



## Dialogue: Race in the Capitalist World-System, Author Responses

### Hanchard's Response to Robinson

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I appreciate Prof. Robinson's thoughtful review of my book. It provides several critiques that enable me to elaborate on several claims made in my book, as well as quibble with some assertions in the review that are not borne out by a closer reading of the text itself. I would be the first to acknowledge that the book is not about capitalism, but I actually do examine the relationship between capitalism, empire, slavery and slave resistance in St. Dominique, as well as the relationship between capitalism and slavery more generally in my concluding chapter. I neither intended nor claimed to have written a book about capitalism, so to take me to task for not doing so seems misdirected.

But there is a deeper question that Prof. Robinson's criticisms suggest: how would an examination of capitalism inform or alter my account of the development of racialized institutions in Western polities deemed democratic? Prof. Robinson suggests several ways in which I might have done so, but each operate with the assumption that racism in both historical and contemporary forms are coincident with capitalism's emergence. In his review, he writes "We have a vast literature showing how systems of race-based slavery, exclusion, and oppression arose as part and parcel of the rise of capitalism and the world system." But this neglects the fact that justifications for a New World slavery with African peoples as the primary object for coerced labor actually begin earlier. To paraphrase Leslie Rout, Jr. (2015), the association of black bodies with degraded labor begin with Iberian elites during the *Reconquista* in Spain and in the ecclesiastic



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discourses of the Catholic Church. In the debates between Sepulveda and de Las Casas, Las Casas made the justification for African enslavement, partially on religious grounds, that Africans, not indigenous peoples, were best suited for slave labor. Thus, the period between the *Reconquista* (the 11<sup>th</sup> century) and the 16<sup>th</sup> century is the period in which one finds evidence of anti-black racism as justification for enslavement. That capitalism utilized anti-black racism as justification for continued enslavement is not in question. My assertion here is that the origins of anti-black racism did not begin with capitalism. My argument is supported by the scholarship of Ian Hannaford (1996), Anthony Pagden (1995), David Theo Goldberg (1993) and Geraldine Heng (2018). Additionally, both Spain and Portugal were relative latecomers to what has come to be known as Europe's Industrial Revolutions, and were hardly capitalist in the period between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As I mentioned in a recent exchange in the *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies*, where I depart from Cedric Robinson is in the broadly ontological claims of a singular black identity and a singular Western or European civilization. The idea of some internally coherent West remains an ideological falsehood deployed by elite and non-elite segments of so-called Western societies, past and present, to forewarn of the impending destruction of Europe and the United States, should non-white migrants at ports and islands across Southern Europe and at the southern border of the United States gain entry into these countries in their quest for a better life.

Thus, to boil down all of Western racism to the emergence of capitalism is to strip away, ironically, a more layered accounting of the relationship between capitalism and racism. Capitalism may have attenuated the circulation of racist discourses and proliferation of racist institutions (and anti-Semitic discourses), but its modes and dynamics of production were hardly the first global institutions and processes to do so. Law, sanction, norms and custom were utilized to limit the freedom of formerly enslaved populations by maintaining structures of racial and class inequality after abolition in the New World, including continued denial of labor power, education, self-possession, and repression of former slaves and their descendants who made collective claims, whether as formal political parties (Cuba, Colombia, Brazil, the United States) or through rebellion and revolution (think St. Domingue and Demerara here). These dynamic activities all involved politics and power, in the quest to either maintain inequality or to smash it.

Robinson also suggests that my explication of political inequality focuses on the wrong things, namely identity and cultural difference and suggests that this direction in my argument necessarily leads to "quite liberal and culturalist assumptions". In several of my cases, however, I stress the fact that difference is indeed relational and constitutive, and only gains significance in power relations, when they can become politically salient. In my examination of the relationship between difference (which is always constructed) and inequality, I offer the following explanation: "Racial regimes provided the means to institutionalize and rationalize hierarchies premised upon phenotypic distinctions, which themselves were based upon interpretive schemes of differentiation that had no natural or scientific basis" (2018: 43). The key passage above is "interpretive schemes of differentiation," which in Robinson's language is the production of difference. I do not use such language precisely because I do not treat the development of racial regimes and hierarchy as

another instance in a particular mode of production, but a combination of material realities and political reactions to maintain a dominant political, economic, and social order that is often shifting—much like capitalism itself, except it involves more than capitalism.

Referring to the Americas specifically, I wrote that “Once independent, most nation-states devised federal laws to limit (when not prohibiting completely) formerly enslaved populations and their descendants (Columbia, the United States, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil among them) from participating in civil and political society as citizens with suffrage and property rights...” (79). These restrictions amounted to racial regimes deployed during moments of crisis and national insecurity, what Gramsci would call a conjunctural moment, when white creole elites considered themselves most vulnerable economically and politically. My point here is that political explanations of how capitalists—as well as monarchs, presidents, bishops, prime ministers and other members of dominant groups—respond to their potential loss of power when confronted with the rise of one or more marginalized populations who live amongst them can be just as important, and in some instances more relevant, for explaining how dominant groups shift and displace the terrain of contestation over those very economic and material conditions that Prof. Robinson wants to explain as the new global capitalism.

Where I differ fundamentally with what Prof. Robinson poses as a counter-argument is that racial and other forms of hierarchy presented as difference are not merely coincident with capitalist relations of production. If that were the case, how would we make sense of the persistent anti-Semitism across the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, the former being what Lenin characterized as a backward society that in fact had a small proletariat, and the latter, a purported socialist republic that for most of its existence had a totalitarian, paranoid core? How should we account for the history of racisms in socialist countries like Cuba or the former East Germany? Should we attribute all of these racisms to capitalism as well? To conclude, I share Robinson’s desire to further explore the relationship between politics and economics, but in my response, I have tried to demonstrate and complicate his understanding of the relation between the two. Conflicts between labor and capital are not the only the source of political or economic inequalities.

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### Robinson’s Response to Hanchard

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I appreciate Professor Michael Hanchard's thoughtful review of my book, *Into the Tempest*. After summarizing the work he raises a number of concerns. Some of these concerns are matters of great significance for critical scholarly and political debate. At the same time, however, in much of his critique Professor Hanchard seems to be grasping at strawmen. Given space limitations, here I will amalgamate his varied concerns into four that stand out: 1) the absence of an analysis of political variation among members of the transnational capitalist class (TCC), and by extension, what he claims is my economic determinism in the analysis of the TCC, and more generally, in analysis of the social and political fabric in global society; 2) my disparaging of post-modernism; 3) my 'Third International' thinking with regard to resistance around the world to global capitalism; and, 4) what he claims is my lack of attention to the role of the transatlantic slave trade in producing the Industrial Revolution.

First, Hanchard says that if the TCC might be uniform in its economic objectives and interests, "class interest alone cannot account for the emergence of neo-fascism." He goes on to attribute to me the view that the "economic objectives of capitalism almost always determine politics," and claims that I fail to take into account regional divergences, politics and ideologies. I most certainly *do* defend historical materialism as methodology. But to claim that this methodology amounts to 'economic determinism' is to misrepresent it beyond recognition. In the first instance, I do not argue that the TCC is an internally unified group. To the contrary, I stress, "Fierce competition among oligopolist clusters, conflicting pressures, and differences over the tactics and strategy of maintaining class domination and addressing the crises and contradictions of global capitalism make any real internal unity in the global ruling class impossible. In fact, at every which way, the TCC is wracked by conflicts that swirl around at every level" (70).

In the second instance, contrary to Hanchard's notion that for me politics is the one-sided outcome of TCC class interests, my work makes clear that politics are driven by contradictions and the clash of social forces in complex mediations between the political, the economic, and the cultural-ideological. Far from a claim that the economic interests of the TCC explains neo-fascism, I affirm that 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism is a response to the legitimacy crisis of the state that involves a triangulation of transnational capital with reactionary and repressive political power in the state and the mobilization of fascist social and political forces in civil society:

Twenty-first century fascist projects seek to organize a mass base among historically privileged sectors of the global working class, such as white workers in the Global North and middle layers in the Global South, that are experiencing heightened insecurity and the specter of downward mobility. As with its 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessor, the project hinges on the psychosocial mechanism of displacing mass fear and anxiety at a time of acute capitalist crisis towards

scapegoated communities, such as immigrant workers, Muslims and refugees in the United States and Europe. Far-right forces do so through a discursive repertoire of xenophobia, mystifying ideologies that involve race/culture supremacy, an idealized and mythical past, millennialism, and a militaristic and masculinist culture that normalizes, even glamorizes war, social violence and domination (199).

Second, Hanchard fails to observe that I don't discuss the post-structural philosophers who he references (Foucault, Derrida, Nancy, Jameson) because that is not my concern. What I reject is *post-modern politics*, about which I have this to say:

The intellectual elite turned [in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century] to a post-modernism that celebrated a world of "differences" and endless fragmentation, out of which came a new identity politics - *not* to be confused with struggles against the particular forms of oppression and exploitation that different groups face – in which capitalism became "just another" among the multi-plicity of oppressive systems. These post-modern narratives alienated a whole generation of young people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries from embracing a desperately needed Marxist critique of capitalism at the moment of its globalization. The best identity politics can aspire to are symbolic vindication, diversity (often meaning diversity in the ruling bloc), non-discrimination in the dominant social institutions and equitable inclusion and representation *within* global capitalism (203).

Third, it is not really clear to me what Hanchard means by my 'Third International' thinking. I gather he means that I stress the shared objective interest of the vast majority of humanity in opposing global capitalism. On this, I am most certainly guilty as charged! Hanchard goes on to insinuate that in underscoring this shared interest, I overlook the heterogeneity and internal stratification within this oppressed and exploited humanity. But do I? In fact, throughout the book I stress such stratification and inequality. In the very first chapter I state (and then further elaborate in subsequent chapters) that transnational capital does not confront 'homogenous working classes' but ones that are historically stratified and segmented along racial, ethnic and gender lines. In the North, for instance, labor of color, drawn originally, and often by force, from the periphery to the core as menial labor, is disproportionately excluded from strategic economic sectors, relegated to the ranks of the growing army of 'supernumeraries,' made the most vulnerable sectors in a racially-segmented labor market which is becoming *more*, not less, rigid under globalization, and subject to a rising tide of racism, including the dismantling of affirmative action programs and repressive state measures against immigrant labor pools. Although globalizing processes are undermining the existence of pre-capitalist classes, they are also intensifying stratification among labor, often along racial/ethnic lines, in both North and South. Uncertain survival and insecurities posed by global capitalism induces diverse forms of fundamentalisms, localisms, nationalisms, and racial and ethnic conflict (23).

So what exactly is Hanchard's concern? It seems his underlying objection is a political one: that I should not grapple politically with how the global working and popular classes could be brought together in common struggle around an emancipatory project *despite* their differences. I most certainly *do* condemn the rejection of unified struggle in the name of 'difference' that is at the core of a post-modern politics that celebrates fragmentation and for which 'difference' is *only of a certain kind of difference, generally postulated as an essentialized identity*.

Finally, Hanchard is most assuredly correct in identifying the centrality of the transatlantic slave trade to the Industrial Revolution. But I am perplexed at why he sees this as pertaining to a review of my book, because at no point in it to I set out to explain or debate the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s. That is simply not the focus of any part of the book. As the subtitle suggests (the 'new global capitalism'), the concern is in exploring and explaining the epoch of world capitalist history that begins in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.