

Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society

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The study of race and racism in the digital society must produce theoretically distinct and robust formulations of Internet technologies as key characteristics of the political economy. The author puts forth racial capitalism as a coherent framework for this research agenda. The argument for racial capitalism draws on two examples of its engagement with two characteristics of the digital society: obfuscation as privatization and exclusion by inclusion. Internet technologies are now a totalizing sociopolitical regime and should be central to the study of race and racism.

INTRODUCTION

It has been 20 years since the first major research article in a U.S. sociology journal declared the study of the Internet vital to our disciplinary practice (DiMaggio et al. 2001). In that time, we have moved from assessing the Internet as a communication technology to understanding digitality as a technique, technology, and process of modern life.¹ Despite important work on racism and technologies, sociology has not forged a cohesive theoretical framework for the study of race in the digitally mediated society. Most research on technology draws on the dominant paradigms in the subfield: racial formation theories and critical race theory. Although these approaches are useful, scholars have discussed at length their weaknesses as they concern systematic theories of race and racism when the Internet is taken into account. Daniels (2013) implored those in the interdisciplinary field of Internet studies to “explore the work of [W.E.B.] DuBois and more recent theorists, such as [Joe] Feagin, who have extended his theoretical framework in ways that are more robust for understanding racism.” Scholars have taken up this call, albeit sporadically. The greatest potential for redressing this

meaningful gap in the literature is at the intersection of platform capitalism and racial capitalism. This focus puts the question of digital transformations of society squarely in the domain of the sociology of race, ethnicity and racism.

In this review, I argue that our empirical study of racism in the digital society suffers from a lack of theoretical coherence. My argument puts forth that there are two turns in the political economy of race, ethnicity, and racism: networked capital that shapes a global racial hierarchy that varies across spatial geographies and the privatization of public and economic life. Internet technologies produced the first turn, and they accelerate the second turn. Internet technologies are central to the political economy of race and racism because Internet technologies are

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the politics and capital of capitalism as we presently experience it. The very scale of this relationship begs for a theoretical program that can capture its complexity and particularity. After outlining the centrality of Internet technologies to the political economy, I put forth racial capitalism as uniquely suited for the study of race and racism in the digital society.

WHAT IS SO DIFFERENT ABOUT THE INTERNET? PRIVATIZATION BY OBFUSCATION AND EXCLUSION BY INCLUSION

An early reader of this article posed a provocative question: is there anything analytically distinct about the Internet? My answer revealed my priors. “Of course the Internet is distinct,” I wanted to say. But that is arguing from an embarrassingly basic logical fallacy. The question of what the Internet does analytically that, say, “capital” or “economy” or “culture” or “organizations” does not already do is important. My answer is debatable, but the debate is worthwhile. I do not know if the Internet adds something analytically distinct to our social inquiries, but it adds something analytical precision. Other constructs capture important dimensions of social life in a digital society. For instance, one can argue that Silicon Valley is a racial project (Noble and Roberts 2019; Watters 2015) or a sociohistorical construction of racial meanings, logics, and institutions (Omi and Winant 2014). White racial frames (Feagin 2020) or color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) can elucidate how ironic humor about Black people, Muslims, and immigrants in online gaming platforms reproduces “offline” racism (Fairchild 2020; Gray 2012). These are just two examples of noteworthy approaches taken to studying Internet technologies and “mainstream” sociological interests (i.e., economic cultures and discourses, respectively). Still, sociological practice does not systematically engage with the social relations of Internet technologies as analytical equals to the object of study. If there is anything particular about Internet technologies for sociological inquiry, we should make it explicit. And once explicit, we should give it the same theoretical care as states, capital, and power. Daniels (2013) points us in the right direction when she argued that

the reality is that in the networked society . . . racism is now global . . . as those with regressive political agendas rooted in white power connect across national boundaries via the Internet, a phenomenon that runs directly counter to Omi and Winant’s conceptualization of the State as a primary structural agent in racial formation.

Daniels named to the global nature of both racism and the networks of capital we gesture to when we say Internet or digital. It is an argument for bringing back the political economy of race and racism. Internet technologies are specific in how they have facilitated, legitimized, and transformed states and capital within a global racial hierarchy. An app with which underemployed skilled labor sells services to customers (e.g., TaskRabbit) might be a U.S. racial project. But the capital that finances the app is embedded in transnational capital flows. Global patterns of racialized labor that determine what is “skill” and what is “labor” mediate the value of labor and the rents the platform can extract for mediating the laborer-customer relationship. Even the way we move money on these platforms—“Cash App me!”—is networked to supranational firms such as PayPal and Alibaba (Swartz 2020). Internet technologies have atomized the political economy of globalization with all the ideas about race, capital, racism, and ethnicity embedded within. An understanding of the political economy of Internet technologies adds a precise formulation of how this transformation operates in everyday social worlds: privatization through opacity and exclusion via inclusion. Both characteristics are distinctly about the power of Internet technologies. And each characteristic is important for the study of race and racism. Understanding platform capitalism helps us understand how these two characteristics are important.

Internet technologies have networked forms of capital (Srnicek and De Sutter 2017; Zhang 2020), consolidated capital’s coercive power (Azar, Marinescu, and Steinbaum forthcoming; Dube et al. 2020), flattened hierarchical organizations (Treem and Leonardi 2013; Turco 2016), and produced new containers for culture (Brock 2020; Noble 2018; Patton et al. 2017; Ray et al. 2017). By that definition, the Internet has amplified and reworked existing social relations. Platform capitalism moves us toward the analytical importance of Internet technologies as sociopolitical regimes. Platforms produce new forms of currency (i.e., data) and new forms of exchange (e.g., cryptocurrencies),

and they structure new organizational arrangements among owners, workers, and consumers (see “prosumers”). Even more important for the study of race and racism, platforms introduce new layers of opacity into every facet of social life. So-called mate markets move from neighborhood bars to dating apps, moving family formation behind a platform’s velvet rope (Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber 2017; Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard 2019). It transforms public education into “online delivery,” locking student-teacher-school interactions into privately controlled black boxes (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). “Smart cities” extract our routine activities from public life, which shapes democratic access to how our communities are governed (Brauneis and Goodman 2018; O’Neil 2017; Walsh and O’Connor 2019). A colleague recently bemoaned the difficulty of negotiating with Facebook for data on political attitudes. Many sociologists share her lament. In our routine work we realize that different rules produce and govern data, from survey to observational, than the rules even 20 years ago. That is but a minor example of the myriad ways platform capitalism’s opacity is qualitatively distinct.

That opacity has a logic. Pasquale (2015) argued that ours is a “black box society.” Administrative opacity is a deliberate strategy to manage regulatory environments. It shields organizations, both public and private, from democratic appeals for access and equity. As the state legitimizes the use of digital and algorithmic decision making, it also creates new data worlds (Gray 2018; Milan and van der Velden 2016) to which few sociologists have access. The inaccessibility of these data is part of their value to state and capital interests. Private data worlds where decision making can be veiled from democratic inquiry fuel economic and political commitment to more datafication. This brings about more secrecy. Sometimes, a firm or organization performs secrecy just for the sake of secrecy. This reinforces its ability to do so and its right to do so (Seaver 2017). Pasquale outlined three types of secrecy strategies. One of those strategies, obfuscation, is particularly relevant to the study of race and racism. Theoretically, obfuscation operates much like willful whiteness that can always claim ignorance of statistical discrimination, for example, because it owns the means of discovery. Obfuscation does not mean that someone or some organization does not know these data. It means that the information is difficult to access and often couched in needlessly complex technical jargon or process. As we privatize public goods, Internet technologies promise cost savings (usually by reducing labor) and

increased efficiency of whatever task is at hand. Those Internet technologies introduce a web of data extraction and valuation that has significant economic value (Zuboff 2015). Obfuscation becomes a technique of privatization through two processes. One, it extracts data that would have previously been public, publicly available or legally discoverable. Two, it expands obfuscation as a logic, even in organizations or institutions that have a public mandate. When full privatization is not possible, obfuscation privatizes information by making it inaccessible in practice. Information is the vessel for social actions and social facts. If information is inaccessible, the objects of everyday life are too.

Although secrecy and means testing for information have always been features of the administrative state and of capital, platform capitalism is about the scale of secrecy, the value of secrecy, and the logic of obfuscation. By thinking about the politics of the Internet technologies embedded in the current political economy, we more precisely capture a set of social relations than occurs when Internet technologies are tangential to our analyses.

Thinking about the analytical utility of the Internet also brought to mind one of the most vexing dialectal tensions of racism under platform capitalism. The Internet expands. This “pervasive expansion” (Castells 2010) is near total. It is no longer a question of whether one is “online.” Whether or not one is online, one’s life chances are shaped by online (Fourcade and Healy 2013). That settles the thing. The expansion requires bringing people into the social relations of Internet technologies. That can happen as a user (Ritzer 2015) or as a site of extraction (Amrute 2016) or by producing a surplus population of users and nonusers (McCarthy 2016). This expansive quality sets us on a crash course with a fundamental understanding of what race does. Race (as deployed by racism) excludes. It also devalues and stratifies. But exclusion is one of the most studied aspects of race and racism in social science. The racialized social hierarchy produced these Internet technologies. Also, Internet technologies became a dominant tool of capital because of their ability to expand markets and consumer classes. To both expand and exclude, the platform-mediated era of capitalism that grew from Internet technologies specializes in *predatory inclusion*. Predatory inclusion is the logic, organization, and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms.

One of the clearest articulations of predatory inclusion comes from work on education, where

educational access and its attendant social rewards are extended to excluded groups on extractive terms (Dwyer 2018; Eaton et al. 2016; Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017). With higher education, predatory inclusion looks like expanding “access” to higher education (and its relation to labor market and status returns) by offering online college degrees that both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations market to African American women (Cottom 2017). When those African American women disproportionately enroll in these institutions, they most often do so by taking on student loans. Some of those loans are publicly subsidized and others are from private lenders. These students’ loans have been shown to be harder to pay off, easier to default on, and more likely to reach negative amortization than student loans taken out at other kinds of institutions by other kinds of students (Scott-Clayton and Li 2016). African American women’s inclusion in higher education comes at a high individual price and with a significant profit to the financial caretakers of that extraction.

Predatory inclusion happens not only in education. It operates through credit schemes, consumer debt (Charron-Chénier and Seamster forthcoming) and small business lending (Nopper 2010). It frames how minorities are “included” in homeownership schemes that pervert the value of ownership because of bad loans and racist social policy (Taylor 2019). Although not explicitly named, another example is found in the “gig economy.” This is where waged work has become harder to secure and surplus labor is nominally included in the “digital economy” on extractive terms. These schemes could happen without Internet technologies. But they happen using Internet technologies, and Internet technologies have made these cases more efficient. Moreover, platform capitalism generates the logic, incentives, and capital for these predatory inclusion practices. Whether they use the Internet to affect these practices, the logic of capital that financializes through algorithmic means at a scale made possible because of network technologies makes these particular processes of the digital society.

RETHINKING RACIAL CAPITALISM

The digital transformation of the political economy indelibly marks race and racism. Aspects of this transformation have leveraged color-blind racism, racial projects, white racial frames, and implicit bias. These are, of course, dominant theories of race and racism in sociology. A full discussion of how

these frameworks contribute to our understanding of race and racism in the digital society is beyond the scope of this article. It suffices to say that each is important, and none is perfect. But theory’s goal is not perfection but specificity. I have laid out that scale, obfuscation, and predatory inclusion take on particular qualities under platform capitalism. And I have followed other research in arguing that platform capitalism is a specific and current stage of capitalism. Given these two priors, the study of race and racism in the digital society should theorize networked scale, the logics of obfuscation, and the mechanisms of predatory inclusion. My survey of published research on race and racism over the past 15 years in U.S. sociology journals finds brief engagement with these aspects of our political economy. Consequently, we have not explicitly surfaced the structure, politics, economics, and culture of the Internet technologies that have transformed society. This absence impoverishes how we understand the contemporary social relations of race and racism.

That same search found fewer than two dozen sociology articles that use racial capitalism as a theoretical framework. Cedric Robinson (2000) never intended for his now classic *Black Marxism* to speak to sociological practice. His intellectual project was a liberatory philosophy for Black studies and the freedom of Black people across the globe. But Robinson’s work calls back to two foundational sociologists, W.E.B. DuBois and Oliver Cox (Robinson 1990). It seems almost quaint now, but when Robinson argued that racism and capitalism were historically co-constitutive, making “a modern world system of ‘racial capitalism’ dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide” (Kelley 2017), it was heretical. Today, an acclaimed French economist argues the same thing without causing much of a stir (Piketty 2017). In its simplest terms, racial capitalism gives race and class equal theoretical relevance. That alone is a worthwhile sociological project (Marable 2015).

More than being in conversation with sociological greats, racial capitalism is a thoroughly contemporary discussion. Nancy Fraser (2016) offered a robust engagement with Marxist sociology, the foundations of capital, and the racialized global project of expropriation. Similar to my claim that platform capitalism is specific, Fraser stated that in “financialized capitalism, accordingly, we encounter a new entwinement of exploitation and expropriation—and a new logic of political subjectivation.” Perhaps this new entwinement or entanglement is conditioned on the expansion and extraction potential of Internet

technologies and resulting ideologies. Jodi Melamed (2015) posited that racial capitalism is “a technology” that correctly identifies capital’s nature: “Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups” (p. 77). Although far more theoretical and radical than mainstream sociology prefers, both Fraser and Melamed engaged the current conditions of capital and labeled the processes of racialization. Like the Internet technologies themselves, racial capitalism captures the dynamic interplay between local and global processes that are different but in the same way. They all racialize because capital must.

A notable exception to the paucity of sociological engagement with racial capitalism is a review of Gargi Bhattacharyya’s (2018) *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Mercado forthcoming). Bhattacharyya’s formulation of racial capitalism may be the most attractive yet to those who study race and racism in the digital society. The book’s 10 “theses” of racial capitalism are a generative theoretical construction that offers fertile ground for a research program. Two theses respond to the obfuscation and predatory inclusion character of platform capitalism. The first is that “racial capitalism helps us to understand . . . the processes that appear to grant differential privileges to workers and almost workers and nonworkers and the social relations that flow from these differentiations” (Bhattacharyya 2018:x). The second is that “racial capitalism operates both through the exercise of coercive power and through the mobilisation of desire” (Bhattacharyya 2018:ix).

CHALLENGING OBFUSCATION AND PREDATORY INCLUSION THROUGH THEORETICAL COHERENCE

Some empirical challenges of studying race and racism in the digital society flow from the theoretical challenges of doing so. Chief among them is digital technologies’ penchant for remaking the ontological boundaries that define so much of our professional work. Take for example a basic question about racism and employment. There must first be agreement on what constitutes a worker. In the twentieth-century model of inquiry, the worker is a waged employee of a government or firm. The worker is mostly distinct from an entrepreneur who creates jobs by starting a new firm. By the end of the twentieth century, as freelancing and consulting

became more commonplace, the worker and entrepreneur are even more analytically distinct from merely the self-employed. Still, the ideas of firm and worker organized enough economic activity with internal consistency that the ontological boundaries around these categories made for meaningful observations and inferences. But what is an Uber driver? Or an Instacart shopper? Or an influencer? These are common enough modes of economic activity in the digital society, and they are not insignificant forms of work. Researchers may overstate the scale of the “gig economy” given its actual share of the labor market, but workers in this sector of the economy are working nonjob jobs that challenge neat categorization. The so-called 1099 workforce represents a collective risk shift from firms to individuals (Cottom 2017; Hacker 2008) that extends beyond employees to obfuscating the idea of employee altogether. Digital technologies abet that risk shift through the sociopolitical regime of platform capture. That platform capture effectively transforms workers into independent contractors.

The political economy of a digital society maximizes technology’s ability to transmogrify various forms of work into nonwork by redefining “job” and “worker.” This differentiation follows the “sedimented histories of racialised dispossession that shape economic life in our time” (Bhattacharyya 2018:x). But these new nonjob work arrangements are also “new and unpredictable” and only appear to grant differential privileges. The status differences between Google employees and long-term temporary Google workers boiled over in 2018. At the time, temporary workers constituted more than half of Google’s global workforce (Wakabayashi 2019). Because of the racialized nature of differentiation, temporary workers were concentrated at non-U.S. sites and in nonprofessional roles. But because of the transformations Bhattacharyya (2018) described, this underclass of temporary workers at Google’s famed California headquarters included a notable number of white-collar roles. The transmogrification had created a new point of differentiation from a sedimented history.

These temporary white-collar workers included lawyers, coders, and top-level engineers. Despite their value to the organization and their location at headquarters, temp Googlers were barred from certain spaces: cafeterias, the campus store, and certain parking lots. To enforce this separation, Google issued red badges to temporary workers. Permanent Google employees have white badges. Google’s justification for this tiered labor system was that it was necessary to protect trade secrets. Corporate

secrecy eventually gave way to obfuscation when someone flooded the online chat boards where temporary workers groused about their conditions with spam and disinformation. Workers complained that the tactics were beneath Google, not because Google used them but because it used them on U.S. workers. These modes of differentiation are specific to the social relations that are extended into new domains. Racial capitalism would link the relationship among global South labor relations, the historical sediments of race in the United States, and the racialized history of the capital that makes Google possible. It would identify how what happens in Mountain View, California, is specific but also linked to these capital expropriation processes in other contexts. In this approach, the obfuscation becomes part of the empirical story, rather than a screen from inquiry. Where the obfuscation occurs, racial capitalism locates a technique of reconfiguring the social relations that are presently at work.

Unlike the demoralized temporary Googlers, my Instacart shopper loves her job. So too do my many students who pick up cash doing shopping or running errands or driving for rideshare apps. My students are not just the young coeds of popular imagination. They are first-generation students. Some of them are older. Many are parents or caretakers for family members and friends. They relish the opportunity to unpack the circumscription of their civil liberties in the terms and conditions of their favorite apps. When they turn that same sociological imagination to the work they enjoy doing, they do not find their enjoyment odd. Knowing the extractive terms of their labor does not diminish their enjoyment of the job. Platform capitalism owes much of its dominance to how good it feels to be captured by the platform. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2019) has stated that racism feels good and that we must contend with how racialized emotions determine racialized experiences. Bhattacharyya similarly calls to how racial capitalism mobilizes desire. The desire for status, belonging, sexual satisfaction—platform capitalism has efficiently monetized all of our basic human desires by capturing both space and place. Likes on Facebook give us a hormone high. Internet romances feel like the “real” thing to our bodies. Twitter fights are thrilling. Role-playing video games engender all kinds of emotional responses. Beyond social media, ideologies like “hustling” and “entrepreneur” mobilize our libidinal energy. In schooling, “personalized learning” and “fast degrees” animate our desire for social status while obscuring the risk of pursuing it.

Extraction and exploitation in the digital society uniquely feel good. Racial capitalism encourages us to identify the sites of coercion where desire organizes “economic arrangements that cast [us] to the social margins.” Other theories unintentionally bifurcate racist extraction as a violent experience because the outcomes of racist extraction are violent. Racial capitalism can feel good to both the oppressor and the oppressed. That is especially true in the digital society, where platforms and monopoly power have distilled the efficient mining of human desire for profit.

A RACIAL CAPITALISM RESEARCH AGENDA

One of the easiest and worst ways to build an intellectual brand is to propose a “new” research agenda. I want to do the opposite. I propose an old research agenda that has new implications. No one should engage with racial capitalism because it is trendy. Racial capitalism should not and could not be a single metatheory of racism, as Bhattacharyya also argues. We should absolutely use the theories of discrimination, bias, stratification, inequality, social movements, and social justice that have contributed so much to the profession.

At the same time, we cannot cede the study of digitality to the center of the discipline. For all the talk about the marginality of Internet studies in professional sociology, a cursory read of American Sociological Association meeting guides shows a plethora of work that mentions digital, Internet, online, and technology. We have dispersed the study of Internet technologies across our working groups. If anything, the empirical study of the Internet is on the precipice of being decoupled from the study of race, which could only make it more attractive to the center of the discipline. Were that to happen, we would lose one of the most dynamic lenses with which to study the social world. The study of race, ethnicity, and racism animates public discourse, attracts investment, and motivates critical research questions. The mismatch between job market specialties and job market hires has long shown that when allowed to pursue their interests, a significant share of emerging sociologists want to engage with race and ethnicity.

Racial capitalism is a robust and flexible framework for understanding the social relations of Internet technologies. These social relations could go by a dozen other names that resonate with sociologists: capital, accumulation, financialization, neoliberalism, and so on. Each of these constructs

are embedded in intellectual histories that mischaracterize the racial nature of capital. The sociology of race and ethnicity is uniquely positioned to address the foundational issue of contemporary social life. Racial capitalism is one way we can do that.

A research agenda should be a collaborative endeavor. I will sketch only a brief proposal. A racial capitalism research agenda should engage with DuBoisian sociology, which has become an exciting subfield. This research agenda should identify the points of departure among the contemporary scholars in the field. Fraser's formulation of racial capitalism as concerned with expropriation/exploitation/exchange versus Bhattacharyya's exploitation/expropriation/expulsion is a suitable place to start. A research agenda should delineate what various formulations apply to what local and global context. Speaking of global, racial capitalism is well situated to redress to the U.S.-centric character of the profession. Racial hierarchies are global relations lived and remade locally. Every empirical project need not attend to the global nature of its mechanism of study. But the theoretical formulations should attend to these connections. Predatory inclusion is the most well-documented mechanism to date. A fuller engagement with the practices of predatory inclusion is a good next step. It should disentangle how and under what conditions predatory inclusion occurs. Is predatory inclusion more likely to leverage public goods than private? How does predatory inclusion shape consumption, communities and families? Is the inclusion elastic or are there bounds for how much extraction a system can withstand before losing legitimacy, political favor, or "prime" consumer-citizens? Finally, a defining characteristic of the digital society is its efficient methods of elimination through inclusion. This is the thorniest, and therefore most generative, aspect of this research program.

CONCLUSION

In the interest of clarity, I have exploited the relative absence of racial capitalism in U.S. sociology journals to argue for its value to sociological practice. But many sociologists engage with racial capitalism in other disciplinary journals (Benjamin 2019; Laster Pirtle 2020; Nelson 2016). That is unfortunate for sociology, and especially for the sociology of race and ethnicity. I have also overstated the incongruence between the study of the Internet and sociology of race. There are robust research programs in social movements, occupations, education, sexuality, and intersectionality that engage how

racism operates in the digital society (Amrute 2016; Brock 2020; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Nakamura 2013; Neves 2013; Ray et al. 2017). We can learn a great deal from these literatures and approaches. We can and should build upon them as we move the study of digitality to the center of our subdisciplinary work.

What I have put forth is an approach to the political economy of race and racism in a digital society. Racial capitalism captures two key dimensions of the digital society, which I describe here as obfuscation as privatization and predatory inclusion. Competing and complementary formulations of racial capitalism all improve on the fragile bridge that connects the study of race and racism to the political economy of a digital society. As it turns out, the study of race resolves the 20-year-old call for sociologists to take the Internet seriously. Racial capitalism shows that the Internet has already taken race and racism seriously. By returning the favor, the sociology of race, ethnicity, and racism can do what it has done since the founding of the discipline: making sociology matter for society.

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NOTE

1. For a discussion of racial theories in Internet studies, see Hamilton (2020).

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