Sussex Centre for Advanced International Theory (CAIT)

Is IR Theory White?
Racialised subject-positioning in Waltz, Keohane and Wendt

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This article develops a methodology for the identification of whiteness in IR theory. Racism is a historically specific structure of modern global power which generates hierarchies of the human. These have far-reaching material and epistemological consequences in the present, one of which is the production and naturalisation of racialised subject positions in intellectual discourse. This article develops a new framework for analysing whiteness through subject-positioning, synthesising insights from critical race scholarship. This framework identifies white subject-positioning as patterned by interlocking epistemologies of immanence, ignorance and innocence. The article then interrogates how these epistemological tendencies produce limitations and contradictions in international theory. It does so through an analysis of three seminal disciplinary texts: Kenneth Waltz’s Theory of International Politics (1979), Robert Keohane’s After Hegemony (2005 [1984]), and Alexander Wendt’s Social Theory of International Politics (1999). It shows that these epistemologies serve systematically to sever the analysis of the international system and the ‘West’ from its actual historical conditions of possibility. The article outlines pathways for overcoming these limitations and suggests that continued inattention to the epistemological consequences of race for IR theory is intellectually unsustainable.

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