Black Marxism and the English working class

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Abstract: This article engages with the theoretical contributions of Cedric Robinson's book *Black Marxism* by arguing that racialised differentiation played an important role in capitalism's emergence in England. Drawing on the methodologies of critical historiography used by Robinson in *Black Marxism*, the author discusses how the medieval social order in England was marked by both colonialism and racialism, and the dynamics of these fundamentally influenced the development of agrarian capitalism. She argues that in the context of developments in English historical knowledge since *Black Marxism* was published, fresh applications of Robinson's theoretical and methodological approach to English historiography give important new insights into the emergence of capitalist social relations. For, as Robinson points out, the destruction of the past and the rewriting of history is a fundamental part of the creation of the other, and the endeavour of racial capitalism. Rescuing history from national myth is an important political and emancipatory act, which Robinson's approach empowers us to undertake.

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1. Introduction: racial capitalism and the historiography of *Black Marxism*

In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson provides 'a framework for understanding the general history of capitalism'.[1] Questioning the Marxist assumption of capitalism as a unifying force that would reduce difference and unite the workers of the world, Robinson instead points out that race is foundationally constitutive of capitalism, which works by creating difference. 'The historical development of world capitalism', Robinson explains, 'was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism. This could only be true of the social, psychological and cultural origins of racism both anticipated capitalism in time and formed a piece with those events that contributed directly to its organisation of production and exchange.'[2]

The extractive logics of capitalism require the exploitation of some for the benefit of others, a division that requires the differential allocation of rights, and the logics to justify that differential allocation. As Jodi Melamed summarises:

> 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 – capitalists with the means of

> production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.[3]

Robinson describes how 'Capitalism and racism were historical concomitants. As the executors of an expansionist world system, capitalists required racism in order to police and rationalize the exploitation of workers.'[4] He points out that although it is accurate to think of anti-Black racism as serving to justify slavery and colonialism,[5] this partnership of othering and economic subjugation was not invented in the colonial era but was evident in 'the very beginnings of European civilisation … at the end of the first Christian millennium' with 'the integration of the Germanic migrants with older European peoples'.[6]

Robinson presents evidence for a close relationship between racialism and economic oppression throughout medieval Europe. He defines racialism as 'the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the "racial" components of its elements.'[7] This racialism appeared and was codified in intra-European relations during the feudal period and was fundamental to the organisation of labour under capitalism. This means capitalism emerged from, rather than negated, feudalism.[8] For him:

> Racism … was not simply a convention for ordering the relations of European to non-European peoples but has its genesis in the "internal" relations of European peoples. As part of the inventory of Western civilization it would reverberate within and without, transferring its toll from the past to the present. In contradistinction to Marx's and Engels's expectations that bourgeois society would rationalize social relations and demystify social consciousness, the obverse occurred. The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions.[9]

Robinson gives the racialised framing of the Irish during English colonialism as a key example of this. He points out how the Slavs (a name derived from slave) and Celtic Irish were the internal European other, precedents of the ‘Negro’ in pre-colonial Europe. This cultural logic was then extended beyond Europe through colonisation.

In this piece, I aim to apply the arguments made in *Black Marxism* to another medieval case study that, I believe, works to illustrate the theoretical strength of Robinson’s thesis: the development of agrarian capitalism in England. Robinson agrees with Marx that England plays an important role in the history of capitalism; though he rejects the myopic approach of many Marxist historians (such as Robert Brenner and E.P Thompson[10]) by also pointing out the global dynamics of this emergence for the imperial British state.

For Robinson, as ‘the English working classes were the social basis for Engels's conceptualization of the modern proletariat, and [occupied] a similar place in Marx's thought, their evolving political and ideological character is of signal importance in reckoning the objective basis for Marxist theory.’ Based on this, he devotes an entire chapter to the English working class in *Black Marxism*, focusing specifically on ‘the extent to which racialism affected the class consciousness of workers in England’. [11] This chapter gives a theoretical explanation of how racialised nationalism meant the universalities of class could not be extricated from the particularisms of race.

I use advances in medieval English historiography since the publication of *Black Marxism* in 1983 to extend the empirical base for Robinson’s thesis, with further focus on the case study of capitalism in England. I argue that, just as Robinson asserted, the emergence of capitalism in England was influenced in a most fundamental way by the dynamics emergent at ‘the very beginnings of European civilisation … at the end of the first Christian millennium’ with ‘the integration of the Germanic migrants with older European peoples’.[12] I argue that the shaping of English society by Germanic Anglo-Saxon migrants, and then Norman conquerors, was vital for English capitalist development. As such, I believe the emergence of capitalism in England cannot be fully explained or understood without recourse to Robinson’s work.

With this empirical study, I follow Nikhil Pal Singh’s argument that capitalism has always been ‘built upon extant group-differentiated vulnerabilities as a valuable resource, even as a site for field-testing new forms of social discipline and value extraction’.[13] Race, as Singh points out, drawing on Robinson, Stuart Hall and Adolph Reed, cannot be separated from class: racism is ‘as an ideological production with material force that specifically adheres to, and conserves, capitalism’s combined and uneven development at different intra-national and supra-national scales.’[14] This intervention supports this point by utilising Robinson’s method of, in the words of Travis Tatum, presenting a critical dialectical analysis that attempts to ‘move beyond the myths that are usually taken as history’,[15] by paying attention both to the cultural precursors of capitalism in medieval Europe, and to intra-European racialism.[16] Doing so shows the racialised origins of English class relations and how these were constitutive of the development of capitalism in England.

I argue that the Victorian historiography of England, still widely accepted as historical fact despite wide ranging historical, archaeological and genetic evidence to the contrary, is an example of what Robinson describes as the substitution of racialised founding myths for history, which has led to significant omissions in the understanding of the development of capitalism in England. A historical analysis of medieval England suggests a racialised basis to class relations that aligns to racial capitalism. The successive wave of colonial conquests of England (particularly the Anglo-Saxon and Norman invasions) in the medieval period present racism and nationalism as particularistic precursors for the development of capitalist class relations in England; showing how racialism drove the emergence of the pre-industrial agrarian capitalism described by Ellen Meiksins Wood.[17] In this article I argue that a close historical study of the emergence of capitalism in England contradicts Wood's assertion that 'capitalism is conceivable without racial divisions, but not, by definition, without class'[18] because, unexamined by Wood, the class system she describes has inextricably racialised origins.

Part one of this paper outlined the thesis of *Black Marxism* on the origins of capitalism in Europe. Part two discusses the relationship between racialism and the emergence of capitalism. Part three, methodologically following Robinson, discusses the role of historiography in racialism in England. Part four attempts to displace the 'aeriform theory and self-serving legend' of racialised historiography by exploring the ways racialism shaped feudalism, and ultimately capitalism, in the development of the English economic system. Part five discusses how Robinson's scholarship helps us better understand the emergence of capitalism in England.

2. Racialism and capitalism

Robinson shows in *Black Marxism* how ethnicity and intra-European racialism shaped feudal and slaveholding relationships in medieval Europe, and how capitalism was not a break from this racialised feudal order, but an extension of it:

> The bourgeoisie that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds. The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate - to exaggerate regional, subcultural and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones.[19]

To evidence this, Robinson presents a range of empirical examples illustrating the ethnic and cultural distinctions of serfs, slaves and proto-bourgeoisie from across continental Europe. Robinson points out that feudalism in medieval Europe was organised along lines of ethnic othering, and capitalism was an extension of these feudal social relations, not their negation.[20] This reality is hidden by the consistent focus on the nation and 'national labour pools' in economic and historical analysis.[21]

Medieval slaves were captured from raids on ethnic others within medieval Europe, with Slavs, Tartars or Celts (depending on the time and place) designated as ‘natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation’,[22] ‘prototypes’ for the ‘the Negro’ as ‘a marginally human group, a collection of things of convenience for use and/or eradication.’[23] These logics were expanded, not invented, with colonialism. As such, Atlantic slavery was a continuation of European norms of exploitation, rather than being born at the point of encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans.[24] As Dušan Bjelić points out, ‘African slavery was only a sequence in the history from pre-Columbian European slave capitalism onwards rather than an out-growth of the Americas’ plantation economy’, and as such, the epistemic exclusion of slavery from European capitalism is a rewriting of history without evidential basis.[25]

Emergent bourgeoisies were not simply uniquely talented or industrious peasants, allowed to competitively differentiate themselves by capitalism’s removal of the fetters of feudalism. As Henri Pirenne bluntly states, there is ‘not the slightest proof’ that the bourgeoise ‘grew up little by little in the midst of the agricultural masses’ of Europe.[26] Rather, ‘the bourgeoise that led to the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups’[27] such as the Genoese, Jewish and Florentine merchant class.[28] Drawing on Oliver Cromwell Cox’s *The Foundations of Capitalism*, Robinson describes the vital role ethnic differentiation played in the emergence of key aspects of mercantile capitalism in thirteenth-century Venice; tracing the social and cultural origins of the city state to its status as a settler colony of 'fugitives displaced from the Italian mainland'.[29] This proto-capitalist settler society, later mythologised as 'a city founded in liberty' and 'a republic of wisdom and benevolence'[30] was economically organised around the exploitation of Slavs – the etymological origin of the word 'slave', as Bjelić observes. The medieval Venetian Republic was thus not just the first centre of world capitalism, but 'the first centre of world capitalism as defined by the commercialisation of slavery.'[31] The exploitation and expropriation of disparate peoples through colonialism and the slave trade were vital to the emergence of Venetian capitalism. [32]

Moving forward to the industrial era, during which England became the 'classic soil' of capitalism and 'its chief product … the proletariat',[33] Robinson presents an archetypal case study of the exploitation of Irish labour in England. Robinson draws on myriad evidence of the racialisation of the Irish as other to draw parallels between the role of intra-European racialism within Europe, and the concomitant anti-Blackness of capitalism and colonial violence and slavery in the US and Empire more widely.[34] 'The Irish immigrant', Robinson says, 'was an important element in the industrial English working class … He was, as Thompson describes the Irish worker of the early nineteenth century, "the cheapest labour in Western Europe".' He then goes on to point out the racialism at the base of this economic relation: 'The Irish worker having descended from an inferior race, so his English employers believed, the cheap market value of his labour was but its most rational form.'[35]

In *Black Marxism*, Robinson describes the English colonisation of Ireland, originating in the twelfth century. Friedrich Engels wrote to Karl Marx in 1856 that, with the success of the 1196 invasion, 'Ireland may be regarded as the first English colony'.[36] Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston describe how the colonial experience in Ireland was characterised by the justification of violence against an 'uncivilised' other, and the framing of the Irish as less-than human, so that 'expropriation, Plantation, starvation and genocide' could be rationalised as a necessary and 'positive virtue of civilisation'.[37] The inherent characteristics of the Celtic Irish was emphasised; with a narrative that stressed, as McVeigh and Rolston describe, how the 'Irish are unworthy in almost every way' as 'a most filthy race, a race sunk in vice, a race more ignorant than all other nations of the first principles of the faith.'[38] As such, racialism was an inherent part of English rule over, exploitation of and expropriation from Ireland over a period of eight hundred years. As Robinson describes, 'over the centuries, English colonial rule in Ireland had compelled a host of gestures of segregation' that meant 'whiteness excluded the Irish. The Irish were a subject people'.[39]

Even before European logics of exploitation were extended into the Atlantic world, they were present within Europe. But is it possible, as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues,[40] that this exploitation, so configurative of capitalist social organisation, is conceivable without racial divisions? That is, could capitalism develop without the legitimation and corroboration of oppressive social organisation as natural, by reference to supposedly inherent, biological and inferior features of the oppressed group? Adolph Reed argues against Wood that a 'more pertinent question is whether capitalist societies characteristically depend on regimes of ascriptive differentiation for stabilization of their class regimes,' pointing out that this 'is an empirical question, not a teleological one.'[41] The issue is not if capitalist social organisation is imaginable without racial divisions, but what historical evidence suggests about the actual formulation of capitalist regimes.

As such, empirical studies on the role of ascriptive differentiation in primitive accumulation play an important role in our understanding of the dynamics and emergence of racial capitalism. Here, the case study of England is of particular interest. First, because England, like Venice, is widely recognised as one of the primary sites for the emergence of capitalist social organisation. Indeed, discussion of the English working class is central to *Black Marxism*, because it is central to Marxism. As Marx (problematically) writes:

> Great Britain, of all other countries, has developed on the greatest scale, the despotism of Capital and the slavery of Labour… In no other country, therefore, the war between the two classes that constitute modern society has assumed so colossal dimensions and features so distinct and palpable. But it is precisely from these facts that the working-classes of Great Britain, before all others, are competent and called for to act as leaders in the great movement that must finally result in the absolute emancipation of Labour. Such they are from the conscious clearness of their position, the vast superiority of their numbers, the disastrous struggles of their past, and the moral strength of their present.[42]

Second, because ostensibly, the case study of the English working class, in which an ethnically English proletariat are oppressed and dispossessed by an ethnically English bourgeoisie, offers the most significant support for Wood's thesis that capitalism can exist without racial divisions. Indeed, as Wood's work extensively focuses on the emergence of capitalism in England, it is likely this empirical example plays no small role in her reasoning. To counter this position, I argue that following the methodological principles laid out by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism*, by taking an empirical approach that pays close attention to the dialectics of English historiography; and moving beyond the pragmatic narrative of history as generation of nationalist legend; we can see that ascriptive differentiation was vital to the emergence of capitalism in England.

3. English historiography

In *Black Marxism*, Robinson identifies the important role historiography plays in the development of nationalism as a counter-revolutionary force, given power by the predominance of racialism in European culture. He presents chauvinistic Anglo-Saxonism in England as a primary example of this, drawing on L. Perry Curtis's *Anglo-Saxons and Celts* to show how race politics shaped British identity in the Victorian era. Both Curtis, and subsequently Robinson, place the key identitarian relationship here as being between the English (Anglo-Saxons) and Irish (Celts). A significant amount of work has been produced about the racialised nature of the relationship between the Irish and the English.[43] But here I want to focus on the relationship between the English governing classes and another Celt: the Celtic Briton.

In *Anglo-Saxons and Celts,* Curtis shares substantially from the quintessential version of 'the Anglo-Saxon fairy tale', told by John R. Green's *A Short History of the English People*, first published in 1874. Green tells the Victorian English student of history that 'For the fatherland of the English race we must look far away from England itself' to 'a number of German tribes … destined to share in the conquest of the land in which we live'.[44] Curtis goes on to illustrate how (with my emphasis):

> *The Victorian Anglo-Saxonist … found his explanation for the rise of the British Empire… in the distinctive racial attributes of the English people… the first seeds of… the English Constitution were planted by sturdy Saxon freemen and their racial kindred in tiny communities… between the Elbe and the Rhine … These Saxon or German liberties which the invaders brought with them to their new island home* survived such ordeals as the Norman Conquest, the Wars of the Roses, and the personal rule of both Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, and they had been given a new lease of life by the Revolutionary Settlement of 1688 and after, and by the Reform Act of 1832. *Anglo-Saxonism thus assumed the existence in England of a homogenous people or race who had possessed since time out of mind certain superior mental and physical features, and it took for granted the existence of a remarkable degree of continuity of both blood and institutions between the … Saxons of the fifth century and the modern English people.*[45]

This narrative is part of what Robinson describes as the 'fabrication of national myths' that 'legitimate the social orders that had come into being'.[46] As Robinson incisively puts it:

> Founding myths were substituted for history, providing the appearance of historical narrative to what was in actuality part fact and part class-serving rationales. Endlessly elaborated, these myths were produced by ideologues who identified with the dominant creed and depended upon those classes in the society that possessed power and the capacities to extend social privilege.[47]

Green's national myth of England that begins with the Saxon freemen destined to conquer goes on to cover, albeit dismissively, the people that lived on the British Isles before the Anglo-Saxon arrival. In Green's words:

> the English conquest for a hundred and fifty years was a sheer dispossession and driving back of the people whom the English conquered … no land was so stubbornly fought for or so hardly won. The conquest of Britain was indeed only partly wrought out after two centuries of bitter warfare. But it was just through the long and merciless nature of the struggle that of all the German conquests this proved the most thorough and complete. So far as the English sword in these earlier days reached, Britain became England, a land, that is, not of Britons, but of Englishmen. It is possible that a few of the vanquished people may have lingered as slaves round the homesteads of their English conquerors

> … But doubtful exceptions such as these leave the main facts untouched … the Briton had disappeared from half of the land which had been his own, and the tongue, the religion, the laws of his English conqueror reigned without a rival.[48]

Here Green gives a popular account of what happened to the Celtic Britons of England on the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons: they disappeared. The Britons were either driven to Wales or wiped out by the English sword. This was unquestioned in English history throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and still accepted into the 1980s, when *Black Marxism* was published.

More recent historical contributions, however, have roundly disproven the widely accepted annihilation of the Britons thesis. Large-scale genetic studies conducted in the early twenty-first century show that rather than only a few of the vanquished Britons lingering as slaves, the ancestry of the modern 'ethnic' English is predominantly Celtic British (approximately 60 per cent) and only 30 per cent Anglo-Saxon.[49] Despite Green's claims, and the dominant narrative of English history that is still accepted by the general population, England remains predominantly a land of Celtic Britons, and was throughout the medieval and industrial period. But where are this Celtic British majority in the Anglo-Saxonist historical narrative, and how do we make sense of their disappearance?

4. Reforming English historiography

The Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain, though not discussed in *Black Marxism*, occurred at what Robinson terms the first distinct moment of European racialism: ‘the racial ordering of European society from its formative period, which extends in to the medieval and feudal ages as ‘blood’ and racial beliefs and legends.’[50] In more detail, Robinson describes how:

> At the very beginnings of European civilisation (meaning literally the reappearance of urban life at the end of the first Christian millennium) the integration of the Germanic migrants with older European peoples resulted in a social order of domination from which a racial theory of order emerged; one from which the medieval nobilities would immerse themselves and their power in fictional histories, positing distinct racial origins for rulers and the dominated.[51]

The Germanic Anglo-Saxons first came to Britain as paid mercenaries for a crumbling Roman administration, before plundering the land of their employers.[52] Robinson describes such phenomena in *Black Marxism*, pointing out that mercenary armies drawn from beyond the nation were the norm in a medieval Europe where loyalty to the ruling class from the lower classes was rare.[53] As Green accurately indicated, centuries of warfare followed between the

Anglo-Saxons and Britons, ultimately resulting in the unification of England under Anglo-Saxon rule, and its cultural division from Wales, which remained Celtic British. The racialisation of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic groups was not invented in Victorian times to justify anti-Irish sentiment; it was present from early Anglo-Saxon times, marking relationships between these groups within England. Archaeologist and Historian of the early Medieval period Bryan Ward-Perkins describes post-Roman England as such:

> When they recorded their past, the Anglo-Saxons and the Britons presented themselves as races apart. The Anglo-Saxons learned to speak neither Latin nor Brittonic (the native Celtic vernacular of the Britons), and, unlike their neighbours, they remained for a long time illiterate… their failure, or refusal, to absorb any of the speech of the Britons into their wider language is quite remarkable… The Germanic invaders absorbed very little of the native culture of Britain; and, by an act of supreme arrogance, they even termed the Britons 'wealas', or 'foreigners', in their own island ... when both peoples came to summarize their dealings with each other, the picture is straightforward and consistent. Two distinct and hostile peoples fight for the same territory; one of them comes by ship from overseas, and gradually expands its power by conquest; the other resists, with greater or lesser success, and

> awaits the moment when the invaders can be slaughtered and their defeated remnants driven to their boats and 'sent home' over the sea.[54]

Primary sources from the era emphasise hostility between Anglo-Saxons and Britons, and ‘the broader evidence of failed contacts, in religion and in language, provides strong support for the idea that this perception of difference was no mere literary construct, but was felt (and lived) throughout society.’[55] This hostility is remarkable among the Germanic invasions across Europe, where more integration and equality is generally found between peoples. As described above, the term *Wealh* (or *wealas*) was used by Anglo-Saxons for Britons. This had the dual meaning of both *foreigner* and *slave*. Debby Banham states:

> Originally, it meant a foreigner, principally a Celtic inhabitant of Britain. At some point *wealh* acquired the additional meaning of ‘slave’. This dual meaning must have arisen in a … period in which ‘Briton’ and ‘slave’ were for practical purposes identical.[56]

The significance of the dynamic movement between ‘foreigner’ and ‘slave’ needs no explanation for those familiar with the arguments of *Black Marxism*. As Robinson describes, ‘Negro’ had a similarly dual use in the Elizabethan period, being used to signify slaves of whatever ancestry.[57]

Moving from linguistic to documentary evidence, the *Law Code of Ine*, a surviving Saxon legal document, makes explicit provision for Britons as a distinct ethnic group in Anglo-Saxon England, delineating their legal status as separate to, and lower than, that of the Anglo-Saxons. British life is legislated as being worth less than that of Anglo-Saxon counterparts.[58] Other documentary evidence from both Anglo-Saxon and British myth, legend and literature demonstrates how each group sees themselves as separate from, and in opposition to, one another.[59]

Recent historical studies have suggested that, considering the mass of genetic, legal, linguistic and archaeological evidence, it is most likely that in Anglo-Saxon England, in the words of Nick Higham, 'the mass of unfree population was probably indigenous. In important respects, this society was one which practised Apartheid.'[60] In an analysis of the likely impacts of these Anglo-Saxon apartheid laws on Britons residing in England, historian Alex Woolf describes how:

> In the long run individual British households would, one by one, become bankrupt and break down, with children being sold into slavery or sent to live with relatives as prospect-less hangers-on. In comparison to English districts, British areas would be regions of high production and low consumption, tribute and disproportionate legal costs flowing out and few

> gifts flowing in. The lack of opportunities for young British males… would, perhaps, have encouraged them to leave for British-controlled kingdoms or led to increasing poverty … In this long drawn-out process of economic decline, many individual Britons may have found themselves drifting into Anglo-Saxon households, as slaves, hangers-on, brides and so forth, but they would have come into these communities as one among many. Their ability to impact on the cultural or linguistic identity of the community would have been minimal.[61]

This means that historical evidence emergent since the publication of *Black Marxism* suggests that Anglo-Saxon England was a racialised apartheid state. '[R]acism has in fact been part of English national identity from the beginning', Banham points out,[62] agreeing with Billie Melman's argument that 'the notion of the English people as a Germanic race antecedes modern imperialism and emerges *outside* imperialist discourse … More significant, the evolution of an English identity depends on that of the Celt as anti-type.'[63] However, the origin of the Anglo-Saxon anti-type of the Celt is not the Celtic Irish, but the vanquished and subjugated Celtic Briton. Banham describes the status of the Celtic Briton in Anglo-Saxon lore and law:

> When the Anglo-Saxons arrived in what was to become England, they

> no more entered an empty wilderness than did the first Israelis in Palestine, or the first European settlers in America … The parts of Britain the English took over are presented as virtually blank: no character, no political organisation. Undifferentiated Britons oppose the establishment of English kingdoms, apparently motiveless, intransigent and without a hope of ultimate success. It is the British who are presented as destroying … We might compare their situation to that of the Israelis in Palestine, or early European settlers in North America. Both are notorious for not recognising the full human rights of the existing inhabitants of 'their' land … portrayal of the British [in Anglo-Saxon legend] makes sense as part of a similar ideology … The situation of the Britons seems to have been similar to that, later in the Middle Ages, of the Irish, forced to live under English law, even though it systematically disadvantaged them.[64]

According to Banham, the likely outcome of the Anglo-Saxon apartheid was a period where 'more or less all Britons were slaves. Presumably not all slaves were Britons: there must have been penal slaves and prisoners of war from other groups, but perhaps all slaves unfree by birth were of British descent, or could be assumed to be so. Anyone not unfree by birth would be unwise to emphasise their Celtic heritage.'[65] Over the course of Anglo-Saxon rule, the Britons as a distinct group disappear from the written record, which is largely limited for the early medieval period. The Briton, subjugated and unwise to emphasise their Celtic heritage, is seemingly assimilated into Anglo-Saxon society; though centuries of war and Apartheid of course influenced the structural form of this assimilation.

Then, in the eleventh century, there was another military invasion, from Normandy in France. The Norman Conquest of 1066 was a violent colonial conquest that resulted in an oppressive, deeply hierarchical society that no one could deny was organised on an ethnic and cultural basis. After the conquest, an English king could not even speak the language of England until 1399, and English did not become the official language of the court until 1490, nearly half a millennium later (and three centuries after the English or, more accurately, Norman – invasion of Ireland).[66] From the conquest of England onwards, more than 90 per cent of English land became the property of a handful of Norman fighters, with the previous Anglo-Saxon owners now ruled by Norman landlords.[67] 'The English groaned aloud for their lost liberty and plotted ceaselessly to find some way of shaking off a yoke that was so intolerable and unaccustomed', Orderic Vitalis wrote in the twelfth century.[68]

As Robinson recognises, the idea of the Norman yoke – an economic oppression that was inseparable from ethnicity and group membership – was prominent in English culture and political discourse right up to the nineteenth century, though interestingly, Robinson repeats George Rude's assertion that this is simply a 'myth' without delving into the explicit racialisation it denotes.[69] After the Norman conquest, the previous Anglo-Saxon ruling class became tenants of Norman lords. As Warren Hollister describes:

> The redistribution of the lands of England among the French was both a grant of revenue and a military occupation. The new landholders acquired all the rents and services which their predecessors had enjoyed. In an economic context the change of lords made little difference to the agricultural producers, the farmers and their labourers, the small-holders and the stock breeders. There were many rough actions and misunderstandings … There may have been a general movement to require full economic rents. But the incoming lords, certainly the major barons, were mostly absentees … On most large estates there remained a number of Englishmen in the class between the newcomers and the farmers – 'squires' with modest estates. These were to be the intermediaries, bi-lingual, but with English as the cradle tongue, and often aspiring to marry into the middle or lower strata of Norman society.[70]

The Norman conquest thus created a distinct, three-tier rural class system in England (the historical foundation of the classical English agrarian capitalist tripartite of landlord, capitalist tenant and labourer).[71] This class system was created by the violent oppression and conquest of different ethnic groups: the Norman landlord, Anglo-Saxon tenant and Celtic labourer. Robinson, drawing on Wallerstein, identifies the 'gentry and yeomanry – the wealthiest and less affluent capitalist farmers –as the critical bases for the rise of a capitalist bourgeoisie' in England.[72] Importantly, the origins of this group can broadly be aligned to colonial events and racialised intra-European relations.

Though Robinson does not explicitly discuss the emergence of the English class system from feudalism in *Black Marxism*, the Anglo-Saxon 'intermediaries' between the post-conquest Norman landlords, and majority Celtic British labouring serfs, align closely to the theoretical framing of the ethnic basis of the European bourgeoisies laid out in *Black Marxism*. The fourteenth-century bourgeoises, Robinson states, were 'not the germ of a new order dialectically posited in an increasingly confining host – feudalism – but an opportunistic stratum, wilfully adaptive to the new conditions and possibilities of the times [which] accumulated in the interstices of the state.'[73] And, in the case of England, an opportunistic stratum drawn, as racial capitalism contends, from a particular ethnic and cultural group.

For more evidence to support this argument, it is instructive to look at the words of this emergent bourgeoise themselves. Notably, this group are explicit in describing themselves in ethnic terms. Christopher Hill describes how the English Revolution of 1640 was a class struggle for power waged by the bourgeoise against the landowning aristocracy, prompted by the socio-economic instability caused by the influx of wealth from Atlantic colonialism: a process by which the dispossession and exploitation of racialised peoples in the Americas and Africa increased the dispossession and exploitation of the lower orders in England.[74] The English civil war, from 1642 to 1651, is framed very explicitly by those fighting at the time as an ethnic, as much as economic, struggle: of free-born Anglo-Saxons against the Norman yoke.[75] As Hill writes, the civil war was fought on the terms that:

> Before 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of this country lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions. The Norman conquest deprived them of this liberty, and established the tyranny of an alien King and landlords. But the people did not forget the rights they had lost.[76]

Robinson associates Anglo-Saxonism, and Anglo-Saxon myth-making, with the colonial expansion of the nineteenth century, but Anglo-Saxonism also played a key role in the justifications and framing of the English civil war.[77] Although this earlier Anglo-Saxonism lacked the scientific racialism that marked the nineteenth century,

> There was, however, a definite emphasis on the links between the Anglo-Saxons and their Germanic ancestors. It was well understood that freedom was brought by Germanic tribes from the forests of Germany to the shores of England, and it was in defining links with their Germanic forbears that the English came nearest to describing racial characteristics rather than institutional excellence.[78]

The bourgeois revolution of 1640 was framed by its participants as an Anglo-Saxon revolution.[79] And it was a revolution that, like that of the Norman conquest, left the material conditions of the lower orders of peasants and labourers largely unchanged.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century, as Robinson identifies, was an era of 'overt class warfare and its accompanying persecution' in England.[80] Two things are important to note about this period: one, the ethnic diversity of English radical movements of the time, with leadership and membership drawn from across the labouring subjects of the British Empire, including English, Irish and Black Caribbean workers.[81] And two, that the working classes 'at home' were racialised as 'other' by the English bourgeois intelligentsia in the same way as the colonial subjects of empire were.[82] As Saree Makdisi describes, relationships in England between what we might now think of as 'higher and lower "classes" were, during this period, actually framed as relations between the members of different ethnicities, civilisations, and races'.[83] Racism and empire, Makdisi argues, were not external matters, but 'penetrated England to its very core and helped to define and structure it from within'.[84] The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racialism Makdisi studies is that of the bourgeoisie, who paint both the 'degenerate aristocracy' (of Norman cultural descent) and 'teeming multitudes' (of Celtic British and also immigrant descent) as racialised others.[85] The grouping of the labouring poor of England with wider colonial subjects was commonplace in Victorian social discourse.[86] Such racialist discourse pervaded the language of social class in the era, with the lower classes of 'darkest England' characterised by missionaries as 'heathen and barbarian as the natives of darkest Africa' and the working people of Lancashire considered a separate 'race of beings' by bourgeois visitors;[87] 'savages' that 'had to be made into Englishmen'.[88]

Part of this civilising mission is the removal of the English Celtic Briton from the historical record, a symbolic move that worked to both deny and encompass the lower orders in Anglo-Saxon ideology. The contradictions of this parallel move of a symbolic and historiographic embracing, and material and relational continuation of millennia-long relations of othering, were made easier by the fact that the English working class, bourgeoise and aristocracy were largely isolated from one another, living entirely separate lives well into the twentieth century.[89] Despite the myth of the nation, there was no cohesive English culture or experience that united people across classes: bar that of war, and its creation of an ideological common enemy. E.P. Thompson calls the English worker ‘a total exile’ from ‘the society he supported’.[90] Notably, Thompson, writing in 1963, describes the complete separation of the worker from his bourgeois and aristocratic countrymen such: ‘In the decades after 1795 there was a profound alienation between classes in Britain, and working people were thrust into a state of apartheid whose effects – in the niceties of social and educational discrimination – can still be felt to this day.’[91] Nigel Young describes the cultural polarisation of nineteenth-century England in similar terms, as a ‘class cultural apartheid’ in which ‘deference was still the typical style of interaction across caste-like boundaries’.[92] Young explains how this segregation meant that possessive individualism,[93] a normative philosophy foundational to capitalism and strongly associated with the (Anglo-Saxon) English intellectual tradition, failed to make inroads into (Celtic) English working class culture. The working class instead retained distinct and different ways of being and understanding to the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoise, based on this separation, and the historical socialisation of the pre-capitalist feudal experience, rather than a new and emancipatory, ‘conscious clearness of their position’ as the mirror of production:[94]

> It is fairly clear that the doctrines of laissez-faire and self-help individualism, with their stress on competitive striving and mobility, did not gain a hold in the working class and that a collectivist culture was insulated from these ideas by its communal institutions and a continuing situation of separation which remained somewhat analogous to a feudal estate.[95]

It is in this context that the racial Anglo-Saxon historiography of ‘the English’ is produced, with ‘the English’ understood by Curtis (the author of *Anglo-Saxons and Celts*) as ‘the Victorian governing classes’ and ‘educated Victorians’.[96] It is notable here that Curtis is a historian based in the US, and the separateness of the English working classes and their exclusion from Victorian England’s intellectual life, means for historians using literary or intellectual sources, it is easy to use ‘the English’ and ‘the Victorian governing classes’ and ‘educated Victorians’ interchangeably (just as it is easy to use ‘the English’ and ‘the Normans’ interchangeably when talking about the invasion of Ireland): indeed, it is just this concomitant erasure of the Celtic Briton and the working class that Anglo-Saxon historiography, and its ‘invisible Britons’ intended to achieve.[97] Robinson himself identifies this problem, writing about the prevalence of racism in Elizabethan England in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*: ‘The sparseness of the evidence in the absence of public opinion surveys bespeaks a problem in historical methodology – after all, we are being asked to accept the notion that the words of "educated men" reflected an English consensus.'[98]

Anglo-Saxon historiography declared that the racially inferior 'Ancient Britons' had been wiped out – 'ethnically cleansed'[99] – with maybe a few insignificant numbers left as slaves, so the Anglo-Saxons could achieve their manifest destiny. Howard Williams argues that the writing of the Briton out of English history was thus an intentional part of the development of Anglo-Saxonism and colonial capitalism:

> rather than being merely a passive omission, within the socio-political context of mid-nineteenth century Britain, this 'forgetting' of the Britons was integral to [the] attribution of … Teutonic supremacy, which would then set the stage for the emergence of the distinctive Anglo-Saxon culture and society to which Victorian Britain looked for the foundations of its civilisation, at home and abroad.[100]

Nationalist Anglo-Saxonism thus serves to both render the exploited English working classes as conveniently invisible, while also creating the conditions to demand ethnic solidarity from those working classes against those others (such as Irish and Black Caribbeans) whose leadership and class solidarity had posed such a threat to English capitalist order in working-class movements such as the

Chartists and Spencerian radicals.[101] As Robinson points out, the destruction of the past and the rewriting of history is a fundamental part of the creation of the other, and the endeavour of racial capitalism. As such, rescuing history from national myth is an important political and emancipatory act, which Robinson's methodological approach empowers us to undertake.

5. Colonialism, racialism and the emergence of capitalism

In *Black Marxism*, Robinson stresses the importance of the European medieval past in understanding the development of capitalism. However, the limitations of English historiography, and the process – also identified by Robinson – by which 'founding myths were substituted for history'[102] elide the role that racialism played in the development of capitalism in England. In this piece, I have tried to show how the analytical power of racial capitalism can be applied to English historiography to better understand why, and how, capitalism arose in England, and why accepted narratives of English history do not account for the racialised nature of English capital development.

As Robinson describes, the capitalist exploitation of labour required and rested upon the construction of both the Black African and Irish labourer as a racial other, 'a marginally human group', with 'no civilisation, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place and finally no humanity that might command consideration.'[103] Yet alongside all the racialised others of capitalism, the ostensibly Anglo-Saxon English working classes appeared to be an example of what Wood saw as class without race. This changes if we look at the development of capitalism in England empirically, and do not treat Victorian historiography as fact, but accept it for what it is: nationalist myth. As contemporary historical, genetic, linguistic and archaeological studies show, the development of English socio-economic relationships through the medieval period, and the rewriting of history in the colonial era, were racialised in England; just as they were in the British Empire more widely. As Robinson observes, this requires us to move beyond unexamined western archetypes and 'perceive that the nation is not a unit of analysis for the social history of Europe. The state is bureaucratic in structure and the nation for which is administers is more a convenient construct than the historical, racial, cultural and linguistic entity that the "nation" signifies.'[104]

Following the tenets of racial capitalism, the invasion and rule over Celtic Britons by first the Anglo-Saxon, then the Norman ruling classes, help explain why capitalism took hold in certain forms in England, rather than among Italian merchants, Spanish *conquistadors* or the joint-stock companies of the Netherlands. As Wood points out, the strong centralised state created by the Norman conquest, and the tripartite relationship of landlord (a Norman derived group), tenant (an Anglo-Saxon derived group) and labourer (a Briton derived group) that the Anglo-Saxon and Norman conquests created – particularly the centrality that rental values came to play in these hierarchical economic relationships, and the comparative ease with which English peasant-labourers (unlike their continental counterparts) could be dispossessed – were fundamental in setting the conditions for the emergence of capitalism in England. [105]

The English social hierarchy, rooted in racialism, did this by ensuring that the domestic socio-economic impacts of colonialism manifested through the creation of *capital*, rather than simply *wealth* for the bourgeoisie and upper classes, as was seen in other colonial European states such as Spain and Portugal. Wood, without recognising the racial elements of this, explains how the English colonial experience shaped the conditions for the emergence of capitalism:

> In the sixteenth century, England - already more unified than most in the eleventh century, when the Norman ruling class established itself on the island as a fairly cohesive military and political entity - went a long way toward eliminating the fragmentation of the state, the 'parcellized sovereignty' inherited from feudalism … land in England had for a long time been unusually concentrated, with big landlords holding an unusually large proportion of land. This concentrated landownership

> meant that English landlords were able to use their property in new and distinctive ways … the concentration of English landholding meant that an unusually large proportion of land was worked not by peasant-proprietors but by tenants … Landlords had a strong incentive, then, to encourage - and, wherever possible, to compel - their tenants to find ways of increasing their output. As for the tenants themselves, they were increasingly subject not only to direct pressures from landlords but to market imperatives which compelled them to enhance their productivity … a growing number were subject to economic rents, that is, rents not fixed by some legal or customary standard but responsive to market conditions ...The effect of the system of property relations was that many agricultural producers (including prosperous 'yeomen') were market-dependent, not just in the sense that they were obliged to sell produce on the market but in the more fundamental sense that their access to land itself, to the means of production, was mediated by the market. [106]

Wood goes on to describe how this exposure to market imperatives – created by racialised colonialism – led to intensified exploitation by capitalist gentry and yeomen, 'new forms and conceptions of property' in England, and enlarged and concentrated landholding.[107] These innovations in property, and requirement for large and concentrated landholdings, alongside the influx of money from slavery and colonialism abroad, drove the enclosures, which dispossessed thousands of the peasants who had previously lived in the estates owned and farmed by their ‘betters’. These dispossessed then either provided cheap and plentiful labour for the nascent factory system (paid for by colonialism and plantation slavery); or were transported to the colonies as ‘white servants’, convicts, or willing migrants lured by the promise of access to land. As this political and economic organisation was rooted in colonial events and exploitation based on racialised groupings, the engineering of the particular social and cultural soil in which capitalism could grow from feudalism in England can be seen as a direct manifestation of racial capitalism. Using broad brushstrokes, after 1066 medieval England had three economic groups: a conquering aristocracy, a dispossessed tenant class, and the labouring peasantry that worked the land. These groups were based on ethnic and cultural differences that, as Reed argues, were dependent on regimes of ascriptive differentiation, that originated in the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism embedded in European feudal society. The particularistic forces of relation between these groups were a direct contributory factor to the development of agrarian capitalism.

I have attempted to extend the arguments of Cedric Robinson to show how racialised feudalism played an important role in the development of capitalist social relations in England. As Robinson, quoting Schumpeter, identifies, ‘social structures, types and attitudes are coins that do not readily melt. Once they are formed the persist, possibly for centuries.'[108] An empirical case study of the English class system, which ostensibly developed without racialisation, shows instead the Celtic British origins of the English working class, Anglo-Saxon origins of the bourgeoise, and Norman origins of the land-owning aristocracy were vital to the relationships of dispossession and oppression that shaped capitalism in England. Following Robinson, if we understand the widely accepted 'national myth' of Anglo-Saxonism as an instance of 'the displacement of history by aeriform theory and self-serving legend',[109] we can achieve a much clearer understanding of the racialised dynamics of capitalism's emergence, which align exactly with *Black Marxism*'s theoretical claims.

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