‘Interlocking Transactions’: Micro-foundations for ‘Racial Capitalism’

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This is a draft chapter for a book edited by me, Melanie Samson and Mark Hunter, celebrating the work of Gillian Hart. The book is structured around concepts from Hart’s work; chapter authors sit with one of these concepts, to think alongside Hart through the preoccupations of their own research. I use this opportunity to do two things: (1) to turn to the interdisciplinary scholarship on the ‘agrarian question’ in the 1980s from South and Southeast Asia to which Hart was an important contributor, particularly to witness the complexity and materialist commitment of this body of work and its non-linear and differentiated conception of agrarian capitalism, and (2) to show how the latter is key to contemporary debate on the concept ‘racial capitalism’ which is better on ideology and consciousness than on material concerns. I conclude that the agrarian debates offer necessary micro-foundations for a conception of racial capitalism that might attend to the multiplicity of outcomes in a time of divergent (uneven and combined) transformations of capitalism. What I am interested in from readers in this seminar is whether these arguments are interesting to them at all, and what might deserve elaboration in a longer paper. Many thanks!

Introduction

The keyword I take from Gillian Hart’s oeuvre is a strange one for our time: ‘interlocking transactions’, the title of an early and influential paper, Hart (1986b) and also a key category in her first book, Hart (1986a), Power, labor, and livelihood: processes of change in rural Java, based on her doctoral dissertation research in a coastal village in Northeast Java she called Sukodono. When I first read Hart (1986b) in the mid-1990s, I found it to be a powerful, field-changing essay with respect to debates on agrarian change. In contemplating my intervention for this volume, I was therefore led instinctively to this ‘concept of praxis’. By the end of this paper, I will argue that ‘interlocking transactions’ is vital for our time of spiralling capitalist crises, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and that it provides a necessary corrective to a concept that has seen renewed interest of late but which remains undertheorized, ‘racial capitalism’ (Bhattacharyya 2018). I will argue that interlocking transactions offers micro-foundations for a Black Marxist conception of racial capitalism.

In juxtaposition a forgotten category from Hart’s early work, and a seemingly novel category of our time, it is tempting to ruminate on how the later Hart is present in her earlier incarnation. We can, I will suggest, read enduring commitments from Hart (1986a) in Hart’s (2007) reading of Stuart Hall’s intervention in the South African debates on race, racism and capitalism. In the spirit of Hall’s (2003) generous reading of Marx, I read across the work of a thinker, in relation to their journeys and to the geographies that mattered to them. So, what was Hart’s (1986b) field-altering essay, what was its careful parsing of positions in a debate, how did it absolutely recast the terms of the debate itself, and why is this still of use to us today?

Interlocking transactions

Hart begins her 1986 article of this name with the observation that ‘recent empirical and historiographical studies are increasingly uncovering enormous variations in the forms of agrarian labor arrangements, often within the same area’. These might ‘range from simple, commercial transactions to many far more complex contracts in which labor is tied in with land, credit and other relations,’ but what is clear is that they are
highly variable and changeable but they do not appear to converge on impersonal, spot markets in ‘free’ labour in Marx’s sarcastic dual sense of freedom from the means of production and freedom from job security. Marx’s conception of complete dispossession and proletarianization does not appear to be or have been an eventuality. Rather, Hart argues, past and present evidence suggest that ‘different forms of tied labor not only survive but are often adapted, reinforced and embellished in many ways’. The key question is how and why these ‘interlocking transactions’ in land, labour and credit have tied specific labourers to specific places and employers, for instance through access to credit, land or other social institutions, all of which have implications for agrarian classes, income distribution and poverty. (Hart 1986b, 177)

Hart was responding to the ‘interlinkage debate’ in agrarian political economy of the 1970s, which she parses into three approaches. The first was argument by Amit Bhaduri that the interlocking of tenancy and credit contracts presented an obstacle to investment and technological change in agriculture. Bhaduri (1973) argued that landlords shy away from innovation in order to maintain the indebtedness of their tenants at low levels of income; Hart reads this as a formalization of V.I. Lenin’s (1889) argument, or a particular reading of it, that labor service is a feudal remnant, closely related to bondage and usury, and that the combination through interlocking contracts was an obstacle to the development of agrarian capitalism. In other words, this was an argument that presented interlocking transactions as ‘semi-feudal’, combining elements of the feudal past with a present that could not reach an ideal of full commodification of land, labour and credit. However, empirical studies in India by Pranab Bardhan, Ashok Rudra, Sheila Bhalla and others showed that interlocking contracts and forms of labor-tying were evidently increasing also in contexts of technological change; parallel research in Thailand, the Philippines and Java concurred. Another kind of critique of Bhaduri was historiographic; it showed that Bhaduri’s teleology was refuted by historical research. Jan Breman’s (1974) study of hali bonded labour relations in South Gujarat shows that the hali sought to retain these relations in order to gain something from a position of comparative privilege; Ernesto Laclau’s (1971) and Arnold Bauer’s (1975) studies of the transition from the colonial encomienda system of labour service to the nineteenth inquilino system of interlinked land and estate labor contracts in Chile similarly refute the notion of a feudal hangover; and Alan Richard’s (1979) powerful comparative essay on nineteenth century Chilean inquilino and Prussian insten concurred, showing also that landlords in these systems had an even more powerful set of powers over estates and localities than the manorial feudal lords of the Western European past.

A second approach to interlocking transactions emerges from a kind of orthodox Marxist position which saw them as a transitory precursor to the emergence of agrarian capitalism; the focus of much this work was on sharecropping. For instance, Robert Pearce (1983) poses sharecropping as functional to the early stages of capitalist development, as a form of formal as opposed to real subsumption of labour which keeps the costs of supervision low. Hart notes that apart from being dichotomous and undialectical, this position could not appreciate the resurgence of forms of labour tying, as in her own dissertation research in Java on the nonlinear history of kedokan tied labour or in Miriam Wells’ (1981) research on the resurgence of sharecropping in California’s strawberry industry.

The third approach in the interlinkage debate was from mainstream economists who posed interlocking contracts as market relations, since they do not rely on ‘extra-economic coercion’ or on ‘non-market’ forms of obligation. Hart notes
that this dualistic framework creates a raft of inconsistencies, not least that when these thinkers address how contracts are enforced, they turn to what they call ‘extra-economic coercion’. Further, they cannot explain the dynamics of exclusionary or preferential relations noted by the historical and ethnographic studies cited above, nor can they explain why labour tying emerges under very different labour market conditions that show that interlocking transactions cannot simply be legible in non-Marxist terms as disguised market relations.

These three approaches in the interlinkage debate offer economistic models of ‘obstacles, precursors or instruments of agrarian capitalism.’ By separating the political from the economic, however, Hart showed that none could explain the dynamics of labour tying or of interlocking transactions because they have no handle on social control, or ‘the ways in which those who control the means of production attempt to exercise power in the non-labor spheres over those with little or no access to assets’ (Hart 1996b, 190). Turning once more to histories of agrarian change in Chile and Gujarat, Hart (1996b, 197) notes that ‘in both cases, control over land and labor were primarily a means whereby the landowning elite gained access to wider spheres of accumulation’. This parallels Hart’s research in Java on the resurgence of exclusionary kedokan labour arrangement alongside the crackdown on agrarian mobilization under the New Order regime, an insight key to Hart (1996a).

The paper ends with the tense dialectical relation between the politics of work discipline and social control. ‘While apparently functional in the short run, such arrangements may well contain the seeds of their own destruction,’ writes Hart (1996b, 200), with reference to the contradictory politics of exclusionary labour arrangements in Bhalla’s analysis of Green Revolution Haryana and in Wells’ work on the California sugarcane industry. While interlocking transactions are not inherently obstacles, precursors or instruments of agrarian capitalism, they illuminate the complex geography of power and powerlessness; power and struggle are decisive in this view. On this final point, Hart (1996b, 201) writes ‘those with little or no access to productive assets are not simply passive units of labor supply. Their efforts to secure a livelihood are part of a larger struggle in which they forge social and political relations with other direct producers and with those on whom their livelihood depends’.

Indeed, one of the important insights of this paper is that labour tying can be a way particularly for women workers to secure preferential terms of employment; this insight was picked up by parallel work in other parts of agrarian South and Southeast Asia. However, Hart was always also South African dissident in Ithaca, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Boston. The notion of preferential arrangements for some was absolutely untenable to the anti-apartheid critic. Her most precise term is ‘exclusionary labour arrangements,’ which she knew extend ‘“privileges” to particular groups while deliberately excluding others’ and therefore that “exclusionary tactics tend also to have a demobilizing effect on agrarian organization” (p.190). Recall, Hart’s Java research was conducted in Suharto’s authoritarian Indonesia built on the ruins of agrarian communist mobilization (see our Introductory chapter, ‘Working Concepts with Gillian Hart’). At best, exclusionary labour arrangements are politically ambiguous; in all probability they are reactionary. They beg the critic to make political choices, to ‘take sides in this game of the world’ (Glissant 1997).

**Interpreting exclusionary land/ labour/ credit arrangements**

The irony is that since Hart’s departure from South Africa in 1971, the country had been rocked by internal struggles, including the emergence of independent Black
trade union movements linked to community struggles that refused the broader edifice of apartheid’s social control. Central to these insurrectionary currents in South Africa was an understanding of the mutually-reinforcing exclusionary labour, land and credit arrangements that upheld apartheid capitalism, and the intersecting struggles necessary to abolish it. What I am suggesting is that apartheid South Africa was present throughout Hart’s research in South and Southeast Asia, not in published citation but in the margins of her biography. In Hart’s hands, the notions of exclusionary labour relations and interlocking transactions held in the shadows the lived experience of apartheid.

When Hart returned to research and write about South Africa following the unbanning of liberation movement organizations in 1990s, she did so overtly citing the lessons of her Asian agrarian experience. Here, she brought to bear her lived and scholarly understandings of Asian and South African capitalisms. In contrast to Asian agrarian transitions and industrialization, Hart seized on the difference that deep levels of dispossession and proletarianization in South Africa meant for the possibility of a post-apartheid order. In the wake of the analysis of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Hart (2002) theorized the importance of re-articulating the land question as the social wage as way of attending to the legacies of racialized dispossession, segmented labour arrangements and grossly skewed access to the means of life. One might add that the political economy of modern South Africa has also been transformed in highly spatially uneven ways by the legacies of indirect rule, and the ongoing dialectics of custom and capital, as Gavin Capps (2019) argues.

When I first read Hart’s explanation of interlocking transactions in land, labour, credit and other relations as forms of exclusion as part of a broader structure of social control meant to demobilize subaltern political will, I read it in the context of broader debates of the 1990s. By this time, alongside the shift in her research towards South Africa in transition, Hart had also offered a powerful critique of metropolitan economic geographers who trumpeted the emergence of a new era of industrial decentralization in which the Third Italy and Silicon Valley were harbingers of a new future. From the vantage of Marxist agrarian studies, Hart was decidedly sceptical on multiple counts (Hart 1998). While Anglo-American economic geographers and economic sociologists thought they had discovered a non-linear conception of capitalist change, Hart and others in her midst offered the reminder that radical agrarian studies scholars of the 1970s and 1980s had already proposed non-linear, non-teleological, multi-stranded and geographical conceptions of capitalist social change. This agrarian studies perspective was deeply suspicious that the 1990s marked a new age of industrial democracy anywhere, rather than a reconfiguration of the social division of labour, and of geographies of capital and power.

My own dissertation research of the 1990s, very much inspired by Hart’s thinking at the time, took the insights of this agrarian Marxism to critique the agrarian origins of industrial flexibility in the town of Tiruppur in South India (Chari 2004). From Hart (1986b), I retained a sense that exclusionary labour arrangements can be quite important to a fraction of the organized working class that might not see itself as a labour aristocracy, but which might be central to the workings of hegemony. In Tiruppur, for instance, the division of labour in the knitwear industry and the revival of older forms of work discipline made space for some male workers of the regionally dominant Gounder caste to forge exclusionary labour arrangements that offered a route to class mobility for ‘self-made men’; these accumulation strategies produced a class fraction, a Gounder fraternity of decentralized capital, that effectively took over the industrial town from the old guard of capitalists of patrician caste backgrounds.
Chari (2004) argues that these subalterns could accumulate capital, but only through the domination of the workforce as a whole, specifically through a shifting gendered hegemony over an increasingly differentiated workforce. Their form of exploitation and social domination hinged on what they called their propensity to ‘toil’, an ideology that interpellated their subjectivation as subaltern capitalists; consequently, they forged an industrial form that was at least by the turn of the millennium difficult for other fractions of capital to break into. In effect, Gounder ‘self-made men’ articulated a particular gendered/caste politics of work to an exclusionary geography of class mobility and capital accumulation, on the backs of deepening immiseration and environmental despoliation. In parallel to Hart’s work in Java, Tiruppur’s fraternal capital forge this intricate form of hegemony in the wake of a long and persisting history of communist trade union activism.

Politically, my argument in Fraternal Capital is similar to Hart’s in that both studies see the transformative power of exclusionary labour arrangements, differently in different contexts, and we do not find them acceptable anywhere precisely because of their demobilizing effects in relation to struggles for social justice. We did not name the exclusionary power of interlocking transactions as the work of ‘racism’ in the general sense proposed by Ruthie Gilmore (2002, 16): ‘Racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet’s sovereign political territories. Racism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs.’ That is, however, precisely what our research in Java in the 1970s and South India in the 1990s was about, albeit through racisms that do not work through ‘race’ but through gender, caste, ethnicity and class.

Reading, however, is also a way of taking a path not taken.

**Code Shift: ‘Racial Capitalism’ with Micro-Foundations**

Reading alongside Hart’s early work in 2020, the concepts ‘interlocking transactions’ and ‘exclusionary labour arrangements’ appear immediately relevant to the concept of ‘racial capitalism’ (Bhattacharyya 2018). Both sets of concepts are revisions of liberal and Marxist conceptions of capitalism that presume an inexorable tendency towards the full commodification of land, labour and money, turning each into impersonal ‘markets’ that bulldoze prior emplaced forms of social power. On the contrary, both sets of concepts try to attend to geographies of social power and exclusion as intrinsic to the way in which capitalism works. By the end of this chapter, I will make a stronger argument that the notion of interlocking and exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements provides necessary micro-foundations for an analysis of capitalism as mediated by ‘death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies’ (Gilmore 2002).

But first, what is the provenance of the concept ‘racial capitalism’ that has returned with a vengeance in scholarship and activism in our time? The person most closely associated with this concept, Cedric Robinson, worked with it roughly at the same period as Hart’s Java and Bangladesh research, building on Black American Marxist sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox. Robinson’s (2000 [1983]) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* does several things; it indicts Marxism as ‘indisputably Western’ at its philosophical foundations and charges ‘European Marxists’ as myopic about the ‘racialism’ at the heart of the ‘ordering ideas which have persisted in Western civilization’. By racialism, Robinson clarifies that he means
‘the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the ‘racial’ components of its elements’ and he adds that this was ‘hardly unique to European peoples’ but was ‘codified, during the feudal period, into Western conceptions of society’ with ‘enduring consequences’. In other words, his concern was with racial consciousness (see Gilmore 2019), but ‘as a material force’ that ‘would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism’. He calls the consequence of this process ‘racial capitalism’. (Robinson 2000, 2)

Robinson clearly lambasts historical materialists who presume that capitalism was a negation of the feudal past; instead, he offers a complex historical argument to conclude that the racialized classes of European capitalism were prefigured in pre-capitalist forms of difference:

‘The bourgeoise that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds. The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones. As the Slaves became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systematic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism.’ (Robinson 2000, 26, my emphasis)

It is fortuitous that Robinson uses the language of the ‘systematic interlocking of capitalism’, but he does not elaborate on what this might mean on the ground. Indeed, this might be an artefact of what Yousuf Al-Bulushi (2020, 2-4) usefully identifies as Robinson’s inclination to the world-systems approach and to the broad sweep of Annales school historiography, as well as more specifically to the arguments of historian Henri Pirenne. What Al-Bulushi does not note is that Pirenne’s position in the heated debates on the transition to capitalism in Europe centred on the key role of towns, burghers and migrants, and that in counterpoint Maurice Dobb had argued that the transition to capitalism in agriculture had been decisive for diverse trajectories of social change. In the 1970s, Robert Brenner’s interventions in these debates, and his geographically-sensitive analysis of agrarian transitions was key within the revival of agrarian Marxism; indeed, to agrarian Marxists, Dobb and Brenner had effectively concluded this debate. By relying on Pirenne without engaging this debate substantively, Robinson misses the opportunity to engage the agrarian revival on the uneven geographies of capitalism. Indeed, agrarian Marxism falls out of his critique of what he sees as Western Marxism.

Robinson makes several other key arguments in Black Marxism; he contrasts what he sees as Western Marxist and liberal traditions with ‘the Black Radical Tradition’ emerging from histories of struggle against slavery, colonialism and decolonization; he argues that the violence of primitive accumulation and forced labour in the Americas produced ‘the Negro’ but also this militant and Black intellectual tradition. The second half of the book turns to its exemplars – W. E. B. DuBois, C. L. R. James and Richard Wright – each engaged in different ways with the tensions between Marxism and Black radicalism. Recall DuBois’ (1998 [1935]) historiographically audacious argument that after watching the advance of Northern armies, slaves downed their tools and joined the advancing forces in an armed general strike; but also recall the powerful argument about the multifaceted exclusionary
arrangements that supported ‘the wages of whiteness’. These were, in Robinson’s hands, the product of a revisionist reading of Marxism in relation to Black radicalism.

Robinson’s arguments have become ionic in some ways, but there is considerable disagreement about the concept ‘racial capitalism’. Is it meant as a reminder that capitalism is always racial, as Gilmore (2017, 225 and 2020, 171) repeatedly insists? I have tended to this view, to think of the compound term as a categorical aid to remember that capitalism always involves forms of racial differentiation, not always through race and often through gender, sexuality and other means (Vergès 2020, Davis 2020, Boyce-Davies 2007). Consider again that Gilmore’s (2002, 16) expansive conception of racism as ‘a practice of abstraction’ or ‘a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies’ or as ‘a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating…onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power’: nothing in this definition limits itself to abstraction through ‘race’ or to Blackness. Rather, it allows us to consider how capitalism works racially, as a difference-producing machine that always attempts to displace the differences it creates through the production of capitalist space.

Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal (2019) offer a sceptical review of ‘racial capitalism’, faulting what they call ‘this literature’ for imprecision about race and capitalism, a tendency to African American exceptionalism, and an attention to the violence of accumulation but not to its transformative power; these critiques are important, but they hinge on an ungenerous reading of many of the thinkers reviewed here and in their paper. I agree with their critique of Robinson on Marx’s attentiveness to social difference and that his choice of exemplars of the Black Radical Tradition is narrow and masculinist (Ralph and Singhal 2019, 860-1 and footnote 21). Yet, I disagree that ‘Robinson sees Marx’s influence on the Black Radical Tradition as a kind of straightjacket it must ultimately escape from in order to be free’ (863). Most importantly, Ralph and Singhal do not appreciate that the concept ‘racial capitalism’ has been useful for interrogating the dialectics of racism and capitalism, when both terms are considered as historical, mutable, and simultaneously material and cultural/ideological.

This is the position Arun Kundnani (2020) takes, that ‘the promise of the term lies in its apparent bridging of the economic and the cultural, of the class struggle and the struggle against white supremacy…It promises a way to close the race-class gap on the Left, a gap through which marched Trump and Brexit, with their nationalist constructions of a white working class’. Kundnani usefully reconstructs the specific conjuncture of late 1970s and early 1980s Britain on the verge of neoliberalism yet still shaped by active anti-colonial, Black and working-class struggles; and that Robinson, working at Cambridge at the time, encountered these struggles through engagement with the journal *Race & Class* edited by Sri Lankan revolutionary exile and Marxist theorist of the British racial state Ambalavaner Sivanandan (Sivanandan 1976). *Race & Class* also published the race-class debates amongst South African exiles, some of whom used the term ‘racial capitalism’. Alongside these thinkers, Stuart Hall was actively reworking his understanding of race, racism, Marxism and capitalism in important ways (Hall 2021a, 2021b). These thinkers would have come into contact with Legasick and Hemson’s (1976) pamphlet for the Anti-Apartheid Movement which critiqued the South African liberal argument that boycotts against the apartheid regime were unnecessary and that capitalism would dissolve the anachronism of apartheid; this argument was seriously debated amongst South
African exiles, as Peter Hudson (2018) notes, and would have been widely noted by Sivanandan, Hall and Robinson.

However, this pamphlet and the critiques it unleashed were a small part of a much broader set of works of the 1970s revisiting the past and present of the South African predicament. South African Communist Party (SACP) Central Committee representative for Europe, Vela Pillay had been writing Marxist critiques of the apartheid economy in the mid-1960s in *African Communist* (Padayachee and Van Niekerk 2019, 51), well before the ‘revisionist’ historians Shula Marks, Stanley Trapido, Leonard Thompson, Harold Wolpe and others effectively rewrote the radical historiography of segregation and apartheid (Wolpe 1972; Legassick 1974a, 1974b, 1976); in parallel, Bernard Magubane, who had worked politically with Legassick in Los Angeles in the 1960s was developing his own Marxist critique (Magubane 1979); in Durban, Rick Turner, fresh from the Sorbonne, brought a particular blend of radical Christianity and critical theory to bear on engaging the 1972-3 Black workers strikes alongside the Black Consciousness Movement and the charismatic Bantu Stephen Biko, whose writings were also in wide circulation; and after his release from Robben Island in 1974, Neville Alexander was forging his particular blend of Trotsky, Luxemburg, Friere and Ilich. All these thinkers were deeply engaged with the relation between racism and capitalism as specifically institutionalized in apartheid.

In his intellectual history of what he calls ‘the dialectical tradition in Southern Africa’, Andrew Nash (2009) notes the increased circulation of the term ‘racial capitalism’ in the late 1970s, because “it summed up the thrust of an analysis of apartheid which was crucial for this generation”; Nash turns to circulation of the term in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in the late 1960s citing Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, Marcuse, Sartre, Fanon and *New Left Review*; later citations in the 1970s were to Althusser and to Stuart Hall’s revision of the South African race-class debates in his 1980 essay (republished in Hall 2021b). Nash insists, I think correctly, that these arguments in South African intellectual life were crucially and “closely engaged with the struggles of the oppressed majority”; in Robinson’s terms, they were already a product of the encounter of Marxism and Black radicalism.

Much hinges on how one interprets the other compound category in the title of Robinson’s book; the 1983 edition does not state clearly what ‘Black Marxism’ connotes. Robinson’s ‘Preface to the 2000 Edition’ tries to answer this with: ‘Black Marxism [the concept] was not a site of contestation between Marxism and the [Black Radical] tradition, nor a revision’ but rather ‘a new vision centered on a theory of the cultural corruption of race’ (Robinson 2000, xxxii); but this does not exactly grapple with whether and how the ‘new theory’ is Black and Marxist, as the term implies. Robinson ends the 2000 Preface modestly: ‘I suspect the Black Radical Tradition extends into cultural and political terrains far beyond my competence to relate. In short, as a scholar it was never my purpose to exhaust the subject, only to suggest that it was there’. Robin D. G. Kelley’s (2000) generous Foreword to this edition picks up on Robinson’s invitation by reflecting on his own work on African diaspora intellectuals and artists drawn to the international surrealist movement: ‘I think it could be argued that surrealism served as a bridge between Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition’ (see also Kelley and Rosemont 2009). Kelley has, to my mind, taken Robinson’s argument in the spirit intended, and offered a useful way of thinking of the compound term Black Marxism as an invitation for what is to be done.

In a parallel spirit, Angela Y. Davis (2020, 205-6) notes that while Robinson may have initially intended ‘racial capitalism’ to be a critique of Marxism from the point of view of Black radicalism, ‘it can also be a generative concept for new ways
of holding these two overlapping intellectual and activist traditions in productive tension'; the key, Davis argues, is to refuse the dichotomy of adherence vs disavowal to Marxism as doctrine, to rather treat Marxism as open to ongoing internal critique, an ‘implicit invitation to push it in new directions’. Such an open Marxism is consistent with the way in which Antonio Gramsci saw the work of the militant intellectual as always translating subaltern and Marxist languages of critique.

This is exactly what Hall’s 1980 paper ‘Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance’ is driven by, the search for ‘a new theoretical paradigm which takes its fundamental orientation from the problematic of Marx, but which seeks by various theoretical means to overcome certain of the limitations – economism, reductionism, “a priorism”, a lack of historical specificity – which have beset certain traditional appropriations of Marxism’ (Hall 2020b, 233). Unlike Robinson, Hall reconstructs Marxism by attending to ‘historically specific racisms’ and decidedly not by ‘extrapolating a common and universal structure to racism’ (Hall 2020b, 234). Historically specific racisms, for instance in slave plantations or in apartheid Israel, work in relation to other social relations; this leads to Hall’s important formulation: ‘One must start, then from the concrete historical “work” which racism accomplishes under specific historical conditions—as a set of economic, political and ideological practices, of a distinctive kind, concretely articulated with other practices in a social formation’ (236).

While Hall’s paper is a response to South African debates, it is clear that he reflects at this crucial point in the argument on his collective work in Hall et. al. (1978) which explains the sudden hue and cry about ‘the mugger’ in the British press as a symptom of multi-scalar crises ramifying through Britain’s ‘internal colonies’ in which many Black descendants of its former empire live, if not always labour. The powerful final chapter of Policing the Crisis recasts criminalized Black youth ‘as a class fraction’ like the lumpenproletariat valorized by Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, a class not just loathed in the realm of ideology but through ‘interlocking structures which work through race…through the education system, the housing market, the occupational structure and the division of labour’; racism is not just ideological, in other words, it is this complex set of institutions which reproduce racialized classes over time (Hall et. al. 1978, 389). After reflecting on the insights from Policing the Crisis, Hall (2021b, 239) offers the famous formulation ‘Race is…the modality in which class is “lived”, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and “fought through”’. The power of racism is that ‘it has performed the function of that cementing ideology which secures a whole social formation under a dominant class’, and part of its power is in its ability to refuse its historicity through ‘the timeless language of nature’ (Hall 2021b, 240-1).

Hall’s work of this time continues on a path not taken in Robinson’s Black Marxism, and it attempts also to move beyond a functionalist argument about the relationship between race and class, or racism and capitalism. The next generation of scholars from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies elaborated on this argument through new layers of theoretical and political complexity, brilliantly demonstrated in contributions by Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby and others in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1982) The Empire Strikes Back.

I would argue that Ruthie Gilmore is the figure who connects the dots between Robinson, Hall, Sivanandan and Davis, not all of whom appeared to engage with each other through their decades of parallel work. Gilmore’s complex material and ideological argument about the attempt to forge hegemony through the racial geography of the prison-industrial complex in California, and her focus with Craig
Gilmore on rural-urban activism to call this structure into question, shows us that bridging Marxism and Black radicalism is always also geographical work (Gilmore 2007). There is an affinity between Gilmore’s carefully theorized and empirically rich analysis of racial capitalist geographies, not all structured by race, and the agrarian Marxist tradition that has shaped Hart’s work. Both are premised on rigorous historical and ethnographic research, and both seek to bridge an open Marxism with the traditions of the oppressed. What distinguishes the Black intellectuals I have considered from their agrarian Marxist counterpoints, however, is the imperative with which the former have foregrounded the work of Black intellectuals in forging critical consciousness, a point which takes us back to the value of Robinson’s contributions not just to understanding racial capitalism but to opposing it.

Openings: Micro-foundations in Practice and Consciousness

I conclude with thoughts for scholars to pick up in new ways, openings emerging from the insights of Hart’s critique of the interlocking transactions debate in relation to the Black Marxist tradition that was re-consolidated in important ways in the 1970s. I argue that, in conjunction with a Black Marxist attention to consciousness-raising praxis, ‘interlocking transactions’ offers tools to interrogate the micro-foundations of exclusion. More precisely, it reminds us of the importance of a more granular understanding of geographies of racial capitalism, by helping us get at the precise ways in which exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements interlock with broader social power relations, including relations of the state, military, police, corporations, universities, hospitals, families and other institutions of social domination which collectively work to reproduce, but also perhaps undermine the workings of racial capitalism.

Two scholars who have produced important scholarship in this vein point us to how we might think engage in this kind of critical ethnographic research. First, Taneesha Mohan’s (2015) insightful doctoral dissertation, inspired by Hart’s framework, shows how labour tying arrangements have intensified in dynamic agricultural areas in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in India in recent years, and how they reproduce exploitative labour contracts particularly with Dalit women. Mohan shows how attempts at progressive state intervention in the countryside through the Public Distribution System and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act have not transformed the social power relations that support the persistence of agrarian unfreedom. Mohan thinks with the categories of Hart (1986b), of labour tying, exclusionary labour arrangements, interlocking transactions and the social power relations that maintain them. I suggest that this work, like my own work in South India and Hart’s in Java and Malaysia, was also about socially and spatially distinctive forms of exclusion as immanent to the dynamics of these capitalist geographies. These were always-already forms of racial capitalism differentiated through means other than race. The important point here is that race, gender, class and other aspects of differentiation are not treated in Weberian fashion as separable categories, but rather as always only apprehended in their articulation. Extending Hall’s formulation, we might say that all forms of social difference are modalities in which class is lived, and the notion of ‘modality’ must be thought in a fully dialectical sense of interrelation, completion and non-identity so as not to convey a sense of hierarchies of separable oppressions (Hall 2003).

Second, Erin Torkelson’s equally insightful research on what she calls ‘racial finance capitalism’ in past and present South Africa shows how another seemingly progressive state intervention, a post-apartheid cash transfer program, has worked to
empower a coercive and monopolistic financial system, and how proprietary technology has in fact undermined the cash transfer program by deepening racialized indebtedness. Torkelson’s work is on a society saturated by race, where the concept ‘racial capitalism’ trips off the tongue with the ease it does in the contemporary United States. Yet, her research also shows that racial finance capitalism is not the product of racial ideology disrupting a race/class/gender-neutral landscape of debt, credit and cast transfer to the poor. Rather, Torkelson’s insights are indebted to the agrarian Marxist tradition for its complex approach to exclusionary relations of land, labour and credit that take different shape through different geographical histories.

What I am suggesting, by directing the reader to Mohan and Torkelson’s thoughtful research, is that in both studies, under very different conditions, geographies of racial capitalism are reinforced rather than undermined by seemingly value-neutral instruments of state and capital that in fact reproduce very different geographies of racial capitalism (Torkelson 2020a, 2020b).

Inspired by these scholars, I would like to ask a more general question about capitalism in our time. We live in a time in which capitalist ideologues cannot argue anywhere, in any society, that capitalism can offer full employment, housing, education, health, and access to the means of life to the denizens of any society. After the end of what was called the ‘golden age of welfare capitalism’ in the North Atlantic world, which was never particularly golden for large numbers of working-class, women, Black, Indigenous and otherwise subaltern people; after the end of twentieth century state socialisms through ‘shock therapy’ or capitalist transformation under one party rule, might we be seeing a renewal of interlocking and exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements in our time? Rather than a world of capitalist convergence, might we see a return to the kinds of uneven geographies of land, labour and capital noted by agrarian scholars of the Global South in the 1970s. Might these interlocking relations tie people into place-specific forms of social domination that prevent spatial and political movement where figures who dispense insecure work, housing, land, credit and other services accrue a kind of emplaced power not unlike the agrarian landlord-moneylender of 1970s agrarian studies.

Perhaps this is the phenomenon that ‘racial capitalism’ ought to name: the breakdown of the hope of spatially uniform markets in land, labour and capital and a return to a much more spatially differentiated order in which interlocking oppressions force people to agree to super-exploitative wages in exchange for relatively stable housing, life-shortening working conditions in exchange for consumption credit, or periodic credit in exchange for political patronage, and so on.

Central to the agrarian Marxist debates of the 1970s was a refusal of a unilinear conception of ‘transition to capitalism’. Today, after the end of the mirage of a golden age, contemporary neoliberal capitalist societies might continue to deploy the rhetoric of individual opportunity and discipline, painting a convergent world in which everything is always for sale, at a bargain, including the value of life. The hegemonic apparatus might also deploy the repressive apparatus against dissent from labour unions, civic organizations, and specifically oppressed groups – Black people, Uighurs, Muslims, Palestinians, and any worker unsatisfied with a life of precarity. After decades of periodic capitalist crises, and with prolonged, multi-faceted crises associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars of contemporary capitalism might attend more carefully to the possibility that we might be in a time of increasingly fragmented, differentiated and exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements.

Indeed, in contexts of spiralling consumer debt, impermanent and precarious labour, transient housing, and perpetually insecure conditions of emplaced livelihood,
personalized and exclusionary arrangements might hold out to some the means of fixing the appearance of security. This is where we might return to Hart’s (1986b) warning that exclusionary labour/land/credit arrangements come with generally demobilizing effects for other working-class people. What this reading of Hart on ‘interlocking transactions’ with Robinson and others on ‘racial capitalism’ points to is that the interlocking arrangements that create geographies of inequality and exclusion are sustained, and undermined, in everyday ways. We must attend to the latter in order to retain the hope of challenging a fragmenting and differentiating enemy. If there is a final lesson from the Black Radical Tradition about the future capitalism, it is summarised in one word it has brought into critical consciousness: abolition!

References


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