

**From Marx to Weber: A Reading of the Black Bourgeois Ideology in Paule Marshall's
Praisesong for the Widow, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Gloria Naylor's
*Linden Hills***

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Abstract: This contribution deals with the fictional representation of the black bourgeois ideology, which acquiesces to the dominance of black people by complicity and participation. It shows that an articulation of superstructural Marxist theories on the one hand, put forth by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, and Max Weber's sociological concepts on the other, can adequately account for that paradox. As it appears, the black bourgeois are interpellated by American capitalism, and their ideology of self-reliance, hard work and personal enrichment is a direct response to a reified environment. The Weberian analysis confirms these findings, and adds a dimension pertaining to status honor: the black bourgeois' attachment to the American Creed largely stems from a desire to maintain respectability linked to a preferential status, and also from survival tactics in a competitive context.

Keywords: superstructure – black bourgeoisie – hegemony – interpellation – status honor – legitimate domination – Protestant ethic

Résumé: Cet article traite de la représentation romanesque de l'idéologie de la bourgeoisie noire américaine, complice de la domination de son peuple. Elle montre que de la rencontre entre le Marxisme des superstructures d'une part, représenté par Antonio Gramsci et Louis Althusser, et la sociologie de Max Weber d'autre part, peut jaillir l'élucidation de ce paradoxe. Il appert que les bourgeois noirs sont interpellés par le capitalisme américain, et de ce fait leur idéologie de confiance en soi, de travail acharné et d'enrichissement personnel est une réponse directe à un environnement réifié. L'analyse weberienne confirme ces résultats, et permet d'ajouter une dimension liée à l'honneur social: l'attachement du bourgeois noir au Credo américain prend principalement source dans le désir de maintenir une respectabilité due à un statut préférentiel, et aussi à des stratégies de survie dans un contexte de compétition permanente.

Mots-clés: superstructure – bourgeoisie noire – hégémonie – interpellation – honneur social – domination légitime – éthique protestante

Introduction

Despite voices calling for a more radical reading of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian thinker remains the anchor for a Marxism of the superstructure riddled of utopias of the

revolutionary *Grand Soir*. The most appealing idea in Gramsci's work is the notion of hegemony, the fact that the bourgeois ruling classes' ideologies prevail in the minds of subalterns, thus fostering their own subjugation by complicity and complacency. This seminal concept is the starting point of my reflection on the class struggle among African Americans, between the middle class – or the black bourgeoisie as E. Franklin Frazier named them – and the lower classes, as staged in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*¹. This peculiar class struggle, waged at the periphery of the capitalist structure between two equally oppressed social groups, resists the traditional Marxist analysis based on a bourgeois/proletarian dichotomy. The content of the feud is largely ideological, and justifies the application of the notion of hegemony, since Steve Jones explains that “Gramsci's work invites people to think beyond simplistic oppositions by recasting ideological domination as hegemony: the ability of a ruling power's values to live in the minds and lives of its subalterns as a spontaneous expression of their own interests” (Jones i).

Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation provides a similar point of departure inasmuch as for him, ideology recruits subjects on behalf of a grand scheme which is capitalist. For him, “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*”, “ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way as to 'recruit' subjects among individuals” [...]or 'transforms' individuals into subjects [...] through the very precise operation that we call *interpellation* or *hailing*” (Althusser *On the Reproduction* 190). The novels' representation of the black bourgeoisie offers a paradigmatic case of interpellation or hegemonic complicity with the oppressive American Creed that deserves a close analysis from a literary perspective. Althusser and Gramsci will thus work hand in hand in my reading of the novels.

Interestingly, this topic allows a theoretical encounter between superstructural Marxism and Max Weber's characterization of class struggle. Despite their radically different premises and conclusions (Löwith 119), Marx and Weber find a common ground on the assumption that capitalism can only prosper with some consent and complicity from the underclass. This paper will analyze the workings of that “manufacture of consent” (Herman and Chomsky ix), by answering these questions: In which ways do the black bourgeois in *LH*, *SOS* and *PW* embody the paradigms of hegemony and interpellation? How can Weber's perspective enrich an account of the black bourgeois' participation in an oppressive scheme? Three specific points raised by Weber will be useful here: the notions of “legitimate

¹ *LH*, *SOS* and *PW*

domination” and “status honor” developed in *Economy and Society*, and the “Protestant ethic” discussed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. These Weberian insights on the nature of domination will complement the Gramscian and Althusserian categories of hegemony and interpellation in this analysis.

I- The superstructural Marxist reading: hegemony and interpellation

The black bourgeoisie in *LH*, *PW* and *SOS* is an aggregate of middle-class white collar workers and a few property owners, progressively constituted since slavery by the scarce black freemen, and which gained a foothold in the American social fabric during segregation. Its development was largely due to what Gunnar Myrdal calls the “advantages of the disadvantages” (Myrdal 794-5), or in other words the strategic exploitation of the niche market provided by the segregated black population. By catering to the needs of their own kin as doctors, barbers, insurance providers or real estate brokers, this social formation thrived at the outskirts of American capitalism, by internalizing the tenets of the American Creed, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”, and also the personal enrichment diktat embedded in capitalism. The interest of Gramsci’s approach to class antagonism is best illustrated in the black bourgeoisie’s situation in the corpus. Not owners of capital but rather petit-bourgeois functionaries, managers, and entrepreneurs, they nevertheless enact the capitalist agenda by their active complicity which works at the individual level as a survival strategy but makes up a bigger picture of endorsement of the American Creed.

The formation of a specific black bourgeois ideology shows the simultaneous mechanics of hegemony and interpellation. One step toward the constitution of that ideology was the inception of a black subject, an autonomous source of thoughts and actions. When black people gained freedom, they began recovering their humanity by the constitution of a subjectivity, a sense of self upon which their existence and survival would be predicated. This was also the first stage of their interpellation, their encounter with the “Absolute Subject” which made them both “free subjectiv[ies]” and “subjected being[s]” (Althusser *On the Reproduction* 268-9). Subjectification, in the process of interpellation, is not merely the constitution of a subject-individual, but mainly of a subject-vassal, as explained by Althusser’s disciple Pierre Macherey². Althusser plays on this double meaning of the word *subject* to emphasize the role of ideology in submitting man to external forces. In *LH*, Gloria Naylor names this superior force: it is “the white god” (16). The existence of the black

² “l’idéologie assujettit, sa fonction est d’assujettir, de dérouler le processus de la subjectivation” (Macherey).

bourgeois is thus premised on his subjectification to the American capitalist structure. This white god is the primary source of the injunctions that set in motion all his actions.

The first element of the bourgeois' interpellation is their staunch belief that only the economy will salvage black people in the USA. Directly interpellated by the pervasive venalism and reification of the society in which they had to live and survive, they become reified, as well as their social relations. For Georg Lukács, reification occurs when "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (Lukács "Reification"). One of the recent proponents of the concept, Axel Honneth, in his discussion of the concept, explains:

[T]he social cause to which Lukács attributes the increasing dissemination and the constancy of reification is the expansion of commodity exchange, which, with the establishment of capitalist society, has become the prevailing mode of intersubjective agency (Honneth 22).

A reified subject produces reified social relations, wherein some people become things in other's eyes. Reification touches the very essence of human nature for it includes man and his social relations into the *will to possess*, under the influence of materialism.

Harry F. Dahms argues that Lukács' critique of reification was much less successful in the United States than in Europe mainly because "the experience of reification is so closely woven into the fabric of American society, and because it is so much part of the common horizon, that its exceptional character is difficult to recognize" (Dahms 122). Reification was more current and ideologically grounded in American society for diverse reasons such as the availability of land and labor, and the Puritan ethic that favored hard work and personal enrichment. The belief that only money triggers respect and agency found its way in black people's minds, as Bernard W. Bell points out: "They realize that their white contemporaries respected the power of money and property more than democratic and Christian principles" and so they develop a "[b]lind faith in the American Dream and puritan ethic" (Bell 43). In order to achieve similar positions of power, enterprising blacks will answer the injunctions of the Subject and act like white people. *LH* pictures the Nedeed family, a dynasty of black real estate developers whose ancestor, Luther Nedeed 1, had well understood and implemented the workings of American capitalism. As early as before Civil War, he was involved in two lucrative activities: trading slaves and providing weaponry to pro-slavery confederates. These economic activities, though valuable from a capitalist perspective, are intrinsically morally transgressive because they run counter to black people's collective well-being.

These examples show that hegemony is premised on material concerns before reaching the ideological realm; they set Gramsci's analysis apart from exclusively superstructural and discursive theories detached from the original Marxian materialist premise³. They also prove that hegemonic ideas are never stymied by scruples. In *SOS* likewise, Macon Dead has a staunch belief in the power of money to gain control of one's own destiny and other people's too. When Macon urges his son, "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (*SOS* 55), or when Luther says that "life is in the material [...] and death is watching someone else have it" (*LH* 9), these statements are responses to a reified environment. As the only available representation of success, frantic material possession is black people's reaction to "the fact of reification in American society" (Dahms 152-3). By abiding to an overarching materialist and reified discourse, the black bourgeois exemplifies the power of interpellation.

The belief in the power of the self, a consistent component of the American Creed, also feeds the black bourgeois' interpellation. Nurtured by the Protestant faith that encourages a personal interpretation of the Scriptures rather than an imposed canonical belief, and also by the so-called *pioneer spirit*, embodied by Westward conquerors such as Daniel Boone, it is an integral part of the American mythology which promotes individual enterprise. Lynn Mahoney argues: "In Victorian America, self-development, within the parameters of a moral society, became a duty and a cornerstone of bourgeois identity" (Mahoney xv). A landmark in the elaboration of that philosophy is found in "Self-Reliance", an essay by the nineteenth century transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. As a matter of fact, the black bourgeois ideology is precisely an Emersonian dismissal of social determinisms coupled with the belief in the individual's capacity to transcend the group's flaws. The narratives under study are thus focused on great individual achievements: Jake, Luther 1, Macon Dead, Jay Johnson, Maxwell Smyth, or Laurel Dumont are all towering figures, embodiments of the strength of willpower. Against several odds, they achieve their dreams (with diverse fortunes, and even tragic ends like Jake's or Laurel's). What Jake spells out in his sermon to his friends partakes of that philosophy:

"See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, [...] never mind nothing! Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling [...] Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, [...] and pass it on – can you hear me? Pass it on!" (*SOS* 235).

³ Such analyses are found for example in Laclau and Mouffe, p. 65.

It is that gospel of self-reliance alongside a sense of responsibility toward history that allows the black bourgeois to achieve their feats. The self-reliance component thus appears as a key element that entrenches the black bourgeoisie's interpellation and participation in the grand American teleology.

II- The Weberian reading

While Gramsci's and Althusser's accounts apply to the relation of subalterns to a master narrative that overdetermines their actions, Max Weber provides a framework of analysis that, despite his rejection of the radically anti-capitalistic nature of Marxism⁴, is a useful explanation of the mechanisms inside the subaltern group, how the hegemonic endorsement of capitalism is manifested practically within the black community. Writing about fifty years after Marx, and at the same period as Gramsci, Weber nuances the Marxian subdivision of society. For him, status and relative power are as important as economic capability or class standing. It is Weber's analysis that allows to understand why one component of the black population comes to consider itself as different, despite systemic reminders of their affiliation to their less favoured kin. Weber devises an interplay between three dimensions of power: class, status and party. While party will not be relevant to the present analysis, class and status are active factors in the process. Weber explains that

In contrast to classes, *status groups* are normally communities. [...] In contrast to the purely economically determined 'class situation' we wish to designate as 'status situation' every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor*. [...] Property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity (Weber *Economy* 932).

The black bourgeoisie derives its strength and *raison d'être* from the advantageous comparison between them and the other blacks. In the novels under study, the existence of a black bourgeois class is thus predicated on that comparison with other blacks, and not with the white population, and is maintained through forms of social prestige that Weber calls "status honor" or "social honor".

The value of social honor is primarily attached to an expected lifestyle, to signs of belonging to a circle, as Weber argues: "In content, status honor is normally expressed by the

⁴ "Quite different [from Marx's] is Max Weber's approach. His attitude towards capitalism is much more ambivalent and contradictory. One could say that he is divided between his identity as a bourgeois which fully supports German capitalism and its imperial power, and his stature as an intellectual, sensitive to the arguments of the Romantic anti-capitalist *Zivilisationskritik* so influential among the German academic mandarins at the beginning of the 20th century" (Lowy).

fact that above all else a specific *style of life* can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle. Linked with this expectation are restrictions on social intercourse” (Weber *Economy* 932). This is the rationale behind most of Linden Hills’ conventional and conformist attitudes, best epitomized by Mrs Tilson. Living on First Crescent in Linden Hills, which is the lowest rank in the social stratification of their community, she strives to present an appearance of wealth, whereas she is the typical petit-bourgeois housewife. When she receives Mason for example, a folk character living across the way in the lower class, she puts on a grand show of dignified manners and high-pitched language. As a meal, she suggests: “we’re eating like peasants tonight – just fried chicken” (*LH* 48), to suggest that she usually eats better than chicken. She immediately adds that she is “trying something a bit daring with the potatoes. A cheese and wine sauce [she] saw in the papers”.

Social status is an important key to a better understanding of the bourgeois’ validation of the Creed. Through the public display of expensive commodities, the bourgeois derives a pleasure mediated through the envious eyes of others. In that process, it is the *sign value* of the commodity, and not its *use value*⁵, that confers it the desirability. Weber’s analysis is complemented here by Thorstein Veblen’s concept of “conspicuous consumption”. As he explains, “in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (Veblen 26). For example, when Macon takes his big Packard car for a ride, it is “a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man” (*SOS* 31). Clinging to external signs of success such as the car (Xavier in *LH*, Macon in *SOS*), or simply the Linden Hills address, the bourgeois characters struggle for status, like Roxanne who agrees: “a Linden Hills address was far better than any she could afford on her own salary [and] you don’t get a Park Avenue husband with a Harlem zip code” (53). This status linked to a specific location is the basis of Weber’s following observation:

In its characteristic form, stratification by ‘status groups’ on the basis of conventional styles of life evolves at the present time in the United States out of the traditional democracy. For example, only the resident of a certain street (‘the street’) is considered as belonging to ‘society,’ is qualified for social intercourse, and is visited and invited. (Weber *Economy* 933).

Even when a character like Lester rebels against the system, the social status claims him as soon as he needs to get out of difficult situations, as he does on page 195: “I happen to live in

⁵ “commodification, an attitude of valuing things not for their utility (use value) but for their power to impress others (sign value)” (Dobie 83)

Linden Hills. My name is Lesterfield Walcott Montgomery Tilson, and I'm the legal owner of the property at One Hundred First Crescent Drive". Despite his constant denial of his bourgeois self, Lester claims here his insider status in order to escape a humiliating arrest by the police, like an ordinary black man. Angela Mae Kupenda emphasizes the importance of the insider status, as she proposes to consider the American dream as a house. Those happy few who have gained access to the dream are the insiders, while the majority of the masses are the outsiders. All the black people, as a formerly enslaved population, are by definition former outsiders, and today some of them have gained access to the house, thus becoming insiders. Following Frazier's indictment of the black elite, she argues against the facile forgetfulness that lurks inside the walls:

Unfortunately, by focusing on our insider state and the privilege of our education and employment, we can be seduced into enjoying the walls that divide us from other outsiders. We can also be seduced into thinking we have actually secured an insider seat. So enticed by our desires to be fully seated and comfortable as part of an insider middle class, we can live in denial of the unstable reality of our situation—ignoring that our place is impermanent. We have been allowed just enough of the insider luxuries to discourage us from dismantling the walls, as our outsider kin continue without (Kupenda 728).

Another dimension of social prestige is the establishment of a "historical bloc" with like-minded whites. In *LH* the black bourgeois and their white counterparts form a historical bloc since they operate from a common ground of the Creed. The social prestige is conferred by the honor of sharing the same concerns, space, and world-views with the former master. Metaphorically speaking, it means living in the master's house, an honor once granted to privileged slaves. There is a class alliance between the once arch-enemy and the Linden Hills inhabitants: "Wayne County [the white district] had lived in peace with Linden Hills for the last two decades, since it now understood that they were both serving the same god" (17). This god is the "will to possess", or the god Mammon, dispenser of earthly material riches. This alliance is actualized at the occasion of the refusal of a municipal project to establish low-income housings near Linden Hills. For this matter, the wealthy residents decide forget the past and gang up with the Wayne County Citizens' Alliance. Dismissing the fact that this group is a white supremacist, KKK-like gang, they decide to "sweep all that junk under the carpet". The word "junk" here means slavery, the hangings, the Jim Crow segregation and all the vexations formerly inflicted by such groups in the USA. By downplaying this notorious

past, the black bourgeois shows a class connection to the other bourgeoisies, at the expense of the black masses.

A second point of encounter between Weber and Gramsci is the black bourgeois' endorsement of their former masters' work ethic, a notion that was used to prime slaves into obedience. Hopkins and Cummings explain that the Protestant work ethic is a notorious concept in the history of black people:

The development of pro-slavery Protestant views, then, exemplifies the external economic, social, and religious dimensions of slave status and indoctrination in the interrelated fields of work and religion. Coupled with the slaveholders' demands for efficiency and maximum productivity, these views combined to create the slaveholders' notion of a work ethic for the enslaved: Slaves, obey your masters (108-9).

It was after Emancipation that the hegemonic character of this pro-slavery Protestant work ethic started to operate, when characters like Macon Dead and Luther Nedeed reactivated it to their own profit. The emphasis that Naylor and Morrison place on the hard work of their bourgeois characters demonstrates the existence of that work ethic. The first Nedeed "haul[ed] or smooth[ed] the logs for the shack that stood on this very ground", the next "poured cement for so many of the foundations up there with his own hands", another one "gambled every dime he had to keep the community afloat during the Depression", and another Nedeed "personally hauled coal for his tenants during the worst blizzard in forty years" (*LH* 285-286). Jake is also pictured as a hard worker who "who could plow forty in no time flat" (*SOS* 235). His son Macon inherits his work ethic, starting "pressing forward in his drive for wealth" at only seventeen (*SOS* 28), and he strives to pass on this quality to his son, teaching him "how to work" (55). Marshall also tells us about "the reputation [Jay Johnson] had acquired around the store of being hard-working, efficient, dependable" (*PW* 92). With this reputation, Jay is the object of black women's desires, and even an archetype of what they expect in a black man: "a Jay – steady, dependable, hardworking Jay" (109).

As a fundamental element of the Creed encapsulated in "the pursuit of happiness", the belief that every man can succeed by dint of hard work was developed by the Puritan educators who swarmed the South during Reconstruction, and later by industrial schools endorsed by Booker T. Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" (Frazier *Black* 60-75). As Frazier argues, "Booker T. Washington had regarded the teaching of 'the dignity of labor' to be one of the primary tasks of industrial education [...] In his Sunday evening chapel talks, Washington constantly urged the students to be efficient and to dignify labor" (75). However, while in both Puritan and Tuskegee traditions Christian faith was still a primary influence, in

LH, PW and *SOS* this religious element is totally absent from the picture. The black bourgeois do not derive their industry from a direct divine order; their obsession with hard work is thus a secular one corresponding to the third stage of Max Weber's description of the evolution of the work ethic, as explained below:

Weber described the evolution of the work ethic in three stages: monasticism, Calvinism, and the secular spirit of capitalism [...] In Weber's third stage faith in God disappeared. The profits resulting from diligent labor and thrift became an end in themselves – but the compulsive sense of duty remained" (Howe D. 1066).

Black people, who had been *existentially* disconnected and alienated from their harassing toil, embraced that work ethic for better or worse. While Jake adopts it in a solidaristic fashion, perceiving the result of his work as a common good, when he says: "We got a home in this rock [...] Nobody starving in my home [...] and if I got a home, you got one too" (235), others like Luther and Jay emphasize the selfish approach. The connection between this selfish ethos and the denial of an outreach to black masses is emphasized by Paul Mocombe:

the rise of the black bourgeois middle class, like their white counterparts, is, ironically, at the expense of the world's people of color. Instead of refusing to be cajoled to participate in a world which seeks to make a few of their fellows rich at the expense of the mass [...] many black folks, like their white counterparts, recursively organize and reproduce the 'soul-less' Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism so that a few black men can have 'bling' 'bling' as a sign of their salvation and predestination" (Mocombe 78).

Mocombe's use of the words "cajoled to participate" and his insistence on the expression "like their white counterparts" aims at emphasizing the systemic nature of interpellation. It is an active *manufacture of consent*, an appeal to the black elites to take part in the elitist race that posits the survival of the fittest. It also shows that black people have acquiesced to the evolution of the Protestant work ethic from religious to secular, in a hegemonic fashion.

The complacent acquiescence to the system's injunctions, as I have argued above, is a manifestation of hegemony and interpellation. In order for the hegemonic system to operate safely, there needs to be some form of authority to validate and enforce it. Further probing into Weber's theories reveals the notion of legitimate domination. For Weber, "[t]he merely external fact of the order being obeyed is not sufficient to signify domination in our sense; we cannot overlook the meaning of the fact that the command is accepted as a 'valid' norm" (Weber *Economy* 946). So for the subalterns to comply with the oppressor's norm, they must accept it as valid. Weber's concept of legitimate domination thus echoes Gramsci's notion of

hegemony: they both imply an acceptance and even complicity. When Maxwell Smyth argues in *LH* that "it's that sort of an attitude that will keep some people cleaning out garages for the rest of their lives" (*LH* 113), thus blaming the unjust American social hierarchy on the victim, his point is clear: the poor are poor because they are lazy. This validation of the status quo is a constant in the black bourgeois discourse. Jay for example has his own version of the story:

The trouble with half these Negroes out here is that they spend all their time blaming the white man for everything. He won't give'em a job. Won't let'em in his schools. Won't have'em in his neighborhood. Just won't give'em a break. He's the one keepin'em down. When the problem really is most of'em don't want to hear the word 'work'. If they'd just cut out the all the good-timing and get down to some hard work, put their minds to something, they'd get somewhere" (*PW* 135).

They dissociate their fate from that of the mass of African Americans, wrapped up in the feeling of agency that their self-help ideology provides them. When Macon, Luther, or Jay look back on their career paths, what they see is the embodiment of the Creed, of the American dream of equal opportunity for all. By dismissing the impact of determinism, they actively accept the belief that black people's poverty is not to be blamed on their white oppressors but on themselves, for their lack of energy and enterprising spirit. Legitimate domination is here the subaltern's acquiescence of his own responsibility in his tragic fate, and also trust in the system's fairness.

For Weber, legitimate domination can take three forms: *traditional*, *rational* or *charismatic*. Since the traditional domination is grounded on "an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions" (Weber *Economy* 215), this model is not operative in our corpus because there is no recognizable traditional pattern. The rational model is based on "a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (Weber *Economy* 215), and it is the form of domination that the bourgeois obey. In the novels, the bourgeois is "essentially a friend of law and order", as Balzac famously said (Kim 318), since revolution is detrimental to business. Considering the American constitution and laws as strictly *rational*, the bourgeois is a law-abiding citizen. Macon Dead is driven by such rationality when he urges his sister Pilate to depart her uncouth law-breaking demeanor, telling her to stop bootlegging wine and also to dress more conventionally (*SOS* 20).

The Linden Hills residents are similarly concerned about the potential vicinity of black outlaws (*LH* 133). These attitudes were prevalent at the turn of the century, when bourgeois "racial uplift" campaigners published lists of do's and don'ts for blacks who behaved rudely,

as in the 17 May 1919 issue of the Chicago Defender: “Don’t take the part of law breakers [...] Don’t get intoxicated and go out on the street insulting women and children and make a beast of yourself [...] Don’t make yourself a public nuisance, [...]” (“Some Don’ts”). Such advice, as in my corpus, contains the element of race management that is crucial to the assimilationist strategies of the elites. The concern for law and order is an implicit appeal to circumvent nihilist, terrorist, non-conformist or anti-establishment conduct within the black masses, and also an acceptance of the ideology that blacks would be treated fairly only if they constituted a subservient and docile mass.

For a more complete account, however, of legitimate domination, an important fact cannot be overlooked: the black bourgeois’ belief in the system’s rationality does not guarantee them an automatic success. On the one hand, they had to struggle to make the most of the capitalist system, a struggle won by dint of hard work and intrinsic qualities like pragmatism and stamina. On the other, they often had to show the white enforcers their own mastery of that rationality. This is what happens every time the Nedeeds, one generation after another, succeed in saving their property from the encroachment of jealous whites. On one instance they have it officially “designated as a historical landmark” (*LH* 14). When white men unearth “a seventeenth century mandate forbidding negroes to own, lease, or transfer property”, Nedeed also argues that it’s “the same law that prohibited Hebrews, Catholics, and devil worshippers from holding public office”, forcing the Mayor Kilpatrick (an obviously Irish Catholic name) to abandon his claim to the property. In the same vein, the thousand-year-lease Nedeed makes his tenants sign is also a trick, to maintain his property under his control.

Likewise, Macon Dead’s investing savvy proves his shrewd command of the system’s workings, as he does with the Erie Lackawanna project (*SOS* 71). These events are clearly in the tradition of *putting on massa* stories wherein the clever black character outmaneuvers his white master by him playing tricks. They mainly show the large amount of *play* that exists inside the system. The black bourgeois trusts the system as a whole, and struggles to get his way, from the inside, with systemic tools. In so doing, he is an enforcer of law and not a lawbreaker. His trust in the law facilitates this play. This also permits a more positive vision of the black bourgeois figure, as a flawed Prometheus whose problematic selfishness cannot elide the latent heroism of his success within a competitive system.

Conclusion

What this brief analysis intended to do was to acknowledge the necessity for a greater intellectual flexibility in grappling with the literary representation of social formations “structure[d] in dominance” (Althusser *For Marx* 201-2). The first important step toward such flexibility is the recourse to superstructural Marxists Antonio Gramsci’s and Louis Althusser’s tools, such as hegemony, historical bloc and interpellation, to eschew the dichotomy of Karl Marx’s base/superstructure analysis. In so doing, the literary reader can recognize the importance of ideology’s work, as exemplified by the black bourgeoisie in *LH*, *SOS*, and *PW*. Though they are hardly ever capital owners *per se*, they embody the bourgeois ethos within the black community by the work of hegemony and interpellation. Acting as buffers or middlemen, they validate the American Creed by their active endorsement of its tenets.

The next important step toward intellectual flexibility is to welcome Max Weber in this attempt to understand the capitalist ethos. The suture between Marx and Weber is operated with the latter’s concepts of legitimate domination, status honor, and Protestant work ethic. Legitimate domination, like hegemony, is the subaltern’s validation of the norms established by the dominant, and in the corpus it is the *rational* form that powers the black bourgeois’ actions. Their concern for social status and honor, as well as their subscription to the secularized form of the Protestant work ethic, further explain their acquiescence of the system’s diktats. This acquiescence, however, goes along with trickster tactics which allow them to make the most of the dominant system’s rationality.

This socio-economic reading of literature is an application of a methodology exemplified by Stuart Hall in “Race, Articulation”, a presentation of routes opened in social theory that attempt a “theoretical convergence” between Marxism and Weberianism. The interest, as Hall argues, is to “integrate political and ideological structures into an economic analysis” (“Race, Articulation” 314). If, as we believe, the work of fiction is a testimony of social conflict, the representation of the black bourgeois is a synecdochial critique of modernity, and thus the Marxist-Weberian articulation is a welcome strategy to voice a poetics of social change.

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