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THE LIMIT POINT OF CAPITALIST EQUALITY

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an era of declining membership in mass-based labour and civil rights organisations, the prospects are dim for both a “politics of race” and a “politics of class”. Shifting the analytic focus from difference to domination directs our attention to the entanglement of race and superfluity, as well as the racialising impact of violence, imprisonment, and warfare. Rejecting an understanding of capitalism as an increasingly inclusive engine of racial uplift, and the state as an ultimate guarantor of civic equality, an abolitionist anti-racism would categorically reject the continuing affirmation of the fundamental respectability, productivity or patriotism of racialised groups as a way to determine their relative fitness for racial domination. Beginning from radically different histories of racialisation, abolitionist anti-racist struggles would aim to dismantle the machinery of “race” at the heart of a fantasy of formal freedom, where the “limit point of capitalist equality is laid bare as the central protagonist of racial ordering.”²⁵

25 Kyriakides and Torres, *Race Defaced: Paradigms of Pessimism, Politics of Possibility*, 36.

understood primarily as vestigial forms of historical injustice, therefore would not in principle be incompatible with capitalism. Finally, the reasoning goes, the qualitative difference between class and other forms of identity rests on the fact that class identity cannot be “celebrated”. And yet the argument elides a fundamental contradiction between the abolition of class inequality and an implicit agent of emancipation in the figure of the working class. While poverty may not be a form of difference which can be “celebrated”, Wood nevertheless produces an implicitly affirmationist account of the working class as that social agent both responsible for and uniquely capable of ending capitalism. The question of how the affirmation of such an identity could bring about the end of class oppression, without simply reaffirming capitalism under the guise of worker self-management, is passed over in silence. Despite the attempt to criticise the logic of identity-based struggles, Wood ultimately offers what I want to call an affirmationist politics of class structurally indistinguishable from similarly affirmationist accounts of race and gender difference.

But what if we did not center anti-racist struggles on difference but on domination? To understand “race” not as a marker of difference but as a system of domination poses the question of the material abolition of “race” as an indicator of structural subordination. Both anti-racist critics of class reductionist Marxisms and Marxist critics of liberal reformist, “merely cultural” anti-racisms gloss over the strategic similarities between the increasingly desperate, defensive struggles of the US labour movement and the race and gender-based “identity politics” to which it is so consistently counterposed. As the 2011 labour struggles in Wisconsin so dramatically revealed, the US labour movement’s turn toward the state and electoral politics to secure its very right to exist mirrors the extreme difficulty of securing even minimal racially redistributive programs in the aftermath of the Great Society programs of the 1960s. Which is to say that, in

Without an account of the relationship between “race” and the systematic reproduction of the class relation, the question of revolution as the overcoming of entrenched social divisions can only be posed in a distorted and incomplete form. And without an understanding of the dynamics of racialisation – from capitalism’s historical origins in “primitive accumulation” to the US state’s restructuring in the post-World War II era – continuing struggles against evolving forms of racial rule can only be misrecognised as peripheral to an ultimately race-neutral conflict between capital and labour. Rather than waning with the decline of what is sometimes construed as a vestigial system of folk beliefs, resistance to racial subordination in the US has continued. “Race” has not withered away: rather, it has been reconfigured in the face of austerity measures and an augmented “post-racial” security state which has come into being to manage the ostensible racial threats to the nation posed by black wageless life, Latino immigrant labour, and “Islamic terrorism”.

Through “race”, black chattel slavery in the United States constituted “free” labour as white, and whiteness as unenslaveability and unalienable property. The formal abolition of slavery has subsequently come to define the American achievement of what Marx called “double freedom”: the “freedom” of forcible separation from the means of production, and the “freedom” to sell labour-power to the collective class of owners of those means.¹ However, “race” doesn’t simply complicate any periodisation of the historical origins of capitalism; it was the protagonist of a global array of national liberation, anti-apartheid, and civil rights movements in the mid-twentieth century. A planetary anti-racist offensive called into question nearly four and a half centuries of racial “common sense” and largely discredited white supremacy as explicit state policy. “Race” has been reconfigured in response to this world-historical anti-racist upsurge, and continues to exist as a body of ideas – but also as a relation of domination inside and

¹ See ‘The Logic of Gender’ in this issue.

outside the wage relation – reproduced through superficially non-racial institutions and policies. Two dynamics have reproduced “race” in the US since the mid-twentieth-century anti-racist movements: first, economic subordination through racialised wage differentials and superfluousness, and second, the racialising violence and global reach of the penal and national security state. Most contemporary ascriptive racialisation processes are to a great extent politically unrepresentable as “race” matters because they have been superficially coded as race-neutral – disciplinary state apparatuses, for example, defined through discourses of “national security threats”, “illegal immigration”, and “urban crime”.

Without an understanding of the structuring force of “race” in US foreign policy and as a driver of the rise of the US carceral state in response to the end of legal segregation, one can have only a partial understanding of the institutional fusion and seemingly unlimited expansion of police and military power over the last forty years. The anti-racist critiques of recent social movements like Occupy Wall Street, and the consolidation of opposition under the banner of a politics of decolonisation, illuminate a major faultline in US political life cleaving a “politics of race” from a “politics of class”. The intellectual polarisation between these two political formations has revealed the inadequacy of both Marxist approaches to class, and theories of “race” couched in an idiom of cultural difference rather than domination.

Overlapping with – yet conceptually distinct from – class, culture, caste, gender, nation, and ethnicity, “race” is not only a system of ideas but an array of ascriptive racialising procedures which structure multiple levels of social life. Despite its commitment to challenging racial ideology as the assignment of differential value to physical appearance and ancestry, much anti-racist analysis and practice continues to treat “race” as a noun, as a property or attribute of identities or groups, rather than

Sweeping critiques of “identity politics”, or of liberal multiculturalism as neoliberal mystification, conceal a deeper elision of the identitarian logic at work in a socialist and social democratic “politics of class”. The classical workers’ movement, with its concept of “class consciousness”, was premised upon a dream that the widespread affirmation of a working-class identity could serve as the basis for workers’ hegemony – within nationally constituted zones of capital accumulation – and so also for a workers’ revolution. Like much contemporary anti-racist scholarship, the Marxist critique of identity politics typically *remakes capitalism as a problem of identity*, specifically of class identity, and reduces structural exploitation to distributive inequalities in wealth. Labour and identity-based struggles, assumed to be qualitatively different in such accounts, are in fact structured by the same representational logic of affirming identities within capitalism. “The ‘difference’ that constitutes class as an ‘identity,’” Ellen Meiksins Wood writes, “is, by definition, a relationship of inequality and power, in a way that sexual or cultural ‘difference’ need not be”:

the working class, as the direct object of the most fundamental and determinative – though certainly not the only – form of oppression, and the one class whose interests do not rest on the oppression of other classes, can create the conditions for liberating all human beings in the struggle to liberate itself.²⁴

This argument from Wood highlights three interrelated problems of framing the interaction between systems of racial, gender, and economic domination which plague both Marxist critiques of “identity politics” and contemporary theories of racial difference. If for Wood race, gender and sexuality are definitionally non-economic categories of social life which index economic inequality only contingently, then it is simply a tautology that these identities are not constitutive of capitalism as such. The abolition of sexual or racial domination, here

²⁴ See Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*. (Aakar Books 2007), 258; and ‘Marxism Without Class Struggle?’ *Socialist Register* 20 (Merlin 1983), 242.

institutionally reinforced division between anti-racism and Marxism has a long history. It has been a commonplace of recent popular historical accounts of the political trajectory of the 1960s-era “New Left” to blame the “fragmentation” of a unitary revolutionary class subject on the emergence of various anti-racist struggles: from US ethnic nationalisms aligned with mid-twentieth century African and Asian anticolonial movements; to black feminist critiques of the centrality of white, heterosexual, middle class women’s experiences in second-wave feminism; to what both liberal and conservative critics have lamented as the rise of a balkanising “identity politics”.

The intellectual polarisation of theoretical traditions which address either race or class could be termed the “unhappy marriage of anti-racism and Marxism”. In the latter half of the twentieth century, with the waning of Third Worldist, Maoist, Guevarist or World-Systems Marxist analyses of “race” and colonialism – and of bodies of writing aligned with and informed by mass anti-capitalist and anti-racist political movements – academic theorists have invoked Marx to reread “race” as historical contingency. “Race” typically persists in academic Marxist discourse as a social division internal to the working class and sown by economic elites in order to drive down wages, fragment worker insurgency, and create the permanent threat of a nonwhite reserve army of labour. In these accounts “race” becomes a functional or derivative component of class rule. This functionalist or “class reductionist” account of “race” has been thoroughly challenged by anti-racist scholars over the last half century, yet these challenges have customarily emphasised the irreducibility or relative autonomy of “race” as one among many equivalent though entangled systems of domination which can be simply superadded to “class”. In turn, both Marxist and anti-racist theories assert, though for vastly different reasons, that there is no constitutive relation between “race” and capitalism.

as a set of ascriptive processes which impose fictive identities and subordinate racialised populations. To distinguish racial ascription from voluntary acts of cultural identification – and from a range of responses to racial rule from flight to armed revolt – requires a shift in focus from “race” to racism. But focusing on the phenomenon of racism tends to narrow the terrain upon which “race” is structurally enforced to personal attitudes or racial ideologies rather than institutional processes which may generate profound racial disparities without requiring individual racist beliefs or intentions.

As a result, “race” gets theorised in divergent cultural or economic terms as evidence of the need to either affirm denigrated group identities or integrate individuals more thoroughly into capitalist markets momentarily distorted by individual prejudice. On the one hand, “race” is a form of cultural stigmatisation and misrepresentation requiring personal, institutional, and/or state recognition. On the other, “race” is a system of wage differentials, wealth stratification, and occupational and spatial segregation. Whether defended or derided by critics across the political spectrum, the concept of racial or cultural identity has become a kind of proxy for discussing “race” matters in general. Conversely, dismissals of “identity politics” grounded in functionalist or epiphenomenalist accounts of “race” propose an alternative socialist and social democratic “politics of class” based upon essentially the same political logic of affirming subjects – i.e. workers – within and sometimes against capitalism. This division between economic and cultural forms of “race” naturalises racial economic inequality and transforms the problem of racial oppression and exploitation into either an epiphenomenon of class or the misrecognition of identity.²

Both the cultural and economic stratification theories have tended to frame racial inequality as fundamentally a problem of the unequal distribution of existing privilege,

² See Nancy Fraser and Linda Alcoff, who stake out nuanced, though largely opposed, theoretical positions on the political possibilities and limits of ‘identity politics’. As this article goes on to argue, both positions are fundamentally informed by the historical promise of a social-democratic coalitional subject, uniting labour, feminist, and anti-racist political campaigns. See Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press 2006); and Fraser, ‘Rethinking Recognition’, *New Left Review* 3 (May-June 2000).

power, and resources while continuing to posit the economy as fundamentally race-neutral or even as an engine of racial progress. A dearth of materialist analyses of the bundle of ascriptive and punitive procedures organised under the sign of “race” has meant that critics from across the political spectrum have continued to downplay the severity and extent of racial domination organised by putatively “colourblind” social institutions. Saddled with discourses of meritocratic racial uplift, “race” continues to be represented either as a cultural particularity or as a deviation from colourblind civic equality. In either case, “race” is articulated in terms of real or illusory difference from a political or cultural norm rather than as a form of structural coercion.

If “race” is thus understood in terms of difference rather than domination, then anti-racist practice will require the affirmation of stigmatised identities rather than their abolition as indices of structural subordination. Formulating an abolitionist anti-racism would require imagining the end of “race” as hierarchical assignment, rather than a denial of the political salience of cultural identities. “Race” here names a relation of subordination. The conceptual elision of the difference between racial ascription and individual and group responses to racial interpellation is endemic in much of the literature either denouncing or defending a politics of identity. From the point of view of emancipation, a social order freed from racial and gender domination would not necessarily spell the end of identity as such, but rather of ascriptive processes so deeply bound up with the historical genesis and trajectory of global capitalism that the basic categories of collective sociality would be transformed beyond recognition.³

A precipitous 21st century decline in the US labour share of business income, and the transition to austerity, has completely altered the terrain, the stakes, and the chances of success for not only the American labour movement but all contemporary anti-racist

³ See ‘Spontaneity, Mediation, Rupture’ in this issue.

government of social insecurity” founded on a punitive upsurge in surveillance, policing, and incarceration in response to the disappearance of secure wage work.²³

“Race” is thus rooted in two overlapping processes of allocation and control. Past and present racial discrimination is cumulative and distributes precarity, unemployment, and informality unevenly across the economy along “race” and gender lines. But “race” is also operationalised in various state and civilian political projects of social control which classify and coerce “deserving” and “undeserving” fractions of various racial groups while determining their fitness for citizenship. Eroding the institutional separation between policing, border securitisation, and global warfare, a massively expanded security state now sends 1 in 3 black men to prison in their lifetime, deports nearly half a million undocumented immigrants annually, has exterminated anywhere from 100,000 to over a million civilians in Iraq alone, and is now gearing up for a \$46 billion dollar “border surge” which includes drone surveillance and biometric exit scanning. 21st century “race” emerges from this matrix of securitisation.

5 THE TROUBLE WITH “CLASS”: class politics as identity politics

As a rhetoric of racial diversity has been used increasingly to conceal or even justify deepening economic inequality, recent theorists from Slavoj Žižek and Ellen Meiksins Wood to Walter Benn Michaels contend that what they call multinational or neoliberal capitalism has come to champion a “politics of race” against a “politics of class”. For these critics, identity-based social movements, and liberal multiculturalism in particular, is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to what Michaels considers the more urgent problem of class inequality. Conversely, anti-racist theorists from Howard Winant to David Theo Goldberg have argued tirelessly for the irreducibility of “race” to political economy. The

²³ Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Duke University Press 2009). See ‘A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats’, in this issue, for a discussion of how such a model was developed in the case of Britain.

4 “RACE” AND SURPLUS HUMANITY

The colonial and racial genealogy of European capitalism has been encoded directly into the economic “base” through an ongoing history of racial violence which structures both unfree and informal labour, and which binds surplus populations to capitalist markets. If superfluity, stratification, and wage differentials are deracialised and the racial content of such categories rendered contingent, then “race” can only appear as epiphenomenal, and possess a *de facto* “specificity”, which severs any causal link between capitalism and racialisation. The racial typologies which emerged from and enabled the spatial expansion of European capitalism as a mode of production, have been renewed over the course of centuries by an immanent tendency within capitalism to produce surplus populations in ghettos, slums, and favelas throughout the world. After the mid-twentieth century racial “break”, formal decolonisation – in places like Brazil, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – left in its wake developmentalist states which absorbed ideologies of industrialisation and, so also, racialised indigenous populations, ethnic groups, and stigmatised castes as peripheral to the wage relation. Such populations will never be fully integrated into capitalist accumulation processes except as bodies to be policed, warehoused, or exterminated.

In the US, the postwar Keynesian state’s grudging extension of public social provisions to non-white communities in the 1960s has now been withdrawn and largely replaced by carceral and state-mandated work regimes applied to disposable populations who inhabit the politically unrepresentable dead zones of raced, gendered, and sexualised poverty. The only alternative to low wage, precarious service work for these populations is a criminalised informal-economy abutting America’s vast carceral system. The US in particular has served as a global model for a “new

up against the reality of persistent structural unemployment and superfluity.

political struggles as well. The legacy of racial and gender exclusions which have structured the US labour movement has been steadily eroded at the same time that the relative size and strength of organised labour has dwindled. Because the public sector, with its robust anti-discrimination mandates, represents the last bastion of US organised labour, hostility to the US labour movement is frequently couched in racist rhetoric. As Kyriakides and Torres argue, 1960s-era visions of a Third World, non-aligned, or anti-colonial coalitional subject in the US have, in an age of declining growth, fractured into multiple “ethnically determined subjects of identity in competition not only for a shred of an ever-shrinking economic settlement but for recognition of their suffering conferred by a nation-state in which the Right won the political battle and the Left won the culture war.”⁴

4 Christopher Kyriakides and Rodolfo Torres, *Race Defaced: Paradigms of Possibility* (Stanford University Press 2012), 119.

5 Barbara J. Fields, ‘Whiteness, racism, and identity’, *International Labor and Working Class History* 60 (Fall 2001), 48-56.

ADDENDUM: ON TERMINOLOGY

“Race” has been variously described as an illusion, a social construction, a cultural identity, a biological fiction but social fact, and an evolving complex of social meanings. Throughout this article, “race” appears in quotation marks in order to avoid attributing independent causal properties to objects defined by ascriptive processes. Simply put, “race” is the consequence and not the cause of *racial ascription* or *racialisation* processes which justify historically asymmetrical power relationships through reference to phenotypical characteristics and ancestry: “Substituted for racism, race transforms the act of a subject into an attribute of the object.”⁵

I have also enclosed “race” in quotation marks in order to suggest three overlapping dimensions of the term: as an index of varieties of material inequality, as a bundle of ideologies and processes which create a racially

stratified social order, and as an evolving history of *struggle against racism and racial domination* – a history which has often risked reifying “race” by revaluing imposed identities, or reifying “racelessness” by affirming liberal fictions of atomistically isolated individuality. The intertwining of racial domination with the class relation holds out the hope of systematically dismantling “race” as an indicator of unequal structural relations of power. “Race” can thus be imagined as an emancipatory category not from the point of view of its affirmation, but through its abolition.

1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACIAL SUBORDINATION: from *limpieza de sangre* to global superfluity

The trajectory of racial domination, from slavery to racialised surplus populations, traces a long historical arc between the colonial creation of “race” in 16th century Spanish notions of “purity of blood” (*limpieza de sangre*), and its structural reproduction under a restructured global capitalism – a history which can only be briefly sketched here. The genealogy of “race” and its precursors can be traced back to the spatial expansion of European colonialism – from the baroque racialised caste system of Spanish and Portuguese colonial administrations to the later, more Manichaeian racial order produced by the British colonisation of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The extermination, enslavement, or colonisation of racialised populations – often at the hands of a colonial class of indentured servants – consolidated “race” through the waning of European servitude and the emergence of black chattel slavery. This was the flipside of what Marxists call “proletarianisation”. Marked by ongoing histories of exclusion from the wage and violent subjugation to varieties of “unfree labour”, racialised populations were inserted into early capitalism in ways that continue to define contemporary surplus populations.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, popular US stereotypes of the relative economic productivity of racial subgroups have justified the exposure of such groups to state surveillance, policing or incarceration – from border patrol shootings of “illegals” to black mass-incarceration. At the same time, the “post-racial” civilising mission of the US, and its prosecution of a multi-trillion dollar military campaign across the Islamic world, has been vouchsafed by a national mythology of the progressive overcoming of the legacy of slavery and legal segregation.

The changing relationship between the US state and superfluous domestic populations highlights the global, foundational role of state violence as a racialisation process. The role of the state itself as an ostensibly neutral agent of racial reform, rather than the principal agent of racial violence, provides the missing third term in theorising the relationship between race and capital. Contemporary US racial politics is fundamentally structured by the decline of US global economic hegemony and by the hyper-militarisation of a “post-racial” security state in response to three racialised “civilisational” threats: the criminal threat of black surplus populations, the demographic threat of Latino immigrant labour, and the unlimited national security threat posed by an elastically conceived Islamic terrorist menace whose adherents are subject to collective punishment, torture, and preemptive eradication. All three are directly targeted and racialised by the state’s penal, citizenship-conferring, and domestic security institutions. The rise of the anti-black US carceral state from the 1970s onward exemplifies rituals of state and civilian violence which enforce the racialisation of wageless life, and the racial ascription of wagelessness. From the point of view of capital, “race” is renewed not only through persistent racialised wage differentials, or the kind of occupational segregation posited by earlier “split labour market” theories of race, but through the racialisation of unwaged surplus or superfluous populations from Khartoum to the slums of Cairo.²²

²²To be clear, these populations are not outside but firmly within capitalism—with labour regulation enforced by an array of punitive state apparatuses—so that while the wage no longer directly mediates collective access to basic needs like food and shelter, a vast informal economy has arisen for securing the basic means of survival. In the example of the partial proletarianisation of the Chinese peasantry and the creation of a massive, 160-million-person rural migrant labour force, agricultural workers, or small peasants, have often become unwaged, self-employed informal sector workers. The historical workers’ movement’s dream (a dream which also sustained the US civil rights movement and an array of anti-colonial national liberation movements), of progressive incorporation into the wage, has run

the proliferation of intra-national non-white ethnic hierarchies, is grounded in intertwined processes of exclusion from the wage, the increasing criminalisation of informal economies, and elevated vulnerability to state terror.

3 RACIAL DOMINATION AFTER THE “RACIAL BREAK”

What Howard Winant and Michael Omi have called the racial “break” or “great transformation”—driven by a world-historical anti-racist upsurge of decolonisation, civil rights, and anti-apartheid social movements in the mid-twentieth century—has discredited white supremacy as explicit state policy across the globe. For Omi and Winant, racial domination has given way to the struggle over racial hegemony, and coercion has given way to consent. But fifty years after the racial “break”, racial domination has also evolved. Many ostensibly “post-colonial” states have resorted to racial violence and ethnic cleansing in the name of nation-building and economic development. After the “racial break”, capital and race intertwine both inside and outside the wage relation. Insofar as labour markets organise the ratio of paid to unpaid labour, “race” as a marker of economic subordination is grounded both in a permanently superfluous population and entrenched wage differentials. After the repeal of most Jim Crow laws and racialised national immigration restrictions, two anti-racist political orientations emerged. In the case of US black-freedom struggles after World War II, persistent racialised wage differentials—and racial discrimination in housing, education, and credit markets—became the target of a late civil-rights-movement politics of equitable inclusion and electoral representation. At the same time, racial exclusion from the wage, *de facto* segregation in ghettos and exposure to systemic police violence, made state institutions—like welfare, prisons, and policing—the target of a black feminist welfare-reform movement, waves of ghetto and prison riots, and a more militant politics of self-defense and self-assertion.²¹

21 Recent studies of the history of armed self-defense in the Civil Rights Movement, for example by groups like the Deacons for Defense and Justice, have emphasised the complexity of the commitment of movement activists to Gandhian strategic nonviolence. See Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (NYU Press 2013); Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (University Press of Florida 2007).

The cursory treatment of racial violence in the historical narration of “primitive accumulation” remains a fundamental blind spot in Marxist analyses of the relationship between “race” and capitalism. In the era of the *conquista* and in the transition to capitalism, “race” came into being through plunder, enslavement, and colonial violence. At the very same time, primitive accumulation in England produced a dispossessed and superfluous ex-peasantry, for the factory system that might absorb them had not yet been created. Many of these ex-peasants were eventually sent to the colonies, or inducted into imperial enterprises—the navy, merchant marines, etc. In the 18th and 19th centuries, more of these surplus populations were integrated into the developing capitalist economy, whether as chattel slaves or as wage labourers, according to an increasingly intricate typology of “race”. Finally, after decades of compounding increases in labour productivity, capital began to expel more labour from the production process than was absorbed. That, in turn, produced yet another kind of superfluous population in the form of a disproportionately non-white industrial reserve army of labour. At the periphery of the global capitalist system, capital now renews “race” by creating vast superfluous urban populations from the close to one billion slum-dwelling and desperately impoverished descendants of the enslaved and colonised.

In the 21st century, the substantial over-representation of racialised US groups among the unemployed and underemployed—“last hired and first fired”—demonstrates the concessionary, uneven incorporation of these groups into a system of highly racialised wage differentials, occupational segregation, and precarious labour. As capital sloughs off these relative surplus populations in the core, the surplus capital produced by fewer and more intensively exploited workers in the Global North scours the globe for lower wages, and reappears as the racial threat of cheap labour from the Global South.

In the US, with the end of secure wage labour and the withdrawal of public welfare provisions, a massive “post-racial” security state has come into being to manage the supposed civilisational threats to the nation – by policing black wageless life, deporting immigrant labour, and waging an unlimited “War on Terror”. The catastrophic rise of black mass incarceration, the hyper-militarisation of the southern US border, and the continuation of open-ended security operations across the Muslim world, reveal how “race” remains not only a probabilistic assignment of relative economic value but also an index of differential vulnerability to state violence.⁶

2 READING WHITE SUPREMACY BACK INTO THE “BASE”

While Marx and Engels generally insisted on the need for workers to oppose racism in its more blatant 19th century manifestations, they did not attempt to articulate the relation of “race” and class at a categorical level.⁷ As Derek Sayer observes, “Marx was a man of his time and place”:

Like most other Victorians, Marx thought both “race” and family natural categories (even if subject to some “historical modification”), and had little trouble in distinguishing between “civilisation” (which for him was white, western and modern) and “barbarism.” His views on the beneficial results of European colonialism would embarrass many twentieth-century Marxists, notwithstanding his denunciations of the violence of its means...⁸

The theoretical relation between “race” and class has subsequently become the subject of a long debate in the varieties of academic Marxism that emerged as a “New Left” generation inspired by the struggles of the sixties entered the university. In an early and influential contribution to this conversation, Stuart Hall asserted that “race” was “the modality in which class is ‘lived’, the

⁶ See Nikhil Pal Singh, ‘Racial Formation in an Age of Permanent War’ in Daniel HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido, eds, *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (University of California 2012), 276–301.

⁷ Marx’s pronouncement that ‘labour in the white skin can never free itself as long as labour in the black skin is branded’ ([MECW 35], 305) is often quoted by his defenders, as are his denunciations of anti-Irish racism. Less often mentioned are Marx and Engels’s opinions about ‘lazy Mexicans’ and the cause of the political immaturity of Lafargue, Marx’s son-in-law, being ‘the stigma of his Negro heritage’ and ‘Creole blood’. See Frederick Engels, ‘Democratic Pan-Slavism’, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 231 (MECW 8),

While non-racially determined varieties of slave labour predated the European colonial “Age of Discovery”, capitalism bears the unique distinction of forging a systematic racist doctrine from the 16th to 19th centuries – culminating in 19th century anthropological theories of scientific racism – to justify racial domination, colonial plunder, and an array of racially delineated varieties of unfree labour and unequal citizenship. The history of capitalism isn’t simply the history of the proletarianisation of an independent peasantry but of the violent racial domination of populations whose valorisation as wage labour, to reverse a common formulation, has been merely historically contingent: “socially dead” African slaves, the revocable sovereignty and *terra nullius* of indigenous peoples, and the nerveless, supernumerary body of the coolie labourer.

Racial disparities have been reproduced as an inherent category of capitalism since its origins not primarily through the wage, but through its absence. The initial moment of contact between a European colonial order and an unwaged, racialised “outside” to capital has been progressively systematised within capitalism itself as a racialised global division of labour and the permanent structural oversupply of such labour, which has produced “one billion city-dwellers who inhabit postmodern slums”.²⁰

Insofar as labour markets organise the ratio of paid to unpaid labour, “race” as a marker of economic subordination is grounded both in a permanently superfluous population and entrenched racialised wage differentials. The expulsion of living labour from the production process places a kind of semi-permeable racialising boundary bifurcating productive and unproductive populations even within older racial categories: a kind of flexible global colour line separating the formal and informal economy, and waged from wageless life. Though this wageless colour line is minimally permeable and explicit racial criteria are no longer formally sanctioned, the material reproduction of racial domination, including

²⁰ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (Verso 2006), 19.

leasing, and debt peonage to gendered forms of home-work and unwaged reproductive labour – *it has required the systematic racialisation of this labour through the creation of an array of effectively non-sovereign raced and gendered subjects*. These modes of exploitation are not destined to disappear with the expansion of capitalist social relations around the world – e.g. through the massive campaigns of independent states in Africa, Latin America, and Asia to subjugate local populations to projects of industrialisation. Instead they are reproduced through the creation of caste-like surplus populations, deserted by the wage but still imprisoned within capitalist markets. “Race” is not extrinsic to capitalism or simply the product of specific historical formations such as South African Apartheid or Jim Crow America. Likewise, capitalism does not simply incorporate racial domination as an incidental part of its operations, but from its origins systematically begins producing and reproducing “race” as global surplus humanity.

As Marx famously noted, the basis for “primitive accumulation”, requiring the dispossession of the peasantry in England and Scotland, lay in New World plantation slavery, resource extraction, and the extermination of non-European populations on a world scale:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of blackskins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moment of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England's Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China, &c.¹⁹

¹⁹ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), 739.

medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through.’⁹ Hall and other cultural theorists supplemented Marxist categories of “base” and “superstructure” with the ideas of Western Marxist figures such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci in particular, and his development of the concept of “hegemony”—with its room for more nuanced theories of culture, ideology, and politics—has been a central reference in academic attempts to rearticulate the relation of “race” and class. In this vein, anti-racist struggle is viewed as a contest for “democratic hegemony”, which followed from the mid-twentieth century discrediting of white supremacy as explicit state policy.¹⁰ Until recently, the Gramscian analytic of hegemony, which has informed both Marxist cultural theory and many highly influential critical accounts of “race” and slavery, has largely gone unquestioned.¹¹

Recent critical writing by Frank Wilderson—part of a group of contemporary theoreticians of black politics whom Wilderson has broadly labelled “Afro-pessimist”, including Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Jared Sexton, and Joy James—sharply challenges the appropriateness of this Gramscian framework. Wilderson assesses the limits of a political economy of “race” centered on wage work, rather than on direct relations of racial violence and terror—from black chattel slavery to black mass incarceration. In contrast to a Marxist perspective that focuses on the struggle around the wage, or around the terms of exploitation, Wilderson identifies “the despotism of the unwaged relation” as the engine that drives anti-black racism.¹²

Wilderson presents a devastating critique of the relevance of a Gramscian analysis of hegemony for understanding structural anti-black violence. For Wilderson it is the focus on the wage which leads to the inability of Marxism to conceptualise gratuitous violence

362; Babacar Camara, *Marxist Theory, Black/African Specificities, and Racism* (Lexington 2008), 71-2.

⁸ Derek Sayer, ‘Introduction’ to *Readings from Karl Marx* (Routledge 1989), ix-xx.

⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance’, *Black British Cultural Studies* (University of Chicago Press 1996), 55.

¹⁰ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (Routledge 1994).

¹¹ For Marxist alternatives to the Gramscian analytic of hegemony, see Bonefeld Holloway, Richard Gunn, and Kosmas Psychopedis *Open Marxism*, vols. 1-3 (Pluto 1995).

¹² Frank Wilderson III, ‘Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?’ *Social Identities* 9 (2003), 230.

against black bodies, a “relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony”.¹³ Wilderson is right to point out that “the privileged subject of Marxist discourse is a subaltern who is approached by variable capital – a wage.”¹⁴ This is because access to the wage was a prerequisite for both labour and later identity-based civil struggles after the end of legal segregation, throughout the 20th century. From the point of view of the classical worker’s movement, racism was thus seen as an unfortunate impediment to a process of progressive integration into an expanding working class. Yet it is precisely the racialisation of the unwaged, unfree, and excluded which constitutes civil society as a space where recognition is bestowed via formal wage contracts and abstract citizenship rights for its members.¹⁵ Thus for Wilderson “the black subject reveals Marxism’s inability to think white supremacy as the base.”¹⁶

Against a Gramscian reading of Marx, with its affirmationist focus on wage labour, value-form theorists provide an alternative framework for charting the complex interplay between direct and indirect forms of domination. If capital is first and foremost an indirect or impersonal form of domination (unlike black chattel slavery or feudalism, for example), in which production relations are not subordinated to direct social relations, there is no necessary incompatibility between this and the persistence or growth of direct, overt forms of racial and gender domination. At play here are not only unwaged, coerced or dependent forms of labour, but also, crucially, the management of those populations which have become redundant in relation to capital. Such populations are expendable but nonetheless trapped within the capital relation, because their existence is defined by a generalised commodity economy which does not recognise their capacity to labour. The management of such populations could be said to be “form-determined” by the capital relation without being subsumed by it.

13 Ibid., 230.

14 Ibid., 225.

15 For a book-length critique of the fiction of ‘colour-blind’ and gender neutral participatory parity which governs much social contractarian thought, see Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell UP 1997); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford UP 1988); Pateman and Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Polity 2007).

16 Wilderson, ‘Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?’, 225.

The “form-determination” theory of the state may also help overcome some of the limits of a Gramscian view of the state as an object over which contending social forces struggle to gain control. From the “state-derivation debate” of the 1970s there emerged an alternative view of the state as a particular manifestation of the capital relation – constituted by the separation of the indirect, impersonal relations of production from direct political power. Thus the state, with its expanded penal or carceral capacities, can impose direct relations of racial domination while for instance involving itself in the disciplinary regulation and expulsion of immigrant labour. In those relations mediated by “free” exchange, where wage labour as a commodity is traded, the state is obliged to ensure the terms of exchange and contract, while unwaged relations put one or both parties in the relation potentially outside or beyond the law. The increasingly punitive criminalisation of the purchase, sale, and transportation of illicit drugs provides perhaps one of the most infamous examples of a racialised and racialising informal economy fundamentally structured by state violence. Women’s former legal status as chattel vis-à-vis marriage offers another, in which women did not traditionally have protection from their husbands within the law, but only protection from men who were not their husbands. The limited protection of this legal status as chattel was revoked in the case of black domestic labourers in order to rationalise widespread rape and sexual exploitation by white male employers.¹⁷ In either case, the racial division of both productive and reproductive labour consistently maintains racial hierarchies within gender categories, and gender hierarchies within racial categories.¹⁸

The workers’ movement – with its valorisation of wage-labour, work, and the worker as the subject of history – failed to grasp that wage-labour is not the only stable form of exploitation on the basis of which capitalists can profit. Capitalism has not only proven fully compatible with unfree labour – from slavery, indentured servitude, convict

17 See Evelyn Nakano Glenn, ‘From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive labour’, *Signs* 18: 1 (1992), 1-43.

18 As P. Valentine has observed, ‘rigorous efforts to engage with and integrate analyses of race that do not mesh seamlessly with Marxist categories’ will inevitably require both rethinking some of those categories and challenging some entrenched orthodoxies of anti-racist thought! P. Valentine, ‘The Gender Distinction in Communisation Theory’, *Lies* 1 (2012), 206. This article is in part an attempt to respond to this invitation.