

Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression And Black Liberation

Part II: Theoretical and Historical Framework

by Linda Burnham and Bob Wing

The following is the second part of the article, *Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation*. Part I, *Critique of the Black Nation Thesis (Line of March, Vol.2 No. 1)*, reconstructed and critiqued the dominant line on Black oppression within the communist movement. That line holds that there is (or was) an oppressed Black Nation in the Black Belt section of the U.S. South which has the right of self-determination. The critique demonstrates the qualitative departures from both Marxist theory and historical reality inherent in the Black Nation line and concludes that it is thoroughly unscientific to view Black oppression in the U.S. through the theoretical framework of the national question. The present article, Part II, lays out a theoretical and historical framework for the analysis of Black oppression. Part III, which will appear in *Line of March* No. 9, advances a conception of the political strategy for the anti-racist struggle flowing from this framework.

I. Introduction

Black oppression—the systematic isolation and persecution of Black people—is one of the central themes of U.S. history. It profoundly shapes politics, economics, social, and cultural life and has been a

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spearhead of class struggle since the early days of colonial settlement. Consequently, an understanding of Black oppression is a prerequisite for comprehending the most basic dynamics of U.S. society. Thousands of books, articles, movies, songs, poems, and plays have been devoted to examining its nature, causes, mechanisms, and consequences—and formulating policy, either to ameliorate it or defeat it.

Since 1930, the communist contribution to understanding the fundamental nature of Black oppression has centered on the view that Black people are an oppressed nation in the Black Belt South, and that the fight for self-determination and national liberation is the key to Black liberation. This line marked a qualitative breakthrough for the communist movement and the anti-racist struggle as a whole when it was first advanced by the Comintern and the CPUSA. But in time the theoretical inadequacies and political shortcomings of this theoretical construct became evident, and with the break-up of the plantation system in the 1950s the principal propositions of the line were refuted by history itself. The CPUSA quietly dropped the Black Nation thesis but typically failed either to conduct a thorough critique of the line or to replace it with an alternative theoretical analysis. Consequently, with the rise of nationalism and Maoism in the late 1960s and 1970s, the Black Nation line was refurbished and continues to greatly influence the communist movement.

Because of the hold this framework has on the communist movement, the Black Nation/Self-Determination line and the national question framework pose the single greatest obstacle to the development of a Marxist analysis of Black oppression. This line consistently departs from Marxist theory, promotes cherished bourgeois myths about U.S. history, and proposes a political strategy which is self-defeating if not downright backwards. Part I of this article, which appeared in the last issue of *Line of March* is a comprehensive critique of the Black Nation line and strategy.

However, the critique of an incorrect line is not identical to the development of a correct alternative: at best it removes a roadblock to renewed theoretical work and provides certain insights into what such a task might entail. Such a critique does not, in itself, give rise to an alternative theoretical framework, or to an accurate historical and empirical analysis, let alone a correct revolutionary strategy. The development of such a framework and analysis is a distinct task which requires intensive and rigorous study, debate, testing in practice, and summation. It is toward this end that the second part of this article is aimed.

In approaching this task, we must frankly acknowledge that many previous alternatives to the Black Nation line have been political retreats, not advances. While the Black Nation thesis advanced a comprehensive though incorrect view of the particularity of Black

oppression—that of being an oppressed nation in the Black Belt South—many of the alternatives to this view have tended to liquidate altogether the struggle to clarify that particularity. The fact that the overwhelming majority of Blacks are now part of the urban working class has provided an excuse to reduce Black oppression to a mere quantitative intensification of general working class exploitation by capital—that is, Blacks as the “most exploited” and “most oppressed” (or “super-exploited”) section of the working class. And, while the Black Nation thesis developed an all-sided theoretical and historical framework to explain Black oppression and tried to relate it to the political economy of U.S. capitalism, most of its would-be replacements have sunk into theoretical eclecticism and pragmatism, the most notorious example being the attempt to pass off the ready-to-hand formula that “racism is a tool of the capitalists to increase their profits and divide the working class” as some profound theoretical insight.

While there are a few notable exceptions to this negative trend, for the most part concerted theoretical and historical work on the particular nature of Black oppression has been abandoned to the academy.*

The present article, then, is a beginning attempt to replace the Black Nation line with an analysis that is equally all-sided, but qualitatively more accurate. Clearly the first step in such a process is to develop an overall theoretical framework. It is to this task that this article is addressed. We have not undertaken to document once again all the concrete and manifold mechanisms of Black oppression or to attempt an extended analysis of the present conditions of Black people or the Black movement; nor have we tried to elaborate an immediate tactical program of action for the present period. Rather, this article tries to develop a logically consistent and historically grounded theoretical analysis of the particularity of Black oppression, to unravel the essence of its interconnection with U.S. capitalist development, and, on this basis, in Part III in the next issue of *Line of March*, to outline in broad terms a revolutionary strategy for Black liberation consistent with its own specific laws of motion.

Therefore Section II immediately following, after a note on method, is

* Some of the best work available is: William Sales, Jr., *Capitalism Without Racism: Science or Fantasy*;¹ Donald Harris, *The Black Ghetto as Colony: A Theoretical Critique and Alternative Formulation*;² and *Capitalist Exploitation and Black Labor: Some Conceptual Issues*;³ Robert Allen, *Reluctant Reformers*,⁴ especially the concluding chapter; Ted Allen, *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race*;⁵ Oliver Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race*;⁶ and Clarence Munford, *Production Relations, Class and Black Liberation*.⁷ We have particularly benefited from a number of unpublished manuscripts by Harry Chang and from the discussion and study conducted by the National Study Project on Racism and the National Question.

devoted to a categorical analysis of the particularity of Black oppression. Our premise is that Black oppression (and the Black/white relation) is a powerful form of oppression in its own right, so that analysis of its unique laws should not be collapsed into an analysis of its relationship to capitalism; indeed the former task must precede the latter to ensure scientific accuracy. The fundamental goal of this section is to demonstrate that Black oppression is racial oppression and that the Black and white racial groups were produced as antagonistic poles of the social practice of white supremacy and Black oppression—that people are not “Black” or “white” in terms of natural science, nor simply because they look different, but because the advent of the social relation of racism polarized society into hostile racial groups.

Section III provides a brief overview of the historical relationship between racism and U.S. capitalism. Our purpose is not to encapsulate U.S. history in a few short pages, but to sketch the essence of the historical cause of racism and to identify the specific forms it assumed within the process of capital accumulation at its key junctures: primitive accumulation, expanded accumulation, and monopoly capital. Our most important conclusions are: first, that racial oppression is a specifically capitalist form of oppression; second, that it is “caused” by the particular needs of U.S. capital accumulation; and third, that racial oppression consolidated into an all-sided system which became an independent social relation in itself that has had a fundamental impact on the very shape of capitalism and bourgeois rule in the U.S.

Part III of this series of articles will be an outline of the main contours of a revolutionary strategy for Black liberation, which we see as basically synonymous with the struggle against racism. The crucial theoretical point is the dialectical distinction and interconnection of race and class, racial interest and class interest, and racial struggle and class struggle. We conclude that the particularity of the anti-racist struggle is the struggle to dismantle the white racial group and that the concrete politics of this struggle are focused on breaking up the bourgeois-led white united front which is the social force promoting white supremacy and Black oppression in U.S. society. The ultimate goal of Black liberation, as we see it, is to completely eliminate the racist social relations that polarize the society into antagonistic racial groups—to abolish the practice whereby color is a powerful factor that determines different life destinies, and ultimately to abolish the very categories of race altogether. The objective laws of this struggle must lead the most determined fighters for Black liberation to assault the bastille of capitalism itself.

II. The Particular Nature of Black Oppression

The first task in the theoretical analysis of Black oppression, or any other social contradiction, is to analyze its essence, to grasp the

particular nature of the unity of opposites that constitutes it and which determines its unique laws of motion as against all other social relations. From there the theoretical challenge is to unravel its interconnection with other social contradictions, especially its relation to the development of capitalism and the fundamental class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This section takes up the first task. It attempts to lay bare the particularity of Black oppression in the U.S., and thereby sets the theoretical framework for the rest of the analysis.

Since concrete reality exists as a complex whole, the task of isolating one aspect for analysis entails a high level of theoretical abstraction. Consequently, an explicit discussion of the method of analysis utilized is a crucial starting point to clarify our approach and to facilitate critical reading.

A. The Marxist Method and Black Oppression

We start by asking: What is the concrete object of analysis in studying Black oppression? What should we abstract from this complex of phenomena for intensive study to understand the essential nature of Black oppression?

In our view, the concrete practice of Black oppression consists in the systematic distinction, theoretically and practically, in the way that whites and Blacks are treated in U.S. society. Indeed the very term Black oppression is meaningless except as a comparative category; it means that Black people in the U.S. are oppressed in ways that white people are not. At the same time this oppression is located in the relations between Black and white people. Consequently, the object of theoretical analysis that will enable us to get to the essence of Black oppression is the relationship between whites and Blacks. Only an analysis of this relationship, which pervades every aspect of U.S. society, will enable us to determine the precise nature of Black oppression.

How is the white/Black relationship to be studied? Usually this is done by marshalling a mass of empirical facts as to the mechanisms and effects of this relationship, drawing comparisons and analogies to similar relationships, and theorizing or building a model that corresponds to this information. Undoubtedly such methods have a role in theoretical analysis, but by themselves they will never lead to clarity on the essence of Black oppression. To begin or rest the study of Black oppression upon the various theories (such as that it is national oppression, racist oppression, etc.), without determining the basic categories which reflect its objective and concrete social practice, is to rest the whole venture upon a shifting foundation of “contending opinions,” a mistake that has been made far too often with resulting confusion and frustration.

We submit therefore that what is needed is a dialectical materialist critique of the nature of the white vs. Black contradiction, beginning with analysis of the categorical opposites, white and Black, that constitute the

unity of that contradiction. In short, what is needed is the application of what Engels called the "logical method of analysis" to Black oppression.

The logical method is rooted in the Marxist understanding of the relationship between the logical (the development of human concepts and categories) and the historical (the development of human social practice). Specifically, it assumes that the logic of concepts and categories is an accurate reflection of the social practice that produced them and that, consequently, the analysis of those concepts and categories, in turn, is key to the analysis of the social practice in question. Since this method has been sorely neglected in the U.S. communist movement, so renowned for its pragmatism, we will briefly review it. Our purpose is not to make a general contribution to understanding the Marxist method but rather to make the basis and assumptions of our analysis of Black oppression explicit.

According to Marxism, human social practice is qualitatively different from the activity of all other living things in that it is *conscious* activity. As Marx put it,

"A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in the imagination before he erects it in reality. . . . He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will."⁸

Unlike other animals, humans are not prisoners of instinct: we conceptualize what we intend to do before doing it, and act on the basis of those conceptions. Sometimes these conceptions are murky, other times sharp; sometimes the result of our activity is quite different from the conception that guided it. But the point is that concepts and categories are an integral element in human social practice; they give human practice its unique conscious quality.

Individuals conceptualize their actions before acting, but those concepts themselves grow out of the practice of society more broadly. Thus, on the relationship between concepts and practice, Marxism takes the clearcut materialist position that concepts and categories are the product of social practice, not vice versa. That is, at the point that a particular human activity reaches any level of general social importance (is no longer accidental or particular), society has already produced concepts and categories (indeed, whole theories) in an attempt to consciously harness that activity to its own ends, that is, to regulate, systematize, or otherwise control it. On the other hand, and this is what makes Marxist materialism dialectical, those concepts and categories which are produced by social practice are in turn wielded by humankind

to consciously and systematically reproduce that practice and even revolutionize it.

In short, concepts and categories are products of social practice and they are also integral to that practice. Consequently, the analysis of concepts and categories is key to the analysis of the social practice that produced them—this is the theoretical basis for the logical method of analysis.

Marx's *Capital* is the quintessential example of the logical method at work. Marx did not content himself solely with gathering data about the capitalist economy and theorizing about its functioning. Instead the majority of the three volumes is devoted to the dialectical materialist critique of the basic concepts and categories of capitalist production, categories such as "profit," "value," "commodity," "money," "interest," "exchange," "rent," etc. Marx's premise was that a systematic set of economic relations necessarily produces a systematic set of concepts and categories that reflect them. Therefore, by dialectically analyzing those categories and uncovering their essential content, he was able to provide powerful insight into the nature and "logic" of the relations of capitalist production themselves. Strikingly, Marx identified very few economic categories aside from those commonly recognized, but rather analyzed the categories already "alive" and integral to capitalist social practice. In a manner of speaking, Marx was able to make the economic relations "speak for themselves" by analyzing them, thus avoiding subjective theoretical speculation or model-building. Engels summarized Marx's method in a review of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the forerunner to *Capital*:

"History moves often in leaps and bounds and in a zigzag line, and as this would have to be followed throughout, it would mean not only that a considerable amount of material of slight importance would have to be included, but also the train of thought would frequently have to be interrupted. . . . The logical method of approach was therefore the only suitable one. This, however, is indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and diverting chance occurrences. The point where this history begins must also be the starting point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the historical course. Though the reflection is corrected, it is corrected in accordance with laws provided by the actual historical course, since each factor can be examined at the stage of development where it reaches its full maturity, its classical form."⁹

Without the logical method of analysis, Marx could never have deepened political economy's understanding of the law of value or discovered the law of surplus value, etc. Instead, he would have been mired at the level of phenomena or entrapped within the theoretical

constructs of the bourgeois political economists before him, such as Adam Smith, whose theoretical work Marx respected. Even Marx's socialist predecessors were limited to hating capitalist injustice while at the same time remaining enslaved to its assumptions and categories—property, money, value, etc.—precisely because they were unable to conduct a dialectical materialist critique of these categories and thus could not uncover the actual laws of capitalist production.*

How should this logical method be applied to the analysis of Black oppression?

We have already noted that the live categories in the social practice of Black oppression are the categories “white” and “Black.” This much is readily obvious. The real questions are where did these categories come from and what do they signify? Our fundamental thesis is that these categories were produced by the historical practice of Black enslavement in the U.S. and in turn became the objective conceptual basis for that oppression to be made more conscious and systematic and to be reproduced over centuries in new and various forms. If humankind could not distinguish “whites” from “Blacks,” “Blacks” could not be singled out for oppression. Contrary to “common sense,” the categories “white” and “Black” are neither natural nor neutral. To the contrary, they are deadly social categories produced by Black oppression and valid only within its realm. Indeed, the widely accepted view that the categories “white” and “Black” are merely descriptive of natural distinctions among people is itself testimony to how Black oppression has become “natural” to U.S. society.

Just as capitalism ensures that everyone knows what “profit” and “wages” are, racism ensures that everyone is able to distinguish white from Black. In fact, the ability to do so is a necessity for everyone who lives within a system where those categories are a fundamental basis to organize society. (By contrast, there is no similar agreement, indeed there is often violent disagreement, over how to characterize the relations between whites and Blacks; some call this racism, others national oppression, and still others, from the other side of the political spectrum, have taken to describing it as “reverse discrimination.”) The point is that the categories white and Black are an objective necessity for the functioning of the system of Black oppression—their use and content are verifiable regardless of one's particular political or ideological orientation. Thus a critical examination of these categories in order to determine their essential social content is key to analyzing the nature of the social practice of Black oppression.

Although the logical method of analysis will be our starting point, it is in no way a substitute for concrete historical and empirical investigation.

*For a critique of these errors, especially as made by the socialist Proudhon, see Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy*.

As Engels commented, “One can see that this method, the logical exposition, need by no means be confined to the purely abstract sphere. On the contrary, it requires historical illustration and continuous contact with reality.”¹⁰ In the remainder of this section then, we will concentrate on the logical/categorical critique, while making use of some historical references. Section III, on the other hand, is entirely devoted to illustrating the logical analysis of Section II through an overview examination of U.S. history.

Taken as a whole, the logical analysis of racial categories and the historical analysis of racism and race relations in the U.S. comprise a theory of racism as applied to the concrete conditions of the U.S.

B. The White vs. Black Distinction

Black and white—these are the operative categories of the race relation in the U.S. Willingly or not, and with varying degrees of consciousness, everyone in the U.S. lives by them. Their very existence as politically and socially charged categories is testimony to the fact that they reflect social reality.

But these categories do not exist or function independently of society. Quite the contrary, they exist only as reflections of human activity. In social life, the categories white and Black exist as racial groups* defined in relation to each other.

Since Black and white are the operative categories of Black oppression, it is essential that we accurately identify the nature of these categories. Our thesis is that these categories have three defining characteristics. First, they are social—as opposed to natural—categories. Second, they are racial—as opposed to class or national—categories. Finally, they are antagonistic—as opposed to neutral or descriptive—categories.

1. Black and White as Categories of Social Practice

Contrary to a certain “common sense” view of racism, the categories Black and white are not “natural” categories of biology, genealogy, or geography (the continent or region of one's ancestors' origin)—instead they are social categories produced by historical practice.

This is a key point, because the false notion of “natural races” is a powerful idea that has served to justify and perpetuate Black oppression

*What we call the white racial group and the Black racial group are simply what in every day language are called “white people” and “Black people.” We use this more cumbersome terminology in order to drive home the point that they are *racial* groups, not nationalities, and to emphasize them as *groups*, not individuals. We consciously avoid the term “race,” as this term has acquired the connotation of a biological concept, while racial groups are social concepts.

for centuries. This view holds that "races" are inherent in biology or genealogy and that racism is the result of some innate and inexorable human behavioral or psychological imperative toward "other-directed" prejudice. Consequently, racial contradictions are reputed to have plagued humankind ever since the different "races" first crossed paths and, at best, racial antagonism can only be rendered less virulent, but never fully eliminated.* However, a careful analysis of the white vs. Black distinction explodes this racist myth.

The peculiar logic of the white vs. Black distinction in the U.S. shows that it has precious little to do with biology, continental/ancestral "gene pools," etc. People in the U.S. are considered Black if they have the slightest visible trace of African ancestry and are considered white only if they appear to be "pure white." For example, a person may have one great-grandparent of African ancestry and seven of European ancestry but still be considered Black in the U.S. so long as African ancestry is visibly detectable. Obviously that determination is socially made. If the category were indeed a "natural" or biological one, such a person would have to be deemed "mainly white." Indeed, the fact that there are no operative categories for the various shades between white and Black is itself further proof that the categories reflect social practice and not nature or genealogy. One study concluded that 21% of people who are categorized as white in the U.S. are part African and that the great majority of people who are considered Black are part European.¹² Clearly the strange logic of the white vs. Black distinction is completely beyond the pale of natural science or genealogical charts to explain.

The point is that Black oppression in the U.S. is not a conflict between genealogically-determined "races," but rather a social conflict which promotes and enforces a fallacious belief about people's genealogical links to Africa in order to justify itself. The idea that biology is the determining factor in the white vs. Black distinction is a vulgar pseudo-scientific myth concocted to promote the racist notion that "races are inherently different," and "racism is inevitable." The implicit assumption and inevitable conclusion of this view is that "the white race is superior."

Further illustration that the white vs. Black distinction is social and not natural is provided through a comparison to other countries where the relations between those who would pass as "whites" and "Blacks" by U.S. standards are mediated by different categories and practices. For example, in South Africa there is a distinct category of "coloured" that stands between white and Black, indicating that the dynamics of racism there are somehow different than in the U.S. On the other hand, in Latin American countries (and many other parts of the world) there are

*In Part I of this article, we showed how the Black Nation thesis conciliates this racist view.¹¹

numerous categories designed to describe different combinations of skin color, eye color, hair color and texture, etc. These categories can be qualitatively distinguished from the white vs. Black racial categories of the U.S. In the main they tend to be more descriptive (albeit usually discriminatory toward darker people) and carry far less social onus and consequences than in the U.S. Clearly the strict white vs. Black system of categorization existing in the U.S. is a product of the particular historical development of this country, not a universally valid biological or genealogical distinction that transcends history. In short, there is nothing natural about it. The white vs. Black distinction was produced—and is sustained—in the U.S. by socio-historical practice, not natural science. Thus the categories Black and white can only be understood as *social* categories. In fact, they defy either definition or description on any other basis. W.E.B. DuBois crystallized this point most eloquently. When challenged to present a definition of a "Black," he decided that the only consistent answer was: "The Black man is a person who must ride 'Jim Crow' in Georgia."¹³

2. Black and White as Racial Categories

Since the categories Black and white are, as we have demonstrated, social categories, what kind of social categories are they? Or put another way, what social groups do they identify?

Our thesis is that they are racial categories. This virtually self-evident point still eludes many communists who realize that there are no such things as "races" in biology or anthropology and therefore mechanically conclude that there are no "races" in the realm of social science despite the fact that race is clearly an operative category of social practice.

No consistent anti-racist or materialist can dispute the fact that "race" is an unscientific category in the world of nature. Since the 1930s, research has conclusively demolished the notion of biological races and proven that the vicissitudes of human history have resulted in immense genetical intermixture. The natural selection of different physical traits associated with different parts of the world were the result of millenia of prehistory where isolated human societies engaged in a primitive battle with nature. The last few thousand years, however, have been marked by steady gains in the human race's command of nature (development of the forces of production). As a result, human history has been shaped by ever greater contact and exchange between peoples. The isolation of earlier societies came to an end, and along with this changed social practice came an increasing intermixture of peoples—proving in fact that the human race was one species, incredibly diverse yet biologically capable of intermixture. As a result, there is no longer any genetically pure people on earth, and scientifically speaking, there is only one race, the human race.

However, just because race is unscientific in a biological sense does not mean that it is not operative socially. Bourgeois society, in particular is not organized according to the latest findings of science, but according to the requirements of capital. Thus, to rule out the notion that white and Black are racial categories because "race" is unscientific is to mistakenly apply natural science criteria to social science. In fact, an analysis of the logic of the white vs. Black distinction proves that this distinction is thoroughly racial in character.

In the U.S., white and Black are determined on the basis of a distinction in the physical appearance of people, mainly a difference in their skin color (along with secondary features such as hair texture, etc.). That is, certain physical features are isolated and fetishized into mutually exclusive racial groups—the white and Black racial groups. The white vs. Black distinction categorizes people based on a reified notion of skin color, irrespective of their other attributes, such as culture, national origin, class, etc. This does not mean that people have no other attributes or that classification into a racial group makes them disappear, only that the white vs. Black distinction is indifferent to them—they are inessential to this particular system of categorization. Consequently it is not at all uncommon for a diplomat from a country such as Nigeria to be treated in an abusive manner in the streets of New York, "mistaken" as an "ordinary Black." And a Puerto Rican family can be split upon arrival in the U.S. because some members begin to be treated as Blacks. Since a socially determined concept of physical features is the basis for the white vs. Black distinction, this distinction is properly called a racial distinction, a distinction between white and Black racial groups.

By contrast, the logic of the white vs. Black distinction has nothing in common with the logic of nations or nationalities. National categories are completely indifferent to physical features. They are determined by *purely* socio-historical factors such as the development of an all-sided economic structure, language, culture, etc., factors that are in turn inessential to the white vs. Black distinction. Racial groups and nations or nationalities are determined by qualitatively different standards and logic, a reflection of the fact that the social practices that produced them (national formation on one hand, racism on the other) are qualitatively different.* The white vs. Black distinction is a socially-determined racial distinction, not a nationality distinction. These racial categories are a powerful social force in the U.S., literally dictating different life destinies along the color line.

*For a fuller discussion of the relationship of racism and national oppression, see *Racial Oppression and National Oppression: Their Particularities and Their Interconnection in the United States*, in *Working Papers of the National Conference on Racism and National Oppression*.¹⁴

3. Black and White as Antagonistic Categories

In addition to being social and racial categories, the white vs. Black distinction is antagonistic; it is not a neutral or unbiased way to describe the physical characteristics of people. Were they neutral descriptions, we would expect to find numerous categories based on eye color, shades of skin color, hair color and texture, physical size, etc. But in the U.S. a rigid two-category system only tenuously related to physical appearance prevails.*

The inherently antagonistic nature of the white vs. Black distinction is graphically illustrated by analysis of its logic. In the U.S. to be "accepted" into the category of white one must appear to be "racially pure" whereas the category of Black is a "genetic dumping ground" for all those who have ostensibly been "contaminated" by the slightest "tinge of Black blood." Put another way, the logic of racial categories purports that whites have unadulterated pedigrees whereas Blacks are mongrels. This baldfaced white supremacist logic is inherent in the white vs. Black distinction itself; it is the logical reflection of the fact that the historical relationship between the Black and white racial groups has been antagonistic, oppressive and racist. Produced by the historical practice of white supremacy and Black oppression, racial categories consequently define the antagonistic poles of the social relation of racial oppression. Far from being neutral categories to describe distinctive physical appearance, white and Black are categories produced by the social practice of racism and in turn are indispensable for the production and reproduction of white supremacy and Black oppression in U.S. society. They have no validity outside the context of racism and the struggle against it. The reality of these categories is that they are used to organize social practice in such a way as to decide the life destiny of millions of people in the U.S.—who shall be slave and who free, who may

*There are in addition a number of other categories in the U.S. that are partly racial and partly national in determination, notably Indian or Native American, Asian or Oriental, Chicano, LaRaza, and Latino. Unlike the categories Chinese, Mexican, Navajo, Puerto Rican, etc. which are categories of nationality, these categories incorporate numerous nationalities into a single concept on an implicitly racial basis: e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, etc. (the "yellow peoples") are collectively called Asian. On the other hand, unlike the strictly racial categories of Black and white, these categories are limited to certain continents or even particular nationalities—e.g. Chicano refers only to people of Mexican descent, whereas Latino is far more inclusive. (By contrast, Black and white are strictly a matter of color.) Thus these categories are quasi-racial, quasi-national in character. They are an accurate categorical reflection of the fact that these peoples face both national minority oppression and racial oppression in this country: they are discriminated against on the basis of both their nationality (e.g. lack of citizenship, language, national culture, etc.) as well as their color and physical features.

ride in the front of the bus and who must ride in the back, who may vote and who may not, who will be educated, hired, and promoted, and who not, etc. Racial oppression and the logic of its categories are a testimony to the limits of bourgeois irrationality, chauvinism, and barbarism. Yet the white vs. Black distinction is universally accepted as a natural fact of life in U.S. society, by "white" and "Black" alike—a dramatic indication of the power and pervasiveness of racism and its world outlook.*

In summation, an analysis of the white vs. Black distinction shows that Black oppression is *racial* oppression. It shows that the white vs. Black distinction is the logical expression produced by the historical practice of white supremacy and Black oppression—that people are not "white" and "Black" by nature (genealogy or biology) nor simply because they look different, but because the social practice of racism polarized society into hostile *racial groups*. Further, this white vs. Black polarization is a product of the particular historical development of the US. (which we will study in more detail in Section III).

Consequently the notion that the division of humanity into races is natural perpetuates the racist myth that Blacks and whites are inherently different and antagonistic, and that nothing can be done to eliminate this problem of "human nature." On the other hand, the notion that racism and racial groups are not real because they are inconsistent with modern science and anthropology is a mechanical transference of natural science criteria to social analysis. And lastly to consider whites and Blacks as nations or nationalities qualitatively obscures the racial character of the white vs. Black distinction and, consequently, makes it impossible to grasp the dynamics of the social practice of Black oppression.

Before moving on to the historical examination of the system of racial oppression and its links to the development of capitalism in the U.S., we must extend our categorical analysis to the particularities of the Black and white racial groups respectively and the intersection of each with classes.

C. The White Racial Group

The white racial group is the oppressor pole within the system of racial oppression. Its existence as a distinct social group is premised on the oppression of Blacks and therefore its objective interest (the white interest) is in racism. Independent of the will of white individuals, the

*By contrast, nations and nationalities harbor no such inherently chauvinistic logic within themselves, and are not necessarily locked into oppressive relations with one another. It is possible for nations to develop relations of equality, mutual benefit, mutual dependence, alliances, and/or competition with one another—not just relations of national oppression. In fact, some nations are oblivious to each other's existence, whereas the notion of "white" has absolutely no meaning apart from "not Black" or "not colored."

system of racism creates the white racial group which shares in the benefits of Black oppression: to the degree that Blacks are overwhelmingly concentrated at the lowest level of political, economic, social and cultural existence that U.S. capitalist society has to offer, whites are proportionately spared that fate.

The white racial group is the *objective* oppressor social group created by the system of white supremacy. This objective condition is *subjectively* expressed in the self-conscious defense of those interests which whites have in common with each other. The social force that actively functions to promote that white group interest in the U.S. is what we have termed the white united front. While all whites benefit to one degree or another from racism, not all whites actively promote or support it—some may actively oppose racism and the interests of the white racial group—and therefore not all whites are in the white united front.

Obviously, the white racial group cuts across class lines. As the result of class differentiation, not all white individuals share in the white interest equally: in particular, class interest and racial interest are not the same. One set of interests flows from the class position of people in society, the other from their racial position. Thus, racial interest and class interest may coincide, or they may be contradictory. This is the key contradiction that makes the white united front inherently unstable and sets the conditions for breaking it up.

For white capitalists, class and racial interest completely coincide: it is no accident that it is a class of whites.* The system of racial oppression was brought into being and perpetuated in order to unfold and expand the exploitation of labor by capital in North America. The vast scale, explosive pace and relative smoothness of capitalist development in the U.S. cannot be fully explained without the factor of racism. And the bourgeoisie's present economic and political rule over the rest of society still rests upon racism as a key foundation stone. Consequently the white bourgeoisie constitutes the core and chief beneficiary of the white united front. It is therefore the main enemy of the anti-racist struggle.

The petit bourgeoisie in the U.S. has been and remains overwhelmingly a class of whites. Racism has conspicuously barred the entry of Blacks and other minorities into this class throughout the country's history. This situation has begun to change slightly only within the past few decades. Even so, the relatively few Blacks who make it into the petit bourgeoisie occupy the most peripheral and precarious positions and are discriminated against within the class. While some whites within the petit bourgeoisie will step forward and others will vacillate in the struggle against racism, the majority constitute a backbone of the white united front in defense of white interests. Every liberal professor who contrib-

*The few functioning Black capitalists are completely peripheral to national production and have nothing to do with the ruling circles of capital.

utes money to the NAACP is matched a hundred-fold by “terrified” storekeepers and landlords who “do business” in the ghettos; hard-pressed “American farmers” who hold their Black and Latino field hands in racist contempt; and Allan Bakke types convinced that “unqualified” Blacks should not be given a “free ride” into the already overcrowded professions. The petit bourgeoisie is a highly competitive and declining class and the defense of its increasingly desperate position is bound to have a sharp racist edge.

By contrast, the multi-racial working class suffers from racism in the same proportion as the capitalist class gains. Its economic and political slavery as a class is strengthened by the system of racism, and the working class is divided against itself by the racism within its ranks which promotes a distinct interest of white workers against Black workers. Consequently the class interests of white workers are in contradiction to their racial interests as whites. This is the only section of the white racial group whose class and racial interests are qualitatively in opposition to each other. As part of the working class, the interests of white workers are anti-racist. As part of the white racial group, however, their interests are racist since *as whites* they gain improved job opportunities, education, housing, etc. relative to Blacks and other minorities. Whether this contradiction is resolved in favor of the class rather than the racial interest is a central question of the class struggle, one for which the communists must devise a very definite strategy. But what is significant about this contradiction is that it provides the working class section of the white racial group with the best material basis to be won away from the racist white united front over to the anti-racist united front, because workers cannot *qualitatively* defend their class interests if they function politically, first and foremost, “as whites.”

But there is nothing automatic about such a resolution. For in an immediate *quantitative* way, there is in fact something to be gained for workers in defending their “white birthright” in the U.S. This unavoidable historical truth, so embarrassing to the conciliators of the racist outlook of many white workers, is the material basis for the reproduction of racism within the working class. The U.S. working class today is extremely broad and stratified in terms of income, conditions of work and life. Although even the more stable sectors of the working class cannot qualitatively escape the instability inherent in their class position, they can be substantially cushioned, especially in an imperialist country. There is understandably a high premium placed upon these more protected positions—and racism and national chauvinism have traditionally given and continue to give the competitive edge to “white Americans”—a prerogative within the working class which its “white interest” will seek to protect. (Witness the stiff resistance to affirmative action, superseniority, etc.) The “white interest” also shows up in the lower, less stable strata of the working class where the competition for

survival is fierce and the racism is often more conspicuous. But the defense of white interest within the working class cannot be reduced to fights on unemployment lines or for job applications; it is far more pervasive and all-sided.

The force of tradition also plays a significant role in reinforcing the defense of the white racial group’s interests in the U.S. Historically the white racial interest became a powerful force precisely because the class and racial interests of the vast majority of whites coincided. For example, the racist enslavement of Blacks enabled most whites to become property holders of one type or another—either as bourgeois merchants, or as petit bourgeois shopkeepers, farmers, craftspersons, artisans, etc., while bourgeois planters were laying a firm foundation for a U.S. national capital on the backs of enslaved Black labor. In fact, the majority of the white racial group was part of the bourgeoisie or petit bourgeoisie up to about the twentieth century—and the whites that were part of the working class were overwhelmingly composed of European immigrants who in turn were themselves climbing off the lowest rungs of the proletarian ladder after a generation or so, leaving newer immigrants and Blacks behind. As a result, the white racial group—and its subjective expression, the white united front—had a powerful class basis for hundreds of years in North America. In fact, the white racial group largely coincided with the bourgeois/petit bourgeois class alliance that constituted the social basis of capitalist rule. In this sense, the white racial group is a bourgeois, racist formation key to the economic and political consolidation of the rule of the U.S. bourgeoisie.

However with the advent of the twentieth century, and especially during the last 50 years, important shifts occurred in the class position of the bulk of the white population, introducing a basic structural instability into the white racial group and the white united front. As U.S. monopoly capitalism matured and large scale European immigration came to an end, most whites have either been unable to climb out of the working class or have been pressed back into it by capital.

Thus the class basis to smash the white united front now exists. But the historical power of the white united front and the fact that the system of white supremacy and Black oppression continues to generate the white racial group with a distinct white interest as a powerful material force, even within the working class, means that this process will be difficult and protracted. This process has no chance of success, however, if the white interest among white workers is conciliated in the slightest instead of being consistently identified and struggled against.

D. The Black Racial Group

As we have shown, Black people are the oppressed racial group within the racist system of white supremacy and Black oppression in the United

States. The Black racial group is the dialectical opposite of the white racial group. All people who appear to be even partially of African descent, independent of their will or their other social or cultural characteristics (such as class or nationality) suffer from racial oppression and are part of the Black racial group. The Black racial group is the oppressed social group created by the system of racism. Consequently, the objective interest of this racial group as a group is in the overthrow of the system of racial oppression, in Black liberation.

More specifically, the oppressed Black racial group in the U.S. is a unity of two interconnected but distinct aspects: Black people are a racially oppressed section of the laboring masses, as well as a distinct racially oppressed people. Between these two, the principal defining aspect of the Black racial group is that of being a racially coerced section of labor in this country.

This view stems from our analysis of the connection between racial oppression and U.S. capitalism. As we have emphasized, racial oppression and class oppression are qualitatively distinct social contradictions with their own dynamics and laws of development. But they are also interconnected. In our view, the nature of this interconnection is defined by the fact that capitalism gave rise to and ultimately determines the form and content of racial oppression. In particular, the ultimate *raison d'être* of racial oppression is the need of U.S. capital accumulation for a specially oppressed, coerced section of labor.

Thus the requirements of primitive accumulation of capital in the New World determined the need for an enslaved labor force and marked the origin of the racist system of white supremacy/Black oppression. In turn the needs of industrial capital ultimately led to the abolition of slavery and its replacement with the racist system of sharecropping. And it was the historical demands of monopoly capital which drove Blacks from the plantation and has kept them segregated in the role of last-hired, first-fired labor reserve in the ghetto heartlands of U.S. cities. After almost 350 years of bitter labor in this country, less than 1% of Blacks have escaped the condition of being part of the laboring masses within U.S. capitalism. (In the category "laboring masses" we include the bulk of the petit bourgeoisie as well as proletarians, tenant farmers, slaves, etc.)

This is not to say that racial oppression is directly a form of economic exploitation, or that economic considerations mechanically determine race relations. But we are saying that the Black racial group was fundamentally created as a coerced labor force for capital, and that this is the principal aspect of racial oppression. Thus, while racial oppression is qualitatively different from the class contradiction between workers and capitalists, it is a particular form of the capital vs. labor contradiction which has been created under the concrete and historically definite conditions of capitalist production in this country. Our main point here is

that Black people are principally a distinct racially coerced section of the U.S. laboring masses.

Compared to the white racial group, the Black racial group is relatively homogeneous in terms of class position and conditions of life. Still, it is also separated along class lines, a fact which gives rise to class contradictions among Blacks, and in turn is reflected in various class responses to the demands of the anti-racist struggle.

At least 90% of the Black population is part of the working class; their racial interests and class interests completely coincide. As such, Black workers objectively constitute a powerful force not only for the Black liberation struggle, but also for proletarian revolution in the United States. As among their white counterparts, however, class consciousness does not develop spontaneously from class conditions. In particular, the pervasiveness and harshness of racist oppression, combined with the historic failure of white workers to fight racism consistently, can obscure class unity and consciousness. Racism has served to concentrate Blacks disproportionately in the lower depths of the working class, subjecting large sections of Black working class families to conditions of perpetual depression-like instability. These circumstances in turn usher in a myriad of ideological problems universally associated with the lumpenized sector of the proletariat.

The particularly insidious intersection of racial and class oppression in the U.S. serves to hide the critical state of absolute emiseration of large sections of the working class. Racism disguises and distorts this condition and makes it appear as solely a racial problem. In addition the system of racial oppression thoroughly orchestrates and frames the attack upon the Black section of the working class. Consequently the working class Black masses themselves often view their predicament as first and foremost a problem of racism.

The Black petit bourgeoisie is a class whose class interests usually coincide initially with its racial interests, and yet tend to conflict in the long run. The struggle against Black oppression entails the demand for equality of opportunity, including entry into petit bourgeois professions and business ventures. Successes scored in this realm mark important gains in the struggle of the Black racial group against white supremacy. In addition this class concentrates some of the most talented and determined elements among the Black masses, who tend to emerge as the "natural" spokespersons and leaders of the Black racial group with political influence far outstripping their numbers or their actual class position relative to broader U.S. society. And this phenomenon will continue to prevail, and gain widespread validation among the Black masses, so long as the Black liberation struggle remains principally locked into the bourgeois world view, because the implicit end goal of Black liberation in this petit bourgeois ideological framework must be for the "talented tenth" of the Black racial group to be allowed access

(according to individual merit) into the petit bourgeois and bourgeois strata, comparable to their white counterparts.

Consequently the Black petit bourgeoisie plays a prominent and articulate role in the Black liberation struggle. However, the counter-current is also powerful. To the extent that the Black petit bourgeois focus on consolidating their individual and family foothold in the petit bourgeoisie (their ability to pass it on to the next generation), their commitment to the Black liberation struggle falters and is bound to be increasingly marked by vacillation and opportunism. This phenomenon stems from the fact that the bourgeois world view proves itself completely inadequate to come up to the strategic demands of the Black liberation struggle. To the petit bourgeois, "liberation" is principally an individual and family question. Yet Black oppression is the racist subjugation of the whole racial group. Therefore liberation can only be mapped out in terms that bring the Black masses squarely up against capital. And, like all petit bourgeois forces, the Black petit bourgeoisie at best will prove to be an erratic and vacillating ally in the struggle against capital.

As for the handful of functioning Black capitalists, their class and racial interests are in opposition. The discriminatory terms on which they are permitted to enter the bourgeoisie presuppose the perpetuation of an oppressed Black racial group. The commodity market they stake out for themselves is based upon the continued ghettoized and marginal existence of the majority of the Black masses. Since they function in the most competitive sector of capital, they also require a pool of easily exploitable Black labor for their survival as capitalists. As a group, they can be expected to respond positively only to the most superficial aspects of the Black liberation struggle (renaming streets after prominent Black Americans, donating encyclopedias to ghetto libraries, etc.) while remaining silent or opposing outright the struggle on more basic issues (unemployment, police brutality, etc.).* They do, however, support anti-racist reforms that remove obstacles to the reproduction and stabilization of their bourgeois class standing.

In addition to constituting a racially oppressed sector of the laboring masses, the Black racial group has been forged by the historical experience of racial oppression, and the struggle to survive and overcome it, into a culturally distinct and cohesive people. In fact, precisely because they are a racially oppressed section of the laboring masses, Blacks have developed into a *racially oppressed people*, who constitute an integral part of the U.S. people, yet at the same time a distinct people in themselves.

*This is not to rule out the possibility that *individuals* from this sector of the Black racial group can and will at certain crucial junctures take up the anti-racist struggle from a revolutionary perspective or even go over to the side of the proletariat in the struggle against capital.

Whites and Blacks have lived and worked together in the same economy and on the same territory for more than 350 years in the course of which they were forged into a single U.S. nationality. However, racism divides the whole society, and hence the U.S. nationality, into antagonistic racial groups: "white Americans" and "Black Americans." Consequently, whites and Blacks experience U.S. national life from opposite ends of the racial contradiction, and these qualitatively different experiences have given rise to distinctive cultural expressions within the U.S. national culture.

But contrary to some romantic notions which attribute to pre-colonial Africa a far greater cultural cohesion than was the case, Blacks did not come to the western hemisphere as a distinct people, nor did this distinctiveness spring into being immediately. In fact, at the time of the origins of racial oppression in the U.S. (the late seventeenth century), the Black racial group included a vast array of quite distinct African ethnic and tribal groups. But precisely because racism ignores all characteristics of people and divides them into racial groups based on their skin color, the Black racial group was formed and faced racial oppression. Blacks were forced to become a racially oppressed sector of the laboring masses long before they were forged into a distinct, unified people. In fact it was the experience of racism and slavery within this country that, by the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century, had begun to amalgamate these different African peoples—together with the various European cultures that Blacks interacted with daily, including those inherited from their own white parentage—into a distinct Black or Afro-American people with a distinct culture. Since that time, Black culture has been enriched and deepened in accordance with the changing experiences of Black people within the U.S.

Thus, Black people and their culture are distinct yet at the same time are part and parcel of the American nationality and culture. Racism denies both of these facts. It attempts to deny that Blacks—or Africans—have any culture worthy of the name, and systematically tries to suppress or co-opt any such expressions. And it attempts to deny that Blacks have made any significant contribution to American culture. In line with the white supremacy/Black oppression logic of racism, American culture and the American nationality—both material and spiritual—are mythologically claimed to be the exclusive product and property of whites. This racist claim is an obvious justification for racial oppression: "Since Blacks have contributed nothing, they should get nothing." In fact, Black people are a distinct people whose culture is extraordinarily rich, vibrant, and diverse, and almost every field of U.S. cultural expression today is thoroughly influenced by it. Black people are central to the American nation and nationality.*

*The white supremacy dialectic poses an interesting insight concerning the interrelationship between Black people and culture and the broader U.S. culture. (cont.)

Because Black people in the U.S. have a distinct culture rooted in a common condition and life experience of racial oppression, many people—even among those who reject the Black Nation thesis—tend to see the Black racial group as an oppressed *nationality*. But a distinct and common culture, even one which is the outgrowth of a common condition of oppression, is an insufficient basis for the forging of a nationality. A nationality is the product of an all-sided community whose material basis rests in a distinct common economic life.* Black people, by contrast, have always been locked into an oppressive position within the larger U.S. capitalist society as a specially exploitable labor force for capitalist development. Consequently their cultural distinctiveness is the product of oppression and the struggle against that oppression *within* capitalist society and not the result of an economic life *outside* that society.

Moreover, culture is neither essential to the white vs. Black distinction, nor is it key to the oppression faced by Blacks. For example, individual Blacks who may not be central to the social and cultural life of the Black community or recently arrived Africans or West Indians are treated no differently than Blacks steeped in U.S. Black culture.

Even beyond Black experience, cultural oppression within the U.S. has always been color-coded: it has always been powerfully affected by racial oppression. As a result, those immigrant nationalities who qualify as “white” in the U.S. racial system are integrated into the larger social fabric in a qualitatively different way and on qualitatively different terms than those who are considered non-white. All immigrants face national minority oppression to one degree or another. But this oppression tends to recede more or less rapidly for the white immigrants, and their U.S.-born descendents rarely face ongoing discrimination of any decisive social consequence. Conversely, native peoples and non-white immi-

Despite racist discrimination, Blacks have in the past been able and continue to qualitatively appropriate to themselves the broader American nationality and culture. Yet due to the white supremacy dialectic, the process is not reversible. Except as commodities, white Americans cannot appropriate the experience of Black Americans. And it is precisely this experience which constitutes the creative, human impulse for Black culture. Therefore, to the extent that “Black culture” can be successfully “marketed” for broad American and international consumption, it is already in the process of being severed from its material, ideological and political foundations. Thus the force and vitality of Black culture is inextricably tied to the struggle for Black liberation and the struggle against racist oppression.

*The term “nationality,” as distinct from “nation,” is ill-defined in Marxist theory. In the U.S., many consider a nationality to be any group that has “some but not all” of the four features of a nation identified by Stalin. This usage is totally arbitrary and is so inclusive as to encompass virtually any distinct social group, thus rendering the category useless theoretically and politically.

grants face all-sided, systematic, and protracted oppression due not only to their nationality, but more crucially because of their color: racism singles out “non-whites” on the basis of color and imposes on their particular class condition both racial oppression and an intensified form of national oppression. Moreover, racism locks their U.S.-born descendents into continuing systematic oppression on the basis of color, even if they are fully steeped in U.S. culture and traditions and have lost touch with the language and culture of their forebears.*

In fact, capitalism’s historic tendency is to break down national distinctions, not to perpetuate and extend them. As Lenin noted, capitalism requires a common language and culture in its workplaces, marketplaces, educational system, etc., and therefore tends to assimilate all people within its national boundaries into a single nationality. This process is faster or slower depending on the degree to which capitalist production dominates a particular country, and is more or less democratically accomplished according to the nature of the political life of each country. But proceed it does in every capitalist country. The U.S. is no exception. Indeed, as the most powerful capitalist country, the U.S. tends to assimilate nationalities very rapidly, a process which is somewhat slowed only by a constant flow of immigrants. Here is the grain of truth in the “melting pot” theory.¹⁵

By contrast, the historic tendency of U.S. capitalism has been to produce and reproduce antagonistic racial groups within it, not to break them down. In the early years, the various African ethnic and national groups were transformed into the Black racial group while the various European nationalities became the white racial group. Over the course of time this racial division was reproduced many times over and extended to draw in the millions of immigrants of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today that color line remains as impenetrable as ever. More rapidly than ever before, all European peoples (from Hungarian “refugees” to Latin Americans of no visible Black or Indian ancestry) are integrated into the white racial group. At the same time, non-white

*As we noted above, non-white people are forced into oppressed racial groups independent of their will and regardless of their nationality or consciousness. As a result, racial consciousness among non-white nationalities tends to lag behind the reality of racial oppression and that oppression is often conceived of as solely national minority oppression—oppression due to nationality. However, in the 1960s a number of these non-white nationalities, influenced by the Black movement, developed their own racial self-identifications, going so far as to produce new terms to replace the ones that have been imposed upon them: e.g. La Raza and Chicano to replace Mexican-American or Spanish; Asian to replace Oriental; Native American also became more popularized. It is not surprising that these terms were usually coined and promoted by second and third generation minorities (and urbanized Native Americans) who were more assimilated into U.S. culture.

nationalities are assimilated into the oppressed racial groups within the U.S. nationality. In particular, the Black vs. white contradiction remains as vicious and all-pervasive as ever.

In other words, racial groups and national minority groups are not the same thing. Under capitalism, the historic tendency is for nationalities to be broken down and assimilated into the dominant nation. By contrast U.S. capitalism produces and reproduces racial groups as an integral part of its historical development, assimilating all people into the racial system internal to it. Since the laws governing the development of nationalities and racial groups are qualitatively different, it is theoretically and politically crucial to be precise on this matter and to identify Black people as a racially oppressed people, not a nationality.

III. The Historical Development of Racism and U.S. Capitalism

A. Racism and the Accumulation of Capital

In the preceding section of this essay we identified the particularity of Black oppression, concluding that it is a socio-historical relationship of white supremacy/Black oppression that polarizes society into antagonistic racial groups. The questions now posed are: What contradictions in the development of U.S. capitalism gave rise to racism? What has sustained racism in the U.S. from generation to generation?

Thus far we have explored the logic of the race relation—the dialectical interconnection between the Black and white racial groups. We have argued that these racial categories are nothing but the ideological reflections of racist social relations which appeared in history before they were expressed conceptually. It remains for us to explain how they came into being and how they have been reproduced in U.S. society. Thus the logical analysis which grows out of history also informs our study of history and is ultimately verified by its ability to illuminate key aspects of U.S. social development.

In this section we will address the historical relationship between racism and U.S. capitalism. Our view is that racism is a form of oppression brought into being and developed within the single, integral class structure of U.S. capitalism. Black oppression is not an oppressive relationship between separate national economies as the Black Nation thesis (as well as the internal colony thesis) asserts. Rather, the *raison d'être* of racism has been the incorporation of Black people into the U.S. class structure as a racially oppressed, coerced labor force. Racial oppression is a particular element of the capital vs. labor contradiction that developed in the concrete conditions of the U.S. It is a specifically capitalist form of oppression. Consequently, the object of analysis is the

production and reproduction of racism within U.S. capitalism.

The key to grasping the particular historical role racism has played in the development of U.S. society is in its connection with the accumulation of capital. Capital accumulation is the motive force for the growth of capitalism as a system. This process includes the accumulation of money wealth, but this is not its essence. Just as “capital” refers to the social relationship between capital and labor, between the owners of the means of production and the sellers of labor power, accumulation of capital refers to accumulation of the capital relationship. Accumulation of capital is the process by which the exploitative production of surplus value comes into being and develops on an ever-widening scale.

Historically, capital accumulation appears in two forms: primitive and expanded. The “primitive accumulation of capital” is the process by which pre- or non-capitalist social relations are broken up and replaced by the capital social relationship. The “expanded accumulation of capital” refers to the process by which the capital relationship, inaugurated in primitive accumulation, systematically brings more and more arenas of social production and increasingly large masses of people under the sway of capital nationally and internationally. The study of this process in any given country is no less than the study of the modern history of that country as a whole.

Ultimately U.S. racism cannot be understood without a comprehensive study of the development of the capital relation in this country. Conversely U.S. history will remain incompletely grasped unless the central role of racism is properly understood. In what follows we make no pretense to having fully accomplished this. Rather we have focused on some of the key junctures in U.S. capitalist accumulation in order to highlight the continuous interpenetration of racism and capitalism throughout U.S. history. Through this examination we hope to demonstrate the qualitative impact that racism has had on the very shape and form of capitalism in this country. For in our view racism has not just added extra dollars to the coffers of the capitalists. It has been a dynamic force that has qualitatively affected the nature of capitalist development in the U.S. as well as the pace and power of its growth.* We will illustrate

*It is common within the communist movement to view Black oppression as essentially a problem of “super-exploitation.” This view is flawed in a number of ways. First, when employed as an analysis of the *particularity* of racism it obscures the racial contradiction between the Black and white racial groups, reducing racism solely to a class contradiction between the bourgeoisie and Black workers. Second, when employed as the central *connecting link* between racism and U.S. capitalism it reduces the impact of racism to one of quantitatively increasing the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists. It thus fails to comprehend the qualitative importance of racism as a foundation of U.S. society, an independent dynamic shaping the very nature of the U.S.

this point by analyzing the relationship of racism to U.S. capitalism in its three main stages of development. First we will discuss the primitive accumulation of capital, the origins of racism and slavery. Then we will analyze the role of racism in the formation of the U.S. proletariat in the nineteenth century. And finally we will investigate the relationship of racism to monopoly capital.

B. Origins of Racism

1. Theoretical Framework

As soon as we begin to address the question of when and how and why racism developed in the U.S., we immediately find ourselves embroiled in a debate. For what would at first appear to be a seemingly simple question that could be settled by fairly straightforward historical investigation turns out to have embodied in it the seeds of all future controversies over the nature of racism and the strategy to overcome it.

Our theoretical starting point is that racism is a systematic separation and distinction of racial groups in a supremacy/oppression opposition based on color and other physical features. Therefore the effort to uncover the origins of racism entails an analysis of when such separation became a generalized social phenomenon and what the key causal factors were. Additionally, since our thesis is that the racial categories Black and white, which today seem so immutable and transcendent, should not be taken as *a priori* categories but must themselves be analyzed as to their historical origins—uncovering the beginnings of U.S. racism also requires an investigation into the process through which

capitalist social formation. Third, the concept of super-exploitation as applied to Black oppression is inconsistent with Marxist political economy. Marxism understands exploitation—and super-exploitation—as a *class relation* between the capitalist class and the working class as a whole. Specifically, super-exploitation as used by Lenin refers to the fact that imperialist capital, due to its distortion and strangulation of the economic development of the colonies and neo-colonies, is able to force the working classes of those countries to accept a wage far below the historically developed value of labor power. By so doing, imperialist capital extracts superprofits from the underdeveloped countries. Super-exploitation does *not* refer to the relationship of a section of a single working class—e.g. Black workers in the U.S.—to the particular capitalists who employ them. If it is viewed as such—rather than as a class relation—all sorts of theoretical confusion abounds. For example, from this point of view, unemployed Black workers are not exploited at all since no value is squeezed from them by the capitalists: the role of the unemployed in capitalism only makes sense as part of a societywide class relation. Thus, while the notion of “super-exploitation” has a useful rhetorical or metaphorical value to describe the special oppression and exploitation visited upon Black people by capital, it is incorrect to use it as a foundation of a scientific theoretical analysis.

these categories came into being and acquired their full social meaning. This is particularly the case since, as we have seen, the categories themselves carry a racist logic.

Thus, an inquiry into the origins of U.S. racism requires an investigation of when and why the social practice of separating and assigning particular status according to race became generalized, as well as an investigation of when the categories Black and white assumed their social content and became reified. Our hypothesis is that the two closely coincided in time (the last quarter of the seventeenth century) and place (the British colonies in North America), and that in this coincidence we will find the origins of U.S. racism.¹⁶

This approach to the question of the origins of racism is significantly different from most prevailing views on several counts.

First, we take the standpoint of materialism and insist that racism is not simply or principally an ideological construct or psychological aberration. Thus, we do not examine the collective unconscious of Europeans to discover what particular psychology might have impelled them to oppress and enslave those with darker skin. In our view, Europeans had no particular predisposition towards oppression and racial hatred. Rather, the specific circumstances of developing capitalism led some European powers to be able to exploit and plunder the people and resources of the world. Out of these circumstances, the national oppression that was part and parcel of European colonialism became racialized and eventually specifically racist social relations came into being and became systematized.

We also do not engage in the kind of chicken and egg controversy that seems to bedevil most genesis theories. On the question of racism this has taken the form of arguing for one or the other of the following propositions: either that racism predates the enslavement of Africans and was its main cause, or that racism is the result of slavery in that the degraded status of Blacks promoted the conception of them as subhuman and racially inferior.¹⁷ Both these lines of reasoning suffer from the same deficiency. Racism is seen as primarily an ideological problem of which the lower social status (in this case slavery) is either the cause or the effect. In other words, the object of study is the “thinking” of whites about Blacks rather than the social practice of racial oppression.

Second, our view is that the white and Black racial groupings came into being in history and thus the study of the birth of these groupings and the racial categories that identify them is an integral and critical part of the historical investigation of origins. The major methodological problem of most other “origins” arguments has been that they presume the eternal existence of racial categories and incorporate them into the analysis as though they were functional social categories throughout history. Our contention is that Europeans conceived of themselves as Christians or Jews, or as nations began to form, as Englishmen,

Dutchmen, etc., or as part of various ethnic or geographic groups, and only descriptively if at all as whites. It is only through developed social practice of a particular nature that a "white consciousness" develops and with it the category "white people," or the white racial group. Likewise, it is through the same social practice that the "others"—who in reality have varying social positions—become subsumed under the category Black and, in the context of a developing common experience, begin to create a common consciousness as Blacks.

Third, we understand racism to be a generalized and systematic relation within a particular society and therefore do not identify the advent of racism with the earliest color-coded expressions of antipathy or with individual and sporadic incidents of discriminatory behavior. We do not presume, for instance, that each negative historical reference to Blacks or Africans in literature, religious tracts, or law is an indication of the existence of racist social relations. Irrational expressions of antipathy on the part of Europeans towards many different groups abound and certainly predate U.S. race relations. But, prior to and in the early period of capitalist colonialism, these expressions are thoroughly intermixed with the religious, ethnic, and especially emerging national conflicts of the day. In studying the origins of racism we seek to understand its beginnings as a distinct and *general* relation—that is, one which impacts and influences society as a whole, polarizing it on the basis of race, and structuring society so that it recreates itself.

Finally, we view racism in the U.S. as distinct from racism elsewhere in the world. That is to say, though we understand that racist social relations prevail in many other countries, U.S. racism has its own particular dynamic. As we have noted, one indication of this is the unique way in which racial categories operate in the U.S. Therefore, the study of the origins of U.S. racism must be steeped in the particularity of the historical development of the U.S. It is only through grasping this history firmly that we will be able to uncover the genesis of racial oppression in its U.S. form.

2. Slavery and Primitive Accumulation

Capitalism in the U.S. was, in its very origins, a thoroughly racist system. The peculiarities of colonial development brought forth a system of racial slavery that placed an indelible stamp on the subsequent class and national formation of the U.S. Essentially, the social relation of racially differentiated class positions became the means through which the capitalist mode of production established itself in North America.

The key to understanding the central role of racism in the development of U.S. capitalism rests on a fundamental point of Marxist political economy. Pointing out that "the accumulation of capital presupposes surplus value" and that "surplus value presupposes capitalist produc-

tion," Marx notes that the solution to this apparent vicious circle is "a primitive accumulation preceding capitalistic accumulation; an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its starting point."¹⁸ Primitive accumulation is not *simply* the early accumulation of money wealth, although such wealth is a necessary element of the process of primitive accumulation. As Marx stressed over and over again, "capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things."¹⁹ Thus, primitive accumulation consists in the creation of that situation in which the owners of money wealth and capital in the means of production and means of subsistence encounter and subjugate to the rule of capital those who have been separated from both feudal obligations and from individual property in the means of production. *Capital the thing* brings together the incipient bourgeoisie and the newly "freed" wage laborer and in so doing begets itself as *capital the relation*.

The process through which this polarization/interrelationship takes place is, simultaneously, the process of the formation of the modern classes associated with capitalist production. The concrete historical phenomena that bring into being a class owning nothing but its labor power and a class which monopolizes the means of production is the material content of primitive accumulation. The production of the relation between the two is the production of the capital relation.

The general process of primitive accumulation is common to all countries in which the capitalist mode of production has come to prevail, but the precise way in which it takes place is historically specific, varying from country to country depending on historical conditions. In the U.S., the capitalist mode of production rose to its feet on the basis of land expropriated from the native peoples, money wealth from England,* and the labor of enslaved Africans. This combination of elements made it possible for the capital relation to gain a firm grounding in the Southern colonies as early as the end of the seventeenth century, enabling the U.S. national bourgeoisie to quickly mature as a class-for-itself led by the capitalist farmer/slaveowners of the plantation South.

The New World was not, of course, unpopulated. All along the Eastern seaboard of what became the colonial U.S. lived native peoples in various stages of development and with various forms of social organization. The land had been the communal possession of the native tribes and formed the material basis for their existence. Their dispossession became the first order of business for the colonists. Land grants from the English Crown served as the legal cover for the creation of private

*Much of this wealth was procured through the robbery and plunder of the rest of the world and through the commercial slave trade which characterized the early colonial system and constituted what Marx called the "chief momenta" of primitive accumulation in Europe.

property in land where no such relation had previously existed. This constituted an essential component in the process of primitive accumulation.*

The settlement of the colonies was an undertaking that required the investment of a tremendous amount of wealth. The outfitting of ships seaworthy enough to make the journey from Europe and laden with enough supplies to see the colonists through the difficult months after landing was no small matter, especially in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Most investors did so in the hopes that the venturesome souls who left England behind would stumble across a get-rich-quick scheme like the robbery of South America's mineral wealth. They were not so lucky, though, and the first fifty years or so were essentially a bust, financially speaking. In fact, the Virginia Company folded, unable to fulfill the expectations of its investors for a steady stream of treasures returned to England. But once Virginia was able to produce tobacco as an export crop on a large scale, sometime around mid-century, the colonies became an increasingly profitable investment. From that period well into the nineteenth century English capital played a central role in the development of U.S. capitalism. As Marx notes, commenting on the employment of child labor as a source of primitive accumulation for English capital, "A great deal of capital, which appears today in the United States without any certificate of birth, was yesterday, in England, the capitalized blood of children."²⁰ These investments were, therefore, another essential component of the primitive accumulation which fueled U.S. capitalism.

But in order for what was capital in England to become again capital in the U.S. and not degenerate into simple money wealth or unutilized means of production, it had to enter into or create the conditions identified above. It had to bring together the nascent bourgeoisie and the "free" laborer. And therein lay the rub. For in the colonial U.S., as was

*The dislodging of native peoples from their land and the appropriation of this land first by English colonists and later by "pioneer" settlers and the U.S. state was a process that was to occur over and over right up to today. This land grab freed up what was undoubtedly one of the most critical conditions for the rapid growth of U.S. capital—a huge and fertile land mass together with incalculable natural resources. At the same time, this process did not, in the main, serve to integrate native peoples into the developing class structure of the U.S. With some important exceptions, the principal dynamics have been either the wholesale extermination of native peoples or their isolation on barren reservations. Although native peoples were, in some cases, enslaved by colonists, for a number of reasons this never became a general social dynamic. Having remained outside the class and national formation of the U.S., though clearly thoroughly oppressed by the development of U.S. capitalism, in our view the oppression of native peoples is best understood and analyzed within the framework of colonialism and national oppression rather than racial oppression.

to be the case in several other British colonies, capital was willing but labor was not. It had other options and, more often than not, chose to refuse capital's tender offer.

The export-producing colonies were faced with a chronic labor shortage. Tobacco production depended upon the labor of indentured servants. But each year another batch of servants worked off their indentures and had to be released. The fact that land was plentiful meant that these newly freed servants could become independent small farmers. It was impossible to monopolize all the land and instruments of production in the hands of the big planters. Thus indentured servitude was an unstable system. Instead of reproducing the capital relation and a class of dispossessed it tended to keep disintegrating and producing a class of self-sufficient farmers and petty commodity producers. When labor had an option, it chose not to work in the service of capital. In the U.S. as in Canada and Australia, the problem of how to expropriate the laborer from the soil and keep him working for the capitalist while the conditions for petty production were at hand was one that troubled would-be capitalists no end. But in colonial U.S. there was one difference: the climate and soil of the Southern colonies were appropriate for the large scale production of an export crop that potentially had a large international market. If the labor problem could be solved, capitalist agriculture could take off.

The problem could not be satisfactorily resolved by making the European indentured servants into slaves since, at least in some sense, servitude took the form of a voluntary contract. Were the planters to have violated such contracts through the permanent enslavement of indentured servants they would have shut off the flow of those willing to immigrate, and brought a protest from England. On the other hand, the slave trade had already transformed captured Africans into a form of property. The buying of slave labor consisted in the transfer of the right to that "property" from the slave trader to the planter. In no sense was it a contractual agreement between the planter and the laborer as with indentured servitude.

It is in this context that slave labor was introduced and took root in the U.S. The international slave trade (principally supplying the West Indies and South America) was a well established commercial venture by the time Virginia was settled. In the early years of the colony the number of Africans imported remained small. Toward the end of the century, though, African slave labor began to replace indentured servants from Europe in the by then flourishing tobacco fields. From the point of view of the planter, slaves were simply a better investment. Though the initial cost of a slave was higher than buying the indenture of a servant, if a slave and all his or her progeny could be held in bondage for life it became well worth the larger initial outlay, for this ensured a permanent, stable labor force for the expansion of capital, something

which the system of indentured servitude could not provide.

Thus the enslavement of Africans became the first form through which capital as a relation gained a firm foothold in the U.S. Black slave labor constituted the permanently dispossessed pole of the capital/labor relation. While the majority of the white population was involved in petty production as small farmers or artisans, the Southern planters (and their English investors and creditors) began to amass huge profits through the cultivation of tobacco, rice, and later cotton on the basis of slave labor. After the close of the seventeenth century, the Southern colonies grew more rapidly than those in the North, mostly due to the importation of slaves. By 1770, 40% of the population of the five Southern colonies consisted of enslaved laborers. Whereas in 1616 Virginia had shipped 25,000 pounds of tobacco to England, by 1688 this was up to 28 million pounds and by 1771, 105 million pounds.²¹ In the New England colonies, commercial capital developed as merchants served as middlemen and suppliers to the planters of the Southern colonies and the West Indies. The enormous profits accruing to the Northern merchants from the slave trade provided the basis for their particular form of primitive accumulation of capital. But capital as a relation of exploitation in production did not develop to any significant degree in the North until the period of early industrialization beginning in the nineteenth century. Here the same problem existed as had existed in the South: labor could not be permanently commanded to work for the profit of capital when it could obtain the conditions to work for itself. *The only arena in which surplus value was being wrung from labor and in which capitalist private property became a generalized social relation prior to industrialization was in the plantation system of the South.*

And here we have unraveled the common origin and essential connection of capitalism and racism in the U.S. Racial slavery was a central foundation for and served to hasten the primitive accumulation of U.S. capital. Capitalism in the U.S. has been, from its origins, a racist system.

3. The Development of Racism and Racial Categories

The development of the capitalist plantation system based on the enslavement of Africans is the historically specific circumstance which produced racism and racial categories in the U.S. Ultimately the plantation system based on racial slavery thrived, becoming a centerpiece of the primitive accumulation of capital in North America. But the development and intersection of the plantation system, slavery, and the system of white supremacy was neither preordained nor a simple transference of the "advanced experience" of Latin America or the Caribbean. Rather these developments were the result of a particular confluence: the systematization of the English colonial system which guaranteed a world market for tobacco, thus giving a qualitative boost to

the development of the plantation system, and the rise of incipient national planter capitalists in the South intent upon expanding that system to the greatest possible degree. That process did not mature until the end of the seventeenth century. Until it did, neither slavery nor racism were fully developed social practices and the categorical distinctions between servant and slave as well as that of Black vs. white were either non-existent or undeveloped.

Of course, the Africans who arrived in Jamestown in 1619 were certainly captives who had been hunted and transported as part of a developing international slave trade that already supplied the Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese colonial possessions with a labor supply. As such it was a given that they would be laborers of some sort. There was no other reason for their importation and they certainly did not come voluntarily to seek their fortunes in the New World. But the specific status of Africans in the English colonies was far from a fully settled question. What would be the social and legal status of these people? How would it be similar to or distinct from that of the indentured servants brought from Europe?

Given that Africans were captives of the slave trade and lacked indentures, their status was probably never identical to that of servants from Europe. One telling example of this is the fact that female servants of European ancestry did not, in general, work in the fields while female African servants did. There are many indications, though, that the concept of certain people being subject to inheritable, lifetime enslavement was not fully developed until the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

In fact, during the mid-seventeenth century servants of European ancestry and those of African ancestry labored together in the tobacco fields under fairly similar conditions. There is considerable evidence to show that these servants shared quarters, socialized together and, quite frequently, ran away from their masters together. The gulf between servant and large planter was far greater than any between the servants themselves, providing the basis for them to make common class cause against those who exploited their labor. This was particularly so during the 1660s and 1670s when a glut in the tobacco market and a radical drop in prices together with attempts to monopolize the best and most protected lands on the part of the big planters severely circumscribed the prospects for freed servants. In some cases Africans and Europeans jointly rose up in rebellions against the large planters.

The point here is that for several decades after the first Africans were brought to the colonies in chains neither the slave vs. servant nor the white vs. Black distinctions had yet become fully consolidated. The division of humanity into antagonistic racial groups, one slave and the other free, had not yet achieved the status of a systematic social relation. Rather, throughout most of the seventeenth century, a profusion of

categories was used to designate people whom we would today, with our thoroughly racialized consciousness, simply identify as Black and white. The dominant categories were Black (actually "Negro," borrowed from the Spanish) vs. Christian and Negro vs. English. That is, religious and national distinctions, not racial distinctions, predominated. (The category "white" did not even formally appear until 1691.)

The initial opposition of Negro vs. Christian reflected the incomplete transition from a feudal/religious context to a bourgeois/secular one. It also testifies to the absence of an impenetrable barrier between people of African descent and people of European descent: that is, the Negro vs. Christian distinction was quite permeable since a Negro could convert to Christianity. In fact, given the proselytizing character of Christianity, one only needed to get baptized to be considered a Christian, and many Negroes, especially those who had been "seasoned" in the Spanish West Indies, availed themselves of this opportunity. The point is that during this early period this religious categorization reflected actual social practice and was not merely a cover-up for racism. Conversion was a decisive factor in determining whether Negro servants would be indentured or freed, or if indentured, for how long. The record also shows that converted Negroes had the right to testify in court, own property, etc. On the other hand, non-Christian Negroes faced discrimination and oppression of various sorts—for example, longer indentures, or even indentures for life. Of course, as racial slavery developed and consolidated into the principal form of the labor process, conversion to Christianity had less and less bearing on one's status, but until the end of the seventeenth century the Negro vs. Christian categorization continued to hold real social, even legal, force. Consequently, the law books and court records of the time are full of references such as "all Negroes imported into the colony who are not Christian. . . ." In other words, the permeability of the Negro vs. Christian distinction was not in contradiction to social reality in this period.

The Negro vs. English opposition overlapped with the Negro vs. Christian distinction, but tended to supersede it by mid-century. The new categorization reflected the political consolidation of the colonies as outposts of British capital and represented the further advance of the plantation system and the movement towards a system of slavery. Nationality was clearly less permeable than a religion which could be penetrated simply by conversion. But even national assimilation was possible and indeed was accomplished to the apparent satisfaction of the courts in a number of instances in which cultural assimilation was deemed crucial in determining the status of "Negroes." This distinction, then, was also not impenetrable. Moreover, it was not inclusive since the colonies included not only English and African, but also Scotch, Irish, German, Dutch, etc. Thus, the Negro vs. English distinction could not establish an impenetrable qualitative distinction between Europeans and

Africans, and indeed was not intended to do so since such a distinction was unnecessary in the mid-seventeenth century.

Of course, we are not arguing that the categories are always the exact reflection of social practice at a given moment. In general, developing social practice tends to render the old categories obsolete, thus necessitating an alteration in their ideological and legal expressions. But whatever the time lag, the fact is that at some point the Negro vs. Christian and Negro vs. English oppositions were the reflections of actual social practice.

In 1660 the Navigation Acts established a division of labor within the English empire that provided a qualitative spur to the plantation system in the colonies. In the last quarter of the century the plantation system came into its own and along with it, slavery and racism. The planters' need for a permanent, unfree, and un-freeable labor force—un-freeable through baptism, "acculturation," or by virtue of part-European parentage—became overwhelming and gave rise to racism and racial categories to ensure its reproduction.

As late as 1680 Negro indentured servants still could be freed, could sue in court, serve as witnesses, enjoy freedom of movement, exercise at least some measure of self-protection, and own property. But the handwriting was on the wall, and a law of 1682 finally closed all loopholes through which Blacks could evade the web of slavery.

. . . all servants except Turkes and Moores, whilest in amity with his majesty which . . . shall be brought or imported into this country, either by sea or land, whether Negroes, Moores, Mulattoes or Indians, who and whose parentage and native country are not Christian at the time of their first purchase of such servant by some Christian, although afterwards, and before such their importation and bringing into this country, they shall be converted to the Christian faith. . . are hereby adjudged, deemed and taken, and shall be adjudged, deemed and taken to be slaves to all intents and purposes, any law, usage or custome to the contrary notwithstanding.²²

The incredibly circuitous language of this law, which laboriously closed all the former loopholes and explicitly retracted all former laws and customs, is itself testimony that racial categories were by no means the norm in the seventeenth century. Otherwise, why not just say "all Negroes shall be subject to enslavement"?

By 1705 Southern history's first slave code was enacted, a code so all-sided that it differed little from those that prevailed up to the Civil War. Included was a very important provision meant to plug what might be called the "miscegenation loophole"; that is, it defined the status of children of "mixed race." ". . . the child, grandchild, or great grandchild of a negro shall be deemed, accounted, held and taken mulattoe"²³ and

hence subject to the slave condition.* This law graphically illustrated the total subjugation of natural, biological diversity to socially determined racial categories. A person who had one Black ancestor was to be considered mulatto, thus enslaveable, even if the majority of his/her forebears were white. Of course, in practice no one spent time searching through genealogical charts. Instead, anyone with a perceptible trace of African ancestry was a mulatto and enslaveable, a powerful incentive for establishing that acute American eye for "race" which is now deeply embedded in U.S. culture.

As for the category "white," it first appeared, appropriately enough, in a law designed to prevent intermarriage and which displayed a degree of chauvinism lacking previously:

"And for prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue which hereafter may increase in this dominion, as well by negroes, mulattoes, and Indians intermarrying with English, or other white women, as by their unlawfull accompanying with one another, *Be it enacted*. . . that for the time to come, whatsoever English or other white man or woman being free shall intermarry with a negroe, mulatto, or Indian man or woman bond or free shall within three months after such marriage be banished and removed from this dominion forever. . . ." ²⁴

More than racial madness was at stake here. Clearly the slave system could absorb a certain degree of "miscegenation," especially if the children of such alliances had no legal status. But widespread, legal miscegenation would have posed enormous contradictions to the rigidly developing racial categories by which the slave vs. free distinction was maintained.

In summation, the racial categories of Black and white are the categorical reflection of the social practice of racism. The insidious racist logic inherent in the white vs. Black distinction came about as the result of a process of conscious definition and refinement necessitated by the labor requirements of the capitalist plantation system. In order to establish these as operative social categories, the ethnic distinctions developed in Africa were obliterated and subsumed in the category Black. And the national and religious distinctions and rivalries between Protestant and Catholic, Irish and English, etc., were subordinated to the category white. And in an inspiration that does credit to the pecuniary instincts of the developing planter-capitalists, though not to their regard

*For a number of years, terms such as mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon which strive to reflect genealogy in a more accurate way than simply "Black" or "Negro" were in use. These may have reflected some slight status distinctions among Blacks, but in time they proved to have little social validity and by the nineteenth century they fell into disuse.

for their own children, the offspring of any "intermixing" were also considered Black in order to entrap the maximum number of people in slavery to capital.

This categorical distinction was a reflection of a qualitative material distinction in which Blacks came to be slaves and whites free. The category "servant" was superseded by Negro slavery on the one hand and white freedom on the other. The hardening of racial categories was a reflection of the fact that one portion of the laboring masses was made to "specialize" in slave labor and the other was exempted from slavery and allowed to rise to the status of free independent farmers and petty artisans, if not planters and merchants.

Thus, primitive accumulation in the U.S. got underway on the basis of both a polarization between capitalist planter and slave and the qualitative racial distinction among the laborers. The full consolidation of the categories Black and white signaled that racism and slavery had achieved the status of generalized social relations. Thus racism and slavery were inextricably connected as racial slavery. The racial categories produced by that union reflected, summarized, and served to reinforce that relationship, inextricably tying both slavery and racism to the earliest formation of capital through the process of primitive accumulation. At the same time, the race relation developed a life and logic of its own based on the systematic separation in law and social status of the historically designated Black and white racial groups. This racial system transcended the direct planter/slave relation and became a foundation for the organization of all aspects of the society.

4. The White Racial Group and the U.S. State

Every system of class oppression is ultimately dependent on a repressive apparatus. That apparatus—the state—is fundamentally the instrument of the oppressor group, the military, legal, and ideological means by which the oppressive social system is reinforced and reproduced. The state, as Engels notes, came into being with classes and private property as the indispensable accompaniment for a system of exploitation and oppression.

Thus the U.S. bourgeois state inevitably emerged and grew as the repressive apparatus of a particular class, the bourgeoisie. But given the centrality of racism to the capitalist mode of production in the U.S., the bourgeois state also developed as the repressive apparatus of the white racial group. In other words, the state enforced and reproduced both the relations of capital and the relations of white supremacy/Black oppression.

It is no accident therefore that the U.S. has traditionally been regarded and, in some quarters, continues to be regarded as a white man's country. This viewpoint is not entirely the subjective delusion of racists. The tendency to make an identity between "American" and "white" has a

powerful base in the economic and political history of this country. More particularly, the U.S. state apparatus has served as an effective and ever available lever to reinforce racist social relations.

U.S. historians have troubled themselves endlessly over the seeming contradiction that characterized the forging of the state. On the one hand, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are recognized as the most advanced political documents of their time, granting broadly defined rights to a wide sector of the population. On the other hand, the U.S. state, in its origins, sanctioned slavery—the total denial of any rights whatsoever to another sector of the population.* Often enough, slavery is viewed as a strange and anomalous formation on an otherwise perfect body politic. Even many Marxist historians have shifted about uneasily in the face of this riddle, oscillating between a glorification of “America’s democratic traditions” and a righteous moral condemnation of slavery.

But this apparent dilemma evaporates as soon as we grasp that the political efforts of the “founding fathers” were devoted not to the establishment of democracy, nor even to the establishment of capitalism in the abstract, but to the establishment of a political system designed to serve the purposes of a historically definite capitalist system. Of course, the capitalist mode of production, founded as it is on free enterprise and the rights of private property from intrusion by the state, tends to broaden the democratic base of society in general. But it always does so in the context of definite historical conditions. The bourgeoisie, being a most political class, never forgets therefore that democracy is always subordinate to its actual and concrete class interests.

In some ways, the U.S. revolution established a broader range of democratic rights for the masses of the population than did any of the other bourgeois democratic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There were two reasons for this. One was the absence of any significant feudal remnants in the U.S. as a result of which there was no grouping of feudal landlords who had to be conciliated in the bourgeoisie’s rise to power. The other is that due to the pivotal role of racial slavery in the developing U.S. capitalist system, the majority of the white racial group were to one degree or another property-holders and thus a broader range of liberties could be extended to the entire group. Essentially the U.S. state, through its chief political document, the Constitution, was able to guarantee wide democratic rights to one portion of the population *because* they were completely denied another.

In this sense, the Constitution—including both its celebrated Bill of Rights and its racist exclusion of Blacks from all of the rights granted whites—is an accurate reflection of social reality.

*At the time of the Revolution Blacks were 20% of the population of the 13 colonies.

The revolutionary coalition that accomplished the political break from England was made up of sectors of the bourgeoisie—mainly slave-owning and commercial—together with the mass of small property owners. It is certainly no accident that several of our most noteworthy and influential “founding fathers,” including the authors of the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, the leader of the revolutionary army, and four of the first five Presidents of the new republic (governing for 32 of the new nation’s first 36 years), were either members or representatives of the plantation bourgeoisie. In many ways, these planters constituted the most “conscious” sector of the bourgeoisie.

But they were a peculiar bourgeoisie in that their unchallenged position in the ruling class was based not on the exploitation of a “free” proletariat but on an enslaved labor force that was entirely Black. The Northern commercial interests, too, depended on the continuation of the slave trade and racial slavery. At the same time, neither of these sectors of the bourgeoisie were yet in direct all-sided antagonistic contradiction to petit-bourgeois capital. In fact, not only did the Constitution represent the interests of both big and small capital, the newly forged state acted to encourage the simultaneous development of both. Of course, the interests of large and petit capital did not always coincide, leading, at times, to overt forms of class struggle—for instance, Shay’s Rebellion (1786) of small, debt-ridden farmers in Massachusetts. However, the real clash did not come until towards the end of the nineteenth century. By and large, “Jeffersonian democracy” could uphold the rights of small farmers and still represent the interests of capitalist agriculture because the expropriation of the small farmers was not yet a requirement for the development of agriculture on a capitalist basis. Essentially, the small farmers, who made up the majority of the population, were protected from expropriation by the fact that, on the one hand, there was an enormous land mass onto which both the plantation bourgeoisie and the small farmers North and South could expand and, on the other hand, because the labor base of large scale agriculture, located in the South was assured through slavery.

In this sense, the revolutionary coalition was a white united front of big and small property standing on the back of Black slave labor to oppose colonial domination. In this united front, big capital could magnanimously tolerate an advance in the democratic rights of the masses so long as those rights were not extended to Blacks. Slavery depended on the categorical identity of “Blackness” and “subject to enslavement” or, put another way, “subject to legally coerced exploitation by capital” under conditions in which the availability of labor was dependent on such coercion. Slavery also depended on its opposite—“whiteness” and “exemption from enslavement.” As long as this arrangement was not tampered with and no one seriously proposed considering the Black

laboring masses to be part of "We, the People" and therefore entitled to rights, the capitalist private property interests of the planters were guaranteed. The white united front remained intact, formalized in the U.S. Constitution. Slavery was reinforced, the system of white supremacy became further reified and a racialized republic was established.

C. Racism and the Forging of the U.S. Proletariat

As we have seen, racism was a central feature of the primitive accumulation of capital in the U.S. The system of racial slavery was the historically specific solution devised by early planter capital to the impasse of a pronounced labor shortage impeding capital formation. By the 1840s, however, when "cotton was king," the role of slavery in capital formation had passed beyond the stage of primitive accumulation. With Southern cotton monoculture fueling the textile industries of both Britain and the U.S. Northeast, the slave system likewise became an important lever in the expanded accumulation of capital, that is in the extension of the capital relationship across the entire U.S. social formation.²⁵

But the expanded accumulation of capital centered in modern industry also brought to the fore the contradictions embodied in the slavery/capitalism relationship. For the unimpeded expansion of capital is ultimately dependent on the development of a "free" labor force if capital is to maximize the variety of forms through which the pursuit of surplus value inevitably unfolds. The ripening of this contradiction—which expressed itself in the intense rivalry between the Southern planter bourgeoisie and the rising Northern industrial bourgeoisie—gave rise to that cathartic event of U.S. history, the Civil War, and, as a consequence, the abolition of slavery.

But the abolition of slavery and the take-off of industrialization did not eliminate racism. Indeed, the system of white supremacy and Black oppression remained fully intact—but in new forms dictated by the requirements of industrial capital. How this came about and why is now the focus of our attention.

At the time of the American Revolution, the plantation system was showing signs of becoming moribund. But the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 revitalized slavery and sealed the fate of Blacks in the U.S. for another 72 years. The development of the gin was undoubtedly the most important advance in the forces of production in this period, leading to a huge advance in textile manufacturing and thereby triggering a wide range of related industrial activity. With this development, cotton quickly superseded tobacco as the principal staple crop of the Southern U.S.

Under the labor conditions prevailing in the U.S., cotton cultivation required the reinforcement and expansion of slavery, ensuring that this form of labor remained pivotal to the creation of surplus value and the

accumulation of capital in the South. Further, the newly formed U.S. state acquired the Louisiana Purchase, doubling its previous land area. The soil and climate of much of this territory suited it to cotton culture, with the result that the slave system inexorably pushed westward. Thus, racial slavery was further deepened, extended and strengthened.

The South and slave labor played a critical role in the early development of U.S. capitalism. And the increasing regional specialization and economic integration of South, Northeast, and West laid the basis for a strong national market and the aggressive industrialization that characterized the U.S. from about the mid-nineteenth century on. But at the same time the contradictions of a slave labor system in a developing capitalist economy began to sharpen. Though the process of primitive accumulation had been centered in the slaveholding states, slavery also placed a limit on expanded accumulation. For one thing, a tremendous amount of capital (approximately \$3 billion at the time of the Civil War) was permanently tied up in slaves rather than freed up for more productive investment with a more rapid turnover elsewhere. And while slavery was not *absolutely* incompatible with industrial capital at that economic level (a significant number of slaves were employed in industry as early as the 1840s and 1850s), it was clearly a qualitatively backward form of the labor process compared to modern industry based on free labor. Additionally, the slave system was labor intensive by nature and thus inimical to mechanization and scientific management. Consequently it contributed little to the development of ancillary industries in production of the means of production, and the relative productivity of slave labor remained very low. This meant that the production of surplus value had massive limitations and could not be systematically raised through the development of technology: that is, slavery was limited to the production of absolute surplus value and stunted in its capacity to produce relative surplus value. Finally, slavery also had the effect of limiting the development of the market since much of the food and furnishings slaves consumed were produced on the plantation rather than procured on the market.*

Thus the slave system was caught in an ultimately insolvable contradiction. Though cotton culture remained a profitable area of investment right up to the time of the Civil War and profit-making remained the motive force of the system, it could not advance the development of the capital-labor relation in an all-sided and progressively more complex way.

*This is not to imply that no market existed. Plantations were generally not strictly self-sufficient. The Kentucky mule breeders, Western grain farmers and Northeastern manufacturers of "Negro cloth" and "nigger hoes" all depended on the slave system for a market. Here we are addressing the stagnation of the market relative to one made up of free wage laborers and small property owners.

However, beginning with the War of 1812, and especially in the 1820s and 1830s, the industrial revolution was transforming the mode of production in the North. By the 1840s modern industry had become the most dynamic sector of U.S. capitalism and, as its necessary counterpart, was forging a "free" proletariat of sizeable proportions for the first time in U.S. history. As industrialization advanced, the European surplus population of displaced peasants was tapped. From mid-century on, wave after wave of immigrants entered the U.S., filling a demand for labor that would continue unabated into the early twentieth century. The dirty work of "freeing" the peasantry from the land and from feudal obligations had already been accomplished by European capitalists. They had only to be joined to U.S. capital to become fully proletarianized. This joining proceeded with much of the same brutality that had characterized early industrialization in Europe. Miserable working conditions, impossibly long hours and child labor were the hallmarks of the birth of American industry. On this basis, and with the spur provided by Westward expansion and taking advantage of the earlier technical and scientific revolution in Europe, the formation, concentration, and centralization of capital developed in the U.S. at a pace without precedent anywhere else in the world.

The vitality of industrial capital in the North stood in sharp contrast to the incapacity of slave-based agricultural capital to develop as a dynamic engine of capital accumulation. Thus, the political fetishes of the slaveowning class could not be allowed to dominate the policies of a nation beginning to flex its economic muscles and requiring state policies that would advance the overall interests of capital. Boiled down to its bare bones, this is essentially what the Civil War was about. Industrial capitalists still had a good portion of the continent in which to expand and many new avenues of production to exploit. The slave system, so long as it was confined to the South, did not pose any immediate economic threat and probably could have been allowed to coexist for some time if that was the price to be paid for maintaining the Union and securing the social order. What could not be tolerated, however, was the continued expansion of the slave system over more territory, the slaveowners' bid to regain political dominance in the federal government, or the fracturing of the unity of the nation. On the other hand, the Southern planters were themselves objectively impelled to press for the expansion of slavery and therefore the political power to enforce that need.

In this sense, existing slavery was not the principal issue at hand for the industrial bourgeoisie. In fact, the North at first pursued the Civil War keeping open the option to preserve both the Union and slavery until it became clear that all attempts at reconciliation on such a basis were doomed to fail, and that breaking the power and spirit of the slaveholding South required separating the planters from their most characteristic form of property—capital in slaves.

Nonetheless, with emancipation, the question of the social and economic status of Blacks was once again posed, as it had been in the period of the differentiation between slavery and indentured servitude and at the time of the forging of the U.S. state. In the dramatically altered circumstances brought about by the freeing of the slaves, the question at hand was whether the racist social relation would be upheld in a new form or whether this oppressive relation would be broken apart—either decisively or gradually. The hegemony of industrial capital over slave capital required the emancipation of the slaves, but it did not require that racism be eliminated.

In fact, the perpetuation of that relationship in new forms was quite important to the program of industrial capital. Capital's principal aim was to unify a highly regionalized and vast country under its hegemony. First and foremost this meant a vast expansion of capital itself and with it, the creation of a gigantic proletariat. In essence, this was accomplished through a racially-differentiated process of proletarianization that relied heavily on immigrant labor from Europe—not the dispossession of the petit bourgeois farmers or the utilization of the former slaves—for its wage-labor force. This racial and national differentiation had a number of social consequences which have indelibly shaped the character and composition of the U.S. proletariat. First, the masses of white people, especially U.S.-born white people, were maintained largely in petit bourgeois farming or crafts, and came to constitute the bulk of the high-paid, stable, skilled section of the working class. Second, the industrial proletariat was formed principally of recurrent waves of displaced European peasants, except in the West and Southwest where Chinese and Mexicans fulfilled this role. And finally, Black people were frustrated in their desire for land, prevented from emigrating North, and held in semi-bondage as agricultural laborers for planter capital, itself dominated by Northern industrial and bank capital.

It was on this basis that the expanded accumulation of capital exploded in the last half of the nineteenth century. As a result, the system of white supremacy and the qualitative division between the white and Black racial groups in U.S. society was maintained, though with a number of new twists, as we will see.

But the affirmation and reimposition of the system of white supremacy was hardly a simple or pacific process. In the wake of the Civil War, a fierce class struggle broke out in the South between former slave-owning planters (and their various allies), who fought to retain a stable labor force in the absence of slavery, and the Black masses (and their mostly vacillating allies), who sought to actively exercise their rights as free men and women. In the years immediately following the war, this struggle took the form of fighting for "forty acres and a mule," as families moved from one locale to another in search of family and better working conditions. It also was expressed in the fight for equal political rights, but

ultimately these could only be fully realized if the struggle for land was successful.

Industrial capital eventually sided with the planters to throttle the former slaves' struggle for land and force Black people back into the role of coerced labor for agricultural capital.* The maintenance and strengthening of the capital relation in the South could not be served by creating a massive class of petit bourgeois farmers (white and Black) who could only impede capital accumulation and challenge bourgeois political power. (Even as things stood, the Populist Movement of the 1880s and 1890s mounted a powerful, though unsuccessful challenge to capital.) Consequently, Radical Reconstruction was aborted before it ever really got off the ground and Blacks were consigned to bitter labor for capital. Although Blacks successfully resisted a return to the gang labor and slave quarters that had characterized ante-bellum plantation life, the growth of the sharecropping system represented a full reconsolidation of the system of white supremacy and Black oppression. While the mass of Blacks were reduced to semi-free agricultural laborers, mainly sharecroppers but also tenants, the majority (59%) of whites filled the ranks of the planters and independent farmers, and most of the rest became renters in the Southern countryside.**

A parallel process of racially differentiated proletarianization took place in the Southern towns and cities. During slavery, Blacks had acquired a relatively wide diversity of skills which were practiced either

*Some Marxists have argued that since the demand for forty acres and a mule and the extension of bourgeois rights to Blacks was a legitimate bourgeois democratic demand, industrial capital "betrayed" its own cause by refusing it and instead acceding to the interests of the planters. Such a view indicates a thorough lack of appreciation for the bourgeoisie's own sense of politics and its limitless capacity to defend its real class interests. No class, least of all the bourgeoisie, resolves political questions on the basis of abstract principle divorced from the actual consequences of its actions.

**There were, in addition, a considerable number of white sharecroppers. But the condition of the white sharecroppers was qualitatively different from that of Blacks. In fact, the poorest white sharecroppers were generally in a better economic position than even land-owning Blacks. This relative relationship continued to prevail right up until the demise of the plantation system itself in the middle of the twentieth century. Thus Harry Haywood notes: "The net result of all this is that ownership by Negroes is confined to the agriculturally least desirable land; and the Negro farms are much smaller than those of the whites. The average size of the Negro owner-operated farms was sixty acres in 1940, about the same as that of the white sharecropper (59 acres). The average value of land and buildings of the Negro farm (\$1,443) was lower even than that of the white sharecropper (\$1,908). The value of implements and machinery of the colored owner was given as \$90 compared with \$322 for the white owner."²⁶

on the plantations or in the urban centers. Together with free Blacks who had developed skills, slaves came to dominate certain trades, in some areas making up the majority of carpenters, blacksmiths, butchers, painters, coopers, etc. Toward the end of the century, however, Blacks were systematically driven from the trades and by 1900 they had virtually been eliminated from them. At the same time, they were effectively barred from employment in the limited Southern industrial development then taking place, except in occasional strike-breaking roles. Like Blacks in the North, they were left to fend for themselves in marginal occupations such as domestic service or were driven back to the countryside while whites made up the bourgeoisie of merchants, bankers, industrialists, etc., the petit bourgeoisie of lawyers, small shopkeepers, independent tradesmen, etc., the skilled trades and the small Southern industrial proletariat. The white vs. Black distinction was reproduced in the Southern cities as well as the Southern countryside.

There was nothing automatic about this process. The abolition of slavery, the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, plus the Civil Rights Acts of 1871 and 1875 formally guaranteed Blacks full equality. On the one hand, while whites had been exempt from enslavement, they could now become (and in fact many were) sharecroppers and tenant farmers. On the other hand, Blacks were no longer owned, no longer a form of capital—at least formally they could own property, vote, testify in court, etc. Clearly this represented a serious weakening of the categorical separation that had been built up and reproduced on the basis of the *Black slave/free white* distinction. The impermeability of racial categories was no longer matched by impermeable economic, social, or political categories. And yet the status of Blacks as a specially oppressed section of the laboring masses remained enormously important to capital.

What followed upon this fact, then, was the ruthless and successful attempt to reinforce the effectiveness of racial categories through political, legal, ideological and terroristic means. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a systematic campaign was unleashed on the Black population of the South to ensure that formal equality with the white racial group remain unrealized in practice. While the Supreme Court systematically declared the key civil rights legislation unconstitutional, the short-lived Black codes and later the all-encompassing Jim Crow laws of the tail end of the century ensured that Blacks would be considered social pariahs even by whites whose material conditions of existence were only a half-step removed. Ingenious methods were invented to bar Blacks from participating in political life and to ensure that the constitutional amendments guaranteeing citizenship and the right to vote remained dead letters. Lily-white trade unions functioned to ensure white domination over skilled trades. But it was the reign of Klan terror, sponsored and directly led by the planters, that guaranteed the

whole process and served as a form of assurance to the poor white that no matter how low he sank, he would never be as low as a nigger.

Finally, the last quarter of the century also saw the rise of the most virulent, anti-human racist ideology. The new circumstances of emancipation required some refinement in the ideological realm. Social Darwinism and the newly developing field of anthropology provided the "scientific" basis to justify the continuance of racist relations. The idea of the innate biological inferiority of Blacks gained the status of an incontrovertible scientific fact and remained the principal rationale for their inferior social status well into the twentieth century.

This reinvigoration of the race relation in the context of a major alteration in the form of class relations (the abolition of slavery) clearly had an impact, not only on the condition of the Black masses, but on the composition of the developing industrial proletariat outside the South.

By 1865 European immigration as the chief source of labor for expanding industrial capital was already well underway. Emancipation did not change this pattern since industrial capital did not look southward for a labor pool but continued to draw on Irish and German and later Italian and Eastern European immigrants for its labor force. Thus, no significant demand for their labor drew Blacks out of the South until WWI. At the same time, Blacks in the North suffered a steady deprivation of rights throughout the nineteenth century and, as the industrial proletariat took shape, they found themselves confined almost exclusively to domestic service and unskilled labor.

Racism as a pervasive social relation profoundly influenced the assimilation process of the European immigrants themselves. In the U.S. the stratifications within the working class inherent in capitalism between the skilled/unskilled and mental/manual labor have been mediated through other social distinctions. The U.S.-born vs. immigrant distinction kept new arrivals temporarily at the bottom of the employment ladder. In particular, Irish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants worked as unskilled labor in the factories of the East and Midwest and built up the transportation networks that provided the basis for the national market. U.S.-born whites dominated the skilled trades. But this distinction did not have the permanence and social power of the racial polarization. There was no impenetrable bar to European immigrants becoming small property owners as independent farmers or entering the skilled trades. In a generation or so, once linguistic and cultural obstacles had been overcome, European immigrants were fully assimilated as white Americans and took their place within the supremacy pole of the Black/white opposition.

Mexican and Chinese labor, however, was forced into the oppressed pole of the racial contradiction, laying the basis for the extension of the

white/Black polarization to white/"non-white" or white/"minority."* Both Mexican and Chinese labor encountered national oppression in their integration into the U.S. working class. In addition, however, the Southern experience in framing Black Codes and Jim Crow laws was consciously applied to enforcing discrimination against these groups. The unfolding of the social relation of racism has its particularity relative to each group, but all are part of the generalized phenomena of racism which had its origins in the U.S. in the development of a distinctive and oppressive economic and social reality for Blacks.

Finally, the earliest organizations of the class were profoundly marred by racism. The early trade union movement fought just as hard to keep the skilled trades lily-white as it did to increase the economic leverage of the workers. As the trade union movement entered the South, Blacks were expelled from the skilled trades they had occupied. And until the 1930s, few attempts were made to draw Northern Blacks into organized labor.** Competition within the class to obtain better conditions of labor took on a decidedly racist edge.

In the formation of the U.S. proletariat, the capital/labor relation was shaped by the already existing race relation. Industrial capitalists drew on labor from all over Europe, Mexico and Asia to start up their factories and build their railroads while the great majority of Blacks were left locked into the plantation system and ruled over by one of the most backward and repressive regimes known to modern capitalist society.

At the same time, the white proletariat cooperated in this policy by failing to champion the cause of Black labor, North or South, and in fact itself actively promoted virulent racist attacks on Black, Chinese, and Mexican labor in the name of the right of white labor to a decent wage and working conditions. Racism carried over into the industrial age intact, still characterized by a contradiction between capital and labor as well as a contradiction among the laboring masses.

*Chinese and Mexican labor was key to the development of capitalism in the West and Southwest, respectively, and the integration of these regions into the national economy in the last half of the nineteenth century. As in colonial America, these regions were sorely lacking in labor, even as capital was abundant. To fill this need, capital turned to Chinese contract labor and oppressed Mexican labor. It was this specially coerced, nationally and racially oppressed labor that laid the basis for the development of capitalist agriculture, manufacturing, railroad building, and mining in California and the Southwest.²⁷

**One notable exception was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) whose non-exclusionary policies were strongly and positively asserted. But the actual racial separation within the working class meant that even this policy could not alter the basic composition of the trade union movement. Within the AFL, such organizing as there was among Blacks generally led to the creation of Jim Crow locals in predominantly white unions.

As the century rounded to a close, a lag in the cotton market and the general backwardness of the South accelerated the growth of a huge reserve of Black labor. The extent of this reserve became apparent with the Black migration northward beginning around 1917-18.

D. Racism and Monopoly Capital

From its first expression in racial slavery to the racialized urban working class ghettos of the twentieth century, racism in the U.S. has consisted in the special oppression of a section of the laboring masses on the basis of socially developed racial categories. However, with the transformation of U.S. capitalism from the competitive to the monopoly stage, the form of racism also changed.

The principal dynamic shaping the intersection of racism and U.S. capitalism in the present era is monopoly capital's need for a thoroughly stratified working class in a period in which the working class has become the overwhelming majority of the population. The condition for this dynamic was the victory of monopoly capital over virtually every sphere of social production and the subsequent urbanization of the country as a whole. This signaled the demise of the plantation system and the transformation of Black people from a primarily agricultural and Southern people into a primarily urban people distributed throughout the country. Therefore, after a brief discussion of the demise of the plantations, this section will concentrate on the stratification of the working class along racial lines, the principal expression of racism in the twentieth century.

1. Capital Taps Its Latent Reserve Army

One of the peculiarities of U.S. capitalism is that well into the twentieth century it continued to suffer a labor shortage. Unlike the European countries where the penetration of capital into the countryside freed up masses of former peasants and threw them into the waiting arms of capital as wage laborers, U.S. capital since its inception was faced with the great problem of locating a labor force. It was precisely this labor problem that lay at the heart of the origin and subsequent reproduction of racism in the U.S. and which relieved Europe of millions of displaced peasants in the nineteenth century.

This massive flow of European immigration in the nineteenth century satisfied capital's labor demands and rendered unnecessary the tapping of the Black labor reserve in the South. World War I, however, put an end to that immigration and monopoly capital was forced to look southward to fill its increasing demand for labor. A massive labor recruitment effort, promising everything from riches to freedom from racism, was mounted to entice Black people northward. As a result, beginning with WWI, millions of Blacks abandoned the horrors of

Southern sharecropping, the KKK, and Jim Crow and migrated to the Northern cities, often leaving their family and friends behind. Slowed temporarily by the depression of the 1930s, this massive displacement of humanity once again picked up steam during WWII, this time opening the West as well as the Northeast and Midwest to Black labor. By the 1950s, the plantation system was broken up. Bereft of cheap Black labor, Southern agriculture finally mechanized in order to drastically reduce its reliance on a labor-intensive work process. Black people were integrated into the urban proletariat throughout the country. Thus, a whole epoch of racism and Black life in the Southern plantation system came to a close.

While this process marked a step forward for Black people, their integration into the broader spectrum of U.S. economic, political, and social life was shaped from beginning to end by the prevailing system of white supremacy. Far from eliminating the oppressive system of racism, this integration reinforced it. Indeed precisely because most Blacks are no longer confined to a distinct condition of labor in one industry in one region of the country, Black oppression under conditions of monopoly capitalism more glaringly reveals the all-sided structural nature of racial oppression in the U.S. and its centrality to U.S. capitalist production. To examine this more closely, we turn to the fate of Black people within the urban proletariat.

2. Stratification of the Working Class

Under monopoly capital, the working class becomes the great majority of the population in the imperialist countries. Petit bourgeois crafts and farming are qualitatively undermined by giant industrial corporations and agribusiness. Shopkeepers give way before the assault of monopoly marketing chains. And one profession after another is reduced to proletarian conditions—teaching, office work, lower levels of engineering and other technicians, etc. The petit bourgeoisie survives, but Marx and Engels' prediction that capitalist society would be increasingly polarized between proletariat and bourgeoisie has been validated by history.

Nowhere is this more true than in the United States. However, alongside the relative and absolute growth of the U.S. working class there has proceeded a thoroughgoing internal stratification of that class. This stratification has many sources, economic as well as political. Indeed, no working class is a homogeneous whole. The very nature of the capitalist mode of production introduces divisions within the working class—skilled vs. unskilled, employed vs. unemployed, industrial, agricultural, commercial, financial sector, etc.* The massive develop-

*Stratification along the lines of gender marks the development of the working class from its very beginnings. This stratification varies in the different periods of capitalist development and exists both within the labor process and external to it.

ment of the forces of production under monopoly exaggerates all these tendencies and adds new ones, the condition of labor in the monopoly vs. the competitive sectors, public vs. private, etc. Moreover, capital consciously promotes this stratification in order to seize greater control of the labor process, to split the working class politically and ideologically, and generally to maintain its political and economic rule in the face of a working class that is far larger and potentially far stronger than the capitalists themselves.

In addition to the stratification which grows out of the labor process itself, capital seizes upon (and even introduces) antagonisms among the working masses—such as differences flowing from religion or nationality—in order to further divide the class. In the U.S., the particularity of stratification in the working class in the monopoly capitalist period is its intersection with the powerful system of historically developed racism.

A key effect of this stratification is to give rise to a privileged “aristocracy of labor” within the working class. The labor aristocracy attempts to speak in the name of the class as a whole while promoting and reinforcing its own privileged position within the class. In so doing, however, it establishes a sharp polarization between itself and a growing mass of proletarians who, by virtue of unemployment, underemployment and generally the most oppressive and unstable conditions of social life, stand at the bottom of the internal class hierarchy. Of all the characteristic features of these two antagonistic poles in the working class, none is more stark or more significant than that one is overwhelmingly white while the other contains within it the highest concentration of Black and other minority workers.

3. The Industrial Reserve Army of Labor and Racism

Capital, to function, needs access to labor which has no choice but to do the bidding of capital, a circumstance which is produced by removing from a certain section of the population its access to any other means of survival but sale of its labor power to capital.* However, even this is not sufficient. Capital must have at its disposal a substantially larger number of laborers than those it can actually employ at any given moment. As Marx pointed out:

But the male-female contradiction is a social relation in its own right which cannot be reduced to a question of stratification in the working class even though, as with racism, there is a crucial intersection. Sexism as a social relation must be examined in its own right, an undertaking which is beyond the scope of this study.

*We have already seen how, under the conditions of an aggravated labor shortage, capital “solved” this problem in the U.S. with the establishment of racial slavery. In general, however, capital solved this problem by separating the laboring masses from the means of production—either from the land or from the tools by which they might otherwise manage.

“A surplus laboring population is . . . the lever of capitalistic accumulation, nay, a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. . . . It creates for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital a mass of human material always ready for exploitation. . . . The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore, also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. . . . *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*”²⁸ (emphasis in original)

In the U.S., this reserve army of labor was relatively invisible and transient until the twentieth century due to the constant waves of European immigration, westward expansion, and fast changing social structure. Now, however, it has emerged with a vengeance—but with the typical U.S. particularity. This “absolute general law of capitalist accumulation” is seen as a natural affliction of Black people rather than an inherent law of capitalism. Racism has made it appear natural that Black people would be chosen to play this role in highly disproportionate numbers due to their “inferiority”—and it matters little whether this “inferiority” is attributed to genetics or the unfortunate consequences of a sociological condition.

That Black and other minority peoples suffer unemployment at well over two times the rate of whites is a well known fact. But even this quantifiable reflection of racism does not capture the full force of racism on the working class and its industrial reserve. For the industrial reserve is itself not an undifferentiated mass of unemployed. It too has a structure that has been racially polarized in the U.S.

Marx identified three forms of the industrial reserve which were differentiated by their role in capitalist production as well as their conditions of reproduction. First, there is the “floating” sector, which may be said to consist of those who fall into unemployment “normally,” that is through the general functioning of the capitalist business cycle, the perennial shifting of production produced by the vagaries of the marketplace and technological development. Then there is the “latent” reserve of those who can be recruited into the active force from occupations within which they are either superfluous or expendable—historically this has mainly referred to the agricultural population but today “housewives” might be added to this category. Finally there is the “stagnant” reserve composed of that sector of the labor force which is habitually unemployed and underemployed and whose conditions of life are significantly lower than the rest of the working class. This analysis of the reserve army is indispensable for understanding the role of Blacks in capitalist production as well as their conditions of life in U.S. society as a whole.

We have already discussed the millions of Blacks who served as a "latent" reserve army of labor for monopoly capital, "called up" during WWI and constantly drafted into the urban proletariat since then. Here we will focus on the "floating" and the "stagnant" reserves.

When government economists detail the extent of unemployment in the country, their figures are based, for the most part, on a count of the floating section of the industrial reserve.* Those in this category characteristically move in and out of employment fairly rapidly and rarely exhaust their unemployment benefits. They are active in the search for new jobs and are joined by those first entering the job market whose prospects for employment are quite good so that they might shop around a bit for a suitable job. A large section of the active part of the U.S. working class is in this category at one time or another. For most workers in this category, unemployment is a temporary condition and is felt unevenly, with workers in certain industries (steel and auto especially) having won extended unemployment benefits which serve to cushion the worst aspects of unemployment. An examination of the "floating" sector of the industrial reserve immediately highlights two facts: first, those white workers who are unemployed are mostly to be found in this category; second, Blacks make up a disproportionate percentage of the floating reserve, relative to their numbers in society.

When we examine the "stagnant" reserve, however, we come to the heart of racism in the structure of U.S. capitalism. For in this category Blacks and other racial minorities not only comprise a disproportionate percentage; it is quite likely that they make up an absolute majority. Here is where the "permanently" unemployed reside, together with those who have "withdrawn" from or perhaps never entered the labor market in despair at ever finding decent employment. Here is where the permanently underemployed dwell, those who move from job to job, or who in an effort to make ends meet hold two or even three jobs at once but nonetheless scramble for survival in precarious and marginal enterprises. Here is where the most depressed sector of the working class is to be found, those who can never make ends meet, locked into jobs under the worst conditions of employment, and housed in the worst slums. In short, this is the penurious "underclass" living in a permanent state of economic depression.

A 1970 Census Employment Survey (CES) based on 68 volumes of raw statistics undertaken by the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in the United States Senate gives a glimpse of the conditions of life in this sector and its possible size. In 1970 nationwide unemployment amounted to 4.9% of the labor force. However, the

*These figures only count those people actively looking for work whose activity has been brought to the attention of the government.

average unemployment in the CES central city survey was 9.6%, almost twice the national average—in New York it was 8.1%. When discouraged workers were added to this count, the New York figure jumped to 11%. A careful calculation of the involuntary part-time employed further raised the figure to 13.3%—nearly double the official unemployment figures for the New York sample areas and triple the nationwide rate of unemployment. When to this was added those who had full time jobs but could not make ends meet (calculated for New York at \$7000 before taxes for a family of four, the nature of which can be judged from the fact that it allowed only \$100 for rent) the results were astounding: "In the seven New York City sample areas, the subemployment rate rises to between 39.9% and 66.6% of the labor force. Indeed, the average for all sampled areas in the country comes to 61.2%."²⁹

Clearly the law of the absolute emiseration of the working class under capitalism—so heatedly debated by those whose vision is conspicuously confined to white workers—has been disguised in the U.S. by the fact that it is color-coded.

4. The Black Ghetto

Racism has always involved a physical separation of the racial groups as well as a political, economic, and social separation. Under monopoly capitalism, this segregation has been reproduced in the form of the Black ghetto. Earlier in this century, the ghetto was a section of the urban area in which the bulk of Black people were forced to concentrate. Today, however, a number of cities are themselves predominantly Black with pockets of walled-off white "protected" areas, as the dialectic of urbanization and suburbanization has been thoroughly racialized.*

These ghettos are the concentrated expression of racial oppression in the U.S. They are the principal communities of the stagnant unemployed and the rest of the racially oppressed section of the laboring masses. On top of this, however, conscious racial policies affect the density of population, the quality and quantity of available social services, the flow of drugs, the quality of housing, and police harassment. Still more, the predatory instincts of petty capital, inherent in its marginal conditions of reproduction, are unleashed in the ghetto in the form of exorbitant prices for low quality merchandise, high rents for shabby housing, small time organized crime, rip-off pawn brokers and bailbondsmen, etc.

The ghetto serves to isolate Black people politically by concentrating

*Alarmed at the potential for political revolt simmering in these ghettos, the bourgeoisie has embarked on a program to re-whiten the cities through "gentrification" and to disperse some of the Blacks through "spatial deconcentration." This latter is a fancy name for an all-out attack on the living conditions of the Black community.

them into one section of the city, subject to manipulation, terrorization, gerrymandering, etc. The ghetto also provides conditions for the uninterrupted, seemingly natural, reproduction of cheap Black labor concentrated in the stagnant section of the industrial reserve.

In other words, the ghetto helps to normalize and reproduce a level of subsistence for Black people well below that of the rest of the working class and, by walling off this sector of the working class from the white world outside the ghetto, locks Blacks into their specially oppressed status. Likewise, the ghetto reproduces the political, social, and cultural relations of racism, thus reinforcing in an all-sided way the material foundations and ideological expressions of the white vs. Black polarization.

Finally we should note that precisely because the ghetto, created in accordance with the needs of racial oppression and monopoly capitalism, is also the principal site of the production of Black self-organization and culture, it is therefore a key arena of class struggle and political organizing.

In summation, the Black racial group as a qualitatively distinct section of the laboring masses has neither waned nor begun to disappear into the general conditions of the working class under monopoly capital. The "declining significance of race," so loudly proclaimed in certain academic and even left circles, is a racist myth. Black and other racial minority peoples remain that section of the working class condemned to perpetual depression level conditions, those assigned the task of absorbing as normal the shocks of capitalist accumulation in order to smooth the ride for others, those upon whom all the contaminations of bourgeois society are dumped in order to make working class life in the U.S. more tolerable for those whose lives "really count." Central to the very functioning and structure of U.S. monopoly capitalism, Blacks are held hostage in a ghetto life which systematically reproduces racism while rendering it relatively invisible.

5. The Aristocracy of Labor

At the opposite end of the working class hierarchy is the aristocracy of labor. This category, named by Engels and discussed by Marx and Lenin, is of the utmost political significance for the U.S. working class movement and the struggle against racism.

While stratification of the working class is inevitable under capitalism, this stratification is qualitatively aggravated under imperialism. Specifically, the imperialist exploitation of a highly disproportionate amount of the world's labor and resources results in a relatively high standard of living for the working class in the imperialist countries. Moreover, this massive imperialist accumulation makes possible the development of an "upper stratum" of the working class which is able to win (or which is granted) a relatively high standard of living, relatively stable and secure

employment, and protected social conditions. This is the material basis for pro-imperialist opportunism within the working class, an opportunism which makes its highest priority the maintenance of the privileged position of this upper stratum over and above the interests of the less protected sectors within the country and the working classes of other nations, especially in the oppressed nations. The forces who promote this opportunism, rooted in the upper stratum of the working class, Lenin called the "aristocracy of labor" and its leaders he dubbed (after Daniel DeLeon) the "labor lieutenants of monopoly capital."^{*}

Thus in 1920 Lenin noted that "the craft union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, and petty-bourgeois 'labor aristocracy', imperialist-minded and imperialist-corrupted, has developed into a much stronger section [in the advanced capitalist countries of the West] than in [Russia]."³⁰ This is all the more true in the world's dominant imperialist country since WWII, the U.S., where it has penetrated not only the skilled crafts and the recently proletarianized professions, but also certain sections of the industrial proletariat and civil service workers, especially during times of capitalist stability. Challenged in the 1930s and 1940s by the left wing of industrial unions, the aristocracy of labor has held unrivaled hegemony in the trade union movement since the 1950s.

The aristocracy of labor in the U.S., however, is not only a social-imperialist, national chauvinist, "patriotic" trend based on U.S. world hegemony. It is also based on racism and is therefore almost exclusively white in composition. As we noted, racism enabled white people to occupy the skilled trades in the nineteenth century by means of Jim

^{*}The U.S. communist movement has for the most part been thoroughly confused about the nature, size, and influence of the labor aristocracy. Some forces, noting the undeniable fact that the U.S. working class stands in a relatively privileged position vis-a-vis the proletariat in most of the rest of the world (especially in the oppressed nations) have concluded that the class as a whole, or at least its entire white section, is hopelessly compromised and incapable of revolutionary consciousness. The opposite reaction has been to minimize the size and influence of the labor aristocracy in the working class, suggesting that this "disease" is peculiar only to the upper echelons of the trade union bureaucracy. Both views reflect a mechanical materialist outlook. For while the size and influence of the labor aristocracy clearly expands and shrinks with a variety of economic, political and social factors operating in the working class, the question is principally one of politics and not sociology. The existence and influence of a social-imperialist trend in the working class movement presupposes but does not automatically flow from a sizeable upper stratum within the class. Certainly imperialist superprofits provide the material basis for such opportunism to exist. In the more developed imperialist countries, therefore, the social base of opportunism in the working class is that much more developed.

Crow, legalized racial discrimination, and lily-white trade unionism. Similar means, together with the full force of most of the leadership of the trade union movement (with a few notable exceptions) are utilized today to protect and further the white interest in the working class. Some of the policies pursued by this racist aristocracy of labor are a lukewarm attitude toward civil rights, absolute opposition to forceful affirmative action, defense of racist seniority systems, good-old-boy recruitment networks and hiring practices, lack of trade union democracy, failure to organize the unorganized and the South and Southwest as a whole, and fighting for demands that principally benefit the upper strata and not the class as a whole (such as percentage rather than across-the-board raises, no-strike agreements, prioritizing pension funds over wage hikes and improvements in working conditions, etc.).

In essence, the labor aristocracy provides the leadership and the social base within the working class movement not only for pro-imperialist politics, but also for racist white interest politics as well. Although far from constituting a majority of the class, the labor aristocracy has so far succeeded in forging a broad white united front within the working class that is linked to the white bourgeoisie against racial minorities. It also exercises effective hegemony over organized trade union politics in general. Consequently, to cover up this reality or to downplay the size, strength, and power of this labor aristocracy and its grip on working class politics today is to conciliate racism and social-imperialism in the working class.

6. The White United Front and the White Racial Group

A cornerstone of monopoly capital's political power, like that of the slaveholders, merchants, and industrial capitalists who preceded it, is the white united front. In the past, this front—which is the political expression of the objective white racial group interest—consisted principally of white bourgeoisie and white petit bourgeoisie.* Today it

*Monopoly capital has significantly undermined the “old,” self-employed petit bourgeoisie of independent farmers, craftsmen and artisans, petty manufacturers, shopkeepers, professionals and intellectuals, etc. But simultaneously it has produced a “new” petit bourgeoisie that works directly for capital consisting principally of technical, marketing, managerial, financial, medical, scientific, and legal experts whose status rests upon their monopoly over advanced educational training. Some of these occupations—for example, public school teachers—have been transformed into working class status in the course of this century as capital has been able to commodify the product of their labor and undermine their monopoly over skills.

However, like the “old” petit bourgeoisie, the “new” one is overwhelmingly white in composition. This is due, in the first place, to the racist maintenance of the universities (increasingly the graduate schools) as white preserves via an
(cont.)

still includes these class forces, but the key new relationship is the one between white monopoly capital and the white aristocracy of labor. The aristocracy of labor provides the critical link to the masses of white people who in this century are workers, not petit bourgeois.

Indeed, the intensification and expansion of the class contradiction under monopoly capitalism makes the white united front of even greater importance to monopoly capital than it was to the U.S. bourgeoisie in earlier periods. When the proletariat was a minority class, the developing bourgeoisie could command a political and ideological majority by strengthening the natural affinities of the property owning classes on a class as well as racial basis. But today the working class is the overwhelming majority of both the population at large and of the white racial group. In addition, contradictions between the monopoly capitalist class and the petit bourgeoisie makes these latter somewhat irresolute and unreliable class allies.

In these circumstances, there is no more powerful weapon at the command of monopoly capital than the white united front. The basis for this front is for whites, no matter what their class, to act politically on the basis of their common *racial* interest. While this racial interest principally serves the bourgeoisie, since for the ruling class there is no contradiction between its interest in the capital relation and the race relation, it is also a factor that impacts whites in the working class. For to the extent that racism serves to protect whites as whites from an equal share in the general emiseration of the working class, there exists a material basis for significant sectors of the white workers to see their racial interest as principal over their class interest.

Of course the extent of the material basis for this racial interest directly corresponds to the location of these white workers in the stratification of the working class in general. Clearly the labor aristocracy is most susceptible to subordinating its class interest to its racial interest, while those white workers less well situated have the best basis for breaking with their racial interest. But in noting this fairly obvious point we should not underestimate the power of either relatively minor privilege or of

educational and social system that constantly throws Black youth onto the streets and transforms their schools into prisons. It is due, secondarily, to outright racist discrimination in the petit bourgeois professions which, much more than working class occupations, are subject to arbitrary and subjective criteria for hiring and advancement since they are largely free of the minimal scrutiny and arbitration processes of unions. An increased number of Blacks gained entrance to some of these occupations as a result of economic opportunity programs and affirmative action that flourished in the late '60s and early '70s (but which are now mostly defunct). But for the most part these Blacks are tokens, window dressing for public relations and increased sales in the minority communities. Moreover they remain almost always the least stable sector of the class to which they have just gained entry.

racist illusions which enable even the poorest and least stable of the white workers to cling to aspirations—however unrealistic—of rising within the stratified class. Nor should we at all underestimate the power of racial inertia which passively reproduces the race relations independently of all attempts to break with “racial prejudice” in the realm of ideology. And finally, we should not underestimate the capacity of the labor aristocracy to make its political program and world outlook the dominant politics and ideology which other white workers will adopt as their own.

At the same time, the vulnerability of the white united front is in its class composition. The white racial interest may provide white workers with a relatively protected position within a system in which they are exploited. But it cannot protect them from exploitation. It may cushion them from the worst shocks of capitalism’s contradictions, but it cannot render them shock-free. And for large numbers of the white workers, the material benefits of racism are indeed crumbs from the bourgeois table.

In this sense, a material basis also exists for the forging of an anti-racist united front capable of embracing a majority of the working class as a whole. That Black and other minority workers have the best basis to be the most resolute and militant sectors of the anti-racist front seems so obvious as to hardly require any further elaboration. Implicit in its very nature is that forging such an anti-racist united front is indispensable to the revolutionary transformation of the working class for the assault on capital itself.

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