

# Examining the Wreckage

NICK ESTES AND ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

The United States is on fire. As we write this introduction, we can read in the ashes and embers of smoldering cities the writing on the wall – the historic movements for Black lives against white supremacy have raised class consciousness to levels that we simply have not experienced in previous generations. We might ask, why are race and white supremacy so central to class consciousness? What can the history of settler colonialism teach us about this current moment? More importantly, what does a decolonization movement look like, and how is it informed by both Black and Indigenous traditions of resistance? These questions are monumental, and each deserves exhaustive treatments, something we can only gesture at here.

The Jamaican-born British Marxist Stuart Hall gave us language to help understand the current conjuncture. “Race is the modality in which class is lived,” he wrote in 1978. “It is also the medium in which class relations are experienced.” Therefore, “it determines some modes of struggle” and “the *adequacy* of struggle to the structures it aims to transform.”<sup>1</sup> Although Hall was writing about a Britain under Margaret Thatcher, the lesson helps us understand the current moment. The abolitionist Ruth Gilmore Wilson builds on Hall when she argues that “capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.”<sup>2</sup> Neither class nor race are fixed identities. Class is fundamentally about power. Put another way, class is a relation of power. It is exercised through the domination of one class over another. It operates on different scales, between boss and worker, oppressor and oppressed, and between colonizer nation and colonized nation. Thus, class expresses itself through race, colonial, gender, and sexual relations of power – and many other vectors to be sure. “The dynamics of class movements emerge in different convergences of struggle,” writes historian Christina Heatherton. “Our theories have to be capacious enough to account for these convergences.”<sup>3</sup> A categorical dismissal of “identity politics” – a concept with its own misuses and abuses – fails to see how groups and entire nations of people confront power and thus become politicized by that historical process.

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Indigenous and African resistance and intellectual traditions have developed some of the most robust theories of anticapitalism, anticolonialism, and socialism within this hemisphere and in Anglo North America where settler colonialism has taken hold. Why? These two traditions alone provide key insights to the very nature of capitalism and how it has unfolded throughout space and time, its tentacles emanating from Europe and stretching across the globe in the forms of imperialism and colonialism.

The historian Cedric Robinson located the origins of a Black radical tradition as arising from a distinct African experience. The transatlantic African slave trade and the plantation system it fed, paradoxically, dehumanized Africans while also exploiting their humanity. It reduced human beings to units of property. It also exploited, in the most nightmarish ways imaginable, whether through natal alienation or through the daily torture of bondage, the very faculties of *humanness* that form the fundamental basis of capitalism: labor and its reproduction. What arose from this centuries-long experience, which lives on today, was a culture of liberation. That historical class consciousness owes its origins not solely to the creation of a European “new world” in the Americas. Its mother is Africa. Robinson writes,

Marx had not realized fully that the cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks – men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the origins of this tradition, however, Robinson begins his analysis in Europe, where racial capitalism began. It was here, after all, where Europe, before it began its planetary enterprise of colonization, colonized itself. In his formulation, capitalism was not a radical “break” or “rupture” from European feudalism or the “old order.” In many ways, it was a continuation of it. Racialism was seeded in European social orders before the dawn of capitalism, creating racial hierarchies that formed early class structures. The racially subordinated Europeans, if they were not outright eliminated, normally labored and worked the land on behalf of the ruling classes. Immigrant workers were usually placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Before there were W. E. B. Du Bois’s darker nations and lighter nations, the Slavs and Irish were the wretched of Europe who would not achieve “whiteness” alongside their fellow Europeans in the United States until the nineteenth century. This is not to say racism did

not exist historically in other societies. Rather, it shows how the root of modern anti-Blackness, which is tied to the system of chattel slavery and its afterlives, and settler colonialism, which is tied to Indigenous genocide and the theft of a continent, had its origins in Europe.

During the so-called “Age of Discovery,” this racial system was exported to the rest of the world. A brutal series of enclosures removed direct producers from the land and forced them to sell their labor in the form of a wage in the factory. Witch hunts eradicated communal relations and subjected the social power of women and children to the drudgery of domestic work and biological and social reproduction. “The history of Europe before the Conquest is sufficient proof that the Europeans did not have to cross the oceans to find the will to exterminate those standing in their way,” writes the feminist scholar Silvia Federici.<sup>5</sup> The surplus populations, mostly from the lower classes that the factory systems could not absorb, were sent to the Americas as frontier fodder where the colonization project continued.

One of the few Indigenous feminist Marxists of her time in Anglo North America, Lee Maracle, a poet and theorist from Sto:lo Nation, spelled out a double conundrum that confronted settler political movements in Canada and the United States. On one hand, she was a firm believer in the materialist method, writing, “the philosophy of my ancestors lines up quite tidily with the philosophy of communism.” That philosophy, according to her, calls for the end to the oppressive and unequal relations between nations of the Global North and South, the violent competition between nations of exploiters, and the privatization of nature for profit. As a result of being a *red* and a woman, she was discriminated against by the deep-seated anticommunism that had infected the Indigenous movement and settler society as a whole (a double red-bait, so to speak) and a general culture of misogyny. On the other hand, many white-dominated leftist organizations, unions, political clubs, and intellectual circles have historically not taken seriously Indigenous knowledge, movements, and politics. In settler colonies, aspirations for “socialism” frequently elide the presence of Indigenous people and nations or at least the continued plunder of their land.<sup>6</sup> In other words, a “socialist” society is easier to conceive than a world without settler colonialism.

This is a core feature of settler colonialism: not just the elimination of the Native, but also the naturalization of unnatural settler states built on the annexation of Indigenous land and the genocide of Indigenous people. Historian Manu Karuka provides a cogent critique of settler colonialism, reconceiving it, more accurately, as continental imperialism. From this perspective, when we read Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier

Thesis” alongside V. I. Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* through the lens of Native and Indigenous Studies, we are presented with a series of different questions in understanding the nature of the United States. “There is no ‘national’ territory in the United States,” according to Karuka. Nor is there a national political economy, “only an imperial one, which continues to be maintained, not through the rule of law, contract, or competition, but through the renewal of colonial occupation.”<sup>7</sup> Put another way, Turner wrote of the closing of the frontier as a sort of “end of history” scenario, understanding the United States as driven fundamentally by land-based, territorial acquisitions through war and treaties, and whose political and economic engine was the frontier. The sudden transformation of that project, Turner lamented, arrived when there was no longer a frontier county reported on the 1890 U.S. Census. What was left for the United States to conquer? Lenin conceived of imperialism as driven by monopoly and capital, not trade and discovery. We can understand this best in the way the United States rapidly expanded. In less than a century, from its original 1784 boundaries, beginning with first the thirteen colonies, the United States annexed nearly two billion acres of territory, most of which is west of the Mississippi River.

The annexation of territory also further expanded the system of plantation slavery, the earliest form of capital accumulation in the United States. While not considered a global superpower until the twentieth century, by 1840 the United States had the highest gross domestic product in the world. This was due to a lucrative enterprise of the Cotton Kingdom of the South. As the United States took Indigenous territory, it brought that territory into its orbit on the conditions of whether or not the state would allow African slavery. Thus, the two destinies are intertwined. Karl Marx began his exegesis of capital in this moment in history, when English factories spun cotton picked by African hands on land stolen from Indigenous people. And it was a time when the steam engine became the heartbeat of the English cotton mill. The fossil economy, as we know it today, which has been the primary progenitor of capitalist-driven global warming, would not have been possible without African slavery, Indigenous genocide, and the proletarianization of European peasants.

Hundreds of Indigenous nations were consumed by this process of relentless westward expansion. Imagine if U.S. historians treated these Indigenous national histories with the same rigor and consistency as they do other non-Indigenous nations. Imagine if students in public schools were required to learn not only Indigenous place names but also the hundreds of languages and philosophies of this immense body of human diversity and knowledge. Understood from this perspective, Native and In-

Indigenous Studies scholars have argued not only that the United States is a settler nation, but that it is also an invader nation. The organic anti-imperialism of Indigenous people, who firmly grasp this history and who are by default political for simply having survived genocide, has fueled some of the most compelling critiques of imperialist state sovereignty and the very idea that the United States is a legitimate nation. After all, conquest is considered an illegitimate form of government. Indigenous nationhood, however, is premised on relationships, not invasion or coercion. Dakota anthropologist Kim TallBear argues that Indigenous people became people in relation to other life forms, which included understandings of life beyond the pale of Western forms of science that considers some things more or less alive than others. Thus, elimination as a tactic of settler colonialism – erasure, disappearance, and killing of Native people – also attacked Indigenous relations with other humans (through policies such as child removal and family separation) or nonhumans.<sup>8</sup> An attack on Indigenous relations is an attack on Indigenous nationhood.

One should weep while reading Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* or the chapters on primary accumulation in *Capital*, volume one, not simply because these are past events but because they are ongoing. The immense loss of life and humanity under the throes of capitalism is absolutely unimaginable in terms of the suffering it has caused and continues to cause. While we typically measure capital's destructive power by what profits are reaped at the expense of a large section of humanity, the African Marxist Amílcar Cabral asks us to "return to the source." The source is what defines the historical nature of continued militant resistance that shapes certain struggles, but it is also the root of what could bloom into beauty if allowed to grow properly. Capitalism and imperialism have maldeveloped the continents of Africa and the Americas. Imagine what these vast continents could be like had they not suffered the crimes they have. Imagine the knowledge, art, books, science, and technology – the beauty of humanity – that was lost and destroyed. We cannot change the past. But we certainly live in a present entirely structured by our past. And for that we are responsible. So, we must dream in this moment about what can grow in the absence of empire, knowing what we know.

As Marxist historians, it is a better method to observe the past to derive meaning and guidance for the present. And while it is characteristic to focus on the generations of the dead, we want to think about the living and the future, something that is not necessarily characteristic of the craft of history. This generation has ushered in an era of world-shattering protest movements – from Ferguson to Standing Rock to the present struggles. The young people in the streets are courageous. They are the true

revolutionary theoreticians, moving history along, sometimes at speeds that feel daunting. More importantly, these movements are categorically shaped by the deep histories of Indigenous and Black resistance. What is different from previous social movements?

This generation of young people have survived two major economic recessions. While the United States has not recovered from the first, the second one has ensured the evisceration of any hope in the current system. There is no future. Peaceful protests did not stop police from killing Black people. Voting did not work. Even the idea of a tepid social democracy that included the most basic guarantees such as socialized health care ended with a whimper as Bernie Sanders left the presidential race. Black people and Native people continue to be in the crosshairs of a murderous police state that had no problem letting nearly two million people become infected by a preventable disease. At the end of May 2020, forty million in the United States had filed for unemployment, at rates not seen since the Great Depression. The U.S. Department of Agriculture let millions of pounds of produce rot in the fields while foodbank demands soared. Breadlines stretched around blocks and thoroughfares, as people lined up in person or by car. Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, and other U.S. billionaires recorded windfall profits amid a pandemic that killed more than one hundred thousand in the United States. It was also announced that Bezos could become the world's first trillionaire by 2026. African-American and Hispanic unemployment rates are 16.7 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively, compared to the national average of 14.7 percent. These numbers do not include the informal economy, nor do they include Native people, who have chronically high rates of unemployment but whose deaths and lives never seem to register.

U.S. history is a propaganda project. But its chokehold on the people that there is only one alternative is looking incredibly bleak. Crisis does not automatically produce revolutionary change. Lenin is attributed with saying, "fascism is capitalism in decay." How we understand, use, and make history in these moments is absolutely crucial. Historians, as part of an academic discipline, have deprived the rest of humanity of the ability to properly understand the nature of this settler empire. Marxists in Anglo North America – with some very important exceptions – have historically failed to accurately tell the history of the United States to the rest of the world because they have frequently elided the question of settler colonialism. (Imagine talking about Israel without talking about Palestinians or South Africa without talking about apartheid!) We are fortunate to have recent scholars and intellectuals who take seriously the Marxist and materialist method as well as intellectuals of Native and Black Studies, who

have historically been far more advanced in their understandings of the nature of the United States—the first nation born entirely as a capitalist state with a burgeoning and land-hungry plantation economy, a nation, in other words, built by Indigenous genocide and African labor, the legacies of which are now being struggled over on the streets. The current crisis tells us as much about the past as it does about the potential future, where decolonization and socialism become synonymous with the emancipation of the planet from capital—the resolution of the metabolic rift.

We also take seriously Fidel Castro’s call to wage a battle of ideas, understanding that the fight for a livable planet and future premised on justice requires struggling on all fronts, whether in the trenches or in the realm of knowledge production. As admirers and avid readers of *Monthly Review*, we are honored to be writing this introduction. We hope that the conversations on settler colonialism and racial capitalism continue to inform our political work and intellectual engagement, understanding the urgency in this moment as a call for a revolutionary future.

## Notes

1. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 394.
2. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement,” *Social Justice*, February 23, 2015.
3. Christina Heatherton, “Not Just Being Right, But Getting Free: Reflections on Class, Race, and Marxism,” Verso blog, July 16, 2017.
4. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 121–22.
5. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003), 223.
6. Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (Richmond, British Columbia: Press Gang, 2001), 112.
7. Manu Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), xii.
8. Kim TallBear, “Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming,” *Kalifou* vol. 6, no. 1 (2019): 24.



In the wake of those five centuries of brutal colonization, the aboriginal populations of the Western hemisphere live under developed and dependent capitalist regimes.... Like African-Americans, who were also among the first victims of capitalist colonialism, they suffer persecution, discrimination, racism, genocide, exploitation, dependence, isolation, and, above all, overwhelming poverty and its social effects. These conditions exist among Indian and African-American populations even in the wealthiest of all societies, the United States and Canada. These populations are discriminated against because of their ethnic particularities, whether they are rural farmers, fishermen, farmworkers, or urban workers. Indian populations, in particular, are usually marginally employed or unemployed, attempting to maintain ties with their home territories.

—ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ, “Aboriginal People and Imperialism in the Western Hemisphere,” *Monthly Review*, 1992