

## **Discourse in the Segregated City: Racial Violence, Capital, and Milwaukee's Media**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the news reportage surrounding two race-related incidents that occurred in 2011 in Milwaukee, WI, one of America's most segregated cities. The altercations involved Black youths violently encountering white attendees of a park in one case, and white attendees of the Wisconsin State Fair in the other. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* stories failed to consider longstanding social and economic injustices that might give rise to such behavior, adopting instead a relatively colorblind position. This strategy fosters the illusion that the conditions between races are equal, despite the unequal, discriminatory effect capital and the state have had on African Americans. While online *Journal Sentinel* reportage contained a subdued racism, many online reader comments appearing below articles were openly white supremacist. Editorials, in accordance with the coverage, called for more responsible parents instead of a more thoughtful capitalism, i.e., one that would not export manufacturing jobs or deliberately phase out the need for Black labor. Drawing on scholars such as Stuart Hall et al., I explain from a Marxian standpoint why Milwaukee's coverage and reader comments take the shape they do. I further argue that these circumscribed case studies can help us understand the ideology at work behind more prominent (and tragic) racial incidents, such as the 2014 summer protests in Ferguson, MO.

**Keywords:** Milwaukee; Media studies; Capital accumulation; Racial violence; Race riot; Ferguson

## **Introduction**

In June 2015, Revolutionary Books in Los Angeles had adorned its storefront window with a large sign that read: “Ferguson Is Everywhere.” Beyond the immediate denotation of Michael Brown’s murder and the subsequent protests in the Missouri town, the sign also indicated the universality of violence both police and ordinary citizens inflict on African Americans, from Eric Garner to Freddie Gray to Trayvon Martin to others. There is an additional signification here too, and one that will serve as the leitmotif for this article. This other signification bespeaks the pervasiveness of commonsense ideology among many European Americans vis-à-vis the daily realities of Black men and women. This gnarled line of thought typically ends in one thicket: the belief in stereotypes of the order of the lazy welfare cheat, the violent animal, and the drug fiend, etc.<sup>1</sup> This ideology, which also has a specific class dimension, is extremely harmful in its casual disregard and willful ignorance. Its adoption can only lead to the recurrence and misguided justification of violence done to people of color.

In light of my interpretation, I think it is appropriate to preface my study of two 2011 racial incidents in Milwaukee, WI with Revolutionary Books’ sign, despite the fact that nobody died during them. I stress the connection because, invariably, racist sentiment and unfair racial stereotypes played a role in how these altercations and many just like them appeared in reportage and became interpreted in online reader comments after the fact. For instance, an apologetic tactic that arose following Brown’s murder was the insistence to wait on more information before passing judgment on the shooter, Officer Darren Wilson. As one commentator put it, “Some people want to accumulate ‘all the facts’ so they can then conclude, ‘It’s too complicated’ [which allows] them to keep their cozy corners of indifference”(Anyabwile, 2014). As we will see, similar discourse harmful to the Black community arose after the Milwaukee events as well.

## **The Case Studies**

Although racial altercations occur regularly in urban centers, the summer of 2011 was a notable time for those taking place in Milwaukee. Over the Fourth of July holiday, Black youths raided a BP gas station and stole sodas and snacks under the eye of a surveillance camera. Immediately afterward, members of the same group attacked young white adults who had amassed in a nearby park to watch the city’s fireworks display. A few weeks later, Black youths again stoked the fear and ire of whites by descending on Wisconsin State Fair’s opening night. The group quickly resorted to violence, injured cops and white fair-goers, and left by the dozens in the

backs of squad cars. The behavior at the fair inspired new, punitive reactions, such as more security and calls to relocate the privileged bastion elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

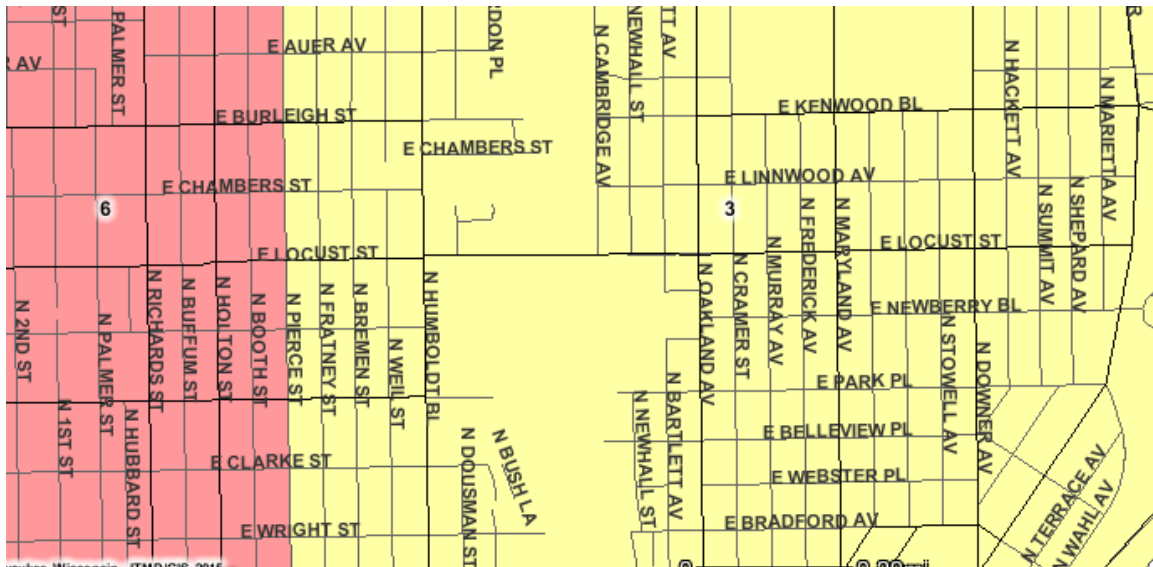
To begin making these cases more intelligible, I will first provide the pertinent social and economic context regarding both Milwaukee and its major media outlet, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, a significant news source that reaches half of the adults in its market through its online and print publications (Kirchen, 2014). To incorporate history into the analysis is to abide by the central components of Marxian political economic study, an approach I draw from (Mosco, 2009). Moreover, to offer a substantive structural analysis of race in the city, which I argue reportage and online reader comments do not, would require acknowledging history, making relevant connections, and showing how the economic factors I will describe created the milieu in which the altercations occurred.<sup>3</sup> After this discussion, I introduce the Marxian theoretical framework that informs this paper. Finally, I weave this theory, borrowing both from critical elements of culturalism and political economy, into a discourse analysis of the reportage and reader comments associated with the racial incidents. My goal is to indicate how media and working-class ideology can act in the interests of capital at the expense of the Black community.

### **Milwaukee and Its Media**

Milwaukee's metro area houses 1.5 million people, with 600,000 living in the city. It witnessed a rise in its Black population after World War II (Jensen, 2011) as many African Americans migrated from the South as part of an "escape [from] Jim Crow and [an attempt to] acquire a better standard of life" (Marable, 2002, p. 44). Upon their arrival in Milwaukee, as well as in other Midwestern and Northeastern cities, they faced a "near-universal pattern of racial segregation" (p. 45). Trotter likewise notes that in such urban cases the "white working-class consciousness" existing there "reinforced the racial interests of employers [and] complicated efforts to build interracial working-class alliances" (2007, p. 564). Today, Milwaukee ranks among the worst cities in the nation for its segregated neighborhoods, vying with Detroit and New York City for the ignoble title (Marable, 2002, p. 298).

To get a sense of the stark division, one needs only to consider the intersection of Holton Street and Locust Street, as depicted in the map of Milwaukee's Eastside and Riverwest below. Slightly to the right of the map (east) is Lake Michigan, and slightly to the left is Interstate 94. The gap in the middle is the Milwaukee River, separating Riverwest from the Eastside. Running north to south, Holton Street separates the Harambee neighborhood from Riverwest. The former is a primarily Black neighborhood, the latter a diverse, art and music-centered area of about 11,000 people many of whom are students due to the cheap rent and proximity to the University

of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus (Trousil). UWM's campus is also featured on the map, comprising the two large squares north of Kenwood Boulevard.



**Milwaukee street map. Generated from the City of Milwaukee website, Milwaukee.gov. Reproduced with permission.**

The northwest side of Holton houses an 84.5 percent Black population (Jensen, 2011). Going only one mile east down Locust, one would find that only 2.94 percent of residents there are Black (2011). Due to these conditions, the urban area can be described as a “largely-poor black inner core surrounded by [white] middle and upper-middle class neighborhoods and suburbs” (2011, p. 2). The following are factors that helped lead to this condition.

Milwaukee was once a thriving industrial hub complete with ports and celebrated breweries. According to one historian, these early employment opportunities offered newly proletarianized Black Milwaukeeans an “improvement” and economic boost in their lifestyles, whereas white industrial workers experienced a decline in “status [and] autonomy” (Jones 2007, p. 546). By the 1970s, the U.S. political economy experienced a dramatic shift from a manufacturing-based Fordist system (of which the above industry was characteristic) to a “flexible” post-Fordist system (Harvey, 1990, p. 201) contingent on new factors such as just-in-time production (1990), neoliberal governance (Harvey, 2005), the “delaying of institutions” (Sennett, 2006, p. 48), and “financialization” (French et al., 2011, p. 801). One of the consequences of the shift was the deindustrialization of many urban spaces and the elimination of one-time steady jobs. A number of companies began exporting them elsewhere, such as to Third

World regions with laxer regulation, thus contributing to unemployment in inner cities (West, 2001, p. 9).<sup>5</sup>

Other factors leading to inner-city unemployment included businesses relocating to suburban areas for the space and convenient proximity to transportation hubs (Logan and Molotch, 2007). In Milwaukee's case, the city had lost 25 percent of its manufacturing jobs by 1983 (Jensen, 2011). In the period between 1970-2000, more specifically, the city lost over 8,000 jobs, whereas nearby Waukesha County (only 1.4 percent Black) added over 145,000 (2011). What's worse, the Milwaukee County Board routinely votes to cut bus service from the city to outlying counties in a move that precludes residents from accessing these opportunities (2011). This has no doubt contributed to the current 50 percent unemployment rate of Black males in the city (Jobs and Economic Task Force). State and local representatives have not been much help. The Republican controlled legislature, for instance, cut \$800 million from K-12 public schools in the last few years (Kaiser, 2012). Meanwhile, the state has seen more funding allocated to the prison system than to higher education (Downs, 2015). In 2012, Milwaukee Public Schools prepared for the influx of 3,500 homeless students, its largest number to date (WISN, 2012). Wisconsin's antiunion governor and failed presidential candidate, Scott Walker, also made no secret about his disdain for the underclass. In early 2011, he got to work dismantling the state's public sector which, as was true around the U.S., has long been a means for Blacks to ensure a better livelihood (Marable, 2002).

Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAHA) has worked to correct social and economic injustices arising in wake of these sorts of conditions. In 2009, for instance, the group pushed for an ordinance that requires "local first source employment [that gives] City residents first consideration for both new and replacement employment opportunities" (Jobs). Similarly, a 2011 ordinance MICAHA advocated called "for 25 [percent] of all contracts for public works by the City of Milwaukee to be awarded to people of color, women, and small businesses" (Jobs). Despite these attempts, MICAHA's president would still go on to declare in 2013 that "Milwaukee is set up like a slave plantation" (Smith, 2013).

That African Americans have historically received the blame for the "city's troubles" is a negative sentiment that has since found life in local media most dramatically in the right-wing talk radio shows of WISN's Mark Belling and WTMJ's Charlie Sykes, which have featured overtly racist themes in the past (MacGillis, 2014). In an example MacGillis cites, the Sykes show does not even need to rely on overt racism, but can rather use coded language to disparage the Black experience in Milwaukee in a way the listenership understands (2014). Moreover, these shows are notable for their "ability to get people to march in step" with conservative

programming (2014). Meanwhile, the editorial board of the *Journal Sentinel* the largest and “most influential paper” in Wisconsin—likewise endorses conservative values, such as a robust defense, “minimal government interference” and a “free enterprise system” (Niederjohn, 2004).

Although one study challenges the claims of the editorial board as window dressing (2004), the fact remains that the news outlet failed at contextualizing the racial altercations in 2011 and acted as a repository for subsequent racist invective.

### **The Media and Marxian Theory**

While I hope to argue that the issue of race relations deserves more careful treatment than what is offered in Milwaukee’s mainstream, I should like to point out that one cannot fully understand the impetus of privately-owned media outside the current mode of production, which is capitalist. Since we are not referring to media in the abstract, but rather as grounded in a historical moment, then we should accept that certain economic pressures dominant in this moment go on to influence content in various ways. Given this, one role the media serve is an ideological one for the capitalist class. Such an approach to media would highlight the Marxian maxim: “in addition to its ownership and control of the means of material production, [the ruling] class also owns and controls the means of ‘mental production’” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 62). The following offers context for this claim.

Marxian theory holds that society’s economic base comprises two major categories: First, the forces of production, which include the tools, materials, and techniques necessary for producing commodities to meet our needs; and second, the relations of production, or the social element, which entails the class arrangement involved (Heilbroner, 1980). While not a simplified, mechanical, one-way translation, the Marxian model places the state, ideas, religion, ethics, and the like in the superstructure, atop the productive base (Ilyin and Motylev, 1986). The ideology found within the superstructure contorts to meet the needs of the productive base (Cole, 1964).

This sentiment also broaches literature of the critical media studies persuasion (though not always Marxian) which, albeit in nuanced ways, defines corporate media outlets as handmaidens to economic and state power and instrumental in hegemonic constructions of reality (Bagdikian, 1992; Fishman, 1988; Gitlin, 1980; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Parenti, 1993; Tuchman, 1978).<sup>4</sup> What I have used more readily in this study rather than these specific scholars, however, are the insights of cultural theorists of race and media, such as Stuart Hall, John Fiske and Tricia Rose. Given the parallels regarding subject matter, however, I choose to prioritize the race/youth/class/media analysis of Birmingham theorists Stuart Hall et al.’s *Policing the Crisis* (2013), very much inspired by Marx and Antonio Gramsci.

According to these authors, the news media or “primary definers” (p. xiii) fulfill an important ideological role for the ruling class, one just as important as the physical “breaking up [of] crowds or imprisoning [of] offenders” (p. xii). Namely, they reproduce dominant ideologies for powerful class fractions without having to be “in their pay” (p. 60). We can thus view the news coverage pertaining to the Milwaukee altercations as a terrain where the dominant interests of capital assert their ideological control. Furthermore, since the news media “provide the base-line interpretations, influence ‘lay’ attitudes, mold the ideological climate and are instrumental in the orchestration of political and public responses” (p. xiii), we have a means at our disposal for understanding the news outlet’s online reader comments. For example, the lay attitudes evident in the comments represent the taken-for-granted, untested expressions of working-class anxieties that merge with the dominant ideologies of capital and the state.

Meanwhile, tossed into the mix in both Milwaukee’s coverage and the coverage examined by Hall et al. are race, youth, crime, and moralization. But just as Hall et al. peeled back the veil of these surface issues to find a burgeoning, multilayered crisis of the U.K.’s economic system, with racism as one of its consequences, I think we can argue here that behind the scenes in Milwaukee is the process of capital overseeing a “divided [working] class... through... internal divisions which have ‘racism’ as one of their effects” (p. 387). This will become clearer later on, particularly when I explain a technologically innovative capital phasing out the traditional role of Black labor, which is no doubt keenly felt in a city with a Black male unemployment rate of 50 percent.

### **A BP Station and a Fair: Two Media Analyses**

The July 4, 2011 incident spanned the space of a few blocks and resulted in severe physical assaults. It began shortly before midnight when a group of around 75-100 Black male and female teens looted a Riverwest gas station. Two surveillance cameras recorded the hectic action as well as sounds of laughter and shouting. Although the Milwaukee Police Department was reluctant to verify that the two incidents were connected, it seems clear that various members of the group (around 60) then made their way to a park where residents had gathered to watch the fireworks (Jones, 2011a). Before long, they began to attack the white park-goers by throwing fists and hurling bottles. Attackers also uttered “racial taunts” such as “White girl bleeds a lot.” While many were hurt, more serious injuries included a head wound that needed staples and a broken jaw. The Black teens also made off with wallets, bikes, and other items.

Most striking about the event’s coverage is the downplaying or omission of race both that of the assailants and of the victims. This was especially evident in the case of Meg Jones’s “Police investigate Riverwest armed robberies” (2011b). The curious omission correlates to the

rise of the “colorblind” era, as famously discussed by Michelle Alexander in her work on contemporary American mass incarceration (2012). Citing Martin Luther King, she writes that “blindness and indifference to racial groups is actually more important than racial hostility” when it comes to racialized control (2012, p. 241). In a case closer to home, we see this happening in Mac Gillis’s reading of the coded racial language used on Charlie Sykes’s show. From a Marxian perspective, in whatever way the capitalist class can control or influence a marginalized people to its advantage, it will try it; this is something Marx himself acknowledged vis-à-vis the “Irish question,” wherein capitalists stoked “anti-Irish racism to divide the working class” in 1800s England (Bakan, 2008, pp. 249-250). Colorblindness in media can presumably operate in the interests of capital too, as in the Sykes case.

However, race *does* make an appearance in some articles on both incidents. Yet, the individuals involved in the crimes are more often described as just that: individuals. Other euphemisms for the Black youths include: “juveniles,” “teenagers,” members of a “crowd,” and members of a “mob” usually without a racial qualifier. Anxiety around unruly youth is to be expected; a great deal of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ most groundbreaking work teased out this phenomenon from the dominant culture, from books *Resistance to Rituals* to *The Empire Strikes Back* to *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 2013, p. xi). In regard to Britain in the late 1960s, Hall et al. write that youth “seemed to figure as recurring agents of ‘trouble,’ symptomatic of a certain social dis-affiliation and of wider social anxiety contributed to the generation of ‘moral panics’” (2013, p. xii). When race was invoked, news articles typically forewent any mention of structural or historical context such as that I expressed above. This was mostly true for the statements Milwaukee Police Chief Ed Flynn issued on the matter, such as when he chose to efface race in order to posit a universal and thus apolitical explanation for crime, calling it colorblind (Jones, 2011a).

These claims cannot help Milwaukeeans better understand *why* such crimes occur and why they will continue to occur because the structural racial injustices haunting the contemporary working class go unrecognized. There is no intimation of the necessity of racial tension for capital, which I will further explore. Meanwhile, local leaders’ impressions of the events deny alternative explanations and interpretations for the looting. One such alternative, according to cultural theorist John Fiske, is that looting is “a form of public speech and a statement of self-assertion [for] ‘looting’ enable[s] the racially silenced to be heard and the overlooked to be seen” (1994, p. 170). Flynn’s statement on the colorblind nature of crime, along with news articles lacking racial qualifiers, makes it difficult for one to factor in past and ongoing domination of



white institutions. However, one element of the local reportage clearly challenges this interpretation of reality: the gas station surveillance camera.

Stills from the BP camera's footage plainly show young Blacks involved in the looting (Photo Gallery). But there's an additional quality of the surveillance video; when it appears along with online news stories which are essentially sanitized of race it stands in as somewhat of an anomaly. As Fiske writes, the camera contains "discursive traces that the word processor [does] not" (Fiske, 1994, p. 55). He notes that the discrepancy of "divert[ing] racial power along its interwoven axes" can hide racism from "mainstream visibility" (1994, p. 37); one example includes use of the word "poor," which recodes race into class (p. 38). The discursive technique prohibits commentators from addressing what should also be a racial issue. Coverage of Milwaukee's incidents, when it recodes race along the axis of *age*, likewise obscures a racial understanding. Yet, as the reportage perpetuated the myth of a colorblind, egalitarian society, BP's surveillance video quietly dismantled such notions despite its prominent endorsement by law enforcement and the top billing it received in news stories.

A few weeks later, a similar altercation took place at the Wisconsin State Fair, which is located near the posh, wealthy, and white Waukesha County. The general area is in stark contrast to Riverwest, the relatively diverse neighborhood that houses Blacks and whites and acts as a buffer between Harambee and the Eastside. This geographical difference is important. As Hall et al. write, "place and location are critical vectors in 'common sense,' carrying powerful social connotations and quasi-explanations in their slipstream" (2013, p. xiv). I argue that the fair altercation represents a sense of encroachment on white space, or what Tricia Rose might call a "loss of control on home territory" (2003, p. 401). The online reader comments about moving the state fair to a different area illustrate this assessment well.

The Black advancement on the fair produced an uproar on par with the Fourth of July incident, or perhaps a greater one. On opening night, a group of Black teens entered the venue and began initiating fights. One columnist described the attacks as "on a much more brutal—and scarier—scale" than the Riverwest incident the month before, as youths injured dozens of white attendees and seven cops (Kane, 2011). In predictable fashion, as more security guards descended on this venue, media coverage obfuscated the meaning of race relations. Despite some reports at least citing race as a factor (Garza, 2011) the media voices' privileged solutions parroted clichés.

Andrew W. Kahrl, in a discussion about race relations during the developing steamboat industry at the turn of the twentieth century, touches on several dominant perceptions of Blacks that continue to appear in today's reportage and online reader comments. For instance, he notes that "white-owned newspapers," police, and government leaders were troubled by "black

gatherings,” assuming that “all black recreational spaces were dominated by undifferentiated mobs of violent criminals, petty thieves, drunkards, and habitual gamblers” (2008, p. 1120). Given this, the predominant solution offered to check the Black presence was “heightened surveillance and scrutiny” (2008, p. 1124) and “more invasive forms of policing” (2008, p. 1110).

Since Kahrl’s analysis focused on Black and white enterprises along the Potomac River, he also writes that “bodies of water... with their... associations with purity and privilege... became sites of some of the most concerted efforts by white segregationists to solidify racial difference, in places where white supremacy seemed most vulnerable” (2008, p. 1121). One may wonder if whites today might romanticize the Wisconsin State Fair in the same fashion, as it too can be seen as a bastion of white privilege. This is of course generalizable to other “white safety zones” as well (Rose, 2003, p. 401). Shopping malls like the Mall of America, for instance, sought to control its Black teenage customers with a “Parental Escort Policy” and the presence of “Mighty Moms,” a cadre cadre of 18 Black women (and one white woman) who acted as liaisons between mall security officers and the kids (Freeman, 1998, pp. 483, 511). As I mentioned, white flight is another option, as evidenced by *Journal Sentinel* reader, hartland badger, who says, “It’s time to move the [Wisconsin] State Fair to a more central location in the state,” adding, “I will never bring my family there as long as it is in the Milwaukee area” (“The Fair Leaves Town”). Badgerfanzrock agrees, writing, “State Fair needs to be moved... period!” (“The Fair Leaves Town”).

Where news outlets seemed to cleanse race entirely from their stories, (save for the “discursive traces” caught on camera) readers willfully opted to drag race back in for destructive not progressive purposes, expecting that Blacks should be depicted as criminals or worse. My goal in the rest of this section is not to simply spotlight racist invective for shock value, but to illustrate one of John Fiske’s points on mediated racism. He writes that Stacey Koon, an LAPD sergeant on trial for the Rodney King beating in 1992, described King at one point as a “Mandingo” which is an *overtly* racist term (1994, p. 146). In a colorblind society, defined by its *covert* racism, such explicit epithets are no longer “permissible” in the mainstream (Alexander, 2012, p. 2). They have to be hidden. As a result, one encounters colorblindness in news reports and an ignorance of structural inequalities in editorials, such as the James Causey piece which places the onus for the problem on nearly everything but the exportation of jobs, citing “parents, mentors, churches, schools and community organizations” as the solution (2011). I argue that the *Journal Sentinel* online reader comments represent a recent incarnation of Koon’s “Mandingo” slur. Their white supremacy is out in the open, making it easier for racial justice advocates to cry foul. The mainstream, *covert* supporters of these racist remarks could join “in the uproar

provoked by [their] publication” if needed, but only to reject their “visibility,” not their principles (Fiske, 1994, p. 146).

To be sure, some readers attempt to contend with the vitriol; I don’t mean to depict feedback as entirely one-sided. However, those posts typically receive more “thumbs down” ratings than “thumbs up” ratings. Regarding a 2011 incident involving Black teens storming Milwaukee’s Mayfair Mall, for instance, KarotHead received 17 “thumbs down” votes by writing, “Go to the ‘HOOD’ or ‘GHETTO’ go see how WE live then you will see why we have these problem (sic)” (Hajewski & Walker, 2011).<sup>5</sup> By contrast, in the same story, de4161954 received 36 “thumbs up” votes by saying, “Quit calling them parents damit (sic)!!!! They are birth givers. Parenting involves caring for offspring.”

But with regard to the two case studies at hand, many commenters recycle the white establishment’s dominant tropes by citing, for instance, the lack of family values and personal responsibility plaguing Black America. This diagnosis for the root of Blacks’ setbacks can be found in the wake of both incidents. After opening night at State Fair, writerwoman states: “Black men who shirk parental duty to their male seeds is the real chronic problem here?” (Causey, 2011b). Other comments on par with “Mandingo” haunt the news outlet’s message boards. Below a story on the Riverwest assaults, Anonymous writes, “Stop giving money to unwed mothers have (sic) kids!” (Jones, 2011b). Says Cracker, “Black leaders will continue to make excuses for criminal behavior because it’s easier than admitting there is a problem with a black culture who embraces (sic) violence and has no respect for life” (Causey, 2011b).

Some recurring suggestions revolve around more efficacious law enforcement, or even more frighteningly, concealed carry. As mrtwigbert says after the Fourth of July incident, “I’m sorry but my experiences have caused me to look at all black teens in a different way.. I know there are some great black teens doing great things with their lives... but I will now always be cautious when I see a black teen.. and now with the concealed carry you can count on me having a gun to defend myself” (Causey, 2011a). These conservative sentiments, connoting a “quest for order” (West, 2001, p. 42), echo what Hall et al. found in their own study in letters to the editor following a 1970s black on white mugging; of those letter writers supporting a harsh sentence, “the strongest theme... was the need to *protect the public from crime*” (p. 123).

And while these utterings are certainly problematic and need to be exposed (especially the frightening allusions to firearms), one comment by moparman1 illustrates the exact lack of historical and structural knowledge I stress throughout this article. He/or she writes devoid of the information on transnational capital, job outsourcing to the Third World, unfair loan practices, and the like. “The only people that (sic) can correct the problems that plague inner city black

neighborhoods are the residents of those communities. Clearly they have accepted things the way they are,” addin. “These neighborhoods have become economic dead zones and will remain so until the residents decide things must change” (“The Fair Leaves Town”). Despite the fact that “the private sector is simply uninterested in” creating jobs for the poor, moparman1 is convinced that the victim is to blame (West, 2001, pp. 84-85).

### **Capital Accumulation and Common Sense**

We see at the ideological level that, on the one hand, local Milwaukee reportage obfuscates the daily realities of Black Milwaukeeans in various ways; one is by sanitizing the element of race from stories. On the other hand, the readership’s commentary inserts race back into the picture but in a way that is derogatory. The question to finally answer, then, is why this discourse appears in these local sounding boards the way it does. Hall et al. offer an answer vis-à-vis their examination of the discursive public reaction to a mugging. Their analysis takes into consideration not just what occurs at the ideological level, but also how the economic base is organized and its bearing on societal consciousness. Given this, I think it is wise to factor in the determining base/determined superstructure I touched on earlier into the Milwaukee case studies.

Production in the capitalist base follows the “General Formula for Capital” (M-C-M’), or the production of commodities for exchange and the subsequent privatization of profits (Shapiro, 2008, pp. 55-56). Inherent in the capitalist system is also the extraction of surplus value at the point of production, made possible by paying workers less in wages than the amount of value they can produce (2008). Over time, capitalists have fetishized automation, machinery, and technological innovation to assist in the accumulation process and as a way to phase out wages and extract more surplus value, which David Harvey refers to as a “technological fix” (2010, p. 211). Consequently, the production process abandons the unskilled labor historically provided by Black workers (Bonacich, 1976). William I. Robinson writes that this also occurs at the global level due to capital’s inclination toward globalization. One of capital’s consequences is a “reduced demand for labor” resulting in millions of people rendered as “superfluous labor with no role to play in the *formal* local structures of globalized production” (2004, p. 105). African Americans compose a considerable element of the reserve army of labor (Marable, 1983). As I mentioned above, this is especially a concern in a segregated city like Milwaukee, where the unemployment rate for Black males is 50 percent.

With a better understanding of the base’s needs, we can begin to interpret the conclusions of Milwaukee’s privately-owned media on racialized violent crime and the reader comments they generated. To begin with, Hall et al. suggest a dialectical relationship between these two actors,

as “the public” does not approach crime “*tabula rasa*” but with “interpretive schema, uninspected assumptions, common sense, tacit knowledge and forms of reasoning, many of which are already in place” (p. xiii). At the same time, due to private media’s ownership structure and role as ideological proponent of the capitalist class, the resulting reportage creates “a particular image of society which represents particular class interests as the interests of all members of society” (p. 62). Hence, the *Journal Sentinel* editorialist, Eugene Kane, can say that “twice so far this summer there’s been a shocking example of mob violence by young black people that *can’t be explained in any sensible way*” (2011; my emphasis). In turn, an opportunity to address the disempowering conditions facing Black Milwaukeeans is lost. Could it be, for instance, that Black antipathy expressed in the Fourth of July and State Fair incidents has its roots in something deeply societal, historical, social, and economic? This is not seriously addressed. Meanwhile, the “particular image” media subsequently create mystifies the racial import on working class schism. The responding readership is fully aware of the racial element of the violence, and it approaches the crime coverage with commonsense assumptions at the subconscious level—as influenced for example by their previous experience (Hall et al., 2013, p. xiii).

We can understand commonsense assumptions as “uncorrected and taken for granted,” as well as devoid of any “criterion for determining how things are in a capitalist society” (p. 153). What drives the constant regeneration of these beliefs are, according to Gramsci, “traces” left behind from “fragments of other, often earlier, more coherent and consistent theoretical elaborations which have lost their internal consistency over time” (p. 164). Drawing on this insight, partly what drives the readership’s antagonism at the heart of this article, as Hall et al. might point out, is a deep-seated, commonsense suspicion present among workers who see the sacrifices they made “in exchange for a subaltern position” threatened by “work-shy layoffs” (p. 161). The “layabout” anxiety seems clear in the reader comments I highlighted, namely in the child-rearing scenario, which in the commenters’ imaginations is absent of Black parents. What these truncated and fragmented aversions fail to grasp is of course the nature of capitalism to stoke the “internal divisions” of the working class through race, one of the “main mechanisms this reproduction of an internally divided labor force has been accomplished” (p. 339). We can see the reactionary comments of *Journal Sentinel* commentators under a new light when consulting a quote by Frank Parkin, quoted in *Policing the Crisis* to reinforce the authors’ conclusions about media, ruling ideas, and the role of subordinated classes: “The social and political definitions of those in dominant positions tend to become objectified in the major institutional orders, so providing the moral framework for the entire social system” (p. 62).

## **Conclusion**

I hope to have conveyed a couple of crucial points in this article. First, as in Hall et al.'s study, the incidents in Milwaukee are much more complicated than what appeared on the surface that summer. Secondly, the original sign I saw in L.A. was more correct than I realized. Ferguson is everywhere—even when the national news media do not pay attention, even when Black struggle doesn't temporarily inspire a social media campaign (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter). In other words, justification for racial denigration happens in microcosm too, as I suggested with these Milwaukee incidents. The *Journal Sentinel* and its online readership offered commentary for each incident, taking plainly unfair and discriminatory positions throughout.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this article was to delineate what these are and what they mean in terms of a broader indication of commonsense ideology. Although I consider just a single Midwestern city and primary data taken from a small number of media sources, I believe that findings from primary sources in other segregated spaces across the U.S. will approximate those described above. So while Milwaukee and its media are but localized cases, I would argue that the value of my focus here also lies in the notion that Ferguson is always roiling even when the cameras aren't rolling.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Hall et al. write that the idea that Blacks “live off the Welfare State is one of the commonest ideas now in the lexicon of racism” (2013, p. 132).

<sup>2</sup> Writing critically about the coverage of these events runs the risk of downplaying the violence that occurred, which is unintended. As Cornel West writes, “We must criticize and condemn immoral acts of black people, but we must do so cognizant of the circumstances into which people are born and under which they live” (2001, p. 85).

<sup>3</sup> To see the structure of society as economic is to agree with Marx (Social structure, 2015). The point I wish to make here, however, is that sociology has looked to explain society through its “stable arrangement of institutions,” and that looking into “social structure” can reveal truths behind inequality (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Mosco characterizes some of this literature, such as Fishman's and Tuchman's, as not Marxian but rather Weberian given its analysis of the “bureaucratic structure” of the media (2009, p. 140).

<sup>5</sup> Invoking this mall case is significant in that earlier that same year as the Fourth of July and State Fair incidents, Black youths stormed through Milwaukee's Mayfair Mall, with the typical result of management looking for ways to regulate entry and conduct (Freeman, 1998). As to be expected, an online reader expressed disinterest in returning to the mall (Hajewski and Walker, 2011).

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