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Capitalism and Race Redux

Race is among the more tortured axes of American social relations. The nation was formed from slavery and genocide and no redistribution of political and economic power has been made to rectify the imbalance that resulted. And less formalized types of violence and exploitation have persisted into the present. The same is true of treatment of the indigenous population— as late as the 1970s indigenous women of childbearing age were still being forcibly sterilized.

This history creates a paradox. Three and one-half centuries after the Anglo-American incarnation of slavery was brought to American shores and one-hundred and fifty years after it was formally ended, racial injustice persists. The economic basis of the injustice was well understood during slavery. Subsequent framing in terms of race misstates the economic motives that have persisted into the present.

The strategy of placing slavery and genocide in a nebulous past ignores that genocide against the indigenous population was still underway when the Nazis began their political ascent in Germany. The relationship between ‘clearing the land’ through genocide in the Americas and the rise of American industrial and military hegemony hardly required an analytical leap. Neither did the contribution of ‘capital accumulation’ that resulted from slavery.

“Avoiding links to the Nazi genocides and German eugenics program may be the foremost contributor to this deliberate secrecy regarding American eugenics.” – D. Forbes, University of Vermont

The backdrop of the political question is that the U.S. remains highly racially segregated. The broader social axis that encompasses this racial segregation is economic segregation. Within the liberal conception of race, racial segregation has an ugly logic. People who share an 'identity' live with those who share it. Economic segregation— rich with rich, bourgeois with bourgeois, working class with working class and poor with poor, suggests that economic factors drive most segregation.

Economic history, as a social history of economic relations, goes quite far in tying where people live to the economic reasons for their being there. The Great Migration of Southern blacks to the industrial North occurred with industrialization and ended with deindustrialization. Today, the heaviest concentrations of poor and working-class blacks remain where they landed in the Great Migration and in the Southern states where slavery was last to end.

A central problem for resolving the class versus race divide is that identity politics and class analysis proceed from incompatible conceptions of history. Economic history goes far in explaining racial segregation. Race as identity offers no insight into economic segregation more broadly considered. The fey concept of 'choice' applies to those with economic means. Otherwise, people tend to live where economic history has landed them. Between 1890 and 1960 the U.S. forcibly sterilized 60,000 human beings under the theory that doing so improved the 'race,' used here as a term for species. The science that supported forced sterilization, eugenics, was founded in the U.S. and it formed the basis of the Nazi eugenics program. When Nazi atrocities became fully known after WWII, efforts were made to distance the American program without abandoning forced sterilization. Twenty-two U.S. states still have compulsory sterilization laws.

Of note is that the concept of race embedded in eugenics is transhistorical in the same sense as 'identity.' The human beings labeled 'defective' were considered to have transhistorical qualities that made them so. The paradox at work is that the process of 'improving the race' was historical, but the qualities upon which doing so was premised were transhistorical. This same paradox lies behind identity politics. Identity is transhistorical, even while the process that is said to have created it is historical.

This temporal sleight-of-hand likely explains why the American left has found identity politics increasingly plausible in recent years. Race, as the possession of individuals as identity, is transhistorical even as it is 'externally' generated by an historical process. As personal possession, the tactic of resolution is personal persuasion. As generated by an

historical process, the tactic of resolution is to rework the generating process, a/k/a political economy.

This transhistorical concept of identity can only have developed historically from a pre-existing conception of race. (If not, where did it come from?) Otherwise, if race didn't motivate racist institutions like slavery and genocide in the past, what did? The occasional answer, that slavery and genocide were motivated by economic interests, but at some point race took on a life of its own, leaves the generating mechanism (capitalism) unchallenged. In the liberal formulation, ameliorating the social impact of racism is a battle, either literal or metaphorical, between racists and anti-racists. If this idea is traced back through history, its implausible structure is made apparent. Slaves weren't enslaved based on identity, and neither was it the basis of genocide committed against the indigenous population. The concept of race didn't exist until a half-century after the establishment of American slavery.

Following WWII, the U.S. theorists of capitalist democracy had two problems with selling the American project. The first and largest was that the Great Depression was widely understood to have been a crisis of capitalism so grave that it contributed to the rise of European fascism. The second was that much of the Nazi program had been borrowed from, and a response to, American economic ascension.

It isn't just that Nazi race laws were based on Jim Crow; American slavery and genocide were used by Adolf Hitler as models for Nazi atrocities. Slavery was used by the Nazis to benefit German industrialists much as the 'capital formation process' of American slavery created the material basis of American capitalism. As historian Adam Tooze argues, Nazi conquest and genocide were a grab for land and industrial 'inputs' much as the American genocide was.

Neoliberalism was conceived in 1948 as 'pragmatic' capitalism by a coterie of Western liberals including Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and Karl Popper. The claim of pragmatism was used to reframe capitalism as non-ideological, as political economy conducive to an open society. 'Markets' gave it a scientific basis that ideologies lacked, went the theory. Popper's philosophy of science has held sway over the American left ever since.

The strategy for obscuring the relation of American to Nazi atrocities was to pose irrational ideology as the cause of European fascism. Friedman and Popper proposed scientific inquiry as the solution to fascist irrationalism. That the Nazis had 'better' science under the terms they (Friedman and Popper) laid out didn't matter. The conception

of 'rationality' used came from capitalist economics. This is important, because genocide for economic gain is 'rational' within the frame.

Assertions that irrational ideas led to the rise of Nazism tie to the argument that 'race' explains American history. Friedman, Popper, et al had to explain American history in terms that fundamentally and irrevocably dissociated American from Nazi atrocities. American slavery and genocide were regrettable, but they formed the material basis of American capitalism. Conversely, went the argument, Nazi atrocities were irrational because they were motivated by racial hatred.

But this assignment of motives was at best only partially true. Adam Tooze provides plausible, if grotesque, economic motives for the holocaust. Adolf Hitler saw foreign conquest, slavery and genocide as the path to American style industrial and military hegemony. His motives were rational, if profoundly socially destructive, within the neoliberal conception of rationality. But why would motives determine the moral character of slavery and genocide?

This is where sanity and rationality part ways. The neoliberal conception ties rationality to economic calculation. This is also what ties neoliberalism to liberalism to identity politics. If racism and anti-racism both emerge from identity, then on which side is the broader social interest best served? Racism is irrational in the economic sense that it undermines the efficiency of markets. It does so by placing racial preference ahead of economic gain.

Modern identity politics could be said to have been born in 1990 when George H.W. Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to replace Thurgood Marshall on the Supreme Court. Mr. Marshall had a distinguished career in civil rights litigation that he brought to the Supreme Court. In contrast, Clarence Thomas was a right-wing functionary who, as a Reagan administration appointee to the EEOC, had thrown out tens of thousands of employment discrimination lawsuits without review.

As a candidate for the U.S. Senate, Mr. Bush had opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And he later used the racially coded 'Willie Horton' ad to accuse Michael Dukakis of being 'soft on crime,' a right-wing dog whistle. Given this political history, Mr. Bush's apparent motive for nominating Clarence Thomas was to move the Supreme Court hard-right by putting forward a hard-right candidate that liberals wouldn't oppose because he was black.

To the extent that he lacked known racial animus, Mr. Bush couldn't be accurately labeled a racist. But likewise, his use of race to gain political leverage— an act, could hardly be called liberatory. The same is true of Bill Clinton's 1994 'Crime Bill.' The bill wasn't

overtly racist— no explicit racial motives were embedded in it. Its consequences were racially lopsided (racist) because of the distribution of political and economic power that it affected.

In some ways this is analogous to neoliberal distinctions made between American and Nazi atrocities based on motives. While a program to extract economic gains explains large parts of both ‘projects,’ (see Tooze above), replacing the Nazi motive with ‘irrationality’ went far toward drawing a distinction between them. That Americans imported Nazi scientists wholesale after the war to build weapons of mass destruction and to work in industry suggests that the narrow economic definition of irrationality served a political purpose.

Identity politics is an argument for social reconciliation without a redistribution of power. In the neoliberal frame, redistribution would interfere with the good working of markets even more than racism does. The rational solution: create equality of opportunity. Anti-racist activists play an important role in assuring the good functioning of markets in this respect. If they could end racism entirely, capitalism would benefit.

It is this perceived convergence of interests that appears to have led the American left to embrace liberalism. However, it is the incompatibility of the competing views of history that points to the disconnect. On the one hand, capital accumulation was the motive and conspicuous product of American slavery and genocide. It has also been the rarely uttered subtext of American foreign policy and militarism for the last two centuries.

On the other hand, the distance between the distributional assumptions of liberal / neoliberal economics and oligarchic control of political economy is profound. ‘Whites’ weren’t the primary beneficiaries of slavery and genocide, oligarchs were. Racialization of the distribution of the spoils is to fundamentally misstate the motives and social mechanisms by which these came to be. Slavery was one of the earliest ‘rationalized’ forms of capitalist production, in this respect a model for the industry that followed.

In the present, fighting racists, rather than racism, implies that the redistribution of power has no bearing on the matter. Racism operates through power, not identity. And even this formulation misstates the structure of the problem: racism is a mechanism of social control, not its motive. As an institution, slavery required broad social power to be maintained. It ended when maintaining it became untenable. Following the Civil War, state and private power were used to recreate the economic mechanisms of economic expropriation outside of slavery.

This reading likely strikes post-modernists as wrong— identity is socially constructed goes the logic, and thereby avoids the pitfalls of being transhistorical. However, a taxonomy that denotes axes of identity— race, gender, etc., either operates outside of history or its meaning as given is indeterminate. This is how the economic motives that drove slavery and genocide in an ‘earlier period’ were dissociated from race as identity the present.

If race is perception— ‘identity,’ then what ties it to other people’s perceptions of race to render it singular? Identity politics and racism emerge from related conceptions of what race is. By rendering concrete (reifying) the concept, identitarians agree that it is what racists claim it to be. From the structure of the question, both views emerge from the modular scientific taxonomy shared with eugenics to claim it as intrinsic.

Politically, race as identity is a category of oppression without an identifiable oppressor. Lacking an analytical frame that ties oppression to power, racists and anti-racists are posed as equals. An analogy of mixed liking to anti-racists is equivalently equipped soldiers on a battlefield. They represent competing forces, but none amongst them launched the war, and shooting one another will have little impact on its ultimate resolution.

Once racism is separated from political economy, there is nowhere go with it. Citing race is to grant its fact without resolution. The distribution of political and economic power would bear no causal relation to the problem as it is formulated, therefore the redistribution of these would do nothing to resolve it. This is likely why the idea is so popular amongst liberal politicians. It is a posture without a path to resolution.

Without the analytical frame of class, capitalist modernity is inexplicable, a march of ideas that emerged from history, but with no ties back to it. This deference to an imagined ‘earlier period’ was used by Adam Smith and John Locke to ground economic relations in history without their being historical. In contrast, it was Marx who, in the latter third of *Capital*, Volume I, lays out his history of the Enclosure Movement to explain where the dispossessed classes he was writing about came from.

The fear of rolling a program of racial reconciliation into a broader political program has an historical basis in the structure of the New Deal that excluded blacks in several realms. As historian Touré Reed addresses [here](#), the problem then was the separation of the idea of race from economic history in the construction of the programs. The goal of the New Deal was to save capitalism, not to redistribute political and economic power democratically.

In a personal sense, my friends and I rallied with the few members of the New York Black Panther Party who weren’t then in prison after Fred Hampton was murdered by the police

(in Chicago). The Panthers, the Weather Underground and the broader forces of the anti-War (Vietnam) movement worked together toward a socialist revolution. The first Earth Day took place four months after Fred Hampton was murdered. My only regret is that we weren't successful then.

Capitalism was / is an attack on everything meaningful, sacred and important. It can't be overcome without a democratic redistribution of political and economic power. The neoliberal / liberal worldview is fundamentally antithetical to the socialist program. This doesn't mean don't form alliances. It means that a democratic redistribution of political and economic power is the path forward. Those in the weakest social position today have the most to gain from such a movement.