

Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore

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The relationship between slavery and race, race and unfreedom, unfreedom and labor, is one that we constantly try to untangle. And at our peril, we ignore it, but also at our peril we make it too simplistic. Because the complexity of it matters for what we do in the current moment to undo the catastrophe of mass incarceration. [0:00]

So, I go down this path of trying to think globally in order to think about how today, given the catastrophe of racial capitalism on a world scale, its particular form of austerity and neoliberalism, in permanent war that we struggle through, requires an approach to solving problems that, however particular and local they are, have an international dimension, because it is an international problem.

Capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it.

This is a foundational point to her work.

My name's Ruth Wilson Gilmore. I have been a teacher and a researcher into especially the prison industrial complex, but in order to investigate that, I've had to lift up from that certain general themes that I'm very excited we are going to be able to explore in our conversation, including racial capitalism, which is all of capitalism, abolition geography, and my role as a teacher in the university, and in the streets.

For more, see her book *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*.

Racial capitalism, which is to say all capitalism, is not a thing it's a relation.

[2:17] Racial Capitalism

However, if we look back through the history of capitalism as it developed, we see that the understanding that those who own the means of production had of their differences from those whose labor they exploited were understandings that we can recognize today as racial practice. So, all capitalism is racial from its beginning—which is to say capitalism that we have inherited, that is constantly producing and reproducing itself—and it will continue to depend on racial practice and racial hierarchy, no matter what. This is another way of saying we can't undo racism without undoing capitalism.

Being a good geographer means going to look and see, and then to challenge oneself in one's description of what one is seeing. But politically it is giving all of the attention you have to the thing, so we understand how it works.

[3:24] Geography

The word "discovery" doesn't sit well with anybody who knows anything about the history of the world, and yet people flock here [Monument of the Discoveries] to this monument unaware or uncaring about its fascist dimensions. Unaware or uncaring about the Compass Rose that sits behind it, that was a gift of the apartheid government of South Africa to the fascist government of Portugal in the mid-1960s.

Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument of the Discoveries), located in Lisbon, Portugal.

To try to redescribe this world that has been described in these particular ways, in this tourist location with this monument and this pavement. Slavery and the slave trade, it's not something that was initiated when some people who became known as Europeans encountered some people who became known as Africans and grabbed them. It was never limited to African slavery. And in fact, we ought to take more seriously than perhaps we do the fact of intra-, what we call today European slavery as being one of the forces that shape the modern world. [4:12]

The foundations of racial capitalism, the foundations of the social organization of human groupings in Western Europe during the rise of capitalism, they don't have anything to do with Africa, Asia, North America, or South America. They have to do with what was happening here in Europe, between people, all of whose descendants might have become white.

And I mean that is the major lesson of racial capitalism. And why does that matter?

It matters because capitalism won't stop being racial capitalism if all the white people disappear from the story. Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it. It started racial without what people imagined race to mean, which is Black people, and it will continue to be racial without what people imagine not-race to be which is white people.

My expertise is on the expansion of criminalization and incarceration in the United States and by extension their expansion in the capitalist world, why and how that has happened, and what we can do to undo that. So, I set myself the task of understanding what had happened in California between say the mid-1970s when anything could have emerged as a solution to surplus labor and what actually happened starting in the 1980s in which California started to build prison after prison after prison after prison when it could have built universities or factories or veterans housing or parks or museums or anything else. [6:00] Prison Industrial Complex

So, prisons then, in my view, concentrate surpluses.

I ask questions about how the relatively powerful local elites use the State to get what they want. So, that brings us back to the question of criminalization. There has to be a steady stream of criminals, of those eligible to be categorized as criminal, they have to keep coming. And so, that group either has to get bigger over time or deeper over time. The sentences have to be longer, the list of behaviors that count as crime have got to grow. People who, having been caught up in the system to get out of it, which is to say, to go back home if they can go home and be there—what people call “reentry”, a word I hate—but, to go home and be there and be in a community and of it is part of how the perpetuation of this category “criminal” that is the basis of the prison industrial complex can perpetuate itself.

The relationship of that to slavery is on the one hand very general: unfreedom is unfreedom. And on the other hand, the racial order and hierarchy of the United States, founded on both slavery and genocide, never stopped reproducing itself through all of its iterations over time.

Abolition geography is always a presence everywhere. And when I say “Ah we're going to abolish prisons” they get frightened. In becoming frightened we say, “Well let's then think about why this is so frightening, and it has to do with all these other things we haven't been talking about. How come California stopped building prisons after having built and open a new prison year in and year out every year for 23 years and the answer is: it was abolitionists. [8:50] Abolition Geography

All liberation struggle is place-based liberation struggle. The scale might differ wildly, and the size might differ wildly, but it is all place-based. Liberation struggle is specific to the needs and the struggles of people where they are and that “where” has many, many dimensions.

We've left the municipality of Lisbon and come into, or shortly will come into, the next municipality which is called "Amadora". And while a good deal of the housing here was privately developed and some significant chunk of it was socially developed, which is to say what we would call in the United States "public housing". There are also numerous neighborhoods that over decades and decades and decades were built by the people who live there. So, some will call those "informal settlements" others will call those "self-built housing". The point is not merely that they're shelters but that they're communities.

[9:54] Place-based
Struggle

People in Cova Da Moura in self-built houses discovered that they were under threat of losing their homes, and therefore, losing their entire community because none of their houses were up to code. The municipality where they're located promised that everybody would get a new house in some social housing project somewhere that would be adequate. The people said no no no no you don't understand, we want to live here. This is our home. Not just the house, this our home this community is our home. We have people and resources here.

So, people start to organize themselves not only to save their houses, which was the number one impetus to organizing, but also to understand well how come we of all of the people of Greater Lisbon are under threat of losing our community and our home. What is it about us?

At the same time, they developed study groups to understand, not just about their local vulnerability or how the city government worked, that kind of thing, but also about the history of colonialism, the history of racism, the current history of citizenship in the EU as it has changed over time, fortress Europe. All of these things became part of their own study program. And they debate all the time, and they create these institutions that I have come to call "pop-up universities".

I was invited to be a part of this intellectual political community by way of, first a personal relationship that I was developing and then by way of the people who do organizing up here and I became part of it.

[12:09]

Although the doors are very modest the meeting space is quite capacious. And there were probably I'd say 50 or 60 people here to talk about prisons and policing, but also to talk about things like African history and political economy and culture and social life. Everything. Like everything that matters to people we discussed in there.

[Talking to Flávio Almada] It's really interesting. I would like to see what you think.

People ask very tough questions. Then there are people who bring their already existing theoretical, political commitments to the debate, but they argue it through. And no one says well if you're not going to agree with me, I'm leaving and never coming back. Not at all. *[Flávio affirms her and says "no, no, no"]* It's a very, very deep debate that's held together by the purpose of the movement.

Flávio Almada: Was wonderful what we learned here with Ruthie. I usually say that every time she's speaking I lose the weight in my head. It's the way I would describe it because it's so deep and so clear.

When we have a university here a lot of people come, and it isn't one way.

Flávio Almada: Sometimes in academia it happens that people just stay there and listen and don't say, but here was a big debate and discussion and some people agree, some people disagree, but it was very important because it is the way that you can move forward.

We have to be attentive to the many, many different kinds of factors, institutions, places, and processes through which people come to consciousness through fomenting liberation struggle.

[14:17]

It's a form of solidarity and its making solidarity. And solidarity is something that's made and remade and remade. It never just is. And I think of that in terms of radical dependency. That we come absolutely to depend on each other. And so, solidarity and this radical dependency that I keep thinking about and keep seeing everywhere is about life and living and living together. And living together in rather beautiful ways and that is something I have encountered on this hilltop and why I like it here so much.

RWG: You know I love you so much.

Flávio Almada: Me too, I love you.

And it's possible, it's really possible, and not in a romanticized way, but you know, material, deliberate, consciousness exploding. It's possible.

Additional Resources

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2006. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

<https://bookshop.org/books/golden-gulag-prisons-surplus-crisis-and-opposition-in-globalizing-california-9780520242012/9780520242012>.

"Padrão Dos Descobrimentos." 2020. In Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Padr%C3%A3o_dos_Descobrimentos&oldid=948180645.