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INTRODUCTION

# The South African tradition of racial capitalism

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**Abstract**
This introduction to the special issue on "The South African Tradition of Racial Capitalism" situates the South African tradition of racial capitalism (SAT) against the organizational backdrop of the anti-apartheid movement, outlines the key theses of the SAT, and presents the contributions of the special issue. We argue that the SAT rests upon four key theses: 1) class struggle from above – the pursuit of profit – generates racism; 2) the capitalist state is the primary agent of racialization; 3) racial ideology can divide, enabling capitalism, but it can also unify, facilitating resistance; and 4) racial capitalism is a strategic concept that emphasizes the inseparability of anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle. The SAT underscores the centrality of struggle and the importance of conjunctural analysis in the study of racial capitalism.

**Keywords** racial capitalism; anti-apartheid movement; South Africa; Black Marxism; anti-racism; anti-capitalism; race and class

> The central argument of RC [racial capitalism] is that the class and national aspects cannot be separated … [R]ace and class are intertwined and … constitute one problem or contradiction. In other words, "apartheid" and "capitalism" do not represent two contradictions, but a single one i.e. racial capitalism … At the level of strategy, RC means the rejection of the "two-stage theory" and the acceptance of the "one-stage theory" … [For proponents of RC,] national liberation means the immediate destruction of racial capitalism and the construction of socialism … RC does not facilitate a broad revolutionary movement at the level of various diverse components of struggle. The acceptance of CST [colonialism of a special type], on the other hand, facilitates the presence of socialists and non-socialists alike, in the struggle for national liberation.
>
> ––Cape Youth Congress (CAYCO), "Left-Wing Deviation: Discussion Article," 1987[1]

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

## Racial capitalism: a South African tradition

What is the relative significance of race and class, respectively, in generating and reproducing inequality? Is one more fundamental than the other? And how do these distinctions translate into strategic terms? These questions were at the heart of debates within the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. But what is often discussed as a singular movement turns out to be far more complex, containing multiple contending solutions to these questions. An outside observer might assume, for example, that a "class first" position maps neatly onto the South African Communist Party (SACP), and that a "race first" position corresponds to the Black Consciousness movement (BCM). But in practice, the truth was far closer to the opposite: the SACP defended an approach that prioritized the struggle for racial equality, and the BCM moved increasingly toward an emphasis on the struggle for socialism.

How can we make sense of this apparent paradox? A starting point is to recognize that many different anti-apartheid organizations shared the twin goals of opposing *both* racism *and* capitalism, but that they developed very different strategies for doing so. The SACP (1963 [1962], 43) came to understand South Africa as "colonialism of a special type" (CST), a "new type of colonialism … in which the oppressing White nation occupied the same territory as the oppressed people themselves and lived side by side with them." In their view, CST implied that popular struggle must unfold in two distinct phases: first, activists should join forces with all organizations fighting apartheid, anti-capitalist or otherwise, to launch a "national democratic revolution" (NDR); and only once the fight against racism was complete could the second phase, the fight against capitalism, enter the discussion.[2] This prioritization of the struggle against racism led the SACP to align with the African National Congress (ANC), which became the hegemonic leader of the anti-apartheid movement and eventually the ruling party of South Africa.

The CAYCO pamphlet cited in the epigraph, however, underscores a very different tradition – racial capitalism – that strongly opposed the SACP's two-stage approach. As part of the United Democratic Front (UDF), the largest anti-apartheid coalition in this period, CAYCO worked firmly in the tradition of the ANC and the SACP. Following the CST thesis, CAYCO insisted that the struggle against apartheid needed to play out in a broad anti-racist popular front. Only once the NDR was achieved, they argued, could the fight against capitalism begin. In defending this position, however, CAYCO pointed to a range of organizations in the "racial capitalism" camp, including opponents of the SACP who refused to separate the struggles against racism and capitalism. Those in the racial capitalism camp understood racism and capitalism as necessarily linked: overthrowing apartheid required an anti-capitalist program.

Who were these proponents of "racial capitalism" so derided by the CAYCO pamphlet? There was Neville Alexander, often cited as the key South African theorist of the term (Burden-Stelly, Hudson, and Pierre 2020; Go 2021; Hudson 2017; Jenkins and Leroy 2021; Singh 2022), as well as his organization of the period, the Cape Action League (CAL). There was the Unity Movement, an early radical organization that attempted to unite all ethno-racial groups under the banner "Non-European," even prior to the beginning of apartheid in 1948. There was the Black Consciousness movement, which became increasingly anti-capitalist in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. And there were a variety of Trotskyist organizations, foremost among them the Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT). All of these tendencies came under fire by name in the CAYCO pamphlet. This was a remarkably diverse assortment of political organizations. And while we are far more sympathetic to the "one-stage" analysis than the "two-stage," we do find ourselves in agreement with CAYCO on one major point: *the theory of racial capitalism as developed in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa held that race and class constituted a single site of struggle*.

The CST thesis, of course, also represents a theory of the relationship between racism and capitalism (SACP 1963 [1962] [1963 [1962]]). In using the term "racial capitalism," however, we mean something far more circumscribed. Our goal in this introductory essay is to identify a political milieu and approach to struggle that developed in opposition to both racial capitalism *and* the CST/NDR tradition – as suggested by the CAYCO pamphlet. We refer to this alternative tradition or milieu as the South African tradition of racial capitalism (SAT). On the side of domination, proponents of the SAT argued that capitalism generated racism, and that the capitalist state was simultaneously a racist state. This was not too far off from the SACP and ANC's analysis, though the SAT developed very distinct political responses. On the side of resistance, they argued that state-generated racial categories divided the population, but that oppositional forces could use new, broader racial categories to forge unity. Further, and perhaps most importantly, they emphasized that anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle could not be successful alone; each required the other. We elaborate these points below in terms of four central theses we develop to characterize the SAT as a whole.

The SAT has become something of a specter haunting racial capitalism studies. Accounts of the concept's genesis have increasingly pointed to South African debates (e.g. Burden-Stelly 2020; Burden-Stelly, Hudson, and Pierre 2020; Go 2021; Hudson 2017; Jenkins and Leroy 2021; Koshy et al. 2022; Kundnani 2020; Taylor 2022). In his foreword to the latest edition of Cedric Robinson's (2021) *Black Marxism*, Robin Kelley argues (2021: xiv), "The phrase originated in South Africa around 1976," pointing to a pamphlet released by one of the Trotskyist groups identified above (Legassick and

Hemson 1976). Singh (2022, 28) dates the origins of racial capitalism to "the South African anti-apartheid struggle in the late 1970s."[3] Given the obvious centrality of these debates, we want to unpack their content. And we want to do so in context, thinking about the emergence of "racial capitalism" as a strategic political intervention in an unfolding conjuncture.

But contextualizing in this way does not necessarily render the SAT "specific to South Africa," as Koshy et al. (2022, 1) argue in a recent volume. It means, rather, as Hall (2021 [1986], 297) once put the point, that ideas "have to be delicately disinterred from their concrete and specific historical embeddedness and transplanted into new soil with considerable care and patience." This is what Taylor (2022, 17) seems to suggest in her call for a return to South Africa:

> I think we would be better served by going back to the development of the idea of racial capitalism, which was not in Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*, but in the Marxist tradition in South Africa. What is useful about that history? I think their development of the concept can be generalized beyond the South African context … The question is how we use their thinking outside its original history and context to explain patterns of race and capitalism in the US … [and] are there other contexts within which this works?

For Koshy et al. (2022, 1), the specificity of the SAT stands in contrast to Cedric Robinson (2021), whose "contribution was to generalize and theorize racial capitalism on a world scale. His thesis was that capitalism was racial capitalism everywhere" (Koshy et al. 2022, 1). Conversely, Taylor (2022) suggests a generalizability with greater contingency: the SAT may apply elsewhere, but this is an open question. This point resonates with Stuart Hall's (2019 [1980], 213) intervention into South African debates, where he argues that "[r]acism is not present, in the same form or degree, in all capitalist formations; it is not necessary to the concrete functioning of all capitalisms." Within this Taylor/Hall frame, the key task for the researcher is to reveal the conditions under which capitalism *becomes* racial, or as Hall puts it, "how and why racism has been specifically overdetermined by and articulated with certain capitalisms." Our goal in this introductory essay, and with the special issue more generally, is to push the analysis of racial capitalism forward by distilling some of the key theses that emerged from the SAT. It will be up to future researchers to apply the theses to other contexts. After presenting the four key theses of the SAT, we present the contributions to the special issue.

## Four theses on the South African tradition of racial capitalism

The SAT was forged in the "context of the struggle," as Clarno and Vally (2023) put it in this volume, against apartheid, colonialism, and racial capitalism. It emerged from a tremendously diverse ecosystem of movements that

challenged – to varying degrees – the two-stage approach of the ANC/SACP. This ecosystem included, among others, the NEUM and its offshoot APDUSA; organizations linked to Neville Alexander such as CAL and the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA); Black Consciousness groups such as the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), Black People's Convention (BPC), and Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO); the National Forum coalition; and the Marxist Workers' Tendency (MWT). Activists in these and kindred groups insisted that the national struggle and the class struggle were inseparable. And as varied as their positions were, we want to suggest that this broader ecosystem of struggle constituted a recognizable South African tradition of theorizing racial capitalism: the SAT.

In this section we outline four of the key theoretical claims that emerged from the SAT. We do not intend to posit these as eternal truths; they are better understood as hypotheses that one may test in other contexts. Following Hall (2021 [1986], 297), our goal here is to "delicately disinter" the key ideas of the SAT, enabling others to "transplant" them "into new soil with considerable care and patience."

## *I . Class struggle from above – the pursuit of profit – generates racism.*

Capitalism generates racism: that was a fundamental point of departure for the SAT. But this argument was developed in a particular context, namely, the peculiar development of racial capitalism in South Africa. Theorists in the SAT never argued that all capitalism is racial, but rather, that capitalism assumes a racial guise under specific conditions. And South African conditions were quite specific, or at least extreme: throughout the late 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ centuries, capitalism developed in tandem with relentless white supremacy, including an especially draconian system of pass laws that enabled the hyper-exploitation of Black workers (Johnstone 1976; Hindson 1987; Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991). For proponents of the SAT, it was the pursuit of profit in this context that underpinned apartheid racism.

In positing the causal role of capitalism, the SAT departs from understandings of racial capitalism that emphasize the origins of racism independently of class struggle. This is the lesson, for example, of Cedric Robinson's (2021 [1983]) *Black Marxism*, which suggests that "racialism" preceded capitalism. In stark contrast, Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko is clear: "There is no doubt that the colour question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons" (Biko 1996 [1978], 87–88). For him, racial divisions became a "moral justification" for exploitation, leading to a fusion of capitalism and racism: "Capitalistic exploitative tendencies, coupled with the overt arrogance of white racism, have conspired against us" (Biko 1996

[1978], 88, 96-97). For this reason, Biko suggests, Black movements will tend toward anti-capitalist challenge:

> "It will not be long before the blacks relate their poverty to their blackness in concrete terms. Because of the tradition forced onto the country, the poor people shall always be black people. It is not surprising, therefore, that the blacks should wish to rid themselves of a system that locks up the wealth of the country in the hands of a few" (Biko 1996 [1978], 63).

Tabata, of the NEUM and later APDUSA, made a similar argument just before the rise of apartheid. Like Biko, Tabata recognized both the class roots of racism and the ways in which the latter assumed an independent guise:

> While at first this racialism was fostered in the economic interests of the White employers, and while it was intended to facilitate the keeping of the Blacks in a subordinate position, so that they would be an every-ready source of cheap labor to feed the triple demands of the industrial machine, the gold-mines and the white farms, it gained so much momentum in the course of time, that now it exists on its own. (Tabata 1974 [1950], 3)

Biko (1996 [1978], 88) agreed that, even if racism was rooted in "the economic greed exhibited by white people, it has now become a serious problem on its own." In contrast to Biko, however, Tabata understood capitalism and class as far more central to the project of organizing resistance. He notes that,

> "The real cleavage is one of class, not one of color. But in the particular historical conditions attending colonial exploitation … [whites found it] extremely convenient to utilize color differences to cover over and obscure the fundamental dividing line, that of class" (Tabata 1974 [1950], 4, see also 1, 3).

Racism had the effect of disorganizing the working class, but it appeared to facilitate capitalist unity. Tabata thus points to the way that British and Dutch colonists became "co-partners in the rape, in the conquest and in the plunder of South Africa … both pursue ever more efficient methods for the exploitation of the Black man in the endeavor to maintain the source of limitless profits" (2). Once again, we see that class struggle from above, the search for profit, generates racism.

Foreign capital played an especially important role in generating racism. Legassick and Hemson (1976, 8) of the MWT, for example, underscore "the role that foreign capital has played not only economically in South Africa, but in the political endorsement and reproduction of South Africa's system of racial domination." They point especially to the collaboration between the "British state, acting on behalf of British capital," and the emergent South African state, itself forged by British interests in conjunction with Afrikaners. At the core of this collaboration, they suggest, was the policy of racial segregation, which "meant the division of the working class on a *racial* basis," and "on terms which perpetuated the profit rates of the mining industry"

(Legassick and Hemson 1976, 4, original emphasis). This policy of racial domination and division, cemented in the early years of the 20th century, "created the foundations of South Africa's racial capitalism and the modern apartheid regime" (Legassick and Hemson 1976, 4). Indeed, the apartheid regime merely represented "the emergence in new forms of the compromises and alliances between imperialist and local capitalist interests which had been continually renegotiated," with the key goal being to "sustain a cheap black labor force" (Legassick and Hemson 1976, 7).

Seen from the vantage point of white capital within South Africa, Alexander (1985 [1983], 43) notes that the "national bourgeoisie" relied on racial domination to secure cheap Black labor, cementing a compromise with British imperialism "to maintain their profitable system of super-exploitation of black labor." Like Legassick and Hemson (1976), Alexander (1985 [1983], 41) understood the apartheid regime as a reflection of a much deeper system – racial capitalism – that was the real target of resistance. Indeed, apartheid reflected a longstanding reliance of the capitalist class on ethnic and racial division to justify inequality – they "artificially created" such groups, "as a matter of state policy, because it was in the broad economic and political interests of the ruling class to keep them divided" (Alexander 1982b [1985], 9). This included, for example, the construction of a "split labor market" that divided white and Black labor (Alexander 1985 [1983], 43). In Alexander's (1985 [1984a], 117) view, then, South African capitalism rested firmly on racial segregation – including, especially, the migrant labor system – as a "fundamental organizing principle" (see also Alexander 1979: ch. 2, 4). Due to the capitalist underpinnings of racism, Alexander (1985 [1982a], 19–20) began to detect a shift from an "anti-white position" to "definitions [of the enemy] based on a class analysis."

Adherents of the SAT were not the only ones to recognize the key role of capitalism, and the imperatives of accumulation, in generating racism. Indeed, the SACP (1963 [1962] [1963 [1962]], 25) offered a parallel analysis in its foundational statement on the CST, noting that, "The South African and foreign monopoly capitalists and large-scale landowners, who, together, are the real rulers of this country, have cultivated racial differences and prejudices as their most effective instrument in their insatiable drive for cheap labour and high profits. The colonial status of the African people facilitates the maximum exploitation of their labour." Likewise, Magubane (1979:, 3), who was loosely aligned to the ANC, argues: "The seemingly 'autonomous' existence of racism today does not lessen the fact that it was initiated by the needs of capitalist development or that these needs remain the dominant factor in racist societies." He stresses the key role of foreign capital, racial segregation, and the use of racial domination to divide and dominate the working class in the service of profit. But despite the overlap with these analyses, as well as others coming out of the Congress tradition loosely defined

(e.g. Davies, O'Meara, and Dlamini 1984; Saul and Gelb 1986 [1981]; Wolpe 1972), the *strategic* consequences members of the SAT drew from this analysis could not be further from that of the CST. SAT theorists were clear: because racism emerges from capitalism, it cannot be challenged independent of capitalism. By contrast, followers of the CST thesis insisted that racism should be challenged separately from capitalism – in a prior "stage." Only then could capitalism be confronted directly.

### *II . The capitalist state is the primary agent of racialization.*

If capitalists promote racism, they do not do so on their own. The state is central to class struggle from above, waged (among other means) through racialization. This explains the centrality of Marxist state theory – above all, the work of Nicos Poulantzas – to South African debates in this period (Clarke 1978; Davies et al. 1976; Davies 1979; Innes and Plaut 1978; Morris 1976; cf. Nash 1999). Proponents of the SAT argued that the colonial/apartheid state developed and implemented racist policies – including segregation, influx control, political repression, and other forms of racial exclusion – *for the benefit* of capitalists. This key role of the state, in turn, underscored the historical specificity of racial capitalism. If South African capitalism rested upon racism and racial division throughout the late 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ centuries, the precise character of this racism – as implemented and secured by the state – shifted over time, typically in response to the contours of class struggle from above and below (Burawoy 1981). This was not a generalized and transhistorical racism, but rather a conjunctural one.

A key example here is Wolpe's (1972) classic "cheap labor" thesis, which differentiates between the periods of segregation (roughly 1870 to the 1930s) and apartheid (from 1948). The policies and practices of the apartheid state, Wolpe argues, reflected an attempt to shore up the migrant labor system established under segregation, and thus cheap labor itself, most notably through stricter regulation of movement, political repression, and the promotion of industry closer to the rural areas. In sum, the state protected capital by implementing racism in historically specific ways – the racism of apartheid differed from the racism of segregation. Wolpe (1988) would later extend and revise this conjunctural analysis, pointing to the greater contingency of racism and capitalism while continuing to insist that the racism of the capitalist state shifts alongside the economy and class struggle.

Wolpe's relation to the SAT, of course, is tenuous. As Burawoy (2004:, 666) notes, he "did not have the courage of his class convictions," and thus remained aligned with the ANC and the SACP (see also Friedman 2015; Lodge 2022). Yet, he was highly critical of both the CST thesis and its implication: the need for an NDR as part of a two-stage transition (Wolpe 1975, 1995). Much like the proponents of the SAT, Wolpe (1975) criticized the

SACP for imposing a singular version of "internal colonialism," which in reality may take varied forms across time and space. This critical view put him on shaky ground in the ANC/SACP (Friedman 2015), though he did not experience expulsion, as did his MWT counterparts. Further, Wolpe's analysis resonates closely with proponents of the SAT. Like Wolpe (1972), for example, Alexander (1979, 33–38) underscores the key role of the state in promoting the migrant labor system, including the preservation of rural areas as a basis for cheap Black labor. Interestingly, though, in doing so he draws only minimally from Wolpe and more so from the lesser-known Molteno (1977), who is quite critical of the CST and suggests that Wolpe's argument amounts to liberal pluralism. Mafeje (1981), who came out of the Unity Movement and aligned with APDUSA, also took Wolpe to task for his abstract Marxism, which, he argued, ignored everyday realities and culture on the ground in the rural areas, imputing monolithic identities from without.

Wolpe was part of a broader academic tradition, rooted in the UK, which pointed to the role of the state in using racism to protect and advance capitalist interests (Burawoy 1981; Davies et al. 1976; Legassick 1974; Marks and Trapido 1979; Morris 1976; Trapido 1971). Many of these academics remained somewhat distant from popular struggles on the ground in South Africa, and some, like Wolpe, aligned with the Congress tradition, though others, like Legassick, joined organizations that were part of the SAT. Nonetheless, periodization of the capitalist state – that is, conjunctural analysis of how state racism enabled capitalism in historically specific ways – was central to thinking within the SAT. In his address to AZAPO in 1982, for example, Alexander argued that racial capitalism and the apartheid state were confronting a crisis due to shifting conditions. Most crucial was the ascendance of manufacturing, the incorporation of Black workers into more skilled positions, and their growing confidence and demands enabled by their new structural power (Alexander 1985 [1982a], 23–27). The new conjuncture thus generated a crisis for "their system of racial capitalism": "The dilemma for the rulers in this connection is how to reconcile the iron laws of capitalist development with the bantustan/apartheid strategy designed for an earlier phase of that development" (Alexander 1985 [1982a], 25–6). In response, he argued, the capitalist state would have to shift yet again, with two possible options: greater repression, or compromise with the Black middle class (Alexander 1985 [1982a], 29–35). As Legassick (1974) suggested, a similar ruling class crisis and decision point in the 1940s led to the implementation of apartheid after 1948.

The central role of the capitalist state was a hallmark of left thinking under apartheid, including proponents of both the SAT and the CST, as well as academics with weaker ties to popular struggle. What is crucial, however, is that they came to different political conclusions. If the SAT and CST both recognized that capitalists and the capitalist state underpinned racism and

apartheid, they disagreed about how to respond. In contrast to the two-stage transition implied in the analysis of CST, proponents of the SAT sought to link struggles against racism and capitalism: they viewed the two as inseparable. This was a consistent feature of the SAT, even if its proponents understood that the capitalist state and racist policies were conjunctural and historically specific. Not only did this lead to different strategy (thesis 4), but it also yielded very different conceptions of race (thesis 3).

### *III . Racial ideology can divide, enabling capitalism. But it can also unify, facilitating resistance.*

Most tendencies in the SAT developed a theory of racial identity rooted in the strategic project of building a united front against racial capitalism. The idea was to reclaim broader conceptions of race that encompassed oppressed and exploited people in South Africa *against* divisive conceptions of race generated by the racial capitalist state. Activists began to recognize the artificiality of racial ideology even before the advent of apartheid in 1948. For example, the Non-European Unity Movement's (1997 [1943], 60) draft program describes "Segregation [a]s an artificial device of the rulers, and an instrument for the domination of the Non-European." As Alexander (1979, 64) puts the point, "Racism has been to the development of capitalism in South Africa what the doctrine of individual rights was to the development of capitalism in England and France." Racism, he argues, historically justified various forms of forced labor; but just as importantly, it had the effect of disorganizing the proletariat, "trapp[ing them] in a divisive and debilitating ethnic consciousness" (Alexander 1985 [1982b], 29). Afrikaner and British settler colonists collaborated to "retribalize" (Alexander 1979, 65; cf. Mafeje 1971; Magubane 1973, 2000) the African population beginning in the late 19th century, largely as a means of reproducing "non-capitalist" rural enclaves in which "tribes" had direct access to the land. This worked to subsidize the impossibly low wages of migrant workers in the mines, and later in heavy industry, maintaining a true semi-proletariat (Alexander 1979; Molteno 1977; Wolpe 1972). This is what Magubane (1979, 96) called, sardonically, "social security for the migrant workers."

The migrant labor system began to unravel once "tribal" subsistence producers were dispossessed, prompting a wave of mass urbanization. Apartheid represented both an attempt to stem this wave, as well as a new strategy of racial fragmentation in the face of growing resistance. As anticolonial struggles picked up pace across the continent, the apartheid regime fragmented race ("Natives," "Africans") into ethnicity (Xhosa, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and so forth), granting "independence" to each ethno-linguistic group and assigning them respective "homelands." This was both a strategy of cooptation, a transparent attempt to "decolonize" South Africa from above

in response to burgeoning independence movements (Magubane 1979, 233), and an attempt to sow division within the category "African," as well as among "Coloreds," "Indians," and "Africans."

Proponents of the SAT criticized the Congress tradition for emulating this race-as-divisive formulation in their own organizing practices. Most famously, Alexander (1979) points out how the ANC's theory of "multi-racialism" – separate resistance organizations for each racial group as defined by the apartheid state – emulates, and even derives from, the apartheid schema.[4] He suggests that the SACP/ANC's multi-racialism shares the apartheid regime's class project of fostering indigenous bourgeoisies among each respective ethnic group. For the CPSA,

> "After 1924 … the Party went over to a strategy of tacit and often open alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie. There was implicit (and often explicit) in its theory and practice the conception of a two-stage revolution: first for bourgeois democratic rights and later for socialism" (Alexander 1979, 50; Zumoff 2014, 345, 356).

And for the ANC and SACP of the 1960s and 70s, Alexander (1979, 99) suggests that by ignoring class in favor of the NDR, both parties were oblivious to "privileged classes" within each racial group being "pulled in the direction of the ruling classes in the South African state," i.e. collaborating with the apartheid state.

This is why Alexander had such disdain for the two-stage theory of the CST, as did most activists in the SAT. Going back to the NEUM's (1997 [1943], 61) draft program, "the Unity of all the Non-Europeans is a necessary precondition for this total fight against Segregation." A couple of decades later, proponents of Black Consciousness would agree with the spirit of this formulation but take issue with the Unity Movement's invocation of "Non-European" as a negative definition of race. BC activists demanded a positive definition, a reclaiming of "Black" as the basis for collective struggle (Biko 1996 [1978], 48; SASO 1970, 1–2). Unity was key here: Biko (1996 [1978], 49) argued that all Black people had "to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude." For Biko (1996 [1978], 48), blackness had two components: subjection to group-based oppression, including "those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group"; and self-identification with the category, because "by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being." Sipho Buthelezi suggests that this politics derived from engagement with Cabral (1973; qtd. in Buthelezi 1991, 114), who argued that colonized people need to "rediscover an identity" as a basis for mobilization – a point which Buthelezi (1991:, 120) suggests was completely alien to the ANC's approach. Instead of letting the apartheid state define

them, BC activists would reclaim "blackness" in "a deliberate attempt by all of us to counteract the 'divide and rule' attitude of the evil-doers" (SASO 1970, 2).

These reconstructions of race aim to simultaneously acknowledge the importance of racism while denying the existence of races. Alexander (1985 [1982a], 37) was at pains to illuminate "the scientific fact that 'race' is a non-entity," yet he also notes that, "though 'races' do not exist, racial prejudice, racialism and racism are as real as the food that you and I eat!" The ANC's multi-racialism, he argued, failed to grasp this complex reality, and as a result it was a false "nonracialism" that actually reinforced racial division. For this reason, Alexander and others associated with the National Forum often advocated for *anti*-racism, rather than *non*-racialism. In Alexander's (1985 [1983], 46) view, anti-racism encompasses both the rejection of race as a scientifically valid concept and opposition to capitalism: "the term not only involves the denial of 'race' but also opposition to the capitalist structures for the perpetuation of which the ideology and theory of 'race' exist." If capitalism generates racism, then anti-racism is about revealing this racism for the fabrication and justification of exploitation that it is.

A distinctive aspect of the SAT approach, then, was the pairing of a healthy skepticism of the divisive potential of certain racial categories with a recognition that these same categories could be rearticulated as a unifying force. The skeptical impulse identified a certain commonality between the thinking of the apartheid state and the multi-racialism of the ANC and the SACP. If the former insisted upon a hierarchy of essential differences rooted in biology and culture (MacDonald 2006, 6–16), the ANC's "four nations thesis" was similarly based in primordialism. This tendency is even evident in the SACP's theorizing (Slovo 1988), which drew heavily on Stalin's (1913) definition of the nation as "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." For proponents of the SAT, apartheid formulations and the multi-racialism of the ANC and the SACP were two sides of the same coin: both took racial categories as relatively immutable. In response, SAT strategists sought to redefine race as a fundamentally political, and thus malleable, category that could either divide or unite.

## *IV . Racial capitalism is a strategic concept that emphasizes the inseparability of anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle.*

If the various groups discussed under the banner of the SAT all appear to converge on the Black working class by the early 1980s, this was not incidental. As a singular figure, this class fraction represents the strategic refusal to separate the national and social struggles into distinct "stages." Proponents of

the CST aligned themselves with the ANC, arguing that the working-class was gaining influence within the organization (Everatt 1992, 34–8); supporters of the SAT, meanwhile, saw this as a dangerous mistake that would focus on the fight for legal equality at the expense of anti-capitalist struggle. But just as race alone was insufficient as the basis for revolutionary activity, so too was class, according to the SAT. It was the *Black* working class that had to play this role.

Why not the *entire* working class? At the first National Forum, AZAPO Chairperson Lybon Mabasa (Mabasa, Manthatha, and Sebidi 1983, 3) argued that "[r]acial capitalism is maintained and sustained by the white middle class … and the 'white working class,' which is satisfied with the status quo and feel they have nothing in common with their counterparts, i.e. the black working class. The latter remains the only politically viable class who can wage a committed and successful struggle." From this perspective, the white working class was a potentially reactionary class fraction, materially invested as it was in the perpetuation of apartheid rule. But the Black working class was invested in the overthrow of this regime and, indeed, of capitalism itself. Mabasa's position is nearly indistinguishable from Alexander's (1985 [1983], 55–6), who, at the very same meeting, drew on the BC conception of blackness: "The black working class has to act as a magnet that draws all the other oppressed layers of our society, organizes them for the liberation struggle, and imbues them with the consistent democratic socialist ideas which alone spell death to the system of racial capitalism as we know it today." Alexander's subsequent group, WOSA, would maintain a similar position, as would the Marxist Workers Tendency. As Legassick (2019, 63) put it in his final published essay, the MWT view was that "in the course of the struggle white workers would move to reaction. The main class force was the black working class."

This position was nothing new in 1983. Even before the launch of the National Forum, at an AZAPO congress a year prior, Alexander (1985 [1982a], 28) argued, "The white working class became a junior partner in the class alliance that governed South Africa … . The white workers formally entrenched their vested interest in perpetuating the system of racial capitalism." This position had a long legacy in the Unity Movement as well. More than three decades earlier, Tabata (1974 [1950], 2) explained that "the White worker's bill of wages is subsidised from that of the Black worker … That is why he is so willing to join the White bloc." This was not only because white workers were no longer trustworthy; racial capitalism had itself been transformed, and white workers no longer had a "virtual monopolisation of productive skills. Today, increasingly it is the black workers who are acquiring this strategic leverage. The white workers, on the other hand, are becoming more and more dispensable as a class." (Alexander 1985 [1982a], 25).

Racism was therefore crucial to the analysis, but it was not something separable that could be challenged prior to capitalism itself. Capitalism in South Africa was *racial* capitalism, or to cite Alexander's (1985 [1983], 53) speech at the first National Forum meeting, "The class struggle against capitalist exploitation and the national struggle against racial oppression become one struggle under the general command of the black working class and its organizations." This is a frontal assault on the notion that the national struggle can be waged independently of the fight against capitalism. So when the MWT's Legassick (2019:, 59), for example, argues that "national oppression could be overcome only through ending capitalism in South Africa," he is not advancing a reductive analysis that privileges class over race. As the MWT argued from the beginning (Legassick et al. 1980), "Just as national oppression is rooted in class exploitation, so the national liberation struggle is rooted in class struggle." The aim, in other words, is not to uncritically revert to a non-racial class politics, but rather to understand racial capitalism as a conflict "between capital and the black working class" (ibid.). This is rooted in a "logic of racial capitalism" in which "racial oppression and capitalist exploitation have come to feed on and reinforce one another" (Saul and Gelb 1986 [1981], 63–4). But the key is that anti-racism and anti-capitalism, while potentially analytically separable, are never empirically separable: "There can be no separation of stages" (Legassick et al. 1980). For Alexander, the goal of working-class struggle is to reconstitute the nation in a way that undermines ethnic and racial division: "the unmaking of ethnic identities through the nation-building process understood as a class struggle waged in the course of national liberation" (1985 [1984b], 151; see also 1985 [1983]).

In practice, this means that the SAT understands racial capitalism as a system co-constituted by twin forces – profitability and dehumanization – in which the latter initially served the former but has now become a force in its own right. Because these two forces are so substantially interlinked, it was the SAT's key intervention to redirect strategic forces to their point of articulation: a successful challenge to either racism or capitalism requires a unified and protracted struggle to challenge them both, simultaneously and together.

## Overview of articles

Our special issue includes seven original articles and an afterword that develop a distinctively South African tradition of racial capitalism. A first set of contributions considers key thinkers in context, asking how their respective theories of racial capitalism square with theories from elsewhere. A second set of articles then puts the SAT to work across multiple time periods, from early 20th century segregation to high apartheid to the present. Finally, an

afterword considers the SAT in relation to Cedric Robinson's theory of racial capitalism.

The first set of articles begins with Andy Clarno and Salim Vally's (2023) analysis of Neville Alexander, who developed a novel theory of racial capitalism in the "context of struggle," the key concept in Clarno and Vally's assessment. Alexander's theory can only be understood in relation to socialist strategy. Racial capitalism, they argue, was a radical critique of the SACP/ANC's two-stage theory of revolution, and was central to the project of building unity among BC activists and Marxists at the National Forum in 1983. They conclude with a global conjunctural analysis, identifying South African racial capitalism as a node in an imperialist system.

A second contribution from Mosa Phadi (2023) turns to a much earlier thinker, often unfairly omitted from debates over racial capitalism in South Africa: Sol Plaatje. Phadi rescues Plaatje from unfair characterizations of him as a liberal – which, she argues, parallel dismissals of the early writings of W.E.B. Du Bois. She maintains that both Plaatje and Du Bois, who actually met and corresponded with each other, developed incipient theories of racial capitalism in their work, long before Du Bois confronted racial capitalism in *Black Reconstruction*.

Third, Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo (2023) analyze Steve Biko's (1979) testimony at the 1976 BPC/SASO trial. Thinking Biko in relation to Stuart Hall, they develop a nuanced account of race-class articulation and present Biko as a radical critic of racial capitalism. Since the SAT is always about strategic thinking, they set their theory to work – Biko-with-Hall, as they put it – in making sense of debates that emerged from the recent wave of student struggles across South Africa.

The final contribution of the first section comes from Bongani Nyoka (2023), who analyzes the thought of Bernard Magubane. While he only infrequently invoked the term (e.g. Magubane 1977, 1983), Magubane consistently centers the relationship between racist policy and capital accumulation. Despite ties to the ANC and SACP, Magubane was a heterodox thinker, putting a theory of racial capitalism to work in analyzing the history of racist land dispossession in the pre-apartheid period. Nyoka concludes his analysis by contrasting the persistence of racial capitalism after apartheid with Magubane's vision of the socialism that a Black working-class insurgency might bring about.

After this initial set of articles, three authors analyze racial capitalism in various periods of South African history. First, Zine Magubane (2023) challenges the standard understanding of whiteness as a "psychological wage" paid to white proletarians. Through a bold new interpretation of the 1932 Carnegie Commission, a study of the "Poor White Problem in South Africa," she argues that the Afrikaner petty bourgeoisie that promoted the report never sought to forge an alliance with white workers by boosting their "public and psychological wage," as Du Bois famously put it. Rather, the

Carnegie Report boosted the actual wages of the Afrikaner petty bourgeoisie, and demonstrated the worth of Afrikaner smallholders to both mining capital and the segregationist state.

The second contribution in this section comes from Bridget Kenny (2023), who develops a relational analysis of white and Black women working in the service sector in Johannesburg in the 1950s through the 70s. Pairing Stuart Hall's theory of race-class articulation with Bridget O'Laughlin's emphasis on the struggles of "living labor," Kenny's analysis disturbs the standard functionalist analysis of the role of women under apartheid: as sources of reproductive labor. This piece – and Kenny's work more generally – demonstrates that women generated politics at the point of production: white women workers reinforced normative white femininity and legitimated apartheid rule, while Black women workers rejected such notions in favor of an oppositional race-class subjectivity. Kenny's work shows what the concept of "living labor" brings to analyses of racial capitalism.

The final piece in this section is by Ashwin Desai (2023), who brings racial capitalism to bear on the July 2021 riots in South Africa, which left over 350 dead. Desai explores the racial dynamics of the violence in an Indian township called Phoenix in Durban, the largest city in KwaZulu-Natal, where vigilantes set upon "Africans," who they immediately identified as "looters." He shows how racial capitalism continues to reinscribe apartheid historical geography by continuing to differentiate populations in the present. What will it take, he asks, to build a "non-racial inclusive democracy"?

The issue concludes with reflections from Robin D.G. Kelley (2023), whose work provides an ideal bridge between South African and American debates over racial capitalism. In the 1980s, he began research for a dissertation comparing the Black left in both countries (Camp and Kelley 2013; Kelley 2014). If today Kelley is celebrated for bringing Cedric Robinson's long-neglected work into the public eye, his graduate work demonstrates that Robinson's "Black radical tradition" was with him from the beginning. In one of his first academic publications, Kelley (1986) argues that the struggle for African self-determination was never imposed by the Comintern or even developed by the CPSA but was already latent in earlier African nationalist movements. His afterword, then, brings us full circle. While we have suggested in this introduction that the SAT is distinct from Robinson's approach to racial capitalism – a conjunctural, as opposed to a global, mode of generalization – following Kelley, we can see how Robinson might help us understand the emergence of the SAT in the first place.

## Conclusion

We present this special issue on the SAT not as a definitive statement, but rather a point of departure. The anti-apartheid movement was vibrant

and diverse. This collection of essays only scratches the surface in terms of uncovering the myriad viewpoints that emerged from the left amidst South Africa's particular combination of capitalism and racism. Nonetheless, we hope that readers will appreciate that South African theorizing is not only important because it coined a phrase – racial capitalism. It is useful, above all, because it offers novel insights that continue to hold relevance today, whether in South Africa or elsewhere. Indeed, exploration of the SAT helps us to recognize that racial capitalism has been a strategic, rather than a purely analytic, concept – a concept that was forged and developed in struggle. One of the most crucial lessons, then, of this foray into the SAT, is that we should appreciate the insights of radical organic intellectuals who are engaged in everyday battles, on the ground and beyond the academy.

## Notes

1. "Left-Wing Deviation: Discussion Article" by Cape Youth Congress 1987, A2562, box 5, folder 1, Mark Heywood Papers, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
2. One may trace the SACP's stagist approach to at least the 1920s, when the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, predecessor to the SACP), embraced the idea of a Native Republic, as directed by the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern). The CPSA's 1929 program called for building "[a]n Independent South African Native Republic as a *stage* towards the Workers' and Peasants' Republic" (CPSA 1929, emphasis added; see also Drew 1991, 2000).
3. Jenkins and Leroy (2021, 22) point out that Blauner's (1972) *Racial Oppression in America* used the term "racial capitalism" as early as 1972. Elsewhere we note that, to our knowledge, this is the first usage of the term in print (Levenson and Paret 2022). Since writing that piece, we have learned that South African sociologist Eddie Webster used the term in a December 1973 speech to the National Union of South African Students. This is the earliest usage of the term in South Africa that we have found (so far).
4. During the Third Period, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) instructed the CPSA to build separate ethnic states even before the apartheid state made doing so official policy (Lodge 2022, 164), calling "[f]or the right of the Zulu, Basuto, etc. nations to form own Independent Republics" (ECCI 2003 [1931], 18), which, as party leader Lazar Bach argued, would "bring about a voluntary association of national republics – Sotho, Tswana, Swazi, Zulu, Xhosa – in a federation of independent native republics" (Simons and Simons 1983 [1956], 473; see also Legassick 1973, 52). But this position quickly faded into oblivion, with the CPSA's organizing work focused on industry rather than ethnicity.

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