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Race, Class, and Colonialism

William Julius Wilson and I joined Chicago's sociology department at the same time. Arriving from the University of Massachusetts as a newly appointed associate professor, he became the only African American on the sociology faculty. Bill had just finished his first book, *Power, Racism, and Privilege* (1973), and was already thinking about his second book, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), which would bring him fame, controversy, and a luminescent career like none other in sociology. His skepticism toward affirmative action, with its implicit critique of the African American bourgeoisie, won him many enemies and friends he did not desire. As I have already indicated, in celebrated book after celebrated book he would stick to his guns, exposing different dimensions of the class divisions within the African American population, but with a focus on the poverty and plight of the "underclass." When he first took up a position in Chicago's sociology department his future trajectory, however, was only in gestation.

That first quarter in the fall of 1972, he gave a course on race relations. I enrolled with enthusiasm. It was the highlight of my first year. He was presenting the power conflict perspective, advanced in his first book that was soon to appear. Racism has to be understood as a relation of domination, white over Black – an argument that was gaining credibility at the time, reflecting the experience

and influence of the civil rights movement. Bill defined successive racial orders in the US – a move from slavery and Jim Crow segregation based on biological racism to the contemporary period of competitive race relations based on cultural racism. The opening of opportunities for the Black middle classes encouraged renewed protest. The last chapters were devoted to a comparison of “race relations” in South Africa and the United States. Thinking of my own work in Zambia and South Africa, while listening to his lectures, I was struck by the absence of any serious talk of class, within both Black and white races. My unflagging interruptions were undoubtedly very annoying, but Bill was interested. He was thinking along similar lines.

I was lucky Bill did not have the legions of students he would subsequently acquire and so we entered into an extended dialogue about race and class. He read my monograph, *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines*, and encouraged me to work on the history of South Africa’s racial order and a critique of the US sociology of “race relations.” Indeed, I was quite astonished by the continuing currency of antiquated approaches – race cycle theories that ended happily, assimilation theses and prejudice studies – as though racism would simply evaporate with time or attitude change. This illusory view, a legacy of the uncritical optimism of US sociology, needed a heavy dose of anti-utopianism. And so it came with the power resource models of sociologists such as Hubert Blalock’s (1967) racial threat theory and Bob Blauner’s (1972) popularization of the internal colonial model. Still, the problem with these models was their failure to examine the broader economy, and thus the relationship between class and race; and their limited model of social change based, as it was, on an indeterminate conflict between racial groups. They still took race as given, rather than forged in the fire of capitalism.

I developed a very different approach to racial orders. Inspired by Giovanni Arrighi’s (1967) account of Southern

Rhodesia's political economy and Jack and Ray Simons's (1969) foundational treatise, I divided South African history into four periods, each marked by an expanding capitalism that transformed the racial configuration of the class structure. The patterning of race and class within the economy was shaped by a racialized "superstructure" that itself underwent changes over time. History unfolded through the interaction between economy and political and ideological institutions. In Marxist language, it was not that the "superstructure" simply reflected the "economic base," it also reacted back upon the base (Burawoy 1974).

The history I told began in the nineteenth century with the growing mining industry, first diamonds and then gold, that drew on indigenous unskilled African labor and imported British workers who occupied the more skilled and supervisory positions. Dispossessed of their land by Afrikaaner farmers – descended from Dutch settlers – and then subject to taxation by the colonial administration, African peasants were driven into the labor market.

With the expansion of the mining industry, British imperialism clashed with and defeated Afrikaaner landed interests in the Boer War. Now the mining companies threatened to meet increased demand for labor by promoting Africans into positions hitherto monopolized by white workers. Festering hostility to mining capital came to a head with the Rand Revolt of 1922 in which white mineworkers struck under the slogan "Workers of the world fight and unite for a white South Africa." It became a violent conflagration, crushed by government troops, but white workers got their way – the entrenchment of an industrial color bar, reserving certain jobs for whites only. In agriculture Africans eked out a subsistence existence while segregated from an emerging class of landless, poor whites. The latter, largely Afrikaaners, were caught between prosperous white landowners and dispossessed Black peasants. In towns Afrikaaners could not compete with cheap African labor, instigating a "civilized labor policy," which promised them jobs in a growing public

sector. Between the two world wars, the South African superstructure was consolidating its apparatus of white supremacy.

After World War II, the growth of the manufacturing class led to demands for a permanent Black labor force that was both cheap and skilled. The interests of the manufacturers clashed with an alliance of white landowners and white industrial workers, seeking to defend their racial privileges. The latter alliance was politically victorious and the racial structure of apartheid was erected, with its extensive controls over the social and geographical mobility of Blacks, preventing the emergence of a stabilized Black proletariat. In the rural areas, the apartheid project created Bantustans, internal colonies run by African chiefs with their own bureaucracies, thereby creating dependent African middle classes. The final period of my historical analysis was marked by the rise of a Black bourgeoisie and the dissolution of colonial rule in the rest of Africa. It was then that the apartheid state adopted its outward-looking policy. Driven by internal economic expansion, it sought out markets in newly independent Africa while internally trying to co-opt the new Black middle class.

There was nothing original in the history I offered. Drawing heavily on Simons and Simons (1969), I wanted to demonstrate that you can't study race without attending to class, and that you can't study the political superstructures that constituted race without attending to the dynamics of capitalism. Contrary to optimistic liberal views about the inevitable breakdown of apartheid in the face of an expanding capitalism, the analysis suggested that capitalism, far from being impeded by a racialized superstructure, could effectively expand within and through institutional racism.

I sent this article to various sociology journals and learned my lesson: frontal assault on reigning orthodoxies does not win supportive reviews. It was eventually published in the *West Indies*. Still, my argument did not go far enough. I'd moved away from psychological

theories of racism and race cycle theories, with its stages of competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. I'd moved beyond power-resource models of racial domination to highlight racial divisions within classes and class divisions within races as these evolved with the expansion of capitalism. But I was still missing a *theory* of capitalism.

I extended and formalized the framework I had developed to study race and class in Zambia, but, as in the earlier monograph, I did not have the theoretical tools to incorporate the driving forces behind the pursuit of profit – a systemic analysis of capitalism. That would have to await my second year in graduate school, when I came under the influence of Adam Przeworski. It was then that I read Marx's *Capital* for the first time – an experience from which I've never recovered. Under Adam's guidance I also immersed myself in French structuralist Marxism that had stimulated a new historiography of South Africa, to which I will turn in Chapter 10. First, I had to develop a theory of migrant labor (Chapter 8) and then a theory of the regulation of the workplace (Chapter 9).