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Definitional Essay 2: Resistance, Race, and Class Under Capitalism

The first comp area involves the nature of an oppressive economic system that puts a premium on profit, not people. The second area largely represents the inverse, covering the pushback from those very people exploited by capital. Put another way, the first area explores the multiplicity of effects attributed to capital, while this one will largely document the multiplicity of challenges to it. As in the first definition, the overall orientation is Marxist.

Bound up in the resistance is a tangle of social identities: age, gender, race, and class, etc. While I recognize the importance of these and more, I opted to delimit the field to address my primary interest: race relations (though as I explain below, youth movements come into play as well). Hailing from an extremely segregated city in the US (Milwaukee, WI), I have become sensitized to racial economic disparity; as such, I devote a major portion here to Black resistance. Fascinatingly, Max Weber (whose theories on ethnicity I included in a section on early social theory and race) also credited “contact with the United States” with increasing “his interest and sensitivity toward race and ethnic relations” (Manasse, p. 199; Stone, p. 392).

The *main* question I am interested in regarding this area overall is: How is Marxism problematized when intersected by race? Further, can the critical body of work with European origins gel with a radicalism meant to gain racial justice, say, in contemporary America? Are the two philosophies incompatible—and if yes, in what ways?

In addition to the twentieth-century activities surrounding the struggle for justice and antiracism among the African-American population—along racially resistant lines (e.g., the Black Panther Party, Civil Rights movement, and pan-Africanism), the comp readings also engage with the Birmingham-style study of subcultures—understood by some as resistant along class lines. Subcultures in the CCCS context can be explained as groups marked by their antagonism, their membership composed of young people, and their triggering of a postwar “moral panic” due to their sartorial styles, consumer music choices, and proclivities for violence (Hall *et al.*, 2013, p. 231).¹ I see the consonance between the two main themes (African-American resistance and subculture) in that white working-class youths, in the case of Hebdige’s London punks, for example, borrowed from Black West Indian culture in their acts of rebellion (Gelder and Thornton, 2005, p. 88). I hope to show how the two themes relate further as well. While the classic works on subculture emerged in Britain in the 1960s and 70s, the comp selections cover a greater timeframe, having been updated with work published in the early 2000s.

Unpacking the two major comp themes (subcultural and racial resistance) will also include asking *how* resistance is carried out to achieve social and racial equality, how this might overlap with organized labor, what these myriad forces look like (as well as what discourses they employ), and whether a force like Black radicalism ever clashes internally so as to be incompatible. On this last point, for example, I refer to the split

¹ As Hall *et al.* say of this “vanguard party of the new materialism”: “All of social change was inscribed, in microcosm, in its innocent face” (2013, p. 231).

between “liberal structuralists” and “conservative behavioralists” over the proper route to the wellbeing and success of African Americans—neither of which is without problems (West, 2001, p. 18). Other questions regarding subculture will involve capital’s cooptation of styles as well as whether certain forms of resistance *actually* pose a challenge to the status quo, or whether they devolve into ritualistic consumption—a necessity if capitalism is to perpetuate itself.

The timeframe and region I consider—the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the West—allow for a survey of the diverse modes of resistance against capitalist modernity. And while the area does not focus necessarily on the Atlantic slave trade and “two hundred and forty-four years of slavery” (West, 2001, p. 123) the readings nonetheless cite them along with empire as foundational causes for contemporary suffering. Instead, attention will be devoted to the theory of Black scholars in the Marxist tradition, such as W.E.B. Dubois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright (who Cedric J. Robinson details in *Black Marxism*), as well as Black radicals sometimes seen as touting a problematic platform, such as Marcus Garvey and his “Back to Africa” plan. Equal attention will be paid to the praxis-oriented movements, nonviolent demonstrations, bearing of arms, and instigation of riots, such as those in American cities in the 1960s as well as those occurring, perhaps most famously, after the Rodney King verdict in 1992 (Palmer, 2000, p. 429). Included among these developments are the discourses and messages espoused by various exponents supporting the cause, such as the definition of “Black Power” and what it meant for Civil Rights leaders. Again, I am interested in teasing out the conflicts that emerge within these forms of resistance too.

Beyond examining resistance and the intersectionality of Marxist theory, it is also important to determine what capitalist modernity means for African Americans specifically, as well as how white supremacy interacts with the exigencies of capital. In this way, this comp area has a bit of overlap with the first, although here I will consider effects that are racially oriented: Jim Crow in the south and racial segregation in the north; tough sentencing and the meaning of the War on Drugs (Alexander, 2012, p. 5); the militarization of police departments; and many other injustices regarding material conditions. Examining the origin, nature, and effects of capitalism will not only permit me to write cogently on *these* questions but on other current phenomena that ruling class ideology has sought to warp in its own interest: for instance, budget crises and public school closings in Chicago in 2012, or the bankruptcy of Detroit in 2013, or the spate of white officers slaying Black men in 2014.

Before diving too far into these topics, however, I think it is important to first possess a working definition of “class” going forward, which in traditional Marxist theory constitutes the core location from which social change springs (Edgell, 1993). Given this, I also include a subsection of social theory in this comp area meant above all to unpack the complicated relationship between racial justice and the Marxist analysis of class, though here I touch on Weberian analyses as well. I felt this was necessary in order to give me a language and framework in which to talk about racism and poverty via Marxist theory, which I expand on below.

I refer to Marx, as he “was responsible for the first and one of the most important sociological theories of class” (1993, p. 2). And although Weber would disagree considerably with Marx over issues pertaining to the capitalist system, the two nonetheless “conceptualized class in economic terms and claimed that the main class

categories in modern capitalism involved the distinction between the ownership and non-ownership of property for exchange” (1993, p. 14). And while Marx’s famous characterization of class relations entails the “two great hostile camps” (1993, p. 2), he did reference others, particularly in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1993, pp. 8-9).

The point I wish to make, however, is that I will adopt Marx’s interpretation of the social class structure because I think it true and tenable that “property and lack of property are... the basic categories of all class situations” (1993, p. 25). This differs to a degree from Weber, who allows for “other factors, such as skill” that would instigate class difference (1993, p. 27). Despite the fact that Weber discussed “ethnic stratification” outside of a class analysis (1993, p. 11), I want to ground my reading of race and capitalist modernity in Marx, because I still see economic disparity as a key determinant. This also speaks to a question I expect to raise at the writing stage involving the complicated relationship between racism and capital’s drive for the accumulation of profit. For instance, how well does an analysis of the latter persuasively explain the reality of the former?

Readings

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