



## Introduction: Globalization and Race in World Capitalism

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### Abstract

*Scholars of world-systems and global political economy have wrestled for decades with the genesis of 'race' as a social construct and its historical significance for the system of world capitalism. Transformations in the world capitalist system pose a new challenge to Western theories of race. Older colonial structures may be giving way in the face of capitalist globalization. Racial or ethnic dimensions of the relations of exploitation in the capitalist world-system need to be reconceptualized. This symposium aims to generate debate and interchange among scholars on such a reconceptualization and to contribute to real world struggles against racial inequities.*

**Keywords:** Race and Capitalism, Race and Globalization, Racism



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Scholars of world-systems and global political economy have wrestled for decades with the genesis of “race” as a social construct and its historical significance for the system of world capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Though much neglected in recent years with the rise of identitarian theories that give little weight to political economy, Oliver C. Cox’s 1948 work *Caste, Class, and Race*, remains a classical study. Despite its well-known limitations (especially its discussion on caste), it has not, in my view, been surpassed as a foundation text on the matter. Cox grounded his analysis of race in the imperative of an outwardly expanding capitalist system to recruit cheap labor for world accumulation to which was subordinate the need to rationalize and legitimate the racial systems put into place through European colonialism. It is worthwhile to reproduce Cox’s central argument:

Our hypothesis is that racial exploitation and race prejudice developed among Europeans with the rise of capitalism and nationalism, and that because of the world-wide ramifications of capitalism, all racial antagonism can be traced to the policies and attitudes of the leading capitalist people, the white people of Europe and North America.... If we should put our finger upon the year which marked the beginning of modern race relations we should select 1493-94. This is the time when total disregard for the human rights and physical power of the non-Christian peoples of the world, the colored peoples, was officially assumed by the first two great colonizing European nations. Sometimes probably because of its very obviousness, it is not realized that the slave trade was simply a way of recruiting labor for the purpose of exploiting the great natural resources of America. This trade did not develop because Indians and Negroes were red or black, or because the cranial capacity averaged a certain number of cubic centimeters; but simply because they were the best workers to be found for the heavy labor in the mines and plantations across the Atlantic. Although this peculiar kind of exploitation was then in its incipiency, it had already achieved its significant characteristics. As it developed and took definite capitalistic form, we could follow the white man around the world and see him repeat the process among practically every people of color. But the fact

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<sup>1</sup> This assumes that the very term and concept of “race” is unproblematic. I make no such assumption. As well, there is the problem that ethnicity tends to become conflated with race. But these are discussions for elsewhere.

of crucial significance is that racial exploitation is merely one aspect of the problem of the proletarianization of labor, regardless of the color of the laborer. Hence racial antagonism is essentially political-class conflict (Cox, 1959 [1948], 321, 331-333).

In the 1960s and 1970s – a time of decolonization and militant mass struggles around the world – scholars engaged in heated and unresolved debates on the matrix of race, class, and capitalism. Subsequently, social scientists who study race would argue that race cannot be reduced to or subsumed into class; others would go so far as to explain race as an immanent category. Depending on one's views, the classical Coxian perspective has been enriched or challenged by post-structural approaches, ethno-national (or ethno-cultural) analyses, racial formation, critical race, and ethnicity theories, and the “coloniality of power” paradigm, among others. These approaches attribute differentiated weight to political economy in the explanation of race relative to ideational, cultural and psychological dimensions. Two paradigms predominate in the sociological literature on race and racism in the United States, the assimilationist paradigm and racial formation theory. Both emphasize the ideological and cultural construction of race and/or the formation of racial meaning and identity over the historical-structural roots of race and its material impacts. In Europe Barth's ethnicity theory has had a major impact. The works of Stuart Hall, who famously stated that “race is the modality that class is lived,” have had a major impact on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, on thinking about race and its relationship to political economy, power and culture.

Now, however, transformations in the world capitalist system pose a new challenge to Western theories of race. Older colonial structures may be giving way in the face of capitalist globalization, the decline of U.S. (and more generally Western) hegemony accompanied by the downward mobility of the once privileged white ethnic sectors of the Western working class, the rise of China and India, the BRICS, and a transnational capitalist class in the Global South. Chinese capitalists now employ thousands of Ecuadorans and Africans, among others, in mines and on plantations in South America and sub-Saharan Africa, in labor relations that are hard not to characterize as racialized and racist (that is, if we use the language of Western race theories). The same holds for some 300, 000 Filipina maids and other care givers who labor for Hong Kong households under conditions that often appear as racialized bondage, or for South Asian workers in the Gulf countries and Nicaraguans working in Costa Rica under such conditions, among many such examples. Directly counter to the arguments of much Western race theory, Chinese, Mexican, and Indian capitalists now own U.S. and European corporations that exploit poor white people.

Consequently, it is clear that the racial or ethnic dimensions of the relations of exploitation in the capitalist world-system need to be reconceptualized. As we give pause to such a reconceptualization, it is worth asking several questions. Should social scientists continue to ground their study of race in its Western/colonial historical origins in the accumulation of capital on a world scale? Or do they need to reorient their analyses to integrate 21<sup>st</sup> century restructuring of the world economy in ways that challenge Western race theories? We need also to ask, at what expense do world-systems scholars continue, for the most part, to neglect race and ethnicity – analytically, theoretically and politically – as critical categories?

Although much has changed in the past half century, it is again a time of militant mass struggles. Our analytical and theoretical understanding of race and global capitalism are ever more urgent to an informed politics as both the deadly embrace of racism and struggles against racial oppression and exploitation intensify. In the United States a neo-fascist presidential candidate calls for the mass deportation of 12 million, largely Latino/a undocumented immigrants and sealing off U.S. borders to Muslims at the same time as the Black Lives Matter movement leads a renewed wave of mass popular struggle. In Central and South America, indigenous communities, under siege by mining, logging and agricultural interests, have launched one uprising after another in defense of their land and autonomy. In the Middle East, Palestinians appeared to be initiating a third intifada while nearly half of the Jewish population of Israel has expressed support for a policy of ethnic cleansing and the establishment of an apartheid state. Mass atrocities against vulnerable minorities are reported everywhere. The specter of genocide looms over some groups, such as the Rohingya in Myanmar. Clearly, the matter of praxis is anything but a mundane academic exercise.

This symposium grew out of a panel on race and ethnicity in the capitalist world-system at the 2015 annual congress of the American Sociological Association. It brings together five commentaries and a concluding reflection from a variety of empirical, theoretical and paradigmatic vantage points. Yet all of them point to the need for new ways to explore the relationship of race to the capitalist world-system, and/or to examine the capitalist world-system in terms of the racial and racist organizations of its social relations.

Ramon Grosfoguel argues in his contribution that “racism is a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority” that “can be marked by color, ethnicity, language, culture and/or religion.” He calls for moving beyond “color racism as the exclusive or universal definition of racism.” For Grosfoguel, racism demarcates groups into “human” and “subhuman.” Those “classified above the line of the human are recognized socially in their humanity as human beings and, thus, enjoy access to rights (human rights, civil rights, women rights and/or labor rights), material resources, and social recognition to their subjectivities, identities,

epistemologies and spiritualities. The people below the line of the human are considered subhuman or non-human; that is, their humanity is questioned and, as such, negated.”

Wilma Dunaway and Don Clelland criticize a global apartheid model in which “all the world’s peoples are homogenized under two broad categories that treat all whites as though they enjoy the same degree of supremacy and all dark others as though there are no ethnic or class differences among them.” Rising semiperipheral countries, they say, “are crucial to the study of race and ethnicity in the modern world-system.” In these countries “reactionary politics, xenophobia and discrimination against ‘foreign aliens’ are routinely documented” although the capitalists of these countries increasingly act globally yet are “neither ‘core’ nor ‘white’ in the sense of the global apartheid model, but they do share the pro-capitalist class interests of core capitalists.”

Tanya Golash-Bosa turns her attention to recent mass deportations in the United States. The rise of a “politics of fear” in the aftermath of the 9/11/2001 attacks, the global financial crisis, and the opportunities that deportation create for corporate profit-making provided a toxic mix for the deportation of three million mostly men from Latin America and the Caribbean. Mass deportation, she says “reinforces the racialized dimensions of the international division of labor that Grosfoguel emphasizes.” She argues, contra Dunaway and Clelland, that “mass deportation is crucial to the maintenance of global apartheid – a system where (mostly white) affluent citizens of the world are free to travel where they like whereas the (mostly non-white) poor are forced to make do in places where there are fewer resources.”

For his part, James Fenelon traces the race-based genocide that “accompanied every phase of world capitalism,” from the mercantile through to the industrial and now the neo-liberal eras of capitalism. He concludes that we should “expand analyses so as to account for the macro-construction of race and systemic racism, often genocidal, within the *longue duree* of the modern world-system.” In her fascinating if deeply troubling look at the global cruise ship industry, Francisca Oyogoa shows how the labor force in the industry is organized along racial and ethnic lines as a reflection of the larger racial and ethnic hierarchies in the world-system. “In both practice and discourse, cruise ships replicate patterns of racialized servility and hierarchies of color which date back to colonialism,” she notes. “Specifically, white men from core countries are at the top of the workplace hierarchy and are racialized as possessing the qualities necessary for leadership and dominance over others.” In turn, “workers from peripheral nations, especially South East Asian men, are racialized as naturally suited for servility.”

Finally, Bill Fletcher, Jr. comments on the five essays. “The challenge of addressing the question of race revolves around appreciating that it cannot be restricted to matters of color, superiority/interiority or hierarchy,” he insists. “Race is a system created with two objectives, as

well articulated by several of the authors, which include: *one, domination and exploitation for a specific population, and, two, social control.*”

It is our hope that this forum will help foment broader debate and interchange among those who student the political economy of the world-system and those who study race and ethnicity. It is our hope as well that such debate and interchange will draw lessons from the real world life and death struggles against racial inequities and may help in turn to inform those struggles.

### **About the Author**

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### **Disclosure Statement**

Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledgments section of the article’s text. Otherwise, authors have indicated that they have no conflict of interests upon submission of their article to the journal.

### **Reference**

Cox, Oliver, C. 1959 [1948], *Caste, Class, and Race*. New York: Monthly Review Press