

Not Working

Reader

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Inhalt

Content

MAURIN DIETRICH	
Einleitung	6
Introduction	12
MELANIE GILLIGAN & MARINA VISHMIDT	
A Conversation	18
Ein Gespräch	40
ANNETTE WEHRMANN	
ORT DES GEGEN	66
The COUNTER-PLACE	68
STEPHAN JANITZKY & LAURA ZIEGLER	
Unheimliches doppelt Gehen	70
Uncanny double walking	78
LISE SOSKOLNE	
Made in Art School	86
Made in Art School	92
JOSEF KRAMHÖLLER	
The Lord Drinks with the Cook in the Kitchen	100
LEANDER SCHOLZ	
Die erblindete Klasse	110
The Blinded Class	118
DUNG TIEN THI PHUONG	
Letter to Ching	124
Brief an Ching	128
STEVEN WARWICK	
Keeping Up Appearances	132
MAHAN MOALEMI	
Notes on Class, Labor, and the Moving Image	144
Beitragende	168
Contributors	
Impressum	182
Colophon	

A Conversation

**The conversation was conducted
from May through June 2020.**

Melanie Gilligan

Two months into the coronavirus crisis, it is impossible to ignore the fact that we have entered an era of unprecedented unemployment and immiseration that has not been seen since the Great Depression. I am writing this in North America. In the U.S., 33.5 million jobs have been lost since the beginning of the pandemic, which has seen the unemployment rate grow from 3.7 to 14.7 percent.¹ In the past months we have seen inequalities that have long been present becoming major factors in the murderous violence of the pandemic. The conditions that people live in, their access to housing and space, health care and transport are all conditions affecting one's chances of surviving the pandemic. In a moment where inequality is so palpably driving life or death struggles in the crisis, one needs to address the outrageous levels of income inequality and hardship that already preceded the present moment and stand to now become much worse.

Recognizing this epochal shift in class dynamics, it is good to establish the terms in which we want to discuss class. Class is intertwined with other categories as important elements, such as those of race and gender. Leading up to this discussion, you raised the famous quote by cultural theorist Stuart Hall "race is the modality in which class is lived, the medium in which class relations are experienced." The idea of encountering race as a lived modality of class is certainly pertinent during a crisis in which race and class define the chances of one's survival. According to the *New York Times*, the coronavirus is killing Black and Latinx people in New York City at twice the rate that it is killing white people.² Just as access to housing affects one's chances of surviving the virus so do economic inequalities and differences in access to health care. A large portion of public facing service workers or other people deemed essential workers are Black and brown people who are trapped in unsafe jobs during the crisis because of economic circumstances. As theorist of critical race and ethnic studies Chris Chen explained in a recent talk while discussing an article by scholar and activist Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, we cannot understand the context in which "the intersecting threats of hunger, eviction, and unemployment drive poor and working class African Americans toward the possibility of infection without an understanding of the capitalist organization of service work itself."³ The coronavirus crisis has made it even clearer than before that income disparity and the lack of support for people in low-paid jobs are in many ways a matter of life and death.

¹ Jim Zarroli, "3.2 Million More Are Out of Work Jobless Claims Keep Piling Up," *NPR*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/07/851320519/3-2-million-more-are-out-of-work-as-jobless-claims-keep-piling-up> and <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/08/852430930/one-for-the-history-books-14-7-unemployment-20-5-million-jobs-wiped-away> (accessed August 5, 2020).

² Jeffery C. Mays and Andy Newman, "Virus Is Twice as Deadly for Black and Latino People Than Whites in N.Y.C.," *New York Times*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/coronavirus-race-deaths.html> (accessed August 5, 2020).

³ Sarika Chandra, Chris Chen, John Clegg, Iyko Day, Idris Robinson, Shellyne Rodriguez, "Racial Capitalism & Disposable Populations in the Time of COVID," streamed live on YouTube May 15, 2020, video, 1:55:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHMeYtYHiKM> (accessed August 5, 2020).

Marina Vishmidt

Yes, absolutely, and this also prompts the reflection that although these statistics are shocking, they are not in any way surprising. In other words, when daily survival already presents a traversal of disaster-like conditions for so many people in a situation without any public-health infrastructure like in the U.S., the effects of a pandemic on those with the least resources to wait it out are going to be massively predictable, and massively lethal—some of the figures I am reading for the U.K. are comparable, or maybe a bit worse, given the smaller proportion of BAME-identified groups⁴ in the population; figures such as four times more likely to die of the virus, and this is concentrated as well in specific neighborhoods and occupations.⁵ So given you have a situation where the infrastructure has either been systematically run down for profit, as in the U.K. and many other parts of Europe, exists but is inadequate, as in many other parts of the world, or is a cannibalistic joke at the best of times, like the U.S. system, we see the contradictions of capitalist social reproduction bloom with grotesque clarity. But in terms of class, some of what I'd be interested in thinking about now, as always, is how the material fallouts of the pandemic and the consequent economic decline, spectacular as they may be, are experienced in the “common sense” propagated by politicians and capitalists (taking into account divisions in that bourgeois class) and as experienced by most people, and how the amalgam of ideology and experience fuses and shifts over time, in specific contexts. The backlash against lockdowns can be perceived in this light as the far-right mobilization of the immiseration that they foster. Certainly the perspectives voiced at those protests are dystopian in their cruelty and stupidity, belligerently reading the causes for the effects and trumpeting a nihilistic individualism. The conversion of status privilege within an increasingly rebarbatively unequal and decaying totality of social life into the universalist claims of freedom is an abiding trope of the contemporary scene. So I'm interested in how class, or class relations (with class itself seen pre-eminently as a relation, and a relational concept) plays out in not just the consequences but the responses, and the world-pictures they imply or forcefully advance. What is also interesting there is that class is often a “vanishing mediator” in many leftist discourses around the pandemic, which precisely articulate class in its simultaneous lived modalities of race, gender, and migration status, and how these affect the chances of being protected from both the virus and the fall-outs of its management by faltering or vicious states. But a language of class is often not present, although maybe that speaks more to the left-liberal occlusion of not just class as a determinate influence on collective social experience but to the occlusion of agency or power in relation to the groups which are dominated, excluded, or seen as disposable in the current period. To say this more succinctly, we hear a lot about the immiseration

of COVID-19, and we—earlier in the pandemic—heard a bit about mutual aid. Recently we heard a lot about the tiny groups of lockdown protesters. What we hear less about in the mainstream left-liberal press is the activity of workers who reject the disposability assigned to them and their families now as before the virus, and who engage in wildcats, walkouts, strikes, and threats of strikes. Which is to say, even a systemic (rather than a fragmented or humanist) panorama of the world transformed by COVID-19 should be wary of getting transfixed by the misery, the grand spectacle of suffering, where power is always abstract and is always exerted from above—politicians, bosses, cops—or below—little particles of virus—but never amidst, with others, in tenuous but recurrent solidarities. There is a larger social narrative that none of that actually matters—and that narrative also infuses critical accounts—not in the face of the obscene omnipotence of power, or the crushing effects of capital's social reproduction, take your pick. So to focus on the struggles in the field of social production and reproduction as you do below, which does include mutual aid and rent strike on a continuum, is absolutely crucial—maybe the dimension of class, in all its modalities, can only register as class *struggle*, and not any kind of identity.

Gilligan

With regards to the experience of the material disaster of the pandemic, this disaster is now being normalized in discussions of when and how to return to work. The people who lost loved ones and the majority of people who fear contracting the virus will experience the calculative rationality of the return to work as an onslaught. While so many people in care homes or who are unhoused go unremembered, what mark does it leave on people's experience to see the social world marching on, eager to reopen and recommit to economic expansion.⁶ As political theorist Charmaine Chua discussed in a recent talk, the “false equivalent of profit and lives” being made currently increasingly enjoins people to prioritize the flow of commerce over the safety of people “in order to defend continued economic mobility as a proxy for the wellbeing of populations.”⁷ The rhetoric that by keeping the economy flowing it is possible to save more lives has implicitly and resolutely put priority only on lives that have already adapted to fit the needs of the current economy. This logic is deployed in defense of a dying model of economic expansion, which ignores that capitalism is structurally increasingly unable to employ as many people because of, among other things, the deteriorated ability of individual capitals to productively reinvest. Hence we read that many of the jobs lost in the COVID-19 pandemic will not come back.⁸ Nevertheless, a capitalist economic model is adhered to as the only option, even as it wreaks more and more havoc, as so many people disappear from the infernal capitalist game board set up by its parameters.

4 BAME is a term used in the U.K. to refer to Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people. As a bureaucratic, catch-all term, it is a highly contested terminology.

5 Robert Booth and Caelainn Barr, “Black people four times more likely to die from Covid-19, ONS finds,” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/07/black-people-four-times-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-ONS-finds> (accessed August 2, 2020). The article, like much other coverage of the disparities in infection and death rates in the U.K. and the U.S., points out the contribution of poor living and working conditions, which ethnic minorities are disproportionately concentrated in, to exposure to the virus, and differences of outcome in treatment are traced to factors such as delayed presentation for medical treatment, and systemic racism in hospitals, also reflected in the far greater death rates among non-white medical professionals and support staff.

6 “Naming the Lost” is a website on which a 24 hour vigil was held for people who died of COVID-19 in the U.S.: http://namingthelost.com/?fbclid=IwAR1rD96gXER7r-70jBAvp06ZWEBk8opPEhU-pRgHc4_NeqoBPVjL0hKh01E (accessed August 5, 2020). During that vigil, a long period was spent reading the names of the people who have died in care homes but who were not named. For an account of the number of bodies that are unidentified, or otherwise unclaimed see: “Reckoning With The Dead: Journalist Goes Inside An NYC Covid-Disaster Morgue,” *NPR*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/28/863710050/reckoning-with-the-dead-journalist-goes-inside-an-nyc-covid-19-disaster-morgue> (accessed August 5, 2020).

7 Charmaine Chua, Deborah Cowen, Spencer Cox, Laleh Khalili, Sandro Mezzadra, Dara Orenstein, and Nantina Vgontzas, “Bottlenecks, Choke Points and Supply Chains,” streamed live on YouTube May 24, 2020, video, 2:01, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWuitn4GpD4> (accessed August 5, 2020).

The call to act for a larger social good evoked by Angela Merkel—as governments asked populations to combat the virus by social distancing or lockdowns—has lasted only long enough for the situation to rebalance itself and people are now being sent back into a dangerous nightmare. In an article in the *New York Times* called “We Can’t Comprehend This Much Sorrow,” writer, photographer, and art historian Teju Cole talks about how the U.S. has not experienced the virus in a collective way. Cole says, “COVID-19 was initially heralded as a great equalizer, and there was some evidence of this in countries.”⁹ However, solidarity built on this basis did not materialize, not in the U.S. or internationally. This says a great deal about how capitalism’s systemic crisis, of which the U.S. is at the vanguard, has created conditions for the virus to spread through unevenly distributed, private health care and also through capitalist social norms of individual responsibility for health problems. So perhaps one could add to your questions by asking what does it mean to experience this much death in the absence of a collective dimension to social life? What would that collective dimension mean if it were present? Political theorist Will Davies during the start of the coronavirus crisis talked about how on the level of public awareness and perception “we’re all Durkheimians now.”¹⁰ By this he meant that during the pandemic, people have been tallying the figures of global deaths and watching how different national responses have shifted outcomes. These events, Davies says, produce a Durkheimian awareness of society as a social fact. But I wonder, what is this social awareness that on the one hand is an awakening to society’s enmeshed interdependence, while, on the other watches statistics happening elsewhere in order to survey and comprehend the threat to one’s own condition? This is a state of isolated connection. It is a time when that isolated connection is magnified by a highly fragmenting relationship to the social where people’s particular experience of sheltering in place to weather the pandemic differs greatly depending on access to resources, whether they be private or the resources of a national health care system. Despite this isolation, some people went far beyond their individual conditions to take part in important mutual aid work, such as providing food to people hit by the pandemic and struggles such as rent strikes, standing in solidarity with those evicted and protesting against local government inaction on housing in the pandemic.

Historian Christina Heatherton describes how a “knee-jerk anxiety that speaking about racism, settler colonialism, homophobia, misogyny, or ableism somehow occludes discussions of the real class struggle” comes from “a (...) zero sum logic—a scarcity-driven capitalist sensibility.”¹¹ As we face the scarcity-driven period of the present, struggles against systemic racist violence and

police brutality such as those happening now in Minneapolis should always be understood as fights against racial capitalism. Yet unfortunately, some Marxists do not see it this way. In his book *Class, Race, and Marxism*, writer David Roediger summarizes a problem that leads Marxists like David Harvey to disregard struggles against police killings, such as those in 2014 in Ferguson, because he does not see them as anti-capitalist struggles. Roediger explains that for Harvey, the logic of capitalism is understood “to exclude racial divisions” and asserts that “in making this distinction Harvey retools the theorist and historian Ellen Meiksins Wood’s contention that ‘Class exploitation is constitutive of capitalism as gender or racial inequality are not.’”¹² According to Roediger this unfortunately “remains broadly the dominant interpretation” and for geographer F. T. C. Manning, Meiksins Wood’s explanation is “the most formidable in contemporary Marxist and communist thought.”¹³ Capitalism, Meiksins Wood argues, is based on what Marx described as “formally free labor” where the worker is at least notionally free to sell his or her labor power on a free market and because of this, those markets are apparently indifferent to race and gender. However, this conception of capitalist markets abstracts substantially from the real conditions of racialized and gendered labor, among many other very real social conditions that this conception of formal freedom does not include or take into consideration.

Furthermore, Meiksins Wood asserts in the context of another debate, that the necessity of having a general theory of capitalism which can work for defining and understanding the capitalist “laws of motion” and rules of capital’s reproduction necessitates not regarding the category of race as constitutive in the same way as class.¹⁴ This defense of the abstract categories of capital as unable to incorporate conditions in which race and gender are reproduced in capitalism is a major problem. Chris Chen objects to this positioning of race outside of the laws that govern capitalism, saying that “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,” that is “misrecognized as peripheral to an ultimately race-neutral conflict between capital and labour.” A very similar issue is raised in the argument that philosopher Cinzia Arruzza makes in her essay “Remarks on Gender,” elaborated by F. T. C. Manning as an approach that divides abstract, logical, or “essential mechanisms” of capitalism from capitalism’s historical and concrete unfolding in gendered forms of labor and oppression. Reflecting on all of this, it seems important to consider some of the specific ways that these sorts of approaches to understanding capitalism divide abstract, logical “laws of motion” from concrete, historical unfoldings. One example I can think of would be David Harvey’s lack of support for struggles in Ferguson, as noted above, but it is worth outlining other ways that this division plays out.

8 Patricia Cohen, “Many Jobs May Vanish Forever as Layoffs Mount,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/business/economy/coronavirus-unemployment-claims.html> (accessed August 5, 2020).

9 Teju Cole, “We Can’t Comprehend This Much Sorrow,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/18/magazine/covid-quarantine-sorrow.html> (accessed August 5, 2020).

10 Alex Doherty, #82 Coronavirus and the networked society w/ Will Davies, podcast, March 25, 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/poltheoryother/will-final-pub> (accessed August 5, 2020).

11 Christina Heatherton, “Not Just Being Right, But Getting Free: Reflections on Class, Race, and Marxism,” Verso Books (blog), July 16, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3317-not-just-being-right-but-getting-free-reflections-on-class-race-and-marxism> (accessed August 5, 2020).

12 David Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2017), 25.

13 F. T. C. Manning, “Closing the Conceptual Gap: A Response to Cinzia Arruzza’s Remarks on Gender,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, May 4, 2015, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/closing-the-conceptual-gap-a-response-to-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender/> (accessed August 5, 2020).

14 Steven Gregory, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Adolph Reed Jr., and Maurice Zeitlin, “How Does Race Relate to Class?,” debate, https://advancethestruggle.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/how_does_race_relate_to_class-2.pdf (accessed August 5, 2020).

Vishmidt

Yes, there's a lot to think about here. I'll focus initially on how the "back to work" imperative has played out, and then turn to the theoretically and politically inadequate purview of "class-first" Marxism that you've outlined above.

I want to think about the significance of "fear" as a material determination in how the pandemic has unfolded over the past few months. Not exactly in the sense of "behavioral psychology," whether applied in analysis of populations or markets, but as a driver of policy in terms of the influence of scenario modeling during COVID-19. Fear of the pandemic, and a pandemic of fear, we might say. First, on the part of the state and capital, there is not a fear of mass death so much as a fear of the social unrest sparked by the phenomenon of mass death spooking the markets and shutting down the economy. This is a development that should be preempted by shutting down the economy. Yet a lot of this is perception management because the economy does not shut down for most of the people whose survival is both challenged and sustained by going out to work. The "essential" human sacrifices that suture the detestable fiction of a society pulling together in the face of bio-threat, i.e. the politics of immunity (and not those of socialism, however wistful leftist journalists may have it otherwise). Thus, we can see that the opposition between saving the economy and saving lives is and always has been profoundly rhetorical, because saving lives has never been anything but an emergency-speed allocation of disposability, a speeded up necro-economics, as Warren Montag has recently termed it.¹⁵ Speeded up and intensified in relation to how that allocation usually proceeds in capitalist societies—especially literally dying ones like the U.S., as you point out, at the vanguard of a death spiral, if that spatiality makes sense—and thus made all the more evident, especially to those whose disposability is neatly intended to be eclipsed by their "essentiality" as workers. The opposition is also absurd because the time of lockdown has also been a time of softening up the population as a whole for holding drastically lowered expectations of surviving their everyday lives, as the economy and their well-being after all cannot be held apart at a magnetic distance forever.

As the writer and editor Brian Kuan Wood notes, "Our lives derive from the health of the current economic system and are directly opposed to it at the same time. While the terms of this biopolitical enclosure (or simply: contradiction) have been clear since the early days of capitalist industrialization, it seems to demand something further today."¹⁶ Both in the U.K. and U.S. the discourse of the state has pretty rapidly attempted to shift from pandemic management to pandemic normalization (without a prior stage of pandemic suppression). As many have noted, that gives you the worst of both worlds: mass death and

economic collapse prompted by repeated lockdowns—except, of course, if you can get the population sufficiently accustomed to mass death then the lockdowns will no longer be necessary. And rapid immiseration is one good technique for fostering this habituation. But, as Wood says, something further is demanded. Over the past months, many on the political and cultural left have framed the quarantines as something of an imposed "general strike," which has to be politically appropriated by communities as a sustained and socially reproductive refusal to go back to work and back to the world as currently constituted. Which is a nice starting point, though the first consideration here is probably not how to keep people at home but how to make it safe for those who can't stay at home to leave work. In other words, the same old question. In other words, the atomization and weakness that gripped workers' movements and workers' organizations by and large may on occasion seem to be ruptured by COVID-linked wildcat strikes and walkouts, but the pandemic has largely had an exacerbating effect on this decomposition, not a countering one. This is because of the explosion in unemployment, which, in systems like the U.S., is directly linked to higher chances of dying because people have no access to healthcare without employer's insurance. Which is where we come back to fear as a material factor. People go to work because of fear. People leave work because of fear. Governments pretend to pursue lockdowns because of fear. Governments cancel lockdowns because of fear. Markets scurry up and down indexes as they always do, driven by delirium and fear. And it becomes increasingly evident that nothing in this scenario will change until most of us inhabiting this death spiral find ways of acquiring the means of the production of fear.

As for the class contradiction as the primary contradiction, and the structure / history split that informs it, it seems like such an arcane discourse from the current perspective (not that it was anything but obtuse and useless to begin with). It is obviously symptomatic of a desire for analytic clarity, and thus also points to a long-standing critical pathology on the left, namely that if we get the analysis right, the politics will automatically gain traction from there. I can't see this debate in any terms but the epochal expression of marginality and defeat, where we go back and hone our analysis until such time as the circumstances become favorable again—but for what exactly, a mass workers' movement, untainted by identity politics? It just seems so irrelevant, when it's clear, as in your citations of Chen, and here I might also bring in political theorist Asad Haider's work, that there is no real-world sense in which race and gender can be experientially or logically separated from how capitalism is reproduced as a social relation. The fact that we still see "structure" or "logic" juxtaposed to "history" playing this pantomime of "essential" and "contingent," which derives straight from scholastic philosophy and prior to that Platonism, is intriguing in some ways but politically and philosophically completely defunct. Here I would approach the Arruzza / Manning debate you mention slightly differently, as it seems to me their positions are reversed. Manning is arguing for a split between logic and history in which the logic includes race and gender, and Arruzza is arguing against the tenability of such a split. But I would probably need to revisit those two interventions to get a clearer grasp of their stakes.

¹⁵ Warren Montag, "Necro-economics: Adam Smith and death in the life of the universal," *Radical Philosophy*, 134, Nov-Dec 2005. Many besides Montag have been in dialogue with Achille Mbembe's influential concept of "necropolitics," as first set out in the 2003 English-language publication of this work "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*, 15 (1), 11-40; see also the recent book-length study *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). Some recent studies working with the "necroeconomics" framework include Vevheniia Berchul, Yu Gong, Andrey Shevlyakov, and Bryan Wolff, "Governing Simulations: Intro to Necroeconomics," *Strelka Mag*, May 19, 2020 and Charles Mudede, "Re-opening Businesses During a Pandemic Shows We Are Entering the Age of Necro-Economics," *The Stranger*, April 23, 2020.

¹⁶ Brian Kuan Wood, "Insurgency of Life," *e-flux journal* 109, May 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/109/331477/insurgency-of-life/> (accessed August 5, 2020).

Gilligan

You are definitely right that this tendency in Marxism is useless and obtuse. Yet it seems one still needs to oppose it, especially when a well-known theorist such as David Harvey who has made these arguments is also a person who repeatedly publicly dismisses immensely important struggles against police violence such as those in Ferguson and the 2011 London riots. From another angle, writer and educator Nikhil Pal Singh in his essay “On Race, Violence and So Called Primitive Accumulation” has pointed out that a problem with Ellen Meiksins Wood’s approach is that it “tend(s) to dismiss or diminish the importance of simultaneous modes of economic expansion, particularly slavery and the slave trade, whose links to the rise of industrial capitalism may be acknowledged but whose contribution to the form of capitalism remains radically underspecified.”¹⁷ Instead this “scholarly approach supports a tendency in Marxist thought to think of slavery as capitalism’s antecedent—a historical stage—which glosses over a startling fact affirmed in much recent historiography: that the chattel slave was a new kind of laboring being and new species of property born with capitalism.”¹⁸ For Singh, Marx’s own oeuvre “exemplifies the problem we face, both offering support for what W. E. B. Du Bois once called the ‘slavery character’ of capitalism particularly in its Anglo-American ascendancy” while “contributing to a problematic conceptual relegation of African slavery within capitalism’s history.”¹⁹ That ambiguity around whether slavery belongs to an earlier historical stage before capitalism, Singh says, has, as a result, “haunted radical politics.” I make this point not only to discuss problems in certain Marxist analyses, but rather to address an issue that is extremely relevant to current struggles against racial capitalism.

In order to elaborate this further, it’s worth turning at length to Singh’s argument on Marx’s discussion of coerced versus free labor. For Singh, a problem lies with Marx’s distinction that violence and coercion are not part of capitalism.²⁰ He points out that “as Marx famously wrote, mature capitalism exists when ‘the silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker.’ At this point, ‘direct force, extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases.’”²¹ Crucially, Singh objects that “the direct application of state-sanctioned force and

violence once required to create wage labor... did not disappear. It remains in hierarchy and competition between workers, in the policing of unwaged labor that has migrated to poverty and the informal economy, and in imperial and nationalist conscription of the metropolitan working class.”²² It is important that Singh describes the force and violence imposed on labor as including the violent policing of unwaged labor that is imposed in conditions of “poverty and the informal economy,” because that is one type of situation, among others, where people are least protected from direct violence and coercion. Singh says that in Marx’s account of the development of capitalism “the exceptional cases in which direct force is used include colonial spaces where slavery and other forms of coerced labor took root” in which “police methods” are required. Arguing that “the inattention to these political effects that frame” relations of production while they “appear to no longer define” them “has led to confusion between forms of domination and stages of development, in which the unevenness of unpaid, disposable, and surplus labor is opposed to the orderly fluctuations of waged and reserved labor...” Singh instead points to the relationship of formal and informal labor as labor that is protected from violence, on the one hand, and that is exposed to violence, on the other. He goes on to explain that when Marx characterizes this difference between forms of labor in terms of their “incompleteness” of the “development of capitalist production,” producing “inherited evils” such as violence “arising from the passive survival of archaic and outmoded modes of production” this “marking of certain relations as passive or anachronistic remains problematic.” “What if,” he asks, “this incompleteness is a permanent feature of capitalism? What happens when those supposedly passive or archaic capitalist methods most closely linked to direct coercion are not only retained within the labor process, but also profoundly shape the form of the state?” Singh goes on to describe the conditions within which the state imposes violence on surplus populations:

*Insofar as this variety of capitalism reproduces divisions between (re)productive humanity and disposable humanity, might we not further recognize how this very division is mediated by the shifting productions of race as a logic of depreciation linked to: 1) proletarianization as a condition of ‘wageless life’—the norm of capitalism insofar as it produces radical market dependency and surplus labor—and 2) the regular application of force and violence within those parts of the social that subsequently have no part?*²³

He asks whether “to the extent to which direct compulsion and organized violence is retained within capitalist social formations, might its conceptual import lie... in their indispensable contributions to maintaining capitalist social relations?” Direct compulsion and violence are organized around “the defense of private property, but also the active management of spaces and times of insecurity and existential threat that threaten or challenge the idea that capitalist social relations successfully encompass an entire way of life.”²⁴

17 Nikhil Pal Singh, *On Race, Violence and So-Called Primitive Accumulation, Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2017), 106.

18 Ibid.

19 For a discussion of this ambiguity, which emphasizes Marx’s assertion that slavery is capitalist, see John Clegg, “A Theory of Capitalist Slavery,” *Wiley Online Library* (website), March 25, 2020, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/johs.12259> (accessed August 5, 2020).

20 Singh explains that “Marx’s analysis, insofar as it adopts the standpoint of ‘developed’ capitalism in England, can lead to an inattention and even indifference to how capital differentiates between free labor and less-than-free labor according to racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies as a means of both labor discipline and surplus appropriation.” Singh, *On Race, Violence and So-Called Primitive Accumulation, Futures of Black Radicalism*, 121.

21 Ibid., 116. One might look at histories such as Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe* to read how capitalism, in the 1920s, relied on the terrifying violence of police and the state to discipline racialized workers, suppressing political protests and resistant political affiliations in many spheres of social reproduction. This is not a condition that is relegated to a previous stage of capitalist development and it is erroneous to regard such violence as extra-economic.

22 Ibid., 117.

23 Ibid., 133.

24 Ibid., 134.

For Singh, there is both a “value and limitation of” Marx’s “work for thinking about the ongoing development of racial categories, and particularly the social reproduction of race through ongoing violence, dominion, and dependency.”²⁵ While he points to the Marxist under-theorization of the use of force in maintaining capitalist social relations, it is incredibly evident in the current moment, when the protests and riots in Minneapolis against police violence mentioned earlier in our conversation have now expanded into an unprecedented uprising and protest movement across the country. For a week and a half, these anti-racist battles against the police have been a necessary defense against police brutality and murder. People have come to the streets in immense numbers across the U.S. and they have been met with horrendous violence and repression. With Singh’s position in mind, it seems essential in a time such as the present to take account of the ways that the racist violence of policing figures into the social reproduction of capitalism.

One article that foregrounds such a question is Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s recent *New York Times* piece entitled “Of Course There Are Protests. The State is Failing Black People.”²⁶ In it, Taylor writes: “The fact that Mr. Floyd was even arrested, let alone killed, for the inconsequential ‘crime’ of forgery amid a pandemic that has taken the life of one out of every 2,000 African-Americans is a chilling affirmation that black lives still do not matter in the United States.” By connecting the police murder of Black people with the dangers that Black people are experiencing in the coronavirus crisis, the line of argument connects living conditions to police violence. Citing that there has been 23,000 COVID-19 related deaths among Black people in the U.S., Taylor describes how “the coronavirus has scythed its way through black communities, highlighting and accelerating the ingrained social inequities that have made African-Americans the most vulnerable to the disease.” Taylor points out that it is white public officials that are trying “to get things back to normal as fast as possible” while disregarding “the pandemic’s devastating consequences to black people,” normalizing the terrible outcomes of this decision. “If there were ever questions about whether poor and working-class African-Americans were disposable, there can be none now. It’s clear that state violence is not solely the preserve of the police.” The desire for immediate, system-wide social transformation that we have seen since George Floyd’s murder shows the links between police violence and other forms of state violence that can be seen throughout policing, the legal and carceral system, laws around housing and real estate, and many more aspects of the systemic racist state. As political scientist Michael C. Dawson said in 2016, “the current crisis of legitimacy within the United States is due in no small part to the increasingly problematic intersection of racial domination, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation.”²⁷ It is a theoretical framework such as racial capitalism that helps to provide a lens for thinking through our current moment.

²⁵ Ibid., 117.

²⁶ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Of Course There Are Protests. The State is Failing Black People,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/opinion/george-floyd-minneapolis.html> (accessed August 5, 2020).

²⁷ Michael C. Dawson, “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order,” *Critical Historical Studies*, March 2016, 143–161.

Also, to respond to what you said regarding Cinzia Arruzza and F.T.C. Manning, I agree with you that Manning was arguing that race and gender are part of the logic of capital. I meant to say that it was Arruzza who initially brought up the distinction of capital’s logic versus history.

Vishmidt

Thanks for bringing in that Nikhil Pal Singh text, it’s obviously an immensely clarifying and substantial analysis that should have far wider circulation than the moderate level of recognition it has, absolutely. But David Harvey aside—and I think his lament is probably something more like “well, riots are all very well, but what about the workplace,” a far from unique type of commentary, which then gets people like Joshua Clover to write books about the world-historical significance of the “riot-form,” making this a bit of an brocialist theory squabble—I would reiterate that I see the purchase of “class-first” Marxism as quite limited, in its own terms and in its wider influence at this point in time. Having said that, it does occupy a certain amount of bandwidth in some sectors of the Left, so there remains a strategic value in continuing to set out the counterarguments. It has to be noted that the political tendencies of people who espouse it are evidently questionable, such as the red-brown fulminations of the likes of academic and writer Angela Nagle, etc. There is a certain socialist mainstream, no doubt, such as perhaps some elements of *Jacobin* magazine, that hold fast to some evergreen dogmas, and in the U.K. you might have some of that as well in Left-Labour spaces like Novara Media and *The World Transformed*, and perhaps we could even say that many “orthodox leftists” who have been formed in a certain tradition, on the trade unionist or even on the far left, hold on to that dogma at some level of their basic attitudes to politics. I just feel like for anyone our age and younger generations, it sounds a bit alien, sometimes for reasons of good analysis, sometimes a bit blurry analysis (reflexive “intersectionality,” the prevalence of terms like “classism”). That anyone in the everyday rather than sectarian world of the left would discount race or gender as extrinsic to the class relation seems implausible to me. But I’m not on social media so I think I might miss a lot of the more obnoxious polemics that go completely in this “class-first” direction and my picture may well be too optimistic. It also seems that given this kind of “common sense,” our political moment, the pandemic which makes the inextricability of race, class, and gender apocalyptically clear (as you have been describing so precisely above) and the work of everyone from Rosa Luxemburg, Cedric Robinson, Angela Davis, Robin D. G. Kelley, Fred Moten, Silvia Federici, and Saidiya Hartman to people who write on the financial innovations of chattel slavery like John Clegg or Ian Baucom to Marx himself, whose passages of reflection on the integral dimensions of plantation slavery, colonialism, and unfree labor in all its manifold to the stabilization and extension of the “world market” are at least as numerous as those evoking any linear notions of dull economic compulsion irrevocably superseding “primitive” accumulation... Even the *Financial Times* recently published analysis of the financial innovations developed in the system of chattel slavery in the southern States. Which is all to say that the connection between capitalism and race, via slavery as

one towering example, is not a scandal or a polemic but a humdrum historical fact, to strike a very positivist note for a moment. It all feels very mainstream. I just feel like that battle has been won a long time ago, to be honest, both conceptually and politically. Maybe I'm wrong. I would say at the same time that we need to appreciate the strategic value of establishing once and for all that there's no such thing as capitalism without race, *even* if it feels like that battle has been won, *even* when there's scads of white people out in the streets for the Movement for Black Lives. Which is to say, there is no such thing as capitalism without persistent and structural violence. When I say, "strategic value," I mean, who is this demonstration directed at and what situation it is trying to bring about? I actually would say at this point in time that anyone who mounts an elaborate defense of a logic of capitalism that is purely formal, with no connection to racialization or gender, is probably a racist and misogynist and therefore their faulty understanding of capitalism is the least of our/their problems.

One thing I have been thinking about lately, and which is maybe less firmly implicated in a discourse about class specifically, and perhaps I should be clearer that I haven't been thinking about it just lately, is the role of categories like "value" in the Marxian discourse that is perhaps most self-conscious about integrating gender and class as analytic parameters, namely social reproduction theory (my feeling is that its address to race is a bit more equivocal). Maybe this comes to mind because I love thinking about "red herrings," and my instinct that the "class-first" or "logic/history" split is one of those which brought me to one of my favorite red swimmers, "value," or "value production," and its generalization/moralization within that discourse. Again, maybe this is lazy thinking, but it really does feel like all these red herrings get so comprehensively cast aside by the necropolitical economy of the pandemic, which, as you say, provides the spectacle of the salvaging of lives that are already deemed the most suited to the needs of "the economy." All those value-producing cleaners are abundantly recognized as "essential," or "keeping us alive," but are still sacrificed on the altar of economic health—it's like some kind of social reproduction dystopia. In an essay on the right way to think about the value composition of the commodity of labor power by Guido Starosta and Gastón Caligaris—an analysis which can be read as one extended footnote, despite never mentioning that piece, on the point made in "The Logic of Gender" that the commodity of labor-power does not roll off the assembly line fully formed—they write: "the unity of the human metabolic process becomes inverted into a moment of the reproduction of capital."²⁸ I find this a fascinating phrase, one that can be revolved and unpacked in so many ways. Their actual argument is more prosaic, to be sure; it has to do with the fact that the value of labor-power is not determinable until it has been absorbed as a use-value in capital's self-realization—it is not determined solely by the "basket of goods" that it takes to reproduce it, nor by reproductive labor. But it seems to me that there's a lot that can be done with this. Certainly if we try and relate it back to a discussion about class, we can see that class, like value, has to be thought from the perspective of "total social capital," as it

were, that none of these categories—class, value, gender, sex, race—have a composite ethical-political valence outside of that, and they can never, actually, be outside of that. So, two things: no capitalism without gender, race, etc. and also those categories are analytically free-floating absent a determinate mode of social production. And then what are the reasons we might want them to have an independent analytic valence? This is definitely the question that animates my thinking: if this, for whom? For what? What desires or anxieties are mediated by any political and philosophical commitment? What is the strategic value of this commitment?

One additional point that could be emphasized here is—and maybe this is similar to the idea of incorporating race and class in a *logic*—how we understand class in articulations of "class-first" or "race/gender-blind" capitalism. Do we understand class as precisely a formal logic without the determinations of difference that constitute its lived "modality" as Stuart Hall underlines? What makes class an analytic category apart from blackness? Conversely, do we read anti-racist struggles as working-class struggles and in which circumstances? Or do we understand class as implicitly white, as a signifier of the structural colorless, i.e. whiteness, of the logic of exploitation? Thus, it has to be an additive "class and..." If class is understood as a relation, in relation, as a moment or a pattern, and not an identity, it's hard to get quite how or why such a "formalism" could take hold. A proximate concern is that accepting "class" as a category implicitly expressive of whiteness that then needs to be articulated with other forms of oppression and struggles, whether analytically or politically, overlooks the Black radical tradition in all its various and not always compatible sites, and the history of Black and women's working-class struggles and theorizing that saw themselves as mobilizing, and mobilizing within, a capacious category of class as the global proletariat, that is, those without the means of production whose labor builds and reproduces the world.

Gilligan

Thank you for going into further reasons why you think that a conversation about "class-first" Marxism is not relevant. It's very helpful that you nevertheless enumerated the reasons why the position is a racist one that, as you say, "understand(s) class as implicitly white." I definitely agree that countless thinkers, working during various periods, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Audre Lorde, have presented arguments that overturned such a position and made it obsolete a long time ago. Before I respond to your points, I want to apologize that my comment that "class-first" Marxism needs to be opposed diverted our conversation, as I only meant this as an aside, not intending to prompt us to discuss the topic further. However, now that the discussion has continued, I will respond to your point about strategic value and, as you say, "who is this demonstration directed at and what is the situation it is trying to bring about." I am in total agreement with you regarding the "strategic value of establishing once and for all that there's no such thing as capitalism without race." I think the reason for opposing "class-first" Marxism is not to do so in order to convince

people who are racist, but because “class-first” Marxism involves a view of how capitalism operates that is racist in the ways that you have outlined. Moreover, it has the effect to limit solidarity between anti-capitalist struggles when it presents class struggle as the most important struggle. For example, you can see this tendency in some aspects in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which has grown to become a large and influential movement in the U.S. in recent years. As Cinzia Arruzza stated recently on Facebook, the DSA is “grossly out of tune with what is happening, from gross interventions in the debate about defunding police to default defense of Sanders’ pitiful positions on the matter, to the regurgitation of the most trite economic reductionism which is utterly incapable of understanding the centrality of racial relations for US capitalism and the fact that class struggle in this country will ALWAYS be mediated by race.” Although Arruzza does not call this “class-first” Marxism, the description of economic reductionism that does not understand “the centrality of racial relations in the US” indicates an associated and similar problem. Related criticisms of the DSA can be found in recent articles by Asad Haider against class reductionism and by historian Barbara Ransby regarding the uprisings in response to the police murder of George Floyd.²⁹ I do not bring this up to make a case that “class-first” Marxism is a prevalent position because I believe you when you say it is not, but to show that where it exists it can propagate extremely harmful conceptions of how capitalism functions that can result in denial or misconception of solidarity with the most vital contemporary struggles against capitalism, such as the current international uprisings in response to the police killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the calls for police abolition that have accompanied them. In the U.S., those protests have together made up one of the largest nationwide uprisings in history, which Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor recently called “the convergence of a class rebellion with racism and racial terrorism at the center of it” that is “uncharted territory in the United States.”³⁰ In a lecture that discusses Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Robin D. G. Kelley describes how “the story of race and the making of the global capitalist order is also about the capacity of capital and the state to capture the white working class and tie its identity to race, that is to whiteness and masculinity. So the secret to capitalism’s survival is racism.”³¹ To add to this, David Roediger’s account in his book, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, outlines that a major factor throughout U.S. history has been the racist defense of privileges by workers who define themselves as white against other workers.³² Looking at Arruzza’s comments on the DSA, one should not forget the histories of exclusion of the political

interests of Black people and other people of color from European and North American worker’s movements and it is that racist tradition which rears its ugly head in phenomena such as “class-first” Marxism. I suppose I want to oppose this tendency because I believe in the importance of analyzing capitalism in order to overthrow it and I think that Marxism is a helpful analytic for this pursuit. However, that understanding of capitalism has to foreground that capitalism is racial capitalism.

I am conscious that the wariness toward Marxism and communism of thinkers such as one of the founders of Negritude Aimé Césaire had very valid reasons. It is immensely important to draw attention to and change those aspects of Marxism that have not in the past or do not currently address themselves to the struggles of people of color. For W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James and Richard Wright, “*Black Marxism* was not a site of contestation between Marxism and the tradition, nor a revision. It was a new vision...” highlighting that a whole new line of thought was needed.³³ To build on this discussion, I would add that a conception of capitalism has to include an understanding that it functions through racialization both in the past and present. I think that you are very right that a tendency to separate class and race is less pervasive today. This is very much because of the strength of past Black and brown social movements and recent ones such as the Movement for Black Lives, the Water Protectors at Standing Rock, as well as the analytical strength of arguments that join together an understanding of capitalism and racialization presented by countless thinkers, some of whom you reference. Two of these thinkers, Cedric Robinson and Robin D. G. Kelley, study racial capitalism, exploring how capitalism developed through racialization. In my view, such analyses employ a relational approach, which as you say, is anathema to an exclusionary “class-first” view, instead attending to how capitalism is comprised of interconnected systems of oppression. I would point out that many theories of racial capitalism put into contact elements that traditional Marxism would conventionally consider separate. One example is described by Kelley in the same lecture on Robinson’s argument in *Black Marxism* regarding the development of capitalism:

...Robinson’s objective... what he wanted to show was how European racism, racialism, and nationalism preceded capitalism. Preceded capitalism. It existed before capitalism emerged, when it emerged in the 13th and in the 15th centuries, between that period. And in doing so he directly challenged the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary break from feudalism. Now capitalism and racism, he says, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from that old order, from the old feudal order, to produce a modern world system of racial capitalism dependent on slavery,

²⁹ Asad Haider, “How calling someone a ‘class reductionist’ became a leftist insult,” *Salon*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/07/25/how-calling-someone-a-class-reductionist-became-a-lefty-insult/> (accessed August 6, 2020); Barbara Ransby, “The White Left Needs to Embrace Black Leadership,” *The Nation*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/black-lives-white-left/> (accessed August 5, 2020).

³⁰ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020; and “Moment of Reckoning: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Cornel West, and Bakari Sellers on Nationwide Uprising,” *Democracy Now!*, video, 28:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_B6n-wBm54 (accessed August 5, 2020).

³¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, “What is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?,” lecture, Kane Hall, November 7, 2017, uploaded to YouTube, November 18, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gim7W_jQQ (accessed August 5, 2020).

³² Roediger explains that “in my view, no answer to the ‘white problem’ can ignore the explanatory power of historical materialism, but neither does Marxism, as presently theorized, consistently help us focus on the central issue of why so many workers define themselves as white.” He goes on to say that “the problem is not just that the white working class is at critical junctures manipulated into racism, but that it comes to think of itself and its interests as white.” David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 1999), 6–12.

³³ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), xxxii.

violence, imperialism, and genocide. So, as he put it, the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate, to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into racial ones, and that's within Europe.³⁴

One might say that Robinson thereby opposed a traditional Marxist understanding of how the feudal order gave rise to capitalism when bringing together the analysis of race and capitalism in that particular way.

Thinking further of how consideration of a relational approach contributes to our conversation, I want to answer a question that you asked which in the context of the discussion seems rhetorical, but that for the sake of our conversation is worth answering. You ask, "Do we read anti-racist struggles as working-class struggles?" I would answer, with Ruth Wilson Gilmore, that struggles such as current anti-racist protests and riots against killings by police are class struggles. Gilmore says in a recent interview that when people look at "the multiple struggles that come together against police brutality, against police killings, against mass incarceration, against austerity..." it is clear "how the struggle is class struggle, always, always, always."³⁵ For Gilmore to call these class struggles is not to reduce their concerns to economic ones. The forms of racial and economic violence that Gilmore describes here are intertwined forms of class struggle and anti-racist struggle against the imposition of economic exploitation, exclusion, domination, and the criminalization of racialized populations. Anti-racist struggles against the state are class struggles because the state uses its monopoly on violence as "indispensable contributions to maintaining capitalist social relation" with capitalism as the only means through which people can live and be reproduced.³⁶ As we read in Nikhil Pal Singh, "racism is a dimension of the form of capitalism," where conditions of domination through market mediation are interconnected with other more overtly violent modes of domination such as police violence.³⁷ So one way to trace a relational analysis is to look at how during the recent anti-racist struggles, which activist and co-founder of Co-operation Jackson Kali Akuno and other people are calling "the Floyd Rebellion," there have not only been horrifying levels of violence from militarized police forces and then the National Guard, but also countless forms of innovations in struggle that have tied together many aspects of social life and social reproduction: from the use of a hotel in Minneapolis by protesters and rioters to feed and house people, to the redistribution of looted goods, to the occupation of New York City Hall, to the 800 strikes that have occurred in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, to the setting free of people as they are arrested and the refusal of bus drivers to transport arrested protesters, to the development of Camp Maroon in Philadelphia and the CHAZ (Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone)

34 Robin D. G. Kelley, "What is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?"

35 Ruth Wilson Gilmore interviewed by Chenjerai Kumanyika, "Ruth Wilson Gilmore makes the case for abolition," *The Intercept*, June 10, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/> (accessed August 5, 2020).

36 Nikhil Pal Singh, *On Race, Violence and So-Called Primitive Accumulation, Futures of Black Radicalism*, 134.

37 Ibid.

in Seattle where people were protected from the police and a police station was temporarily closed.³⁸

So it is both by looking at the work of thinkers of racial capitalism such as Cedric Robinson, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore and by watching current anti-racist struggles that we observe many articulations of the relationships between race and capitalism. Elaborations of these relationships frequently take place through study of systems of social reproduction, where areas conventionally associated with capital accumulation, such as labor, meet areas of social life that are often mediated by the state. Gilmore's important work on the California carceral system, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*, demonstrates how capitalist violence and racial domination happen as a result of, among other things, discipline through economic policies and legal frameworks. In the book, Gilmore articulates how the rapid expansion of the California prison system was propelled by many parallel changes such as, for instance, a waning agricultural economy, changes in state laws, and increased levels of unemployment, demonstrating the relationship between state enforcement of legal and carceral systems with multiple levels of exploitation and economic capitalization. I would say that such a comprehensive relational approach not only leads to better analysis but also moves a Marxist economic analysis beyond formalist divisions that would in blinkered fashion limit what constitutes anti-capitalist analysis or struggle.

To expand the proposal that analyzing across areas of social reproduction in capitalism one can develop better political understandings, I want to bring up an interesting passage in David Roediger's *Class, Race, and Marxism* about the film *Ferguson: Report from Occupied Territory* made in 2015 by Orlando de Guzman. Roediger explains why the struggles in *Ferguson* were part of a larger picture of anti-capitalist struggle through his description of the film. He says that "by letting poor people speak and taking viewers into their homes to an extent very rare in US cinema, *Ferguson* shows the municipal courts, the warrantless searches later justified by finding warrants accumulated in previous instances of racial profiling, unpayable fines for petty offenses, and the brutal but self-satisfied behavior by the police that ruin the lives of African American workers. We see the vast expanses of closed factories and the abandoned neighborhoods lost to deindustrialization and unfair housing practices that provide a backdrop."³⁹ This picture of the wider social conditions is crucial to understanding the connection between police killings and other forms of domination and structural racism in capitalism that operate through courts, schools, housing, and many other interconnected public and private systems and social institutions in the United States. With regard to the specific role

38 See Mike Elk, "AFL-CIO Attacks Our Live Battered Inspired Strike Wave Coverage," *Payday Report*, June 23, 2020, <https://paydayreport.com/4300-shipyard-worker-strike-afl-cios-racist-attack-on-our-blm-strike-coverage-hca-hospital-strike/> (accessed August 5, 2020); Biba Adams, "Viral video shows New Orleans Police release woman after protesters intervene," *the grio*, June 12, 2020, <https://thegrio.com/2020/06/12/video-shows-police-release-woman/> (accessed August 5, 2020); Jason Koebler, "NYC Bus Drivers Union Refuse to Transport Protesters for the NYPD," *Vice*, May 30, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/m7jed3/nyc-bus-drivers-union-refuses-to-transport-protesters-for-the-nypd (accessed August 5, 2020).

39 David Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2017), 2.

played by housing in this network of systemic racist social forms and institutions, academic Kwame Holmes offers helpful insights in the 2017 article “Necrocapitalism, Or, THE VALUE OF BLACK DEATH,” by describing the way U.S. geographies permeated by capital relations are tied to police violence and white supremacy. On the one hand, Holmes explains, the context for many recent police killings in the U.S. take place where “poor African Americans... found themselves without options; hemmed into subsidized housing within Metropolitan America’s most inaccessible geographies. So many of the black people who have lost their lives at the hand of the police—Oscar Grant, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling—lost their lives in those same neighborhoods, because police have been empowered to treat poverty with deadly force.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, Holmes shows how in wealthier suburbs, such as Falcon Heights, Minnesota, where Philando Castile was murdered, many families’ household finances are increasingly reliant on real estate investment, engineering frightening alliances between real estate market property values, the murderous racism of police, and white, middle-class capitalization. This last example shows how white supremacy is upheld through systems of market mediation that white people in the U.S. seek to support in order to reproduce their livelihoods.

Returning to Guzman’s film, what is clear is that it achieves something like the full and complex presentations of social conditions through adopting a relational approach similar to those I have admired in some studies of racial capitalism. By depicting the relationships between different aspects of the state, economy, the courts, and the police, Guzman shows that capitalism and political opposition to it involves much more than just the workplace. It is instead many interconnected systems of society that reproduce capitalism, namely the state and the deadly racist violence of police, harassment, fines, racial profiling and its relation to racial discrimination in housing, schools, and courts. Pinpointing how these systems interlink is an important focus for anti-capitalist analysis as well as struggles. The film’s narrative focuses on the conditions experienced by people who are Black and proletarian. Roediger points out that “those interviewed in the film clearly understand their problems as those of the working poor and the deindustrialized, as well as of those victimized in schools, courts, and on the streets because of their race,”⁴¹ emphasizing this to argue against those Marxists who say that, unless a struggle is communicated as a class or anti-capitalist struggle, it is not politically revolutionary in the Marxist sense. To this, I answer that those theorists are absolutely wrong to presume to dictate the correct way that people should articulate their struggles. One of the reasons that people struggle is that they are confronted by oppressions in their lives and, in the case of the protests and riots in Ferguson, it makes sense that a film about the conditions that incited these struggles brought together the systemic violence and racism to which Black people are subjected with an analysis of living conditions.

40 Kwame Holmes, “Necrocapitalism, Or, THE VALUE OF BLACK DEATH,” *Bully Bloggers* (blog), July 24, 2020, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2017/07/24/necrocapitalism-or-the-value-of-black-death-by-kwame-holmes/> (accessed August 5, 2020).

41 David Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism*, 2.

One book that may add to this discussion is *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* by Michael C. Dawson, which asks: “how do the different structures of black and white economic reality differ from each other? Do different strata of blacks experience a common economic reality?”⁴² Writing in 1995, Dawson looks at the question of whether Black people in the U.S. consider their collective class interests before the collective interests of their race. He explains that:

*African-Americans, although not yet as well off as whites, are becoming increasingly polarized among themselves. The black middle class though very vulnerable is growing, as is the sector of the economic community that is economically devastated. Yet systematic manifestations of these class divisions have been difficult to find. The puzzle for researchers and political observers is why, given the growing economic cleavage among black Americans, political unity among blacks appears to remain fairly strong. After all, as Dawson and Wilson (1991) have documented, virtually all social science theories of race and class, except black nationalism, predict that black political diversity will follow black economic diversity.*⁴³

Dawson posits a reason why the growing division in class interests does not produce a division in solidarity which he bases on a “framework [that] requires that we relate African-American political beliefs and actions as *individuals* to their perceptions of racial *group* interests” and goes on to say that “for African-Americans, this means that one’s individual preferences are partly shaped by one’s ties to the black community, one’s perception of group interests, which in turn, is partly shaped by one’s place in the African-American class structure as well as one’s race in a society structured by racial hierarchy.”⁴⁴ He defines this as a type of collective interest in Black communities, which he calls “linked fate.” Dawson says:

*If one believes that blacks as a group are in a subordinate position, one’s belief in the linked fate of individual African Americans should be strengthened. Furthermore, if one perceives the fates of individual blacks as linked to that of the group, it is at least in part because one perceives blacks as a subordinated and exploited group in American society. One’s beliefs about whether blacks are in a subordinate economic position and one’s fate is linked to that of the racial group should be mutually reinforcing. This thesis was tested by modelling the relationship between perceptions of linked fate and black economic subordination as a reciprocal relation.*⁴⁵

Dawson’s study demonstrates that in linked fate solidarity relates to living in social conditions of systemic racism, which combines social as well as economic forms. Because people who are Black are confronted by systemic racism in countless areas of social life, whereby “white economic supremacy was

42 Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 15.

43 *Ibid.*, 45.

44 *Ibid.*, 47.

45 *Ibid.*, 80.

maintained by the use of violence, law, the local government apparatus, the credit system and psychological oppression” there is commitment to mutual support and action within Black communities to fight this violence.⁴⁶ The important fidelity of linked fate involves identification based on race while Dawson describes its implications as built on an understanding that Black people are subject to multiple forms of racist oppression, including shared economic oppressions.

Vishmidt

Yes, I am very much in alignment with what you say about social reproduction, and that looking at how social reproduction is mediated both by the market and market-shaped varieties of state violence such as policing, the carceral complex, and geographies of racialized displacement is what makes it valuable as a tool against class reductionism. This is an impulse that is of course completely fundamental to social reproduction feminism, from the more Italian autonomist (Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati) to the more Althusserian (Lise Vogel, Martha E. Gimenez), tried to deal with the problem of class reductionism as a (white) patriarchal reflex in Marxism by expanding the purview of the working class, and hence class struggle, from waged labor to activities that were often not waged and were not considered labor. More recently, theorists like Tithi Bhattacharya have insisted that the line between production and social reproduction is hazy anyway as everything that a worker does, wherever they do it, can be considered as contributing to the reproduction of themselves and their families. So, in some ways, it is a very capacious category, and it was partially this analytic flexibility that made the concept of direct and indirect market mediation in Endnotes’s “The Logic of Gender” such useful interventions.

However, in terms of class, I would like to link the emphasis on survival in the politics of social reproduction with the rest of the preceding discussion in its determination of what constitutes class struggle but also to make a broader point in historical materialist analysis of racial capitalism (was there ever any other kind? It is as if we have to extract the “racial” from the “capitalism” just to be able to point to it). This is the point about expropriation being primary to exploitation, as cultural historian Michael Denning outlines so conclusively in his article “Wageless Life.”⁴⁷ The originary moment of capitalism is not putting people to work, it is throwing them off their land. It is not giving them money; it is taking away their means of survival. I think the distinction between “free” and “unfree labor,” “economic compulsion” and “direct coercion” is much harder to sustain in light of that idea. A similar line is taken by Jason W. Moore when he gives priority to “appropriation” over “commodification” as a dynamic of capitalist accumulation, or contemporary writers on “extraction” over “exploitation” (meaning, exploitation is not superseded by but proceeds in the mode of extraction), which loops back around to policing and state violence in accounts such as Jackie Wang’s of the economy of fines and tickets, incarceration by other means, in the super-policing of racialized, low-income communities in the U.S. All of which is to say that, speaking more generally, and which I think we’ve both been suggesting all along, it’s not just about having a more complex

understanding of capitalism—which after all has the potential of being trapped in academicism—but of having a more accurate understanding of what capitalism actually is, and the advantages this has in organizing movements. It never was and never could be anything but racialized, violent, and extractive. Its break with feudalism was as real as its continuity with it, one could say, but to unpack that we would have to discuss colonialism and imperialism because these are again not abstract axioms but historically, geographically, and socially specific processes. The latter is important, because the salience, analytical and political, of tracing various forms of systemic subjugation—such as racism and sexism—to a “before” (also an “elsewhere”) of capitalism is something that comes up a lot. It comes up in Cedric Robinson’s writing, which you allude to, but also in the “Afropessimist” current of thought, at least with regard to race and to blackness, specifically. That kind of search for origins is always bound to pose a problem and a border for inquiry, especially for political inquiry. Capitalist modernity, through its vehicles of colonialism, chattel slavery, and imperialism, exerted sufficient pressure on every society it came into contact with and continues to do so, that Marxists often make the argument that the only analytically/politically relevant social forms are those we encounter today, in all their singularity as well as their systematicity. At the same time, there is a huge challenge to that argument in the (para-)ontological thinking of Afropessimism, which identifies a trans-historical singularity in Black suffering that places it both beyond the political, and as its basis insofar as the main structural antagonism in society is not a class antagonism, not even an intersectional antagonism, but the antagonism between the Black and the Human. This is considered to be irreducible and untranslatable. That goes beyond lots of critiques of Marxism, such as the ones we have been discussing and even Robinson’s, because it displaces the whole conversation from sociology and history—disciplines or approaches that can be expanded or refigured—to ontology, which is a thinking of Being and positions itself beyond debate. So both the sociological and the ontological argument around blackness, or racialism, in Robinson’s terms—which is quite different, because “racialism” is a relational concept for him, and the Black is the absence of all relation—is something that is quite important, though also quite difficult, as I’ve said, to think about in terms of the kind of conversation we’ve been having. I’m not actually that convinced by that ontological approach and its political value or philosophical coherence, but that conceptual challenge is definitely there, and it comes from diametrically the opposite side to “class-first” Marxism.

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