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# What's New About Woke Racial Capitalism (and What Isn't)

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## "WOKEWASHING" AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION

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During the 2016 Democratic primary campaign, Hillary Clinton challenged Bernie Sanders with this line: “if we broke up the banks tomorrow... would that end racism?” The unspoken part of the message seemed to be something like this: leaving the banks to get on with business as usual while making sure their boards are impeccably diverse would end racism—and that would make the banks OK, regardless of Sanders’s concern about their outsized influence and predatory practices.

That non sequitur seems to be enjoying a renewed burst of popularity in 2020, as a slew of corporate interests and professional elites project their (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2019/09/26/the-importance-of-diverse-role-models/>) agenda (<https://www.aperianglobal.com/leaders-diversity-inclusion-5-lessons-top-global-companies/>) onto the popular uprising that followed the police murder of George Floyd. So, for example, we see World Bank president David Malpass and plenty of other high-level corporate executives proudly declaring that their organization “set up a Task Force on Racism.” The mandates of such task forces vary, but what they tend to share is a focus on visible diversity as a broadly aesthetic quality. This is rather like the Washington DC’s mayor’s decision to paint “Black Lives Matter” on the plaza in front of the White House, where law enforcement continued to brutalize protestors against racist police violence only to receive a multimillion dollar budget increase from City Hall shortly afterwards. We call this aesthetic, “woke capitalism.”

What does this increasingly popular newfound antiracist aesthetic of the ruling class tell us about the evolution of capitalism? What exactly are the interests, actors, and coalitions at play? How does woke capitalism fit into the larger history of racial capitalism, and what—if anything—does it entail when it comes to the underlying material realities?

On the Left, there are two broad families of opposing answers to that set of questions, which are related to, but quite separate from, those posed by the debate over ‘cancel culture (<https://areomagazine.com/2020/07/08/debating-the-future-of-leftism/>)’ (<https://areomagazine.com/2020/07/08/debating-the-future-of-leftism/>). The dialectic we are concerned with here is rather one about the diversity-capitalism nexus.

In one corner, there is what we may call the wokeness-enthusiastic tendency (<https://labourlist.org/2020/06/starmer-unveils-race-equality-strategy-to-boost-diversity-within-labour/>): this is roughly the view that any gain in diversity (even if confined to the top of society) is progress and so one

should not perform too close an examination of the woke capitalists' gift horse's mouth. And even those in this camp who do recognize the perils of cosmetic wokeness tend to praise its provision of role models (<https://books.google.nl/books?id=l7wpDwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>) and the like.

In the other corner we find wokeness-skeptics of various stripes, from the intransigent (<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/08/15/trouble-disparity>) to the more nuanced (<https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2020/06/29/the-racial-wealth-gap-is-about-the-upper-classes/>) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/07/cancel-culture-and-problem-woke-capitalism/614086/>). Here, the dominant view is that material inequality rather than racism is the main driver of the marginalization of people of color, and so attention to diversity does little to advance the material interests of those most in need and equal racial representation acts as a legitimation story for record-level inequality.

In this brief piece we try to carve out a third position—not a middle ground, but a distinct view nonetheless. Our contention is that while what may be termed woke capitalism is the result of real changes in both the material structure of capitalism and its ideological superstructure, those are not changes pulling in the same direction.

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The main material development is the consolidation of the shift from a quasi-deterministic to a more pronouncedly probabilistic nexus of class and race. The professional-managerial and ruling classes are now both racially permeable by law and in practice, but the relationships between groups on average remain. This represents a genuine, non-illusory structural change from an earlier version of global capitalist society where, in many contexts and with few exceptions, being of a dominant racial status set a juridically enforced floor on one's relationship to production (candidacy for slavery) and being of a dominated racial status set an equally firm and likewise enforced ceiling on one's relationship to production (exclusion from the ruling class).

But it is unclear that this makes much difference to the material prospects of the vast majority of people of color or indeed of people in general. Indeed, the racial permeability of the upper classes is accompanied by an increased and inverse racial permeability of the underclass. However, we are still far from proportional racial representation across classes, and it is unclear that the current trend allows us to predict it will ever be reached. Diversification is so elite-driven that it is unlikely to proceed beyond the cosmetic, and for that reason it seems that diversification does not necessarily correspond to any major structural changes in the relations between groups of people, whether we consider them as arranged by class, race, or the intersection of the two.

It follows that the politics of representation should not be regarded as a vehicle for the agenda of the materialist left. We propose instead a *responsive universalist approach*—responsive to racism and all other forms of marginalization and different from the homogenizing universalism of class-only politics. This approach has a long history of development in supposedly “identitarian movements”—Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us in *Freedom Dreams* that many campaigns for racial reparations in the United States were built to produce more comprehensive social transformation rather than merely racially targeted cash payouts. He made the same argument here in *Spectre* about movements against policing under racial capitalism. Accordingly, prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore recently reminds us (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>) that the “abolition” in recent abolition movements is not simply an absence of prisons or police but a presence of comprehensive systems of social support for everyone.

Taking our cues from this long history, we argue that the left should focus on universal policies—the Green New Deal, or Medicare For All, say—but those policies should not be colorblind. Rather, they should be weighed and designed to address social identity-based disadvantages with specificity. In fact, we argue for the further kind of position taken by [Theda Skocpol](#)

(<https://scholar.harvard.edu/thedaskocpol/publications/targeting-within-universalism-politically-viable-policies-combat-poverty-u>) and [the Haas Institute](#) (<https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism>): that only a “targeted” universalism that responds to marginalizations inherent in our social structures is true universalism, insofar as it aims at impacting everyone equitably without homogenizing them.

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## WOKE CAPITALISM: PROPAGANDA AND REAL CHANGES

In this section we try to show that, while there is an upper- and managerial-class woke aesthetic that mainly aims at sugarcoating the perpetuation of capitalism, this supervenes on some real structural changes. However, these do not threaten the stability of the capitalist system nor even of some of the most longstanding linkages between race and class.

There have been two major changes in racial capitalism in the decades that followed the wave of decolonization movements, one ideological and one material. Both were caused by the massive change in the geopolitical situation occasioned by the Cold War.

In 1946, there were thirty-five member states of the United Nations. By 1970, there were 127. What happened? A massive global network of anti-colonial movements. Some fought wars, some negotiated. All wanted out of colonial domination. The unprecedented expansion of independent states occurring over the period from 1946 to 1970 occurred during intense state competition between the US and the USSR. How those new countries aligned was of immense consequence to the US, the staunchest defender of capitalism.

This political development combined with a second crucial development in technology: the television. By 1947, there were forty million radios in the U.S., but only 44,000 television sets. But in the post-war period, the world's largest national economy moved quickly. By 1969, forty-four million homes owned at least one TV. The stakes were raised by the refinement of the [color TV](#) (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/color-tv-transformed-way-americans-saw-world-world-saw-america-180971343/>) in the 1950s, which was thought to increase “emotional involvement, empathy, creativity, comprehension, sociality, and immediacy” in unprecedented ways, signaling new possibilities for advertisers and thus for capital.

But these factors combined to create a political opportunity that did not go unnoticed by activists, who skillfully managed the new geopolitical situation to defeat [colonial](#) (<https://thewire.in/history/dien-bien-phu-indochina-war>) and [apartheid](#) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodesian\\_Bush\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodesian_Bush_War)) regimes outright in the Third World and to extract concessions from First World countries' then scarcely veiled systems of racial apartheid. In the US, for example, nonviolence allowed marchers to simplify the context of oppression with a complex history, structural contours, and characters that Black southerners like King and Abernathy couldn't possibly expect white American or foreign journalists to deeply understand. There's nothing morally simplifying like watching a policeman beat an unresisting child. How can you be confused, at that point, as to what the sides are? As to which side you should be on? Hence also the Civil Rights Movement's insistence on non-violent tactics: the [optics](#) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/04/televisions-civil-rights-revolution/554639/>) had to be right, and without today's ubiquitous cell phone cameras to record police

brutality, one could take no chances with confrontational direct action given the likely effects of racism on their reception by the audience.

As legal scholar Derrick Bell famously noted in 1980, there was interest convergence between the federal government and the struggle against racial injustice, particularly its more reformist and less revolutionary (<https://libraries.indiana.edu/black-liberation-army-program-armed>) or secessionist (<https://www.aaihs.org/free-the-land-fifty-years-of-the-republic-of-new-afrika/>) tendencies. Visceral, color images of racial violence in First World states—especially the United States, then the global hegemon—could damage their attempts to recruit Third World hearts and minds to the struggle against communism and the Second World.

This strategic situation helped fuel the emergence of a new, dominant governing ideology: neoliberalism. Early on, merely relentless technocracy sufficed to sanitize the colonization of all political rationality by market language—since race isn't explicitly mentioned in, say, structural adjustment programs ([https://ips-dc.org/structural\\_adjustment\\_programs/](https://ips-dc.org/structural_adjustment_programs/)), and racial undesirables are permitted to join the ruling elite, and hopefully no one will challenge the system more broadly (as understanding how it works becomes further and further out of reach).

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This ideological change required, as the television era demanded, visuals and advertising: the ruling class had to be, to some extent, racially integrated, to help sell the new neoliberal consensus. In the First World, this produced an entirely new elite. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, commenting on the emergence of a Black elite in the United States, calls this the “most significant transformation in all of Black lives over the last fifty years.” Similar ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachida\\_Dati](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachida_Dati)) developments ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rishi\\_Sunak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rishi_Sunak)) can be observed throughout the rich world, albeit at different paces and in a variety of context-bound declinations. In the Third World, the success of national liberation movements put the preexisting elite (emergent or surviving within colonial domination) into the formal trappings of state power.

Both of these facts represent *genuine material changes* to our global social structure. Both the massive increase in the number of countries (and thus of formal political leadership over this or that group of people) and the inclusion of elites from dominated races into corporate boardrooms represents an evolution in racial capitalism from rigid racial criteria for formal inclusion into the ruling class. In this sense we may say that changes in the racial make-up of the ruling class accompany a genuine change in relations of production, as the more explicitly extractive and hierarchical aspects of colonialism are abandoned in favor of new and more market-based forms of exploitation—a process that resembles the evolution of feudal bonds into capitalist market relations documented (<https://www.versobooks.com/books/2407-the-origin-of-capitalism>) by Ellen Meiksins Wood, or indeed the transition from slavery to a nominally colorblind wage labor market. Add global capital flows to the mix, and you get British billionaires sharing a class identity ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_British\\_billionaires\\_by\\_net\\_worth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_billionaires_by_net_worth)) with Indian- or Russian-born magnates; though, just as with the earlier changes in production relations, that still hasn't altered the racial hierarchy between the vast majority of Western Europeans and Eastern Europeans, let alone South Asians.

But this simply is not the change that is advertised by wokewashers. Their focus is more on success stories in the professional-managerial class, and on the aesthetic of the multiracial corporate boardroom (or CIA division heads' meeting (<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-spy-agencies-face-shocking-lack-diversity/story?id=72915850>)). Indeed, diversity is also an update to the professional-managerial class's longstanding ideology of meritocracy. An AB from Harvard is a sign of excellence, but these days. “real” excellence requires a “diverse”

school. It's as if there were a tacit alliance between the higher echelons of the old (white) elite and the upwardly mobile racialized strata. To be sure, this doesn't happen without some friction—witness the issue of admissions of Asian Americans and less posh or accomplished whites. But in the main, wokewash is an effective cosmetic measure, carefully calibrated to not upset the status quo too much as it revamps it: “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”, as a shrewd fictional aristocrat (<https://www.economist.com/moreover/1998/10/22/changing-things-so-everything-stays-the-same>) famously responded to political turmoil.

But below the ruling class, and outside of the realm of Harvard admissions, racial stratifications persist in material terms. Wealth, food-energy-water insecurity, and housing insecurity persist, at both global and national scales, and Black and Indigenous peoples face the worst of these just as they did a century ago. Geographer and theorist of racial capitalism Ruth Wilson Gilmore defined racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” in her book-length explanation of how surplus land and financial capital helped spur racially distributed mass incarceration and policing in California, the U.S.' most populous state.

The fact that there *has* been a material change is part and parcel of racial capitalism's ideological strategy: wokewashing offers itself up as an explanation for the real and substantive changes in political economy, though it is a largely misleading explanation, as it centers individual success stories as evidence of supposed progress towards full inclusion, which obscures the largely class-bound nature of the changes in racial hierarchies. The potential small numbers of the middle class of racial minorities to enter the increasingly multi-racial global elite has often come alongside the cementation or even acceleration of exploitation and vulnerability for working class people of all races. Since the global and horrifically violent campaign of repression and terrorism against the Left (particularly anti-communism (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-world-the-jakarta-method-built-a-conversation-with-vincent-bevins/>)) helped eliminate the basis for alternative explanations, the neoliberal racial progress narratives go without substantive challenge.

But as the contradictions in the system have become more apparent—most dramatically in continued and unmitigated police violence—wokewashing has become more central to the ideological project. Both technocratic and wokewashing strategies of obfuscation represent part of the dangers. Kwame Nkrumah, writing presciently (<https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/introduction.htm>) from the 1960s:

Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism. For those who practise it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress. In the days of old-fashioned colonialism, the imperial power had at least to explain and justify at home the actions it was taking abroad. In the colony those who served the ruling imperial power could at least look to its protection against any violent move by their opponents. With neo-colonialism neither is the case.

There's no popular control mechanism for the World Bank, IMF, or World Trade Organization—insofar as these institutions also empower some local elites in formerly colonized countries, they can wokewash their racist neocolonial policies, and they do.

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## UNIVERSALISM WITHOUT SAMENESS: BEYOND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

To recapitulate, there have been two developments in capitalism, one in the superstructure, one in the base. They are not the same development, though one supervenes on the other. The development in the superstructure is woke capitalism—an aesthetic, a cultural meme. The development in the base is a significant increase in the permeability of race and class. There is no longer a co-definition of class and race tempered by the odd rags to riches-style counterexample. That's been replaced by a much more openly probabilistic race-class nexus. Observing that those phenomena are related but pull in different directions is crucial to the development of an effective anticapitalist political strategy.

The first, tentative conclusion we should draw is that the politics of representation is now even less of an anticapitalist vehicle than it had ever been. This leaves open the extent to which anticapitalism goes hand in hand with antiracism—a question for another time. For now, let us just stress that we cannot merely assert the equivalence of the two. To say that anticapitalism is now completely detached from antiracism would be an overgeneralization (because of the now more probabilistic than deterministic nature of the class-race nexus), but so is the opposite. This gives rise to two symmetrical questions for the materialist left: (i) How to be antiracist without playing into the hands of the neoliberal wokewashers? (ii) How to be anticapitalist without ignoring the more than residual racial stratifications in contemporary capitalism?

Here is a rough sketch of a strategy to tackle both questions at the same time. Crudely, we need to move away from the politics of representation and focus on universalist policies, but not in a colorblind way. Even policies expressly meant to address various racial gaps should *also* be universalist policies, but *weighted* so that racial equity is pursued by means of universal benefit. For example, imagine a program like the Green New Deal—clearly meant for universal benefit—but with a measure of race-sensitivity in its resource allocation mechanisms (e.g. tendering procedures, geographical priorities, and so on). In this way, we can embed antiracist policy within a universalist materialist politics. We should view antiracism as *constitutive* of universalism, not as an add-on. At the same time, because of this constitutive relation, we should abandon the politics of mere representation in favor of a form of joined-up materialist universalist antiracism, which we call *responsive universalism*.

In other words, universalist programs need to become truly universal by becoming responsive to differences, such as racial differences. Here is one such difference: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor [gives the example](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-reparations-debate) (https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\_articles/the-reparations-debate) of the large disparity rate in maternal mortality between Black mothers and white mothers. The accumulated history of disparate and discriminatory treatment and policy means that not all of the relevant social problems that would have to be overcome to genuinely universalize access to health care are themselves “common” problems or faced by the entirety of a population. This has been, from the inception of racial capitalism, a reliable fact about how social structures have operated. Another comparable fact is the disproportionate [impact on ethnic minorities](https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/racial-and-ethnic-minorities-suffering-disproportionately-during-coronavirus-crisis-says-enar) (https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/racial-and-ethnic-minorities-suffering-disproportionately-during-coronavirus-crisis-says-enar) of the current COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. We need to both recognize such facts and embed our remedies within policies that benefit all. So, to name just another flagship universal policy, Medicare For All, we must envisage ways to embed our understanding of racialized health issues within a program of universal healthcare provision. That wouldn't make it less universal, but more so. The political message the left should communicate in putting forward such policies is that their impact will be equitable in its universality.

That formulation may remind some of John Rawls's [difference principle](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/#:~:text=The%20difference%20principle%20requires%2C%20that,those%20who%20are%20advantaged%20least.&text=Here%20the%20difference%20principle%20selects,le) (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/#:~:text=The%20difference%20principle%20requires%2C%20that,those%20who%20are%20advantaged%20least.&text=Here%20the%20difference%20principle%20selects,le

ast%2Dadvantaged%20group%20does%20best.) of distributive justice, whereby inequalities are only justified if they are to the advantage of all, and in particular of the worst off. But there is an important difference: we are not proposing a trade-off between inequality and universally beneficial outcomes weighted in favor of the worst off. Rather, we are proposing to redefine universal benefit itself in a weighted way: universal benefit is not properly universal unless it is weighted according to our best social-scientific understanding of social identity-related disadvantage (so what we say here in regard to race could and should also be expanded to cover gender, ability, and all other forms of marginalization and social exclusion).

This approach should allow us to stem the identitarian drift, which as we have seen is easily captured by [neoliberal wokewashing](https://jacobinmag.com/2020/06/blackwashing-corporations-woke-capitalism-protests/) (https://jacobinmag.com/2020/06/blackwashing-corporations-woke-capitalism-protests/) (cue, for instance, ex-president Obama's recent [intervention](https://sports.yahoo.com/barack-obama-spoke-lebron-james-chris-paul-nba-boycotts-walkouts-urged-return-season-221542926.html) (https://sports.yahoo.com/barack-obama-spoke-lebron-james-chris-paul-nba-boycotts-walkouts-urged-return-season-221542926.html) to attempt to break a racial justice strike, which leaned heavily on his own identity). Rejecting identitarianism and the politics of representation means abandoning the neoliberal dream of impeccably multicolored boardrooms. But it does not mean retreating into a tone-deaf class-only politics. What we are advocating is rather a return to the materialist left's universalist messaging, but this time in a truly universal rather than merely homogenizing way.

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