

Black Atlantic, Black Liberation

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The cultural history of the 'Black Atlantic' and the African diaspora as a "modern political and cultural formation" cannot be adequately understood without reference to the transatlantic slave trade and colonial conquest.¹ Blackness and the ideology of white supremacy are legacies of European colonialism and its plunder and pillaging of Africa and other continents. 'Race', in this sense, is not extrinsic to capitalist modernity or simply the product of specific historical formations such as South African apartheid (c. 1948-1994) or Jim Crow America (c. 1883-1965). 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".²

Africans caught and sold into chattel slavery provided the unfree labor for the plantation system in the Southern parts of North America and in the Caribbean; they were condemned to the production of cotton, sugar, tobacco, and coffee as commodities for the emerging world market - or the misery of domestic servitude. The 'triangular trade', which lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, was an economic terror regime if there ever was one. According to conservative estimates, 12.5 million Africans were taken across the so-called Middle Passage (of the triangular trade) on slave ships; over 2 million died on this journey alone.

Kunta Kinte, Alex Haley's iconic fictional character, first introduced in the 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and adapted to the television screen in the eponymous 1977 ABC miniseries, is a popular representation of the history and trauma of chattel slavery (which considers slaves as personal property), the Middle Passage and the plantation system. In 2016, budgeted

¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: 1993, p. 19.

² Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism," *Endnotes* 3 (2013), 202-223, here p. 214.

at \$50 million and featuring famous actors such as Forest Whitaker and Laurence Fishburne, a slightly less melodramatic remake of *Roots* was aired on the History Channel. Here, too, Kunta Kinte remains the story's most iconic character. Taken captive in the Gambia and sold into the slave trade, the male Mandinka warrior's courageous refusal to accept his slave name and numerous daring attempts at escape that resulted in his mutilation are commonly understood as contributing to the cultural memory of slavery and liberation in a way that equally acknowledges black suffering and resistance: "They can put the chains on your body. Never let them put the chains on your mind" (*Roots*, 2016, episode 2).

Such focus on *individual* acts of symbolic resistance and defiant consciousness, however, also works to erase the memory of *collective* acts of militant resistance such as slave revolts (e.g. in South Carolina, 1822, led by Denmark Vesey, and in Virginia, 1831, led by Nat Turner) and sidelines the role of organized abolitionist networks, of which the Underground Railroad was the most successful. Some estimates suggest that by 1850, 100,000 slaves had escaped to the North via the 'Railroad,' which counted Harriet Tubman and John Brown among its most infamous members.

The original "'race making' institution"³ of slavery, however, did not simply disappear with the passing of legal acts in the nineteenth century such as the (British) Slavery Abolition Act (1833) and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1863). Instead, it was the American Civil War (1861-1865) that defeated the Confederate States Army, which sealed the fate of the plantation system in the South. The first successful revolution to abolish slavery and overthrow (French) colonial rule in the New World, however, was the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), chronicled by the Caribbean historian C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins* (1963).

The aim of this final chapter of our introductory course is to *historize* racism; this means that rather than looking for anthropological or psychological reasons for why one group of humans devalues another group on the basis of external markers (like skin color, for example), we are concentrating on the changing socio-

³ Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh", *Punishment & Society* 3:1 (2001), 95-133, here p. 116.

economic conditions that enable and form racism. In particular, this chapter introduces a historical materialist analysis of slavery and racial capitalism in order to provide a conceptual understanding of the role of 'race' in capitalist modernity. As Karl Marx noted, the basis for 'primitive accumulation' as a condition of possibility for the capitalist mode of production lay in New World plantation slavery, resource extraction, and the extermination or domination 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 indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation [*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*]. Hard on their heels follows the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield.⁴

Marx emphasizes that the different moments of primitive accumulation – colonies, national debt, a modern tax system, etc. – were first "systematically combined together at the end of the seventeenth century in England". While these methods depended

on brute force, for instance the colonial system [...], they all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition.⁵

The position of the slave is generally determined by what Orlando Patterson has termed "social death".⁶ African slaves in the New World were by definition excluded from both citizenship (rights)

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: 1976, p. 915.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 915-916.

⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge: 2018, p. 38.

and 'free' labor relations (wages). The open racism of the colonial period made the contradiction between enslavement and freedom somewhat invisible, and, in doing so, justified slavery as a legitimate, if not natural, condition for African Americans. This racism was not simply driven by blind hatred, but by the profitable enterprise of forced labor. Historian Barbara Fields reminds us that "the chief business of slavery," after all, was "the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco," not the "production of white supremacy".⁷

The continuing pursuit of cheap and easily manipulated labor did not end with slavery; consequently, white supremacist ideas concerning the inferiority of Blacks were perpetuated with fervor even after the event of slavery. By the twentieth century, shifting concepts of race were applied not only to justify labor relations but more generally to explain the curious way in which the experiences of the vast majority of African Americans confounded the central narrative of the United States as a place of unbounded opportunity, freedom, and democracy.

In terms of ideology, 'race' is thus in a constant process of being made and remade:

Ideology is best understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day. [...] It is the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and re-create their collective being [...]. As such, ideologies are not delusions but real, as real as the social relations for which they stand [...]. An ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies, even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down.⁸

In other words, racial ideology naturalizes the historical and social causes of Black inequality and cultural difference. It can be

⁷ Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America", *New Left Review* 181/1 (1990), 95-118, here p. 99.

⁸ Barbara J. Fields & Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, London: 2012, p. 134, 137.

strategically or unconsciously employed to blame Black people for their own oppression, transforming material causes into subjective causes.

It may be more difficult to see, however, what structural forms anti-black racism took after the original 'race making' institutions of slavery and legal segregation (Jim Crow laws) had ended in the 1960s. During the Fordist period of industrial production, African American labor constituted a seemingly indispensable workforce in the United States, especially in the industrial centers of the North and major cities on the East Coast, where the majority of black Americans settled during the Great Migration. In time, the new 'race making' institution of the ghetto historically superseded the earlier 'peculiar institutions' of slavery and the Jim Crow laws.⁹ It inherited, though, the twin political and economic functions of social ostracization and economic exploitation, of "ethno-racial enclosure" and "labor extraction."¹⁰

In 1964, only a month away from the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Malcolm X (much like Martin Luther King) castigated economic exploitation in the black community as "the most vicious form practiced on any people in America."¹¹ Likewise, the Black Panther Party since their inception in 1966 struggled against super-profits from the exploitation of black labor. Yet in the 1980s, in a historical move 'out of the frying pan into the fire', black labor increasingly found itself rendered superfluous to the needs of the post-Fordist economy that trapped poor and working-class Blacks at the bottom of the social structure.

In particular, the so-called 'War on Drugs' (initiated by the Nixon administration and continued and intensified under Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Obama, and Trump) facilitates the rise of what can be called the American carceral state. Black inner-city ghettos and social housing 'projects' as well as poor suburban areas transformed into a space that the sociologist Loïc Wacquant calls 'hyperghetto'. This 'hyperghetto' is characterized by a 'deadly symbiosis' of

⁹ Cf. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis", p. 98.

¹⁰ Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, Durham: 2009, p. 198-208.

¹¹ Malcolm X qtd. in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago: 2016, p. 38.

ghetto and prison, in which the ghetto increasingly meshes with the prison system so as to constitute the fourth and most recent 'race making' institution.¹² This is the social space that gangsta rap and trap music refer to as the 'hood' or 'trap' respectively.¹³

Wacquant's analysis not only concentrates on socio-economic and political developments, but also emphasizes the significance of (stereotypical) media representations such as the "dissolute teenage 'welfare mother' on the female side and the dangerous street 'gang banger' on the male side" that are pervasive in neoliberal 'law and order' discourse and ubiquitous on national television.¹⁴ Even bestial metaphors such as 'super-predators', 'wolf-packs', or 'animals' are common in the journalistic and political field. The conflation of blackness and crime (as well as blackness and welfare) thus reactivates 'race' and anti-black racism and shapes social policy. This can help to explain the

[e]xplosive growth of the incarcerated populations, which increased fivefold in twenty-five years to exceed two million [2.3 million in 2017] and are stacked in conditions of overpopulation that defy understanding; continual extension of criminal justice supervision, which now covers some seven million Americans, corresponding to one adult man in twenty and one young black man in three.¹⁵

From the perspective of Cultural Studies, the persistent centrality of 'race' in the reproduction of class relations is hardly surprising. "Race", as Stuart Hall put it in a UNESCO paper, is a "modality in which class is 'lived'".¹⁶ In *Policing the Crisis* (1978), Hall and his colleagues first argued that race is "intrinsic to the manner in which the black labouring classes are complexly constituted," at economic, political, and ideological levels. Hence,

¹² Cf. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis", p. 116.

¹³ Cf. Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, "Surplus Trap: Crisis, Gangsta Rap, and Trap Music Videos", *LWU* L3/4 (2017), p. 211-239.

¹⁴ Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis", p. 120.

¹⁵ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, p. xv.

¹⁶ Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, ed. UNESCO, Paris: 1980, 305-345, here p. 341.

race is the modality in which class is lived. It is also the medium in which class relations are experienced. This [...] has consequences for the *whole class*, whose relation to their conditions of existence is now systematically transformed by race.¹⁷

Uneven deindustrialization, for instance, “first displaces black workers into informal economies and market struggles”. As a consequence, many “now confront extreme policing, hyperincarceration, and the lived experience of being surplus to the needs of the economy”.¹⁸ Surplus, that is, to an economy geared towards profits, and not towards providing humans with a livelihood.

According to Joshua Clover, these are the exemplary subjects of “a global recomposition of class within which the riot of surplus populations is not a likelihood but a certainty.”¹⁹ Such “surplus rebellions” generally occur in spaces of circulation (market squares, shopping malls) rather than spaces of production (factories), from which the most precarious and immiserated groups increasingly find themselves excluded.²⁰ For Clover, writing in 2015, the “recent waves of struggle” from Oakland to Ferguson and Baltimore essentially reveal the riot of racialized surplus populations to be “the other of [mass] incarceration.”²¹

In the United States, the carceral state can be seen as a spatial fix to an economic crisis, a means of managing those who find themselves superfluous to the needs of the economy. In her study of the formation of mass incarceration in California, Ruth Wilson Gilmore concludes that the

correspondence between regions of suffering deep economic restructuring, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among men [most of whom are not

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London: 1978, p. 394.

¹⁸ Joshua Clover, “Surplus Rebellion,” *The New Inquiry*, May 17, 2016; <https://thenewinquiry.com/surplus-rebellions> (accessed 26 January 2021)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cf. Joshua Clover on “The Long Crisis” in *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*, London: 2016, p. 129-152.

²¹ Ibid., p. 162.

white], and intensive surveillance of youth by the state's criminal justice apparatus present the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state's solution.²²

Structural racism of this kind no longer needs conscious racist hatred and bigotry, but it still needs agents. There is no structure without agency. Agency itself, in turn, is always-already structured, made by the culture from which it emanates. Bigotry and hatred still exist, of course, including in the police force, as the continuous extra-judicial killings of black people by police indicate.

As Chris Chen argues, racialization and proletarianization are mutually constitutive processes in relation to the production of 'relative surplus populations' on a global scale:

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 [also] renewed [...] through the racialisation of unwaged surplus or superfluous populations from Khartoum to the slums of Cairo.²³

Marx analyzed the production of such 'relative surplus populations' (that is people in structural un-/underemployment) alongside the reproduction of the wage-relation in *Capital*, where he used the term to describe that part of the workforce "no longer directly necessary for the self-valorization of capital".²⁴ According to Marx, the extended reproduction of capital ultimately produces a growing 'surplus population' and it is in this sense that "[a]ccumulation of capital is therefore multiplication of the proletariat."²⁵ Rather than absorbing more and more labor, capital increasingly ejects workers from the immediate process of (an increasingly automated) production into the sphere of circulation.

²² Ruth W. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Berkeley: 2007, p. 113.

²³ Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality", p. 217.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p. 557.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

Given the global trajectory of capitalist crisis since the 1970s, the historical timing could hardly be worse, as Chen notes with regard to the confluence of surplus-proletarianization and racialization. After decades of compounding increases in productivity, capital began to expel more labor from the production process than was absorbed. That, in turn, produced yet another kind of population superfluous to the needs of the economy in the form of a disproportionately non-white 'industrial reserve army' of labor:

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.²⁶

However, as we discussed before, economic relations do not determine social formations in any simple way; the relations have to be *lived*, too. In his acclaimed analysis of the colonial subject in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon's social psychology dissected the forced internalization and 'epidermalization' of ascribed inferiority resulting from colonial domination and racial oppression. Epidermalization, here, is understood as essential to the 'racial gaze' that sees Africa as an absolute Other outside of history and civilization (or inherently criminal and beyond reform).

Half a century earlier W. E. B. DuBois had insisted in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* that the "problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line."²⁷ DuBois here develops a relational concept of 'double consciousness' in the context of a fundamental racial antagonism that forces African Americans to partly internalize the dominant anti-blackness of white America:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring

²⁶ Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality", p. 209.

²⁷ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent H. Edwards, Oxford: 2007 [1903], p. 3.

ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife [...].²⁸

If we direct our attention to state violence and 'white anxiety' rather than the state of 'black identity' in the present, we may come to agree with the Invisible Committee that the fear of zombies – the most popular monster figure in today's media culture – has a long and racialized history, linked in no uncertain terms to the fear of "a generalized insurrection by the black proletariat."²⁹ And the "other side of this fear [...] that refuses to be mentioned or is repressed," Idris Robinson argues, "resides in the paranoia of the white middle class over its own worthlessness."³⁰ Racialized 'surplus populations' often have nowhere to go and nowhere to hide as the "police now stand in the place of the economy, the violence of the commodity made flesh."³¹ Thus, Black Lives Matter is not a purely American slogan or a simple fact: "It is a universal and generative truth, from which great implications flow."³² The 2020 George Floyd Rebellion, a militant nationwide and multiracial insurrection, extending from Minneapolis to hundreds of cities in and outside the United States dramatically proved that the struggle for abolition continues in the present.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 8-9.

²⁹ Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, Cambridge: 2014, p. 18.

³⁰ Idris B. Robinson, "How It Might Should Be Done", *Ill Will*, July/August, 2020; <https://illwilleditions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Robinson-How-It-Might-Should-Be-Done-READ.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2021)

³¹ Clover, *Riot*, p. 125-126.

³² Bue Rübner Hansen, "The Universal Truth of Black Lives Matter – a View from Europe," *Roar*, June 14, 2020; <https://roarmag.org/essays/the-universal-truth-of-black-lives-matter-a-view-from-europe/> (accessed 26 January 2021)

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