

Race, Capital, and Colonialism: A Response

Race, capital et colonialisme: une réponse de l'auteur¹

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I am deeply grateful to Ashiagbor (2025) and Ferdinand (2024) for their thoughtful replies to my article. Their commentaries are provocative. They compel me to think more deeply about the limits of my theorization of racial capitalism. Ashiagbor's comments make me want to know more about the legal infrastructure for racial capitalism. Her claim that "race continues to play a key role in the legal form by which labour markets are regulated" is packed with seminal lines of future research and theory. Ferdinand's question about racial capitalism's relationship to the Earth highlights a serious gap in my theorization. I agree that connecting racial capitalism with the ecological question requires further work. As I continue to think about this issue, I will certainly turn to Ferdinand's *Decolonial Ecology* (2022).

In this rejoinder, let me bracket these issues and dwell on a different issue that both Ashiagbor and Ferdinand raise, however in different ways: colonialism. Ashiagbor suggests that a contingency-contextual theory of racial capitalism downplays colonialism and therefore downplays race (because colonialism, according to the argument, is necessarily racialized). This is a fair reading. But I must clarify. I agree that colonialism has been central for capitalist modernity (after all, I have devoted all of my scholarly career of over three decades to researching and writing about colonialism and imperialism). Indeed, the idea that colonialism (and therefore racism) have been central to capitalism historically is the hallmark of much of the racial capitalism literature that I refer to in my article (especially the literature produced by

historians). Bhambra and Holmwood's (2023) claim about colonialism and racial capitalism simply reiterates this existing literature. It is another way of saying what Nancy Fraser and others already show: that capitalism depends upon "expropriation" (or "primitive accumulation").

However, to advance our understanding of racial capitalism, we might want to think more deeply about whether colonialism (and therefore racism) is *logically* necessary for capitalism? Could capitalism exist without colonialism? This is a question that neither existing historical work nor Bhambra and Holmwood address. But it is crucial for understanding racial capitalism.

Part of the answer depends upon how one defines colonialism. Throughout my career, I have drawn upon diverse social scientific scholarship to define colonialism as a system of political domination whereby one ruling power seizes foreign land and rules it, operating according to the "rule of colonial difference" (Chatterjee 1993) whereby citizens are distinguished from subjects (Go 2003; 2006; 2011). By this definition, it would be difficult to claim that capitalism necessarily requires colonialism. There could be an entire world of fully sovereign nation-states operating in a capitalist system. Or we could have a single capitalist world system without any political borders at all: a single political system and capitalist system. Colonies would not exist in either of these cases. But capitalism would.

Even if colonialism is necessary for capitalism, the other question is whether racism is the only form of difference that colonialism deploys. Couldn't colonialism be based upon religious or ethnic difference rather than strictly racial difference? Historians

¹ Une version intégrale de l'article en français est disponible sur le site <https://marronnages.org/>

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might suggest that, historically, the Russian or Chinese colonial empires relied upon ethnic or religious difference rather than racial difference (Lieven 2002). Furthermore, some might suggest that there are forms of colonialism today that are ethnic and religious rather than only racial. One might, for example, look at the Philippines. There, the Southern “Moro” territories can be said to be “colonial territories” of Manila. But the inhabitants of those territories are differentiated by religion, language and culture – not race.

I do not have a firm view on these issues. My point is that colonialism might not require racial difference. It is true that, historically, across most parts of the world, the “rule of colonial difference” has largely been racial. But that does not mean *it has to be*. There is no *logically necessary* connection between colonialism and racialization, only a *historically necessary* connection.

Ferdinand’s (2025) concept of “colonial capitalism” defines colonialism differently. Rather than a matter of political power and sovereignty, the term colonial “designates one of the intrinsic traits of capitalism: capitalism requires the conquest, through economic and military domination, of new geographic spaces of the Earth” (60). This is a useful definition. My only question is whether “colonial capitalism” is any different from the existing concepts we already have, such as “primitive accumulation” or “expropriation.” I do not know. But if it is the same, I would concede that colonialism and capitalism are logically and necessarily related.² As I suggest in my article, expropriation is necessary for capital accumulation historically and in the present. It is also logically necessary: without “spatial fixes” that involve expropriation, as David Harvey (2005) suggests, capitalism might not survive.

These questions of racial capitalism and whether racialization, colonialism and capitalism are logically or contingently connected may appear to be irrelevant academic questions. I contend that they are not. Rather, they are crucial for any anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics, and for understanding how racial capitalism may or may not be overcome in the future. For example, the claim that capitalism and racism are logically and

necessarily connected implies that any anti-racist struggles are logically and necessarily anti-capitalist. It also implies that anti-capitalist struggles are necessarily anti-racist. Further, it implies that the end of capitalism means the end of racism. If racism and capitalism are intertwined, then the dismantling of one should bring the end of the other.

But are anti-racist struggles intrinsically anti-capitalist? I doubt it. Successful anti-racist struggles could just as well herald a liberal multicultural utopia: a capitalist society where there is racial equality but not economic equality. I would also insist that anti-capitalist struggles are not necessarily anti-racist. They could lead to a post-capitalist world where racial hatred persists. I agree with Hubert Harrison, one of America’s first Black Socialist intellectuals (along with W. E. B. Du Bois), when he wrote: “I do not expect the advent of Socialism will at once remove race prejudice – unless it removes ignorance at the same time” (Harrison 1911: 6). A contingency-context theory of racial capitalism can absorb these conclusions. A theory that insists that race and capitalism are logically and necessarily connected cannot.

The question of logical or historical necessity also has implications for theorizing the end of capitalism. In Marx’s theory of the development of capitalism, the continued pursuit of surplus value pushes capitalist society to the point where labor time is repeatedly reduced by automation. Human labor is slowly but surely replaced, so that “necessary labor time” approaches zero labor time. In other words, human labor is no longer necessary for capital. At such a stage, therefore, there is no hierarchy of skilled and unskilled human labor. There is no subproletariat that is different from the proletariat. There is only a handful of capitalists and a mass – the majority of the world’s population – who are unemployed. This sets the conditions for capitalism to be overcome. Only when “necessary human labor” has been rendered superfluous will capital reach its own internal limits. But that will only come as the proletariat becomes one single unemployed class readied to overthrow capitalism (Marx 1977).

What does this have to do with race? The answer is simple. As the proletariat becomes one single class replaced by automation, there is no longer a hierarchy to labor. There is no human labor at all. Therefore, racialized differences among the proletariat that I theorize in my article become irrelevant to the production process, and therefore become irrelevant to capitalism. Capitalism reduces if not eliminates the

² The other concept Ferdinand deploys, “colonial inhabitation,” is novel and important. It captures the subjectivity of primitive accumulation; a way of seeing and being that is devastating to the earth and its many different inhabitants. It is a particularly useful concept for beginning to connect racial capitalism with the ecological.

social differences, such as race, that it had previously created and depended upon, creating only one singular difference: socioeconomic class. Racialization is no longer necessary for capitalist production. Of course, racial meanings might persist. Capitalists might racialize all of the unemployed population as subhuman. But this racialization would be a leftover from capitalism's previous stages. Racialization might persist but because human labor is not necessary for capitalism's operations, neither would be racial difference.

Can a theory of capitalism that insists that capitalism and racialization (which is rooted in hierarchies of labor) are necessarily and logically connected apprehend this development? Does a theory of capitalism that insists upon the logical necessity of race and capitalism permit a theory of how capitalism will develop over time and how it will necessarily end? More thought is required.

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