

Michael C. Dawson, "Hidden in Plain Sight: A Note on Legitimation Crises and the Racial Order" (Critical Historical Studies, Spring 2016).

Response by Ittai Orr

With "Hidden in Plain Sight," Michael Dawson builds on Nancy Fraser's influential essay "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode," which argued that all those aspects of life we imagine to be "counter" to the hegemony of neoliberal capital, including the unpaid labor of housekeeping, reproduction, ecological conservation, even gardening, are in fact the pillars upon which capital stands. What is at stake in her intervention is the determination of the contours of capitalism itself; if we are to challenge its logic, we should be aware of exactly what it is, and what is actually opposed to, or outside of it. For her, capitalism is "neither an economic system nor a reified form of ethical life." Rather, it is "best conceived as an institutionalized social order, on a par with, for example, feudalism." Like feudalism, capitalism has convenient myths undergirding its inherent imbalance of power: where Fraser suggests the feminine domestic space as a hidden abode for capital, Dawson points to the "hidden abode of race" as a crucial resource for reinforcing capitalist inequality. Racism allowed "war capitalists" to expropriate labor under the guise of the liberal meritocracy by suggesting certain people deserved no better than slavery or subjugation, and race continues to differentiate between disposable and valuable lives today.

Dawson asks, "What is the relationship between race and this new stage of neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century?" And he writes: "Whether as slaves during one epoch; as colonized workers, sharecroppers, workers within segregated/ segmented labor markets throughout the twentieth century; or, as disposable workers in this neoliberal era—those marked by race within the United States and elsewhere have been denied a basic feature of capitalism—access to labor markets or, if granted access, the ability to sell their labor on an equal basis." Not everyone comes to the "Eden" of the labor market on equal terms, ready to negotiate as equal parties, as Marx smugly reminds us. Each arrives burdened or blessed with a history; some have met before, in an act of armed robbery. What makes this period different, Dawson argues, is the pace of abandonment and disposal, the intensity with which capital exploits and moves on to cheaper labor rendering superfluous a population of laborers in this country defined largely by race.

Dawson's next question is: "To what degree can we characterize the period we live in as one of crisis, and, if so, what is the nature of the crisis?" He answers this with a decided "yes," and specifically identifies it as a *crisis of the legitimacy of the state*, after Jurgen Habermas. The tense marriage of capitalism and white supremacy has generated unrest among blacks and whites in different ways. Since the alliance between state and white power was shaken with the civil rights act in the 1960s, and especially as the white middle class fell prey to the all-too-familiar changes inherent to the process of capital accumulation, it formed reactionary and overtly racist movements to "Make American Great Again." Meanwhile, a crisis of legitimacy among the urban African-American population has resulted from the state's toleration of racist executions at the hands of the police, and because of what Michelle Alexander calls the New Jim Crow, itself the

outcome of a “deal with the devil” between the state, the rural white vote, and private prisons roving for new inmates.

Dawson’s paper carries significant stakes for activism as well as scholarship. Do we tell stories about the proletariat and capital, what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls History 1, or is there another story that needs immediate attending, History 2, histories that have at best an indirect or non-obvious relationship with the rationalizing process of capital: namely, the now incontrovertible fact of a systematic racist massacre carried out by the police.¹ By referring our attention to the “hidden abode of race,” Dawson suggests that when we look at one history, we see the other, and he powerfully updates DuBois’s concept of double-consciousness or twoness to mean a black subjectivity that combines the potential disposability of the slave with exploitation of the black worker. “It is not a case of either/or.” Why, then, is there a stubborn division between these two aspects of black subjectivity in this country, especially when we look at ground-level politics? After all, Bernie Sanders, despite bold and very public support from Eric Garner’s daughter, still came across as a myopic one-issue candidate when he conflated African-Americans and the poor into a racial under-caste in many of his speeches. I wonder if this has to do with his overarching narrative of decline since the 1960s, or if the results of the primary should not be taken as an indication of the resonance of his message. Nevertheless, why is the racial struggle not also the labor struggle?

One perspective that may shed some light on the obscure, “hidden” relationship between the extraction of surplus value today, in its hyperbolic neoliberal form, and race is the global view. Understood as a global doctrine of deregulation and “free trade,” and not just a loosely structured “social order,” neoliberalism has another hidden abode alongside race and the domestic space: the global sweatshop, including U.S. prisons and off the books wage slavery for latino/a migrant workers. These global sweatshops are filled with poor mostly non-Europeans sometimes in rapidly “modernizing” settings. Even here, race is not incidental. After all, which countries and peoples are in such abject and desperate conditions that they seek help from the US, World Bank and IMF in the first place? Especially in the case of the Caribbean, the history of racial subjugation and continued racism map onto continued oppression to a degree that is impossible to ignore. They seem to afford unique opportunities for exploitation by US companies, either because of a historical disadvantage wrought by slavery, because of a lack of political, military and economic leverage, because of the living racism of the “West,” or all of these reasons. This leaves me wondering if an international consciousness might also be necessary as we attempt to address the twin problems of race and capital: how is the Haitian struggle also the Black labor struggle?

And my last question deals with the outcome of what Dawson calls “the crisis.” As deregulated, modernizing states fail to meet the needs of populations around the globe, a situation has developed internationally that looks somewhat like the one in the United States. ISIS, which recruits through loud rhetoric against even the idea of the modern “nation-state,” is fueled by disaffection among people in modernizing or European countries, but then, ironically enough, is precisely engaged in building a nation-state or what is the same thing, a “caliphate.” Likewise, in the United States, Trump populism is a reassertion of the (white) nation state under the guise of a party that

¹ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2007)

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frequently claims to loathe the government. How do we make sense of this double move toward and against the state? If the state has lost its legitimacy, can we expect the reassertion of the state (united with the Romantic concept of “nation,” understood racially) in a way we have not experienced since the Second World War?