

---

# Race Capitalism Justice

---

**Walter Johnson with Robin D. G. Kelley**

---

**Manisha Sinha, Donna Murch,  
Peniel Joseph, Daniel Borzutzky,  
Peter Linebaugh, Samuel Moyn**

**Race**

**Capitalism**

**Justice**

*Dedicated to Cedric J. Robinson (1940–2016),  
pioneering scholar of racial justice*

**Editors** Deborah Chasman, Joshua Cohen

**Managing Editor** Adam McGee

**Associate Web and Production Editor** Avni Majithia-Sejpal

**Associate Editor** Matt Lord

**Poetry Editors** Timothy Donnelly, BK Fischer, Stefania Heim

**Fiction Editor** Junot Díaz

**Editorial Assistants** Spencer Ruchti, Andrea Sandell

**Poetry Readers** Andy Nicole Bowers, William Brewer, Ally Covino,  
Julie Kantor, Becca Liu, Nick Narbutas, Diana Khoi Nguyen,  
Charlotte Lieberman, Eleanor Sarasohn, Sean Zhuraw

**Publisher** Louisa Daniels Kearney

**Marketing Manager** Anne Boylan

**Outreach** Kira Brunner Don

**Advertising/Sponsorship** Christopher Wiss

**Finance Manager** Anthony DeMusis

**Magazine Distributor** Disticor Distribution Services  
800-668-7724, [info@disticor.com](mailto:info@disticor.com)

**Printer** Quad Graphics

**Board of Advisors** Swati Mylavarapu & Derek Schrier (co-chairs),  
Archon Fung, Deborah Fung, Richard M. Locke, Timothy Lyster,  
Jeff Mayersohn, Jennifer Moses, Scott Nielsen, Martha C. Nussbaum,  
Robert Pollin, Rob Reich, Hiram Samel, Kim Malone Scott

**Graphic Design** Zak Jensen

**Typefaces** Druk and Adobe Caslon Pro

To become a member or subscribe, visit:  
[bostonreview.net/membership/](http://bostonreview.net/membership/)

For questions about subscriptions, call 877-406-2443  
or email [custsvc\\_bostonrv@fulcoinc.com](mailto:custsvc_bostonrv@fulcoinc.com). For adver-  
tising questions, call 617-324-1325 or email  
[ads@bostonreview.net](mailto:ads@bostonreview.net).

*Boston Review*  
PO Box 425786, Cambridge, MA 02142  
617-324-1360

ISSN: 0734-2306

Authors retain copyright of their own work.  
© 2017, Boston Critic, Inc.

# Contents

## Introduction

*Robin D. G. Kelley* 5

## Triptych

*Dwayne Betts* 9

## To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice

*Walter Johnson* II

### History Matters

32 *Donna Murch*

### Abolition as Market Regulation

39 *Caitlin Rosenthal*

### The Gong of History; Or, What Is a Human?

44 *Peter Linebaugh*

### Theories of Justice

54 *Roberto Gargarella*

### Racial Capitalism and the Dark Proletariat

59 *Peter James Hudson*

### Reviving the Black Radical Tradition

66 *Manisha Sinha*

### Putting Rights in Their Place

72 *Samuel Moyn*

### What Slavery Tells Us about Marx

78 *Stephanie Smallwood*

83 **When Liberalism Defended Slavery**  
*Andrew Zimmerman*

90 **Black Humanity and Black Power**  
*Peniel Joseph*

96 **This, Our Second Nadir**  
*N. D. B. Connolly*

105 **Racial Capitalism and Human Rights**  
*Walter Johnson*

**Lake Michigan, Scene 22**  
*Daniel Borzutzky* 113

**Births of a Nation:  
Surveying Trumpland with Cedric Robinson**  
*Robin D. G. Kelley* 117

**From *Good Stock / Strange Blood***  
*Dawn Lundy Martin* 139

**Further Reading** 141

**Contributors** 143

---

## Introduction

*Robin D. G. Kelley*

CEDRIC J. ROBINSON'S PASSING this summer at the age of seventy-five went virtually unnoticed in the media. Professor emeritus of political science and black studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Robinson was one of the most original political theorists of his generation, yet no major U.S. newspaper devoted a single paragraph to his memory. Although he deliberately avoided the pitfalls of intellectual celebrity, his influence was greater than perhaps he may have realized. Today's insurgent black movements against state violence and mass incarceration call for an end to "racial capitalism" and see their work as part of a "black radical tradition"—terms associated with Robinson's work.

Born on November 5, 1940, Robinson grew up in a black working-class neighborhood in West Oakland. Educated in public schools, he spent hours in the library absorbing everything from Greek philosophy and world history to literature. Soft-spoken but never "quiet," he attended the University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in anthropology and rose to prominence as a campus activist. He helped bring Malcolm X to campus and protested the Bay of Pigs Invasion, for which he received

a one-semester suspension. After graduation in 1963 and a stint in the army, Robinson worked briefly for the Alameda County Probation Department, encountering both a racially biased criminal justice system and fellow employees determined to change it—including his future wife, Elizabeth Peters. By 1967, inspired by the urban rebellions and the antiwar movement, the couple chose to join those determined to change the world, pursuing a life of activism and intellectual work.

In 1974 Robinson earned his doctorate in political theory from Stanford University. His dissertation, “Leadership: A Mythic Paradigm,” challenges the conceits of liberal and Marxist theories of political change, arguing that leadership—the idea that effective social action is determined by a leader who is separate from or above the masses of people—and political order are essentially fictions. Contending that “orthodox Western thought was neither universal nor coherent,” he ultimately arrives at the conclusion that “the political is an historical . . . illusion.” When he submitted a draft of his dissertation in 1971, the faculty was ill-prepared to sign off on a project that questioned the epistemological foundations of the entire discipline. Since no one could reasonably reject a thesis so sound, elegant, and erudite, some members resigned from his committee, citing an inability to understand the work. It took three years and the threat of a lawsuit for his dissertation to be approved, and another six years before it was published as *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (1980).

Robinson’s critique of political order and the authority of leadership anticipated the political currents in contemporary movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter—movements organized horizontally rather than vertically. His monumental *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) takes Karl Marx to task for failing to comprehend radical movements outside of Europe. He rewrites the history of the West from ancient times to the mid-twentieth century,

scrutinizing the idea that Marx's categories of class can be universally applied outside of Europe. Instead he characterized black rebellions as expressions of what he called the "Black Radical Tradition," movements whose objectives and aspirations confounded Western social analysis. Marxism also failed to account for the *racial* character of capitalism. Having written much of the book during a sabbatical year in England, Robinson encountered intellectuals who used the phrase "racial capitalism" to refer to South Africa's economy under apartheid. He developed it from a description of a *specific* system to a way of understanding the *general* history of modern capitalism.

So what did Robinson mean by "racial capitalism"? Building on the work of another forgotten black radical intellectual, sociologist Oliver Cox, Robinson challenged the Marxist idea that capitalism was a revolutionary negation of feudalism. Instead it emerged within the feudal order and flowered in the cultural soil of a Western civilization already thoroughly infused with racialism. Capitalism and racism, in other words, did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of "racial capitalism" dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide. Capitalism was "racial" not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. The first European proletarians were racial subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery within Europe. Indeed, Robinson suggested that racialization within Europe was very much a colonial process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy. Insisting that modern European nationalism was completely bound up with racialist myths, he reminds us that the ideology of *Herrenvolk* (governance by an ethnic majority) that drove German colonization of central Europe and "Slavic" territories "explained the inevitability and the

naturalness of the domination of some Europeans by other Europeans.” To acknowledge this is not to diminish anti-black racism or African slavery, but to recognize that capitalism was not the great modernizer giving birth to the European proletariat as a universal subject, and the “tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones.”

*Black Marxism* was largely ignored for two decades, until its return to print in 2000 renewed interest. While Robinson is most known for that book—and its discussion of racial capitalism and the “Black Radical Tradition”—he leaves a vast body of work, notably *Black Movements in America* (1997), *An Anthropology of Marxism* (2001), and *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (2007).

Robinson was a challenging thinker who understood that the deepest, most profound truths tend to bewilder, breaking with inherited paradigms and “common sense.” When asked to define his political commitments, he replied, “There are some realms in which names, nomination, is premature. My only loyalties are to the morally just world; and my happiest and most stunning opportunity for raising hell with corruption and deceit are with other Black people.”

In that spirit, the essays that follow apply Robinson’s ideas in service of a just world. As Robinson would have hoped, the terrain of their inquiries is wide-ranging, both geographically—from St. Louis to South Africa to South America—and conceptually, as they question a spectrum from orthodox interpretations of Marx to the genealogy of Black Power. Although the contributors often disagree (as Robinson would have expected), they draw from his landmark insights the intellectual and ethical resources required in today’s quest for racial justice and the global fight against economic exploitation.