

The racial constitution of neoliberalism

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Abstract: Prevailing scholarship on neoliberalism fails to recognise that it generates its own distinctive forms of racial domination. Influential analysts such as Wolfgang Streeck, David Harvey and Wendy Brown assume or argue that racism exists today because neoliberalism's defeat of racial legacies is incomplete. This ignores how racism is reconfigured in ways that are specific to the historical moment of neoliberalism and dependent on a distinctive and substantial intellectual and political hinterland. A consideration of Friedrich Hayek's theory of cultural evolution reveals a contradiction in neoliberal thought between its aspiration to establish a universal market system and its dependence on particularist ideas of western cultural pre-eminence. This ideological contradiction correlates with the fact that globalisation produces masses of surplus populations which are of no market value. A racial idea of culture is the means by which neoliberalism manages and works through its own limitations. Above all, 'race' provides a means of coding and managing the material boundaries between different forms of labour under neoliberalism: citizen and migrant, waged and 'unexploitable', bearers of entitlements and bare life.

Keywords: David Harvey, Friedrich Hayek, neoliberalism, racism, Wendy Brown, Wolfgang Streeck

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In neoliberalism's Euro-American heartlands, racism has thrived, from the state violence of racist policing, incarceration, border regimes, and imperialist wars, to the votes for Trump, Brexit, and far-right parties in Europe. The idea that a more market-based society would be less racist has been empirically refuted. Yet the question of why racism has flourished in the neoliberal era – perhaps the crucial question of this political moment – has received insufficient attention. Influential accounts of neoliberalism do not offer a satisfactory answer. For Wolfgang Streeck, for example, racist reaction is no more than a cultural backlash against a neoliberal 'cosmopolitanism' that has otherwise rendered racial domination anachronistic. For David Harvey, no sustained examination of racism seems to be required to understand neoliberalism. For Wendy Brown, the relationship between neoliberalism and racism is more intricate but, as we shall see, also one of anachronism: racism is presented as external to neoliberalism and interacting with it from the past. All three scholars assume or argue that neoliberalism does not generate its own distinctive forms of racial domination. Rather, they say, racism, if it seems to spring up today, exists because neoliberalism's defeat of racial legacies is incomplete. For this reason, all three theorists end up having to impose a strong separation between class struggles and struggles against racial domination – with dire political consequences.

In what follows, I argue that neoliberalism's relationship to racism cannot be understood as a matter of past racial legacies that are weakened by neoliberal cosmopolitanism but not fully defeated. Nor is it sufficient to argue that racism is exacerbated as an indirect consequence of the social devastation that neoliberalism wreaks, that it provides scapegoats for economic failures, or that it functions as a means of camouflaging neoliberalism's class rule. Those are all parts of the picture but to only see those is to miss the ways that neoliberalism produces its own

distinctive structures of racial oppression. Neoliberalism cannot be understood – or politically opposed – without taking into account how it reorganises and reconstitutes racism to produce a new, integrated structure specific to the historical moment of neoliberalism and dependent on a distinctive and substantial intellectual and political hinterland. Racial domination does not simply survive under the seemingly racially neutral auspices of neoliberalism but is actively reworked as an internal aspect of its redrawing of the social, the political, the cultural, and the economic. As A. Sivanandan argues, ‘Racism does not stay still; it changes shape, size, contours, purpose, function – with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system and, above all, the challenges, the resistances to that system.’¹

Through a discussion of Friedrich Hayek’s theory of cultural evolution, I argue that neoliberal thought is wracked by a contradiction between its aspiration to establish a universal market system and its dependence on particularist ideas of western cultural pre-eminence. This ideological contradiction correlates with a political limitation of the neoliberal project: the globalisation of neoliberal rule produces masses of surplus populations who are of no value to neoliberal markets and must therefore be policed by an imperialist violence that neoliberal discourse cannot acknowledge on its own terms. Neoliberalism is thus haunted by its failure to universalise its market order; a racial idea of culture is the means by which this anxiety is managed and worked through. Because of its powers of naturalisation and dehistoricisation, race serves as a space within which the contradictions and limits of neoliberalism can be worked upon ideologically. I interpret neoliberal discourse as depending upon what Etienne Balibar calls ‘neo-racism’, in which ideas of culture function paradoxically both to lock groups into immutable natures and to establish a global hierarchy of cultural evolution.² Race also provides the organising terms for state practices of global policing of the surplus populations

that neoliberalism cannot directly incorporate. Racial border regimes, mass incarceration, and imperialist violence are integral to neoliberal political economy. Above all, race provides a means of coding and managing the material boundaries between different forms of labour under neoliberalism: citizen and migrant, waged and ‘unexploitable’, bearers of entitlements and bare life. This racial ordering of labouring populations at the level of global class relations is violently maintained by neoliberal states and provides the material reality that enables the spontaneous plausibility of racist ideology as a ‘folk’ explanation of social and political relations.

Streeck: race as anachronism

Neoliberalism has wreaked social and economic devastation, argues Wolfgang Streeck, and centre-left parties have abandoned ‘the everyday experience of the groups and regions in decline’.³ A 2017 essay on the election of Trump and far-right figures elsewhere has the virtue of stating plainly a claim that is implicit in much discussion of race and neoliberalism. Neoliberalisation, argues Streeck, weakens the legacy of structural racism. The emphasis on market-based individualism and diversity means that whatever individual racial attitudes remain under neoliberalism are no longer expressive of any economic or social structures.

Streeck argues that the election of Trump and his ilk needs to be explained as expressing a ‘politics of resentment’ in response to neoliberalism’s redefining of ‘the struggle for social equality as one over identity, that is, over the symbolic recognition and collective dignity of an indefinite number of ever narrower status groups’.⁴ Neoliberalism, he writes, seeks to replace a culture of ‘traditional solidarity’ with ‘a morality of equal access and equal opportunity regardless of status (such as “race, creed, and national origin”)’. This, says Streeck, spells the end of the social protections, such as welfare rights, for which the nation-state and

its associated ideas of national citizenship had been the necessary vehicles. Those who lost out in this transformation experience not just ‘ever-lower wages and reduced social security benefits’ but also the relegation in status that comes with being seen as morally ‘deplorable’ for opposing neoliberalism’s ‘new spirit of openness and diversity’. These outcasts are now seeking a nationalist ‘symbolic rehabilitation’, having lost their ‘sense of identification with the country as a whole’. In doing so, they transform the meaning of class itself into another ‘status group’ within ‘a polity of status groups.’ This is not the return of a genuine class politics but the unexpected extension of the language of identity to the ‘remnants of the traditional working class.’

There are good empirical reasons for challenging Streeck’s analysis.⁵ However, I want to focus on the conceptual underpinnings of his argument. In a key passage, Streeck writes:

Globalization favors the equal access of everyone to worldwide markets. It has no use for national citizenship or national citizens. Another moral system is at work. Cultural reeducation is required to erase traditional solidarity and replace it with a morality of equal access and equal opportunity regardless of status (such as ‘race, creed, and national origin’). Justice is served as soon as market access is equalized. The replacement of class solidarity by status rights demands flexible adjustment to changing market conditions. The morality of marketization entails a categoric delegitimization of distinctions.⁶

Thus, for Streeck, one of the consequences of neoliberalism is the delegitimizing of status distinctions such as race. In the absence of other factors, neoliberalism will tend to eradicate racial domination. The politics of resentment Streeck describes can bring a resurgence of racism in ‘symbolic’ form but not as a material force structuring economic and social relationships under neoliberalism.

Streeck grounds this account of neoliberalism's race politics upon a distinction between class and status. 'Classes are constituted by the market; status groups by a particular way of life and a specific claim to social respect', writes Streeck. Economy and culture, class and race, universal and particular are cleanly separated and placed in two distinct spheres, each to be analysed with different tools: a Marxist notion of class is the key to the economic; a Weberian notion of status is the key to the cultural and racial.⁷ There is, of course, a substantial body of Marxist scholarship on race that Streeck bypasses.⁸ Indeed, within the Marxist tradition, the description of race as a status category was already refuted by Oliver Cromwell Cox in the 1940s.⁹ Streeck reaches instead for Weber to think about race. But this is not a theoretical convergence of Marxism and Weberianism so much as an untheorised borrowing of Weber to plug the holes in a form of Marxism that regards race as a separate and secondary aspect of social life.

Harvey: race as external

In his influential *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey presents neoliberalism as 'a theory of political economic practices' that becomes part of a project to free capital from the restraints of a mid-twentieth century 'class compromise between capital and labour' in Europe and the US. Thus the neoliberal turn is 'associated with the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites'.¹⁰

Harvey's *A Brief History* refers to race in two paragraphs in its two hundred pages. It is worth quoting at length one of those moments:

Employers have historically used differentiations within the labour pool to divide and rule. Segmented labour markets then arise and distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion are frequently used, blatantly or covertly, in ways that redound to the employers' advantage. Conversely, workers may use the social networks in which

they are embedded to gain privileged access to certain lines of employment. They typically seek to monopolize skills and, through collective action and the creation of appropriate institutions, seek to regulate the labour market to protect their interests. In this they are merely constructing that ‘protective covering of cultural institutions’ of which Polanyi speaks. Neoliberalization seeks to strip away the protective coverings that embedded liberalism allowed and occasionally nurtured.¹¹

This extract can be read in multiple ways and it would be wrong to place too much weight on it. Yet there is an apparent alignment between Streeck’s claim that neoliberal marketisation renders racial status distinctions anachronistic and Harvey’s writing that neoliberalisation strips away the privileges of workers related to the ‘social networks in which they are embedded’ – a phrase that presumably would include racial privileges. To the limited extent that Harvey mentions race in this text, it appears as an external ‘cultural’ factor that is allowed to distort the logic of markets in earlier periods but is stripped away under neoliberalism as social relations are organised according to universal market laws.

In more recent writing, Harvey has argued that, while the ‘intersections and interactions between racialisation and capital accumulation are both highly visible and powerfully present’, studying them ‘tells me nothing particular about how the economic engine of capital works’.¹² Whereas capital accumulation can be examined in the abstract as having certain universal features across different social formations, race varies across time and space.¹³ Harvey’s point is that, because race is not part of the inner logic of capital, it can be dispensed with by capitalism, and this is indeed what he often seems to think capitalism does in the neoliberal era with its embrace of diversity and cosmopolitanism.

Brown: race as wounded identity

Of all the theorists of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown has done most to rethink and develop her analysis in light of ‘the rise of antidemocratic politics in the West’ – the electoral successes of far-right parties in Europe, the Brexit vote, authoritarianism in Turkey and eastern Europe, and Trumpism.¹⁴ In her earlier, 2015, *Undoing the Demos*, she reconstructed and developed the work on neoliberalism that Foucault produced in the 1970s.¹⁵ Neoliberalism, she argued, is a normative order of reason rather than an ideology or set of policies. It is ‘a governing rationality’ that ‘configures all aspects of existence in economic terms’.¹⁶ Her *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019) is a substantial rethinking of this earlier work. She recognises that her critique of neoliberalism as market rationality, while still crucial, is by itself an inadequate response to these new developments.

She argues instead that we need to pay closer attention to neoliberal reason’s ‘tilling the ground for the so-called “tribalisms” emerging as identities and political forces in recent years’. Neoliberalism, she says, has not just produced economic inequality but also dismantled the social, dethroned the political, and valorised ‘traditional morality and markets in their place’; it thereby ‘prepared the ground for the mobilization and legitimacy of ferocious antidemocratic forces in the second decade of the twenty-first century’. Whereas her earlier argument emphasised the persistent expansion of neoliberal rationality, squeezing from every sphere of our lives any other logic of social and political relationships, her revised analysis attends to neoliberalism’s ability to align ‘with other powers and energies, including those of racism, nihilism, fatalism, and resentment’. A series of metaphors define this ‘admixture’, which she does not analyse as reducible to or directly caused by neoliberalism alone. Racism sprouts in the ‘ruins of neoliberalism’ or on the ground that neoliberalism has prepared. It is a ‘deformed

plant' grown in 'soil fertilized by' neoliberal ideas. It is 'not neoliberalism's intended spawn, but its Frankensteinian creation'. And neoliberalism 'produced a monster its founders would abhor'.¹⁷ Elsewhere, Brown writes racist politics 'is not neoliberalism's natural telos'.¹⁸

Adjusting her earlier argument, Brown now places traditional morality alongside markets at the centre of neoliberal reason.¹⁹ This broadening enables her to demonstrate how neoliberals mobilised 'patriarchal family norms not as a sideshow, but rather as deeply embedded within neoliberal welfare and education reform'.²⁰ While a gender politics is now placed within neoliberal reason, a race politics remains external. 'Hayekian neoliberalism', she says, 'is a moral-political project that aims to protect traditional hierarchies by negating the very idea of the social and radically restricting the reach of democratic political power in nation-states'. Yet traditional hierarchy here does not seem to mean racial hierarchy: Brown thinks Hayek would be repulsed by the racist mobilisations neoliberalism has energised, which is 'something radically different from the neoliberal utopia' of individuals and families 'pacified by markets and morals and subtended by an autonomous authoritative, but depoliticized state'.²¹

Brown views racial inequality as 'tradition' or 'legacies', an endurance of the past which then meets and interacts with the neoliberal present. There are three accounts of what that interaction looks like. The first is suggested once but not pursued: Brown says that 'deregulated markets tend to reproduce rather than ameliorate historically produced social powers and stratification', such as those organised in terms of racial categories – in other words, neoliberal markets do not undermine legacies of racial inequality but enable them to continue.²²

In her second account, racial legacies are diminished by the spread of neoliberal rationality to every area of life. Thus, under neoliberalism, whiteness can no longer provide ‘protection against the displacements and losses’ of the ‘working and middle classes’. Racial ‘dominance is ebbing’, weakened by neoliberal ‘cosmopolitanism’, ‘mortally wounded’ but not fully destroyed. Under neoliberalism, ‘the world has invaded the nation, weakening its borders’. The general sense here is that neoliberalism has a levelling effect on racial disparities.²³

In her third account, this levelling process, in turn, generates a ‘wounded’ and ‘dethroned’ white identity that lashes out in a nihilist and resentful form well suited to neoliberalism’s ruination of the social and political. The tradition of racism, now disembedded from ‘organically reproducing civilization, securing social bonds, and governing conduct’, becomes a weapon of the resentful. These constituencies are ‘anxious about their ebbing place and privilege’ and unrestrained by conscience, which does not survive neoliberalism’s nihilist devaluation of all values. They are powered by ‘reactive energies’ and a ‘hatred of the world’, aggressively mocking any concern for human suffering or injustice. A refashioning of white supremacy as a ‘raw entitlement claim’, detached from any broader ideological grounding, ‘converges powerfully with neoliberalism’s assault on equality and democracy, the social and the political’. This process runs against neoliberalism’s ‘own aims’, producing a raucous populist subjectivity quite different from the disciplining of morals and markets that Hayek, for example, had envisaged.²⁴

All three of Brown’s accounts of neoliberalism’s relationship to racism share a common temporality: in each, racism is presented not only as external to neoliberalism but as impinging on neoliberalism from the past. Within her analysis, the only generative work that neoliberalism does with regard to racism is to

produce a sense of white victimhood, resulting from neoliberalism's partial defeat of racial legacies. In framing racism as allochronic to neoliberalism, Brown excludes the possibility of neoliberalism itself constituting distinctive new structures of racism which are not comprehensible in terms of weakened legacies of the past. Linked to this is Brown's isolation of neoliberalism from its racial and colonial genealogies. Neoliberalism was certainly founded, as Harvey argues, as an attempt to restore ruling class power in the face of the mid-twentieth century strength of the organised working classes of Europe and North America. But founding neoliberal intellectuals were equally preoccupied with resisting the mass struggles of the global South and racialised groups in the North that sought redistributions of wealth along anti-colonial and anti-racist lines. At least some of the major schools of neoliberal thought were shaped by the desire to reconstitute racial and colonial dominations in the face of the Black and Third World nationalist insurgencies of the twentieth century.²⁵ Neoliberals saw organised labour, anti-colonial nationalism, and the US Black freedom movement as homologous threats. As the early neoliberal Lionel Robbins put it: "the mines for the miners" and "Papua for the Papuans" are analytically similar slogans'.²⁶

As I argue below, neoliberalism, in its theory and its practice, conceives of the market order as a universal that transcends racial and ethnic differences but also as needing to be embedded culturally in racial systems of spatial order. From this contradiction stems neoliberalism's own distinctive racial systems of labour, policing, bordering and imprisonment. If neoliberalism has a telos, racism is a part of it. To use Brown's imagery, racism is not a monster that the neoliberal Frankenstein inadvertently created; rather, the monster was already there within the Doctor.

The race-class gap

Despite getting there along a different methodological pathway, Brown's account ends up at the same impasse as Streeck and Harvey, in which neoliberal political economy is overly separated from racial processes, resulting in an account that renders racism non-contemporary. All three scholars agree that race is not a dimension along which neoliberalism itself directly acts. Rather, racism exists because neoliberalism has only partially defeated it. Though none of these scholars pursue the logic of their argument in this direction, an implication of their framing of racism's relationship to neoliberalism is that the more neoliberalism saturates social relationships, the less room there is for racist reaction; neoliberalism might cause the conditions for a resurgent racism but, on their accounts, must also be the solution to it. A political consequence of this analytical logic is to pull anti-racism and anti-neoliberalism in opposite directions, opening a gap between the politics of race and of class.

Before developing my argument that neoliberalism constitutes its own structures of racism, I want to examine a related but different position developed by scholars of racial neoliberalism writing especially in response to the Barack Obama presidency in the US and associated claims of post-racialism. In this body of work, neoliberalism interacts with race in three ways. First, neoliberalism's mask of racelessness has a concealment effect: structural racism becomes harder to see if the prevailing discourse is a market logic held to be colour-blind, post-racial, diverse, multicultural and meritocratic.²⁷ Second, the privatising of public life that neoliberalism engenders has racially disparate consequences due to 'the past history of racially differentiated and discriminatory treatment'.²⁸ Welfare cuts, for example, will disproportionately affect particular racial groups. Third, neoliberal

privatisation makes it harder to advance publicly organised remedies to the legacies of racial inequality that have been passed down to us.²⁹

This approach powerfully captures the limits of neoliberal post-racialism. But when called upon to explain what forces hold up the structures of racism despite neoliberal discourse's apparent promotion of colour-blind meritocracy, the argument is usually that racism persists because of the sheer weight of history coupled with neoliberal inaction. This concedes to neoliberal discourse its internal race neutrality but then holds it responsible in practice for creating conditions in which it is harder to remedy legacies of racism. What this misses is that neoliberalism does not only conceal and fail to remedy older racisms; it also generates its own distinctive structures of racism that are discontinuous with the past. Racial inequality does not simply *survive* under the seemingly racially neutral auspices of neoliberalism, but is actively reworked.

By turning to Hayek's thought, we can make this visible. The extension of Brown's analysis of Hayek to include an emphasis on traditional morality needs to be pushed still further to recognise that, alongside his ideas of markets and morality, his thought also constitutes a racial-civilisational project.

Hayek: the cultural evolution of neoliberalism

At the centre of the intellectual system that Hayek developed from the late 1950s to the early 1980s is the idea of market systems as self-organizing structures. They have not been designed in order to achieve particular outcomes but have emerged through a process of cultural evolution, in which better rules replace worse ones through a gradual process of trial and error.³⁰ The success of the market as a system of general rules of private ownership and impersonal exchange rests upon its purported creation of a space of individual autonomy – called 'property' – and

its ability to coordinate the actions of large numbers of actors.³¹ Exactly how the general rules will produce specific outcomes when all the elements begin to ‘play the game’ of a complex market system is unknowable. Only a market system is able to extract the dispersed knowledge that each participant has about their values and desires and integrate those into a single system.³²

Deliberate efforts can be made to enhance the general rules of the market order but only in a piecemeal fashion and without imposing an external design or plan.³³

Questions of social justice cannot be meaningfully asked of self-generating orders.³⁴ To impose any kind of broader redesign of the rules or to intervene in the specific outcomes they generate is bound to result in totalitarianism: when a government seeks to impose its plans on the ‘spontaneous order’ of the market, it squashes the knowledge the market produces and is forced instead to use its own ideas of what people need. ‘All endeavours to secure a ‘just’ distribution must thus be directed towards turning the spontaneous order of the market into ... a totalitarian order’.³⁵ For Hayek, the NHS leads inexorably to the SS.

While these arguments are well known, less attention has been paid to Hayek’s work on the process of cultural evolution that brings the market order into existence.³⁶ The market order is inseparable, he writes, from the ‘common cultural tradition’ that undergirds it.³⁷ Free markets require a tacit propensity among a people to obey certain general rules of conduct upon which the market depends. This cultural foundation is, a matter of ‘the whole cultural inheritance which is passed on by learning and imitation’.³⁸

Hayek draws on a conventional ‘Plato to NATO’ history of Western civilization:³⁹ the rules enabling a market order to emerge were first glimpsed in ancient Greece, then revived in the Renaissance, before being consciously articulated for the first

time by Whig thinkers like Edmund Burke, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith.⁴⁰ The resulting ‘Open Society’ lifted Western culture beyond a ‘tribal’ level of group belonging, to an abstract universalism that was generally emulable. As the scope of human interaction increased with new communication technologies, the West’s values were imitated elsewhere, because they were the only possible means of coordinating modernity’s complex systems. In this narrative, the ‘genius of the West’ and its values formed the universal principles of the world system.⁴¹ As John Gray points out, for Hayek, the laws of liberty are discovered not invented. This discovery is only available ‘in the traditions of some but not all peoples.’⁴² For Hayek, market freedom emerges organically in the West out of a cultural tradition of liberty but its implantation in the non-West is through emulation.

Hayekian neo-racism

For Hayek, the universal market order paradoxically attains legitimacy through its embedding in the particular cultural framework produced by the intellectual legacies of western civilisation. The values of that civilisation emerge historically among a particular people but are also universally applicable. The cultural embedding of neoliberalism thus operates in a contradictory space between the universal and the particular, and between the prescriptive and the descriptive. For his system to work, Hayek has to argue that the superior logic of market rationality will prevail in every part of the world, while also holding that one part of the world, the West, has a special role in its discovery. Having championed individual freedom from state coercion, he has to reject any suggestion that his principles can be imposed by force as a civilising mission; instead, he writes these values will spread by ‘voluntary and unhampered intercourse’.⁴³ But ‘intercourse’ here actually means competition. And ‘competition is as much a method for breeding certain types of mind as anything else’ – markets are tools of cultural change.⁴⁴

What he has in mind is that, competition, if allowed to do its work, will make irrational populations act rationally and civilise the ‘tribal’. Peoples whose cultural traditions ‘lack the spirit of enterprise’ will soon enough acquire it, first through ‘foreign intruders’, then by local imitation encouraged by market competition.⁴⁵ Competition for Hayek operates not only between individuals in markets but also between culturally defined sets of rules in processes of social evolution.⁴⁶ This is where his argument rests on a circularity: market competition is supposed to magically generate its own cultural preconditions. Hayek’s thought is haunted by its failure to explain how its implementation could be universalised without undermining its own nominal universal values. What he displaces from his account, of course, is any reckoning with the imperialist violence that, in practice, has been necessary to secure neoliberal globalisation.

Like all the leading neoliberals, Hayek’s writing presents the period from the 1870s through to the date of its publication as marked by near-fatal attacks on freedom from labour movements, social democratic parties and anti-colonial nationalisms. Given Hayek’s account of the western cultural underpinnings of market systems, a necessary element in the task of reinvigorating freedom is a project of ‘preserving western civilisation’.⁴⁷ Though he does not use the term very often, it is clear that at the core of his argument is a belief that ‘western civilisation’ is threatened from within and without. From within, the West’s market order is threatened by the desire for social justice, what he calls the ‘savage in us’, a ‘relapsing rapidly into the conceptions of the tribal society’.⁴⁸ This can take the form of socialism or New Left radicalism, whose advocates are ‘the non-domesticated or un-civilized who have never learnt the rules of conduct on which the Open Society is based, but want to impose upon it their instinctive, “natural” conceptions derived from the tribal society’.⁴⁹ There is a recurring association in

Hayek's writing between the demand for distributive justice and earlier stages of cultural evolution that are presumed un-western or anti-western.

From without, western market freedoms are threatened in two ways. First, calls for the redistribution of wealth from the West to poorer parts of the world are attempts to apply to humanity as a whole obligation which were 'appropriate only to the fellow members of a tribal group'.⁵⁰ Second, Hayek believes western civilisation needs to be protected from immigration to the West. He argues that 'limitations on the free movement of men across frontiers' are necessary because 'liberal principles can be consistently applied only to those who themselves obey liberal principles, and cannot always be extended to those who do not'.⁵¹ Hayek advocates what has become the standard argument for racist immigration policies in Europe: western values need to be defended from being overwhelmed by others with a different culture.⁵²

Hayek's argument on immigration is worth examining closely because of what it indicates about the relationship between the universal and the particular in his political philosophy. When Hayek discusses the principles of a market order, he says that any attempt by a state to create a system of explicitly defined privileges that cannot be justified by principles of universal application will, of necessity, undermine the market order.⁵³ But immigration controls, which grant some but not others access to particular national labour markets, on the basis of national citizenship, are just such a set of rules of privilege. Tampering with the spontaneity of markets through immigration controls ought to be, for Hayek, another route to totalitarianism.⁵⁴ Yet Hayek sets aside his universal market principles when it comes to immigration. He instead introduces a distinction between the utopian abstraction of neoliberal principles and the practical need to maintain western culture, the condition of the market order itself. Whereas on questions of social

justice, conventional morality must be rejected as ‘tribal’, on immigration controls, he writes, neoliberals must defer to ‘prevailing moral standards’ and the movement of people across national borders curtailed.⁵⁵ What would otherwise be a glaring inconsistency can be made sense of if Hayek’s somewhat submerged ideas of western civilisation are recognised as at work. The universal market order depends upon a particular set of cultural values – those which define the West. When these values are threatened, the universal order can only be preserved by granting this particular culture special rights to defend itself – paradoxically contradicting the principles of the universal order itself. The Open Society needs to know when to close its doors – and to whom.

Hayek has normally been read by his critics and defenders alike as a theorist of the spontaneous order that only market mechanisms can enable. Actually existing neoliberalisms are then contrasted with the purity of his imagined market utopia. But even Hayek, the greatest market ideologue of the twentieth century, was not a ‘market fundamentalist’ in the sense that market principles supplied the sole grounds for his political philosophy. Brown is right to point to his deployment of traditional morality as a supplementary source of social order within his system. But what even this revision to our reading of Hayek misses is the necessary role that ideas of western culture play in his thinking. In this respect, his philosophy is a product of European colonialism – even though it distances itself from the classical forms of high imperialism. He inherits from this tradition his basic conception of western civilisation as originator of freedom and other cultures as making progress only through imitation of the universal West. While he rejects the concept of race in any physiological sense, his theory of cultural evolution works through ‘the play of substitutions between race, people, culture and nation’.⁵⁶ It is a form of what Etienne Balibar calls neo-racism, in which ‘culture can also function like a nature,

... locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin,' while paradoxically assimilation of the other into western culture is nevertheless possible and desirable.⁵⁷ Balibar aptly notes that behind this theory lies 'barely reworked variants of the idea that the historical cultures of humanity can be divided into two main groups, the one assumed to be universalistic and progressive, the other supposed irremediably particularistic and primitive'.⁵⁸ On the one hand, neo-racism claims that all cultures have their particular, fixed nature; on the other hand, it holds up western culture – presented as open, enterprising, and individualistic – as a universal standard against which others are judged inadequate.⁵⁹

Hayekian neoliberalism is troubled by the fear that its desired universal market order may be constrained in its application by particular cultures unable to grasp the virtues of competitive society; a neo-racist idea of culture is the necessary means by which this danger is conceptualised and made sense of. Such an idea of culture reconciles two mutually contradictory impulses. First, it enables western culture to be assumed universal: this is what guarantees the viability of its implantation outside the West and therefore underpins a global market order. Second, it enables the limits to the spread of 'western' markets to be comprehended as the result of the immutable inadequacies of other cultures and grants the superior West special rights to uphold and defend the market order. Neo-racism thus enables neoliberalism to oscillate between thinking the limits it encounters are the necessary consequence of inferior others and thinking they can be overcome by renewed imposition of its market logic.

Neoliberalism and racial capitalism

Other founding neoliberal theorists shared in this civilisational discourse with varying slants. The work of Hayek's mentor, Ludwig von Mises, is marked by the

same tension between universalism and particularism. He advocated for globalist forms of governance to free the market order from mass democratic demands to which nation-states were occasionally responsive, while also believing racial differences meant market liberalism could only be spread outside the West by force.⁶⁰ Wilhelm Röpke, a central figure in the neoliberal movement, argued that market economies depended upon a ‘moral infrastructure’ that thinned in proportion to one’s cultural distance from the West. Lacking this infrastructure rendered a people culturally unsuited to market competition and therefore unlikely to consent to neoliberalism. He defended apartheid in South Africa as a means to ensure Africans could not jettison the western culture that was, he held, the only basis for stable market orders in the non-western world.⁶¹ For similar reasons, Milton Friedman supported white minority rule in Rhodesia in the 1970s and described the imposition of sanctions as ‘the suicide of the West’.⁶² My argument is not that neoliberals as individuals harboured racial prejudices that led them to distort neoliberalism into a racist form. Rather, the logic of neoliberalism itself draws the project towards a racial civilisational discourse and an associated structure of globally organised state racism.

While a neo-racist discourse emerges to resolve the tensions in neoliberal ideology, state racism is practised to resolve the tensions in neoliberal political economy. Neoliberal political economy differentiates as much as it homogenises; it seeks a world of universal markets and divides the world through various kinds of boundary making. The concept of racial capitalism is the most productive way to interpret this process.⁶³ Cedric Robinson uses the term to emphasise that each period of the capitalist world system finds a distinctive way to reify regional and cultural differences into races in order to structure social divisions between different forms of labour. Capitalism has not universalised the capital-wage labour

relationship described by Karl Marx in Volume 1 of *Capital* (Marx 1890) – a fact Marx recognised empirically, even if he drew from it different theoretical conclusions.⁶⁴ Waged labour under capitalism has always been combined with various forms of coerced labour, including today, for example, undocumented migrant labour – as well, of course, as the usually unwaged gendered labour of social reproduction.⁶⁵ In this view, race is not just a means of dividing waged working classes but also the means by which capitalism codes and manages the contradictions between waged and unwaged, between possessors and dispossessed, between citizens endowed with liberal rights and ‘unfree’ labouring populations – from the enslaved to the undocumented.⁶⁶ This means that racism is not reducible to a legacy of the past but is continuously regenerated in new forms out of globally dispersed divisions of labour and the struggles against them.

Neoliberalism involves a new iteration of this process. By placing the principle of competition at the centre of its political economy, neoliberalism intensifies differentiation. Market competition requires differences in capacities, resources, and vulnerabilities in order to do its incentivising work: the market game has to punish its ‘losers’. As we have seen, success and failure are understood within neoliberal discourse as judgments not just on the individual but on groups marked by their shared culture understood in neo-racist terms. The emergence of a new global neoliberal regime of capital accumulation from the 1970s went hand in hand with the mass rendering surplus of such racially marked populations across the global South and in the North.⁶⁷ David Harvey’s use of the Marxist concept of primitive accumulation to describe the processes of privatisation, commodification, and financialisation that produce these surplus populations is crucial.⁶⁸ Indeed, this is ‘the most accelerated and extensive processes of primitive accumulation in world history’.⁶⁹ However, to characterise neoliberalism’s surplus populations as

‘disposable workers’, to use Harvey’s term, is incomplete.⁷⁰ Disposability refers to a short-term wage relationship with capital, which is certainly true for a large proportion of workers. But significant sections of neoliberalism’s surplus populations are not engaged as waged labour by capital even for a short period. They ‘are unable to be exploited at all. They are abandoned subjects, relegated to the role of a “superfluous humanity”. Capital hardly needs them anymore to function’.⁷¹ Kalyan Sanyal calls them the ‘wasteland’ populations, defined by their being fully excluded from capitalist exploitation, not even able to serve as a reserve army of occasional labour.⁷²

Notions of reserve or disposable labour are also incomplete if they neglect the racial dimensions to the production and management of surplus populations under neoliberalism.⁷³ Race serves as the means by which neoliberalism organises and codes the complex, dispersed boundaries between these populations and others, between the ‘exploitable’ and ‘unexploitable,’ the ‘free’ and ‘unfree,’ the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’.⁷⁴ It is a material feature of the global division of labour that neoliberalism generates. Ideologically, neoliberalism is haunted by the existence of these surplus populations. They signify a limit to its reach, a failure to universalise, a space from within which resistance is generated. The tension between the desire for a universal market order and the anxiety that there are limits to market rule is resolved through a racial idea of culture – as Hayek’s theory of cultural evolution exemplifies. Race enables the limits to the universalisation of neoliberalism to be naturalised and dehistoricised: political opposition to market systems mounted by movements of the global South or racialised populations in the North is read by neoliberal ideology as no more than the acting out of cultures inherently lacking in traits of individualism and entrepreneurialism. Neo-racism

does its ideological work by displacing the political conflicts generated by neoliberalism onto the more comfortable terrain of clashes of culture.⁷⁵

In particular, racisms of the border, of law and order, and of counter-terrorism are the arenas within which the complex fears, tensions, and anxieties generated by neoliberalism and its discontents are projected and worked through. The surplus dispossessed come to be represented through a series of racist figures – ‘welfare queens’, ‘Muslim extremists’, ‘illegals’, ‘narcos’, ‘super-predators’, and so on – as part of the process of securing neoliberalism in the realm of ideology. These figures of economic dependency, violations of property, and threats to western culture rework older legacies of racism to produce images that are distinctive to the neoliberal era. A full account of this reworking is beyond the scope of this article but what these images have in common is their representing limits to market logic. They serve as displaced signifiers of neoliberalism’s failure to universalise its legitimacy, analogues of the ‘black mugger’ whom Stuart Hall described in the 1970s as a ‘signifier of the crisis in the urban colonies’.⁷⁶ With this phrase, Hall meant that racist images are not conjured out of nothing in the corridors of power but involve displacement along a signifying chain from actual political insurgencies or social antagonisms to the racist fantasies that fail to represent them. Behind the images of the Black woman on welfare, the radical Muslim and the violent immigrant lie fears of actual Black radicalism, of the actual Palestinian national movement, and of the actual politicisation of working classes induced by migrant workers.

Politically, race offers the neoliberal state organising terms for embedding markets in systems of spatial order and for policing surplus populations. In the state’s practices of ‘law and order’, ‘securing borders’, and ‘national security’, race is, as in Hayek’s philosophy, both concealed and constitutive.⁷⁷ The dramatic increase

under neoliberalism in the capacity of states to carry out policing, carceral, border, and military violence, domestically and globally, is linked to the need to manage surplus populations – and it is racially coded.⁷⁸ A transnational security infrastructure, led by the United States but dispersed globally through the nation-state system, spatially organises the neoliberal order through race. Racist bordering regimes, with their huge death tolls in the seas and deserts to the south of Europe and the United States, and their warehousing of millions of refugees in camps conveniently far from the West; racist projects of broken windows policing and mass incarceration, another form of warehousing of surplus populations; and global infrastructures of counter-insurgency, such as the racist wars on terror and drugs, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands – all this is inextricable from neoliberalism’s market order.⁷⁹ The global policing of Blacks, migrants and Muslims thus meshes with and comes to stand in ideologically for the broader problem of policing neoliberalism’s surplus populations, within and without the West. That the think-tank networks involved in promoting neoliberal political economies have typically also been key mobilisers of projects of racist policing, incarceration, and counter-terrorism is not coincidental. In the UK, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), the prototypical neoliberal think-tank that was founded in 1955 at the suggestion of Hayek himself, provided a support network for the founder of modern conservative racist politics, Enoch Powell, and later spun off outfits such as Civitas and the Centre for Social Cohesion that have hosted anti-immigration ideologues like Douglas Murray and Anthony Browne. In the US, for example, the Manhattan Institute, founded, like the IEA, by Antony Fisher, has been a major artery of neoliberal policymaking while also driving the national adoption of the ‘broken windows’ policing methods that have been key to mass incarceration.

In particular, the neoliberal border produces racial segregation as absolutely and violently as the Jim Crow laws of the US South or South African apartheid. Distinctly neoliberal zones of ‘crimmigration’ are produced by border regimes, the purpose of which is not to remove migrants from the economy but to deepen their ‘disposability’ as workers, a different structure from earlier regimes of labour migration under capitalism.⁸⁰ The border becomes the key tool for producing spatial boundaries between different kinds of labouring populations and a material aspect of the racist global division of labour under neoliberalism. In this way, to draw on Hall’s formulation, race is the modality in which the global structure of class relations is ‘lived’, the medium through which they are experienced, the form in which they are ‘appropriated and “fought through”’, not only an ‘ideological trick’ but ‘the material and social base on which “racism” as an ideology flourishes’.⁸¹ It follows that the kinds of racist populist politics that have surged in recent years cannot be analysed as masks with which to conceal a putative non-racial economic core to neoliberalism.⁸² Rather, they can only be made sense of by understanding the ‘material and social base’ of actual racial divisions of labour and the racist practices of neoliberal states, which provide a legitimacy and spontaneous ‘folk’ plausibility to right-wing racist political rhetoric. The recent electoral successes of racist politicians and parties are not antagonistic to neoliberalism but the making explicit of a racial ordering that neoliberalism has always worked through.⁸³

In this political context, it is crucial that the structural depth of racism’s material effectivity under neoliberalism be understood. That can only be done by tracing the new, distinctively neoliberal racial contours marked out across the social, political, cultural, and economic, not by assuming the lingering of a ready-made inheritance from the past that has been weakened by neoliberalism but not defeated. Racism

under neoliberalism cannot be understood as simply a means of camouflaging class projects or of scapegoating for economic failures; nor is it only an indirect consequence of the devastation that neoliberalism wreaks. Rather, race is a material feature of the division of labour that neoliberalism produces. Despite its rhetoric of colour-blind market competition, the neoliberal state is a racist state, committed to violently maintaining a racial ordering of labouring and surplus populations. So long as prevailing accounts of neoliberalism fail to encompass all this, there will be a stultifying divide between two kinds of left politics: one – predominantly white – that has a narrow conception of class struggle and is unable to make organic connections to movements against state racism; the other – predominantly not white – that grasps that a leading edge of class politics today lies within migrant movements against border violence and Black movements against police violence and incarceration.⁸⁴

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