



# Images, Racial Hierarchy, and Critical World Order Studies

ARTICLE

BRENT STEELE 

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## ABSTRACT

This essay contributes to the forum by pivoting from three themes in Debrix's classic text, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* — visibility, purity, and order. Specifically, it calls attention to 'world order' and its hierarchical features. The racial hierarchical features are *always embedded* both within contemporary Western discourses and more specifically in the US as a political community that was founded upon, and reinforced by, white supremacist violence. This essay examines the transnational manifestations of racial hierarchies. It also explores via Debrix the role of what is visible in upholding (through performative cruelty) but also challenging such racial hierarchical (dis)orders. It therefore points the way towards confronting world order's racial hierarchical features. A number of contemporary international relations (IR) and global political developments provide a collective springboard for this critical world order studies approach to racial hierarchy, including the contemporary populist 'moment'. I specifically focus on work in Historical International Relations, and the detailed scholarship by Robbie Shilliam in rediscovering 'anticolonial antifascist' responses in global politics.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Brent Steele**

University of Utah, US

[brent.steele@utah.edu](mailto:brent.steele@utah.edu)

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In the summer of 2018, the US media began publishing accounts and images of the Trump administration's 'zero tolerance' policy towards asylum seekers, exemplifying a broader approach to immigration that had been established from the start of that presidential term. That approach involved family separation of children and parents at the Mexico border, 'tender-age' detention centers and, even before that, several attempted bans on Muslims entering the United States. When the descriptions of the detention centers first appeared in the US press, the Trump administration tried a curious approach in "a public relations effort to counter some of the damning descriptions of its detention centers."<sup>1</sup> The administration opened up the centers, including the largest one in McAllen, Texas, allowing what had been only described in words to be publicized by those media outlets via images. And yet, "rather than prove the administration's point, the images of the McAllen facility only serve to further illustrate the horrific nature of its practices, showing kids held in metal enclosures sprawled atop mattresses laid on a concrete floor, with little around them except flimsy space blankets."<sup>2</sup>

The example of the images can initially be read as a hopeful, even ironic one. But whether it was the Trump administration's assumption that the images would 'prove' their point, or the journalistic account's assumption that they were, in fact, self-defeating, both share a problematic assumption about the image as an independent arbiter. That, in a sense, the 'image' will settle what is fundamentally a political struggle, once and for all.

There are three reasons that images don't settle (international) political disputes. First, those who would otherwise be mobilized by the image may find it too shocking, too abhorrent, too disgusting, to view, hear, or even feel. Second, the images themselves are already layered with issues of presentation (how much is included, and for how long, in the frame), and then representation (discourses intervening to provide 'context'). The violent recordings of systemically racist police beatings in the United States, for instance, almost always get reconfigured in this way – "what happened before the video beginsbegins?!", "did the victim have drugs in their system?!", etc. Third, images contain what François Debrix describes as "supplemental and differential meanings."<sup>3</sup> Putting these three reasons together, images depend on the viewer, and viewership. They, frustratingly, are simultaneously vice and virtue, and violence may be both abhorrent but also transgressively exciting, an end rather than a means, a "fantasy space or dream land" of simulation.<sup>4</sup> And the violence within images is not a brief, regrettable but still necessary departure from order, but the foundation for the order itself.

Debrix's classic text, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, was pathbreaking in a number of ways. Its import for contemporary world order studies instructs us on the issue of images in a time of transgressive US violence. As Barder in his contribution to this forum notes, "Debrix's critical world order project calls into question the self-congratulatory story of the Westernization of the global," and that it also "alerted" readers to how the "West's appropriation of alterity showed latent fascistic desires that circulate and haunt the present."<sup>5</sup> Like Barder, my essay calls attention to 'world order' and its hierarchical features. Mine is a provocation to add race, and specifically racial hierarchical 'order', as features that are not just 'outside' but *always embedded* both within Western discourses (especially at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), and in the US as a political community that was founded upon, and reinforced by, white supremacist violence.

This is a legacy that continues to be reinforced today, through 'self-refuting' images, such as the aforementioned pictures of asylum-seeking children in detention centers, pictures of police brutality, to most recently, the medievalist iconography of Trump-supporting insurrectionists seeking to overthrow the US government in the January 6, 2021 riots at the US Capitol. While this event remains raw and fresh, the details and accounts disclosing what happened on January 6th in DC and across the US have been carefully curated. Nevertheless, there were

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1 Li Zhou, "These photos were the Trump administration's attempt to quiet criticism. They're only increasing critics' horror." *Vox*, June 18, 2018. Online: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/6/18/17474986/familyseparation-border-video>.

2 Ibid.

3 François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 133.

4 Ibid., 216.

5 Barder, Alexander D. "The West and its Radical Others." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021), 15.

three sets of responses evident in the video clips and images of the insurrectionists that invaded the US Capitol: (1) latent/implicit support, (2) shock and horror as an aberration ('this is not who we are!'), and (3) shock and horror as resignation ('this is exactly who the US is, has been, and without major changes or accountability, will continue to be'). The transnational manifestations of this — expressed in the 2016 Brexit vote and the 2019 New Zealand mosque attacks — and the role of what is visible in upholding racial hierarchical (dis)orders through performative cruelty, point the way towards confronting world order's racial hierarchical features and challenging them.

Writing during that same summer of 2018, in the wake of the aforementioned images, essayist Adam Serwer described the historical legacy of the images championed by Trump supporters. In a widely invoked column titled "The Cruelty is the Point," Serwer recalled early 20<sup>th</sup> century images of lynchings. The focus, however, for him was "not the burned, mutilated bodies that stick with me. It's the faces of the white men in the crowd," many of whom demonstrated enjoyment and pride.<sup>6</sup> The enjoyment factor was on full display during the recent Trump insurrection event. One reporter from the scene noted that: "It almost felt like a music festival or something."<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to the 'balance of power' or 'international society' interpretations of that era, it was the same context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century racial hierarchical 'order' (orderly for some, terrorizing for others) that generated effects that included but were not limited to white supremacist monuments and other forms of white supremacist terror. These were prominent not only in the US, but also across the world. They involved the eugenics movement and the development of a 'race science', the White Australia policies of that country in the early 1900s, Canada's 1923 Chinese exclusion act, and the immigration act of the following year in the US (which barred Asian immigrants). Further examples of a racial paranoia stemmed from the defeats of Italy vis-à-vis Ethiopia in the 1896 Battle of Adowa and the Japanese victory over Russia in the 1905 Russo-Japanese war. Military strategists of the white North, nowadays considered required reading for students of military power, were at the time animated by a concern over a nonwhite global South swamping the great powers of the Anglo-Saxon world. As Lucian Ashworth noted of the time, this was characterized as a "view of the west as an oasis in a desert of racial barbarians, and the consequent need for solidarity among western powers."<sup>8</sup> Further, institutions of the new field of International Relations (IR) were also shaped by racial hierarchy. For instance, the iconic IR journal *Foreign Affairs* was notably originally titled the *Journal of Race Development*.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there were also transnational resistances at the time. W.E.B. Dubois, whose writings on International Relations are increasingly being re-appropriated by IR scholars, recognized the global features of this white supremacy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>10</sup> Dubois's attempts to foster racial equality were reissued at the second Pan-African Congress in 1921, and then developed as a *Manifesto to the League of Nations* to eliminate white colonial rule over Africa. A number of contemporary IR and global political developments points provide a collective springboard for this critical world order studies approach to racial hierarchy,<sup>11</sup> including the work on the global right,<sup>12</sup> work on the contemporary populist 'moment', work in historical International Relations, and the detailed work by Robbie Shilliam in rediscovering 'anticolonial antifascist' responses in global politics.<sup>13</sup>

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6 Adam Sewer. "The Cruelty is the Point: President Trump and his supporters find community by rejoicing in the suffering of those they hate and fear." *The Atlantic*, October 3, 2018. Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104/>

7 Carroll, "The Backstory."

8 Lucian Ashworth, *A History of International Thought: From the origins of the modern state to academic international relations*. New York: Routledge (2014), 104.

9 Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson. "The big bangs of IR: The myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919." *Millennium* 39, no. 3 (2011): 735–758.

10 Errol A. Henderson, *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized: Cultural Revolution in the Black Power Era* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019).

11 Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A genealogy of a racialized identity in international relations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

12 Abrahamsen et al., "Confronting the International Political Sociology of the New Right."

13 Shilliam, "Intervention and colonial-modernity."

Returning then to the two main themes of this essay – images and order – brings forth five non-exhaustive avenues for how to fashion, in part, critical world order studies going forward. First, a racial hierarchical order has been upheld by *both* actions, and also images, of violence. It is an ‘order’, as noted earlier, that rests on a supremacy that, as Barder notes in his contribution regarding Debrix’s import, “sustains the West as a parasitical project that feeds on the violence and misery inflicted upon others.”<sup>14</sup> Second, in speaking about an (inter)national racial hierarchical order, we must pay attention to both the context within which it develops, in particular national polities, as well as the transnational connections between those orderings. Third, the images of the actions that maintain that order are polyvalent – subject to competing interpretations. Images may sicken and thus mobilize some, but they also provide a vessel for libidinal transgressions, much like the function of intervention for writers like Žižek, who Debrix calls out for their “retro moral fascism.”<sup>15</sup> Again, images will not provide the independent arbiter we think they should, or could, because of this polyvalence.

Fourth, and looking towards the sociological context in critical world order studies may be pursued, racial hierarchical orderings and the actions sustaining them are embedded in the ‘Disciplinary Liberalism’ that was of central concern in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*. Here, it exists in a series of juxtapositions and racially ordered tensions: violence against some, ‘freedom’ (from health restrictions, for instance) and ‘rights’ (to deploy low grade violence) for others. And as it is in the UN of Debrix’s focus in *RP*, such disciplinary liberalism is embedded within and facilitated by institutions. And yet, a fifth necessity for this approach is a reflexive one, a vocational impulse for students and scholars to contest, upend, and *continually resist* this hierarchy. Precisely because images on their own cannot overturn these structures, the efforts needed will have to be comprehensive and relentless by the human agents to do so. This painstaking work has been and will need to be agentic, facilitated through micropolitical spaces and times – the classroom, workshops, forums, and forms of protest. But it must be institutionally reformative as well. The disciplinary liberalism of the 2020s involves a full-fledged neoliberal state in higher education,<sup>16</sup> which has resulted in an increasing privatization of higher education, a turn towards broader ‘metrics’ of success that reinforce inequitable outcomes and privilege STEM fields over humanities and humanistic social science disciplines.<sup>17</sup> Academic practices as well need to be part of this reckoning to contest and even reverse their “inequalities, suspect labor relations, uneven opportunities, and mystifying institutional hierarchies.”<sup>18</sup>

All of this sounds ambitious and, to put it mildly, potentially exhausting. Burnout is always possible and even probable. But Debrix’s call for a “new anti-imperialist spirit” at the end of *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* provides some inspiration. The preceding five avenues need not be considered only a *struggle* against the oppressive structures of racial hierarchical ordering. Debrix calls for a “spirit” that “pays close attention to disciplinary liberalism’s own discourse,” but also, “in a festive and affirmative manner ... will seek to *haunt hegemonic ideology and its visions of global order*.”<sup>17</sup> Images are a part of this haunting — if not for arbitration (for such arbitration as noted will not come) — then for inspiration, poignant reflection, rage, memory, and commemoration. In so doing, may such festive hauntings continue to cultivate an agency and strength previously determined by our cynical exhaustion and low expectations to be unthinkable.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Brent Steele  [orcid.org/0000-0003-3679-6824](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3679-6824)  
 University of Utah, US

14 Barder, “The West and its Radical Others,” 16.

15 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 144; Barder, “The West and its Radical Others,” 16.

16 Saunders. “The impact of neoliberalism on college students.”

17 Adler and Harzing, “When knowledge wins: Transcending the sense and nonsense of academic rankings.”; Baele and Bettiza. “What do academic metrics do to political scientists?”

18 Mauro J. Caraccioli and Aida A. Hozic. “Reflexivity@ Disney-U.” *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 144.

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