03/23 Reading Response 4 – Racialized Labor

Based off of this week’s readings, in order to understand capitalist labor relations, specifically in a US context, one must understand that race has become intertwined in the hierarchical categorization of laborers. As noted, the presence of the phrases “white collar worker” and “working man” attempt to make a distinction between a worker and a laborer in order to maintain a social balance of skill and labor of privilege vs. unskilled and labor of necessity. Paraphrasing from Roediger, the “white worker as a historical phenomenon”, is a trend that has reformatted itself, and reassigned itself throughout history. Beginning pre-capitalism in feudal society, as uncovered by Robinson, “The character of capitalism can only be understood in the social and historical context of its appearance.” – being the appearance of hierarchies of workers in feudal European civilization. Peasants in European feudalism existed as othered, or subjected groups from conquered societies. In this nature, becomes simpler to trace the growth of the Black worker and laborer in American society as the modern version of the peasantry in feudal Europe. Because the feudal state was essential for the growth and maintenance of the bourgeoise, it has been necessary to maintain the structures and ambitions of such a system in order to ensure consistency in the formulation of societies that have spanned from Europe post colonization.

One prime example of the necessity in assuring society of a social subordinate in order to maintain this system is the presence and politics surrounding chain gang laborers. The narratives and testimonies of Black people working on chain gangs were left completely unacknowledged. The work of Black laborers to support the production of white wealth, growth, and urbanization was listed as a healthy and positive for the personal growth of the prisoner. The distinction in the framing of racialized labor offered in Henderson’s writings on the benefits of outdoor prison labor, was a clear nod to the fact that there is a trend of white phenomenology of labor. Cephas notes, “With the relegation of black prisoners to roadwork and the prioritization of new road construction in the 19’s as a part of the modernization of the new South, road work had progressed from being an expected civic duty to an emblem of racial denigration.”

Having discovered this systematic trend of oppression through labor structures, how might we interject this system? Is it possible to overcome the hidden structures within capitalism without acknowledgement of them, or is it first necessary to break capitalism into its respective pieces in order to reframe our thought process and understanding of labor relations in the US?