

Revisiting the “Articulation” of Capital and Difference: Louis Althusser, Stuart Hall, and the Built Environment

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Abstract

In the context of ongoing debates in the social sciences on the relationship between race, gender, and the reproduction of capitalist society, many scholars have turned to the concept of “articulation.” However, it remains unclear how, exactly, capital and ascriptive difference are articulated and why particular articulations of race, gender, and capital remain so enduring. This article undertakes a critical reading of Stuart Hall’s landmark writing on articulation to engage these themes. I begin by contextualizing Hall’s “articulationist” approach, situating it in relation to Louis Althusser’s writing on articulation and in relation to the “modes of production debate.” Against the backdrop of Hall’s account, I then argue that the built environment is a mechanism through which the articulation of capital and difference occurs and a critical “line of tendential force” that holds articulations together over time and space.

Keywords

articulation, race, gender, Louis Althusser, Stuart Hall

Introduction

It is unlikely that capitalist society requires “race” or “gender” for its expanded reproduction. Even if many capitalist societies have long been structured by racialized and gendered forms of domination, it is implausible that capital—at the highest level of conceptual abstraction—necessitates those specific forms of ascriptive hierarchization in any respect. Following Julian Go’s (2021) brief but highly influential intervention on the tensions at the core of the “racial capitalism” debate, we might say that insofar as scholars have arrived at that position—at the claim that capital requires race and gender as distinctive forms of ascriptive differentiation—they have done so in a way that is inattentive to the distinction between a *theory of capital* and a *theory of capitalism*. After all, and as Go (2021:42) reminds us, a *theory of capital* is principally concerned with the development of “a formalized and abstract representation of the inner workings of capital . . . its contradictions, and its necessary demise through a series of central categories that capture the key elements of the capitalist system.” A *theory of capitalism* aims at precisely the

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opposite. It intends to speak directly to “capitalist development and dynamics in their empirical specificity. It is meant to explain and describe specific capitalist formations and developments as they really exist in the world, not their abstract conceptual form” (Go 2021:42). With this distinction in view, the suggestion that capitalism necessarily carries with it processes of racialization and gendered hierarchization—that they are necessary to a theory of capital—appears to simply reproduce a kind of “ex post facto functionalism” in which the centrality of those forms of difference in capitalist history is read as proof of their place in the “inner workings of capital” itself (Brenner 2019:61).¹

In other words, although the claim that capitalist society is necessarily mediated by race and gender has become common in recent years, this is an exceedingly difficult argument to substantiate in practice. Arriving at it typically involves identifying the functional imbrication of race, gender, and the “laws of capitalist motion” within particular historical-geographical contexts; and, subsequently, shifting that pattern of functional imbrication up the ladder of conceptual abstraction, thus holding from view the manifold combinations of racialization, gendered hierarchization, and capital accumulation that are quite plainly visible at other scales of analysis and across capital’s uneven history in the *longue durée*. Søren Mau (2023:160), in a closely allied formulation, notes: “By vacillating between different levels of abstraction,” scholars that pursue this kind of theoretical move “inadvertently ‘ontologise’ historically specific systems of [race and] gender rather than explain the relationship between capitalist production and the oppression of [racialized minorities and] women.” In suggesting that capitalist society requires race and gender for its reproduction, these scholars invariably trans-historicize the meaning and significance of those categories of difference and the specific functional role they play in certain historical-geographical contexts. Some scholars go even further, arguing that race and gender are the result of capital, “slip[ping] into a functionalist and reductionist account of capital as an omnipotent subject creating the social differences it needs in order to function” (Mau 2023:162).²

But if race and gender are best understood as logically contingent forms of ascriptive hierarchization within capitalist society, a set of questions immediately arises. How should we describe the relationship between those patterns of ascriptive difference and capitalist reproduction? Moreover, how might we explain the enduring character of their combination—or the simple fact that much (perhaps all) of capitalist history has been mediated by distinctive forms of racialized and gendered domination, albeit in differentiated and contextually specific ways? Indeed, precisely because race and gender are logically contingent vis-à-vis the laws of motion of capitalist society, their consideration thrusts us to the center of a set of debates regarding the combination and reciprocal interaction of capitalist society’s necessary and contingent parts.³ Because these forms of difference are not necessary to a theory of capital and cannot be “conceptually derive[d] . . . from the capital form,” we are left to wonder about the nature and mechanics of their connection to capital’s constitutive features and dynamics, and their enduring (if variegated) reproduction within capitalist societies (Mau 2023:168).

In this article, I will suggest that the Althusserian concept of “articulation”—deployed here to refer to the connection, combination, and “structured interrelationship” of distinctive aspects of society that have no necessary (logical) relation (see, for context, Resch 1992:106)—is crucially important if we are to engage these questions. As some readers will note, this is not a surprising theoretical move. In the long-standing debate on capitalism and ascriptive difference, there is a relatively clearly defined “articulationist” strand, which emerged from the tradition of Althusserian Marxism and which has become increasingly prominent in discussions on capital and difference in recent years. This tradition enables scholars to consider racialized and gendered difference not as logically necessary in capitalist society but as part and parcel of a broader social whole in which “contingent connections . . . are seen to be in a constant process of aggregation, assemblage, and change” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013:284; see also Chari 2017; Dawson and

Katzenstein 2019; McClintock 1995; Paret and Levenson 2024). Yet, I will make the case for *revisiting* the concept of articulation, nonetheless. Indeed, I will argue that in the articulationist literature on capital and difference, articulation remains something of a conceptual black box. It is not clear, even in the most sophisticated iterations of that approach, how articulated relations are joined together—or articulated—in the first instance, and how and why particular articulations of race, gender, and capital remain so enduring over time and space.⁴

To substantiate and address these concerns, I will take up a reading of Stuart Hall's writing on the articulation of capital and difference, which I take to be the most sophisticated and influential engagement in the articulationist literature. First, I will provide a brief introduction to the concept of articulation, paying particular attention to the emergence of the concept in Louis Althusser's work in the 1960s and its reception by economic anthropologists in the context of the "modes of production debate" in the late 1960s and 1970s—two key references that established the terrain for the development of Hall's account. I will then develop a sympathetic critique of Hall's theorization of the articulation of capital and difference, teasing out the most significant lacunae in his landmark engagement with this theme. Against the backdrop of Hall's writing, I will then advocate for turning toward the built environment. I will argue that the built environment—or the relatively fixed and immobile environment that surrounds us and that was produced in the service of specific forms of individual and collective use⁵—is (1) a key modality through which the articulation of capital and difference occurs (if certainly not the only one), and (2) a "line of tendential force," to use Hall's language, that holds together and structures the rearticulation of contingent combinations of race, gender, and capital over time and space. I will argue that if articulation remains a conceptual black box (even) in Hall's account, in turning to the built environment, we can address some of the most urgent questions regarding the articulation of capital and ascriptive difference that linger in his wake.⁶

Revisiting "Articulation": From Althusser to Hall

The conceptual history of "articulation" can be told in a number of ways. In the opening pages of *Power of Articulation*, Kortesoja (2023) indicates as much indirectly. Kortesoja (2023:7) moves swiftly from the concept's invocation in anatomy, to phonetics, to Saussure's notion of "articulated speech" ("*gegliederte Sprache*"), and well beyond, tracking its use across a range of disciplinary contexts and historical-geographical conjunctures. And yet, in considering the articulation of capital and logically contingent forms of ascriptive difference like race and gender, the most relevant place to start is with the work of Louis Althusser. After all, it was Althusser who first latched onto Marx's use of "*Gliederung*" (rooted in the German for limb, "*Glied*"), rendered it as "articulated whole" or "articulated combination," and situated the concept at the center of his reading and explication of Marxist philosophy and critique of Hegelian dialectics. Indeed, it is precisely this usage that has come to structure the articulationist literature on the problem of ascriptive difference, not least Hall's enduring and highly influential account. If we want to make sense of, and go beyond, Hall's landmark theorization of the articulation of capital and contingent processes of ascriptive hierarchization, we would thus do well to begin with Althusser's development of the concept of articulation. To contextualize and transcend that (most sophisticated) account in the articulationist strand of scholarship on capital and difference, we should begin with Althusser's earliest uses of the term, in texts like "On the Materialist Dialectic" (1963), "Marxism and Humanism" (1964), and *Reading Capital* (1965).⁷

In "On the Materialist Dialectic," Althusser (2005:180) sets as his task the theoretical expression of the Marxist approach to dialectics, which had until that point only been resolved (he claimed) in political practice. In so doing, Althusser demonstrates that at the core of Marxist philosophy and its approach to dialectics is a set of concepts that emerged not from the inversion of

Hegel's dialectic but through the abandonment of that ideological problematic and with the establishment of a "new, scientific" one (p. 193).⁸ He insists that within Marxism, there is no "essential, original process" or contradiction that structures the social whole, such that more complex processes are only "complications of it"—a notion with decidedly Hegelian roots. There are, rather, only "complex processes," which "are never anything but given complexities" (p. 195). The social whole is always "a structured social whole" of many relatively autonomous parts, and "every 'simple category' presupposes the existence of the structured whole of society" (pp. 195–96). Even if Marxists invoke the image of Hegel's "original unity which develops within itself by virtue of its negativity" for the sake of simplicity, true Marxist practice rejects such a reading of the social whole (pp. 197–98).⁹ "What Marxism refuses," according to Althusser, "is the (ideological) philosophical pretension to coincide exhaustively with a 'root origin'" (p. 198).

Indeed, most crucially for our purposes, Althusser suggests in that 1963 text that what Marxism offers in the place of the Hegelian account of dialectics is the image of the ever-pregivenness of a complex whole that can be *articulated* in manifold ways. He provides the image of a complexly structured and overdetermined social whole that is "always already" structuring of social life and which is not defined by a single contradiction or structure, but by many contradictions and structures, all of which are held together *through their articulation* (Althusser 2005:199). It is in this discussion of the complexly structured whole—and in this theoretical expression of the Marxist approach to dialectics—that Althusser first invokes the concept of articulation, noting that the "unity is not and cannot be the unity of a simple, original and universal essence"; and moreover, "that the unity discussed by Marxism is *the unity of the complexity itself*, that the mode of organization and articulation of the complexity is precisely what constitutes its unity" (pp. 201–02). If difference is "alien" to the Hegelian totality, it is integral to Althusser's. Althusser's totality is a "'structure of structures' comprising a 'plurality of instances' (composed of a multiplicity of distinct practices)," and it is articulated despite its internal heterogeneity (Elliot 2006:135).

Yet, if all this is quite clear in "On the Materialist Dialectic," Althusser's engagement with the concept of articulation did not end there. As noted above, it continued in "Marxism and Humanism" the following year, which turned more directly to Marx's so-called epistemic break with "theoretical humanism," and "with every theory that based history and politics on an *essence of man* [italics added]" and the notion of abstract "*human nature* [italics added]" (Althusser 2005:227). Indeed, in that text, Althusser argues that Marx not only broke with theoretical humanism in his mature work, but he "replaced the old postulates" of "empiricism/idealism of the subject, empiricism/idealism of the essence" with a "historico-dialectical materialism of *praxis*: that is, [with] a theory of the different specific levels of human practice . . . in their characteristic articulations, based on the specific articulations of the unity of human society [italics added]" (p. 229). More plainly put, Althusser suggests therein that the subject of history is radically rewritten in Marx's mature works, and that the abstract "human subject" is replaced by an overdetermined totality that is connected—or articulated—together in spite of its differentiated parts, and that is comprised of three distinct and relatively autonomous levels: the economic, the political, and the ideological. The concept of articulation appears as a constitutive dimension of Marx's founding of "the *science of history* of social formations" (Althusser 1972:166). Althusser insists that through this concept, Marx breaks with humanism, inaugurating a new science that allows us to think history as a process without a subject.

The concept of articulation is further deployed and developed in *Reading Capital*, a collaborative project jointly authored by Althusser and his students, and published in 1965. Therein, Althusser sets out to identify the presence of a philosophy in Marx's mature critique of political economy "but absent from his discourse" (Althusser and Balibar 1970:30). In so doing, he develops a method of symptomatic (*symptomale*) reading—ostensibly the same method Marx developed in his engagement with classical political economy—which reveals the *absent presence* of

the “concept (and of all the sub-concepts) of the effectivity of a structure on its elements” (Althusser and Balibar 1970:29) in Marx’s mature work; and a “knowledge of the ‘*Gliederung*’ (the articulated, hierarchized, systematic, combination)” that is capitalist society (Althusser and Balibar 1970:64). In other words, Althusser returns to the concept of articulation in that text by way of the notion of symptomatic reading, and suggests that it was central to Marx’s own effort to produce the image of a social totality composed of distinctive and relatively autonomous parts, including a structure in dominance (Althusser and Balibar 1970:48), and to imagine a totality that is *both* overdetermined and determined in the last instance by the economic level, which provides “an absolute precondition for the necessity and intelligibility of the displacements of the structures in the hierarchy of effectivity” (Althusser and Balibar 1970:99). Here, articulation provides yet another means for rejecting Hegel’s “essential section” (*coupe d’essence*) in which “all the elements of the whole” are discovered to be in “immediate relationship with one another” (Althusser and Balibar 1970:94). And it provides a means for engaging the reciprocal interaction of each of the levels of the social whole while remaining attentive to the problem of dominance and determinacy.

With that said, the notion of articulation provides something else in *Reading Capital* as well. The term is deployed in that context in order to describe not only the joining up or connection of relatively autonomous levels or instances within the social whole but the articulation of temporalities too; or, in order to think through the structured coexistence of distinctive “type[s] of historical existence” (Althusser and Balibar 1970:99; see also, for context, Tomba 2013). In *Reading Capital*, Althusser not only rejects the image of Hegel’s “essential section” and its expressivity, but he also rejects the “homogenous and continuous ideological time” that it necessarily carries with it, offering, by contrast, a totality in which “different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar relations of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation and torsion which obtain” between the instances (Althusser and Balibar 1970:108). For Althusser, this does not mean these differential histories are “independent of the whole” (p. 100). They continue not only to be articulated together, but to maintain their relative autonomy as a result of “a certain articulation in the whole, and therefore [as a result of] a certain type of *dependence* with respect to the whole” (p. 100). But with that said, Althusser insists in *Reading Capital* that this articulation of distinctive rhythms and temporalities in a complex whole is not the articulation of “discontinuities in [a] continuity,” or the articulation of temporalities that are departures from an established “base time” (p. 106). Each temporality is a result of the whole—but each also remains a distinctive temporality, nonetheless.

This broad line of argumentation regarding articulation was immediately influential. For scholars working in and on the peripheries of the capitalist world-system, it provided not only a break with the developmentalist image of linear temporality (presupposed in much modernization theory), but a new means of thinking unevenness, “survivals,” and the notion of underdevelopment itself (Althusser and Balibar 1970:105). (And in Hall’s own articulationist account of capital and ascriptive difference, he drew extensively on both Althusser and these inheritors of his lexicon.) Of course, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were a number of efforts to challenge the presuppositions of developmentalist thought, and many scholars did so with relatively little (if any) engagement with the Althusserian language of articulation. Samir Amin (1974:9) saw underdevelopment not as a form of historical delay but the result of a distinctive kind of integration into the capitalist world economy—one defined “by [the] production of luxury goods and exports and the consequent lack of importance of internal mass markets.” For Andre Gunder Frank, underdevelopment was the result of the peculiar character of capitalism itself, constituted—as it ostensibly was and is—“by a uniform hierarchy of metropolis and satellite, expropriating and appropriating surplus upwards and outwards, nationally and internationally” (Foster-Carter 1978:49). And for Jairus Banaji (2010:358), so-called underdevelopment could

not be understood in relation to the “linear succession” of distinctive modes of production, each defined by specific forms of exploitation, but rather grasped only in relation to the model of “combined development.”¹⁰ None of these thinkers relied on Althusserian language in their development of these claims.

Nevertheless, for many others writing in this context, the specificity of Althusser’s language of articulation provided an immediate resource for engaging the “problem” of underdevelopment; and in taking up this language of articulation, these thinkers established the terms for Hall’s engagement with the concept vis-à-vis the question of ascriptive difference. Drawing on Althusser’s writings on articulation, uneven development, and overdetermination, a cohort of economic anthropologists inaugurated in the late 1960s and 1970s what ultimately came to be known as the “modes of production debate,” which revolved around a rejection of those linear models of development intimated above, and which, for many, demanded an account of the so-called “articulation of modes of production.” The “articulation of modes of production” does not—as a phrase—appear in Althusser’s work (Foster-Carter 1978:54). Althusser *does* underscore, in texts like “On Theoretical Work” (1967), that “abstract production, does not exist (Marx), but only this or that concrete-real conjunction-combination of *hierarchically structured modes of production in this or that determinate social formation* [italics added]” (Althusser 1990:46). But he does not directly speak of “articulation” in this context. Yet, in and through his writing on articulation, Althusser clearly provided an opening for this debate. He provided a concept for scholars who wanted to think through not only the complexly structured totality that is the social formation, but to consider the connection of distinctive modes of production as well. His language of articulation—and its associated concepts—enabled a cohort of economic anthropologists to understand underdevelopment and unevenness as the result of the particular articulation of modes of production in distinctive contexts.

In its broadest register, Althusser’s language of articulation enabled figures like Claude Meillassoux (1972:102) to make sweeping claims regarding capital’s vested interest in the *maintenance* of “agricultural self-sustaining communities” in “underdeveloped countries.” It also enabled more pointed (and geographically specific) arguments, such as Harold Wolpe’s (1972:433) claim that South African Apartheid represented an attempt to maintain (and transform) noncapitalist relations in a context “in which the conditions of reproduction...of that labour-force [were] rapidly disintegrating”; as well as Ernesto Laclau’s observations regarding the “substantial elements of feudalism” that persisted in Latin America “not [as] exogenous to capitalism, nor as pockets of decline, but as an intrinsic and structured part of a wider system” (Foster-Carter 1978:50). More plainly put, Althusser’s language of articulation—and his assertion that social formations are a combination or condensation of several distinct temporalities and modes of production—provided a means for a generation of economic anthropologists to extend his understanding of difference and its persistence in the context of capitalist society (see also Montenegro 2024).

Not all of the economic anthropologists involved in the modes of production debate would break with the received teleologies of developmentalist thought and full-throatedly embrace the language of difference offered by Althusser and his notion of articulation. Pierre-Philippe Rey (1973), in his widely read and debated *Class Alliances*, remained wedded to a kind of mechanism and teleology insofar as he posited three discrete “stages of articulation” that defined the relationship between capitalism and precapitalist modes of production and which ultimately culminated, in his account, in the “total disappearance of the precapitalist mode” (even if that stage was almost “nowhere evident” except in the United States at his time of writing; Foster-Carter 1978:56; see also Rey 1982:52). For most participants in this debate, however, Althusser did facilitate a mode of thinking in and through difference—a rejection of not only Hegelian historicism and humanism but of all kinds of reductionism and mechanism. And once again, it is in

precisely this context that Stuart Hall enters the fray—not only as a reader of Althusser, but of Althusserianism broadly, and the debates it provoked on uneven development, difference, and the articulation and combination of temporalities and modes of production in the 1960s and 1970s (Hall 2019b:250). Hall, whose work represents the most sophisticated and influential expression of the articulationist approach to capital and ascriptive difference, took the entirety of this intellectual milieu as his point of departure.

Indeed, Hall's most influential engagement with the relationship between capital and ascriptive difference—published in 1980 as “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance”—came by way of a direct engagement with Althusser, this broader Althusserian moment, and the concept of articulation it offered. In that text, Hall (2019a:176) turns explicitly to the language of articulation not only to pursue a counter-reductionist Marxism but, more precisely, to thread the needle between economistic accounts of racism, which “command all differences and specificities within the framework of a simplifying economic logic,” and pluralistic accounts, which “lack an adequate theorization, and which in the end are descriptive rather than analytic.” What Hall ultimately endorses is not only allied with Althusser but with some of the more adventurous Althusserian approaches to the modes of production debate as well. After surveying the work of a litany of scholars, Hall (2019a:193) suggests that

the emergent theory of the “articulation of different modes of production” . . . deliver[s] certain pertinent theoretical effects for an analysis of racism at the social, political, and ideological levels. It begins to deliver such effects—and this is the crucial point—not by deserting the level of analysis of economic relations (i.e., mode of production) but by posing it in its correct, necessarily complex, form.

While underscoring that the term itself has a somewhat ambiguous meaning, Hall (2019a:201) insists that the Althusserian notion of articulation, and its “cognate concepts,” enables us to think the “complex unity” of the social formation, all while threading the needle between economism and pluralism. Althusserian language allows him to suggest that while race is a logically contingent phenomenon in capitalist society that is variously articulated within and across distinctive capitalist social formations, the material conditions of society effectively determine “the mode of combination and the placing of each instance in an articulated relation to the other elements” (p. 198). Racism has no “universal structure”—no transhistorical belongingness within capitalist society (p. 211); yet it is not entirely unmoored from the relations of production either. Insofar as it is present in the conjuncture, race mediates all aspects of capitalist life. But precisely how it will do so cannot be known *a priori*, beyond the fact that the material conditions of society will play a determining role in its effectivity. Because racism “is not necessary to the concrete functioning of all capitalisms”—because it is logically contingent—it must be “shown how and why racism has been specifically overdetermined by and articulated with certain capitalisms at different stages of their development” (p. 213). We must probe precisely how race sorts “economic agents at the level of economic practices, and [mediates] the class struggles which result from it”; how it is constituted through and structuring of the “means of political representation . . . as political forces in the ‘theatre of politics’”; and how it structures the articulation of the working class “as the collective and individual ‘subjects’ of emergent ideologies”—among many other things (pp. 215–16).¹¹

Throughout his corpus, Hall is relatively consistent in this approach to race and racism, and while he tends not to focus on gendered hierarchization directly, this reading of articulation seems to define his engagement with capital and ascriptive difference, broadly conceived. Indeed, despite the insistence of certain scholars to the contrary, Hall maintains throughout his oeuvre a clear commitment to the above-sketched relationship between determination and articulation. In “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees” (1986), Hall (2021a) underscores that “the economic aspect of capitalist production processes has real limiting and constraining effects (i.e., determinacy)” on the social totality, “setting the limits” within which potential articulations

can be made, even if it does not guarantee correspondence across all of the levels of the social whole or the “one-way transmission of effects from base upwards” (p. 155). And in work that both preempted and followed the publication of his essay on “societies structured in dominance”—like 1978’s jointly authored *Policing the Crisis*, 1981’s “The Whites of Their Eyes” (Hall 2021b) and even 2000’s “The Multicultural Question” (Hall 2019b)—Hall continues to frame forms of ascriptive difference (like race and gender) as embedded *within a “net of [material] constraints,”* which is itself a site for the overdetermined reproduction of ascriptive difference (p. 155, italics added). Hall continues to suggest that racism, for example, assumes a range of appearances—including its “overt,” “inferential,” biological, and culturalist forms—across the levels of the social totality (Hall 2021b:102, 105; see also Hall 2019b:112); all while maintaining that racism has its own effectivity that is determined by “material production and its relations” (Hall 2021a:67).

With that said, in developing this highly Althusserian account of the relationship between capital and logically contingent racisms and sexism, Hall does not endorse every aspect of Althusserianism. While he largely accepts Althusser’s method of symptomatic reading, Hall (2021a:94) cautions against the temptation to mobilize such a method “like a theoretical guillotine,” cutting off any concept or indeterminacy that “stray[s] from [the] appointed path,” finding only what we set out to find. Moreover, while Hall largely agrees with the results of Althusser’s symptomatic reading of Marx—finding in texts like *The Class Struggles in France* (1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852) the beginnings of a rejection of the notion that the “contradictions in the ‘base’” unfold in a unilinear way, producing corresponding effects in the “superstructures”—he offers a more modest account of Marx’s epistemic “break” (Hall 2021a:67–68); one that identifies an expressive totality in text’s like *The German Ideology* (1846) and a “differentiated unity” in Marx’s more mature work, but which cautions against the “severe and finalist manner” of Althusser’s periodization (Hall 2021a:94).

Even more significantly for our purposes, Hall (2019a) also tends to push back against Althusser’s “silences” as they pertain to “the development of conscious struggle and organization,” demonstrating a decidedly Gramscian inheritance in his approach to articulation (p. 64). He draws on Althusser’s own concept of relative autonomy to make the case for the active capacity of social subjects to disarticulate prevailing social formations, and to disarticulate concepts from within certain chains of resonance and to insert them into other kinds of ideological discourse so as to facilitate or hinder the development of the economic “base” (Hall 2021a:121, 131, 228). Hall rejects the notion that people are merely “supports for class relations” (Hall 2021a:100). He demonstrates that hegemony is not given but is always produced and complexly articulated, “weld[ing] together” distinctive class fractions and populations that cut across the axes of race, gender, and “status symbolization,” and that particular hegemonic formations are open to disarticulation in and through social struggle (Hall 2019a:38; see also Hall 2021b:152).

Lines of Tendential Force

Thus far, this article has taken several steps. After recalling the enduring debate regarding the relationship between capital and ascriptive difference, I suggested the usefulness—given the logical contingency of racialized and gendered difference in capitalist society (Conroy 2022, 2023)—of the Althusserian language of articulation in our efforts to make sense of the connection or combination of those relations. I then turned to Hall’s reading of Althusser and the modes of production controversy, suggesting that his account represents a particularly sophisticated and highly influential theorization of the articulation of ascriptive difference and the other dimensions of the capitalist socio-spatial totality. Indeed, if it is not already entirely clear, my contention is that Hall’s account—while generally (albeit not exclusively) focused on the problem of

race and racialization—represents *the* most critical contribution on the articulation of racialized and gendered difference in capitalist society. It allows us to demonstrate not just the contingency of those forms of ascriptive difference in capitalist society, but (1) the relative autonomy of race and gender and their structuring force across all levels or instances of the social totality; (2) their determination *in the last instance* by “material production and its relations,” relations that are themselves profoundly shaped by patterns of racialized and gendered hierarchization (Hall 2021a:67); and (3) the potentiality for race and gender to be rearticulated in relation to the complex topography of the social whole and remade over time.

And yet, as clarifying as this account might be as a means of describing the contingent association of capital and ascriptive difference within capitalist society, in what follows, I will argue that several open questions remain. With Hall’s landmark theorization in view, it is no longer unclear whether race, gender, and capital are contingently related—they certainly are; nor whether these phenomena might combine and condense in a number of contingent ways, producing contextually specific mediations—they certainly can. Rather, what remains unclear is how and why particular articulations or connections of capital and ascriptive difference emerge, in the first instance; and, moreover, the determinations and parameters that constrain the articulation or structured interrelationship of capital and difference over time and space, beyond the elusive invocation of economic determinacy in the last instance. Put differently, if capital is only contingently related to racialized and gendered ascription and differentiation—and there are no trans-historical articulations, but only conjunctural racisms and sexism in combination with capital’s invariant structures and its “logical” or “abstract” core (see Best 2021)—we are still left to contemplate the critical questions raised at the start of this article: How is capital connected, in the first instance, to these logically contingent forms of ascriptive difference? How do specific connections or articulations come to be made, unmade, and remade anew over time? And finally, how might we explain the enduring character of certain articulations of capital and racialized and gendered difference across time and space?

Here, we should recall that Hall does provide a theoretical opening—if certainly not a response—to these questions across nearly all of his work on the articulation of complexly structured capitalist social formations. In nearly all his writing in an Althusserian mode, Hall (2021b:102) is at pains to emphasize that “historical connexions”—or “*the terrain of past articulations* [italics added]”—“are peculiarly resistant to change and transformation,” thereby shaping the nature of subsequent articulations and combinations in capitalist society. In other words, in a relation not dissimilar to the relation that persists between the economic base and the other levels of the social totality—that is, in its relation of “modal determinacy”—Hall consistently notes that historical “traces” set the limits within which present and future articulations of logically contingent relations are made.¹² He even develops a specific conceptual vocabulary to describe this dynamic, in and through his notions of “lines of tendential force” and “magnetic lines of tendency” (see Clarke 2015; Slack 1996). Across some of his most widely read texts, Hall (2021a:153) argues that “lines of tendential force” or “magnetic lines of tendency” structure the parameters, set the limits, or define the “*givenness* of the historical terrain,” thereby ensuring that specific articulations—which are not “inevitable, necessary or fixed forever”—are more favorable and available than others. These historical lines of tendency “define the horizon of possibilities” in the present and the future, shaping how open, and how closed, it is to new combinations and articulations (Hall 2021b:307). As Hall (2019a:236) puts it in one of his strongest formulations, certain lines of tendential force embed specific articulations so deeply it would be *almost* “idiotic to think” that one could fully “detach” them.

Again, this notion of historical lines of tendential force is an opening, not a response, to the questions posed above. It enables us to underscore that while certain articulations—not least certain logically contingent articulations of race, gender, and capital—are not necessary or inevitable,

they are also far from “free-floating” (Hall 2019a:236). Race and gender are not “potentially articulatable with anything” within capitalist society, precisely because of how they have been embedded in the social formation historically (p. 240); or precisely because of how these forms of difference have become “*sedimented and solidified* [italics added]” in their articulations “by real historical development over time” (p. 203). But of course, with that said, we still do not know very much about these lines of tendential force, nor do we have a precise sense of how articulation takes place in the first instance—or how, exactly, the complexly articulated whole that is capitalist society comes to be connected. We know that lines of tendential force reproduce articulations and hold them in place (at least to a certain extent), providing us with yet another concept for engaging the contingent combination of race, gender, and capital. But we have yet, it seems fair to suggest, actually cracked open the black box of articulation beyond the relatively obvious observation that historical relations are more likely than others to be reproduced in the present. And again, with this in view, my claim is that the built environment itself is a central modality of articulation and critical line of tendential force; and one that is particularly central to the articulation and reproduction of capital and logically contingent patterns of ascriptive difference over time and space. Indeed, my claim in light of this lacuna is that the built environment—or that relatively fixed and immobile environment that surrounds us and that preempts specific forms of use—is a medium or mechanism that shapes the articulation of ascriptive difference and capitalist society’s necessary features, and that it also functions to hold articulations together over time and space.

In saying as much, I am not simply recasting the arguments of otherwise highly compelling work in socio-spatial theory on articulation and the production of space, such as Cowan’s (2025) recent contention that the agrarian/urban nexus represents a site of compromise, contestation, subsumption, and articulation. Rather, I am arguing, again, that the built environment is a modality—or a particular mechanism or medium—central to the articulation of capital and ascriptive difference. Indeed, not only does the built environment connect or link up patterns of racialization, gendered hierarchization, and capitalism’s constitutive dimensions that have no necessary relation or inevitable permanence; it also “brings forth” certain logically contingent relations or combinations (Hall 2019b:234–35). And going further still, my claim is that the materiality of the built environment, and its embeddedness in space as the material prerequisite for capitalist life, operates as a critical line of tendential force that ensures the relative continuity of logically contingent articulations of race, gender, and capital. It renders the disarticulation of specific forms of racialized and gendered capitalism more difficult over time, and it provides the geographical parameters within which future articulations will be made, as well as their “speed and direction” (Slack and Wise, as cited in Clarke 2015:280). The built environment preempts or presupposes particular forms of individual and collective use; it is part and parcel of a broader environment; it includes the suburb and the ghetto just as much as the plantation and the mine, but it excludes aspects of our environment that are not relatively fixed and that were made without particular forms of use in view. And going further, the material footprint of the built environment quite literally establishes the “lay of the land”—a useful turn of phrase that Hall only metaphorically invokes—or the historical “grooves” that constrain the rearticulation of capital and ascriptive difference (Hall 2019a:236).

At this stage, a natural question arises. If my argument—yet unsubstantiated—is that we can address some of the pitfalls of the articulationist literature on capital and ascriptive difference—and move beyond Hall’s own landmark account—through engagement with the built environment, how exactly does this work? How does the built environment operate as a modality of articulation that produces and connects race, gender, and the necessary dimensions of capitalist society, and as a line of tendential force that holds them in place? To engage this question, we must recall two of the central arguments regarding the built environment that have defined the past several decades of scholarship in critical urban studies. The first is that the built environment in capitalist contexts is made and remade in and through the crisis tendencies of capital, and it is

both precondition and result of capital's constitutive dynamics (for the foundational statements on this theme, see Harvey 1982, 1989). In other words, we would do well to recall that the built environment in capitalist contexts is "a 'net of uneven mesh' in and through which the spatial practices... of capitalist [accumulation] are stretched unevenly among local, metropolitan, and regional centers" (Brenner 2019:70); and, moreover, that this mesh is made and remade in and through capital's inherent or necessary dynamics and by the convulsions produced in a society dominated by abstract labor, "objectified as value" (Elson 1979:174)—by the "immaterial but objective, historically emerging social compulsion that comes to function in capitalist society like a force of gravity" (Best 2021:899).

Of course, with this first claim in view, we are still quite far from an adequate theorization of the role of the built environment as a modality of articulation. Indeed, the mere fact that capitalist life is spatialized in and through the built environment—and that the built environment is the presupposition and result of capitalist society's constituent features and its most defining social forms (like the value form of wealth itself)—"says nothing [inherently] about which groups in society will actually perform" the specific "functions" of capitalist life or about the ascriptive identities that will emerge in and through those spaces of work, in the abstract (Massey 2004:113). After all, specific populations do not have an "ontologized" position vis-à-vis "global value relations" (see Chandra and Chen 2022:156–57), and while the respatialization of the capitalist built environment and the restructuring of capitalist space occurs as a result of the constitutive, propulsive dynamics produced by the capitalist form of value, the contingent identities of those who come to be associated with the specific forms of capitalist work that are presupposed and produced by these dynamics are far from preordained. What is certain is that new rounds of accumulation entail new spatializations and materializations of capitalist life and "new sources of expectation and obligation for the provision of collective social reproduction" in the broadest sense (Miraftab 2011:399). But the social identities of those assigned to perform specific kinds of work, located in specific places within and across the capitalist built environment, are not logically predetermined (see Mau 2023:162).

And yet, this is not all. The second argument that we must recall, and which has long defined scholarship in critical urban studies, is that the built environment is not simply the presupposition and result of capital's constitutive dynamics and social forms—and that it is remade in moments of crisis—but that, in concrete capitalist conjunctures, the built environment plays an active role in the production and reproduction of distinctive forms of ascriptive identity as well. Indeed, we must recall the long-standing observation in critical socio-spatial scholarship that in concrete historical contexts, "[u]rban form and process and locational differences within [and between] cities *actively construct* [italics added] gender [and race] as well as other social relations" and are not simply the site of their preformed appearance (Bondi and Rose 2003:232). Spaces are not simply retrospectively associated with certain forms of identity—although that is true, given the "imprinting [of] categories of perception" on spatial reality (Wacquant 2022:164). Rather, certain built environments—and certain established socio-spatial forms like "the ghetto," "the plantation," "the kitchen," "the suburb," and "the colony"—participate in the iterative construction of categories of identity like race and gender, too. Of course, those categories of identity are much more than spatially produced. Their production requires more than particular and differentiated built environments. Nevertheless, how an individual or a group occupies and relates to "a particular space and time" informs how that group comes to be differentiated and ascribed, much as "being in the 'wrong' place or time can [] challenge [] roles themselves" (Sayer 2000:116). In certain contexts, not only are built environments associated with distinctive forms of ascriptive differentiation—again, think of "the ghetto," "the plantation," "the kitchen," "the suburb," and "the colony"—but those categories of ascriptive differentiation are the *result* of those socio-spatial forms.

My central contention is that with these two foundational arguments in view, we can begin to see how the built environment functions as a modality of articulation. What we have in view are the claims that ascriptive identities like race and gender are produced and reproduced spatially—albeit, we should add, in distinctive ways, which I am simply bracketing at present.¹³ And, moreover, that so too are the constitutive dynamics of capitalist society, such as the value form of wealth and the processes that constitute it, like exploitation and social reproductive work outside of the wage nexus. In seeing how the built environment functions as a modality of articulation, we must simply recall that these are not two distinctive moments in the reproduction of capitalist life but concurrent ones. We do not at one moment reproduce our ascriptive identities in and through the built environment and at another the constituent features of capitalist society. Rather, we iteratively live our ascriptive identities in and through the built environment, and we simultaneously live capitalism's constituent features. Certain spaces are not only implicated in the production and reproduction of categories of difference, but they are “always already” constituted by and productive of forms of work that define capitalist society at a high level of abstraction. While “the colony,” for example, gives shape to the meaning and significance of race in a particular context, it is also always already constituted by and productive of particular forms of exploitation and expropriation. And “the colony” is thus itself the medium or mechanism through which race is produced and—at one and the same moment—articulated to certain necessary or constituent features of capitalism.

In making the case for the built environment as the mechanism, medium, or modality through which contingent patterns of race and gender are articulated in capitalist society, my language is distinct, but much established work supports this claim. Consider Linda McDowell's classic work in urban geography on the gendered division of urban space in Britain. As McDowell (1983:62) notes, “the division of urban space *both reflects and influences* [italics added] the sexual division of labour, women's role in the family, and the separation of home life from work that developed in the period of capitalist industrialisation.” Here, the “division of urban space” is not productive of gender in one moment and of capital's constituent division between productive and reproductive work in another. Rather, it makes gender via “the separation of home life from work that developed in the period of capitalist industrialisation,” even if gender is also made through other means as well. We glean the same insight from classic work on race and racialization in American urban sociology, too, albeit in a different idiom. Wacquant (2001:116–17), for example, writes that “the ghetto” is—much like other socio-spatial forms—a

“*race making*” institution[] [italics added], which is to say that [it does] not simply process an ethnoracial division that would somehow exist outside of and independently from [it]. Rather, [it] *produces (or co-produces) this division (anew)* [italics added] out of inherited demarcations and disparities of group power and inscribes it... in a distinctive constellation of material and symbolic forms.

The ghetto, per Wacquant, does not produce race in a void but “in a distinctive constellation” of forms of work, which includes those forms of work that define capital at a high level of abstraction.

These references help demonstrate that in concrete contexts, the built environment is centrally implicated in the construction of hierarchized social identities and, in precisely the same moment, in connecting those identities to forms of work and capital's constituent features. The built environment does not “only” play a role in the production of race and gender. It is implicated in the production of these categories of difference and, in practice, in their articulation to particular constituent features of capitalist life. Going further still, the built environment is reciprocally implicated in the production of racialized and gendered patterns of social behavior and reciprocally implicated in the production of group differentiated ideologies and narrative structures regarding the “dynamic material limits to the possibility of [social] change” (Gilmore 2022:489). This final insight is captured in mainstream and heterodox modes of socio-spatial thought, in

work ranging from Wilson's (1997) writing on ghettoization and the production of the norms that prevail among the "new urban poor" to Gilmore's (2022:490) enigmatic invocation of the "infrastructures of feeling" that materially ground "our capacity to...select and reselect liberatory lineages." Not only are categories of difference—and their relation to capital's abstract or constituent features—produced through the built environment, but so too are our forms of life, social behaviors, and (utopian) political imaginaries.

In short, the built environment is not only produced by and productive of categories like race and gender in practice, but it is "always already" implicated in how those categories are positioned vis-à-vis all aspects of capitalist life, and to the reproduction of capitalism's constituent features (see Chibber 2022:174). In practice, those categories of difference do not exist outside of their spatialized expression and connection to capital's necessary relations. And the built environment is, in precisely these terms, a modality of articulation. The production of social and physical space appears as a critical factor—if certainly not the only one—in determining how identities and social groups are reproduced, situated, and linked to the economic, political, and ideological dimensions of capitalist society—to "social location and life chances" (Taylor, as cited in Chandra and Chen 2022:145). Indeed, "habitus"—as Bourdieu would have it—is not only spatially structured, such that groups in different places have different "patterned practices, representations, and emotions...at ground level" (Wacquant 2022:167). But so too is the relationship between distinctive populations—categorized by, among other things, race and gender—and all aspects of the capitalist totality. The built environment does not linearly determine the meaning and significance of categories of identity like race and gender, nor is it the only means through which those categories are made and remade. The built environment is not the only modality of articulation (see Note 6). Yet, race and gender are often only conceivable with reference to their enactment in space, and in their enactment, they are always already articulated to capitalist society's constituent relations.

Still, if the built environment is indeed among the "field of forces and dynamics that produce and follow from the linkage between body and social location" (Taylor, as cited in Chandra and Chen 2022:145), one question raised at the outset of this article remains unanswered: How does the built environment structure how subsequent articulations of capital and logically contingent patterns of ascriptive difference are made? In what sense can we suggest that the built environment, to redeploy language from another context, "might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, [or] forbid" particular expressions of racialized and gendered capitalism (Latour 2005:72)? How does the built environment function as a "line of tendential force"?

My final argument in reference to this question is that while the meaning and significance of race and gender will almost certainly be remade with the crisis-induced reorganization of the built environment—and that the built environment is subject to such transformations as a result of its role in the reproduction of capital at a high level of abstraction—the embedded materiality of the extant built environment effectively ensures that the rearticulation of race, gender, and the necessary features of capitalist society will take place within a fairly circumscribed spectrum of possibility. It will take place within a spectrum of possible combinations and not in a totally open field (see Balibar and Wallerstein 1991:40), with the built environment providing a degree of continuity to the reproduction of the social formation over time. "The organization of space," as Santos (2021:98) writes, "tends to reproduce its principle lines of force." And what this means is not simply that the distribution of human settlement will have some continuity over time, but that the relationship between particular populations, particular physical and social spaces, and the spatialization of capitalist society's constituent dynamics is relatively continuous too. "Space as a form...is not phantasmagoric" (p. 112). The complex and contingent features of any capitalist society manifest spatially; geographical space always registers the social formation or "the mode

of production in its *concrete coming into being* [italics added]" (p. 104). And once this materialization has occurred, produced space operates as a "dynamic inertia" that shapes future historical-geographical evolution (p. 103).

In saying as much, I am emphasizing—if only indirectly—the well-established claim in critical socio-spatial theory that the reweaving of capitalist space takes place through a process of layering and relayering. Capitalist "regions occupy unique positions within wider divisions of labor, their political cultures and class, [race,] and gender profiles reflecting (*in 'sedimented' form*) the cumulative effects of the succession of historical roles [italics added] that those places ha[ve] played in different production networks ... and 'rounds of accumulation'" (Peck 2015; see also Massey 1995:114). And going further still, I am suggesting that these historically "sedimented" profiles constitute an "objective constraint" on the remaking of the relationship between capitalist society's constitutive features and logically contingent forms of ascriptive difference (Lipietz, as cited in Soja 1985:98). "The sobering reality," as Markusen (1980:36) notes, is that the place of race and gender in the social whole is "literally constructed in brick and concrete." The articulation of these forms of difference in the whole "lingers in the material ordering of social space" (Singh 2022:36). And as such, while the relation between race, gender, and capital's necessary forms of productive and reproductive work—and, indeed, the socio-spatial totality in general—can be remade, what comes before in space establishes the parameters and potentialities for what will be made next.

While I will not provide an extensive illustration of how this dynamic functions empirically, we might recall—if only to concretize this claim somewhat—that the shifting spatialities of capitalist production and the reweaving of the built environment in and beyond the United States in the 1970s not only partially dislodged the articulation of racialization, expropriation, and industrial superexploitation; but, moreover, that it rearticulated and solidified the relationship between black racialization, specifically, and another constituent dynamic of the capitalist system—expulsion, wagelessness, and devalorization. Global deindustrialization and the emergence of the "long-downturn"—to say nothing of the logistics revolution and the suburbanization of employment—meant, in the United States, that "the vast majority of uneducated blacks [were consigned] to economic redundancy" (Wacquant 2001:105; see also Bernes 2013). And, crucially for our purposes, the inherited socio-spatial structure of the ghetto, broadly speaking, played an undeniable and profoundly significant constraining role in this dynamic of rearticulation, operating as a "key structural factor[] responsible for the perpetuation [and reorganization] of black poverty" in that context (Massey and Denton 1993:9; see also Wilson 1997). "The ghetto" gave way to the "hyperghetto," which was defined by specific physical and social infrastructures and symbolic representations, and which produced a new meaning of "race" as well. The physical, social, and "organizational structures" of the hyperghetto were not simply made "in accordance with the law of value" but made from the geographical conditions of the previous society—from its spatial distribution of productive forces, infrastructures for provisioning the flow of "ideas as well as material goods," its "schools, churches, shopping centres and parks, roads and railways" (Harvey 1982:373; see also Mills [1997] on the "norming" and "racing" of space).

And, of course, if the built environment has functioned as a critical means of constructing, articulating, and constraining the nature of ascriptive difference in U.S. capitalist society, this dynamic is hardly only observable in that context alone. Daniel Nemser's (2017) *Infrastructures of Race* is useful here, providing an illustration of the theorization above, beyond the U.S. context. Tracking what he refers to as a "genealogy of concentration" (Nemser 2017:2–5), Nemser demonstrates that the spatial techniques and material infrastructures of colonial governance in sixteenth-century Mexico not only produced the racialized category of "the Indian" within a "grid of intelligibility": They rendered conjuncturally specific races as "thinkable," articulating distinctive races to specific "machineries of extraction and accumulation," processes of Christian

salvation, and forms of tribute as well. As Nemser notes, the early colonial state centralized and concentrated indigenous communities into “orderly towns” organized “along a regular, orthogonal grid” (pp. 20–21). Between roughly the “founding of Vasco de Quiroga’s ‘hospital-towns’ in the early 1530s and . . . the official prohibition of the labor draft known as *repartimiento* in 1632,” these infrastructures effectively made the category of “the Indian” (p. 27).

These built environments produced the category of “the Indian” and, in so doing, articulated that category primarily with capital’s requisite forms of superexploitation and expropriation (Nemser 2017:21, 58). And going further still, Nemser (2017) underscores two additional points, which are critical to the present argument. First, he notes that the remaking and articulation of gender was profoundly implicated in this process, such that the “reterritorialization” of indigenous people in space not only produced the paradoxically “deterritorialized” notion of “the Indian,” but a new set of gender norms and practices within and beyond the home, and “embedded in the architectonic structure” (pp. 40, 58). Second, Nemser notes that these infrastructures of race and gender established the parameters for future articulations, given that infrastructures “tend[] to cohere around the accretions that precede [them]” and weigh “like a nightmare on the circulation of the present” (pp. 19–20). Nemser effectively demonstrates through his genealogy of concentration how the built environment might function—outside the U.S. context—as a modality of articulation that connects capital and ascriptive difference; and how it operates as a line of tendential force that constrains how capital and logically contingent patterns of ascriptive difference are rearticulated as well.

There are surely antecedents to the line of argumentation I am developing here, in both the theoretical literature traced above and beyond it. To provide just one example, Althusser himself, in his late work on the *Philosophy of the Encounter* (posthumously published in English in 2006), develops a conception of historical geography that rejects any notion of the directionality of history while also emphasizing—following Lucretius’s materialism—that once a “world is born” out of the “pile-up and collision-interlocking” of elements, what comes next is “*determined . . . by the structure of the encounter* [*italics added*]” (Althusser 2006:191). In other words, Althusser suggests in this late intervention that even if there is no rationale for any originary combination of contingent elements—or even if “no law presides over the encounter in which things take hold”—what follows will always be “subject to rules and obey[] laws,” while being simultaneously open to contestation and change (pp. 194–95). There is much to recommend in such an account, suggesting, as it does, a relatively sophisticated approach to the problem of path-dependency that does not budge on the original question of history’s movement. Althusser is here interested, I would suggest, in developing an account of something like the historical endurance of “contingent necessities”—so central, incidentally, to Jessop’s (1990:11) early critique of Althusserianism and its received language of determinacy—“whose own necessity originates only in and through the contingent coming together of . . . causal chains in a definite context.”

My specific theorization of the built environment’s role as a modality of articulation and line of tendential force remains, however, decidedly different from this late Althusserianism, and rather more specific still. Not only is my assertion that “[t]he construction of the system of spatialities” that defines the capitalist built environment “a prime means to articulate power systems” that might only be contingently related or aleatorily combined (Harvey 1989:249). It is, moreover, that the potential meaning and significance of race and gender—as contingently articulated phenomena in capitalist society—is delimited by how certain subjects and ascriptive groups have been geographically produced during previous rounds of accumulation. My claim is not simply that the past persists, “depositing in every present its residual traces” (Harootunian 2015:17). It is that the built environment is “a produced space that does *more* than represent. It guides” (Mitchell 2008:44). And this is thus also not simply a trite reformulation of the notion of “duality of structure,” or another means of suggesting that “the structural properties of social

systems...are both medium and outcome of [the reproduction of] the practices that constitute those systems” and that this dynamic takes place in space (Giddens, as cited in Pred 1981:8). It is a necessary prerequisite for a spatial reading of Marx’s own formulation in the *Grundrisse*: his contention that it is out of the ruins of the articulated “structure [Gliederung] and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations” that later social formations emerge (Marx, as cited in Kortesoja 2023:46). Insofar as they are present, racialization and gendered hierarchization are articulated to the social whole through their enactment in the built environment; and both forms of ascription function in ways that are “historical and specific” and—more importantly in the present context—“cumulative and territorially distinct” (Gilmore 2022:115).

Conclusion

This article has taken up a very specific relation to the concept of articulation. Whereas some writing in the wake of Althusser have suggested that “[t]he social is articulation insofar as ‘society’ is impossible”—that articulation is a necessary feature of capitalist society precisely because “there is *no identity* [italics added] which can be fully constituted” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:111, 114)—I have argued something rather different. I have suggested that capitalist society in particular is constituted by both necessary and contingent elements—or essential and nonessential relations—with race and gender falling squarely into the latter category. Moreover, I have insisted that in order to properly grasp how the articulation and reproduction of these necessary and contingent elements takes place, we would do well to engage the built environment. Against the backdrop of Stuart Hall’s articulationist writing on capital and ascriptive difference—which I took as the most sophisticated expression of an ongoing tradition of writing on that theme—I made the case for the built environment as a modality of articulation and line of tendential force. The normative implications of this account of articulation and the built environment will have to be considered more fully in another context. At present, however, suffice it to simply note that “a worker [always] has multiple subject-orientations determined by class and other structures”; and “workers” must be politically “mobilized on the basis of a variety of (layered and sometimes contradictory) subjective identifications” (McCarthy and Desan 2023:19; see also Hall 2017:58). What comes into view, in light of those claims, is that the capitalist built environment is central to this complex dynamic of subject-orientation determination, and that it must be considered in our effort to develop a politics that can construct connections across difference.

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Notes

1. I discuss these issues at length in Conroy (2023), which is itself a longer version of the argument developed in Conroy (2022). In that work, I argue that much of the scholarship on racial capitalism—including Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (2000), specifically—implies that capitalist society is necessarily racialized insofar as it suggests that capitalist society carries with it a distinctively Western or European racist metaphysic.

2. We find a version of this strong claim in Fortunati's (1995:39) *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, as she suggests that "male/female inequality, far from being a relic of barbarism, is inherent, inborn and necessary for the functioning of the capitalist mode of production."
3. Here, I should underscore two points regarding my usage of "necessity" and "contingency." First, my primary objective in using this language is to differentiate "good abstractions" from "chaotic conceptions." Chaotic conceptions "arbitrarily divide[] the indivisible and/or lump[] together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby 'carving up' the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form" (Sayer 1992:138). They lump together the necessary and the contingent, whereas good or rational abstractions do not. Second, in my usage, "contingency" is dissociated from terms like "local," "insignificant," "haphazard," or "random." It is my view that "to describe a relation as necessary... or contingent... is to say something about the conditions of existence of the relata; in the first case that the very existence of the relata is interdependent, in the second case that it is not" (Sayer 1991:292).
4. In referring to the "articulationist" school on capitalism ascriptive difference, I am not referring to work that posits racism and sexism as wholly autonomous from capitalism, such that each of those systems can be addressed without affecting the others (for what I take to be an illustration of that position, see Michaels and Reed 2022).
5. In my conceptualization, the built environment has a specific temporality—it preempts and interpellates us (Robbins 2007). It includes plantations and designated conservation areas just as much as sidewalks and apartment complexes, but it excludes the atmosphere, rain, and the squirrel outside my window given that these latter objects were not produced in the service of particular forms of use.
6. My claim is not that the built environment is the sole modality of articulation. That said, it is a particularly significant one given the continuity and "durability" it gives to particular articulations of capital and difference.
7. Althusser (1976) sketches out his own understanding of the intellectual and political context of this work in "Is It Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?," a key moment in his *Essays in Self-Criticism*.
8. While it is not my concern here, "On the Materialist Dialectic" also contains a wide-ranging discussion of the production of scientific knowledge, or, in Althusser's language, of the production of "scientific generality" out of "ideological generality."
9. Althusser (1990:63) situates the "true" Marxist practice of figures like Lenin in opposition to the political practice of many of the parties of the Second International, which were defined by their "mechanistic, economistic and evolutionist relationship to Marxist theory."
10. For a more extended discussion of this kind of thinking on unevenness and temporality outside of the Althusserian paradigm, see Harootunian (2015).
11. This argument is repeated, almost verbatim, in Hall's coauthored *Policing the Crisis* (1978).
12. See Hall's "Marx's Notes on Method: A 'Reading' of the '1857 Introduction'" and "Rethinking the 'Base and Superstructure' Metaphor," both of which are included in Hall (2021a).
13. My intention is not to obscure the significant differences between race and gender in capitalist society—and their distinctive, if interrelated, genealogies and spatialities. With that said, both can be described in comparable terms in the present context insofar as both are spatially constituted and reproduced.

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