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# Marxism, Racism, & Capitalism: A Critical Examination of Nancy Fraser

Joseph Murphy

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MARXISM, RACISM, & CAPITALISM:  
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF NANCY FRASER

by

JOSEPH MURPHY

Under the Direction of Andrew Altman, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

An ongoing point of contention within political philosophy—particularly among those on the Left—is to what extent, if at all, Marxist theory is useful in addressing certain forms of oppression found under capitalism, such as racist oppression. Leftist critics of orthodox Marxism, prominently including Nancy Fraser, often claim that Marx’s critique of capitalism is class-essentialist and unduly narrow and that his theory of exploitation—which these critics allege is the essence of Marx’s theory—is inadequate for the purposes of understanding “extra-economic” forms of oppression. I disagree with these critics. Focusing on Fraser, my aim is to show precisely why the critics are wrong and, moreover, to offer at least an outline for a positive account of a Marxist theory of race and racism, particularly as situated within capitalism.

INDEX WORDS: Capitalism, Marxism, Oppression, Race, Racism

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JOSEPH MURPHY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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JOSEPH MURPHY

Committee Chair: Andrew Altman

Committee: S.M. Love

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Georgia State University

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Stacy & Mark, and my dearest partner Emily Treu. I wouldn't have made it this far without their love and support to carry me.

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I owe an immeasurable amount of gratitude to Dr. Andrew Altman for the effort and time he's spent on encouraging and nurturing my intellectual development during my seven years at Georgia State University. It has been a privilege to work with him on a thesis whose topic means so much to me.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

An ongoing point of contention within political philosophy—particularly among those on the Left—is to what extent, if at all, Marxist theory is useful in addressing certain forms of oppression found under capitalism, such as racist oppression. Leftist critics of orthodox Marxism, prominently including Nancy Fraser, often claim that Marx’s critique of capitalism is class-essentialist and unduly narrow and that his theory of exploitation—which these critics allege is the essence of Marx’s theory—is inadequate for the purposes of understanding “extra-economic” forms of oppression. I disagree with these critics. Focusing on Fraser, my aim is to show precisely why the critics are wrong and, moreover, to offer at least an outline for a positive account of a Marxist theory of race and racism, particularly as situated within capitalism.

My discussion focuses on arguments put forward by Nancy Fraser, who is a sympathetic critic of Marxism. My contention is that, while orthodox Marxism is in need of some revision and supplementation regarding a conception of race, Fraser overlooks important aspects of Marxism that illuminate how race, economics, and politics are deeply entangled under capitalism.

## 2 FRASER’S THESIS

Capitalism has historical as well as contemporary ties to racist oppression. To address this relationship, Nancy Fraser offers an “expanded” conception of capitalism<sup>1</sup> that frames it as an “*institutionalized social order*.”<sup>2</sup> She says that capitalism must be seen not merely as an economic system, but rather more broadly as a social totality. In this way, there are different logics working together within the capitalist system. That is, there are various social forces—cultural norms, laws,

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism: A Reply to Michael Dawson” (*Critical Historical Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, 2016). [Hereafter: *EERC*.] See also: Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism” (*New Left Review* (86), 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 173; *italics in original*.

and so forth—by which the capitalist system is ordered, maintained, and perpetuated. Among these different logics is racism, particularly manifested as white supremacy in the United States.

Fraser holds that Marx’s model of capitalism is a necessary starting point for her own conception. “Undoubtedly,” Fraser writes, “Marx’s is the most influential of the[] [systematic] critiques [of capitalism] and, to my mind, the most convincing.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Fraser holds reservations regarding the scope of Marx’s analysis as she understands it. Marx’s conception of capitalism, says Fraser,

is immensely clarifying—as far as it goes. But absent some supplementation and revision, it cannot fully explicate [the] point that capitalism is deeply entangled with racial oppression. The trouble is, the Marxian perspective focuses attention on capital’s exploitation of wage labor in commodity production; in its usual guise, therefore, it marginalizes some equally fundamental processes that are bound up with that one.<sup>4</sup>

By focusing on exploitation, Marx’s criticism of capitalism obfuscates what Fraser contends are, next to exploitation, two equally important “extra-economic arrangements”<sup>5</sup> of the capitalist system: *expropriation*<sup>6</sup> and *political subjection*.

Expropriation “generated much of the initial capital that kick-started the [capitalist] system’s development.”<sup>7</sup> Fraser agrees with Marx on this point. Marx, in his discussion of the primitive accumulation of capital, recognizes the roles of slavery and colonialism and other forms

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<sup>3</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> *Expropriation* is “unfree, dependent, and unwaged labor” (Fraser, *EERC* p. 165): it is “[d]istinct from Marxian exploitation, but equally integral to capitalist development” (*ibid* p. 166). Expropriation “is accumulation by other means,” inasmuch as it “[d]ispens[es] with the contractual relation” present in exploitation and instead works by “confiscating capacities and resources and conscripting them into capital’s circuit of self-expansion” (*ibid*). Thus, expropriation may express itself violently and blatantly as in the case of slavery, or it may be “veiled by a cloak of commerce” (*ibid*).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p. 167. *See also*: Marx, *Capital* I, chapter 31: “The Historical Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist.”

of expropriation as crucial to the birth of capitalism. As Fraser sees matters, “expropriation has always been part and parcel of capitalism’s history, as has the racial oppression with which it is linked.”<sup>8</sup> But, as Fraser explains, the connection between capitalism and racist oppression “is not just historical.”<sup>9</sup> First, “[c]apitalism was not ‘just’ created through the institutions of slavery and colonialism.... Those processes also required the ‘othering’ of entire populations as being outside of humanity....”<sup>10</sup> “Understanding the foundation of capitalism,” therefore, “requires a consideration of ‘the hidden abode of race’: the ontological distinction between superior and inferior humans—codified as race—that was necessary for” ushering-in capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Fraser notes that capitalism’s logic of valorization lends itself to lowering the cost of production in order to maximize profit. In the absence of a wage contract (and all the regulations that may come with the legally sanctioned wage laborer-employer contract), expropriation is a mode of labor appropriation cheaper in monetary cost than is exploitation. Fraser says that this fact explains why it is the case that “even ‘mature’ capitalism” relies on expropriation, “especially from racialized subjects.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, systematic expropriation needs legitimation and enforcement: enter the state, laws and law enforcement mechanisms, ideological justification, and so on. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Fraser agrees with Dawson on this point. For more from Dawson, see: Michael C. Dawson, “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order” (*Critical Historical Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Dawson p. 147.

At this point, it is necessary to make explicit the conception of racism with which I am working in this paper. I refer to George Fredrickson’s conception of racism: “racism exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another on the basis of differences that it believes are hereditary and unalterable” (*Racism: A Short History* p. 170 [hereafter: *RSH*]). Racism is a phenomenon in which real or imagined differences across a human population are essentialized by an ideology that is used to rationalize stark, institutionalized power differentials that enable one group to exterminate, expel, or dominate the *other*.

<sup>12</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 167.

way, capitalism is “an institutionalized social order in which racialized political subjection plays a constitutive role” by justifying and keeping in check the capitalist status-quo.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Fraser presents an “expanded conception” of capitalism that emphasizes expropriation, as well as the political order that legitimates it, with a particular focus on the role played by racism. By “shift[ing] our gaze from the political economy theorized by Marx to the...‘non-economic’ conditions of possibility”<sup>14</sup> for the valorization of capital, Fraser aims to “disclose the centrality of *racialized dependent labor* to capitalist society.”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, she writes that “the subjection of those whom capital *expropriates* is a hidden condition of possibility for the freedom of those whom it *exploits*. Absent an account of the first, we cannot fully understand the second.”<sup>16</sup>

### 3 A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF FRASER’S THREE-TIERED MODEL

At this point, the main question that I aim to answer is this: *Is Fraser correct when she says that orthodox Marxism cannot adequately address the ties between racism and capitalism without substantive revision and supplementation?* I argue that Fraser’s attempt to revisit and revise Marx’s critique of capitalism is problematic; the “fixes” she deems necessary are not so. What is already contained within a Marxist perspective explains what Fraser thinks can be accounted for only by building upon Marx’s critical model of capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p. 166.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Fraser admits that “it would be false to say that Marx did not consider these processes at all [i.e., forms of expropriation such as slavery & colonialism]” (“Is Capitalism *Necessarily* Racist?” p. 41, footnote 3). “But,” Fraser qualifies, “with the exception of” what Marx writes about the reserve army of labor in *Capital I*, “these discussions were not systematically elaborated. Nor did they generate categories that play an integral, structural role in his conception of capitalism” (*ibid*). Therefore, says Fraser, to the extent that Marx does not develop a systematic account of capitalist expropriation (especially as it relates to racism), his criticism of capitalism is missing something important.

Fraser asserts that her “expanded conception of capitalism...is broader even than Marx’s.”<sup>18</sup> Marx offers only a “two-level picture” of capitalism, comprised of “the apologists’ level of exchange plus the ‘hidden abode’ of exploitation.”<sup>19</sup> Building on the foundations laid by Marx, Fraser presents a “three-tiered model” that aims to offer a more precise understanding of the systematic, historical entanglement between racist expropriation and capitalism.

However, the way Fraser frames Marx’s conception of capitalism is problematic for the same reason that she criticizes it. Her representation of Marx’s model as “two-tiered” is itself too narrow. Such a characterization overlooks aspects of Marx’s theory, starting with his conception of alienation, that are as important and valuable, as is his account of exploitation, for understanding capitalism’s relation to racism.

### 3.1 Alienation & Oppression

Exploitation is, on Marx’s account, essentially a relationship between persons; it is an asymmetric power dynamic, mediated through the process of production. Exploitation is the dominant condition of labor under capitalism. And alienated labor is but one expression of alienation more generally.<sup>20</sup> Marx’s conception of alienation is helpful not only for understanding the relationships between different segments of the non-capitalist classes as well as between the

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However, Rosa Luxemburg, by Fraser’s own admission, incorporates expropriation into her criticism of capitalism, understanding it as an integral part and logical consequence of the capitalist system—and I agree with Luxemburg on the matter (Fraser, *EERC* p. 168; Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* pp. 446 & 454). Luxemburg’s position is substantively an elaboration of what Marx says when he explains that capitalism’s tendency is its expansion *ad infinitum*, which is satisfied through “the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones” (Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* p. 478). Additionally, in *Capital III* there is a discussion on foreign trade explaining how investment and production in lesser-developed areas produce “surplus profit” *via* super-exploitation and expropriation (pp. 344-345).

<sup>18</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 166.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser, *EERC* p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> Avelichiv *et al.*, xv.

non-capitalist classes and the capitalist class (and even within the capitalist class itself); alienation also is helpful for illuminating the role of racist oppression within capitalism.

Any conditions that prevent persons from having real opportunities to actualize their human freedom are alienating. In my view, the overarching Marxist criticism of capitalism is that it perverts and alienates our species-being,<sup>21</sup> i.e., our essential life activity that distinguishes us as humans.<sup>22</sup> Marx's idea of communism, a state of affairs to be realized historically, is best understood abstractly and essentially as the transcendence of alienation. As Marx writes, communism is the

re-integration or return of man to himself, the transcendence of human self-estrangement [i.e., alienation]. ...Communism [is] the positive transcendence of private property, or human self-estrangement, and therefore [is] the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore [is] the complete return of man to himself.... [C]ommunism...is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between

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<sup>21</sup> I recognize that my view of Marx's overarching criticism of capitalism is one that is highly contested. Indeed, the dominant view is that there is a distinct theoretical shift in Marx's work: it is widely accepted that there is a dividing line between the "Young Marx" and the "Mature Marx": the "Mature Marx" abandoned his "unscientific" humanistic framework for economic analysis. However, while it is true that in his later works Marx focuses a great deal on economic analysis, nonetheless I agree with those who argue that there is a conceptual continuity in Marx's work, from the *Paris Manuscripts* to his later works, including *Capital*. I will not defend my view in this thesis. Nevertheless, even if one does not accept the view I endorse, that does not pose too serious a problem for my argument. First, the question I am addressing is not one of historical conceptual continuity in Marxist theory; it's whether Marxist theory offers concepts sufficient to address Fraser's concern. Second, the dominant view poses a problem, if at all, only for the relevance of alienation to Marx's "mature" theory, not his conceptions of class oppression and ideology.

<sup>22</sup> Thus, in the broadest sense, human beings are alienated when we are separated, and systematically kept from actualizing, our human essence by freely choosing, and participating in, the natural, life-sustaining, as well as creative & social activities, that constitute a full and flourishing human life. Now, alienation is a condition of all class-based societies. Moreover, it is the given concrete social conditions (in this case those under capitalism) that are alienating; these conditions are too varied and dynamic to list here. The upshot is that one of the benefits of Marx's conception of alienation is that it captures an essential phenomenon of class society, even as that phenomenon takes on different concrete forms in different societies.

the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.<sup>23</sup>

It is not only the case that racialized subjects are alienated by racism; racism is alienating to everyone within the system: the construction of the racial *other* is a paradigmatic form of human self-estrangement, subordinating some to others and separating all from their species-being. (I will later expand on this point in my discussion of Abigail Bakan's work on the intersection of racism, alienation, and capitalism.) A society in which the prejudices, oppressions, and conflicts of racism exist is one in which none of its members can fully actualize their human freedom. Marx understands communism as "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, such an association requires that every basic form of alienation be overcome. Therefore, from a Marxist perspective, racism is to be understood as an obstacle to the realization of human freedom.

Alienation and oppression often go hand-in-hand for Marx. Oppression is like alienation inasmuch as it is a phenomenon endemic to all class-based societies. Accordingly, Marx writes, "[a]n oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes."<sup>25</sup> Generally speaking, oppression is a relation of dominance and subordination by which the ruling class constitutes its position within the given class hierarchy. Crucially, class oppression can—indeed does—take form in a variety of ways: laws and the enforcement of laws; physical violence or threats of physical violence, either by state actors or non-state actors; coercion (e.g., through the deployment of economic power); propaganda & reigning ideology—and so on. Moreover, there is a logic of cyclical reinforcement at play: reigning ideologies that support the

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<sup>23</sup> Marx, "Private Property & Communism" p. 84.

<sup>24</sup> Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* p. 491.

<sup>25</sup> Marx, "The Coming Upheaval" p. 218.

status-quo and sustain the alienation of individuals and groups are used to legitimize oppression. In turn, those who are oppressed experience alienation as isolation, exclusion, and mistreatment.

When it comes to alienation in particular, most relevant for matters of race is Marx's conception of the "*estrangement of man from man*,"<sup>26</sup> the condition in which persons see and treat each other as "*other*."<sup>27</sup> As Abigail Bakan points out, "[a]lienation is expressed in the distance between the sense of 'self' and the sense of 'other'."<sup>28</sup> This is, of course, particularly true of interpersonal alienation manifested as racialized alienation.

Racialized alienation is expressed in concrete, historically determined social conditions, in this case those under capitalism. Racialized subjects are alienated politically and economically. It is a matter of fact, historically and at present, that racialized subjects—in particular blacks in the U.S.—are barred from full social participation. With respect to politics, the rights to vote, hold public office, and express viewpoints without undue retaliation, have all been disproportionately limited for racialized "others" in the U.S. With respect to economics, access to credit, availability and quality of work, treatment in the workplace, etc., have been and continue to be greatly, negatively affected by one's race (or, at least, what one's race is perceived to be by others). Additionally, the movement of blacks and other non-whites through public spaces reveals the pervasiveness of racist oppression under capitalism: racial disparities regarding surveillance, stops, searches, arrests, and shootings by law enforcement.<sup>29</sup> Police departments in the U.S. have treated

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<sup>26</sup> Marx, "Estranged Labor" p. 77. (I refer to this form of alienation as *interpersonal alienation*.)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Bakan p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, Cody T., "A Multi-Level Bayesian Analysis of Racial Bias in Police Shootings at the County-Level in the United States, 2011–2014" (*PLoS ONE* 10(11), 2015); The Blue Ribbon Panel, "Transparency, Accountability, and Fairness in Law Enforcement" (San Francisco, 2016); *Floyd v. City of New York*, 08 Civ. 1034, United States District Court of Southern New York (August 12, 2013); Khan *et al.*, "Protecting Whiteness: White Phenotypic Racial Stereotypicality

blacks “less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue” through fines and court fees.<sup>30</sup>

These forms of discriminatory, oppressive treatment are supported by an ideology that is alienating both in its content and its consequences. That is, racism presupposes an oppressive, alienating ideology of race (I will expound on this point in §4). Additionally, alienation is essentially an objective social condition (or set of conditions) not dependent on any subjective awareness or feeling;<sup>31</sup> nonetheless, being alienated is often felt on a subjective level.<sup>32</sup> In this way, alienation may be experienced as a sense of loneliness and isolation, of being on the outside looking in. Victims of racist alienation have experiences quite different from those who are not racialized *others*. The members of racially alienated groups experience themselves as outsiders, involuntarily excluded from full social participation and belonging.

Another illuminating dimension of Marx’s account of alienation is what he refers to as alienation from the “process,”<sup>33</sup> i.e., the labor process. He holds that labor, voluntarily undertaken, is an activity essential to actualizing our human nature. But Marx certainly may also be understood as seeing participation in democratic decision-making as another such activity, at least until the withering away of the state.<sup>34</sup> In fact, one of the central reasons Marx criticizes liberal democracy

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Reduces Police Use of Force” (*Social Psychological and Personality Science* 7(5), 2016), pp. 403–411.

<sup>30</sup> United States, Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department* (4 March 2015), p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Iain Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought* p. 506.

In other words, given Marx’s conception of human nature and social classes, alienation is a condition inherent in all class societies. Accordingly, one need not *feel* alienated, or experience a particular form of alienation, in order to be alienated. Alienation is an effect of living under a certain type of social structure. To that extent, alienation is an objective condition.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, “Estranged Labor” p. 74.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, “Estranged Labor” p. 74.

<sup>34</sup> Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* p. 491.

is that such democratic processes and institutions are a sham: they are not truly democratic.<sup>35</sup> When it comes to cases where entire groups are politically disenfranchised because of race (or other ascribed differences), the abstract, underlying phenomenon is the alienation from an important life process.

An interesting examination of racist oppression within capitalism—which, like the oppression of blacks in the U.S., is connected to the reigning capitalist power-structure—is found in Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*. Citing Theodore W. Allen, Ignatiev explains that “the distinction between racial and national oppression turns on the composition of the group that enforces elite rule.”<sup>36</sup> In particular, “[u]nder [a] system of racial oppression, elite rule rests on the support of the laboring classes of the oppressor group.”<sup>37</sup> Ignatiev explains how “[e]ighteenth-century Ireland presents a classic case of racial oppression.” For instance,

Catholics there were known as native Irish, Celts, or Gaels (as well as ‘Papists’ and other equally derogatory names), and were regarded, and frequently spoke of themselves, as a ‘race,’ rather than a nation. The Penal Laws imposed upon them a caste status out of which no Catholic, no matter how wealthy, could escape. The racial and class hierarchy was enforced by the Dissenters, who were mostly Presbyterian farmers, mechanics, and small tradesmen, descendants of soldiers settled by Cromwell and Scots settled later in Ulster.<sup>38</sup>

Ignatiev notes that the first Congress of the U.S. voted in 1790 “that only ‘white’ persons could be naturalized as citizens.” As he explains, “coming as immigrants rather than as captives or hostages undoubtedly affected the potential racial status of the Irish in America, but it did not settle the issue,” because “it was by no means obvious who was ‘white.’” At the time, the “Irish were frequently referred to as ‘n---s turned inside out’; the Negroes, for their part, were sometimes called

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<sup>35</sup> Alan Gilbert, “Political Philosophy: Marx and Radical Democracy” pp. 168-195.

<sup>36</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* p. 30. (Hereafter: *HIBW*.)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

‘smoked Irish.’”<sup>39</sup> And, “although the...Church of Ireland excluded Dissenters (who made up the majority of non-Catholics) from the ruling group, ‘the most worthless Protestant...if he had nothing else to boast of, at least found it pleasing to think that he was a member of a dominant race.’”<sup>40</sup> The irony is that “the poorest among the Dissenters lived under conditions but little removed from those of the Catholic majority.”<sup>41</sup>

Marx was well aware of this dynamic; consider the following excerpt from a letter by Marx on the condition of the Irish under British rule during the 1800s:

Every industrial and commercial centre in England possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the “n---s” in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.<sup>42</sup>

Elaborating on a key idea behind Marx’s account of the attitudes of English and Irish workers toward one another, Bakan explains that among those who are oppressed, some experience the oppression differently than others, depending on their social position. Accordingly, racist oppression fits under what Bakan calls “special oppression.” She writes:

What can be called special oppression divides the working class or any other oppressed class against itself, and in turn obscures class differences by creating new lines of demarcation that are used as means of subordination. Special oppression is particularly

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<sup>39</sup> Ignatiev, *HIBW* p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* p. 35. (Here Ignatiev is quoting W. E. H. Lecky, *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century: Volume II* (New York, 1878-1890), p. 182.)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid* p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Marx, “Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt in New York, 9 April 1870” n.p.

necessary where there is a threat of unity among the oppressed classes against the hegemonic bloc.<sup>43</sup>

A common experience of oppression threatens to create unity among the non-capitalist masses. Marx notes that one of the contradictions of capitalism is that “the combination of capital...create[s] for” the oppressed “a common situation, common interests.”<sup>44</sup> Unity among the oppressed under capitalism does not bode well for capitalists. Thus, it is in the interests of capitalists to keep the working class, and any potential working-class allies, divided. Racism, in particular, has been highly useful in keeping the non-capitalist masses divided. The divide-and-conquer strategy is a long-running tradition in the pursuit of power, and ideological support for racism is certainly an instance of this strategy. One of the reasons racism has been so effective in support of capitalism is because “[m]embers of the working class can and do embrace oppressive ideologies and practices against others of their own class, not in an instrumental manner, but *because they come to believe and support such views.*”<sup>45</sup> That is the power of ideology. Racism, like other similar ideologies, legitimizes systematically worse treatment for some of the oppressed than for others. The *racial bribe*<sup>46</sup> perfectly encapsulates this exact point.

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<sup>43</sup> Bakan p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, “The Coming Upheaval” p. 218.

<sup>45</sup> Bakan p. 114.

<sup>46</sup> Michelle Alexander offers a clear and concise account of the racial bribe at play in class antagonisms as early as the initial settling of the North American colonies; see *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently summarizes the point:

[Through its control of media, the southern aristocracy] saturated the thinking of the poor white masses [with the ideology of white supremacy], thus clouding their minds to the real issue involved in the Populist Movement. They then directed the placement on the books of the South of laws that made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level.... [I]t may be said of the Reconstruction era that the southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow.... And when his wrinkled stomach cried out for the food that his empty pockets could not provide, he ate Jim Crow, *a psychological bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better*

## 4 A MARXIST MODEL OF RACIALIZED CAPITALISM

In this section, I begin by pointing out a major flaw in orthodox Marxist theory, that is, Marx's conception of race—which Fraser erroneously omits in her criticism of Marxism. Furthermore, I expand on the connections among race, racism, and capitalism. Specifically, I focus on understanding race as an ideology within the capitalist superstructure. Racist ideology has the force and effect of alienation and oppression and thereby helps to perpetuate the capitalist system. Moreover, it has changed in ways that follow, and are conducive to, changes in the capitalist mode of production.

### 4.1 Race: Biological vs. Social

One of the greatest errors in Fraser's examination of Marxist theory is that she does not address Marx's conception of race.<sup>47</sup> What this means for Fraser's approach to Marxist theory is that her emphasis on expropriation misses an important point: Marx, like virtually all 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, holds a biological conception of race, not a social constructionist one. Consider, for instance, Marx's contention that “[a] negro is a negro...[and it is only] [i]n certain relations [that] he becomes a slave.”<sup>48</sup> According to this view, a person's race is determined by some biological, objective fact(s) about that person. To be sure, Marx understands that the meaning and consequences of being a member of a race are contingent upon a wider set of socially-constructed relations, such as the mode of production. Nonetheless, race, according to Marx, is a physical fact much like one's hair color. Accordingly, Marx's critical model of capitalism needs some revision to the extent that Marxist theory requires a social constructionist conception of race in place of the

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*than the black man. And he ate Jim Crow... their last outpost of psychological oblivion. (“Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March”; emphasis added.)*

<sup>47</sup> I give full credit to Andrew Altman (Professor & Director of the Jean Beer Blumenfeld Center for Ethics, Department of Philosophy, Georgia State University) for pointing this out to me.

<sup>48</sup> Marx, *Capital* I p. 932, footnote 4.

debunked biological conception of race. Harry Chang's contribution to a Marxist theory of race and racism within capitalism is helpful here.

## 4.2 Race as Fetishism

Chang understands racism in the abstract as “a scheme of stratification.”<sup>49</sup> And in his explication of the connection between the schemes of *race* and *class*, Chang elaborates on an important distinction between the two: whereas class formations are constituted by *Gesellschaft* logic, national or racial identities are constructed according to *Gemeinschaft* logic.<sup>50</sup> This distinction helps to explain why it is that “[a] Black man belongs to the Black race *because* he is determined to be Black..., rather than through the inverted ‘logic’ of common-sense which says that a man is Black because he belongs to the Black race.”<sup>51</sup>

Discussing the psychology underlying the construction of race or racial groups, Chang draws an analogy between the socially-constructed racial *other* and Marx's concept of commodity fetishism: “Racial formation in a country is an aspect of class formation, but the reason races are not classes lies in this objectification process (or fetishization) which is crucial for race relations but is more or less absent in class relations in the abstract.”<sup>52</sup> On this view, “[m]oney, of course, is a relation; but common sense [i.e., the ruling ideology] in bourgeois society sees money as the intrinsic quality of gold, independent of the exchange relation.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the social constructions of race and money are similar inasmuch as they are both reified in “the quality of the objects in relation.”<sup>54</sup> Race, as a hierarchical classification scheme, is similar to what occurs

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<sup>49</sup> Harry Chang, *Toward a Marxist Theory of Racism* p. 43. (Hereafter: *TMTR*.)

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* p. 44. (A “*Gemeinschaft* is a ‘larger unity’ which determines its members and a *Gesellschaft* is a ‘coming-together’ of those who are already determined individually” (*ibid* p. 39).)

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> Chang, *TMTR* p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> Chang, *TMTR* p. 43.

with commodity fetishism, inasmuch as some persons ascribe to other persons qualities which are thought to be innate and non-relational, and the qualities are used—consciously or unconsciously—to make sense of, or justify, a certain mode of use for, or treatment of, them. A clear example of this is the “White Man’s Burden,” which rests on the false claim that blacks (as well as other racialized *others*) are inherently incapable of creating a civilization.

### 4.3 The Pragmatic Fluidity of Ideology

Addressing race as an ideology within capitalism, Adolph Reed, Jr. argues that a Marxist perspective is a great deal of help in “demystify[ing]” the relationship between capitalism and racism, inasmuch as “it perceives capitalism dialectically, as a social totality that includes modes of production, relations of production, and *the pragmatically evolving ensemble of institutions and ideologies that lubricate and propel its reproduction.*”<sup>55</sup> Among this “ensemble” are *ideologies of ascriptive difference*. Ideologies of ascriptive difference often “emerge from self-interested common sense as folk knowledge,” and are “‘known’ to be true unreflectively because they seem to comport with the evidence of quotidian experience.”<sup>56</sup> Crucially, such ideologies gain traction and begin to “stick,” as it were, when they “help to stabilize a social order by legitimizing its hierarchies of wealth, power, and privilege, including its social division of labor, as the natural order of things.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, ideologies of ascriptive difference will be “imposed as such by law and custom, when they converge with and reinforce the interests of powerful strata in the society.”<sup>58</sup> Here Reed is following the Marxist view that the ruling class “represent[s] its interest as the

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<sup>55</sup> Adolph Reed, Jr., “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism” p. 49; *emphasis added*. (Hereafter: *MRN*.)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* Racists, in their attempts to justify racism, often make appeals such as, “that’s just the way things are,” or point to token cases of members of a racial group behaving in ways that are purported to “support” their prejudice.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

common interest of all the members of society” and that it must “give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”<sup>59</sup>

How, then, does a Marxist conception of ideology address race and racism in particular? According to Reed, “[r]ace is a [socially constructed, contingent] taxonomy of ascriptive difference, that is, an ideology that constructs populations as groups and sorts them into hierarchies of capacity, civic worth, and desert based on ‘natural’ or essential characteristics *attributed* to them.”<sup>60</sup> Reed’s understanding of race here is consistent with, and addresses, Fraser’s concerns about political subjectivation. Especially regarding politics and access to well-paying and meaningful work, racialized subjects under capitalism have been historically, and continue to be, stripped of the ability to fully participate in civil society.

Reed argues that

the significance of race..., and [its] content as [an] ideolog[y] of [ascribed] essential difference ha[s] changed markedly over time in relation to changing political and economic conditions. Regarding race in particular, classificatory schemes have varied substantially, as have the narratives elaborating them. That is, which populations count as races, the criteria determining them, and the stakes attached to counting as one, or as one or another at any given time, have been...fluid matters.<sup>61</sup>

Ignatiev’s account of *How the Irish Became White* is a perfect illustration of the fluidity to which Reed refers, inasmuch as Ignatiev shows how an entire group of persons underwent a radical change in its racial status. Now Fraser, to her credit, tracks the historical changes regarding the nature of racist oppression under capitalism in the U.S.<sup>62</sup> But Fraser does not explicitly concede the point that Reed makes, which is that the Marxist dialectical approach makes sense of these changes. It is difficult, therefore, to see precisely how Fraser’s “correction” of Marxism is useful.

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<sup>59</sup> Marx, *The German Ideology* p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> Reed, *MRN* p. 49; *emphasis added*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* p. 50.

<sup>62</sup> Fraser, *EERC* pp. 173-177; Fraser, “Is Capitalism *Necessarily* Racist?” pp. 31-37.

The fluidity of race and racism should not come as a surprise, because, as Reed notes, “race, like all ideologies of ascriptive hierarchy, is fundamentally pragmatic. After all, these belief systems emerge as legitimations of concrete patterns of social relations in particular contexts.”<sup>63</sup> What we recognize today as the ideology of race is just one “historically specific instance of a genus of ideologies of ascriptive hierarchy that stabilize capitalist social reproduction.”<sup>64</sup> Part of the resilience of capitalism is its being fueled by the petrol of the various prejudices and worst tendencies of human psychology and behavior; these tendencies become effective fuel when they are conducive to the reigning system of power. And when, how, and to what extent ascriptive differences support the status-quo are not static states of affairs.

#### 4.4 The Racial Contract Theory & Marxism

In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills offers an account of racist oppression within the liberal capitalist tradition that closely tracks with a Marxist theory of race and racism. Mills utilizes conceptions of ruling ideology, the centrality of the dominant mode of production’s effect on reigning ideology, and the dialectical fluidity of race as an ideology and racism as an oppressive practice. Mills’s aim is to show that the liberal capitalist tradition—and the social contract theory underlying it—has been, and continues to be, deeply entangled with racist oppression.

Mills defines the Racial Contract as

follow[ing] the classical model [of liberal social contract theory] in being both political and moral. It explains how society was created or crucially transformed, how the individuals in that society were reconstituted, how the state was established, and how a particular moral code and certain moral psychology were brought into existence.

...The Racial Contract is that set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements...between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) criteria C1, C2, C3...as ‘white,’ and coextensive...with the class of full persons, to categorize the remaining subset of humans as ‘nonwhite’ and of a different and inferior status, subpersons.... [T]he general purpose of the Contract is always the differential

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<sup>63</sup> Reed, *MRN* p. 50.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid* p. 53.

privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them.<sup>65</sup>

In other words, the Contract is a set of asymmetric power relations—political, economic, moral, and epistemic; it is enforced through violence and “ideological conditioning.”<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, “[t]he Racial Contract norms (and races) the individual” by creating a hierarchical “social ontology,” thereby “establishing personhood and subpersonhood.”<sup>67</sup> In this way, the Contract taxonomizes persons by ascribing to them inherent features that carry a status of moral standing and socio-political power.

To Mills’s mind, the “whole point of establishing a moral hierarchy and juridically partitioning the polity according to race is to secure and legitimate the privileging of those individuals designated as white/persons and the exploitation of those individuals designated as nonwhite/subpersons.... [T]he bottom line [of establishing such a hierarchy],” he concludes, “is material advantage.”<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, Mills insists that “the economic dimension of the Racial Contract is the *most* salient, foreground rather than background, since the Racial Contract is calculatedly aimed at economic *exploitation*.”<sup>69</sup>

As previously stated, the Contract relies a great deal on ideological conditioning *via* a “depersonalizing conceptual apparatus through which whites must learn to see nonwhites and also, crucially, through which nonwhites must learn to see themselves....the aim being to produce an entity who accepts subpersonhood.”<sup>70</sup> Importantly, Mills insists that, as an ideology of ascriptive

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<sup>65</sup> Mills, *The Racial Contract* pp. 10-11. (Hereafter: *RC*.)

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid* pp. 81-89 & 101.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid* p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> Mills, *RC* pp. 32-33.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid* p. 32; *emphasis added* on “exploitation”.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid* pp. 87-88.

difference, “racism needs to be understood as aiming at the minds of nonwhites as well as whites, inculcating subjugation.”<sup>71</sup> Here one can clearly see at work the overlap of oppression and interpersonal alienation. As I pointed out earlier, some persons who are oppressed and alienated experience the oppression and alienation differently than others. Accordingly, there is a two-dimensional alienation occurring in this case: not only are so-called “full persons” and racialized *others* both prevented from actualizing their common human nature in the Marxist sense; the racialized *other* is not recognized even as fully human, either by herself or by others. In this way, the problem of class oppression, from a Marxist perspective, is further exacerbated: it is difficult already to engender class consciousness and solidarity between members of the same class who also share a racial identity; in the case of members of the same class who do not share any racial identity, they will likely not see themselves as having similar problems, inasmuch as both fail to see each other as counting the same ontologically.

Speaking to the fluidity of race and racism, Mills says that “the Racial Contract is *continually being rewritten* to create different forms of the racial polity”:<sup>72</sup> that is, the “Racial Contract evolves” by “altering the relations between whites and nonwhites,” as well as “by shifting the criteria for who *counts* as white and nonwhite.”<sup>73</sup> In the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels and Marx say that “[p]olitical power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another.”<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, Mills says that his “preferred account of the Racial Contract” understands race in a manner that is “*debiologized*, making explicit its political foundations.”<sup>75</sup> The construction of race, and how race is determined, is a creation of “white”

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid* p. 88.

<sup>72</sup> Mills, *RC* p. 72.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid* p. 78.

<sup>74</sup> Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* pp. 490-491.

<sup>75</sup> Mills, *RC* p. 78.

European domination, the bottom line of which is material interest. When material conditions change, the necessity for ideological change follows. To repeat Reed's point, ideologies of ascriptive difference are, after all, pragmatic.

#### 4.5 Historical Changes Through a Marxist Lens

Continuing to examine the fluidity of race and racism, let us return to Fredrickson's *Racism: A Short History*. The shift in the dominant mode of racist oppression, particularly in the U.S., may be understood in relation to various external pressures—especially those that arise from changes in material conditions. Citing Philip A. Klinker's and Rogers M. Smith's *The Unsteady March*, Fredrickson sees that “the progress of racial equality in the United States has been fostered mainly by the external pressures generated by wars and international rivalries.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, “[t]he conjunction of the Cold War and the decolonization of Asia and Africa created enormous practical incentives for racial reform in the United States.”<sup>77</sup>

When the U.S. arose out of Second World War as a superpower, its focus shifted to the only other state that was not completely destroyed by the war and that posed a threat to the reach and influence of American power—namely, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. The rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union is commonly understood as a struggle between two vastly different ways of organizing and living human life in all its social dimensions, both of which were understood as supervening on each's respective mode of production. Americans, for instance, were to understand that Soviet communism leads to restriction of individual rights, a reduction in living standards and personal happiness, and so on.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Fredrickson, *RSH* p. 131.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid* pp. 129-130.

<sup>78</sup> To be clear, I do not accept the view that the Soviet Union represented either a viable or (classical) Marxist alternative to American capitalism. The model carried forward in the Soviet Union is what Lenin called “state capitalism”. The point is, the struggle between the two states

Yet, as Fredrickson points out, the Soviets “had some natural advantages [against the U.S.] in this conflict,” inasmuch as “Marxist ideology [is] insistently ‘nonracialist’.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, given the ongoing racial oppression in the U.S. at the time, the Soviets had “an enormous propaganda advantage in calling attention to America’s practice of segregation and to the incidents of racial violence and terrorism that continued to occur in the southern states.”<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, Fredrickson explains why so many “[s]tatesmen, policy makers, molders of public opinion, and even judges became increasingly sensitive during the postwar years to the international liability of America’s racial practices in the struggle with the Soviet Union for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the people in what came to be known as the Third World.”<sup>81</sup>

This shift had a great impact on the white supremacist regime of South Africa, which Fredrickson cites as exemplifying a significant change in racist oppression and ideology. The change is explained in terms that, I think, are consistent with, and supported by, a Marxist conceptual framework. As Fredrickson understands the matter, the apartheid regime was determined to maintain the rule of white supremacy, especially “[a]s more and more African countries became independent and the ring of ‘frontline states’ grew closer and closer to South Africa’s borders.”<sup>82</sup> Those at the helm of the regime believed they could rely on, and continue to receive, aid and support from the U.S., because the “overtly racist regime” was seen as a “bastion of anticommunism” on the African continent.<sup>83</sup> However, there came a breaking point at which

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was one between two class-based societies over material domination. Moreover, productive technological capacities as well as variety of, and access to, material resources greatly affected the respective superstructures of these two states—in addition to the U.S.-led economic sanctions and sabotage against the Soviet Union and its allies.

<sup>79</sup> Fredrickson, *RSH* p. 130.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Fredrickson, *RSH* p. 130.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid* p. 133.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

the “South African regime could no longer expect aid or even toleration from the West for its role in the defense of capitalism.” Moreover, the African National Congress’s response and willingness to negotiate was heavily influenced in a similar way when “the disintegrating Soviet Union cut off aid” to the organization.<sup>84</sup>

Fredrickson and Mills acknowledge that both the concept race and racist oppression no longer exist in the blatant, obvious, direct ways of the past (at least in most places in the world). Explicitly racist modes of thought were once squarely part of the dominant ideology under capitalism. Presently, racism continues to manifest in subtler forms that are nonetheless still useful in the service of the valorization of capital.

Unfolding before us, there appears a great dialectical tension. On the one hand, the elections and growing influence of certain politicians, organizations, and pundits—such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Milo Yiannopoulos, Richard Spencer, and Vox among others—as well as the surge in racist and xenophobic violence are just some of the phenomena which mark an alarming resurgence of far-Right politics. As capitalism continues to globalize and wreak havoc as always, we are presented with a cornucopia of reactions. Focusing on the U.S. context, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of racism<sup>85</sup> and other forms of bigotry are the expected logical outcome, according to a Marxist perspective. Looking back to the past decade alone following the Great Recession, the ruling class and media have been feeding an “economic recovery” narrative to the public which, of course, does not buy it. This skepticism is due to the fact that the recovery is one for capitalists, not for the majority of citizens, who still feel

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid* pp. 137-138.

<sup>85</sup> I should say that this rise is but one of many throughout history. Moreover, it’s not only a rise; it is an exposure of racism and bigotry that lay relatively hidden for some time. Additionally, one can trace the recent rise in racist sentiment to the first election of Barack Obama. During Obama’s tenure, there was a large increase of memberships in bigoted, racist, politically-active hate groups.

economically insecure; and in many respects, the situation for the majority of citizens is getting worse, not better. It is no wonder, then, that weary, angry, struggling citizens are reacting in the ways in which we observe. The volatile combination of widespread desperation and a government that serves the ruling class at the expense of the masses opens the door to what we now see: when people have had enough, they flock to those who offer answers that appear to provide new, alternative explanations of, and solutions to, long-running problems. Scapegoating of “foreigners,” immigrants, and the *other*, is a tried-and-true method for garnering political support and shaping political consciousness among a fearful and angry public: it awakens and strengthens our most primitive, aggressive, tribal instincts. One of the many ways by which capitalism survives is the siren song of oppressive, alienating ideology that turns widespread anger, attention, and criticism away from the underlying, systematic causes of the present crisis to symptoms and falsehoods.

On the other hand, the revival of the far-Right has galvanized masses of socially-conscious, civically-involved persons around the globe who are organizing resistance to the far-Right’s response to these hard times. The reactionary revival continues to inadvertently act as a lit match flung unto a tinder box of progressivism.

There is yet another aspect of the progressive pushback against the reactionary revival. In recent years especially, anti-racist ideology has been coopted by neoliberals and eased into the capitalist framework. Consider, for instance, Nike’s recent advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick in its “Just Do It” campaign: multinational capitalist enterprises are using the struggle of racial justice to help sell products. Nike, like other major capitalist enterprises, sees the strategic opportunity, and even the necessity, in adopting the banner of social justice—especially in a globalized capitalism where, more and more, there creeps the inevitability of cosmopolitanism. And this should be no surprise—indeed, it is not puzzling at all from a Marxist perspective,

because, in the end, capital is essentially “a social power,”<sup>86</sup> and it will deploy any means necessary to its characteristic relations of power. To be sure, the claim here is not that racism is now irrelevant or on its way out. The point, rather, is that racism must be understood and examined as part of a larger social totality, and Marx’s theory is more capable for that task than Fraser gives credit.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have sought to show how Karl Marx’s conceptions of alienation, oppression, and ideology are helpful in illuminating and addressing the historical and contemporary ties between capitalism and racism. Nancy Fraser argues that Marx’s critical model of capitalism is insufficient for such a task because, as she claims, the model is too narrow insofar as its essential criticism aims at exploitation. Thus, Fraser argues that, while Marx’s theory is helpful to the extent that it reveals the “hidden abode” of exploitation, his theory is in need of substantive revision and supplementation. But I have argued that while Fraser is correct that Marx’s criticism of capitalism needs some revision, Fraser does not address Marx’s erroneous conception of race; moreover, she mistakenly frames Marx’s model in an unduly narrow manner, overlooking aspects of his theory that are as important as is exploitation. I show that such overlooked aspects of Marx’s theory do in fact address the concerns Fraser raises. As far as Fraser’s argument goes, it remains unclear how her position improves on a Marxist theory of race and racism.

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<sup>86</sup> Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* p. 485.

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