

Martin Luther King's Marxist critique on race

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Abstract

Martin Luther King Jnr. stood on the front lines in the fight against racism in the United States. It was his dream that the United States may be emancipated not only from the shackles of slavery and segregation, but the bonds of hatred and prejudice as well. However, in the wake of the Vietnam War, King's analysis of racism began to parallel Marxist debates on the capitalist production of racial discrimination. In fact, towards the end of his life, King began to believe that his very struggle against racism would not succeed if it did not also seek to struggle against its capitalist roots. This analysis will not seek to position King's argument within a particular strand of Marxist scholarship, but highlight the way in which King began to utilise and publicise a Marxist approach to his analysis of racism.

Keywords

Marxism, racism, exploitation, capitalism, Martin Luther King.

Introduction

On August 16, 1967, Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. announced to the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) that in order to resist and revolutionise race relations, the civil rights movement must also resist the capitalist system in which it was generated ([King](#), 1967a). This systematic correlation of racism and capitalism represented the first public address in which King clearly articulated a Marxist critique of capitalist social relations. While King and many members if the SCLC had previously been associated with Marxist sentiments, this announcement came to characterise King's revolutionary focus in the last years of his life, as his distaste for the perpetual reproduction of racism, and what he saw as an imperial war in Vietnam, lead him to publicly question the interconnected nature of racism, imperialism and capitalist production ([Fairclough](#), 1987; 1983). This critical approach towards racism was also characteristic of many of King's Marxist contemporaries, such as [Cox](#) (1948, 1972) and [Nikolinakos](#) (1971) who argue that racism is both a product of and prerequisite for capitalist exploitation. These theorists connect racism to an economic base through a structural analysis of racism and capitalism, and in doing so, question the whole society through the lens of historical materialism. While contemporary Marxism represents a diverse and contested field, [Ravenhill](#) (2008) highlights that it is this methodological framework of social analysis that remains essential to Marxist critiques and which aligns itself with King's own interpretation of racism.

A Marxist perspective on racism

In order to understand how King's structural analysis of racism resembles a Marxist critique, it is essential to outline the Marxist perspective of society. Rather than Marxism itself, this analysis defines a Marxist methodology as a critical approach to economic and social relations which focuses upon the constructive nature of social structures, institutions and practices embedded within particular modes of production ([O'Brien & Williams](#), 2010). These modes of production form the economic base upon which broader social relations are actively shaped ([San Juan Jr.](#), 2002). This is known as the base-superstructure dynamic in which a society's economic framework or "base" is seen to not only influence, but in fact determine social relations through the construction of political and ideological "superstructures" ([Sivanandan](#), 1981). This may be seen as a historical materialist approach, which upholds the historically specific production of the material world in shaping the imaginary ([Tabb](#), 1971). In this sense, Marxist scholarship has often adopted an inversion of the Hegelian notion of consciousness, arguing that it is not the consciousness of individuals that shapes their reality, but their social relations, shaped by a society's systems of production, which dictate their consciousness ([Wolpe](#), 1986).

Through this lens of historical materialism, Marxist critiques seek to unpack the social, political and ideological norms of a given society and uncover the ways in which they may be shaped and manipulated by historically constructed economic relations ([Matthaei](#), 1996). As such, while contemporary Marxist scholarship is incredibly diverse ([San Juan](#), 1998), the tradition of Marxist scholarship has sought to analyse the production of seemingly isolated political and social norms through an interrelated but historically specific economic nexus. As

Matthaei (1996) notes, Marxism may be seen as a truly interdisciplinary theory which invites continual questioning of the interconnected nature of the economy, polity and social identity. This approach was highlighted by King (1967a), who also argued that to question racialised poverty in the United States, one must question its source. Explicitly, King stated that “when you ask that question (of racial poverty), you begin to question the capitalistic economy” (King, 1967a, p. 174).

The reproduction of Marxist social relations

According to Marxist analysis, capitalist economic relations have acted to stratify social relations along the lines of those who control and are controlled by the material production of goods (O'Brien & Williams, 2010). In this sense, Marx argued that in any given society, not only does the economic base of social relations contribute to the construction of norms and ideas, but the capitalist class seek to manipulate and control this economic base, and therefore control the structure and production of society's superstructure ([Marx](#), 1947 [1848]). As such, those with the means to control material production, also control the mental production and reproduction of social and political norms ([Marx & Engels](#), 1967 [1894], p. 64). King's analysis of racism directly parallels the questions asked by Marx, as he believes that in order to uncover the root causes of racism, one must “question the whole society”, and more explicitly “question the capitalistic economy” (King, 1967a, p. 174).

Although social stratification and control are evident in many different economic systems, Marx argued that capitalist production has actively concentrated the benefits of a seemingly free exchange of labour in the hands of an elite minority (Marx, 1947 [1894]). While

classical and contemporary liberal scholars such Smith, Ricardo and Friedman conceive capitalism as a natural, rational and mutually beneficial socio-economic evolution ([Friedman](#), 1962; [Underhill](#), 2000); Marxist theory views the development of capitalism as the emergence of an entirely new set of stratified social relations, shaped by the private ownership of the means of production, the competitive drive for commodities, and the commoditisation of the individual through wage labour ([Oatley](#), 2010). As [Solomos & Back](#) (1995) note, the exploitative character of this capitalist relationship lies in the extraction and appropriation of surplus value from the working class, as competitive power differentials insist upon and ensure the minimum wage necessary for the reproduction of their labour. It is this competitive market which drives the capitalist class to perpetually increase their economic, social and political power through the extraction of surplus value from the working class. Furthermore, [Bakan](#) (2008) argues that this surplus extraction also promotes and perpetuates the institutionalisation of social classes, shaped through exploitation and discrimination. Building upon this framework, Nikolinakos (1973) argues that racism not only facilitates increases in surplus extraction, but has been perpetuated as a means of justifying increased exploitation of racialised subjects throughout the capitalist system.

In a similar manner to Nikolinakos (1971), Marxist interpretations of racism have sought to analyse this relationship between the expansion of capitalism and the intensification of racist exploitation ([Macedo and Gounari](#), 2006). One of the most influential Marxist critiques on race was presented by Cox (1948). In his study, Cox argues that the contemporary notion of racial antagonism had not existed prior to 1492, but developed concomitantly as a requirement of capitalist expansion. In a later paper, Cox writes that racism developed as a “complimentary

social attitude" ([1948](#), p. 322) of European expansion to produce and ensure the exploitable nature of an inferior, non-white labour force. This is supported by [Amin](#) (1985), who highlights that although racial stratification was common among "tributary" pre-capitalist economies, it is the unique global expansion of capitalism that institutionalised the ideals of transnational white supremacy and non-white inferiority. In this respect, King saw that the mercantile capitalism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the field of scientifically justified racism first developed alongside each other as part of a mutually perpetuating nexus of racial exploitation. In a similar manner to Cox (1948), King also proposed that colonialism and neocolonialism, which should be viewed as "racism in its more sophisticated form" ([King, 1968](#), p. 175), were merely natural extensions of capitalist inspired surplus extraction. This also correlates with [Suyin's](#) definition of racism as an "invented psychological justification" (1971, p. 4) designed to immutably camouflage class or ethnic exploitation and oppression by another dominant class or ethnic group. Building on this framework, King argued that this capitalist relationship between exploitation and racism may also be seen to lead international expansion and militarism, stating that:

A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will 'thingify' them, make them things.

Therefore they will exploit them and poor people generally economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments . . . and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together (1967a, p. 251)

This framework has also been applied by Marxist scholars (Razack, 2002) in regard to the colonial expansion of European powers. According to Blackburn (1997, p. 311), English and

French colonialists utilised “newly elaborated social distinctions and racial identities” to construct, justify and perpetuate “intensive systems of exploitation” throughout their colonial empires. As Razack (2002) notes, these racial distinctions enabled the capitalist ascendancy of the white European elite, and the dehumanisation of an international class of inferior, non-white workers. As King also observed, “in country after country we see white men building empires on the sweat and suffering of colored people” (1967a: 174). However, as King also argued, these “triple evils” (racism, economic exploitation and militarism) of the modern era are “incapable of being conquered” when “profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people” ([1967b](#), online).

King's Marxist methodology

As noted by King (1967a, p.185), understanding the relationship between racism and capitalist exploitation, or what he labeled a “more sophisticated form of racism”, provides the key to understanding the international political circumstances of modern history. As [Resnick & Wolff](#) (1987, p. 115) highlight, this methodological analysis of socio-economic phenomenon is inherent to the praxis of Marxism, which involves constructing the connecting links between abstract concepts of class as a process of economic exploitation, and the “conjuncture of social relationships, social conflicts, and social change”.

As Bakan (2008) explains, exploitation did not act as a relationship between things for Marx, but as a social relationship that is constructed and shaped through the process of production. In this way, Bakan describes Marx’s construct of exploitation as an interaction between various types and forms of human difference, serving to define and redefine certain

human characteristics based on their potential economic value. It is this production of difference through the process of competitive labour exploitation which Marxist scholars have argued divides, dehumanises and dissociates the working class along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity and nationality (Tabb, 1971).

Social segregation and racism

Through this process of dissociation, [San Juan](#) (1989; 1992) argues that society itself becomes a zone of alienation, as social divisions along the lines of the working and capitalist classes, but also along the lines of racial, ethnic, sexual and national qualities become normalised. This process is anything but natural. As Tabb (1971) highlights, the extent to which the capitalist class is able to isolate segments of the working class from each other not only strengthens its position, but perpetuates and internalises racism within the working class. If one group of workers are able to command higher pay or to exclude others from work, and if the other group are limited in their employment opportunities to the worst jobs and lowest pay, then a marginal working class has been created which benefits both the capitalist class and the newly formed working aristocracy. The marginal working class then must produce goods at below the cost of the labour aristocracy and become a sub-class in themselves.

In this way, numerous Marxist scholars of racism have framed their analysis of economic production and racism in a similar manner to the production of class division, dehumanisation and dissociation. Conclusively, Cox (1948) argues that racial antagonism is inherently part of this class struggle which enacts itself both between and within the classes. As such, Macedo & Gounari (2006) have argued that the position of black people in Western societies is primarily a

result of their active exclusion in the labour process and their position as a marginal working class. While on the surface, this process of discrimination and exclusion may seem indirectly linked to capitalist relations, it is inherently tied back to the process of alienation in which capitalist exploitation becomes invisible. It is here that King sought to bring to light the capitalist processes of abstraction, as he argued that the production of racism was hidden behind the same social veil as the production of class exploitation and imperialism. As [Franklin](#) argues, “in a capitalist society, discrimination against Negroes takes place under the banner of freedom” (1970: p. 337).

Through a Marxist analysis of these seemingly natural social relations, one may argue that the seeds of racism lie in the capitalist mechanisms of dehumanisation, alienation and class stratification (Tabb, 1971). Furthermore, it is through these mechanisms that the capitalist production of racism, as highlighted by Cox (1948), may be reproduced through seemingly natural social relations within the working class. It is through this methodological framework in which Marxist critiques of racism have sought to unite seemingly isolated social and political phenomena. This was also the desire of King, who sought to highlight the interrelated nature of social, political and economic phenomenon through a critical questioning of the seemingly isolated and invisible “evils” of the “whole society”. As he later argued, this critical analysis requires one to seek out and question the root economic causes of social phenomena that may otherwise be taken for granted:

One day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the

question, 'Who owns the oil?' You begin to ask the question... 'Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water? (King Jnr., 1967a, p. 174).

Conclusion

The scope and methodology of King's social analysis directly parallels Marxist critiques of racism and its roots within the capitalist system. Through his call to question the nature of the "whole society," King constructs an argument which may be seen to be in direct correlation with the base-superstructure logic of historical materialism. This has been the core derivation for Marxist critiques of racism, which maintains that the construction and reproduction of racialised discrimination is directly related to socio-economic power structures that manipulate and control the prevailing social discourse (Suyin, 1971; San Juan, 1989). This process occurs through the dehumanisation and dissociation of agents capable of selling their labour power within the capitalist system, who must remain employable in order to participate and compete for their own exploitation ([Gabriel & Todorova](#), 2003). This is the process which King (1967a, p. 251) describes when he notes that "a nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will 'thingify' them, make them things". In this way, capitalist relations play out through an invisible exploitation of seemingly consensual yet dissociated agents. The State has relied upon the atomization of the labour force as part of the way in which systemic relations of exploitation, alienation and oppression are rendered invisible (Bakan, 2008). As Suyin (1971) notes, this enables a superstructure of belief which perpetuates racism as a social expression of its own existence. As King notes, in order to uncover the root causes of racism, one must "question the capitalistic economy" (King, 1967a, p. 174). While contemporary scholars have sought to

contest the concreteness of this “economic reductionism” due to its devaluation of discourse and individual autonomy (San Juan, 1989). It is this interrelated logic which continues to frame Marxist critiques of racism. As such, King’s analysis of race relations opens itself not only to a Marxist interpretation of racism, but more broadly, as a Marxian critique of capitalist exploitation. For King, as for Marxist scholars; racism, economic exploitation and expansion may be seen as entangled dreads of hair connected to the same head.

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