

Comparative and Global Inequality: Racial Capitalism

Florida International University • Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies
Spring 2024 • SYO 6536 • Monday 11:00–1:40 • PC 419 • Professor Zachary Levenson
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(<https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/xpakt>)



Take a look at the protest sign in the picture above. Is it correct? Is capitalism racist? And if so, is it *necessarily* racist? Is racism baked into the very logic of its operation? Or does it only become racist under certain conditions? We already have two distinct theories of racial capitalism. In this course, we'll be working through debates on the relationship between capitalism and racism in the modern world, from classic texts to new books that will be released during our course. Ultimately, our task is to examine the relationship between capitalism and racism: can one exist without the other? Can profitability be maintained without the racial differentiation of the workforce? And conversely, would racism exist if it weren't for the pressures of competition? And for those writers who do see them as intertwined, *how* are they linked? Once the connection is established, is it permanent? Or is this a terrible way to think about racial capitalism: as two mutually distinct systems of domination intersecting? Are they instead co-constituted? Do they emerge in tandem, or does one produce the other?

These are just some of the questions we'll explore over the course of the semester. The concept of racial capitalism may be back in vogue, but for many decades, it was rarely deployed. In the US, it is often attributed to Cedric Robinson (1983). More recently, scholars have begun to acknowledge the concept's South African roots a decade earlier. But as it turns out, it also appears elsewhere on the African continent and in the US even earlier. And do we really care about the term itself? Some of the most important theorists of racial capitalism – *most* of them, in fact – never actually invoked the concept even if the same problematic characterizes their field of inquiry.

We'll begin this class with a general discussion of why so many sociologists appear to be troubled by the concept. We'll then turn to the first major section of the course in which we will read some of the most widely cited authors in the current round of racial capitalism debates: you

can consider this the classical theory of racial capitalism. Then for the second half of the course, we'll read recent books that put the concept to work. Some of them are primarily works of social and political theory, others are rooted in ethnographic or archival research, and most of them are actually both. The idea in this second half is to see how this theoretical construct has been put to work and how it can help us in our quest to make sense of the social world.

While the material in this seminar can certainly stand on its own, it is also imperative that you relate key themes to your own research interests. While this will certainly take place in the final paper, you can also do it over the course of the semester. This may be more straightforward in the second half of the course when we read more contemporary works, but I encourage you to draw from your own theoretical preoccupations, research design, and ongoing fieldwork in order to assess the utility of some of these theoretical frameworks.

Requirements

This seminar will be focused primarily on close readings and critical engagement. While I will occasionally break into mini-lectures during part 1 of the course, the bulk of the seminar will be organized around your participation. We will attempt to collectively reconstruct arguments, develop critiques both immanent and external, and ultimately, figure out what this body of literature can do for us as social scientists engaged in the enterprise of global research. Your final grade will be based on the following components:

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| ▪ Participation in class | 20% |
| ▪ Weekly analyses | 50% |
| ▪ Final paper | 30% |

Participation

I'm perfectly aware that different students have different styles of engagement: some speaking on a regular basis, whereas others listen intently and chime in more occasionally. That's fine. But I do expect you to come to class having read and thought about the week's readings, which should allow you to engage at a high level. I expect you to be able to speak at length about course readings. Depending on the course composition, I may ask students to lead seminars for part 2 of the class. Participation makes up 20 percent of your grade.

Weekly Analyses

The night before every class – in our case, Sunday night – you will be required to submit a short reading analysis. These should be one single-spaced page – no longer, no shorter. Your analysis should outline the central argument of the reading, evaluate the theoretical tools deployed, and end with a brief critique, or at the very least, point to some of the limits of the reading. I'll give you feedback on these so that you can improve your critical writing skills over the course of the semester. Together, all of your written analyses make up 50 percent of your grade.

Final Paper

The final paper should be roughly 4000 words, which is about 15-18 double-spaced pages. While it should obviously concern racial capitalism, you have two options. First, you can write a critical

synthesis of the seminar material, drawing connections between readings and ultimately making an argument about racial capitalism. Or if you prefer to engage your own MA or PhD research material, that's a great option as well – preferable even. How do theories of racial capitalism shed new light on your research proposal, ongoing fieldwork or archival research, or dissertation chapters? While you should of course engage course readings, if you choose the second option, you can pick a theorist or three and deploy them in relation to your empirical projects. It goes without saying that you're welcome to float ideas to me all semester – that's what office hours are for! The final paper is worth 30 percent of your grade.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct includes the following intentional acts or omissions:

Cheating: The unauthorized use of materials, information, study aids, or assistance from another person on any academic assignment or exercise; assisting another student in the unauthorized use of any materials, information, study aids; having a substitute complete any academic assignment or completing an academic assignment for someone else, either paid or unpaid.

Plagiarism: The use and appropriation of another's work without any indication of the source and the representation of such work as the student's own. Any student who fails to give credit for ideas, expressions, or materials taken from another source, including internet sources, is guilty of plagiarism. Any student helping another to plagiarize may be found guilty of academic misconduct.

Multiple submission: Submitting academic work for credit more than once.

Penalties: Academic misconduct will be penalized in accordance with the Student Conduct and Honor Code. Any student suspected of academic misconduct may be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity (SCAI). The suggested minimum penalty for academic misconduct in this class is a zero for the assignment and a drop by a full letter grade on your final grade. Please note that this is a *minimum* penalty; egregious cases may result in an F in the course at my discretion.

Required Texts

We do a lot of reading in this course, and if you are able, I would suggest purchasing physical copies of all books. However, I will not require anyone to purchase a single book; if you'd prefer to obtain PDFs (by any means necessary) or eBooks (where available), that also works. However, please do take reading seriously. It's fine if you'd like to read on a screen, though please don't read these difficult books on your phone. Or else you might opt to print them out. Note that many of the books we read in the first half of the class are classics, so you may wish to purchase them. The same goes for the recent books in the second half: no duds, only bangers. Otherwise I wouldn't assign the book! But I do understand that we're not rolling in dough. If

you'd rather avoid shelling out the big bucks for books, I get it. How you obtain readings is up to you. Please reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns.

Weekly Reading Schedule:

Introduction:

January 8: Mom, the Sociologists Are Complaining Again!

- Loïc Wacquant, "The Trap of 'Racial Capitalism,'" *European Journal of Sociology* 64(2): 153–62 (2023)
- Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, "The Trap of 'Capitalism,' Racial or Otherwise," *European Journal of Sociology* 64(2): 163–72 (2023)
- Sanjay Subramanian, "Revisiting 'Racial Capitalism,'" *European Journal of Sociology* 64(2): 173–81 (2023)
- Loïc Wacquant, "Racial Capitalism Decoupled: A Rejoinder and Reformulation," *European Journal of Sociology* 64(2): 183–93 (2023)
- Julian Go, "Three Tensions in the Theory of Racial Capitalism," *Sociological Theory* 39(1): 38–47 (2021).

January 15: Martin Luther King Day – No Class

- *Optional reading:* Andrew J. Douglas and Jared A. Loggins, *Prophet of Discontent: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Critique of Racial Capitalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021)

Part I: Theorizing Racial Capitalism

January 22:

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 2017 [1935]): 3–83, 580–636, 670–730.

January 29:

- Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 3rd edition (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 2021 [1944]).

February 5:

- Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (New York: Verso, 2018 [1972]): 106–244.

February 12:

- Stuart Hall, *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, edited by Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021): 136–245.
 - “Pluralism, Race, and Class in Caribbean Society” (1977)
 - “‘Africa’ Is Alive and Well in the Diaspora”
 - “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance” (1980)

February 19:

- Neville Alexander, *Against Racial Capitalism: Selected Writings*, edited by Salim Vally and Enver Motala (London: Pluto, 2023): 65–184.
- Zachary Levenson and Marcel Paret, “The South African Tradition of Racial Capitalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46(16): 3403–24.

February 26: Spring Break – No Class

March 4:

- Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd edition (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 2021 [1983]): 1–28, 101–74, 307–18.

Part II: Putting Racial Capitalism to Work

March 11:

- Gargi Bhattacharyya, *The Futures of Racial Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024).

March 18:

- Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare/Red Scare: Theorizing Capitalist Racism in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

March 25:

- Jordanna Matlon, *A Man among Other Men: The Crisis of Black Masculinity in Racial Capitalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

April 1:

- Andy Clarno, *Neoliberal Apartheid: Palestine/Israel and South Africa after 1994* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

April 8:

- Sarah Mayorga, *Urban Specters: The Everyday Harms of Racial Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

April 15:

- Ida Danewid, *Resisting Racial Capitalism: An Antipolitical Theory of Refusal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).