

Black Atlantic, Black Liberation

Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich

The cultural history of the ‘Black Atlantic’ and the African diaspora as a “modern political and cultural formation” cannot be adequately understood without reference to the transatlantic slave trade and colonial conquest.¹ Blackness and the ideology of white supremacy are legacies of European colonialism and its plunder and pillaging of Africa and other continents. ‘Race’, in this sense, is not extrinsic to capitalist modernity or simply the product of specific historical formations such as Jim Crow America (c. 1883-1965) or South African apartheid (c. 1948-1994). Likewise, capitalism does not simply incorporate racial domination as an incidental part of its operations, but from its origins “systematically begins producing and reproducing ‘race’ as global surplus humanity”.²

Africans caught and sold into chattel slavery provided the unfree labor for the plantation system in the American South and in the Caribbean; they were condemned to the production of cotton, sugar, tobacco and coffee as commodities for the emerging world market – or the misery of domestic servitude. The ‘triangular trade’, which lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, was an economic terror regime if there ever was one. According to conservative estimates, 12.5 million Africans were taken across the so-called Middle Passage (of the triangular trade) on slave ships; over 2 million died on this journey alone.

Kunta Kinte, Alex Haley’s iconic fictional character, first introduced in the 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and adapted to the television screen in the eponymous 1977 ABC miniseries, is a popular representation of the history and trauma of chattel slavery (which considers slaves as personal property), the Middle Passage and the plantation system. In 2016, budgeted at \$50 million and featuring famous actors such as Forest Whitaker and Laurence Fishburne, a slightly less melodramatic remake of *Roots* was aired on the History Channel. Here, too, Kunta Kinte remains the story’s central character. Taken captive in the Gambia and sold into the slave trade, the male Mandinka warrior’s

courageous refusal to accept his slave name and numerous daring attempts at escape (that resulted in his mutilation) are commonly understood as contributing to the cultural memory of slavery and liberation in a way that equally acknowledges Black suffering and resistance: “They can put the chains on your body. Never let them put the chains on your mind” (*Roots*, 2016, ep. 2).

Such focus on *individual* acts of (symbolic) resistance and defiant consciousness, however, can also suppress the memory of *collective* acts of militant resistance such as slave revolts (e. g. in South Carolina, 1822, led by Denmark Vesey, and in Virginia, 1831, led by Nat Turner) and sideline the role of organized abolitionist networks, of which the so-called Underground Railroad was the most successful. Some estimates suggest that by 1850, 100,000 slaves had escaped to the North via the ‘Railroad’, which counted Harriet Tubman and John Brown among its most (in)famous members.

The original “‘race making’ institution”³ of slavery, however, did not simply disappear with the passing of legal acts in the nineteenth century such as the (British) Slavery Abolition Act (1833) and Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863). Instead, it was the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the defeat of the Confederate States Army that sealed the fate of the plantation system in the South. The first successful revolution to abolish slavery and overthrow (French) colonial rule in the New World, however, was the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), chronicled by the Caribbean historian C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins* (1963).

The aim of this final chapter of our introductory course is to *historicize* racism; this means that rather than looking for anthropological or psychological reasons for why one group of humans devalues another group on the basis of external markers (like skin color, for example), we are concentrating on the changing socio-economic conditions that produce and form racism. In particular, this chapter introduces a historical materialist analysis of slavery and “racial capitalism”⁴ in order to provide a conceptual understanding of the role of ‘race’ in capitalist modernity.

As Karl Marx noted as early as 1867, the basis for “primitive accumulation” (as a condition of possibility for the capitalist mode of production) lay in New World plantation slavery, resource extraction and the extermination or domination of non-European populations on a world scale:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation (*ursprüngliche Akkumulation*).⁵

Marx emphasizes that the different moments of so-called primitive accumulation were first “systematically combined together at the end of the seventeenth century in England”. While these methods depended

on brute force, for instance the colonial system [...], they all employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition.⁶

The position of the slave is generally determined by what Orlando Patterson has termed “social death”.⁷ African slaves in the New World were by definition excluded from both citizenship (rights) and ‘free’ labor relations (wages). The open racism of the colonial period made the contradiction between enslavement and freedom somewhat invisible, and, in doing so, justified slavery as a legitimate, if not natural, condition for African Americans. This racism was not simply driven by blind hatred, but by the profitable enterprise of forced labor. Historian Barbara Fields reminds us that “the chief business of slavery”, after all, was “the production of cotton, sugar, rice and tobacco”, not the “production of white supremacy”.⁸

In the immediate aftermath of slavery, restrictive laws (so-called Black codes) were designed to reimpose the conditions of slavery on the freed, or otherwise ensure their continued availability as cheap labor. The codes were ultimately abolished and replaced with the first Civil Rights Act of 1866. At this point, Black people were no longer formally excluded from citizenship, but they were also freed with almost no discernible means to create new lives outside of bondage. Only few years later, so-called Jim Crow laws (re-)enforced racial segregation across the South. By the twentieth century, shifting concepts of race were applied not only to justify labor relations but more generally to explain the curious way in

which the experiences of the vast majority of African Americans confounded the central narrative of the United States as a place of unbounded opportunity, freedom and democracy.⁹

In terms of ideology, ‘race’ is thus in a constant process of being made and remade:

Ideology is best understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day. [...] It is the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and re-create their collective being [...]. As such, ideologies are not delusions but real, as real as the social relations for which they stand [...]. An ideology must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies, even though it may seem to be safely embodied in a form that can be handed down.¹⁰

In other words, racial ideology naturalizes the historical and social causes of Black inequality and cultural difference. It can even be strategically or unconsciously employed to blame Black people for their own oppression, transforming material causes into subjective causes.

It may be more difficult to see, however, what structural forms anti-black racism took after the original ‘race making’ institutions of slavery and racial segregation had ended with the Voting Rights Act in 1965. During the Fordist period of industrial production, African American labor constituted a seemingly indispensable workforce in the United States, especially in the industrial centers of the North and major cities on the East Coast, where a majority of Black Americans settled during the so-called Great Migration from a rural South to an urban North (c. 1910-1970). As a consequence, the new ‘race making’ institution of the ‘ghetto’ historically superseded the earlier ‘peculiar institutions’ of slavery and the Jim Crow laws.¹¹ It inherited, though, the twin political and economic functions of social ostracization and economic exploitation, of “ethno-racial enclosure” and “labor extraction”.¹²

In 1964, only a month away from the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Malcolm X (much like Martin Luther King, Jr.) castigated economic exploitation of Black people as “the most vicious form practiced on any people in America”.¹³ Likewise, the Black Panther Party since their

inception in 1966 fought against the super-exploitation of Black labor and other parts of the working class. The formal emancipation of Black citizens, curiously, coincided with the emergence of the inner-city Black ghetto:

By the 1960s, [...] white Americans began to flee the central city in droves. These decisions are typically attributed to their racist aversions to living alongside blacks. Such aversions were commonplace; embodied in restrictive covenants and a violent defense of the ‘color line’. But the growth of the suburbs in this period is arguably better understood as a case of capital flight, enabled by America’s peculiar fiscal geography. In the 1950s federal spending and subsidies redirected investment from cities to suburbs via a boom in highway and home construction. Factories moved to the suburbs to take advantage of the new infrastructure, escape urban union strongholds, and benefit from lower taxes – and many skilled and white-collar workers followed them. [...] This pattern of economic development generated a racialized social crisis.¹⁴

In the 1980s, in a historical move ‘out of the frying pan into the fire’, Black labor increasingly found itself rendered superfluous to the needs of the post-Fordist economy, which had trapped poor and working-class Blacks at the bottom of the social structure. A so-called ‘War on Drugs’ (initiated by the Nixon administration and continued under Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Obama, Trump and Biden) further contributed to the rise of what can be called the US carceral state. Black inner-city ghettos and social housing ‘projects’ as well as poor suburban areas transformed into a space that the sociologist Loïc Wacquant calls “hyperghetto”. This hyperghetto is characterized by a “deadly symbiosis” of ghetto and prison, in which the ghetto increasingly meshes with the prison system so as to constitute the fourth and most recent ‘race making’ institution.¹⁵ This is the social space that gangsta rap and trap music refer to as the ‘hood’ or ‘trap’ respectively.¹⁶

Wacquant’s analysis not only concentrates on socio-economic and political developments, but also emphasizes the significance of (stereotypical) media representations such as the “dissolute teenage ‘welfare mother’ on the female side and the dangerous street ‘gang banger’ on the male side” that are pervasive in neoliberal ‘law and order’ discourse

and ubiquitous on national television.¹⁷ Even bestial metaphors such as ‘super-predators’, ‘wolf-packs’ or ‘animals’ are common in the journalistic and political field – when denigrating poor people, in general, and Black poor people, in particular. The conflation of blackness and crime (as well as blackness and welfare) thus reactivates ‘race’ and anti-black racism and shapes social policy, not least when it comes to the penal system. The “disparity in incarceration between rich and poor” has risen “dramatically over the last few decades”, John Clegg and Adaner Usmani observe in their examination of the economic origins of mass incarceration. And as Black people have been pushed into poverty, underemployment and informal work more strongly than others, they also end up in prison more often:

Black men born between 1965 and 1969 have been more likely to go to prison than to graduate from college. American punishment is [...] of unprecedented severity – more prisoners per capita than ever before, and more so than any comparable country in world history. It is also characterized by extreme inequality – some Americans are much more likely to languish in prisons than others.¹⁸

From the perspective of Cultural Studies, the persistent centrality of ‘race’ in the reproduction of class relations is hardly surprising. “Race”, as Stuart Hall put it in a UNESCO paper, is a “modality in which class is ‘lived’”.¹⁹ In *Policing the Crisis* (1978), Hall and his colleagues first argued that race is “intrinsic to the manner in which the black labouring classes are complexly constituted”, at economic, political and ideological levels. By way of a conjunctural analysis of British news media representations of ‘mugging’ and the role of such representations in the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism (‘law and order’), they were able to show that, for black proletarians,

race is the modality in which class is lived. It is also the medium in which class relations are experienced. This [...] has consequences for the whole class, whose relation to their conditions of existence is now systematically transformed by race.²⁰

Uneven deindustrialization, for instance, “first displaces black workers into informal economies and market struggles”. As a consequence, many “now confront extreme policing, hyperincarceration, and the lived

experience of being surplus to the needs of the economy”.²¹ Surplus, that is, to an economy geared towards profits, and not towards providing people with a livelihood.

According to Joshua Clover, those ‘surplus to the needs of the economy’ are the exemplary subjects of “a global recomposition of class within which the riot of surplus populations is not a likelihood but a certainty”.²² Such “surplus rebellions” generally occur in spaces of consumption or circulation (market squares, shopping malls, logistic centers, highways) rather than spaces of production (factories, mines, offices), from which the most precarious and immiserated groups increasingly find themselves excluded.²³ For Clover, writing in 2015, the “recent waves of struggle” from Oakland to Ferguson and Baltimore essentially reveal the riot of racialized surplus populations to be “the other of [mass] incarceration”.²⁴

In the United States, the carceral state can be seen as a spatial fix to an economic crisis, a means of managing those who find themselves superfluous to the needs of a capitalist economy. While neoliberal restructuring served to ‘manage’ the problem of structural unemployment by transforming it into various forms of chronic underemployment (rising precarity), Black youth unemployment in some regions has kept floating near 50 percent. In her study of the formation of mass incarceration in California, Ruth Wilson Gilmore concludes that the

correspondence between regions of suffering deep economic restructuring, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among men [among which Black and Latino men are overrepresented; D. B.-U.], and intensive surveillance of youth by the state’s criminal justice apparatus present the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state’s solution.²⁵

Structural racism of this kind no longer needs conscious racist hatred and bigotry, but it still needs people acting in ways that support such structures. Where ‘punishing the poor’ is chosen over meaningful reform, Black people are much more likely to experience police violence or end up in prison when socio-economic structures leave them more vulnerable.

As Chris Chen argues, racialization and proletarianization are mutually constitutive processes in relation to the production of ‘relative surplus populations’ on a global scale:

The rise of the anti-black US carceral state from the 1970s onward exemplifies rituals of state and civilian violence which enforce the racialisation of wageless life, and the racial ascription of wagelessness. From the point of view of capital, 'race' is [also] renewed [...] through the racialisation of unwaged surplus or superfluous populations from Khartoum to the slums of Cairo.²⁶

Marx analyzed the production of such 'relative surplus populations' (that is people in structural un-/underemployment) alongside the reproduction of the wage-relation in *Capital*, where he used the term to describe that part of the workforce "no longer directly necessary for the self-valorization of capital".²⁷ According to Marx, the contradictions of capitalist production for profit promote "overproduction, speculation and crises", and lead to the "existence of excess capital alongside a surplus population".²⁸ Rather than absorbing more and more labor, capital increasingly ejects workers from the immediate process of (an increasingly automated) sphere of value production (the factory) into the sphere of circulation, where value is realized (the market). While some (already precarious) workers can still sell their labor for a wage in the sphere of circulation (Amazon, Ueber, Gorillas, etc.), others find themselves excluded even from exploitation (slum dwellers, long-term unemployed, etc.).

Given the global trajectory of capitalist crisis since the 1970s, the historical timing could hardly be worse, as Chen notes with regard to the confluence of surplus-proletarianization and racialization. After decades of compounding increases in productivity, accompanied by an unresolved crisis of industrial profitability, capital began to expel more labor from the production process than was absorbed. That, in turn, produced a population superfluous to the needs of the economy in the form of a disproportionately non-white 'industrial reserve army' of labor:

At the periphery of the global capitalist system, capital now renews 'race' by creating vast superfluous urban populations from the close to one billion slum-dwelling and desperately impoverished descendants of the enslaved and colonised.²⁹

However, as we discussed before, economic relations do not determine social formations in any simple way; both the Black laboring and non-laboring classes are "complexly constituted" at the economic, political

and ideological levels, which calls for a “conjunctural analysis” of any given period in the history of capitalist crisis “during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape” – or articulation.³⁰ Race, class, gender, and other social antagonisms necessarily *intersect* in various ways and social relations have to be *lived*, too.

If we direct our attention to the present and to the role of state violence and ‘white anxiety’ rather than ascribed Black inferiority, we may come to the conclusion that the most popular monster figure in today’s global media culture – the zombie horde – has a long and racialized history, linked in no uncertain terms to the fear of “a generalized insurrection by the black proletariat”.³¹ Cultural Studies offers a theoretical framework and methodology that allows us to better understand the cultural work performed by this figure as well as other (non-fictional) media representations. After all, racialized ‘surplus populations’ often have nowhere to go and nowhere to hide as the “police now stand in the place of the economy, the violence of the commodity made flesh”.³² In this context, ‘Black Lives Matter’ is not a purely American slogan or a simple fact. Rather it is “a universal and generative truth, from which great implications flow”.³³ The 2020 George Floyd Rebellion, a militant nationwide and multiracial insurrection, extending from Minneapolis to hundreds of cities in and outside the United States, dramatically proved that the struggle for abolition continues in the present.

1. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: 1993, p. 19.
2. Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism", *Endnotes* 3 (2013), 202-223, here p. 214.
3. Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh", *Punishment & Society* 3:1 (2001), 95-133, here p. 116.
4. Cf. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, London: 1983.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: 1976, p. 915.
6. Ibid., p. 915-916.
7. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge: 2018, p. 38.
8. Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America", *New Left Review* 181:1 (1990), 95-118, here p. 99.
9. Cf. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford, 1997.
10. Barbara J. & Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, London: 2012, p. 134, 137.
11. Cf. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis", p. 98.
12. Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham: 2009, p. 198-208.
13. Malcolm X qtd. in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago: 2016, p. 38.
14. John Clegg & Adaner Usmani, "The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration", *Catalyst* 3:3 (2019) (accessed 22 Jan 2024).
15. Cf. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis", p. 116.
16. Cf. Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, "Surplus Trap: Crisis, Gangsta Rap, and Trap Music Videos", *LWU L:3/4* (2017), p. 211-239.
17. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis", p. 120.
18. Clegg & Usmani, "The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration", n. pag.
19. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance", *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris: 1980, 305-345, here p. 341.
20. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke & Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London: 1978, p. 394.
21. Joshua Clover, "Surplus Rebellion", *The New Inquiry*, May 17, 2016 (accessed 26 Jan 2021).
22. Ibid.
23. Cf. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*, London: 2016, p. 129-152.
24. Ibid., p. 162.
25. Ruth W. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Berkeley: 2007, p. 113.
26. Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality", p. 217.
27. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 557.
28. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach, London: 1991, p. 350.
29. Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality", p. 209.
30. Stuart Hall & Doreen Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis", *Soundings* 44 (2010), p. 57-71.
31. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, Cambridge: 2014, p. 18.
32. Clover, *Riot*, p. 125-126.
33. Bue R. Hansen, "The Universal Truth of Black Lives Matter – a View from Europe", *roarmag.org*, June 14, 2020 (accessed 29 Sep 2021).

Selected Bibliography

Fields, Barbara J. & Karen E. Fields: *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*, London: 2012.

Gilmore, Ruth W.: *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Berkeley: 2007.

Gilroy, Paul: *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: 1993.

Hall, Stuart, et al.: *Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London: 1978.

quote as:

Dennis Buescher-Ulbrich, “Black Atlantic, Black Liberation”, *An Introduction to the Study of British and American Cultures*, cultural-studies.org (February 2024)