Ethnographies of Power


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I first read Gillian Hart’s article ‘Interlocking Transactions’ (1986a) in the mid-1990s. I found it field-changing with respect to debates on agrarian change. And it was here that I first encountered the concept of interlocking transactions, referring, in brief, to the problem of how transactions in land, labour and credit in rural Asia were usually intertwined, rather than separable as abstract markets. In other words, rural people often worked for specific landlords in their villages for low wages rather than working nearby for higher wages in the hope of accessing credit or other kinds of support, or they accepted usurious loans in the hope of future access to work, land or credit. In all these kinds of situations, poor people were forced to participate in land, labour and credit relations under extremely deleterious terms. Social scientists across the disciplines debated whether these relations were stubborn holdovers from a feudal past or whether they were on the verge of erasure by the inevitable advance of capitalism. Hart was among those who shied away from both radical and liberal wishful thinking to engage agrarian realities as they actually were.

In contemplating my intervention for this volume, I was led instinctively to this concept of praxis, ‘interlocking transactions’, as also important for our time of spiralling capitalist crises, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. I show how Hart’s intervention in the Asian
‘interlocking transactions’ debates is key to deepening the theorisation of a concept that has seen renewed interest of late, also to explain specifically dire capitalist geographies, and this concept is ‘racial capitalism’ (Bhattacharyya 2018). There are many positions on ‘racial capitalism’, as we will see, but they converge on the importance of understanding how racialisation is closely intertwined with the workings of capitalism. The Black Marxist position goes deeper to argue that racialisation is not just a matter of ideology, but is immanent to capitalism’s internal relations. Another way to put this position is that racialisation is not simply an addition to the workings of capitalism as we know it, but is foundational at the micro level to ways in which configurations of land, labour and credit relations emerge and transform everywhere. This is the line of argument I follow to show how Hart’s intervention from Marxist agrarian studies points precisely to the micro-foundations necessary for a Black Marxist conception of racial capitalism.

In juxtaposing a forgotten category from Hart’s early work and a seemingly novel category of our time, it is tempting to ruminate on how the later Hart is present in her earlier incarnation. We can read enduring commitments from Hart’s early essay on ‘interlocking transactions’ (1986a) to her reading of Stuart Hall’s intervention in the South African debates on race, racism and capitalism, which take her to the more supple Gramscian notion of ‘articulation’ (see chapter 8 in this volume). Just as Hall (2003) famously argues that we ought to read Marx’s oeuvre as a whole, I suggest we read across Hart’s work with the same generosity precisely for the richly materialist critical apparatus it offers for our time. I begin with a close reading of her important article published in the Journal of Development Economics (Hart 1986a).

‘Interlocking transactions’

Hart begins her article of this name with the observation that ‘recent empirical and historiographical studies are increasingly uncovering enormous variations in the forms of agrarian labour arrangements,
often within the same area’ (1986a, 177). These might ‘range from simple, commercial transactions to many far more complex contracts in which labour is tied in with land, credit and other relations’ (177). What is clear is that they are highly variable and changeable and do not appear to converge on impersonal, spot markets in ‘free’ labour in Karl Marx’s sarcastic dual sense of freedom from the means of production and freedom from job security. Marx’s conception of complete dispossession and proletarianisation does not appear to be or have been an eventuality. Rather, Hart argues, past and present evidence suggests that ‘different forms of tied labour not only survive but are often adapted, reinforced and embellished in many ways’ (177). The key question is how and why these ‘interlocking transactions’ in land, labour and credit have tied specific labourers to specific places and employers – for instance, through access to credit, land or other social institutions, all of which have implications for agrarian classes, income distribution and poverty.

Hart was responding to the ‘interlinkage debate’ in agrarian political economy of the 1970s, which she parses into three approaches. The first was an argument by Amit Bhaduri that the interlocking of tenancy and credit contracts presents an obstacle to investment and technological change in agriculture. Bhaduri (1973) argues that landlords shy away from innovation in order to maintain the indebtedness of their tenants at low levels of income. Hart reads this as a formalisation of Vladimir Lenin’s (1899) argument that labour service is a feudal remnant, closely related to bondage and usury, and that the combination through interlocking contracts was an obstacle to the development of agrarian capitalism. In other words, this was an argument that presented interlocking transactions as ‘semi-feudal’, combining elements of the feudal past with a present that could not reach an ideal of full commodification of land, labour and credit. However, empirical studies in India by Pranab Bardhan, Ashok Rudra, Sheila Bhalla and others showed that interlocking contracts and forms of labour tying were evidently increasing also in contexts of technological change; parallel research in
Thailand, the Philippines and Java concurred. Another kind of critique Bhaduri proposes is historiographic; it shows that Bhaduri’s teleology is refuted by historical research. Jan Breman’s (1974) study of hali, a specific regime of bonded labour relations in South Gujarat, shows that the institution of hali sought to retain these relations in order to gain something from a position of comparative privilege. Ernesto Laclau’s (1971) and Arnold Bauer’s (1975) studies of the transition from the colonial encomienda system of labour service to the nineteenth-century inquilino system of interlinked land and estate labour contracts in Chile similarly refute the notion of a feudal hangover. Alan Richards’ (1979) powerful comparative essay on nineteenth-century Chilean inquilino and Prussian insten concurs, showing also that landlords in these systems had even more power over estates and localities than the manorial feudal lords of the Western European past.

A second approach to interlocking transactions emerges from a kind of orthodox Marxist position, which sees them as a transitory precursor to the emergence of agrarian capitalism; the focus of much of this work is on sharecropping. For instance, Robert Pearce (1983) poses sharecropping as functional to the early stages of capitalist development, as a form of formal as opposed to real subsumption of labour, which keeps the costs of supervision low. Hart notes that apart from being dichotomous and undialectical, this position could not appreciate the resurgence of forms of labour tying, as in her own dissertation research in Java on the non-linear history of kedokan tied labour or in Miriam Wells’ (1981) research on the resurgence of sharecropping in California’s strawberry industry.

The third approach in the interlinkage debate was from mainstream economists who posed interlocking contracts as market relations, since they do not rely on ‘extra-economic coercion’ or on ‘non-market’ forms of obligation. Hart notes that this dualistic framework creates a raft of inconsistencies, not least that when these thinkers address how contracts are enforced, they turn to what they call ‘extra-economic coercion’. Further, they cannot explain the dynamics of exclusionary or
preferential relations noted by the historical and ethnographic studies cited above, nor can they explain why labour tying emerges under very different labour market conditions that show that interlocking transactions cannot simply be legible in non-Marxist terms as disguised market relations.

These three approaches in the interlinkage debate offer economistic models of ‘obstacles, precursors or instruments of agrarian capitalism’, the subtitle of the article I am offering a close reading of here. By separating the political from the economic, Hart shows that none of these approaches can explain the dynamics of labour tying or of interlocking transactions because they do not have a handle on social control, or ‘the ways in which those who control the means of production attempt to exercise power in the non-labour spheres over those with little or no access to assets’ (Hart 1986a, 190). Turning once more to Richards (1979) and Breman (1974) on agrarian change in Chile and Gujarat, Hart notes that ‘in both cases, control over land and labor were primarily a means whereby the landowning elite gained access to wider spheres of accumulation’ (Hart 1986a, 197). This parallels Hart’s research in Java on the resurgence of exclusionary *kedokan* labour arrangements alongside the crackdown on agrarian mobilisation under the New Order regime, an insight key to Hart (1986b).

Hart’s article ends with the tense dialectical relation between the politics of work discipline and social control. ‘While apparently functional in the short run, such arrangements may well contain the seeds of their own destruction,’ writes Hart (1986a, 200), with reference to the contradictory politics of exclusionary labour arrangements in Bhalla’s analysis of Green Revolution in Haryana and in Wells’ work (1981) on strawberry farming in California. While interlocking transactions are not inherently obstacles, precursors or instruments of agrarian capitalism, they illuminate the complex geography of power and powerlessness; power and struggle are decisive in this view. On this final point, Hart writes that ‘those with little or no access to productive assets are not simply passive units of labor supply. Their efforts to secure a
livelihood are part of a larger struggle in which they forge social and political relations with other direct producers and with those on whom their livelihood depends’ (1986a, 201).

Indeed, one of the important insights of Hart’s early article is that labour tying can be a way for women workers particularly to secure preferential terms of employment; this insight was picked up by parallel work in other parts of agrarian South and South East Asia. However, Hart was also a South African dissident in Ithaca, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Boston. The notion of preferential arrangements for some was absolutely untenable to the anti-apartheid critic. Her most precise term is ‘exclusionary labour arrangements’, which extend ‘“privileges”’ to particular groups while deliberately excluding others’ and therefore that ‘exclusionary tactics tend also to have a demobilizing effect on agrarian organization’ (Hart 1986a, 190). Recall that Hart’s Java research was conducted in President Suharto’s authoritarian Indonesia, built on the ruins of agrarian communist mobilisation (see the introduction to this volume). At best, exclusionary labour arrangements are politically ambiguous; in all probability, they are reactionary. They beg the critic to make political choices, to ‘take sides in this game of the world’ (Glissant 1997, 8).

**Interpreting exclusionary land/labour/credit arrangements**

The irony is that after Hart’s departure from South Africa in 1971, the country was rocked by internal struggles, including the emergence of independent Black trade union movements linked to community struggles that refused the broader edifice of apartheid’s social control. Central to these insurrectionary currents was an understanding of the mutually reinforcing exclusionary labour, land and credit arrangements that upheld apartheid capitalism, and the intersecting struggles necessary to abolish it. What I am suggesting is that apartheid South Africa was present throughout Hart’s research in South and South East Asia, not directly
in her published work, but in the margins of her biography. In Hart’s hands, the notions of exclusionary labour relations and interlocking transactions held in their shadows the lived experience of apartheid.

When Hart returned to research and write about South Africa following the unbanning of liberation movement organisations in the 1990s, she did so overtly citing the lessons of her Asian agrarian experience. She brought to her work lived and scholarly understandings of Asian and South African capitalisms. In contrast to Asian agrarian transitions and industrialisation, Hart seized on the implications of deep levels of dispossession and proletarianisation for the possibility of a post-apartheid order. In the wake of the analysis of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), in *Disabling Globalization* (2002), Hart theorised the importance of re-articulating ‘land’ as ‘the social wage’ as a way of attending to the legacies of racialised dispossession, segmented labour arrangements and grossly skewed access to the means of life. One might add that the political economy of modern South Africa has also been transformed in highly spatially uneven ways by the legacies of indirect rule and the ongoing dialectics of custom and capital, as Gavin Capps (2019) argues.

When I first read Hart’s explication of interlocking transactions in land, labour, credit and other relations as forms of exclusion that were part of a broader structure of social control meant to demobilise subaltern political will, I read it in the context of broader debates of the 1990s about persisting forms of unfree labour and non-linear trajectories of capitalist change across the post-colonial and post-socialist world. By this time, alongside the shift in her research towards South Africa, Hart had also offered a powerful critique of metropolitan economic geographers who trumpeted the emergence of a new era of industrial decentralisation in which the Third Italy and Silicon Valley were harbingers of a new future. From the vantage of Marxist agrarian studies, Hart was decidedly sceptical on multiple counts (Hart 1998). While Anglo-American economic geographers and economic sociologists thought they had discovered a non-linear conception of
capitalist change, Hart and others offered the reminder that radical agrarian studies scholars of the 1970s and 1980s had already proposed non-linear, non-teleological, multi-stranded and geographical conceptions of capitalist social change. This agrarian studies perspective was deeply suspicious that the 1990s marked a new age of industrial democracy anywhere, rather than a reconfiguration of the social division of labour, and of geographies of capital and power.

My own dissertation research of the 1990s, very much inspired by Hart’s thinking at the time, took the insights of this agrarian Marxism to critique the agrarian origins of industrial flexibility in the town of Tiruppur in South India (Chari 2004). From Hart (1986a), I retained a sense that exclusionary labour arrangements can be quite important to a fraction of the organised working class that might not see itself as a labour aristocracy, but might be central to the workings of hegemony. In Tiruppur, for instance, the division of labour in the knitwear industry and the revival of older forms of work discipline made space for some male workers of the regionally dominant Gounder caste to forge exclusionary labour arrangements that offered a route to class mobility for ‘self-made men’. These accumulation strategies produced a class fraction, a Gounder fraternity of decentralised capital, which effectively took over the industrial town from the old guard of capitalists of patrician caste backgrounds.

In the book emerging from this research, I argue (Chari 2004) that these subalterns could accumulate capital, but only through the domination of the workforce as a whole, specifically through a shifting gendered hegemony over an increasingly differentiated workforce. Their form of exploitation and social domination hinged on what they called their propensity to ‘toil’, an ideology that interpellated their subjectivation as subaltern capitalists. Consequently, they forged an industrial form that was, at least by the turn of the millennium, difficult for other fractions of capital to break into. In effect, Gounder ‘self-made men’ articulated a particular gendered/caste politics of work through an exclusionary geography of class mobility and capital accumulation,
all on the backs of deepening immiseration and environmental despo-
liation. In parallel to Hart’s work in Java, Tiruppur’s fraternal capital
forged this intricate form of hegemony in the wake of a long and per-
sisting history of communist trade union activism.

Politically, my argument in Fraternal Capital is similar to Hart’s on
Java in that both studies see the transformative power of exclusion-
ary labour arrangements, differently in different contexts, and we do
not find them acceptable anywhere precisely because of their demobilis-
ing effects in relation to struggles for social justice. We did not name the
exclusionary power of interlocking transactions as the work of ‘racism’
in the general sense proposed by Ruth Gilmore (2002, 16; emphasis in
original): ‘Racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displace-
ment of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and
between the planet’s sovereign political territories. Racism functions
as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating
in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who,
due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers
of power that might relieve them of those costs.’ That is, however, pre-
cisely what Hart’s research in Java in the 1970s and my own research
in South India in the 1990s was about, albeit through racisms that do
not work through ‘race’ but through gender, caste, ethnicity and class.

Reading, however, is also a way of taking a path not taken.

Code shift: ‘Racial capitalism’ with micro-foundations

Read alongside Hart’s early work in 2020, the concepts of interlocking
transactions and exclusionary labour arrangements appear immedi-
ately relevant to the concept of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018).
Both sets of concepts are revisions of liberal and Marxist conceptions of
capitalism that presume an inexorable tendency towards the full com-
modification of land, labour and money, turning each into impersonal
‘markets’ that bulldoze established forms of social power. Both sets of
concepts try to attend to geographies of social power and exclusion
as intrinsic to the way in which capitalism works. By the end of this chapter, I will make a stronger argument that the notion of interlocking and exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements provides necessary micro-foundations for an analysis of capitalism as mediated by ‘death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies’ (Gilmore 2002, 16).

Central to my argument is a path not taken by perhaps the most important contemporary progenitor of ‘racial capitalism’, Cedric Robinson, who developed a critique of Western Marxism and of the transition to capitalism in Europe, but without engaging with the insights of the agrarian Marxist tradition. To be clear, Robinson does not refute or decline this tradition, but its occlusion provides an opportunity to rethink what might yet bolster the concept’s contemporary possibilities.

First, what is the provenance of the concept ‘racial capitalism’ that has returned with a vengeance in scholarship and activism in our time? At roughly the same period as Hart’s Java and Bangladesh research, Robinson was working on ‘racial capitalism’, building on the work of Black American Marxist sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox. Robinson’s *Black Marxism* does several things: it indicts Marxism as ‘indisputably Western’ at its philosophical foundations and charges ‘European Marxists’ as myopic about the ‘racialism’ at the heart of the ‘ordering ideas which have persisted in Western civilization’ (Robinson [1983] 2000, 2). By racialism, Robinson clarifies that he means ‘the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the “racial” components of its elements’ and he adds that this was ‘hardly unique to European peoples’, but was ‘codified, during the feudal period, into Western conceptions of society’ with ‘enduring consequences’. In other words, his concern was with racial consciousness (see Gilmore 2019), but ‘as a material force’ that ‘would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism’ (Robinson [1983] 2000, 2). He calls the consequence of this process ‘racial capitalism’.
Robinson clearly lambastes historical materialists who presume that capitalism was a negation of the feudal past. Instead, he offers a complex historical argument that the bourgeoisie at the helm of the development of capitalism in Europe emerged from specific cultural and ethnic groups, as did workers, mercenaries, peasants and slaves. This led him to conclude that the racialised classes of European capitalism were prefigured in pre-capitalist forms of difference:

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. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systematic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism. (Robinson [1983] 2000, 26; emphasis added)

Fortuitously, Robinson uses the language of the ‘systematic interlocking of capitalism’, but he does not elaborate on what this might mean concretely. Indeed, this might be an artefact of what Yousuf Al-Bulushi (2020) usefully identifies as Robinson’s inclination to the world-systems approach and to the broad sweep of *Annales* school of historiography, as well as more specifically to the arguments of historian Henri Pirenne. What Al-Bulushi does not note is that Pirenne’s position in the heated debates on the transition to capitalism in Europe centred on the key role of towns, burghers and migrants. In counterpoint, Maurice Dobb argued that the transition to capitalism in agriculture had been decisive for diverse trajectories of social change. In the 1970s, Robert Brenner’s interventions in these debates, and his geographically sensitive analysis of agrarian
transitions was key within the revival of agrarian Marxism; indeed, for agrarian Marxists, Dobb and Brenner effectively concluded this debate.

By relying on Pirenne without engaging this debate substantively, Robinson misses the opportunity to engage with the agrarian revival on the uneven geographies of capitalism. This is why agrarian Marxism falls out of his critique of what he sees as Western Marxism. We might wonder what Robinson might have made of the agrarian Marxists as they ventured out to study exactly the phenomenon he points to in the quote above, with a differentiated understanding of ‘the peoples of the Third World’. What might Robinson have made of Hart’s interlocutors in the ‘interlinkage debate’ who were concerned precisely with the revival and transformation of social institutions as they sought to determine the specific land, labour, capital and state relations that produced diverse forms of ‘systematic interlocking of capitalism’ across the colonial and post-colonial world – forms that were always tenuous and prone to produce new rounds of struggle?

Robinson ([1983] 2000) makes several other key arguments in *Black Marxism*. He contrasts what he sees as Western Marxist and liberal traditions with ‘the Black Radical Tradition’ emerging from histories of struggle against slavery, colonialism and decolonisation; he argues that the violence of primitive accumulation and forced labour in the Americas produced ‘the Negro’, but also a militant Black intellectual tradition. The second half of his book turns to its exemplars – W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James and Richard Wright – each engaged in different ways with the tensions between Marxism and Black radicalism. Recall Du Bois’ ([1935] 1998, 700–701) historiographically audacious argument that after watching the advance of Northern armies, slaves downed their tools and joined the advancing forces in an armed general strike; but also recall the powerful argument about the multifaceted exclusionary arrangements that supported ‘the wages of whiteness’. These were, in Robinson’s hands, the product of a revisionist reading of Marxism in relation to Black radicalism.
Robinson’s arguments have become iconic; that is, they are often pointed to with reverence rather than grappled with in comradely debate. Yet, there is considerable disagreement about the concept of racial capitalism, both in readings of Robinson and in general. Is it meant as a reminder that capitalism is always racial, as Gilmore (2017, 225; 2020, 171) repeatedly insists? I have tended to this view, to think of the compound term as a categorical aid that signifies that capitalism always involves forms of racial differentiation, though not always through race and often through gender, sexuality and other means (Boyce-Davies 2007; Davis 2020; Vergès 2020). Consider again Gilmore’s (2002, 16) expansive conception of racism as ‘a practice of abstraction’ or ‘a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies’ or ‘a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating … onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power’. Nothing in this definition limits itself to abstraction through ‘race’ or to Blackness, a point that Gilmore often makes. Rather, it allows us to consider how capitalism works racially, as a difference-producing machine that always attempts to displace the differences it creates through the production of capitalist space.

Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal (2019) offer a sceptical review of racial capitalism, faulting what they call ‘this literature’ for imprecision about race and capitalism, a tendency to African-American exceptionalism, and an attention to the violence of accumulation, but not to its transformative power. These critiques are important, but they hinge on an ungenerous reading of many of the thinkers reviewed here and in their article in Theory and Society. I agree with their critique of Robinson on Marx’s attentiveness to social difference and that his choice of exemplars of the Black Radical Tradition is narrow and masculinist (Ralph and Singhal 2019, 860–861 and footnote 21). Yet, I disagree that ‘Robinson sees Marx’s influence on the Black Radical Tradition as a kind of straightjacket it must ultimately escape from in order to be free’ (863). Most importantly, Ralph and Singhal do
not appreciate that the concept of racial capitalism has been useful for interrogating the dialectics of racism and capitalism, when both terms are considered historical, mutable and simultaneously material and cultural/ideological.

This is the position Arun Kundnani (2020) takes, arguing that ‘the promise of the term [racial capitalism] lies in its apparent bridging of the economic and the cultural, of the class struggle and the struggle against white supremacy … It promises a way to close the race-class gap on the Left, a gap through which marched Trump and Brexit, with their nationalist constructions of a white working class.’ Kundnani usefully reconstructs the specific conjuncture of late 1970s and early 1980s Britain on the verge of neo-liberalism yet still shaped by active anti-colonial, Black and working-class struggles. Robinson, working at Cambridge University at the time, encountered these struggles through engagement with the journal Race & Class, edited by Sri Lankan revolutionary exile and Marxist theorist of the British racial state Ambalavaner Sivanandan (1976). Race & Class also published the race–class debates among South African exiles, some of whom used the term ‘racial capitalism’. Alongside these thinkers, Hall was actively reworking his understanding of race, racism, Marxism and capitalism in important ways (Hall 2021a, 2021b). These thinkers would have come into contact with Martin Legassick and David Hemson’s (1976) pamphlet for the Anti-Apartheid Movement, which critiqued the South African liberal argument that boycotts against the apartheid regime were unnecessary and that capitalism would dissolve the anachronism of apartheid. Peter Hudson (2018) notes that this argument was seriously debated among South African exiles – and, it is worth noting, also by writers such as Sivanandan, Hall and Robinson.

However, Legassick and Hemson’s Foreign Investment and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism in South Africa and the critiques it unleashed were a small part of a much broader set of works in the 1970s revisiting the past and present of the South African predicament.
The South African Communist Party (SACP) Central Committee representative for Europe, Vela Pillay, had been writing Marxist critiques of the apartheid economy in the mid-1960s in *African Communist* (Padayachee and Van Niekerk 2019, 51), well before the ‘revisionist’ historians Shula Marks, Stanley Trapido, Leonard Thompson, Harold Wolpe and others effectively rewrote the radical historiography of segregation and apartheid (Legassick and Hemson 1976; Wolpe 1972). In parallel, Bernard Magubane, who had worked politically with Legassick in Los Angeles in the 1960s, was developing his own Marxist critique (Magubane 1979); in Durban, Rick Turner, fresh from the Sorbonne, brought a particular blend of radical Christianity and critical theory to bear on engaging with the 1972–1973 Black workers’ strikes alongside the Black Consciousness Movement and the charismatic Bantu Stephen Biko, whose writings were also in wide circulation (Biko 1978; Turner 1978); and, after his release from Robben Island in 1974, Neville Alexander as ‘No Sizwe’ was forging his particular blend of Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich (No Sizwe 1979). All these thinkers were deeply engaged with the relationship between racism and capitalism as specifically institutionalised in apartheid South Africa.

In his intellectual history of what he calls ‘the dialectical tradition in South Africa’, Andrew Nash (2009) notes the increased circulation of the term ‘racial capitalism’ in the late 1970s because it epitomised the analysis of a generation of apartheid’s critics. Nash discusses the circulation of the term in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in the late 1960s, citing Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and *New Left Review*; later citations in the 1970s were to Louis Althusser and to Hall’s revision of the South African race–class debates in his essay of 1980 (republished in Hall 2021b). Nash insists, I think correctly, that these arguments in South African intellectual life were crucially linked to the struggles of the oppressed; in Robinson’s terms, they were already a product of the encounter of Marxism and Black radicalism.
In the 1970s and 1980s, social historians and political economists thinking about and working on South Africa reflected carefully on Brenner’s interventions in the debates on transitions to agrarian capitalism. Helen Bradford (1990) argues that Mike Morris, Tim Keegan, Colin Bundy, Henry Slater, William Beinart and others of this burgeoning agrarian scholarship were sensitive to sociocultural and historical variation, as well as to the politics of the time.

Since the 1990s, the standard bearer for South African agrarian studies has been the Programme in Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, through the work of Ben Cousins, Lungisile Ntsebeza, Ruth Hall, Andries du Toit and others, including Henry Bernstein in London. Another key strand were scholar activists engaged in documenting rural dispossession through the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA) and the Surplus Peoples’ Project, including Cherryl Walker. A proper accounting of these fields of agrarian study and advocacy is well beyond the scope of this chapter.

Returning to Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, much hinges on how one interprets the other compound category that is its title. The 1983 edition does not state clearly what ‘Black Marxism’ connotes. Robinson’s preface to the 2000 edition tries to answer this with: ‘Black Marxism [the concept] was not a site of contestation between Marxism and the [Black Radical] tradition, nor a revision’, but rather ‘a new vision centred on a theory of the cultural corruption of race’ (Robinson [1983] 2000, xxxii), but this does not exactly grapple with whether and how the ‘new theory’ is Black and Marxist, as the term implies. Robinson ends the preface modestly: ‘I suspect the Black Radical Tradition extends into cultural and political terrains far beyond my competence to relate. In short, as a scholar it was never my purpose to exhaust the subject, only to suggest that it was there.’ Robin D.G. Kelley’s (2000, xxi) generous foreword to this edition picks up on Robinson’s invitation by reflecting on his own work on African diaspora intellectuals and artists drawn to the international surrealist movement: ‘I think it could be argued that surrealism served as a bridge between Marxism and the Black Radical
Tradition’ (see also Kelley and Rosemont 2009). Kelley has, to my mind, taken Robinson’s argument in the spirit intended, and offered a useful way of thinking of the compound term ‘Black Marxism’ as an invitation for what is to be done.

In a parallel spirit, Angela Y. Davis notes that while Robinson may have initially intended racial capitalism to be a critique of Marxism from the point of view of Black radicalism, ‘it can also be a generative concept for new ways of holding these two overlapping intellectual and activist traditions in productive tension’ (2020, 205). The key, Davis argues, is to refuse the dichotomy of adherence versus disavowal to Marxism as doctrine, and to rather treat Marxism as open to ongoing internal critique, an ‘implicit invitation to push it in new directions’ (206). Such an open Marxism is consistent with the way in which Antonio Gramsci saw the work of the militant intellectual as always translating subaltern and Marxist languages of critique. This is also, of course, how Marxist feminists and Marxists of the global South have approached ‘Marxism’.

This also is exactly what Hall’s 1980 chapter ‘Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance’ is driven by, the search for ‘a new theoretical paradigm which takes its fundamental orientation from the problematic of Marx, but which seeks by various theoretical means to overcome certain of the limitations – economism, reductionism, “a priorism”, a lack of historical specificity – which have beset certain traditional appropriations of Marxism’ (Hall 2021b, 233). Unlike Robinson, Hall reconstructs Marxism by attending to ‘historically specific racisms’ and decidedly not by ‘extrapolating a common and universal structure to racism’ (234). Historically specific racisms – for instance, in slave plantations or in apartheid Israel – work in relation to other social relations, which leads to Hall’s important formulation: ‘One must start, then from the concrete historical “work” which racism accomplishes under specific historical conditions – as a set of economic, political and ideological practices, of a distinctive kind, concretely articulated with other practices in a social formation’ (236).
While Hall’s chapter was a response to South African debates, it is clear that he reflects at this crucial point in the argument on his collective work in *Policing the Crisis* with Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts (Hall et al. 1978), which explains the sudden hue and cry about ‘the mugger’ in the British press as a symptom of multi-scalar crises ramifying through Britain’s ‘internal colonies’ in which many Black descendants of its former empire live, if not always labour. The powerful final chapter of *Policing the Crisis* recasts criminalised Black youth ‘as a class fraction’ like the lumpenproletariat valorised by Fanon, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, a class not only loathed in the realm of ideology but through ‘interlocking structures which work through race … through the education system, the housing market, the occupational structure and the division of labour’; racism is not just ideological, in other words, it is this complex set of ‘interlocking structures’ that reproduces racialised classes over time (Hall et al. 1978, 389; emphasis in original). After reflecting on the insights from *Policing the Crisis*, Hall (2021b, 239) offers his now-famous formulation: ‘Race is … the modality in which class is “lived”, the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and “fought through”.’ The power of racism is that ‘it has performed the function of that cementing ideology which secures a whole social formation under a dominant class’ and part of its power is in its ability to refuse its historicity through ‘the timeless language of nature’ (240–241).

Hall’s work of the late 1970s and early 1980s continues on a path not taken in Robinson’s *Black Marxism* and it moves beyond a functionalist argument about the relationship between race and class, or racism and capitalism, by attending to lived experience and struggle. The next generation of scholars from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies elaborated on this argument through new layers of theoretical and political complexity, brilliantly demonstrated in contributions by Paul Willis, as well as by Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby and others in *The Empire Strikes Back* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982).
Gilmore is the figure who connects the dots between Robinson, Hall, Sivanandan and Davis, not all of whom appeared to engage with one another through their decades of parallel work. Gilmore’s complex material and ideological argument about the attempt to forge hegemony through the racial geography of the prison industrial complex in California, and her focus with Craig Gilmore on rural–urban activism to call this structure into question, shows us that bridging Marxism and Black radicalism is always also geographical work (Gilmore 2007). There is an affinity between Gilmore’s carefully theorised and empirically rich analysis of racial capitalist geographies, not all structured by race, and the agrarian Marxist tradition that has shaped Hart’s work. Both are premised on rigorous historical and ethnographic research, and both seek to bridge an open Marxism with the traditions of the oppressed. What distinguishes the Black intellectuals I have considered from their agrarian Marxist counterpoints, however, is the imperative with which they foreground the work of subaltern intellectuals in forging critical consciousness, a point that takes us back to the value of Robinson’s contributions not only to understanding racial capitalism, but also to opposing it.

**Openings: Micro-foundations in practice and consciousness**

I would like to conclude with some thoughts for scholars to pick up in new ways, openings emerging from the insights of Hart’s critique of the interlocking transactions debate in relation to the Black Marxist tradition that was reconsolidated in important ways in the 1970s. I argue that, in conjunction with a Black Marxist attention to consciousness-raising praxis, the concept of interlocking transactions offers tools to interrogate the micro-foundations of exclusion. More precisely, it reminds us of the importance of a more granular understanding of geographies of racial capitalism, by helping us get at the specific ways in which exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements interlock with broader
social power relations, including relations of the state, military, police, corporations, universities, hospitals, families and other institutions of social domination, which collectively work to reproduce – but also perhaps at times to undermine – the workings of racial capitalism.

What would it mean for Black Marxist scholarship to attend to micro-foundations in ways that I suggest the agrarian Marxism of the last quarter of the twentieth century models for us? Notice that both Robinson and Hall use the metaphor of interlocking elements in the making of capitalism. What the agrarian scholarship I have alluded to – on the revival of bonded labour in late-twentieth-century Gujarat or nineteenth-century Chile, or on the persistence of village-specific tenancy contracts linked to landlord power over land, labour and credit in rapidly transforming rice-farming systems in India, or on the revival of sharecropping in California’s strawberry fields in the 1990s – points to is the diversity of ways in which the institutionalisation of land, labour and credit relations might be understood in their concrete articulations, which also involve the reproduction of specific forms of social differentiation and exclusion. With this work in mind, Black Marxist attention to geographies of social change ought not presume to homogenise ‘capitalism’ or ‘the market’, but rather attend with this kind of political-economic sensitivity to micro-level institutional mechanisms through which specific forms of power and exclusion in the making of land, labour and credit relations ‘interlock’ in specific capitalist geographies. Indeed, this is what the critical ethnographic approach offers – a grounded understanding of concrete articulations of power and exclusion.

This is where Hall’s ‘articulation’ emerges as a better concept than ‘interlocking’ or ‘interlinking’, as it carries an engagement with the expressive aspect of social relations that the Black Radical Tradition has engaged with consistently. ‘Articulation’ is the concept that assumes the place that the working concepts ‘interlocking’ and ‘interlinking’ sought to grasp (see chapter 8 in this volume).
Two scholars who have produced important scholarship in this vein point to how we might think about engaging in this kind of critical ethnographic research. First, Taneesha Mohan’s (2015) insightful doctoral dissertation, inspired by Hart’s framework, shows how labour-tying arrangements have intensified in dynamic agricultural areas in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in India in recent years, and how they reproduce exploitative labour contracts, particularly with Dalit women. Mohan shows how attempts at progressive state intervention in the countryside through the Public Distribution System and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act have not transformed the social power relations that support the persistence of agrarian unfreedom. Mohan thinks with the categories of Hart (1986a), of labour tying, exclusionary labour arrangements, interlocking transactions and the social power relations that maintain them. I suggest that this work, like my own work in South India and Hart’s in Java and Malaysia, is also about socially and spatially distinctive forms of exclusion as immanent to the dynamics of these capitalist geographies. These were always already forms of racial capitalism differentiated through means other than race. The important point here is that race, gender, class and other aspects of differentiation are not treated in Weberian fashion as separable categories, but rather as always only apprehended in their articulation. Extending Hall’s formulation, we might say that all forms of social difference are modalities in which class is lived and the notion of modality must be thought in a fully dialectical sense of interrelation, completion and non-identity, so as not to convey a sense of hierarchies of separable oppressions (Hall 2003).

Second, Erin Torkelson’s equally insightful research on what she calls ‘racial finance capitalism’ in past and present South Africa shows how another seemingly progressive state intervention, a post-apartheid cash-transfer programme, has worked to empower a coercive and monopolistic financial system, and how proprietary technology has in fact undermined the cash-transfer programme by deepening racialised
indebtedness. Torkelson’s work (2020a, 2020b) is on a society saturated by race, where the concept of racial capitalism trips off the tongue with the ease it does in the contemporary United States. Yet, her research also shows that racial finance capitalism is not the product of racial ideology disrupting a race-/class-/gender-neutral landscape of debt, credit and cash transfer to the poor. Rather, Torkelson’s insights are indebted to the agrarian Marxist tradition for its complex approach to exclusionary relations of land, labour and credit that take different shape through different geographical histories.

What I am suggesting, by directing the reader to Mohan’s and Torkelson’s thoughtful research, is that in both studies, under very different conditions, geographies of racial capitalism are reinforced rather than undermined by seemingly value-neutral instruments of state and capital that in fact reproduce very different geographies of racial capitalism (Torkelson 2020a, 2020b).

Inspired by these scholars, I would like to ask a more general question about capitalism in the current moment. We live in a time in which capitalist ideologues cannot argue anywhere, in any society, that capitalism can offer full employment, housing, education, health and access to the means of life to the denizens of any society. After the end of what was called the ‘golden age of welfare capitalism’ in the North Atlantic world, which was never particularly golden for large numbers of working-class, women, Black, Indigenous and otherwise subaltern people; after the end of twentieth-century state socialisms through ‘shock therapy’ or capitalist transformation under one-party rule, might we be seeing a renewal of interlocking and exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements? Rather than a world of capitalist convergence, might we see a return to the kinds of uneven geographies of land, labour and capital noted by agrarian scholars of the global South in the 1970s? Might these interlocking relations tie people into place-specific forms of social domination that prevent spatial and political movement? And might those who dispense insecure work, housing, land, credit and other services accrue a kind of emplaced
‘racial’ power not unlike the agrarian landlord-moneylender of 1970s agrarian studies?

Perhaps this is the phenomenon that racial capitalism ought to name: the breakdown of the hope of spatially uniform markets in land, labour and capital and a return to a much more spatially differentiated order in which interlocking oppressions force people to agree to super-exploitative wages in exchange for relatively stable housing, life-shortening working conditions in exchange for consumption credit, or periodic credit in exchange for political patronage, and so on, buttressed by notions of differential humanity expressed in a variety of forms of racialisation.

Central to the agrarian Marxist debates of the 1970s was a refusal of a unilinear conception of ‘transition to capitalism’. Today, after the end of the mirage of a golden age, contemporary neo-liberal capitalist societies might continue to deploy the rhetoric of individual opportunity and discipline, painting a convergent world in which everything is always for sale, at a bargain, including the value of life. The hegemonic apparatus might also deploy the repressive apparatus against dissent from labour unions, civic organisations and specifically oppressed groups – Black people, Uighurs, Muslims, Palestinians and any worker unsatisfied with a life of precarity. After decades of periodic capitalist crises, and with prolonged, multifaceted crises associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, scholars of contemporary capitalism might attend more carefully to the possibility that we might be in a time of increasingly fragmented, differentiated and exclusionary land, labour and credit arrangements.

Indeed, in contexts of spiralling consumer debt, impermanent and precarious labour, transient housing and perpetually insecure conditions of emplaced livelihood, personalised and exclusionary arrangements might hold out to some the means of fixing the appearance of security. This is where we might return to Hart’s warning in ‘Interlocking Transactions’ (1986a) that exclusionary labour/land/credit arrangements come with generally demobilising effects for
other working-class people. What this reading of Hart on interlocking transactions with Robinson and others on racial capitalism points to is that the interlocking arrangements that create geographies of inequality and exclusion are sustained, and undermined, in everyday ways. We must attend to the latter in order to retain the hope of challenging a fragmenting and differentiating enemy. If there is a final lesson from the Black Radical Tradition about the future’s capitalism, it is summarised in one word it has brought into critical consciousness: abolition.

REFERENCES


