



PROJECT MUSE®

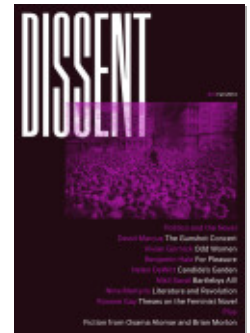
## Brute Ideology

Walter Johnson

Dissent, Volume 61, Number 4, Fall 2014, pp. 127-132 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2014.0090>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/554798>

## **Brute Ideology** Walter Johnson

*Racecraft:*

*The Soul of Inequality in American Life*  
by Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields  
Verso, 2012, 310 pp.

*The Problem of Slavery in the Age of  
Emancipation*

by David Brion Davis  
Knopf, 2014, 448 pp.

The field of U.S. history today is characterized by a mania for management. The “new” history of capitalism has focused its attention on the creation and daily reanimation of the grand abstraction from which it draws its title: the mid-level market makers who take capital and transform it into capitalism. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, increasing numbers of historians have turned their attention to the histories of powerful historical actors we have too long ignored or dismissed as “dead white men” unworthy of the attention of the properly progressive historian: financiers, bankers, and businessmen of all kinds. Despite the obvious importance of the task and the avowedly critical purpose of the turn towards the study of the mechanisms of market practice, however, some of the bolder claims that have been used to mark out the novelty of this “new” history seem unwarranted, perhaps even misguided. Can historians really set aside the study of racial and sexual domination now that they have discovered the economic exploitation underlying all other history? Can they really write a better history of capitalism by simply replacing the history of the marginal with the history of the powerful? Amidst the end-of-historiography enthusiasm for the “new” history of capitalism, two recent books remind us of the enduring importance of some of the questions posed by the old history of capitalism: questions of determination, ideology, and hegemony, and of collective action, resistance, and (even) revolutionary social change.

Bringing together previously published and new essays treating U.S. history from the time of the American Revolution to the eve of the Occupy movement in 2011, *Racecraft* reminds us that, at the very least,

the “new” history of capitalism has some very distinguished antecedents. Taken together, the writing of the historian Barbara J. Fields and the sociologist Karen E. Fields (sisters; hereafter “Fields and Fields”) provides a sustained and brilliant exposition of the history and practice of race-marking in America. If race is “socially constructed,” as virtually every educated person in the United States knows it officially to be, then why do we believe we can determine the race of the person on the other end of the line as soon as we pick up the phone?

As the title’s invocation of witchcraft suggests, the book is framed by the idea that there is something occult about such everyday practices of divination. For the authors, race is a kind of magical thinking, a way of isolating a few of the surface features of near-infinite human diversity and over-generalizing them into an architecture of biological, social, and even metaphysical difference. Race thinking, they suggest, is a sort of transubstantiation that adduces essence out of circumstance, made up of turns of phrase and ways of thinking so familiar and yet so powerful as to persistently remake the material world in their own image.

Fields and Fields illustrate and expose this sort of magic through a close reading of the printed matter of our times: newspaper accounts of proudly segregated high-school proms and white supremacists carrying guns to Obama campaign rallies; peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly journals and the bureaucratic memos that established the “multiracial” category in the U.S. census. They juxtapose the “trog-lodyte racism” of the crypto-Klan birthers to the breathless intonations of historical transcendence (“the end of racism??!!”) common among twenty-first-century white liberals. The main argument of the book is with the latter’s sometimes unwitting, sometimes self-congratulatory engagement with the dark magic of racial difference itself.

Take the “multiracial” moment—the idea that the bad old days of “black” and “white” may finally be giving way to an embrace of “mixture” and “difference.” But wait: “mixture” of what with what? According to *Racecraft*, the Census Bureau defines a “multiracial” person as “someone with two monoracial parents.” Through the heart of

the celebration of the new multiracialism circulates a notion of blood purity worthy of *The Birth of a Nation*. For Fields and Fields, any invocation of “race” as an explanatory or even descriptive category is in and of itself racist. The use of “race” to explain anything from ancestry to economic inequality unwittingly reinforces the false belief in deep-rooted biological differences between black and white people. “Ancestry,” according to the authors, should be understood as a way that individuals are linked across generations without being thickened into “race.” Heredity, whether responsible for visible traits like curly hair or hidden ones like the sickle cell, is just that and nothing more: “genetic’ is not equivalent to ‘racial.’”

If we had only to worry about a mediascape where relevance is measured by the ability to attach ideas to beginnings and endings (the “post-racial” election of the “first black president”) things would be bad enough. “Racecraft,” however, has infiltrated even the hallowed ground of academia. Precisely and compellingly, Fields and Fields demonstrate that scientists use “racial” causes to explain what are in fact social effects. A recent scientific study of high asthma rates among schoolchildren in the South Bronx, for example, concluded that—in addition to heavy traffic, dense population, poor housing, and lack of preventative health care—the neighborhood was characterized by “a large population of blacks and Hispanics, two groups with very high rates of asthma.”

Even as the idea that “race is a social construction” has reached the level of truism among academics, most continue to think, write, and act as if there are identifiable races—not just “blacks” and “whites,” but “Hispanics,” “Native Americans,” and “Asian Americans”—and as if those categories provide a solid basis for understanding history and society. As the authors write, “Race relations as an analysis of society takes for granted that race is a valid empirical datum and thereby shifts attention from the actions that constitute racism—enslavement, disenfranchisement, segregation, lynching, massacres, and pogroms—to the traits that constitute race.” As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “The black man is someone who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”

A classic essay by Barbara Fields, originally published in 1990, provides the

historical foundation of the critique outlined in *Racecraft*. The premise of the essay, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America,” is that “when virtually the whole of society ... commits itself to belief in propositions that collapse into absurdity upon the slightest examination, the reason is not hallucination or delusion or even simple hypocrisy; rather it is ideology.” Her definition of “ideology” is unapologetically Marxist and refreshingly orthodox; it is the day-to-day vocabulary of prevailing economic and social relationships. And the material foundation of racist ideology in the United States, Fields argues, was slavery.

Slavery did not always exist in the British colonies of North America. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, indenture was the dominant mode of labor in colonial Virginia, and the vast majority of bonded laborers had been born in England. Only as indentures began to term out and the growing number of emancipated Englishmen began to demand political rights concomitant with those of their landed neighbors did wealthy Virginians begin to look for another source of labor. They found it in slaves from Africa. Those slaves were available, they were bonded for life, and they were excluded from the political rights increasingly being claimed by emancipated Virginians.

Saying that this transition can be explained by racial difference, however, strikes Fields as analogous to saying that “the Civil War *explains* why Americans fought between 1861 and 1865.” The relevant difference between Englishmen and Africans was not racial, it was historical, rooted in histories of struggle that made it more difficult to manage and exploit “free-born Englishmen” than it did enslaved Africans. The contradiction between the enslavement of some and the equality attributed to all at the moment of the American Revolution subsequently spawned a set of explanations (or perhaps even rationalizations): “Those holding liberty to be inalienable, and holding Afro-Americans as slaves, were bound to end by holding race to be a self-evident truth.” Every subsequent generation of Americans has “re-invented” and “re-ritualized” that ideology in everyday life.

The connections between race-thinking and ritual are made plain in another classic essay, “Witchcraft and Racecraft: Invisible

Ontology in Its Sensible Manifestations,” written by Karen Fields. Both witchcraft and racecraft, she argues, are patterns of thought that lead otherwise sensible people to uncritically believe in non-existent things. Each represents a commitment to an “invisible ontology”—a rational (which is not to say accurate) way of explaining how things came to be a certain way, an accounting of cause and consequence. In the case of witchcraft, for example, the surface features of repeated bad luck—hit by a truck, fell from a tree, hit by another truck—make sense when interpreted as serial manifestations of a single underlying curse. Likewise, the impoverished, excluded, stigmatized, and imprisoned are viewed as racially different. Witchcraft and racecraft—unlike witches and race—are things that actually exist. They help make sense of the invisible order that underlies the palpable experience of everyday life; they revivify belief through its incessant ritualization.

*Racecraft* concludes with an essay on the question of inequality in the contemporary United States. While the vast majority of recipients of public assistance in the United States self-identify as “white,” the common association of poverty with blackness, argue the authors, has foreclosed the possibility of a thoroughgoing critique of inequality. Any effort to provide what should be basic rights—“a decent job, a solid education, health care, dignity in old age”—is ultimately forestalled by the association of “government entitlements” with “black people.” In speaking of the racial politics of the Obama presidency, Fields and Fields observe that the “inclination to shun identification with black Americans makes it impossible for him [Obama] to identify with the modest wage and salary-earners, the unemployed, and the working and disabled poor of all ancestries; in short, the bottom 99 percent of American society.” “Racecraft,” Fields and Fields conclude, “shrinks our mental world to its own pusillanimous measure.”

*Racecraft* is a brilliant book: by turns incisive, wise, outraged, and mordantly funny. It is mindful of language in a way that seems, at least to me, unique. Yet it is also rather Presbyterian: rigidly textual and drily unfor- giving. The sources Fields and Fields use to represent “the United States of America” are drawn from a fairly narrow band of dis- course: articles printed in scholarly journals,

mass-market periodicals, and newspapers published in New York and Washington, D.C., as well as a few telling stories drawn from personal experience. There is little attention given to the broad-band of race- (and money-) making cultural forms gener- ally known as American culture: from the NBA to N.W.A., from Claude McKay to Clarence Thomas, from *Django Unchained* to Dave Chapelle. Countless sites of racecraft, theaters of racial call and response, fall out- side the ambit of their book.

That might not be a problem but for the corresponding narrowness of the remedy that Fields and Fields prescribe. Having written a book about language based on textual evidence, Fields and Fields pro- pose more of the same: “observe racecraft in action, study its moves, listen to its lan- guage, and root it out.” And then: “Only after doing so will we be prepared for the still harder work of tackling inequality.” This is a strange conclusion for a book that con- tains one of the most resolutely materialist analyses of racial thought ever written. It is as if racial ideology has been lifted out of its embeddedness in the material conditions of twenty-first-century life, from Manhattan and Mississippi (not to mention Monrovia and Martinique), only to be set down again squarely in the middle of the editorial page of the *New York Times*.

Of course, Fields and Fields are intellec- tuals, Verso publishes books read mostly by intellectuals, this journal is read mostly by intellectuals, and I’m mostly an intel- lectual. There is nothing wrong with close reading and careful argument in the ser- vice of social justice. It is just that the close reading and careful argument are granted a sort of elect privilege in *Racecraft*, while other sorts of methods advocated by other sorts of seekers are pitilessly cast out. Fields and Fields have no time for cultural nationalism or counter-hegemony, much less black nationalism, affirmative action, African-American Studies, or presumably any other sort of usage of the word “we” among the darker peoples of the world. Fields and Fields have an approach to polit- ical mobilization that is as inherently limited (especially in regard to those who under- stand their joys and sorrows, their triumphs and their oppressions as features of their lives as black people) as it is intellectually astringent.

Still, in contrast to the neo-progressive top-downism of so much of the “new” history of capitalism, the approach of Fields and Fields to economic analysis and political mobilization (albeit old-fashioned) at least takes the ideas and actions of people other than bankers and businessmen seriously. The idea that ordinary people might, by dint of intellectual hard work and collective action, transform the framing parameters of their lives is the framing premise of David Brion Davis’s recent book. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* is the third and final volume of Davis’s field-defining trilogy, published almost fifty years after the first. It is only appropriate to begin by saying thank you: Davis has done as much as any scholar to advance and define the modern field of slavery studies. Like the other volumes, this one is a testament to Davis’s learning and his generosity (it seems as if every scholar who has written a book on slavery in the last twenty-five years or so is name-checked in the text). If this book, which ranges between the Old Testament, the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, the Second World War in Europe, and the present-day United States, seems different in both empirical foundation and analytical ambition from its more rigorous predecessors, it is also true that David Brion Davis has earned the right to have his say.

Davis has always asked essential questions. In *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966), he asked how it was that after centuries of equating slavery with social order, people first came to believe it was wrong. In *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975), he asked how people began to try to do something about it: the identification of slavery as a specifically “racial” problem, he argued in a line of reasoning later picked up by Barbara Fields, made it seem uniquely wrong to its opponents, even as it enabled them to ignore other wrongs, specifically the “wage slavery” of the white working class. Now, in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (2014), Davis asks how people came to believe that black people—slaves for so long—were human beings, fully entitled to the same rights and privileges as others. Like *Racecraft*, the latest *Problem* is as much a work of moral philosophy as of history, framed by Davis’s palpable anguish at the wrongs he describes.

Davis begins with a simple, if debatable, premise: slavery was, as the title of another of his books would have it, “inhuman.” While the centuries of slavery described elsewhere in the trilogy might seem to suggest otherwise, Davis remains committed to a sort of final-instance humanity, to the idea that it requires some sort of moral mystification for human beings to set aside their innate empathy and do horrible things to one another. Specifically, he suggests that world-historical moral wrongs like genocide and slavery require the “animalization” of the victims. Davis explains what he means in an extended comparison of the psychoethics of American slavery to those of the Holocaust: “the creation of ‘animalized humans’ can produce a mental state in the victimizers and spectators that disconnects the neural sources of human identification, empathy, and compassion, the very basis for the Golden Rule and all human ethics.”

Of course, Davis is not saying that enslaved people were animals, only that their owners treated them that way. Nor is he arguing that enslaved people “internalized” the idea that they were animals, although he allows that, at certain times and under certain circumstances, they did. Rather, he is using the idea of “animalization” to reframe the problem of slavery: the “impossibility of converting humans into the totally compliant, submissive, accepting chattel” stood in contradiction to slaveholders’ “efforts at animalization.” This is the problem of slavery in the age of emancipation.

According to Davis, the Haitian Revolution posed significant philosophical and psychic (as well as enormous practical) problems for New World slaveholders, especially those in the United States. Masters who had recognized that barnyard animals might run away or resist but not revolt were now faced with proof that the enslaved could rebel on a world-changing scale. This eruption of the contradiction at the heart of human “animalization,” Davis argues, was gradually reworked into a new pro-slavery synthesis: the idea that the Revolution was characterized by uncontrolled savagery rather than collective self-organization, by the upswelling passions of the “id” rather than the stabilizing impulses of the “ego.”

Images—tales, rumors, and fantasies—of the Revolution in Haiti framed the politics of slavery in the antebellum United States. For

white opponents of slavery, it was a setback. The horrific violence of the Revolution was cited to show that slavery was the opposite of “race war” and “barbarism,” rather than “freedom” and “progress.” But for black opponents of slavery, especially black men, the Revolution quickly became a touchstone. It provided abolitionists like Denmark Vesey and Frederick Douglass with a model of black martial “honor” and a historical reassurance that bondage was neither an inevitable nor an eternal fate. Where Douglass saw in the Revolution a refutation of the stigma of black incapacity, many white people saw it as bolstering their briefly unsettled notions of black inferiority.

In the image of the post-Revolutionary re-animalized “Negro,” white Americans projected their deepest fear about themselves: their base commonality with the animalian majority of Creation. Many whites harbored doubts about the morality or wisdom of slavery but held fast to their negative opinion of black people—and were increasingly certain that there was no place for them in the United States. The most immediate result of the Haitian Revolution in the United States, Davis suggests, was an almost compulsive mania for expelling African Americans. He provides a comprehensive and fascinating account of the American Colonization Society and its erstwhile colony, Liberia, framed by the idea that in expelling blacks, American whites, even well-meaning ones, unconsciously hoped to rid themselves of the bestiality that lurked within themselves.

You will have noticed by now that Davis leans heavily on mass psychology to explain both enslavement and emancipation. Both bondage and freedom, he argues, were driven by the process of “dehumanization and animalization” by which slaveholders reduced “a human to the status of chattel property, an instrument to serve the needs of the owner.” And so emancipation became a drama of self-realization: of African Americans proving to both whites and to themselves that they were human beings, not animals. As the historian Nell Irvin Painter has argued, “soul murder” was an integral aspect of the history of slavery. The ghost of Stanley Elkins’s “Sambo thesis” (set forth in the widely read 1959 book, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*), which held that slavery

infantilized black people, has for too long haunted any effort to explore the affective dimensions of slavery. But is the “animalization” thesis the best way to go about it?

In her classic 1990 essay, Barbara Fields makes a distinction between *doctrine* and *ideology*. Doctrine, for her, is a ruling class’s official version of things—all men are created equal; all slaves are animals. But it should be distinguished from ideology, the “distillate of experience” drawn from everyday experience—*I own that man and so must be better than him; even though I am better, the man I own can do things I cannot*. The problem with Davis’s treatment of “animalization,” is that he mistakes doctrine for ideology; indeed, he imagines the daily life of slavery as a contest over pro-slavery doctrine. “Juvenilization,” writes Davis, “the development of childlike characteristics in slaves was clearly the goal of numerous slaveholders, despite their lack of any scientific understanding of how domestication had changed the nature and behavior of animals.”

Was it really? As Fields argues in the same essay, slaveholders were interested in producing tobacco, sugar, and cotton, not in proving an abstract point about the nature of black people. Indeed, as Davis recognizes, the daily business of slavery was dependent upon black capacity, not incapacity. But, having suggested that slaveholders were self-consciously trying to “dehumanize” or “animalize” their slaves, Davis goes on to suggest that black abolitionists understood their task to be framed by the imperative to “rehumanize” themselves and their fellows. The great radical pamphleteer David Walker, for instance, “had a passionate desire to solve the problems of black dehumanization and white racism,” and “expressed a deep concern over the way that slavery ... had dehumanized American slaves and even many free blacks.”

But, is that actually what he said? Walker was unstintingly critical of others—slaves and free people of color alike—very few of whom he believed possessed his spirit and intelligence. But he never (*pace* Davis) quite said that black people had “become domesticated animals.” Instead, he worried that “in consequence of oppression,” they had “nearly lost the spirit of man, and in no very trifling degree, adopted that of brutes.” That’s the word he used over and over again:

“brute.” And it is the same word that Frederick Douglass used—as did the influential minister and orator, Henry Highland Garnet. What did they mean?

“Brute” turns out to be an exceptionally interesting word. It is nasty and pejorative and can be applied to animals and human beings alike, even to ideas: “brute beasts,” “brute creation,” “brute force,” “brute conjugality,” “brute materialism.” It often marks a boundary between human and animal but is not a word that confuses one with the other: both humans and animals can be “brutes,” but being that way does not make one into the other. In its dominant usage, applied to human beings, it means dull or stupid or rough or unreasoning or sensual. Base, but human. The word “brute” described the condition of human beings stripped of their higher-order functions: pleasures and aspirations; creativity and generosity. “Brute” can describe the condition of slavery, the condition of being treated like an animal, or of being used as an instrument. It is a distillate of the everyday experience of slavery.

Why make such a big deal over a single word? Because being treated *like* an animal is not the same thing as being turned into one, and the difference is absolutely essential. The word “brute” holds the categories “human” and “animal” in dynamic tension, without reducing either one to the other; it marks the existence of what Du Bois termed a *tertium quid*, a third thing. Among black abolitionists, the humanness of slaves was never in doubt, though others might doubt it. “You have to prove to the Americans and the world, that we are MEN, and not *brutes*, as we have been represented, and by millions treated,” wrote David Walker. The fact that we regard slaveholders to have acted “inhumanly” or treated their slaves like animals does not mean that they “dehumanized” or still less “animalized” their slaves. Saying so confuses the actions of a subject with the character of the object, racism with race, as Fields and Fields would have it.

The black abolitionist usage of “brute,” however, also suggests a corrective to the account of ideology and racism offered in *Racecraft*. Rather than tacitly acknowledging their erstwhile “animalization,” as Davis might have it, or unwittingly re-catalyzing a distillate ideology produced out of the very history they sought to escape, as Fields and Fields might have it, when

they used the word “brute,” black abolitionists were repurposing the racial ideology of slavery to serve their own ends. Their achievement, one that Davis, with some reason, terms “the greatest landmark of willed moral progress in human history,” reminds us of the enduring importance of cultures and ideologies of resistance—of social histories written from the bottom-up—to any “fully-loaded” cost accounting of the history of capitalism and slavery.

*Walter Johnson directs the Charles Warren Center for the Study of American History at Harvard University. He is the author of the recently published River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom.*

### **The Gospel According to Terry** Eugene McCarragher

*Culture and the Death of God*  
by Terry Eagleton  
Yale University Press, 2014, 248 pp.

God has been through a very rough patch over the last 500 years. Once the Creator and Ruler of the universe, He fell into a long and precipitous decline with the advent of modernity. Dethroned as Ruler in the North Atlantic by religious tolerance and democracy, the Almighty watched helplessly as science refuted His claim to be the Creator. Historians, archeologists, and literary scholars broke the spell of His holy books, impugning their inerrancy and exposing them as riven by myths, errors, and contradictions. Add popular education, material prosperity, and longevity extended by better diet and medicine, and God’s hold on the moral and metaphysical imagination grew ever more attenuated.

Secular intellectuals have been of two minds about the Heavenly Father’s demise. Hoping that the last king would be strangled with the entrails of the last priest, Diderot mused that God had become “one of the most sublime and useless truths.” Yet Voltaire—fearful that his own impiety would embolden his servants to murder and larceny—maintained that if God did not exist, it