 'making live and letting die' towards an account of the 'racializing biopolitical logics of security' (Puar, 2017: x). This latter consists in debilitating and maiming lives, without necessarily killing them.

An insistence on modes of governing by harming without letting or making die helps capturing the heterogeneous ways in which subjects are racialized. In fact, migrants are often the objects of a politics of disregard and abandonment: they are constantly chased away and forced into a convoluted hypermobility; they are confined in 'cramped space' (Walters and Luthi, 2016); and their infrastructures of liveability are often dismantled, as in the case of border-zones like Calais or Ventimiglia. In fact, more than being objects of a clearcut necropolitics (Mbembe, 2006) that optimizes some lives and kills or lets others die, migrants' lives are violently disrupted, debilitated, confined and harmed.

Individuals who are governed as 'migrants' are the objects of heterogeneous racializing biopolitical interventions that multiply internal hierarchies among lives and that are not limited to security and humanitarian reasons. Hence, coming to grips with the neglect of race and racism in critical security studies requires a methodological shift from 'the racialized body as such' towards an account of 'the political technologies through which new distinctions and hierarchies of life are produced' (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020: 208). Relatedly, in order to grasp racialization processes in their making, it is key to question how, in both humanitarian and security approaches, migrants and refugees are repeatedly stripped of their histories: the refugee appears as a 'singular category of humanity' (Malkki, 1996: 378). The dehistoricization of refugees and migrants who are crafted as black bodies to be saved and as subjects of pity contributes to the invisibilization of forms of political agency and the reiteration of racializing classifications. Hence, an analytical sensibility towards the multiple and changing modes of racialization prevents the reification of 'migrant' as a fixed category, and sheds light on how 'flexible classifications of difference devised for governing

different people for labor extraction' (Lowe, 2015: 32) are enacted today, as well as on the differences between how such classifications have played out now and in colonial times.³

Racializing bordering practices

Migration scholars have analysed in depth how migrants are turned into security objects (Squire, 2015; Stierl, 2020). Nevertheless, seen through the lens of securitization processes, the racialization of migration has been mainly tackled on a discursive level, through the study of how migrants are presented as potential threats to state sovereignty and inserted within a broader (in)security continuum (Bigo, 2002; Ibrahim, 2005). Such an approach to securitization, oriented towards finding out how states craft migrants as threats, contributes to the disregard towards racializing mechanisms that, in fact, actively participate in the transformation of some phenomena into security concerns. Harriet Gray and Anja Franck (2019: 280, 278) have discussed the 'gendered and racialized representations of vulnerability and threat', showing how these are 'shaped by the discourses that are embedded in "colonial modernity"'.

Similarly, Moffette and Vadasaria (2016: 292) have stressed the 'systematic absence' in critical security studies 'of analysis attentive to the role of race' for tackling anti-immigration violence. In their attuned mobilization of 'racial governmentality' as a corrective to the neglect of race, Moffette and Vadasaria mostly focus on the discursive level. Yet, in order to unpack the racialization–securitization nexus, we also need to draw attention to administrative measures, political technologies and legal practices. Racializing processes are not limited to the representation of migrants as threats or as risky subjects. They also contribute to crafting abject subjectivities who are cramped, suffocated or hindered in their mobility and presence. It is therefore paramount that we go beyond representation and discourses to investigate the material, legal and administrative practices through which some lives are racialized. Indeed, as Luke de Noronha (2019: 2418) has put it, not only do racialized practices inform border policies, but also 'immigration controls and citizenship restrictions themselves are productive of racial meanings and inequalities in the present'. Below, I examine racializing practices adopted to contain, govern and select migrants in detention and para-detention sites, showing how these racializing labelling and bordering mechanisms change over time.

Hotspot of Lampedusa, autumn 2015: the migrants who were rescued at sea and disembarked in Italy at that time were immediately fingerprinted and then divided into groups on the basis of their nationality. Or, more accurately, Syrians and Eritreans were separated from the others and only they could access the Relocation Scheme implemented by the EU that year with the aim of alleviating the migratory pressure on Italy and Greece and transferring asylum-seekers to other EU member-states. One year later, the indistinct group of 'non-Syrians' and 'non-Eritreans' in Lampedusa had been divided into 'people coming from North Africa' and all others. The racialized label of 'people coming from North Africa' encompassed migrants from different countries and with very diverse individual histories who were preventively excluded from the asylum procedure. As part of this preventive exclusionary process, the police issued such individuals with so-called seven-day decrees – a document that established that they must leave the country on their own within one week.

The new racializing partition between migrants coming from North Africa and the others was inscribed in a form produced by the Italian Ministry of the Interior that migrants who entered the hotspot had to fill in. In this form, racializing mechanisms were framed in terms of a mix of conduct and nationality. Indeed, the form obliged migrants to answer why they had come to Italy and to tick one of the following boxes: (a) to work; (b) to escape misery; (c) to escape for other reasons; (d) for family reunification (Sciurba, 2016). Only those who declared that they had come to Italy 'for other reasons' could access the asylum procedure and, as reported by NGOs, police officers often filled in the form on behalf of migrants, depending on their nationality.⁴ Therefore, the

racializing mechanisms enshrined in the securitization of migration are moulded in a highly versatile way, on the basis of changed political and geopolitical contexts.

In Greece, securitization of migration and the exclusionary logics of protection were mutually intertwined around racializing criteria that changed over time. In 2015, Syrians ‘represented the yardstick of humanitarianism of the refugee crisis and at the same time the only truly humanitarian subjects. Indeed, they have been the sole migrants’ nationality that used to be labelled “refugee” on the spot’ (Tazzioli, 2020: 65). This was the case until the implementation of the EU–Turkey Deal in March 2016, which marked a watershed in the treatment of Syrians as they were directly targeted by the agreement and de facto preventively excluded from the asylum procedure. At that time, Pakistanis emerged as the national group of asylum-seekers that were to be preventively rejected, while the indistinct racializing category of ‘migrants from North Africa’ was used by state authorities and migration agencies for tracing a first demarcation line between people deserving protection and bogus refugees.

Accordingly, nationality criteria combined with racialized denomination (‘migrants from North Africa’) were located at the core of security–humanitarian modes of governing and partitioning would-be refugees. After the implementation of the EU–Turkey Deal, racialization through nationality-based criteria was partly superseded by and combined with a blurred medical-psychological criterion – vulnerability: only migrants who could prove to be ‘highly vulnerable’ could be transferred from the Greek islands to the mainland and have the ‘geographical restrictions’ imposed by the EU–Turkey deal lifted. In this way, vulnerability became a terrain of struggle between migrants, state authorities and humanitarian actors. Hence, the ‘making of migration’ – that is, the ‘political, administrative and legal procedures through which some people are labelled and governed as “migrants”’ (Tazzioli, 2020: 2) – is characterized by highly flexible and constantly changing racializing criteria. Such an insight into migration shows the importance for critical security studies of studying the versatility of racialization processes and taking into account the material–administrative assemblages – made up of papers, police practices and humanitarian interventions – that multiply hierarchical differences among human beings. In fact, the very notion of ‘race’ should be unpacked and de-essentialized through an analytical sensibility that draws attention to ‘the mutability of race’ (Davis, 2011)⁵ and the heterogeneity of racializing practices. The theoretical stake consists less in demonstrating straightforward continuities between colonial practices and present racializing mechanisms than in historicizing the latter and studying how they have been transformed and reinvented over time.

Conclusion: Tackling race from its contestations

An attentive analysis of racializing biopolitical practices involves exploring how these are reassembled and transformed over time. This intervention has advanced two mutually related methodological moves for coming to grips with the racialization–securitization nexus. First, going beyond regimes of discourse and representation, it has pointed towards the racializing administrative practices that are used to govern, exclude and select migrants. Second, it has drawn attention to the heterogeneity of biopolitical tactics, not narrowed to security and humanitarian rationales, showing how these are constantly reassembled and transformed over time. Migration, this piece has shown, is a crucial terrain for scrutinizing racialized security technologies, including their heterogeneity and their deep instability. Indeed, as Nicholas de Genova (2018: 1766) has pointed out in relation to the European context, ‘the brute racial fact of [the] deadly European border regime is seldom acknowledged, because it immediately confronts us with the cruel (post)coloniality of the “new” Europe’.

However, the history of (the making of) racialized subjects is also the history of anti-racist struggles that have generated new collective political subjectivities. In fact, both from a political

and from a theoretical point of view, it is important not to erase the history of transversal struggles. Recent mobilizations – such as Black Lives Matter, feminist international movements and migrant struggles, among many – shed light on how anti-racist claims and practices have been pushed forward from different angles and have been intertwined with related claims – such as those related to unequal rights to mobility, labour exploitation and gender violence. Accordingly, a critical inquiry into the heterogeneity of racializing bordering practices should be combined with an analysis of the materiality of struggles against ‘processes of hierarchy, dispossession and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ (Gilmore, 2017: 228). In fact, heterogeneous racializing practices are interlaced with and inseparable from other modes of exploitation and exclusion – based on gender, class and nationality – and, as Angela Davis (2016) has stressed, these need to be thought and conceptualized together. This is what a focus on the materiality and history of struggles enables us to see. Critical security studies has ultimately sidelined the political legacy of collective struggles – of slaves, fugitives, migrants and other racialized subjects. Racialization mechanisms can be studied as part of a ‘historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics’ (Foucault, 2003: 8). That is, more than (just) denouncing the neglect of race in international relations and critical security studies, this piece calls for a close scrutiny of racializing practices and for productive engagement with the political legacies of transversal anti-racist struggles.

Indeed, the epistemic quandary of race in critical security studies cannot be disjoined from the question of how to undo the recursive racialization of (some) lives and politicize struggles that have been invisibilized or left out of states’ archives. In order to highlight the mutability of race, this article has suggested, it is key to shift from the level of discourses and representations to the heterogeneity of racializing practices and their contestations.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. These criticisms intersect and bring together different angles on race that, I contend, should be disentangled from each other – such as the partial elision of race and the legacies of colonialism in international relations; the lack of an in-depth investigation of racializing processes; and the Western-centred and Eurocentric approach of critical security studies.
2. Throughout this intervention, I use ‘migrant’ to broadly refer to individuals who have been racialized, labelled and governed in that way, and I speak about ‘migrants and refugees’ when I am also including those subjects who are shaped and targeted by humanitarian technologies. It is not my intention to reproduce the exclusionary distinction between migrants and refugees in this intervention: when I name both, this is to highlight how humanitarian practices and logics shape people.
3. A growing scholarship has rightly pointed to the colonial legacies of contemporary migration and asylum policies (for instance, see El-Enany, 2020; Mayblin, 2017). The main goal of this intervention is less to criticize the exclusionary asylum regime by stressing a continuity with colonial politics than to grasp the specificity of the present moment by foregrounding how racializing bordering mechanisms have changed over time. Relatedly, as I argue in the conclusion, a constructive approach to racializing bordering mechanisms consists in drawing the attention to the history of anti-racist struggles.
4. Information collected from NGOs during fieldwork conducted in Sicily in July 2017 and June 2018.
5. No page reference is provided for this quotation as I was unable to access a physical copy of the cited work owing to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.

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