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White Dominion as Control: On Scientific Management and Racial Capitalism

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White Dominion as Control: On Scientific Management and Racial Capitalism

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

The question of how contemporary capitalist societies remain shaped by slavery animates numerous recent debates in the humanities and social sciences.¹ Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois, political theorist Ella Myers has recently contributed to these discussions by arguing that, although abolition ended the legal ownership of one person by another, white identity is still activated by the idea of ownership over non-white people. In describing the afterlife of racialized practices of ownership and possession, Myers describes this Du Boisian position as “whiteness-as-dominion” and argues that it exceeds Du Bois’s notion of “wages of whiteness.”² For Myers, whiteness-as-dominion includes at least three elements: the *exploitation* of non-white peoples and materials, the *dispossession* of non-white people’s lands, and a near-religious *faith* in white people’s entitlement to possess the non-white world. By incorporating these elements, Myers argues that whiteness-as-dominion helps us see not only Du Bois’s account of racial capitalism but “racial-colonial capitalism.”³

Through an attentive reading of Du Bois’s texts between 1920 and 1940, especially *Darkwater* and *Dusk of Dawn*, Myers provides an indispensable exegesis of Du Bois’s claim in “The Souls of White Folk,” an essay in 1920’s *Darkwater*, that “whiteness is the ownership of the earth,

¹ For a concise summary of some important views, see Orlando Patterson’s new preface to *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), x-xi, xviii-xx.

² Ella Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage: Du Bois on White Dominion,” *Political Theory* 47, no. 1 (2019): 6-31.

³ Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 20.

for ever and ever, Amen!”⁴ And by showing how whiteness-as-dominion moves beyond the “wages of whiteness” thesis, Myers elaborates an important way of thinking about white identity in capitalist societies. However, her emphasis on ownership may obscure another aspect of whiteness that Du Bois raises in “The Souls of White Folk,” a few paragraphs after his claim about the desire for ownership. I refer to Du Bois’s discussion of what happens when Black people reject a white sense of entitlement, often simply by existing in public spaces. According to Du Bois, when resistance to whiteness-as-dominion occurs, white people do not merely reassert their right to ownership but become hostile and seek to actively *control* non-white people. As historian Caitlin Rosenthal has recently noted, the term control typically refers to “direction, management, and surveillance.”⁵ Myers tends to emphasize the assertion of ownership that Du Bois describes but downplays the strategies of control that white people employ when their assertions are resisted. In doing so, Myers potentially misses the dynamic nature of whiteness-as-dominion, which contains a first step in which ownership is asserted, and a second, which revolves around tactics of control.

I therefore argue that the idea of white dominion can be deepened by paying greater attention to practices of racial control. Yet Du Bois himself, at least in “The Souls of White Folk,” tends to emphasize the most extreme forms of control, writing of white attempts at “destroying, killing...[and] torturing of human beings,” and of “cruelty, barbarism, and

⁴ W.E.B Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Howe, 1920), 30.

⁵ Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 4.

murder...”⁶ In the context of Jim Crow and world war, this emphasis on spectacular forms of violence is accurate; however, Du Bois elsewhere points to less extraordinary modes of racial control, and it is this thread of his work that I follow in this essay. More specifically, I elaborate Du Bois’s suggestive claim in his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn* that whiteness in the twentieth century has been premised on a “ruling caste of the Efficient,” with “Efficiency—Ability at the top and submission and thrift at the bottom.”⁷ Glossing a prevailing view of whiteness during Jim Crow, Du Bois writes that “the efficient” tend to be construed as “well-bred persons of English descent and New England nurture...[and] remnants of the Southern slave-holding aristocracy and some of the Mid-Western agrarian stock...”⁸ He briefly touches on this connection between whiteness and efficiency in “The Souls of White Folk,” writing that “Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is [considered] ‘white’...”⁹ Yet in these texts, while Du Bois briefly objects to how “efficiency” is linked to white racial identity he never amplifies this point into a full-blown argument.

To reconstruct the link between efficient forms of control and whiteness, my strategy in this essay will be to trace out the racial dimensions of two of the most prominent theorists and advocates of efficiency, Charles Babbage and Frederick Winslow Taylor, considered the founders of scientific management. I read Babbage’s 1833 book *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* and Taylor’s 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management* through the lens of racial capitalism.

⁶ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 33.

⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 158.

⁸ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 158.

⁹ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 44.

Racial capitalism is a concept meant to show how capitalist economic processes—especially the division of labor—operate through racial categories and practices. Rather than seeing capitalism as a homogenizing force that standardizes everything, theorists of racial capitalism show how economic actors exploit land and labor via the proliferation of difference.¹⁰ In this essay, I draw on Onur Ulas Ince’s argument that seemingly neutral categories of capitalist political economies, such as productivity and efficiency, are infused with racial meanings.¹¹

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first, I set out Myers’s account of whiteness-as-dominion and show why it is illuminating for scholars of race, capitalism, colonialism, and Du Bois. However, via a different reading of Du Bois, I then show why racialized conceptions of ownership need to be supplemented by ideas of control. In section two, I engage Babbage’s book, which scholars such as Harry Braverman describe as the founding text of scientific management.¹² I argue that while Braverman’s reading of Babbage is indispensable, he overlooks how Babbage’s account of the detailed division of labor is set within a broader theory of racial, civilizational, and anthropocentric hierarchy. Babbage, I suggest, advances a notion of whiteness as calculative control. In the third

¹⁰ For a helpful and wide-ranging critical engagement with the literature, see Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal, “Racial Capitalism,” *Theory and Society* 48 (2019): 851-881.

¹¹ Onur Ulas Ince, “Deprovincializing Racial Capitalism: John Crawford and Settler Colonialism in India,” *APSR* (2021): 1-17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000939>

¹² On Babbage, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), esp. 54-57.

section, I turn to a reading of Frederick Taylor's racial tropes. Although Taylor's work may appear to be a color-blind application of some of Babbage's core insights, I show that racialized notions of infantilization were central to his practices of managerial control. Whereas scholars of Taylor have argued that scientific management conflicted with an "old management" logic that relied on the arbitrary and often racist power of the foreman,¹³ I show that Taylor placed arbitrary practices of infantilization at the center of his "science" of control and that these practices should be considered as part of the afterlife of slavery. I then elaborate on the global dimensions of Taylorism, showing how efficient labor control operated in a colonial context, which, I suggest, helps us understand how scientific management is not only a form of labor exploitation but also facilitates land dispossession and expropriation.

I. White Dominion as Ownership

In her illuminating discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois's claim that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth, forever and ever, Amen!" Ella Myers develops the claim that Du Bois's thinking about white identity exceeds the idea of "wages of whiteness." The "wages" thesis, set out in *Black Reconstruction*, argues that poor white people attain a psychological wage from their white skin that compensates them for low wages and undermines their solidarity with Black workers. In contrast, Myers argues that *Black Reconstruction* and some of Du Bois's other writings from 1920-to 1940 include a broader conception of whiteness, centered around an "ethos of ownership." This

¹³ David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 147.

ethos entails a possessive disposition towards the labor and land of non-white people, domestically and internationally. By connecting this claim from Du Bois's 1920 book *Darkwater* to passages from *Black Reconstruction* and 1940's *Dusk of Dawn*, Myers makes a persuasive case that this ethos of ownership is both continuous and discontinuous with slavery. While legal ownership of persons has ceased, a disposition of entitlement and possession has not.

On her account, the ownership that Du Bois speaks of may include actual ownership and title to land but is not reducible to this literal interpretation. Other scholars such as Patchen Markell have shown that dominion derives from the Roman law term *dominium*, which refers to "ownership of a thing, that is, a right to use and dispose of the thing at will."¹⁴ *Dominium* has typically been described as a form of "private power," whereas *imperium* has usually referred to the public power of the state.¹⁵ More specifically, dominion refers to private property and title, in both people and land. It does then imply a sense of ownership, which can be seen in both the narrow legal definition of the term and in a more expansive view in which "the leverage people have over others need not consist in enforceable property rights."¹⁶ Myers interprets Du Bois as holding a view of ownership in this more expansive sense. She gives readers at least four reasons for thinking the idea of whiteness-as-dominion is important.

First, she argues that the dominion thesis is compatible with, but differs from, the idea of "proprietary whiteness" found in the critical race

¹⁴ Patchen Markell, "The Insufficiency of Non-Domination," *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (February 2008): 25.

¹⁵ Markell, "Insufficiency," 24.

¹⁶ Markell, "Insufficiency," 24.

theory of Cheryl Harris and Derrick Bell. Harris and Bell, according to Myers, view whiteness as a valuable form of property that can provide benefits even in the absence of actual title to land or other assets. This is the view, essentially, of Du Bois's psychological wage idea. But Myers shows that the "ethos of white entitlement" idea concerns white people viewing *non-whites* and the land they may reside upon as property. "In other words," as Myers puts it, "the entity that is propertized in these accounts differs."¹⁷

A second reason whiteness-as-dominion is significant is that it shows how ideas of ownership during slavery did not disappear with abolition but continued in modified forms. The concept can therefore help explain twenty and twenty-first-century racism. In an original reading of Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn*, Myers shows how during Jim Crow, race served as a "badge" or marker. According to Du Bois, the racial markers of Blackness in the U.S., such as skin color, functioned for whites as a "badge of inferiority" and an "inescapable sign of slavery."¹⁸ While legal ownership of persons had been abolished, both law and everyday custom used "white" and "black" to remake the owner-owned distinction following emancipation.¹⁹

Third, central to Myers' argument is that whiteness as dominion can help unite two concerns in the study of racial capitalism—the concept of exploitation and the concept of dispossession. On Myers's account, the former refers to the possession of labor, the latter to land entitlement. As she puts it, exploitation and dispossession name two "complementary

¹⁷ Myers, "Beyond the Psychological Wage," 12.

¹⁸ cited in Myers, "Beyond the Psychological Wage," 14.

¹⁹ Myers, "Beyond the Psychological Wage," 13.

strategies...strategies united by the worldview of white dominion.”²⁰ As such, she argues that studying whiteness as an “ethos of ownership” can help us understand not just racial capitalism but “racial-colonial capitalism.”²¹ Capitalist exploitation and colonial expropriation, she argues, are “mutually reinforcing forms of white entitlement.”²² And just as the “badges” of slavery persisted into the twenty-century, Myers argues that for Du Bois, the new imperialism of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century “repeats and updates features of the legalized slave” primarily by dispossessing Africa of its land.²³

Fourth and finally, Myers argues that ownership is an “orientation” or “horizon of perception” akin to religious faith. This is an essential point for Myers because it indicates that the idea of white dominion cannot be reduced to practices of capitalist exploitation and dispossession since it is not just the bourgeoisie who hold the view of entitlement, but so too “white workers in Europe and the United States.”²⁴ Myers here draws out a significant point in Du Bois’s later writings: he often links religion, especially Christianity, with whiteness, nationalism, and imperialism.²⁵ Such a view cuts across class divides and thus exceeds the wages of whiteness thesis, which is largely, for Myers, “a class-specific conception of whiteness-as-payment.”²⁶

Myers’s focus on whiteness as a sense of ownership is especially useful in thinking about the racial dimensions of land expropriation that

²⁰ Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 20.

²¹ Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 20.

²² Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 18.

²³ Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 19.

²⁴ Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 21.

²⁵ See e.g. Du Bois, *Dusk*, 153-67.

²⁶ Myers, “Beyond the Psychological Wage,” 25.

she identifies as central to Du Bois's analysis of whiteness. But I am not persuaded that it helps us think about exploitation, which, as she correctly notes, is central to Du Bois's notion of whiteness as dominion. When Du Bois glosses the idea of exploitation as it is used in Jim Crow America, he certainly notes its connections to ownership. But I would suggest that he says more than this, that exploitation is also about control, management, and discipline of the labor force. Exploitation, he writes in *Dusk*, "means using the world for the good of the world and those who own it; bringing out its wealth and abundance; making the lazy and shiftless and ignorant work for their soul's good and for the profit of their betters, who alone are capable of using Wealth to promote Culture."²⁷ In the first clause, we see Du Bois emphasize the role of ownership. In the remainder of the sentence, I would suggest, Du Bois is talking about control of the labor force, especially capitalist control, in which exploitation is not simply for its own sake but for (1) profit of the owners and (2) the purported development of the worker's soul. This focus on profit is significant because it is not necessarily implied in the concept of ownership. It is possible to own something in a capitalist society without necessarily seeking to profit from it. But the point of controlling or, exploiting labor in a capitalist society is precisely to profit from it, as Du Bois's definition emphasizes. And we can also see that a religious-like conversion narrative is built into ideas of exploitation: controlling labor is not simply for profit but for the conversion of the worker's soul.

Du Bois explicitly connects the concepts of control and dominion in *Dusk of Dawn* a few chapters before he defines exploitation. He describes the "history of our day" as "the domination of white Europe over black

²⁷ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 162, my emphasis.

Africa and yellow Asia, through political power built on the economic control of labor, income, and ideas.”²⁸ In several places, he explicitly pairs the concepts of ownership and control. For example, in describing an instance of German imperialism in Africa, he writes that “a German war vessel sailed into an African port, notifying the world that Germany was determined to have larger ownership and control of cheap black labor.”²⁹ In his 1945 book on colonialism, *Color and Democracy*, among one of many injustices of colonial relations has been that indigenous “property ownership and control [have been] overridden...”³⁰ And in describing his own vision of socialism in the 1930s, he also paired the concepts of ownership and control, writing: “We believe in the ultimate triumph of some form of Socialism the world over; that is, common ownership and control of the means of production and equality of income.”³¹ Du Bois is making a non-trivial distinction here: a person or group can own property, but the way they direct, regulate, and discipline labor may differ considerably.

In speaking of white dominion, the concept of ownership is necessary but insufficient. By supplementing it with control, we can better understand the exploitation of white and non-white labor, not only as a set of practices but, like the ethos of ownership, something akin to religious faith. More specifically, what I think Du Bois is getting at when he invokes control are hierarchical forms of labor management, especially as those hierarchies are based on racial markers. The ethos of possession that

²⁸ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 96.

²⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 231.

³⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich, 1945), 43.

³¹ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 321.

Myers finds so central to Du Bois is ownership combined with undemocratic control of the labor on that property. Du Bois is not against all ownership; for example, he often speaks of the need for public or “common” ownership, as in his quote above about socialism. But even public ownership might entail undemocratic control of the labor force, and it is this latter which Du Bois objects to. He criticizes, for example, what he calls monarchical and aristocratic governance and control of the workplace.³²

Like ownership, the concept of control in Du Bois does not inherently imply a notion of subjugation. Given this assumption, how does control become linked to racially exploitive practices and ideals? To answer this question, in what follows I look to one of the most influential ideologies of labor control of the past two centuries, scientific management. “Scientific management,” according to Harry Braverman, “is an attempt to apply the methods of science to the increasingly complex problems of the control of labor in rapidly growing capitalist enterprises.”³³ For Braverman, two thinkers stand out as seminal contributors to scientific management—Charles Babbage, born in London in 1791, and Frederick Winslow Taylor, born in 1856 in Philadelphia. I try and show how the categories of productivity and efficiency in each thinker, which are primarily about labor, are racialized. However, labor control is never just labor control. I see the “major” theme in Babbage and Taylor as labor control and exploitation. Yet, in both, I demonstrate a “minor” theme about land dispossession. In the following section, I discuss the work of Babbage, whose main book, *On the Economy of Machinery and*

³² Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 157-8.

³³ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 59.

Manufactures, was published in 1832, with a second edition appearing the following year.

II. Charles Babbage and the Racial Division of Labor

Although relatively unknown today, Babbage's work was given prominence in the late twentieth century by Braverman's 1974 book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman argues that Babbage's account of the capitalist division of labor elucidates perhaps the most foundational principle of capitalist societies, which Braverman calls the "Babbage Principle." The Babbage principle emphasizes a simple yet overlooked idea: the detailed division of labor in the factory leads to higher outputs of commodities because it cheapens labor. In making this claim, Babbage criticizes Adam Smith, who focused on how the division of labor enhanced workers' skill and productivity rather than on the cheapening of labor. Babbage's "principle," in short, was that capitalist production had to consciously produce workers who had little knowledge of the overall production process to keep their skills and wages low. As Braverman puts it, "labor power capable of performing the process may be purchased more cheaply as dissociated elements than as a capacity integrated in a single worker."³⁴ For Braverman, this simple, almost obvious observation, first formulated explicitly by Babbage, is foundational to capitalism. Babbage's principle of de-skilling and cheapening labor, Braverman writes, is "certainly the most compelling reason of all for the immense popularity of the division of tasks among workers in the capitalist mode of production, and for its rapid spread."³⁵ This division of tasks not only

³⁴ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 57.

³⁵ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 55.

pertains to different forms of manual labor but extends to a division between mental and manual labor, or what Braverman calls the division between “conception” and “execution.”³⁶

Braverman provides a highly insightful and close reading of chapters nineteen and twenty of Babbage’s book, focused on the division of labor. By establishing Babbage’s text as a seminal intellectual influence on the history of capitalist management, Braverman’s work is indispensable. Yet Braverman fails to note that Babbage’s principle about the division of labor was hitched to an ideal of civilizational hierarchy in which white Anglo, large-scale capitalists were at the top.

We see this civilizational narrative already in chapter nineteen, “On the Division of Labour,” which is Braverman’s primary source for his discussion of Babbage. In the first paragraph of the chapter, Babbage writes that “it is only in countries which have attained a high degree of civilization, and in articles in which there is a great competition amongst the producers, that the most perfect system of the division of labour is to be observed.”³⁷ In chapter one, Babbage had made clear that England was at the top of this chart of civilization. Nothing distinguishes England, he writes, more so than the high degree to which it has incorporated machinery into its division of labor, which has not just benefitted England but also “distant kingdoms” in China, Africa, and Java. “The luxurious natives of the East,” he argues, alongside “the ruder inhabitants of the African desert are alike indebted to our looms.”³⁸ Such a “high degree of civilization” could, in theory, be attained by others, he suggests, but

³⁶ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*,

³⁷ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 169.

³⁸ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 4.

currently, Babbage writes, Europeans have outpaced the Chinese in “a proper attention to mechanical methods” and therefore in their degree of civilization. The Javanese, Babbage states, following John Crawford’s work, are even further behind in their mechanical and calculative competency.³⁹

Yet civilization and a highly developed division of labor are not simply about the proper mechanical methods, but are also linked to “character,” of which English manufacturers, according to Babbage, have a clear advantage.⁴⁰ He writes that “high character supplies the place of an additional portion of capital” and “is one of the many advantages that an old manufacturing country [i.e. England] has over its rivals.”⁴¹ Yet not all capitalists possessed this trait of character according to Babbage—it was, specifically, a virtue accruing to large scale capitalists: “The value of character, though great in all circumstances of life, can never be so fully experienced by persons possessed of small capital, as by those employing much larger sums...”⁴²

Large capital, however, requires “a great demand for its produce,” says Babbage, and this is where an emphasis on land dispossession comes into view, as he advances what Onur Ulas Ince calls “the trope of vacant land.”⁴³ In a discussion of the ideal location for factories, Babbage writes that “Manufactures, commerce, and civilization, always follow the line of new and cheap communications. Twenty years ago, the Mississippi

³⁹ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 20. On Crawford’s “capital theory of racialization,” see Ince, “Deprovincializing Racial Capitalism,” 1-17.

⁴⁰ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 219.

⁴¹ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 219.

⁴² Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 219.

⁴³ Ince, “Deprovincializing Racial Capitalism,” 2.

poured the vast volume of its waters in lavish profusion through thousands of miles of countries, which scarcely supported a few wandering and uncivilized tribes of Indians.”⁴⁴ The demand for goods that must supply large scale capital, in other words, is to be obtained via colonial adventurism. He goes on to affirmatively cite the colonial pioneering of English brothers Richard and John Lander, who had sought to establish commercial markets in Nigeria.⁴⁵

Babbage’s principle of the need to create and control cheapened labor, in short, was connected to a broader set of claims about how a highly specialized division would allow large-scale capitalists, typically white, to extract and control the land and labor of non-white peoples. The idea was to do so to produce the cheapest commodities possible, for profit. As he notes,

The first object of every person who attempts to make any article of consumption, is, or ought to be, to produce it in a perfect form; but in order to secure to himself the greatest and most permanent profit, he must endeavour, by every means in his power, to render the new luxury or want which he has created, cheap to those who consume it.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 228.

⁴⁵ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 220.

⁴⁶ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 119.

Central to Babbage's theory of civilization as premised on cheap commodities, is the further idea that efficiency of time, or, "economy of time," is central to civilizational development.⁴⁷ Efficient control was to be achieved by the greater application to industry of the arts and sciences of numerical calculation.

Far from being simply an idea for how to achieve maximum profits however, calculation takes on the tinge of a religious faith, much in the same way that Du Bois's account of white dominion does. The idea of calculation bookends Babbage's text, providing an important clue to his motives for writing it. He tells us in the preface to the first edition that analyses of the manufacturing processes in England, which provided the primary source material for his book, came about as a by-product of his larger attempt to develop what he calls a "Calculating Engine," which many scholars cite as a precursor to the modern-day computer. Babbage's ideas for such a computer were never built, but his preliminary research led him to investigate the large-scale machine operations in industrializing England. His aim, he says, was simply to help the reader better understand how these mechanical processes work.

Yet in the conclusion of the book, Babbage provides a further motive, one driven by a cosmological belief in the science of calculation to tame the universe for efficient human ends. After discussing the sciences of physics and chemistry, he writes that "another and a higher science...is also advancing with a giant's stride...It is the *science of calculation*—which becomes continually more necessary at each step of our progress, and which must ultimately govern the whole of the applications of science

⁴⁷ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 8-9.

to the arts of life.”⁴⁸ Not only is the science of calculation “higher” than physics and chemistry, according to Babbage, but it must also pervade every sphere of life. Far from simply proposing to help the reader better understand the industrial mechanisms of their societies, here he sets out a foundational view of the cosmos and goes on to explicitly link such a science of control to human dominion. Calculation, he writes, will be central to “the future progress of our race [i.e. the human race]” and “it may possibly be found that the dominion of mind over the material world advances with an ever-accelerating force.”⁴⁹ The dominion mentioned by Babbage here is not just about ownership of the material world, but control and mastery. Natural forces, which formerly had been the “unruly masters of the poet and the seer” will, under a calculative science “become the obedient slaves of civilized man.”⁵⁰ It is within this context of human control over non-human nature combined with a civilizational hierarchy that Babbage’s notion of the division of labor should be set.

What I suggest below is that although Taylor dropped some of the more explicit racial themes found in Babbage, he nevertheless carried forward this focus on efficient control and productivity, linking these ideas to racial characteristics. I also want to suggest that in Taylor’s work we also see one of the legacies of slavery that Myers doesn’t address: the infantilization of the worker. Racial subordination, in many ways, has been premised on the naturalized domination of children. As political theorist Toby Rollo has argued, “the idea of the sub-human child is an antecedent structuring principle of race. Where Black peoples are situated as objects

⁴⁸ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 387-88, emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 390.

⁵⁰ Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 390.

of violence, it is often precisely because Blackness is identified with a state of childhood and because the child is already understood as a perennial archetype of naturalized violence, servitude, and criminality.”⁵¹ While Taylor’s infantilization was directed more at immigrant groups than African-Americans, by importing ideas of infantilization into his work, Taylor generalized a core principle of slave labor control, seeking to expand it to all forms of labor.

III. Taylorism: Immigration, Infantilization, and Colonialism

Taylor’s most famous work *Principles of Scientific Management*, was published in 1911, and as historian Caitlin Rosenthal notes, “By 1915...[it] had been translated into eight languages, and it helped to inspire the first consulting firms.”⁵² Braverman too highlights the profound influence Taylor’s work has had:

Control has been the essential feature of management throughout its history, but with Taylor it assumed unprecedented dimensions... His “system” was simply a means for management to achieve control of the actual mode of performance of every labor activity, from the simplest to the most complicated. To this end, he pioneered a far greater revolution in the division of labor

⁵¹ Toby Rollo, “The Color of Childhood: The Role of the Child/Human Binary in the Production of Anti-Black Racism,” *Journal of Black Studies* 49, no. 4 (2018): 310.

⁵² Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 5.

than any that had gone before.⁵³

Taylor's "revolution in the division of labor" was powered primarily by his focus on the idea of making labor more efficient, by closely measuring, regulating, and incentivizing the precise movements a worker needed to take to carry out even the smallest task. Taylor opens *The Principles* with a quote from a Theodore Roosevelt, who had called for a movement for "national efficiency." What Roosevelt meant, according to Taylor, was primarily a conservation of natural resources.⁵⁴ Taylor complains however, that conservation of resources is only one way of thinking about national efficiency, and that what really needs attention is the inefficient "waste of human effort," throughout the workforce.⁵⁵ In all of his writings, Taylor was adamant that the number one "evil" that his management system targeted was the deliberate "restriction of output," by workers, also known as "soldiering" or "underwork." Both the old foreman-based system of management, which was in the dark about how long tasks took, and workers who labored under such a system, were guilty of soldiering. This was both a moral and political issue for Taylor: soldiering was a "robbery" of the wealth of a country—citizens had a right to the products of wealth that came from the "real wealth of society"—its land and its labor.⁵⁶ Here we see in Taylor the ethos of dominion Myers describes. For Taylor, people in the U.S. were entitled not only to the

⁵³ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

⁵⁴ Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper, 1915), 5.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Principles*, 5.

⁵⁶ Frederick W. Taylor, "Testimony of Frederick W. Taylor at Hearings before the Special House Committee of the House of Representatives, January 1912," *Bulletin of the Taylor Society* 11 (nos. 3 & 4): 1926, 100

products of land and labor, but to the maximum and efficient output of these products. Despite this daily waste, Taylor says, “there has been no public agitation for ‘greater national efficiency,’ no meetings have been called to consider how this is to be brought about.”⁵⁷ It was to this task of efficient labor control that Taylor committed his career.

If we turn briefly back to Du Bois’s *Dusk of Dawn* we can see how this purportedly objective scientific language of efficient labor was highly racialized in the early twentieth century. In *Dusk* Du Bois notes how whiteness in the twentieth century has been premised on a “ruling caste of the Efficient” which includes a hierarchy of control, with “Efficiency—Ability at the top and submission and thrift at the bottom.”⁵⁸ Glossing a predominant view of whiteness during Jim Crow, Du Bois writes that “the efficient” tend to be construed as “well-bred persons of English descent and New England nurture...[and] remnants of the Southern slave-holding aristocracy and some of the Mid-Western agrarian stock...”⁵⁹ He echoes this connection between whiteness and efficiency in *Darkwater*, writing that “Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is [considered] ‘white’...”⁶⁰ Du Bois himself doesn’t necessarily criticize the idea of efficiency—in *Darkwater*, for example, he sometimes uses it in positive terms. What he objects to is how efficiency is linked to white racial identity and has been used to keep Black people doing menial work with low status and pay.

Turning back now to Taylor, we can begin to see the racial dimensions of his focus on efficiency and productivity. At one point, for

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Principles*, 6.

⁵⁸ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 158.

⁵⁹ Du Bois, *Dusk*, 158.

⁶⁰ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 44.

example, Taylor links the problems of soldiering to conceptions of the civilized and the uncivilized: “the one element more than any other which differentiates civilized from uncivilized countries—prosperous from poverty-stricken peoples—is that the average man in the one is five or six times as productive as the other.”⁶¹ He also connects civilization-as-productivity to Europe, writing that England, for example, was “perhaps the most virile nation in the world.”⁶² Taylor’s key motivation was not only to have the U.S. meet the civilizational standards of labor productivity in Europe, but to ensure U.S. ownership and control of colonial territories. For example, he notes that he began introducing scientific management at Bethlehem Steel in Philadelphia as a direct result of the beginning of the Spanish-American war,⁶³ and that scientific management would “lower the cost of production [so] that both our home and foreign markets would be greatly enlarged.”⁶⁴ The Spanish-American war did precisely this, as Du Bois notes, as it “brought Cuban sugar under control and annexed Puerto Rico and the Philippines.”⁶⁵ Historians have also noted how active Taylor was, especially in Navy circles, in promoting scientific management within the U.S. military prior to the first world war.⁶⁶

The racialized dimensions of Taylor’s system also come through in his discussion of white immigrant labor. The immigrant plays a somewhat paradoxical role in his system—they are both more pliable and easier to

⁶¹ Taylor, *Principles*, 142.

⁶² Taylor, *Principles*, 142.

⁶³ Taylor, *Principles*, 41.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Principles*, 15.

⁶⁵ Du Bois, *Dusk*,

⁶⁶ David W. Holden, *Managing Men and Machines: U.S. Military Officers and the Intellectual Origins of Scientific Management in the Early Twentieth Century* (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2016), 118-179.

control, since, Taylor argues, they can be treated like children. Yet because of this status they are likely to be more productive and therefore more civilized. We see this dual role of the immigrant in the first step of his system, which focuses on the *selection* of ideal workers for scientific management. Taylor writes, for example, that the ideal is someone who “shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type.”⁶⁷ Like an ox, he writes, the worker should “be heavy both mentally and physically.”⁶⁸ The example he gives of such an ideal worker is a man he calls “Schmidt,” meant to be representative of a German immigrant. Taylor writes that he was selected initially for a few reasons: he would jog home from work, with no apparent fatigue; he was building his own home on his property, with savings from work; and he was extremely frugal about money.⁶⁹

In Taylor’s description, Schmidt’s English is also heavily accented, implying for the reader that the ideal object of control is someone at a linguistic disadvantage to management. Taylor’s comments elsewhere support this view that immigrant labor is preferable because pliable. In an earlier book titled *Shop Management*, for example, he invokes immigrants as menial laborers in describing the job ladder within his system: “The type of man who was formerly a day laborer and digging dirt is now for instance making shoes in a shoe factory. The dirt handling is done by Italians or Hungarians.”⁷⁰

Once workers have been selected, Taylor argues that the manager must induce them to be both internally and externally motivated to take on

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Principles*, 59.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Principles*, 137.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *Principles*, 43-4.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *Shop Management*, 147.

a much greater deal of work. This is the second step, *recruitment*, which follows selection. Taylor's tactic for extrinsic motivation is fairly straightforward—to promise workers more wages for a greater amount of work. Yet in his rendering, such material rewards have somewhat deceitful purpose. Their purpose is to distract the worker, as a parent would a child, from a difficult task. The idea is to “fix [the worker's] attention on the high wages which he wants and away from what, if it were called to his attention, he probably would consider impossibly hard work.”⁷¹

Taylor's tactics for *intrinsic* motivation build on the external material rewards offered yet rely upon infantilization via insult rather than incentive. To Schmidt, Taylor says:

“Schmidt, are you a high-priced man?”

“Vell, I don't know vat you mean.”

“*Oh yes, you do.* What I want to know is whether you are a high-priced man or not.”

“Vell, I don't know vat you mean.”

“*Oh, come now, you answer my questions.* What I want to find out is *whether you are a high-priced man or one of these cheap fellows here.* What I want to find out is whether you want to earn \$1.85 a day or whether you are satisfied with \$1.15, just the same as all *those cheap*

⁷¹ Taylor, *Principles*, 46.

*fellows are getting.*⁷²

While Taylor seeks to make his system “scientific,” and although he has told us about Schmidt’s autonomy outside of work, here he intentionally uses tactics that rely upon degrading Schmidt’s peers while they are absent and urging Schmidt to internalize the invidious comparisons. Far from distancing himself from the arbitrary or “rule-of-thumb” modes of power and decision-making of the older managerial practices he contests, here we see arbitrariness and insult lodged in the center of Taylor’s system.

The third step is not about selection or recruitment, but the actual *supervision and control* process. This step is infantilizing in that Schmidt must exhibit complete obedience, “with no back talk.” Taylor tells him:

Well, if you are a high-priced man you will do exactly as this man [pointing to a supervisor] tells you tomorrow. When he tells you to pick up a pig [iron] and walk, you pick it up and you walk, and when he tells you to sit down and rest, you sit down. You do that right straight through the day. And what's more, *no back talk*. Now a high-priced man does just what he's told to do, and *no back talk*. *Do you understand that?* When this man tells you to walk, you walk; when he tells you to sit down, you sit down, and *you don't talk back* at him.⁷³

⁷² Taylor, *Principles*, 44, my emphasis. The vernacular spelling in the dialogue is Taylor’s.

⁷³ Taylor, *Principles*, 46, my emphasis.

Now, this whole process of infantilizing *selection, recruitment, and supervision* is conditioned by a broader prior process that has separated mental from manual labor, or what Braverman, citing Babbage, calls the separation of *conception* and *execution*. This is perhaps Taylor's most paternalistic move, in that it relies upon the idea that the workers who have been restricting their output do not know their own interests. He describes as a fallacy the idea amongst workers that it is "for his interest and for the interest of his fellow workmen to go slow instead of going fast, to restrict output instead of turning out as large a day's work as is practicable."⁷⁴ Since both workers and union leaders are "ignorant of the underlying truths of political economy"⁷⁵ their knowledge and the supervision of its implementation should be put in the hands of "an intelligent, college-educated man."⁷⁶ Taylor's racialized forms of control, in short, were advanced through a series of practices of infantilization.

As noted above, processes of infantilization have long been a structuring principle of racial control. Political theorist Josiah Ober defines infantilization as when "we are unduly subject to the paternalistic will of others" or "we are denied the opportunity to employ our reason and voice in making choices that affect us."⁷⁷ Toby Rollo writes that "The idea of the child as an object without status or legitimate claims to status was central to the practice of racial slavery in America..."⁷⁸ We can see this in Saidiya Hartman's idea of "scenes of subjection," which she defines as "coerced

⁷⁴ Taylor, "Testimony," 96.

⁷⁵ Taylor, "Testimony," 97.

⁷⁶ Taylor, "Shop Management," 48.

⁷⁷ Josiah Ober, "Democracy's Dignity," *APSR* 106, no. 4 (Nov. 2012): 831.

⁷⁸ Rollo, "The Color of Childhood," 309.

spectacles orchestrated to encourage the trade in black flesh.”⁷⁹ These scenes, she writes, were premised on the spectacularization of black pain and racist conceptions of Negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering...”⁸⁰ Patricia Hill Collins argues that during the twentieth century, similar frameworks were applied to Black women workers: “Deference rituals such as calling Black domestic workers ‘girls’ enable employers to treat their employees like children, as less capable human beings.”⁸¹

What I want to suggest is that by institutionalizing infantilization as a mode of labor control, Taylor was implicitly importing tactics from antebellum slave plantations and from Jim Crow employment relations. In making this claim, I am pushing further historian Caitlin Rosenthal’s claim that scientific management, in general, had important predecessors in the numerical experiments of slave managers. In a recent article, Rosenthal demonstrates that the scientific management practices we often associate with Taylorism and Fordism have important precursors on nineteenth-century slave plantations.⁸² She argues that new methods of bookkeeping, accounting, and other record-keeping techniques imposed novel forms of temporal regimentation and control on slave labor, and thus that

⁷⁹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.

⁸⁰ Hartman, *Scenes*, 22.

⁸¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 71.

⁸² Caitlin C. Rosenthal, “Slavery’s Scientific Management: Accounting for Mastery” in *Slavery’s Capitalism*, eds. Seth Rockman, Sven Beckert, and David Waldstreicher (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

capitalism and slavery are more tightly linked than has previously been recognized. Methodologically, she argues that a study of accounting practices or “commercial numeracy,” broadly understood, offers a picture of how capitalist slavers sought to exert both “mastery” and “control” over the labor process.⁸³

As she suggests, and as I have tried to show via Babbage and Taylor, this control was often exerted through racial idioms of efficiency and productivity, which were far from scientific and objective, but required infantilization and arbitrary power to be implemented. Historian Jennifer Karns Alexander has argued that behind the very idea of efficiency is “the attempt to control a changing situation,” based on both “specific methods” of assessment and measurement and a “larger vision of how the world should be ordered.”⁸⁴ While the situations of slavery and an epoch of capitalism certainly differ, the attempt to control the labor force through a racial division of labor remains.

Colonial Taylorism

But what does this focus on labor control have to do with land dispossession and appropriation? Far from being merely a domestic practice, scientific management was used to subjugate non-white peoples and land globally. Here we can look to the preface to the French edition of Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management*, written by Henri Le Chatelier

⁸³ Caitlin C. Rosenthal, “From Memory to Mastery: Accounting for Control in America, 1750–1880,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012).

⁸⁴ Jennifer Karns Alexander, *The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 163.

and published in 1913.⁸⁵ Chatelier was a French chemist and champion of scientific management. Crucially, he introduced André and Edouard Michelin to scientific management.⁸⁶ The two brothers were the owners of the Michelin tire company, founded in 1889. As historian Stephen Harp writes, “Before the first decade of the twentieth century, France was the world’s largest market for automobiles and their tires,” and it was Michelin “which dominated that market...not only by exporting its products throughout the world...but also by finding ways to create more demand for tires.”⁸⁷ Harp also notes that “Michelin was a champion of ‘Taylorism.’”⁸⁸ In 1925 and 1926, Michelin established the Dou Ti° ng and Ph¼ Ri° ng plantations in French Indochina.⁸⁹ By 1930, Dou Ti° ng was “the world’s largest rubber estate” according to historian Martin Thomas, and Michelin was “the largest corporate actor in French Indochina.”⁹⁰ Establishing these plantations required a great deal of labor-intensive forest clearance and the planting of rubber trees.⁹¹ To accomplish these tasks, Michelin hired

⁸⁵ Henri Le Chatelier, “Preface to the French Edition of *The Principles of Scientific Management*,” in *Scientific Management: A Collection of the More Significant Articles Describing the Taylor System of Management*, ed. Clarence Bertrand Thompson (London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 1993 [1914]), 842-59.

⁸⁶ Francesca Tesi, “The Application of Taylorism in France: The Role of the Michelin Family in the Rationalization of French Work,” *Business and Economic History Online* 7(2009): 10.

URL: <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2009/tesi.pdf>

⁸⁷ Stephen L. Harp, *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 65.

⁸⁸ Harp, *World History of Rubber*, 26.

⁸⁹ Harp, *World History of Rubber*, xiv.

⁹⁰ Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers, and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918-1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 151, 154.

⁹¹ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 151-3.

poor contracted laborers from Northern Vietnam, subjecting them to brutal working conditions. Thomas argues that “In 1928...17 per cent of the coolies on Michelin’s Phu-Ri^o ng plantation died.”⁹² Arbitrary beatings were common, and in 1930 and 1932, massive strikes occurred on the plantations to protest working conditions.⁹³ Harp suggests that such treatment was justified by French corporate actors via a “logic of empire” which “assumed that Asian workers were inferior workers as well as inferior beings ‘with fewer needs’...”⁹⁴ We do not know how much of Taylor’s system was employed on these plantations, since Michelin to this day refuses to open its plantation archives to historians,⁹⁵ but as we have seen above regarding Taylor, his system was compatible with a highly arbitrary and authoritarian treatment of workers. And given the close connection between Chatelier and the Michelin brothers, it seems likely that the plantations in Indochina likely employed some aspects of the Taylor system. If we look at Chatelier’s preface, we can see the racial logics underpinning the treatment of non-white workers and their land.

Like Taylor, Chatelier argued that scientific management could be a panacea against the “the incessant struggle between capital and labor.”⁹⁶ In making this claim, however, he goes farther than Taylor in describing the causes of such conflict. Taylor argued that workers themselves wrongly assumed that their interests did not align with capital, and that such a misconception was stoked by labor organizers. Chatelier adds the claim that there is a “natural perversity of man...to do the greatest

⁹² Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 153.

⁹³ Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 151-71.

⁹⁴ Harp, *World History of Rubber*, 21.

⁹⁵ Harp, *World History of Rubber*, 140.

⁹⁶ Chatelier, “Preface,” 846.

possible harm to his neighbor,” and argues that such perversity can be found in the disobedience of workers, who, he says are “obeying the same instincts as the negro among the uncivilized natives of Africa, who slay for the pleasure of seeing the blood run.”⁹⁷ He goes on to note that in “civilized communities” such instincts are curbed by “fear of the police, religious sentiment, and the power of custom;” however, when “these reins are relaxed, man reverts to the savage state.”⁹⁸ Scientific management, on Chatelier’s view, is not only a solution to the conflict between capital and labor, but to the deeper and perennial conflict between civilization and savagery. What distinguishes civilization from savagery? Like Babbage and Taylor, Chatelier argues that it is the “productivity” and the division of labor amongst peoples that determines the difference, a difference which follows the color line. “Often the negroes of the African tribes are satisfied with primitive homes; they go without clothes and have no other ambition than to lead a vegetative existence in the sunshine, without bestirring themselves.”⁹⁹ In contrast, civilized countries, according to Chatelier, have a greater ambition to produce and consume and are therefore constituted by a more developed division of labor and specialization.

By making productivity and efficiency the dividing line between civilization and savagery, and by arguing that these characteristics followed racial lines, Chatelier made much more explicit some of the assumptions embedded in Taylor’s writing. In many ways, his language echoes the more racially explicit language of Babbage. What he added was a more scientific language, arguing that Taylor’s “principles” of

⁹⁷ Chatelier, “Preface,” 846.

⁹⁸ Chatelier, “Preface,” 847.

⁹⁹ Chatelier, “Preface,” 849.

scientific management and the assumptions embedded within them, should be taken as deterministic laws. “When the belief in determinism shall have become common with employers and workmen, half of the social problem will be solved. Then also, the ideas of Frederick Taylor will find many advocates.”¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the concept of ownership is only one moment of whiteness-as-dominion and that scholars should also focus on how whiteness operates via control. The idea of control focuses on how people and lands are managed, supervised, and disciplined. In the work of labor and business historians, for example, control typically means “direction, management, and surveillance.”¹⁰¹ In this essay, I have taken this general insight and argued that white racial identity is premised not only on a vision of owning the non-white world but controlling it. More specifically, by drawing on the preeminent “science” of capitalist control, scientific management, I have tried to demonstrate how ideas of productivity, efficiency, and the division of labor operate in the works of Charles Babbage and Frederick Winslow Taylor via racial categories of civilization, savagery, and efficiency. While my primary aim has been to better understand the concept of white dominion, the paper’s conclusions have broader implications in that they suggest a much closer link between the everyday practices of slavery and those of capitalism. As Caitlin Rosenthal has argued, the innovations of scientific management, although usually associated with Taylor, were first developed on slave plantations. This

¹⁰⁰ Chatelier, “Preface,” 849.

¹⁰¹ Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*, 4.

suggests that movements against racial capitalism and settler colonialism should closely examine the role that capitalist management practices continue to play in perpetuating racial injustice.

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