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Introduction to Special Issue on Race and Capitalism

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Introduction to Special Issue on Race and Capitalism

Keywords

race, capitalism, imperialism

Capitalism came with the promise of emancipation – from entrenched social hierarchies and personal dependencies – opening a world in which anyone could succeed with enough ambition, ingenuity and, truth be told, luck. If capitalism refers to an economic system in which formally free and equal individuals enter the marketplace to exchange goods and services, then the category of race as a hierarchical social relation ought to have no place within it. From this vantage point, race appears to be an anachronism, a distortion of the putatively modern capitalist social form, an anomaly that either holds back capitalist development or will eventually be swept aside by it. This view of capitalism is, however, unjustifiably narrow: not only does it focus solely on the ideological self-presentation of capitalism (freedom and equality for all), but it brackets the manifold “non-economic” factors that aid and abet the accumulation of capital, from colonial plunder and slavery, through rapacious resource extraction, to the corralling of peoples within national borders. While capitalism as an economic system pledges inclusive prosperity, capitalism as a social system has proven replete with inequalities and exclusions, of which racial oppression is probably the most evident form. Such a broader view of capitalism permits a more sustained interrogation of the relationship between capitalism and race: are race and racialization accidental or constitutive features of capitalism? Are they peculiarities of specific historical forms of capitalism, enabling logistics for launching the pursuit of profit or, rather, systemic features of the very logic of competitive profit-production? The pieces we have collected for this special issue of *Emancipations* on race and capitalism canvas some of this vast territory of inquiry.

In [“Slavery, Work, and History: DuBois’s Black Marxism,” Amy Allen](#) considers W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* in relation to Marxist theory and to the Black radical tradition. Against Cedric Robinson’s claim that these two great political-theoretical currents are incompatible (the European origins of Marxism having allegedly imprinted racialism in its very DNA), in Allen’s reading Du Bois develops a Black Marxism that can attend to the complex

entanglements of race and capitalism, without reducing one to the other. While Marx grasped the foundational role of slavery (and colonialism) in the development of capitalism, Allen points out that by placing the exploitation of formally free wage labor at the center of the valorization of capital, slavery remains peripheral to his account. By theorizing the slave as a worker, by contrast, Du Bois underscores the revolutionary agency of slaves, who he argues played a pivotal role in the US Civil War by abandoning plantations and joining Union forces, thus acting as the agents of their own emancipation.

Together with Du Bois's interpretation of Reconstruction in terms of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the end of Reconstruction as the counterrevolution of property, Allen suggests that Du Bois's creative transformation – but not outright rejection -- of Marxian categories shows a way to expunge the Marxist theory of history of its Eurocentrism and progressivism. Allen's reading of Du Bois also has implications for the concept of racial capitalism. Rather than reducing the significance of the modifier "racial" to an acknowledgment of the ways in which capital profits from racial ideologies and hierarchies, and thus treating race as ultimately secondary to class as a system of oppression, Allen finds in Du Bois an example of how to theorize race and class as "distinct yet interdependent vectors of oppression."

If Du Bois highlights the essential connection between whiteness and property, writing that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth, forever and ever, Amen!", then **Jonathan Masin-Peters** shows how this whiteness-as-dominion (as theorized recently by Ella Myers) also involves strategies of racial control. To that end, in ["White Dominion as Control: On Scientific Management and Racial Capitalism,"](#) Masin-Peters draws out the racial undertones of two foundational texts in the development of modern industrial relations: Charles Babbage's 1833 book *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* and Frederick Winslow Taylor's 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*. While both are well known for their advocacy of the division of labor, Masin-

Paters shows how this ostensibly race-neutral “scientific” principle sits within a “broader theory of racial, civilizational, and anthropocentric hierarchy” (in the case of Babbage), and racialized infantilization that continues the legacy of slavery (in the case of Taylor).

While DuBois stretches Marxist orthodoxy by treating slaves as workers and their revolutionary agency as central to capitalist dynamics, thus forging a theory of racial capitalism, in [“Expecting Blows: Sylvia Wynter, Sociogeny, and Exceeding Marxist Social Form,”](#) Sara-Maria Sorentino traces an alternative, “diagnoal,” move away from Marxism in the thought of Sylvia Wynter. As Sorentino shows in her article, Wynter’s foregrounding of the plantation and slavery establishes a resonance with world systems theory’s decentering of European capitalism, and we might add, with a theory of racial capitalism of the kind that Allen draws out from the work of Du Bois. And yet, rather than merely integrating the forced labor camps of the colonial plantation into the framework of global capitalism by demonstrating the indispensable role that they played in its development, Sorentino’s reading of Wynter suggests that the “modern,” capitalism, and slavery all share a common root in Renaissance humanism’s secularized conception of Man.

While the “degodding” of Man provided a new condition of freedom, Wynter suggests that its resultant groundlessness triggered an anxiety that was met by the abjection of racialized populations to the realm of non-Being. While recognizing that racial violence can indeed be structured by the class dynamics of labor exploitation, Sorentino suggests that Wynter’s insistence on the primordial scene of the plantation and its irreducibility to wage labor can account for the persistent “afterlife” of slavery in “anti-black violence that flows from the [more fundamental] problems of freedom, history, life, and death.”

Mouna Maaroufi’s [“Contingent Conjunctures of Racial Capitalism”](#) adds two trajectories of critique, as she investigates the dynamic interaction between labor and race. First, she traces the *political production* of racialized

differentiations. Drawing on labor market integration policies for refugees in Germany after the ‘summer of migration’ in 2015, including on original empirical material she collected in Berlin and Brandenburg, Maaroufi surveys the political logistics through which the workfarist labor regime (typical of neoliberalism) engendered racialized subjugation. On one hand, it conditioned immigrant integration on waged work within a highly competitive and precarious labor market while foreclosing other channels of social integration. On the other hand, through racialization, it confined refugees to an inferior, subordinated labor-market position. Thus, purportedly ‘progressive’ reforms aiming at the social integration of immigrants via inclusion in the labor market, foster social exclusion. These dangers can be countered, she suggests, by “new infrapolitics based on an autonomous appropriation of counter-knowledge, counter-logistics, and citizenship claims”.

The second trajectory of critique in Maaroufi’s contribution concerns the *complexity and dynamic nature* of racialization. Her account of the active political production of constantly changing racializing criteria and the structuring of racialized differentiations into malleable hierarchies that “proliferate within groups of refugees, migrants, and the society at large” is a reminder that racial hierarchies exist not only between races but also within them. Indeed, distinctions drawn on the basis of skin color might be most visible, but racialization does not need color to generate social inequalities. (We might do well to recall that the process of racialized subjugation can be traced at least back to feudalism when the Ottoman empire sourced its Christian slaves from Eastern Europe. These hierarchies in the attribution of social value still exist within the European Union, running West to East, North to South).

Gurminder K. Bhambra emphasizes the need to foreground colonial processes (dispossession, appropriation, elimination, extraction, enslavement, and indenture) as driving forces in the creation of “modern” Western societies. As the title of her **discussion with Albena Azmanova** – [“Decolonizing the](#)

[Western Mind](#)” – reveals, for Bhambra decolonization needs to take place within the production of social scientific knowledge, since the very categories inherited from the tradition of modern social theory are haunted by their disavowed colonial entanglements. To take one example, Max Weber gave us the canonical modern definition of the state as exercising the monopoly on the use of legitimate violence within a territory, and yet the very state that he was referring to was built upon the use of violence *outside* its territory. Of particular relevance to capitalism, Bhambra insists that rather than seeing the industrial revolution as an event that began in England and then spread to the rest of the world, a proper attention to the reliance of English accumulation strategies on colonial processes reveals that the global is the “*condition* of the modern world, not its *consequence*.” This fundamental insight has not only historical significance, but bears importantly on contemporary framings of global inequality.

“Understanding the connections between race, capitalism, and indigenous exploitation in the settler colony is a case study not only of overt abuse but also of insidious, long-lasting violence”, writes **Madeline Bass** in [“Answering the Call”](#) - her review of Brazilian scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva’s “Reading the Dead: A Black Feminist Poethical Reading of Global Capital”. The perspective of ‘the Dead’ that da Silva has introduced in the analysis of historical injustice allows us to perceive, Bass notes, the way the violence of slavery and imperialism has embedded itself into state formation. Because ‘the Dead’ are not just the Indigenous and enslaved peoples whose lives were taken, but also “the pasts, presents, and futures that were no longer because of their obliteration”, as da Silva has put it. Colonialism and imperialism are death-dealing endeavors in this profound and persistent manner. Bass’s reconstruction of da Silva’s writing is filtered through her original engagement with the histories and cultural practices of the Oromo people who are indigenous to the Horn of Africa but were colonized by the Abyssinian Empire in the late 1880s and remain a part of the settler colonial state of Ethiopia. This allows her, in this short essay, to give us not only a historically textured account of the way the ‘total value’ of the formerly

living was expropriated, but also to elucidate pathways towards alternate futures. “Economies based on respect and kinship, communities that sustain themselves through logics of care, and a sociolegal framework that listens to and respects the Dead”, can help us “move towards a liberatory, decolonizing elsewhere, beyond the violence of the world as we presently know it”, she asserts.

In [“The World’s Languages in Crisis \(Redux\): Toward a Radical Reimagining for Global Linguistic Justice,”](#) **Gerald J. Roche** begins with the startling projection that “this century will conclude with thousands fewer languages than it started with.” While the problem is relatively well known (at least to linguists), Roche resignifies its description as a crisis along Gramscian lines to refer to the indeterminacy of the present, in which language elimination coexists alongside language revitalization and efflorescence. Moreover, Roche approaches language loss not as “endangerment” but as a form of oppression that is driven by the reinforcing operations of nationalism, colonialism, racism, and capitalism. This in turn suggests that the emancipatory resolution of the crisis leading to linguistic justice must join forces with anti-nationalist, decolonial, anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements.

Taking as an entry point insidiously recurring antisemitism, in her [“Progressives and the Jewish Question”](#) **Jacqueline Kay** draws on recent works addressing this phenomenon, as well as on her own experience as a Jewish-American living in France, to explore the status of race within contemporary capitalist democracies. Why is the ‘Jewish question’ still a question? What accounts for its uncertain status within the emancipatory agenda of progressive politics? What kind of minority are Jewish people, why is it so difficult for some to see them as a race and what does this say about ‘race’ as a concept we deploy in struggles for justice?

As recognition of wrongdoing to minorities seems to have become a competitive zero-sum-game in our societies, “why are Jews always the losers in the Diversity Hunger Games?”, Kay asks. Does it have to do with the ever-intensifying

competitive pressures of globally integrated capitalism? This directs our debate towards investigating the paradoxical liaison between capitalism as a ‘market economy’ and as a social system. Could it be that the competition for profit, even as it stipulates the non-discriminatory inclusion of all in commodity production, generates a social context in which racialization is a strategy for reducing competitive pressures on the dominant group, with the rest competing for victimhood as a path to some social protection, and with political elites asserting their power over the minorities they patronize, as one of us (Azmanova) has argued? In this context, Jews are stigmatized as being (allegedly) ‘good at capitalism’ and hence in no need of protection against discrimination, while being forced to incarnate capitalism and all its evils. Kay comes to the conclusion that “It is only when society addresses its ambivalence about capitalism and the injustices that it has produced for everyone, particularly minorities, that it will even be possible to unpack anti-Semitism and its poisonous manifestations”.

Sean Sayers’ review of [Marcello Musto’s *The Last Years of Karl Marx, 1881-1883: An Intellectual Biography*](#) does not speak directly to the theme of racism and capitalism; however, it delivers an invaluable insight about the kind of intellectual effort and style of critique that best nourishes emancipatory social criticism – a core theme for this journal. As Musto goes in detail through Marx’s correspondence and his notebooks to construct a detailed picture of what Marx was writing, reading (works on political economy, Russian society, anthropology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics for ‘relaxation’), and thinking about in the last two years of his life, three features of Marx’s creative process and intellectual stance come into view. First, Marx was a notoriously meticulous author, never happy to publish until he had taken account of the latest ideas and developments and incorporated them into his work. Second, it is intellectual curiosity, and not restless activism, that animated Marx’s writing - a predilection that kept him free of the dogmatism of some fellow socialist thinkers and helped him seek capitalism’s immanent logic of oppression beyond the political agendas of the day. Third, Marx rejected schematic, a-historical theoretisation. He insisted he

had not put forward a universal theory of history according to which capitalism is an inevitable phase, and saw his analyses as but a historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe. There is no “all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory”, no “historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples”, he wrote in letters to socialist activists at the time. To understand real historical transformations, Marx insisted, it is essential to study phenomena in their particularity.

We end this introduction with two brief reflections on our own position as white scholars within the system of white supremacy. First, we observe that this journal is hosted by Mississippi State University, which was established as a land grant university under the Morrill Act (1862), a key plank in the settler colonial practices of the United States. The Morrill Act authorized the United States government to obtain over ten million acres of indigenous lands and to grant that land to public universities.¹ Land grant universities didn't just build their campuses on this land; in many cases they established their initial endowments with the sale of newly acquired holdings, far from the location of the university receiving the grant, and making handsome profits in the process. For example, the US government paid the eastern bands of the Dakota around \$3.78 for the title to 160 acres of their ancestral land, then granted it to Alcorn State University and Mississippi State University, who raised \$143.50 from the sale of the very same land. According to the Land-Grab Universities investigation, the US government did not pay for a quarter of the parcels of land that it granted the universities; for those that it did purchase it paid \$400,000, providing an endowment principal and other land holdings worth an estimated \$22.8 million by the early Twentieth Century.

¹ Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, “How They Did It: Exposing How U.S. Universities Profited From Indigenous Land,” *Pulitzer Center* May 19, 2020, accessed May 5, 2022, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-they-did-it-exposing-how-us-universities-profited-indigenous-land>

We refer to this history, not to diminish the vital role that land grant universities have and continue to play in offering high-quality and relatively affordable higher education to the communities they serve. No doubt this education has provided a form of empowerment to millions of minority students over the years (since integration). But how well are universities serving the needs of students who are black, indigenous or persons of color? What more could we, as academics, do to address the legacies of colonialism?

We are also mindful of our identity as white scholars (notwithstanding the less visible forms of racialization within whiteness, mentioned above), editing a special issue on race and capitalism. Certainly, our own privilege as editors and academics is in part enabled by profound and enduring injustice, which means that we ought to reflect carefully on how we use that privilege. We realize that for some readers our own whiteness might be taken as a disqualification, or at least, grounds for suspicion, for editing this issue. We reject the view that white people ought not to talk about race since we have no personal experience of racism. Moreover, *not* analyzing race as white editors might reinforce the notion that somehow racism is a social phenomenon that exists separately from other spheres and processes. As the articles in this issue make clear, such a notion is especially false with regard to global capitalism. At the same time, and depending on the nature of the work itself, identity does inform scholarship in various ways, and pretending that we can approach an issue like race from an objective viewpoint would be to ignore the rich and powerful critiques of objectivity as well as purportedly value-neutral social science.

A note on this issue's cover

Attentive readers with a horticultural bent may recognize in the cover art a crop of cotton. This image is taken from a photograph that Chamberlain took when he first moved to Mississippi, in 2014. The crop itself was being grown in a field that forms part of Mississippi State University's agricultural research facilities. However, the image also serves as a synecdoche for a planetary web

of expropriation, exploitation, and capital accumulation that laid the foundation of contemporary global capitalism: enslaved persons kidnapped from Africa, forced to work on land expunged of its original inhabitants by a genocidal settler colonial state; the owners of forced labor camps/plantations shipping the crop to Europe, where impoverished workers suffered their own kind of living hell as they processed the raw cotton and enriched the capitalist class. We would like to credit Chamberlain's colleague in the philosophy department at MSU, Dr. Anthony Neal, for inspiring us to choose an image of cotton for our cover.