

What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?

Excerpted from bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism.

By Robin D. G. Kelley

Cedric J. Robinson's passing this summer [2017] at the age of seventy-five went virtually unnoticed. Professor emeritus of political science and black studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, [he was] arguably one of the most original political theorists of his generation. ... Although he deliberately avoided the pitfalls of intellectual celebrity, his influence was greater than perhaps he may have realized. Today's insurgent black movements against state violence and mass incarceration call for an end to "racial capitalism" and see their work as part of a "black radical tradition"—terms associated with Robinson's work.

Robinson's critique of political order and the authority of leadership anticipated the political currents in contemporary movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter—movements organized horizontally rather than vertically.

... So what did [Cedric] Robinson mean by "racial capitalism"? ...

Robinson challenged the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary negation of feudalism. Instead capitalism emerged within the feudal order and flowered in the cultural soil of a Western civilization already thoroughly infused with racialism. Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. Capitalism was "racial" not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. The first European proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery *within Europe*. Indeed, Robinson suggested that racialization within Europe was very much a *colonial* process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy.

Insisting that modern European nationalism was completely bound up with racist myths, he reminds us that the ideology of *Herrenvolk* (governance by an ethnic majority) that drove German colonization of central Europe and "Slavic" territories "explained the inevitability and the naturalness of the domination of some Europeans by other Europeans."

To acknowledge this is not to diminish anti-black racism or African slavery, but rather to recognize that capitalism was *not* the great modernizer giving birth to the European proletariat as a universal subject, and 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."

*[The essay from which this excerpt is taken] is the introduction to Boston Review's print issue, Forum I, titled [Race Capitalism Justice](#). Inspired by Cedric Robinson's work on racial capitalism, this themed issue is a critical handbook for racial justice in the age of Trump. **Order your copy here.***