



CHAPTER 4

Capitalism, Class, and the Matrix of Domination

Every year I team-teach a course on race, and there always comes a point in the semester when students start saying things like this: "We don't get it. If race is socially constructed and doesn't exist otherwise, and if human beings aren't bound to be terrified of one another, then where does racism come from? Why all the oppression and hostility and violence over something that's been made up? And why would people make it up this way in the first place? It's stupid."

The answer we give takes us into the history of race, where we find two things that usually startle them as much as they did me when I first became aware of them. First, white racism hasn't been around very long—hardly more than several centuries and certainly not as long as white people have been aware of other races. Second, its appearance in Europe and the Americas occurred right along with the expansion of capitalism as an economic system. This is no coincidence, because capitalism played a major role in the development of white privilege, and still plays a major role in its perpetuation.

This isn't surprising given the importance of economics in social life, which is, after all, how people organize themselves to provide what they need for their material existence—food, shelter, clothing, and the like—and to live what their culture defines as a "good life." Because economic systems are the source of wealth, they are also the basis for every social institution, since the state and church and universities and the like cannot survive without an economic base. It takes a great deal of material and labor to build a cathedral or a university, for example, or to pay for political campaigns or equip and feed a police force or an army. This means that the central place of economics in social life gives individuals and systems powerful reasons to go along with the dominant economic system. Capitalism has been that system for the last several hundreds years, and today, with the demise of the Soviet Union, it's virtually the only game in town. What, then, did capitalism have to do with the origins of white racism? In the simplest sense, it was a matter of economics: Understanding why begins with understanding capitalism itself.¹

HOW CAPITALISM WORKS

The basic goal of modern capitalism is to turn money into more money. Capitalists invest money to buy what it takes to produce goods and services: raw materials, machinery, electricity, buildings, and, of course, human labor. It doesn't matter what they produce so long as they can find a market in which to sell it at a profit—for more than it cost to have it produced—and end up with more money than they started with. Whether the result enhances human life (providing healthy food, affordable housing, health care, and the like) or causes harm (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, weapons, slavery, pollution) may be an issue for individual capitalists who value a clear conscience. But the system itself doesn't depend on such moral or ethical considerations, for

profit is profit and there's no way to tell "good" money from "bad." Even the damage done by one enterprise can serve as a source of profit for another. Industrial pollution, for example, creates profitable opportunities for companies that specialize in cleaning it up.

Capitalists employ workers to produce goods and services, paying them wages in exchange for their time. Capitalists then sell the goods and services that workers produce. For capitalists to make a living (since they don't produce anything themselves), they have to get workers to produce goods and services that are worth more than the wages capitalists pay them. The difference is what capitalists live on.

Why, however, would workers accept wages worth less than the value of what they produce? The general answer is that they don't have much choice, because under capitalism the tools and factories used to produce goods aren't owned by the people who actually do the work. Instead, they're owned by capitalists, especially stockholders who invest in companies. So, for most people who want to earn a living, chances are they'll have to work for one capitalist employer or another, which means choosing between working on the capitalist's terms or not working at all. As corporate capitalism has extended its reach into every area of social life, even professionals now have to confront this choice. Physicians, for example, who were once regarded as the model of an independent profession, are increasingly compelled to become what are essentially highly paid employees of health maintenance organizations. As a result, they have recently begun to lobby Congress for the right to engage in collective bargaining with HMOs—in other words, to form a labor union for physicians.²

Since capitalists profit from the difference between the cost of producing goods (most of which is people's labor) and what they can sell goods for in markets, the cheaper the labor, the more money left over for them. This is why capitalists are so con-

cerned about increasing "worker productivity"—finding ways for workers to produce more goods for the same or less pay. One way to accomplish this is through the use of technology, especially machines that replace people altogether. Another is to threaten to close down or relocate businesses if workers won't make concessions on wages, health and retirement benefits, job security, and working conditions. A third and increasingly popular strategy in the "new global economy" is to move production to countries where people are willing to work for less than they are in Europe or North America and where authoritarian governments will control workers and discourage the formation of unions and other sources of organized resistance, often with the direct support of the U.S. government.³

CAPITALISM AND CLASS

The dynamics of capitalism produce not only enormous amounts of wealth, but high—and increasing—levels of inequality, both within societies and globally. The richest 10 percent of the U.S. population holds more than two-thirds of all the wealth, including almost 90 percent of cash, almost half the land, more than 90 percent of business assets, and almost all stocks and bonds.⁴ In 1998, the richest top 20 percent of all households received almost *half* of all income, and the richest 40 percent received almost *three-quarters*, leaving just a quarter of all income to be divided among the remaining 60 percent of all households.⁵

Such patterns of inequality result from and perpetuate a class system based on widening gaps in income, wealth, and power between those on top and everyone below them.⁶ It is a system that produces oppressive consequences. For those at the bottom, the costs are enormous, with living conditions among the rural poor, for example, at or below the level found in many of the world's most impoverished nonindustrial societies.⁷ Even

among employed members of the working class, as well as many of those in the middle class, the class system offers little security and takes an emotional toll. A great many jobs are boring, mind-numbing, and make use of much less than what most people have to offer. And the vast majority of working people have little if any control over the work they do or whether they keep their jobs.

It also doesn't take much to see that with the bottom 60 percent of the U.S. population having to divide just a quarter of all income among themselves, there isn't going to be enough to go around. While capitalism produces an overall abundance of goods and services, it distributes that wealth so unequally that it also produces conditions of scarcity for most of the population. This makes life for those 150 million or so people an ongoing competition that is full of anxiety and struggle. For a majority of people, it wouldn't take very much—a divorce, perhaps, or a serious illness or being laid off—to substantially lower their standard of living, even to the extent of putting them out of their homes and onto welfare.⁸

The "American Dream" aside, most people also have relatively little power to improve their class position. Much of the increase in household wealth, for example, has been based on a growing mountain of credit card debt, people working two or more jobs, and families relying on two wage earners to support the same standard of living their parents managed with one. Although unemployment is at record low levels, most of the new jobs that have been created over the last several decades have been low-paying and with little chance of advancement. In addition, studies of occupational mobility show most people are as likely to move downward as they are upward in the class system.⁹ Because of this and the widening gulf separating the upper class from everyone else, the middle class has actually shrunk.¹⁰ Since 1964, the percentage of people who see themselves as middle class has fallen from 61 to 45, while the percentage seeing themselves as working class has risen from 35 to 44.¹¹

In short, in an era of continuing corporate downsizing, the flight of well-paying industrial jobs overseas, and the rapid growth of low-level service occupations, for most people the struggle to move upward rarely gets much beyond hanging on to what they have.¹² There is, of course, upward movement by some, but outside of high-technology fields that are currently in demand, this almost always comes at the expense of others who must move down to make room for them. This creates what economist Lester Thurow calls a "zero-sum" society, adapting a term used to describe games that are designed so that one person's gain is always someone else's loss.¹³ This makes it inevitable that at any given moment a substantial proportion of the population will have to live in poverty or close to it. But it also sets the stage for different groups within the "bottom" 60 percent to see one another as competitors and threats to their livelihood.

As we'll see below, such dynamics of capitalism have played a key role in the trouble around difference and privilege, especially in relation to race and gender.

CAPITALISM, DIFFERENCE, AND PRIVILEGE: RACE AND GENDER

Given how capitalism works, it connects to white racism in ways that are both direct and indirect. In the history of the United States, the direct connection is most apparent in the enslavement of millions of Africans as a source of cheap labor on cotton and tobacco plantations in the South. This was done for purely economic reasons, as became dramatically apparent after Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1792 made it possible to process many times more cotton than before. Tempted by the potential to multiply cotton production—and profits—many times over, planters chose to minimize labor costs by exploiting slave labor rather than pay free workers a living wage.

As a result, the number of enslaved blacks in the United States jumped from 1 million in 1800 to almost 4 million in 1860, just before the start of the Civil War.¹⁴ The primacy of profit in white thinking was also apparent in the reactions of businesses that relied on paid white workers. They didn't object to slavery on moral grounds. Instead, they complained that slave owners were engaging in unfair competition because their labor costs were so low it was impossible to compete against them. It was common, for example, for construction firms that depended on slave labor to win contracts away from their competition by underbidding them.¹⁵

Following the Civil War, the capitalist appetite for cheap agricultural labor was no less than before, and freed blacks were held in a new form of bondage by an oppressive system of tenant farming that kept them perpetually in debt.¹⁶ Beyond the South, the profitability of racism showed itself in the widespread use of Chinese immigrant labor to build the Western railways under harsh and demeaning conditions. Even farther west, Japanese immigrants had similar experiences on the sugar and pineapple plantations of Hawaii.¹⁷

Capitalism's direct connection to white racism has also operated in the acquisition of land and raw materials which, like cheap labor, play a key role in the rapid growth of industry and wealth. In the heyday of capitalist expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe and then the United States found an abundance of what they needed in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. To acquire them, they relied on varying combinations of military conquest, political domination, and economic exploitation.¹⁸ They were spectacularly successful at it, especially Great Britain, a small island nation with few natural resources of its own that nonetheless managed to become the world's first true industrial power. Unlike Britain, the United States was already rich in natural resources, but whites could get at them only by taking them away from the

Native American tribes who inhabited most of the land as well as from Mexico, which encompassed most of what is now the far western and southwestern United States. Whites managed to take what they wanted through a combination of conquest, genocide, and a complex array of treaties that were routinely ignored.¹⁹

To justify such direct forms of imperialism and oppression, whites developed the *idea* of whiteness to define a privileged social category elevated above everyone who wasn't included in it.²⁰ This made it possible to reconcile conquest, treachery, slavery, and genocide with the nation's newly professed ideals of democracy, freedom, and human dignity. If whiteness defined what it meant to be human, then it was seen as less of an offense against the Constitution (not to mention God) to dominate and oppress those who happened to fall outside that definition as the United States marched onward toward what was popularly perceived as its Manifest Destiny.²¹

Other capitalist connections to racism have been less direct. Capitalists, for example, have often used white racism as a strategy to maintain control over white workers and thereby keep wages low and productivity high. This has been done in two main ways. First, beginning early in the nineteenth century, there was a systematic public campaign to encourage white workers to adopt whiteness as a key part of their social identity—something they hadn't done before—and to accept the supposed superiority of whiteness as compensation for their low class position. No matter how badly treated they were by their employers, they could always look in the mirror and comfort themselves with the fact of being white and therefore elevated above people of color, even those who might have a class position higher than their own.²² With the emancipation of the slaves following the Civil War, however, lower-class whites could no longer point to their freedom as a mark of superiority. Their response to this loss was a period of enormous violence and

intimidation directed against blacks, much of which was perpetrated by the newly formed Ku Klux Klan with no serious opposition from government or the larger white population.

Another way for capitalists to control workers is to keep them worried over the possibility of losing their jobs if they demand higher wages or better working conditions. White racism has a long history of being used for this purpose. The oppressed condition of blacks and other racial minorities encourages them to work for wages that are lower than what most whites will accept. Employers have used this to pose an ongoing threat to white workers who have known employers could readily use racial minorities as an inexpensive replacement for them. This has worked most effectively as a way to break strikes and the labor unions that promote them. As unions became more powerful at the turn of the twentieth century, for example, employers often brought in black workers as strikebreakers. The strategy worked to draw the attention of white workers away from issues of capitalism and class to issues of race. It focused their fear and anger on the supposed threat from black workers, which made them less likely to see their common condition as workers and join together against the capitalists. In this way, racial division and conflict became an effective strategy for dividing different segments of the working class against one another.²³

Similar dynamics operate today, although perhaps with greater subtlety. The controversy and conflict over affirmative action programs, for example, as well as the influx of immigrant workers from Mexico and Asia reflect an underlying belief that the greatest challenge facing white workers is unfair competition from people of color. This ignores the capitalist system itself, which by its nature increases the wealth of capitalists by controlling workers and keeping wages as low as possible, and allows a small elite to control the vast majority of wealth and income, leaving a relatively small share to be divided among

everyone else. This makes for conditions of scarcity that encourage fierce competition, especially in the working and lower classes, but also in many segments of the middle class. Given the historical legacy that encourages whites to feel a sense of superiority and entitlement in relation to people of color, such competition is bound to provoke anger and resentment among whites, which is then directed at people of color rather than at those whose wealth and power lie at the heart of what is essentially an economic problem centering on the distribution of wealth. In this way, dynamics of class privilege fuel continued racism which, in turn, draws attention away from capitalism and the class oppression it produces.

Capitalism also shapes and makes use of gender inequality.²⁴ The cultural devaluing of women, for example, has long been used as an excuse to pay them less and exploit them as a source of cheap labor, whether in the corporate secretarial pool in New York or garment sweatshops in Los Angeles or electronics industry assembly plants in Asia.²⁵ Women's supposed inferiority has also been used as a basis for the belief that much of the work that women do isn't work at all and therefore isn't worthy of anything more than emotional compensation.²⁶ Capitalism couldn't function without the army of women who do the shopping for households (which is how most goods are purchased) and do the labor through which those goods are consumed: cooking the meals, making the bed with the new set of sheets, and so on. On a deeper level, women are, with few exceptions, the ones who nurture and raise each new generation of workers on which capitalism depends, and this vital service is provided without anyone's having to pay wages or provide health and retirement benefits. Women do it for free—even when they also work outside the home—to the benefit of the capitalist system and those who are most privileged by it.

Capitalism, then, provides an important social context for the trouble around privilege and difference. And the class

dynamics that arise from capitalism interact with that trouble powerful ways that both protect capitalism and class privilege and perpetuate privilege and oppression based on difference.

THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION AND THE PARADOX OF BEING PRIVILEGED AND UNPRIVILEGED AT THE SAME TIME

As the dynamics of capitalism and class suggest, systems of privilege are complicated. This is one reason why people can belong to a privileged category and not feel privileged. There is more than one set of categories, which means a person can belong to the privileged category in one set and an unprivileged category in another. So, for example, a middle-class white lesbian's class and race privilege may blind her to issues of race and class, her experience of gender inequality and heterosexism may counter the illusion that this automatically prepares her to know everything she needs to know about other forms of privilege and oppression. Or a working-class white man may be annoyed by the idea that his whiteness and maleness somehow give him access to privilege. As a member of the working class, he may feel so insecure, pushed around, looked down on, and exploited that the last thing that he feels is privileged.

Part of such feelings comes from the misconception that privilege is something that is just about individuals. From this perspective, either he's privileged or he's not, just like he has two ears or he doesn't. If he can show that he's not privileged in some way (being working-class), then that would tend to cancel out any claim that he's privileged in another.

But the truth is more complicated than whether he is privileged, for in a basic way, privilege isn't really about him, though he's certainly involved in it. The social categories "white," "male," and "middle-class" are privileged in this so-

he belongs to two of those. Being working-class, however, he gets up barriers that make it harder for him to attain the benefits associated with being white and male. If he can't earn a good living, for example, he may have a hard time feeling like a "man" bonded to other men in their superiority to women. The privileged social category "male" still exists, and he belongs to it, but his social-class position gets in the way of his enjoying the advantages that go with it.

Another complication is that categories that define privilege don't fall all at once and in relation to one another. People never see privilege solely in terms of my race, for example, or my gender. Like anyone else's, my place in the social world is a package deal—the male heterosexual (middle-aged, married, father, writer, teacher, middle-class, Anglo, U.S. citizen, and on and on)—and that's the way it is all the time.

Whether, for example, my students perceive me as intelligent, credible, and competent will most likely be affected by their perception of my race. In that sense, no student could see me simply as professor, for they will also see a person of a certain gender, race, and class. Even if they first meet me on the phone, they'll form impressions of my race if only by assuming I'm white unless I give them reason to think otherwise. In that sense, I don't exist purely as a professor separate from the other social categories I belong to.

Given that reality, it makes no sense to talk about the effect of belonging in one of these categories—say, white—without also looking at the others and how they're related to it. My experience of being identified as a white person in this society is affected by my also being seen as male and heterosexual and of a certain class. If I apply for a job, for example, white privilege normally give me an edge over a similarly qualified Latino. But if the people doing the hiring think I'm gay, my white privilege might lose out to his heterosexual privilege, and he might get the job instead of me.

It's tempting to use such comparisons to try to figure out some kind of net cost or benefit associated with each social category. In other words, you get a point for being white, male, or heterosexual, and you lose a point if you're of color, female, or homosexual. Add up the points and the result is your position in relation to systems of privilege. That would put white male heterosexuals on top (+3) and lesbians of color in some kind of "triple jeopardy" at the bottom (-3). White lesbians (-1) and gay men of color (-1) would fall somewhere in between and presumably on the same "level." This would also be true of gay white men (+1) and heterosexual white women (+1).

Life and privilege aren't that simple, however. It's not as though being male gives you a certain amount of something called "privilege" and being white gives you more of the same and being gay cancels out half of it. Privilege takes different forms that are connected to one another in ways that aren't obvious. For example, historically one of the ways that white men have justified their domination over black men has been to portray them as sexual predators who pose a threat to white women. At the same time, they've portrayed white women as pure and needing white men's protection, a dependent position that puts them under white men's control. Notice, then, how the dynamics of gender and race are so bound up with each other that it's hard, if not impossible, to tell where one ends and the other begins. How much race or gender "counts" all by itself cannot be determined.

This is why sociologist Patricia Hill Collins describes such systems as a "matrix of domination" or what Estelle Disch calls "matrix of privilege," and not merely a loose collection of different kinds of inequality that don't have much to do with one another. As Collins and numerous others argue, each particular form of privilege, whether based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, or ethnicity, exists only as part of a much larger system of privilege.²⁷

Looking at privilege and domination in this way simplifies and clarifies things considerably. For example, once we see that each form of privilege exists only in relation to all the rest, we can stop the fruitless habit of comparing them and trying to figure out which is the worst or most oppressive.

We also free ourselves from the trap of thinking that everything is a matter of either/or—either you're oppressed or you're not, privileged or not—because reality is usually a matter of both/and. In other words, we can belong to both privileged and oppressed categories at the same time, and if we're going to make ourselves part of the solution to the problem of privilege, we have to see that. Why? Because we can't make ourselves part of the solution without seeing clearly how we're connected to the problem.

Perhaps most important, the concept of a matrix helps us see how the different dimensions of privilege and domination are connected to one another, how heterosexism is used to support male privilege, for example, or how racism is used to support class privilege. We can also see how subordinate groups are often pitted against one another in ways that draw attention away from the system of privilege that hurts them both. Asian Americans, for example, are often held up as a good example—the "model minority." This makes other racial and ethnic minorities look bad by comparison and encourages them to blame Asian Americans for their disadvantaged status.²⁸ In this way, Asian Americans serve as a buffer between whites and other peoples of color, as Korean Americans were in Los Angeles after the police who assaulted Rodney King were acquitted and the rage of black people spilled over into Korean neighborhoods, where stores were burned to the ground. Only when the rioting reached the edge of white neighborhoods did police finally respond to pleas for help.²⁹

The complexity of the matrix of privilege and domination makes it clear that work for change needs to focus on the idea

of privilege itself and all the forms it takes. We won't get rid of racism, in other words, without doing something about sexism and class, because the system that produces the one also produces the others and connects them all together.



CHAPTER 5

Making Privilege Happen

Although privilege is attached to social categories and not to individuals, people are the ones who make it happen through what they do and don't do in relation to others. This almost always involves some form of discrimination—in other words, treating people unequally simply because they belong to a particular social category.¹ Whether it's done consciously or not, discrimination has the effect of maintaining a system of privilege. Giving admissions preference to the children of graduates from elite colleges and universities, for example, is an act of discrimination because it perpetuates elite privilege by favoring their children over others regardless of their qualifications. In the same way, refusing to admit, say, Jewish students is discrimination because it perpetuates their oppressed position in relation to non-Jews.

Like all behavior, discrimination is connected to how we think and feel about people, and prejudice plays a powerful role in this.² Prejudice is a complicated thing, because it involves both ideas and feelings. Racial prejudice, for example, includes