

American Pastoral: When Privilege is Coded as Whiteness

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In a much discussed scene from the newest season of Issa Rae's show *Insecure*, protagonist Lawrence (Jay Ellis) ends up being seduced into a threesome with two women who, as it turns out, sees him as little more than a black dildo. In the throes of sex, one woman cries out in a *Get Out*-like quip, "Your black cock feels so good in my white pussy!" The other complains about Lawrence's inability to stay hard for her, chiding him for what she evidently sees as a failure of his black masculinity. True, as a recent *Vulture* article¹ points out, the scene succinctly deals with the fetishization of black (male) bodies, the tendency to reduce the black male in the American sexual imagination into little more than an erect penis, both feared and desired for its virility. Here's the kicker: one of the instigators of this threesome (Hayley Kiyoko) gone terribly racist is Japanese-American.² We've been here before: the dragon lady becomes the downfall of an unsuspecting male, only that in our age of racial progressivity, the man in question can now be black.

Rest assured that this essay is not about *Insecure*. This essay is also emphatically not yet another think-piece lambasting the Left for a perceived over-reliance on identity politics that construe similarly coloured bodies as necessarily having the same interests, and rely on essentialist interpretations of identities themselves. I

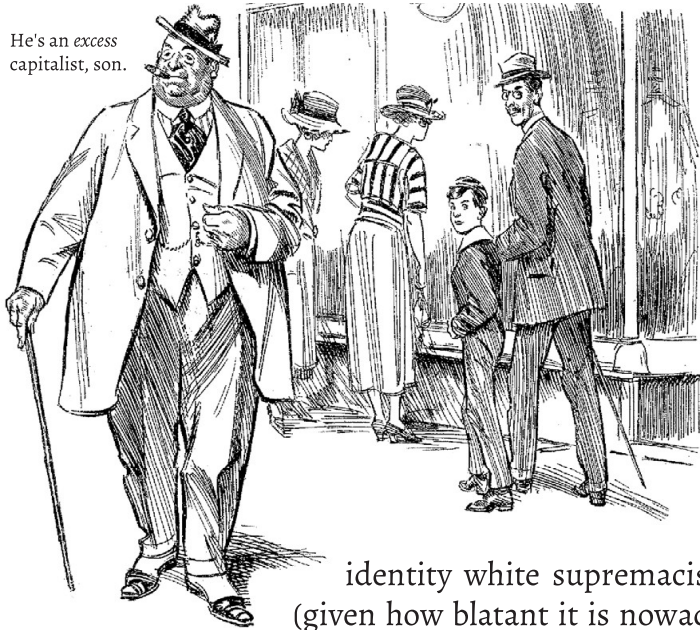
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1. Angelica Jade Bastien, "Hella LA' is *Insecure*'s Boldest Episode Yet," published August 14th 2017 in *Vulture*, last accessed on August 29th 2017 (<http://www.vulture.com/2017/08/hella-la-insecure-boldest-episode-yet.html>).

2. I'm not even going to delve into how Kiyoko is an openly queer pop culture figure, and how her lesbianism complicates our discussion of race here.

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He's an *excess*
capitalist, son.



am not interested in the Mark Lilla, anti-PC version of the argument that identity politics spawned a resurgence of white supremacist movements. What this essay is is a response to the myopia that is sadly all too common when it comes to discussing the roots of racism—that although it is easier for the ragtag Left to

identity white supremacist thought and colourism (given how blatant it is nowadays), there is credence to the Marxist notion that racism functions as an outlet for releasing discontent against our capitalist society. It is this dynamic between systemic power, reductionist perceptions of racism as anti-blackness, and economic inequality that is partially begetting the lack of a coherent critique of anti-East Asian sentiment. It is to our detriment as progressives to collapse economic privilege with race, without clarifying racism's multifarious relationships to capitalist economic development.

Worth noting here is that the “Yellow Peril” has been around since at least the 19th century, when Germany and other imperial nations required justification for what could only be fairly called an attempt to seize and plunder the rest of China and Japan. The East acted as the stage upon which the colonialist West could inscribe their anxieties about their masculinity, cultural hegemony, and above all, miscegenation in its multitude of footholds in the global South. Lurid fantasies about the decimation of the West through the chattel-like reproductive capabilities of Chinese immigrants were myriad; it is an undisputed fact of colonial historiography that what we consider to be whiteness today came into existence because of the reconfiguration of the native—black, yellow, or

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brown—as sexual threats to a newly defined, white status quo. Yet for America (as with Europe), this has never just been a question of sexual insecurity, as seen in a labour organiser’s op-ed prior to the ratification of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act:

Our moneyed men (...) have rallied under the banner of the millionaire, the banker and the land monopolist, the railroad king and the false politician, to effect [sic] their purpose. We have permitted them to become immensely rich (...) to find the meanest slave on earth—the Chinese coolie—and [import] him here to meet the free American in the Labor market, and still widen the breach between the rich and the poor, still further to degrade White Labor. (...) We are men, and propose to live like men in this free land, without the contamination of slave labor, or die like men, if need be, in asserting the rights of our race, our country, and our families. California must be all American or all Chinese. We are resolved that it shall be American, and are prepared to make it so.³

Fitting that rhetorical strategies from the 1880s are still employed today against minorities in face of similar economic scarcities. For the white labouring class, it was always a question of economic anxiety, of displacement and a perceived deprivation of their entitlement to “their” lands and resources, intertwined with xenophobia and racism. During the very same period of increased aggression towards these migrants was the economic depression of 1873-78, whereupon one of the most influential investment banks at the time, Jay Cooke & Co., went bankrupt due to rampant speculation, and New York Stock Exchange had to be shut down for ten days.⁴ Unemployment and labour strikes were at an all-time high. It may have been far more politically expedient to lay the blame on a group of perceived foreigners that turned into larger than life figures hellbent on exterminating the white race than to cajole the rapidly growing industrialist middle class into allies against an economic system that begot financiers and speculators.

But what the organiser here suggests is that the spectre of Chinese immigrants is one and the same as the realities of capitalist-catalysed impoverishment, making it less likely to be just a tactical deployment of anti-Chinese agitation. The Chinese immigrant in

3. Dennis Kearney, President, and H. L. Knight, Secretary, “Appeal from California. The Chinese Invasion. Workingmen’s Address,” *Indianapolis Times*, 28 February 1878. Last accessed August 29th 2017 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5046/%7C>).

4. History summarised in Francois Furstenberg’s July 1st 2011 article, “What History Teaches Us About The Welfare State,” in *The Washington Post*.

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this op-ed is less a racial caricature and more a *material* symptom of the ills of their time, an impossible accomplice to the greed of industrialists seeking to deprive the working class of the barest of subsistence. Note that the organiser stops short from labelling the Chinese as malicious agents altogether, placing the ethical responsibility about the industrialist class, presumably out of an orientalist refusal to consider the Chinese to be capable of conniving thought. In our age of racial progressivity, however, it is now possible for the Chinese to *be* the ones behind such machinations against so-called real Americans. If this sounds altogether unfamiliar to you, you need only take Steve Bannon's recent phone call to *The American Prospect*:

*"We're at economic war with China," he added. "It's in all their literature. They're not shy about saying what they're doing. One of us is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years and it's gonna be them if we go down this path. (...) The economic war with China is everything. And we have to be maniacally focused on that. If we continue to lose it, we're five years away, I think, ten years at the most, of hitting an inflection point from which we'll never be able to recover."*⁵

5. Robert Kuttner, "Steve Bannon, Unrepentant," published August 16th 2017 in *The American Prospect*. Last accessed on August 29th 2017 (<http://prospect.org/article/steve-bannon-unrepentant>).

6. But obviously he is still very much a racist asshole.

7. Heather Long, "Think what you want about Steve Bannon, but he's got a good point on China," published August 17th 2017 in *The Washington Post*.

Bannon, not exactly like his fellow racists-in-struggle, is not concerned with the racial composition of America insofar it has no impact on what he sees as the global war for ultimate financial dominion.⁶ On his radio show prior to his short-lived White House tenure, Bannon has repeatedly lambasted immigration policies that he considers to only serve both East and South Asians, allowing for high-skilled immigrant workers to take over lucrative jobs for which native-born Americans are ostensibly no longer competitive enough. The Asian immigrant now takes the place of scapegoat and accomplice to the domination of global capital and globalisation, only that specific state actors (i.e. China) are also attempting the obliteration of the American republic. For what it's worth, *The Washington Post* has published a piece in response to Bannon's comments entitled "Think what you want about Steve Bannon, but he's got a good point on China,"⁷ and anti-globalist politicians worldwide repeat all the same talking points about Asian immigrants—leading, for example, to a surge in hate crimes against Chinese communities in France.⁸

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Nothing I've traced so far is new. The premier model for seeking out material embodiments, culprits and architects of an abstracted economic system designed to subjugate the labourer has historically been anti-Semitism. The Left has yet to develop a pithy summation and/or analysis of anti-Semitism: the texture of this hate instinctively feels different than that of anti-blackness or any other variant of racism, especially when Jewishness in America has been (albeit not unproblematically) subsumed into whiteness for the most part, and is associated with vast amounts of white privilege by the undiscerning person. But anti-Semitism is precisely the rejection of Jewish assimilation into our white supremacist society—that the Jewish person is emphatically *not* white, and should not be able to access the same privileges as the white person. Anti-Semitism (as opposed to various forms of anti-Jewishness writ large) is then a historically contextual argument against socio-economic conditions generated by a system that demands the constant accumulation of capital, albeit one made intelligible through xenophobia. As Marxist historian Moishe Postone aptly explains:

Modern anti-Semitism, then, is characterised not only by its secular content, but also by its systematic character. Its claim is to explain the world—a world that had rapidly become too complex and threatening for many people. (...) [A] careful examination of the modern anti-Semitic worldview reveals that it is a form of thought in which the rapid development of industrial capitalism, with all its social ramifications, is personified and identified as the Jew. It is not merely that the Jews were considered to be the owners of money, as in traditional anti-Semitism, but that they were held responsible for economic crises and identified with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid industrialisation: explosive urbanisation, the decline of traditional social classes and strata, the emergence of a large, increasingly organized industrial proletariat, and so on.⁹

To belabour his point: the Jewish person is identified as the *cause* by which the anti-Semite mediates her understanding of economic trials and tribulations. It makes sense, however perverse, when neo-

8. Consider, for instance, the BBC's reportage of anti-Chinese racism and resulting police brutality in France.

9. Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism," in *New German Critique* No. 19 (Duke: Duke University Press, 1980), 107.

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Nazis and white supremacists march on Charlottesville, ostensibly against the removal of Jim Crow-era racist monuments, scream slogans like “Jews will not replace us.” It makes sense that notable figures on the alt-right like Richard Spencer have no problem doing the *sieg heil*, or associating globalism with the long-extant conspiracy theory about Jewish families controlling the global economy. Economic protectionism thusly coincides with a perverse, pessimistic theory of why people—mostly white people, but a few scattered handfuls of people of colour and minorities—never seem to earn enough for a decent standard of living, of why they never seem to benefit from a system that allegedly rewards the hard-working.

It may seem far too forgiving of anti-Semites to basically call them racist anti-capitalists upon first glance. But the power of anti-Semitic thought lies in its providing the dispossessed with material descriptions and arguments to latch on through its close identification between the Jewish person and the pitfalls of capitalism—to render the abstract into terms one can easily understand. Young Karl Marx, as he struggled to articulate what he would later call the reification of labour, the reduction of human work to a base means of subsistence, started his career by utilising anti-Semitic tropes to explain what he saw as the greedy, exploitative core of the capitalist system. In a passage that could have been taken from anti-Semitic pamphlets, he states:

Money is the jealous god of Israel, beside which no other god may exist. Money abases all the gods of mankind and changes them into commodities. Money is the universal and self-sufficient value of all things. It has, therefore, deprived the whole world, both the human world and nature, of their own proper value. (...) The god of the Jews has been secularised and has become the god of this world.¹⁰

10. Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 50.

The abstract machinations of capital are personified into the Jew, traditionally associated with rejecting the Christian injunction against money-lending and commerce, modes of acquiring greater capital and monetary wealth. As Postone notes later on in his essay, industrialisation and its accompanying woes coincided with a growing number of Jewish families’ having assimilated and

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Paunch-coat requests a portrait



enjoying relative prosperity; anti-Semitism relies on this disjunction—that it should have been white folk who should have reaped the benefits of capital. The trope of shape-shifting, conniving Jews comes to

mind. In this sense, modern anti-Semitism is also the indexing of a growing proximity to privilege by the Jewish people, or rather, their perceived ability to negotiate and subvert the terms by which all people lived.

Why is the (Ashkenazi) Jewish population identified as white then in mainstream identity politics, to speak nothing of the almost complete destruction of Jewish culture via the Holocaust? Back in the 1980s, it was still common to refer to people of Jewish and Italian stock as “ethnic” whites. But there is a social, a cultural construction of linkages between the colour of a person’s skin and her perceived economic productivity and advantages within the context of capitalist production. Whiteness is the natural proximity to economic privilege, to the rampant accumulation of capital, the default position doubling as a descriptor for a skin colour our economic system has been engineered to benefit. In its common usage, whenever we call a Jewish person (or really, any person) white, we are already speaking of privilege, the extent to which she has access to systemic power. For the anti-Semite, the Jewish person is the arbiter of privilege, a conspirator building a world in which the white person is systematically abused.

It should be made exceedingly clear that I am not arguing against the existence of the multitudes of relative privileges Jews enjoy over their black and brown kin—only that our examination of the Jewish person’s situation in 2017 reveals that the usage of the term white

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is less a skin colour descriptor and moreso a general descriptor of relative socio-economic privilege. The Jewish person is deemed white in non-anti-Semitic society insofar as whiteness is another term for a particular level of economic standing—nothing more than that, because it should be clear that the Jewish population is not safe from violence in the year 2017. Hyde Park’s Jewish Community Center had to be evacuated because of multiple bomb threats after the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency, to use just one example. But to the anti-Semite, the Jew is only *masquerading* as white, making her even more insidious a danger to the social organisation system that he mistakes late capitalism to be. To the anti-Semite, the Jew is why he suffers so.

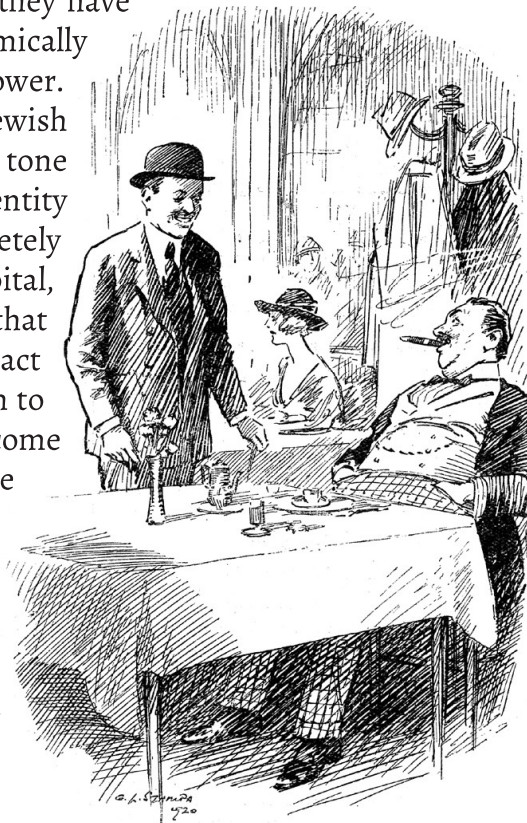
How the Jewish person’s sublimation into whiteness is related to our previous analysis of anti-Asian racism has yet to be made clear. But as Asians become ever more assimilated into American society, occupying more and more echelons of privilege, as Asians (especially Chinese-Americans) become more and more proximate to capital and wealth accumulation, we risk collapsing economic privilege with inherent structural privilege when analysing the Asian situation—much in the same way the Jewish community can no longer speak of anti-Semitism in mainstream discourse without resorting to accusations of racism, which necessarily comes off as a much weaker claim than, say, those of Black Lives Matter activists (and for good reason). We need to be clear about what we mean when we discuss structural privileges, and the system that generates it: it is a *description* of power differentials, not a prescription.

It really is telling, then, that Hayley Kiyoko can be written off as white in some reviews of the *Insecure* episode before their eventual correction, *because* it makes sense, in this framework of whiteness as socio-economic privilege, to lump white and Asian women together as the same categorical threat to black masculinity. And it really doesn’t help that we now have the equivalent of the Jewish stereotype of being obsessed with money and frugality in the myth of the model minority, easily warped into insinuations about Asian desires to *be*, quite literally, white. Ask your average passer-by if an Asian person

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is brown, and I guarantee you that any answer you get will come out a confused mess of unclear and competing terminologies. In our age of globalised finance capitalism, if Jewish folk serve as great scapegoats for capitalism, Asians now are becoming those for globalisation and its attendant inequities.

Let me be clear: if white supremacy is a socio-economic program benefitting the descendants of the original American settler-colonisers dependent on the construction of racial difference, if white supremacy is *the* organising principle of capitalist society and its processes of social stratification, of reifying unequal power differentials between races, then we should be ever more careful about our analysis and criticism of groups that we increasingly dismiss as beneficiaries of a white supremacist state. Never mind that it diminishes solidarity amongst different races underneath the Leftist banner—we would be buying into the argument that Asians and Jews, personifications of the ills of capitalist deprivation, are partially responsible for the maintenance of this hellhole we live in, that it is on *them* that they have gained access to a more economically privileged form of systemic power. The constant criticism of Jewish and Asian privilege *qua* skin tone and other performative identity markers then becomes completely beyond the point. Global capital, our enslavement to a system that deprives us of our own intact selves, encourages every person to identify with and attempt to become part of the class of respectable accumulators of capital. Any critique of privileged groups in this vein will always read more as an assimilationist approach to power than a demand for a complete dismantling of our power structures.



We don't earn
money, we
spend it!