



Silvia Federici*

Foreword: The Significance of “Racial Capitalism”

That capitalism is a racist system built upon the devaluation of those it exploits and the construction of racial hierarchies has long been known and denounced, especially in the literature of anti-slavery and anti-colonial movements. What does it mean, then, that the concept of “racial capitalism” has acquired such prominence in recent times—especially with regard to an understanding of the history and logic of capitalist society and its political implications?

As Cedric Robinson (1983), among others, has shown, both the anti-slavery and anti-colonial struggles decentered the strategic plane of revolutionary transformation. They proved that capitalism could not be understood if viewed primarily from the perspective of waged labor, and that “class” had to be much expanded if it was not to exclude all the unfree and unpaid workers on which the capitalist accumulation has historically rested.

Still, the works of Cabral, Césaire, and Fanon were primarily concerned with describing the function of racism in the construction of colonial rule. They were, moreover, written at a time when the beginning of decolonization and the existence of socialist countries generated the expectation that a new world order might be on its way. Today such an illusion is not possible. The experience of the “missed opportunity”—so often relived in the last century—precludes it. Racial discrimination, affecting every articulation of social life, continues to be reproduced in old and new forms, in the US and beyond. Witness how the reorganization of the world economy starting in the late 1970s has recolonized much of the “global South.” These developments account for the growing conviction that racism and racialization are structural characters of the capitalist system, i.e., *they are essential conditions of its existence*, and therefore, will shape its development to the very end.

This is a conclusion that some orthodox Marxists may resist. When speaking of “patriarchal capitalism,” I have been at times reminded that it is logically possible to imagine a capitalism accumulating wealth through the exploitation of undifferentiated, disembodied labor. But this is to annul centuries of history demonstrating that accumulated capitalist wealth has been produced mostly by unfree, racialized workers, and that the capitalist class did not simply accumulate wealth, but used racial hierarchies and social inequalities to enforce the most brutal forms of exploitation, to divide those it ruled, and to gain the complicity of sectors of the exploited in the process.

Indeed, without the support of large sectors of the white male proletariat (and of many white women as well), slavery, Jim Crow, the construction of apartheid regimes, and “sacrifice populations” would not have been possible. Like patriarchal relations, racial hierarchies have enabled capitalism to benefit from a system of indirect rule whereby whites can with impunity operate as whips on black people, in the same way that men—especially those with the power of the wage—have been allowed (if not encouraged) to supervise the work of women and punish any transgression. All this, again,

* Professor Emerita and Teaching Fellow at Hofstra University; feminist activist, writer; and co-founder of the International Feminist Collective, the Radical Philosophy Association Anti-Death Penalty Project, and the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa.

demonstrates that as crucial as studying the intricacies of capitalist economics is, it is vital to acknowledge the racial/patriarchal/colonial structures and institutions that sustain them and their constant interaction. This special issue on law and racial capitalism and the effort to map their interaction is an important contribution to this process.

First, all the articles, whether they look at the whiteness of property, the racism of international laws, or the racialization of microfinance, show that there is a crucial difference between viewing racism as an ideology, or attributing to racist policies and politics a contingent character—i.e., seeing them as products of moral flaws or institutional failures—and acknowledging that they are the intended results of consciously constructed mechanisms. These mechanisms have become so deeply ingrained in the social texture of capitalist society as to constitute a material force. Most important, together these articles provide a cartography of the legal tools, operations, and strategies by which racialization shapes economic, cultural, and political life and is maintained and re-created nationally and internationally. Especially important is the stress that these articles place on the racialization of reproductive work, the intersection of racial and patriarchal relations, and the workings of ecological/environmental racism.

Their value is not only analytic, but political. By showing how racialization structures every articulation of social life, the articles demonstrate that capitalism cannot be ameliorated without every social movement (over housing, health care, education, etc.) placing the question of “race” and the refusal of racism and racialization at the center of its program and struggle. For as destructive as the exploitation of labor for the purpose of accumulation is, a system that can only conceive of prosperity through the dehumanization and destruction of a large part of the world’s population is much worse. This means that our goal is not only to defeat capitalism, but also to ensure that the world we construct to replace it is not (in Marx’s words) a continuation of “the old muck,” but rather a true historical break with the violence and racism that for so long have plagued human relations.

REFERENCES

Robinson, Cedric J. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of North Carolina Press.