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Racism and State Formation in the Age of Absolutism

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Abstract

This essay explores four questions through a critical dialogue with Black Marxist, Decolonial, and Political Marxist accounts of racism. First, is it possible to speak of racism before the advent of colonisation in the Americas? Second, what were the determinants for the production of these earlier modalities of racism? Third, who were the key actors responsible for the production of such racism? And fourth, what were the linkages between these developments and racisms that would unfold with the capitalist colonisation of the Americas? I contend that the historical formation of racism as a material force lies in the formation and dissolution of absolutist states in Western Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. By demonstrating how elite political cultures of Western European societies were suffused with the logic of racialisation prior to the colonisation of the Americas, the essay helps render transparent hitherto occluded connections between histories focusing on the internal racialisation of Europe and the racialisation of the European exterior. And in doing so, it establishes the constitutive part racism played in the emergence of capitalist modernity.

Keywords

racism – state formation – capitalism – transition debate – Spain – England

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Debating the History and Concept of Racism

There is a long-standing consensus that the origins of racism lie in the capitalist colonisation of the Americas.¹ According to the Political Marxist Charles Post, ‘race is crystalised’² in late seventeenth-century English America in the ‘wake of Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 when indentured servitude and other forms of unfree labour which had brought Europeans to the colonies disappeared in Virginia leaving only enslaved people of African descent unfree.’³ Thereafter, racism became a ‘distinct way of differentiating human beings [which] developed with capitalist social property relations.’⁴ More specifically, the ‘disjuncture between the lived experience of legal juridical equality in the labour market and the substantive inequality of capital and labour in capitalist production require[d] the invention of race.’⁵

Like most scholars working within a historical-materialist problematic, decolonial thinkers also assert racism’s intimate entanglement with the development and expansion of colonial capitalism. However, reflecting their intellectual roots in world-systems analysis, they tend to push the historical formation of racism back in time to sixteenth-century Spanish America. For one of the founders of decolonial theory – the Peruvian Anibal Quijano – ‘capitalism came into history, for the first time, with America,’⁶ and ‘[o]ne of the foundations of that pattern of power was the social classification of the world population upon the basis of the idea of race, a mental construct that expresses colonial experience.’⁷ Quijano continues, ‘[t]he racial axis has a colonial origin and character. ... The idea of race ... does not have a known history before the colonisation of the Americas ... it originated in reference to phenotypic differences between conquerors and conquered.’⁸ This racialising process helped hierarchically order the populations of the Americas and legitimate the social relations of domination imposed by the conquest and ensured that race became ‘the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power.’⁹

1 Du Bois 1999; Williams 1994; Cox 1989.

2 Post 2020.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Quijano 2000a, p. 219.

7 Quijano 2000a, p. 215.

8 Quijano 2000b, pp. 533–4.

9 Quijano 2000b, p. 534. See also Mignolo 2009, p. 19, who argues that ‘Racism as we know it today was the result of ... conceptual inventions of imperial knowledge.’

There is undoubtedly much of intellectual and political value in both these perspectives. The devising of transnational accounts of capitalist development and consolidation makes an important contribution to unsettling still-dominant Eurocentric perspectives that focus almost exclusively on the internal European mechanisms that facilitated the flourishing of capitalism.¹⁰ Further, the returns accruing from centring racism and colonialism within such accounts of global capitalism are equally compelling. At the same time, this essay contends that there remain fundamental analytic blind spots within these competing schools of thought that militate against the development of a more comprehensive Marxist account of the historical formation of racism.

Political Marxists, as well as Anglo-American Marxism more broadly, tend to conceive of racism in the singular as the anti-Black ideology and exclusionary practices that English settler-colonists deployed against those of African descent. This essential but nevertheless narrow understanding of racism has tended to preclude not only further investigation of the colonial English racialisation of the Indigenous communities of the Americas but also an analysis of the patterns of racialisation deployed by the Spanish settler-colonists who arrived in the Americas a century before the English. Thinking relationally about such modalities would reveal that racialised structures of domination involving the exploitation and oppression of Indigenous and African communities were already being put in place long before the English set foot in North America.

One of the most profound weaknesses of these accounts is the difficulty they have in theoretically accounting for the production of racisms within Europe itself. This is a product of understanding colonialism (including Atlantic slavery) as the universal mechanism for the production of racism. And because colonialism is understood to happen outwith Europe, racism comes to be narrowly understood in the singular as white supremacy. Or to put it more bluntly, it is the ideology that legitimated the damage, degradation and destruction Europeans inflicted on non-Europeans beyond the shores of Europe.

This is also why decolonial theorists like Walter D. Mignolo rule out the possibility of racisms being produced by processes and mechanisms within Europe itself, because 'the nation in Europe was constituted of one ethnicity, articulated as whiteness'.¹¹ Significantly, such a position is entwined with Mignolo's wider project to paint historical materialism as Eurocentric, as exemplified in his claim that Marxism is 'a critical and liberating project dwelling in the local

10 See Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015 for an excellent account of the intersocietal origins of Western European capitalist development.

11 Mignolo 2007, p. 157.

history of Europe, in a fairly homogenous community where workers and factory owners belonged to the same ethnicity.¹²

Leaving aside the erasure involved here of Marx's own analytically perceptive writings about the significance of colonialism and slavery to Western European capitalist development, the structuring power of anti-Irish racism and anti-African racisms, as well as the diverse traditions of anticolonial and antiracist thought and practice that have germinated within the Marxist problematic subsequently,¹³ what is particularly astonishing is the decolonial description of nineteenth-century Europe as a 'fairly homogenous community'.

Even Eurocentric metanarratives of modernity are alive to the existence of different ethnicities and religious schisms within Europe, and the allegation of erasure of colonised and internal others in nineteenth-century Europe is particularly surprising. In Britain, for example, there is now a voluminous body of work that plots how the industrial revolution pulled diverse groups of racialised outsiders into Britain, most notably Irish Catholics but also a sprinkling of Africans and Caribbeans. This was followed over time by migrations of those of Jewish and Asian descent, suggesting that the working class of imperial Britain was a multi-ethnic formation from the very moment of its inception.¹⁴

Further, this decolonial deployment of a racialised and ahistorical understanding of European ethnicity as white has deleterious effects on our collective understanding of the emergence and consolidation of racism. In fact, their operationalising such a narrow conception of racism leaves them performing all sorts of conceptual gymnastics when confronted with empirical evidence of racism directed at European populations. For instance, Mignola, drawing on a one-dimensional reading of Césaire's powerful anticolonial essay 'Discourse on Colonialism',¹⁵ reductively conceptualises the Holocaust as 'a racial crime perpetrated against racialised whites in Europe applying the same logic that the coloniser had applied to people of colour outside of Europe'.¹⁶ In this account, the Nazi genocide of European Jewry is derived from the racialised logic of coloniality, a sort of one-off racist blowback into Europe.

While there is much to be gleaned from mapping how certain repressive technologies of power in colonial Namibia were imported by the imperial officer class of the German Empire and eventually put to work by the apparatuses

12 Mignolo 2007, p. 164.

13 See, for example: Anderson 2016; James 1991.

14 See, for example: Linebaugh and Rediker 2002; Virdee 2014. For an application of this argument across European states more widely, see the collection of articles in McGeever and Virdee (eds.) 2017.

15 Césaire 2000.

16 Mignolo 2007, p. 155.

of the Nazi state to extinguish Europeans of Jewish descent,¹⁷ we cannot derive an understanding of the Holocaust solely from the practices of colonial racisms but must also be cognisant of its unique logics and historical specificities. Where, for example, in decolonial studies is the same considered attentiveness to the long history of religious antisemitism within Europe itself, and the examination of how and when this was overdetermined by racist antisemitism as a result of social conflicts within and between European states? We need to build into our theoretical accounts a multi-directional flow of racialising ideas and exclusionary practices that accompanied the construction of racist orders across the world, with each one representing a moment of elite learning from which flowed more-refined ways of thinking and making 'races' with a view to expanding and legitimating the system of exploitation and oppression.

In contrast, in conceiving of the Holocaust as a singular event, Mignolo not only abstracts it from centuries of European history scarred by religious antisemitism but also the everyday and structural racist antisemitism that characterised Jewish lives in Europe long before the Shoah. This failure to consider internal developments and divisions within Europe relationally and alongside those outwith Europe is also what explains the wider decolonial erasure of anti-Roma racism, and anti-Irish Catholic and anti-Slavic racisms within the European interior.¹⁸

The process of decolonising Europe cannot stop at the shoreline of Europe, nor can it be achieved by marrying the so-called 'inter-societal' to already existing Eurocentric accounts of Europe's rise;¹⁹ instead, they must be interwoven with and interrogate further what happened in Europe itself with a greater attentiveness to racism. We need to connect both parts of the story if we are to produce more comprehensive accounts of the emergence and evolution of racism. That is, a double determination and reconstruction is required, and decoloniality gives us only one.

Operationalising an understanding of racism as white supremacy also carries with it the danger of presentism, of interpreting the past through the lens of the present. Such an approach tends to collapse and occlude the labyrinthine, contradictory and still-unfinished processes and trajectories through which the populations of Europe were homogenised and came to understand themselves as Christian, European and white over historical time. Unlike in the settler colonies where white identifications were consolidated across most social classes by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of the

17 See, for example, Madley 2005.

18 See, for example, the papers in McGeever and Virdee (eds.) 2017.

19 See, for example, Bhabra 2007.

establishment of structurally-based racialised orders of domination, it is problematic to claim that most Europeans understood themselves as white in this period, or for that matter in the nineteenth century.

Whiteness within Europe remained by and large an identification restricted to elite Europeans and parts of the middling classes until the twentieth century. And its embrace by the working classes of Europe was always, and remains to this day, an uneven and unfinished process in formation. This does not mean there was an absence of long-standing structural racisms within Europe, as I have already indicated with regard to antisemitism; just that the dominant modalities within European history were less likely to be colour-coded, and were more closely articulated to questions of class, culture, religion, and national belonging.²⁰ We must therefore pluralise our understanding of racism.

What is at stake here for Marxists is the question of how important racism is to our accounts of the emergence and consolidation of capitalist modernity. My suggestion is that to fully grasp the powerful structuring force of racism across the *longue durée* of capitalist modernity requires that we be more vigilant to the convoluted and relational ways in which the racisms of the European interior as well as those of its exterior helped produce the hegemonic and racialised structures, inequalities and identifications that we live with today. We must link and hold those histories together and endeavour to make connections thus far occluded while at the same time remaining attentive to their historically specific genealogies and logics. Unless we study and recognise the multiplicity of racisms and their different determinants, the danger is that we will end up underestimating or even obscuring the constitutive role that racism has played in capitalist modernity's emergence and consolidation.

This essay contributes to this task through the production of a theoretically-informed historical account that unravels the connections between different modalities of racism and the formative part they played in the step-by-step transition from feudalism to capitalism. It not only contributes to the long-standing debates about how to understand racism and the conditions for its historical emergence but also links with and sheds light on its relationship to under-studied aspects of the historiography of absolutist state formation and historical capitalism. And from this, I develop an account which insists that racism and capitalism are inter-related in such a way that the essence of each can only be understood in its relation to the other.

²⁰ Renton and Gidley 2017; Virdee 2014.

Cedric Robinson and his Critics

Against this backdrop, I believe a critical reading of the lines of argumentation pursued by Cedric Robinson in his landmark volume *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*²¹ can contribute to an improved understanding of the theoretical and historical connections between racism in the Americas as well as its formation within Europe, thereby enabling the production of a more comprehensive account of the emergence and consolidation of racism.

For Robinson, racism is ‘not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the “internal” relations of European peoples’, forming an intrinsic ‘part of the inventory of Western civilization’ since the twelfth century.²² Key to the production of this racialised sensibility within the European interior were the ‘antagonistic differences’ and conflicts arising from a division of labour where the migrant formed an indispensable component of the workforce. In particular, Robinson focuses his attention on the widespread use of migrant slavery in the Mediterranean region in occupations as diverse as domestic service and mining to make transparent the continuities and connections to the capitalist catastrophe yet to unfold:

This variety of uses to which slaves were put illustrates clearly the degree to which medieval colonial slavery served as a model for Atlantic colonial slavery. ... The only important change was that the white victims of slavery were replaced by a much greater number of African Negroes, captured in raids or brought by traders.²³

Significantly, the prevalence and persistence of such slavery required justification, particularly after the consolidation of Christianity in Europe. And as Robinson shows, it was during the medieval period that the writings of ancient apologists for slavery including Aristotle and Plato were wrenched from their historically specific contexts to provide the intellectual legitimation for feudal-elite oppression and exploitation of the migrant and slave.²⁴ Aristotle’s ‘racial constructs’,²⁵ including the assertion that the deliberative faculty of the

21 Robinson 2021.

22 Robinson 2021, p. 2.

23 Robinson 2021, p. 16.

24 Robinson 2021; Robinson 2019.

25 Robinson 2021, p. 11. Here Robinson appears to make a distinction between racism as practice and racialism as thought, with the latter being traceable back to Greek antiquity and the writings of Aristotle and Plato.

soul is absent in the slave, and that non-Greeks and labourers are ‘slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts’;²⁶ alongside Plato’s invocation of Hesiod’s myth of the origins of human development, and argument positing the threat to ruling-class rule posed by ‘miscegenation’ between ‘those qualified to be rulers’ and ‘farmers and workers’;²⁷ helped solidify a racialised understanding of the class structure such that ‘from the twelfth century on, one European ruling order after another, one cohort of clerical or secular propagandists following another, reiterated and embellished this racial calculus.’²⁸

And because capitalism emerged from within this feudal order, an order that was already deeply stained with the logic of racialised difference and hierarchy, Robinson contends it was inevitable that capitalist development and expansion would also pursue ‘essentially racial directions’.²⁹

The historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true if the social, psychological, and cultural origins of racism and nationalism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events that contributed directly to its organization and production and exchange. Feudal society is the key.³⁰

In this way, Robinson turns the dominant Marxist understanding of capitalism’s tendency to homogenise the world’s workforce on its head; instead of reducing difference, the emphasis in Robinson’s account is placed on the continuities with developments in feudal society and particularly the tendency of ‘racial capitalism’ to extend modes of racialised differentiation as the European elites moved to bring the world within its domain.³¹

26 Robinson 2021, p. 11.

27 Robinson 2019, p. 133.

28 Robinson 2021, p. 11.

29 Robinson 2021, p. 2.

30 Robinson 2021, p. 9.

31 The general thrust of Robinson’s argument demonstrates in compelling fashion the incremental and contingent manner in which the different components of racism were assembled over historical time to produce the global system of racialised capitalism. However, it is worth drawing attention to his tendency to sometimes conflate ethnocentrism (understood as the culture of one group being superior to that of another) with racism in his discussions concerning the medieval division of labour. Also, he occasionally reifies race (see for example, ‘this European civilisation, containing racial, tribal, linguistic, and regional particularities’ (Robinson 2021, p. 10), or ‘those peoples to whom the Greeks and the Romans referred collectively as barbarians were of diverse races with widely differing cultures’ (p. 10; emphasis added)), which can sometimes exaggerate the structuring force of racism in the feudal period.

The bourgeoisie 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 another; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds. The tendency of European civilisation through capitalism was thus not to homogenise but to differentiate – to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial ones.’ As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the Middle Ages, 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 civilisation, reproduced by capitalism.³²

There has been a sustained wave of interest in Robinson’s theorisation of racialised capitalism, particularly since the advent of the Movement for Black Lives in the United States and beyond with many academics and activists deploying the concept as a framing device to make theoretical sense of the contemporary crisis of global capitalism and the place of racism within it.³³ At the same time, others have been more critical of Robinson’s account, particularly its historical foundations. Political Marxists like Charles Post and Ellen Wood, for example, reject Robinson’s claim that racism existed in feudal Europe, accusing him of ‘a fundamental confusion between precapitalist and capitalist modes of differentiating human beings’.³⁴ According to Post, racism and the idea of ‘*inherent* and *unchangeable* divisions among humans’ was unnecessary in feudal society because ‘social inequality was legally and juridically inscribed in pre-capitalist class relations. In modes of production based on serfdom, slavery and other forms of legal coercion, inequality was *assumed* to be the natural condition of humanity’.³⁵

Continuing in this functionalist vein, Ellen Wood argues that racism was required under capitalism only when ‘relations of exploitation are not defined by a hierarchy of civic status’ but as social relations between ‘free and equal individuals, who ... share every legal and political right, up to and including full citizenship’.³⁶ Thus, for Wood, ‘it was only relatively recently that the human race was rigidly divided into racial categories. ... The modern slave-owner or

32 Robinson 2021, p. 26.

33 See, for example, Bhattacharyya 2017.

34 Post 2020.

35 Ibid.

36 Wood 2002, p. 278.

imperialist, lacking more traditional civic categories, in a world where ideas of civic freedom and equality were becoming a major ideological weapon, were obliged to find some more decisive “natural” way of excluding his [sic] victims from the normal world of free and equal human beings.³⁷

The central defect with this Political Marxist argument rejecting the applicability of the category racism to feudal society flows from its *a priori* mode of reasoning and theoretical deduction. No empirical investigation is conducted to examine either Robinson’s claims of feudal racisms or the social conflicts that might have stimulated such a response; instead, Post and Wood proceed simply by reading off from their frozen theoretical model that inequality was a natural condition in the medieval period. And they continue with this line of argumentation by abstractly deriving a universal conception of racism, one that emerged specifically in the aftermath of the French Revolution to contain the global subaltern demand for equality and freedom.

This doctrine of racial typology, or scientific racism as it came to be known, held that: (i) humans can be sorted into a finite number of racialised groups using a limited set of physical markers; (ii) these groups are endowed with differing capacities for cultural development, with Europeans ranked at the top of this racial order and sub-Saharan Africans at the bottom; (iii) each group’s capacity for civilisation is fixed and immutable over time and space, such that African and Asian societies are effectively imagined as lying in a state of arrested development akin to European societies at an earlier stage in their civilisation.^{38,39} If decolonial scholars like Quijano and Mignolo can only envision racism as arising in those instances where social groups with different phenotypes came into contact with one another in the sixteenth century, then the rigid formalism of the Political Marxists pushes its emergence in world history into the late eighteenth century and the construction of ‘racial types’.⁴⁰

This approach contrasts sharply with Marx’s own method, which is undergirded not only by the materialist premise, ‘that the analysis of political and

37 Wood 2002, pp. 279–80.

38 See Banton 2019; Barkan 1991.

39 Less well known is the fact that accompanying this racialisation of peoples outwith Europe was the simultaneous racialisation of the European interior, with the interior divided into Nordic, Roman, Gallic, Slavic and Semitic races, each one constructed as a distinct physical type with varying levels of capacity for civilisation (Balibar 1988; Poliakov 1996). All European nations were held to be a composite of such races and the proportion of the mix of superior and inferior races was said to determine the position of the nation on the scale of superiority and inferiority (Miles 1989, p. 114).

40 Post, who is more attentive to the historical archive than Wood, follows Theodore Allen in dating racism’s emergence (as represented by the invention the ‘white race’) to late seventeenth-century colonial Virginia (Allen 1997).

ideological structures must be grounded in their material conditions of existence', but also the historical premise which posits 'that the specific forms of these relations cannot be deduced, *a priori*, from this level but must be made historically specific "by supplying those further delineations which explain their *differentiae specifica*."⁴¹ And it is Robinson's attentiveness to the historical archive that allows him to supply those 'further delineations' and demonstrate how racism emerged as a historically contingent mechanism to legitimate the widespread use of slavery and ruthless exploitation of migrant labour in societies that were outwardly informed by the ideals of Christian universalism and the redemptive powers of baptism.

In contrast, Wood's approach effaces these vital 'traces of history'⁴² of earlier modalities of racism as well as the racialised orders of domination that were built and which formed an intrinsic component of the emergent structures of the world capitalist economy long before the advent of scientific racism.⁴³ That is, it prevents her from examining not only the degree to which racism might have shaped social relations under feudalism but also how it might have informed three centuries of subsequent colonial-capitalist subjugation from the late fifteenth century, including the genocide of the Native Indian population and the African enslavement that accompanied it. The theoretical and political consequences are disastrous, since Wood's conceptually deflated understanding of racism with its narrow association with Enlightenment thought means she effectively ends up marginalising the significance and structuring force of racism in the making of capitalist modernity.

Racism does not emerge with the politicisation of phenotypical differences, as decolonial scholars claim, nor with the sifting and hierarchical ordering of humans into discrete biological categories, as Political Marxists argue, because there is no such thing as an absolute biological substance. Arguments such as those above mistakenly attribute to race an ontological status it does not deserve by reifying skin colour as an active determinant of social relations. Instead, these understandings are expressions of racism's own epistemological schema, which it uses both to justify itself as well as to obscure its own historical, social and political contingencies.

In contrast, this essay is informed by the understanding that 'the visibility of somatic characteristics is not inherent in the characteristics themselves but

41 Hall 1980, p. 322.

42 Wolfe 2016.

43 Wood cannot conceive of a process of racialisation that is constantly refashioned and refined over historical time and space in response to the changing priorities of state and capital but also resistance from those who are subjugated by such ideologies and exclusionary practices.

arises from a process of signification by which meaning is attributed to certain of them.⁴⁴ Further, this visibility is socially constructed within a wider set of structural constraints, that is, within a set of relations of domination such that it is more appropriate to conceive of racism as ‘a set of sociopolitical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are projected onto the putatively biological human body’⁴⁵ with the intention of legitimating oppressive and exclusionary practices. In this sense, racism is a technology of power, ‘an inscription of power on the body’ as Lentin puts it,⁴⁶ which also has the effect of making the rest of the population indifferent to the resultant suffering inflicted on those constructed as racialised outsiders. And because many physical characteristics (real and imagined) have been ‘signified as a mark of nature’⁴⁷ throughout history, this understanding of racism allows us to not only encompass colour-coded modalities of racism but also the entire plurality of racisms in world history including those which emerged within the European interior itself.⁴⁸

By thinking of racism in this theoretical but historically-sensitive manner, we can proceed to re-connect the earlier modalities of racism that Robinson identified to those that followed in the post-Enlightenment world that Wood and Post refer to where science had displaced religion as the dominant idiom. And from this we can begin to surmise that the racialisation of intellectual thought in Europe in the late eighteenth century was not the moment of racism’s birth but an aftershock of the processes of state formation and original accumulation legitimated by earlier modalities of racism.

The aim of the early Enlightenment thinkers had been nothing less than to sweep away the idea that the world is ordered according to God’s will and craft a new moral and philosophical attitude informed by a secular outlook and reasoned judgement based on observation. However, because this project grew within a system in which Western European states were engaged in capitalist

44 Miles 1993, p. 87.

45 Weheliye 2014, p. 5.

46 Lentin 2020, p. 4.

47 Miles 1993, p. 87.

48 In contrast to most other critical scholars, I do not deploy race as an analytic concept because I want to refrain from bringing into my conceptual apparatus ideas generated with the intention of dehumanising parts of the human population and which helped construct brutal social orders of domination that have scarred the modern world since its inception. In contrast, I work within a racialisation problematic developed most fully in the first instance by Robert Miles, which explicitly draws attention to the politics of signification and the role of human beings in the processual nature of race-making and race-thinking in the context of historical capitalism and class relations.

expansion involving the colonial subjugation of Asian, African and American peoples, intellectual thought emerged contaminated with racism.

Racism and the inequalities that flowed from it were already sedimented and institutionalised within the emergent structures of the capitalist world-system. That is why, for the intellectual and political elites of late eighteenth-century Western Europe, the ongoing project of colonial conquest became a live data-set, a human zoo from which they distilled their magical theories of scientific racism. The ongoing reverberations of colonialism and the profound structural inequalities made it possible for European elites to think in new and disturbing ways about humanity.

By making these connections across time and space, we can see more clearly the convoluted, incremental and contingent manner in which different modalities of racism were assembled and sedimented over the course of historical time to produce the global structures of racialised capitalism that we live with today. This is why I insist that racism must be understood as a constitutive feature of capitalist modernity, one that was informed by and consolidated itself alongside Western European capitalist development.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to focus on how this still-unfolding world history begins by mapping how racism accompanied the formation and dissolution of absolutist states in Western Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. When it comes to their accounts of racism, Wood and Post fail to consider the significance of the contentious developments in Western Europe during the age of absolutism.⁴⁹ This interregnum was witness to a multi-level crisis of the European social formation defined by intra-elite conflicts and class struggles of an intensity not witnessed in centuries – precisely the kind of economic and political conditions under which dominant ideologies of the kind Wood and Post draw attention to would have become unsettled and new ways of thinking might have emerged as part of the elite repertoire of stratagems for re-securing their rule.⁵⁰

I contend that the emergence of racism as a material and cultural force can be located more precisely in these social and political conflicts and a phase of historical time that Marxists commonly refer to as the ‘transition’ between a feudal order that was in terminal crisis and a bourgeois order struggling to be born. In that sense, the racisms that I discuss should be classified as *racisms of the transition*.

49 This is all the more surprising given the formative contributions made by Political Marxists like Robert Brenner concerning the origins of capitalism in the transition debate.

50 Wallerstein 1974; Gramsci 2005.

My account invites the reader to interrogate possible connections between the racisms of Spanish and English America and the racialised political cultures from which the settler-colonialists arrived. To what extent were these political cultures of Western European societies already suffused with the logic of racialisation and racism in the lead-up to the capitalist colonisation of the Americas? My intention is not simply to offer a 'race-attentive' account of the internal history of Europe but rather to stimulate further discussion on the possible historical linkages between the internal racialisation of Europe and the racialisation of its exterior, linkages that have so far not received the attention they deserve. This could be framed more contentiously by inverting the usual logic which presumes that racism blows back into Europe from the colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to ask, what if white supremacy in the colonies has important continuities with, and emerged out of the logics and lineages of, earlier modalities of racism born within Europe itself?

Further, and like Robinson's *Black Marxism*, this essay opens up the possibility that racism no longer needs to be understood as a post-hoc, conspiratorial elite rationalisation of slavery and settler colonialism in the Americas but rather as a set of ideologies and practices that built in different ways on processes of racialisation that had already stained elite Western European cultures prior to the Spanish and English settlers' setting off on their so-called voyages of discovery. Or as Robinson puts it: '[t]his cultural tradition of a moral and social order that rested on racial distinctions was ... readily available for the extension to Asian, African and other non-European peoples when it became appropriate.'⁵¹

Surprisingly, Robinson himself does not place as much emphasis on the developments in Europe immediately preceding and coterminous with the Spanish and English colonisation of the Americas in his account of racialised capitalism,⁵² whereas I insist that this was the formative moment in the historical formation of racism in world history. In that regard, my essay both expands upon and challenges key aspects of Robinson's account by periodising more precisely the origins of racism as a material and cultural force in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁵³

51 Robinson 2021, p. 74.

52 For example, there is little in *Black Marxism* about the racialised dynamics informing the later phases of the *Reconquista*, the Inquisition and the expulsion of Jewish and Muslim converts to Christianity from Christian Spain, nor for that matter the racialised discourses and practices that emerged during the English Civil War and the early-modern colonisation of Ireland.

53 My intention is not to reject Robinson's claims about the existence of medieval racisms. There is now an emerging body of work that reinforces and extends Robinson's

Before I move on to this discussion, let me clarify briefly what I understand by absolutism. The feudal mode of production defined by the unity of economy and polity distributed in a chain of parcellised sovereignties throughout the social formation began to fall apart as a result of a systemic, multilevel crisis triggered by the fall-out from the Black Death, famine, and peasant resistance. Serfdom – the key mechanism of surplus extraction under feudalism – which fused economic and political coercion at the level of the village began to disappear with the commutation of dues into money rents. And these developments when taken together threatened the class power of feudal lords, forcing the displacement of politico-legal power upwards towards a centralised and militarised summit such that absolutist monarchies replaced the parcellised sovereignties of the medieval social formations.⁵⁴

Perry Anderson notes that while absolutism was a ‘recharged apparatus of feudal domination, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position’,⁵⁵ the retention of state power by the feudal nobility required their forging of an alliance with an increasingly powerful urban bourgeoisie. In this sense, the absolutist monarchy was a ‘political balancing-mechanism between nobility and the bourgeoisie’.⁵⁶ Further, while it may have helped to temper the multi-level crisis of feudalism, absolutism generated its own structural contradictions and further economic, political, and social upheaval that would unintentionally upend the old (feudal) ways of working and thinking. And it is precisely amid these intra-elite as well as class conflicts that racism emerged as a material force for the first time in world history.

To fix racism’s causation more precisely in time and space requires a degree of historical concretisation, for the reason that no absolutist state was the same. Specifically, it requires an analysis of what Tilly⁵⁷ refers to as ‘the interplay among causal mechanisms, idiosyncratic events and powerful contingencies’, so as to illuminate what work racism accomplished across time and space, as

arguments, at least at the empirical level (see in particular Heng 2018). However, it is my belief that until the age of absolutism and the move towards the political centralisation of state authority there were few mechanisms available to the elites to enforce and diffuse such exclusionary practices across large swathes of territory. For example, the 1290 Edict of Expulsion which called for the forced removal of Jews from England may well have been motivated by an emergent racial antisemitism, but such episodes remained on the whole disturbing sparks in the night heralding the catastrophes to come with the transition to capitalism.

54 Anderson 1974.

55 Anderson 1974, p. 18.

56 Anderson 1974, p. 16.

57 Tilly 2008, p. 124.

well as for whom and why. For this reason, I will focus mainly on developments in Spain because these comprised the first episode of absolutist-state reconstruction. However, more briefly, I will also touch on how Spanish developments informed English elite practices, including how racism accompanied the capitalist colonisation of Ireland and Virginia.

Intra-elite Conflict and Absolutist State Formation in Spain

Absolutism was the first international state system in the modern world, and the first absolutist state was Spain, established in 1479 when the Kingdoms of Castille and Aragon were conjoined in dynastic union with the marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand.⁵⁸ The *conquistadores* who left for the Americas over the next few decades emerged from a social milieu that already understood itself as battle-hardened warriors with a strong attachment to a racialised religious superiority rooted in the purity of their Christian descent. Such a racialised worldview did not emerge overnight but developed incrementally as the unintended outcome of multiple determinants that included the *Reconquista* – a retrospective imagining of an uninterrupted struggle to reclaim the Iberian Peninsula for Christianity after 800 years of Muslim rule; the multi-level crisis of the feudal mode of production; and the intra-elite struggles for power, wealth, and influence that accompanied the formation and consolidation of the absolutist state.

The *Reconquista* was a project launched by key elements of the Christian clergy to reclaim the Iberian Peninsula, which had been under Islamic authority since the eighth century. However, it was only with the onset of the Crusades in the late eleventh century, when the belief that military activity could have a penitential value if it was directed against the enemies of Christendom gained currency, that parts of the nobility were won over to this mission.⁵⁹

Over the course of the next two centuries, much of the Iberian Peninsula other than the statelet of Granada was reclaimed through war waged by the Iberian Christian elites. However, as they moved through the previously Muslim South, they found themselves in charge of an increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural population of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. On the one hand, they understood that this ethnically diverse population, particularly

58 Anderson 1974.

59 Cited in Barton 2004, p. 55. Particularly important was the pronouncement from Pope Urban that, 'It is of no virtue to rescue Christians from Muslims in one place, only to expose Christians to the tyranny and oppression of Muslims in another.'

the Muslims, formed an indispensable component of the rural workforce, and was therefore vital to ensuring the economic security of the newly-conquered Christian lands. Consequently, many like Alfonso X of Castile encouraged fellow Christians 'to convert the Moors and cause them to believe in our faith by kind words and suitable preaching, not by force or compulsion ... for our Lord is not pleased by service that men give Him through fear, but with that which they do willingly and without any pressure.'⁶⁰

On the other hand, the regimes of representation perpetuated by important fractions of the Christian clergy imagined Islam as 'barbaric, degenerate and tyrannical'⁶¹ while elite discourse informing the *Reconquista* itself represented the Muslim population as fifth columnists who might at any time rise up in rebellion. Indicative of this was James I of Aragon, who insisted that 'the Moors of the Kingdom of Valencia are all traitors and have often made us understand that whereas we treat them well, they are ever seeking to do us harm.'⁶²

This contradictory response emanated in large part from the fact that the thirteenth century remained an era of parcellised sovereignties whereby no unitary political authority encompassed the entire Iberian Peninsula. On the whole, the life and property of Muslims were respected and religious and civil rights guaranteed. The goal remained a sort of voluntary assimilation through religious conversion. However, where the conquering Christians encountered armed resistance, it becomes possible to discern sparks in the night heralding a hardening of attitudes and the racisms to come. For example, in Minorca and Ibiza, Muslims were sold into slavery and their lands shared among Christian settlers, while elsewhere Muslims found themselves forced to live within walled ghettos and prevented from holding public office.

Perhaps most significantly when it comes to understanding the antecedents of modern racism, social interactions, particularly sexual relations, between Christians on the one hand and Muslims and Jews on the other came to be punishable by burning or stoning to death.⁶³ As early as the thirteenth century, then, parts of the Christian elite were beginning to mentally close down the possibility of the redemption of non-Christian others through conversion and assimilation.

Significantly, the stalling of Christian expansion across the Iberian Peninsula as a result of the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century and the resulting crisis in the feudal mode of production further consolidated this

60 Cited in Barton 2004, p. 72.

61 Miles 1989, p. 18.

62 Cited in Barton 2004, pp. 69–70.

63 Barton 2004.

direction of travel towards the emergence of racism. Shortages of labour were accompanied by rising prices and taxation, leading to a growth in agrarian unrest. Significantly, this unrest was accompanied by a marked hostility toward Jews, who were accused of instigating the Black Death by poisoning wells and of killing Christian children; increasingly they came to be represented as the Devil in popular mythology and folklore.⁶⁴

While antisemitism was widespread throughout Europe in this period, what was striking about the Iberian Peninsula was the sheer scale of violence and the numbers impacted. By 1360, antisemitic violence was endemic with 4,000 Jews massacred in Seville, followed by attacks in Toledo, Valencia and Barcelona that resulted 'in the deaths of thousands of Jews'.⁶⁵ What can be discerned in this moment is the beginning of 'the repudiation of the Christian offer of salvation to all humanity' and the pushing of Jews 'outside the circle of potential Christian fellowship'.⁶⁶

While these developments constituted the antecedents of racism, it would be the intra-elite social and political struggles accompanying the emergence and consolidation of the absolutist state that proved to be decisive in birthing racism and sealing the tragic fate of Jews and Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula. The emergence of the absolutist state in 1479 was a historically contingent outcome of the elite's desire to resolve the deep crisis of feudalism. However, moves towards the creation of such a unitary and centralised political authority under royal command helped produce a highly contentious intra-elite turf war that rapidly became racialised.

One of the ways in which Jews had tried to circumvent the summary violence they were subjected to in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was by accepting baptism and conversion to Christianity. Conversion implied assimilation into the dominant Christian society, the right to live outside Jewish residential quarters without any need to wear distinctive clothing as well as the freedom to marry fellow Christians. Significantly, for a minority it also allowed them to maintain influential positions in the secular and ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁶⁷

However, this tendency towards conversion infuriated those elites who now came to understand themselves as Old Christians (*Cristiano viejos*) because they perceived the *Conversos* as adversaries in the competition for power, wealth, and influence over the monarchy and the emergent apparatuses of absolutist power. As a result, these elements, drawn principally from the clergy and descendants of the military nobility who had participated in the *Reconquista*,

64 Fredrickson 2002, p. 21.

65 Martínez 2008, p. 27.

66 Fredrickson 2002, p. 26.

67 Martínez 2008, p. 27.

increasingly questioned the sincerity of *Converso* Christian beliefs. They accused them of failing to sever their social and cultural ties with the wider Jewish community, and many had recourse to genealogy to determine who was Christian and who was not.

In this sense, Jewishness came to be understood as transmitted in the blood, 'a natural, inheritable condition'⁶⁸ such that Jewish ancestry was said to compromise 'Christian identity, values and understandings'.⁶⁹ Old Christians insisted on the avoidance of sexual-reproductive marital relations with *Conversos* as a way of protecting their pure Christian lineages from Jewish blood. Significantly, these efforts to naturalise a religious-cultural identification coincided with the emergence of a lexicon of terms like *raza* (race), *casta* (caste) and *linaje* (lineage) that informed popular notions of biological reproduction in the natural world, particularly horse breeding.⁷⁰

Probably the first instance of how this modality of racism was deployed as a technology of power to marginalise and exclude *Conversos* from positions of influence within key public offices occurred in the city of Toledo in 1449 when the city's religious and secular leaders rebelled against the tax policies of King Juan II by scapegoating the *Conversos*, some of whom worked as tax collectors. Toledo's mayor, Pero Saramiento, drew up a decree making all converted Jews and their descendants permanently ineligible for public office and municipal appointments on the grounds that 'New Christians could not be trusted because of the insincerity of their conversions; deep hatred of *christianos viejos lindos* [clean/beautiful Old Christians]; and crimes against God, king and the public good.'⁷¹

While Pope Nicholas V as well as many Christian Spaniards opposed this first blood-purity statute (*limpieza de sangre*) on the grounds that it undermined the redemptive power of baptism, the direction of travel was towards the expansion and diffusion of such racist practices as a way of ensuring that only those with an 'unsullied' Christian lineage could occupy positions of power and influence. Religious orders as well as universities in Cordoba and Seville followed Toledo in establishing such statutes in the 1460s and 1470s, and accompanying such exclusionary practices was a dehumanised set of representations that depicted Jews and *Conversos* as products of 'monstrous mixtures', including demons and animals.⁷²

68 Martínez 2008, p. 28.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Martínez 2008, p. 29.

72 Martínez 2008, p. 30.

In this way, racial antisemitism became conjoined to the struggles that led to the process of absolutist state formation in Spain, increasingly informing the political conflicts between nobility, clergy and the crown over taxation and local autonomy, the role of municipal government and the march towards political centralisation. Eventually, the Monarchy would reach an accommodation with the Christian religious orders, higher nobility and others keen to further their economic and political objectives at the direct expense of Jews and Muslims by accentuating the emphasis they placed on a racialising Christianity.

In 1478, just one year before the official inauguration of Spanish absolutism, Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to establish the Inquisition with the express intention to 'root out heretical beliefs and practices from among the Converso population'.⁷³ Suspected heretics were required to appear before the tribunal of inquisition at a ceremony called the *auto da fé* (act of faith) where *Conversos* and others were subject to expropriation, expulsion, and execution. 700 *Conversos* were burned to death in Seville between 1480 and 1488, while another 5,000 received other punishments. In Catalonia, most *Conversos* fled the region in fear of their lives. The first fifty years of the Inquisition proved to be the 'bloodiest, producing thousands of deaths at the stake'.⁷⁴ And the estates of such persons would be confiscated such that no descendant could lay claim to them, a racialised process of accumulation through forced dispossession that the Spanish would shortly launch on a mass scale in the Americas.

And such racialising Christian zeal was cemented with the declaration of war against the last remaining Muslim principality of Granada in 1482. Framed as the culmination of the *Reconquista*, by January 1492, 800 years of Islamic rule on the Iberian Peninsula came to an end with its annexation by Isabella and Ferdinand. More than 200,000 Muslims would emigrate to North Africa in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Granada. And joining them would be the Jews of Castille and Aragon unless they converted under threat of expulsion and accepted the status of second-class Christian subjects in a new Spanish order obsessed with blood and descent.⁷⁵

It is surely of some significance to our understanding of racism that, just eight months after the fall of Granada in August 1492, the Genoese merchant and mariner Christopher Columbus would set off on his journey to the Americas, sponsored by that same dynastic union of Isabella and Ferdinand.

73 Barton 2004, p. 100.

74 Martínez 2008, p. 37.

75 The expulsion decree was designed to sever the link between *Conversos* and Jewish culture and prompted conversions on an unprecedented scale (see Martínez 2008, p. 35).

The colonisation of the Americas would eventually bring into the Spanish state's orbit a vast multi-ethnic empire comprising Native American, African, and settler-colonial populations. Yet, here we see, literally a matter of months before, how the twin notions of Old Christian blood and genealogical purity were already being deployed by those same Spanish elites as powerful exclusionary technologies of power to cleanse the population within its internal state boundaries using the methods of expropriation, expulsion, and execution.

A decade later in 1502, Castille's Muslims were offered the same constrained choice of expulsion or conversion as Iberia's Jews, with Aragon following in 1526. Most of these Muslim artisans and farm workers chose to convert, yet, despite *Moriscos* (Muslim converts to Christianity) constituting around 6 per cent of the Spanish population, there was little effort made to integrate them into Christian society over the course of the sixteenth century. Instead they continued to find themselves represented as an enemy within, who at any time might lend their support to future invasions, especially by the Ottoman Turks.⁷⁶

And in this moment of intensified racialised conflict within the Iberian Peninsula (alongside the onset of colonisation in the Americas) we see an expansion in the number of blood-purity statutes. From the mid-sixteenth century in particular, the Vatican increased its support for the Inquisition which in turn encouraged more and more military orders, colleges, guilds and cathedral chapters to make membership conditional on the purity of one's blood. Such statutes effectively debarred any Christian of Jewish or Muslim descent from holding public office. Instead, a certificate of pure Christian descent defined by blood was required such that 'doctrinal heresy and enmity towards Christians came to be seen as the likely, even inevitable consequence of having Jewish [or Muslim] blood'.⁷⁷

Alongside this, a sustained attack was launched on *Morisco* cultural identity during the first half of the sixteenth century which included the burning of more than a million Arabic-language books and manuscripts and the banning of traditional dress. This process of dehumanisation and discrimination would continue until 1609 when the entire *Morisco* population of around 300,000 would be expelled from Spain such that 'to be truly Spanish ... one [now] had to claim to be of pure Christian descent'.⁷⁸

76 Christian Iberia's resentment towards the Ottomans stemmed from the latter's seizure of Constantinople in 1453 and the blocking of their overland route to the East. Attempts to find alternative routes to the East is what partly stimulated the initial phase of Spanish colonisation of the Americas.

77 Fredrickson 2002, p. 32.

78 Fredrickson 2002, p. 33.

This abbreviated account of the history of the interior of Spain, one that is more attentive to the process of racialisation, renders transparent often-neglected but important connections between the events that unfolded on the Iberian Peninsula and Spanish colonisation of the Americas. Significantly, what becomes more evident is that the Spanish who left for the Americas emerged from a political culture where they already understood themselves as battle-hardened Christian warriors imbued with a racialised religious superiority rooted in blood and descent. Only those thought to be of pure Christian ancestry were permitted to join the ranks of the *conquistadores* and missionaries.^{79,80} And most of the 150,000 Spaniards who crossed over to the Americas between 1493 and 1550 came from Andalucía and Castille, the regions where such racialised conceptions of religious superiority were most strongly held.⁸¹

By 1600, 'Madrid controlled the largest collection of territories the world had seen since the fall of the Roman Empire and the heyday of Genghis Khan.'⁸² And confronted with the intensity of new desires, pressures, and conflicts in the New World, these Spanish *conquistadores* and missionaries would go onto adapt this racialised mental framework to make sense of the Native American and the African – except now, the tainted bloodlines could be discerned on the body itself, in the darker skin tone of the racialised other. The colour-coded hierarchical order of racist domination – *sistema de castas* – that would come to undergird Spanish colonial rule in the Americas in the late seventeenth century was based on proportions of Spanish, Indigenous and African ancestry. To sit at the apex of this pyramid, that is, to be Spanish in the colonies, required not only pure Christian descent but pure *white* Christian descent.^{83,84}

79 Ibid.

80 Horne 2020, p. 60, observes how Old Christian ancestry was a precondition for going to Spanish America, with instructions that 'No Jews, Moors ... or recent converts ... be allowed'.

81 Barton 2004, p. 109.

82 Horne 2020, p. 17.

83 Pagden 1987, p. 71, argues that 'within a few years of the conquest the mestizos, far from being the bearers of a new mixed culture, had become a despised breed, contemptuous of their own Indian origins and rejected by a white elite that had come to fear racial contamination too much to wish to acknowledge direct association with them.'

84 In contrast, Horne 2020, p. 20, claims we have to wait until the English colonisation of Virginia for racism to appear in world history because the Spanish 'took religion too seriously', such that their sectarianism towards Protestants mitigated against the development of white supremacy.

Racialisation as Contagion: English Absolutism, the Colonial Conquest of Ireland and the Norman Yoke

But we cannot leave the historical account there because, as Perry Anderson puts it, this first episode of absolutist state reconstruction in Spain exercised a determining influence on the rest of Western Europe. We know that many English merchants were resident in Andalucía and Castille during the years of the Inquisition and the completion of the *Reconquista*, while in England the elites of the absolutist Tudor state looked on with increasing envy as Spanish galleons returned from the Americas laden with looted gold and silver.⁸⁵

It is not surprising, then, that many of the English nobility – men like Walter Raleigh, Henry Sidney, Humphrey Gilbert, Richard Grenville, Robert Devereaux, and John Davies – who would go on to play a formative role in the colonisation of Ireland in the late sixteenth century were very familiar with the racial cleansing of the Iberian peninsula as well as the Spanish maltreatment of the Indian and the African in the Americas.⁸⁶ Davies, for example, justified the transplantation of English and Scottish settlers into Ulster using the precedent of ‘the Spaniards [who] lately removed all the Moors out of Granada into Barbary without providing them with any new seats there.’ Similarly, Robert Devereux, legitimating the conquest of Ireland, said he expected ‘that within two years, you shall make restraint for the English to come hither [to Ireland] without license as at this date it is in Spaine for going to the Indies.’⁸⁷ Leicester – another nobleman – openly acknowledged that his ideas about the Gaelic Irish were informed by the Spanish understanding of other subjugated populations, leading him to classify the Irish as ‘a wild, barbarous and treacherous people. I would deall as I have hard and redd of such lyke how they have byn used.’⁸⁸

At the same time, the English colonisation of Ireland had its own historically-specific dynamics which over-determined what they learnt from the Spanish. For example, unlike the Spanish who were fervent Catholics, the English were Protestants and hypercritical of Catholicism. And compounding this was the fact that when they arrived in Ireland, they were confronted with a form of religious observance among the Gaelic communities that did not even resemble the Catholicism they despised so vehemently. This quickly led the English colonists to brand the Irish as pagans, with their alleged behaviour making it

85 Horne 2020, p. 30.

86 Canny 1973, p. 593.

87 Canny 1973, pp. 594–5.

88 Canny 1973, p. 594.

seem that ‘they neyther love nor dredd God nor yet hate the Devell, they are superstycyous and worshippers of images and idolaters.’⁸⁹

And this categorisation was the first step to representing the Irish as barbarians, or even ‘beasts in the shape of men’⁹⁰ – an unreasonable people who could not be bargained with. All sorts of inhumane acts would follow in the slipstream of this symbolic and material devaluation. Gilbert, Sidney, and others came to understand that in dealing with the native Irish population they were absolved from all normal ethical constraints – one of the quintessential hallmarks of racialisation. In 1574, when Robert Devereaux led a raid which resulted in the execution of the entire population of Rathlin Island, his lieutenant Edward Barkley offered the following justification: ‘How godly a dede it is to overthrowe so wicked a race the world may judge; for my part I think there cannot be a greater sacryfice to God.’⁹¹

Here we can discern the emergence of a discourse of race as lineage deployed to make sense of the ways of the Gaelic Irish; such an understanding acquired an ever-increasing degree of material force across this period of profound economic and political turbulence. Richard Verstegan, in his then influential book *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, published in 1605, argued that ‘Englishmen are descended of the German race and were heretofore generally called Saxons.’⁹² Others followed suit. By the onset of the English Civil War – itself triggered by the Gaelic Irish rebellion against colonial subjugation in 1641 – we see the deployment of the theory of the Norman Yoke as part of the intra-elite conflict between a Stuart monarchy, keen to weaken the power of Parliament and rule by divine right, and the defenders of Parliament, who turned to the historical record to legitimate their argument.

According to Christopher Hill,⁹³ key elements of this latter group contended that before 1066, the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of England lived as free and equal citizens governing themselves through representative institutions. However, the Norman conquest had deprived them of this liberty and established a tyranny of an alien King and landlords, which weighed heavily on the Anglo-Saxons. In such accounts, the ruling class was conceived as having descended from a foreign and oppressing people who therefore had no right to be in the country and no claim to the obedience of Englishmen – themselves forged from the original stock of Anglo-Saxons. And it was only by reversing

89 Canny 1973, p. 584.

90 Canny 2019, p. 63.

91 Canny 1973, p. 581.

92 Banton 2019, p. 16.

93 Hill 1997.

this conquest and its legacies that the English could return to a life of liberty and equality.

So, as in Spain a century earlier, we can discern the racialisation of bitter intra-elite (as well as colonial) conflicts informing efforts to reconstruct the absolutist state. Unlike in Spain, however, where it was the clergy and the nobility who deployed the racialising discourse of pure Christian descent rooted in blood, in England – reflecting the later period where capitalism was increasingly dominant – the idea of race was taken up by a very different set of actors, namely, elements of the emergent bourgeoisie and middling classes who deployed it to cohere the Third Estate against the Crown, Church and landlords. In this sense, the idea of race was used by social groups invested in democratising the English state.⁹⁴

This ascendancy of the bourgeois order in England also heralded the consolidation of English colonialism in the Americas. And accompanying this was a further iteration of regimes of racialised representations. Just as in Spain, where the internal struggles over state formation helped produce a racialised Christian consciousness, including among the Conquistadores who travelled to the Americas, so it was that the conflicts in Ireland and within England itself helped produce a racialised self-understanding among the Puritans migrating to the Chesapeake region of colonial English America. And no doubt this would have been reinforced by the active presence of men like Davies,⁹⁵ Gilbert, Raleigh and Grenville, who played such a formative role in the conquest of Ireland, as well as the second and third generation of English settlers escaping the fall-out from the English Civil War, a conflict undergirded ideologically by the theory of the foreign Norman Yoke on the neck of the indigent Anglo-Saxon.

Political Marxists like Charles Post and Ellen Wood, by uncoupling the emergence of racism in the English colony of Virginia from this prior history and the racialised political cultures from which the settler-colonialists emerged, effectively end up occluding and even erasing the continuities and discontinuities between the respective forms of racialisation to be seen on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps if we re-imagine the conquest of Ireland as ‘a dress rehearsal for a grander exploitation across the Atlantic’,⁹⁶ we can finally dispense with the understanding of racism as a post-hoc capitalist conspiracy. Ideas of race as lineage were already in play in conflicts in Ireland as well as within England

94 Stoler 1995.

95 Canny 2019, p. 60, draws attention to how Davies and others made significant investments in the Ulster Plantation and the Virginia Company.

96 Horne 2020, p. 130.

itself, which is why they also informed the structural foundations of the Virginia colony almost from the moment the English settlers arrived.

Specifically, with the surplus threatened by a persistently non-compliant multi-ethnic workforce comprising English and African labourers, court records from the 1640s reveal how the elites of the Virginia legislative assembly turned to sifting the workforce using the relational categorisation of English and 'Negro' – the latter term denoting black in the Hispanic languages.⁹⁷ This encoding of the category 'Negro' in law was a formative moment in this racialisation process in English America because a darker skin complexion was explicitly used to distinguish labourers of African descent from those of English descent. Further, this categorisation was but a prelude to institutionalising systematic forms of discrimination against African labourers which would eventually reduce their legal status to that of a slave. And it is deserving of the classification racism because in this new hierarchical order of labour any possibility of the African changing their status was made impossible because here difference was essentialised through the racialisation of ancestry.

Remaining attentive to class divisions within the English-descended population, however, reveals that it was not until the 1680s that English labourers as a social group came to fully embrace such a racialised order. Significantly, this bifurcation within the labouring class occurred in the aftermath of the defeat of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 when 1,000 English and African labourers rose up in armed rebellion against the Governor William Berkeley, demanding nothing less than the end of 'chattel bond-servitude'.⁹⁸ Horrified by the fact that more than three decades since their institutionalisation of racism they had failed to fully break the affective ties forged among subaltern groups who shared neither ancestry nor faith but class position, the Virginian elite turned towards the explicit deployment of the language of whiteness.

From the 1680s onward, racism not only did its work through the signification of the categories 'English' and 'Negro', but also via the related categorisations of 'white' and 'black'. That is, legislators began to differentiate the labouring population using colour as a sorting mechanism, and because chromatic differences laid seamlessly on top of already existing racialised ancestral differences, the unequal treatment of African and English labour based on descent morphed easily into one informed by absolutist interpretations of colour difference. Terms like 'Christian woman' and 'Christian indentured servants' were now prefixed with 'white' and used to regulate everything from intimate

97 Allen 1997.

98 Allen 1997, p. 239.

relations to the granting of land to English labourers.⁹⁹ Within the space of three generations, the vocabulary of difference shifted decisively from that based on religion (for example, Christian and heathen) and racialised ancestry (for example, English and 'Negro', where the African's so-called blackness was used as a marker of ancestry) to one informed by an explicitly colour-coded racism (for example, White and Black).

The success of white supremacy in affectively attaching the English labourer to the colonial elite was bound up with the imperialist expansion of the plantation economy westwards, such that accompanying the invention of a 'screen of racial contempt' were material advantages such as the ownership of land, the freedom to move freely without a pass, and, to marry without upper-class consent.¹⁰⁰ But the wages of whiteness extended well beyond the material. In the same moment that English labourers were acquiring an enhanced status in colonial society, the humanity of African labourers was annihilated as they found themselves reduced to a commodity to be bought and sold in market squares. The recalibration of the moral worth of English and African labouring lives generated a structural and symbolic chasm that could no longer be bridged. Having witnessed this tragedy unfold in real time, perhaps English labourers determined they would embrace their newly-conferred whiteness fearful that relinquishing it might mean being reduced to the status of a slave, of becoming 'Negro'.¹⁰¹

But in choosing to become white, these English subalterns also became complicit in the catastrophe that was visited upon the African. While racism was a class project of the English colonial state, its ultimate success rested on subaltern assent. From this moment on, the expansion of rights and liberties for white labourers in the colonies was made dependent on the confirmation of the hereditary slave status of the African.¹⁰²

The wider significance of these events lies in the fact that the social processes and conflicts associated with state formation and colonial capitalism which helped birth racism first in the Iberian Peninsula and Spanish America and then in England and its American colonies would go onto reproduce racism on a global scale with the consolidation of capitalism. The competitive

99 Vaughan 1989.

100 Allen 1997, p. 17.

101 Significantly, the invention of whiteness in English America would also eventually help to dissolve the racialised antagonisms arising from the English colonisation of the Gaelic Irish. In English America, the latter united with their previous oppressors across class and religious lines in what Horne 2020, p. 198, describes as a 'militarized identity politics' of whiteness forged in relational opposition to the Native American and African.

102 Roediger 2008.

nature of predatory state-building among Western European nations meant the French rapidly followed suit with the introduction of a Code Noir in 1685, versions of which were adapted throughout the colonial French Americas. This process of elite European learning, of coming to an understanding that commodity production and capitalist accumulation would proceed more efficiently by producing a heightened sense of essentialised difference among the global subaltern classes was, like capitalism itself, 'a value-added process gaining in complexity as it moved along a chain of inter-related sites'.¹⁰³

Conclusion

This essay challenges the long-standing understanding that capitalist colonialisation of the Americas forms the universal explanation for the historical formation of racism. Through a critical engagement with Decolonial, Political Marxist, and Black Marxist accounts of racism it invites the reader to consider what if white supremacy in the colonies had important continuities with, and emerged out of the logics and lineages of, earlier modalities of racism born within Europe itself? Concretely, it demonstrates how a racialised religious superiority rooted in the purity of Christian blood developed incrementally among the Spanish elites as the unintended outcome of multiple determinants including the completion of the *Reconquista*, the multi-level crisis of the feudal mode of production, and the intra-elite struggles for power, wealth and influence that accompanied the formation of the absolutist state. In contrast, in England, racism emerged later than in Spain and was intimately entwined with intra-elite and class conflicts that heralded the dissolution of the absolutist state and the rise of capitalism. Consequently, it was deployed not by the absolutist monarchy and nobility as in Spain but by the emergent bourgeoisie and middling classes seeking to legitimate their conquest of Ireland alongside cohering the English population against the Crown and Church as it attempted to capture state power.

Over the past half century or more, there have been multiple debates about the transition to capitalism, but no school of thought thus far has had particularly much to say about how these debates might speak to the historical formation of racism. Racism has almost always been post-hoc, a sort of calculated effort on the part of the colonial elites to resolve the labour problem in the Americas and thereby facilitate the process of capitalist accumulation on a world scale. This essay, by re-orienting discussions regarding the temporal and

¹⁰³ Anderson 1993.

spatial origins of racism as a material and cultural force towards developments within the European interior – including on the Iberian Peninsula as well as in England – helps make clear that we can no longer ignore the constitutive part racism played in the transition to capitalist modernity.

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