

The Yellow Plague and Romantic Anticapitalism

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Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content.

—FREDRIC JAMESON¹

COVID-19 is a great revealer, laying bare the structures of racial disposability that have sacrificed people, from migrant detainees to meat packers. We are also witness to the rise of anti-Asian violence. Brutal attacks against Asian Americans have exposed the fraudulence of the model minority myth and the assimilationist paradigm that legitimizes state violence against Black and Brown bodies.² There is no doubt that Donald Trump played a role in stoking Sinophobic racism in particular, referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and later stirring conspiracy theories that the pathogen was developed in a Chinese lab as a biological weapon. Not only are these desperate attempts to deflect scrutiny away from the incompetence and corruption of his administration, but they should be read equally as efforts to use an Asian scapegoat to shift attention away from the failures of neoliberal capitalism. From the gaping vulnerabilities in the supply chain to the profound inadequacy and immorality of privatized, for-profit health care, neoliberalism has lost almost all credibility. But beyond Trump’s race-baiting, I argue that anti-Asian racism is symptomatic of something more deeply ingrained in U.S. capitalism. Specifically, the idea of Asians – particularly the Chinese – as viral transmitters of disease is part of a longer history of romantic anticapitalism that remains a key ideology of white settler colonialism in North America.

The left is not alone in recognizing the evils of financial capitalism or the existential threat that climate crisis poses as a result of unrestrained growth. White supremacist organizations, often present among right-wing demonstrations at state capitols protesting the lockdown, are often critical of global capitalism. Some of these organizations present Malthusian, ecofascist, and eugenicist beliefs and support genocidal population control. In these cases,

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they blend neo-Nazism, populationism, and a rejection of liberal modernity. They see economic and social liberalism as responsible for the degenerative effects of immigration and multiculturalism. For them, only the restoration of white racial purity can save the planet. While these ideas may seem eccentric and extreme, they form the bedrock of white settler ideology. Fears over "white race suicide" have been embedded in the conservation movement since the early twentieth century, corresponding with the rise of eugenics. After the First World War, much of the U.S. conservationist movement was imbricated with eugenicist thought, fusing wilderness protection with white racial preservation through analogies that linked the degradation of the natural environment with the degeneration of the white race through miscegenation and rising nonwhite populations. Alexandra Minna Stern explains that during the 1920s, efforts to save redwood trees in California sometimes served as a "metaphor for defending race purity and ensuring the survival of white America." Reactionary conservationists frequently collapsed distinctions between the redwood and white America: "Like Anglo-Saxon America, which was being engulfed by hordes of defectives and mongrels and menaced by the excessive breeding of undesirables, the redwood was imperiled by 'race suicide' from rampant logging, urban encroachment, and human ignorance."³ While mobilizing against the expropriation and destruction of the natural environment is a worthy cause, it has frequently been accompanied by reactionary expressions of an endangered whiteness.

With the rise of ecofascism, defined here as the contemporary merging of white supremacy with Malthusian populationism, we are also observing the confluence of anti-Asian and anti-Semitic violence. Corresponding forms of racial animosity toward Jewish people and Asians has a long history, animated by an alienated, binaristic view of capitalism and nature. Like Jewish peoples, the historical mobility of the Chinese conveyed a lack of rootedness to nature or proprietary right to land, violating emerging conceptions of ownership.⁴ As Jonathan Freedman has demonstrated, like Jewish peoples, Chinese merchants who were active throughout East and South Asia also faced resentment and discrimination. Intersecting expressions of industriousness, greed, and evil have been infused in popular culture representations of both groups in Europe and North America, from novelist George Du Maurier's 1895 creation of the Jewish-descended Svengali to novelist Sax Rohmer's 1921 invention of Fu Manchu. Both characters are perverse, evil geniuses who aspire to world domination.

Racist caricatures that associate Jewish people and the Chinese with rats are particularly germane to the current pandemic. Recent images of white supremacists holding signs depicting a rat wearing a Star of David under the words "The Real Plague" recycle anti-Semitic tropes that draw on the long-standing symbolism of rats as carriers of the bubonic plague. Similarly, in the

United States, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular depictions portrayed the Chinese as rats and rat eaters, whose degeneracy was further reinforced in debates about Chinese live animal markets in San Francisco. Such depictions resonate with current Orientalist constructions of the Chinese as bat eaters whose cultural depravity is encapsulated in so-called wet markets. Whether the Chinese are represented as rat eaters or are themselves rat-like, the point is, as Claire Jean Kim puts it, “both are pestilential vermin to be dispatched without mercy.”⁵ Importantly, like the surreptitious rats lurking unseen in the background, the threat of contagion that Asians represent is largely an invisible one, akin to the “invisible enemy” that Trump continually invokes at his press briefings. Popular constructions that evoke inscrutability, untrustworthiness, mystery, or deceitfulness collectively reinforce the *hidden* menace associated with Asians, suggesting that the negative, racial substance of Asianness is beyond representation. It is the very invisibility and abstract qualities of the virus, analogous to the immaterial circuits of capital, that merge to produce a toxic cognitive mapping of race, disease, and crisis.

Romantic “Anticapitalism”

The racial embodiment of Asians as an invisible disease shares characteristics with the evolution of modern anti-Semitism in Europe, and both are shaped by romantic “anticapitalism.” Romantic anticapitalism is not in fact anticapitalist, but rather its regressive, fetishistic form. It is an ideology that *misunderstands* capitalism as an opposition between the concrete, sensory, natural world on one hand and the abstract, intangible, nonsensory dimension on the other.⁶ As Neil Levi clarifies, “romantic anticapitalism...hypostatizes the concrete, rooted, and organic, and identifies capitalism solely with the abstract dimension of the antinomy.”⁷ From this position, what is abstract are the unnatural and intangible characteristics of value and finance, while what is concrete is romanticized as the “thingly” and sensory that marks one’s social relations and organic connection with nature. Even though the concrete labor and “thingly” use values are incorporated into and materially formed by abstract capitalist social relations, this is not understood by romantic anticapitalism.

In his essay “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism,” Moishe Postone focuses on the secular process by which Jews became associated with the *abstract* evils of finance capital. Because Jews had long been segregated to finance and interest-generating sectors of European society, traditional anti-Semitism identified them as owners of money. However, by the nineteenth century, modern anti-Semitism not only identified Jews as the owners of money but “held [them] responsible for economic crises and identified [them] with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid industrialization: explosive urbanization, the decline of traditional social

classes and strata, the emergence of a large, increasingly organized industrial proletariat."⁸ In short, as Postone explains, Jewish people "became the *personification* of the intangible, destructive, immensely powerful, and international domination of [finance] capital as a social form."⁹

Here the attributes of "abstractness, intangibility, universality, [and] mobility" that are associated with Jews are striking in their resonance with characteristic forms of Asian racialization in North America.¹⁰ The racial signifiers of inscrutability, perpetual foreignness, transnational mobility, and flexibility similarly register the abstract features of Asian racialization that are aligned with the evolution of settler colonial capitalism in North America. Jewish people came to personify processes internal to finance capital under Nazi ideology *within capitalism*. Today's romantic anticapitalism (which, in some variants, is also superficially antifinance capitalist and uses this symbolically to facilitate a racist ideology) works to consign Asians to abstract processes of value formation anchored by labor. From the economic efficiency that was denigrated as "cheap" labor in the nineteenth century and valued as "efficient" in the twenty-first, Asians evoke the dehumanizing equivalence of "abstract labor," a concept foundational to Karl Marx's conception of the labor theory of value. Rather than signaling discrete racial meanings, we can see that yellow perilism and the model minority stereotype function as complementary aspects of the same form of racialization in which economic efficiency is the basis for violent exclusion *or* assimilation.

For Marx, the historical processes encoding a distinction between concrete and abstract social relations were reflected in an internalized duality within the commodity. The confusion over the appearance and essence of the commodity is what Marx refers to as its "fetishism." While a focus on the fetishism of the commodity appears initially removed from the realm of race and social relations, the commodity is foundational to the labor theory of value, as understood by Marx, and structures social – and hence race, gender, and sexual – relations within a capitalist mode of production. The chief effect of this fetishism is the appearance of capitalist social relations as antinomical: that an opposition exists between concrete and abstract realms of society.

Under a romantic anticapitalist view, what is real, sensory, or "thingly" is the earth under one's feet, the hardworking laborer, the tools in the drawer. These make up the concrete realm. What is unnatural, nonthingly, or intangible is capital accumulation, surplus value, and money. These form the abstract realm of value. Therefore, as Postone explains, "the existent concrete dimension is then positively opposed to it [the abstract realm] as the 'natural' or ontologically human, which stands outside the specificity of capitalist society."¹¹

The false, antinomical view that characterizes romantic anticapitalism *glorifies* the concrete dimension while casting as evil the purely abstract

domination of capitalism. In particular, the specific power attributed to Jews under Nazism anthropomorphizes the internal workings of the commodity itself. What is remarkable is how the traits of mobility, abstractness, immateriality, and universality that modern anti-Semitism identifies with Jews are the very same characteristics that Marx uses to describe the commodity's value dimension. However, as Postone notes, "this [value] dimension – like the supposed power of the Jews – does not appear as such, rather always in the form of a material carrier, such as the commodity. The carrier thus has a 'double character' – value and use-value."¹² In other words, what romantic anticapitalism misunderstands is that value, while seemingly abstract, is nonetheless objectified within the concrete, sensory form of the commodity during the exchange process. Commodities are above all the representations (carriers) of social processes, objectified in things.

The main secret hidden within the commodity is that it comprises a duality of abstract and concrete dimensions. In a section of volume one of *Capital* titled "The Dual Character of the Labour Embodied in Commodities," Marx explains that the commodity internalizes two aspects: (1) use value (a thing of use) and (2) exchange value (the exchangeability of that thing). A use value is concrete in a material sense – a table, for instance – but exchange value is abstract and immaterial in the sense that we cannot see or touch it. Dissecting the labor that produces the commodity, Marx continues by saying that "labour, too, has a dual character insofar as [when] it finds its expression in value, it no longer possesses the same characteristics as when it is the creator of use-values."¹³ Concrete labor refers to a specific activity – whether mining or cooking – that produces a use value. In contrast, it is "abstract labor" that objectifies a commodity's value.

What distinguishes concrete and abstract labor is time. The actual hours and minutes it takes to produce a commodity, in the case of concrete labor, has no immediate bearing on a particular commodity's value. If it did, a commodity would become more valuable the *slower* a worker labored to produce it, or as Marx puts it, a given product "would be more valuable the more unskillful and lazy the worker who produced it, because he would need more time to complete the article."¹⁴ Concrete labor will only tell us how well made a commodity is; it is the *qualitative* dimension of use value.¹⁵ However, abstract labor is a *quantitative* expression of value – an unfixed social average of human labor time. As Marx explains: "In the former case [of concrete labor] it was a matter of the 'how' and the 'what' of labour, in the latter [abstract labor] of the 'how much,' of the temporal duration of labor."¹⁶ Time is the ultimate measure of abstract labor and the magnitude of a commodity's value. The quantity of time in abstract labor is not individual or provisional but *socially necessary*. Marx writes, "Socially necessary

labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society."¹⁷ From this view of the dual character of labor embodied in the commodity, we see how concrete labor is more directly aligned with the *qualitative* production of use value, while abstract labor is more directly aligned with the *quantitative* dimension of value. Extending this distinction into an ideology of romantic anticapitalism, "concrete labor is understood as the non-capitalist moment which is opposed to the abstractness of money."¹⁸ While use value and value are inseparable, internal features of each and every commodity, they nevertheless *appear* on the surface as discrete and even oppositional. What this means is that the duality of use value and value are expressed *externally* as an opposition between commodities and money.

The social consequences of a binary rather than dialectical view of use value and value are such that the use-value dimension appears empirically grounded while the value dimension appears ephemeral or abstract. Specifically, the dialectical tension between value and use value in the commodity requires that its dual character be materially externalized in the value form, where it appears "doubled" as money (the manifest form of value) and the commodity (the manifest form of use value). The effect of this externalization, as Postone elaborates, is that "the commodity, although it is a social form expressing both value and use-value, appears to *contain only the latter, i.e., appears as purely material and 'thingly'*; money, on the other hand, then appears to be the *sole repository of value, i.e., as the manifestation of the purely abstract, rather than as the externalized manifest form of the value dimension of the commodity itself.*"¹⁹ The point here is that even though a fork and money are both commodities that internalize use value and value, the fork appears only as a concrete "thingly" use value and the money as an abstract source of value. This illusory opposition is at the core of the commodity fetish and romantic anticapitalism, which disguises the *actual* basis of value, which is "socially necessary labor time." A key aspect of romantic anticapitalism, then, is the mystification of capitalist social relations that present themselves antinomically, not dialectically, *as the mere opposition of the abstract and concrete.*

Racial Abstraction

In the nineteenth century, we can see how the social consequences of this antinomical view of capitalist social relations emerge and take on racial significance. As capitalism underwent rapid expansion, the externalization of abstract and concrete forms intrinsic to the fetish of commodities became increasingly biologized and racialized in concert with prevailing socioscientific conceptions of the world. The proliferation of scientific racism with the

rise of social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century demonstrates how society and historical development were increasingly understood in biological terms, moving from a more mechanical or typological worldview, in which events were a reflection of divine power and design, to a more secularized, biologized worldview that naturalized an antinomical view of capitalist relations. Related to this is a regressive-romantic attachment to a revitalizing and pure construction of an unchanging nature, in contrast to the alienation attributed to capitalist modernity. Expressing the antinomy of concrete and abstract, nature therefore personifies concrete, perfected human relations against the social degeneration caused by the abstract circuits of capitalism.

This antinomical view of capitalism finds acute biologized expression in the context of anti-Semitism. During Germany's rapid industrialization in the nineteenth century, Jews were often perceived as an all-powerful international conspiracy that orchestrated capitalism. Jews were not only identified with money but became a personification of the destructive nature and abstract domination of capital. In other words, the concrete side of this antinomy was naturalized and biologized as real, hardworking Germans. German labor and machines were glorified as concrete "counter principles to the abstract." Alternatively, the manifest abstract dimension of money and finance became biologized as the Jews. As Postone explains, "Jews were not merely identified with money, with the sphere of circulation, but with capitalism itself." Jews came to personify the "intangible, destructive, immensely powerful and international domination of capital as a social form."

In Nazi ideology, as Postone emphasized, Jews were identified as controllers of money and thus misidentified as responsible for finance capitalism's oppression, a misperception based on the erroneous notion that capitalist oppression *was caused by* money – despite the reality that money and commodity forms are relative expressions of value determined by socially necessary labor time. Thus, even though Jews were citizens, citizenship was once again deemed politically abstract compared to the more concrete notion of the nation defined by "common language, history, tradition, and history." As Postone observes, "The only group in Europe, which fulfilled the determination of citizenship as a purely political abstraction, were Jews following political emancipation in the nineteenth century. They were German or French citizens, but they were not really Germans or Frenchmen."²⁰ Instead, they were of the nation only "abstractly, not concretely," which was ultimately a fatal relation to the scourge of "capitalism" and the bourgeois state. Thus, anti-Semitism solves a problem of representation by giving human form to the abstract circuits of capitalism.

In my book *Alien Capital*, I argue that a settler colonial ideology of romantic anticapitalism constructs Asians as the racialized embodiment of the destruc-

tive abstractions of capitalism by projecting a kind of perverse, excessive efficiency onto their bodies. Figured alternatively as cheap labor or as efficient model minorities, Asian racialization has consistently turned on notions of excessive economism. The economism of Asian racialization is rooted in the nineteenth-century temporal alignment of fungible Chinese bodies with abstract labor. White settler ideology hypostatized the concrete, pure, and organic dimensions of white labor and leisure time, while identifying capitalism solely with the abstract dimensions of the antinomy, personified by Chinese labor. In the context of railroad building, the temporal excess associated with Chinese bodies through their higher rate of exploitation was combined with the perversity connected to the nonreproductive spheres of Chinese homosocial domesticity. This rendered Chinese labor a quantitative, temporal threat to the qualitative and normative temporality of white social reproduction. The temporally excessive and fungible character of Chinese labor was the foundation on which Asians have been associated with a destructive value regime.

Similarly, before the expulsion and relocation of 120,000 Japanese Americans from the west coast into internment camps during the Second World War, we can also observe the development of an increasingly unnatural, mechanical abstraction attributed to the Japanese. Building on Colleen Lye's argument that Japanese Americans were associated with monopoly capital, I argue that the association of Japanese labor with the modernizing displacements of technological innovation fed the perception that Japanese labor monopolized the creation of relative surplus value. Here, Japanese labor is associated with a destructive value regime that threatened white agriculture and the fishing industry.

On the flip side of the economic abstraction tied to Asian racialization, romantic anticapitalism imagines Indigenous peoples as entirely outside of capitalism or time, inviting a white settler colonial identification with the Indigenous that Shari Huhndorf calls "going Native."²¹ Today's white supremacists, too, sometimes idealize Indigeneity. In an interview with *New Stateman*, a self-described ecofascist claimed that "the import of these non-Europeans have brought in people who do not share the same respect for nature and especially not animals. Nor do they have the connection to the soil the natives have."²² In the massacres committed in Christchurch, New Zealand, and El Paso, Texas, in 2019, the gunmen similarly justified the killing of immigrants as "protecting nature."²³ In the frame of romantic anticapitalism, non-European immigrants represent an abstract yet existential threat that is counterpoised with the concrete purity of Indigenous peoples and their connection to land. Of course, so-called white people are not indigenous to North America either. This is one reason white settler cultural identity is so heavily invested in appropriating Indigeneity. From *Dances with*

Wolves to Avatar, white men are not only allied with Indigenous struggles against frontier violence and resource extraction but are revealed as “true” Natives, “ironically demonstrat[ing] white superiority even as [they] go native.”²⁴ This mode of going native functions to erase the history of colonial invasion and genocide by reimagining a natural affiliation to land.

It is important to recognize the racist scope of this form of romantic anticapitalism. As an illustrative example, Huhndorf offers the surprising account of the publication of *The Education of Little Tree*, the autobiography of a Cherokee man that garnered praise for its sensitive and “true depiction of Cherokee beliefs and ways of life.” It was eventually discovered that the identity of the author, who went by the pseudonym Forrest Carter, was none other than Asa (Ace) Earl Carter, described as a “Klu Klux Klan terrorist, right-wing radio announcer, home-grown American fascist and anti-Semite” who was the speechwriter for Governor George Wallace’s racist 1965 speech opposing desegregation. Huhndorf reveals how nativist white supremacy can literally take the racial form of the “Native.” As she explains, “going Native” ultimately “serves to regenerate white society and naturalize its power.”²⁵ Through the irrationality of romantic anticapitalism, the double character of the commodity is thus externalized as an antinomy of concrete and abstract dimensions, racially manifesting as an opposition between an abstract-value dimension associated with Asians and a qualitatively concrete dimension of Indigeneity. Settler whiteness, which has no biological substance beyond the political right to exclusive possession, actively strives to form a concrete body by eliminating and replacing the Indigenous.

Conclusion

Our collective consciousness about the structures of racial disposability obviously preexisted the pandemic, but the virus has thrown them into heightened relief. Domestically, we watch Trump and his allies volunteer people to die for the sake of the U.S. economy. The global dimensions of disposability include the murderous sanctions of the United States against Iran, Venezuela, and forty-eight other countries, contributing to the global chain of viral transmission by blocking these nations from life-saving equipment and supplies. But in the United States, which has the highest number of deaths from the coronavirus by far, the pandemic has revealed the dramatic extent to which race and gender shape the way “capitalism privatizes life [and] socializes death”²⁶

The decades-long spiral of U.S. economic decline and the global scale of the pandemic present the perfect breeding ground for romantic anticapitalism. In this essay’s epigraph, Fredric Jameson describes conspiracy as a “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age” and, as such, romantic anticapitalism expresses a deep conflict over progress and

modernity. Anti-Asian *pathogen racism* is a reaction to the abstract domination of capital, whereby Asians become the personification of a destructive value dimension that is otherwise immaterial and unrepresentable. Because value does not appear—it is immaterial but objective—it must come in the form of a material “carrier.” In a context of romantic anticapitalism, Asians are the material bearers of that form of infectious value.

But, as conspiracy theories go, romantic anticapitalism may also have things to teach us about racial capitalism, in which it is embedded, since it exposes the violence of abstraction. Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet’s sovereign political territories.” Commodity-determined social relations thus externalize the dehumanizing abstraction embedded in the value form. Gilmore continues, “the violence of abstraction produces all kinds of fetishes; states, races, normative views of how people fit into and make places in the world.”²⁷ Romantic anticapitalism is the ultimate generator of violent racial fetishes, grounding white settler colonial fictions of innocence and belonging.

Finally, we might approach the pandemic itself as the most useful cognitive mapping of how capital is a “social relation between persons which is mediated by things.”²⁸ Through the crisis, we have seen the way neoliberal capitalism produces scarcity out of plenty, isolation over connection, competition rather than cooperation. It is the deadly illness for which there remains no vaccine.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 356.
2. For an exemplary expression of model minority ideology, see Andrew Yang, “We Asian Americans Are Not the Virus, But We Can Be Part of the Cure,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2020.
3. Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 124.
4. Brenna Bhandar, *The Colonial Lives of Property* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
5. Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101.
6. Romantic anticapitalism, in the sense treated here, is largely a racist ideology, not to be confused with the great progressive, even revolutionary Romantic figures such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Ruskin, William Morris, Henry David Thoreau, Raymond Williams, and many others, as depicted, for example, in Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, *Romantic Anti-Capitalism and Nature* (London: Routledge, 2020).
7. Neil Levi, *Modernist Form and the Myth of Jewification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 123.
8. Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 107.
9. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 112.
10. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 108.
11. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 110.
12. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 108.
13. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 132.
14. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 129.
15. Concrete labor does not necessarily lead to the production of commodities.
16. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 136.
17. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 129.
18. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 110.
19. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 109, emphasis added.
20. Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” 109–13.
21. Shari Huhndorf, *Going Native* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
22. Sarah Manavis, “Eco-fascism,” *New Statesman*, September 21, 2018.
23. Joel Achenbach, “Two Mass Killings A World Apart Share a Common Theme,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2019.
24. Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 3.
25. Huhndorf, *Going Native*, 130, 132.
26. Sarah Jaffe, “Social Reproduction and the Pandemic, with Tithi Bhattacharya,” *Dissent*, April 2, 2020.
27. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference,” *Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 16.
28. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 932.