Materialities of racial capitalism
populations, bodies, politics

Thursdays, 2-4.30 p.m. in Carlsson 1-122

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Over the second half of the twentieth century the world-order ostensibly aimed to overcome the unprecedented global trauma that was World War II in which racial policies were driven to their murderous limit. But the projects of human and civil rights, feminism, decolonization, multiculturalism, and environmentalism have recently become fragile as new forms of authoritarian nationalism are attacking the postwar democratic consensus, brazenly but with increasing popular support. It has meanwhile become clear that the capitalist system bequeathed humanity, especially already vulnerable populations, a series of slower but more intractable disasters in the form of climate change and pollution.

Commentators from conservatives to anarchists note we seem to have landed in a 1930s-type moment in which the choice between fascist barbarity and a just and open society is becoming ever starker. This seminar develops the idea that a materialist concept of race will be essential to confronting the twenty-first-century challenges of inequality, war, and differential mobility. "Materialism" here will mean a focus on bodies, populations, economies, and ecologies, more than knowledges, media representations, or the law. In particular, we will investigate how European colonialism and slavery are foundational features of modern globalization. Starting with black feminism and indigenous theorizing, passing through Foucault and Marxism, and ending with Afrofuturism and novel forms of communism, the readings are selected to enable understanding the key topics and theorists as well as introduce recent theoretical developments. The more influential authors include Glen Coulthard, Angela Davis, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Federici, Michel Foucault, Édouard Glissant, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Saidiya Hartman, Claudia Jones, Karl Marx, Achille Mbembe, Cedric Robinson, Françoise Vergès, Alexander Weheliye, and Sylvia Wynter.

Students write short weekly responses and a course paper. They take turn introducing the readings with some biographical and theoretical background. One emphasis in the seminar is on example: if you can’t find fun examples to elucidate a difficult argument, you probably don’t yet understand it. Another is on ethical and political commitment. The times might be tough, but to put a cliché to good use, we can only make it through together.