# CHAPTER 2. Intersections of Data Power: Unmasking the Nexus of Data Colonialism and Digital Racial Capitalism

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## Summary

* Modern global capitalism relied on processes of imperialism and racialization—a technology of power—to justify the differential relations of economic appropriation and exploitation —to extract racial surplus value. Thus, modern global capitalism has remained inextricably linked to racialization processes.
* Today, digital transformations across global political-economic systems are giving rise to the emergence of digital racial capitalism. This is occurring through the convergence of digital transformation, racial capitalism, and data colonialism practices, resulting in digital- and data-mediated forms of racialisation, structural violence, and data necropolitics.
* Digital racial capitalism creates racialized hierarchies of risk and vulnerability to data colonialism, by using data and digital tech to reconfigure or create new categories of racialisation (e.g., migrant, terrorist, etc.), and digital technology and data-mediated harm. Racialized and ethnicized groups of people are structurally more vulnerable to hyper-surveillance and digital harms across several dimensions of intersectionality,
* Digital racial capitalism conceptually explores how colonial power enables and is reproduced by data colonialism alongside the structurally violent implications of data colonialism. The data obtained from data colonialism is being used to create new forms of categorisation, stratification and racialisation that place people into different categories of ‘dispossessability’ and ‘disposability’.

What connects the complexities of colonialism –its multiple, linked dimensions that Quijano called ‘the colonial matrix of power’– to wider historical processes? In particular, what connects them to colonial power relations generally is the continued role that racialism and imperialism have played in the organization of economies and societies during the past five centuries, particularly under capitalism? This is what I explore in the rest of this chapter.

## Looking Back: Coloniality of Power

In 1992, the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano introduced his concept of the ‘Coloniality of Power’  — the structures of power, control, and hegemony emerging from the era of historical colonialism continue to the present day in the form of a global caste system.[[1]](#footnote-1) The concept of the coloniality of power emerged to look at how colonial legacies of power were globally and locally interpreted and reconstituted throughout the world and the complex dimensions of structural inequality stemming from it. Coloniality of power *continues* to structure racialized, classed, and gendered social hierarchical orders that privilege (or provincialize) people, cultures, and knowledge systems. The association of dominated groups of people with non-paid or non-waged labor was premised upon their perceived inferiority based on coloniality's social classifications and racialized hierarchies.[[2]](#footnote-2) This concept brings into greater relief how ‘social classification’ has structured social inequality both within nations and globally as reflected in the current day social and economic relations, particularly global capitalism and the geopolitics of knowledge, that structure contemporary societies.[[3]](#footnote-3),[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are very interesting links from this concept to earlier work on the multiple complexities of how race interacts with other dimensions of power. In her 1990 ground-breaking book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, sociologist and Black Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins introduced the concept of the ‘Matrix of Domination’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Conceptually, the Matrix of Domination explores the interlocking systems of oppression along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social identities that lead to the marginalization and othering of certain groups of people.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Extending from this, in 2000, Quijano conceptualized the ‘Colonial Matrix of Power’' to articulate how the coloniality of power became articulated through four key domains  –authority, economy, knowledge and subjectivity, gender and sexuality– and propagated through racialism and economic systems.[[7]](#footnote-7),[[8]](#footnote-8) As noted in chapter 1 by Alejandro Mayoral, the colonial matrix of power produces new categories of racialization across global and local granularities to justify and sustain differential social relations of exploitation and appropriation of resources and labor depending on an identity group's positionality in racialized hierarchies. But from here, it is only a short step to see that capitalism itself, far from merely being a matter of the organization of the economy, is also always from the start a social formation, that is, *racial* capitalism.

## Racial Capitalism

Historian Eric Williams’ book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, illustrates how modern global capitalism emerged from the transatlantic slave trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. First, the premature accumulation of vast sums of capital extended from the surplus value elite actors were able to extract from the labor of enslaved African people; the surplus value extracted from their labor would later play a pivotal role in financing the industrialisation of Europe and the Americas.[[9]](#footnote-9) Colonial imperial expansion has remained entangled with modern global capitalism through its reliance on racialisation as a technology of power to extract racial subsidies by marking racialized populations of people as inherently more disposable through racist scholarship, policies, and state violence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Williams’ work would later be expanded upon through the Black Radical Tradition's concept of 'Racial Capitalism'. Political Scientist Cedric Robinson conceptualized Racial Capitalism to describe how ‘the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism’.[[11]](#footnote-11) The racial capitalism thesis investigated how racialist ideologies, like white supremacism and antiblackness, were used to structure power along political and economic systems through racialized hierarchies.[[12]](#footnote-12),[[13]](#footnote-13),[[14]](#footnote-14)

Importantly, racial capitalism does not ascribe intentionality, sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya elaborates that ‘racial capitalism is a way of understanding the role of racism in enabling key moments of capitalist development — it is not a way of understanding capitalism as a racist conspiracy or racism as a capitalist conspiracy’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a political-economic geographer, articulates the coevolutionary nature of racialism and capitalism in shaping the contemporary global political-economic systems, emphasizing that ‘capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Gillmore highlights that race is ‘the modality through which political-economic globalization is lived’ and materiality felt by people.[[17]](#footnote-17) As the digital transformations of those modalities occur, the logic undergirding them, unfortunately, remains the same —imbued with ‘colonialism’s economic imperatives— expansion, exploitation, inequality’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Racial Capitalism’s economies of dispossession are still very present in global digital transformation processes. Thus, many critical digital scholars are looking back while looking forward to conceptually looking at the interconnectivities between racialism, capitalism, and the digital.[[19]](#footnote-19),[[20]](#footnote-20),[[21]](#footnote-21),[[22]](#footnote-22),[[23]](#footnote-23),[[24]](#footnote-24)

So, then, what is racial capitalism? Racial capitalism ‘speaks not of racialization, but rather of racializations in the plural’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Essentially, racial logics are both globally and locally constituted. The factors that undergird global racialism also create across local geographies ‘racial categories, structuring race relations via laws, labor and spatial territory demands, the transportation of bodies across borders, and building early ideologies and justifications of racial rationale and violence’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Consequently, while racialization is articulated differently in different places, it is still produced relative to needs of ‘the global capitalist order’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, critical digital studies scholars are both looking back at historical European colonialism and postcolonial neocolonialism and forward at its modern incarnation.

Critically, racialization is used as a technology of power to legitimize the subjugation and oppression of some groups of people over others in the modern global economy. Global racial capitalism is promulgated through economic, political, and knowledge systems at the global and local levels. While global white supremacy remains at the apex of the global hierarchical order under global racial capitalism, it cannot be reduced to bodies alone. Rather, whiteness remains ‘materially and symbolically represented’ through a particular group's position at the apex of a racialized hierarchy.[[28]](#footnote-28) National racialized hierarchies are embedded into global racial capitalism's own racial hierarchy. Not only do people occupy different positionalities on multiple hierarchies at once but also access to ‘symbolic whiteness’ is premised on factors that extend beyond one's phenotypic expression.

This provides a deeper basis from which to understand recent debates about the digital and data. The emergence of digital capitalism relies on the accumulation of data. Zuboff explains how surveillance capitalism enables actors to extract massive amounts of data as a strategic asset for possible later use through her concept of behavioral surplus.[[29]](#footnote-29) While data dispossession is fundamental to data capitalism, communities’ level of vulnerability to data dispossession and its harms is tied to racial capitalism.

Racialized communities are more likely to be hyper-surveilled and thus more vulnerable to data dispossession.[[30]](#footnote-30),[[31]](#footnote-31) Thus, the types of beliefs used to justify the predatory expropriation and exploitation seen around data—to get the behavioral surplus that facilitates the emergence of digital capitalism—are tied to racialisation. Cedric Robinson explains that as ‘surplus was necessary to the production and reproduction of capitalism, it necessitated discipline and management, through constant and differing modes of racialization’.[[32]](#footnote-32) is not merely apolitical and non-ideological but also premised on very old (and some new) ideological foundations worth examining.

Racialism is central to capitalism. It helps legitimize the inequality that capitalism requires by creating fiction about the differential worthiness of human groups based on the myths of racialization.[[33]](#footnote-33) Coloniality is the ideological basis used to explain the differential worthiness ascribed to human beings  — based on the bodies they occupy, cultures they are part of, and geographies they find themselves in or from —  to justify inequality.[[34]](#footnote-34) Imperialism, racialism, and coloniality converge to create a fiction about the differential worthiness of human beings to sort people into categories of (1) disposability and (2) dispossessability in across political and economic systems.[[35]](#footnote-35),[[36]](#footnote-36) Digital racial capitalism's innovation upon racial capitalism is in its use of digital technologies, digital transformation processes, and datafied ways of knowing to devalue, exclude, and stratify human beings in ways that are tied to and extend beyond prior iterations of racialism.

Central to this process of digital racial capitalism —in today’s Big Data era— is data colonialism. Data colonialism is commodifying human relations, bodies, and behaviors *through data*.[[37]](#footnote-37) The hierarchies of risk in terms of which bodies, categorized through the uses of data, are most vulnerable to that dispossession and its implications are tied to existing forms of structural oppression and types of racialisation. These generate the basic features of today’s data-driven digital racial capitalism.

## Digital Racial Capitalism

The convergence of global racial capitalism, imperialism, and data colonialism is leading to the emergence of new types of risks and harms that are mediated through Big Data, AI, and digital technologies. These data and digital-technology-mediated risks and harms are unevenly distributed along intersectional racialized hierarchies that mark some populations of people as inherently more dispossesable and disposable and thus more vulnerable to data colonialism, hyper surveillance, algorithmic harm, and structural violence, or in other words, digital racial capitalism.[[38]](#footnote-38) Digital racial capitalism also explores how data and digital technologies, like AI, are being used to create new forms of racialisation —ascribing racial meanings to a relationship, practice, or group for the purpose of domination, exploitation, and social exclusion—[[39]](#footnote-39) through data and the algorithmic sorting of people. Digital racial capitalism exacerbates existing and perpetuates new patterns of racialization and categorization among populations based on levels of disposability, and exposure to data-driven necropolitics. Digital racial capitalism both proceeds and extends from data colonialism. Finally, digital racial capitalism explains how digital risks and harms get structured in society whereas the structural violence of digital systems, algorithmic technologies, and data relations are disproportionately present at the bottom of racialized hierarchies. tied to global capitalism.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Digital racial capitalism is being instrumentalized through the state as well. At different points in time, governments have deployed differing logics of distribution and calculations of racialization to decide who should make up the deserving versus undeserving among their citizens and non-citizens alike.

How states determine who lives and dies through their bureaucratic and administrative systems is what political theorist Achille Mbembe conceptually refers to as ‘Necropolitics’*.* Mbembe’s concept of Necropolitics explores how assemblages of power instrumentalize human life for some populations while managing the material destruction of other populations.[[41]](#footnote-41) In turn, this shift which is dependent on the use of computers has led to societal transfixation with not only predicting the future and sorting people into categories of dispossessability but also the preoccupation of powerful private and public actors alike with manufacturing the future through the means of instrumentarian power be it through its velvet-gloved ‘nudges’ or other, more direct, ways.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Reminiscent of Couldry and Mejias' explication on data colonialism's commodification of human life itself, Mbembe articulates how computational capitalism's molecular deployment of race through the identification of biological differences has taken a techno-genomic turn, whereas data and the digital are being utilized to demarcate further human variation beyond the phenotypical.[[43]](#footnote-43) Underwriting the global resurgence in racialism and ethnonationalism is a belief in the division of humanity into groups based on one's assumed superiority over another. These ideologies of xenophobia and supremacism are not new. What is new is how they are being operationalised and reconfigured through digital technologies targeted at surveilling the bodies of people who are minoritized, racialized, and subalternized in the name of ‘security’.

Mbembe illustrates this point further, saying: ‘We particularly need to explore the emerging nexus between biology, genes, technologies, and their articulations with new forms of human destitution. At stake in the contemporary reconfigurations and mutations of race and racism is the splitting of humanity itself into separate species and subspecies as a result of market libertarianism and genetic technology’.[[44]](#footnote-44) In a sense, Mbembe is warning about how data and the digital are being used to create new racialised typologies of people based on their behavioral data that can be used to limit, exclude, deny, dehumanize, and ultimately kill —facilitating the emergence of data necropolitics.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Bhattacharyya explains that global racial capitalism's ‘sorting of global and local populations into hierarchies of disposability is assisted by practices of racialisation’.[[46]](#footnote-46) In the context of digital racial capitalism, data colonialism is facilitating the sorting of populations along hierarchies of disposability today as marked by their level of actual or risk of subjugation to data necropolitics of the state.

Data necropolitics refers to the forms of digital governance that expose people to health inequalities, social violence and death (both literal and social) and how data is instrumentalized by governments to normalize health and social inequity.[[47]](#footnote-47) According to the political scientist Michael Chisnall, ‘the subsequent use of such data to feed technology that seeks to control our behaviour, emotions and consumption, so diminishing our capacity to appropriate our own lives, is morally repugnant’.[[48]](#footnote-48) The extensive and exploitative nature of data extractionism and the ways in which people's personal data is being instrumentalized is self-alienating, diminishing people's positive freedoms and cultivating what Chisnall describes as the emergence of digital slavery.

## Conclusion

In sum, racialism (along with other intersectional categories) is utilized to facilitate the exploitative social relations necessary to enable data colonialism's processes of dispossession. In turn, data colonialism is facilitating digital racial capitalism, producing contemporary states’ *data* necropolitics. To put it succinctly, data colonialism and digital racial capitalism are co-constitutive of one another and facilitative of global digital domination, in the process diminishing people's agency (e.g. their ability to contest decisions) as well as alienating people from their data.

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