

UNRAVELING THE RELATION OF RACE AND CLASS IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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The race/class debate has vexed American intellectual life, particularly left intellectual life, for more than a century. This debate has centered on determining the relation of race and class as forces shaping inequality and the struggle against it in the United States. The debate has taken numerous forms. One strain, historically associated most commonly with the more radical left, has centered largely on determining whether racial inequality is best understood and addressed as an artifact of capitalist production relations. The rise to prominence within the left's discursive communities – both inside the academy and elsewhere – of sensibilities accepting the autonomous force of noneconomic, ascriptive identities has undermined this long conventional formulation of the race/class debate. Few people are prepared now, on either intellectual or moral grounds, to characterize racial injustice as a simple byproduct, or “epiphenomenon”, of capitalist class relations.

Another more recent strain, which extends beyond the discursive networks of radicals, has centered on arguments concerning whether race has declined in significance as a factor shaping life-chances, particularly among black Americans. This reformulation of the debate has both subtly disconnected it from its radical roots in structural critique of American capitalism and established it on a polysemous foundation that gives it broader resonance, though at the price of lack of clarity. For instance, David Duke and Charles Murray are no less likely than Cornel West or Molefi Asante to contend that “race matters”.

Political Power and Social Theory, Volume 15, pages 265–274.
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ISBN: 0-7623-0883-4

However, we can assume that West and Asante intend interpretations quite different from Duke and Murray regarding *how* race matters and draw equally different political and policy implications from that judgment.

I propose that the familiar juxtaposition of race and class forces in debates about American inequality misunderstands both phenomena by treating them as fundamentally distinguishable. Instead, both are more effectively, and more accurately, seen as equivalent and overlapping elements within a singular system of social power and stratification rooted in capitalist labor relations. Hierarchies of civic status mediate and manage this stratification system by defining populations and assigning them ascriptively to what come to be understood as appropriate niches of civic worth and entitlement. These hierarchies evolve and are enforced formally through laws, public policies and quasi-official means – such as officially tolerated but unofficially enacted preferences and coercion – and informally through popular ideologies, social practices and normative sanctions. From this perspective, race appears as a social category that has evolved to denote an especially durable kind of ascriptive civic status in the context of American capitalism and the political and ideological structures through which it is reproduced as a social order.

The confluence of race and class is a fact of life older than the country itself. Its practical foundations are visible in seventeenth century Virginia planters' attempts to impose – through laws and otherwise – absolute, unbreachable distinctions between permanently and hereditarily bound slaves and indentured servants bound for specified terms. Draconian regulation of contact between slaves and the English indentured servants alongside whom they often worked and lived and assignment of differential prerogatives and protections to the two populations inscribed one side of that distinction. On the other side, measures narrowly limiting the activities and rights of free blacks reduced that population's distinction from slaves. The combined effect was ultimately to establish civic membership and aspirations definitively on a racialized basis.

In the period between the Revolution and the Civil War the nexus of race, class and civic status figured centrally in defining the character of labor radicalism and other forms of popular democratic insurgency. Struggles to extend the electoral franchise beyond the ranks of property owners and against the degradation of workers were typically articulated through a rhetoric that either advocated or accepted a premise restricting full civic membership to those capable of living independently and heading households. This view, which has been characterized as producerist ideology, was an outgrowth of well established ideological principles that had undergirded political debate and the regime of limited, property-based civic membership within and against which those struggles emerged. It automatically disqualified women of all sorts, who

were legally and normatively subordinate to men. It also, of course, disqualified slaves. Elites had already long since codified slavery on exclusively racial terms, and blacks, as a population capable of being enslaved, in general occupied a civic status that was understood to be dependent and inferior to whites. In that context nonelite white men's demands for greater civic inclusion unsurprisingly sought legitimation and justification often through protest that those who were unavailable for enslavement were not accorded a civic status sufficiently different from those who were. Thus demands for extension of suffrage to propertyless white men were likely to be accompanied by demands to enforce or reinforce blacks' exclusion from full civic membership. Similarly, objection to the loss of independence associated with proletarianization also often reduced to a complaint that free white men were being treated as though they were slaves. Both concern to emphasize difference from a population consensually – and by and large legally – recognized as available for degradation and fears that emancipation would lead to competition from a mass of degraded black labor fueled tendencies to link pursuit of improvement in white male workers' status with demands for blacks' exclusion in this domain as well.

In the late nineteenth century another wave of radical insurgency, at its height associated with the Knights of Labor and the largely agrarian populist movement, enacted for a time a different response to the nexus of race, class and civic status. While hardly free from the presumptions of a racially stratified society, important strains of this movement, which for a time may have been strongest in the South, sought to build and mobilize on a biracial or interracial basis, even in the face of constant and brutal race-baiting responses from its elite antagonists. A crucial difference in this period was that blacks were no longer enslaved and were eligible for civic participation. Significantly, this movement was not defeated until planter elites had been able, through officially sanctioned terror, blatant and systematic election fraud, and similar means, to impose white supremacist politics on the region by eliminating blacks from public life.

The campaign to impose an official regime of white supremacy in the late nineteenth century South also underscores the artificiality of the race/class dichotomy. It was the ultimate political expression of a counterrevolutionary struggle, led by the elite planter class that historically dominated southern politics, against the expanded prerogatives blacks acquired because of Emancipation and citizenship rights conferred by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Planters' commitment to black subordination, though certainly buttressed by beliefs in black inferiority, stemmed from their more practical concerns to compose a labor regime that would approximate as nearly as possible a restoration of slavery. Immediately after Emancipation planters sought to bind

black freedpeople with long-term labor contracts, which planter-dominated state legislatures fortified by imposing restrictions on blacks' labor mobility and limiting both their economic alternatives to accepting work on whatever terms planters offered and their legal recourse to contest unjust treatment. Planters and other elite whites objected vigorously to initiatives undertaken by interracial Reconstruction governments to protect workers' rights and to provide funding for schools and other public services that would transfer resources to blacks and poor whites and increase their potential for economic independence. At the heart of this southern ruling class's all-out political offensive was its widely shared fear of the possibility that blacks and nonelite whites would form a durable alliance that could effectively challenge for power or disrupt, and perhaps radically alter, prevailing economic and class relations. As long as blacks were able to vote and participate in the South's political life that fear persisted, and, despite constant agitation to isolate blacks and to exhort, or coerce, whites to unite around a white supremacist ideological program, enough instances of at least germinal expressions of that alliance recurred, even prior to the populist explosion of the 1890s, to nurture elite anxieties throughout the region. That is, notwithstanding the pervasiveness of ideologies of racial hierarchy and attitudes that today would properly be understood as racist, elimination of potentially consequential interracial political solidarities formed on the basis of shared practical, largely class-based concerns required elite-led putsches that "purified" the electorate of blacks and many poor whites and imposed harsh legal and moral sanctions – including freely applied, officially condoned violence – on transgressions of the apartheid-like regime they installed.

Conventionally, attempts among progressives to make sense of the relative roles of race and class in American politics have erred by approaching the question from an analytical vantage point that is too abstract and ahistorical. Both those who emphasize the class pole and those who emphasize the race pole tend to proceed from a notion of capitalism as an ideal-typical system defined by generic economic categories. There are two crucial problems with this idealist view. First, there is no generic capitalism, only discrete capitalist systems that evolve within historically specific matrices of social relations. From an historical perspective it is no overstatement to say that capitalism exists not because of willful efforts to create a system that conforms to a set of abstract characteristics; it is the summary product of pragmatic struggles by individuals and groups to pursue concrete material interests and to improvise institutional frameworks that facilitate their pursuits. (These systems, of course, may be imposed willfully from without, as in colonialism, but even under those conditions their specific character is embedded in local patterns of social relations and institutions.) At best, ideal-typical formulations of capitalism abstract away

from the historically specific features of the regimes resultant from those struggles to identify formal characteristics that such systems share; at worst, they function as theological postulates that steer debate into scholastic arguments over which systems or patterns of social relations genuinely deserve the capitalist label. Ideal-typical formulations of capitalism's features and logical tendencies can have heuristic value, certainly, but they cannot help to clarify the relation of race and class in a given society. This is so partly because reliance on such reified notions of capitalism yields an interpretive reflex that approaches the social and political dynamics idiosyncratic to the society in question from a Procrustean frame of reference, that gives short shrift to their integrity and significance in defining what capitalism is in *that* society and how it is reproduced concretely. Thus those who emphasize the class pole of the debate tend to see racial ideology as ephemeral to capitalism's fundamental dynamics and to construe it as an irrational, or exogenous, force cultivated by the ruling class as a device to divide the ruled. Those who stress the race pole also tend to accept the ahistorical, ideal-typical view of capitalism, often because it is rhetorically convenient for prior ideological or interpretive dispositions to see race as an autonomous force that transcends historical and social context and that shapes social relations independently. Neither of those formulations can capture effectively the complex ways that racial and class identities and consciousness have been shaped and have evolved mutually.

The second problem is related to the first. Also because they abstract away from the idiosyncratic features of actual capitalist societies, ideal-typical constructions tend to disregard the role of political institutions and systems of civic hierarchy in defining the terms on which specific capitalist social orders cohere and are reproduced. Among Marxists this limitation has been acknowledged, more or less directly, in expressions of concern with the need to overcome tendencies to economism in interpretation and inattention to the role of the state in organizing and reproducing capitalist social relations. However, this concern is frequently articulated in ways that propose to search for a general theory that can also be too abstract or generic to apprehend effectively the fluid, evolving, reciprocal relation between race and class as nodes in a unitary system of civic hierarchy rooted in the capitalist labor relation. Following out the entailments of the current academic commonplace that race is a social construction puts the inadequacy of attempts to capture this relation through general theories into bold relief.

Although the specific forms of class identity and practice that emerge and operate within capitalist social structures may vary in idiosyncratic and unpredictable ways over place and time, they originate from an essential, materially demonstrable foundation that can be generalized across social

contexts – the social organization of labor on more or less coercive bases for the production of privately appropriated value. This cellular reality is what sustains the tendency to simplistic, economic interpretation and endows it with a modicum of verisimilitude. Race, on the other hand, like other categories of ascriptive status, has no such essential foundation; its concrete features, characteristics, meanings and significance are entirely bound by the specific social context within which it is deployed. Contrary to flippant, often disingenuous objections to the assertion, this is the insight underlying the constructionist claim, not that race isn't a social reality or has no substantive importance or consequences for the lives of people thus categorized. The pertinent implication is that, insofar as they abstract from the discrete, mundane institutional and civic dynamics of specific societies and their histories, general theories of capitalism's race/class relations are overwhelmingly likely to produce accounts that are, from the standpoint of a concern to understand the workings of any particular social order, unhelpful and no better than trivially true.

To the extent that they retain the race/class debate's fundamental reifications, moreover, attempts to correct its reductionist formulations have produced contentions that racism may arise within capitalism's material dynamics but then "takes on a life of its own." This interpretation, however, also tends to treat racism, once emergent, as a monolith that imposes itself on social and economic institutions and practices according to its own independent and predictable logic. Even variants that focus on the ways that racial stratification is reproduced concretely through the routine operations of those institutions and practices – interpretations that cluster around notions of "institutional racism" or "possessive investment in whiteness" – theorize those dynamics in jerry-built, reified terms that reproduce the original polarity's chicken-and-egg features they try to overcome. They tend to characterize whiteness or racism as a singular force that does not vary historically in content and meaning and that creates hierarchies independent from, though interactive with, capitalist class dynamics.

All sides of the debate underestimate the significance of struggles over civic status – including articulation and contestation over categories of ascriptive status such as race and gender – as definitive of the concrete class dynamics of American capitalism as a social system. The codification of racial hierarchy in the seventeenth century, the intimate connection of racial, citizenship and class claims in the antebellum period and the populist struggle in the late nineteenth century illustrate the central role of civic membership in establishing and sustaining regimes of civic worth and entitlement. These regimes inscribe boundaries of desert and expectation that effectively stabilize patterns of social and economic hierarchy and set frameworks for aspiration and contestation. Hierarchies based on categories of ascriptive status are the most durable elements of those regimes

of civic worth and entitlement because such hierarchies rest on notions of essential difference.

Ascriptive hierarchies sort populations into categories of classification that are in principle set off from one another by clear, uncrossable boundaries. Gender is one such ascriptive category; within its compass a person can be only either male or female, and each classification carries with it a normatively – and until recently, legally – prescribed range of possible locations within the social division of labor and civic entitlement. Wage discrimination and labor market segmentation, the job/housework double day, the medical profession's inattentiveness to heart disease among women, authorities' reluctance to prosecute rape and domestic violence (both, thankfully, now apparently significantly diminished as a result of political agitation), and the relative disadvantage of female candidates for elective office are mutually reinforcing elements of a social hierarchy organized around the presumption that men and women are populations with different kinds of appropriate civic membership and entitlement.

Race evolved in America as such a category of ascriptive status. As a framework of social classification, it emerged as a basis for setting sharp, practically impermeable boundaries between the settler European, indigenous and black populations. Establishment of these boundaries was embedded within an on-going elite program of defining and assigning limits of civic membership and thresholds of social entitlement and aspiration. Another insight deriving from the social constructionist perspective is that those populations have been to significant extent created by this framework of classification. In North America, at least, race became a category that homogenized populations initially as Indian, black and British, and eventually European or white, to emphasize those ascriptive commonalities over the many ways that those assigned to the separate classifications differed within them or shared similarities across them and to fix boundaries for distributive claims based on civic entitlement.

Specific racial classifications and criteria for classification, as well as the social consequences and ideological meanings attached to them and to race as an overarching category, have changed along with the changing political, economic and social environment within which they are deployed. However, like gender, as racial classification was inscribed as a category in the official and customary calculus of civic worth and desert, as a technology of social hierarchy, it became a constitutive element of the social experience of people thus grouped and a material basis for fashioning group identities and for mobilizing social solidarity.

Political expression of class contestation in this context characteristically takes the form of challenging existing regimes of civic worth and entitlement through assertion of rights *of* or rights *to* civic membership. The late eighteenth

and early nineteenth century struggles for franchise extension that were articulated through arguments emphasizing distinction between free white and slave black labor, for example, sought to challenge a theretofore hegemonic differentiation of free-holding property owners and the propertyless as ascriptively distinct populations. The merger of racial and labor status in pressing that challenge stressed one domain of ascriptive hierarchy to undermine another. Contemporaneous struggles for abolition and subsequent struggles for black civil rights sought to contest denial of full civic membership on the basis of ascriptive racial hierarchy. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century debates over the racial status of immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Europe's margins were, from this perspective, controversies over how to situate populations that seemed to fit ambiguously within the classificatory scheme then prevailing. These controversies were explicit contests over access to civic membership and the presumptions of worth and entitlement that accompany it. Racial limitations on qualification for naturalized citizenship heightened the stakes at the extreme. Even short of that extreme, recognition as white provided a moral and legal status – especially, though not exclusively, in the South – that buttressed claims to the rights and protections of civic membership.

The crucial point that is often overlooked about these hierarchies of civic status is that they function as mechanisms in the reproduction of American capitalism as a discrete, historically specific social system. These hierarchies are articulated in relation to an evolving social division of labor and its regulation through law, institutions of public authority and what appear to be customary social relations and the common sense of the time. Not only are racial and class hierarchies inextricably linked, therefore, in the sense that it is impossible effectively to understand them separately; it is also necessary to recognize their common foundation in the capitalist labor relation. Stratification based on categories of ascriptive status does not as a rule immediately reflect that foundation. This is the case practically by definition because these forms of stratification stabilize hierarchical relations originating in the division of labor by representing them as expressions of natural distinctions, that is, distinctions existing logically prior to and beyond the alterable scope of prevailing forms of social, political and economic organization. Liberal formulations positing clear separation between state and market, or between state and civil society, support this mystification by obscuring the seamless connections of those domains in a singular system of social reproduction.

At the risk of functionalist oversimplification, ascriptive status distinctions have served to impose limits on tolerable or legitimate political demands and aspirations by constraining access to effective membership in the polity partly because the American political system at least nominally confers political

equality among those recognized as having full civic membership. This was the material basis of producerist political ideology in the nineteenth century. It has also underlain the rhetoric of desert and civic worth that have shaped subsequent debates over social wage entitlements, from the New Deal through the Great Society and since. Most black workers, for example, were initially excluded from social security coverage, minimum wage legislation and relief under the Agricultural Adjustment Act for economic reasons and the imperatives of legislative politics; white southern legislators objected to extending safety nets that would reduce black agricultural and domestic workers' dependence on low-wage employers and planters for economic survival, and the votes of those legislators were necessary to secure passage of the various initiatives. Even though those exclusions were framed in race-neutral terms, they could be incorporated easily and without sense of contradiction because blacks were generally understood on ascriptive grounds to occupy a subordinate status that accorded them a limited or contingent civic membership. Ironically, this understanding has been affirmed even by conscious attempts to overcome racial hierarchy. Calls for Americans to address *their* "Negro problem", as in Gunnar Myrdal's famous construction in the influential 1944 study, *An American Dilemma*, reproduced the assumption of blacks' less than full membership in the polity, their status as objects of, rather than equal participants in, civic debate.

Presumption of black people's lesser civic worth informed the processes of political compromise through which the American welfare state was established on a segmented, or two-tiered, basis that allocated benefits unequally – officially by program type but, at least unofficially, by race and gender. It facilitated blacks' effective exclusion from participating in the federal housing subsidy programs that provided the principal vehicles through which most Americans have been able to accumulate personal economic assets for more than a half-century. It also informed the interest-group dynamics that after the Second World War shaped the urban redevelopment regime in which black people persistingly figure primarily as victims of physical displacement to make way for more market-value intensive land uses. It reinforces wage and labor market segmentation by race, not least as an element of the culturally influenced determination of minute gradations of skill in occupational structures, as well as notions of fair wages and suitability for different kinds of employment. It appears yet more catastrophically in the assumptions driving the so-called War on Drugs, most strikingly in sentencing disparities for powder and crack cocaine.

It is recognition of the generative and self-intensifying logic of racially-skewed costs and benefits resultant from these often ostensibly race-blind policies and practices that has prompted such formulations as institutional racism and

whiteness as property. These interpretations attempt to account for the material foundations of ascriptive racial hierarchy, but they do so within the limiting conceptual apparatus of the race/class dichotomy itself. Similarly, the artificiality of the boundaries separating classifications within categories of ascriptive status has provoked an interpretive response that focuses on exposing situations, individuals or groups that transgress the boundaries between ascriptive categories or classifications. But the actual porousness of ascriptive boundaries does not undermine them, and the focus on the margins of hierarchies shifts attention from the work they do perform and the ways they operate.

CLASS, RACE, AND CAPITALISM

Ellen Meiksins Wood

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

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

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

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

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

CAPITALISM AND CIVIC IDENTITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE UTILITY OF RACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTE

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am grateful to Charlie Post for his very helpful suggestions.

ON THE 'CONFLUENCE OF RACE AND CLASS' IN AMERICA

Maurice Zeitlin

The suppression of historical memory, whether intentional or not, has pernicious intellectual consequences, for when the real past is obscured, the sources of the actual present – and of what else was (and may again be) possible – are mystified. So Adolph Reed is surely right to censure analyses that ignore or “underestimate the significance of struggles over civic status” – particularly the “ascriptive status” of race – “in shaping the concrete class dynamics of American capitalism” (p. 270). Salutary also is his call to focus analyses of the race/class nexus on actually-existing capitalisms and the “mundane . . . dynamics of specific societies and their histories” (p. 270). Yet his essay suffers in part from these self-same analytical defects. First, he fails even to mention, let alone actually examine the historical meaning of, the most significant interracial working-class struggles of the past century and their impact on “the confluence of race and class” in the United States. Second, because he labels as “idealist” any “notion” that capitalism has so-called “generic” tendencies (p. 268), he is at a loss to provide even a theoretical clue as to how capitalism is involved in determining this “confluence.”

1. To find a crucial historical instance of an interracial movement that sought to alter the “nexus of race, class, and civic status” (p. 266), Reed reaches back to “the late nineteenth century . . . wave of radical insurgency,” and in particular to the Knights of Labor (p. 267). Yet he ignores the far more profound radical insurgency of the Red Decade and the birth of the militant, racially egalitarian,

industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1935–1955. Under the old radical banner of “black and white, unite and fight,” the CIO embraced the aspirations of black workers and fought for black/white equality, “as had no previous sustained American labor organization” (Zieger, 1995, pp. 153, 372). For “the forgotten black workers of American history,” a columnist wrote in the Urban League’s *Opportunity* in late 1942, “the coming of the CIO has been the most important experience in 75 years of struggle.” W. E. B. Dubois, then the nation’s preeminent black leader, declared in 1948 that the CIO, by uniting “black and white, as fellow workers striving for the same objects,” had brought about “an astonishing spread of interracial tolerance and understanding” (Foner, 1976, p. 268; Dubois, 1948, p. 236).

Communists and their radical allies organized and led the CIO’s most principled interracial unions; they – Communist-led unions – not only demanded and won more egalitarian workplace practices and increased black/white employment equality but also fought against Jim Crow laws and racial discrimination in the community and revived nearly dormant civil rights organizations. Rather than viewing racial inequality as a mere “artifact of capitalist production relations,” which is a position Reed attributes to an unidentified “more radical left” (p. 1), Communist unionists recognized and emphasized the specificity of black oppression – which they saw as an inherent evil to be fought and extirpated. In contrast, it was their liberal and socialist opponents in the CIO who typically “*subsumed concern for black workers under class appeals* that ignored or evaded confrontation with racist forces in the community and on the shop floor” (Zieger, 1995, p. 374, italics added).

Reed’s silence about the CIO’s – and especially its Communist-led affiliates – “consequential interracial political solidarities” (p. 6) and their historical meaning is puzzling, given his censure of “abstract and ahistorical” analyses of the race/class nexus by “progressives.” But such suppression of historical memory is, unfortunately, characteristic (to borrow his words) of “all sides of the [race/class] debate” (p. 9) – in particular, the debate about the determination of the deepening white/black unemployment gap since the 1950s and the emergence of the so-called black underclass. Even studies of “black insurgency” and the civil rights movement ignore these crucial battles for racial justice by America’s industrial unions. Yet cognizance of the CIO’s racially egalitarian achievements and thus recognition of the consequences of the CIO’s decline, and its merger with the AFL in 1955, is essential to an adequate explanation of the race/class relationship. To forget that the CIO’s class-conscious radicalism and militant commitment to interracial solidarity – of which the Communist-led unions were the preeminent expression – increased black equality, in both the workplace and the community, distorts both theory and history.

2. The relationship between race and class is not a uniquely American dilemma. Workers everywhere in the capitalist world must decide how to deal with competition in the aggregate labor market from unemployed, underemployed, and lower-paid workers, who often also differ in ethnicity, “race,” or “color.” They have to try to defend themselves against the drive of employers to lower labor costs both by gaining access to cheaper labor supplies and by raising productivity through the mechanization and rationalization of production and the consequent displacement of employed labor. This tendency toward the cheapening and displacement, and thus inegalitarian differentiation, of labor is an inherent dynamic of capitalist accumulation that goes on regardless of the sex, creed, ethnicity, race, or color of potential or actual competitive labor. So to gain a modicum of job security and protect their wages and working conditions, organized workers are compelled to choose between a strategy of exclusion, which may also take the form of ethnic or racial discrimination, or of inclusion, and class-wide solidarity (Botwinick, 1993, pp. 9, 99, 101, 164; Williams, 1991, p. 86; Rubery, 1978, p. 34).

What they choose – whether they pursue interracial unity or racial discrimination – is thus crucial, given the dynamics of capitalist competition, in the determination of racial inequality. Job vacancies, even when they are abundant, and especially the better jobs, are always “rationed among a chronic surplus of applicants” (Reynolds, 1951, p. 246). Nor is there any necessary equilibrium between the demand and supply of labor; labor mobility can result in a surplus of workers applying for the same jobs. Who fills the job vacancies is decided by employers, but within the kinds of constraints that unions are ready, willing and able to impose: They – the unions – can try either to exclude black workers or to ensure that employers treat them no differently than white workers in filling job vacancies.

During the half-century preceding the CIO’s birth, the American Federation of Labor and its affiliates had chosen, and were disfigured by, tacit or overt racial exclusion. The CIO shattered this racist mold and, during its short but decisive life-span, fought exemplary battles that enlarged the freedom and enhanced the human dignity of America’s workers, black and white alike. The inernecine split and expulsion of the “Communist-dominated” unions in 1949–1950, followed quickly by the CIO’s merger with its old nemesis, the AFL, resulted in the demise of the twentieth century’s most potent organizational expression of interracial working-class solidarity. In its wake, the white/black unemployment gap deepened and the bane of chronic black structural unemployment set in (Zeitlin & Weyher, 2001; Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin, 2002).

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THE 'PARADOXES' OF MISPLACED CONCRETENESS: THINKING THROUGH THE STATE

Steven Gregory

Last year, while doing research in the Dominican Republic, I met a woman named Josefa Sanchez. A forty year old mother of four, Josefa eked out a living washing clothes for her neighbors in the town of Andres – a former sugar *batey*, not far from the capital. Josefa's husband had once worked in the town's state-owned, sugar mill. However, not long after the mill was privatized and sold to a Mexican corporation, it was abandoned for lack of profitability. Josefa's husband lost his job and, soon afterwards, left her.

For some twenty years, Josefa had been trying to find steady work, but she lacked the identity papers needed to apply for most jobs in the formal economy. Josefa had been born in a small rural town and her parents, for one reason or another, had never registered her birth with the authorities. By age of 18, Josefa's family, like others in her town, had moved to the capital in search of work. Now a legal adult, but without a birth certificate, Josefa could not apply for a *cedula*, the state-issued ID card needed to obtain work and other social goods associated with citizenship. Over the years, Josefa had hired lawyers to track down people who could testify to the facts of her birth in accord with a complex legal procedure that would grant her a birth certificate *post facto*. These unsuccessful efforts had drained the family's resources and now, without a steady income or support from her husband, Josefa had given up hope.

Earlier that year, Josefa had opened an illegal gambling parlor in her house to supplement her income made from washing clothes. But lacking documents,

she feared arrest by the police. Worse still, she feared being mistaken for a Haitian immigrant and deported to Haiti, which sometimes happens to Dominicans without documents who are thought to resemble Haitians. As my research assistant put it, Josefa was an "invisible woman – a woman without an identity." Josefa's predicament is not uncommon among the poor, and among people of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic, where citizenship rights are routinely denied to people of Haitian parentage.

I take Josefa's predicament as a point of departure from which to consider Adolph Reed's effort to unravel and, hopefully, put to rest the debate concerning the relative determinacy of race and class in the structuring of social inequalities. For it is a debate that, as Reed points out, owes much of its liveliness as a polemic to an analytic posture that is both too abstract and too ahistorical. Indeed, in Josefa's case, any attempt to disentangle and prioritize the power relations that govern her situation would not only fail to capture her complexity as a subject, but also greatly simplify, if not distort the political structure of the capitalist social formation in which she has lived her life.

During the course of our conversations, for example, Josefa would variously characterize her predicament as being that of *una prieta* [a black woman], of *los pobres* [the poor], of a person *sin papeles* [undocumented], and more generally, as that of *los Dominicanos*, with each reference mapping out an interrelated field of power relations, stretching from her household, to the political field of the State, to the global division of labor. And it is precisely this political complexity, both in time and space, that has been elided, if not obscured by the debate over the priority of race and class.

Adolph Reed rightly argues that theorists on both sides of the race/class debate have tended to treat capitalism as an "ideal-typical system defined by generic economic categories" (p. 268). From this idealist perspective, class is taken to be foundational and ascriptive social identities and hierarchies, tied to race, gender or sexuality, are seen as serving – or, alternatively, not serving – to shore up the relations of production and further the realization of surplus value. Moreover, these ascriptive social hierarchies, what Reed calls "hierarchies of civic status," are treated as exterior to, rather than as *constitutive* of the relations of production and the social division of labor on which these latter rest; that is, as if the relations of production were fashioned and reproduced in a political vacuum, and not through power relations associated with ideologies of "natural" human difference. On the "class first" side of the debate, this idealism takes the form of economism – an "in the last instance" style of reductionism. On the "race first" side, ascriptive social hierarchies are taken to be relatively independent of "the economy," abstractly conceived. Both approaches tend to construct the economic system too narrowly and, as Reed points out,

as abstracted from the evolving political conditions that secure its reproduction through history.

To the contrary, hierarchies of civic status, rooted in notions of "natural" human difference, associated with race, gender, kinship or, for that matter, religion, are not effects of, or otherwise exterior to capitalist relations of production; instead, they constitute the political conditions of possibility for the latter's systemic articulation and reproduction; that is, a class relation (*an sich*) and a class identity (*fur sich*) are always, already invested with, and realized through the exercise of ideologies that assert the "natural" basis of human inequality. In this sense, capitalist relations of production are *fetishized*, as are the commodities that they produce, through an equally "fantastic" appeal to a metaphysics of human difference.

To be sure, the specific ascriptive mix – the peculiar and unstable "chains of equivalence" that constitute the social under capitalism – varies through time and space (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). For this reason, the relationship between concrete, ascriptive hierarchies and the social relations of production to which they give rise is an historical problem and not a logical one. Put another way, the fact that we make a logical distinction between race and class as abstract, system-defining categories does not mean that there is a concrete separation between them as they are constituted in the world. To proceed from this separation, a priori, can only lead to what Whitehead has termed the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," the foundational error made on both sides of the race/class debate (1925).

With respect to race, the fallacy is rooted in what has been a tendency to reify the racial categories of 19th century, racial "science." Racial categories, constituted through historically-conditioned processes of racial formation, are treated as a structural "system" that remains relatively stable through time – hence the frequent appeal to DuBois's comment concerning "the problem of the color line" – and, as such, can then be brought to bear, as an explanatory *model* to account for complex social relations and processes that, properly, are irreducible to race. This is not to say, of course, that ascriptive categories – and, to be sure, the color line – have not achieved concrete social and institutional forms. But that enduring historical legacy does not lead, logically, to the proposition that race has a determinacy that is prior to, or independent of class, or for that matter, gender and sexuality. Here, Reed is right to direct our thinking to the much more dynamic and politically challenging concept, "hierarchies of civic status," which, as he points out, "are articulated in relation to an evolving social division of labor" (p. 12). From this perspective the "color line" was not *the* problem of the twentieth century; indeed, the problem was and remains to this day much more daunting and complex.

To proceed from either side of the debate as if race and class were separable, as if ascriptive hierarchies were exterior to an abstractly conceived model of capitalism, leads, as Reed observes, both to a failure to adequately address the complex matrices of social relations through which capitalist systems are forged, and to an equally serious failure to appreciate the role of the political – and, I would stress here, the role of the State – in the political articulation and reproduction of capitalist social formations. This leads to a different, although closely related debate concerning the relationship of states to capitalist economies, since the former play a leading role – whether individually or in concert with others – in articulating and governing status hierarchies within capitalist social formations. Leaving aside for now the debate regarding the degree of autonomy of the state under capitalism, it is clear that the state plays a critical, although by no means exclusive role, in securing the political, juridical and ideological conditions needed for capital accumulation.

As Nicos Poulantzas pointed out:

Through its activities and effects, the State intervenes in all the relations of power in order to assign them a class pertinency and enmesh them in the web of class power. The State thereby takes over heterogeneous powers which relay and recharge the economic, political and ideological powers of the dominant class. The power exhibited in sexual relations between men and women, which is certainly dissimilar to that of class relations, is nevertheless *invested in the latter* and is mediated and reproduced as a class relation by the State and company or factory: class power therefore traverses, utilizes and gears down that other power, assigning to it a given political significance (1980, p. 43; emphasis added).

To be sure, the state is no mere “instrument” of the dominant classes and its political interests, the “national interests,” are not everywhere and at all times identical to those of the capitalist elites who operate across its political field – the recent Enron debacle provides a telling example to the contrary. The State, itself a “relationship of forces,” as Poulantzas notes, is relatively autonomous of *particular* fractions of the ruling power block, precisely so that it can “ensure the organization of the general interest of the bourgeoisie under the hegemony of one of its fractions” (1980, p. 128). Moreover, power is not reducible to the state. With respect to the social division of labor and class struggle, Poulantzas argued, “relations of power *go far beyond the state*” (p. 36; original emphasis). Rather, from this perspective, the state is the “central site of the exercise of power” insofar as it both *concentrates* and *materializes* power based on class relations, while at the same time, appropriating – but not exhausting – the “specific mechanisms” of power exercised within other arenas of social relations, such as those associated with race, gender, ethnic or kinship-based hierarchies.

What is important to note here is that, under specific historical conditions, race and gender-based hierarchies, for example, can *simultaneously* operate with

relative autonomy within certain fields of power relations *and* be harnessed on the political field of the State in ways that directly or indirectly serve the interests of the ruling power bloc. This more complex view of the articulation of status hierarchies and class power as mediated – but not exhausted – by the State both exposes and undermines the false “paradoxes” that are often mustered to support “either-or” lines of reasoning.

For example, William J. Wilson’s argument for the priority of class rather than race in determining the contemporary life chances of the black “underclass” rests on the putative paradox presented by fact that intense black poverty persists in the face of state-sponsored legislation ending discrimination and enabling the rise of a black middle class. But to reconcile this false paradox – by separating race from class – Wilson must not only disentangle the state from the economy and class power, but also reduce the political field of the state to that of the exercise of its legislative and juridical powers.¹

The existence of the black middle class and the tempering of state-sponsored racial discrimination in no way belies the fact that race continues to strongly condition the nation’s class structure – for example, through the educational system, social welfare and immigration policies, banking practices, law enforcement practices and, indeed, the ideology of the black underclass itself. Indeed, if the life chances of the ghetto underclass *appear* to be governed more by class than by race, it is precisely because the class structure of the United States has been so strongly shaped, if not overdetermined by race. To arrive at this “class first” position, one must, as does Wilson, disregard the central and multifaceted role that the State plays in marshalling, articulating and governing hierarchies of civic status in the service of the ruling elites, enmeshing the former, as Poulantzas put it, “in the web of class power.”

For example, even a cursory review of the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill of 1996 and, for that matter, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of that same year, underscores the degree and extent to which the state is aggressively involved in constructing and “disciplining” the social division of labor – nationally and internationally – and, in the process, shaping the ascriptive hierarchies from which this latter is constituted. To regard these modes of State intervention as not having everything to do with race, gender, sexuality and, indeed, class would require abstracting them from their historical and political contexts.

A more recent and not unrelated effort to sort out the relationship between class-based and ascriptive hierarchies is Nancy Fraser’s drawing of an analytic distinction between “injustices of distribution” and “injustices of misrecognition.” Fraser contends that the former, distributive injustices, are rooted in the unequal distribution of economic goods (for example, through economic exploitation and

marginalization), while the latter are anchored in “institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem” (1997, p. 280). Social distinctions based on race, gender, sexuality and other ascriptive criteria, Fraser holds, have their origins in “social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication” rather than directly in the political-economic and class structure of society (1995, p. 71).

Fraser argues that, though injustices of recognition take concrete, or “material” form and, in existing social systems, are deeply enmeshed or implicated in class-based, distributional injustices, they must be analytically differentiated since they give rise to distinct justice claims and strategies of redress.

Recognition claims often take the form of calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group, and then of affirming the value of that specificity. Thus they tend to promote group differentiation. Redistribution claims, in contrast, often call for abolishing economic arrangements that underpin group specificity. (An example would be feminist demands to abolish the gender division of labour.) Thus they tend to promote group de-differentiation. The upshot is that the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution appear to have mutually contradictory aims (1995, p. 74).

Thus, a critical awareness of these contradictory aims and the resulting dilemma can lead to a more nuanced and sophisticated politics, critical to coalition building, that can attend to and recognize injustices that have their origins in distinct, yet cross-cutting relations of power and that require different and, at times, contradictory strategies of redress.

However, to sustain this analytic distinction in the face of existing social systems where issues of recognition and distribution are mutually intertwined, Fraser advances the argument that the social organization of capitalist societies “creates an order of specialized economic relations that are relatively uncoupled from relations of kinship and political authority” (1997, p. 284). For this reason, structures of economic distribution and those of social status can diverge. Fraser contrasts this uncoupling in capitalist systems with pre-capitalist, pre-state societies where, “status simply is the overarching principle of distribution and where the status order and the class hierarchy are therefore fused, misrecognition simply entails maldistribution” (1997, p. 280).

This notion of a fusion between the status hierarchy and economic orders constitutes a rather static and homogeneous view of pre-capitalist societies, since much of the dynamism found in pre-state societies is the result of antagonisms ensuing from disparities between the status claims made by elites and the economic and political prerogatives they attempt to exercise. For example, Edmund Leach’s influential study of the Kachin people of highland Burma disclosed the instability of Kachin social structure and, more to the point, the status hierarchies upon which it was ideally based. Taking a critical view

of British social anthropology, which tended to present primitive societies as existing in a state of “stable equilibrium,” Leach found that Kachin social structure oscillated between two contradictory ideals: a *gumlao* system that was “anarchistic and egalitarian, and a *gumsa* system that was “autocratic” and based upon a principal of aristocratic descent.

In situations such as we find in the Kachin Hills Area, any particular individual can be through of as having a status position in several different social systems at one and the same time. To the individual himself such systems present themselves as alternatives or inconsistencies in the scheme of values by which he orders his life. The overall process of structural change comes about through the manipulation of these alternatives as a means of social advancement. Every individual of a society, each in his own interest, endeavors to exploit the situation as he perceived it and in so doing the collectivity of individuals alters the structure of society itself (1964, p. 8).

In short, the situation among the Kachin Hills peoples was one in which people manipulated as well as contested status claims, largely through ritual, in pursuit of their political and economic interests. There was no simple “fusion” or correspondence between status and class hierarchies but instead a dynamic tension between ideal status systems – one might say “ideologies” – and their practical exercise in everyday political and economic life. Wrote Leach, “I hold that social structure in practical situations (as contrasted with the sociologist’s abstract model) consists of a set of ideas about the distribution of power between persons and groups of persons. Individuals can and do hold contradictory and inconsistent ideas about this system (1964, p. 4). Importantly, Leach was careful not to confuse the model system – whether it be that of the Kachin aristocrat or that of a sociologist – with how things are, as he put it, “on the ground” – the error of misplaced concreteness.

But even if we admit a relative decoupling of distribution and prestige in capitalist societies, when compared to *pre-state* societies, then it is crucial to immediately add that, in the case of the former, it is precisely the *state* that assumes this role of articulating status hierarchies – enmeshing them, as Poulantzas put it, “in the web of class power” – to the economic interests and prerogative of the ruling classes. “*The political field of the State* (as well as the sphere of ideology),” writes Poulantzas, “has always, in different forms, been present in the constitution and reproduction of the relations of production” (1980, p. 17; original emphasis). The fact that George W. Bush claims that the Enron scandal is an economic issue (a problem of “the business community”) and not a *political* one does not make it so.

What is at stake in the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist social formations is less an “uncoupling” of the economic from status structures and

political authority – relative or otherwise – than a *transformation* of “relations of personal dependence” (what Marx called the “*directly social*”) to contractual relations in which material claims among people are no longer mediated by relations of kinship or vassalage, but rather through the “exchange of things” – money, private property and “free” labor power. In short, the laborer is no longer bound by obligations of kinship or the like, but *is* bound by contractual obligations as “free” labor power. And it is the State that emerges as the guarantor *par excellence* of all contracts.

Fraser’s notion of the uncoupling of the economy from structures of status and political authority in capitalist societies, thus, not only elides the politicized – hence, contested – character of status claims in pre-capitalist societies, but also obscures the importance of the State as Stuart Hall put it, as “a crucial site in a modern capitalist social formation where political practices of different kinds are *condensed*” (1985, p. 93; emphasis in the original).²

But equally important, this claim of “relative uncoupling” tends to obscure the historically-specific political structures and modes of intervention that characterize the State under capitalism. Once again, Poulantzas is instructive. Addressing the separation of the State from the *space* of the reproduction of capital, he writes:

What is involved here is not a real exteriority, such as would exist if the State intervened in the economy from the outside. *The separation is nothing other than the capitalist form of the presence of the political in the constitution and reproduction of the relations of production.* This separation of State and economy and the presence-action of the former in the latter – in effect, two expressions of a single pattern of relations between State and economy under capitalism – traverse all historical stages and phases of the mode of production; albeit in changing forms, they are rooted in the hard core of capitalist relations of production (1980, p. 19; emphasis in the original).

The failure of the recognition/distribution distinction to attend to the peculiar articulation (rather than uncoupling) of the economic on the one hand, and status and political authority on the other, secured on the *political* field of the State, leads Fraser to an “either or paradox” of her own, not dissimilar to that exercised by Wilson in his “class first” argument concerning the ghetto underclass. Responding to Judith Butler’s essay, “Merely Cultural,” Fraser explains why, from her viewpoint, “contemporary capitalism seems not to require heterosexism” and, consequently, why “we do not need to overthrow capitalism in order to remedy those disabilities”; that is, economic disabilities suffered as a result of heterosexism (1997, p. 285).

Referring to Butler’s argument, Fraser writes;

The gender order, in turn, is held to presuppose a mode of sexual regulation that produces and naturalizes heterosexuality, while simultaneously producing homosexuality as abject.

The conclusion drawn by Butler is that the heteronormative regulation of sexuality is part of the economic structure by definition, *despite the fact that it structures neither the social division of labor nor the mode of exploitation of labor power in capitalist society* (1997, p. 284; original emphasis).³

Fraser’s italicized assertion rests on the notion of the uncoupling of economic relations from kinship relations and political authority under capitalism, a claim that, once again, elides the key role played by the state in concentrating and materializing class power rooted in the relations of production. Instead, “the economic structure” is viewed narrowly or, more accurately, as exterior to the political field of the State. As a result, Fraser’s claim that the roots of heterosexism rest not in the political economy, but rather in the “cultural-valuational structure of society” (and is, therefore, primarily a problem of recognition), finds support in the claim that “homosexuals are distributed throughout the entire class structure of capitalist society” (1995).

Clearly, what is at stake in Butler’s argument is not whether homosexuals are discriminated against within labor markets – an issue that, nevertheless, remains open to debate – or the degree to which gay and lesbian movements, for example, threaten or destabilize capitalism. Rather, the more foundational argument is that capitalism has *historically* structured its social division of labor in gendered terms that presuppose heteronormativity. But this development can only be appreciated if one attends to the articulation of “the economic structure” with the political exercise of class power. And it is on the political field of the State, in particular, that the relations of production are constituted and reproduced, politically *and* ideologically, through the governing of sex and gender social relations and identities.

To digress here to the concrete, it is well known that the still-evolving, global division of labor is deeply structured in terms of both gender and sexuality. For example, in the Dominican Republic, women are the preferred labor source for the lowest paying, factory jobs in the export processing sector, based in Free Trade Zones. As is well known, factory managers assert that women are “naturally” better at performing repetitive, mind numbing tasks, and are also less likely to resist factory discipline. Women are subject to sexual abuse from factory managers, which is often exercised as a form of punishment and control. Since the factories do not pay a living wage, the factory labor force tends to be skewed towards women who can rely on the economic contributions of a domestic partner. For this reason, many of the women whom I interviewed regarded factory work as *presupposing* a nuclear family; that is, as coupling discipline at the factory to submission to a spouse at home. Women without an employed, domestic partner and unable to earn a living wage were often forced into the informal economy where they were subject to arrest and abuse

by public authorities. In this case, a model of the heterosexual, male-headed household – materialized through state policies and affirmed by dominant social norms – strongly conditioned the organization of the relations of production, and evaluations of the relative skill and value of labor power.

By way of conclusion, Adolph Reed's essay challenges us to situate the problem of race in a dynamic and historically situated analysis of the relationship between ascriptive status hierarchies and capitalist social formations. Treating status hierarchies as separable or as "uncoupled" from capitalist economic systems – a feat which can only be accomplished by abstracting them *logically* from their contexts – may lead to lively academic debates and puzzling paradoxes but I do not think that it will help us to understand the functioning of concrete capitalist social formations, let alone come to terms with what is to be done politically.

Here I think the question of the State is crucial since it forces us to proceed historically and concretely towards a political understanding of, as Hall put it, "difference *in* complex unity" (1985, p. 93). This task is all the more critical today when thinking about "globalization" has led some theorists to proclaim the increasing irrelevance of the State to the process of capital accumulation, providing yet new opportunities to decouple political-economy and misplace the concrete. For what is at stake in the elision of the State is political struggle itself insofar as the former *is*, as Poulantzas observed, the "central site of the exercise of power," and that power is the power of the dominant classes. The geopolitical aftermath of the events of September 11th provides a telling lesson in this respect. Addressing State power, therefore, can only but disabuse us of the illusions of reformism – that social inequalities tied to race, gender and sexuality can be somehow resolved without *fundamentally* transforming the economy and, more to the point, the political field upon which it rests.

As V. I. Lenin pointed out, the only "correction" that Marx saw fit to make to *The Communist Manifesto* in the preface to the 1872 German addition concerned precisely the political necessity of not merely "seizing" the capitalist State, but rather of destroying its bureaucratic-military apparatus (1976, p. 45).

In his April 12, 1871 letter to Kugelmann, written at the time of the Paris Commune, Marx explained:

If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you will find that I declare that the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it [Marx's italics – the original is "*zerbrechen*"], and this is the preliminary condition for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting (quoted by Lenin 1976, p. 46).

Lenin underscored the point that Marx viewed this smashing of the bureaucratic-military state machine as the "preliminary condition for every *real people's revolution*" since this task was required by the *varied* interests of all those exploited by the capitalist ruling classes; that is, observed Lenin, the State "*places before them the common task* of removing the 'parasite' and of replacing it by something new" (1976, p. 49: emphasis added). From this vantage point, the State is not only the "central site of the exercise of power," but it is also the political field upon which *heterogeneous* forms of inequality can be *recognized* as requiring a general resolution – the "common task" of smashing the bureaucratic military apparatus of the capitalist state. And it is precisely this daunting possibility that has been elided, if not foreclosed by the State-evasive race/class debate.

NOTES

1. Wilson writes:

My argument that race relations in America have moved from economic racial oppression to a form of class subordination for the less privileged blacks is not meant to suggest that racial conflicts have disappeared or have even been substantially reduced. On the contrary, the basis of such conflicts have shifted from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order and therefore do not play as great a role in determining the life chances of individual black Americans as in the previous periods of overt economic racial oppression (1978, p. 23).

Wilson's argument relies on a rather arbitrary separation of the economic sector – narrowly understood as labor markets – from the sociopolitical order – the educational system, residential communities, political structures, and so on, where Wilson concedes "racial conflict" persists. Needless to say, the sociopolitical order, so described, has everything to do with constituting and reproducing the social division of labor and the relations of production and, consequently, determining the life chances of African Americans.

2. The full quote is instructive:

The function of the State is, in part, precisely to bring together or articulate into a complexly structured instance, a range of political discourses and social practices which are concerned at different sites with the transmission of power – some of those practices having little to do with the political domain as such, being concerned with other domains which are nevertheless articulated to the State, for example, familial life, civil society, gender and economic relations (1985, p. 93).

3. The service of paradox in Fraser's argument is highlighted in her arguments against Butler's position on "empirical ground":

No wonder, then, that the principal opponents of gay and lesbian rights today are not multi-national corporations, but religious and cultural conservatives, whose obsession is status, not profits. In fact, some multinationals – notably American Airlines, Apple Computers, and

Disney – have elicited the wrath of such conservatives by instituting gay-friendly policies, such as domestic partnership benefits (1997, p. 285).

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REJOINDER

Adolph Reed, Jr.

I thank Diane Davis, Christina Proenza, Maurice Zeitlin and the editors of *Political Power and Social Theory* for organizing this symposium, and Steven Gregory, Maurice Zeitlin and Ellen Meiksins Wood, for their very thoughtful and judicious contributions. They have provided me a very useful opportunity to work through, and to try to clarify, ideas and arguments I have been puzzling with for some time. I appreciate the sympathy that Gregory, Zeitlin and Meiksins Wood demonstrate for my intellectual project and the care and seriousness with which they engage my arguments. That sympathetic understanding makes the areas where we disagree all the more interesting and meaningful. I hope to reply in the same spirit as the authors' critical assessments; in doing so, I shall respond to each in turn.

Gregory's remarks, as I take them, amplify my arguments. I certainly agree with, and would underscore, his insistence on the central role of the state, and state processes, in defining and mediating the relation of class and civic status, and in "the political articulation and reproduction of capitalist social formations" more generally. The importance of the state stands out to the extent that analysis begins from the premise, which Gregory also propounds, that "the relationship between concrete, ascriptive hierarchies and the social relations to which they give rise is an historical problem and not a logical one."

Examining any society as a discrete entity, from the inside out, throws into relief the crucial ways that the state legitimizes, stabilizes and gives at least an appearance of coherence to the hierarchies of civic status that fetishize, in Gregory's apt formulation, capitalist production relations. This role is more easily overlooked if one approaches the issue from the standpoint of a thin, abstracted logic of capitalism that is not sufficiently sensitive to the importance

of historically specific institutions and ideologies in giving capitalism its shape in any given society. I shall return to this point, which bears on the extent to which we see capitalism narrowly as an economic system or more broadly as a social system anchored in and articulated in relation to the economy. This difference marks a major conceptual fault line in left debate around issues such as the race/class dichotomy.

I agree with Gregory as well that the rhetorical presumption of separation of state and economy in capitalist societies is an important instrument of bourgeois class rule. The liberal rhetoric of civic membership screens out the realities of economic hierarchy from its calculus of rights and equal citizenship. At least between the successful nineteenth century struggles for expansion of suffrage and the triumph of neoliberalism at the end of the twentieth, this has been a pivotal mystification obscuring the contradiction at the core of what once was called bourgeois democracy. Its effect has been to naturalize those hierarchical social relations anchored in capitalist market power by locating them outside the boundaries of public intervention and therefore beyond the scope of official discourses of rights and justice. This also renders invisible the state's role in shaping and sustaining them.

I also agree with Gregory that, therefore, too glib oppositions of "recognition" and "redistribution" can be problematic, though I am not similarly convinced that all such distinctions are flawed or useless. Certainly, from a policy point of view, and a strategic one, it is important to keep in mind that entrenched institutions routinely attempt to translate demands for material redistribution into demands for symbolic forms of recognition. Though the two forms of demand may be *ultimately* linked in a logic of systemic reproduction and contestation, they not only can be, but routinely are, distinguished as alternative programs of demand and response, and their potential impact on the lives of beneficiaries can differ radically. Consider the different outcomes for black Americans of a successful campaign for a Martin Luther King holiday and a successful campaign for a single-payer national health insurance system.

Although I suspect that Gregory and I may align somewhat differently on the Fraser/Butler debate, whatever differences we may have in that regard are not pertinent here. And I emphatically endorse his anthropologist's skepticism toward narratives sharply contraposing the forms of hierarchy that reproduce precapitalist and capitalist societies as ideal types. Those narratives, as he points out, understate the complexity of actual social relations and the dynamics through which hierarchical regimes are reproduced in precapitalist societies. They also depend upon acceptance of the mystified view that political power and civic status are indeed separated in capitalist societies. In addition, they uncomfortably resemble an ideologically self-congratulatory and ethnocentric

disposition that has plagued social theory in the West in an unbroken line from the ethnological "comparative method" in the Victorian era to modernization theory in the decades following World War II.

Zeitlin believes that we disagree in ways that I do not. His main complaints are that I do not discuss the period of CIO insurgency in the 1930s and 1940s and that I go too far in rejecting general theories of capitalism. This second criticism he shares with Wood, who elaborates it more extensively. For that reason I shall address that second criticism mainly in responding to her.

As to Zeitlin's objection regarding my failure to discuss the CIO, I share his general assessment of the history he describes, though I would insist on a picture of the CIO's and Communists' roles that is less clean and an account of that history that is less clear than he proposes in a radically telescoped characterization. A main reason I do not discuss this period is that my original essay began as a sort of prolegomenon for a book reinterpreting the race/class dynamic that actually begins with the New Deal era. I preferred to save that discussion for the book.

Nevertheless, the question really at stake is: How would my account be significantly different if I were to do as Zeitlin suggests? The answer is not clear to me. In my view, I only selected a different example, late nineteenth century populism, to illustrate the point that he makes through the CIO and CP – that there are significant historical precedents for "consequential interracial political solidarities." I did not "forget" the CIO; I simply did not mention it.

Zeitlin's critique in other ways reflects the limitations of an approach that begins from a general notion of capitalism and then reasons down to particulars. As I have argued, that kind of approach too easily supports Procrustean interpretations that torture the facts of social relations and phenomena to fit them to the categories posited a priori in the ideal type. The relative inattentiveness to contextual specificity encouraged by interpretation driven by ideal types also can easily lead to naturalizing familiar, but flawed, presumptions that define the common sense formulations around which prevailing understandings take shape. Especially when the context under examination is the analyst's own everyday world of practice and discourse, this tendency does not adequately safeguard against smuggling in highly questionable and problematic assumptions and formulations – even of the sort that bear directly on the issues at hand. An effect can be to reproduce precisely the ideological distortions that one seeks to challenge. Zeitlin, and, as I will demonstrate, Wood exhibit this problem in a particularly ironic way. Despite their common concern to overcome the apparent power of racialist ideologies by subordinating them to an account of capitalism's dynamics that emphasizes class as a universalizing category, each winds up naturalizing racial difference by treating it as a given fact of life,

rather than as something historically specific and in need of careful explanation itself.

Zeitlin treats "ethnicity, race, or color" (and then sex and creed) as markers of human difference that are just *there* and available for appropriation as unproblematically as the bounty of a primeval forest. Yet close attention to the specific history of the development of American capitalism indicates both that these notions emerged over time and that they have evolved in concert with evolving political and economic forces. Moreover, they have been crucially implicated in the concrete articulation of this country's class dynamics – from the workplace to citizenship rights and legal privileges and protections to, as Gregory points out, access to elements of the public, semi-public and privatized social wage benefits won over the last two centuries. I revert to my earlier paraphrase of Barbara Fields's proposition that race typically has been a language through which American capitalism's class contradictions are expressed. Without even acknowledging those processes of mutual constitution, we can never hope to explain – much less resolve – the race/class conundrum. The most we can do is fit the old bromides into new linguistic attire and repeat the same stale debates.

Zeitlin's reference to Du Bois is another revealing expression of this tendency's easy embrace of the wrong-headed or inadequate formulations of the moment. I hardly wish to diminish Du Bois's significance in American political and intellectual life in the twentieth century; after all, I have written a book on his political thought.¹ However, although Zeitlin's description of him as "the nation's preeminent black leader" is meant to underscore his importance, it rehearses a deeply problematic way of thinking about black politics. What, indeed, is a "black leader"? How is one's preeminence as such a thing, whatever it is, determined? And by whom? The "black leader" formulation is embedded in a well-worn, unexamined way of describing and understanding black political and social life, one that was never adequate for making sense of politics and political relations among black people. And it is a way of thinking about politics that is completely innocent of class analysis; it cannot conceptualize structures of cleavage based on social position and interest *among* blacks.²

Ellen Meiksins Wood believes we agree where we do not. Some of our differences may be only semantic or taxonomic, but I suspect that even these may spring from deeper conceptual and interpretive disagreements. The wellspring of our differences is Wood's insistence on grounding analysis in an elaborate ideal-typical formulation of capitalism's "laws of motion," "rules for reproduction" or "basic requirements." Here the difference may hinge on what counts as capitalism's "basic" features, as Wood finds my notion too narrow. She disagrees with my contention that a more general theory of capitalism

cannot help us make sense of the relation of race and class in a given society, and she objects to my view that such general theories are useful mainly as heuristic devices. (It is she who diminishes heuristic value with the adverb "only," not I.)

Why does Wood consider my characterization of capitalist societies' least common denominator – "the social organization of labor on more or less coercive bases for the production of privately appropriated value" – inadequate? I freely acknowledge that it is not useful for some purposes; for example, it is not precisely enough specified to assist in clarifying how capitalism as an exploitative system of production differs from feudalism or some other ideal-typical order. But formulations are more or less useful as descriptions, or adequate as guides to interpretation, only in relation to the questions one is interested in posing and resolving. My contention is that, for purposes of unraveling the relation of race and class as expressions of hierarchy in a specific capitalist society, we do not need to recur to a more ambitious general theory of capitalism. That is, finding out what time it is does not require learning the inner mechanics and history of the timepiece. And, as a practical matter, engaging those more remote issues risks detour into debate on the history and mechanics of watch-making that distracts from the task of ascertaining the time, especially if intellectuals are involved.

Wood objects to this view on the ground that "it is worth considering" how capitalism's "general operating principles" shape its specific historical manifestations, including the role of racial hierarchies in reproducing capitalist class relations. Perhaps, but worth considering toward what ends? This she does not make clear. What Wood actually wants is an interpretation that preserves the sharp race/class distinction and the priority of a thin, economic conception of class within it. She acknowledges as much immediately in her assertion that "class is constitutive of capitalism in a way that race is not." This is exactly the sort of formulation that has sustained the wrong-headed debate for more than a century. It is not so much wrong as fatally miscast. It establishes an either/or framework that imposes rigid, reified conceptual categories on a much more fluid history and lived experience.

To wit, Wood then asserts that "capitalism is conceivable without racial divisions." True enough. However, many things are conceivable that do not exist and have never existed – unicorns, dragons, and the *homo oeconomicus* of neo-classical economists' fantasies, for example. And the development of American capitalism has been inseparable historically and ideologically from the emergence and evolution of racialist ideologies, as well as other ideologies of ascriptive hierarchy. This is not to argue that capitalism *requires* racial stratification. One thing that Marxists should have learned during the last century

of our self-confident, always premature pronouncements of capitalism's laws and limits is that, as a social system, it is remarkably absorptive and adaptive. The reason that is so, as I argued in my original provocation, is that, in the practical mechanisms and tensions that reproduce and shape it in specific societies, capitalism exists *not* as a formal system governed by a dogma or a *telos*.

The structural features that distinguish capitalism from other systems of production and social relations did not emerge and do not persist most consequentially as the result of intentional logic and willed adherence to a philosophical ideal. They are sustained and reproduced by pragmatic, interest-driven actions of individuals and collectivities within the context of asymmetrical power that originates in the organization of and for production. This is the process that we summarize as class struggle. This is at odds with the view, which Wood seems to embrace, that the system is driven by some reified logic that imposes inexorable "laws." To the extent that these laws are understood as more than by-products of the durable patterns of social relations that define specific capitalist social orders in specific times and places (including their articulations within global regimes) and with specifically evolved ideologies and political institutions and demographics, that view is idealist. It seems, at least superficially, to share more with teleology and theology than with dialectical and historical materialism, but I do not wish to engage in arguments concerning what counts as Marxist authenticity; these only feed a strain of scholastic debate that has reflected and contributed to the left's debilitation.

A consequence of this foundation in idealism is that Wood's account of the relation between capitalism's class character and the dynamics of racial hierarchy looks suspiciously circular, if not flatly tautological. She stipulates capitalism's formal properties; what falls outside her stipulated model is by definition not essential or necessary for its reproduction. (This suggests that her problem with my specification of capitalism's pertinent general features may actually be that it is too broad, not too narrow.) That is true in the empty way that all tautologies are true, but it does not help us get closer to understanding the relation of race and class in American capitalism. The formulation that "race and class belong to different conceptual categories and that they explain the operation of U.S. capitalism in different ways" is embedded in this circular, tautological reasoning. It is true only if we accept the thin, ahistorical definition of capitalism's essential characteristics that Wood proposes. And it does not enable us to move beyond the hoary chicken-and-egg frame of the race/class debate that has been so unproductive for so long.

Beneath Wood's insistence on a formalistic notion of capitalism's basic features and requirements that transcends any specific social and historical context lies her commitment to a narrowly economic construction of the

defining features of a capitalist social order. This prevents her from considering capitalism as a broader social system, which in turn leads her to trivialize the role of the arenas and foundations of social agency – the state, civic status hierarchies, always already sedimented local ideologies and regimes of social relations – in constituting what capitalism is, what is necessary for its systemic reproduction, in specific societies at specific moments. To be sure, her "working definition" of capitalism is unobjectionable as a distillation of features shared by all social orders reasonably characterizable as capitalist. But the problem with that definition, again as I argued in my initial provocation, is that its disregard for historical specificity forces us away from the domain where race and class actually emerge and interact mutually as concrete social relations. This approach cannot help us figure out *how* capitalist social relations – the reality of capitalism in the world – are constituted and reproduced practically.

Her thin, economic view leads Wood to overstate the extent of capitalism's unique rationality in arguing that, "In contrast to precapitalist forms in which class relations are defined by extra-economic identities, capitalism, as much as it mobilizes extra-economic hierarchies as mechanisms of reproduction, ultimately depends on the reduction of all workers . . . to interchangeable units of labor abstracted from any particular personal or social identity." Although Wood acknowledges that capitalism "benefits" from differentiating workers, she concludes that "civic status is *not* constitutive of capitalist class relations in the way it is in other social forms." The tendency to reduce all workers to interchangeable units certainly is a powerful one in capitalist production relations. However, if we understand capitalism's definitive features as *including* its mechanisms of social and ideological reproduction, we see a more dynamic and more complex picture. From that perspective the role of regimes of civic status in creating and maintaining the political, ideological and material stability necessary to sustain the production system becomes a central component of capitalism as a social order.

A dose of historical specificity would be a good corrective here. As Wood indicates, the language of free and equal citizenship emerged and evolved with capitalism. For her this is partly what distinguishes it from feudalism and why, in her view, hierarchies of civic status are not as significant for reproducing capitalist social orders as they are in precapitalist social formations. But there is something of a sleight-of-hand in her contention. This rhetoric of equal citizenship emanated from the political sphere and civic life, not the production relation. Yet Wood maintains that the latter domain alone is the source of capitalism's systemic identity. On her terms, therefore, equal citizenship would be no more definitive of capitalism than would civic status hierarchies.

Consistent with Gregory's criticism of Fraser, I suspect that Wood's formalist comparison also overstates the extent to which a seamless organicism defines the practical life of precapitalist societies. Wood's own hedges reinforce this suspicion. What begins as more forceful assertions recoil, properly I believe, toward more contingent ones: civic status was "more directly constitutive" of precapitalist class relations; capital can exploit labor "without *exclusive* civic privileges" [my italics]. On principle of the distinction between ascertaining the time and narrating the history and theory of keeping time, I am not interested in revisiting here the subject matter of what have become known as the Dobb/Sweezy and Brenner debates regarding European transition from feudalism to capitalism.³ Nor am I competent, in any event, to expatiate on those otherwise important questions. Nevertheless, Wood's claim that "capitalism, alone among all forms of class society, is constituted by relations of exploitation that are *not* defined by a hierarchy of civic status" is unquestionably problematic on empirical and historical grounds. It is plausible only within the circumference of the narrowly economic definition of capitalism she stipulates. Only such formalist inattentiveness to specific histories and social contexts can yield the conviction that in capitalist societies class relations are not meaningfully "defined by extra-economic identities." This claim is particularly untenable with respect to the United States, where availability for enslavement on a racialized basis was an important variable in the elaboration of capitalist labor and social relations from their earliest consolidation.

Wood's retreat to more hedged language as her formulations approach concreteness is a *de facto* concession to the reality that capitalist societies do not differ so sharply from others in their dependence on systems of ascriptive inequality. Wood's claim that feudal or slave societies are less flexible than capitalist ones with regard to accommodating transformations in systems of civic hierarchy while retaining their fundamental character poses an interesting counterfactual. However, its bearing on the question of the centrality of such hierarchies to the reproduction of specific capitalist social orders is not clear. A more pertinent question is whether capitalist societies characteristically depend on regimes of ascriptive differentiation for stabilization of their class regimes. This is an empirical question, not a teleological one.

The language of equal citizenship emerged as an element of a program of bourgeois class rule as realized through state power. It is a familiar and historically reasonable argument that, once this rhetoric was institutionalized, it became available as a vehicle for workers and other subordinate strata to use to advance their claims against, or at least in relation to, the prerogatives of bourgeois rule. Liberal democracy was the outcome of the dialectic of contestation, compromise and accommodation thus set in motion. It was no

more *required* by capitalism than was free labor. Robert J. Steinfeld has argued persuasively that what we now recognize as free labor – employment terminable at will by either party – did not grow smoothly or organically out of capitalist employment relations. It also was the product of long struggle waged at the level of individual factories and mines and through the state, struggle in which employers typically showed a practical preference for a labor system that approached bondage without reciprocal obligation. Moreover, Steinfeld shows that the modern notion of free labor was not generally consolidated institutionally in either Britain or the United States – not even among white workers in the North – until after the American Civil War.⁴ As Wood acknowledges, generalization of the institutions of liberal democracy was the product of similar struggles. Seeing these signature capitalist institutions as effectively predetermined by the system's logic, therefore, demands a leap of faith, as well as an anachronistically foreshortened reading of history.⁵

Claims that capitalism somehow *requires* the development and generalization of liberal democracy or free labor derive from the logical error of assuming that, because liberal democracy and free labor emerged within capitalist evolution and capitalism seems to have been a precondition for their development, capitalism must somehow have required them.⁶ Vulnerability to this error is exacerbated by adherence to a belief that history is driven by inexorable laws of development. This belief, at least among Marxists of a sort, rests on a Newtonian metaphor of science that in its quest for covering laws ironically warrants a teleological view of history. Thus the desire for an ironclad materialist theory of history can become the platform for a rigid, idealist orthodoxy worthy of the medieval Church.

Wood's observation that capitalist social orders are flexible in the principles of differentiation they generate and utilize is correct but beside the point. She seems to think that two significant implications follow from the fact that the kind of ascriptive differentiation condensed in the discourse of race – that is, differentiation based on a mythology of subspecies level populations that cluster around socially consequential, uniquely shared phenotypic (and, more recently, genetic) characteristics – is not the only kind of ascriptive differentiation available or utilized. These are: (1) that capitalism can survive without racism; and (2) that the contingency of all specific forms of ascriptive differentiation proves that ascriptive hierarchies in general are not primary, structurally definitive features of capitalism as a social system.

I will grant that capitalism in the abstract can survive without racism in the abstract. That and \$1.50 will get me a ride on the subway, at least until the next fare increase. To be meaningful, however, that truism first of all would have to specify what is meant by "racism," which in this kind of formulation

is a far too polysemous, catchall category to have much analytical usefulness. As Wood indicates herself, the social meanings of race and racial stratification can vary tremendously over time and space, both denotatively and in their social connotations. At this point in American political and social discourse "racism" can mean anything from individual prejudice, bigotry and stereotyping – symbolized famously in Cornel West's and other prominent black people's difficulties in getting cabs in Manhattan – to labor market segmentation, anti-immigrant agitation, redlining, racial profiling, gerrymandering, coded attacks on the poor and the public sector, the corporate glass ceiling and police brutality. Presumptions of racial inequality obviously figure into all these phenomena, but they are not the same and their structural significance, social meanings, sources, consequences and entailments differ substantially. We need an analysis that makes sense of these different relations and seeks to understand how they operate concretely to shape and reproduce capitalist political economies. Wood's apothegm tells us nothing helpful either analytically or politically about a society such as the United States in which racial stratification emerged as a mutually constitutive element of capitalist institutions and evolved and became institutionalized in tight, practically indissoluble connection with them.

Regarding the second implication, the fact that a given form of ascriptive hierarchy is not a universal or permanent hallmark of capitalist social structure has no bearing on the extent to which such civic hierarchies in general are central to capitalist social organization. As powerful a force as it has been in American history and in the modern world, race is ultimately a species of a genus of insitutionalized, vertical relations of social and political power organized on a principle of purportedly essential difference. As I have suggested, race is a label attached to a form of presumptively fundamental human differentiation held to be recognizable phenotypically and naturalized through a narrative anchored in biology and common descent. Claims of essential, naturalized human difference are a defining feature of metrics of ascriptive status differentiation, though not all rest on the same sorts of biologically inflected narratives as does race.

Locating race as a subset of this larger class of phenomena helps to contextualize it, to emphasize that it is both an ideology and the product of specific historical processes. This is an important perspective to maintain, partly because, as I have also argued, both sides of the race/class debate tend to ontologize race as a category of social classification. Properly situating race conceptually in this way also highlights the integral role of ascriptive status hierarchies in capitalist societies more generally. Ideologies of ascriptive differentiation are always social inventions; their specific content is by definition fluid. Particular metrics of civic status gain social traction, wane or become internally

transformed in response to their resonance with entrenched patterns of social relations and the shifting tides of political struggle. Race's social meaning now, for example, is significantly different from even half a century ago, even if its dominant folk imagery as a fundamental unit of human classification has not much altered. Ascriptive hierarchies function to stabilize asymmetrical relations of class and social power that originate in the capitalist production system.

Although such hierarchies of civic worth may predate the development of capitalist institutions, they have evolved in tandem; their functions are integral to maintaining stability of the class order, especially as it requires accommodation to ideologies of liberal democracy that have evolved simultaneously within that order. On that basis, I am convinced that we need to theorize capitalist society in a way that accounts for them as components of its fundamental fabric.

Wood and I do arrive at practical political judgments that are most often quite compatible, even though we reach them from very different, perhaps diametrically opposed, conceptual routes. It is reasonable to ask, therefore, whether my elaborate exposition of what I believe to be our conceptual differences and my insistence on the need for a thicker, more contextualist approach to analyzing the nexus of race and class in the reproduction of capitalism's social relations is an instance of the "narcissism of small differences." In addition to the standard scholarly grounds that I believe it provides for richer, more accurate accounts and avoids the logical difficulties I have described here, the approach I propose offers advantages that may have ramifications beyond scholarly concerns.

The rapidly shifting demographic composition of the United States, the changing place of familiar patterns of racial hierarchy in capitalism's everyday reproduction, and the successful institutionalization of the partial, but substantial, victories won in the last half century of struggle against racial injustice have combined to alter the forms, meaning and significance of race and racial stratification in American life. These changes are uneven and difficult to map, and their impact on the lives of individuals who live within the categories of racial hierarchy can easily be both overstated and understated. They have also assisted, and are reflected in, the successful propagation of social constructionist views of race that further undermine its foundations in essential, biologically based difference. These changes are to be applauded, at a minimum because they help to remove a layer of mystification that has justified oppression and otherwise indefensible inequalities. However, they do not by any means signal a retreat of hierarchies of ascriptive civic status in general. Culturally based notions of essential racial difference have arisen to modify or supplant those openly rooted in biological narratives. And new categories of ascriptive

differentiation, more appropriate to current sensibilities and systemic imperatives, have emerged to reconfigure patterns of differential civic worth. The reinvention of the habitual criminal, often immersed in narratives of genetic difference, the mythologies of the urban underclass, crack babies, and "super predator" youth all perform ideological functions similar to those historically associated with race. These new categories largely overlap the familiar racial classifications and draw persuasiveness from their residual imagery, but they are not exactly reducible to them. Indeed, that they are not is a vital element of their power.

These regimes of civic hierarchy are endemic to the logic of American capitalism's everyday reproduction as a social system. They are woven into its class dynamics as people live them on a daily basis; they have definite material sources and consequences, experienced both in the labor market and in other spheres. They shape class identity and class consciousness and aspirations in the most practical, everyday terms. Unless we begin with an understanding that they are not ephemeral or epiphenomenal, not simply irrational or atavistic, it will be that much more difficult to devise effective strategies to counter them. This is one of the greatest challenges that faces the project of building a coherent, powerful working class political movement. A dogma that seeks to articulate a basis for unity by insisting, contrary to people's lived experience, that the dynamics of ascriptive civic hierarchy are exogenous to capitalism's most elemental processes of class differentiation handicaps this project.

We need a conceptual approach – not an elaborate, frozen theory destined to chase after an object that constantly evolves away from its interpretive boundaries – that enables us to perceive capitalism as it is lived, as a coherent social system in which political, economic and civic domains are joined in a seamless dialectic, albeit one anchored materially in production relations. This dialectic is the concrete source of the system's dynamism and creates the trajectory of its development. It is the context within which classes and other groups, as well as the individuals who constitute them, form and improvise consciousness. We cannot adequately comprehend this dialectic and the complex relations that drive it if we proceed from a mindset that retains neoclassical economists' artificial elevation of market forces above the social, political and cultural matrix within which they are embedded. Acceptance of that mystification, even if it is leavened with an equally artificial and pro forma teleology of class struggle, will not help us craft strategies that can mobilize the broadly based, politically assertive working class solidarities and programs necessary to build the sort of movement we need.

Finally, an approach such as I propose frees us from the scholasticism that flows so readily from debates over what capitalism requires and what it does

not. Those debates are fundamentally irresolvable. They depend on arbitrary, formalistic stipulations of capitalism's essence and are doomed to circularity. In that sense they are similar to arguments over who was the greatest third baseman of all time or what television will be like in the twenty-second century. They are, therefore, best suited for the parlor, bar or barbershop. Capitalism's limits and requirements can be known only by testing them practically. Moreover, because it proceeds from thin, ideal-typical constructions of capitalist societies, the discourse surrounding these formulations is vulnerable to taking for granted important features of really existing capitalist societies that should be problematized. Their Procrustean logic supports an interpretive hastiness that can ensconce tacit premises of the all too familiar, commonsense ideologies that should be interrogated – de-familiarized – if we are to develop a clear picture of how a society's mystifications actually operate.

It may be instructive regarding the depth of ideologies of primordial racial difference in American life, for example, that Wood, like Zeitlin, also in effect naturalizes such notions even as she seeks to ephemeralize them in her construction of capitalism's essence. She notes, on the one hand, that ideologies of racial difference appeared only recently in human history, that they are a "modern invention." On the other hand, she maintains that "race would not have the salience it does were it not for the relegation of so many African Americans to the lower ranks of the working class or their exclusion from the labor market altogether." This formulation may be a simple expository lapse. On its face, however, it is another problematic counterfactual. Given the category's origins to which she alludes, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine race even existing as a metric of human classification in the United States in the absence of a framework of civic hierarchy predicated largely on the subordination of people defined as black. The only way to think otherwise, and thus to pose this counterfactual, is to presume that the racial classification exists, logically if not historically, prior to the framework in which it developed. This contradicts the social constructionist implications of her earlier observation.

That counterfactual formulation also shows the inadequacy of the conventional terms of the race/class debate. Not only does this debate send us off pursuing unanswerable, naively formulated questions; in the process it distracts us from the really important ones. The pertinent questions concern not whether capitalism can exist without racism or vice versa, but how racialist ideologies and regimes of racial stratification, along with other forms of civic hierarchy based on ascribed status and notions of differential civic worth, consolidate and reproduce capitalist class dynamics. Answers to those questions can be sought only concretely, for specific societies within lived history. In the United States, with respect to the race/class relation, this means examining carefully and

critically the manifold, complex ways in which civic hierarchies based on racial classification suffuse the material substance of American capitalism and have helped to define the fundamental and practical terms of class struggle. Finding appropriate answers to those questions is one of the most important intellectual tasks that confront us if we are to fight effectively for a better world.

NOTES

1. A. Reed, Jr. *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1997.
2. I discuss this issue at considerable length in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, esp. chapter one.
3. On the former see: M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*. New York: International Publishers, 1963, and *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, R. H. Hilton, introduction, New York: Science & Society, 1967. On the latter, see *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, T. H. Aston & C. H. E. Philpin (Eds), London: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
4. R. J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English & American Law and Culture, 1350-1870*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, and *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
5. Wherever pertinent, I like to draw attention to Butterfield's splendid, but largely forgotten, critique of teleological anachronism in thinking about the past, partly because thinking historically about the past is under assault from so many quarters in academic life - from rational choice theory to poststructuralism. See H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* New York: Norton, 1965. Butterfield's essay originally appeared in 1931. Also see G. W. Stocking, Jr. "On the Limits of 'Presentism' and 'Historicism' in the Historiography of the Behavioral Sciences" in Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
6. This logical error also routinely plagues interpretation in the history of ideas, in which it commonly takes the form of free and easy imputations of lines of influence from one writer to another based on such skimpy bases as similarity of formulations and evidence that the later writer was familiar with the work of the earlier one. Wood succumbs to this expression of the error in her assertion that Oliver Cox is my "major theoretical inspiration." Though I certainly respect Cox's critiques and have been familiar with and have engaged them for more than three decades, I can attest emphatically that I have never regarded him or his work at all in the light that Wood assumes. Nor can there be evidence to support that view in anything that I have written. Wood apparently bases this conclusion on the fact that I wrote an introduction to the recent publication of an abridgment of Cox's *Caste, Class, and Race*. In fact, during the years when it might have been reasonable to look for anything like "major theoretical inspirations" in my intellectual development, my relationship to Cox's critiques was rather more complex, if not ambivalent, than it has become since. I point this out neither to diminish Cox's

significance within the stream of left American, and especially black American, discourse in the middle third of the twentieth century nor to suggest that he cannot be read profitably now. I am more convinced than ever that his work has been underappreciated. My objectives in making this point are to illustrate the insidiousness of the anachronistic fallacy and, admittedly the much smaller point, to clarify the record regarding my own intellectual foundations, since Wood apparently considers them worthy of comment. On the more significant issue of problems associated with attributions of intellectual influence, see Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" *History and Theory*, 8 (first quarter 1969) esp. p. 26.