

We need to talk about ‘race’

Symposium: Critical Race Perspectives on International Law

“Race is the child of racism, not the father,” writes Ta-Nehisi Coates in “Between the World and Me”. Such understanding of race, not as an empirical category but as a category for analysing power relations and structural discrimination, underlies the symposium “Critical Race Perspectives on International Law”. We take inspiration from the important work of critical race theorists who posit that racism is not simply a matter of individual prejudice or a problem of a deviant societal fringe. Instead, as Angela P. Harris wrote, racism is “an inescapable feature of Western culture, and race is always already inscribed in the most innocent and neutral seeming concepts.” A critical race approach thus questions law’s colour blindness but also critically engages with law’s ability to fight racial discrimination. Over the course of this symposium, we will interrogate the ways that race matters in law. Our contributors critically analyse law as a tool in the fight against racism by shedding light on the plight of the Roma people in Europe and law’s difficult relationship with antisemitism, thereby revealing the serious shortcomings of anti-discrimination laws. Other contributions examine law’s complicity in the perpetuation of racial hierarchies and race thinking in fields such as international criminal law and justice or the role of race in the colonial project and its repercussions for our contemporary world. Taking seriously the lessons of intersectionality, our contributors also pay attention to the entanglement of race with other ascriptions of ‘difference’ such as religion and ethnicity. Engaging with the myriad ways in which law and race intersect requires an interdisciplinary approach, which draws on knowledge from the social science and the humanities. One of our contributions thus looks at the tools of legal anthropology to unmask hegemony and ‘othering’ in law more broadly and to think about ways to include the voices of the marginalised. We look forward to the discussion, invite your comments, and hope you will enjoy the contributions as much as we do.