

RACIAL CONTRACT THEORY AND CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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The contract between the state and its citizens—the social contract—is typically understood as the foundation of the modern Western political tradition. This is the tradition which has precipitated the development of economic and political liberty, as well as democracy. Charles Mills, in his book, *The Racial Contract*, draws on the racial contradictions in both the philosophical roots of liberalism, and its history. Mills is fundamentally altering the West's conception of itself, and its conception of relations with the rest of the world. The discipline of Canadian foreign policy is one that generally understands itself as either an operational force for good in the world,¹ or is recognized at least for a tradition of liberal internationalism and a continued capacity for being a force affecting positive change in the world through the promotion of its interests and values.² The period between St. Laurent and Pearson is typically regarded as the 'golden age' of Canadian foreign policy, a time when Canada was able to exert a disproportionate influence on global politics. By questioning the fundamental assumptions inherent to Western liberalism, Mills forces a reorientation of all the policies pertaining to the Western liberal state—international relations and foreign policy in particular. What if there are elements of Canadian foreign policy that are based on exclusiveness, alienation, and illegitimate power relations?

The Middle East is the region that is most typically identified as having anti-Western constituents that are more than anti-colonial, but represent a sustained backlash against Westernization, and Western models of modernity, such as liberalism, and the very nation-state. Race as a construct of a hierarchy of power is important to the discipline of Middle Eastern studies,³ but for the purposes of this paper, the year 1798 will be used to provide the framework for analysis, marking the modern period in the Middle East when it came to be dominated by non-indigenous foreign powers who made no pretensions to be Islamic. The first half of this paper will be a theoretical discussion of the racial contract by drawing on arguments presented by Charles Mills and Edward W. Said. The second half of the paper will be to use the racial contract as a toolbox to understand not only Canadian foreign policy in the Middle East, but also to make international politics aware of the Mills' critique of 'global white supremacy'. For Canada to promote international politics that does not support, either implicitly or unintentionally, a racial contract, it must be willing to acknowledge the existence of Islamic political groups that it has historically marginalized.

THE RACIAL CONTRACT AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

This section is structured using the three subheadings that act as the first three theses of Charles Mills' book, *The Racial Contract*. Following a brief overview of Mills' argument under each subheading, Mills' argument will then be discussed first in relation

¹ John Kirton, *Canadian Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (Toronto: Thomson Nelson, 2007).

² Andrew Cohen, *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004); Jennifer Welsh, *At Home in the World* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2004).

³ Islam was founded by Muhammad as God's message delivered to the Arabs in Arabic. While the religion was meant to unite the community of believers, the *umma*, by abolishing the divisive tribal gods, Islam itself created a number of divisions during the *halifa rashideen* that continue to this day.

to Edward W. Said and the West's relationship with the Middle East, and then to other relevant scholarly literature of international relations.

1) THE POLITICAL RACIAL CONTRACT

The first thesis posited by Charles Mills is that politics has been determined by a racial contract that divides persons from non-persons, or 'white' and 'other.' The division between person and non-person is de-biologized, yet institutionalised internally through the construction of the polity, and externally by inventing 'foreign' lands such as the Orient.⁴ The Orient as understood by Said is a 'constituted entity' consisting of a group of people who live in a separate geographic space, and constructed by the West as radically different on the actual basis of identity.⁵ The foundation of Orientalism is the 'truth' of the primitivism of non-European races.⁶ International relations has been argued to make an explicit distinction between 'inside' and 'outside'. Outside of the state is regarded as different, alien, and often primitive.⁷

2) THE HISTORICAL RACIAL CONTRACT

The period of overseas European Imperial expansion coincided with the promulgation of a racial contract within Europe. The subjugation of indigenous people around the world militated what Mills calls a 'global white supremacy' through a series of conquests.⁸ Despite Europe's proximity to the Middle East, it was unable to conquer it until much later than the New World was conquered due to the 'gun powder empire' of the Ottomans. However, the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth century was marked by a number of losses against European forces, until its humiliating defeat during Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, and according to Said, the beginning of modern Orientalism. French military occupation brought with it an intellectual conquest consisting of thousands of surveyors and scientists. The knowledge that is attained through power is then subject to the biases and distortion produced by colonial domination. Progress becomes confused with Westernization, legitimising a more sustained and systematic colonialism. European control of the Mahgreb during the nineteenth century, and the British and French dismantling of the Southern territories of the Ottoman Empire under agreements such as Sykes-Picot and San Remo are justified under these same terms that originate from 1798. Orientalism remains relevant after the period of European Imperialism according to Said for two reasons: 1) After WWII the U.S. accommodated this tradition that began in Europe, and 2) As Orientalism was a sustained tradition in Europe, it became a sustained tradition among scholars in the U.S.⁹ Once the racist lenses and bias achieve societal recognition as norms, international relations might then be affected through powerful societal influences based on identity.¹⁰ This could offer explanatory power regarding the convergence of racist interpretations of

⁴ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997): 12-18.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 322.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 234-233.

⁷ R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13, 174.

⁸ Mills, 20-25.

⁹ Said, *Orientalism* 300.

¹⁰ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

the Middle East found in post-War American culture and the biases found in U.S. foreign policy.¹¹

3) THE EXPLOITATION OF THE RACIAL CONTRACT

The racial contract is responsible for global poverty and inequities that serve the interests of white political economy. The non-persons the racial contract constructs are the exploited masses subject to domination from the structure of modern international political economy. Said asserts that the U.S. has more invested in the Middle East than in any other region,¹² and that one of the triumphs of Orientalism in the modern world is the integration of the Middle East into the global political economy in profoundly unequal trading agreements.¹³ Western domination of Middle Eastern natural resources and institutions originally resulted in interstate showdowns such as the Suez Crisis, has now shifted to conflict at a grassroots level as the Middle East's history of colonialism has served to bolster widespread suspicion and outright distrust regarding Western interests in Iraq and across the Gulf.¹⁴

Mills clearly describes 'whiteness' as a set of power relations. These constructed power relations have in turn constructed a system of global white supremacy that is now, according to Mills, being contested around the world, even if the combatants do not identify the conflict in such terms. Mills himself uses both pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism as examples of reactions against the system of international politics identified as global white supremacy.¹⁵

CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

As a Western liberal democracy with an active and engaged foreign policy, Canada could easily be defined as a supporter of the projection of whiteness internationally. The second half of this paper is composed of three sections: 1) Revolutionary *salafism* as a radical rejection of global white supremacy, 2) The distinction between the revolutionary *salafists* and Islamic political parties, and 3) Options available to Canadian foreign policy.

REVOLUTIONARY SALAFISM

Preceding 9/11 and in its immediate aftermath Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri's terrorist organization Al-Qaeda was harboured by a state—Taliban controlled Afghanistan. The goals of Osama bin Laden and the tradition of revolutionary *salafism* to which he belongs can not be understood as merely wanting to replicate Taliban controlled Afghanistan across Middle Eastern states, but a systemic transformation of the region based on *Wahabi* interpreted Islamic values that requires a rejection of the nation-state across the region. The nation-state is what has artificially divided the unity of the *umma* and only the return to the 'Golden Age of Islam,' such as the Abbasid Caliphate, that can restore Islam back to its status as a world power. A call for a need to return to pristine

¹¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); *Ibid.*, *Covering Islam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

¹² *Ibid.*, *Orientalism* 321.

¹³ Said, *Orientalism* 324.

¹⁴ Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 166; Zaki Chehab, *Inside the Resistance* (New York: Nation Books, 2005), 143.

¹⁵ Mills, 113.

Islam is not a new phenomenon, but one that has entered Islamic discourse throughout the centuries.¹⁶

ISLAMIC POLITICAL PARTIES

As the former nationalist *Wafd* party in Egypt became increasingly seen as an instrument of British domination of Egypt, Hasan al-Banna began his bill pushes to attract the growing number of Egyptians who felt alienated by the secular policies of Egypt's constitutional monarchy. Hasan al-Banna called his new political party the *Ikhwan*, or, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. Al-Banna did not call for the overthrow of the monarch or the parliament, but for the accommodation of Islamic values of fraternity, equality and social justice into the Egyptian state. Following the 1952 Free Officers Revolution that ushered in the period of dictatorial rule in Egypt, the Brotherhood was increasingly forced out of public politics and the mainstream. It was in one of Nasser's jail cells Sayyid Qutb wrote his most revolutionary treatise—*Signposts*—that called for the overthrow of the Egyptian state itself. Today, the *Ikhwan* have recanted on the use of violence and despite frequent arrests, participate in Egyptian elections.

The Egyptian Muslim Brothers and al-Qaeda are examples of the 'Third Worldist' perspective and the 'neo-Third Worldist' perspective.¹⁷ Al-Qaeda represents an example of neo-Third Worldism because it adopts the position that it is the very institution of the nation-state itself that must be opposed. While the *Ikhwan* have undergone various existential changes since the time of al-Banna, they do present an example of the Third Worldist approach. The Third Worldist approach is a non-Western variety of nationalism, but one whose goal is not to overthrow or abolish the territorial state. The Brotherhood's struggle is not necessarily against the Western model, but an attempt to modify Western identity to better suit the context.¹⁸

CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND 'GRASSROOTS SECURITY'

It is the context of the Middle East that does require modifications regarding the relations Western countries such as Canada have with the region. In Niall Ferguson's analysis of twentieth century conflict, the historian uses the Iranian Revolution as a counter-example to the 'end of history' argument. Ferguson understands the Revolution as an example of the growing trend of political 'Islamism' as a powerful and far-reaching challenge to perceived Western superiority and ideological victory.¹⁹ This revival of Islamism can be understood based on four general interrelated factors:

- 1) *Economics*: The first factor to consider is the role of alienation and materialism. While this does include those marginalized by economic growth and development, it also includes those who have benefited from oil wealth and have become idle or alienated by materialism.
- 2) *Weakness*: The second factor to consider is the preponderance of weak states across the Middle East. The region is composed of states that are weak for either

¹⁶ At the beginning of the onslaught of the Mongol invasions as well as during the decline of the Ottoman Empire before and after the *Tanzimat* Reforms.

¹⁷ Anders Strindberg and Mats Wärn, "Realities of Resistance: Hizballah, the Palestinian Rejectionists, and Al-Qa'ida Compared," *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2005): 26, 31; Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37 (2005): 390-391.

¹⁸ John L. Esposito, and James P. Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," *Middle East Journal* 45, no. 3 (1991): 427-440.

¹⁹ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006): 638-640.

- one of three reasons; 1) The state is operationally weak, such as Lebanon, and post-War Iraq,²⁰ and 2) The state is weak because it lacks legitimacy and is trapped in a ‘state-strength dilemma’, such as Syria and Egypt.²¹ 3) The state is a rentier Gulf state that obviates the issue of citizenship by allowing each naturally born resident to operate with a high level of economic autonomy. The state does not operate by taxing its citizens and has done little to promote entrepreneurs or even a Middle class.
- 3) *Patronage*: The third factor is the ‘devil you know’ policy favoured by the West understood by both Said and his rival, Bernard Lewis.²² The West has supported and continues to support detested regimes that have retarded the growth of civil society, and prevented the development of representative institutions. Grassroots resentment is directed not only at the repressive states that rule over them, but also at their powerful Western benefactors.
- 4) *Islam*: The final and most complex factor is relating to Islam. In his chapter on the modern Arab Middle East in the Cambridge History of Islam, Ira Lapidus ambiguously suggests that central to understanding the failure of state building in the region has been the failure to coherently integrate Islam into the polity without creating double standards and compromise on Islamic values pertaining to social justice and tolerance.²³

The West is obviously not the source of every problem facing the Middle East today. The Sunni-Shia conflict is one that while may have become exacerbated in recent years as a result of Western involvement, is certainly one that does have its origins at the end of the *halifa rashideen*—fourteen hundred years ago. It becomes important though, as the West dominates international institutions and is disproportionately responsible for shaping the so much political development of the region, it is accountable for improving areas of life where and when it can for the purpose of global security.

Building on the framework provided by Mohammad Ayoob that the disintegration of the state would only further complicate Third World conflict,²⁴ for international security, Western states must develop foreign policies that will preserve and legitimise the nation-states of the Middle East. There are four options available for Canada’s foreign policy in the Middle East and Afghanistan that I have listed as part of a continuum of least desirable to most desirable:

- 1) *Reduction and withdrawal*: Admitting that the Canadian presence in Afghanistan has meet with marginal success and that in many areas of the country the Taliban is growing in strength. By coming to acknowledge our own hypocrisy, Canada

²⁰ Joel S. Migdal, “Strong States, Weak States: Power and Accommodation,” in *Understanding Political Development*, eds. Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 391-436.

²¹ Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 116-117.

²² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 300; Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003), 103-112.

²³ Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 580-585.

²⁴ Mohammad Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995).

- can first address internal inequities and injustices and then address the root causes of Third World conflict caused by the international political economy.²⁵
- 2) *Maintain the status quo*: Canadian armed forces will continue to engage Taliban and *Mujahideen* forces in Afghanistan while trying to build institutions. Continue Canada's rhetorical commitment to the spread of democracy, and refusing to recognize political actors who represent Islamization of the regime, even if they are participating in the nominal democratic elections allowed by the authoritarian state.
 - 3) *Grassroots security*: Revisiting the Axworthy Agenda's 'human security', Canada will engage grassroots political parties that in many countries are the key providers of civil society and/or the main constituents for democratisation. These groups are primarily Islamic, but many are also tribal. This is not intended to undermine state sovereignty, but in the long run is intended to encourage the sustainable development of the state.
 - 4) *Preserve the International system*: Acting as either a principal power or a middle power to preserve the conditions of peace and stability that best promote economic growth and democratic development. Acting through exclusive institutions such as NATO when required, but acting multilaterally when possible. Canada works to prevent another attack on the North American continent as well as ensuring the legitimacy of the international system Canada has identified itself with since St. Laurent and Pearson.²⁶

The above listed options are in no way meant to be exclusive to each other, but instead act as a continuum where an eclectic approach might be the most effective foreign policy for Canada. Taliban forces that refuse to accept the Kabul government might not easily be accommodated under any framework acceptable to Canada and may remain enemies of the Afghan government and NATO. However, when the common humanity of the Taliban is recognized, their tyrannical and barbaric interpretation of Islam may not be forgiven, but acts as a warning to Canada that other illiberal and anti-democratic groups similar to the Taliban might be the future for Afghanistan if conditions on the ground do not substantially improve. The Taliban was itself a product of the Pakistani refugee camps that proliferated as a result of the brutality of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Canada is not only responsible to the Karzai government, but to the people and tribal units to whom Afghanistan ultimately belongs.

Said remarked that the West tends to remain uncomfortable with non-Western nationalist aspirations, even when the Western model is severely lacking much in the way of positive precedents.²⁷ To continue to marginalize Third Worldist political parties and designations will serve to either strengthen neo-Third Worldist groups such as Ansar al-Islam and al-Qaeda, or to radicalise the Third Worldist groups themselves, until they recant on the use of democratic institutions and become revolutionary *salafists* that deny the nation-state itself. The danger a radicalisation of Islamic political parties across the Middle East poses would present a challenge to the state even greater than is currently

²⁵ Jack Layton, "Jack Layton's Speech on the NDP's Opposition Day Motion on Afghanistan." *NDP* (Retrieved 1 May 2007) <http://www.ndp.ca/page/5211>

²⁶ Kirton (2007); Tom Keating, "Canada and the New Multilateralism," in *Readings in Canadian Foreign Policy*, ed. Duane Bratt and Christopher J. Kukucha (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2007): 21-26.

²⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 216.

being observed. The violent potential a marginalized Islam is operationally capable of is related to what Zakaria has called, 'the democratisation of violence'.²⁸ Due to forces not only political, but also technological, a diffusion of power exists throughout much of the Middle East where the state no longer maintains a monopoly on the use of violence, and the potential for a region wide uprising, or a broadening of the Iraq Civil War would plunge Middle Eastern regimes and Western armies into an extremely bloody regional conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

Racial privileging is not natural, or even necessarily biological. During the eighth century, the *Umayyad* Caliphate discriminated against the *Mawali*²⁹ by constructing the Arabs as superior to Persians.³⁰ However, the forces that fought against the *Umayyad* Caliphate consisted of a union of different ethnic groups that included Arabs, as well as both powerful Shii and Sunni communities. The *Umayyad's* institutionalisation of racism acted as the catalyst for their downfall, by denying the humanity of those very people who the Caliphate needed for its vitality and security. The racial contract according to Mills is based on the distinction between persons and non-persons, the whites who have power and everyone else who does not. Said posited that the West, by dominating the Middle East politically, denies the humanity of the people who live there. A system of international politics that will only have relations with those who rule the state will alienate and deny the humanity of all those who live within the boundaries of the territorial nation-state but are in no way represented by the ruling government. The development of democracy in the West has been closely associated with liberalism. Islam is certainly not incompatible with democracy, but its relation with liberty is subject to debate. What is clear though, is the role Islam has played shaping Middle Eastern history and the creation of identity, social institutions and the polity. To suppress perhaps the most significant force in Middle Eastern history is to deny the one billion plus people who identify themselves as Muslims first, and their nationality second.

Said identifies as the major reason for the failing of Orientalism is its inability to connect with the human experience.³¹ Borrowing the term 'contrapuntal' from music theory, he elucidates an inclusion of the other without the suppression of the differences that arise from separated, yet converging histories.³² The colonizer and the colonized are then able to see themselves contrapuntally, and can then understand the common humanity that is denied them under constructed racial hierarchies. Central to Mills' argument for the development of other frameworks is from the bottom-up as a racial version of standpoint theory.³³ The implication for Canadian foreign policy is the

²⁸ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 16.

²⁹ Non-Arab Muslim converts.

³⁰ The *Umayyad* Caliphate was the empire that carried Islam across three continents—Africa, Asia, and into Europe. While depictions of the fall of the great Arab empire as a clash between Semites (Arabs) and Aryans (Persians) is best left to the racist orientalists of the nineteenth century, the alienation felt by the non-Arab Muslims from their empire, and their very own faith should not be understated as a principle cause for the overthrow of the *Umayyad* Caliphate. Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

³¹ Said, *Orientalism* 328.

³² Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (New York: Verso, 2003), 24.

³³ Mills, 109.

necessity of a far more inclusive approach that is better able to promote a convergence between Canada's values and interests and the forces of international politics.

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