

**Università degli studi di Urbino Carlo Bo  
Admission to the XXXIX CYCLE Ph.D. Programmes  
Global Studies. Economy, Society and Law**

**Rethinking Global Capitalism**

**Critical Perspectives between Cedric Robinson and Gayatri Spivak**

**Presented by Elia Alberici**

Postcolonial Studies – Global Capitalism – Race – Gender – Critical Theory –  
Decolonial Feminism – Racial Capitalism

**SPS/01 – SPS/02**

**1. General Presentation of the Project and State of the Art**

**Abstract**

This research project seeks to conceptualise global capitalism through the perspectives of two postcolonial thinkers, Cedric Robinson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In order to explore capitalism from global and critical perspectives, research must interrogate the tradition of thought criticizing Eurocentric and colonial narratives of Western modernity. Cedric Robinson's category of racial capitalism permits a critique of Marxist interpretations of transitional phases within capitalist social mechanisms cited as being the impetus for overcoming the so called 'primitive' and 'underdeveloped' world. Only through an understanding of the complex interplay between race, capital, and Western civilization can a rethinking of Marxist theoretical perspectives on imperialism be effective by way of accounting for global and racial inequalities. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's reflections on the gendered nature of third world subaltern social categories allow for capable of accounting for an idea of 'global' as the interconnection of different and heterogeneous elements of exploitative social relations. By combining these theoretical perspectives, elaboration of a critical political approach to contemporary global capitalism is made possible.

**State of the Art**

This project adopts an interdisciplinary approach, finding itself at the intersection of different disciplines as well epistemological foundations. First it will deal with postcolonial

studies, finding their origin in the processes of decolonization following the second World War. In their seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) reveals the constitutive and dominant relation with an 'other' (the 'Orient') needed by European and Atlantic modernity. Within the same approach, Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) *Provincializing Europe* discusses the 'epistemic violence' of the Western knowledge and power, demonstrating how it served as a material and discursive tool of domination across the globe.

Despite the birth of these debates in the field of literary studies, their contribution stretches across a great number of disciplines, touching on political, economic, and anthropological themes. This is the case of dependency theory elaborated notably by Samir Amin (1975, e.g. *Unequal Development*), who explores the imbalanced relations between core and periphery in the rising global economy. Later, this perspective is reflected in the world-system theory as discussed by Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi, in the latter's *The Long Twentieth Century*. These two perspectives allow for an understanding of capital as a true global phenomenon, overcoming the Eurocentric narration; however, their approach is closer to history and economic, rather than engaging with a conceptual analysis. Lastly, within these ontological boundaries, the field of Subaltern Studies presents itself as an invaluable tool to inform critique of global political economy, best represented by Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, e. g. *Selected Subaltern Studies*). Subaltern studies allow to include within a new analytical framework the subjectivity of the postcolonial world.

These theoretical perspectives create an avenue for a critical understanding of the concept of 'global', as defined by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) in *Border as Method*. The main problem of defining what is global is that hierarchies and discontinuities are no more inevitably fixed by an economic and political power in the postcolonial world, as notably interrogated by Miguel Mellino as well (2005). Understanding global capitalism as a postcolonial world is at the centre of the pivotal text *Rethinking Capitalist Development* by Kalyan K. Sanyal (2007) as well, where he carefully analyses the case of Indian capitalism. Within this stream of studies, *The Politics of Operations* by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2019) emphasize the global perspective required to explore contemporary capitalism. This work is inscribed in the attempt to conceptualize contemporary capitalism from a global perspective, considering the complexity of the postcolonial world. Mezzadra and Neilson only briefly discuss Spivak and Robinson; however, these two thinkers can shed a new light on conceptualizing the complexity of global capitalist inequality.

Specifically, this project interrogates two thinkers who inscribe themselves in the Marxian tradition. From a postcolonial and global perspective, this tradition has been subjected to a harsh critique, due to the presence of Eurocentric elements. Research seeking to combine postcolonial critiques with a Marxian framework, must consider the intellectual currents of prominent political philosophers, namely C. L. R. James in his work *The Black Jacobin* (1st ed. 1938) and Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1st ed. 1961). These two pivotal works were written in the context of decolonization processes, opening a new path for research seeking to combine the social realities of race and Western colonial domination from an explicitly Marxist perspective. In order to do so, Fanon elaborates a radical critique of the Western knowledge, articulated through a critique of its objectivity as Stefano Visentin (2020, 133-4) emphasizes. This that is not a deconstructionist exercise, rather, only by refusing the epistemology of the Western science, the colonised can think and practice their liberation (Visentin 2020, 135-6). This project assumes the centrality of these epistemological reflections, when it comes to deal with postcolonial studies.

Recently, this line of thought addressed the issue of the so-called 'white' (e.g., Western) Marxism to criticize and reassess the limit through which Marxist and Marxian tradition navigate race and the colonial questions. Additionally, the work of Cedric Robinson in his seminal *Black Marxism* (1st ed. 1983) as well as *Considerations on Western Marxism* by Perry Anderson (1976), provide a harsh critique to the Marxian tradition and its Eurocentric, racist, and colonial tendencies, as Miguel Mellino and Andrea Ruben Pomella (2020) emphasize in their recent *Marx nei margini*. From this perspective, Marxism is inherently 'white' as it reproduces aspects of Western domination; thus, from their reading, the objective is to reach beyond traditional Marxist epistemology. Moreover, although not directly connected with the purposes of this project, it is worth mentioning the work of Kevin Anderson (2010) in *Marx at the Margins*, as he looks for this postcolonial and anti-racist tendencies within the thought of Karl Marx's texts.

As far as the two thinkers considered in this project are concerned, Cedric Robinson (2000) is generally associated with his theorisation over racial capitalism in *Black Marxism*. This category is largely widespread in the sociological, historical, and economical literature, as testified by the very recent *Markets of Civilization. Islam and Racial Capitalism in Algeria* by Muriam Haleh Davis (2022). This fortune of racial capitalism originated after the reprinting of *Black Marxism* in 2000, was almost forgotten for two decades. An example of this fortune can be seen in the 2014 conference 'Confronting Racial

Capitalism: The Black Radical Tradition & Cultures of Liberation' organised by Ruth Wilson Gilmore at CUNY.

Despite the fortune of racial capitalism, literature lacks a theoretical discussion of this concept, which is usually re-interpreted according to specific needs, as Davis' book on Algeria shows. In this sense, there is a lack of analysis of racial capitalism within the intellectual path of Robinson himself as well as a reasoning on the historical, economical, anthropological, and conceptual dimension of racial capitalism per se.

A different situation regards Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as she is a worldwide recognised scholar in the field of philosophy, postcolonial thought and decolonial feminism, as *The Spivak Reader* published by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (1996) testifies. Many scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds engage in critical discussions with her rich thought.

## **2. Research Design and Objectives**

This project aims to elaborate a political interpretation of global capitalism from a critical perspective. In order to do so, the main theoretical object is accounting for the complex heterogeneity and discontinuity of contemporary global capitalism.

First, it will be essential to reconstruct the intellectual path of Cedric Robinson, giving a textual ground to his reasoning over racial capitalism. It is necessary to consider Robinson's dissertation *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*, in order to understand how his intellectual path begins with a radical critique of political leadership which interested the Marxist tradition as well. In the aforementioned Black Marxism, one can find a theory of racial capitalism. All in all, it is a discourse over the inability of capitalism to impose the universality of class in a homogeneous way over the globe. In this sense, it will be important to discuss how the rise of capitalism did not turn the world into a tabula rasa. On the contrary, historical differences play a pivotal function. Robinson (2000) writes: "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism, was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate — to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (26). Racial capitalism accounts for these differences.

Moreover, it is essential to discuss Robinson's reconstruction of black thought and black epistemology, studying his reading of radical black thinkers, such W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James. Following his magnum opus, it is necessary to take into account *Black Movements* and *An Anthropology of Marxism* where the tradition of communitarianism is displaced from a Marxist and Eurocentric conception. In this way, it is possible to

appreciate the multifaceted essence of his discourse over racial capitalism, which is not simply a historiographic category, but, rather, a broader multilayered concept.

As far as Gayatri Spivak is concerned it is necessary to discuss her overall intellectual path, paying great attention to her consideration over Feminism and Marxism. To do so, one must discuss *Feminism and Critical Theory, Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value*, and her fundamental *The Postcolonial Critique. Interview, Strategies, Dialogues*. It will be necessary to discuss Spivak's proposal of adopting the positionality of the black subaltern women. In this way, it is possible to understand capitalism as a global social relation, by looking at the different lines of exploitation condensed in the subjectivity of the third world woman. In order to grasp these elements, Spivak invites readers to assume this positionality, which calls for deconstructing the gaze of the white first world woman, as testified by the famous essay *Can the Subaltern speak?* To acquire a deep understanding of this concept, it is necessary to interrogate Spivak's reflection over French philosophy as well as Subaltern Studies.

The original aim of this work consists of combining these discourses to elaborate a critical political interpretation of global capitalism. Global power relations are not simply shaped by the economical and abstract dominion of capital. Rather, they result from the intertwining of empirical, concrete, and heterogeneous forces. Thus, a concept which deals with this complexity is needed.

### **3. Methodology and Expected Results**

#### **Expected Results**

First, this research will aim to show differences and similarities between the thought of Robinson and Spivak. As they both write from a Marxian and postcolonial perspective, similarities and compatibilities between the two will be emphasized. However, it is important to recognise discontinuities as well; for instance, Spivak (1999) in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* took a noticeable distance from postcolonial thought.

By combining racial capitalism with decolonial feminism, this research refuses a conceptualization of global capitalism and globalization as an impersonal, economical, and neutral force. On the contrary, by assuming the historically determined gaze of racial capitalism and the positionality of black women, will it be possible to understand the elements of rupture and discontinuity in the production of the global space. The global condition, far from being smooth and homogeneous, is crisscrossed by inequalities, historical differences, and heterogeneous subjectivities. This is the result of the long process of becoming postcolonial on the world stage: by looking at capital through a partial

gaze, it possible to address these elements of differentiation; namely, to put it in philosophical terms, to address the coexistence of different historical times and modes of productions.

In this sense, through these authors, this work assumes an economical-historical approach (Robinson) and the positionality of the black women (Spivak) to conceptualize global capitalism. This does not mean renouncing to a more general and comprehensive discourse over the production of differences and inequalities in the global world, but this analysis will be accompanied by a grounded reflection and interpretation of global systems of capitalist extraction and profound exploration of anthropologically measurable social mechanisms.

## **Methodology**

While aiming at producing a theoretical-political discourse, this project is based on true interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, Robinson and Spivak write at the intersection between different disciplines: history, economy, sociology, and anthropology. Therefore, it will be necessary to accurately deal with this interdisciplinarity.

The methodology adopted for this work is diachronic and synchronic at the same time. It is based on a synchronic approach because the overall objective is understanding global capitalism with a theoretical perspective. Therefore, it will be necessary to engage with a discussion, which is obviously not entirely abstract since it has an interdisciplinary fashion. Nevertheless, this research should adopt a diachronic approach because both Robinson and Spivak, two coeval thinkers, wrote in an historical determined period. This historical dimension of their writing should be emphasized and discussed. For instance, part of their intellectual production such as *Black Marxism* by Robinson and *The Postcolonial Critique* by Spivak were written in the Eighties, in a relevant global conjuncture for the decolonization processes. These historical and political elements must be taken into account within the analysis of their intellectual production.

## **4. Description of the Research in the Three-year Period**

During the first semester of the first year, I will collect the most recent literature on global capitalism and globalization, from a political theory perspective. In the second half of the first year, I will study the thought of Cedric Robinson. During the first semester of the second year, I will inquire the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. During the second half of the second year, I will spend some time abroad to deepen my research. First, I can rely on some contacts in the academic context of London, due to the research I carried for

my MA thesis, with Professor Jamie Woodcock. In particular, the network of 'Historical Materialism' represents a fundamental centre of critical thought, for those who study the interconnections between Marxism, Race and Gender. Moreover, in London one can find the 'Institute for Race Relations' where Cedric Robinson himself was involved and it still represents a fundamental place of research for the critical race theory. For these reasons, a co-tutorship with a London scholar would represent an interesting opportunity to carry this kind of research. Nevertheless, this project should include a period of visiting in the United States, since its academic context is one of the more advanced concerning postcolonial studies. It will be important to conduct an interview with Spivak and broadly engage in an intellectual relation with her. Indeed, the Columbia University appears as a relevant place to conduct this research, since not only Spivak teaches, but also the department of 'African American and African Diaspora Studies' is one of the most advanced worldwide. Lastly, I will entirely dedicate the third year to write my dissertation.

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