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Racism and Capitalism: Intertwined, Insidious, and Imperative to Destroy

*“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another...”*

— Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

*“Anti-Black violence is not a form of discrimination. It’s a necessity that allows everyone else to bloom... We need... an analysis of slavery that goes beyond Marxism and understands slavery as a 21st-century dynamic as opposed to a historical past.”*

— Frank B. Wilderson III, *On Afropessimism* interview

*“The possessive investment in whiteness can’t be rectified by learning ‘how to be more antiracist.’ It requires... abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism. What is required is a remaking of the social order, and nothing short of that is going to make a difference.”*

— Sadiya Hartman

There are many lenses through which to explain the historical and present suffering of subordinated subjects. However, two such lenses make themselves distinct not only in their breadth and depth, but also in their interconnectedness. These are race and class. Regardless of the ontological conclusion one arrives at, these forces have been and continue to be extremely influential in shaping inequality and suffering in the world. Thus, analyzing where and how they intersect as well as attempting to reconcile conflicting positions on each axis is important. Ultimately, in this analysis I will conclude that racism and capitalism are intertwined at their foundations, meaning one cannot be abolished while the other still stands. Additionally, I will recognize multiple perspectives but still argue for destroying capitalism as a common solution.

This paper will examine the relationship between race and capitalism primarily from race-based perspectives. I will begin by establishing the causal historical link between capitalism and slavery/race. This link will be further strengthened by the analysis and examples found in Harris' work *Whiteness as Property*. Then, I will expand the framework through time with arguments from Alcoff's work on Latina/o identity, Omi and Winant's "Racial Formation," and Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. These arguments will provide evidence that capitalism must be destroyed if racism is to be destroyed. From here, the merits and shortcomings of reparations and affirmative action will be considered. I will also address potential intersectional criticisms of this racism-capitalism framework, recognizing Crenshaw's work. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting two applications of this thinking to Afropessimism, reiterating the conclusion that capitalism should be targeted but accepting the fact that further discussion is necessary on the ontological basis of Black suffering and racism. Ultimately, addressing capitalism will be found to be a more practical and urgent concern than ontological debates.

## **Historical Formation & Origins of Race**

Before examining the historical foundations of race, I would like to clarify that race will be seen through a constructionist view; that is, race is a social reality (not a biological one) constructed by societies and used to subordinate or privilege individuals in a power structure. From this definition, the question immediately emerges: why and how was race constructed?

One does not have to look too deeply into history to realize the correlation between the emergence of race, as a concept, and slavery. Harris lays this out: “The racialization of identity and the racial subordination of Blacks and Native Americans provided the ideological basis for slavery and conquest” (Harris 1715). Although intertwined, these concepts did not emerge simultaneously. And counter to some instincts, slavery did not emerge out of racism or some sort of hatred for Africans and their descendents. Rather, race and racism were constructed to justify chattel slavery. Slavery came first. And the greater motivation behind slavery was, ultimately, capital. Free labor is incredibly profitable. Thus, capitalism led to the historical formation of slavery, race, and racism.

This conclusion stands despite the fact that early slavery included indebted white servants as well as Black slaves. The racial distinction merely grew over time as slavery’s profitability was recognized and race was constructed to justify it. Ultimately, race came to signify a property status: “Black” subjects were enslaved while “white” subjects were not enslaved. “Through slavery, race and economic domination were fused” (Harris 1718). Harris provides further analysis of the property characteristics of whiteness. She points out how whiteness was used to legally justify the seizure of land (property) from Native Americans. She also dives into how whiteness is upheld by the law as property (regardless of the definition of property used) and how it exercises property rights such as the rights to use and enjoy, to reputation, and to exclude.

Harris' argument is extensive and convincing; it does not need to be analyzed deeply for the purposes of this paper. Whiteness understood as a form of property strengthens the link between race and capital, because private property is a core element of capitalism. Historical and legal investigation make it clear that capitalism systems, through both profit and property, encouraged and rewarded the construction of racism. The historical causal link between capitalism and race/racism is thus firmly established.

### **Perpetuation of Racism-Capitalism Through Time**

Capitalism and racism have been thoroughly linked by the historical event of 1600s-1800s enslavement of Africans. But what about in the present day? How does this relationship hold up through time? I'd like to answer these questions from three different perspectives.

Firstly, capitalism and racism appear to sustain one another through both legal and market institutions. Using whiteness as property, Harris demonstrates how US legal institutions such as the Supreme Court consistently uphold and reify white property interest through law. Alcoff provides another key example of state and market racial construction in her chapter "Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?" She writes, "In the 1960s, U.S. state agencies began to disseminate the ethnic label 'Hispanic'... The mass media, entertainment, and advertising industries have increasingly addressed this large population as if it were a coherent community" (Alcoff 29). In this example, a new ethnic label was constructed (with little rationality) and perpetuated by capitalist/market industries because of its potential to create a new lucrative group. Although significantly more subtle and less harmful, this nonetheless parallels the market's introduction of the label "Black" to capitalize and profit off slavery. These examples demonstrate that capitalist

systems will consistently lead to various forms of race, racism, or new subordinate labels because they are profitable.

Secondly, racism seems to have been spread beyond institutions. Two works speak to how capitalism and racism have entrenched themselves in this way. Omi and Winant describe how racial formation can be thought of through the lens of hegemony (consolidated rule).

“Racial rule can be understood as a slow and uneven historical process which has moved... from domination to hegemony. In this transition, hegemonic forms of racial rule – those based on consent – eventually came to supplant those based on coercion” (Omi & Winant 131). This notion of hegemony is especially useful and will be applied later, but more specifically, the idea of manufactured consent is key: “...in order to consolidate their hegemony, ruling groups must elaborate and maintain a popular system of ideas and practices... which [Antonio Gramsci] called ‘common sense’” (Omi & Winant 130). Extrapolating this thought, racism in the US is not only sustained by top-down institutional/market subordination and influence, but also by bottom-up consent by the infected minds of (at least some of) its subjects. Theoretically, this “common sense” could be cleansed once its source (hegemony/capitalism) is destroyed.

Finally, a perspective on the nature of racism and time aptly applies here. In Hartman’s chapter “The Burdened Individuality of Freedom,” she challenges notions of historical slavery and progress. In regards to abolition and slaves becoming “free,” Hartman describes, “...the paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity... were fiercely regulated and policed in the interests of an expanding capitalist economy...” (Hartman 117). Here, she illustrates how Black subjects were not “freed” at all, but burdened in new ways to keep serving racism and capitalism. Hartman also exposes how in order for some to be “free,” others must be

“unfree” or enslaved. She argues that Black subjects still occupy this position of unfreedom. Put bluntly, slavery was not simply abolished once and for all. Thinking of slavery as a present reality suggests that racism and capitalism are just as deeply enmeshed now as they were at the historical advent of slavery. Slavery is the “glue” that makes racism profitable to capitalism; if it has persisted through time then so has the race-capital relationship.

Hartman readily acknowledges this link, stating, “Racism was central to the expansion of capitalist relations of production, the organization, division, and management of the laboring classes, and the regulation of the population...” (Hartman 119). Finally, Hartman’s implications of history being a repetition of slavery parallel Marx’s famous quote (found on the first page of this essay) about history being summed up by class struggle. The distinctions and ontological fundamentality of these two takes can be debated, but they both make clear the deep persistence of oppression (both race- and class-based, at least) through time.

From these three perspectives, it is clear that racism and capitalism remain intertwined today through government and market institutions, through individuals infected with manufactured “common sense,” and through the perpetuation of unfreedom (slavery/class conflict) through time. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that they will untangle or come apart naturally or even through reform. Thus, the thesis is established: due to their perpetual and mutually-sustaining relationship, racism cannot be destroyed without also destroying capitalism.

### **Considering Reparations and Affirmative Action**

I’d now like to discuss two leading anti-racist projects in contemporary American politics: affirmative action and reparations. At first glance, these projects have a lot to offer. Ta-Nehisi Coates lays out a sweeping account of American society’s “indebtedness” to Black

people in his article “The Case For Reparations.” Coates argues for reparations, even if they were found impractical, as a “maturation out of the childhood myth of [America’s] innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders” (§X. ¶15). (Setting aside the fact that America was founded in part by slave owners, this is a compelling argument).

Similarly, Alcott suggests affirmative action as a solution to whiteness as property, stating it would function as “a principle, internationally recognized, based on a theory of rights and equality” as well as “facilitate the destruction of the false premises of legitimacy and exclusivity inherent in whiteness...” (Harris 1788-1789).

Both of these arguments are valid. In fact, they even have some justification within the racism-capitalism framework. Reparations appear promising because they seem to be actively correcting for racial capitalist exploitation, and affirmative action is important in that it works to correct the exclusionary aspect of whiteness as property. Neither of these projects are currently operating widely in the US at this time (affirmative action being struck down in 2023 by the Supreme Court and reparations having gained no federal support and only little state support), but they should be researched and enacted.

However, it is essential to not view these projects as fully sufficient solutions to racism. Because both these initiatives operate within capitalism and do not severely weaken it (with the exception of extreme reparations, although those are currently unlikely), they would fail to adequately disrupt the mutually-sustaining relationship between capitalism and racism. It is unclear to what degree these projects would be ineffective due to this fact, but I do believe they would be impactful enough to be justified as a starting point, though not effective enough to be a solution. Reparations and affirmative action do not go far enough to abolish capitalism, so they alone will not destroy racism.

## **Potential Criticisms and the Intersectional Perspective**

There is significant evidence for both the causal and present-day link between capitalism and racism. However, there are two acute criticisms of this framework that I'd like to briefly discuss. First is that of socialism. Socialism is generally seen as the default alternative to capitalism. Although there are various other political theories beyond these two (which cannot be explored in the scope of this essay), when it comes to political movements, (democratic) socialists are the most relevant group opposing capitalism. Yet socialism has been and often is criticized for ignoring race and only focusing on class — for example, Afropessimism finds Marxism insufficient. While my analysis of racism-capitalism suggests that reducing class injustice would greatly reduce racial injustice as well, it certainly wouldn't be enough. Additionally, it is reasonable to conclude that racism may still persist from socialist governments even if capitalist institutions are abolished. I mention these points merely to conclude that socialism is not an automatic solution to capitalism; other alternatives could be considered, including some sort of “intersectional socialism” that proactively addresses race (and other) issues alongside class issues. Such a topic should be explored beyond this essay.

The second critique of this analysis is that it, rather bluntly, ignores gender. Examining oppression through race and class simply leaves out the unique experience of women of color and/or lower class, and this is indeed shortsighted and dangerous. There are two common defenses to the gender critique. In terms of race, Afropessimists will claim that Black subjects (once marked as such and enslaved) were ungendered; due to their subhuman status the axis of gender becomes invalid. In terms of class, socialists may argue that class is material and not identity-based, and that it may encompass and explain gender issues (e.g. wage gap, financial marriage rights, etc.). While intriguing, neither of these points are fully convincing to me as they,



respectively, ignore gender identity as coming from the subject and ignore uniquely gendered issues such as sexual violence or transgender rights.

These two critiques have one obvious factor in common: intersectionality (Crenshaw). Different “-isms” (feminism, antiracism, socialism, etc.) fall into a cycle of critiquing each other for ignoring other “-isms.” This is why intersectionality is always important to at least acknowledge, if not apply. Applying it to this racism-capitalism framework is beyond my current scope, hence its acknowledgement in this section. However I will offer a reflection on the matter by returning to the concept of hegemony. Omi and Winant write, “Thus race, class, and gender... constitute ‘regions’ of hegemony, areas in which certain political projects can take shape... They overlap, intersect, and fuse with each other in countless ways (Omi and Winant, 132). I would further argue that turning these socially constructed groups to critique and exclude each other is in the interest of hegemony — a sort of divide-and-conquer strategy. While these axes are social realities and each must be addressed in its specific way, intersectionality must also come at the forefront of discussion. Combining “-isms,” and, more productively, their solutions, is the best way to move forward. I will conclude by combining this racism-capitalism framework to Afropessimism and non-pessimism, but further application to ignored regions such as gender or sexual orientation is warranted.

### **Reconciling with Afropessimism**

On the surface, Afropessimism and this racism-capitalism framework appear strongly opposed. Afropessimism directly rejects “Marxism” or a capitalism-based analysis as sufficient to explain Black suffering. In other words, Afropessimists take Black suffering to be distinct (and greater than) class suffering because the former is the basis for civil society. Thus, the

“solution” to racism implied by Afropessimism is to destroy civil society in its entirety. It is important to point out that this includes destroying capitalism, but also goes beyond destroying *only* capitalism — some greater part of “the world” must also fall. I would like to posit two different conclusions that combine Afropessimism and the racism-capitalism theory.

Firstly, if Afropessimism is to be believed, then the two theories can nonetheless agree on a starting point: abolishing capitalism. This is their overlapping factor. And it makes sense: capitalism is a significant element of “the world” or “society” today, at least in a US context. While this is not any type of formal reconciliation between the two theories, it nonetheless provides a concrete starting point for destroying racism (a feature arguably lacking in Afropessimism). Thus, Afropessimism reinforces the capitalism-racism framework even though it demands greater ontological import as to the source of Black suffering.

Omi and Winant mention an important point on the topic of concrete foundations and (im)practical scale of theories about racism:

But such an approach [that addressed the structural dimensions of racism]... tended to ‘inflate’ the concept of racism to a point at which it lost precision... it became difficult to see how the democratization of US society could be achieved... An overly comprehensive view of racism, then, potentially served as a self-fulfilling [pessimistic] prophecy.” (Omi and Winant 133-134)

This is a useful insight when considering the practicality or potential solutions suggested by a framework of racism. Although the conclusion that the abolition of capitalism is necessary is indeed very large in scale, it is nonetheless concrete. For this reason, I’d also like to offer an admittedly simple synthesis between Afropessimism and the racism-capitalism framework.

Although Afropessimism holds Black suffering to be a constant through time, it does recognize the advent of slavery and the founding of (murderous) America as landmarks. If these events are understood as being driven by capitalism, then we could perhaps understand Black suffering to be a timeless constant only necessary for capitalism rather than all of civil society / the world as a whole. In effect, I'm suggesting a very convenient substitution (scaling back) of the basis of Black suffering from the entire world to the structure of capitalism. Thus, rather than having to destroy the world, it could be sufficient to merely destroy capitalism.

This landscape of potential solutions and societal-scale targets gets extremely messy. As discussed earlier, focusing on capitalism as the culprit is not without its intersectional critiques. Additionally, considering Afropessimism makes clear the ontological uncertainty about the basis of race and racism. However, as Mallon argued in his work *'Race': Normative, Not Metaphysical or Semantic*, ontological debates can often be unproductive and unnecessary. So perhaps we should accept these gray areas and keep on moving.

I believe that this racism-capitalism framework can be useful. It is clear that restricting and ideally abolishing capitalism (and not forgetting intersectionality in whatever follows) can be nothing but productive in the fight against racism. Doing so would eliminate the largest structural source/perpetuator that racism rests on. In the short-term, proper reparations and affirmative action can provide useful improvements so long as they are not thought of as complete solutions. Abolishing capitalism is surely dangerous territory, but then again, so is allowing it to perpetuate racial inequality and hegemony throughout society.

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