

Revisiting “Racial Capitalism”

Abstract

The brief essay is a response to an article by the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant which critiques the concept of “racial capitalism” that has gained much prominence and currency in recent times. It offers a historical analysis of the emergence of “race” as a concept in the Euro-Atlantic sphere and points to the complexities in extending it beyond that space, into the Indian Ocean world for example. As a consequence, the ambitious claims made by some theorists of “racial capitalism” appear difficult to sustain.

Keywords: Asia; Atlantic; capitalism; caste; race.

IN HIS BRIEF BUT MORDANT ESSAY, the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant offers a refreshing critical perspective on the concept of “racial capitalism”. This concept has, in the past two decades, gained much ground in the United States and other parts of the world where the social sciences and history are practiced in an Americanized mode; so far, its success in many parts of Europe and Asia has been more limited (with the inevitable exception of the UK). However, as Wacquant rightly notes, this success has not always been accompanied by a rigorous examination of the concept since it first entered common use in the 1980s, on the impulsion of the writings of Cedric Robinson and his followers. A recent essay by historian Catherine Hall seems undecided, for example, as to whether using the concept implies “that the historical development of capitalism and race were inseparable” (a strong claim) or whether it is merely “a way of talking about the interconnected systems of racialized and capitalist formations” (a far more modest view) [Hall 2022]. Wacquant’s purpose is therefore to pose some difficult questions concerning the concept’s analytical thrust and coherence, and then to relate it to some of the relevant literature on the modern United States in particular. My own purpose in this brief essay is different but complementary, namely, to deepen the historical perspective on the concept of

race and to offer some brief remarks based above all on the history of capitalism in Asia. Since Wacquant surveys much of the relevant sociological literature that is both supportive and critical of racial capitalism as a concept, I will not go over the same ground except where it is essential.

It is well-known that race as a concept (a “floating signifier” that “can never be finally or transhistorically fixed”, in Stuart Hall’s words) [Hall 2021] is located in a densely populated semantic field, and a major difficulty lies in distinguishing it from other concepts that have been used to classify populations on an ethnic basis (as opposed to through features such as gender, age, or political preference). It goes without saying that no serious analyst today is able to defend the view that such ethnic classifications have a serious biological or otherwise objective basis, and everyone is consequently more-or-less a “constructivist” on the matter of race [Fredrickson 2002]. This has nevertheless led to several debates which have not been satisfactorily resolved. I will focus here on two of them. One concerns the antiquity of ideas of race in the western (Euro-Atlantic) world. The other concerns the translatability of ideas from outside the western world to western concepts of race. We shall see presently that the two problems are in fact related. As regards the former, the intellectual historian Jean-Frédéric Schaub has proposed the existence of roughly five positions in the recent literature: (1) the view that a clearly defined concept of race had already emerged in classical antiquity with the Greeks and Romans and then persisted through European history [Perry *et al.*, 2021: 215–216]; (2) the position that race as an idea was in fact born during the Crusades, with the political and military confrontation between Christians and Muslims (and to a lesser extent Jews) producing forms of racialized alterity; (3) a view—largely supported by Schaub himself—that underlines the crucial role for the emergence of ideas of race of the Iberian expulsion of Jews and Muslims and the construction of the Iberian overseas empires in the 15th and 16th centuries, with their emphasis on colonization and the long-distance slave trade; (4) a position that emphasizes the central place of the European Enlightenment and its projects of human classification in the later 17th and 18th centuries; (5) and, finally, the position that race as a stable concept and racism as an ideology only emerged full blown from the 19th century, with Social Darwinism, “scientific racism”, and allied projects. While Schaub has not produced a rigorous “conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*)” of race, his exercise is nevertheless a useful point of departure for our purposes [Schaub 2018; Schaub and Sebastiani 2021].

It is clear where Wacquant’s own preferences in the matter lie, since in an essay that can be seen as a direct predecessor of this one, he notes that

“the 18th century, as the ‘century of classification’, marked a historical rupture in putatively racial constructions, with the rise of science and the political principle of equality” [Wacquant 2022: 69]. Whatever had existed before in terms of ethnic stereotyping and classification does not, in his view, attain the bar. This is an important claim because if it is true, what it means effectively is that race as an established concept, and “racialism” as an ideology, cannot be said to precede the emergence of strong forms of mercantile capitalism in the Euro-Atlantic world, which certainly date to the Iberian empires and their north-west European rivals, if not earlier to the Italian city-states (Amalfi, Genoa, Venice, and so on) and the northerly Hanseatic League. The counter argument would usually require an adherence to either one of positions (1) or (2) laid out above, with position (3) presenting a knotty set of problems. This counterview seems in fact to be the road taken by Cedric Robinson in his *Black Marxism*. In his first chapter, which provides a long-term but very rapid historical narrative of the idea of “racial capitalism”, Robinson asserts that “the social, psychological, and cultural origins of racism and nationalism [...] anticipated capitalism in time” [Robinson 2000: 9]. Since he equally argues for the “first appearance of capitalism in the fifteenth century”, we are left to assume that racialism (or racism, both terms he uses with a certain imprecision) must have existed in Europe before that. In order to make this point, Robinson emphasizes what he sees as the constant importance of slavery in European history, positing that “slave labor as a critical basis of production would continue without any significant interruption [from the late Roman Empire] into the twentieth century”. According to him, these slaves were drawn from populations that were always classed as inferior, beginning with the barbarians at the fringes of the Roman imperium who were “of diverse races with widely differing cultures” (a formulation which ironically poses race as an objective rather than a constructed category). Slavery and unfreedom thus seem to him to be the key to race and racialism in Europe, and “racialism and its permutations persisted, rooted not in a particular era but in the civilization itself” [Robinson 2000: 28].

As becomes evident, Robinson’s argument thus rests on his regular recourse to the explanatory category of “European civilization”, an essentialized construct that seems for him to exist outside history. It is this “civilization” which is the principal agent in his story, rather than concrete social groups acting in particular historical contexts, and here we can see the distance that has been traversed between Marxism and a form of cultural essentialism. As a consequence, the historical basis of this chapter in his book turns out to be remarkably fragile. One would of

course not expect a close reading of primary sources to inform such an exercise. But the endnotes to this chapter are still rather surprising. Extensive recourse is taken to the writings of and direct quotations from Henri Pirenne (1862-1935), whose “politically charged grand narrative” with its “simple beauty yet dangerous flaws” most historians would have viewed as a problematic authority on medieval Europe by the 1980s [Effros 2017]; and to other writers such as Iris Origo and Robert Latouche, whose works were far from evoking universal enthusiasm [Latouche 1961]. In this matter, Robinson resembles other neo-Marxists writing in the 1970s and 1980s such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, who were notoriously indiscriminate in their citations of historical work [Subrahmanyam 2000]. The brunt of Robinson’s thesis thus appears to be that race and its concomitant “racialism” emerged in the mists of the distant past and somehow became deeply embedded in “European civilization”, thus influencing every significant European process, including the rise of capitalism there.

We are aware that in the two decades since the publication of the second edition of Robinson’s work (in 2000), scholars remain divided on whether “race” and “racism” should indeed be treated as central concepts for the study of medieval European history [Bartlett 2001; Jordan 2001]. These scholarly divisions have various bases, not only between the avowed “presentists” and their opponents, but between literary scholars and social historians. Most scholars are perfectly aware that Latin terms such as *gens*, *natio*, or *lex*, abound in both normative and other materials of the medieval period, but the thorny question is whether (or when) to translate these as “race”. When one reads the scholarship of a more socio-political bent, it stresses not the hardening of ethnic divisions and an accompanying ideology obsessed with keeping the walls of differentiation in place, but rather the malleability of ethnicity as indeed the crucial place of “ethnogenesis” in the medieval centuries [Pohl 2017]. Few of the ethnic descriptors from the last centuries of western Roman rule survived intact into the 13th or 14th centuries, and those that did seem to have been linked to still another category, namely *religio* (also sometimes used with *lex*). This takes us to position (3) of those listed by Schaub, namely the view that race emerged as a master-concept at the moment when the Christian Iberian elites began to shift the grounds of inter-ethnic relations in the peninsula by systematically deploying ideas such as *limpieza de sangre* (“purity of blood”) against Jews and Muslims. This seems to have happened once the demographic recovery from the Black Death was underway and was consolidated in the 15th and 16th centuries. Several historians have

persuasively argued that the stricter policing of religious boundaries was a political act carried out at this time from fear of the imperceptible intermixing of groups.

However, it is no simple matter to make a causal link between the hardening of ethno-religious boundaries circa 1500, and the logic of an emergent commercial capitalism. To be sure, the Iberian empires of the 16th century then proceeded to develop an elaborate ethnographic vocabulary, whether with respect to peoples in Europe, Africa, and the Americas or those in Asia [Subrahmanyam 2017: 90-99]. They did this at two levels, by deploying a variety of classificatory concepts on the one hand, and a profusion of ethnonyms on the other. Considering the Portuguese case, we find vernacular terms such as *lei*, *gente*, *nação*, *estirpe*, *geração*, and *casta* as the concepts most regularly used to distinguish ethnic groups, with *raça* entering common usage relatively late (possibly as a loan word from Italian or French). Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, these terms were not perfectly interchangeable, nor did they carry the same implications. If some stressed group identities that were formed on the basis of shared phenotypic traits, others insisted on the importance of endogamy (itself a cultural choice of some kind), the inherited nature of occupational activity, the reproduction generation after generation of certain peculiar “customs”, and so on. Equally important, when concretely deployed in texts or documents, one often found a combination of classificatory concepts and ethnonyms, thus what was a variable cocktail of the -etic and the -emic.

To argue that the formation of these empires that covered larger and larger spaces, combining diverse societal and institutional arrangements, had a significant influence on the production of such a luxuriant ethnographic discourse, is simple enough. But it is not the same thing as arguing for a causal scheme in which models of ethnographic classification (such as “race”) fundamentally drove the economies of the Iberian Atlantic empires. To be clear, these economies were themselves mixed affairs. In the Spanish empire, modes of tribute extraction through *corvée* initially dominated through much of the 16th century, driving the great silver boom for example. The institutions deployed were largely of an inherited seigneurial type, and only began to shift appreciably in the course of the 17th century with the consolidation of a creole bourgeoisie. On the other hand, it was the Portuguese who moved first to a form of plantation capitalism in order to produce sugar in Brazil (after their less successful experiments in the Atlantic islands); this in turn was the model that would be followed, whether consciously or not, by the English, Dutch and French, eventually embracing a larger variety of crops

[Schwartz 2004]. The core of the labor process was based on slavery and, given the nature of the Atlantic slave trade after 1550, the enslaved populations were largely west Africans [Alencastro 2018]. However, it does not follow from this either that (1) plantation slavery was driven by the existence of an already formulated and stable “racialist” ideology; or that (2) Atlantic capitalism was simply a by-product of the slave plantation complex, an erroneous understanding that has been supported by the “new history of capitalism” movement [Burnard and Riello 2020].

It is also important for our purposes to move the discussion of race and capitalism beyond the Euro-Atlantic world. As is well-known, the long-held prejudice amongst both Marxists and Weberians sustained that capitalism had unique roots in western Europe and then spread into the non-Western world through colonial conquest. This view still formed a fundamental tenet of the “world-systems theory” propagated by Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers in the 1970s and 1980s. However, this position has come to be increasingly questioned over the past half-century as outlandish ideas like the Asiatic Mode of Production have loosened their stranglehold [Subrahmanyam 1995]. It is now increasingly clear that various forms of merchant capitalism flourished in Asia from at least the late 14th century onwards, both in maritime spaces and along overland trade routes. It turns out that what were once posed as “agrarian states” (such as the Ming, the Mughals, and the Safavids) in fact enjoyed a complex relationship with both trade and manufacturing [Gipouloux 2009]. Besides, one can identify a whole series of compact maritime states, from East Africa and the Red Sea to Melaka and the Javanese *pasisir*, which subsisted on a fruitful relationship with a variety of mercantile communities [Lombard and Aubin 1988].

A close look at all these polities does show the existence there of forms of ethnic differentiation based on religion (Islam, Buddhism, etc.), language, phenotypic characteristics, occupation, as well as freedom and unfreedom. In the case of South Asia, a key and widely used organizing term in the medieval centuries was *jati*, referring to an intricate pattern of social differentiation with a mix of hierarchical, occupational, and spatial elements running into the thousands. On this was overlaid a radically simplified theoretical scheme of *varna*, which formed the core of many Brahmanical texts on social differentiation. An important distinction between the two was that while *varna* was seen as the outcome of a single process, no single explanation could be given for *jati* (whose profoundly unsystematic character has often been underestimated by observers). In a similar vein, one could argue that many societies in Asia had produced

theoretical reflections on how they were organized, such as the Confucian four-fold scheme (*shi-nong-gong-shang*) in China, to which were added the ethnographic materials on the non-Han populations encountered through imperial expansion [Hostetler 2001]. The Portuguese, who arrived in Asian waters at the close of the 15th century, came in their own way to be cognizant of such forms of ethnic division, and often borrowed the ethnonyms in use wholesale. However, they overlaid their own organizing concepts atop this congeries of categories, first the term *lei*, and then towards the end of the 16th century *casta*. In turn, the English, Dutch, and French, who followed them to Asia, borrowed the latter term and incorporated it into their own vocabularies. We may thus state, as a shortcut, that *casta* and caste became a distorted translation of the term *jati*, and by combining it with *varna*, the idea emerged in colonial writings by the 1850s of something called a well-defined “caste system”.

The relationship between caste and capitalism in an Asian (and especially South Asian) context has been a major preoccupation of 20th century social science, especially when done in a Weberian mode [Rudner 1994]. This was based above all on the observation that capitalist entrepreneurship seemed to be particularly associated with certain “castes”, whether Hindu, Jain, Muslim, or Zoroastrian; the caste composition of the industrial proletariat that emerged in the 19th century proved a thornier branch to grasp. Explanations for this relationship between caste and capitalism have varied over time, from now unfashionable ideas about “innate qualities” and “secret techniques”, to more recent theories stressing group solidarity, trust, and the economics of information. But where does this leave the question of “racial capitalism”? The real significance of race in an Asian history of capitalism must await the 19th century, though the emergence of European plantation capitalism in some limited areas such as the Mascareigne Islands (Mauritius and Réunion) does precede it. Here, a mixture of African and Asian slaves were deployed by European plantation owners, in what was an attempted transposition of the Atlantic model [Vaughan 2005]. In the 19th century, however, the emergence of a class of European (English and Scottish, but also Dutch, French and Portuguese) entrepreneurs introduced the language of “race”, which was added to existing forms of ethnic differentiation present in the space. This language was eventually adopted beyond the sphere of Europeans and gained even more ground with the growing acceptance of “scientific racism” and Social Darwinism [Dikötter 1992]. Indian entrepreneurs in Africa, or their Chinese counterparts in Southeast Asia, often came to conceive their relations with their “host

societies” in racial terms, with associated tensions and violent political consequences in the postcolonial period. However, the existence of such forms of capitalism with racial overtones must be seen as a particular development and offshoot rather than demonstrating that a “racial factor” lay at the very origins of Asian capitalism.

To conclude, it is impossible to deny that the histories of capitalism and race have been intertwined in many parts of the world in the past couple of centuries. But there are significant temporal and spatial variations in such processes, which have a particular salience for the Euro-Atlantic world. The attempt to reduce this diversity to such rigid theorems as “capitalism *is* racial capitalism” [Melamed 2015], or that “the historical development of capitalism and race were inseparable” [Hall 2022] simply does not do justice to this complex historical experience, and even less so a formulation in which “race” itself becomes an immutable category embedded in a civilizational complex. Would it be unjust then to point to the fragility of multi-storied edifices built on the uncertain foundations of “floating signifiers”?

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