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# Toward a Reoriented Radicalism: Black Marxism and Orientalism

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**TOWARD A REORIENTED RADICALISM:  
BLACK MARXISM AND ORIENTALISM**

by

ALEXANDROS ORPHANIDES

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2017

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in  
Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Political Science.

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## ABSTRACT

### Toward a Reoriented Radicalism *Black Marxism & Orientalism*

by

Alexandros Orphanides

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The 21st century has witnessed the unquestioned supremacy of late capitalism. It holds coercive power over nation states; it generates increased inequality within countries and around the globe. It can, today, exploit everywhere at once. The poorest countries in the world reside in the Global South. Of the twenty poorest countries in the world, seventeen are in Africa; the rest are elsewhere in the Global South. Of the hundred poorest countries in world, over 95 percent are in the Global South. In the United States, Blacks, Latinos, and Indigenous people have poverty rates that greatly exceed the national average. Poverty and income inequality are only two metrics we can employ to get a sense of oppression. The aforementioned populations are at greater risk for health-related issues, violence, and incarceration. The epistemology that imagines capitalism to be neutral serves to rationalize the continued international exploitation and oppression of racially-marked groups. Any radical, emancipatory politics must include a critique of racist capitalism. Working with *Black Marxism* by Cedric Robinson and *Orientalism* by Edward Said, this article seeks to propose approaches that may elucidate theories of racial construction and the production of knowledge in the context of capitalism that upholds current systems of oppression which manifest in deep inequality across racial lines.

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*“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”*

- Audre Lorde

*“El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos.”*

- Subcomandante Marcos

## Introduction

It is quite common, when I participate in a Black Lives Matter protest that I may see a banner that reads “Palestine Stands With Black Lives Matter.” Throughout the countless protests, actions, and meetings I have attended over the years, I have often been surprised at the willingness of people not directly affected or identified with a particular struggle to lend their solidarity and to learn from the activism of another group. It is actually common for solidarity to be expressed at almost any gathering of the disparate factions of the Left. This phenomena begs a theoretical question: what connects these struggles? A major feature of solidarity building among social-justice-oriented organizations is the terminology “people of color.”<sup>1</sup> In a nation founded as a white supremacist state,<sup>2</sup> the distinction of the color line separating white people from those racialized<sup>3</sup> as nonwhite is useful for organizers. In the United States, Black people, Indigenous people and Latinos consistently rank far behind Whites across all economic indicators.<sup>4</sup> Asian Americans have dealt with immigration policies that

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, Maurianne, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin. *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> White supremacy refers to an economic, political, and cultural system by which individuals racialized as white control material resources, the institutions of the state, and social norms while marginalizing communities racialized as nonwhite or persons of color.

<sup>3</sup> Racialization is the ascribing of racial or ethnic identities to individuals and communities based on physical or cultural factors. These factors categorizations impose hierarchical relations between races.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Weller and Farah Ahmad, *State of Communities of Color in the Economy*, (Center for American Progress, 2013)

excluded them and continue to face discrimination in hiring practices.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, on an international level, the former colonies of Europe in the Global South rate as underdeveloped and impoverished.<sup>7</sup> In Central America, failed states, U.S. foreign policy, and plundering by multinationals results in large scale migrations to the U.S., resulting in racialization, undocumented status and continued exploitation. What links these seemingly disparate phenomena is their existence in the capitalist world order and the racialization which informs their meaning.

As the hegemonic world economic system, capitalism is implicated in worldwide exploitation.<sup>8</sup> Capitalism nestles everywhere, settles everywhere, and establishes connections everywhere.<sup>9</sup> Just as it nestles, capitalism's reliance on financial flows disintegrates its bonds, leaving ruptures and creating new opportunities for exploitation, oppression, and capital accumulation the globe over.<sup>10</sup> Extreme inequality and wars for resources are but some of capitalism's children, necessitated and sanctioned by polemics masquerading as traditional historical narratives. Faith in the blind neutrality of the market has resulted in convenient rationalizations for inequality and exploitation,

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<sup>5</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)." Open Collections Program: Immigration to the US, Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). Accessed November 15th, 2016. <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/exclusion.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "HUD USER." Housing Discrimination Against Racial And Ethnic Minorities 2012 | HUD USER. Accessed January 22, 2017. [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/fairhsg/hsg\\_discrimination\\_2012.html](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/fairhsg/hsg_discrimination_2012.html).

<sup>7</sup> For more on the underdevelopment of the Africa and Latin America: Rodney, Walter, A. M. Babu, and Vincent Harding. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> By exploitation and oppression, we mean a broad range of systems in place in the United States that result in settlement of indigenous lands, polarizing wealth inequality, mass incarceration, and urban displacement and their specific impact on Black communities and other racialized communities. We also mean exploitations through U.S. foreign policy resulting in military force, resource extraction, and the actions of multinational corporations by which communities around the globe are

<sup>9</sup> Alluding to Marx and Engels' famous line in the *Communist Manifesto*, "'It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.'"

<sup>10</sup> For more on this, Saskia Sassen's work on the expanded terrain for advanced capitalism and parallel modes of accumulation and exploitation in the Global South and Global North. (Sassen, Saskia. "Expelled: Humans in Capitalism S Deepening Crisis." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 19, no. 2 (08, 2015): 198. doi:10.5195/jwsr.2013.495.)

both in the United States and in a global context, and because capitalism seems to engage in racialized protocols, it provides a post hoc explanation of past exploitation and a *priori* cause for future exploitations.

In the public discourse, inequality of this magnitude is rationalized by way of demeaning the individuals' market value based on their education, skills, or perceived cultural defects. On an international level, developing countries are criticized on the basis of the policy blunders of contemporary leaders and are urged to forget about colonialism.<sup>11,12</sup> This is not to say that capitalism and its concurrent social relations invented exploitation, but that the nature of capitalist exploitation is predicated on and perpetuates a rationalized form of racism. As capitalist hegemony continues its daily revolutions, entrenching itself further into the spatial and psychic dimensions of the globe, so too must radicalism find ways to reorient itself or it will remain insufficient.

Theorizing around these questions from the perspective of race is often discouraged in the area of political theory as many tend to avoid employing the explanatory power of racism, in favor of material or systemic approaches in favor of treating racism explanation as ideational force.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1980s, Cedric Robinson, a political theorist, argued in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* that the material and the ideational are linked and this overlap includes the construction of racial categories that engender capitalism that are marked by both class-based and

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<sup>11</sup> Crossette, Barbara. "Stop Blaming Colonialism, U.N. Chief Tells Africa." The New York Times. April 16, 1998. Accessed August 20th, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/17/world/stop-blaming-colonialism-un-chief-tells-africa.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Shearlaw, Maeve. "'Africa Should Stop Blaming History for Its Economic Problems' – Is Obama Right?" Guardian Africa Network. July 30, 2014. Accessed August 20th, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/30/sp-obama-africa-colonial-excuses-poll>.

<sup>13</sup> "Race and Class in Political Science." Race and Class in Political Science. Accessed November 15th, 2016. <http://scholar.harvard.edu/jlhochschild/publications/race-and-class-political-science>.

race-based logic.<sup>14</sup> Writing in the early 1980s, Robinson was working in similar streams and currents as the noted literary theorist Edward Said, who argued in *Orientalism* that “the European study of and romance with the ‘East’ was primarily about constructing the Occident.”<sup>15</sup> These constructions, he would argue, developed through European and later American literature and the arts, and would inform Western policy toward Arab communities and geography. Despite their similarities these works have rarely been put in conversation.

In an attempt to build a framework toward decentering European or Western hegemony from historical narratives and from institutional and ideological production of knowledge, we aim to move away from unitary narratives. When *Black Marxism* and *Orientalism* are put in conversation, the two works are shown to supplement each other, toward providing a framework for decentering European or Western hegemony from historical discourse and providing opportunities for theories defined in opposition to Western hegemony, not sprung out of it. *Black Marxism*, in its critique of Marxist historiography, provides an analysis into the racial protocols present in capitalism since its beginnings, and the role that Blackness and the construction of white supremacy has had on maintaining capitalism. Furthermore, Robinson shows how even radical Marxist historiography centers Europe and is unable to break free from the epistemology that rationalizes global exploitation. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said demonstrates how knowledge is produced and maintained through art, literature, and media, and the how

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<sup>14</sup> Hébert, Paul. ““The Negation of the Negation in the World System”: Introducing Cedric Robinson’s Black Marxism.” AAIHS. Accessed November 15th, 2016. <http://www.aaihs.org/the-negation-of-the-negation-in-the-world-system-introducing-cedric-robinsons-black-marxism/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kelley, Robin D.G., *Forward: Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1983) xiv

the pervasiveness of these is forms of knowledge informs policy making on the Middle East.

Robinson and Said wrote about specific and distinct geographies of study. *Black Marxism* focused on Marxist historiography, the African diaspora, African-European history, Atlantic history, and the Black Radical Tradition.<sup>16</sup> Said's writing centered on the Middle East, European colonization of "the Orient," representations of Arabs in art and media, and U.S. policy. These seemingly disparate projects provide us with complementary frameworks for alternative historical analysis and toward laying the groundwork for new forms of resistance to exploitation.

### **Significance to the Field of Political Science and Subfield of Political Theory**

The American Political Science Association's 21st Century Task Force Report: *Political Science in the 21st Century* articulated a few concerns related to the significance of this study both for the field and subfield. The report opined that political science is often poorly equipped to address why marginalized communities around the world are unable to have their needs met and rarely works to "develop explanations for the social, political, and economic processes that lead to groups' marginalization."<sup>17</sup> This weakness in the discipline, they argued, limits the utility of the field in the broader political and social discussion around marginalization.

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<sup>16</sup> Robinson defines the Black Radical Tradition as a collective knowledge that exists throughout the African diaspora comprised of cultural knowledge that enslaved Africans carried with them throughout the slave trade, experiences of large and small-scale resistance to domination, as well as the academic work of scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois, CLR James, and Richard Wright.

<sup>17</sup> American Political Science Association, *Political Science in the 21st Century*, (2011), pg.1.

Additionally, they found that “issues related to marginalization including race, gender, and inequality” are not prevalent in the flagship journals of the discipline.<sup>18</sup> They posited that the discipline avoids using identity as an analytical category regarding political behavior and treats identity as a given. This limits the extent to which work around race, ethnicity and identity can engage the political questions posed by these criteria and faced by individuals and communities that inhabit these identities. Secondly, they argued that political science has a tendency to focus on traditional methodological approaches which privilege quantitative methods and approaches that approximate an “objective science.”

The central questions around this study are fundamentally about race, ethnicity and marginalization and the methods of analysis proposed later in this paper are qualitative. The hope is that by engaging with the work of Edward Said, a giant in the field of Postcolonial Studies and Cedric Robinson, a scholar whose work is receiving renewed interest in the areas of Africana Studies, History, and Political Science, political science can engage in broader, interdisciplinary work around race and marginalization and that this study may present a humble framework by which future studies can undertake similar tasks.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, engaging these two scholar broadens the subfield of political theory. In *Beyond Monologue* political theorist Fred Dallmayr argues that the discipline of political theory should “supplement the rehearsal of routinized canons with a turn to

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<sup>18</sup> "Task Force on Political Science in the 21st Century." Task Force on Political Science in the 21st Century, 1. <http://www.apsanet.org/21stcentury>

<sup>19</sup> Hébert, Paul. ""The Negation of the Negation in the World System": Introducing Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism." AAIHS. Accessed November 15th, 2016.. <http://www.aaihs.org/the-negation-of-the-negation-in-the-world-system-introducing-cedric-robinsons-black-marxism/>

global, cross-cultural (or “comparative”) political theorizing.”<sup>20</sup> The political vision of undertaking comparative political theorizing is in the service of global democratic cooperation over dominant, unilateral production of knowledge in the form of an academic monologue. This vision is very much in the same stream that both Said and Robinson concerned themselves. While both scholars worked in English and would be considered part of the Western academe, they wrote from marginal positions in the dominant society. Said as an Arab immigrant of Palestinian origin and Robinson as a Black, leftist scholar in the United States. Working with Said and Robinson, or other western marginalized scholars is no substitute for engaging with non-Western scholars (we should be careful of this conflation), but does offer a possible alternative to dominant Western narratives. Comparing the two would undoubtedly be in the service of comparative political theory.

### **Death of Comparative Literature**

In the forward to the reissue of *Black Marxism*, Robin D.G. Kelley explicitly states that Robinson and Said’s work paralleled each other in their attempts to unseat Eurocentric historiography. Yet despite their status as contemporaries, it is surprising that aside from a few remarks in passing, there is little to no literature that discusses Said’s *Orientalism* and Robinson’s *Black Marxism* simultaneously. This silence may be due to their work in different disciplines, their primary focuses, and differences in popularity.

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<sup>20</sup> Dallmayr, Fred. "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory." *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 02 (06 2004), 250. doi:10.1017/s1537592704040137.

Cedric Robinson was a political scientist who reshaped the fields of Black Studies. As a student, Robinson was involved in the Afro-American Association and the Revolutionary Action Movement. Robinson received his doctoral degree in political theory at Stanford University. His dissertation, titled *Leadership: A Mythic Paradigm*, argued that “the idea that...social action is determined by a leader who is...above the masses of people...are essentially fictions [of Western anarchist tradition].”<sup>21</sup> His later work focused on understanding and contributing to the historiography of Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition, and providing a counter-narrative to Western history from the perspective of the Black experience. Robinson was the author of five books and a number of scholarly articles. Throughout the course of his academic career, Robinson published a number of books, including: *The Terms of Order: Political Science and The Myth of Political Leadership* (1980), *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), *Black Movements in America* (1997), *An Anthropology of Marxism* (2001), and *Forgeries of Memory & Meaning: Blacks & The Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film Before World War II* (2007).<sup>22</sup>

In the last few years, Cedric Robinson’s work has received renewed interest. In 2016, the *African American Intellectual History Society* produced a web-based, digital roundtable on his work featuring 5 prominent Black scholars engaging his work. Noted historian Robin Kelley has given lectures around the country that provide insights into Robinson’s work in the context of the disciplines current trends, contemporary politics,

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<sup>21</sup> Kelley, Robin D.G. "Cedric J. Robinson: The Making of a Black Radical Intellectual." [www.counterpunch.org](http://www.counterpunch.org). June 17, 2016. Accessed June 21, 2016. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/06/17/cedric-j-robinson-the-making-of-a-black-radical-intellectual/>.

<sup>22</sup> Myers, Joshua. "The Scholarship of Cedric J. Robinson." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.5, no.4, (06 2012), 49.

and the Black Lives Matter movement. Furthermore, in the context of the 2016 presidential election, one in which many liberal pundits decried the divisions of identity and class politics, Cedric Robinson's work on both class and race may be a provocation to further study his work.

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem and educated in Egypt and New England throughout his childhood. Throughout his life he became engaged in the Palestinian liberation movement. His primary focus early in his career was in the area of literary and cultural criticism, which he pursued at Harvard University, earning a doctoral degree in English Literature after having completed a thesis on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. *Orientalism* (1978) would be his most noted book. His other titles include: *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *Covering Islam* (1981), *After the Last Sky* (1986), *Blaming the Victims* (1988), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

To be clear, Edward Said and Cedric Robinson were asking different questions and proposing different answers. Said's interest in *Orientalism* was in showing how imperial systems were constructed and maintained through discourse, knowledge production, and historiography. 'Orientalism,' Said wrote, 'is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and ... "the Occident."' It was the thesis and argument presented in *Orientalism* that sociologist Steven Seidman has described as having greatly influenced sociology, literature, and postcolonial theory.<sup>23</sup> According to Seidman, Edward Said's work informs our study of empire by relaying the importance of narration and cultural meanings in sustaining

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<sup>23</sup> Seidman, Steven, and Edward Said. "Empire and Knowledge: More Troubles, New Opportunities for Sociology." *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 3 (05 1996): 313. doi:10.2307/2077439.

empire. The Guardian's obituary of Said, presents the reach of his influence as impacting several academic disciplines and catapulting Said to the role of public intellectual -- a role in which he became an ardent critic of U.S. foreign policy and supporter of Palestinian liberation.

How might this study benefit from Edward Said? As Seidman indicates in his recommendation of Said to sociologists, "Said urges us to consider empire alongside class, gender, race...and make the problem - difference...of the social construction of Otherness central to cultural studies."<sup>24</sup> In these ways, Said asks that scholars engage and problematize knowledge as force in the material, political, and geographic manifestations of empire.

By most standards, both scholars were extremely successful. Said's career would take him to Columbia University, where he served as Professor of Literature until his death in 2003. *Orientalism* was a critical success, its thesis remains hotly contested, and is often credited as one of founders of postcolonial studies.<sup>25</sup> *Orientalism* is a staple of postcolonial syllabi and is a frequently cited text in literature, history, cultural studies, media studies, and Middle Eastern studies. Cedric Robinson served as Professor Emeritus of Black Studies and Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara until his death in 2016. Robinson's most important work, *Black Marxism*, was largely ignored and went out of print until it was reissued in 2000. It is currently

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<sup>24</sup> Seidman, Steven, and Edward Said. "Empire and Knowledge: More Troubles, New Opportunities for Sociology." *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 3 (05 1996): 313. doi:10.2307/2077439.

<sup>25</sup> Varisco, Daniel Martin. *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007, 10.

experiencing a renaissance in both scholarly and public interest, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite their broad and sometimes overlapping interests, the primary focuses of their work differed. Said wrote primarily about the Middle East, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Islam, literature, and cultural production, whereas Robinson's work focused on the African diaspora, slavery, capitalism, Marxism and Black mass movements.

While it appears that Said never engaged Robinson's work professionally, *Black Marxism*, which followed *Orientalism* five years later, did include one endnote that referenced *Orientalism*. As one might assume, the reference deals with Said's attacks on the "ideological currents" of Bernard Lewis, a British historian of the Orient's historiography.<sup>26</sup> Robinson employed this in a larger section that worked toward the aim of dismantling European historiography of the Islamic world.

Robinson addressed Said's work specifically, with regard to Said's (along with Gayatri Spivak's and Homi Bhabha's) use of Frantz Fanon's work in their own self-referential debates that he claimed depoliticized the content of Fanon's work. This single engagement may provide us with a clue as to why Robinson and Said did not engage each other's work and why scholars do not put the two in conversation. Robinson is interested in the material conditions and economic processes of capitalism, and explicitly interrogates functions of historiography. Said investigates aesthetic qualities implicit in cultural productions and their epistemological underpinnings.

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<sup>26</sup> Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 346.

Notably, Robinson and Said have different relationships to the work of Karl Marx, mainly because Robinson engages Marx's work extensively and critically. Said did not engage Marx frequently in his own texts, with the exception of two surprisingly brief engagements in *Orientalism*. Said controversially quotes Marx in "(t)hey cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." This quote, taken out of context is set to frame the East-West divide. Said engages with Marx directly once again, in his brief analysis of Marx's view of British rule of India of which I will discuss in limitations section. Perhaps Said's lack of engagement with Marxism positions *Orientalism* as an ill fit to read along *Black Marxism*, or perhaps it provides an opportunity to enrich and enliven the conversation around both texts by looking for ways in which Robinson's work offers analyses of Marxism that fit well with *Orientalism*.

One scholar who has worked with *Black Marxism* and *Orientalism* side-by-side is Wendy Cheng, a professor of Asian Pacific American Studies at Arizona State University, who published *Strategic Orientalism: Racial Capitalism and the problem of 'Asianness'* in *African Identities*. Cheng argues that Robinson and Said converge in Robinson's reorienting of history to center marginalized figures, who are in fact central to the construction of empire and Said's analysis of how these systems are upheld through cultural production and systems of knowledge:

Putting together racial capitalism and Edward Said's theorization of orientalism, however, to focus on how racial-economic tropes operate on the ground, offers productive possibilities for implementing a racial capitalism approach to theorize 'Asianness' alongside Blackness, as well as suggesting different and strategic ways of 'being' Asian.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cheng, Wendy. "Strategic Orientalism: Racial Capitalism and the Problem of 'Asianness'." *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (05 2013): 148-58. doi:10.1080/14725843.2013.797284

Cheng is most interested in how these scholars can inform an understanding of how Asianness functions as a racial protocol in the context of capitalism. Cheng's work provides us with a path to recreate or modify in the pursuit of the previously stated research questions, which aim to fill a gap in discourse for people of color in the United States and abroad.

Embarking on a study of these two texts may provide a springboard toward a theoretical analysis of the status quo, as well as critiques of widely accepted understandings of history. The implications are broad, but I would like to engage in the role these analyses may play toward reorienting our conceptions of history and radicalism. If we hold that the epistemological justifications for capitalist exploitation, for racialized inequality, and for the economic subjugation of nations are based on a racist epistemology, and that racialized policy decisions by global powers are rooted in flawed Eurocentrism, then we can step out of these rationalizations by reorienting our histories and epistemologies to uncover the nature of social relations as they were, not as they were imagined.

A reorienting of history will vanish neither racism nor capitalist exploitation, but can provide new epistemological bases to challenge the existing order. Our questions are broad and ask that we interrogate *Black Marxism* and *Orientalism* simultaneously to elucidate theories of racial construction and the production of knowledge that upholds current systems of oppression which manifest in deep inequality across racial lines.

## Cedric Robinson and Edward Said Together

Read together, Cedric Robinson's opus, *Black Marxism*, and Edward Said's classic text *Orientalism* provide a complementary framework for a reoriented analysis of capitalist exploitation. Both texts continue to pose broad challenges to Western radical thought, mainly how to unchain intellectual formations and their corresponding resistance movements from the shackles of Eurocentrism.<sup>28</sup>

Robinson offers us racial capitalism and a historiography free of Eurocentrism as the basis of his exploration into a Black Radical Tradition. In arguing that Marxism, as a construct of European thought, provides insufficient consideration to the problems of racialism and racial oppression, he attempts to present a radical politics free of Eurocentric epistemology. Robinson's choice of Marx as the basis of his attack on historiography is significant because Marxism is a critique of capitalism and popular among leftist organizations and theories. Instead, Robinson's work is focused, as the title would suggest, with Black radicalism in the African diaspora. Perhaps his most important contributions are the extensive counter-narrative to Western history and the concept of racial capitalism. For Robinson, that the European epistemological foundations of Marxism render it unable to encapsulate or understand the Black experience is central to retelling a liberatory history.

Along with Edward Said's earlier work *Orientalism*, which traces the Orient to the Othering of the East via Enlightenment thought and the rationalization of a subjugation of "inferior" peoples, Robinson's work seeks to reorient the Other as the subject of

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<sup>28</sup> I am relying here on Samir Amin's understanding of Eurocentrism, not as a social theory but as a prejudice that teleologically centers European development and distorts theory and supplies a "common sense" ideological paradigm that informs daily interactions, understanding of history, scholarship and politics. (Amin, Samir. *Eurocentrism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989.)

history. Robinson does so by dismantling the stage-set of Eurocentric history, exposing it for what it is -- an insufficient construction -- and providing an alternative rooted in African history and the Mediterranean world. But by employing much of Marxist theory and dialectic, he also elucidates “the ways in which the Marxist tradition -- indispensable for the struggle -- may impede it through its Eurocentric focuses,” as Cornel West puts it in his review of the book.<sup>29</sup> Some have argued that Robinson’s task is too ambitious, but perhaps it belongs in the story of an even more ambitious project, one that sees all histories as equivocal in their epistemologies and rooted in hidden exploitations. Without disregarding the tremendous destruction and continuous exploitation of Black people in the context of White supremacy, perhaps Robinson’s work, via his critique of traditional historiographies, opens the space to reorient history, to reorient our radicalisms, and to reorient ourselves toward a new type of global radicalism: one that centers and de-centers, one where the periphery is always at the center.

If we are to discuss Robinson and Said in the context of exploitation and oppression, we are presented with the challenge of providing a definition for these terms. Generally, we mean the way in which racialized and gendered constructs are employed to take labor, wealth, and resources from people and to deny people their autonomy, land and history. When discussing exploitation and oppression, it is difficult to provide a total framework for what we mean by these frequently employed terms. The presumption that a master framework is conceivable relies on the notion that all oppressed people experience oppression similarly. By exploitation and oppression, we

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<sup>29</sup> West, Cornel. "Black Radicalism and the Marxist Tradition." *Monthly Review* 40, no. 4 (09, 1988): 51. doi:10.14452/mr-040-04-1988-08\_5.

mean the systems in place in the United States that result in settlement of indigenous lands, polarizing wealth inequality, mass incarceration, and urban displacement and their specific impact on Black communities and other racialized communities. Consequently, we also mean exploitations through U.S. foreign policy resulting in military force, resource extraction, and multinational trade by which communities around the globe are oppressed and by which even marginalized people in the United States are complicit with and benefit from. Furthermore, within these specific zones of racialized exploitation, there exists gendered exploitations unique to each zone. To provide a single definition of exploitation and oppression then would be reductive and essentialize the experiences of distinct peoples.

We do not seek to employ Robinson and Said as new patriarchs, presenting new master narratives, but as offering launching pads by which different communities can dismantle hegemonic historiography. By resting Robinson and Said side by side, we can reveal the functions that racial constructions and the epistemology founded on Europe and later America as the subject of a Eurocentric history, driven by and rationalized through racializations, have played in the development of racist capitalist regimes.

As Robin D.G. Kelley wrote in his foreword to the reissue of *Black Marxism*, “we needed new histories willing to adopt a more global perspective...In short, we needed a clearer, more radical understanding of the past in order to chart the way forward.”<sup>30</sup> And as H.L.T. Quan astutely notes, “*Black Marxism* sought not so much to reinvent a past, a

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<sup>30</sup> Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

task more fitted to fictional writing, as to re-imagine a past that would provide a theoretical edifice of radical thought which twenty years ago, had little or no record of the participation of our particular ancestors.”<sup>31</sup> In constructing new historiographies, we can aim, as Said urged in his lecture at York University to develop “new critical consciousness, a kind of counter-discourse to empire.” If scholars, activists, and communities are going to engage in centering their specific struggles, Robinson and Said provide visions for how that may be accomplished.

### **Robinson on the Birth of Capitalism**

The opening passage of Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* stakes his central claim, that “(t)he historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism.”<sup>32</sup> Both Said and Robinson trace the roots of racial antagonism in Europe to the ancient world, to the Greco-Roman conceptions of barbarians. Robinson argues that primitive accumulation begins in Europe with the enslavement of Europeans and others racially-marked as different, creating the intellectual and cultural foundation for a particularly capitalist racial imaginary.

Robinson’s history of capitalism does not begin in the factories of Europe or with the enclosure of the commons, but in the 12th and 13th century with the economically and culturally devastated regions closest to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>33</sup> These regions

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<sup>31</sup> Quan, H. L. T. "Geniuses of Resistance: Feminist Consciousness and the Black Radical Tradition." *Race & Class* 47, no. 2 (10 2005): 39-53. doi:10.1177/0306396805058081.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, 16.

had lost their significance with the fall of the Western Roman Empire and only regained economic viability via long-distance trade predicated around the Mediterranean. He goes on to detail how the most precious cargo of 13th century Mediterranean trade was human cargo, used primarily as domestic slaves but also as agricultural and mine labor in Spain, Cyprus, Crete, Asia Minor and Palestine.<sup>34</sup> This historical manifestation of slavery was multiracial and as “the tendency...through capitalism was not to homogenize but to differentiate, to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial ones,’”<sup>35</sup> European racializations took form.

It appears that for Robinson, feudalism is not supplanted by an exogenous capitalism but rather, its mechanisms and weaknesses birthed capitalism. The feudal state’s inability to sustain itself placed a primacy on the role of the merchant, creating a bourgeois class that, as it increased in wealth, would discipline the old order. With the rise of capitalism, the mystifications of the feudal era would give way to new ones, namely race as “the rationalization for domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of non-‘European’ (including Slavs and Jews).”<sup>36</sup>

### **Race in a Capitalist Setting**

Robinson explores the further rationalization of racism in a capitalist setting as a means of perpetuating capitalism and destroying the potential for a universal worker solidarity. He identifies forms of nationalism and xenophobia in the English working class of the 19th century and their relationship to the Irish-immigrant worker. Hailing

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 26.

from an economically dependent colony of England, Irish workers supplied 19th-century English industry with the cheapest and most intense labor. This low market value of Irish labor was rationalized by the belief by English employers that the Irish descended from an inferior race.<sup>37</sup> Robinson identifies the Chartist movement of the mid-1800s as a period of cooperation between English and Irish workers against the forces of capitalism.

Momentary solidarity, he argues, is crushed by violent repression on the part of the English government, but also by the expansion and growth of English capitalism. The racial dynamic of capitalism provided the English worker with perks that were inaccessible to the Irish worker in the hierarchy of a racialized “world system.”<sup>38</sup> Exploited by the modes of production, solidarity among the Irish and English working class dissipated. The English worker identified the Irish worker, much like native workers in any contemporary setting view the foreign worker, as a “depressive element in the labor market.”<sup>39</sup> The function of racial difference here for the bourgeoisie and the worker is instructive: it serves as a rationalization for further exploitation of the reserve labor and as a source of animosity between workers. Capitalism, as Robinson shows through the English-Irish example, perpetuates racial antagonisms.

The existence and function of racial antagonism between workers problematizes Marx’s conception of the proletariat. Racial distinctions and hierarchies strain the notion of an ontologically-coherent proletariat; the pseudo-scientific distinctions between the races further solidify grounds for cross-worker antagonism. As we have seen, racial

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

inferiority in the English-Irish case justified lower wages and poorer working conditions for the Irish, depreciating the value of labor in the capitalist system. Taken to the next step, the construction of a wholly inferior, subhuman race would serve as a rationale for the institution of a specifically racialized slavery.

### **Said on the Orient and Rationalizing Empire**

Said's *Orientalism* is in large part a response to a Western political and geographic hegemony which he feels operates as an epistemological lens, broadly of the West, produces knowledge that represents the Orient and the corporate institutions which "by making statements about it, [authorize] views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it."<sup>40</sup> Said's analysis is largely about art, but his aim is much greater, he aims to demonstrate how it is that racialized understandings of diverse groups justifies their subjugation.

Said begins from the position that the Orient as geographic or cultural place, does not exist, neither does its opposite the Occident (the West or Europe). Instead both of these concepts are constructed by people. The Orient and the Oriental he argues, is constructed by and for the West.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the function of the Orient, he argues, cannot be discussed without an analysis of the relationship between the Europe and the Orient. That relationship is marked by "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

The construction of the Oriental according is about conflating diverse groups into an inferior population, ripe for exploitation. As he writes “(t)he important thing was to dignify simple conquest with an idea, to turn the appetite for more geographical space into a theory about the special relationship between geography on the one hand and civilized or uncivilized peoples on the other.”<sup>43</sup> This dignification of conquest, Said argued, occurred through Orientalist discourse by which Western thought represented Orientals to be a race of people, generally indistinct from each other who were illogical, fatalistic, and unable to comprehend self-rule.

Said argues that Orientalism’s potency of this racialization is in its capacity to dismiss autonomy, be it in the form of political conservatism, liberalism, or insurrection. Orientalism is as much about recasting, as it is about erasing the identity of disparate groups and reducing them under one, essentializing banner.

[...] when Orientals struggle against colonial occupation, [the Westerner] must say...that Orientals have never understood the meaning of self-government the way “we” do. When some Orientals oppose racial discrimination while others practice it, you say “they’re all Orientals at bottom” and class interest, political circumstances, economic factors are totally irrelevant. [...] History, politics, and economics do not matter.<sup>44</sup>

Not only does the political autonomy of the Oriental not matter, but the Oriental is incapable of rational intellectual production in the domains of history, politics, and economics. This type of essentialism has direct implications for Western political and financial dealings with the Orient and followed to its logical progression, would travel

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 73.

with individuals who migrate to the West. If the Oriental is perceived as “all Orientals at bottom” then their core is incapable of internalizing Western norms, which in the context of the Westerner are the most advanced product of human civilization.

### **Racial Construction**

Robinson and Said set out to deconstruct the Eurocentric traditions and racial constructions that respectively abetted capitalist and imperialist exploitations. Robinson’s unique insight, that essentializing the Other, was both necessitated by and permeated through capitalism, complements Said’s *Orientalism*. Together they provide reconcilable analyses of racial capitalism and inequality both on a local and a global scale.

In reading Europe’s essentializing of Africans, Robinson turns to Hegel, whom he quotes as critical of European-American enslavement of Africans as “bad,” yet still imagined the position of the African in his native land as worse, existing in a perpetual state of slavery and as a “mere Thing...an object of no value.” This portrait of the African is one that is not fully human. Hegel’s view on Africa was no better, as he described it as “....no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” For Hegel, Africa was ahistorical; any semblance of civilization in Africa belonged to the “Asiatic or European world.”<sup>45</sup> This construction relies on a dichotomy of the European world and the non-European world, the fully human and the unrealized human.

Said identifies a similar trend, by analyzing the work of two late 19th-century British imperialists, Lord Balfour and Lord Cromer. Even in the relatively modern era,

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<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73.

their understanding of the Orient is predicated on a kind of “general theory” that held “Orientals were almost everywhere the same.” Said uncovers in their description of the Oriental, that he is “irrational, depraved...childlike, ‘different’ thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’”<sup>46</sup> Like in Robinson’s reading, the standard for the fully developed and realized human is again the European. Thus the subjugation of the Other is a rationalized necessity.

That these racialized categorizations were different is not the issue, but that they served to rationalize Western subjugation of the Africa and the Middle East is. Robinson traces the role of the Atlantic slave labor as central to the development of capitalism and the construction of the “Negro” as the pinnacle of Othering, and whose exploitation would not end with slavery but would continue into the future “[a]s peasants, as tenant farmers, as migrant laborers, as day laborers, as domestic servants, and as wage labor, their expropriation extended into the present century.”<sup>47</sup>

Like Robinson, Said follows his theory to the present, in Western (American, British, French) foreign policy toward the Global South. Constructions of the Other function to legitimize politics surrounding “issues [such] as immigration laws, the legislation of personal conduct, the constitution of orthodoxy, the legitimization of violence...and the direction of foreign policy, which very often has to do with the designation of official enemies.”<sup>48</sup>

By assessing Robinson and Said side by side, we can reveal the functions that racial constructions and the epistemology founded on Europe and America as the

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<sup>46</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 332.

Subject of a Eurocentric history, driven by and rationalized through racializations have played in the development of racist capitalist regimes.

### **Said and Robinson's History**

In an attempt to reorient our interpretation of history and explore the limitations of European radicalism, Robinson breaks with traditional historiographies of the development of capitalism and racism. He emphasizes the role of "Islamic" (i.e., Arab, Persian, Turkish, and African) domination of Mediterranean civilization and the consequent retarding of European social and cultural life (the Dark Ages) as well as the subsequent introduction of non-European slave labor into the world systems of mercantilism and capitalism. He also pays close attention to colonization, slavery, and racism as a force that produces labor reserve for capitalism.<sup>49</sup> In Robinson's story, the African is the Subject of history, not an encounter in the story of European flourishing. To do so, Robinson stresses that history cannot be left to "revolve around...or originate from Europe as its center."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps it is at this juncture that we can bring Robinson and Said together.

In his landmark book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said identified Orientalism as both a "field of learned study" and also a "kind of intellectual power" that distinguishes the West as superior to the East and preemptively provides an epistemological framework that functioned to deepen and harden the distinction.<sup>51</sup> As a lens, Orientalism could be subjected to "imperialism, positivism, utopianism, historicism, Darwinism, racism,

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<sup>49</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 67.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>51</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 42.

Freudianism, Marxism...” and so on, informing all of these models with an inherently Eurocentric and teleological worldview that provided the grounds for an *a priori* Orientalist discourse that rationalized European imperialism and domination of the East as an inevitability of history.

As Robin Kelley mentions in his foreword to *Black Marxism*, Robinson begins his decentered history in Europe, because the racialization and construction of an ahistorical “Negro” begins there. In *Orientalism*, Said locates the cultural and intellectual manufacturing of the ahistorical Oriental in a “sovereign Western consciousness.” Where Robinson follows the material history of racial capitalism, Said elucidates the knowledge-producing mechanisms that gave it life and sustained it. That Said’s work is a response to European imperialism and foreign policy in the Middle East and Robinson’s work is primarily concerned with the African diaspora is of note, yet they are linked by their discourse on populations that were racially-marked and Othered by Western discourse and subjugated by Western capitalism. Robinson made note of these intersections when he wrote of European development’s labor needs being met by the exploitation of African, Asian, and Native American bodies.<sup>52</sup> A similar theme was later identified by Said in an opinion piece about the civilian cost of the Iraq sanctions: “Against this backdrop [slavery, Jim Crow, segregation] it is no wonder that as non-Europeans the Arabs, Muslims, Africans, and a handful of unfortunate others receive so poor a treatment in terms of US foreign policy.” He continues to expound on the role that knowledge production holds in unraveling layers of oppression:

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<sup>52</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73.

I would stipulate across the Arab world that every university require its students to take at least two courses not in American history, but in American non-white history. Only then will we understand the workings of US society and its foreign policy in terms of its profound, as opposed to its rhetorical, realities.<sup>53</sup>

These commonalities can then be a source of inspiration and solidarity; Said continues, “we should then be able to draw sustenance from the struggle of the African-American people to achieve equality and justice. We share a common cause with them against injustice.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Black Radical Tradition**

At this point, mention must be made of Robinson’s “Black Radical Tradition.” To discuss Robinson without this major aspect of his work would be inadequate. By arguing that Marxist historiography, as a Western historiography, is largely silent on Africa, Robinson shows that it is silent of forms of radicalism and resistance that are rooted in an African experience, that survived the slave trade in the bodies of enslaved people and that persists in communities throughout the African diaspora.

Robinson locates a radical tradition of resistance in the enslaved Blacks’ African past. He notes that slave ships contained not only human bodies, but also “African cultures, critical mixes, and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality.”<sup>55</sup> This resolutely African humanity would form the basis of Black resistance in the New World. It would permeate through the

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<sup>53</sup> "Reflections on American Injustice." Al-Ahram Weekly | Opinion | Reflections on American Injustice. Accessed March 15th, 2016. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2000/470/op3.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 12.1

ages and through its encounter with other cultures. Every act of Black resistance would, in some form or other, hold the DNA of this Black Radical Tradition.

Additionally, if as Robinson argues, capitalism requires racial protocols to persist, and if Marxist historiography is largely silent on the formation and function of these protocols as they relate to non-Europeans, then as a response to capitalism, Marxism is insufficient. The silence on non-European history, the centering of Western historiography, and the erasure of non-Western autonomy only serves to compound the problems posed by capitalism as alternative forms of resistance cannot be located in histories that are not told.

Said's *Orientalism* can provide us with an example of how these racialized categories are constructed, upheld, and maintained through various mediums of communication. His work also demonstrates the link between cultural knowledge production and policies that result in domination and exploitation. Robinson's analysis of racial construction and its function in the development of capitalism as well as its integral role in operationalizing it, provides us with a framework by which we may analyze the construction and economic function of other racial groupings. Neither Said or Robinson provide ready-made templates that we can simply transfer to other contexts, but they provide procedures which others can follow along with careful scholarship rooted in the communities to which they belong. As capitalism has transitioned toward a globally-dispersed, highly-financialized economic system, so too must our radicalisms be prepared to reorient themselves. This is not to say that the notion of a Black Radical Tradition is obsolete, just the opposite, we must uncover multitudes of radical traditions to address myriad oppressions rooted in racism.

## Limitations and Possibilities of Orientalism and Black Marxism

If our project is to develop a framework for analysis and radicalism around *Orientalism* and *Black Marxism* both texts should be analyzed for their weaknesses and limitations. These limitations may provide future scholars with areas in which they may deepen or broaden work in the field of political theory. In the case of *Orientalism*, Said offers an analysis of how cultural productions uphold imperialism. But his brief and rather cursory engagements with the work of Marx leaves much to be desired and may be characterized at best as an incomplete reading of Marx or a misrepresentation. With regard to *Black Marxism*, as a text that aims to decenter dominant, Western narratives on the left and seeks provide a counter narrative, little is done to address gender (say more here).

As a theory of how imperialist systems are justified and maintained through the production of certain types of knowledge and as a book that opens with a quote from Karl Marx's *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *Orientalism* offers a rather insufficient analysis of any economic mechanism or theory. Said's quotation of Marx is rather crude epigraph that suits the overall theme of his book but distorts Marx's work. Said uses "(t)hey cannot represent themselves; they must be represented[,]" as a framing device for his text that alludes to the idea that Western scholars remove agency from the Oriental and represent history through a Western perspective or more specifically that critics like Marx must represent those incapable of representing themselves. Yet if we return to the original text, the passage from which Said quotes is an analysis of the French social order during the reign of Louis Bonaparte, in which Marx elucidates the contradictions between the representation of the political struggle and the the real-

existing conditions and class incoherence of the French peasantry.<sup>56</sup> Taking this quotation out of context is certainly problematic, the bit that Said relies on appears to be a good framing device for the thesis of his book, but if intended as evidence for his work, any scholar who looks just beneath the surface sees this fallacious usage as a mischaracterization of Marx's work.

Said engages with Marx briefly once more when he refers to *The British Rule in India and The Further Results of British Rule in India*, in which according to Said, Marx's view of Asian economic processes is dependent on Orientalist hegemony. Said argued that despite Marx's recognition of colonization as a cruel practice, he held to the "the idea that even in destroying Asia, Britain was making possible there a real social revolution...even though Marx's...sympathy for the misery of people, are clearly engaged...in the end it is the Romantic Orientalist vision that wins out."<sup>57</sup> Said's engagement to Marx here is a discursive analysis in which he identifies Orientalist themes in Marx's work. If we read the text through the lens that Said provides, then we come to the same conclusion: Marx does in fact argue that the contradictions introduced by British colonization of India and the regions "despotic" history provide the grounds for an upheaval of the social order. But a Marxist reading does not render colonization of India to be a liberatory endeavor but instead one pursuant of the capitalist aims of acquiring resources and monopolizing new markets. Marx recognizes that capitalist

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<sup>56</sup> Marx's quote is as follows: "They [the French peasantry] are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself."

<sup>57</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 153

expansion into India is revolutionary in the sense that he views capitalism as revolutionary mode of production that upends the social order, but it remains deeply exploitative. But Indian Marxists frequently quote, Marx was clear that Indians will not benefit from colonization or capitalism until “*the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the British yoke altogether. At all events, we may safely expect to see, at a more or less remote period, the regeneration of that great and interesting country.*”<sup>58</sup> In this way, Marx’s text appears to be ambivalent to Orientalist history in that it ascribes historical agency for progress to Indians and not the British. Having never traveled to Asia and relying primarily on European accounts of India, Marx was certainly not immune to Orientalist hegemony and his work is not free of these tropes, but in omitting the nuance Said cheapens his usage of Marx’s text.

This looseness with Marx is coupled with the notion that Said is himself essentializing the Middle East and its relationship to Marxism, this argument comes that comes from Arab Marxist scholars. The summary of this that Orientalism as a text is geographically essentialist. Articulated by Gilbert Achcar in *Marxism, Orientalism, and Cosmopolitanism*,

This [essentialist critique] was underlined by Said’s Oriental Marxist critics—al-’Azm, ‘Amil, Samir Amin, and Aijaz Ahmad—who all reproached him for adhering to a construction of the West that postulates a continuity from Ancient Greece to the present-day United States, and for positing that true knowledge of the Orient is beyond the reach of Western minds, thus pandering to Oriental ethnocentrism and their own mythical representation of their communities.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Karl Marx, “The Future Results of British Rule in India”, as cited by Indian Marxist D. D. Kosambi. Kosambi, D. D. "On The Class Structure of India." Exasperating Essays. Accessed January 22, 2017. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kosambi/exasperating-essays/x01/1954.htm>.

<sup>59</sup> Achcar, Gilbert. *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2013, 37.

Therefore, this dismissal of the entirety of Marxism as Orientalist, relies on the very construction of an East-West binary that Said rails against, entrenching ethnocentrism and leaving a Marxist analysis out of the realm of possibility for would-be authentic intellectuals grounded in their communities. This critique would be stronger if Said's work was a direct critique of Marxism, but instead, Said treats Marxism rather casually and deals primarily with literature, art, and colonial correspondences.

Some scholars have pointed to the fact that Orientalism does not deal explicitly with feminism, while others argue that despite not setting out to be, it is an accidental feminist text. This claim is made most notably and emphatically by Sondra Hale in *Edward Said - Accidental Feminist: Orientalism and Mideast Women's Studies*. Hale points to Said's work exposing the oversexed, eroticized image of the Oriental women in 19th European century literature and art. More incisively, she argues that *Orientalism* asks an implicit question: why do women figure so prominently in Western domination of the Middle East?<sup>60</sup> Hale is clear that Said did not set out to be a feminist, not did he actively engage with feminist theory, but that feminist scholars have engaged the text as if through "Braille" to feel for its insights on gender and sexuality, and to find launching pads for further analysis. One example of a scholar who has taken the task of building on Orientalism from a feminist perspective is Maryam Khalid. In *Gendering Orientalism: Gender, sexuality, and race in post- 9/11 global politics*, she argues that a feminist reading of Orientalism elucidates the ways in which gender and racial binaries are constructed and deployed through policy like the War on Terror.

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<sup>60</sup> Hale, Sondra. "Edward Said—Accidental Feminist: Orientalism and Middle East Women's Studies." *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 1 (01 2005): 4. doi:10.17953/amer.31.1.e183116

The most glaring weakness in Black Marxism is in its analysis of gender, either in the work of scholars or as a place of resistance. In introducing the concept of racial capitalism, Robinson problematizes Marxist historiography as Eurocentric and silent on the construction of racial protocols. Despite providing passing remarks, Robinson is relatively quiet about gender. As literature scholar Boyce Carol Davies notes, this is most noticeable in the three scholars he identifies as representative of the Black Radical Tradition: C.L.R. James, W.E.B. DuBois, and Richard Wright, three men.<sup>61</sup> By rendering the three landmarks of the Black Radical tradition men, Robinson omits the contributions to the Black Radical Tradition of women. When writing *Black Marxism*, the work of Claudia Jones' 1949 text "An End to the Neglect of The Problems of The Negro Woman!" was available and would have provided a radical text by a Black woman that problematizes Marxism and Marxist organizations' relationship to women on the basis of race and gender. Writing in the early 80s, Robinson was certainly aware of scholar and activist Angela Davis, who he mentions in a list of scholars, but by the time of his writing there had been countless interviews with the former political prisoner and three works in her bibliography that engaged Marxism and Black resistance in the United States. Considering that Robinson remarks that Marxism erases both race and gender, his argument is problematized by his erasure.

In *Geniuses of Resistance*, HLT Quan offers the caveat that while *Black Marxism* does not explicitly include the work of female scholars, it is an open text that allows for other theorists to use a similar methodology as a "point of departure." Furthermore,

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<sup>61</sup> Davies, Carole Boyce. "A Black Left Feminist View on Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism." AAIHS. Accessed November 20th, 2016.. <http://www.aaihs.org/a-black-left-feminist-view-on-cedric-robinsons-black-marxism/>.

Quan warns that the inclusion or representation of women in a text, does not render the text feminist.<sup>62</sup> She also points out that Robinson notes the role that many women played in forming the Black Radical Tradition throughout history, and that when history is evaluated we find women “in fact jousting with the most powerful economic forces in the country’, with the capitalist world system, whether in the embodiment of the Poor Clares of Medieval Europe, the Nanny of Barbados, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Aida Walker or the National Association of Colored Women.”<sup>63</sup> What the text is successful in doing, she argues, is in providing “the grammar of our cognitive map for considering gender as an infrastructure of resistance.”<sup>64</sup> The challenge, she argues is up to future scholars to co-conspire, many of whom already have been in the engaged in the work decentering both European and masculinist historiography, in scholarly work of resistance.

It must be stressed that both texts are highly specific in their endeavors and the historical phenomena they seek to analyze. As such, neither *Black Marxism* nor *Orientalism* provide a ready-made template that translates to their unintended subjects. To do so, would be to impose on the text an unwarranted responsibility and on the subjects the hegemony of foreign and ill-fitting analysis. If anything they provide us with examples of how we may unravel historiographies that undergird the logics of oppression.

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<sup>62</sup> Quan, *Geniuses of Resistance*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

The 21st century has witnessed the unquestioned supremacy of late capitalism. It holds coercive power over nation states; it generates increased inequality within nations and around the globe. It can, today, exploit everywhere at once. The poorest countries in the world reside in the Global South. Of the twenty poorest countries in the world, seventeen are in Africa; the rest are elsewhere in the Global South. Of the hundred poorest countries in world, over 95 percent are in the Global South. In the United States, Blacks, Latinos, and Indigenous people have poverty rates that greatly exceed the national average. Poverty and income inequality are only two metrics we can employ to get a sense of oppression. The aforementioned populations are at greater risk for health-related issues, violence, and incarceration. The epistemology that imagines capitalism to be neutral serves to rationalize the continued international exploitation and oppression of racially-marked groups. Any radical, emancipatory politics must include a critique of the racist capitalism.

As suggested throughout this work, both texts examined thus far are projects toward critical analyses of the status quo, as well as critiques of widely accepted conceptions of history. The implications of both are broad, but may aid in our ability to analyze the existing social relations and guide us toward a reorienting of radicalism. If we hold that the epistemological justifications for capitalist exploitation, for racialized inequality, and for the economic subjugation of nations are based on a racist epistemology, and that racialized policy decisions by the global powers are rooted in flawed Eurocentrism, then we can step out of these false rationalizations by reorienting our histories and epistemologies to uncover the nature of social relations as they were,

not as they were obscured. A reorienting of history will vanish neither racism nor capitalist exploitation, but can provide new epistemological bases to challenge the existing order.

A reoriented radicalism cannot bunker itself down in new essentialisms, something that Said termed “the seductive degradation of knowledge,” to fabricate prejudiced pseudo-sciences.<sup>65</sup> The historical, cultural, and psychological effects of racial capitalism’s oppressions are varied upon the distinct histories of humankind, they perpetuate after slavery, after colonialism, and after occupation have ended. The frameworks examined in this paper offer an incomplete, but useful method by which oppressed people can reinterpret their historical significance, deconstruct the premises of exploitation, and collectively challenge the forces of domination.

A reoriented radicalism must take from the frameworks supplied by *Orientalism* and *Black Marxism* and go beyond them toward constant and fluid reorientation. Epistemology must not only be emancipated from Eurocentrism. Perhaps contemporary scholars can engage in theoretical work that reorients other systems of oppression by engaging with the epistemology that undergirds not only capitalism and Western Marxist historiography, but also masculinist history, ableist value-systems, and continue circulating to uncover and unravel all of our exploitations and oppressions. Any less will be a truncated liberation. Emancipation for oppression will not be a product, it will only exist in the process.

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<sup>65</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 328.

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