Racial capitalism
and South Africa's changing race-class articulations

By Sam Ashman

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Apartheid was defeated by the liberation struggle and dispatched to the lower reaches of hell. But what about "racial capitalism"? SAM ASHMAN reflects on how this rallying theme is used across the world today. Few of those using the slogan now are aware it was first developed amongst Marxist scholars and historians in South Africa in the 1970s. Are there grounds to re-interpret the concept to explain South Africa today?

The resurgence of a term

According to the *New York Times*, between 15 million and 26 million people took part in the protests against the murder of George Floyd in 2020 – and that was during Covid-19. That scale makes these Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests (to use an umbrella term) the biggest movement in the history of the US, according to some at least. These protests saw, amongst other things, the removal of statues of slave owners both in the US and beyond. The resonances with the Rhodes Must Fall issue in South Africa are clear, though Rhodes seems unlikely to fall from the wall of Oriel College, Oxford. Alongside this movement, there has been a resurgence in the use of, and debate around, the term "racial capitalism." Whilst this pre-dates George Floyd's murder, the emergence of BLM has propelled the term to the forefront of left debate, particularly in the US.

The term racial capitalism has roots in South Africa's race-class debates (Legassick and Hemson, 1976), even if its use has waned somewhat in South Africa – though it may be making a comeback under the impetus of US debates, and as we grapple with South Africa's seemingly enduring legacies and ongoing realities (for recent discussions see Mabasa, 2021; Motala

and Vally, 2021; Phiri, 2021). South Africa's past debates remain important, both historically and for understanding the country's present (Bond, 2011; Friedman, 2015). In these debates many have argued rightly for the need to avoid both class reductionism and race essentialism, and instead to look at race-class articulations, and how these change over time. This article argues that the racial capitalism literature can help us chart this course by pointing to race/class simultaneity (Roediger, 2017) and race/class contingency (Hall, 1980; Magubane, 2001; Wolpe, 1988), but that we also need particularistic understandings of racial capitalism in time and space. It argues that the legacy of South Africa's forced labour system remains centrally important for understanding South Africa's specific form of racial capitalism, and that this forced labour system needs to be understood in the context of the ways that South Africa was embedded in the combined and uneven development of the world economy at the end of the 19th century and for most of the 20th century. The continued, if changing, uneven and combined development of the world system continues to condition race-class articulations.[1]

Race, class, and labour

A central theme of the racial capitalism literature is that capitalism is imbued with racial distinctions from the start. US historian Walter Johnson (2020) has defined racial capitalism as the "dialectical relationship between capitalist exploitation and racial domination". Much of the work and discussion about racial capitalism reaches back into what Cedric Robinson (1983) in *Black Marxism* – his influential, but uneven work – calls the black radical tradition, earlier work connecting capitalism and racism, particularly that of W. E. B. Du Bois (1935), and also work that puts the role of women centre stage in racialised regimes of accumulation and reproduction (Hudson, 2018). Du Bois roots his understanding of racial capitalism in the history of slavery and the central role played by black labour in the construction of modern capitalism: "Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose in both Europe and America."

Racial capitalism as a term therefore places the relationship between capitalism as a system and racism centre stage. Race, its construction and deployment, is not outside the logic of capital. For Bhattacharaya (2018), capitalist accumulation critically rests on and requires inequality, not least profound differences of economic wealth and power, and racism is a major means of ensuring this, drawing on and remaking old differences, and creating new ones. Conceptions of race, and processes of race-making, are entangled in the changing history of capitalist accumulation and the world system, the racial hierarchies of colonialism and imperialism, the expropriation and exploitation of labour and populations deemed to be racially inferior, and the creation of racialised relative surplus populations (Bernards and Soederberg, 2020; Fraser, 2016).

Themes relating to biopolitics are also raised (Rose 2008) and issues around who lives and who dies, who controls the right to life, and how capital's power depends on relatively tight control over labouring bodies. Of note is how Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) has defined racism in the US. Moving away from systematic or structural discrimination understandings, she defines racism in relation to death: racism is "the state sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." This resonates with Achille Mbembé's (2003) work on necropolitics, which involves more than the right to kill, but the right to expose other people to death, and regimes which systematically reduce people to precarious conditions of life. Mbembé discusses this in relation to the plantation, the colony, apartheid and Palestine. Now, with climate change, capital seems untethered from planetary welfare, posing questions about the future of life.

Kundnani (2020) suggests that the term racial capitalism is attractive precisely because it "promises a way to close the race-class gap"; it points to the race-class simultaneity emphasised by Roediger (2017); it doesn't abstract race from capitalism and the foundations of wealth, power and privilege, but neither in this literature are classes imagined in some "pure" imaginary form. They are raced and gendered and sexed. As Robin D G Kelly (2021) puts it, traditional Marxists tend to argue that race is real but, "it sort of gets in the way of what's really the root of oppression", whilst Afro-pessimists see "the whole structure of Western civilization as based on anti-Blackness and anti-Blackness alone".

Stuart Hall's contributions about the nature of race-class articulations (e.g. 1980) are of lasting relevance, have been expertly excavated and deployed by Hart (e.g. 2004) and were in part in response to South African debates and Harold Wolpe's contributions in particular. Wolpe correctly thought about processes of racialisation and race-making in relation to capitalist development, not seeing them as in conflict, or racism as a hangover from the past. As the apartheid era brought a barrage of racist legislation and racist practices pervaded all areas of life, liberals challenged the white racism of the apartheid state by arguing that race domination was the irrational consequence of Afrikaner pre-modern ideology that would be erased with economic growth and the development of a "modern" market economy. In

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response to the liberal perspective, South African Marxists from the 1970s developed a distinctive analysis of the emergence and development of capitalism and apartheid that saw apartheid as conducive to capitalist development (discussed in the next section).

Wolpe has been widely criticised for the functionalism contained in his view of the relationship between capitalism and white domination – at least in his early formulations. He also tended to use articulation to mean linkage, as in his analysis of the articulation of modes of production. Hall disputed Wolpe's functionalism, arguing that capitalism and white domination ought not to be seen as an automatic relationship. Whilst modern racism plays a central role in the constitution and development of capitalism as a world system, racism and black identity is not "singular, essential, ahistorical, given or fixed, but multiple, conjunctural, and always a process."

Hall argued that articulation does not simply mean connectedness, but that it has a double meaning: it means both joining together and giving expression to, famously writing that, "Race is thus, also, the modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'." Actors are understood in situated spaces in which meanings, constraints and interests are in flux, articulated and re-articulated in a constant process of contestation. In specific historical situations, these articulations take particular forms, however conjunctural race-class articulations become real material facts. And as old linkages can be dissolved, new connections, re-articulations, are forged.

Magubane (2001: 3) periodises South African history's changing race-class relations and argues that "Racism is not simply a discourse, but a practice which produces certain knowledge of the colonized, and indeed, exploited, that makes the practice of domination, restructuring, and having an authority of the colonized natural". And, borrowing from Edward Said, he argues that ideas of racism and white supremacy need to be examined historically both genealogically (provenance, affiliation with other ideas, and with political institutions) and as practical accumulation (of power, land, ideological legitimacy). Although racism "cannot be simply correlated with the process of material exploitation, the discourse produces forms of knowledge which are of great utility in justifying the degradation of the exploited" (Magubane, 2001: 4). Money and commodification, as discussed below, are essential. That "great liberal thinker" John Locke, in *First Treatise of Government,* discusses the power of West Indian planters over their slaves, arguing that this power ("whether over slaves or horses") is something which "derives from his purchase." Money confers power over property, be it animals or subordinated humans (McNally, 2014).

In addition to the slave trade, there is the critical importance of racialised processes of primitive accumulation, tied to colonisation. Examining settler colonialism is instructive in understanding these processes – though across very different capitalisms in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (e.g. Coulthard, 2014). McNally (2020), for example, looking at the origins of racial capitalism in the US, argues that it is to be found in the conjunction of plantation slavery and indigenous dispossession, enshrined in the classical liberalism of the founding fathers, as epitomised by Locke who saw communal land as "pre-rational" and "pre-civilisational"; "wild Indians do not know the virtues of enclosure".

Whilst these point to the homologous roots of different racialised regimes of accumulation, we must also be attentive to the differences. Much racial capitalism work is infused with what Paul Gilroy (1993) called the Black Atlantic. Yet there are immense differences across racialised regimes of accumulation and reproduction. I argue that the racial capitalism literature points to four factors, which play out differently in time and space: the specific expendability of black labour; the carceral treatment of black labour; the emergence of a "white labour »

problem;" and dominant if changing narratives which are simultaneously anti-radical and anti-black as they attempt to divide off the white working class from black labour. Burden-Stelly (2021) discusses the last of these in relation to modern US racial capitalism, where she argues that US dynamics are quite specific, but nevertheless anti-blackness and anti-radicalism are mutually constitutive "legitimating architectures".

Slavery, dispossession and proletarianisation are part of the commodity economic logic of emerging capitalism in which money plays a key role. McNally (2020) argues persuasively that changing monetary forms have long been attached to labouring bodies, and to the political economy of life and death. The ancient markets of the Roman Empire, represented in the silver Athenian owl coin, expanded via warfare because it was a crucial means of surplus appropriation, and this plunder also entailed slavery and the establishment of armies which were paid – perhaps the first modern wage system – as well as 30,000 slaves who worked the Athenian silver mines. From the 1690s onwards, the development of state finance and the constitution of bourgeois money took place under the aegis of the emerging Bank of England, which loaned money for war and slaving to the English government and through which came the emergence of paper notes, literally IOUs. This monetary form and system were the financial basis for the British Empire and established Britain as both the world's largest colonial power and, by the middle of the 18th century, the largest slave trader. The Gold Standard supported this global system. The US Federal Reserve, formed in 1913, eventually took over as the dominant institution and the dollar as the dominant currency, with the dollar tied to gold until the collapse of the Bretton Woods System. This collapse laid the basis for the dollar to act as world money, and for the emergence of the financialised capitalism of today.

South Africa's development is profoundly shaped by late 19th century imperialism (though conquest predates mining). South Africa's transformation, as we know, is tied to the powerful demand for gold in a specific period of capitalism, the world economy, and its monetary system. Whilst this period may be when the slave trade has been formally abolished, it is still one where the combined and uneven development of the world economy links together demand for gold to support the gold standard, with the emergence and development of unique form of labour supply in the form of the Migrant Labour System (MLS). Indeed Legassick and Hemson (1976) were seeking to understand a particular form of capitalist development in time and place – albeit one critically shaped by global conditions.

Gold and forced labour

The origins of the term racial capitalism, it seems generally agreed, lie in the debates about South African development and the relationship between racism and capitalism and the widely discussed revisionist school of South African historiography. Legassick and Hemson's 1976 pamphlet for the British Anti-Apartheid movement, "Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa", stressed the central role of mining capital, and the overseas investment embodied in it, and was deployed to support the sanctions campaign against the apartheid state, particularly given the centrality of British imperial involvement. In challenging liberalism, these South African Marxists and others argued that to understand race and class in South Africa, and racial capitalism, it was essential to go further back than the 1948 victory of the National Party. Firstly, it was necessary to examine the role played by imperial mining capital once minerals were discovered, and the establishment over time of the MLS to supply the great need for labour to the mines. Secondly, there was the role of mining capital in the subsequent establishment and construction of the Union of South Africa from 1910 onwards, and the ways in which the policy of segregation during this time lay the foundations on which the apartheid regime was built. Mining and agrarian capital reached a series of compromises which would have lasting consequences, "allocating" African labour to both the mines and the farms.

Segregation was designed to ensure that African labour would continue to engage in household production (though in small and declining amounts) in the reserves but not to such an extent that wage labour could be avoided, and not to such an extent that produce could compete on the market with white capitalist farmers. The social costs of the reproduction of labour were transferred to the Bantustans. African labour was not to remain in areas of their work but was legally required to return to the reserves when their contract expired. Once the Chamber of Mines (now re-branded as the non-racial "Minerals Council of South Africa") began to recruit labour on a monopsony basis, combining in order to keep wage costs down, a free labour market was blocked further in order to prevent Africans moving to better paying mines. The system also permitted some classic divide and rule, as "troublesome African labour organisers are expelled to the Bantustans, where the black mark on their computerised cards will ensure they never get a job again" (Legassick and Hemson, 1976).

As the economy developed around a minerals and energy core, with weak secondary manufacturing, this highly lopsided industrial structure served capital and the white working class, ensured African labour was necessary, and rendered many Africans surplus to the immediate needs of capital

> **... capitalist accumulation critically rests on inequality ... and racism is a major means of ensuring this ...**

accumulation, a highly racialised "relative surplus population," which today is increasing not diminishing within the global political economy of capitalism (Bernards and Soederberg, 2020). And so the term racial capitalism, probably only coined by the end of the 1970s, came to sum up the thrust of the radical critique of apartheid (Nash, 1999). The idea is also present, if not the term initially, in the work of Neville Alexander (1983). These and other critics of colonial capitalism in southern Africa developed a powerful insight: that migrant labour was part of a unitary, if contingent, system of capitalist development (see First, 1983).

Discussing South Africa's forced labour system she makes a number of theoretical claims. I argue that three things follow:

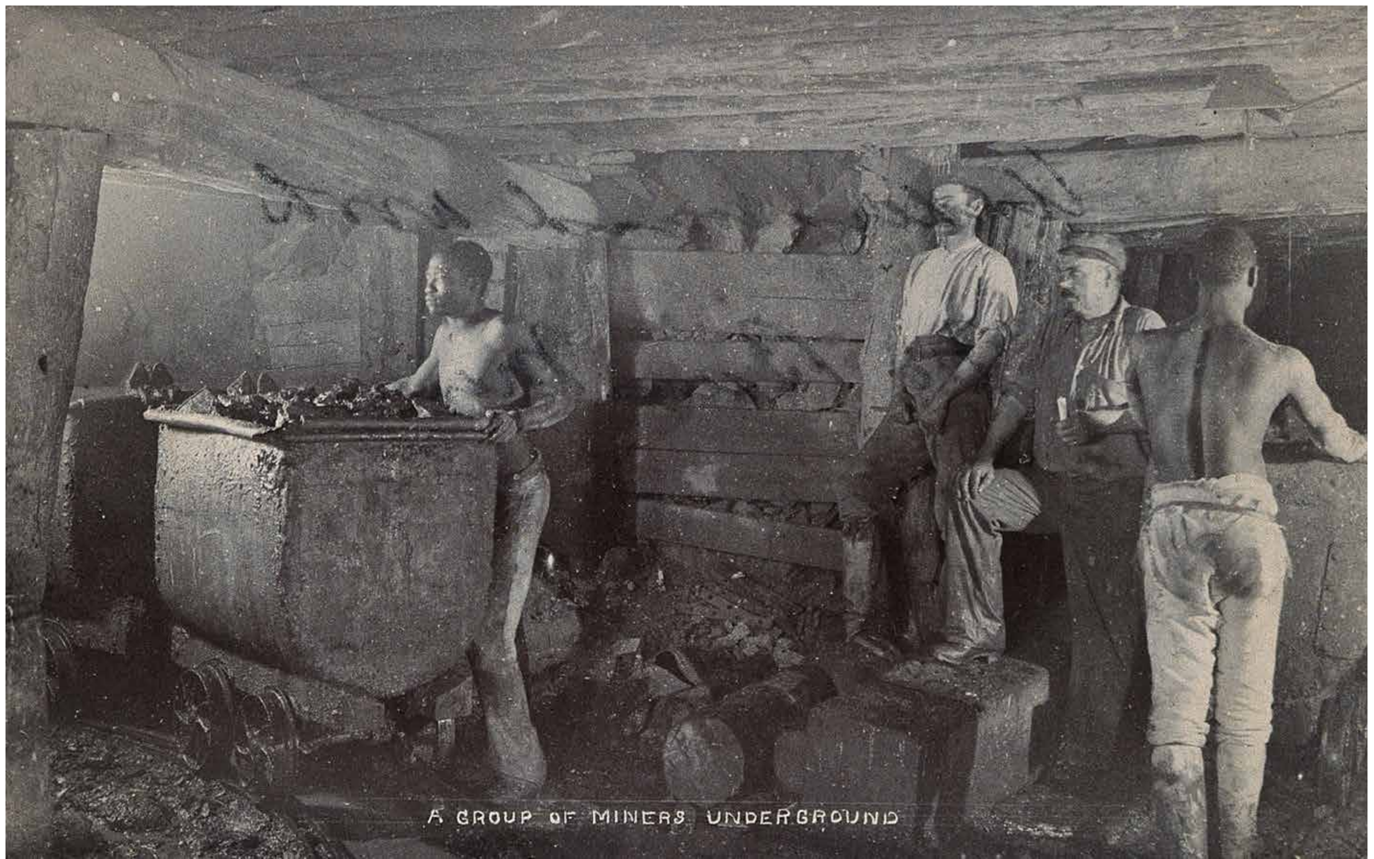
Firstly, one must throw out linear or stadial readings of capitalist development, and of primitive accumulation. The linear reading suggests that the development of capitalism means the violent expropriation of the peasantry from the soil, through enclosures, a process which establishes free wage labour and capital accumulation, and from which follows a concomitant decline in violence, or extra-economic coercion, and the development of a settled, urbanised proletariat (Nicholls, 2015). Instead in South Africa's case, the black majority were certainly violently dispossessed of land through war and conquest, but extra economic coercion continues, as the emergence of a "free" labour market for African labour is blocked.

Secondly, and following from this, a binary between free and unfree labour is not helpful (Banajee, 2003; McNally, 2014), with labour regimes better placed on a continuum. Segregation and apartheid's racial domination involved the denial of citizenship to the black majority as part of a wholesale system of control over access to land, work and movement.

Thirdly, we need to reject Eurocentric understandings of social reproduction. The MLS drew from across empires, challenged "standard" timeframes of work and labour contracts, of living arrangements, and changed the roles of women and households. The place of social reproduction for male workers was the compound for large parts of the year, with women, children and the young in the reserves. The burden this placed on African women was certainly underestimated in the first wave of the debates.

Apartheid, of course, tried, and ultimately failed, to generalise a key element of the MLS. This was to reduce all workers in most of South Africa to "temporary sojourners" without rights. But as manufacturing developed, however skewed and weak, a more settled and skilled African workforce emerged, whatever the law officially had to say. This workforce would go on to produce the mass strikes of 1973 and the trade union movement, which later, along with school students' resistance and the urban risings and strikes of the mid-1980s, eventually brought apartheid to its end. This was the grain of truth in the liberals' argument. Wolpe's (1988) later reformulation of his view reflected this as he emphasised not the functional relationship between capitalism and apartheid alone (certainly true for mining and agrarian capital), but historical contingency and change, arguing in a Hall-esque way that:

> The supposition that capitalism in South Africa, in its very constitution, requires the racial order which is forever necessary for its development and reproduction, precludes the search for and analysis of the uneven, asymmetrical, contradictory and unstable relations between capitalism and race. ➤



> **The term "racial capitalism" originated in the debates of the so-called revisionist school about South African development in the 1970s.**

Wolpe (1988) came to emphasise the contingency between capitalism and the racial order, seeing it as the outcome of struggles between contending classes and groups, a relationship "simultaneously functional and contradictory", advancing some class interests, whilst undermining the interests of others. "Which pole of the relationship will be dominant depends on the historically specific conditions."

Racial capitalism in South Africa today

Some on the left concluded, mistakenly, that as capitalism and apartheid were inseparable, a negotiated settlement was not possible. Now lack of progressive change since 1994 leads some today to conclude that, really, apartheid is not over, or that it has been "privatised" (Mpofu-Walsh, 2021). The more accurate perspective is that, with a negotiated settlement, segregation and apartheid's material structuring of the economy would need more than the vote and legal equality to bring the change necessary for a more equal and just future. Meaningful political equality and democracy require the social and economic resources essential for human flourishing. As Du Bois wrote about the aftermath of the US civil war, radical reconstruction was doomed without a commitment to "real economic emancipation." Martin Luther King (1967: 5-6) made the same point about the Civil Rights Movement: "The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap. ... Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters."

But several things combine. One is the structuring of the past, or the legacy; another is the change brought about by the decisions of the present, which compound the legacies of the past. Democratic South Africa has joined the neoliberal, financialised, (unevenly) globalised world system.

Global restructuring since the 1970s has produced centralisation of corporate power, the concentration of wealth, jobless and frequently credit led growth, and an intensifying climate crisis. As global production has restructured, producing global value chains, costs are often loaded onto "peripheral" workers, with wages frequently squeezed below the costs of social reproduction. This has entrenched a global racial hierarchy, whilst allowing for some to join the top ranks.

In South Africa, a small black elite has emerged, and the black middle class has grown. But the ANC has presided over widening inequality, increasing unemployment, precariousness for those in work, a gathering climate crisis and growing levels of corruption. The ANC's own self-imposed economic framework has helped develop the financialisation of the economy, which has undermined already skewed productive structures. The legacy of migrant labour and the apartheid Group Areas Act remains apparent, with apartheid spatial economic geographies marking urban and rural spaces alike. We face intersecting crises across many areas of society. The experience of race and racism remain complex, with race-class dynamics articulating with language, culture, ethnicity and nationality (Phadi, 2021). Few open defenders of apartheid remain, but racist ideas in many forms are entrenched. The system continues to shape black experiences as race and class are reproduced. The uneven and combined development of the world system, and South Africa's position within it, conditions contemporary race-class articulations and the lived experience of racial capitalism in South Africa today. Hall's insistence that black identity is not singular and essential, but multiple, conjunctural and always a process is borne out, once again, with all its South African characteristics.

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ENDNOTES

1. There are other strands of the racial capitalism literature which posit an essential, rather than an historical, relationship between racism and capitalism. Reasons of space mean these are not discussed at the length they deserve. NA