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The Trap of “Capitalism”, Racial or Otherwise

Abstract

Loïc Wacquant’s essay, “The Trap of ‘Racial Capitalism’”, asks whether the term is “a conceptual solution or a conceptual problem”. His answer is forthright. He argues that racial capitalism has no place in a properly defined and understood social science. In this contribution, we set out the limitations, as we perceive them, of Wacquant’s own analysis and, at the same time, discuss other difficulties of the idea of racial capitalism. These, we suggest, are associated with an absence common to Wacquant and the major proponents of racial capitalism alike; namely, a failure to reckon systematically with the ways in which modern capitalism arises and develops within the global structures of European colonialism.

Keywords: Class; Colonialism; Migration; Race; Slavery.

LOÏC WACQUANT traces the development of the idea of racial capitalism from its specific use within South African debates over apartheid to its adoption by Cedric Robinson, who, according to Wacquant, applies the term “to the entire West across a millennium” [2023: 153]. It is this latter understanding that has become dominant within north American social science, and as Wacquant sets out, it is increasingly accepted within Europe as well. This transnational dominance is the focus of his agitation and, in particular, his sense that the US represents a different social context to that of Europe and that ideas developed in the US ought not to be simply taken up in Europe.¹ Racial justice is a

¹ A similar animus against the false universalism of the concept of “multiculturalism”—of “folk-concepts” imported into theory—

motivates an earlier article written with Pierre Bourdieu [BOURDIEU and WACQUANT 1999].

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legitimate concern of actors across different settings but, for Wacquant, the concept of racial capitalism is inadequate as a means to deliver valid social scientific knowledge relevant to the pursuit of justice in any of the settings in which it is currently applied.

Although it is correct that the United States represents a distinct social context, its difference from Europe is not unconnected to Europe and its histories. It is a settler colonial country deriving from British (and other European) colonial projects. Historically, it was organised in terms of a plantation economy whose legacy continues to structure modes of racial segregation and understandings of racial hierarchy. However, this neither separates the US from other settler colonial countries and other plantation economies, nor from colonial powers such as Britain and France whose engagements across racial lines are initially “externalized” to their colonies only to return later to those metropolises as issues of the “immigration” of non-European “others”.² The requirement for any theoretical construction must be to provide a framework that adequately accounts for these connections.

This introduction to Wacquant’s essay serves to highlight two matters. The first is the distance that Wacquant wishes to put between north America and France in terms of current political realities. The second is how his methodology of beginning from analytical distinctions facilitates the elision of the historical connections between them.

We now turn to his methodological strategy.³ The first aspect is a familiar distinction between science and political engagement derived from Weber’s methodology of value-relevant (*Wertbeziehung*) social science. Wacquant’s criticism is that racial capitalism is, in truth, an idea that comes from political engagement rather than from science. He wishes sociology to be directed towards racial justice, but at the same time to subject how those claims are made in the world to sociological scrutiny; a process which, he suggests, involves “epistemological elucidation, logical clarification, and historical elaboration” [2023: 153]. This is what is needed in his terms “to make the label more than another *conceptual speculative bubble*” [*Ibid.*]. Wacquant’s purpose in the essay, then, is to show that the idea of racial capitalism conflates distinctions necessary to professional social science.

² We place “immigration” in inverted commas because, although Wacquant treats immigration as a matter of movement across national boundaries—as, for example, between Belgium and France, and Spain or Italy and France, as in the study by Noirel that

he cites—subjects of Empire only become migrants across a political boundary after the end of Empire.

³ His methodological approach is set out more extensively in WACQUANT 2022.

Alongside his distinction between political engagement and science, he argues that there is an analytical (logical) distinction to be made between the "economic" and the "social". The former is a sphere of rational actions, while the latter refers to non-rational values, norms, conventions, and the like. Once this essentially Weberian distinction is accepted, then the "capitalism" in racial capitalism is assigned to the "economic", while the "racial" is understood as a matter of the "social". Even before we have examined any of the substantive arguments put forward by proponents of the idea of racial capitalism, we are invited to understand it as logically deficient and resting upon the conflation of an analytically necessary distinction.

Wacquant attributes to the authors of the idea of racial capitalism the view that, because they have placed race and capitalism within a single concept, they are committed to the idea that capitalism is *necessarily racialised*. By the same token, once the analytical distinction is made, it is easy for Wacquant to make a counter argument that capitalism can easily be conceptualised as not racialised. Beyond this, and following the Weberian direction in which Wacquant seeks to take us, he concedes that racial capitalism is a logical possibility, but it is only one such possibility. There are many forms that capitalism could take, for example, *gender* capitalism, *state* capitalism, and *military* capitalism. It is significant that there is one form of capitalism that Weber identifies that Wacquant does not discuss. This is "modern capitalism", a form distinct from other types that have occurred historically and one that is "world historical" in its character in the sense that other types of capitalism have occurred in the interstices of other social and economic arrangements without coming to dominate over them.

Wacquant's treatment of enslavement is similar in nature. He does not directly discuss "modern slavery". Indeed, he performs the same exercise in his discussion of slavery as he does in his discussion of capitalism, identifying many possible types of slavery. Here, he draws on Orlando Patterson's historical account of the varieties of slavery to argue that the majority of those types do not involve racial or ethnic difference. However, this focus on the variety of types deflects from any focused consideration of the specificity of *modern forms of forced labour*.

By "modern capitalism", of course, we (and Weber) mean capitalism understood as the organised orientation to profit through the production and sale of commodities (what Marx, for his part, called the capitalist mode of production); by "modern slavery", we mean chattel slavery, or the development of the trade and use of human beings as commodities and the utilisation of their forced labour. Notice the association between

the two definitions. Within sociology, and including both Marx and Weber, the first involves the commodification of the labour power of the labourer, while the second depends on the commodification of the labourer [Holmwood and Bhambra 2018]. Modern slavery, then, is distinct and different from other forms of enslavement. By and large, however, the understanding of modern capitalism arises in social science without recognition of chattel slavery (and other forms of forced labour such as indenture) as a part of it. Indeed, it would seem to have a distinct character as both peculiarly modern and only contingently related to the emergence and reproduction of modern capitalism.

Wacquant wishes to argue that proponents of the idea of racial capitalism ignore the “hundred years of plain academic economic history” that suggest that capitalism emerged out of feudalism [2023: 153]. But, of course, plain academic economic history is not clearcut even from within Wacquant’s Weberian methodological assumptions. The selection of problems is, after all, provided by value-relevant questions and conceptual framings. So, if the conceptual construction of modern capitalism, whose emergence is the object of social scientific interest, has been defined in a way that elides issues of forced labour as integral to it (because of its claim that its underlying logic derives from free labour) then that “plain academic economic history” will stand in need of rectification. The puzzle is why Wacquant refuses to see this, given that it is consistent with his own methodological assumptions.

He understands the United States as a special case and allows that race might have salience there, but argues strongly that this understanding of the salience of race should not be generalised, and especially not to France. Yet, France was a slave-holding society, just as Britain and other European countries were, during the period of what is presented as the emergence of modern capitalism. As we observed earlier, the special nature of the US is that the consequences of its past as a plantation society are visible within the present and within its current boundedness as a country. For former European colonial powers, that past now lies outside their current national boundaries. As such, it can be presented as not part of their present unless, as Wacquant believes, it is “falsely” imported into that present by new, misplaced, theories of “racial capitalism”.

Wacquant takes great exception to the idea of racial capitalism but also great glee in the fact that it is difficult to find its major proponent, Cedric Robinson, using the term. He does not believe that this could be an opportunity to consider Robinson’s arguments and how they might be positively reconstructed; he only negates their potential value. We should state at this point that we, ourselves, are not advocates of the term racial

capitalism. What we wish to do here, however, is to provide a positive reconstruction of those arguments to place slavery within our understandings of modern capitalism. We further wish to go beyond the understandable emphasis on slavery to see how other forms of unfree, forced labour, such as indenture, are also integrally associated with modern capitalism (and are also returning to visibility, especially in proposals for the management of migrant labour in new forms of indenture; [see Holmwood and Bhambra 2015]). But we also want to argue that appropriation through labour is not the only colonial mechanism.

One of the problems of Robinson’s [(1983) 2020] conceptualisation is his strong attachment to Marx’s core idea of capitalism as formed around the capital-labour relation. This is also true of all other proponents of racial capitalism. It is in terms of this relation that Marx himself also operates with a form of the analytical separation of the economic and the social. Thus, pre-existing conventional differences among labourers drawn into the capitalist mode of production—whether those are differences associated with gender or race—will gradually be eroded by a process of proletarianization that reduces all to “abstract” labour. The force of Robinson’s argument is to show that, in the face of the “universal” processes of class formation that modern capitalism *should* reproduce, what is in fact reproduced are racialised differences.⁴

Wacquant might have reflected upon why Robinson called his book *Black Marxism*, not *Racial Capitalism*. We suggest that it is because Robinson was engaging with a tradition of Black thought that had seen the universalism of class as an alternative political position to the false universalism of US “democratic values” (as in Myrdal’s idea of the “American creed” that would dissolve racial difference⁵). He is further confronting the political failure of the universalism of class as a rallying call for proletarian solidarity across racial lines. We also note that, for those who live racial injustice, the matter cannot primarily be an issue of “sociological correctness”. The lived injustice is, at least, also a spur to sociological reconstruction.

Robinson gives up the universalism of class, while retaining class as the underlying mechanism producing the injustice that he is concerned with rectifying. That is, he is interested in the appropriation of the surplus produced by labour while at the same time understanding the nature of that labour as more varied than simply organised as free labour.

⁴ This is the reason why Robinson’s ideas are also fiercely resisted by some Marxists asserting the “truth” of proletarian identity.

See, for example, ROBINSON, RANGEL and WATSON 2022.

⁵ MYRDAL 1944.

Also, he is committed to understanding how capitalism can continue to reproduce conventional differences as part of what David Roediger [1991], after Du Bois, called the “wages of whiteness”. What if the problem with the idea of racial capitalism was not its understanding of race, but its Marxist (and Weberian) understanding of capitalism? This understanding of capitalism is something shared by Wacquant. Modern capitalism is regarded as a distinct and self-contained economic formation (mode of production) of modernity. It is seen to emerge out of the transition from feudalism in Europe, involving the dispossession of peasant producers and new social relations of production that are then accelerated through the expansion of production for the market and mechanisation. The conceptual structure for its analysis is provided by Marx and subsequently re-interpreted through Weber within mainstream sociology. [For further discussion, see, Bhambra and Holmwood 2021.]

How should we understand modern capitalism differently? Here we propose to understand it as colonialism. This is not to argue for an idea of “colonial capitalism” (as if the two have only a contingent relation), but to argue for a political economy of colonialism within which the structures and processes that are otherwise attributed to capitalism are located and re-conceptualised.

Wacquant suggests that there “is a crucial triple question that racial capitalism eludes because it presupposes it resolved: when, how, and why did the *economic variant of slavery become racialized* in the Atlantic world?” [2023: 160]. The irony of Wacquant asking these questions is that the answers lie where he steadfastly refuses to look. The economic variant of slavery is a product of modern European colonialism, and it is precisely in this context that distinctions are made between free and forced labour with the latter coming to be racialized. This is not simply an issue of the Atlantic world, but something that exists across all the worlds of European colonialism. This is also not to imply that unfree labour was unknown within Europe before the emergence of free labour [see, Kolchin 1987]. But with the availability of unfree labour elsewhere, free labour becomes a category of social distinction rather than the primary economic category of emergent modern capitalism.

Wacquant wishes activists for racial justice to take *class* more seriously, but his own understanding of class is grounded in the idea of free labour and a conventional understanding of the history of capitalism that “moves from its primitive to competitive to monopoly to neoliberal incarnations” [2023: 153]. In this context, he argues that the very idea of racial capitalism forecloses the question of how capitalism takes on

board racialization differentially in each of these stages. Yet, it is he who has separated the issue of unfree labour from the constitution of class. His political economy depends upon a logical distinction by which modern capitalism is separated from its origins in colonialism. Let us explore this issue a little further because it involves a re-framing of racial capitalism through the lens of colonialism.⁶

Colonialism is not simply a companion condition of the emergence of capitalism, which is otherwise understood through an immanent logic (an impulsion “outwards”—whether of markets or production). In many discussions of the history of capitalism, Wacquant’s included, there are typically four stages presented. As Fraser and Jaeggi, for example, put it: “first, mercantile or commercial capitalism, followed by so-called “liberal” (competitive) capitalism, then state-managed (or social-democratic) capitalism, and finally, financialized capitalism” [2018: 64].

Mercantile capitalism is defined by the increasingly global trade in luxury commodities conducted by private European corporations operating under royal charters. The activities of these companies were not simply profit-seeking through turning the terms of trade to their advantage, but also involved claims for jurisdiction and sovereignty in the name of European monarchs. As such, their activities occur in the context of the appropriation of lands, via the elimination and dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the beginnings of the systematic trade in human beings that would enslave millions of Africans and transport them, as commodities, to the New World. Rather than understanding this stage as “mercantile capitalism”, it is better understood as “colonialism through private property” and its extended imposition and reproduction. Whereas enclosure in Europe is seen to create a nascent class of free labour, the incorporation of lands elsewhere does not.

Colonialism through commercial corporations is succeeded by “colonialism as a national project” whereby European states begin the process of restricting the external activities of private companies through the establishment of direct colonial rule and incorporating colonies and imperial possessions within a nationally organised political economy. This includes the utilisation of labour—both enslaved and indentured—but also extends to direct appropriation through taxes and other forms of extraction upon colonial populations. These monies are used both in the metropole and in the furthering of elite economic interests in the dominion and settler colonies (including those not under direct political

⁶ This section of our paper draws on BHAMBRA 2021.

control, such as the US and Argentina). State-managed colonialism facilitated the development of what is otherwise seen as global industrial capitalism emanating from activities in the metropole. As Patnaik and Patnaik argue, even countries without colonies benefitted from the colonial drain from India as more than “four-fifths of export of capital from Britain went to developing continental Europe, North America, and regions of recent white settlement such as Argentina, South Africa, and Australia” [2017: 184].

These processes necessarily impinge upon what is otherwise seen as the domestic class formation of national societies in Europe and north America. This class formation is typically understood in terms of an organised working class and its struggles for a welfare state and the partial declassification of labour. Outside professional social science—for example, among commentators in the colonized world and the segregated societies of north America⁷—the connection between the exploitation of colonies and welfare in the metropole was understood. It was also evident to policy-makers in the colonial metropole. For example, Winston Churchill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1929, described income from the British colonies as “the explanation of the source from which we are able to defray social services at a level incomparably higher than that of any European country... These resources from overseas constitute the keystone... of our economic position”. As Hansen and Jonsson [2014] have shown, the European Union also came about with the explicit understanding of Africa providing a dowry for Europe.

As we have argued throughout, what are presented as separate societies—Britain, France, the US, etc.—are interconnected by processes that run through them. This does not mean that those processes produce common effects. For example, the United States did not develop a common and public welfare state as became typical across Europe. Instead, it had segregated “Fordist” welfare arrangements which provided benefits through private corporations that were themselves racially segregated [see, Holmwood and Bhambra 2018]. For the most part, Europe’s racial divide lay outside national borders in transfers of wealth from the colonies to the metropolises and in the restricted movement of people. Wacquant cites Gérard Noiriel’s [1988] study of French immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries to characterise the country’s openness. However, this is primarily migration from other European

⁷ For example, by NAOROJI 1901, W.E.B DU BOIS (1945) 2007, and COOPER 1892 among others.

countries, and Noiriél argued that it would take three generations before a similar assessment could be made of migrants from France’s colonial empire. It is piquant that Wacquant fails to offer a recent evaluation, but it is perhaps significant that his animus towards American theories of racial capitalism expresses concern over the importation of “foreign” ideas about racial difference, but not about racial differentiation in France itself.

How are we to understand *les trente glorieuses* across post-WW2 Western societies without understanding the patrimony of colonialism? How are we to understand their end without its association with the end of formal colonialism? Perhaps now, with neoliberal recommodification of labour in the West, we are experiencing pure capitalism at the end of colonialism, and the possibility of capitalism without race. In fact, it looks much more like the earliest form of modern colonialism through private property where the extractive practices of large corporations are able to dominate nation states, especially those of “new” nations. The political economy of neoliberalism does not seem to be based upon the form of the class relation central to theories of capitalism.

What we have set out here is a sketch of a political economy in which colonialism is central rather than contingent. Our purpose has been to show that each of the stages of the history of capitalism is determined by colonial processes and practices. There is no underlying logic of capitalism that can be separated from colonialism and no underlying logic through which colonial relations are filtered. Given that colonialism operates through forms of domination in which only national populations are considered to provide the legitimacy on which sovereignty rests, it is not possible for it to be anything other than a system organised on the basis of race. None of this involves either an essentialising of race or an argument that race represents a constant in how it is manifested. Rather, we are setting out the ways in which colonial processes produce and mobilise racial difference.

The problem does not lie with the emphasis on race in racial capitalism, but in the concept of capitalism as a process separated from colonialism.

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