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How is capitalism racial? Fanon, critical theory and the fetish of antiblackness

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ABSTRACT
I outline a proposal for an analysis of antiblackness grounded by the Marxist critique of the fetishistic forms of capitalist society. Traditionally, Marxist accounts of antiblackness turn, not to Marx’s theory of fetishism, but rather to dynamics of class formation under capitalist development, and hence to the ways that class formation motivates types of racism, including antiblackness. But accounts like these do not explain the distinctive features of modern antiblackness. Turning to the Marxist critique of fetishism, I argue for an account of the distinctive features of modern antiblackness, by bringing into conversation: (a) comments by Fanon on negrophobia and the relations between antiblackness and antisemitism; and (b) work by Postone on the fetishistic nature of modern antisemitism. I argue that antisemitism and antiblackness afford a pair of devices for falsely concretising the structure of alienation that produces the apparent opposition of labour and capital. These devices present the pathologies of modernity as stemming not from capitalist social relations but rather from the apparently essential powers of antisocial races: the Jew of antisemitism, caricatured as cunning will without productive bodily expenditure, and the Black of antiblack racism, caricatured as biological energy that lacks self-governing will.

KEYWORDS
Racial capitalism; fetishism; antiblackness; antisemitism

Starting in the fifteenth-century Atlantic space (Wynter 1995; Trouillot 2003), the modern world has been built around antiblackness, as a vector of distinction, exploitation, and oppression. Few other kinds of hatred have been so broadly consequential. And few have grounded so much collective violence, from the Middle Passage to the Belgian Congo – and perhaps even on to the Holocaust, which as Arendt (1951), Cesaire (2001) and others have shown can, in a certain light, be seen as the repatriation of genocidal racism from the colonies.

How, then, is this pervasive antiblackness to be accounted for as a feature of global modernity? In the Marxist tradition, accounts of the large-scale salience of modern antiblackness have in many cases turned on its relationship with processes of class formation. In South Africa, for instance, some of the most compelling accounts of the origin and structure of apartheid look to the role of a colonial antiblackness in the creation of a form of racial capitalism where race and class overlap to the point of identity...
(Alexander 1979; Wolpe 1986). Such accounts are potentially open to the criticism, however, that, in relating antiblackness to the national formation of classes, they might not account for distinctive features of modern antiblackness that transcend the issue of class, but are nonetheless central to the dynamics of a racialised global modernity. Before it can serve as a cover or as a useful tool for projects of capitalist class formation, antiblackness has to be constituted as such, with the particular caricatures, fears, and hatreds that it involves.

Beyond the Marxist tradition, theorists of race have often therefore looked elsewhere than to capitalist development to identify a historical frame for the rise of antiblackness. Sylvia Wynter, for instance, examines antiblackness through its emergence as part of the Western imagination of the figure of Man and its others (Wynter 1995; Erasmus 2017, 54ff). Wynter clearly contrasts this explanation to Marxist accounts of race that refer to dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. She insists that antiblackness is based on a level of interpellation prior to the economy as such—a level she identifies as the “mode of socialization” that gives rise to specific identities in the realm of the symbolic (Wynter n.d.; Erasmus n.d.).

In the proposal that I outline here, it is agreed that antiblackness has specific features that cannot be explained in terms of class formation. But in Marxist thought, class is not the only or even the most fundamental dimension to capitalist society (Postone 1993). Class is itself a product of the organisation of practices around the growth of capital: what Marx ((1867) 1976) called valorisation. The valorisation of capital is the outcome of an extraordinarily complex social process, and that complex social process unfolds in a way that obscures its social conditions, and thus its own social nature. This is of course the cornerstone of the Marxist theory of fetishism, in which forms that are socially constituted appear not to be as such, but rather as expressions of the essential nature of elements in the process of valorisation: most famously, as powers that are intrinsic to commodities such as money (Marx (1867) 1976, 163–176). It is out of this theory of fetishism, not from the theory of class, that I aim to propose the outlines of a Marxist account of modern antiblackness.

My starting point is a discussion of the concept of racial capitalism. This is a South African concept originally, although it has travelled abroad as well, especially in the work of Cedric Robinson on race and accumulation in the Americas (see, e.g., Robinson 1983). What I find compelling in it is the sense that the development of race is not parallel, or extraneous to, but in fact somehow internal to the development of capitalism, and in ways that cannot simply be reduced to class. In the South African case, Neville Alexander’s work is the most iconic version of this insight (see, e.g., Alexander 1979; 2003).

But there is something I find unsatisfactory, at least not yet complete, in the way this idea has been formulated. Although theories of racial capitalism avoid reducing race to class, they nonetheless approach capitalism primarily as a structure of classes, and therefore still treat the problem of racial capitalism as a problem of relating race and class, albeit nonreductively. This is still a trap. In response, I turn to Fanon (1986) because he gives a particularly penetrating analysis of modern antiblackness. For Fanon, antiblackness is fixated on the brutishness of the black body. It reduces an embodied subjectivity to animal biology, a feral bodily power that can be socialised only by taming it. I take this as my framing account of the content of antiblack racism as modern ideology on a global scale. Fanon himself is clear that the economic relations of
slavery, colonialism, and capitalism are the deeper historical platform for antiblackness. He treats it as a historically grounded phenomenon, not a transhistorical one. But he does not work out in detail how we should comprehend that grounding. So how might we close the circle, grasping the specificity of antiblackness while grounding it determinately in a general account of capitalist society?

For a model, I turn to Postone (2003) on the connection between antisemitism and the overall structure of capitalist social relations. Postone shows us that modern antisemitism is not just an irrational or atavistic prejudice. Antisemitism is especially closely fitted, instead, to the way that valorisation appears, in fetishistic form, as a power intrinsic to money, controlling the concrete world from a position of invisible but all-encompassing potency. Postone takes this as the reason for asserting not just the deepness of the relationship between capitalist development and modern antisemitism, but also as grounds for insisting on the uniqueness of antisemitism as a modern species of hate. Is there, therefore, any way we can use his account to think through other varieties of racism, and especially the antiblack racism that also seems pervasive in modernity?

To show we can, I take us back to Fanon, to a passage juxtaposing antiblackness to antisemitism (1986, 124–127). Although he does not say as much explicitly, it seems clear from Fanon’s account that he is interested in how these two form a dialectical pair. What unites them is not their identity but their polarity. Without rehearsing the argument in detail in advance, the point I derive from this insight is my response to the incompleteness of the thesis of racial capitalism.

Through a dialectical synthesis of insights from Fanon and Postone, we are able to advance our understanding of racial capitalism as a global form, by showing how the pair of antisemitism and antiblack racism find their political potency in their ability to offer racial proxies for the basic structure of capitalist social relations. Following Postone (1993), I take that basic structure not to be class but rather the alienated structure of social action, under its domination by the dictate to valorise capital. This structure of alienation appears in a polarised pair of fetishes, representing abstract value and abstract labour not as two sides of the same coin, which they are, but as two separate kinds of powers. On the one hand, a denatured, abstract will that has no body, but controls other lives through hidden operations. On the other hand, a brute biological force that lacks self-governing will and is thus in need of socialising violence to make it useful to civil society. The ideological pair of antisemitism and antiblack racism gives us human proxies for these fetish forms, casting the pathologies of modernity not as the outcome of a structure of alienation, but as the powers of antisocial racial types. That is how antiblack racism is such a recurrent figment of global modernity.

**Racial capitalism**

First then, I will look at racial capitalism. The phrasing seeks a proper name for the structures of South African society as they emerged in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. Discussion of it has unfolded mostly in left intellectual circles, and in small political movements to the left of the alliance led by the African National Congress. That is important because the idea of racial capitalism is a double critique: not just of the society it names, but also of the account of that society provided by Congress theorists, especially in the Communist Party (see, e.g., SACP 1989). This is not the place for
a history of South African socialisms, but let us recall what the theory of racial capitalism
endeavours to improve upon. Its target is the theory of “colonialism of a special type”: colonialism that is special because internal, not imperial. This Congress approach assigns no less importance to either racism or capitalism, but somewhat paradoxically, it holds them together by keeping them apart. It holds them together in theory, that is, by distancing them in time, in order to assign their political salience to different historical periods. Race is at issue first in anticolonial struggles for national democracy. Capital is only put at issue when that stage of struggle is over.

This way of arranging the problem has been arguably a response to certain constraints, such as conforming to Soviet orthodoxy during the twentieth century and also to explain why socialists should harness working class movements to a struggle for the redistribution of property but not the abolition of the property forms of capitalism as such. As much as it has been guided by political expediencies, it has had less to do with a realistic appraisal of South Africa, where racism has hardened and deepened over time, exactly as a consequence of the development of capitalist society. As critics from the left have insisted, this makes it hard to sustain the idea that opposing capital has to wait until racism is otherwise defeated. That insight was what motivated Neville Alexander and others to turn to an alternative formulation.

In One Azania, One Nation, for instance, Alexander (1979) lays out why he thinks racism so central to the development of capital in what became the society of apartheid. A cautionary note is necessary here. Alexander is the theorist most closely associated with notions of racial capitalism, both by convention and in his writing, but in this particular text he tries to replace the notion of race with that of “colour-caste.” His reasoning is that the mere existence of racism does not allow us to talk about race as if it were a reality, even one that is socially constructed. Still, he is forced by his own inquiry to acknowledge that the historical reality of racism has divided the South African population into pseudo-biological, unequal groupings, which he calls colour-castes rather than races in order to signal his unwillingness to talk in the language of racism. As much as we might sympathise with the impulse – and as much as it is true that we run the risk of reproducing racial categories in our critique of the inequalities they generate – there is ultimately little if any daylight between these colour-castes and the categories that a constructivist account would label racial, without thereby granting more than a contingently historical reality to the phenomenon. So I stay here with the phrasing Alexander is best known for: racial capitalism.

As to why South African capitalism is racial, Alexander’s argument turns to colonial history. The pre-history of the development of capital in the subcontinent was a form of settler colonialism that created social relations of inequality under the guise of racial differences. In the conditions under which capitalism grew later, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, accumulation would not have been sustainable if the society was remade in the way metropolitan Europe, especially England, had been remade during that century. Despite the expertise required for mining (the engine for the development of capital in South Africa), the accumulation of profit was only possible with a supply of very cheap labour. The response was to invoke the pre-existing system of racial castes to create a radically bifurcated working class. On one hand, a white labour aristocracy with skill and relative privilege, based above all on a wage that guaranteed a “civilised” life. On the other hand, a black working class that was not one. It was not one
because, at least in its origins, it was not completely dispossessed of land as a means of production. It was dispossessed enough to force it into the labour market. But even the marginal sustenance of its households as autonomous rural producers meant it was possible to pay these workers less than the costs of the reproduction of labour-power. At the same time, the racial basis of this subjected every African household equally to the dynamic. Despite the vaunted autonomy of the “native” reserves, no African bourgeoisie was to emerge there, only those who were more or less directly dependent on migrant labour. What elsewhere appeared quite obviously as class was thus, in South Africa, constructed as and by race. The national bourgeoisie was also white, and only by means of racism was it possible to constitute a form of proletarian labour that made the accumulation of capital feasible. Racism being the enabling condition for capitalism in South Africa, Alexander claimed that a strategy of national-democratic but not anticapitalist liberation was unrealistic. Strategy aside, this was also the only thesis that took cognisance of the intrinsic role of race in the development of capital in South Africa.

Two related questions follow. The first concerns Alexander’s claim that the racial dimension of capitalism is based upon the contingencies of the South African example. The second concerns his argument for the appearance of class as race. Let me tackle them separately. For a start, it is no accident that a South African would have generated the theory of racial capitalism, for in few places has it been so clearly the case that race facilitates the accumulation of capital. But the idea of racial capitalism has also inspired insights into accumulation elsewhere. Robinson is the example I have in mind. In Robinson’s work, racial capitalism acquires a much more ambitious, wide-reaching salience. Working from this South African idea, Robinson suggested that it opens onto a much more global account. He argues that this allows us to see an aspect of the development of capital that traditional Marxist theory has ignored because of its emphasis on class as rendered in Marx and Engels’s ((1848) 1998) work on the English case. Robinson (1983) therefore shows us how specifically racial modes of exploitation ground a tradition of black radicalism that runs alongside and often in opposition to orthodox Marxism.

There is not space here to give flesh to this genealogy, but one point is crucial. What Robinson draws from the notion of racial capitalism is the claim that while race is fundamental to capitalism, it may not be identical to class in the way that concept is conventionally understood. That would imply that the theory of racial capitalism raises questions about the centrality of class to our understanding of capitalist society as such. Alexander does not seem to question class that way, but it makes sense that others have focused on the limits of class in explaining racial capitalism.

That takes us to the second question: how class appears as race. Wolpe is among the South African theorists who have considered this most carefully. Although he was a Communist, Wolpe resists official formulations of the theory of colonialism of a special type. It was a matter of deep interest to him that race and class appeared to coincide in the case of South Africa, and he did not accept the idea that these should refer political action to different phases of national history. Wolpe is also the theorist who inspired Alexander’s account of the role of the rural labour reserves, with the cheap labour that they facilitated, in scaffolding accumulation in what were otherwise hostile historical circumstances (Wolpe 1972). More of note for my purposes is his effort to
develop a Marxist account of the ways that class might also be race under certain historical conditions (see, e.g., Wolpe 1986).

For Wolpe, this is a matter of taking seriously the Marxist idea that social reality operates not in a flat space but at more or less deep or abstract and at more or less superficial or concrete levels. In Marx’s thought, the distinction of surface from depth is not a distinction between the illusory and the true, although it might be the case that surface forms remediate content from deeper levels in ways that render those deeper levels unrecognisable. Appearance or representation is a mode of translated reality here, not ungrounded untruth – something often forgotten when we encounter the Marxist concept of ideology (see White 2013a). In Wolpe’s view, the distinction of the abstract from the concrete is essential to the relation of class and race within South African society. Class, he suggests, is essential to the organisation of capitalist production. Only through the existence of proletarian labour is capitalist accumulation possible. But that abstract structure is necessarily mediated into the organisation of particular social formations – a formulation from Althusserian Marxism (Althusser and Balibar 2009). In South Africa, Wolpe argues, race is the concrete form in which class appears. If we hold in mind that appearance is not illusion, but mediation into particular contexts, this argument seems to specify theoretically what Alexander means when he calls racism the condition of possibility for capitalist development in South Africa. Racism, in other words, is the necessary condition for the appearance, in the concrete social reality of the South African case, of the abstract relation of capital to labour that is essential to the accumulation of value.

But what happens if we take both Wolpe’s and Robinson’s claims as vectors for the theory of racial capitalism? The first version of the problem is this: if race is the mode in which class appears in South Africa, why is it also the mode in which the operations of capitalism appear in a wider variety of geo-historical settings, in which “black” and “working class” overlap much less perfectly? Furthermore, nothing in Alexander’s account tells us why the specific dynamic of race is what appears in that variety of settings. Precisely because he does not want to give credence to the reality of race, Alexander is too quick, I think, to contain it in the legacies of South African colonialism. He treats it as a product of elite manipulations of a pre-existing form, where that form is useful for something that is external to it: the accumulation of capital through the formation of racial classes. But the fact that Cedric Robinson is able to extend the theory to many more historical examples implies there is something deeper at work. And I think we should take heed of Robinson’s argument that race is deeply related to the trajectory of capitalist accumulation globally, even where this does not involve a predominantly black proletariat, as in South Africa.

The example of the New World is particularly important. Much as there is a long-standing black working class in the Americas, and strands of thought associating black dignity with labour, the main way race and class have been articulated there is through the problem of drawing black people into the waged working class. Since emancipation, the issue facing capital in the Americas has been how to incorporate black people into the cycle of accumulation as “free” proletarian labour (Holt 1991; Marx (1867) 1976), 931–940). Black people have been portrayed within this context as the limit point of working-class identity, not as its appearance, and definitely not its apotheosis. Compare that to Fernanda Pinto de Almeida’s incisive insight (2014) that twentieth-century South
African mining photography made black skin into a fetish-form for the value of the gold removed from the earth by African labour. Contrarily, racism in the Americas has often depicted black people not as a labouring class but as a lazy one, recalcitrant and lacking self-control (see Carlyle 1853). Finishing the circle, there is the irony that the same claims about black laziness have been argued in South African racism, too, where black and proletarian are synonymous, in contrast to the New World situation.

So something is clearly inadequate in the efforts to explain racial ideology by grounding it in particular local trajectories of capitalist development. And the first part of what is missing is an account of the ideological specificity of modern antiblack racism. Here Fanon gives special insight. I draw especially on Black Skin, White Masks, his masterwork (1986) on racism in Europe and its colonies. Fanon’s most powerful claim is that antiblackness equates the black person with, to use his phrase, “the cycle of the biological” (1986, 124). The Black is cast not as having or even less as using a body, but actually as being one, in the animal sense of the term. An essentially biological body, driven by instincts that lie far beneath the domain of human action led by reason and by will. Lacking full human will, this black body is unmastered. It is hypersexual, violent, and a potent force that interrupts civil society. It thus inspires fear, and it can only be incorporated into ordinary social life if some kind of external mastery is exercised over its burgeoning.

Fanon’s account strikes one intuitively with its power, whether in South Africa or the Americas, in Europe, and across the modern world. Across its global instances, antiblack racism situates the black person as an untamed animal potency: a biological power that is dangerous and in need of violent mastery in order to make its powers into useful ones. This biological potency can take the form of fertility or of disease, of violence or sexual drive, of recalcitrance or extraordinary strength, but it has a singular nature: a feral vigour that threatens civilised society unless it is harnessed with dominating power, in which case it becomes a force of production.

Is it possible, then, to develop the idea of racial capitalism in a way that grants the ubiquity of this structure of antiblack racism, at the same time as it is true to its ideological specificity, and while it holds to a general account of the structure of capitalist society? That is the question I now want to tackle.

**Racism and capitalism**

My route into this is through Postone’s account of twentieth-century antisemitism (2003). Postone, as far as I know, is the only critical theorist who gives an account of a form of racism that addresses at once its specific ideological content and its historical grounding in global capitalist modernity. It makes sense that twentieth-century antisemitism would afford this kind of analysis. There are few events as historically particular as the Holocaust. If Postone is able to show how the specificity of modern antisemitism is related to the general structure of capitalist society, then he shows us something that no other theorist of racism and capitalism has accomplished.

Postone’s approach is to show how features of antisemitic discourse gain political purchase by offering partial, fetishised representations of the functioning of capital. Three things stand out. The first is that antisemitism represents Jews as agents possessing extraordinary social power. This in itself is remarkable: a racism that comprehends
its targets as possessors of control. The second is that antisemitism depicts this Jewish power as invisible. It operates through conspiracy, from behind the scenes, by manipulating the interventions of concrete representatives. The third is that this influence is unhealthy: Jewish power is a disease within the national body politic, parasitically twisting its dynamics to fulfil purposes that are foreign to its nature. In all these ways, for Postone, antisemitic imagery provides a potent symbol for the fetish form of capital. Not capital comprehended as a totality of complex social relationships that sustain accumulation, but capital as a fetishised congelation: as the apparent power of money, in particular – the power that money seemingly has to dissemble, to commensurate, to control the world from behind a hidden distance. In this fetishised appearance, money is the body of the abstract dimensions of capital, and antisemitic imagery makes the Jew into the racial body of money. Now Postone is clear that Western antisemitism has a long pre-capitalist history. It is precisely this past that makes possible the symbolic identification of Jews with money, even though modern finance has long replaced the peculiar roles of Jewish merchants in medieval European society (Bloch 1977). But just as money has changed in the course of becoming a moment of capital, so is the content of modern antisemitism different from its historical antecedents. Money becomes a concrete representation of the abstract nature of capitalist unfreedom – a fetish form that is concretised even further by antisemitism as the vital force of a race. Antisemitism thus acquires a special political function: it appears to be anticapitalism, and so a form of revolt against the corrupting power of money. Modern antisemitism has pseudo-emancipatory attractions and is thus especially dangerous as well as very recurrent.

For Postone, in short, the Jew of antisemitism is a symbol of the fetish form of capital. So what can we retool from this to the understanding of any other variety of racism, especially the antiblack racism that concerns us here? There appears to be a difficulty in doing so. Postone is very clear that he is not analysing racism in general. He is interested in the peculiar features of modern antisemitism, its differences from other kinds of hate, and he does not think a general account of racism can explain this. I think he is right, and my argument will not be that antiblack racism resembles antisemitism. What I will argue is the opposite. Antiblack racism is not the same as its antisemitic counterpart. To return to monetary metaphor, it is the opposite side of the coin. They are connected not in identity but rather as a dialectical pair.

Once again I am inspired by Fanon. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon (1986) is keenly attuned to the correlation of antisemitic and antiblack racisms. He tells of an Antillean mentor in Paris, who cautions him that when the French express hatred of Jews they are talking about him too (1986, 92). And he would have read Cesaire’s analysis (2001) of the Holocaust as a continuation of forms of racial violence that developed in the colonial world. But in one key passage, Fanon (1986, 124–127) pushes his reflections on this co-appearance in quite a different direction and notes that there are in fact important differences between the two kinds of hate.

In Fanon’s account of racial phobogenesis, both the Jew and the Black inspire terrible fear in the racist mind. But they do so very differently, and these differences produce different genres of violence:
The difference between the two attitudes is apparent. The Jew is attacked in his religious identity, in his history, in his race, in his relations with his ancestors and with his posterity; when one sterilizes a Jew, one cuts off the source; every time that a Jew is persecuted, it is the whole race that is persecuted in his person. But it is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked. It is as a concrete personality that he is lynched. It is as an actual being that he is a threat. The Jewish menace is replaced by the fear of the sexual potency of the Negro. (Fanon 1986, 125–126)

And:

When it is a question of the Jew, the problem is clear: He is suspect because he wants to own the wealth or take over the positions of power. But the Negro is fixated at the genital; or at any rate he has been fixated there. Two realms: the intellectual and the sexual. (Fanon 1986, 127)

For Fanon, antisemitism is the paranoid fear of a people engaged in conspiracies of will: antisemites are terrified by the imaginary capacity of Jewish people to exercise an invisible, untraceable intelligence. The violence that this calls forth aims to flush out and destroy an entire people, as a people, to surgically excise their racial will. Something different is happening in antiblack racism, he says. Blacks are feared not for hidden cunning, but in their visible bodies:

The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes on a new guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance. (Fanon 1986, 87)

The Black of antiblack racism is hated not as a member of a people but as a concrete bodily being. Unlike the Jew, the Black does not control others through the exercise of will. To be black is to be the opposite of control: an uncontrolled bodily energy. And the violence that this calls forth is a destruction of life in its concrete, corporeal, visible existence, rather than as the agent of a race. For Fanon, this is the key generic difference between the industrialised mass murder of the Holocaust and the ritualised destruction of the individual black body by a lynching mob.

Fanon does not explore the issue further, but it is clear from what he writes that he is interested in the way that antisemitic and antiblack racisms together form a strongly polarised pair. So strongly polarised, I would add, that this duality cannot be simply accidental. They are not just coincidental forms of hate in modern society. They are so specifically polarised that they seem to be systematically related.

That system, I now want to argue, is the same fetishistic structure Postone brings to bear in his work on antisemitism. In Postone’s account, the Jew of antisemitism is the human body of money, which in turn is the material form of one side to the relationship of capital: the abstraction of wealth as dematerialised value. But capital, as Postone (1993) reminds us clearly in his interpretation of Marx, is a dialectical process, not a one-dimensional thing (abstract or not). Most importantly, the other side to capital is labour. Indeed, they are the same thing in different appearances: both of them are moments in the manifestation of value.

Marx’s account ((1867) 1976)) of this value relation exceeds simple summarisation, but certain points can be rallied. Fundamental to his analysis is the structure of social action and coordination characteristic of capitalist society. In capitalist society, more and more of collective life is organised around the drive to grow capital. The means to this is the production of wealth, most proximately in the form of massed commodities. Wealth
as such is created in many ways, of course, but only through the expenditure of labour-power as labour-time does wealth accrue as value. Value is not material wealth as such. In crises of overproduction, an excess of material wealth can in fact be destructive to value. Value is an accumulation of labour-time, rather, that valorises capital by way of its congelation in wealth. What this means in practice is that “free” labour under capital becomes a thing as abstract and superficially mysterious as capital itself. In its simplest form, deskilled by the growth of technology, it becomes a sheer expenditure of time in productive work (White 2013b). But this expenditure must be harnessed to global standards of productivity, and preferably outstrip them. Whether by coercion or by technology and corporate organisation, labour becomes a social force abstracted from individual or wilful action. It appears rather as a visceral human capacity, intrinsically and constantly in need of external direction.

This is what Marx means by calling proletarian labour “abstract.” It is not human action traditionally understood. It is a blindly productive power that is called forth by the organisation of capitalist society. And this is just where his theory of the fetish formations of capital comes to bear on our discussion. Although abstract labour might actually be the product of a historically specific set of relationships developed under capitalism, it does not appear as such. Just as capital seems to be a force in itself, a self-moving substance, so does labour seem to be in its abstract mode. What is more, it appears as such in dialectical contrast to the fetish form of capital. Where capital appears as a force of pluripotential monetary intelligence, labour in its abstract form appears as a force of pluripotential biological energy. It appears to be humanity in its most vital yet its most brutish, biological expression: animal vigour.

Let us think back to Postone’s claim (2003) that the Jew of antisemitism is the human body of money, the apparently intrinsic power of money being the fetish form of value. We could note that there are other racial types that take similar roles in settings where suspicions of commerce are racialised diversely. But the legacy of pre-modern antisemitism affords an identification of Jews with the power of money, even when that power has become the appearance of capital, as a process of social reproduction, and not of the archaic figures of usurer or merchant. But if capital and labour are a dialectical pair, and if capital appears in fetishistic form as a power intrinsic to money, then what is the corresponding form for labour? I have suggested that this fetish form is the biological potency of the human body, conceived as animal force. The biological body is semantically the opposite of money. Both are powers, but where the power of money is cunning, that of the biological body is brute. Where money dissolves appearances, the biological body is intractably concrete, even though this concreteness is the expression of an abstraction of action as labour-power. Money is a power of control, but the biological body is a power that requires control.

If this is what labour appears as in its fetish form, it will be clear where I am going. If the Jew of antisemitism is the human body of money, the Black of antiblack racism is the human representative of brute biological bodiliness. The content Fanon saw so clearly at the heart of antiblack racism, above all the identification of blackness with the untamed biological, is precisely the form that abstract labour assumes within its fetishised representation. The Black is the representative of that same biological potency, bereft of self-directing will, which affords to abstract labour its own fetishised representation as an essence, not as a moment in a relationship.
Why have people of African descent been thus interpellated? Consider again the parallel with the history of antisemitism. Modernity inherits the identification of Jews with commerce and usury. This is an archaic identification – Bloch (1977) calls it “nonsynchronous” in his critique of the National Socialist imaginary – but it affords a symbolic register for something that is new: the fetishistic representation of capital. Similarly, the history of Atlantic slavery (see Johnson 2013, 185–191) and of European colonialism in Africa has bequeathed a lasting identification of Blacks with regimes of forced labour. Forced labour was perhaps not the essence of slavery (Patterson 1982) or of colonialism (Mamdani 1996). But seen from within the normative frame of capitalist modernity, unfree labour is what stands out retrospectively in both. And the spectre of unfree labour is what haunts the reconstitution of work as “free” proletarian labour-power. Abstract labour, an amassed biological energy, is the mode of work that capitalist society has constituted, but which it must deny because of the limit it presents to the identification of capitalism with human freedom, and thus with will. Much like with antisemitism, but exactly in the opposite way, the hatred of the Black is thus a dangerously misleading form of emancipatory fantasy. Note that this presents an important caveat to Pattersonian strands of Afropessimism (see, e.g., Sexton 2015), according to which antiblackness is a consequence of the constitutive role of slavery in the making of global modernity. Afropessimism identifies the non-accidental connection of antiblackness to the modern social order. That relation, however, is one in which the imaginary of slavery is summoned from the grave by contradictions alive in the present world, not as a simple echo of its early modern precedents. It is not those histories that give us the all-too perfect polarisation of antisemitic and antiblack racisms in capitalist modernity. Instead, it is the fetishised representation of the structure of human action under capital that awakes them for us now. The Jew of antisemitism is the racial type that embodies the power of capital in the fetishised form of money, along with its cunning intelligence. The Black of antiblack racism is the racial type that embodies abstract labour in the form of amassed biological force, along with its animal brutishness. This is not an atavism but an opposition generated repeatedly within the forms of capitalist society.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by reiterating two points that might anticipate objections to my argument. First of all, what I have offered is not a genealogical claim about the origins of modern antiblack racism. I am not trying to identify the precedents for it in ways that lead from the past towards the present. I have argued that the structure of modern capitalist society calls forth in the present the fetishised representations of capital and of labour (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). This calling forth has fed deeply on older histories of racial typology in the medieval and early modern worlds, within which antisemitism and antiblack racism first emerged. Without those pre-histories, Jews and Blacks as such would not have become the particular victims of these stereotypic images. But those pre-histories do not explain in themselves how the hatred of each has gathered such a striking force and salience in contemporary society, nor the fact that the hatred towards each type has such a strikingly dualistic relation to the other. This can only be explained, I suggest, with reference to the fetishistic appearance of social relations that are ultimately based not upon the past but upon the present.
Second, mine is not an inductive argument that works from specific local or empirical examples. I have argued that the content of antiblack racism in the modern world transcends local histories of capitalist development. This insight demands mediation into particular examples, but it does not reflect directly or precisely in any one of them. It operates instead at a level of structural generality that can only be comprehended correctly as global (see Sartori 2015). (Potentially it also thus applies in settings where socialist states have not been able to challenge the fundamental relation of “free” wage labour to capital by nationalising the latter.) The test of this kind of argument is not how well it already fits this case or that, but whether it is able to ground further work that would illuminate those cases in their local mediations.

What I have argued is that the structure of social action under capitalism is a structure that also generates fetishistic representations of its own functioning. These representations appear as the power of money on the one hand and the power of human biology on the other, each of which then finds representation in racial types that are marked as antisocial. Is there any other way to account for the fact that, in the maelstrom of capitalist development, race has been such a persistent, hardened feature of global modernity? It is not – I want to insist on this – because racism has been used to constitute classes. That has happened, and it has happened especially in contexts such as South Africa. But this cannot explain the recurrence and the prominence of antiblack racist affects across so many different trajectories of capitalist development, where the intersection of race and class takes many varying forms. What is much more general, I have suggested, is the connection of race to the fetish forms of capitalist society. If the Jew of antisemitism is identified with capital-in-itself, or money, the Black of antiblack racism is identified with labour-in-itself: a brute biological force in need of mastery. Race and class might be linked or not in different historical settings. Race and capitalism are deeply linked. The critique of either one of them must also necessarily involve the critique of the other.

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