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## *The Trap of “Racial Capitalism”*

### Abstract

This article weighs the meaning, potential, and pitfalls of the concept of “racial capitalism” for studying the nexus of racial division and the economy. The concept has spread like wildfire in Anglophone social science since its introduction in Cedric Robinson’s revisionist account of the rise of capitalism as racializing, but it remains epistemologically inchoate and analytically problematic. The critique of leading uses and common corollaries of the term shows that it stipulates that which needs to be explicated, namely, the “articulation” of capitalism “through race,” which is not a structural invariant but ranges from coevalness and synergy to parasitism and disconnection. The notion cannot accommodate the varied bases of race as a naturalizing and hierarchizing principle of vision and division as well as the historical peculiarity of the economic variant of slavery in the Atlantic world. Advocates of “racial capitalism” need to put in the hard work of epistemological elucidation, logical clarification, and historical elaboration needed if they are to make the label more than a “conceptual speculative bubble.”

*Keywords:* racial capitalism; Cedric Robinson; race; epistemology; conceptual speculative bubble.

*Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning—then it can be put back into circulation.*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (1944)

IS “RACIAL CAPITALISM” a conceptual solution or a conceptual problem? Let me briefly weigh the meaning, potential, and pitfalls of the construct for studying the nexus of race and the economy. The expression first appears in print in the Anglophone sphere in 1976

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under the pens of the South African historian Martin Legassick and union organizer David Hemson in a 16-page technical report in reference to the *specific* interweaving of international capital and white rule during the three decades of apartheid.<sup>1</sup> It was picked up on American shores and *generalized* to the entire West across a millennium by the African-American political scientist Cedric Robinson in his 1983 book *Black Marxism*.<sup>2</sup> At first the book went unnoticed, but its 2000 republication gradually garnered readers and its expanded 2020 edition, motivated by the spread of the thematics of “racial capitalism” in the tow of black American street protests, has become the object of a mantric cult among factions of Left intellectuals, scholars, and activists.<sup>3</sup>

For Robinson, Marxism got its history, ontology, and politics wrong, and a focus on race as advocated by the “black radical tradition” can set them right all at once. Western capitalism was born not through the negation of feudalism, as Marx would have it, but by extending its social relations and harnessing the racialism Robinson argues was already woven deep into the fabric of medieval Europe.<sup>4</sup> Going against the whole body of Marxist theory but also against a hundred years of plain academic economic history, Robinson boldly asserts that “the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones.”<sup>5</sup> Thus England’s industrial working class was not the “universal proletariat” of Marxist teleology but was formed *ab initio* on the basis of the racialization of the Irish. Bourgeois society did not “rationalize social relations and demystify social consciousness”: quite the contrary. “The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from

<sup>1</sup> LEGASSICK and HEMSON, 1976. The report was commissioned by the Anti-Apartheid Movement based in London. It uses the term “racial capitalism” 16 times but does not define it, suggesting its meaning was transparent to South African readers. For a fascinating account of the prehistory of the term and of the South African debates within which the concept emerged as a “strategic critique” at the crossroads of scholarship and activism, see Zachary LEVENSON and Marcel PARET, 2022. Levenson and Paret are the editors of a forthcoming thematic issue of *Racial*

and *Ethnic Studies* on “The South African Tradition of Racial Capitalism: From Margins to Center.”

<sup>2</sup> ROBINSON [1983] 2000. To situate Robinson in the long stream of black radical thought, read the lucid “Preface” by Robin D. G. Kelley to the 2000 edition of the book.

<sup>3</sup> ROBINSON, RANGEL and WATSON 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For a meticulous critique of Robinson’s wholesale repudiation of Marx’s account of the genesis of capitalism, see RALPH and SINGHAL 2019: 860–865.

<sup>5</sup> ROBINSON [1983] 2000: 26.

capitalism. I have used the term ‘racial capitalism’ to refer to this development and to the subsequent structure as a historical agency.”<sup>6</sup>

Robinson does not elaborate on what he means by “racialism.” He also uses the adjectives ethnic, national, regional, tribal, linguistic, and immigrant to characterize the subalterns of Europe’s interior.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the new preface to the 2000 edition of the book, he makes Aristotle’s “inferiorization” of women, non-Greeks, and all laborers (not just slaves but also artisans, wage workers, and farmers) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* the root of “an uncompromising racial construct” and asserts that, “from the twelfth century on, one European ruling order after another, one cohort of clerical or secular propagandists following another, reiterated and embellished this racial calculus.”<sup>8</sup> It is not clear what is “racial” about this ancient construct and what makes it specifically Western: Did other civilizations *not* inferiorize women, laborers, and assorted ethnic outsiders? It is also unclear what exactly Robinson means by “permeate” and what makes such permeation “inevitable.” It does not help that he invokes the expression “racial capitalism” only three times in the rest of the book (it rates a single mention in the index). Similarly, Robinson does not employ the expression *even once* in the rich posthumous collection of his essays, spanning four decades of scholarship, published in 2018 under the somewhat misleading title *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*.<sup>9</sup> In any case, is it not theoretically risky to infer the objective workings of the capitalist economy from the subjective visions of it among state rulers and cultural elites?

No matter. The tag “racial capitalism” caught and spread like wildfire in the late 2010s among American scholars, first in the humanities, eager “to understand the mutually constitutive nature of racialization and capitalist exploitation”<sup>10</sup> in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 and to respond to the current insurgent movement for racial justice on America’s streets. Workshops, reading groups, research networks, multi-institution projects, special journal issues, and symposia have

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 2. Note the puzzling formulation, which makes the structure an agent.

<sup>7</sup> “From its very beginnings, this European civilization, containing racial, tribal, linguistic, and regional particularities, was constructed on antagonistic differences.” *Ibid.*: 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, preface to the 2000 edition: xxxi.

<sup>9</sup> ROBINSON, 2019. All 13 mentions of “racial capitalism” are in the foreword and introduction by the volume’s editors. Only

one of the 26 chapters deals *obliquely* with race and capitalism, in the course of an analysis of the Rodney King uprising in Los Angeles in 1992. It makes one wonder: Was “racial capitalism” in *Black Marxism* more than a throwaway line for Robinson?

<sup>10</sup> BURDEN-STELLY 2020. A provocative analysis of how the Black Lives Matter movement has appropriated the term (if not the concept) is Siddhant Issar [ISSAR 2021].

boomed and spilled over into public debate, as with the 2017 issue of the *Boston Review* on “Race, Capitalism, Justice” featuring leading historians of the African-American experience.<sup>11</sup> One would think that this extraordinary outpouring of intellectual energy would spawn a crisply enunciated concept informing a set of clear claims about the nature of race, the logics of capitalism, and the dynamics of their causal, structural, and functional interweaving. But one searches in vain for this clarification. Instead, one finds the mere *stipulation of their “articulation,”* as in the introduction to a leading volume of essays on *Histories of Racial Capitalism* (2021), where we read: “Racial capitalism is the process by which the key dynamics of capitalism—accumulation/dispossession, credit/debt, production/surplus, capitalist/worker, developed/underdeveloped, contract/coercion, and others—become articulated through race.”<sup>12</sup> But, precisely, it is the nature of this “articulation” that needs explication.

The editors of that collection, the historians Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins, deserve credit for striving to derive from this spongy definition three defensible scholia; however, upon examination, each scholia makes the central concept not more solid, but more brittle: (1) “Capital has not historically accumulated without previously existing relations of racial inequality.” But, aside from the contestable historical accuracy of the claim as applied to all historical variants of capitalism (think of the South Korean variant, for instance), the same is true for, say, state formation, wars, and urbanization:<sup>13</sup> does that *eo ipso* produce *state* capitalism, *military* capitalism, and *urban* capitalism? Historical precedence is not social causation or structural linkage. (2): “The violent dispossession inherent to capital accumulation operates by leveraging, intensifying, and creating racial distinctions.” But, again, capitalism has used and generated a variety of distinctions, which included racial division in certain geographic zones and historical periods: Does the use of national distinctions, prominent in 20th-century Europe as attested by

<sup>11</sup> JOHNSON with KELLEY (eds) 2018. A widely cited piece from that feature is Robin D. G. Kelley’s short essay, “What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?” (2017). See the dialogue between philosopher Nancy Fraser and Barnaby Raine, Jordan T. Camp, Christina Heatherton, Manu Karuka, and Bruce Robbins in *Politics Letters*, 15 May 2019; also the exchange between Michael Waltzer and Olúfemi O. Táíwò and Liam Kofi Bright in *Dissent* in the summer of 2020. Most stimulating are the running

contributions to the “Race and Capitalism” online project run by the Social Science Research Council under the editorship of the political scientist Michael Dawson.

<sup>12</sup> LEROY and JENKINS, eds, 2021: 3. Note that the first three of these are not specific to capitalism, as shown by GRAEBER 2011. Julian Go notes that advocates of racial capitalism have not supplied a rigorous characterization of capitalism [GO 2020: 5].

<sup>13</sup> On the central roles of war and cities in the birth of capitalism, see TILLY 1992.

two world wars, produce *national* capitalism? Does the gendered division of labor spawn *gender* capitalism? And what of the erosion, if not erasure, of the ethnonational, ethnoreligious, and ethnolinguistic differences widely attested in the formation of European working classes in the period of Fordist industrialism, the United States aside?<sup>14</sup> (3) “Race serves as a tool for naturalizing the inequalities produced by capitalism”: This minimalist definition of the ideological function of race applies to any and all forms of inequality, capitalist or not, whose beneficiaries always try to cloak them in the mantle of legitimacy. And another institution provides for a more implacable sociodicy of the established order, the higher education system: Do we, for that reason, live under *credential* capitalism?<sup>15</sup>

Then (3) Jenkins and Leroy flag “the devastating effects of the subprime crisis for communities of color” and the growth of “the Prison Industrial Complex” as two tangible expressions of racial capitalism—these are the usual suspects in numerous invocations of the notion.<sup>16</sup> But the racial skew of the subprime debacle was an American peculiarity linked to the unique combination of high levels of racial and class segregation in the US metropolis with the specially lax federal regulation of the country’s financial industry.<sup>17</sup> As for the capitalist nature of hyperincarceration, it is a nonstarter: the notion that prisons serve to extract labor and generate private profits (beyond the firms supplying the services needed for the maintenance of the inmate population) pertains to political demonology, not to the sociology of the penal state, which remains a doggedly public institution. The myth of the Prison Industrial Complex is hardly the salvation of racial capitalism. One figure: fewer than 2,000 inmates out of 2.1 million were working for private employers at the peak of private prison employment in 2002; all correctional expenditures in the United States came to less than one-half of one percent of its Gross Domestic Product that same year. The construction of a gargantuan prison archipelago pertains to state-building, not to economic accumulation; it is a drain on the public coffers and ultimately deeply dysfunctional for neoliberal capitalism, aside from temporarily disappearing a vilified surplus population that will cycle back into the underbelly of cities in any case.<sup>18</sup> Hyperincarceration is another

<sup>14</sup> A single example suffices here: NOIRIEL [1988] 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Randall Collins crafted a close conceptual cognate more than forty years ago in his book *The Credential Society* [COLLINS 1979].

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, MURCH 2022, especially: 41–52, 73–86, and 105–119.

<sup>17</sup> TROUNSTINE 2018 and FLIGSTEIN 2021.

<sup>18</sup> WACQUANT 2009: 181–185, and WACQUANT 2010, for a methodical dismantling of the demonic myth of the “Prison Industrial Complex.”

American extremity that cannot be explained in terms of a universal logic of capitalism, racialized or not.

Racial capitalism, we are told, is “a highly malleable structure,” so *malleable* indeed that it encompasses exploitation and expropriation that draws populations into capitalist production (“slavery, colonialism, and enclosure”) as well as their opposite, exclusion (“containment, incarceration, abandonment”).<sup>19</sup> But what remains racial about capitalist exploitation after it has expelled racialized populations from the economy? On the other hand, is racial capitalism *malleable enough* to encompass the varieties of capitalisms well documented by comparative political economists, not only in the West, but also in East and Southeast Asia,<sup>20</sup> or is it irredeemably mired in unrepentant Occidentalism or, more narrowly still, in Atlantico-centrism?

It is good that the expression “racial capitalism” has energized research on the intersection of ethnoracial division and economic inequality and supplied historians, geographers, sociologists, and other scholars with a language to make their work relevant to the current American politics of race. If this encourages racial justice activists to take class seriously, this is all to the good. Trouble is, if we start from the *premise* of the “inextricability of race and capitalism” and the *postulation* that “the temporality of racial capitalism is one of ongoingness,”<sup>21</sup> we foreclose the question of the social conditions under which capitalism takes (or not) racial division on board *differentially* and could eventually throw it overboard.<sup>22</sup> Then we cannot construe the racialization of capitalism as a *historical variable* that ranges from coevalness and synergy to parasitism and disconnection, as capitalism moves from its primitive to competitive to monopoly to neoliberal incarnations.

Similarly, racial capitalism is hard-pressed to accommodate the varied historical bases of race as a naturalizing and hierarchizing principle of vision and division that is glossed over by the conveniently vague expression “people of color.”<sup>23</sup> *Ethnoracial classification and stratification are not everywhere fashioned from the same cloth*: here, they rely on descent, creating clear-cut boundaries and spawning an obsession with racial purity; there, on phenotype, creating fuzzy boundaries that facilitate admixture and admit categorical mobility; and elsewhere, on a range of

<sup>19</sup> JENKINS and LEROY 2021, “Introduction”: 3.

<sup>20</sup> FELDMANN 2019.

<sup>21</sup> JENKINS and LEROY 2021, “Introduction”: 15 and 12.

<sup>22</sup> Racial capitalism does not resolve “whether the interconnectedness of racial

difference and capitalism is a logical or a contingent necessity” [GO 2021: 6–7].

<sup>23</sup> The distinctions and claims in this paragraph are elaborated in WACQUANT (forthcoming), chap. 2.

sociocultural variables (religion, region, language, occupation, lifestyle, etc.), treated as markers of inherited and immutable difference. Moreover, racialization may impact some institutional sectors (say, the labor market) while leaving others largely untouched (say, the housing market or the marital sphere). Lastly, the salience of race on the phenomenological horizon and in the public sphere does not mechanically arise from, nor determine, its social consequentiality. Indeed, in many contemporary societies, the United States included, ethnoracial distinctions have surged in the political and journalistic fields even as the penalties for being an “ethnic” have decreased in the main, at the same time that glaring disparities endure in some domains. Much like it ignores the wide variety of capitalisms, racial capitalism *short-changes the variety of regimes of ethnoracial domination* and erases their distinctive historical dynamics.

I note with some worry five parallels between today’s vogue of “racial capitalism” and the academic craze of the “underclass” in the 1980s that sidetracked and neutralized an entire generation of scholars of race and poverty in the metropolis:<sup>24</sup> (1) the mistaken belief that the concept is *novel* and should reign supreme over its ever-expanding research province; (2) the notion that racial capitalism is essentially a *black issue*; (3) the fact that its resonance and currency emerge out of *traumatic racial events* piercing the screen of US public attention (the ghetto revolts of the 1960s, the spate of videographed police killings of black men in the 2010s); (4) the prime role that the Social Science Research Council has taken in supporting work animated by the category; and (5) the doggedly and doxically *Americano-centric cast* of the debate. Which leads one to wonder whether we are not witnessing a typical instance of the *lemming effect* caused by the ardent and commendable wish to reconnect academic debate with the burning racial issues of the day, but a wish that leads to burning up a lot of intellectual fuel for very limited scientific mileage.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, there is the claim that, because (Western-Atlantic) capitalism and slavery were *historically* linked, capitalism and race are *necessarily* linked, and this forever more. But *slavery is not a racial institution*. It does have an internal affinity with race in that both inflict generalized dishonor on the people they strike. But, as Orlando Patterson points out in his majestic tome, *Slavery and Social Death*, among the 55 slave societies for

<sup>24</sup> WACQUANT 2022.

<sup>25</sup> “The *lemming effect* denotes a bandwagon of enthusiastic scholars rushing en masse to invoke a notion because everyone

around them is invoking it, only to fall into a scientific precipice because the notion was flawed or impertinent to the phenomenon at hand” [WACQUANT 2022: 172].

which the requisite data is available, “75 percent had populations in which both slaves and masters were of the same mutually perceived racial group.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, for centuries, enslavement was a doxic practice that did not need legitimation and, when it did, one could turn to religion for it. Even in the United States, the racial defense of slavery was not fully articulated and broadly diffused until the 1840s in the works of the “School of American Ethnology.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in many civilizations, slaves played a marginal economic role. They were captured, bought, and held for ritual purposes, sexual or marital congress, administrative tasks, military impressment, used as tribute or currency, or to attest to the grandeur of a ruler, chief, prince, sultan, or emperor.<sup>28</sup> Here is a crucial triple question that racial capitalism eludes because it presupposes it resolved: When, how, and why did the *economic variant of slavery become racialized* in the Atlantic world? To say that capitalism and racism are “co-constituted,” to cite a common vocable, or that their relationship is one of “historical intimacy,” is an analytical cop-out. We must find a way to disentangle their relationships and specify the constituent components of “racial capitalism,” or else the notion will remain a mere oratorical gesture to echo the American racial politics of the day.

It is fine for activists to use a nebulous notion to provide a *diagnostic vision* of the task at hand and a *rhetorical tool* for mobilization.<sup>29</sup> It is an altogether different matter for scholars, who are *ex officio* expected to deploy rigorous concepts with a clear meaning and controlled uses subjected to the constructive critique of peers. The nexus of racial rule and capitalism is of paramount importance to a theory of both historical capitalism and ethnoracial domination. Therefore we should collectively beware of letting the momentary political allure of racial capitalism turn into an enduring analytic lure. Ultimately, a construct that has attained minimal semantic clarity and logical consistency must prove scientifically heuristic to justify its further use and extension by social scientists. At this writing, it is unclear what, if anything, the use of “racial capitalism” has revealed that we would not otherwise know—indeed, that we did not

<sup>26</sup> PATTERSON (1982) 2018: 176.

<sup>27</sup> KOLCHIN 2003: 192–193.

<sup>28</sup> PATTERSON (1982) 2018: 173.

<sup>29</sup> The notion then serves as a vehicle for ever more encompassing and totalizing, if not apocalyptic visions, as illustrated by geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s characterization of “racial capitalism” as a “catastrophe on a world scale” manifested by “austerity,

neoliberalism, and permanent war” with no end in sight: “Racial capitalism is all of capitalism” because “capitalism is racial since its beginning and it will continue to depend on racial practice and racial hierarchy no matter what” [GILMORE 2021]. But then, what is the point of mobilizing when faced with such a resistant, all-encompassing, and seemingly eternal structure?



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already know from the masterworks on the topic by W. E. B. Du Bois, Eric Williams, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Walter Rodney, and Manning Marable.<sup>30</sup> It behooves the advocates of “racial capitalism” to pause, then, and put in the hard work of epistemological elucidation, logical clarification, and historical elaboration needed if they are to make the label anything more than another *conceptual speculative bubble*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Retro-projecting the term “racial capitalism” onto the work of these scholars, as Leroy and Jenkins do in *Histories of Racial Capitalism* [2021: 7–10], does not clarify and validate its current uses. A similar move, seeking to annex to the notion a long string of “Black anticapitalist thinkers” going back a full century, is made by BURDEN-STELLY 2020: 11.

<sup>31</sup> “A *conceptual speculative bubble* develops when an inchoate, unbounded, or unfinished notion, often borrowed from political discourse and action, is invoked to capture an ever wider range of historical realities before its semantics have solidified.” [WACQUANT 2022: 173].

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