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Class, race, and capitalism

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# CLASS, RACE, AND CAPITALISM

Ellen Meiksins Wood

I agree entirely with Adolph Reed's basic premise that race and class are intimately related in U.S. capitalism, because race, like other "hierarchies of civic status", has served as a major mechanism for the reproduction of capitalist class relations. I also agree entirely that an overly abstract and reified conception of capitalism, which obliterates historical particularities, the specificities of time, place, and culture, is not much use in clarifying the relation between race and class – or, indeed, anything else.

But I think his argument might be even stronger than it already is if he didn't overstate the unity of race and class. I actually believe that the argument he's making requires us to stress not only the close relation between race and class in U.S. capitalism but also the conceptual and (for lack of a better word) structural distinctions between them. In fact, I can find nothing in Reed's argument that requires his insistence on "the artificiality of the race/class dichotomy" – although I agree with him entirely that the relation between them is captured neither by treating race as an "epiphenomenon of capitalist class relations", nor by treating race as entirely autonomous from class. I just think there's a better way of characterizing the relation, as Reed himself understands it.

I also think that, while ahistorical and "reified" conceptions are pretty useless, the relation between race and class can and must be illuminated by a more general conception of capitalism. Of course, there is no single capitalism. But neither can we proceed with a conception of capitalism so vague and minimal that it doesn't give us any solid grounds for distinguishing capitalist societies, in all their diversity, from any other social form. If the concept of capitalism is to have any meaning at all, it has to be fairly precise in identifying the common operating principles that allow us to include under that rubric a great

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many different cases, at many different times and different places, from (at least) the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, or from Britain, to the U.S., to Japan, to Brazil. We have to be able to identify the common “laws of motion” or, better still, the “rules for reproduction”, that make all these cases capitalist, shaping their social processes in some commonly decisive way, and placing the same systemic constraints on them.

Now, it is not that Reed denies that there is some common reality shared by all capitalist societies. But, if I understand him correctly, he defines that common reality fairly narrowly and, more importantly, he seems not to think that we can learn much from it about the relation between race and class. I simply don’t agree that a general conception of capitalism has only “heuristic” value and that it “cannot help to clarify the relation of race and class in a given society.”

## CAPITALISM AND CIVIC IDENTITY

The question I’m raising here, then, is whether there is anything useful we can say about the relation between race and class proceeding from a general conception of capitalism, and not only from the specificities of time and place. To put it another way, it is worth considering how the specificities of time and place are shaped by capitalism’s general operating principles. My argument is simply that, if we want to understand how racial hierarchies reproduce capitalist class relations, we have to understand the basic requirements of capitalist reproduction itself, as distinct from the rules for reproduction that govern other social forms.

Let me begin by making one bald statement: that class is constitutive of capitalism in a way that race is not. Capitalism is conceivable without racial divisions, but not, by definition, without class. It would certainly be true to say that no capitalism can exist without various mechanisms of reproduction, including various non-economic hierarchies that help to reproduce class domination; and, while these vary from one specific capitalist society to another, race happens, for historical reasons, to be a major “extra-economic” mechanism of class reproduction in U.S. capitalism. But it is surely important to recognize that this implies, at the very least, that race and class belong to different conceptual categories and that they explain the operation of U.S. capitalism in different ways.

Clearly Adolph Reed’s argument acknowledges this distinction when he writes, for instance, that, while there is a “cellular reality” of capitalism, which all capitalist societies have in common, “Race. . . , like other categories of ascriptive status, has no such essential foundation” but is entirely bound up with

the specific social context in which it operates. But I wonder if it's enough to say this. It's one thing to say that general theories of capitalism that remain completely abstracted from specific social and historical contexts are unlikely to shed much light on how race and class operate in any given social order. But it would be quite another thing to say that we can understand the workings of race and class in a given society without understanding capitalism itself as a specific social form, with common driving principles in every social context, or that these commonalities have no important bearing on how race reproduces class in any specific case.

Here, then, is a working definition of capitalism, from which we can proceed to consider what it tells us about race and class in capitalist societies: capitalism is a system in which all economic actors, producers and appropriators, depend on the market for the most basic conditions of their self-reproduction. Class relations between producers and appropriators, and specifically the relation between capitalists and wage laborers, are also mediated by the market. This is in sharp contrast to precapitalist societies, where direct producers typically had non-market access to the means of production, especially land, and therefore were sheltered from the forces of the market, while appropriators relied on superior force to extract surplus labor from direct producers. In capitalism, the market dependence of both appropriators and producers means that they are subject to the imperatives of competition, accumulation and increasing labour productivity; and the whole system, in which competitive production is a fundamental condition of existence, is driven by these imperatives.

What general effects do these characteristics of capitalism have on the relation between race and class?

Consider the effects of capitalism's distinctive form of purely "economic", market-mediated exploitation. For example, while we can certainly learn a great deal from the specific proposition that, in U.S. capitalism, the civic status of race has acted in various ways in various periods to reproduce the relations of class, we can also learn something from the general proposition that, because of its unique relations of class exploitation, civic status in capitalism plays a role very different from its role in non-capitalist societies. It would, I think, be very hard to explain how and why U.S. capitalism – as capitalism – has been sustained by racial division without understanding that civic status is *not* constitutive of capitalist class relations in the way it is in other social forms.

Let me explain. Civic status was more directly constitutive of class relations in non-capitalist societies, because class exploitation took place by "extra-economic" means – that is, by means of coercive force in the form of military, political and judicial power. Such extra-economic forms of exploitation, including slavery, do take the form of "civic" status, in a sense that race, as such does

not. The relation between master and slave was a legally recognized relation between a proprietor and chattel property, a formal expression of the relation of force and dependence between them, the master's coercive power and the slave's subjection to superior force. Similarly, the relation between landlords and peasants in feudalism was expressed in a "civic" relationship between lordship and legal dependence. In such cases, civic status was not only a mechanism for reproducing some other relationship, a class relationship that stood apart from it. Instead, civic status was directly implicated in that class relation and was, by definition, irreplaceable by some other, very different mechanism of class reproduction. If the civic relation between masters and slaves, or lords and serfs, were transformed into a relation between juridically free and equal citizens, there might still be some kind of exploitation of one by the other; but, by definition, it would not be slavery or feudal serfdom.

Nor is this simply a matter of abstract definition. The point is that capitalism, alone among all forms of class society, is constituted by relations of exploitation that are *not* defined by a hierarchy of civic status. The relation between capital and labour is, juridically, a relation between free and equal individuals, who (at least in "liberal democracies") share every legal and political right, up to and including full citizenship. Extending the franchise, for example, to include the propertyless working class certainly required long and painful struggles, and it was certainly worth winning (though not as much as those who struggled for it, such as the Chartists in Britain, had hoped). But its achievement did not mean the end of capitalism, nor did it transform the primary mode of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism can tolerate the universality of certain formal legal and political rights, because capital can exploit labor without exclusive civic privileges and the coercive power that they represent. No analogous transformation of legal and political relations in feudalism would have left the system intact.

This is not a trivial matter. It has to do with a fundamental reality in capitalism, namely that it has created a form of exploitation that does not depend on direct coercive force. It is based, instead, on the market dependence of both appropriating and producing classes. The relation between capital and wage labor is a market-mediated relation, between a class of proprietors and a propertyless class compelled to sell its labour power not by direct coercion but by purely "economic" imperatives, just to gain access to the means of labour itself. In contrast to non-capitalist forms in which class relations are defined by extra-economic identities, capitalism, however much it mobilizes available extra-economic hierarchies as mechanisms of reproduction, ultimately depends on the reduction of all workers – men and women, black and white – to interchangeable units of labor abstracted from any particular personal or social identity. Having reduced all workers to units in the collectivity of "abstract

labor”, capitalism certainly benefits from the differentiation of workers (a point to which I’ll return in a moment); but it is fairly flexible in how it effects this differentiation, and can, if necessary in any given historical circumstances, replace one principle of differentiation with another.

There are, though, certain kinds of “civic hierarchy” that capitalism cannot easily accommodate. Capitalism depends on the operation of *economic* imperatives, and it not only permits but creates powerful pressures to replace extra-economic with economic compulsion. This means that it can (though it need not) also tolerate “liberal democracy”, in a way no other mode of exploitation can. The effect of this has been to preclude civic hierarchies of the kind that once sustained the non-capitalist social order. The relation between capital and labor is supposed to be a contractual relation between juridically free and equal individuals; and it has even become a major ideological principle of capitalism that all citizens, capitalists and workers alike, are free and equal. Formal democracy, with its ideology of freedom, equality, and classlessness, must surely be one of the most effective reproductive mechanisms of capitalist class relations.

There is a sense in which the racial hierarchy developed as it did precisely as a *substitute* for precapitalist forms of civic status, which were no longer necessary or acceptable. It is a curious fact, for instance, that truly virulent, pseudo-biological concepts of race are a modern invention. This is so not simply because the sciences evolved in certain ways in early modern Europe. After all, ideas of natural inequality and even natural slavery were available to much earlier societies. But the significant point is that such ideas of natural slavery never became the norm, even in ancient slave societies. In ancient Greece, for example, where Aristotle elaborated his idea of natural slavery, that idea was never widely accepted; while the Romans, in their pragmatic way, were quite prepared to accept that it was an unnatural, though useful, institution.

It was only relatively recently that the human race was rigidly divided into racial categories; and it is very tempting to think that part of the reason, at least, was that civic categories of inequality were no longer available to justify slavery or imperialism. The ancient Greek could simply write off non-Greeks or non-citizens as “barbarians”, for reasons having to do with civic status, or with language and location, but not with racial categories. The modern slave-owner or imperialist, lacking more traditional civic categories, in a world where ideas of civic freedom and equality were becoming a major ideological weapon, was obliged to find some more decisive, “natural” way of excluding his victims from the normal world of free and equal human beings.

In the U.S., most other laborers were juridically free – whether as small farmers, artisans, or wage laborers; and the ideology of freedom and equality

was particularly strong as the essence of the foundational mythology. Here, the ideological challenge posed by slavery was typically met by what some call “cultural racism”, which acknowledged the humanity of African slaves, but conceived of them as eternal children, subject unconditionally to the patriarchal master. Yet this was still, in effect, a theory of natural slavery. The subordination of slaves was as “natural” as the subordination of children to parents, but in the case of slaves, the condition of subordination was permanent.

In this respect, the strongly patriarchal notion of the family on which Southern planters drew for their justification of slavery was itself a substitute for other principles of inequality, such as feudal notions of corporate hierarchy, that were no longer available. It is (as I have suggested on other occasions) even possible to argue that patriarchal theories of the family, which subordinated not only children but women and servants to the head of the household, gained a new lease on life in an era when the natural equality of all men was becoming a dominant ideological principle – in eighteenth century America, no less than, for instance, in seventeenth century England. In such circumstances, nothing short of excluding human beings from that universe of natural equality could justify their permanent subordination. Children and even servants (in a contractual relationship) might be only temporarily subordinate, but African slaves (and women, though with different natural capacities and hence different familial rights) belonged in their place by nature.

The racial hierarchy in the U.S. today is a legacy of the historical moment in which the ideology of formal freedom and equality came up against the realities of slavery and imperialism. This is not to say that its persistence no longer has a material foundation, in a capitalist world without chattel slavery, where imperialism generally no longer takes the form of outright conquest and colonization. But today, the racial hierarchy no longer serves quite the same purpose.

There was a time in the U.S. when the economic category of slave labor directly coincided not only with a legal “civic” category but also with the extra-economic identity of race. Today, race still serves to reproduce class hierarchies, but it does it, so to speak, at one remove. Its role is not to sustain a legal division between capital and labor, or even a simple class relation between white and black. However disproportionately African-Americans may be represented in the working class, and especially in its lowest ranks, they do not constitute the whole of that class; and their “extra-economic” racial status cannot define the category “working class”, as civic status once defined serfs and slaves. So it works to reproduce class relations in different ways, which are determined precisely by the fact that class, in capitalist societies, is *not* defined by civic status.

## THE UTILITY OF RACE

In fact, one obvious way in which the “extra-economic” hierarchy of race helps to reproduce capitalist class relations is precisely by deflecting attention away from those class relations. Civic status in non-capitalist forms, by contrast, although it defined and enforced relations of exploitation in a way that it does not in capitalism, could not help but draw attention to the exploitative relation between master and slave or lord and peasant, just as resistance to exploitation necessarily entailed a challenge to the civic hierarchy. The case of capitalism is very different. Race reinforces class because it *obscures* relations of class exploitation in capitalism; and it can do so, in a way that non-capitalist civic hierarchies could not, precisely because civic status in capitalism does not define class. Even with the best intentions, the effect, to put it crudely, is that we let capitalism off the hook by blaming poverty and injustice on race abstracted from class.

There are, of course, other ways in which race serves to reproduce class; and in all of them, the function of race depends not on the unity of race and class but on the *separation* of class from civic status. Take, for example, the function of race in dividing the working class. Reed may be right to dismiss arguments about the utility of race in dividing the working class, if his point is simply that we cannot explain it as just the effect of a ruling class conspiracy. (Not, by the way, that ruling class conspiracy can be dismissed altogether. One of Reed’s own prime examples of the role played by race in U.S. history is the “widely shared fear” on the part of the southern ruling class, in the age of Reconstruction, “that blacks and nonelite whites would form a durable alliance that could effectively challenge for power or disrupt, and perhaps radically alter, prevailing economic and class relations.” It was, as Reed points out, the threat that class might override pervasive racist ideologies that made this prospect so dangerous. So the ruling class had a powerful interest in maintaining that racial division, and unleashed a major political offensive to prevent its dilution by government policies, precisely to prevent the absorption of race by class. Things have certainly changed since then, but that ruling class fear can hardly be dismissed today.) But, ruling class conspiracy or not, and whatever the intentions of those whose actions have preserved the hierarchy of “civic worth”, its effects are still there. As Reed so effectively demonstrates, this hierarchy is being maintained not despite but because of “color-blind” policies, for instance, on welfare or drugs; and its effect has certainly been to reproduce capitalist class relations, not only, but not least, by dividing the working class. This effect is possible because race and class do not coincide and because class relations in capitalist society are obscured rather than exposed by “civic” hierarchies.

There is also another sense in which the division of the working class by means of race serves the interests of capital, not just by disarming the oppositional power of the working class but by satisfying the need – imposed by capitalism’s basic imperatives of competition, accumulation, and profit-maximization – for cheapening labor. Harry Braverman, in his classic work on the labor-process, explains how capital subdivides labor, so that as much of the labor process as possible is relegated to unskilled, low-paid work. This, of course, has the effect of creating wide variations in wages and working conditions among workers, not only among different industries but within the same enterprise. Race, as an ascriptive category (as well as gender and ethnicity), has served as a means of organizing this differentiation of work and workers – a point made a long time ago by Oliver Cox.<sup>1</sup>

I don’t think we disagree about any of this. But it is surely worth saying that none of these functions of race in the reproduction of capitalism are understandable without a general conception of capitalism and its basic rules for reproduction, its specific mode of exploitation, and the imperatives of competition and accumulation that drive it. It may also be worth saying that, in all these functions, the utility of race in the reproduction of capitalist class relations lies in its *failure* to coincide with class.

At the same time, of course, class also reproduces racial hierarchies. Race in the U.S. would not have the salience it does were it not for the relegation of so many African Americans to the lower ranks of the working class or their exclusion from the labor market altogether. But this only confirms the asymmetrical relation between these two principles of “stratification”. While the eradication of class would have a profoundly transformative effect on racial divisions, the eradication of racial hierarchies would not fundamentally transform the nature of capitalist class relations, even though it would, in the U.S. in particular, deprive capitalism of one of its most useful mechanisms of reproduction. Capitalism will always have a working class, and it will always produce underclasses, whatever their extra-economic identity. It can adapt to changing conditions by changing the meaning of race and ethnicity, so that one group can displace another at the bottom of the ladder (as Hispanic groups have in some cases replaced African-Americans); or the boundaries of racial categories can, if necessary, be redrawn. It could even survive the eradication of racial, or any other “civic” categories altogether.

This in no way suggests that struggle against racial oppression is unimportant on its own terms, or even that it cannot make a major contribution to struggles against capitalism. Nor is it easy to imagine a time when U.S. capitalism will not be sustained by racial divisions. But to recognize the importance of race

in sustaining U.S. capitalism, and the importance of struggles against racial oppression, does not make it irrelevant or unimportant that capitalism as a social form does not depend on racial divisions in the way that it depends on class.

The point, then, is that racial hierarchy is not constituted by capitalism, nor does it constitute capitalism, and yet it can work to reproduce capitalism. We cannot make sense of how this mechanism of reproduction works unless we acknowledge both sides of the equation. We have to acknowledge not only that race can work as a mechanism of reproduction, but also that it can do so because it stands apart from class, and that other mechanisms could, and do, serve the same purpose. We have to acknowledge not only that racial hierarchies can reproduce class relations, but also that capitalist class relations could survive without racial divisions (just as it could without a gender hierarchy). We have to acknowledge that historical realities have given race a central position in sustaining U.S. capitalism, but also that to overcome this historical legacy is not necessarily to eliminate capitalism. And so on.

If I understand Reed correctly, there is nothing in my argument with which he needs to disagree. Nor do I think an argument like mine is too abstract to be useful, or, if true, only trivially so. On the contrary, I think it actually sums up and reinforces Reed's own position, answering both the view that race is autonomous and that it is simply a reflex of capitalism, while acknowledging the role of race in reproducing class but without conflating the two. It also has political implications. On the one hand, it means that the struggle against racial oppression will not by itself end capitalist exploitation, which most African-Americans, like a great many others, are subjected to as members of a class. Nor will anti-racist struggle end capitalism's need for ideologies of extra-economic oppression, of one kind or another, as a means of reproducing class relations. On the other hand, autonomous anti-racist struggles have accomplished a great deal on their own, independently of working class organizations. When class organizations do not wholeheartedly take up the challenge of anti-racist struggle, the fight against racial oppression is obliged to go it alone and the working class movement is far weaker than it ought to be. What this two-sided picture most clearly reveals is that both struggles would be very much stronger together than apart.

## NOTE

1. For a discussion of the differentiation of work and wages, see Howard Botwinik, *Persistent Inequalities: Wage Disparity under Capitalist Competition* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1993). Reed has written an introduction to Oliver Cox's *Race* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), an abbreviated edition of his book, *Caste, Class, and Race*, originally published in 1948.

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1. T. NesbitClass Analysis in Adult Education 64-69. [[CrossRef](#)]