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IS CAPITALISM RACIST?

A scholar depicts white supremacy as the economic engine of American history.

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For revisionists, slavery's end simply ushered in a new phase of exploitation. Illustration by Keith Negley

Before the Civil War, Southern slaveholders used to claim that their labor system was more humane than "wage slavery" in the factories of the industrializing North. They didn't win that argument, but the idea took root that the South, during and after slavery, did not have a true capitalist economy. In 1930, twelve Southern writers (all white men) published a collection of essays, titled "I'll Take My Stand," that opened with a declaration that they "all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial." To believe that the South was economically different didn't entail being a defender of slavery or segregation; it didn't even have to mean you were a political conservative. When I was growing up in New Orleans, among the descendants of antebellum sugar and cotton planters, efficiency and industriousness were not highly valued, and all the general social indicia—income, health, education—were much lower than they were in the North. This condition seemed connected to the exploitation and political disempowerment that went along with a racial caste system. It was worse than capitalism, not part of capitalism.

But for many years now historians have disputed the old Southern agrarian notions about how the South related to capitalism. This form of revisionism, which has blossomed in the academy and beyond during the past decade or so, takes its inspiration from "Capitalism and Slavery," published in 1944 by Eric Williams, a young historian who later became the first Prime Minister of an independent Trinidad and Tobago. The book, which argued for the centrality of slavery to the rise of capitalism, was largely ignored for half a century; now its thesis is a starting point for a new generation of scholarship. Large-scale Southern slaveholders are today understood as experts in such business practices as harsh, ever-increasing production quotas for workers and the creation of sophisticated credit instruments. Rather than representing an alternative system to industrial capitalism, American plantations enabled its development, providing the textile mills of Manchester and Birmingham with cotton to be spun into cloth by the new British working class. As Walter Johnson, one of our leading historians of slavery, wrote in 2018, "There was no such thing as capitalism without slavery: the history of Manchester never happened without the history of Mississippi."

The new history of slavery seeks to obliterate the economic and moral distinction between slavery and capitalism, and between the South and the North, by showing them to have been all part of a single system. Inevitably, this view has generated intense arguments, not only about how integral the slave plantation was to the national and global economies but also about whether we should regard the end of slavery as an important breakpoint in American history or merely a rearranging of an oppressive system into an altered but still essentially oppressive form. Critics of the new history of slavery chastise it for downplaying developments like Britain's abolition of slavery in its colonies and the American Civil War, and for overstating slavery's importance to the growth of the early American economy, even if the plantation was a particularly ruthless business enterprise.

The arguments about slavery imply larger arguments about America. At least among respectable academic historians, the days of triumphant historical accounts of the greatness of the United States are long past. But for some the national enterprise can still be seen as a slow and often interrupted progression toward a more just and democratic society; for others, it amounts to a set of variations on racial hierarchy and economic exploitation. Once slavery is positioned as the foundational institution of American capitalism, the country's subsequent history can be depicted as an extension of this basic dynamic. This is what Walter Johnson does in his new book, "The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States" (Basic). The study demonstrates both the power of the model and its limitations.

Johnson, who grew up in Missouri, tells us that he was moved to write the book by the events in Ferguson in the summer of 2014—the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen-ager, by a police officer named Darren Wilson, and the period of local unrest and national attention that followed. In Johnson's account, Ferguson emerges as the distillation of a vexed history that goes back to the city's beginnings. Johnson's earlier work presented slavery as the furthest thing from a "peculiar institution" set apart from the American mainstream; here, he makes a similar case for the centrality of St. Louis. "St. Louis has been the crucible of American history," he writes. "Much of American history has unfolded from the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness in the city of St. Louis."

Johnson's guiding concept is "racial capitalism": racism as a technique for exploiting black people and for fomenting the hostility of working-class whites toward blacks, so as to enable white capitalists to extract value from everyone else. For his purposes, St. Louis is a case study in the pervasiveness and

the longevity of racism outside the formal boundaries of slavery. As he wrote in an earlier essay, "The history of racial capitalism, it must be emphasized, is a history of wages as well as whips, of factories as well as plantations, of whiteness as well as blackness, of 'freedom' as well as slavery."

A small French outpost situated just below the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, St. Louis became part of the United States in 1803, owing to the Louisiana Purchase. Thomas Jefferson soon put in motion the Lewis and Clark expedition, which set off from St. Louis, in 1804. In Johnson's account, St. Louis in its early decades becomes the staging area for the brutal taking of the American West. For blinkered whites like William Clark, the complicated realities of the West were "subordinated to a racially fundamentalist understanding of the world (red, white, and black) and the politics of white settler imperialism and ethnic cleansing." The Missouri Compromise, in 1820, admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state, and, Johnson points out, Missouri's new constitution restricted the rights of black people, preventing free blacks from settling in the state.

A parade of men (most of them, in Johnson's telling, closely connected to St. Louis) who were long presented to schoolchildren as the heroes of American history are revealed to be anything but. The iniquities of Jefferson and of Lewis and Clark are a mere prologue to those of Andrew Jackson, "the nation's most prominent Indian hater"; John C. Frémont, the explorer and the first Presidential candidate of the Republican Party, who "was an imperialist and, by any modern standard, a war criminal"; and Ulysses S. Grant, whose essential military technique was "murderous fury." Abraham Lincoln comes off no better. He began his career as a "settler militiaman," and, for the rest of his life, "remained committed to ethnic cleansing." Lincoln developed a winning political platform for the Republicans in which slavery was opposed mainly because it competed with the economic interests of white farmers and laborers; Lincoln's first priority was to deliver a whites-only frontier to the "white supremacist, imperialist, and removalist" Republican base. Horace Greeley's Liberal Republican movement, following the Civil War, was based on a "white nationalist" ideology whose "predictable result" was genocide.

At the World's Fair of 1904, hosted by St. Louis, Johnson finds a literal exhibit of this enduring legacy: an elaborate celebration of the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase that was "designed to domesticate the restive immigrant workers of St. Louis by turning them into white people," and to insure white workers' "proper alignment with the course of freedom-through-capitalism and imperial

progress." Such racial capitalism led to the city's most notorious incident of racial violence before Ferguson, the East St. Louis massacre of 1917, which left dozens of black people dead and thousands more displaced, and which was sparked by the hiring of black replacement workers during an aluminum-ore processors' strike. "The white workers of East St. Louis kept on somehow believing that the city belonged to them rather than their corporate overlords," Johnson writes. "They believed it with such force and passion, such a sense of beleaguered entitlement, that when the time came, they would prove more than willing to kill for it." And this massacre, Johnson says, "forecast" a series of violent post-First World War incidents in other American cities.

Indeed, as Johnson moves through the twentieth century, he consistently treats what are often taken to be national trends as toxic gifts from St. Louis. In the early years of the century, St. Louis voters passed one of the country's first public referendums to institute residential segregation. Later, the city made copious use of restrictive covenants that barred black home buyers from white neighborhoods; the 1948 Supreme Court opinion that declared restrictive covenants legally unenforceable—a decision that was widely ignored—originated in St. Louis. Harland Bartholomew, the St. Louis version of mid-century urban master planners like Robert Moses, used his "malign genius" to become "the segregation and suburbanization czar of the United States." The bulldozing of black neighborhoods that looked to whites like slums (such as the one where the Gateway Arch now stands) and their partial replacement by high-rise public-housing projects, aggressive policing, mass incarceration, and the use of business-friendly, community-unfriendly tax abatements to revitalize older cities—all this, in Johnson's telling, was pioneered in St Louis.

Racial capitalists conquered the West; racial capitalists waged the Civil War; racial capitalists industrialized St. Louis, and then deindustrialized it, at every step exploiting black people just as brutally as slaveholders did. It's a big, all-explanatory theory that is serviced by the tone of Johnson's account, which is forcefully didactic at every moment. "The Broken Heart of America" is a history populated by good guys and bad guys—many more of the latter. Johnson doesn't hesitate to use terms that didn't exist at the time to describe the motivations of historical actors: "genocide," "settler colonialism," "ethnic cleansing"—terms given a honed edge by being relieved of historical specificity. Even one of the few entities he approves of, an "urban guerrilla" organization called ACTION, which staged public demonstrations to protest, for example, the lack of black construction

workers hired to build the Gateway Arch, in the mid-nineteen-sixties, is reprimanded for being "racist, sexist, and heteronormative" in its embrace of the view "that a male breadwinner was the keystone figure of healthy Black family life."

Johnson's propensity for pasting condemnatory labels on his characters displays a concern that, without his firm guidance, readers may not draw the proper conclusions from the material he is presenting. He is disinclined to describe any situation as ambiguous. In the case of Michael Brown, Johnson doesn't hesitate to call it a murder. Darren Wilson, he suggests, stopped Brown for jaywalking, and then, "after a short scuffle in the street, Brown ran away. When Wilson shot him, several witnesses later asserted, Brown had his hands raised in the air." Johnson is polite about the Obama Justice Department's 2015 report on the Ferguson police department's systemic racial bias, but only in the endnotes does he mention the Justice Department's second, simultaneously issued report, on the incident itself, which concluded that the facts of the case didn't warrant federal prosecution. Giving particular weight to witnesses whose testimony was consistent with the forensic evidence, investigators concluded that Wilson heard of a robbery at a local market, that Brown reached into Wilson's car and tussled with him, and that Brown was approaching Wilson when he was fatally shot. (Many of these points are intensely in dispute.) Without addressing the specifics, Johnson writes that the report "is, at best, a legalistic restatement of the extraordinary latitude provided police officers who shoot unarmed people in the United States and, at worst, a complete misunderstanding of the full circumstances surrounding the shooting."

In the craft of history, tendentiousness is an ever-present temptation; Johnson is as insistently moralizing in his way as previous generations of romantic, heroic historians of the West were in theirs. A story centered on a transhistorical force of oppression—spotlighting St. Louis as the capital of racial capitalism—offers an all-encompassing explanation but doesn't leave much room for racism untethered from capitalism or capitalism untethered from racism. Other scholars have found different ways of explaining the same parlous present-day conditions in distressed black neighborhoods. James Forman, Jr., in "Locking Up Our Own" (2017), showed how a series of late-twentieth-century policing and sentencing techniques, widely endorsed by tough-on-crime public officials, black and white, wound up putting many more black people in prison and making things worse in black communities. In "The Origins of the Urban Crisis" (1996), a work centered on postwar Detroit, the historian Thomas Sugrue insisted on an approach to urban history that took into account a range of

factors, including not obviously racial ones like deindustrialization; in its introduction, he wrote, "The coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in a particular historical moment, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, set the stage for the fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America." The implication of these books is that significant policy changes would help black communities. They have that in common with many previous books about urban black America in the twentieth century, including the greatest of them all, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's "Black Metropolis," from 1945. Johnson, impatient with such particularity, always goes both smaller, in the sense of depicting St. Louis as a fulcrum of history, and bigger, in the sense of making racial capitalism an eternal, all-powerful force, floating free of any specific time or place.

The idea that racism can be connected to capitalism has been around for a long time; the question is how the connection works, and whether the two are inextricable. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his great speech on the steps of the Alabama statehouse at the conclusion of the Selma-to-Montgomery march, in 1965, said, "The segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land." King was at that moment pushing for the passage of the Voting Rights Act and other civil-rights legislation, so he had a reason to locate the nexus of race and capitalism specifically in the Southern Jim Crow system. Within a year, he was leading demonstrations against slumlords in hyper-segregated Chicago, and advocating new forms of national legislation, like the Fair Housing Act. In 2018, more than ninety per cent of African-American voters in Missouri cast their ballots against Josh Hawley, the victorious Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate; Hawley now presents himself as a critic of global capitalism without ever mentioning race. It's possible to be anti-capitalist without being anti-racist, and anti-racist without being anti-capitalist. Johnson might say that both positions are deluded, but they have appeared regularly in our country's history.

Through it all, black neighborhoods, especially poor black neighborhoods, still bear the weight of a malign history. Reading "The Broken Heart of America" inevitably prompts the question of how what's broken might be repaired. Does a politically charged history come with a politics for the here and now?

Historically, Johnson doesn't find many people to admire. Among whites, the main exceptions are a few Communists and radically inclined labor organizers. He takes a dim view, too, of mainstream black organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League. Liberal politicians hardly attract his notice, except when, as in the case of Lincoln, their reputations require revising downward. But after laying out a relentlessly bleak history he ends, jarringly, on a hopeful note. During the unrest following Michael Brown's death, he tells us, "the disinherited of St. Louis rose again to take control of their history." Since then, a number of activists—Johnson provides thumbnail sketches of them—have launched efforts in poor black neighborhoods meant to reverse, or at least resist, the pernicious workings of racial capitalism. Today, Johnson writes, "I have never been to a more amazing, hopeful place in my life." Underlying his stated optimism is an implicit conviction that it wouldn't do much good to look for help from the larger society; the victims of oppression must find a way forward by themselves.

As a child in the Jim Crow South during the civil-rights era, growing up in a conservative white milieu, I often overheard bitter adult conversations about the hypocrisy of white liberals in the North. Were they really any better than Southern segregationists, to go by their lived behavior? Walter Johnson, coming from the left, offers a good deal of empirical support for opinions like that. His account discourages us from drawing much hope from past events like the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the major civil-rights victories of the sixties, or the election of Barack Obama as President; the regime of racial capitalism, in his vision, always manages to reconstitute itself. Broader reforms that aimed, at least, to smooth the roughest edges of capitalism—like the regulation of business excesses or the creation of Social Security and Medicaid—are, we gather, no match for white supremacy.

Democratic politics, especially in a country with a racial history like ours, is necessarily messy, impure, and capable of producing no more than partial victories, and, even then, only when pushed hard by political movements. But deflating and deriding the progress it has made in the past and the promise it might hold for the future invites the hazards of defeatism. It distracts from the kinds of economic, educational, and criminal-justice reforms that mainstream progressives hope to enact. These are the tools we have at hand. It would be a shame not to use them. ♦

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