

Racial Capitalism and COVID-19

How racial capitalism, and not just capitalism, shapes exploitation and solidarities

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In June 2020, while the Americas were deep in the throes of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, 116 farmworkers left Jamaica for the United States under a seasonal work program. They were destined for Gebbers Farm in Washington, where they would be reaping apples. The Jamaican Minister of Labor and Social Security praised the program as an excellent example of the strength of the U.S.-Jamaica bond and a lifeline for both Jamaican workers and the national economy. The U.S. Ambassador to Jamaica said the program was a win-win for everyone, a powerful partnership. In an interview with one of the departing farmers, a journalist for Loop Jamaica asked, “How does your family feel about you leaving them at this time?” The farmer replied, “If I stay in Jamaica, probably they wouldn’t get a school book in September to go back to high school, so I talk to them and the risk factor is there but I still have to take a chance.”¹

In the midst of this global pandemic, hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, South Africans, and other people from colonised and formerly colonised countries in the global periphery are labouring on farms across North America and Europe to keep food on the grocery shelves.² Long before COVID-19, they were forced to live in



Photo by [Lucio Patone](#) on [Unsplash](#)

¹ ↪ [“More Farm Workers Leave for the United States,” Loop News](#), June 13, 2020.

² ↪ Harriet Grant, [“No Food, Water, Masks, or Gloves’: Migrant Farm Workers in Spain at Crisis Point,” Guardian](#), May 1, 2020.

unsanitary, overcrowded, and unsafe conditions. On top of not receiving sufficient personal protective equipment, workers' conditions further exacerbate the spread of the virus.³ In Canada, at least six hundred migrant farmworkers have

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contracted the virus since they arrived in the country and at least two have died, both from Mexico.⁴ These Black and Latinx workers, as well as other nonwhite racialised workers, have now been deemed essential, so they still have to report to work despite stay-at-home orders. While

viewed as essential, they are also treated as expendable, as many do not get paid sick leave or have access to health care or health insurance, and those who are undocumented still face the threat of deportation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the deep structural problems affecting nonwhite racialised

How can we understand the unremitting superexploitation of Black and other nonwhite racialised labour in the core and the periphery? Dominant approaches to capitalism are not enough. It is urgent that we anchor our analyses in the concept of racial capitalism, which helps us better understand the forces driving the global political economy.

workers in the core and periphery. Yet, many social scientific analyses of the global political economy, at least in the pre-COVID era, are race neutral or wilfully indifferent to the persistent racial pattern of global inequalities. Even if they do address the legacies of colonialism, they ignore the ongoing racial logics of oppression embedded therein. How can we understand the unremitting superexploitation of Black and other

nonwhite racialised labour in the core and the periphery? Dominant approaches to capitalism are not enough. It is urgent that we anchor our analyses in the concept of racial capitalism, which helps us better understand the forces driving the global political economy.

Black Radical Thinkers and Racial Capitalism

Although very much still on the margins, we have seen a recent surge in the use of the term racial capitalism in the social sciences. The term was made popular by Cedric Robinson's seminal work *Black Marxism* published in 1983. However, the overarching framework of racial capitalism dates further back, to early twentieth-century Black radical

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thinkers such as Esther Cooper Jackson and W. E. B. Du Bois, to Oliver Cromwell Cox and Eric Williams, all the way to contemporaries like Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Racial capitalism refers to the mutually constitutive entanglements of racialised and colonial exploitation within the process of capital accumulation. According to this framework, capitalism, as we know it today, would not have been possible if not for imperialism,

colonialism, racial slavery, expropriation, and superexploitation. Capital accumulation would not be possible today if not for these ongoing logics. This scholarship, therefore, prefigured dependency and world-systems theory by elucidating

³ ↪ James Rippingale, "[Consumers Are Not Aware We Are Slaves Inside the Greenhouses](#)," *Al Jazeera*, October 16, 2019; Kate Cimini, "[California Farmworkers Face New Perils From Mask Shortage as Growers Try to Roll Out Other Protections](#)," *The Californian*, March 26, 2020; Emma Wallis, "[Forgotten Migrant Workers in Southern Spain Speak Out About Conditions](#)," *Info Migrants*, September 30, 2020.

⁴ ↪ Amanda Coletta and Gabriela Martínez, "[Canada Coronavirus: Migrant Farmworkers Die; Mexico Wants Answers](#)," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2020.

how imperialism and colonisation created a system of unequal exchange where the periphery is impoverished as it supplies grossly underpaid (and enslaved) racialised labour and raw materials that enriches the core.

Theories of racial capitalism also highlight the centrality of race to capital accumulation. They maintain that capital and capitalist states secure profit maximisation not simply by “rendering labour abstract,” as Karl Marx theorised, but by tying profits to what Lisa Lowe called “the social production of difference,” including race, gender, and nationality.⁵ Du Bois described both the racial and colonial character of global capitalism and how the incredible accumulation of capital was achieved through the superexploitation of the so-called darker races across the world and within the core.

That dark and vast sea of human labour in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States — that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry — shares a common destiny; it is despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, prisoned and enslaved in all but name; spawning the world's raw material and luxury — cotton, wool, coffee, tea, cocoa, palm oil, fibers, spices, rubber, silks, lumber, copper, gold, diamonds, leather — how shall we end the list and where? All these are gathered up at prices lowest of the low, manufactured, transformed and transported at fabulous gain; and the resultant wealth is distributed and displayed and made the basis of world power and universal dominion and armed arrogance in London and Paris, Berlin and Rome, New York and Rio de Janeiro.... Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts, which in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal.⁶

The creation of “inferior” “Black” and other racialised workers in colonised and peripheralised regions of the world—through enslavement, dispossession, exploitation, and general degradation—facilitated industrialisation and the creation of “white workers,” as peasants in Europe moved from agrarian to factory work.⁷ Blackness, in particular, was and remains, as Charisse Burden-Stelly puts it, “a capacious category of surplus value extraction essential to an array of political-economic functions, including accumulation, disaccumulation, debt, planned obsolescence, and absorption of

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the burdens of economic crises.”⁸ Therefore, as Du Bois wrote, the Black worker was the “founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world.”⁹ Moreover, Marxist feminists like Claudia Jones in the 1940s and many others today argue that Black women face a triple or interlocking oppression in the racial capitalist system, along the axes of race, class, and gender.¹⁰ Race and colonialism, they argue, structure the exploitation of workers by elucidating how neither the induction to work

nor the surplus value created by all workers is the same. In doing so, they specify why capitalist exploitation is more intensive and brutal for workers of color. Through the structural and historical framework of racial capitalism, we can

⁵ ↪ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁶ ↪ E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (1935; repr. New York: Free Press, 1992), 15–16.

⁷ ↪ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins* (1938; repr. New York: Vintage, 1989); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (1983; repr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; repr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

⁸ ↪ Charisse Burden-Stelly, “Modern U.S. Racial Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* 72, no. 3 (July–August 2020).

⁹ ↪ Claudia Jones, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!* (New York: National Women's Commission CPUSA, 1949).

¹⁰ ↪ Claudia Jones, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!* (New York: National Women's Commission CPUSA, 1949).

analyse both how capital accumulation depends on this global racialised division of labour and who is disproportionately impacted.

How does racial capitalism help us understand the global political economy in the time of COVID-19? It historicises the pandemic within the long arc of racial capitalism, and shows the mechanisms by which COVID-19 has exacerbated the

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already existing, structural racial and colonial inequalities that undergird the global economy. Capital and states have deemed Black and other nonwhite racialised labour “essential” to maintaining profits. Core countries are calling on these workers both within their countries and in the global periphery to ensure continued production and profits in almost every realm, thereby exacerbating racial and economic inequalities both within and between countries. At the same time, neoliberal racial states are further marginalising these very workers by excluding them from

much needed social protections to cope with the impacts of COVID-19 on their health, income, and overall well-being. Finally, racial capitalism literature illuminates why, despite these dire social and economic conditions, white workers continue to refuse to join a multiracial antiracist movement for liberation from imperial and racial capitalist exploitation.

Exacerbating Race-Based Economic Inequalities within and between Countries

Billionaires have seen their wealth increase by the billions during this pandemic.¹¹ At the same time, Black and other nonwhite racialised workers have played a disproportionate role in keeping capitalism running. In doing so, they experience greater exposure to the disease, increased health risks, and, paradoxically, more economic precariousness. Already over-represented in the service sector—from transportation, health care support, food preparation and serving to building and grounds cleaning and maintenance, and personal care and service—these predominantly Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Arab, and Asian workers have been required to continue working to provide goods and services.¹² These are also the industries facing the largest layoffs.¹³ Likewise, Amazon’s racialised warehouse and delivery workers have ensured the continuation of e-commerce and food supplies throughout the pandemic, despite the lack of appropriate social distancing, personal protective equipment, and cleaning.¹⁴ In New York City, 75 percent of all frontline workers are people of color.¹⁵ At the intersection of race, gender, and class, women of color are far more likely to have jobs deemed essential and at the front lines, including cashiers, custodial staff, nurses, home aides, nursing home staff, and more.¹⁶ Particularly in the health care workforce, COVID-19 cases and deaths match the pre-COVID-19 racial and gender disparities for workers within this sector.¹⁷ These workers are being compelled to risk their lives not just to keep

¹¹ ↪ Hiatt Woods, “[How Billionaires Saw Their Net Worth Increase by Half a Trillion Dollars During the Pandemic](#),” *Business Insider*, October 30, 2020.

¹² ↪ Tiana Rogers, Charles Rogers, Elizabeth VanSant-Webb, Lily Gu, Bin Yan, and Fares Qeadan, “Racial Disparities in COVID-19 Mortality Among Essential Workers in the United States,” *World Med Health Policy*, August 5, 2020.

¹³ ↪ Jocelyn Frye, “[On the Frontlines at Work and at Home: The Disproportionate Economic Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Women of Color](#),” *American Progress*, April 23, 2020.

¹⁴ ↪ Allana Akhtar, “[California Just Fined Amazon \\$1,870 for Poor Workplace Safety During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#),” *Business Insider*, October 14, 2020; Jay Greene, “[Amazon Far More Diverse at Warehouse Than in Professional Ranks](#),” *Seattle Times*, August 14, 2015; Aimee Picchi, “[US Billionaires Gained Almost \\$1 Trillion in Wealth During the Pandemic](#),” *CBS News*, October 20, 2020.

¹⁵ ↪ “[New York City’s Frontline Workers](#),” New York City Comptroller, March 26, 2020.

¹⁶ ↪ Campbell Robertson and Robert Gebeloff, “[How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America](#),” *New York Times*, April 18, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “[Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Employed Persons by Detailed Industry, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity](#),” accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁷ ↪ Elizabeth McClure, Pavithra Vasudevan, Zinzi Bailey, Snehal Patel, and Whitney Robinson, “Racial Capitalism Within Public Health — How Occupational Settings Drive COVID-19 Disparities,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 189, no. 11 (2020): 1244–253; Frye, “On the Frontlines at Work and at Home.”

others alive through food, health, and sanitation services, but also to guarantee the continuation of (often nonessential) commercial activities. Even in sports, there was a dogged insistence that U.S. basketball and football athletes, for instance, who are predominantly Black, must persist through the pandemic, generating profits for team owners and providing sporting entertainment to those privileged enough to work from home.¹⁸

Likewise, racialised workers from peripheralised countries are being recruited into the core to help North American and European countries manage care and turn out even more profits during the pandemic. Women from Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa accounted for 75 percent of all foreign-born health care workers in 2018, and 83

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percent of all foreign-born registered nurses in the United States.¹⁹ Certified nursing assistants, for instance, tend to be women of color, and mostly Black women, with 20 percent of these women of color born outside the United States.²⁰ The food industry is similar. One study on food production found that out of 1.87 million frontline farm and food processing jobs in ten industries in the United States, 790,000 are immigrant workers, nine in ten of whom are Latinx.²¹ Similarly, in Italy, the largest share of seasonal workers come from

Africa and the Middle East, including Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Morocco, and Tunisia.²² In addition, according to 2019 estimates, there are about 560,000 migrants who work in Italy without work permits or residency documents.²³

It is no surprise, therefore, that across North America, Europe, and Brazil, it is these very people, particularly African and African-descended populations already living under the weight of centuries of white supremacy and structural racism, who are disproportionately dying from the virus.²⁴ These workers, due to the compulsion to work for much-needed and often low wages, are rendered more exposed than others. Facilities housing farmworkers and meat-processing plants have been sites of terrible COVID-19 outbreaks.²⁵ On top of this, COVID-19 fatalities occur more frequently among patients who have comorbidities, such as hypertension and diabetes. Within the United States, residential segregation, unequal race-based resource allocation, exclusion from housing, and inadequate access to health care are all drivers of comorbidities that render Black and other populations racialised as nonwhite more susceptible to COVID-19.²⁶ Stay-at-home orders do not necessarily help these workers, as Black and other minoritised populations also tend to be housed and schooled in environments with many more pollutants and less access to nutritious food.²⁷ These are direct outcomes rooted in histories of structural racism and racialised labour extraction linking redlining, Jim Crow residential and school

¹⁸ ↪ Tom Goldman, [“Even in a Pandemic, the NFL Is Ready to Dominate the Sports Landscape,”](#) NPR, September 10, 2020; Chris Bumbaca, [“NBA Commissioner Adam Silver ‘Anxious’ but Confident on the Eve of Restart,”](#) USA Today, July 29, 2020.

¹⁹ ↪ Jeanne Batalova, [“Immigrant Health-Care Workers in the United States,”](#) Migration Policy, May 14, 2020.

²⁰ ↪ [S. Nursing Assistants Employed in Nursing Homes: Key Facts](#) (Bronx, NY: PHI, 2019).

²¹ ↪ Susan Ferriss and Joe Yerardi, [“Trump Attacks Them. COVID-19 Threatens Them. But Immigrants Keep the US Fed,”](#) Public Integrity, September 28, 2020.

²² ↪ Alessandra Corrado, [Migrant Crop Pickers in Italy and Spain](#) (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2017).

²³ ↪ [“Italy to Offer Permits to Illegal Migrants for Farm Work in COVID Crisis,”](#) Reuters, May 5, 2020.

²⁴ ↪ Whitney N. Laster Pirtle, [“Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Pandemic Inequities in the United States,”](#) Health Education & Behavior 47, no. 4 (2020): 504–8; Kia Lilly Caldwell and Edna Maria de Araújo, [“COVID-19 Is Deadlier For Black Brazilians, a Legacy of Structural Racism That Dates Back to Slavery,”](#) The Conversation, June 10, 2020; Tim Cook, Emira Kursumovic, and Simon Lennane, [“Exclusive: Deaths of NHS staff from COVID-19 Analysed,”](#) HSI, April 22, 2020; Haroon Siddique, [“British BAME COVID-19 Death Rate ‘More Than Twice That of Whites,’”](#) Guardian, April 30, 2020.

²⁵ ↪ [“COVID-19 in Rural America: Impact on Farms and Agricultural Workers,”](#) National Center for Farmworker Health, December 9, 2020; Aritz Parra, [“Virus Spike in Spain Reveals Plight of Seasonal Farm Workers,”](#) ABC News, July 4, 2020; Anthony Reuben, [“Coronavirus: Why Have There Been So Many Outbreaks in Meat Processing Plants,”](#) BBC, June 23, 2020.

²⁶ ↪ Pirtle, “Racial Capitalism.”

²⁷ ↪ Harriet A. Washington, [“How Environmental Racism Is Fuelling the Coronavirus Pandemic,”](#) Nature, May 19, 2020.

segregation, and underfunded public services in and for minoritised communities all the way back to the period of the enslavement of African and African-descended workers. Through a racial capitalism framework, we can analyse how current capital accumulation in the COVID period still depends on this racialised and colonial exploitation, and continues to shape who is most negatively impacted.

Thus, despite the fact that by and large, and up to now, many African and Caribbean countries have done remarkably well in containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus and minimising the number of fatalities, continued capitalist extraction compounds and intensifies the ongoing patterns of colonial domination and racialised superexploitation in peripheralised countries in this as well as other areas. According to figures from the World Health Organization, African and Caribbean countries have relatively outperformed North American and European states. As of December 2020, Jamaica, for instance, has reported 12,684 confirmed cases and 294 deaths. Likewise, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Dominica, and St. Kitts and Nevis have cases ranging from 30 to 116 and have not lost a single life to COVID. Admittedly, the Dominican Republic stands out with 165,940 confirmed cases and 2,404 deaths, but this is a clear exception to the general trend. A similar trend exists for African countries. South Africa stands out with 994,911 cumulative cases and 26,521 deaths, but other data range from 122,413 cases and 1,901 deaths in Ethiopia and 83,576 cases and 1,247 deaths in Nigeria to 22,081 cases and 133 deaths in Côte D'Ivoire and 524 cases and 10 deaths in Mauritius. There are many reasons to be cautious about these numbers. There are problems with testing and tracking. However, testing and tracking is a challenge for numerous countries, notably the United States. On the ground, it is clear that many countries in the global periphery have avoided large masses of people being stricken with COVID-related symptoms. Nor are they experiencing the kinds of increases in death rates afflicting North American and European countries.²⁸

Early in the pandemic, while European and North American governments were at a loss for how to manage the disease,

Despite these unfounded claims, we know that, due to enduring relations of colonial domination, African and Caribbean economies remain tethered to the global political economy in ways that make them even more susceptible to the effects of this pandemic. These countries are in a structural position of extreme dependency on international markets and international travel and exchange, rendering them exceptionally vulnerable to both the spread of COVID and its negative economic effects.

with Black and other racialised people within those countries hospitalised and dying at disproportionately high rates, it came as a surprise to them that majority-Black countries were not just managing better than expected, but outperforming the Western imperial core. Many hypotheses abound to explain the performance of African and Caribbean countries, from age structure of the population and climatic factors related to temperature and humidity, to even those who reify “race” by looking for causation in genetic variations between “races.”²⁹ In a now retracted news headline, the BBC even offensively asserted that

“poverty” might have spared African nations from COVID-19.³⁰

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²⁸ ↩ [“Weekly Epidemiological Update – 29 December 2020,”](#) World Health Organization, December 29, 2020.

²⁹ ↩ David Evans and Eric Werker, “How Africa’s Age Structure Will Affect the Impact of COVID-19,” *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 9 (2020); Paulo Mecnas, Renata Travassos da Rosa Moreira Bastos, Antonio Carlos Rosário Vallinoto, and David Normando, “Effects of Temperature and Humidity on the Spread of COVID-19: A Systemic Review,” *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 9 (2020); Hugo Zeberg and Svante Pääbo, “The Major Genetic Risk Factor for COVID-19 Is Inherited from Neanderthals,” *Nature* 587 (2020): 610–12.

³⁰ ↩ [“Outrage as BBC Links Low COVID-19 Deaths in Africa to Poverty on Continent,”](#) *Sahara Reporters*, September 3, 2020; Eddy Mwanza, [“Too Poor to Die? BBC Africa Report Causes Uproar,”](#) *Kenyans*, September 3, 2020.

of this pandemic. These countries are in a structural position of extreme dependency on international markets and international travel and exchange, rendering them exceptionally vulnerable to both the spread of COVID and its negative economic effects. But across Africa and the Caribbean, governments acted early, contained and closed schools, workplaces, and public events, restricted movement, some offered economic support to citizens, launched vigorous public information campaigns and a coordinated public health response, and people largely cooperated. Some note that African countries have the benefit of already having developed this infrastructure dealing with other outbreaks and epidemics, such as Ebola. Had masks been expensive and hard to access, Caribbean and African countries might have fared very differently. Still, it is in large part because of rapid, centralised, and coordinated government responses that African and Caribbean countries have done well to contain the virus and minimise loss of life.

However, the sustainability of remaining COVID-safe in a system of racial capitalism is all very dicey. Jamaica, for instance, experienced a spike in cases between August and September 2020 after reopening international borders and

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easing internal restrictions.³¹ This raises serious questions about the future of these countries in a COVID and post-COVID world. How will economies that depend on tourism and frequent international travel do? What will happen in countries that depend on remittances when workers abroad who were sending money home are now experiencing COVID-related wage and

salary cuts and layoffs? Can these governments guarantee that more lives will not be lost if workers return to export-processing zones? And for countries that depend on natural resource exploitation, what is the plan for the future when, due to reduced international demand, commodity prices have plummeted in spectacular fashion? Many African and Caribbean countries continue to be saddled with unsustainable debt burdens in the midst of this public health crisis. The G20 economies have allowed the most heavily indebted countries to suspend bilateral debt repayments for a period of time, but they have not entertained debt cancellation.³² Therefore, as Walter Rodney laid out in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the question of dependency and the legacies of colonialism through which dependency is reproduced still lingers.

Through the racial capitalism lens, we can more holistically process the fact that Black workers are being compelled to

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leave Jamaica, where their health was just about guaranteed, and, quite literally, face illness and death in the United States in order to get much-needed income, working for low wages. Wealthier imperial countries continue to extract more undervalued labour from the periphery. Formerly colonised countries already constrained by relations of dependency are now in an

even more precarious position. African and African-descended people continue to be disproportionately impacted by this virus because of ongoing racial and colonial logics.

Racial Capitalism, States, and COVID-19 Relief Responses

³¹ ↪ Arthur Hall, "No Need to Panic," *Jamaica Observer*, August 22, 2020.

³² ↪ "The IMF Response to COVID-19," International Monetary Fund, October 28, 2020, accessed January 20, 2021.

Protections, such as the U.S. Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Not only have these protections not targeted the most vulnerable, but they have deliberately excluded the very people most impacted by the virus—Black people, Indigenous people, and other people racialised as nonwhite.

Racial capitalism also helps us understand state responses to the pandemic, which have been aimed at preserving the system and protecting the interests of white capital. Neoliberalism promotes the market and individual responsibility as the solutions to racial inequality. Neoliberal ideology and the neoliberal state justify and guarantee capital accumulation through

privatisation, racialised state violence, and dismantling social protections by making public goods and public institutions synonymous with continuously racialised and demonised people of color.³³ Today, states continue to reproduce inequalities based on race and citizenship through their COVID-19 relief and welfare programs.

Not only have these protections not targeted the most vulnerable, but they have deliberately excluded the very people most impacted by the virus—Black people, Indigenous people, and other people racialised as nonwhite. The U.S. Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of March 2020 offered a one-time \$1,200 payout to people living below a certain income threshold and an additional \$600 per week for individuals receiving unemployment insurance. However, those people still had to make debt payments and rents. Additionally, according to one study, racially minoritised households were much more likely to experience delays receiving these payments than white households, people with very low incomes (less than \$10,000 in 2019) experienced more delays than those with higher incomes,

The Act also excluded undocumented workers in all industries, including food production... At the same time, a number of provisions in the Act provided enormous relief that further enriched corporations and billionaires.

and renters were more likely to experience delays than homeowners.³⁴ Six months into the pandemic, individuals earning lower incomes, as well as Black and Latinx individuals, more generally reported difficulties meeting bill payments, rent or mortgage payments, and medical care bills.³⁵ The Act also excluded undocumented workers in all industries, including

food production. It did so through a range of measures, such as by excluding workers who use taxpayer identification numbers to file taxes, as undocumented workers typically do, thus excluding whole families, even if children or spouses are U.S. citizens or permanent residents if taxes were filed jointly.³⁶ At the same time, a number of provisions in the Act provided enormous relief that further enriched corporations and billionaires, such as allowing corporations to increase interest deductions, facilitating increased refunds for taxes paid in previous years, and removing the cap on the ability to use losses to offset taxes on other gains.³⁷

In Europe, states are busy planning ways to go back to economic organisation based on neoliberal ideologies that guarantee capital accumulation through racialised relations of exploitation and expropriation rather than envisioning a different future, a different way forward.... [The metropolises of capitalism] are also expanding their racist carceral and surveillance functions by continuing to entrench categories of race and citizenship.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the No Recourse to Public Funds clause bars immigrants from accessing financial and social support from the state, even in the pandemic.³⁸ In Denmark, immigrants are required to show a certain minimum

³³ ↪ George Lipsitz, "Introduction: A New Beginning," *Kaitou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 11–12; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016).

³⁴ ↪ Stephen Roll and Michal Grinstein-Weiss, "[Did CARES Act Benefit Reach Vulnerable Americans? Evidence from a National Survey](#)," Brookings, August 25, 2020.

³⁵ ↪ Kim Parker, Rachel Minkin, and Jesse Bennett, "[Economic Fallout from COVID-19 Continues to Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest](#)," *Pew Social Trends*, September 24, 2020.

³⁶ ↪ CARES Act, S. 3548, 116th Cong. (2019–2020).

³⁷ ↪ Terry Gross, "[How the CARES Act Became a Tax-Break Bonanza for the Rich, Explained](#)," *NPR*, April 30, 2020.

³⁸ ↪ Frey Lindsay, "[Thousands of Migrants in the UK Are Seeking Relief from 'No Recourse to Public Funds'](#)," *Forbes*, July 30, 2020.

amount of annual income. As thousands of workers lost their employment or were asked to reduce work hours due to the pandemic, which caused reductions in their take-home income, many immigrant workers now face losing their visas or rejections of their permanent residency applications.³⁹ In Italy, the government sought to fill a dire gap in seasonal farm workers by approving the issuance of residency permits to some 560,000 undocumented migrant workers, despite vigorous opposition. However, the permits only last six months and apply to agricultural and domestic workers, thereby excluding other sectors that also rely heavily on undocumented labour, such as construction and food services.⁴⁰ This is, therefore, an attempt to plug a labour shortage rather than to comprehensively reform the conditions of racialised exploitation in Italy. These states are continuing to entrench categories of race and citizenship.

States in the core are also expanding their racist carceral and surveillance functions. Even as the virus ravages the United States, particularly in prisons and detention facilities, the U.S. government has made no real moves to release the mostly Black and Latinx people in detention. Those administering carceral and detention facilities continue to demonstrate a lack of concern for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and providing proper medical care to people in custody.⁴¹ This insistence on maintaining an incarcerated population echoes Gilmore's argument that criminalisation produces and reproduces freedom and unfreedom based on racial hierarchies. In Texas, incarcerated workers were tasked with

This "color caste founded and retained by capitalism," Du Bois asserted, "was adopted, forwarded, and approved by white labour, and resulted in subordination of coloured labour to white profits the world over." Racism provided the broadly accepted material and ideological foundation for this global racialised division of labour involving the superexploitation of the so-called darker races.

relocating the bodies of COVID-19 victims from the hospital to permanent and mobile morgues for \$2 an hour.⁴² In fact, U.S. law enforcement has continued to lock people up on frivolous charges, such as protesting, and ICE has continued deporting people even if they have symptoms of coronavirus. Again, women of color in these facilities bear unique burdens as reports of coerced mass hysterectomies up to December 2019, and perhaps ongoing, tie into the long history of racist medical practices and forced sterilisation of women of color in the United States.⁴³

Admittedly, some states like Spain have released detained migrants into the community, but, without any support, many of these people are forced to live in encampments that nevertheless unduly expose them to COVID-19, while others have deported undocumented workers on chartered flights.⁴⁴ Regardless, all these measures to provide relief for workers are temporary provisions. States are busy planning ways to go back to economic organisation based on neoliberal ideologies that guarantee capital accumulation through racialised relations of exploitation and expropriation rather than envisioning a different future, a different way forward.

Racial Capitalism and Multiracial Worker Solidarity

³⁹ ↪ "Greencard – Extension," Danish Immigration Service, accessed January 20, 2021.

⁴⁰ ↪ Stefania D'Ignoli, "Italy's Coronavirus Amnesty: Migrant Rights or Economic Self-Interest," *New Humanitarian*, May 25, 2020.

⁴¹ ↪ "Coronavirus Lawsuit Against ICE: Complaint and Declarations," Lawyers for Civil Rights, March 27, 2020; Alejandro Lazo and Zusha Elinson, "Inside The Largest Coronavirus Outbreak in Immigrant Detention," *Wall Street Journal*, April 30, 2020; Benoit Hasse, "Coronavirus: de nouveaux cas de contamination au centre de rétention de Paris-Vincennes," *Le Parisien*, April 17, 2020; Jon Ironmonger, "Coronavirus: UK Detention Centers 'Emptied in Weeks,'" *BBC*, May 7, 2020.

⁴² ↪ Scottie Andrew, "Inmates in El Paso Are Volunteering to Move Bodies of COVID-19 Victims at Medical Examiner's Office," *CNN*, November 16, 2020.

⁴³ ↪ Nicole Narea, "The Outcry Over ICE and Hysterectomies, Explained," *Vox*, September 18, 2020; Project South, "Re: Lack of Medical Care, Unsafe Work Practices, and Absence of Adequate Protection Against COVID-19 for Detained Immigrants and Employees Alike at the Irwin County Detention Center," e-mail to Joseph V. Cuffari, Cameron Quinn, Thomas P. Giles, and David Paulk, September 14, 2020, available at projectsouth.org.

⁴⁴ ↪ Karina Piser, "The End of Immigration Detention Doesn't Mean the End of Fortress Europe," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2020; Bethan Staton and Laura Hughes, "The UK to Pursue Jamaica Deportation Despite Partial Court Reprieve," *Financial Times*, February 11, 2020.

Racial capitalism literature also helps explain why, in this moment, white workers, not as individuals but as a race-class analytical category within the global hierarchical racial capitalist system, are not joining forces with Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other racialised workers to form a mass movement against the system of racial capitalism. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois argues that material interest was not the only incentive for white workers in the nineteenth-century United States. In this racial capitalist system where white supremacist ideology prevails, white workers also seek to maintain their public and psychological “wages of whiteness,” that is, a higher social status and sense of superiority from being categorised as “not Black.”⁴⁵ This “color caste founded and retained by capitalism,” Du Bois asserted, “was adopted, forwarded, and approved by white labour, and resulted in subordination of coloured labour to white profits the world over.”⁴⁶ Racism provided the broadly accepted material and ideological foundation for this global racialised division of labour involving the superexploitation of the so-called darker races. North American and European labour movements embraced this to a large extent as well, as the concept of socialism, as Du Bois noted, was sometimes used in such a way as to exclude nonwhites in the core and periphery from the “kingdom of industrial justice.”⁴⁷

Racism and white supremacy are not fixed in time, but white working- and middle-class commitment to white

now, more white working- and middle-class people are experiencing much of the precariousness and pauperisation well known to their Black counterparts.... [but] such class-based concerns have historically not resulted in the mass unification of workers. Rather, new deployments of anti-Black racism and racist nativism driven by both white capital and white workers themselves are propagated.

supremacy and racial capitalism is reproduced by the ever-evolving strategies of capital accumulation. Neoliberalism, like other accumulation strategies that predate it, has negatively and more intensively impacted people of color. However, now, more white working- and middle-class people are experiencing much of the precariousness and pauperisation so well known to their Black counterparts.⁴⁸ As Du Bois and others have long maintained, such class-based concerns have historically not resulted in the mass unification of white workers and other workers of color. Rather, new deployments of anti-Black racism

and racist nativism driven by both white capital and white workers themselves are propagated.⁴⁹

Now that the wages of white workers have plummeted (though not nearly as much as for workers of color), many are clinging to their psychological wages of whiteness, as they did in the era of Reconstruction. Many oppose policies that

In the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing an intensification of white nationalism and white supremacist extremism.

would improve their well-being, such as gun control laws, health care expansion, and public school investments.⁵⁰ In fact, middle-class white support for Donald Trump in the United States and for Brexit in the United Kingdom appears to be driven more by anxieties around preserving their relative position in the global race-class hierarchy than by actual material economic

⁴⁵ ↪ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*.

⁴⁶ ↪ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 30.

⁴⁷ ↪ E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater* (New York: Dover, 1999), 27.

⁴⁸ ↪ Michael Dawson, “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order,” *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 143–61; Nancy Fraser, “Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson,” *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 163–78.

⁴⁹ ↪ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; Huey Newton, *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (New York: Seven Stories, 2002); David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁵⁰ ↪ Jonathan Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness* (New York: Basic, 2019).

disadvantage.⁵¹ Likewise, in the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing an intensification of white nationalism and white supremacist extremism.⁵²

Despite the wave of Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, which involved historic expressions of multiracial solidarity in the struggle against racist policing in the United States, it remains true that a little over half of white voters cast ballots for Trump in 2020, and in even greater absolute numbers than in the 2016 election. Thus, the white working and middle classes continue to replicate earlier patterns of devotion to white supremacy and racial capitalism, avidly supporting a system that undermines their own well-being. That white workers often seek candidates who vow to reassert their racial dominance means we must consider how racial capitalism, and not just capitalism, shapes exploitation

and solidarities.

Conclusion

Both during this crisis and after it passes, people's lives are at stake in how we understand the capitalist system. People are suffering but not everyone is suffering equally. The current conditions are not surprising to those of us who take a racial capitalism approach to the study of the global political economy. Racial capitalism as a theoretical and analytical framework increases both our explanatory and our predictive power. It highlights who continues to generate wealth during this pandemic and surely thereafter. Black and other racialised workers in the core and periphery are being disproportionately exploited—we must grasp this if we want to save lives. As governments disseminate and administer the COVID-19 vaccine, there is much talk about prioritising the older population and health care workers (without specifying which people in either category). But countering the racial pattern in those disproportionately affected by COVID-19 is not at the forefront of these discussions. At the same time, addressing these racial COVID-19 gaps requires the acknowledgment and development of ways to earn the trust of racialised communities that have a long and ongoing history of being harmed by institutions of science and medicine. As such, we need to take up this challenge. If we do not, we will all lose.

⁵¹ ↪ Gurminder Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class," *British Journal of Sociology* 68, no. S1 (2017): S214–32; Robbie Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁵² ↪ "ADL H.E.A.T. Map," Anti-Defamation League, accessed January 20, 2021; Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2020.

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