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Five Interconnections of Race and Class

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Abstract

This paper proposes a five-part empirical typology of interconnections of race and class. We describe the mechanisms whereby (1) race is a form of class relation; (2) race relations and class relations reciprocally affect each other; (3) race acts as a sorting mechanism into class locations; (4) race acts as a mediating linkage to class locations; and (5) race interacts with class in determining other outcomes. Rather than insisting on one or another mechanism as the overarching framework for conceptualising the interconnections between race and class, we propose a theoretical integration of all five within a functionalist model. The model reconciles the empirical effects of race variables with a class-functionalist explanation of race. Our typology of interconnections is useful for situating concrete empirical phenomena, and our theoretical integration of those interconnections offers a coherent explanatory system that captures the recursive causality of race and class.

Keywords

class – race – racism – inequality – functionalism – capitalism

1. Introduction

Sociologists, in their attempts to theorise race and class, often want to provide an overarching framework to explain the relationship between them. In the seminar room, one may hear the blunt assertion that class shapes racial domination or, on the contrary, that race shapes the class structure. The sophisticated theorist will then intervene to propose that race and class are in fact co-equal, reciprocally impacting each other. When the frustrated quantitative scholar enters the fray, they clarify that race and class are simply variables which, separately and together, impact other variables. After a tense silence, a wry smile stretches across the face of the Hegelian slumped in the corner. Unruffled by his fuzzy-thinking colleagues, he looks up over tented fingers and stakes a claim for the last word: race and class are in fact one, inextricably bound up, each collapsed into the other.

We do not wish to throw cold water on the efforts of such well-meaning scholars by saying it is all more complicated than that. Like the seminar contributors, we too wish to offer an overarching framework to explain the relationship between these variables. But when any one of these approaches is taken as the master structure determining the race and class interaction, it is always easy enough to point out different aspects of the dynamic that make the general claim appear invalid.

It is often argued that class is more 'fundamental' than race, or vice versa; when theorists make this argument, they do so by pointing to some mechanism and some empirical evidence, as if that solves the broader theoretical question. A general claim that 'class explains racial domination' will be met with evidence for the statistical significance of a race variable on some class outcome. Indeed, there are mechanisms whereby race causally affects class and others whereby class causally affects race. Another group of analysts might then conclude that race and class are simply one variable, or that they are co-equal; they might then present empirical evidence to support this claim, as if it were the general form that

the race–class interaction takes rather than just another dynamic. In fact, all of these interconnections operate in the world and have evidence behind them, and yet none of this evidence is decisive, we argue, in understanding some general frame to explain how race and class interconnect.

This paper is an attempt to have it both ways. We wish to identify the many mechanisms through which race and class interconnect. Here, we are eclectic: much of this paper is an attempt to describe and classify the diversity of observable race–class connections in the world. We also wish to subsume them into a broader explanatory structure. In particular, this paper first offers five different ways that race and class interconnect at the meso level, acknowledging that these broad variables can and do form different kinds of interconnection. We then go on to argue that none of these configurations count as the *general* form of the interaction, and so we attempt to integrate the various interconnections into a broader theory.

Erik Olin Wright, in his 1997 book *Class Counts*, offered a similar list of the meso-level interconnections of gender and class. We find that the application of the same basic approach to race and class allows us to generate an empirical typology of five interconnections that characterise different historical contexts. Unlike Wright, beyond listing the potential empirical interactions, we attempt to theorise the ways in which they fit together.

Outlining a menu of possible interactions of race and class helps situate concrete empirical phenomena. Differently put, our taxonomy of meso-level interconnections will be useful in conducting empirical work and in contextualising descriptive accounts of race and class. In the following five sections, we delineate these five interconnections.

In the seventh section, we bring them together and integrate all five into a broader conceptual approach to the race–class interaction: we argue that it is reasonable to consider our specific configurations as pieces of a broader functionalist relationship between race and class. At the highest level of abstraction, we argue that there is good reason to believe that race – which we call elsewhere a

belief-dependent social construct – ought to be *functionally explained* by class – which we call a structure-dependent social construct.¹ As W.E.B. Du Bois argued, ‘the income-bearing value of race prejudice was the cause and not the result of theories of race inferiority’.² We believe this to be true – not in spite of real-world evidence of empirical mechanisms showing that race has effects on the class structure, but because of it.

The way to conceptualise an overarching framework for race and class is not best developed by pointing to one or another empirical causal path: the empirical evidence suggests that the variables interact in a multiplicity of ways, like so many links in a chain. This will lead some scholars to throw up their hands and argue that the variables are co-equal. Others will appeal to their fundamental context-dependency, concluding that there can be no general claims about the interaction, no broader puzzle to organise the pieces, which are irreducibly empirical. We believe that the evidence can be interpreted in a different way, and the task is to fit the various mechanisms into a broader model. That is, we attempt to organise the different real-world interconnections outlined in the next five sections – where sometimes race affects class and other times class affects race – into a coherent explanatory system that integrates the complex and recursive causality of race and class. The task of the theorist is to make sense of the empirical complexity of the world, not to surrender to it.

Even if the reader does not ultimately accept our attempt at integrating the various interconnections, we believe that the typology is useful in thinking through and better identifying the diversity of empirical race–class dynamics described in social science research.³

¹ Calnitsky and Billeaux Martinez 2023, p. 240. Some readers might worry that allowing race to have causal power is tantamount to racial realism, or that it entails a claim about the biological reality of race. It does not. The fact that race has its own social reality and operates as a unique and sometimes causal social variable does not imply any racial realism – social facts have causal force. And ideas, too, can have proximate effects, even if they may themselves have deeper functional causes.

² Du Bois 2007, p. 65.

³ We believe that our five-fold typology is likely exhaustive, but we are open to additions. We exclude third variables (social movements, levels of development, gender, and so on), which would make this exercise unwieldy.

Before moving on, it is worth making two metatheoretical points. First, our approach is broadly consonant with the Analytical Marxist tradition, and this means that the typology we provide consistently abstracts from concrete phenomena in order to generate analytical categories. Some scholars might contend that our use of the concepts of race and class renders them free-floating ‘idealisations’ rather than ‘abstractions’ rooted in concrete phenomena.⁴ We ask our readers to entertain our somewhat more formal analysis, if only to see the kinds of conclusions it generates, and even if they are ultimately inclined to reject our premises as ahistorical. However, we believe that it is fruitful to take our deductive approach and that it can draw out real-world causal connections. In particular, we take issue with the general theoretical claim that race and class are inextricably bound up, because we see empirically-grounded causal mechanisms that ought to define where our analytical cut points lie. If they were ‘inextricably’ bound up, there would be one variable, not two, and we would never observe independent causal mechanisms. Moreover, interconnections cannot be discovered when only a single variable exists. Allowing the variables to be separable is what licenses an empirical study of their interactions; it permits an understanding of a world where the variables can move together or apart. This means that whether race and class are ‘free floating’ or bound up ought not to be an *a priori* theoretical commitment but rather an empirical question to be determined case by case. Our typology, we believe, helps to place those cases. As we will show, race and class are sometimes bound up, sometimes not; sometimes they are ‘co-constituted’, and other times perfectly extricable. Ultimately, we leave it to the reader to decide whether our typology floats too far above the ground on which it ought to sit.

Second, beyond Analytical Marxism, the broader history of Marxist thought is replete with functionalist accounts of race, which provide context for our essay. Two features of these accounts stand out: (1) an emphasis on the objective effects of race, and (2) the unintentional reproduction of race.⁵

⁴ See, for example, Botwinick 2018 and Shaikh 2016.

⁵ Referring to the ‘objective effects of race’ does not require the reification of race. Race is an ideology, but in functionalist accounts, ideology has real effects – for example, in stabilising the class structure. If it did not, then why

These accounts often situate race as a mechanism for the legitimation of exploitation or the division of the working class, the emergence and reproduction of which is inherent to capitalist class relations.⁶ Sometimes, identifying an argument as functionalist is automatically read as a dismissal. This is unfortunate, because functionalism is a powerful explanatory tool in cases where two social facts are consistently linked across a wide range of disconnected contexts and where intentionality is largely absent. In these cases, it is reasonable to consider functional explanations, so long as they incorporate plausible mechanisms rather than appealing to the disembodied needs of a system. Functionalism is everywhere in Marxist writing, and we see it as an often perfectly reasonable and broadly defensible part of the tradition – a matter we return to in Section 7.

2. Race as a Form of Class Relation

would it be so pervasive? The functionalist view is incompatible with the epiphenomenalist view, which holds that race is merely an effect without effects of its own; indeed, on this point, we disagree with Robert Miles (1984), who sometimes characterises race as simply a kind of mask obscuring class relations.

⁶ Oliver Cromwell Cox, in Robert Carter's summary, argues that 'racism functions as the rationalisation or ideology of capitalist exploitation' (Carter 2008, p. 433). Howard Sherman argued that the function of racism was 'to justify economic exploitation' and to 'find a scapegoat for all problems' (Sherman 1972, p. 180). Barbara Fields likewise emphasises the rationalising function of race: 'Racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery ... [in] a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights' (Fields 1990, p. 114). Du Bois's famous discussion of the 'public and psychological wage' of being white is a classic formulation of racism's function as a class divider. Similarly, Rhonda Williams summarises the work of Gordon, Edwards and Reich: '[T]he US working class remains divided largely because of objective divisions among workers in their production experiences' (Gordon, Edwards and Reich 1993, p. 211). In a recent debate on the concept of racial capitalism, Post asserts that the logic of capitalism forces race into being: '[R]acism as a distinct way of differentiating human beings developed with capitalist social property relations and is a necessary feature of this system. ... [T]he reproduction of capitalist social property relations through the "dull compulsions" of the market ... makes the relationship of capitalism and racism necessary, and not historically or theoretically contingent. ... Race is the necessary and unintended consequence of capitalist competition and accumulation' (Post 2020). The key words in this text are at the top: 'racism as a distinct *way of* differentiating'. The passive phrase 'way of' is different from the idea that racism was designed by specific people to have specific effects. Furthermore, it is different from the purely descriptive statement that racism happens to have specific effects. As a phrase, 'way of' suggests a kind of functional relationship, which we will defend.

While the concepts of race and class are analytically distinct, there are situations in which race relations are class relations and, symmetrically, class relations are race relations; in these instances, the two categories collapse into one. When blacks as a group are denied homeownership, which is then subsidised for whites, race and class are one; access to residential property is a kind of class relation and can be defined along racial lines in certain historical moments.⁷ Perhaps the clearest historical example is racial slavery in the United States: in 1860, a significant minority of white people kept some 90 per cent of black people as property.⁸ Ownership and non-ownership of persons defines a class relation. There was thus a clear establishment of a class line defined in racial terms: Blacks were almost always slaves, and slaves were always black; to be white was to be immune to the ownership category of enslavement. Race and class, in certain respects, were one.

This is not to claim that race relations capture the entirety of the class relations of the antebellum United States. There was class differentiation among whites, of course. But with respect to slavery – the class relation defining the rights and powers that a slaveowner has over human inputs to production – one observes a merging of race and class.

Indeed, this merging of race and class helps to explain the peculiar character of the US racial system. Historical studies of the genesis of race in America generally confirm that it emerged as the

⁷ Throughout, we use the lowercase 'black' when referring to the racial category rather than the capitalised 'Black'. Because this departs from this journal's standard usage, we want to explain this choice. In 2020, the Associated Press announced that they were changing their style guide "to capitalise Black in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense, conveying an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa" <<https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>>. In our view this is a highly contested political claim. There is, no doubt, an ongoing *project* to construct a shared sense of history and identity among black people, but it is not a *fait accompli* – and there are also counterclaims, such as those made by the American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) movement, that seek to emphasise the ethnic and national *distinctions* within the broader racial category. More basically, it seems to us that the average African American may not in fact perceive themselves as having a shared history with a Somali, for instance. Most importantly for our purposes, capitalisation fits awkwardly with a claim we make later in this essay: the extent to which the ascriptive categories of race correspond to how people perceive their interests, construct their reference groups, and organise their political behaviour is an empirical variable. The intellectual projects and classification struggles waged around these questions are themselves interesting subjects for study and are often tied, we think, to class dynamics.

⁸ See Bourne 2008.

legitimising ideology of a class relation, and the very tight correspondence of race and class was reflected in the nature of the racial beliefs that emerged in the US context.⁹ Namely, the stark white/black binary construction of racial categories, demonstrated most clearly by the ‘one drop’ rule, was a legal and ideological artefact of this near-total collapse of race into class.

Feudal societies may have exhibited something very similar. For instance, in the history of Russian serfdom, there was an aristocratic belief that serfs had black bones, so different were they to the nobility.¹⁰ This belief approaches the idea of racial difference, emerging from a class distinction and still perfectly mapped onto it. Cedric Robinson makes the case that this kind of race–class merger was central to pre-capitalist European civilisation generally: in one example, the nobility believed themselves to be the descendants of the Trojan heroes; the peasants, on the other hand, descended from Ham and bore his curse.¹¹ This may not yet be quite the ideology of race, but it is clearly a close cousin.

In any given case, there may be exceptions to the ideal-typical description; historically, there always have been. When the exceptions overwhelm the rule, we are no longer in the realm of race as a form of class relation. Nonetheless, this configuration of race and class helps us to understand certain social formations. Were it the case that race and class always interacted in this way, the two concepts could be replaced by one – call it *clace*. It is sometimes argued that race and class are not analytically distinct concepts.¹² As a rule, we generally disagree – and the rest of the paper explains why – but this is a case where the statement is correct.

3. Race Relations and Class Relations Reciprocally Affect Each Other

⁹ See Allen 1994; Berlin 1998; Fields and Fields 2012.

¹⁰ See Kolchin 1987.

¹¹ Robinson 2000, pp. 21–2.

¹² According to Wendy Brown, it is best to think about these ideas in ways ‘that do not honor analytically distinct identity categories’. See Brown 1997, p. 87.

Even where race is not directly a form of class relation, race and class may have deep reciprocal interactions. To identify reciprocity in the interaction is to say that there are two variables and that the causal arrow runs in both directions. On the one hand, the structure of class relations can shape the character of interracial friend and family networks, the norms governing interracial interaction, and people's subjective stances towards the racial divide – in a word, race itself. For example, a class structure with no labour-market segmentation may tend to erode racial divisions. On the other hand, existing patterns of racial inequality can affect the structure of class relations, changing the characteristics of particular class locations or even generating whole class locations that would not exist otherwise. Manual agricultural labour, say, may have entirely different pay and working conditions absent a relation of racial inequality in citizenship status.

This understanding of race and class as proximate causes of one another is but one example of the broader sociological phenomenon of the recursive causality of structure and ideology. In Section 7, we argue for a causal asymmetry between the two, where class (as *structure*) is best understood as causally prior to race (as *ideology*). Still, the assignment of distal causal priority to class does not alter the general claim that the *effects* of both become proximate *causes* in the historical development of each.

In the examples described in this section, it is often possible to zoom out to prior causes. Here, however, we do the opposite, zooming in on individual links in a broader chain.

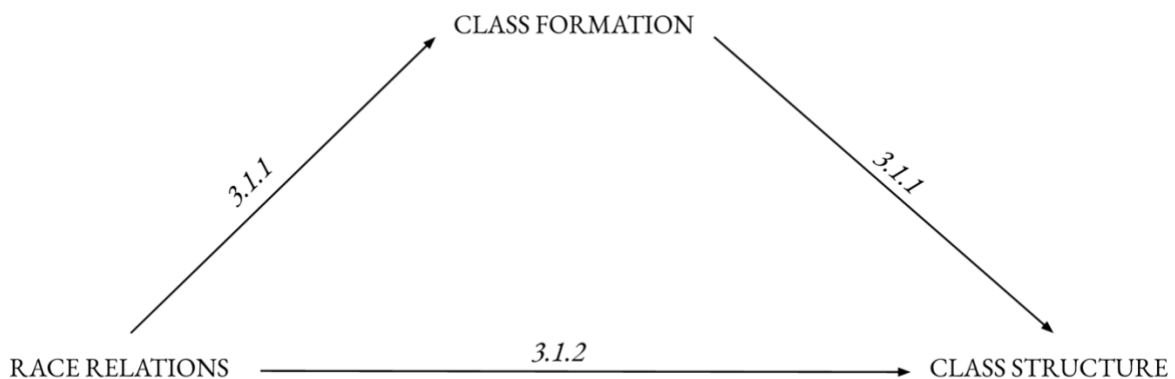
3.1 *Race Affects Class*

There are at least two causal pathways by which race affects the structure of class relations. First, racism can affect the patterns of alliances that emerge within and between classes, ultimately affecting the class structure through its effects on class formation and class struggle. Second, racial oppression and inequality

can have a direct effect on the class structure. The latter case is about the unintended consequences of race on class structures; the former is about how people's intentions to impact class structures through organisation and struggle are themselves shaped by racial divisions. Put another way, race affects, respectively, both 'class in itself' and 'class for itself'.¹³

The upshot in each case is that racial dynamics tend to create greater income inequality in the class structure and make possible the existence of jobs that would otherwise be fewer in number, less dangerous, better paid or eliminated altogether. The following subsections describe three examples for each of the two causal pathways, shown schematically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Two Pathways from Race to Class



3.1.1 *Race Affects Class Through Its Effects on Class Formation and Class Struggle*

The absence of racial dynamics makes it easier for workers to form political alliances that would raise wages and reduce inequality. The same effect may be achieved even in a racialised labour force *if* workers

¹³ Marx 1995.

achieve a high degree of interracial solidarity, and therein lies the trouble: racism makes working-class solidarity more fragile than would otherwise be the case. The causal path from racism to working-class disorganisation is agnostic with regard to specific mechanisms connecting cause to effect. In this section, we review three proposed mechanisms, all of which are suggested in the final pages of W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*.¹⁴

The differential exploitation (hereafter, DE) mechanism, sometimes referred to as the 'divide-and-conquer' model, asserts that race facilitates the division of the working class – where whites accept increased status in exchange for reduced incomes – which allows for them to be 'conquered', that is, paid lower wages. The 'conquering' results in a racially unequal class structure with lower wages across the board. Race undermines working-class formation and in turn affects the class structure.

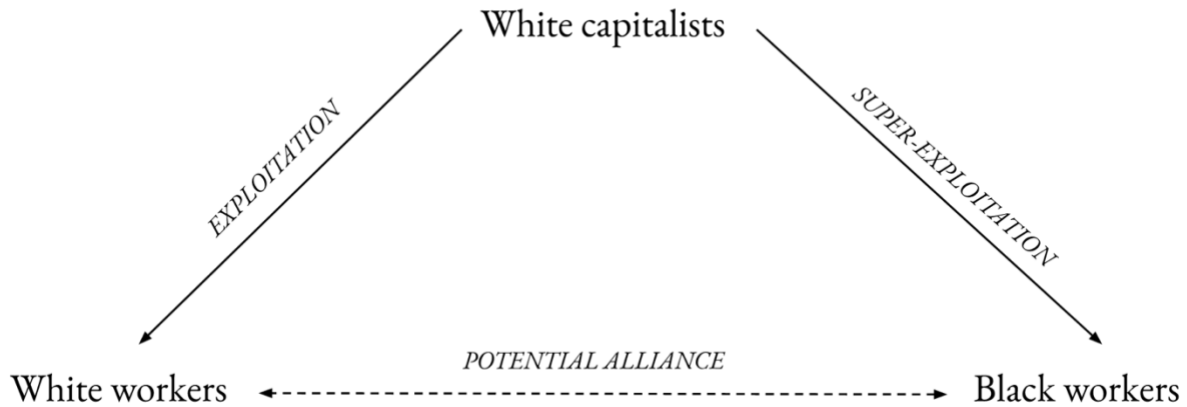
As described in Figure 2, the DE model indicates that capitalists have an interest in maintaining racial inequality, while white and black workers alike have a shared interest in overcoming it. In Figures 2, 3 and 4, solid lines represent relations of exploitation or oppression. Oppressors benefit from the mere exclusion of the oppressed from some productive resource, while exploiters also benefit from the *labour effort* of those so excluded.¹⁵ Dashed lines represent potential alliances in terms of the shared material interests implied by the configuration of exploitation/oppression relations.¹⁶

¹⁴ Du Bois 1998, pp. 700–1.

¹⁵ See Wright 1997; Roemer 1982; Roemer 1988.

¹⁶ Reduced exploitation and super-exploitation refer to rates below or above what would be the average rate of exploitation in the absence of the racial wage differential.

Figure 2. Differential Exploitation (Reich)



The clearest statement of this mechanism comes from Michael Reich, who assumes that accumulated forms of racism (residential segregation limiting access to jobs and resources, outright discrimination from employers, reduced access to education, and so on) tend to result in lower wages for blacks. He shows that a lower ratio of black median incomes to white median incomes (call this wage ratio B/W) leads to lower average wages for white workers and a greater proportion of total white income captured by the top end of white earners. On the other hand, the effect of a higher B/W is higher wages across the board and less income captured by top white earners.¹⁷

What connects greater relative wages for whites to their lower absolute wages and greater inequality overall? *Racial division makes it harder for workers to organise.*¹⁸ Reich finds that low-B/W areas had lower union density; high-B/W areas had higher density. In the economic sphere, weakly organised workers are less capable of bargaining for higher wages. In the political sphere, organisational weakness reduces workers' influence in obtaining public goods that increase worker incomes, such as education and

¹⁷ Reich 1978, pp. 531–6.

¹⁸ For example, see: Spero and Harris 1931; Foner 1974; Goldfield 1997; Gerteis 2007.

welfare.¹⁹ This is essentially identical to Du Bois's claim about the 'public and psychological wage' offered to the poor white for the elite white's benefit. White workers face a trade-off between income on the one hand and race-based status privilege on the other. Meanwhile, white elites have their cake and eat it too: their incomes increase along with their racial status.

The configuration of interests and antagonisms posed by the DE model implies that employers may deliberately use racial division in an attempt to wreck or prevent the formation of solidarity – which is to say, they literally divide and conquer.²⁰ Historically, there is no shortage of incidents of the vulgar manipulation of racial differences by employers, but the argument does not depend on capitalist scheming: the salience of race *itself* makes it more difficult for workers to organise.²¹

The split labour market (hereafter, SLM) mechanism proposes a different configuration (Figure 3). Here, race is not merely a case of working-class disunity but also one of intra-racial solidarity. Rather than facing a trade-off between incomes and racial status (as in DE), the class and racial interests of white workers align. In SLM, white workers' exclusion of blacks from various trades or of Chinese workers from labour markets altogether – that is, oppression – transforms the class structure in such a way that the class positions monopolised by whites are less exploitative than they would be otherwise.

In particular, SLM theory says that interracial conflict is likely where two racially defined groups command different wages for the same type of labour, for any reason; under such conditions, high-wage (white) workers will pursue strategies to exclude low-wage (black, Chinese, etc.) workers, lest they bid down the wage, while capitalists aim simply to hire labour at the lowest available price.²²

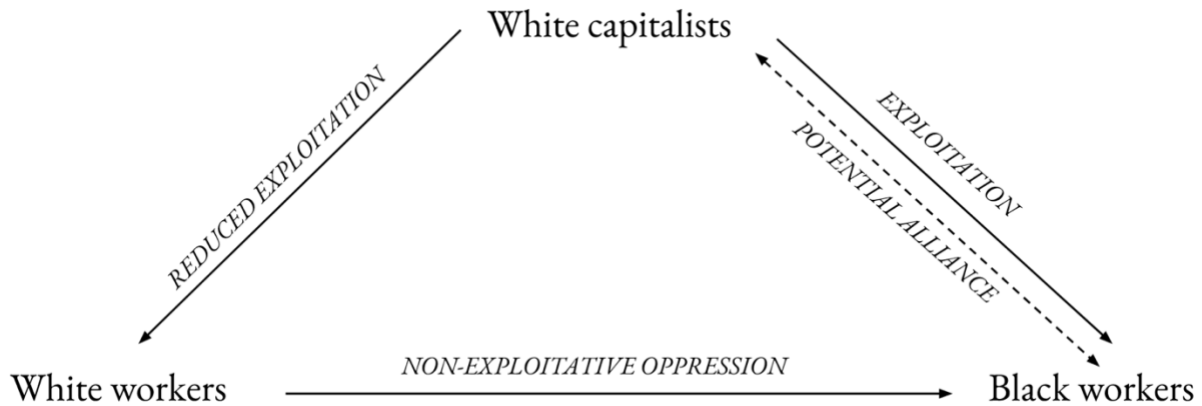
¹⁹ Reich 1978, pp. 536–41.

²⁰ See Baron 1983 and Gordon, Edwards and Reich 1982.

²¹ See Reich and Divine 1981.

²² See Bonacich 1972.

Figure 3. Split Labour Markets (Bonacich)



The differences between DE and SLM are worth emphasising. First, with DE, existing racial inequalities and racism among whites make worker unity difficult to achieve, but SLM provides the basis for actually *antagonistic* intraclass interests and open conflict among workers: white workers attempt to exclude, and excluded minority workers seek to undercut whites.²³ Second, in DE, capitalists have a positive interest in maintaining worker disunity across racial lines; in SLM, they do not.²⁴ In DE, there is a material basis for unity between black and white workers against the capitalists who benefit from their division. In SLM, white workers are antagonistic both to black workers *and* to the capitalists who wish to hire cheaper black labour, and there is a material basis for cooperation among capitalists and black workers to oppose the oppressive schemes of white workers.

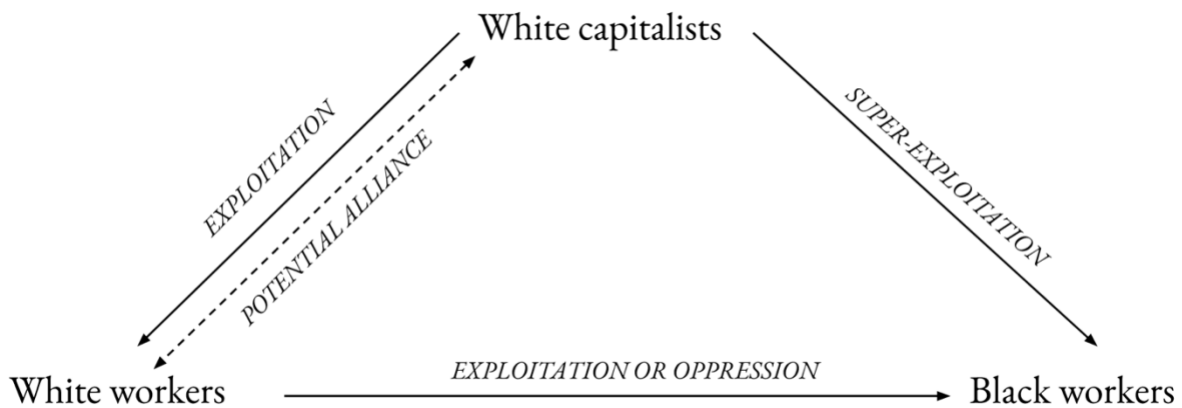
A final proposed mechanism is internal colonialism (hereafter, IC), which, like the first two, says that race divides the working class. Unlike the first two, as shown in Figure 4, race facilitates an alliance

²³ On black strikebreaking, see, for example, Whatley 1993.

²⁴ This difference hinges on whether one assumes that capitalists seek to increase profits by maximising efficiency (SLM) or by maximising surplus labour extraction (DE). See: Bowles 1985; Reich and Divine 1981; Gould 1991. For an interesting case study supporting the latter assumption, see Murray and Schwartz 2017.

between white workers and white capitalists who oppress and super-exploit blacks, thereby shaping the class structure. There are two ways this might work: either white workers in some way *exploit* black workers in the sense of capturing some portion of black surplus labour as wages, or the (non-exploitative) oppression of blacks itself offers material benefits for white workers.

Figure 4. Internal Colonialism (Blauner and Davis)



The most direct argument about the exploitation of black workers by white workers comes from Robert Davies on race–class relations in South Africa.²⁵ Davies argues that the surplus value produced by super-exploited black workers is distributed to white workers as higher wages. This is shown by a comparison of white and black average wages; through various political mechanisms, white workers were paid well in excess of what they would have earned on the basis of their productivity, out of the surplus taken from black labour. If black workers disappeared, white workers would be worse off. Ultimately, the argument is not convincing, especially because Davies does not demonstrate that white workers’ wage premiums

²⁵ See Davies 1973.

are paid out of revenues rather than capital.²⁶ Nevertheless, it does model the basic logic necessary to establish the claim that white workers exploit black workers.

Another influential version of the IC model emphasises white workers' role in the administration of oppression.²⁷ Institutions are required to mete out oppression and deal with its consequences. These institutions require the employment of millions of whites as police, prison guards, prosecutors, parole officers, clerks, welfare agents and social workers.²⁸ Again, the implied mechanism is political: by virtue of their greater power, whites have privileged access to employment in the agencies responsible for the oppression of blacks. This cannot really be understood as exploitation in the strict sense of white state employees benefiting from the surplus labour of black workers. But the economic incentive of whites with respect to the oppression of blacks is opposite to that implied by SLM: rather than oppressed blacks representing a threat to white wages, they represent an employment opportunity.

These examples may be more or less historically observable and may even operate simultaneously in the same society; in all cases, race makes working-class solidarity less likely and facilitates greater inequality in the class structure.

3.1.2 *Race Affects Class by Directly Impacting the Labour Market*

While the mechanisms described in 3.1.1 also have effects on the labour market, they are interesting because of their indirect effects by way of the impact on solidarity. Nonetheless, it is worth examining the

²⁶ See Wolpe 1976.

²⁷ See Blauner 1969.

²⁸ Cf. Gans 1972.

direct effects of race on the class structure, defined as the labour market.²⁹ Racism makes possible the existence of a class structure with certain jobs that would not exist otherwise.³⁰

In the United States, the ideological association of racial inferiority with servility, combined with the tendency of white workers to monopolise higher-status work and employer use of racial exclusions in the management of labour produced a large reserve of workers cut out of skilled jobs. The generation of this labour reserve created highly favourable labour-market conditions for bosses in the domestic, hospitality and agricultural sectors. The claim here is not merely that racism entails the disproportionate sorting of non-white workers into these already-extant class locations – an interconnection described below – but that racism helps to explain the character of the locations themselves. We spell out three examples to demonstrate the argument: domestic servants, tipped service trades and manual agricultural labour.

In the United States, live-in domestic servants and maids were typically not only women but women of a subordinate racial status. The availability of Irish women and then black women in particular underpinned the abundance of domestic service jobs in the nineteenth-century class structure.³¹ There is good reason to think that the twentieth-century decline of domestic service jobs would have occurred more rapidly if not for the Great Migration, which provided cities with an infusion of oppressed labour.³² In a counterfactual world without racism, you might observe a class structure with fewer, better-paid, and possibly less strenuous domestic-service jobs.

Another way race has affected the class structure is exemplified in the history of tipped labour in the US. Tipping was initially imported to the United States from Europe by returning tourists and travellers

²⁹ More broadly, we might talk about the distribution of material wellbeing. In doing so, we would consider the welfare state, which might be directly and indirectly impacted by race.

³⁰ The IC model, for instance emphasises this mechanism to the extent that it claims that whites' material interest in racism hinges on the proliferation of jobs that are tied to the administration of a racist regime.

³¹ See Dudden 1986 and Lynch-Brennan 2009.

³² See Dudden 1986.

eager to adopt the high-status posture implied by the act. After the Civil War, it was quickly adopted by employers seeking to put former slaves to work without paying them even the small incomes to which wage labourers were accustomed. Well into the twentieth century, virtually all sleeping-car porters employed by the Pullman Car Company – then the nation’s ‘leading exponent of tipping’ – were black men, whose wages were set with the understanding that they would subsist on riders’ tips.³³ Would Pullman have employed as many porters if the company had to pay each of them the prevailing wages?

The custom of tipping naturally appeals to service employers, but it was not originally a practice taken for granted among the public. Accepting tips was a mark of dependency that offended republican sensibilities. But racist exclusions made it easier for employers to find workers willing to work for tips, and racist ideology made it easier for everyone else to adopt tipping as customary practice. The exclusion of black people from more desirable jobs made them a captive labour force for service industry employers; the stigma of race, when attached to such work, enabled the construction of these jobs as servile, and therefore tipped, jobs. The claim is not that racism is the sole explanation for the rise of tipped labour in the US; rather, it is that racial exclusion structured the labour market in such a way as to make possible a greater number of subminimum-wage service jobs within the class structure.

Finally, agricultural employers in the US have long expressed a clear preference for vulnerable and marginalised workers who are forced to accept low wages, long hours, and harsh working conditions. Vigilant border enforcement helps to keep wages low by putting immigrant workers in a highly vulnerable position, and because border policing relies on racial profiling, its threats are particularly acute for racialised immigrants.³⁴ Were Latino immigrants not racially oppressed, and were there something like an open-border policy, it is likely that the class structure would quickly shift towards fewer and better-paid farmworker positions. Under such conditions, it is reasonable to expect that super-exploitative

³³ See Scott 1916 and Spero and Harris 1931.

³⁴ See Aranda and Vaquera 2015.

agricultural employers would have to offer something up to prevent some workers from simply walking away – either by increasing the wage or improving working conditions, thereby changing the class structure.

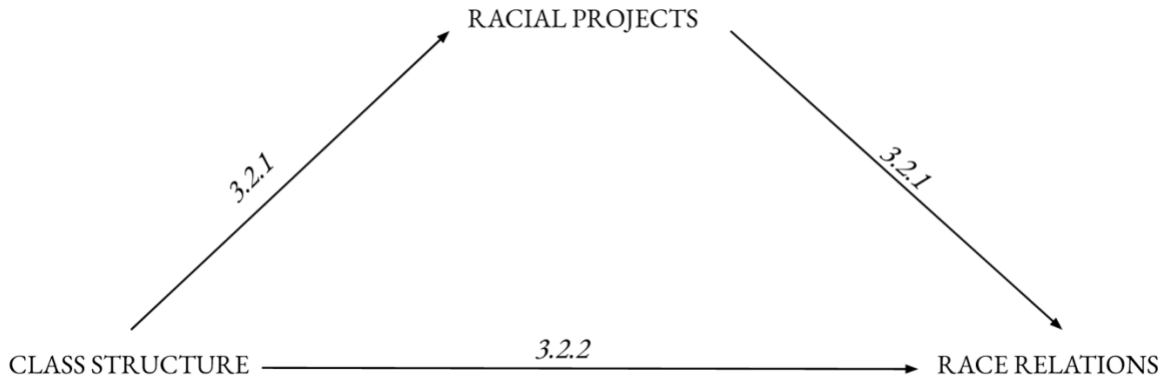
All three of these examples suggest the same basic relationship of race to class: the patterns of material and political exclusion along racial lines shape the labour market, making certain kinds of undesirable jobs more numerous.

3.2 *Class Affects Race*

So far, we have shown how certain race relations can affect the class structure; now we turn to the ways that class structure affects race relations. First, the class structure affects the probability of the emergence and success of various kinds of ‘racial projects’ – efforts to form coalitions in pursuit of interests defined along racial lines, in other words to impact race relations.³⁵ Second, the class structure sets broad limits on the parameters of racial inequality or the salience of race in social life. We elaborate in turn each of these causal paths, which are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Two Pathways from Class to Race

³⁵ See Omi and Winant 1994.



3.2.1 *Class Affects Race by Its Effects on Racial Projects*

An implication of Section 3.1.1 is that there is a distinction between class as a *structural location* within economic relations, on the one hand, and class as an *organised project* geared towards satisfying the interests defined by those locations, on the other. Race can act as a barrier to the emergence of the latter, but so too can things work in the other direction. Call it the distinction between ‘race-in-itself’ and ‘race-for-itself’: whether the ascriptive categories of race actually correspond to how people organise collectively in pursuit of shared interests is an empirical question. Races (in the ‘in-itself’ sense), in other words, have a long way to go before they become collective actors, and the class structure may facilitate or mitigate the formation of racial projects (which give rise to race in the ‘for-itself’ sense).

When the class structure has highly segmented labour markets and when labour-market segments correspond to racial classifications – as in the SLM scenario described above – interracial solidarity becomes less likely and racial group formation more likely. Under such conditions, the experience of work itself is less likely to include regular or close interracial interaction, and the experience of being working class – as structured by individual and neighbourhood incomes, access to skill or

authority assets at work, and so on – is also marked by racial difference. In these circumstances, racial projects are less likely to find competition for recruits from interracial class projects. In short, class affects racial projects.³⁶

When the class structure is characterised by large groups of workers with similar tasks and homogeneous working conditions, a unified set of experiences may make interracial unity more likely. Indeed, the homogenisation of labour in the era of industrialisation came to represent a serious problem for employers, as a multi-ethnic working class began to overcome its divisions.³⁷ This also led to intra-racial divisions, as it became harder for black elites to organise black workers into their own projects and likewise harder for white elites to organise white workers into theirs. We might offer as a general hypothesis that racial projects are more successful in a context of high segmentation than in a context of a more equal class structure.

3.2.2 *Class Directly Impacts Race Relations*

The second way that class affects race is that the class structure sets broad limits on the parameters of racial inequality itself. As discussed in Section 2, American racial categories and their particular meanings emerged out of the class relation of slavery. The abolition of slavery as a class structure in the US meant the abolition of master/slave as a class–race relation. The history of the post-Civil War era is fundamental to an understanding of twentieth-century US *race* relations; this is largely because it was a time of contention over what *class structure* would replace the racial slave system in agricultural production and

³⁶ To the extent that the theory of the ‘labour aristocracy’ deals with race, it implies a mechanism whereby intraclass differences among workers become the basis for chauvinistic attitudes. As Post puts it, one of the two key claims of the thesis is that ‘working-class conservatism is the result of material differences – relative privileges – enjoyed by some workers. Workers who embrace racism, nativism, sexism, homophobia and pro-imperialist patriotism tend to be those who earn higher wages, experience more secure employment, and have access to health-care, pensions and other forms of the social wage’ (Post 2010, p. 6).

³⁷ See Gordon, Edwards and Reich 1982.

set the new parameters of *racial* inequality. The country's abandonment of Reconstruction without any land redistribution meant that a mostly landless, oppressed peasant workforce replaced the slaves. It was in this class context that the Jim Crow system could emerge as a ruling-class project to preserve labour discipline over the new peasantry. That is to say, in both systems, class shaped race.

Consider also the following hypothetical case: income inequality is reduced by half, but proportional inequalities by race hold constant. Without changing the basic relative patterns of racial inequality, a change in the class structure of this sort would vastly reduce racial inequality in absolute terms and therefore reduce the salience of race. It is reasonable to suppose that, under conditions of greater overall economic equality, the material and political divisions that comprise race relations would be significantly weakened and the barriers to interracial solidarity (discussed in Section 3.1.1) reduced. This, of course, is why the interrelation is reciprocal.

As an example of this kind of argument, it is worth considering a hypothesis in the Marxist tradition – one that goes back to Anwar Shaikh (2016) and Howard Botwinick (2018) and that was also elaborated on by Patrick Mason (1995) and mentioned by Post (2020). In essence, Shaikh and Botwinick point out that ordinary capitalist competition generates different conditions within different industries; newer 'regulating' capitals exist among older vintages, and those older firms are unable to adopt the techniques available to the newest ones without totally wasting their earlier investments. This results in differences in profitability and in wage rates in the economy as a whole and hence also in inequalities among workers. This, Post notes, is the 'the social matrix for the production and reproduction of race and racism'. He argues that '[r]ace is the necessary and unintended consequence of capitalist competition and accumulation'.³⁸

³⁸ See Post 2020. In the time since we wrote our initial draft of this paper, Post has published a longer elaboration of the argument in this journal. See Post 2023.

In our terms, this is a straightforward mechanism suggesting that capitalist class structures causally shape race and racism. This is also a manifestly empirical hypothesis: those economies with bigger gaps between old and new vintages of capital ought to have greater wage inequality and also greater racial inequality, *ceteris paribus*. As far as we know, there has been no attempt to provide empirical support for such a claim. The theory seems to imply that vintage gaps generate income inequality, which then necessarily manifests as racial inequality. We know of no empirical evidence to support the first link, that vintage gaps cause income inequality. However, we do know that evidence for the second link is absent: while American wage inequality has grown, black–white wage gaps have not.³⁹ It is also not clear to us why the wage inequality generated by vintage gaps should tend towards racial inequality as opposed to other forms – unless racism sticks because it is an especially strong functional fit to capitalism, an additional claim requiring further elaboration. Whether or not this particular mechanism finds empirical support, it is a clear example of the effect of class on racial inequality.

Because the interconnections between race and class are complex and reciprocal, specifying a typology of pathways helps the researcher to place their concrete analyses into a particular link in a broader model. It helps to avoid being deceived into thinking, on the one hand, that there is some particular mechanism that is *the* mechanism or, on the other hand, that there is only an incomprehensible fog of connections.

Although Section 3 shows how race and class reciprocally affect each other, we also argue that there are causal asymmetries between the variables: exploitative class societies, in order to be stable, sustain social divisions such as race, but not the other way around. This account is elaborated in Section 7.

³⁹ For gaps in median wages by race, see the State of Working America Data Library: <epi.org/data>.

4. Race as a Sorting Mechanism Into Class Locations

The concept of race as a sorting mechanism into class locations can be distinguished from race as causally impacting the class locations themselves. The latter concerns the *what* and the former concerns the *where* of class – what class relations look like and where people are allocated inside of them. This section considers the racial mechanisms that determine the sorting of persons into a class structure, but which may not impact that structure *per se*. The central mechanisms are (1) ordinary and statistical discrimination and (2) social network effects.

It is possible that employers who are aware of racial inequalities adjust their competitive strategies to take advantage of those divisions and, for example, create jobs on that basis. Insofar as that mechanism plays out it is a case of race affecting class. By contrast, the all-else-equal approach to discrimination takes the class structure for granted. That is, employers have openings – for instance, they are looking for salespersons and janitors and managers – and discrimination is a process of sorting some people into those positions and others into, say, unemployment.

Marxists have noted the role of race as a sorting mechanism into class locations. To quote again from Post's discussion of the theory of the labour aristocracy, '[r]ace, nationality and gender structure the employment-queue – the order in which capitalists hire workers – in capitalist societies. ... [R]ace, nationality and gender do create a stratified working class as workers are distributed into branches of production that competition and accumulation – not monopoly – continually differentiate in terms of technique, profitability, and wages and working conditions'.⁴⁰ In our terms, this amounts to a claim that race (as well as other factors) differentially sorts workers into the class structure.

Mainstream sociology has also emphasised the sorting mechanism. In a now famous study, Devah Pager matched pairs of black and white male job applicants and sent them to apply in person for entry-

⁴⁰ Post 2010, p. 28.

level, low-wage jobs.⁴¹ Half of the confederates had a curriculum vitae indicating that they had served prison time for a drug offence, and half did not; all curricula vitae were otherwise identical. The study then ranked call-backs from employers: white non-felons had the most calls, followed by white felons, black non-felons, and finally black felons. It may be more advantageous to be a white male with a prison record over a black male without one.⁴²

The two oft-discussed mechanisms that generate these outcomes are ordinary discrimination and statistical discrimination. The former is sometimes called ‘racial animus’ or prejudice – a straightforward dislike of African Americans, for example. Gary Becker called this a ‘taste for discrimination’, whereby employers simply prefer to maintain a colour bar, either due to their own prejudices or in accommodation to those of their employees or customers.⁴³ By contrast, in cases of statistical discrimination, employers without access to cheap and detailed information about individual applicants have real or imagined views about group attributes. They may believe that black applicants are more likely to live in faraway neighbourhoods with bad public transportation, making them more likely to miss work and to be a more costly hire on average. This perception on the part of firms, a wholly rational and profit-oriented strategy – one that may hold irrespective of any ‘tastes’ for discrimination – will then generate systematic disadvantages for black workers within labour markets, whether or not they fit the assumed attributes.

The critical point, however, is that in both types of discrimination we see a class structure that can be held more or less constant and it is the mechanisms associated with race that ultimately explain who gets shoved into what place in the class structure – the empty place of the low-wage job or the empty place of unemployment.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Pager 2007.

⁴² See also Pager, Western and Bonikowski 2009, which, besides replicating the earlier results, adds Latinos to the comparison and leverages applicant testimonies to shed light on just what, exactly, employers are doing when they engage in covert discrimination.

⁴³ Becker 1971, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Could we reverse the interconnection described in this section? We do not see an argument for doing so, but there is a theoretical possibility that class works as a sorting mechanism for an existing racial structure.

Another important example of a sorting mechanism comes from Nancy DiTomaso, who frames the problem as follows: (1) we live in a world where we see racial inequalities in income and wealth; (2) we also live in a world where very few people, in survey data, admit to individual-level racial animus or hostility towards black people.⁴⁵

What explains this puzzle? There are two ways to go. The first maintains that we will see, so long as we dig deep enough, that racial animus does in fact hold. Recent popular accounts take this route.⁴⁶ People actually are racist, even if they insist they are not, and their racism is always in there somewhere. Implicit-bias tests are said to reveal this deeply hidden fact.⁴⁷ The second, which is DiTomaso's perspective, maintains that you can generate and reproduce racial inequality without racial animus or implicit bias playing a role at all. The argument is that by virtue of the history of US residential segregation and its impact on school systems, we have a world where blacks and whites are mostly separated. This means that friendship and familial networks end up segregated as well. DiTomaso then asks about the nature of job acquisition in America and argues that, contra audit studies, people do not generally access jobs through blind submissions of curricula vitae. Instead, they access them through their friendship and familial networks. If those networks of 'weak ties' are racially closed it might for instance mean that a black person will be less likely to have an uncle with a hardware store – and thus less likely to get that first job at an uncle's hardware store.

In this case, you have a given class structure within which race sorts people into different locations. It is race that structures a person's social and kinship networks – after all, race remains a major factor in predicting who one will or will not marry.⁴⁸ In turn, social and kinship networks strongly impact

⁴⁵ See DiTomaso 2013.

⁴⁶ See, for example, DiAngelo 2018.

⁴⁷ Banaji and Greenwald 2016.

⁴⁸ See Fryer 2007.

the probabilities attached to the distribution of certain kinds of people into certain kinds of jobs. Race thus sorts people into a class structure without impacting the structure itself.

5. Race as a Mediating Linkage to Class Locations

An entirely distinct interconnection of race and class concerns the ways that race acts as a *linkage* between one class location and another. To understand the idea, consider how gender relations can provide mediating linkages to the class structure. The character of gender dynamics in a given society will determine marriage relations, which in turn determines the 'shadow classes' of women. In this case, the idea of a shadow class refers to one's class position should a marriage relation be severed.⁴⁹ A person's 'all-things-considered' class position will incorporate a temporal aspect and be defined as a combination of their current class position and, probabilistically, their shadow class. The relevance of the shadow class is in part affected by the rate of marital dissolution, which is itself affected by gender relations.

In this way, gender provides a mediating linkage to a class location. You might be married to a capitalist, and your *current* class interests might be entirely shaped by that class location, but it is important to consider your mediated linkage to that location because the dissolution of the marriage has some probability attached to it. When that probability changes, so do your objective class interests. Therefore, we can better understand people's all-things-considered class interests by considering how gender shapes their relationship to a given class location.

⁴⁹ Erik Olin Wright's idea of 'shadow classes' refers generally to an actor's probable future class locations, given their personal history and present configuration of choices and constraints. For example, salaried professionals have a petty bourgeois shadow class position to the extent that they have the option of pursuing self-employment, even if they ultimately do not (Wright 1989, p. 334). He applied the concept to gender relations in this way in his 'Class and Gender' lecture in his long-running 'Class, State and Ideology' seminar at the University of Wisconsin. His notes on this lecture can be found at: <<https://www.sccc.wisc.edu/soc/faculty/pages/wright/621-2011/lecture%2013%202011%20--%20Gender%20and%20Class.pdf>>.

Much like how gender shapes marital relations which shape the shadow classes of women, race can shape kinship networks which impact a person's potential access (or lack thereof) to jobs, property and credit. In particular, the structure of racial relations in a given context will affect friendship and familial networks, which link a person to potential rather than actual class locations. A person's mediating linkage to the class structure influences their prospects in life and therefore their class interests.

To use the language of Mark Granovetter's economic sociology, race will organise a person's weak ties, and those weak ties will organise their counterfactual connections to class locations. Indeed, proof of concept in this case will be the way a person's counterfactual linkage to class locations impacts their behaviour – including their risk tolerance, such as their willingness to invest in education.⁵⁰ Although a social network may not be as relevant to a person's all-things-considered class location as a marital relation, it might be sufficiently relevant to impact their interests and behaviour. If you know that you could easily access credit or a job through your network, you might be more likely to take on high-risk but high-reward endeavours.

Consider a case analogous to the gender example: were your social network to dissolve, your class position (which ought to be otherwise understood as the totality of your direct and mediated class location) would be fully explained by your direct location in the class structure. This thought experiment brings a person's counterfactual class location into relief.

We can imagine a black person and a white person who are both, say, fine arts students; and when we exclusively consider their current or direct class location, we ought to treat them identically. But a person's all-things-considered class location is a function of *both* their mediated and direct class locations. Insofar as race impacts social networks (by impacting the kinds of social interactions and friendships that are salient in people's lives), the two may have very different social networks, characterised by different kinds of opportunities. One network may include employers, creditors, and

⁵⁰ Granovetter 1973, pp. 1371-73.

other powerful actors in a given class structure, while the other may not. Insofar as we believe that people's interests are affected not only by their direct linkages but also by their *mediated* linkages to the class structure – and insofar as we believe that race, *per se*, shapes those linkages – we ought to consider this kind of mediation as a distinct and relevant interconnection of race and class.⁵¹

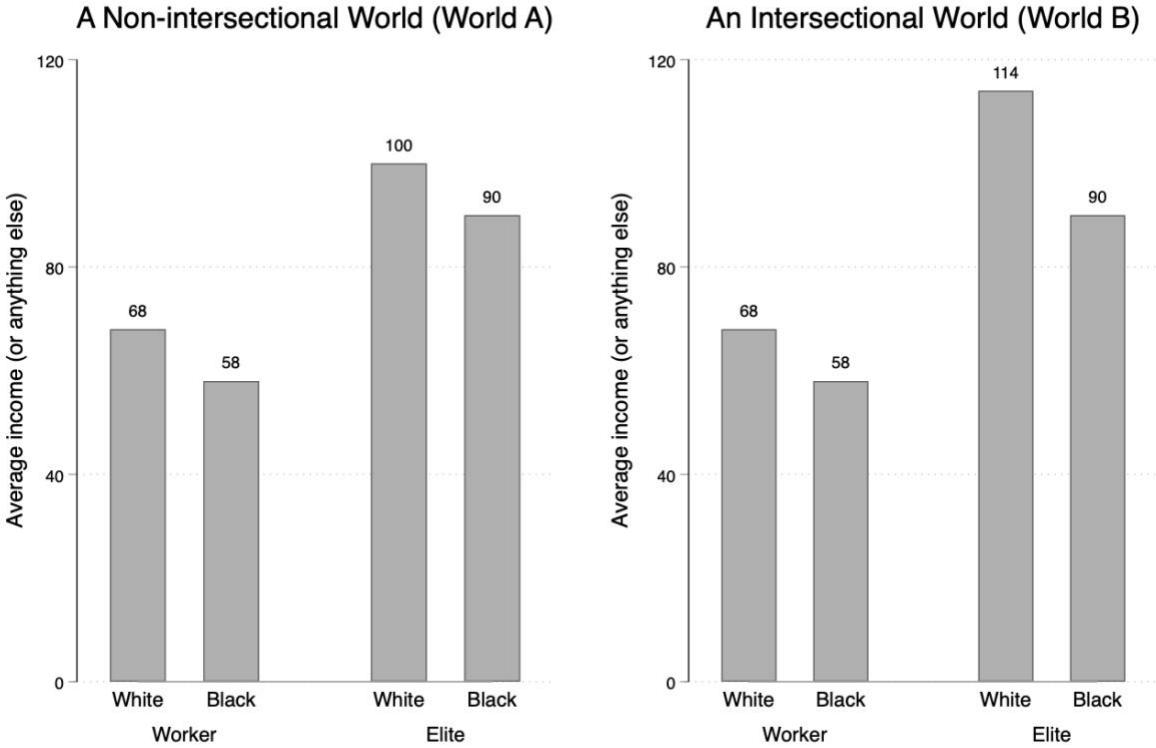
6. Race as a Causal Interaction with Class in Determining Outcomes

One way to understand recent debates about intersectionality is to follow the intuition behind the concept of 'interaction' in statistical models.⁵² In this view, intersectionality is a causal interaction of two variables. Imagine a highly stylised model designed to explain how average wages vary by race and class. We could take 'class' to mean ownership and non-ownership of the means of production or to mean household income; what is important is that we avoid setting income as both the *explanans* and *explanandum*. In one world – World A – race on its own matters if, say, black wages are lower than white wages. Likewise, class on its own might matter in World A. That is, elite incomes are greater than worker incomes both for blacks and whites, and white incomes are greater than black incomes for both workers and elites. There may be pervasive inequality, but World A is not an intersectional world. See Figure 6 for invented data to illustrate the point.

⁵¹ Could class serve as a mediating linkage into racial locations? This might be a case where economic elites (even when non-white in other contexts) are more likely to pass as white by virtue of their network of economic elites. If one's elite network collapses and one is, as a consequence, less able to 'pass', this mechanism might be at play.

⁵² This is, of course, not the only way to understand intersectionality, and we realise that our approach strays from the standard accounts (for a range of approaches, see McCall 2005; for the canonical account, see Crenshaw 1989).

Figure 6. Intersectional and Non-intersectional Inequalities



In this non-intersectional world, the effect of race and the effect of class are purely 'additive': each component, race and class, can be separately estimated. The racial gap within the group of elites – 10 dollars – is the same as it is within the group of workers. Race has uniform, not variable, effects across class lines. Likewise, the class gap is 32 dollars; the effects of class in this example are uniform for both blacks and whites. Class does not vary by race; race does not vary by class.

We might, however, live in another world – World B – where intersectionality obtains. Here, it is not simply race and simply class that have additive but separate effects; rather, it is the interaction of the two that largely explains wages. In this world, race has different effects across class groups: the 'class' wage gap is greater for whites, at 46 dollars, than it is for blacks, at 32 dollars. There is no uniform class effect; all the action is in the interaction. This is an intersectional world. In this example, it is essential to understand how class plays out differently in different contexts. Likewise, to understand race, one has to look at how it hinges on the class context – among elites, racial disparity in wages is 24 dollars; among workers, it is 10 dollars. In the extreme case, there might be no independent race effect and no independent class effect, only an effect captured by the product of the two. If we can separate class from race in World A, they must be combined in World B.

It is tempting, but mistaken, to view the gradient of wages in World A as evidence of intersectionality. The intersectionality analyst might argue that we cannot reduce the position of a black worker to 'blackness' plus 'workerness'. To take a perhaps more conventional example, using race and gender in place of race and class, the same analyst might conclude that we cannot reduce the position of a black woman to the sum effects of 'blackness' and 'woman-ness', just as the privilege of a white male is not merely the sum effect of 'whiteness' and 'male-ness'. But in World A, one *can* make a reduction of this sort. To understand the effect of some phenomenon on black workers, one can simply observe the difference between black elites and white elites to identify the isolated race effect, observe the difference

between white elites and white workers to understand the isolated class effect, and then compute the combined effect on black workers.

In our reading, this is the view criticised by proponents of intersectionality. The intersectionality view is that there is something unique about particular social positions. This is the picture represented by World B, where race plays out differently among workers and elites, and where class plays out differently among blacks and whites. Only in World B do we have unique social positions irreducible to their component parts.

Five final points. First, we use wages in the above illustrations, but one could substitute any relevant and observable phenomena – from the domestic division of work-hours to incarceration rates to incidents of police harassment. Second, our example is extremely simplified; one could add any number of intersections to it – gender, ability, sexuality, national origin, and so on. This only demands bigger models and better information. Third, insofar as empirical evidence shows significance only in the race–class interaction term, we are in the world of ‘clace’ research, as discussed in Section 2. Fourth, a statistical model might include race on its own, class on its own, and the race–class interaction, and they all might turn up significant. This would imply that race and class have explanatory power both independently and together: the world is both intersectional and non-intersectional.

Fifth, it is worth considering the Afro-pessimist literature with these considerations in mind.⁵³ Afro-pessimism amounts to an argument that anti-black oppression is a constitutive part of modern life and civil society. In effect, the Afro-pessimist position is that we live in an extreme version of World A – where there is no intersectionality between race and class, and where race has uniform, non-multiplicative effects. Whatever happens to the class structure, anti-blackness is undisturbed; there can be no genuine social change. The aim of our paper, by contrast, is to enumerate the causal relationships between race and class – the causal impact of race on class, and the causal impact of class on race. A

⁵³ See, for example, Douglass, Terrefe and Wilderson 2018 and Sexton 2016.

premise of causal relationships is that there is variation in the categories we are studying; by our read, a premise of Afro-pessimism renders that variation across time and space impossible. Now, it is possible that the Afro-pessimists are correct, but we believe that, at the very least, this is an empirical question rather than a theoretical postulate.

In our approach, intersectionality is not an ‘analysis’ that one has in an *a priori* sense. It is an empirical phenomenon one may or may not observe in any given case. Perhaps we live in an intersectional world when it comes to certain aspects of life, where other circumstances have flat effects across all groups. In a world where all blacks are slaves, the isolated category of race might explain a range of crucial variables on its own (the class variable would suffer from collinearity and the interaction term would not exist, – or, equivalently, race would be the only variable and the others would not exist). Poverty, by contrast, tends to be intersectional today. Perhaps its effects were flatter in the 1950s, but it now increasingly intersects with race: before the Civil Rights movement, blacks were far more concentrated among the poor. Intersectionality, in this view, is more of a research agenda than a worldview.

Is police harassment intersectional? Or are its effects experienced in a roughly uniform manner across racial lines? When people argue that even rich and famous black people suffer from racist policing, they are asserting that the world is decidedly non-intersectional. Does the effect of being a non-status migrant fairly consistent with respect to, say, access to health care? Or does it crucially depend on other variables?

It is most likely that intersectionality really matters in some respects and less so in others. For this reason, it is fair to presume that we live in a world that is both intersectional and non-intersectional.

However, there is evidence showing that the race-class interconnection captured by the intersectionality concept is increasing in relevance. William Julius Wilson’s book *The Declining Significance of Race* generated more misunderstanding than was probably necessary.⁵⁴ What he aimed to describe

⁵⁴ Wilson 2012.

was a widening bifurcation of the black experience in recent US history. Growing class divisions among blacks meant that race *qua* race became less statistically significant. With much less controversy but no loss of meaning, he could have titled the book *The Increasing Intersectionality of Race*.

Race on its own may have declined in statistical significance, but its interactions with class reveal persistent inequalities and continued salience. This is the somewhat non-obvious reason why the concept of intersectionality – the final race–class interconnection in our typology – has grown in its relevance for understanding the contemporary world of social inequality.

7. A Functional Integration of Race–Class Interconnections

We have described five interconnections; can they be stitched together to form a broader account? To begin with, is it possible to integrate the following, seemingly contradictory, statements?

- (1) class shapes race relations
- (2) race shapes the class structure
- (3) class asymmetrically explains race

Functionalist explanations are strange because they explain phenomena by virtue of their effects. This means that central to the explanation is the claim that the thing to be explained (*explanandum*) shapes other things; it has crucial empirical effects in the world, and those effects (*explanans*) are how we explain the thing itself. In particular, functionalist arguments explain things by their stabilising or beneficial

consequences for some relevant phenomenon. While we do not have space to provide a full defence of functionalism.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, an example might be useful for clarification.

Consider social norms against divorce: the consequences of having a divorce in a small town in the 1950s might have been enough to make someone flee to evade social shaming. Why were anti-divorce norms so powerful and ubiquitous? The functionalist explanation for norms against divorce proposes that norms (*explanandum*) are in place because of their effect in reinforcing family cohesion (*explanans*). Patriarchal gender norms encourage fertility and, more specifically, ensure the social reproduction of the family.⁵⁶ This then stabilises those patriarchal norms and makes communities that have them more successful. In Cohen's terminology, it was a 'dispositional fact' about the social structure at the time that its reproduction was buttressed by the stability of the nuclear family, and that oppressive anti-divorce norms held families together.⁵⁷ This descriptive feature points to an explanatory selection process. Imagine a distribution of small early twentieth-century American communities, some with strong anti-divorce norms and others without them. The functionalist expects that, in the long run, the former have better survival odds, because those norms increase the odds of socially reproducing the family. This is a functional explanation: norms are explained by their effects.

This is, of course, a cultural fact rather than a biological one: as social reproduction came to rely less on the reproduction of the nuclear family (as women entered the workforce, their independent access to resources increased, and so on), the norm steadily weakened. In particular, as it became easier for single mothers to raise children, as women earned their own incomes, the divorce norm became less functional for the reproduction of the family. It no longer provided unique benefits. As such, the functionalist prediction would have been that the norm would slowly unravel, which it did.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ We ask readers to consult our earlier article, which does attempt this. See Calnitsky and Billeaux Martinez 2023.

⁵⁶ For an empirical analysis, see Diefenbach and Opp 2007.

⁵⁷ Cohen 1979, p. 261.

⁵⁸ Consider another example. Many cults that are disconnected across time and space have often displayed similar features. They have often imposed isolation on group members, insisting that they cut ties to outsiders. If we imagine

Notice that the thing we wish to explain, anti-divorce norms, has crucial objective effects in our example.⁵⁹ Likewise, the ways in which race affects class, outlined above, are crucial to a class-functionalist explanation of race: *the objective consequences of race play a central role in the class functional explanation of race.*

To take an example from above, in the DE argument discussed in 3.1.1, race (*explanandum*) stabilises capitalist social relations because it serves as a barrier to workers' solidarity (*explanans*). Racial oppression will tend to be stable in the long term because it is corrosive to the workers' organisation necessary to eliminate it (and also because it is profitable for capitalists). Those capitalist social formations with disorganised workers, as we will discuss below, have higher odds of survival over time. Insofar as the three theories from this subsection (DE, SLM and IC) describe a divided working class, they are consistent with a functionalist account of race.

It is worth elaborating just how race hampers class solidarity.⁶⁰ The claim that race divides the working class is rooted in familial and friendship relations: when workers are divided solely along skill lines – with no correspondence to race – they will more easily accept the costs entailed in solidarity. For example, reduced inequality means that some individual workers will lose out (even if average well-being improves). If you are a skilled worker but your children are unskilled workers, you (and your associated political groups) may accept the solidarity trade-off more easily. If, on the other hand, there exists a tight correspondence between race and skill lines, skilled workers from a privileged racial group will have few familial and friendship bonds with unskilled workers. Thus solidarity becomes harder to forge and sustain.

a number of cult-like groups one year, and then in the next year, those groups that – for whatever causal reason – actually imposed isolation on members, may simply have greater odds of persisting over time. In this example, it is a 'dispositional fact' about cults that isolationism improves – we could say 'objectively' improves – their survival odds. It is the effects that are doing the work. This is functionalism.

⁵⁹ In functionalist explanations, the *explanandum* must have 'objective effects'. To clarify, the contrast here is not between objective and subjective effects; rather, it is between objective and intended effects. In functionalism, the effects of, say, anti-divorce norms really have to do what they are supposed to do (that is, reduce family dissolution) – otherwise, social reproduction is not secured. It is not enough for the effects to be simply intended by actors – which is enough in an ordinary intentional explanation – they have to work as intended.

⁶⁰ For classic accounts, see: Spero and Harris 1931; Foner 2018; Goldfield 1997.

Insofar as one accepts (1) that capitalist economies are exploitative and frequently harm the interests of workers, and (2) that capitalist economies would be less stable in the long run with a unified working class (for whom a more egalitarian economy is preferable), we can conclude that capitalist economies that in one way or another undermine worker solidarity will be more stable. Social divisions are explained by their effects.

Perhaps early North American capitalism was so exploitative that it was only stable with racism.⁶¹ Could we imagine stable capitalist–slave relations in the New World without racism? In this view, there was a kind of selection pressure for racism because it had the objective effect of dividing people who might have otherwise successfully rebelled together. Something had to solve capitalism’s instability problem; racism emerged and it stuck because of its effects. In an explanation of racism, its survival is more important than its emergence. However it emerged, it was durable because it increased capitalism’s reproduction odds. Indeed, we know that this kind of exploitative system was less stable without institutionalised racism, which is sometimes dated, in the North American context, to the period after Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 when black slaves and black and white indentured servants rebelled together.⁶² This was an unstable configuration, and an ideological system came along that had the objective effects of providing more durability to the capitalist system.⁶³ Race would not exist if it had not offered such effects, and it persisted because it continued to provide them.

For these reasons we can subsume a number of our interconnections into a broader class-functional explanation of race. What kinds of interconnections should and should not be incorporated? A helpful way to sort through this question was spelled out by G. A. Cohen in his elaboration of

⁶¹ See: Fields 1990; Fields and Fields 2012; Williams 1944; Cox 1959.

⁶² See Berlin 1998.

⁶³ The phrase ‘came along’ is acceptable because durability is what matters and because an origin story could be accidental: to explain religion is to explain its durability, not the emergence of the first religious person. This is not to say that origins are irrelevant, and functionalist accounts must track observed historical processes. Thus, we refer to the origins of race in our defence of a class-functional theory of race against a race-functional theory of class in the conclusion below.

functionalism.⁶⁴ He argued that, contra Weber, Protestantism can be broadly explained by virtue of its stabilising effects on capitalism. But what parts of the religion count? Perhaps its worldly asceticism and its individualism can be explained by their effects, but there exists no functionalist account of why Luther nailed 95 rather than 94 theses to the church door in Wittenberg rather than Leipzig.

The corresponding claim would be that the empirical effects of race on class that effectively reproduce the class structure are those that can be functionally explained. For example, the mechanisms described in Section 3.1.1 – where the empirical effects of race impede class solidarity – are good candidates. On the other hand, those effects of race on class that do not have an impact on the class structure are not functionally explained by class. For example, the cases in which race provides a mediating linkage to class may or may not have a significant impact on class solidarity, and therefore the class structure. Those cases where effects of race on class cannot be functionally explained are akin to aspects of Lutheran ideology – why there were 95 and not 94 theses, say – that cannot be explained by capitalist economic development. Features that are not explained by their effects simply require separate, perhaps historical and contingent, explanations.

Figure 7 presents our class-functionalist explanation of race, following Stinchcombe's elementary functionalist model.⁶⁵ Exploitative relations in capitalism generate instability that must be fixed one way or another. Capitalist class structures are not naturally sustained, and they only stabilise by means of a mechanism (of which race is one) that serves to divide the exploited; in turn, race increases the odds of the reproduction of the class structure, thereby helping to explain why it exists.

Figure 7. The Stinchcombe Special: An Elementary Functionalist Model

⁶⁴ See Cohen 1979.

⁶⁵ See Stinchcombe 1968.

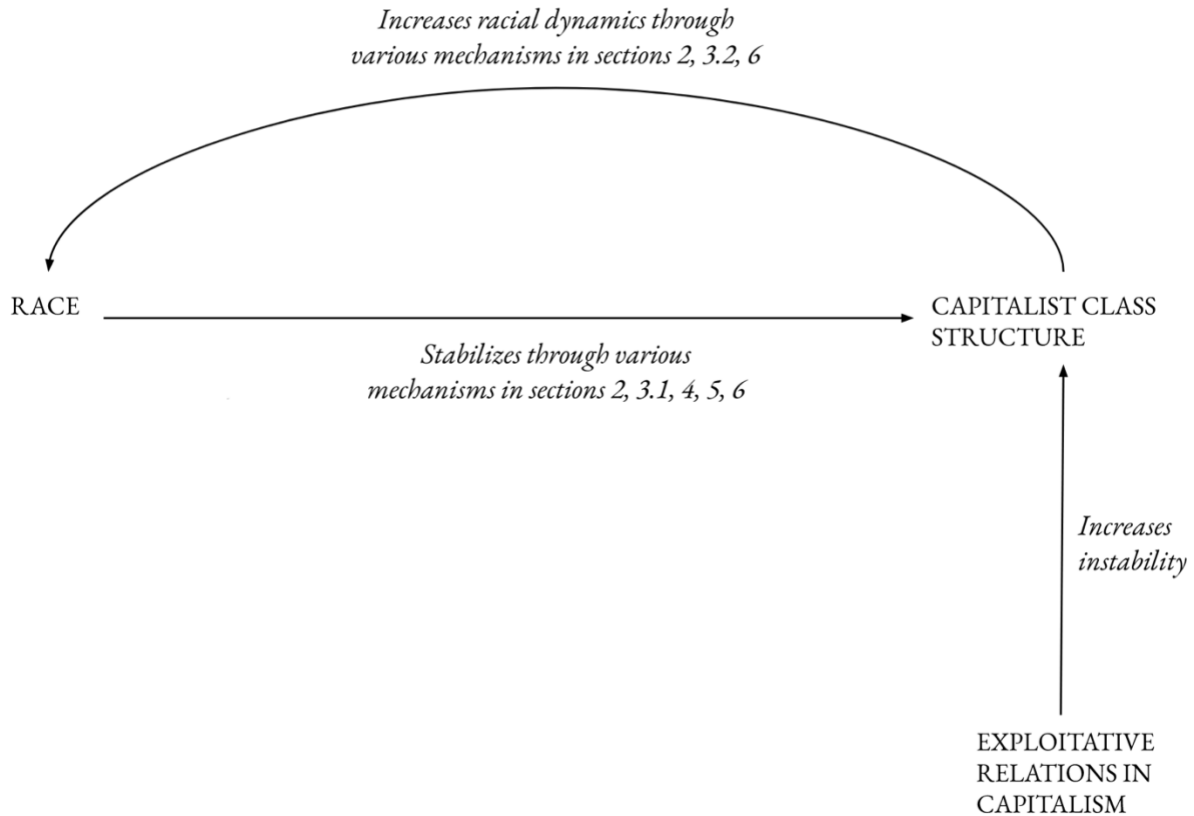
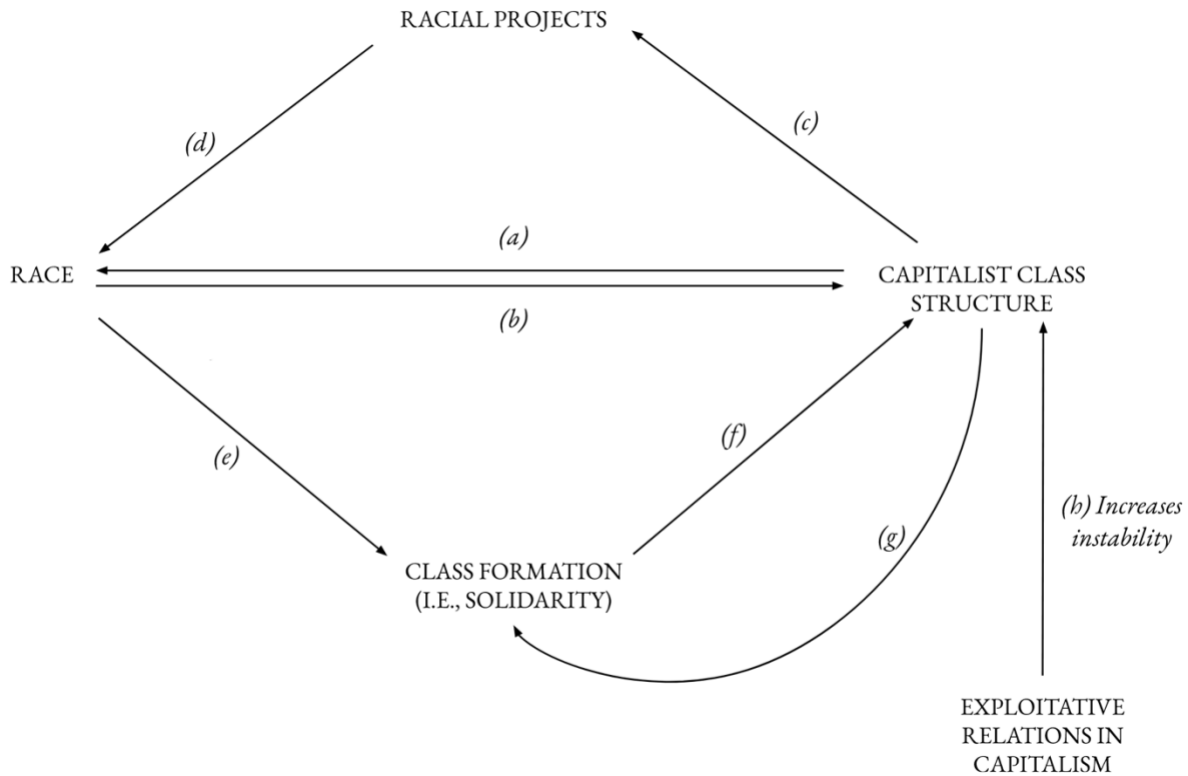


Figure 8 expands on the above model and presents our full class-functionalist explanation of race. It is meant to incorporate all of the interconnections in Sections 2 through 6 as they would operate in a functionalist account. Above, we zoom in to each interconnection itself. Here, we zoom out to integrate them. Above, they are explored as discrete links; here, we have the chain. Moreover, expanding the pathway from race to class captures the interconnections described in Figure 1; expanding the pathway from class to race captures the interconnections in Figure 5.

Figure 8. The Stinchcombe Expansion Pack: An Elaborated Functionalist Model



NOTES: The sections in this paper map onto paths in this model. **Section 2:** Taking ‘race’ as race–class relation. The collapse of race into a class relation stabilises capitalism because it disrupts solidarity. In Section 2, we talk about the race–class interconnection more narrowly; however, interpreted in our functionalist model, it ought to be seen in terms of a loop ($a \rightarrow e \rightarrow f$), from the capitalist class structure to race (as race–class), where capitalism makes the reproduction of race more likely by way of the effects race has on solidarity. **Section 3.1:** The interconnection described in 3.1.1 goes from e to f. In its broader functional context, it includes either line a ($e \rightarrow f \rightarrow a$) or lines c to d ($e \rightarrow f \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$). The interconnection described in 3.1.2 is captured by line b; in the broader functional context, it must include our loop through solidarity and have a link from class to race directly ($b \rightarrow g \rightarrow f \rightarrow a$) or indirectly ($b \rightarrow g \rightarrow f \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$). **Section 3.2:** The narrow interconnection described in 3.2.1 goes from c to d; interpreted in its broader functional context, it can run as $c \rightarrow d \rightarrow e \rightarrow f$. The narrow interconnection described in 3.2.2 takes path a; in broader functional terms, it runs $a \rightarrow e \rightarrow f$. **Sections 4 and 5:** The interconnections described in sections 4 and 5 go from race to class, as captured in line b. If one were to argue for its integration into a functionalist account, it would take the direct ($b \rightarrow g \rightarrow f \rightarrow a$) and indirect ($b \rightarrow g \rightarrow f \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$) paths described for section 3.1.2. **Section 6:** The interconnection described in Section 6 can take any path, including incidental ones. If the broader functional context is interpreted as proposed in Section 7, it takes the same paths as 3.1.1.

Figure 8 places the pathway for each interconnection, in its narrow sense, along its pathway in a broader class-functionalist account. The crucial point is the integration of the interconnection with an effect on class solidarity and, in turn, class structure. Therefore, each interconnection has a short path signifying the interconnection itself, and a long path signifying its role in a functionalist account. For example, the

interconnection in 3.1.1 is represented by $e \rightarrow f$, the path from race to class structure through class formation; in its functionalist context, it includes the selection mechanism, captured either by line a ($e \rightarrow f \rightarrow a$), selecting race itself, or lines c to d ($e \rightarrow f \rightarrow c \rightarrow d$), selecting race by shaping racial projects. The note to Figure 8 elaborates the integrated class-functional pathways for each interconnection. Taking the case of Section 3.1.2, race generates a more unequal labour market (b), which by itself undermines class solidarity (g) and therefore stabilises the capitalist class structure (f).⁶⁶ These stabilising effects explain the persistence of racial division.

The interconnection in Section 2 described a situation in which race and class merge; this is more difficult to model but can be illustrated through multiple circuits. Nonetheless, reading 'race' in the model as a race–class relation, the disruption of solidarity stabilises the capitalist class structure. Indeed, in terms of our functionalist account, it is hard to see how the capitalist exploitation of slave labour would have been as stable for as long as it was without race.

Insofar as race as a sorting mechanism or a mediated linkage to unequal class locations (b) affects solidarity (g) and then the class structure (f), the mechanisms discussed in Sections 4 and 5 can be subsumed into our functionalist argument. The extent to which the solidarity effect holds – essential for integration into the model – is an empirical matter. For example, the argument for the class functionality of mediating linkages requires that, without these linkages, solidarity is more likely. The opposing argument goes as follows: in a world of racial income inequality, but in which jobs and credit are not accessed through informal social networks, but rather through formal mechanisms, capitalism would be no less stable. Race would still delineate networks, families, and friendships, but those ties are not linked to class because opportunities for jobs and credit are allocated through, for example, online job databases and banks.

⁶⁶ Throughout this paper, we use labour-market inequality synonymously with class structure.

Finally, we discussed in Section 6 the additive effects as well as the interactions between race and class. Insofar as an intersectional path that undermines solidarity exists, it may play a role in our class-functionalist argument. This, again, is an empirical question, and could work in a variety of ways. For example, as suggested by Adolph Reed – who, in our view, makes a deeply intersectional point – a race-class interaction term may imply a racially integrated ruling class and a racially divided working class.⁶⁷ This kind of intersectionality reduces working class solidarity (e) and stabilises the capitalist class structure (f).

8. Conclusion

The purpose of our paper is to describe how a wide range of empirical interconnections of race and class can be integrated into a class-functionalist argument, not to defend class functionalism per se. Nonetheless, there are two objections to a class-functionalist theory of race that are worth addressing. First, it is not clear that racism does, in fact, work to stabilise capitalism. Is not the capitalism of the racially divided US more chaotic than that of the racially homogeneous and apparently more functional Nordic states, for instance? Second, why not reverse the direction of causality? Why not consider a race-functionalist theory of class?

To the first objection, functionalist arguments require what we can call an ‘instability premise’ – without some stability-generating solution, social reproduction is insecure. For example, capitalism is exploitative and oppressive, exploitation and oppression create discontented workers, discontentment creates resistance, and capitalism therefore requires functional stabilisers to enhance its survival odds over time. But we also contend that there are alternatives to racism that can serve this function: other

⁶⁷ See Reed 2000 and Leong 2021.

forms of regional, linguistic, or other divisions might work, but so might ordinary free rider problems.⁶⁸ In short, rather than suggesting that racism is the only available functional stabiliser for capitalism, we argue that it is a likely one given certain parameters – namely, high levels of economic inequality and exploitation. But there are two general paths out of the problem of discontented workers: divide the discontented, or make them content. In general, making economies more socialistic – weakening the exploitative nature of capitalism and bringing more of the social surplus under the control of workers – makes workers more content. Rather than thinking about strong welfare states as an alternative functional stabiliser, we might think of them as mitigating the kind of social conflict that generates the requirements for a functional stabiliser in the first place. As societies become more equal and democratic, and as they cede more power to workers, they move steadily away from capitalism per se and towards a more socialistic economy, which naturally would not have the same functional requirements as a more capitalist economy. And that in turn depends on a philosophical-empirical claim, which is that economies are best understood in continuous rather than dichotomous terms, suggesting that capitalism can fade into socialism, something that categorical language disallows. This is a controversial premise, to be sure; we agree with it, but we do not have the space to defend it here.⁶⁹

To the second objection, we see no necessary a priori reason to rule out a race-functionalist theory of class. How the theory would work evades our intuition; until it is articulated it is something of a black box, theoretically speaking. More importantly, we do not know how our typology of race–class interconnections would fit into it because we do not know what it is. But it would have to go something like: capitalist class relations can be explained by their effects on the stability of racial ideology. Yet that theory would have to explain why racial ideology has weakened over time – something we believe to be true, relative to a world with black enslavement or legal apartheid.⁷⁰ We can account for this fact in our

⁶⁸ See Calnitsky and Billeaux Martinez 2023.

⁶⁹ See: Calnitsky 2018; Calnitsky 2023; Wright 2011.

⁷⁰ See, for example: Forman 2012; Reed 2000; Wilson 2012.

class-functionalist theory of race, whereby we see race as one of a number of possible mechanisms to reproduce the class structure, as noted above. This is why we see race as *explained* by capitalist class relations, even if it is not *necessary* for them.⁷¹ In the face of the evident decline of racial ideology, a race-functionalist theorist of class would have to go one of two ways: either argue that capitalist class relations have weakened, or deny that racial ideology has declined. Again, this argument could perhaps be made creatively, but it would not be ours.

History also lends credibility to the race-functionalist theory of class: in seventeenth-century North America, for instance, class relations were threateningly unstable, and elites gradually landed on racial division as a control mechanism. The aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion, in particular, stands out in historians' accounts of the emergence of racial ideology.⁷² In general, we know that American slavery emerged to solve colonial labour shortages, not to fulfil the racial desires of whites – and that, more to the point, American slavery caused American racism, not the other way around.⁷³ We cannot think of examples going in the other direction, in which racial elites happened upon (or invented anew) some class structure in order to solve a racial problem.

The race-functionalist theory of class would need to trace the process whereby class relations intervene as a stabiliser for racial domination. Say a high-status racial group senses that its domination over a low-status group is vulnerable to resistance, and they introduce capitalist class relations as a means to secure their racial advantages. How would this measure help? It is unclear how introducing class divisions across the board – i.e., introducing class per se in the additive sense, splitting both the dominant and dominated racial groups – could play this stabilising role for racial domination. Increasing the class divisions within the racial groups would undermine the dominant group's claim to superiority because it would introduce competing cleavages and risk the formation of interracial coalitions among the now

⁷¹ For an elaboration, again see Calnitsky and Billeaux Martinez 2023.

⁷² See Goldfield 1997 and Berlin 2009.

⁷³ See Fields 1990.

multiracial exploited classes. Differently put, we see an asymmetry in the plausibility of the implied 'dispositional facts' when comparing the class-functionalist and race-functionalist arguments.

Alternatively, a different approach might argue that we expect nation states to require stability. One could construct a state-functionalist theory of class, whereby those nation states with capitalist class structures are more productive and thus more likely to survive, while those who fail to generate such structures disappear. On the other hand, this takes us some distance away from the project of explaining race and racism, and it would have to contend with the evidence that less capitalistic state formations have been stable. But ultimately, again, our paper is not meant to adjudicate among these alternative theories, which first have to be articulated.

To look at this problem from another angle, consider how a class functionalist theory of religion might operate in feudal Europe. Feudal religion, in this example, would be explained by virtue of its stabilising effects on the class structure. Religious ideas like 'having pie in the sky when you die' and the divine right of kings, in the functionalist account, would be said to exist because of their effects. In this view, feudal class structures without religious ideological systems would be less stable and have lower survival odds than those with them – this, then, providing the ground to explain religion by its effects.

Now, someone could object: why not have a religion-functionalist theory of class? In this case, the feudal class structure exists because of its stabilising effects on religion. Such a theory is far less intuitively appealing. We think this is the case because religion is a set of beliefs and ideas, whereas class is a social structure. The former is a 'belief-dependent construct' where the latter is a 'structure-dependent construct'. Belief-dependent constructs, like religion, are fundamentally sets of beliefs and values that inform people's worldviews and provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose. By contrast, class systems, as 'structure-dependent constructs,' are based on tangible social and economic arrangements that dictate the distribution of power, resources, and opportunities within a society. Meaning systems will naturally assign meaning to those distributions. Therefore, religion, like race, works

fundamentally as an ideological meaning-making system that justifies social arrangements, and these are natural candidates for the dependent rather than independent variables.

It might be worth stepping back at this point. We have argued that race and racism *can* operate as independent variables, and we explicate these interconnections in Section 3.1. So what might it mean to argue, consistent with the suggestion in the above paragraph, that ‘class is sociology’s only independent variable’?⁷⁴ The idea here is that while race as a variable may indeed have causal force, especially in the context of a functional explanation – where the *explanandum*, race, has effects in the world – it may not, in a deeper sense, operate as a prime mover. In other words, while it is reasonable to think that race as an empirical variable may be statistically significant in a regression model, its causal force may be disconnected from any independent mechanism.

Consider a comparison with the core mechanisms underlying a statistically significant gender variable. In the case of gender it seems reasonable to identify the causal process as one grounded in sexuality and the related identities and motivations that shape gender oppression. Another way to ground the idea is in the questions related to biological reproduction and the kinds of harms that are directly linked to it. Gender, in other words, may genuinely capture mechanisms that are entirely autonomous from other variables such as class. Can we say the same about race, even if race turns out to be a powerful proximate ideological determinant in all kinds of empirical contexts?

Even if race is a powerful *explanans* in a statistical model, it may be an *explanandum* in an underlying causal model, and this is precisely what our class-functionalist explanation of race is meant to express. The main alternative to class as prime mover would be a political mechanism: if we consider the case of anti-Asian sentiment in the US, it is clear that inter-group conflict can emerge in the political-cultural sphere without entailing material exclusions (i.e., class) at all. This provides an alternative explanation but, again, race is not the prime mover. Both mechanisms avoid assigning a prime-mover

⁷⁴ Stinchcombe is cited in Wright 1979, p. 1.

status to race per se; that view entails a race essentialist argument wherein race captures a fundamental groupness that most sociologists would disavow.

This paper aims to unify distinct levels of analysis of the race–class interconnection. Remaining at too high a level of abstraction leads to absurd claims about concrete reality; namely, that empirical mechanisms where race affects class are illusory. It would wrongly imply, for instance, that racism per se cannot shape the structure of class relations, such as the level of inequality or the presence of certain jobs in the occupational structure. On the other hand, remaining at too low a level of abstraction, never leaving the world of immediately observable phenomena, leads inexorably back to essentialism and a reification of race – in other words, finding that race has empirical effects and concluding that it is therefore ‘real’. Orthodox Marxists will sometimes discount causal pathways at lower levels of abstraction, insisting that the real truth lies in the highest level of abstraction and that concrete phenomena which seem to show the causal power of race are mere appearances. Meanwhile, empirical social scientists sometimes reify concrete empirical phenomena, discounting efforts to peel back appearances to capture underlying causal realities. In doing so, they may fall prey to the belief that statistical significance automatically captures the full explanatory architecture.

In fact, lower levels of abstraction are in no way mere appearances, and higher levels of abstraction are no less causally powerful. An adequate sociological theory of the race–class nexus will integrate the concrete with the abstract. This is why it is important to link our empirical typology in Section 2 through Section 6 with our abstract integration in Section 7. An abstract functionalism does not obviate the necessity of an elaborated explanation of empirical forms, and an empirical typology does not complete the task of organising the links between variables.

This paper has argued that there are indeed a number of different empirical interconnections between race and class. There is no single way in which the variables connect in empirical contexts, and the typology, we hope, will be useful for empirical research. It is up to the researcher to determine which

of these empirical interconnections obtains in a given setting and which specific mechanisms underpin them. Social scientists ought to retain a healthy agnosticism about the variety of empirical interconnections, but they ought not mistake these interconnections for a deeper causal relationship. For this reason, we believe that it is worth considering an integration of these empirical types at a more abstract level: doing so requires us to keep in mind the higher level of analysis, the lower level of analysis, and the relationship between the two.

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