

Is There a Racial Capitalism?

SOC 490 • Fall 2021 • Mon 2-4:50 • Zoom

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Office hours Tu 12-2 via Zoom • Sign up at <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/xpakt>

“It seems clear that in developing a theory of race relations in the South one must look to the economic policies of the ruling class and not to mere abstract depravity among poor whites. Opposition to social equality has no meaning unless we can see its function in the service of the exploitative purpose of this class.”

—Oliver Cromwell Cox (1945)



Welcome back to the world of social theory. If you are in this class, I will presume you have taken Social Theory I (SOC 290), either with me or with someone else. In that class, you worked through writings of a number of 19th and early 20th century social theorists, many of whom were writing before sociology was formalized as a discipline.

This class is completely different. For starters, it's a discussion-based seminar, not a lecture, and it's writing intensive, but I'll get to that a minute. What makes Social Theory II so different from Social Theory I is that it's *contemporary*. In fact, it's so contemporary that some of the readings on our syllabus aren't even out yet – they'll be published during the course of the semester.

Another major difference is that this class is thematic. Social Theory I was a general introduction to social theory. But in this class, what I want to do is fully immerse you into a set of specific (and ongoing!) debates. As you can see from the title, we're going to be addressing the question as to whether there is a racial capitalism. But what does this mean?

Well, let's think back for a minute to Social Theory I when we read Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*. Think about the dilemma he posed in that book. If white workers wanted to more effectively challenge their capitalist bosses, they would need to unite with all of their fellow workers, and this meant joining forces with Black comrades. Of course, they refused. For Du Bois, it was strategic for white bosses to convince white workers to align with them against Black workers. While white workers got to feel superior to Black workers, they were still exploited by their capitalist overlords. As Du Bois famously put it, they may've received a "psychological wage," but they were still underpaid.

As this example makes clear, capitalism and racism are intertwined. But are they *necessarily* intertwined? In other words, could capitalism exist without racism? And conversely, could racism in its modern form exist without capitalism? This is precisely the question we'll be exploring in this class. We'll begin with a few readings that frame the problem for us, including an excerpt from Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*, easily the most widely cited text on the question of racial capitalism, as well as two of his students: Ruthie Gilmore and Robin Kelley. From there, we'll turn to some historical questions. To what extent do modern theories of "race" emerge from capitalism itself? Could modern industrial capitalism have emerged if it weren't for all of that slave labor forcibly relocated across the Atlantic? And what about colonization? To what extent was the colonization of the entire African continent necessary for the development of industrial capitalism in the US and Europe?

From there, we'll examine some writings on racial capitalism in a very different context: South Africa under apartheid. Believe it or not, there are quite a few parallels with our own country during this period, and we'll think about what South African writing has to teach us about our own context. This body of writing deeply impacted Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born social theorist who died in 2014. We'll be reading his seminal essay on what it means to experience class as race.

Then we'll return to a US context and think about how these global historical accounts might shed some light on this place. If Walter Rodney asked how Europe underdeveloped Africa, Manning Marable (who died less than a decade ago) is going to ask us how capitalism underdeveloped Black America. Bobby Wilson (who teaches at Georgia) will take us to Alabama and draw upon South African insights to ask how racism and capitalism were intertwined in that state's industrialization. But what does it mean for racism and capitalism to "intertwine"?

It's not just about being excluded from opportunities. Sometimes inclusion can be the problem, like when racialized populations are subject to predatory lending. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor will explain how banks systematically undermined Black homeownership in this country, demonstrating that we don't need to pick one – capitalist *or* racist – but can account for the interaction of both.

We'll then turn to the question of policing and mass incarceration. It's easy enough given the data to dismiss these as racist. But are they racial capitalist in the sense explored in this class? How might policing and the prison-industrial complex deploy racist strategies in ways that simultaneously produce value? And who's profiting from all of this?

Our final week, we will attempt to answer the question after which this course is named: *is* there indeed a racial capitalism? We'll read a recent article advocating the thesis, as well as two recent critiques and try to reach some sort of consensus through discussion. We may not all agree, which is of course fine. But at the very least, we'll want to understand the basis of any disagreements.

As I'm sure you've already gathered, many of the readings in this class are quite dense. Some aren't. Some are more sociological, others are more historical, but none of them are easy. However, for this class to work, *I'll need you to do all of the reading for every single class*. Remember, it's a seminar, so I won't be lecturing after the first class. This is not the sort of class in which discussion will work if you haven't done the reading. So please, please, please do it, and do it consistently. I've limited the selections so that we never have more than 60 pp/week, and typically a bit less. Usually this class meets twice per week, but since we're online, I thought it'd be more convenient to meet once a week – but you still have a full week's worth of reading, which we'll be going over in class. So again, this isn't the class to skimp on readings; please do them, and budget ample time to get through them. Reading is your primary task in this class.

But it's of course not your only task. In addition to doing the reading, there are a number of other assignments – some of which we'll be doing regularly, others which are once-off. So what are they?

1. **Discussion questions (10 %):** For every class, you'll need to post one discussion question before we meet. There is a special section for this on Canvas. Please note that these shouldn't just be simple recall questions – try to put the *discussion* in “discussion question.” I will use some of these to help facilitate discussion and get a sense for what you want to discuss in seminar. The earlier you post them, they more likely I am to get to them.
2. **Reading analysis (30 %):** For every week, you'll need to complete and submit a reading analysis sheet. If there are multiple authors that week, the correct author is indicated under "Assignments." I will provide the standard sheet on the first day of class.
3. **Attendance (20 %):** Attendance is crucial in this class since it's a seminar. There's not really a way to discuss without being present, so attendance is required. We only meet 13 times, so I'm not asking a lot. You can miss twice without me even noting it. After that, you lose 3 points for every absence. If you attend at least 11 classes, that's a free 20 percent for you! I do understand that these are wild times, and I'm not a monster. If you have an emergency and need to miss class beyond the 2 allotted absences, just let me know in advance, and we'll work something out. I promise I can be accommodating, but in order to do this, I need you to communicate with me. If you miss a bunch of classes and don't check in until the last week of class, there's nothing I can do at that point.

4. **Final paper (40 %):** This is a writing intensive class. What this means is that while there are no exams, you will be producing a final paper, which should be between 10 and 15 double-spaced pages (12-point font, 1” margins, and please use a relatively normal font). For this paper, you have two options:

a. Is there a racial capitalism? Drawing on the readings from this syllabus, you will either argue that yes, there is a racial capitalism, or conversely that no, there is not a racial capitalism. You will both use and critique authors we have covered to *make and substantiate an argument*. This needs to be clearly stated from the outset and developed over the course of the paper.

b. Racial capitalism: a case study. Instead of writing about racial capitalism at the level of theory, you can opt to make it a bit more concrete and use a racial capitalism “lens” to examine the case study of your choice. Most students will likely choose this option, and I highly recommend it, though either is fine. Some options include:

policing – gentrification – education – banking – debt – employment – mass incarceration – development – gender and racial capitalism – sexuality and racial capitalism – medicine – mental health – histories of political struggle – civil rights and capitalism – whiteness and racial capitalism – racial capitalism and Latinx, Indigenous, South Asian, East Asian, etc. – housing – violence – colonialism – decolonization

This list is not of course exhaustive. If you want to propose something else, that’s fine, but I’d recommend you run it by me either via email or in office hours.

The 40 % includes two component parts:

1. Before class on November 1, you will need to submit a 1-2 pp **outline** of your paper via Canvas. It’s fine if it changes. The point is to present your argument so that you can get some feedback from me before writing the thing. This is worth 10 %.
2. On December 1, your **final paper** is due via Canvas. This is worth 30 %.

Finally, a few notes about this class. You don’t need to buy any books. I will make every single reading available on Canvas free of charge. However, I highly recommend printing them out, or else annotating them on an electronic device. It’s very difficult to absorb this material if you just read through it. You should really be marking up your readings. And you must have these texts accessible during class time. Having a PDF somewhere on your phone isn’t what I mean by accessible. If someone is reading a quote from p. 45, you should be able to flip to p. 45 without delay.

And now, for the unpleasanties. If you are currently enrolled at UNCG – and you are – then I expect that you know what constitutes plagiarism. If you do not, I urge you to consult the UNCG Office of Rights and Responsibilities website on plagiarism, available at <https://osrr.uncg.edu/academic-integrity/violations-and-sanctions/plagiarism/>. I don’t play when it comes to plagiarism, especially when it comes to online assignments. If I catch you plagiarizing on an assignment, it should go without saying that I will fail you on that assignment. If the case is sufficiently egregious, I may decide to fail you for the entire class.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me via email or preferably, during office hours. I promise I don't bite. I wish these sorts of unpleasanties did not require addressing, but after more than a decade of teaching, I have come to the realization that they absolutely do. Please do not be that person. It's 2021, and the plagiarism detection software will catch you before I even have to lift a finger.

Without further ado, let us move on to the schedule of readings...

August 23: Introduction

August 30: What is racial capitalism?

- Robin D. G. Kelley, "Introduction," *Boston Review: Forum 1 – Race, Capitalism, Justice*, edited by Walter Johnson and Robin D. G. Kelley (2017): 5–8.
- Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000 [1983]): 9–28.
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," Pp. 225–40 in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, edited by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso, 2017).

September 13: What is the "race" in racial capitalism?

- Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," Pp. 111–48 in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, by Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields (New York: Verso, 2014 [1990]).
- Stephanie E. Smallwood, "What Slavery Tells Us about Marx," *Boston Review: Forum 1 – Race, Capitalism, Justice*, edited by Walter Johnson and Robin D. G. Kelley (2017): 78–82.

September 20: Without slavery, no capitalism?

- Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964 [1944]): 51–84.
- Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800* (New York: Verso, 1997): 511–45.

September 27: Without colonization, no capitalism?

- Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (New York: Verso, 2018 [1972]): 175–244.

October 4: Why is racism profitable?

- Harold Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid," *Economy and Society* 1, no. 4 (1972): 425–456.

October 18: What does it mean to call racism "capitalist"?

- Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” Pp. 172–221 in *Essential Essays, Vol. 1*, edited by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019 [1980]).

October 25: Why is poverty racialized?

- Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2015 [1983]): 21–60, 93–115.

November 1: Why are Black workers underpaid?

- Bobby M. Wilson, *America’s Johannesburg: Industrialization and Racial Transformation in Birmingham* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019 [2000]): 1–16, 65–136.

November 8: What if racism doesn’t only exclude, but also includes?

- Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2019): 1–54, 253–62.

November 15: Mass incarceration is racist, but is it capitalist?

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 5–29.
- Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2003): 84–105.

November 22: Policing is racist, but is it capitalist?

- Robin D. G. Kelley, “Insecure: Policing Under Racial Capitalism,” *Spectre* 1, no. 2 (2020): 12–37.
- Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2019): 56–90.

November 29: Is there a racial capitalism?

- Julian Go, “Three Tensions in the Theory of Racial Capitalism,” *Sociological Theory* 39, no. 1 (2021): 38–47.