Material Insecurity, Racial Capitalism, and Public Health

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In the oft-cited 1995 article "Social Conditions as Fundamental Causes of Disease," Bruce Link and Jo Phelan describe social and political factors as "fundamental causes" of death and disease. Part of the inspiration for the authors' claim was the intractability of poor health outcomes in impoverished communities, even of particular diseases. "[E]ven if one effectively modifies intervening mechanisms or eradicates some diseases," the authors argue, "an association between a fundamental cause and disease will re-emerge. . . . [F]undamental causes can defy efforts to eliminate their effects when attempts to do so focus solely on the mechanisms that happen to link them to disease in a particular situation."[1]

Link and Phelan's analysis presents an important question: how to diagnose the social conditions themselves. Recently, sociologist Whitney Pirtle suggested a provocative answer when she asserted that racial capitalism should be considered a "fundamental cause" of death and disease.[2] Using the case of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, she has argued that racial capitalism's role in the crisis there meets each of the criteria Link and Phelan's article outlines: racial capitalism influenced multiple disease outcomes, affected disease outcomes through multiple risk factors, involved access to flexible resources that can be used to minimize both risks and the consequences of disease, and was reproduced over time through the continual replacement of intervening mechanisms. In this essay, we will argue for Pirtle's conclusion by supplementing it with tools identified by Arlene Bierman and James Dunn.

Bierman and Dunn provocatively claim that "social class dwarfs healthcare as a determinant of health." Bierman and Dunn take it that class is linked to health outcomes through its influence on populations' abilities to reliably access "basic necessities": housing and food. Poverty is the "leading cause of avoidable mortality" in part because of the "forced choice" that impoverishment presents to low-income people: whether to pay rent, buy food, or seek medical care.[3] No matter how a person in this predicament chooses, something will go missing, undersupplied, or come by erratically, which will become a vector for negative health outcomes.

But decades of social science have also linked race with these same outcomes. Moreover, authors in the literature on racial capitalism tie race and class together with the broader system of capitalism that determines how income, wealth, and social advantages are produced and distributed. Racial capitalism's effects on public health can thus be understood as a fundamental cause of health outcomes using the same approach that Bierman and Dunn used to link health outcomes to class. For public health research, what is key is perhaps less whether we use the terms "race" or "class" but the system of hierarchies that both these terms help to categorize: different strata of material security and insecurity, or the degree of security with respect to "basic necessities."

Racial Capitalism

The term "racial capitalism" is used by people expressing a set of intellectual positions about our global social structure that developed over the twentieth century. The sociologist Oliver C. Cox developed some of the key building blocks of what became racial capitalism theory in *Class, Caste, and Race* (1948) and *The Foundations of Capitalism* (1959). He concluded that "racial antagonism . . . developed within the capitalist system as one

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of its fundamental traits" and, furthermore, that "racial feeling developed concomitantly with the development of our modern social system."[4] The term "racial capitalism" originates from African theorists like Neville Alexander and Harold Wolpe, and it was popularized in the United States by theorists including Cedric Robinson.[5]

Theorists of racial capitalism hold that racism is a functional part of capitalism—that is, that racism is not merely part of the explanation of how capitalism got here in the first place but also an active part of the reason capitalism persists.[6] Geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, one of today's leading theorists of racial capitalism, introduces useful specificity about how racism functions in a capitalist world, defining it as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[7]

Vulnerability to premature death comes, of course, in many forms: at least as many forms as there are ways to die prematurely. But here it is instructive to recall Bierman and Dunn's reasoning for classifying social class as a prime driver of health outcomes. First, they point out the what: that poverty is the "leading cause of avoidable mortality."[8] Second, they point out the why: that impoverishment presents low-income people with a "forced choice" between paying rent, buying food, or seeking medical care, thus ensuring that something essential will be shortchanged. It is not poverty in and of itself, then, that causes death but what poverty reliably does: it causes insecurities or precarities that have an understood and deleterious effect on health outcomes. Race, theorists of racial capitalism point out, has this same effect on populations.

Food insecurity is an important determinant of public health. Undernutrition, particularly of children, is a primary cause of ill health and premature mortality in the Global South.[9] Famines represent an extreme case of food insecurity. Groundbreaking work by philosopher and economist Amartya Sen highlighted a surprising fact about this extreme case that is politically informative about the structure of our society: famines often are unrelated to food availability.

This point is counterintuitive. Before Sen wrote, the traditional approach to explaining famines appealed to food scarcity: famine involves starvation, and starvation is lack of food. This "food availability approach" was assumed in classic works of economics and philosophy (most famously by Thomas Malthus). If you wanted to explain a famine, you appealed to activity in or of the natural world that would interact with the food supply: pests, droughts, heat waves.[10]

In "Famines," Sen appeals to two cases. The first is a famine in Ireland following a potato crop failure in 1822. There, people starved to death even though there was plenty of corn to eat. The second concerns the Bengal famine of 1943, in which three million people starved to death even though food production had actually increased relative to 1941, when there was no famine at all. The food availability approach does not offer a satisfying explanation to these famines. In both cases, Sen argues, the failures were socio-political: the reluctance of the British Empire to defend its colonized subjects rather than particular elites' financial interests.[11]

The reason that people starved in Bengal and Ireland is explicable in terms of the framework offered by racial capitalism, especially as explained by Robinson and Gilmore. Robinson notes that the social structure enabled by splitting the ruled into separate populations arranged into a sharp, vertically organized hierarchy was developed in Europe (to the disadvantage of groups like the Irish and the Slavs) and came to operate on a world scale (incorporating Africans and Indigenous peoples) because of European colonization and subsequent capitalism.[12] These distinctions in hierarchy, Gilmore's definition tells us, become differences in group-level vulnerability, with groups further down the racial hierarchy systematically experiencing more vulnerability than groups farther up. This stratification is exploitable by the political powers that be: in Ireland, to defend profits and colonial control by largely English elites (higher up the racial hierarchy than the Irish) and, in Bengal, to defend the strategic interests of the British military (which feared Japanese invasion in rural Bengal).

The theory of ecologically unequal exchange allows us to tell this same kind of story on a global scale, and with a wider reference to ecological phenomena than with the narrow focus on agricultural systems. This theory holds that our world economic system moves energy and biophysical resources from poorer to richer countries. This scheme in turn distributes ecological risks perversely, tending to concentrate them in the Global South.[13] With the Global South carved into planetary politics by the same forces that colonized Bengal and Ireland, richer countries like those in Europe are "draining ecological capacity from extractive regions by importing resource-intensive products and shifting environmental burdens to the South through the export of waste."[14]

Similarly, environmental economists and geographers have advanced the "pollution haven hypothesis," which predicts that companies faced with stringent and costly environmental regulations in one country or region will move production to places with less-stringent regulation. The relationship is causal: higher-income countries (disproportionately yesterday's colonizers) have more economic leverage against companies and more politically empowered populations, which correlates with tougher environmental regulations. Some empirical work has lent support to this hypothesis.[15] The locating of manufacturing in countries with weaker environmental regulations redistributes environmental risk along the same lines as the ecologically unequal exchange theory predicts and can be viewed as one causal mechanism within that theory's larger story.[16]

Inequitable distribution of environmental risk doesn't happen only at the global scale. Within countries, there are "green crime havens"—areas of unlawfully elevated environmental risk. As with the pollution haven hypothesis, this concept represents the geographical distribution of pol-

In India during the pandemic, food insecurity has been characterized not by resource scarcity but by a failure of distribution schemes.

lutants and environmental vulnerability in ways that track power relations.[17] And, as with the other theories, the relationship described is a causal one: researchers at Auburn University and the University of Florida explain that the havens arise "as part of power differences and corresponding zoning decisions," not simply as a result of the havens' proximity to natural resources that companies want access to for production.[18]

Whether one relies on the globally scoping ecologically unequal exchange theory, the transnational pollution haven hypothesis, or the idea of subnational green crime havens, the balance of evidence suggests that the geographical distribution of pollutants and environmental risk reflects social power dynamics. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the relationship between the political power of a population and its susceptibility to environmental vulnerability is a causal one, not simply a set of unhappy coincidences. This fits squarely into Gilmore's definition of racism: "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." Racial capitalism, then, links racial power and security disparities themselves to environmental exposures and health outcomes.

Housing

Racial capitalism also explains stable, long-term, structural stratifications in housing. Consider the examples of the United States and Brazil.

In the United States, a variety of systems secure the investments of landlords by shifting the financial and social risks of housing toward the most vulnerable residents.[19] Working-class and affluent renters pay similar amounts of rent but live in housing of vastly different levels of quality because working-class renters are often confined to dilapidated housing stock.[20] Low-income renters are identified via complex surveillance systems that function much like a criminal record: appearances in housing court, credit problems, and run-ins with the law can all mar a low-income tenant's record and prevent them from accessing safe housing.[21] Racial stratifications show up in the same pattern: Black renters are disproportionately targeted for eviction, by predatory lending, and by the police, all circumstances that serve to increase these renters' vulnerability to housing insecurity.[22]

Urban informal settlements are characterized by a combination of concentrated poverty, insecure and poor-quality housing, political disenfranchisement, and a lack of access to essential life-supporting services such as clean water, sanitation, and health care. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second largest city, 1.39 million people (22 percent of the total population) live in informal settlements.[23]

Morro da Providência, Brazil's oldest favela, was first settled by veterans of the War of Canudos in 1897. Following the war, soldiers settled on the *morro* ("hill"), and later, opportunities for unskilled laborers also attracted formerly enslaved people (who had been freed in 1888). At this time, the government had given little thought or support to how newly liberated people would survive; hundreds of thousands of formerly enslaved people came to Rio seeking employment provided by Rio's wealthy families. In Morro da Providência, these newly freed people had nowhere to live, but they had access to free land in the morros.

Many of these dynamics are still in place in Morro da Providência. The population is largely Black and mixed race; by contrast, Rio's wealthy southern zone is 80 percent White.[24] Land in Rio is incredibly valuable, and proximity to the capital city is a necessity for many who rely on the opportunities there for survival. While the government of Brazil has worked with favelas to improve infrastructure and expand access to sanitation, residents of Morro da Providência live in a state of constant precarity given Brazil's history of policies that result in the displacement and destruction of these informal settlements.

India's "Corona Capitalism"

Racial capitalism does not apply only to long-term, structural phenomena like housing and ecological exchange. As we saw in Sen's example of famines, it also applies to short-run crises of material insecurity. In this final section, we consider another short-run example: the ramifications of stratification under racial capitalism in the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

India's pandemic response has demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between racial capitalism and disaster capitalism, described by Naomi Klein in her 2007 book, *The Shock Doctrine*, as a framework wherein governments exploit crises to push through (often unpopular) neoliberal policies for the benefit of a small group of wealthy elites at the expense of the poor.[25] Klein has described the current manifestations of this strategy as "corona capitalism." Klein notes, "This crisis—like earlier ones—could well be the catalyst to shower aid on the wealthiest interests in society, including those most responsible for our current vulnerabilities, while offering next to nothing to most workers, wiping out small family savings and shuttering small businesses."[26]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indian government instituted what was the world's largest and among its most restrictive lockdowns, leading to an exodus of migrant workers at a scale reminiscent of the 1947 partition of India and rendering millions of lower-caste workers homeless and unemployed overnight.[27] Dalits and Adivasis made up most of the informal and daily wage laborers forced to leave cities due to loss of livelihoods, exacerbating existing inequalities along caste lines.[28] From December 2019 to April 2020, the proportion of employed members of the upper castes decreased by 7 percent, compared to a drop of 20 percent among members of Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and 15 percent among members of Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis).[29] Because the majority of Dalits and Adivasis are landless, the lockdown worsened their already-precarious living conditions and left many stranded in cities with no work, nowhere to stay, and no way to leave.[30] As a result, they shouldered an undue burden of the ensuing housing and food insecurity crises in addition to increased exposure risk amidst a pandemic. In India during the pandemic, as in Bengal during the famine, food insecurity has been characterized not by resource scarcity but by a failure of distribution schemes: more than 65 lakh tonnes of grain (equivalent to 6,500,000 metric tons) were left to rot over four months while people at the bottom (and outside) of the caste hierarchy went hungry.[31] On May 26, 2020, after nine weeks of complete lockdown, the Supreme Court admitted "inadequacies and certain lapses" on the part of central and state governments and ordered them to provide food, shelter, and transport to stranded migrant workers.[32]

As the lockdown lifted and workers returned, several Indian states moved to suspend labor laws, such as eliminating requirements for a minimum wage and removing health and safety protections, while also limiting employer liability for injuries and illnesses caused on the job.[33] In tandem, the government pushed through three new farm laws to deregulate the agricultural industry by excluding a mandate for a minimum support price (MSP), weakening land ownership rights, and removing products from the list of essential commodities.[34] These changes opened the door for large corporations, agribusiness firms, and e-commerce companies to undercut local buyers, engage in stockpiling and price manipulation, and reduce farmers' bargaining power, particularly among small and marginal cultivators.[35]

Opposition to the new farm laws led to the largest protest in human history, with more than 250 million people observing a nationwide general strike in November 2020.[36] Despite no gains from nine months of negotiations with the central government, the farmer protests have garnered widespread international support. Nonetheless, the demands among farmer unions to repeal the three new laws and receive assurance of a mandatory MSP are likely to benefit only those who own land and would not alter the circumstances for Dalit agricultural workers who are landless.[37] In many districts, nearly all Dalit and Adivasi farmers work on land that they do not own.[38] Although the protests may succeed in repealing the new laws, such a victory will have limited, if any, effects on the material security of agricultural workers if demands do not also include measures to reduce land alienation among Dalit and Adivasi farmers (and for women farmers, most of whom face both caste- and gender-based discrimination); removal of wage ceilings; and strict prohibitions of violence and boycotts carried out by landlords against workers agitating for higher pay and better conditions.[39]

Beyond the agricultural industry, new acts that ostensibly promote the rights of Dalit sanitation workers in India (such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation [Amendment] Bill of 2020) lack robust enforcement mechanisms.[40] Other reforms such as three new labor codes (Industrial Relations Code Bill, 2020; Code on Social Security Bill, 2020; and Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code Bill, 2020) expand access to social security for unorganized workers, gig workers, and interstate migrants but also undermine employment security by allowing employers more flexibility to hire and fire workers without government permission, imposing restrictions on the right of workers to strike, and removing a previous provision requiring employers to provide temporary accommodation near the worksite for migrant workers.[41]

Covid-19 has been described as a "great leveler" in India, affecting all people irrespective of caste, class, race, gender, or religion.[42] However, caste inequality has deepened, as traditionally disenfranchised groups have suffered the most severe economic impacts while also being blamed as the source of contagion and being forced to endure violence and mistreatment under the guise of hygiene and public health.[43] In an attempt to decouple casteist connotations from Covid-19 guidance, some have called for "social distancing" and "social isolation" to be reframed as "physical distancing," a symbolic gesture to combat stigmatization that will have no impact on the material realities of Dalits and Adivasis or of Muslims. In India, religious and caste discrimination often intersect, as 85 percent of Muslims in the nation are considered "Pasmanda," a Persian term that means "those who have fallen behind," referring to lower-caste Muslims.[44] Most Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims are subjected to both implicit and explicit forms of untouchability without recourse against such abuses.[45] Numerous examples of this scapegoating abound, such as health officials forcibly spraying lower-caste migrant workers with industrial disinfectants, police repelling farmers with water cannons and characterizing the protests as "superspreader events," government officials subjecting religious and caste minorities to targeted surveillance and quarantine while overlooking larger religious and political gatherings supported by the ruling party, and the horrendous conditions Dalit and Bahujan crematorium workers endured without adequate pay or protective equipment during India's devastating second wave.[46]

The lethal combination of racial capitalism with disaster capitalism has been painfully visible throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and in the draconian restrictions imple-

mented in India.[47] The underlying caste structure has been reinforced through the gradual unraveling of labor laws to protect the most vulnerable and essential workers, the deregulation of the agricultural sector and other industries at the core of India's supply chain, and a corporate-friendly tax policy resulting in explosive wealth accumulation among a small group of Indian billionaires while the majority of the population has struggled to survive.[48]

Moving Forward

The ways we understand fundamental causes of disease shape the interventions, policies, and programs designed to address pervasive poor health outcomes and health disparities. Key to this understanding is the role of racial capitalism in producing material insecurity, whose impacts and dynamics are far reaching. One need only to think of the myriad ways in which the global pandemic and climate change compound each other.[49] As the compound crisis develops, differences between levels of group vulnerability to climate disaster and associated socioeconomic impacts may have important political effects.

The theory of racial capitalism may provide researchers with useful frameworks for predicting and addressing these effects. Most importantly, such frameworks would add an explicitly political dimension to the discussion of exposure to environmental hazards and thus to health problems. We hope that the analysis offered here invites attention to these aspects of social structure by public health professionals and that it also promotes interest in and attention to the public health consequences of injustice by political theorists and other researchers. Racial, as well as caste and class, disparities in power and racist, casteist, and classist predation by states and corporations are direct causal determinants of health outcomes and are thus of direct relevance for public health researchers and professionals.

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