

OLIVER C. COX: COLONIALISM & CAPITALISM

A MARXIST EXPLANATION OF RACIAL INEQUALITY



Oliver C. Cox argued that racism is not natural or timeless. It developed alongside colonialism and capitalism to justify exploitation, divide workers and protect economic power.

WHO WAS OLIVER C. COX?



- Trinidadian-born sociologist who worked in the USA.



- Key work: *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (1948).



- Developed a Marxist explanation of racism and racial inequality.



- Argued that racism emerged with colonialism and the rise of capitalism.

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT



Colonial powers expand and exploit.



Labour, land and resources are exploited.



Racial ideas are created to justify inequality.



Workers are divided along racial lines.



Capitalist groups benefit from control, profit and power.



KEY IDEA: Racism is an ideology that supports exploitation, protects capitalism and weakens class solidarity.

KEY CONCEPTS



COLONIALISM

Domination of other lands and peoples to extract resources, labour and wealth.



CAPITALISM

An economic system based on profit, private ownership and wage labour.



IDEOLOGY

Ideas and beliefs that make inequality appear natural or justified.



EXPLOITATION

When one group profits from the labour of another group.



DIVIDE AND RULE

Keeping power by encouraging divisions between groups.



CLASS SOLIDARITY

Workers uniting because of shared interests against exploitation.



RACIAL CAPITALISM

Capitalism developed through systems that treat some racialised groups as cheap, controllable labour.

HOW COX EXPLAINS INEQUALITY



COLONIALISM CREATES RACIAL HIERARCHIES

Colonial powers used racial ideas to justify conquest, enslavement and control of colonised peoples.



CAPITALISM BENEFITS FROM UNEQUAL LABOUR MARKETS

Employers gain from cheap, divided labour with different pay, conditions and status.



RACISM DIVIDES WORKERS

Racial divisions stop workers uniting. This protects the power of employers and the wealthy.



WEALTH AND POWER ARE PASSED ON

Historic exploitation leads to unequal wealth, housing, education and political power across generations.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

- Links Britain's colonial past to present-day inequalities.
- Helps explain gaps in wealth, work, housing and power.
- Shows why racial inequality persists even without open legal discrimination.
- Encourages focus on power, history and material life chances.

CONTEMPORARY UK EVIDENCE

- Overcrowding (2020–23):** 25% of Arab households and 18% of Bangladeshi households are overcrowded vs 2% of White British households. (Ethnicity Facts & Figures, 2025)
- In-work disadvantage (2026):** Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani adults are more likely to be in low-paid, low-control jobs and remain in poverty. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)
- Racial wealth divide (2025):** Wealth is heavily concentrated among White British people. Communities of colour have far lower wealth ownership. (Runnymede Trust)
- Employment gaps (2022):** Employment rate for White people (16–64) is 77% vs 61% for Pakistani & Bangladeshi people. (Ethnicity Facts & Figures, 2023)

EVALUATION OF COX

STRENGTHS

- Links racism to capitalism, colonialism and exploitation.
- Highlights material inequalities in work, wealth and housing.
- Explains why racial inequality persists across generations.

LIMITATIONS

- Can be seen as too economically deterministic.
- Underplays culture, politics, religion and individual prejudice.
- Does not fully explain differences between ethnic groups today.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

- Weberians (e.g. Rex & Tomlinson): focus on social closure and competition for scarce resources.
- Castles & Kosack: capitalism creates a reserve army of cheap, flexible migrant labour.
- Feminists: racism intersects with patriarchy and gender inequality.

EXAM-READY SUMMARY



Cox argues that racism developed with colonialism and capitalism to justify exploitation, divide workers and create unequal life chances. Evidence today shows ethnic minorities are more likely to experience low-paid work, overcrowded housing and lower wealth. However, his approach can be criticised for being too economic and not fully explaining cultural, gendered or within-group differences.

KEY TERMS FOR REVISION: Colonialism | Capitalism | Ideology | Exploitation | Divide and Rule

Racial Capitalism | Class Solidarity | Racism | Wealth Inequality | Institutional Racism



The Sociology Guy

helping students understand society